CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND FACTUAL EVENTS

Peace and violence co-exist in all societies. No part of today’s world is left untouched by violence. The form and intensity of violence vary, and they are conditioned by socio-economic, geo-political, and situational factors. Of late, violence has crossed national borders, and it has assumed international dimension and focus. The participants in violence, in whichever society they belong to, are drawn from various sections of population. Violent acts manifest in organised forms, and there is increasing networks among the forces instigating violence chiefly due to communication networks. The perpetrators of violence now have increasing access to modern weapons, and ultimately, violent acts cause serious effects on individuals and society. No doubt, violence has outgrown the mechanisms of its resolution or management.

While the culture of violence has become a notorious global affair, the caste based violence is peculiar to the Indian society, and within region, it largely remains as a territorial social issue. In Tamil Nadu in particular, certain districts are noted as sensitive in this regard.

The issues and actors involved in caste based violence/conflicts can be categorised as heterogeneous and varied. The recent episodes of caste conflicts and violence in Tamil Nadu sparked off from trivial events such as violation of the rule of caste-endogamy, damage caused to the statues of caste leaders, breach of normative
customary practices, etc. Whatever may be the cause, at times, the implications of caste conflicts are beyond estimation. A case in point is Naraikinaru, a village in south of Tamil Nadu, wherein caste conflicts resulted in destruction of every kind such as murder, loss of livelihood, destruction of properties, and mass migration of communities.

Some people even justify violence as means to achieve ends. Yet, it should not be allowed to continue for the sake of welfare of humanity as a whole. Whatever may be the causes, intensity and implications of caste conflicts, the issue of caste conflicts should be understood objectively with a view to resolve them at appropriate levels by adopting effective strategies.

Social Violence

Social violence is defined as a behavior that injures a person who does not want to be harmed. Robert Baron (1997) has focused on four salient features of violence: (a) behavior, (b) intention to harm (c) human being as a victim and aggressor and (d) reluctance of the victim to be harmed. Social violence refers to violence against one group by another. The cause may be religious, sectarian, social, caste or political differences. The above definition is applicable to group conflicts.

The social violence as understood by Janowitz, M(1969) covers both communal and commodity riots. Caste/communal violence refers to physical attack against one group by another; commodity riot refers to riot against property including damage, destruction and looting of shops, houses and other establishments. Thus
violence refers to both, offences against persons as well as property. It includes physical attack as well as violence of threat, slur and abuse.

Conceptualization of Violence: Some Theoretical Perspectives

The various theories of violence are briefly presented below:

Biological

John C. Brigham (1986) has pointed out that individual derives aggression from the animal instinct. It is due to genetic abnormality and extra sex chromosome that individual becomes aggressive. It is also reported that human beings by nature during fight or flight situation become aggressive. It may be due to parental influence, namely, hereditary, and lack of emotion. It is reported that the central nerve systems are aroused and there is a brain dysfunction involving anterior brain region. In 1968, Linus Pauling, a Noble Prize recipient for Chemistry, has considered physical constitutional defects as responsible for violence. But according to biochemical approach, faulty diet and abnormal concentration of some toxic substances, such as mercury adversely affects health, and cause violent behavior. However, there is no natural born violent individual, and hence, biological theory could not be accepted as valid.

Physiological

There are aggression centers in the brain which produce aggressive reaction. Thus different stimulation can produce different reactions. Alcohol produces pharmacological effects on the brain and increases the level of aggression, after
weakening the inhibition. Mental illness also affects the mind and causes deprivation and neurosis. Physical pain causes frustration and violence.

**Psychological**

This theory centers around personality of the individual. If a person is bored and lacks interest in himself and others, he feels insecure, and becomes violent. Such a feeling of insecurity has been learnt as a child, and due to parental reward and punishment practiced.

**Social Psychological Explanation**

John Brigham, a social psychologist, viewed that there are four vital elements in caste violence. Firstly, there is instigation to violence. Here, party politics and political leaders play a dominant role. The other reason is to satisfy ego and show off alleged martial caste that they are superior humans than the untouchables. The behavior of the aggressor is appreciated and he becomes a hero and protector of his community frustration, high arousal, anger, jealousy, low self awareness, and pain as well as perceived threats, attack and desire for revenge can lead to angry aggression.

The second group of factors relates to habit strength. This refers to past experience in which such violent behavior is not punished but on the contrary rewarded and that is why again and again it is stressed that caste violence be thoroughly investigated and the real culprits be arrested, and under no circumstances serious crime committed should be withdrawn from the trail of court to maintain so called peace.
The third factor is inhibition against violence. The person who participate in violence does not feel that he is doing a wrongful act as his values and attitudes have changed in favour of violence due to loss of self awareness and deindividualisation i.e.lowered feelings to his own action.

The last factor relevant for analysis is stimulus, that is, situational factors. During violence, the aggressor looks for weapon and what ever is available at that time is utilized. The stoning of victim or setting fire to houses or standing crops explain this part of behavior. The use of fire arms and bomb also offers stimulus for explosion. The availability of a victim is an important stimulus. During caste violence if a person innocently passes through an affected area, he is likely to be brutally killed, more so, if that victim is alone and stranger to that area. This explains as to why dead body is found at the out-skirts of the village, as a victim is readily available to the aggressors. The victim is killed as he is seen at wrong place and wrong time when the mob is looking for a victim to attack. Normally, police patrolling is not effective at such stray places, unknown to the police. The availability of alcohol to the aggressor is another important factor as individual inhibition is reduced after consumption of liquor.

**Prejudice and Discrimination**

Discrimination is a behavior borne out of prejudice, but it is not always true that only a prejudiced person will discriminate. There may be instances where a person without prejudice will also discriminate. Prejudice reflects emotions, sentiments and discrimination related to general behavior patterns within the social structure of culture. Prejudice is called as ‘diseased imagination’ by Fredrick Douglas.
Discrimination refers to favour or disfavor on the basis of the membership of a caste rather than on individual merits. Scarpitti Frank R. (1974) has mentioned five stages of discriminatory behavior (1) oral ethnic slur, (2) avoidance (3) segregation by exclusive housing, education etc. (4) physical abuse by attacking others and (5) extermination which means genocide.

Prejudice results lack of cooperation between different groups and it kills collective consciousness thereby affecting common sentiments and beliefs; Prejudice and discrimination affect social life, de-humanize victims and threaten the stability of the society.

**Social Learning Theory**

Albert Bandura (1977) has studied various variables affecting acquisition and maintenance of violence. He emphasizes observational learning and direct experience. The observational learning refers to what one sees around and picks out as model behavior and then remembers and practices. The three major sources of social learning are family, subculture and symbolic modeling. Direct experience with violence reinforces the activity. There are models which motivate violence, through stimulus-enhancing functions. The aversive experiences and incentive inducements also encourage violence. The other two direct motivators are instructional control in which people are conditioned to obey orders, and delusive belief or system.
Sociological

The individual who wants to move upwards identify himself with higher caste and wants recognition but perceives threats from other caste groups. Such feeling of frustration, poverty and emotional deprivation leads to violence. The method adopted to control violence also encourages social violence as they are not adequately punished. The differential opportunity, violent culture, social alienation and distress out of multiple deprivation are also responsible for violence. The disorganized society also encourage violence. Thus discriminatory practice, prejudice, frustration and injustice are responsible for social violence.

Cultural Conflict Theory

(a) Due to industrial revolution, there is increased mobility, higher level of aspiration, acquiring more wealth equating with success and excellence, inevitably bringing cultural conflict within the various groups and undue stress on the individual as pointed out by Harold J.Vetter and Ira J.Severman (1986). In the modern industrial society, control by family, school and religion towards enforcement of standards of ethical behavior has weakened resulting to criminal behavior. In such a complex society with various groups connecting for wealth and status, norms are violated by different groups, thereby creating inevitable conflicts.

(b) Within in group, there are different subcultures with reference to norms, beliefs, attitudes and values, which may not be accepted by the other segments of the society. In the past, hard work was the criterion for
success, which has now been substituted with educational and occupational background. The people who migrate to large towns lack both educational and occupational background while competing for better jobs, and they are unable to improve the economic situation, giving rise to slums and their subculture. Their low socio-economic positions due to poor educational and occupational skills cause caste prejudices and discrimination. Thus violence is an inevitable part of a healthy society, as pointed out by Durkheim (1938). It is the price we have to pay for the freedom. He profounded ‘the theory of anomie’ which refers to conditions in which the rules governing a behaviour are not sufficiently clear to anticipate the action of others nor provide guidelines for their own action in certain situations.

(c) In a multiple social structure, there are increasing pressures on certain individuals who engage in behavior not approved by the society. Robert K.Merton (1957) has identified that in all societies (1) there are cultural goals providing direction for individual behavior, and (2) there are socially approved means for achieving these goals. The main goal in modern society is acquiring wealth and status, but due to lack of education and opportunities everyone cannot acquire wealth giving rise to non-conformal behavior. The individual may reject the goals and thereby become escapist, or he may reject the means and become a criminal, and may reject both the goal and means and substitute new goals and means and become a rebel and indulge in revolutionary activities. In multiple casteist and religious developing societies, such a situation occurs. Thus stress is laid down more on success without adequate emphasis on means utilized to achieve
the goals. Such an undue emphasis on acquiring wealth and status creates an alarming situation in the society, as there is pressure for success due to ambition. The undue emphasis on success without providing an opportunity encourages to adopt illegal, violent and criminal methods and form group of criminals who accept such behaviors and value systems.

(d) Albert Cohen (1955) has formulated the concept of delinquency and status frustration. He explained that in a working class atmosphere, the middle class standards to evaluate performance impairs the ability for achievement giving rise to a situation of stress. Delinquent boys reject the middle class standards and develop a subculture opposite to the middle class value and behave maliciously, and negatively for immediate gains. Such stressful violence encourages more violence.

(e) The disparity between expected goals and actual opportunities results in discontent and the individual either blames himself by resorting to solitary solutions or blames society or other groups as scapegoat and avail illegitimate opportunity by indulging to criminal and violent activities. The individual resorts to methods of toughness and smartness, like excitement and believes in external locus of control (fate) as pointed out by Walter B.Miller(1958).

(f) Finally, situational factors are responsible for violence. The role of provocation, verbal and physical attack, i.e. insults and humiliation, and its reciprocal violence should not be under estimated. The availability of weapons, missiles such as stones, the presence and status of victims and their capacity to provide leadership and experience gained earlier are relevant factors for violence. Dolf Zill Mann’s (1978) excitation transfer
theory in which, residual excitement transfers to new situations and energizes any response in a new setting is an equally important concept to understand violence. The role of mass media including T.V. radio and newspapers in promoting violence is to be taken note of. The weather, noise, pollution, consumption of alcohol and drugs are the other factors to be taken into consideration. Among various profound theories discussed above, the cultural conflict and situational theories are more appropriate for study of caste violence.

Formation of Groups

George Humans (1961) has pointed out that groups are formed on the basis of activities, interactions, and sentiments. Persons with similar attitudes, form or join a group for attaining common objectives and goals based on reward and cost. Caste based groups are formed for the purpose of security or social reasons. The highly cohesive groups are always powerful with a positive leadership. The group may be composed either formally or informally and the latter with dysfunctional aspects of spreading false rumors during riots. The group is influenced by the leader through his persuasive communication. The group prefers its in-group members and considers itself superior than others. During aggression there is relation-free and censure-free anonymity among the members; perceived external threat and injustice aid in maintaining identity of the group, and they at times attack the police for alleged support to the opposite group. Though a caste group may help solidarity and boost confidence among the members based on cultural pride, it encourages more divisions thereby encouraging caste conflicts. The reference group for the members are caste fanatics, who encourage casteism; social learning is more relevant in that group.
Intelligent persons in the group lose their identity for fear of alienation under pressure from the peer group and they are led by emotion of others. Face to face contact generates loyalty among members. During the riot, there may be adhoc groups temporarily formed at the particular occasion or on-going group for establishing a sense of responsibility with the caste. In democracy, there is identity crisis and people want to join the group to establish identity based on language, caste, religion, status, sex or any other interest.

**Inter-group Caste Violence : Some Insightful Observations**

After considering the various theories of individual violence, an attempt is made to examine the intergroup-caste violence. Caste violence takes place as groups feel disadvantaged due to great expectations and frustration, and the failure of peaceful efforts. Violence is not the property of one group or individual. Violence is perceived irrationally as strength by perverse anti-democrats. Group violence is a “major aberration in a democratic society,” (U.S.National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence, 1969:57) In a democratic society free mobility is conducive for carrying out violent acts with the aid of manpower, materials including lethal weapons and support of mass media. Group violence is utilized by “groups seeking power, by groups holding on to power and by groups in the process of losing power”. The commission further points out that though right to protest is an indispensable element of a free society, group violence is not to persuade “but to compel” the opposite group and government. The nation has yet to acquire the status of body of law-abiding citizens. The lack of respect or fear of law, further accelerates the group violence. The tough and aggressive style encourages the youth to join the group violence.
History reveals that group violence has achieved some of its objectives, for examples the notable success of trade union movement and gain for the workers. The use of excessive force to repress group violence may contain violence temporarily, but not diminish it. In an open society the response of political and social system to such organized group violence determines further violence. The continued violence is counter productive and may result loss of sympathy among it supporters. The continued violence will disintegrate the nation and practice of violence will encourage further violence. Therefore, group violence should be put down firmly and immediately.

**Social Stratification: A Conceptual Framework**

Besides being a fundamental reality and a fact of life, social stratification is a sensitive subject as it refers to social ranking of people in high and low positions in society. At times it seems that social ranking is deterministic or one-dimensional, but in reality it is multi-faceted and multi-causal. Caste, class, race, ethnicity, etc., are certainly different forms of social inequality, but what is apparent in them is not found in substance. Caste is not just a system of social stratification based on ritual purity and impurity of people, things and occupations. Economic and power dimensions have also been the central foci of the caste system. Class and ethnicity are also found embedded in each other, sometimes distinction between these two even gets blurred.

Yogendra singh (1977) observes in his book on Social Stratification in India, that: The theoretical and methodological issues which one observes in the studies of social stratification in India relate mainly to formulation of conceptual schemes and operationalization of these schemes through indicators of status, levels of equality,
occupational differentiation or degree of homogeneity and heterogeneity of groups in status hierarchy and of interactional variables such as pollution-purity (through exchange of food articles, codining, etc.), dominance, fusion, fission, etc.

Singh finds systematic theories such as functionalism and Marxism more powerful than the conceptual schema. Using a two-dimensional property space in the context of caste, all approaches are classified by Singh as universalistic-particularistic and cultural-structural. Singh analyzes caste as a universal reality and not as a typical Indian social reality on the one hand, and as a cultural/ideological system versus a system of social relationships on the other. The conceptual schemes like the closed and a open, and segmentary and organic systems of the caste stratification (Bailey 1963; Beteille 1966), also fall under this broad rubric of the functionalist analysis.

Studies of class stratification in particular have used the Marxist models employing interactional categories and concepts. Ram Krishna Mukherjee (1957), Daniel Thorner (1976) and several others have studied agrarian relations in interactional terms focusing upon the nature of the mode production in Indian agriculture.

**Caste, Hierarchy and Power**

Hierarchy and power are the dominant topoi informing interrogations of caste. Dumont (1972) set the scene with his assertion that in India homo is hierachicus. His highly influential study defined caste in terms of a hierarchical system structured along the dichotomy of pure/impure. His essentialised description, however, was
criticised for overstatement of the consensual nature of social rankings, for missing the complexity of caste relations and for ignoring historical changes.

While Dumont's theory of caste has been rejected, questions of hierarchy, power and conflict continue to occupy a central position in discussions of caste. This is also true for research on scheduled castes. Reacting to Dumont, scholars have stressed that the notion of a single caste hierarchy has no universal appeal. Judgments about caste hierarchy vary depending on who makes them. Like all other castes, Dalits express pride in their heritage. This is reflected impressively in origin myths, which recollect how "untouchable" castes lost their high status through foolishness, treason, chicanery or self-sacrifice. Scheduled Castes refuse to view themselves as less worthy, projecting an image of pure origin and expressing the hope of regaining their rightful status in the future. In recent years the debate has turned to the political assertion of Scheduled Castes. There are detailed accounts of the successful rise of Dalit parties since the 1980s. We find elaborate reflections on reservation politics and research on the connection between local caste traditions and political mobilization. The main thrust of the debate is summed up succinctly by Dipankar Gutpa (2004; 2005), who contends that in the political arena caste has moved from an assertion of hierarchy to a triumph of identity. Caste continues to constitute a platform for competition. However, in their new guise, caste assertions and caste alliances are designed to supply numbers and deliver political influence and economic empowerment.
Caste System in Tamil Nadu

The indigenous social stratification among the early Tamils was based on physiographic distinctions, which led to different occupations. The five-fold divisions Palai, Kurinchi, Mullai, Marudam and Neydal appear clearly in the Sangam sorks. The residence of the regions came to be known respectively as the Maravar, Kuravar, Ayar, Ulavar and Paradavar.

Castes classified on the basis of racial origin have been made by certain writers. V.A Smith thought that the Villavar or the bowmen were akin to Bhils and that they, as well as the Minavar or fishermen represented the earliest inhabitants and that they were akin to the aboriginal tribes in Malaya, Australia and other countries.

M. Srinivasa Aiyangar stated that the Valayar, Pallar, Sanar, Idaiyar, Maravar, Paraiyar, Kaikkolar, Kammalar, Vaniyar, Kallar and Ambalakkarar were either Nagas or were descendents of a mixed race of Nagas and Dravidians. He holds that Kuravas alone represented the pure Nagas. This seems to be an over simplification of a complex problem. The Nagas appear in various places of India and at different stages of her history. Though no satisfactory explanation of their origin has been provided, it seems that they were of proto-Austroloid stock. There appears to have been an admixture of this element with the Dravidian population. To differentiate the Aryan from the others in South India is not also an easy affair. There had occurred such a admixture of the Aryan and Dravidian elements that except in respect of a small minority, the demarcation is not historically valid. A certain measure of wishful thinking on the one hand, and an attempt to read the present into the past on the other,
have vitiated the proper approach to the study of this question of caste, its origin and development.

Tamil Nadu has been known for rigidity and complexity of caste structure. The caste rules are observed rigidly by the various upper, middle and lower castes. Historically, caste feelings became strong among the Tamils during the Pullava (300-630 A.D) and Chola (850-1279 A.D) periods, and are still dominant in many respects.

The peculiarity of caste system of Tamil Nadu is the grouping of castes as the Right-hand (Valangai) and the Left-hand (Idangai) noticed in the early eighteen century. According to Senart, these two were two sectors corresponding roughly to agricultural and artisan castes. Ghurye notes the right hand faction had sixty castes in it and the left hand ones had only six.

During the past few decades, due to the political and economic factors, there occurred some changes in the caste structure of Tamil Nadu. The various caste groups in Tamil Nadu may be categorised under three broad divisions such as Brahmins, non-Brahmins and the Scheduled castes. Among the Brahmins there exists various endogamous divisions. The non-Brahmin segment consists of various Sudra castes, besides certain powerful landowning caste groups but occupy differential status positions in the social circle of the Tamil society.

The Scheduled castes are the Adi-Dravidars some of whom are Pallars, Paraiahs, Sackilis etc. They were once considered untouchables by the so called high
caste groups. People belonging to this disprivileged section also observe their own caste rules.

As a consequential effect of industrialisation and urbanization, a considerable proportion of Brahmins in rural areas of Tamil Nadu migrated towards Metropolitan centres and settled there. It has paved way for transfer of power and position from the hands of Brahmin Landlords to other locally dominant non-brahmins such as Vellalars, Vanniars and Kallars.

Andre Beteile who studied the relations among the Brahmins, non-brahmins, and the scheduled castes has referred to such transfer of economic and political power from one dominant caste (the Brahmins) to another (the Kallars and the Vellalar groups of Castes among the non-Brahmins). Some other scholars like K.C.Alexander have also noted the increasing dominant character of the local non-Brahmin peasant castes in Tamil Nadu. To support this view, Hutton reports as early in 1931 Kallars of Ramnad propounded eleven strictures for the depressed classes in that area.

It is interesting to note here that in Tamil Nadu the competition for status is often high between the castes which are adjacent to each other in the hierarchy. The Vellalars in Tamil Nadu often attempted to raise their status equal to that of the Brahmins. By giving up meat eating and by wearing sacred thread and having their own family priests and performing rituals and ceremonies many Vellala castes have been Brahminised.

Hardgrave argues that Nadars or Shanars of Tirunelveli fought for the status of Kshatriyas. The Maravars and the Nadars always hated each other. Among the
untouchable castes, the Pallars always claimed a higher status than the paraiahs. The Paraiahs demanded equal status with the Pallars. The competition for higher status often resulted in conflicting relationship between the castes involved.

**Depressed Classes in Tamil Nadu**

The bulk of the depressed classes population in Tamil Nadu consisted of Pallars and Paraiah. Spatially they were segregated and forced to live at the periphery of the village just as the social position of the Harijans was at the periphery of the Hindu social order. Their settlement was called by a segregate term ‘Cheri’ and Cheris were viewed as ritually polluting to all caste Hindus.

In fact they were kept in a servile position. Thurston notes that in times prior to British rule, the whole Paraiah community, without exception, were slaves of the superior castes. Even today some of these people are being employed as ‘Pannaials’ (attached labour) by the land holding caste Hindus. They were compelled to take up jobs which were considered to be mean and polluting to all the upper castes. The three communal servants viz. the grave diggers (Vettiyan), Watchman (Talayari) and scavengers (Thotty) are exclusively from the paraiah community.

In south of Tamil Nadu, the lower sudra castes such as Nadars suffered all the degradation of a lower caste. They faced numerous social disabilities and economic hardships.

The persons of depressed classes in Tamil Nadu were not permitted to approach those of higher status, and fixed distance was prescribed for each caste.
Position of Depressed Classes in Tamil Nadu during the British Period

History shows that in Madras Presidency the British administrators took special interest on uplifting the Paraihans. In the state of Travancore and Madras, the British Government took efforts to abolish the institutions of slavery. Thurston, points out that in 1792, the year in which British rule commenced, a proclamation was issued against dealing with slavery.

The Western education and the technology brought by the British government had an impact on society. White collar jobs were thrown open to all eligible persons, without reference to caste. But certain sphere of institutional living (sphere of religion, and personnel law governing family, kinship, property and succession) remained intact under the external impact. It is essential to note here that the British government tried to uplift the depressed classes and at the same time their laws permitted traditional caste practices to a large extent. The Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850 introduced by the government did not have much impact on the practice of caste inequalities. G.S.Ghurye feels that the Act did not remove the civil disabilities existing between castes but facilitated conversion to another religion or admission to another caste.

The religious policy of the British government was more or less protective in nature. The British government did not want to touch the practice of Hindu social order in Indian society. M.N.Srinivas thinks that the varna model became more popular during the British period. He states “--- it is my hunch that the Varna model became more popular during the British period as a result of variety of forces”.
O’Malley holds the view that the British government, being an alien government, was naturally reluctant to interfere with the customs based on religion.

The Madras Manual of Administration described the Pariahs of the Presidency as a community of heredity slavers whom the British government had freed concomitant legal disabilities but who were still at a low depth of social degradation. Though the British government introduced certain measures to improve the conditions of the depressed classes, it had no genuine intention to bring about a real social change in the lives of people belonging to the depressed classes.

Movements for the Upliftment of the Depressed Classes in Tamil Nadu

During the 19th and 20th centuries several reform and revolutionary movements arose to end the caste system. But historically, every attempt to reform Hinduism or to attack on caste system in Tamil Nadu has not produced much positive results.

The Hindu reform movements were rather a defensive reaction to the missionary influence among the depressed castes. The Arya Samaj, founded in 1875, by Swami Dayanand Saraswathi, appeared in some of the strategic regions of Tamil Nadu where Christianity began to grow. Arya Samaj attempted to rectify the defects of rigidity within the Hinduism by giving a call to go back to Vedas. Arya Samaj sponsored a special programme ‘Shuddhi’. The shuddhi aimed at reconversion of Christian and Muslim converts into the fold of reformed Hinduism. In North India Arya Samaj became a mass movement with its programme of Shuddhi. But in South
India, notably in Tamil Nadu, Arya Samaj had very little impact. In Tamil Nadu, it was not a movement which devoted to elevate the untouchables. It was not able to bring about social equality among its adherents.

The Theosophical Society founded in 1875 in Newyork, came to Madras in 1878. Annie Besant took the lead of the society and started working among the depressed classes. The Madras Depressed Classes Mission was established in Madras in 1909 with the objective of educating lower castes and removing social disabilities. But the work of this Association did not bring about any radical changes in the outlook of depressed classes.

**Mass Conversion**

Conversions from Hinduism to non-Hindu religions have been a regular feature in Indian Society. Pickett’s study shows that the mass movements in India occurred among people who felt themselves oppressed and exploited.

Several notable mass movements erupted in Tamil Nadu, and they were for freedom from oppression and social restrictions. The Christian missionaries always found the southern part of Tamil Nadu as a fertile region for their religious conversion activities. This was due to the peculiar situation which prevailed in that region.

There arose a greatest man movement among the Paravars (fishermen caste) in 1532 in Tamil east coast. At this time about 20,000 Paravars had been converted
en bloc to Roman Catholic Church. In Madurai, many Sudra and Paraiah castes were converted to Christianity by the Jesuit missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries.

By 1700, there was a Christian community of 10,000 in Madurai. Among the Nadars, the Church Missionary Society at Tirunelveli and the London Missionary Society in South Travancore came to work, and they were successful in converting 10,000 Nadars into the Protestant Church between 1820-35.

Conversions towards Islam also took place. The Muslim missionaries brought in by the invaders carried out peaceful means of mass conversions. A section of Muslims in Tamil Nadu called ‘Ravuttans’ (they are now found in Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Madurai and North Arcot districts of Tamil Nadu) were converted in groups by the missionary – Syyid Nathar Shah.

Though proselytisation activities including material inducement could be cited as causes for the mass movements, many of the mass conversion movements arouse as protest movements attacking against the evil socio-religious customs and practices.

**Socio-Political Awakening: Non-Brahmin Movement**

Politics became the motive force for the non-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu. At first the revolt of the Non-Brahmins against the Brahmin domination led to the formation of Justice Party in 1917. In the beginning, the Justice party won the support of the depressed classes as a movement for democratic liberation. But after winning the election in 1920, the non-Brahmin upper castes like Vellala, Chetty, Naidu alienated the depressed classes.
During the Justice party’s rule, no member of depressed classes found admission into the central legislature. The people of depressed classes felt that the non-Brahmins replaced Brahmins in power and position.

The Self-Respect Movement (Swayam Mariyathai Iyakkam) was started in 1925 in Tamil Nadu by Ramaswami Naicker. This was an atheistic and anti-Brahmin movement which aimed at uplifting the non-Brahmin classes by uniting them against the Brahmin domination. Ramaswami Naicker later formed the Dravida Kazhagam in 1944 and the movement assumed political dimension. The anti-brahmin moment later developed into anti-Hinduism. The effect of the movement did not reach the southern districts of Tamil Nadu where the Brahminical supremacy was high.

Caste Conflicts in Tamil Nadu: A Historical Perspective

History reveals that in the early Tamil society, the clashes were between Right-Hand and Left-Hand divisions. It is believed that the origin of this conflict is traced to a dispute between Tamils involved in internal trade and Telugus engaged in overseas trade. In this dispute the intervention of Chola king was sought. Those who stood by the right side of the king became Right-Hand division and those who stood by the left side of the king became Left-Hand division. This view has been contested by recent researchers who hold the view that the locals who were controlling the land came to be classified as Right-Hand group and those who were engaged in manufacturing activities or artisans were considered Left-Hand group.

During the Chola period those who belong to Right-Hand caste group remained powerful. But the Left-Hand caste group began to dominate during the reign
of Vijayanagara rulers. According to Nilakanta Sastri, both caste groups had separate temples. The clashes that broke out during the rule of Kulothunga Chola resulted in setting fire to Raja Mahendra Chaturvedi Mangalam in Papanasam Taluk, Thanjavur District. When the East India Company commenced its rule Chennai became the epicenter of the deadly clashes of Right-Hand and Left-Hand groups. There were major riots in Black town in 1652, 1707 and 1789. Initially the British found it extremely difficult to maintain Law and Order in the face of such conflicts. However, since many of the disputes related to temple, they solved the issues by closing down the temples. Such Right-Hand and Left-Hand caste clashes died down after the consolidation of the British rule in India.

A new form of social violence broke out in the context of conversion of Hindu Nadars into Christianity. Nadars until the end of the 19th century were treated as untouchables. They were denied access to temples and to other public spaces. In view of the encouragement received from Christian Missionaries, Nadars took to Christianity in protest against the caste oppression of dominant communities. This made the upper caste people furious. They started attacking the Nadar converts who were forced to settle down in newly established colonies like Mudalur, Meignanapuram and Nazereth. Christianity and English education empowered Nadars. As Nadars could be easily converted, the Europeans tried to win over this community by taking them into confidence in trade and commerce. In view of the economic advancement of Nadars, they began to assert their rights to enter temples. Their attempts to enter the temples of Siva in Kamuthi, Sivakasi, Madurai and a few other places led to clashes with the upper caste people. Their assertive attitude was disliked by Thevars who could not accept the new found prosperity of Nadar community. The outcome was violent clashes between these two communities in
Sivakasi (1899) and Kamuthi (1918). Though the Nadars’ social movements were crushed, their aspirations found expression in the manifestos of Indian National Congress, a task also taken up by E.V.R. Periyar.

Following the footsteps of Nadars, the Dalits also began to assert their basic rights. By moving out of the country to work on plantations of Ceylon, Mauritius, Fiji and in Burma and Malaysia, they awakened to the world around. As a mark of protest they also changed their religious affinity, and also joined in the army in a big way.

Parayars had strong leaders such as M.C. Raja and Rettamalai Srinivasan who were voicing the grievances of all the Dalit caste groups through Adi-Dravida Welfare Association and in the Madras Legislative Council. As for Pallars, they had Perumal Peter as their leader who had returned from Malaysia and founded an organization for them. Thanks to the awareness created by Perumal Peter, the Pallars could refuse to do their traditional jobs. They also demanded wage hike as agricultural labours. In Thanjavur, agricultural labourers belonging to Dalit castes were organized on class lines. However, in Ramanathapuram district the clashing of Pallars as landless labourers with land controlling Maravars were treated as Law and Order problems.

In both the districts the conflict remained eternal. But because of agitations organized on class lines in Thanjavur, the agricultural labourers could make progress in their living conditions. In Ramanathapuram, because of caste twist given to the otherwise agrarian struggle, the Dalits could not achieve any material progress. In the 1950s when Immanuvel Sekaran resisted the caste oppression under the banner of the Congress Party, it was viewed as a direct challenge to Muthuramalinga Thevar who wielded enormous influence both among the Thevars and the Pallars. Immanuvel had
to die as a martyr in 1957 for the cause of liberation of Dalits from the age old caste tyranny. The tension prevailing in Thanjavur region came to an end with the killing of 44 persons, mostly children and women, in Keelvenmani in 1968.

Though the upsurge of Dalits was late in Tirunelveli, discontent was not wanting amongst Dalits. In 1944 the Pallars of Seethaikurichi under Uthumalai zamin converted towards Islam from Christianity. Arya Samaj, with the help of Thevars conducted demonstration against the conversion of Seethaikurich Dalits. This was precursor to Meenakshipuram conversion of 1981. Tirunelveli region experienced caste violence of unprecedented nature in the 1990s. The 1992 incident of police action as a repressive measure at Nalumoolaikinaru became a significant event in dealing with caste conflicts. The Supreme Court of India ordered for compensation to the victims.

The people of Kodiyankulam were relatively prosperous in view of their education and employment in the Middle East. Under the pretext of search for the accused and the weapons, the police conducted “Operation Venus”. After the operation, the police were accused of damaging the household articles and other precious belongings of the people of Kodiyankulam. The Kodiyankulam incident took place in the background of caste conflict of 1995 between Thevars and Pallars. The caste violence unleashed since then had continued to cover other districts as well. The estrangement between Thevars and Pallars reached such a stage that after the amendment of Tamil Nadu Panchayat Act (1996). In reserve constituencies, Dalits could not contest elections in Melavalavu, Pappakudi, Keeripatti of Madurai District. Those who dared to file nomination were murdered by the dominant Thevar caste people. Kundupatti of Dindigul district became another Kodiyankulam in 1998. The
Justice Murugesan Commission indicted the police and recommended suitable compensation for those affected by Police excesses.

Interestingly when there was caste conflagration in South Tamil Nadu, North Tamil Nadu remained incident free during this period. However, the emergence of a militant Vanniar caste outfit coinciding with the rise of Dalit Panthers Iyakkam (DPI) for Parayars, under the strong leadership of Ramadoss and Thol.Thirumavalavan respectively sharpened the cleavages between the two agricultural caste groups and deepened the crisis. The decision of DPI to field Thol.Thirumavalavan as a candidate against a Vanniar in Chidambaram constituency (1999) was the starting point for the ongoing conflicts in the region. The attacks and counter attacks of both the caste groups go unabated to this date.

**Dalits Assension in Tamil Nadu: The Role of Intellectuals**

C.Ayothidas was a great Tamil scholar. His writings reveal that he was a person well acquainted with Sanskrit, Pali, English and, of course, Tamil. He seems to have been well read in the philosophical thought of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity. He founded the Advaitananda Sabha in 1870 in the Nilgris, the Dravida Mahajana Sangham in 1881 and Chakya Buddhist Sangham in 1898 in Madras. A conference of the Dravida Mahajana Sangham was held on 1 December 1891 at Ooty. Resolutions were passed demanding civil rights, educational concessions, removal of certain objectionable rules in the Jail Manual and economic advancement in Government services including that of village officers. In 1892 the Depressed Caste leaders of Madras formed another organization under the name Adi Dravida Mahajan Sabha. Both the Dravida Mahajana Sangham and Adi Dravida
Mahajana Sabha worked together in the matters of common interest of the Depressed Castes.

The work of the Depressed Caste leaders in conjunction with that of the Christian missionaries bore fruit. The Government of Madras accepted the demands of the Depressed Caste leaders and issued favourable orders in the form of G.O.Nos.1010, 1010(A), Revenue dated 30 September 1892 and G.O.No.68, Education dated 1 February 1893 (hailed as the Magna Carta of Panchama education). Between 1891 and 1935 forty conferences and meetings were held in different parts of the Madras Presidency and the various thorny problems of the Depressed Castes were discussed publicly.

Further, the enlightened Depressed Caste leaders in Madras realized the need for launching journals through which they could ventilate their grievances to the Government, formulate favourable public opinion and of course educate their own brethren about their pitiable plight. Between 1869 and 1916 about a dozen magazines were run by the Depressed Caste leaders themselves: *Suriyodayam* - 1869; *Panchama* - 1871; *Dravida Pandian* (later *Dravidian*)-1885; *Andror Mitran* – 1886; *Maha Vikata Tutan* – 1888; *Paraiyan* – 1883; *Illaravolukkam* – 1898; *Puloga Vyasan* – 1900; *Tamilan* – 1907; *Dravia Kokilam* – 1907; and *Tamil Pen* - 1916. In the columns of these magazines writers like C.Ayothidas Pandithar, A.P.Periyasamy Pulavar, Pandit Munisamy, Rettamalai Srinivasan, John Rethinam, Muthuvira Pavalar, Tirumathy K.Swappaneswari Ammal and several others vehemently criticized casteism, communalism, Brahminism, Manu Dharma, Kalpa Sutra etc. They also took up the cudgels against social eveils that were rampant in Hindu society.
Ayothidas did much for the reconstruction of the history and culture of the Adi Dravidas through intensive research and study. His research convinced him that the Pariahs of Tamilnadu were the original inhabitants of this region and that their ancestral religion was Buddhism. He constructed and activated a Buddhist *weltanschauung vis-à-vis* the brahminical world-view and also used Buddhism as a normative creed against which the historical as well as the spiritual deceptions of Brahminical Hinduism could be measured. Ayothidas was more than convinced that the problems of the Pariahs could not be resolved without constructing a counter tradition which alone could explain the history and culture of the Dalits. He also felt the imperative need for condemning the Brahminical tactics which were basically responsible for the degradation of the Dalits. Ayothidas thus left ‘behind’ him a legacy of learning and tradition of critical political hermeneutics that was put to good use by those who came after him. This legacy and tradition proved inspiring to not only other Panchama intellectuals but also to the Self-Respectors.

Ayothidas’ example was emulated by a host of equally eminent Dalit intellectuals like G.Appaduraiar, Masillamani, Maduraiyar, Rettamalai Srinivasan, J.S.Kannappan, M.C.Raja, Mayor Sivraj, Mayor Sivashanmugam Pillai, Munisamy Pillai and Balagurusivam. They worked untiringly for the uplift of the Depressed Castes and for the promotion of their self-respect and self-consciousness long before the Justicities and Self-Respectors.

In the matter of social reform and social protest movements of the 19th century Tamilnadu the Dalit intellectuals were the pioneers. In the matter of communal G.O too the Depressed Castes set a precedent to the Justicites. As early as 1909 these leaders focused their view through C.Ayothidas and placed their demand for
communal representation in Governor’s Executive council, Army, Medical, Police, Railway and Educational services and Municipalities in accordance with the population of all the major communities in the Madras Presidency. It was the caste Hindus who were not prepared to concede communal representation to the Depressed Castes. Thus long before the formation of the Dravidian parties such as the Justice Party (1916), the Self-Respect Movement (1925), the Draviar Kazhagam (1944) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (1949), the Dalit intellectuals and Dalit leaders of Tamilnadu had raised their political voice for social justice in the 19th century itself.

**Assertiveness of Dalits : Some Recent Socio-Political Events**

Assertiveness of Dalits (Devendrakula Vellalar) was evidenced first in Ramanathapuram district. A contemporary Government report vividly recorded the events: ‘The movement of Adi-Dravidas towards their emancipation is almost a mass movement. At several places in the district (Ramnad) time – honoured obligations of degradation were thrown aside and the concerted efforts of higher caste to resist and suppressed movements lead to the situation which were with difficulty controlled by the police’. The defiant attitude of the Devendrakula Vellalar signalled social change in Ramanathapuram region.

On the contrary, in the present Tirunelveli and Thuthukudi districts where caste clashes of 1995 predominantly figured, such militancy was totally absent. A perusal of records has brought to light a few disputes, one at Keezhapattam village and the other at Kondanagaram, which were quickly settled by the police. Similarly, the Muthukulathur riots of 1957 in which Immanuel, a dalit leader, was said to have
murdered by the rival caste group had no great repercussion in the present Tirunelveli district.

The assertive dalit, thus, seems to be a recent phenomenon in Tirunelveli and Thuthukudi districts. A small section of the Devendrakula Vellalars who had for long remained landless agricultural labourers have been recently empowered to at least a small extent as a consequence of access to education and government jobs. The relative affluence of Kodiyan kulam, for instance, is explained by monetary repatriation from the gulf countries, where some of them have managed to find employment. Another dimension to the assertion of Devendrakula Vellalars is the emergence of political organizations among them. John Pandian’s Devendrakula Vellalar sangam, the militant Thiyagi Immanuel Peravai (named after the martyr of 1957 Muthukulathur events) and Krishnaswamy’s outfit Federation of Devendrakula Vellalars organizations have to a great extent politicized the Devendrakula Vellalars.

An important feature of 1995 riots was, for the first time in this part of Tamil Nadu, the Devendrakula Vellalars who chronically suffered deprivation and distress responded to upper-caste violence. While earlier generation of them may have taken discrimination lying down, the new breed of youth, especially with the backing of caste organisations, have attempted to defend themselves and even counter-attack. It should be noted, however, that wherever Devendrakula Vellalars are dependent on Maravar peasants for livelihood, they have tended to remain submissive. Similar is the case of Parayars and Chakkiliyars, two dalit castes which are a minority in the region.
There was no state-wide caste organisation to fight for the interest of the Pallars until 1967 when Tamil Nadu Devendrakula Vellalar Sangam with Madurai as headquarters was started. The proclaimed objectives were to strive for educational development as well as the economic progress of the community by forging unity among the caste people all over the state. The organisation could not make such headway and hence the need for the birth of similar organisation with Tiruchirappalli as headquarters in 1983. The activities of this Association are brought to light by its monthly journal Indirar Kural.

The new-found assertiveness amongst Pallars is traced to attempts made by the Dalits to take part in mainstream party politics. The Pallars began to contest elections to the state legislature exclusively on their political platform as early as 1970s. In 1977, Perayoor Muniyasamy lost the Muthukulathur Constituency only by a margin of 400 votes. The murder of a Pallar leader, a school teacher, Chelladurai in 1982 caused a void which was filled by John Pandian of Tirunelveli who found the All India Devendrakula Vellalar Munnetra Sangam in 1983.

In the meantime K.Krishnaswamy, a medical doctor in Coimbatore, had floated his Tamil Nadu Federation of Devendrakula Vellalars Sangam in 1985. It took ten years for him come to political limelight, K.Krishnaswamy’s Devendrakula Vellalar Federation, John Pandian’s Devendrakula Vellalar Sangam and the Thiyagi Immanuel Peravai (named after martyr of the 1957 Muthukulathur events) helped to politicize the pallars and made them assertive. The emergence of assertive pallars has meant that they would not take discrimination lying down. South Tamil Nadu has its own share of discrimination against dalits.
The year of 1995 should be considered a watershed year for the dalit movement in the state. The news of disfigurement of the statue of Pasumpon U.Muthuramalinga Thevar, the much deified leader of the Maravars, in the wake of Pallar and Maravar clashes at Verasigamani, set the stage for the unleashing of violence on the dalits. While earlier generations of dalits may have taken these things lying down, the new breed of youths especially with the backing of dalit organisations began to retaliate. Street fighting, Stabbing, bomb-throwing and arson property worth a few crores of rupees, apart from the scores of public transport buses that were torched or damaged, or destroyed. For over five months incidents of caste riots and violence were being reported on an almost weekly basis.

**Thevars: The Dominant Caste**

Thevars are numerically far more important than the other agricultural castes of the region. Land reforms, like the Zamindari abolition, Tenancy Acts of 1950s helped the rich Thevar farmers to promote their interests. They have also been the main beneficiaries of the government agricultural policies providing institutionalized credit and liberal and subsidised agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, seeds, water electricity, etc. A sizeable number of others making use of their political clout have earned quick money through illicit brewery, contract works and money lending. However, it should be remembered that vast number of thevars also work as agricultural labourers and wage earners.

In the last 20 years, systematic efforts have been made to unite all three clans of thevar community, namely, Kallar, Agamudaiyar and Maravar. Pasumpon U.Muthuramalinga Thevar has been deified and used as a symbol to bring all the
groups under one single banner. The government classification of ‘thevar’ community as the most backward class helped bring about this unity. In Tirunelveli region many statues of Muthuramalinga Thevar, were erected in 1980’s. Even the Veerasaigamani village statue which was disfigured – an event responsible for riots in 1995 – had been installed only in 1986. The Thevar Peravai leadership had cultivated strong caste sentiments among the thevar youth by erecting Thevar statues everywhere.

The Present Study

The textual presentation made above reiterates that the feeling of casteism and caste animosity has become rock solid. This is not a welcome trend for the progress of the nation.

It should be emphasised here that there are several other excellent alternatives available to the undesirable path of violence, which may take the humanity, irrespective of caste or religion, to new frontiers in life. The present research is an attempt made in that direction.

The present research not only probes the causes and consequences of caste conflicts but also seeks to scrutinize the performance of police in different stages in conflict, from the viewpoint of the affected as well as neutral parties (individuals). Besides, the present research focuses its attention on resolving caste conflicts in the best possible manner.