

Adoption Of the Term ‘Arunthathiyar’ In Tamil Nadu: A Sociological Understanding

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Abstract: The adoption of the term Arunthathiyar marks a significant transformation in the historical identity and collective consciousness of one of Tamil Nadu's most marginalized Scheduled Caste communities. Historically, the community was identified by various regional and occupational names, including Chakkiliyan, Madiga, Madari, Pagadai and Thoti, all of which were closely associated with traditional occupations such as leather work, carcass disposal and sanitation services. Over time, these occupational labels acquired derogatory connotations and became symbols of caste-based exclusion and untouchability. Against this backdrop, the emergence of the collective term Arunthathiyar represented an important process of identity reconstruction aimed at replacing stigmatized nomenclature with a socially dignified and inclusive identity.

This article critically examines the historical evolution and adoption of the term Arunthathiyar through a qualitative review of documentary sources. Drawing on colonial ethnographies, government reports, census publications, academic literature and community-authored histories, the study analyses how different historical narratives have shaped the community's identity. Using documentary analysis and sociological interpretation, the article explores the relationship between colonial classification, occupational identity, state recognition and community agency in the evolution of the collective designation. It argues that the adoption of the term Arunthathiyar was not merely a linguistic or administrative change but a socio-political process through which the community challenged caste-based stigmatization, strengthened collective solidarity and negotiated greater recognition within the democratic framework of post-independence India.

The study further demonstrates that caste nomenclature is neither static nor historically neutral. Instead, it is shaped by changing political, social and cultural contexts in which communities actively negotiate their identities. By examining the politics of naming within the broader framework of caste and identity formation, this article contributes to the growing scholarly work on Dalit history, identity reconstruction and social transformation in South India. It also highlights the need for further interdisciplinary research integrating archival evidence, oral histories and ethnographic studies to deepen the understanding of the historical evolution of the Arunthathiyar community.

Keywords: Arunthathiyar, Community Identity, Social Change, Scheduled Castes, History, traditional work, leather worker, Naming

1.Introduction

Community names are not merely descriptive labels but important markers of identity, dignity, and social positioning. In the Indian caste system, caste names have historically been associated with occupation, ritual status, and social hierarchy, shaping both external perceptions and internal community identities (Bourdieu, 1991; Dirks, 2001; Ambedkar, 1936). Many caste names emerged through customary practices and administrative classifications, often carrying meanings that extended beyond simple identification. For communities positioned



at the margins of the caste system, nomenclature became an important instrument through which social inequality was maintained and reproduced. Consequently, the adoption of new collective identities has frequently formed part of broader struggles for dignity, recognition and social justice.

The Arunthathiyars constitute one of the most socio-economically marginalized Scheduled Caste communities in Tamil Nadu. Historically, the community has been identified by several regional and occupational names, including *Chakkiliyan*, *Madari*, *Pagadai*, *Thoti* and *Madiga*. These names were associated with hereditary occupations such as leather processing, footwear production, carcass disposal and sanitation services. Within the traditional caste hierarchy, such occupations were regarded as ritually impure and became closely associated with untouchability and social exclusion. Over time, these occupational labels acquired derogatory meanings and functioned not only as caste identifiers but also as symbols of inherited social disadvantage.

The widespread use of these names was reinforced during the colonial period through census operations, ethnographic surveys and administrative documentation. Colonial officials classified communities primarily according to occupation, language and ritual status, producing categories that became institutionalized in official records. These classifications often ignored indigenous histories and the internal diversity of caste communities, instead presenting occupational identity as a fixed and defining characteristic. Such representations shaped both administrative practice and public perception, strengthening the association between hereditary labour and caste identity.

The emergence of the term *Arunthathiyar* during the twentieth century marked an important shift in this historical trajectory. Rather than identifying the community through occupation, the new designation sought to establish a collective identity rooted in dignity, cultural recognition and social equality. The adoption of a common name also enabled different regional sub-groups to articulate shared interests and participate more effectively in movements for social justice, educational advancement and political representation. Thus, the evolution of the term *Arunthathiyar* reflects broader processes of identity reconstruction that accompanied constitutional reforms, Dalit movements and changing political realities in post-Independence India.

Scholarly discussions on the Arunthathiyars remain relatively limited when compared with studies on other Scheduled Caste communities in South India. Existing knowledge is dispersed across colonial ethnographies, government committee reports, census publications, community-authored histories and a small body of academic literature. While these sources provide valuable insights into the historical development of the community, they also present differing interpretations regarding the origin, nomenclature and identity of the Arunthathiyars. Colonial writings generally emphasized occupation and administrative classification, whereas community histories sought to recover historical dignity through alternative narratives of origin and identity. Consequently, the evolution of the term *Arunthathiyar* remains insufficiently examined as a process of social and political transformation.

This article examines the adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* through a qualitative analysis of documentary sources. It argues that the transition from occupational labels such as *Chakkiliyan*, *Madari*, *Pagadai* and *Thoti* to the collective identity *Arunthathiyar* represented more than a linguistic change. It constituted a process of identity reconstruction through which the community challenged historically imposed stereotypes, negotiated a dignified public identity and strengthened collective mobilization. By analysing colonial records, government reports, census documents, scholarly literature and community narratives, the article demonstrates how the politics of naming became an important strategy for social transformation among the Arunthathiyars.

The study contributes to the growing scholarship on caste, identity and social change by highlighting the relationship between nomenclature and community formation. It further demonstrates that the adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* should be understood not merely as an administrative or linguistic development but as an important historical process through which the community redefined its place within contemporary Tamil society.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative documentary research design to examine the historical evolution and adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* in Tamil Nadu. Documentary research is particularly suitable for investigating historical phenomena where evidence is primarily available through published records rather than direct observation or field-based data collection. As the study focuses on the historical development of community nomenclature and identity, secondary sources constitute the principal source of evidence.

The study draws upon a wide range of documentary materials, including colonial ethnographies, census reports, government committee reports, academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles and community-authored histories. Key sources include Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909), the Justice M. S. Janarthanam Committee Report (1985), Census of India publications, and scholarly works on caste, identity and social stratification. Community publications such as *Arunthathiyar Varalaru* were also consulted to understand indigenous perspectives on the origin and historical identity of the community.

The collected documents were analysed using qualitative content analysis and historical interpretation. The analysis focused on recurring themes related to community nomenclature, occupational identity, colonial classification, state recognition and identity reconstruction. Documentary evidence from different categories of sources was critically compared to identify areas of convergence, divergence and historical continuity. Rather than privileging a single narrative, the study adopts a comparative approach that situates competing interpretations within their respective historical and socio-political contexts.

The reliability of documentary evidence was assessed by considering the historical context, purpose and perspective of each source. Colonial ethnographies primarily reflected administrative and ethnographic interests, government reports emphasized policy concerns, while community-authored histories sought to recover collective memory and historical dignity. Recognizing these differences, the study triangulates evidence from multiple documentary sources to provide a balanced interpretation of the adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar*.

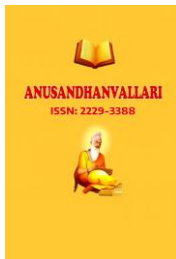
As a review-based study, the article does not seek to establish a definitive historical origin of the community. Instead, it critically synthesizes existing documentary evidence to examine how the term *Arunthathiyar* emerged as a collective identity and how its adoption reflects broader processes of caste, identity formation and social transformation in Tamil Nadu.

3. *Arundhati* to *Arunthathiyar*

The adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* represents a significant shift in the collective identity of the community in Tamil Nadu. The term emerged during the early twentieth century, around the 1920s, as a self-chosen alternative to caste names such as *Chakkiliyan*, *Pakadai*, and *Mathari*, which were widely perceived as derogatory and stigmatizing. By adopting the name *Arunthathiyar*, the community sought to assert a more dignified collective identity and challenge the social stigma historically attached to traditional caste labels.

The name *Arunthathiyar* is commonly believed to have been derived from the mythological figure **Arundhati**, the wife of the sage Vasishta, who occupies a revered place in Hindu tradition as the embodiment of chastity, virtue, devotion, and moral integrity. According to community narratives, Arundhati's unwavering commitment to righteousness and her miraculous powers earned her divine recognition, and she was later elevated to the status of a celestial star. The ritual of newly married Hindu couples viewing the stars of Vasishta and Arundhati symbolises marital fidelity and harmonious family life, further reinforcing her cultural significance.

Many Arunthathiyars believe that they are descendants of Arundhati and regard her as their tutelary deity, also identified in some traditions with Mathamma or Matangi. This origin narrative is widely shared among community leaders and social organisations working for the welfare of the Arunthathiyars. Although the account is



mythological rather than historical, it has played a crucial role in constructing a positive collective identity by linking the community with a respected and sacred figure in Hindu mythology.

The adoption of the name *Arunthathiyar* therefore represents more than a change in nomenclature. It reflects a conscious process of identity reconstruction, social assertion, and the rejection of caste-based stigma. Through this symbolic transformation, the community sought greater dignity, social recognition, and collective solidarity, making the term *Arunthathiyar* an important marker of self-respect and social change in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

4. Historical Background of Community Nomenclature

The historical nomenclature of the Arunthathiyars reflects the complex interaction of occupation, language, regional migration and caste hierarchy in South India. Prior to the widespread adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar*, the community was identified by several names that varied across regions and administrative contexts. These designations were neither uniform nor static; rather, they evolved in response to local socio-cultural conditions, occupational specialization and changing political circumstances. An examination of these historical names provides important insights into the processes through which caste identities were constructed, classified and eventually transformed.

One of the earliest and most widely used names was Chakkiliyan (also spelled *Chakkiliyar*), which was prevalent throughout Tamil-speaking regions. Colonial ethnographers, including Thurston (1909), consistently used this designation to describe communities engaged in leather processing, footwear production and carcass disposal. While the term initially denoted an occupational group, it gradually acquired broader social significance because these occupations were regarded as ritually polluting within the traditional caste order. Consequently, *Chakkiliyan* came to represent not only a hereditary occupation but also a socially stigmatized caste identity associated with untouchability and exclusion.

In the western and northern districts of Tamil Nadu, as well as in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, sections of the community were identified as Madiga. This designation reflected the Telugu linguistic background of many families who migrated into Tamil Nadu during different historical periods, particularly under the Vijayanagara and Nayaka administrations. Although *Madiga* and *Chakkiliyan* referred to communities sharing similar occupational roles, the distinction illustrates the linguistic and regional diversity that existed within what later became recognized as the Arunthathiyar community. Other names, including Madari, Pagadai and Thoti, similarly reflected regional variations in language, settlement and occupational specialization.

The existence of multiple names demonstrates that the community was never socially homogeneous. Different historical experiences, migration patterns and linguistic affiliations contributed to the emergence of distinct local identities. Nevertheless, despite these regional differences, the various sub-groups occupied comparable positions within the caste hierarchy and experienced similar forms of social exclusion. Their common association with occupations considered ritually impure ensured that, irrespective of regional nomenclature, they remained subject to discrimination, untouchability and economic marginalization.

Colonial administration further reinforced these identities through systematic classification. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, British officials attempted to categorize Indian society through census operations, ethnographic surveys and district manuals. Communities were classified primarily according to hereditary occupation, ritual status and linguistic affiliation, with limited attention to historical change or indigenous perceptions of identity. As Dirks (2001) argues, colonial knowledge transformed caste from a flexible social institution into a rigid administrative category. Consequently, occupational names such as *Chakkiliyan* and *Madiga* became institutionalized within official records, educational documents and administrative practices, reinforcing their social legitimacy and perpetuating existing hierarchies.



The persistence of occupational nomenclature also reflected the ideological foundations of the caste system. According to Dumont (1980), caste hierarchy was organized around the principle of purity and pollution, whereby occupations associated with leather, death and sanitation were positioned at the lowest level of the ritual order. Communities engaged in these occupations inherited not only their professions but also the social stigma attached to them. Thus, occupational names gradually lost their descriptive function and became enduring symbols of caste-based inequality. The repeated use of these labels in both everyday interactions and official records strengthened the association between hereditary labour and community identity.

The transition from multiple occupational names to the collective designation *Arunthathiyar* therefore cannot be understood as a simple linguistic modification. Rather, it emerged as a response to the historical burden associated with caste-based nomenclature. Community leaders, social reformers and intellectuals increasingly recognized that the continued use of occupational labels reinforced discrimination and fragmented collective identity. The search for a common and dignified name reflected broader aspirations for equality, social recognition and community solidarity.

The evolution of community nomenclature also mirrors wider processes of identity formation among marginalized communities in India. Similar movements can be observed among several Scheduled Caste groups that abandoned historically derogatory names in favour of identities emphasizing dignity, cultural heritage and collective assertion. In this broader context, the eventual adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* represents part of a larger process through which caste communities sought to redefine themselves beyond the constraints of hereditary occupation and socially imposed identities.

Understanding the historical development of community nomenclature is therefore essential for interpreting the significance of the term *Arunthathiyar*. The earlier names reveal how caste identity was historically shaped by occupation, language and administrative classification, while the emergence of a unified designation reflects the community's efforts to reconstruct its identity in response to changing political, social and cultural conditions. The transformation of nomenclature thus marks the beginning of a broader process of identity reconstruction that would later gain momentum through social reform movements, state recognition and community mobilization.

5. Colonial Construction of Occupational Identity

The colonial period marked a significant turning point in the construction and institutionalization of caste identities in South India. Although caste distinctions and occupational specialization existed long before the British rule, colonial administration fundamentally altered the way communities were identified, classified and documented. Through census operations, ethnographic surveys and administrative reports, colonial officials transformed flexible and regionally varied social identities into standardized categories that were subsequently incorporated into official governance. For communities such as the Arunthathiyars, this process reinforced occupational identities and contributed to the long-term institutionalization of caste-based stigma.

British administrators regarded caste as one of the main organizing principles of Indian society and sought to classify every community according to occupation, language, religion and ritual status. Ethnographic works such as Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909) became influential reference texts for colonial governance. Thurston described communities identified as *Chakkiliyan*, *Madiga*, *Madari*, *Pagadai* and *Thoti* primarily in terms of their traditional occupations, particularly leather processing, footwear production, removal of dead animals and sanitation services. These descriptions emphasized hereditary labour as the defining characteristic of the community while paying limited attention to its historical evolution, internal diversity or cultural traditions.

The colonial census further strengthened this occupational approach to caste classification. Census officials sought to organize India's diverse population into discrete and mutually exclusive categories for administrative convenience. Communities were classified according to hereditary occupation and social rank, producing a rigid

bureaucratic framework that often ignored regional variations and changing occupational practices. As Nicholas Dirks (2001) argues, colonial knowledge did not merely record caste; it actively reshaped caste by converting fluid social identities into fixed administrative categories. The repeated use of occupational labels in census records, district manuals and official correspondence gave these identities institutional legitimacy and normalized their use in public administration.

For the communities later identified collectively as Arunthathiyars, colonial classification had far-reaching social consequences. Occupational labels such as *Chakkiliyan* were no longer understood simply as descriptions of economic activity but became official markers of caste identity. The association between hereditary occupations and social status was reinforced through administrative documentation, educational records and legal procedures. Consequently, the community's identity became inseparable from occupations that were already regarded as ritually impure within the caste hierarchy.

This process also reflected the broader ideology of purity and pollution that structured caste relations in South Asia. Dumont (1980) explains that occupations involving leather, animal carcasses and sanitation occupied the lowest positions within the ritual hierarchy because they were associated with physical and symbolic impurity. Colonial administration largely accepted these indigenous classifications rather than challenging them. By organizing communities according to occupations already considered polluting, colonial records unintentionally reinforced existing social prejudices and contributed to the persistence of untouchability within modern administrative institutions.

The institutionalization of occupational identity also influenced public perceptions of the community. Official descriptions produced by colonial ethnographers were widely cited in subsequent administrative reports, academic studies and policy documents. These representations shaped how the community was understood by the state as well as by wider society. The repeated emphasis on hereditary labour obscured the diversity of occupations, migration histories and cultural practices that existed within the community. As a result, caste identity became increasingly defined by inherited occupation rather than by historical experience or social transformation.

The legacy of colonial classification extended well beyond the colonial period. Even after Independence, many administrative records and public documents continued to employ occupational labels inherited from colonial ethnography. Although constitutional reforms abolished untouchability and introduced affirmative action policies, historically embedded nomenclature remained influential in everyday social interactions and bureaucratic practice. The persistence of these labels demonstrated that legal reforms alone could not eliminate the symbolic power associated with caste-based naming.

It was within this historical context that community leaders and social reformers began to challenge occupational nomenclature. They argued that names such as *Chakkiliyan* perpetuated historical stigma by continually associating the community with hereditary occupations regarded as degrading. The search for an alternative collective identity therefore represented an effort to break the symbolic connection between caste and occupation. Rather than accepting externally imposed classifications, the community sought to define itself through a name that reflected dignity, unity and historical recognition.

The colonial construction of occupational identity thus provides the historical foundation for understanding the emergence of the term *Arunthathiyar*. The adoption of a new collective designation was not simply an administrative modification but a response to centuries of occupational categorization and social exclusion. It represented an attempt to redefine community identity beyond the restrictive framework established through colonial ethnography and traditional caste hierarchy. The next section examines how the term *Arunthathiyar* emerged as a unifying identity and became an important instrument of social transformation and collective assertion.

6. *Arunthathiyars* - Identity Reconstruction and Collective Assertion

The adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* represents a landmark in the social and political history of one of Tamil Nadu's most marginalized Scheduled Caste communities. More than a change in nomenclature, it signified a conscious effort to reconstruct a collective identity free from the historical stigma associated with hereditary occupations. The transition from occupational labels such as *Chakkiliyan*, *Madari*, *Pagadai*, *Thoti* and *Madiga* to the unified designation *Arunthathiyar* reflected broader processes of social reform, political mobilization and identity assertion that unfolded during the twentieth century.

Historically, the community had been identified through names derived from occupation or regional affiliation. These labels, while initially descriptive, gradually acquired derogatory meanings because they became inseparable from occupations regarded as ritually impure within the traditional caste hierarchy. As discussed earlier, colonial ethnographies and administrative records institutionalized these occupational identities, reinforcing social discrimination and limiting opportunities for social mobility. Consequently, many members of the community viewed the continued use of these names as a reminder of untouchability, exclusion and inherited social disadvantage.

The emergence of the term *Arunthathiyar* must therefore be understood within the wider context of post-Independence social change. The Constitution of India abolished untouchability under Article 17 and introduced affirmative measures to improve the educational, economic and political status of Scheduled Castes. These constitutional developments encouraged marginalized communities to question historically imposed identities and to seek greater social recognition through collective organization. Across India, several Scheduled Caste communities adopted new names that emphasized dignity rather than occupational status. The adoption of *Arunthathiyar* formed part of this broader movement towards identity reconstruction and social equality.

Community organizations, social reformers and educated members of the community played a significant role in promoting the new identity. They argued that occupational labels fragmented the community into several regional sub-groups and perpetuated social prejudice. A unified designation was therefore considered essential for strengthening community solidarity and enhancing political representation. The term *Arunthathiyar* gradually emerged as a collective identity encompassing various sub-groups previously identified separately under names such as *Chakkiliyan*, *Madiga*, *Madari*, *Pagadai* and *Thoti*. By transcending regional and linguistic differences, the new nomenclature fostered a stronger sense of shared history and common social experience.

The choice of the name *Arunthathiyar* was itself symbolic. Community scholars have proposed different interpretations regarding its origin. One widely accepted explanation associates the name with Arundhati, the revered woman in Hindu tradition known for virtue, wisdom and fidelity. According to this interpretation, adopting the name represented an attempt to replace stigmatized occupational identities with a culturally respected symbol. Another interpretation traces the term to the ancient Athiyar or Adhiyaman lineage of early Tamil society, suggesting that the community possesses a deeper historical connection to Tamil civilization than colonial ethnographies acknowledged. Although these interpretations differ in their historical basis, both reflect an effort to reconstruct community identity through narratives of dignity, antiquity and cultural legitimacy. From a sociological perspective, the significance of these narratives lies less in establishing definitive historical origins than in understanding how marginalized communities employ history and collective memory to negotiate identity and challenge dominant representations.

Government recognition played an equally important role in consolidating the adoption of the new identity. Official reports increasingly replaced earlier occupational labels with the collective designation *Arunthathiyar*, acknowledging the need for a unified administrative category. The Justice M. S. Janarthanam Committee Report (1985) was particularly significant in this regard. While examining the socio-economic conditions of the community, the Committee recognized the various constituent sub-groups under the broader identity of

Arunthathiyar and highlighted their distinct disadvantages within the Scheduled Caste population of Tamil Nadu. Such official recognition facilitated the inclusion of the collective name in government records, educational institutions and welfare programmes, thereby strengthening its institutional legitimacy.

The adoption of the term also had important political implications. A common identity enabled the community to articulate collective demands concerning education, employment, reservation, housing and political representation. Instead of advocating separately as regional sub-groups, members increasingly mobilized under the broader identity of *Arunthathiyar*, strengthening their visibility within state policy and public discourse. The emergence of community organizations advocating internal reservation and equitable distribution of welfare benefits further demonstrated how collective nomenclature became a foundation for political mobilization and social justice.

From a theoretical perspective, the transformation illustrates the relationship between naming and symbolic power. Bourdieu (1991) argues that the authority to classify and name social groups constitutes an important form of symbolic power because classification shapes social recognition and legitimacy. Historically, the Arunthathiyars were identified through names assigned by dominant social groups and reinforced through colonial administration. The adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* reversed this process by enabling the community to participate in defining its own public identity. Similarly, Jenkins (2014) distinguishes between external categorization and internal identification, emphasizing that collective identities emerge through the interaction of these two processes. The evolution of the term *Arunthathiyar* illustrates this dynamic: while earlier occupational labels reflected external classification, the new designation represented a consciously asserted collective identity grounded in self-recognition and community agency.

At the same time, the adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* should not be interpreted as the complete disappearance of earlier identities. Regional names continue to be used in some local contexts, particularly where linguistic and cultural distinctions remain significant. Moreover, debates regarding the historical origin of the term itself indicate that identity formation remains an evolving process rather than a completed transformation. Nevertheless, the widespread acceptance of the collective designation has substantially altered public discourse by shifting attention from hereditary occupation towards community identity, historical recognition and social rights.

The adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* therefore represents both symbolic and institutional transformation. Symbolically, it challenged the historical association between caste identity and occupations regarded as polluting, replacing inherited labels with a name that emphasized dignity and collective belonging. Institutionally, it facilitated administrative recognition, strengthened community mobilization and provided a common platform for pursuing educational advancement, political participation and social justice. The evolution of this collective identity demonstrates that caste nomenclature is neither fixed nor merely descriptive; rather, it is a dynamic social process shaped by history, power, resistance and community agency. The transformation from occupational labels to *Arunthathiyar* thus reflects a broader struggle for recognition through which the community has sought to redefine its place within contemporary Tamil society.

7. Discussion

The adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* reflects a broader process of identity reconstruction among one of Tamil Nadu's most marginalized Scheduled Caste communities. The analysis demonstrates that earlier labels such as *Chakkiliyan*, *Madiga*, *Madari*, *Pagadai* and *Thoti* were deeply embedded in hereditary occupations and gradually became markers of caste-based stigma. Colonial ethnographies and administrative classifications institutionalized these occupational identities, reinforcing social exclusion through official documentation and public discourse (Dirks, 2001; Thurston, 1909).

The emergence of the collective identity *Arunthathiyar* represented an important shift from occupation-based identification to a unified community identity emphasizing dignity, equality and collective recognition. As

Anandhi (2013) in her work *The Mathammas: Gender, caste and the politics of intersectionality in rural Tamil Nadu*, argues that caste identities are continuously reshaped through changing political and economic conditions rather than remaining historically fixed. The adoption of *Arunthathiyar* illustrates this dynamic by demonstrating how marginalized communities actively negotiate identities that challenge inherited forms of social exclusion.

The adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* also reflects broader processes of identity reconstruction among marginalized communities in India. As Nithya Rao (2005) in her work *Women's lives and livelihoods in rural India: A perspective from the semi-arid regions* argues, caste continues to shape access to livelihoods, education and social mobility despite constitutional safeguards. The persistence of structural inequalities demonstrates that symbolic changes in identity must be accompanied by socio-economic transformation. Within this context, the collective identity *Arunthathiyar* represents not only a change in nomenclature but also an effort to negotiate dignity, equality and social recognition.

The findings therefore demonstrate that community nomenclature is more than a symbolic change. The adoption of *Arunthathiyar* represents a collective effort to redefine identity beyond hereditary occupation while strengthening social recognition and political assertion. Although debates regarding the historical origin of the term continue, its contemporary significance lies in its ability to unite diverse sub-groups under a common identity and provide a foundation for community mobilization and social transformation.

8. Conclusion

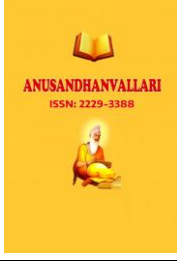
This study examines the adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* through a qualitative analysis of documentary sources, including colonial ethnographies, government reports, census publications and community histories. It argues that the transition from occupational labels to the collective identity *Arunthathiyar* was more than a change in nomenclature; it represented a process of identity reconstruction aimed at overcoming historical stigma and promoting collective dignity.

The study highlights the role of colonial classification in reinforcing occupational identities and demonstrates how post-independence social reforms, state recognition and community initiatives contributed to the acceptance of a unified identity. The adoption of the term *Arunthathiyar* strengthened community solidarity and facilitated greater social and political recognition.

Although this study is based on documentary evidence, it provides a foundation for understanding the relationship between caste, nomenclature and identity formation. Future research integrating archival records, oral histories and ethnographic fieldwork can further enrich the understanding of the historical evolution and contemporary significance of the *Arunthathiyar* identity.

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