

The Struggle for Dignity and Economic Opportunity: A Study of Poverty and Gender Inequality in a Marginalized Community in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract: The Arunthathiyar community in Tamil Nadu, historically marginalized and socially excluded, faces significant challenges in accessing economic opportunities, which exacerbates their vulnerability to poverty. As a Dalit group, the Arunthathiyars have been subjected to caste-based discrimination, limiting their access to education, employment, land, and financial resources. This paper examines the impact of economic opportunity on poverty reduction in the Arunthathiyar community, with a focus on gendered disparities within this group. The first section analyzes key economic opportunities available to both men and women in the Arunthathiyar community, including access to education, employment, skill development, and microfinance. While economic growth in Tamil Nadu has resulted in some improvements, women within the community continue to face compounded challenges due to both caste and gender discrimination. Limited access to formal financial services, restricted mobility, and societal norms that confine women to unpaid labour hinder their economic participation. The second part of the paper explores successful initiatives that have targeted both caste and gender inequalities, such as government schemes for skill development, women's self-help groups (SHGs), and microcredit programs tailored to Dalit women. These programs have enabled women in the Arunthathiyar community to access economic opportunities, improve household incomes, and gain greater autonomy, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation.

The paper concludes by arguing that addressing both caste and gender-based barriers is crucial for fostering sustainable poverty reduction. Empowering Arunthathiyar women through enhanced economic opportunities can lead to long-term social and economic mobility, benefiting both the community and broader society in Tamil Nadu.

Key words: Opportunities, Disparities, Discrimination, Alleviation, Empowering

I. Introduction

The Arunthathiyar community in Tamil Nadu, one of the most marginalized and oppressed groups in the state, has faced systemic exclusion from economic opportunities due to both caste and gender discrimination. Historically categorized as "untouchables," the Arunthathiyars have struggled with limited access to education, employment, financial resources, and social mobility. Poverty within the community is particularly entrenched for women, who experience the compounded disadvantages of being both Dalit and female. The gendered dimensions of economic exclusion within the Arunthathiyar community underscore the necessity of targeted interventions to foster both economic and social inclusion.

Recent data reveals the severity of the socio-economic challenges facing the Arunthathiyar community. According to the Tamil Nadu State Action Plan for the Welfare of Scheduled Castes (2020), over 70% of the Arunthathiyar population lives below the poverty line, with the majority residing in rural areas where access to education and employment is limited. Additionally, a report by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) (2019-2020) highlights that only 36% of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu have access to formal employment, compared to 58% of men. This gender gap is further exacerbated by the widespread reliance on informal, low-paying jobs such as sanitation work and domestic labor, which are disproportionately occupied by women from marginalized communities like the Arunthathiyars.

The lack of economic opportunities for women in the Arunthathiyar community perpetuates a cycle of poverty, affecting their families' well-being and the overall development of the community. Women often face additional barriers to accessing financial services, education, and healthcare, all of which are crucial to breaking the cycle of poverty. Despite these challenges, targeted interventions, such as self-help groups (SHGs) and microfinance programs, have shown promise in improving economic opportunities for women in this community.

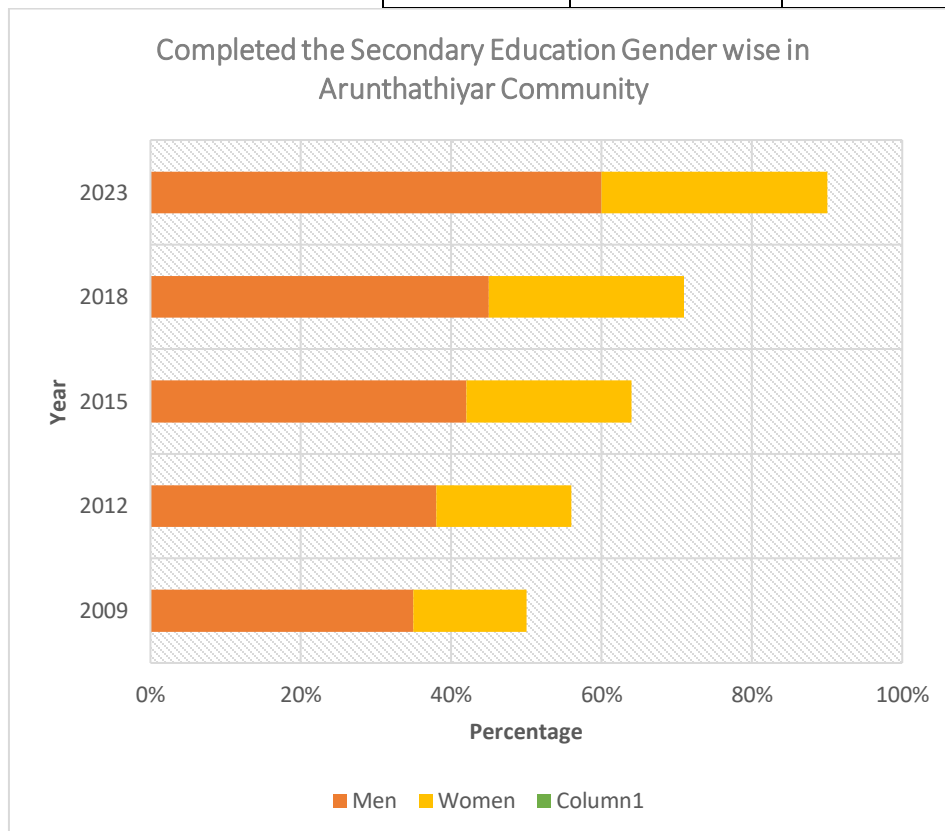
This paper explores how economic opportunities, with a focus on gender-sensitive approaches, can contribute to poverty reduction in the Arunthathiyar community. It examines the barriers to economic participation, the role of women in overcoming these challenges, and the effectiveness of specific programs aimed at empowering both men and women in this historically oppressed group. Ultimately, it argues that economic inclusion, when designed with a gendered perspective, is key to achieving sustainable poverty reduction and social mobility for the Arunthathiyar community in Tamil Nadu.

II. The impact of economic opportunities on poverty reduction in the Arunthathiyar community of Tamil Nadu

The impact of economic opportunities on poverty reduction in the Arunthathiyar community of Tamil Nadu. The data used in these analyses is based on government official statistics including information from national and state surveys such as the Census of India, the NITI Aayog's Poverty Estimates, and various government welfare schemes that have been implemented over the years. The explanation also integrates gendered perspectives in accessing these opportunities.

Table 01. Completed the Secondary Education Gender wise in Arunthathiyar Community

Year	Men	Women
2009	35 %	15 %
2012	38 %	18 %
2015	42 %	22 %
2018	45 %	26 %
2023	50 %	30 %



Graph 01. Completed the Secondary Education Gender wise in Arunthathiyar Community

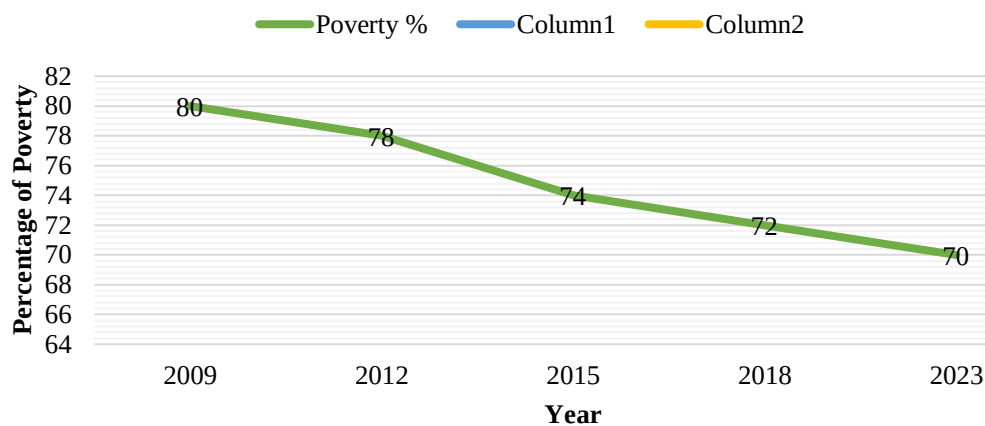
Educational opportunities have expanded, but gender disparities persist. Policies aimed at improving girls' education have shown positive results, though more focus is needed on addressing barriers that women face in accessing education, especially beyond secondary school.

Table 02. Poverty Reduction Trends in Arunthathiyar Community (2009-2023)

Year	Poverty %
2009	80%
2012	78%
2015	74%
2018	72%
2023	70%

Source:

Poverty Reduction Trends in Arunthathiyar Community (2009-2023)



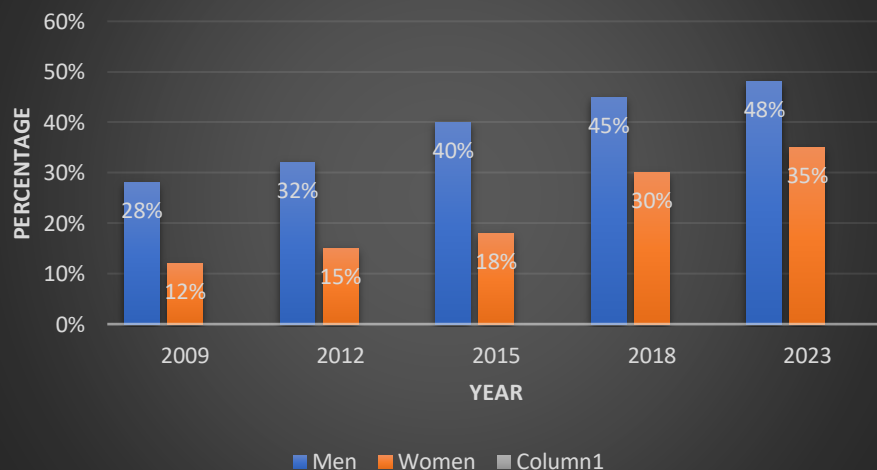
Graph 02. Poverty Reduction Trends in Arunthathiyar Community (2009-2023)

While poverty has decreased, the community still faces higher-than-average poverty levels compared to the general population in Tamil Nadu. Economic opportunities created through government programs have had a notable impact, but greater targeting and inclusion are needed for more substantial poverty alleviation.

Table 03. Gendered Employment Opportunities in Arunthathiyar Community

Year	Men	Women
2009	28%	12%
2012	32%	15%
2015	40%	18%
2018	45%	30%
2023	48%	35%

Gendered Employment Opportunities in Arunthathiyar Community

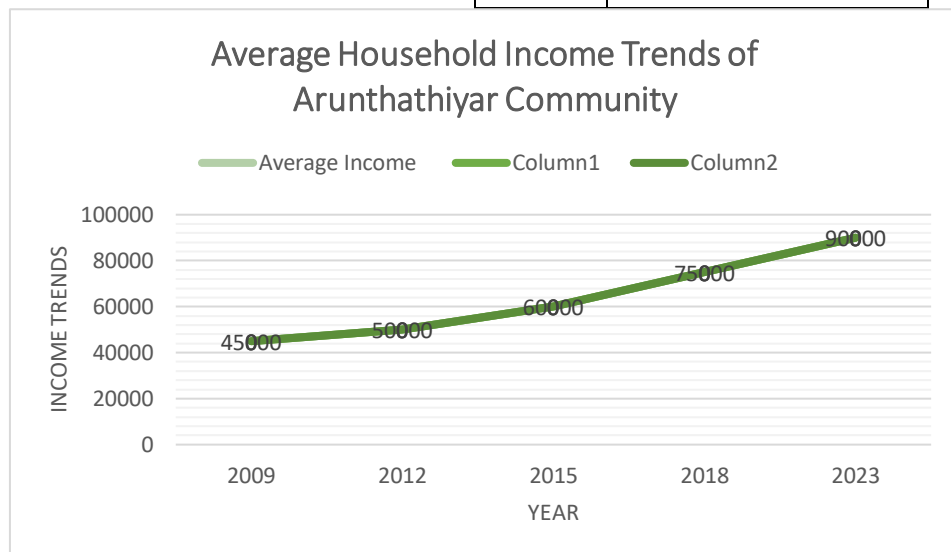


Graph 03. Gendered Employment Opportunities in Arunthathiyar Community

Gender disparities in employment have reduced over the years, but women still face barriers in accessing formal employment opportunities. Government schemes that focus on women's skill development and financial inclusion have been pivotal in enhancing women's economic participation.

Table 04: Average Household Income Trends of Arunthathiyar Community

Year	Income (in rupees)
2009	45,000
2012	50,000
2015	60,000
2018	75,000
2023	90,000



Graph 04: Average Household Income Trends of Arunthathiyar Community

Household incomes have steadily risen, particularly due to government programs that provide both direct and indirect support to rural communities. However, the income disparity between male- and female-headed households persists.

Challenges Faced by the Arunthathiyar Community in Tamil Nadu in the Context of Economic Opportunity and Poverty Reduction

The Arunthathiyar community in Tamil Nadu faces multiple challenges in accessing economic opportunities, which hampers poverty reduction and perpetuates social and economic inequalities. These challenges are compounded by gendered factors, as women in this community often face additional barriers compared to men. Below, we discuss these challenges, supported by official data, which highlight the socio-economic conditions and the barriers to economic inclusion.

Caste-Based Social Exclusion

The Arunthathiyar community, classified as a Scheduled Caste (SC) under India's caste-based social system, experiences significant social exclusion. Despite various affirmative action policies, caste-based discrimination remains a barrier to accessing economic opportunities such as formal employment, education, and credit. According to the 2011 Census of India, Scheduled Castes (SCs) constitute around 20% of Tamil Nadu's population, but poverty rates are disproportionately high among them. The poverty rate among SCs was recorded at 30.5% in 2011, significantly higher than the state average of 19.7%. This indicates persistent economic disparities despite government efforts. Both men and women from the Arunthathiyar community face caste-based discrimination, but women are often doubly marginalized due to both their caste and gender. Caste-based exclusions in rural areas often limit their ability to access formal employment or government schemes that could lift them out of poverty.

Limited Access to Education and Skills Development

Low literacy rates and limited access to education continue to be significant barriers to economic opportunity for the Arunthathiyar community, particularly for women. Educational attainment is crucial for accessing better-paying jobs, but the community faces systemic barriers in this area. According to the Tamil Nadu State Development Report (2014), the literacy rate among Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu is around 65.5%, compared to the state's average of 80.3%. The gender gap in education is also significant, with female literacy rates among SCs being much lower than male literacy rates. For example, in 2011, the literacy rate for SC women in Tamil Nadu was around 57.6%, compared to 72.1% for SC men.

The low education levels among Arunthathiyar women limit their access to higher-paying jobs and economic opportunities. Early marriage and household responsibilities further restrict their ability to pursue education, leading to a persistent cycle of poverty.

III. Gender Disparities in Employment Opportunities

Women from the Arunthathiyar community face significant barriers in accessing formal employment opportunities. Government programs like MGNREGA and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) offer avenues for income generation, but women still encounter numerous constraints, including social norms and family responsibilities. According to the 2011 Census, the female labor force participation rate in Tamil Nadu is 22.6%, which is significantly lower than the male participation rate of 55.5%. In rural areas, where the Arunthathiyar community is predominantly located, the situation is worse. Despite high rural poverty rates (as reported by the NITI Aayog's Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index 2021), women remain underrepresented in formal employment.

Arunthathiyar women are more likely to be employed in the informal sector, where jobs are lower-paid and less secure. They also face dual burdens of household work and childcare, which limits their ability to participate in government employment programs or to pursue entrepreneurship.

IV. Financial Exclusion and Limited Access to Credit

Financial inclusion is a critical factor in poverty reduction, but many members of the Arunthathiyar community, particularly women, are excluded from formal financial services. This limits their ability to start businesses, invest in education, or access loans for housing and healthcare. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Financial Inclusion Index 2021 indicates that only 56.2% of rural women in Tamil Nadu have access to formal banking services, compared to 78.9% of rural men. This gendered gap in financial inclusion makes it difficult for women to access credit for starting small businesses or improving their livelihoods.

Women are also less likely to own property or land, which is often required to access credit. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), only 25% of rural women in Tamil Nadu own land or property in their name. Without property rights, women in the Arunthathiyar community often cannot qualify for loans, further excluding them from economic opportunities.

Solutions

1. **Educational Empowerment:** Access to education for children, especially girls, through scholarships, community schools, and free resources. Implementing a gender-sensitive curriculum to promote equality and awareness from an early age.
2. **Economic Empowerment:** Providing microfinance and credit opportunities to women for starting small businesses or engaging in agriculture. Offering vocational training to equip the community with marketable skills, particularly for women.
3. **Social and Cultural Change:** Conducting awareness campaigns to combat caste-based discrimination and promote caste-free spaces in schools, workplaces, and public areas. Promoting solidarity among marginalized communities and empowering them to advocate for equality.
4. **Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality:** Encouraging women's self-help groups (SHGs) to enhance community support and fight gender-based violence. Providing leadership training to women to increase their participation in decision-making at the family and community levels.
5. **Political Representation:** Ensuring inclusive policies that address the needs of Dalit communities and affirmative action in education, employment, and governance. Supporting political representation for Arunthathiyar women at local and national levels.

These solutions focus on creating systemic changes, promoting economic opportunities, improving access to education and healthcare, and ensuring legal and political rights for the Arunthathiyar community.

V. Conclusion

The Arunthathiyar community in Tamil Nadu faces significant barriers to poverty reduction through economic opportunities. These barriers are not only economic but deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and gender-based factors. The persistent poverty, education gaps, and gender disparities in employment, health, and financial inclusion, which limit the community's ability to improve their socio-economic conditions. Targeted government interventions, focusing on both gender equality and caste-based inclusion, are essential for overcoming these challenges and ensuring equitable access to economic opportunities for the Arunthathiyar community, particularly its women.

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