Caste Discrimination in the Church
CHAPTER II

CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN THE CHURCH

It is important to be reminded of the fact that most of the Dalits embraced the Christian faith at a Critical Time while facing serious caste atrocities in their villages. They joined the Church seeking solace and liberation. The Church received them with enthusiasm, and initially did quite well also, both in terms of Christian values and material progress. However, today the Dalit Christian Community reflects a deep social crisis within itself.¹

In Tamil Nadu, Dalit Christians are treated as ‘Outcastes’ by the non-Dalit Christians. They suffer discrimination not only by the Christian Community, but also by the Church administration.² The extent of rigorous caste discrimination in the Churches varies from place to place. The main concern for the Dalit Christians are social discrimination, poverty, low literacy rate, absence of political support, legal disabilities and discrimination within the Church. In the course of history Catholic and Protestant missionaries have taken different approaches to deal with these incompatibility.

PREVALENCE OF CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN THE CHURCH

The prevalence of caste distinction was quite evident in the Cathedral Church at Tirchirapalli. The Caste Christians were not ready to sit with the Dalit Christians in the Church. They wanted to maintain their Caste hierarchy even after conversion to

² Ibid., p.245.
Christianity. Hence the Church provided a caste bar to divide the Dalit Christians and the caste Christians in 1839. This was done by the Church to please the caste Christians as well as to attract good number of caste Hindus to Christianity. This resulted in provoking the sentiments of the Dalit Christians in Tiruchirapalli.

There was a problem between the Vellalar and the Nadar Christians at Vadakkankulam and Kallikulam in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. The Vellalars closed their streets against the religious processions by Nadars since the processional rights were assigned to them alone. This happened between 1872-1874. The Vellalar Christians wanted to assert their caste superiority by not allowing the processions by Nadars. Besides, there was a wall in the Church of Vadakkankulam which had kept the two groups from seeing each other in the Church for a long period. The conflict between vellalars and Nadars became severe over the demolition of the wall of separation in the Church of Vadakkankulam in 1916. The above cases prove that there was a caste distinction in the Church of Tirunelveli district.³

The caste discrimination was quite common even among the students. The high caste Christian students studied at St. Joseph’s College, Tiruchirapalli were very much particular in maintaining their caste superiority. They did not want to mingle with the Dalit students. Hence they refused to dine with Paravar students who were socially backward. This was in practice from 1893-1900.⁴

Paul D. Wiebe and S. John Peter study reveals how caste-like differentiation characterises the Catholic Church at Kovilanoor Parish in Tamil Nadu. The study exemplifies the ways in which the stigma of untouchability is manifest within the Christian Community.

The effects of caste were evident within the Church in Kovilanoor, South Arcot District of Tamil Nadu. Until about 1950 the Untouchables and the Malaiman Udaiyan Christians sat in carefully differentiated places in the Church. Then a French missionary and Parish Priest tried to eliminate the segregation by forcing a mixed seating arrangement. Many of the Udaiyans refused to accept the missionary’s attempts and a good number of them temporality withdrew from the Church. Some of them physically attacked the members of the Dalit Christian community who wanted to take advantage of the new arrangements. There was no alternative for the area Bishop but to replace the priest by another more responsive to the local structure of the Church. However, caste differences within the Church still exist. The Udaiyan males and children occupy the middle row of seats in the Church, the Udaiyan women the row on the right and the Dalit Christians the row on the left. The pattern of segregation is not clearly marked as it once was either in practice or in the minds of the people but it is still clear at all times. Whatever the numerical balance of converts by caste, the Malaiman Udaiyan Christians are the most powerful group within the Kovilanoor Parish.

There is also a remarkable card of Hindu caste lines being carried over and maintained within the social systems of the Christians. The Christians have successfully proved that caste Christians looked down on Dalit Christians and kept them aloof both in life and in death. The Dalit Christians in some regions were kept outside the Church for a long time. They were allowed to sit in the Church in a separate wing. Even today Christians belonging to untouchable castes are forced to have separate cemeteries in some parts of India. Even the dead must observe caste and Untouchability.6

In most of the Parishes and Villages the Dalits Christians and the Caste Christians had separate burial grounds and hearses. The hearses were not given to the Dalits in most of the villages where the Dalits did not have a hearse. In Tiruchirappalli town two separate burial grounds for the Dalits and Non-Dalits that existed side by side with a separating walls was a serious problem which called for the diocese to take concrete and concentrated effort to remove the wall and the discrimination of the Dalits. In certain places the funeral procession of the Dalit people was not allowed in the streets of the caste people and their funeral procession was directed to the burial ground only in the fixed routes.7

All the above cases have proved that the prevalence of caste distinctions is quite common in the Church in Tamil Nadu right from the 18th century.

DISCRIMINATION BY THE CHURCH HIERARCHY

The caste discrimination was practised not only by lay people but also by clergy and religious in the organization of the Church. Dalit priests, nuns and seminarians are discriminated by the caste clergy and religious. The following evidences prove the practice of caste discrimination by the clergy and religious.

Archbishop Arokiasamy has stated in his report in the CBCI in 1989 that the discrimination by the Church hierarchy is one of the discriminations against Dalit Christians. Again the CBCI in 1983 reported, “Clergy and religious too are not altogether free from caste - feelings both among themselves and their attitude towards the people.”

While understanding the problems of caste mentality in the Churches, Centre for People’s Movement wrote in its letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, that the problems are basically related to the class-caste character of those who are in authority in the Churches and Church related institutions. Amaladoss observes that caste mentality is not of the past, but still seems to be a factor, in open or hidden ways, in the life and administration of Religious Congregations.

8 Hierarchy: It means literally “rule by priests.” It is the body of ordained ministers in the Church: Pope, bishops, priests and deacons. According to the Code of Canon Law, no. 207, the religious state does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church. It nevertheless does belong to her life and holiness.

9 M.Arokiasamy, op.cit., p.53.


Antony Raj reports from his findings that non-Dalit priests and nuns practise discrimination against the Dalit Christians. In terms of mean combined frequency to all eleven questions (for the eleven questions see above table 1), 53 per cent for the former and 60 per cent for the latter are recorded. Table 1 shows that for the last two questions, i.e. (I) speaking about the caste mentality, and (ii) calling by the caste appellation, the priests and nuns are more discriminating than the caste Hindus and Christians. For speaking of caste mentality, in terms of frequency (high discrimination), the priests – 79 per cent and the nuns – 78 per cent are recorded. For calling by their caste appellation, the priests – 84 per cent and nuns – 81 per cent are recorded. From the point of the respondents, the priests and nuns practice a high social discrimination.

As seen above, social distance and discrimination are practised in some Churches during liturgical celebrations, such as the sprinkling of holy water and the distribution of holy communion, first to the upper castes and then to the rest, the different seating arrangements in the Churches, not having Dalit boys and girls in the choir. As long as a priest is responsible for the continuation of these practices, one can definitely say that he discriminates against the Dalit Christians.

Fernandes after his research in 1993 expresses a similar view, “Several respondents stated that the caste consciousness is stronger among priests than among lay persons.... About 40 per cent of those interviewed after that said that it is true.”

narrates some examples from his study, "I was told that at Tachur a Dalit was doing a reading during mass on 31 May 1993. A guest priest originally from that village, stopped him and then asked who had allowed a Dalit to do the reading in the Church, and did it himself."\(^\text{15}\) He states another view, "The statement about greater caste consciousness among the clergy and religious would get a much stronger basis if it were substantiated beyond doubt that the violence at Thanjavur on 26 May 1993 was organized by some priests."\(^\text{16}\)

Fernandes after his survey says that caste consciousness is stronger among the younger priests, scholastics and seminarians than among most of the older priests. This seems to be a part of a socio-political process in the State as a whole that is influencing the Church institutions. This does not mean that no member of the senior clergy is free from caste feelings. The observation is also made that some senior clergies have had a life-long commitment to the Dalits. "They have worked among the Dalits in the past and have been discriminated against for this. For example, some have been refused tea and coffee in the hotels because, though they were from an upper caste, the hotel owners identified them with the Dalits."\(^\text{17}\)

On the other hand, there seems to be a relatively large number of upper caste priests who take an active part in their caste associations. While not being as actively

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p.53.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p.53.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid., pp.53-54.
involved in caste associations several other middle aged and older priests seem to make caste an important criterion in becoming a pressure group.

It seems that the leadership of the upper caste persons takes the caste system for granted. Being brought up in the system and socialized in it, very few of them question it. They view it only as a social situation and not a moral question to be dealt with as being unchristian. Resistance to those working for a change seems to substantiate this. From the discussions and the statements of the respondents, Fernandes states, "In most cases caste attitudes have not changed substantially. Those few members of the clergy and religious orders who would like to bring about change, face resistance from a majority of upper caste priests, lay leaders and from caste Panchayats."\textsuperscript{18} From these one cannot generalize the situation in the whole State. The conditions were different from one diocese to another, but one can understand the reality from these observations about the existence of social discrimination in the Church hierarchy. The social discrimination does not stand alone, it has a link with the economic and political conditions of the Dalits. When the Dalit Christians experience social discriminations in the society, it affects their economic conditions and they feel powerless in the society.

**POLICIES OF THE CHURCH ON CASTE**

The main objective of the Church was to spread Christianity with everyone. This could be possible only when the Church accepts the social customs of the people.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.54.
in Tamil Nadu. Hence the Church did not want to interfere with the local affairs of the people, particularly in the system of caste which is quite common in the Tamil society. Therefore the Church was reluctantly made to adopt the following policies which advocated the caste system to some extent in the Church in Tamil Nadu.

Fr. De Nobili tried a new approach to the problem of evangelization in India. He sought the advice of the local people on the manner of winning the people. They advised him to dress like the Gurus and Sanniyasis, to wear the thread like the Brahmins and Rajas and to engage Brahmins in his service to prepare his meal.\(^\text{19}\) Considering what these people had expressed, he realised that the aversion which the Indians felt for European was based on certain civil customs which they held in abomination, such as those regarding the manner of dressing, eating, the custom of having food served by low caste people, and other such practice. He therefore decided to imitate the highest among them, who were the Brahmins, and among the latter the Sanniyasis.\(^\text{20}\)

Accordingly De Nobili changed his diet, custom, dress everything to the liking of the people in order to prove to the people that the missionaries were not the Parangis as they thought. Being a new comer he openly said that he was a Rajah from North. Secondly, in order to convince the people he asked permission from the provincial to abstain from eating meat, fish, and eggs and take only rice, milk and vegetables. Thirdly, from that moment he avoided touching the low-caste. Fourthly, he took a Brahmin as a

\(^\text{19}\) Letter of G. Fernandez, Madurai Mission, dated 7 May 1610.
cook and considering those people's repugnance for the Parangis, he decided, on the advice of his friends, to change his dress and adopt that of scholars and Sanniyasis.\textsuperscript{21}

In his movements, behaviour, and in all respects he exactly resembled a Hindu Brahmin Sanniyasi.\textsuperscript{22} He was also called by them a Brahmin. By that he converted many Brahmins. He also took keen efforts in Indianising the Christian religion. As the first step, he called Roman Catholic religion Satyavedam.\textsuperscript{23}

De Nobili, after Indianising the Christian religion or allowing certain local customs to be followed in the worship, proceeded to adopt certain civil customs of the Hindus, such as wearing a thread (Poonul) and having a Tuft (Kudumi) which were the distinctive signs of their caste and nobility. Fr. Antony Vico was strongly convinced of De Nobili's method. He pleaded with Rome that two things had to be permitted in the conversion of the Hindus, in view of the prevailing civil customs. First the neophytes had to be allowed to keep the rank to which they were entitled by birth, and to retain the customs and insignia which appertained to it, provided they were not connected with superstition. The second point was that having adopted the ways and mentality of these people, they went on to behave like Indians avoiding the bad habits.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} Sanniyasis means Chaste men.
\textsuperscript{22} To De Nobili “Brahmin” meant a learned man, a guru and a Sanniyasi and not necessarily a Brahmin by birth.
\textsuperscript{23} By this name, he identified Christian religion with the four-Varnas of the Hindus.
\textsuperscript{24} By bad habits here he refers to use of liquor, meat-eating and smoking.
In 1617 Fr. De Nobili went in person to Cranganore to discuss the problem of wearing the thread. In fact, the Archbishop of Cranganore favoured the demands of Fr. De Nobili. Regarding the Poonul and Kudumi of the Brahmins, this Holiness issued a Bull in which he declared that they could be permitted to have them without any scruple.

There were two classes of missionaries, one called Sanniyasis and the other Pandarams. This kind of change in appearance as well as in their attitude was mainly because of these reasons: First, owing to the prejudice against the Parangis, they could not move freely towards the people, and so it became a source of great anxiety. Secondly, since Nobili’s method of conversion failed to attract the low-class people, they wanted to explore an alternative in order to convert the Sudra castes.

The ‘Pandarams’ had to look after not only Sudras, but also the Pariahs. There were among the Hindus, Sundra Sanniyasis known as Pandarams. The institution of Pandaraswamis established in 1640, was not to be confounded with the class of Pandaraswamis instituted later on in 1744 by Benedict XIV. The latter were exclusively reserved for Pariah living with pariahs. While the Brahmin missionaries dressed in white, the Pandaraswami dressed in Cavi (Saffron) or Yellow-ochre. These Brahmin Sanniyasis and Pandaraswamis could not intermingle freely and openly with the public.

26. The Bull of Pope George XV dated 31 January 1623: In which the Pope permitted De Nobili to admit the social customs of the people, provided they removed all superstitious things.
27. Being a Brahmin Sanniyasi he could not move with the low class people. His methods were purely meant for Brahmin or mostly high caste people.
The Bishop of Pondicherry in 1900 stated in his moral teaching: "The existing caste system in India is quite consistent with the way of the world. The gospel has no direct relevance to this. Therefore the Catholic Church abides by it. Apart from preaching the gospel and bringing salvation to human souls, it has nothing to do with the caste system." The Madurai Mission Manual of 1916 maintained that "high caste converts may and for the sake of others must keep their caste after Baptism just as before." It centred around the question: "By ceasing to be Hindus, can they cease to be Indians?" In the conference of Indian Hierarchy at Mylapore in 1921 no direct attack on the caste system as such was to be made in view of the majority of the Indian clergy approving of that system and in order to avoid "the eternal loss of some souls, serious disturbances and breaches of the peace and recrudescence of caste fanaticism propaganda". The caste Christians were advised to practise humility and charity and the Dalits patience and pious resignation.

All the above policies practised by the Church to spread Christianity to all sections of the people in Tamil Nadu very clearly prove that some of the Christian missionaries accepted the social distinctions in the Church as it was in the Tamil society, which resulted in a number of protests and struggles against the caste distinctions in the Church in due course of time.

28 L.Stanislaus, op.cit., p.111.  
30 L.Stanislaus, op.cit., p.112.
STRUGGLE AND PROTEST AGAINST CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN THE CHURCH

Not everyone accepted the caste divisions in the Church. Many missionaries and Bishops opposed the practice of untouchability and caste distinctions in the Church and in society. Many opposed these practices and some showed solidarity in fighting for their equality and justice in the society. They opposed them because the Gospel teaching demanded equality, justice and human dignity of all human beings.

The following are some of the examples of the missionaries who opposed the caste system.31

The Jesuits of Tamil Nadu fought for the rights of Dalit Christians on a number of occasions. The caste Christians practised discrimination against the Dalit Christians at Kalugumalai and Sivakasi. The Dalit Christians were severely illiterate in the Church as well as in the day-to-day life by the Caste Christians. Hence the Jesuits joined hands with the Dalit victims and demanded equal rights for the Dalit Christians at Kalugumalai in 1895 and at Sivakasi in 1898. Besides, the Jesuits fought for the same cause at Vadakkankulam in 1912.

The South Indian Bishops also exposed their solidarity against the caste discrimination practised in the Church. In 1933 the Bishops wrote a common pastoral letter in favour of the abolition of caste distinction in the Church. This created a lot of

31 Ibid., p.112.
uneasiness in the minds of caste Christians who were not ready to give equal treatment to the Dalit Christians in the Church as well as in the society. The Bishop of Tiruchirapalli, Barthe fought vigorously against the caste distinction in the Church. He stipulated that he would allow himself to be buried in the Cathedral at Tiruchirappalli only if distinctions had been abolished.

Some of the missionaries who fought for the cause of the Dalit Christians are the following.  

The caste Christians and the Dalit Christians were separated by rallies at the Cathedral in Tiruchirapalli. This was seriously viewed by the then Bishop Leonard. He wanted to remove the rallies to allow both the groups to sit together without any distinction. Hence he took the bold action of removing the rallies to allow everyone to sit as they liked without making any distinction. This was done in 1937. The action taken by the Bishop Leonard set a precedent for future actions of reforms in the Church.

The Chakkiliyars at Paraltchi in Madurai District were severely illtreated by the caste Christians. The Chakkiliyans were socially and economically very weak. They were not even allowed to enter the Church by the caste Christians. The pitiable condition of the Chakkiliyars was felt by the Parish Priest. He built a Chapel for the use of the Chakkiliyars. The action of the Parish Priest was strongly opposed by the Caste Christians. As the priest was very courageous, nothing was done against him. The Chakkiliyars had a separate place for their worship.

\[32\] Ibid., p.113.
In Rameswaram there was a co-operative society. This society was founded to cater to the needs of the local people. The Kadayars, who were Dalits, sought help from the co-operative society but the society refused to extend its support to the Kadayars as they were Dalits. In order to help the Kadayars, a foreign missionary, Boyle came forward and established the “Kadayar Registered Society” as a protest against the Rameswaran Co-operative society.

Thus missionaries came forward to fight for justice and human rights on behalf of these disadvantaged groups. The new awakening, hunger for better life and desire for freedom from the humiliation of the high castes were instilled by the missionaries.

The Dalit Christians too were not keeping quiet and they expressed their dissatisfaction in the Church towards the policies and practices of the Church. In the context of dehumanizing situations, the hopes and desire of the Dalits to have equality and freedom from oppression today, there are more organized protests and struggles to achieve liberation. But in the history of the Church there were more unorganized protests. They were against the caste Christians and the Church authorities. Sometimes these protests led to violence, non-cooperation and arson. The following protests were organised by the Dalit Christians themselves.33

The practice of separate dining for the Dalit Christian students was at St. Joseph’s College, Tirchirapalli. The Dalit Christian students considered it an insult and degradation. They wanted to sit together with the Caste Christians students in the dining

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halla. When the caste Christians refused to have them nearby, the problem started. The Dalit Christian students launched protests in the College. The protest was organised from 1893 to 1900. At last the problem was ended when the Dalit Christian students were allowed to dine with the caste Christian students in 1900.

The Caste Christians practised inequality against the Dalit Christians at Poondi and Koviladi in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. The Dalit Christians were severely humiliated in their religious and social life by the caste Christians. As the Dalit Christians could not tolerate the illtreatment of the caste Christians, they decided to put an end to this practice. Hence clashes took place on various occasions between these two groups in 1900.

There was a discrimination in distributing the holy communion at Varadarajanpet in South Arcot District. While distributing the holy communion, the Caste Christians had the privilege of receiving it first. The Dalit Christians were given last. This was a practice for a very long time. This was considered a discrimination by the Dalit Christians. Hence the Dalit Christians confronted Vanniar Christians. This created a lot of uneasiness at Varadarajanpet in 1944.

The struggle for entry into the Church and to wrest village administration took place at Athippakkam and Nedungampatta in 1953. In these two villages Dalit Christians were majority in population. The Caste Christians were Chettiar, Reddiars and Padaiyatchi who were a minority. The minority caste Christians were dominant in the Church and village administration. The Dalit Christians were not allowed to enter the
Church at Athippakkam and Nedungampattu. Hence the Dalit Christians launched a struggle against the caste Christians and achieved their objectives.

All these protests were demonstrated without any Dalit organization and were mostly unorganized or spontaneous from the place itself. From 1978 onwards more organized groups have been formed and their protests show more response to the problems faced by them.

**RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH TO THE CASTE DISCRIMINATION**

Protestants and Catholics have realized the urgent need to deal with the problems of and discrimination against Dalits. The National Convention on the Plight of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin was held at Bangalore in June 1978 and was a landmark in history. This was the beginning of an organized struggle against the Government and Church discrimination of the Dalit Christians in India.\(^{34}\)

Although caste discrimination has been a problem in the Catholic Church for centuries, the CBCI did not say anything about it till the late sixties. For the first time in the All India Seminar held in 1969 the problem of caste within the Church and in society was discussed.\(^{35}\) Then in the meetings of the CBCI, 1970 and 1974 it showed its concern for the Dalits. During the General Body Meeting of the CBCI at Ranchi in 1979 the need was felt that the CBCI should set up a desk to study the problems of the Dalits and Tribes.

\(^{34}\) The Story of 30 Years Struggle for Justice: A Consolidated Account of 30 Years Effort in the Cause of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin, Bangalore, 1978.
\(^{35}\) All India Seminar, Church in India Today, Bangalore, 1969, New Delhi, p.256.
The Standing Committee met from 11-14 December 1984 and decided to constitute an ad hoc committee. The CBCI General Body Meeting held at Goa from 9-18 April 1986 created a new Commission for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Backward Classes with Bishop Cheriankunnel as chairman. Bishop Michael Augustine was appointed chairman of the ST/SC/BC commission for the Tamil Nadu Catholic Bishops’ Conference.

The TNCBC as the responsible body of the Church issued a clear cut Statement against the caste divisions in the Church in 1982. It states:

"It is clear that divisions among the people, especially divisions and differences on the basis of caste are not only a stumbling block to the growth of the Church but also devalue the teachings of Christ... caste divisions not only devalue the new life in the spirit but are also a contradiction and rejection of the message of Christ. Though Christianity has been existing in India for the last 2000 years, there are no indications that the presence of caste is on the decline. Even within the Christian community its presence continues to scatter the members of the community, giving rise to conflicts and violence, acts of discriminations and atrocities and destroys Christian love and unity.

It is the responsibility of the Bishops to safeguard the message of Christ and to make sure that it is totally adhered to by the faithful. We, to whom

this responsibility has been given, invite the Christian community to eradicate caste divisions and to give witness to truth, justice, and love of neighbor".\(^{37}\)

The Bishops accept that caste divisions and unjust practices are not only contrary to the growth of the Church, but because of its presence in the Church, their social teaching becomes self-contradictory to the people.\(^{38}\) Thus the Bishops do not accept that the caste can be accommodated within Christianity. Its very existence is contrary to the basic and fundamental teaching of Christianity that holds everyone as equal. In the Justice Sunday message of 1986 the Bishops said that God created human beings so that they may be happy. But the caste divisions, injustice and oppression which are created by human beings destroy others’ happiness.\(^{39}\) The TNCBC also recognizes that untouchability is sinful; untouchability is a great offence and untouchability is an inhuman act. Therefore caste systems, their oppressive nature and the practice of untouchability can never be compromised with the message of Christ.\(^{40}\)

The Bishops have opposed the discriminatory policy of the Government towards Dalit Christians and condemned the injustice practised by the Government in India. They demand that the policy of ‘protective discrimination’ must be applied to all Dalit Christians too because like other Dalits the Dalit Christians experience social

\(^{38}\) Ibid., p.7.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., p.7.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., p.7.


Statement of the TNCBC, 1988, p.73.
discrimination and are economically backward and politically powerless.\(^1\) The TNCBC accepts the fact that divisions and differences on the basis of caste continue in the Church. The situation has not changed in the Church as is evident from the statement of 1988:

"We accepted with deep pain the continuing presence of the caste difference and its consequences, acts of injustice and discrimination in the Catholic Church. We requested all Catholics to do away with even the smallest manifestations of untouchability and to accept one another in true brotherhood and goodness".\(^2\)

Thus it points to the 'double discrimination' experienced by the Dalit Christians. They reiterated, “Catholics must do away with any kind of untouchability. Caste divisions must be abolished and everyone should live with brotherhood and fraternity.”\(^3\)

As early as 1992 a committee of three Bishops, namely Archbishop Michael Augustine of Pondicherry, Bishop M. Ambrose of Coimbatore and Bishop S.L. Gabriel of Trichy was appointed to study more deeply the problem of casteism in the Church of Tamil Nadu and suggest ways and means to find equitable solutions. The committee drew up a working paper on the phenomenon of casteism. The following is the extract: \(^4\)

\(^{42}\) Statement of the TNCBC, 1987-88, p.68.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., pp.68-69.
“The first and foremost task of the Church in this matter is to evangelize the individual, society and culture i.e. to bring about a conversion, which means the transformation of conscience both individual and collective. The committee of bishops should start addressing the presbyterium of each diocese in order to help them understand the gravity of the caste problem and thus bring about a change of heart and mentality. The lack of proper information about the discriminations they suffer is one of the reasons for their indifference. They must be properly informed and involved. In other words the evangelizer needs to be evangelized. It is hoped that the present proposal would be a great step in this direction”.

“What is important is that priests and religious working in the diocese are brought together for discussion and deliberation on the issue of the problems of untouchability and caste discriminations found in the diocese. In other words priests and religious are the target group in this effort.

It is not possible to bring a change of attitude overnight. But surely it will be a step towards that direction. All of them may not cooperate, but most of them may not hinder. But persistent and prolonged effort in this line should be kept up in order to bring about a change in the attitude.

Bishops are earnestly requested to kindly explore the possibilities of arranging monthly recollections and talks to priests of the dioceses on the
theme of eradicating caste discriminations; seminars and talks may be arranged for the religious (men and women religious working in the diocese) on the same topic". 

Without the cooperation and collaboration of the Priests and Religious the efforts won’t bear much result. So it is important that they get involved in the process of transformation. Their indifference and passivity are mostly due to non-involvement and ignorance of the discriminations suffered by the Dalit Christians at various levels. So the TNBC commission for SC/ST/BC proposed motivational efforts in the form of recollections and seminars to all the priests and religious working in the dioceses. The priests and religious are not sufficiently aware of the enormous disabilities and disadvantages the Dalits are going through socially, economically and emotionally. They themselves are part of the social structure. They need to be told about the counter witnessing nature of caste discrimination in Christianity that they are trying to preach and witness. Not only they need to be informed sufficiently but also they need to be urged and encouraged to involve themselves in those activities that help to eradicate this evil.

The following statement was made by the Church on the Church’s Mission in 1994: 

"It is sad that various forms of caste discriminations still persist within the Church. The Dalit Christians are kept at the periphery of the Church life. They legitimately claim

\[\text{\textsuperscript{45}}\text{Ibid., p.16.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{46}}\text{Extracts from the Statement of the National Consultation on Mission, held at Ishvani Kendra, Pune, 1998.}\]
a better participation in the leadership within their Churches. Christian Dalits like the rest of the Dalit population are coming to a new awareness of their problems and potentialities. This challenges the Church to seriously examine her stand in the light of justice and liberation”.

“Recognising the sinful neglect of the Dalits in the past, the Church should collaborate with the support movement towards resorting their lost dignity and commit herself to revive their cultural traditions and history. She needs to be open to, and be enriched by, the cultural and spiritual insights found among the Dalits. Priestly and religious vocations from among them should be promoted to ensure better participation at all levels of decision – making in the Church and steps should be taken to bring in new legislation or to modify the existing legislation to safeguard the Dalits’ rights”.

The Catholic Bishops of India delivered the following message in 1998 on the caste problem. The Church in India, particularly in recent years, has been actively involved in denouncing the caste system and discrimination against the Dalits. Further, it has taken positive measures for their development. However, we have to admit that the situation still remains a serious concern. The prevalence of caste-based practices, not only in society but also in some parts of the Church in India. It is a cause of sorrow and an expression of our inability to live our Christian faith adequately.

It is not only a denial of human dignity and equality, but also against the fundamental teaching of Christ who was a friend of the outcaste of his time and freely mixed with them. Discrimination against anybody on the basis of caste is a sin against
God and humanity. This needs to be proclaimed from the house tops so that caste-based practices will be removed from the Christian community totally”.

In their action programme the bishops therefore recommended the following measures to be implemented in the whole Church to eradicate caste discrimination:47

"Non-formal education to conscientise, train, organise and empower the poor, the Dalits and the Tribals must be given top priority in our social apostolate. The Church must take a clear stand against caste discrimination and declare it a sin. This must be taught in catechesis and homilies and any form of discrimination must be completely stopped, wherever it exists, be it among the priests, in religious communities, in the selection of candidates for priesthood and religious life and in the sphere of administration. We propose this as a goal to be set in motion powerfully and immediately.

There should be no sign of any discrimination in places of worship and cemeteries. The institutional services must cater increasingly to the poor and there must be reservations both in admissions and in employment for the Dalits and Tribals”.

Bishop A.M. Chinnappa, Chairman of the CBCI Commission for SC/ST/BC, proposed an action – plan on 20 May 1998 to eradicate discrimination in the Church. It includes the following recommendations:48

47. Extracts from the CBCI General Body meeting, dated 21 to 28 March 1988.
Take effective steps to appoint Dalit members in the administration of the Church and related organisations according to the proportion of the Dalit population. Work at having a reservation policy of the Dalits / Tribals in the diocesan / religious institutions. Make efforts to recruit candidates of Dalit origin for priesthood and religious life in keeping with their numerical strength.

The message of the Catholic Bishop of India at the end of their General Body meeting at Varanasi in March 1998 focussed on just two issues of “serious concern” which needed immediate action. They were poverty and caste problem. That caste problem within the Church should find such a major portion of the message is certainly an indication of the gravity of the problem. "The prevalence of caste system”, say the Bishops, "is a matter of shame and disgrace to all of us. It is a cause of sorrow and expression of our inability to live our Christian faith adequately. It is not only a denial of human dignity and equality but also against the fundamental teachings of Christ". And the Bishop declare that discrimination against anybody on the basis of caste is a sin against God and humanity”, and that it should be proclaimed from house tops so that the caste system will be removed from the Christian community totally as a preparation for Jubilee 2000.

And in a message to the Bishops of the country dated 20 May 1998, the National Chairman of the Commission for SC/ST/BC went as far as to suggest ‘postponement’ of the Jubilee 2000 “until true brotherhood and equality is practised by all the faithful of a parish”. In November 1998 in a seminar for the vocation promoters organised by the Tamil Nadu vocation Commission the secretary of TNBC Commission for SC/ST/BC
drove home the importance of recruiting vocations from the Dalit communities. Though they form about 65% of the population their percentage in the priestly and religious vocation was as low as four percent.

In December 1998 a two day seminar on untouchability and Casteism was taken to the deacons of the Good Shepherd College, Coimbatore.\(^\text{50}\) Casteism and untouchability are completely contrary to the values of Christianity and human dignity. But as caste system which is deep rooted in the Indian society has found its way into Christianity in India, it stands bereft of its real sheen. Though it is felt in every quarter that casteism and untouchability are contrary to Christianity, the coordination of the various Church Organisations for that purpose seems to be very much absent. It was with this background that a two-day consultation at the (Tamil Nadu) Regional level was convened in Trichy on 11 and 12 May 1999 under the title “The Empowerment of the oppressed and Jubilee – 2000”. The consultation was jointly organised by the CBCI & TNBC commissions for SC/ST/BC.

Fr. S. Lourduswamy, the secretary of the CBCI commission for SC/ST/BC recalled the message of the CBCI condemning the caste-based discriminations in the Church and called for the implementation of the decisions made by the CBCI.\(^\text{51}\) In his presidential address Archbishop Arul Das James insisted that the elimination of discrimination is the


\(^{51}\) Ibid., pp. 10 -11.
responsibility of every baptized Christian and promised to bring up the resolutions and recommendations of the consultation to the serious consideration of the TNBC.

The followings resolutions were made in the consultation:

It is a known fact that in the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu untouchability is being systematically practised. In order to eliminate this evil, policy level decision should be declared in every diocese. Building of two Churches and Chapels, maintaining two tumbas, two cemeteries and celebrating two festivals based on castes should not be permitted. Fitting punishment must be awarded to any person who instigates caste-based discriminations. Every effort should be taken to make all Christians realise that eradication of untouchability is the bounden duty of every Christian.

Pope John Paul II told the Roman Catholic Bishops from India on 17 November 2003 that the Christians must reject divisions based on caste, saying such prejudice "denies the human dignity of entire groups of people". He repeated his condemnation of the caste system made during a 1986 visit to India and applauded steps by Indian’s bishops to fight the divisions as examples for others to follow. In the speech to bishops from Tamil Nadu the Pope said caste-based prejudice was contrary to "authentic human solidarity, a threat to genuine spirituality and a serious hindrance to the Church’s Mission of evangelisation". “Therefore, customs or traditions that perpetuate or reinforce caste

\[52 \text{Ibid., p.12.}\]
division should be sensitively reformed so that they may become expression of the solidarity of the whole Christian Community”, he said.53

It is proved beyond doubt that there is caste discrimination in the Church even at present. Above all, the discrimination practised by the hierarchical Church is quite clear. It is confirmed that some of the Christian missionaries who came to India to spread Christianity advocated the caste practices in the Church without knowing the consequences of it and of course, they could attract a number of caste Hindus to Christianity but the problem of caste discrimination entered the Indian Churches. It is found out that there is not much difference between the socio-economic condition of Dalit Christians and Dalit Hindus in Tamil Nadu.

In due course the Dalit Christians raised their voice against the caste discrimination practiced against them by the Church. The Church was made to realise its mistake and, as a result, the Church came out with some constructive policies to end this problem which resulted in minimizing the caste distinction practised in the Church. But the caste discrimination practised by the Church is not completely eradicated as there are caste fanatic leaders in the Church who are a great hindrance to implementing the policies formulated by the Church.

If the Church is bold enough of taking stern action against those who are in support of caste discrimination, the problem can be ended in the near future. Besides, the Dalit Christian organizations should consolidate their position and fight for their rights in the Church till they attain their goal.