chapter 1

Social Setting
The background of the movement in Tamil Nadu can be clearly understood only when a detailed study is made on physiography, political history and the social setting of the state.

PHYSIOGRAPHY

The term ‘Tamil Nadu’, referred in the context of this thesis, covers the territories where Tamil is predominantly spoken. Tamil Nadu is situated on the southeastern side of the Indian peninsula. It is bound on the east by the Bay of Bengal, in the south by the Indian Ocean, in the west by the States of Kerala and Karnataka and in the North by Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Tamil Nadu comprises thirty districts. They are Chennai, Coimbatore, Cuddalore, Dharmapuri, Dindigul, Erode, Kancheepuram, Kanyakumari, Karur, Krishnagiri, Madurai, Nagapattinam, Namakkal, Nilgiris, Perambalur, Pudukkottai, Ramanathapuram, Salem, Sivagangai, Thanjavur, Theni, Thiruvannamalai, Thiruivarur, Tirunelveli, Tiruvallur, Tiruchirappalli, Tuticorin, vellore, Villupuram and Virudhunagar.\(^1\)

The landmass of the state can be divided into two natural divisions (i) the eastern coastal plain and (ii) the hilly region along the north and the west. The coastal plain is usually subdivided into: (a) the Coromandel plain comprising the districts of Chingelput, South Arcot and North Arcot, (b) the alluvial plain of the Cauvery delta extending over Tanjore and part of Tiruchirappalli districts, and (c) the dry southern plains in Madurai, Ramnad and Tirunelveli districts.  

Tamil Nadu is situated between 8° 5' and 13° 35' Northern latitudes and 76° 15' and 80° 0' longitude East of Greenwich. It has an area of 1,30,057 square kilometers. Along the whole length of the western part, at a distance from the sea varying from 80 to 160 km, runs the range of the Western Ghats, a steep and rugged mass averaging 1220 metres above the sea level and rising to 2440 metres. The Palghat Gap about 25 km in width is the only marked break in the great mountain wall to the south of this gap, the range is known as ‘Anaimalai’. On the east are the Palani Hills on which is situated the famous hill station of Kodaikanal. The slopes of the Western Ghats are covered with dense evergreen forests. These slopes are the sources of the rivers Kaveri, Vaigai and Tamaraparani. The Nilgiris and the Anaimalai are hill groups with maximum height. In the famous Ootacamund area of the Nilgiris district, the highest peak of Doddabetta, is 2640 metres above the sea level.

4 Census of India 1991, Directorate of Census Operations, Tamil Nadu.
5 Meaning Elephant Hills.
The so-called Eastern Ghats begin in Orissa and pass through Ganjan district of Orissa and run south west through all the districts lying between Ganjam and Nilgiris plateau. Their elevation is 610 metres on the average and their highest peaks are less than 1830 metres. No river of any importance rises from these ranges in this State.

The rainfall in the region is determined by the southwest monsoon (June to September) and the northeast monsoon (October to December). The northeast monsoon is more important to Tamil Nadu than the southwest. The northeast monsoon sharply distinguishes the State from the rest of the country where the southwest monsoon plays the major role. The districts of Chingleput, South Arcot, Thanjavur, Madurai, Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli depend mainly on the northeast monsoon. The normal rainfall is 1020 to 1140 mm in South Arcot and Thanjavur districts and 760 to 890 mm in others. The districts of North Arcot, Salem, Coimbatore and Tiruchirappalli in the central region depend on both the monsoons (northeast and southwest) and the rainfall is between 760 to 1020 mm. Nilgiris depends on the south west monsoon with a normal rainfall of 1520 to 1780 mm. The average rainfall in the State varies over a wide range of 640 to 1910 mm per year.

The rivers of the state flow eastward from the Western Ghats and are entirely rain-fed. The perennial rivers are: Palar, Cheyyar, Ponnaiyar, Kaveri, Meyar, Bhavani, Amaravati, Vaigai, Chittar and Tamraparni. The non-perennial rivers are the Vellar, Noyil, Siruliar, Gundar, Vaipar, Valparai and Varshali. The 760 km long Kaveri is the
great river of the State. Rising on the Brahmagiri, a hill in Coorg in the Western Ghats, almost near the Arabian Sea, it travels the entire breath of the peninsula and forms a large delta at its mouth in the Thanjavur district before flowing into the Bay of Bengal.

The Geography of the State has played a significant role in the social life of the people. The society depicted in the early Sangam literature, *Ettutokai* and *Pattuppattu* is a simple one, consisting of various groups, divided horizontally on a regional and professional basis. The whole Tamil country was divided into four geographical regions, *kurinci*, *mullai*, *marutam* and *neital*, which represented the hilly, forest, plain and littoral regions. The dry and arid region was known as *palai* (desert). The inhabitants of these regions practised those profession which were suited to each one of them. Thus people living in the *kurinci* region, naturally took to *vettai* (hunting) and were called *vettuvar* (hunters). Thus their castes were named after their professions. They were also named after the region they occupied, that is *kunravar* or *kuravar* (*kunru* means hill) and *kanavar* (*kanam* means forest). They used bows and arrows for hunting.

People who lived in the *mullai* or forest region were naturally engaged in sheep and cattle rearing and were called *kovalar* (protector of cow). Those who inhabited the *marutam* or plain region practiced cultivation and were known as *ulavar* (cultivators).

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The naital region was peopled by paratavar or meenavar (those who indulged in fishing, meen means fish) or those who went out on the sea; (paravai means sea). The palai or arid region was occupied by martial races such as maravar (battle heroes, maram means heroism). But all these people are never spoken of as untouchables or segregated from other groups.

During the period of the Pallavas a number of bramana families were brought into Tamil Nadu from places like Magadha in the North, granted them tax-free lands and settled them in separate villages called caturvedi mangalam. The Pallavas were followed by the Imperial Chola, Pandya and Vijayanagar rulers. They held the brahmana rajagurus and priests in high esteem, because they recognised them as ksatriyas of the Suryakula (solar race) or Candrakula (lunar race). In return for this recognition they and their kinsmen were rewarded with tax-free lands called caturvedi mangalam where the four varna system was strictly enforced and some group of people who were indulging in certain impure and tabooed jobs were regarded as avarnas and segregated from the regular settlements.

There is a tradition that Rajendra Chola I brought a large number of Saivite brahmanas from the banks of the Ganges and settled them in the Kaveri basin in villages.

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7 K.R.Hanumanthan's, 81st Birthday Commemoration Volume, Felicitation Committee, Chennai, 2003, p.3.
8 K.K.Pillai, Studies in Indian History with special reference to Tamil Nadu, Madurai, 1979, p.320.
called Caturvedi mangalams. The Paraiyas seem to have lived in separate ceris outside the villages. In an inscription of Rajaraja Chola I (A.D. 1014) separate ceris and burial grounds are mentioned for paraiyas, toddy tappers and goldsmiths. The Pandyas took special pleasure and pride in creating brahmadeya (tax free) villages for brahmanas. Sundra Pandya I connected a number of villages and created the "Sundrapandya caturvedi mangalam comprising of 200 veli of land." Vikrama Pandya brought into existence created Vikrama Pandya caturvedi mangalam. Like this there were nine more caturvedi mangalams in the Pandyan empire.

During the period of Vijayanagara rule, Viswanatha Nayaka, a Viceroy of Vijayanagara in Tamil Nadu, introduced the palayam system (a kind of fendal system) by which the whole of Tamil Nadu was divided into 72 palayams. Ariyanatha Mudaliar, a vellala appointed by Viswanatha Nayaka as the chieftain of Tinnevelly region, brought a number of vellalar from Tondaimandalam and settled them in the Pandya region. The lands which were owned by the allies of the Pandyas i.e., the nattar, paraiyas and pallas were confiscated and given to the followers of the Nayaks. Landless canars, paraiyas and pallas naturally became agrestic serfs and untouchables in course of time, to the Vellala Marava and Telugu landlords.

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When the Polygar system was introduced in the south of Tamil Nadu by the Nayaks and the Mirasider or Zamindari system in the north of Tamil Nadu by the British, lands were grabbed from the original tillers of the soil, such as Paraiahs, Pallas and Pallis and were made the property of the Polygars, Zamindars and Mirasidars. The latter treated the landless labourers as untouchables and slaves. Untouchability served as a convenient tool in the hands of land owners, whether Tamil or Telugu or Maratha nobles, for the enslavement of the poor landless labourers.

When the Nawabs of Arcot introduced their rule the situation remained the same. They did not touch the social hierarchy of the Tamils except making little improvement in the life style of the Tamil Muslims. The transfer of the Government from the Nawabs to the East India Company in 1801 and the political homogeneity of the erstwhile, Madras presidency did not in any way touch the social background of the caste hierarchy. The political stability created by the British in the Madras presidency gave a freedom to the Christian Missionaries to spread Christianity to the rank and file of the people of Tamil Nadu. The opportunities offered by independence and the political frame work of the Indian constitution to create secular equalitarian society through the system of reservation, in no way touched the Dalit Christians.

POLITICAL HISTORY

Tamil Nadu has a very ancient history that goes back to some 6000 years. The state represents the nucleus of Dravidian culture in India, which antedated the Aryan culture by almost a thousand years. It is generally held that the architects of the Indus Valley Civilization of the 4th millennium BC were the Dravidians and that at a time anterior to the Aryans, they were spread over the whole of India. With the coming of the Aryans into North India, the Dravidians appear to have been pushed into the south, southern States, such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu and they today form the repositories of the Dravidian culture.

The Dravida country, of which modern Tamil Nadu formed a part, was reputedly under three dynasties, Chola, Pandya and Chera from the 4th Century BC. The Cholas occupied the present Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli districts and the surrounding territories and excelled in military exploits. In the 2nd Century BC a Chola prince, Elara, conquered Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The Pandyas excelled in trade and learning. They ruled the districts of Madurai and Tirunelveli and part of South Kerala. A Pandyan King sent an embassy to the Roman Emperor Augustus in the first century BC. The Cheras were powerful on the West Coast.

The Pallavas of Kanchi rose to prominence in the 4th century AD and dominated the south for another 400 years. In the sixth century they overran the Chola dominions and carried their arms as far as Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The famous Alvars and Nayanars,
sea-ports, flourished during the Pallava era. In the 9th century the last of the Pallavas was defeated by the Cholas who again became a great power in the south.

In the 13th century the Pandyas became dominant. Their kingdom was a great center of international trade. The rise of Vijayanagar spelt the decline of the Pandyas. Vijayanagar ultimately defeated them and their territories were annexed to the Vijayanagar Empire. With the disintegration of the Vijayanagar Empire, Tamil Nadu was parceled out among several petty kings.13

The rise of the Muslim power in India has had its impact on Tamil Nadu and by and large Tamil Nadu remained unaffected by the political convulsions in north and central India. With the establishment of the East India Company at Madras in 1639, a new chapter was opened in the history of Tamil Nadu. Slowly the whole of Tamil Nadu and most of South India came under the British rule14.

When India became free, the old Madras province, comprising Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and part of Kerala, continued as the State of Madras. After bifurcation the Tamil Speaking areas formed the Madras State. The old capital Madras City was retained by the new Madras State. Under the States Reorganisation Act 1956, Madras lost the Malabar District and the Kasargoa taluk of South Kanara District to the newly formed

state, Kerala, while Madras gained four taluks of Trivandrum District and Shencotta taluk of the Quilon District from Kerala.

On January 14, 1969, Madras State changed its name to Tamil Nadu. The capital city Madras renamed Chennai in 1996\(^\text{15}\).

People belonging to different ethnic groups had come and settled in Tamil Nadu. The predominant communities in the state were Kallars, Muthurajas, Vanniars, Vellalas, Nadars, Muslims, Dalits and Brahmins. The extension of Vijayanagar rule over Tamil Nadu resulted in the flow of Telugu Reddiyars and Naidus from Andhradesa. Majority of the people were agricultural labourers who did not possess land. They were wholly dependent on daily wages for their livelihood.\(^\text{16}\)

The political condition of Tamil Nadu has played a significant role in the life of Christian missionaries. The Christians living in the Kanyakumari district, had a difficult time at the end of the sixteenth century, because of the tyranny and the greed of one of the local chiefs. Hence since 1597 the Christians of the coastal villages between Cape Comorin and Manappad were staying at the latter place, for the sake of safety, but they were not left in peace even there and were involved in a struggle with the Nayak of Madurai, as were their brethren in Tuticorin.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{15}\) K.M. Mathew, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 693.


Until about 1635, De Nobili was always on good terms with the native rulers, but from then on he began to suffer some persecution, probably due to the outbreak of hostilities with the Portuguese. In 1640 one of his helpers, Father Martins, was expelled from Trichinopoly, while De Nobili himself spent a year in prison at Madurai.\footnote{Christopher O Mahony, \textit{A Summary of Church History}, Alwaye, 1967, p.205.}

John De Britto, one of the greatest figures of the Society of Jesus in India went to care for the Christians of Tattuvancherry, and later for those in the kingdoms of Gingi and Thanjavur. He baptized over 2,000 persons and administered the sacraments to nearly all the Marava Christians. This aroused the Brahmins, who had him and six of his co-workers arrested, imprisoned, tortured and condemned to death by the \\textit{Setupati Raghunatha Thevar}. However, they were all eventually pardoned and expelled for good from the Marava king.

Assigned once again to the Madurai Mission, it was only in May 1691 that Britto was able cautiously to re-enter Marava territory. But he was again arrested by Raghunatha Thevar of Ramnad and sent for execution to his brother, Uriya Thevar, Governor of Oriyur. There on February 4, 1693, John De Britto was beheaded.\footnote{John Correia - Afonso, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.201-203.}

Another missionary by name John Baptist Buttari, who came to India in 1738, the following year was sent to Aur and Dindigul. He was appointed to the Newman Mission,
where two years later a persecution was launched by a petty raja looking out for money, but finally won over by the missionary's exemplary life. Later a major persecution was begun by the Raja of Thanjavur forcing Buttari to lead a wandering life until his last sickness and early death.20

A soldier by Profession, Devasagayam Pillai met the Belgian Eustace de Lannoy, captain of the Travancore forces. Lannoy introduced him to the Christian religion and sent him to Buttari, who duly instructed and baptized him. Buttari sent him on some business to the Raja's minister, Rama Iyer. In the course of Devasagayam's discussion with Rama Iyer, Rama Iyer lost his temper and reportedly threatened to expel all Christians from Travancore. In fact Devasagayam was arrested on February 23, 1740, and suffered various forms of imprisonment and torture because of his refusal to renounce his faith. Finally he was executed at Kathadimalai. His tomb is now under the cupola of the Kottar diocese.21

The political resistance faced by the Christian Missionaries reduced considerably in the 19th and 20th centuries when the rule of British was further consolidated in the Madras Presidency. With the support of the British rulers the missionaries could carry out their work without much trouble. After independence the Government of India put a

20. Ibid., p.247.
lot of restriction to the Foreign Christian Missionaries to enter India. But the task was undertaken by the Indian Christian Missionaries as secularism is guaranteed by the constitution of India.

The secular nature of India was questioned by the Government of Tamil Nadu when the Government of Tamil Nadu passed the Anti Conversion Act in 2002 which greatly restricted the activities of the Christian missionaries towards non-Christians in Tamil Nadu. Of course, the Act was recently revoked by the Government. Thus the Christian missionaries faced a number of political checks and challenges in Tamil Nadu while spreading Christianity.

**SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN TAMIL NADU**

India had, from time immemorial, a commercial contact with the outside world. But in the modern times it was the Moors of Arabia who achieved suzerainty over the Indian seas and hence were able to introduce the Indian spices and herbs to the West. After geographical discoveries of sea routes to the East, it was the Portuguese who landed first on the Indian coast.

The vast period from 1497-1706 A.D. is a period of great adventure, experiments, literary masterpieces and boisterous oppositions coupled with tremendous success for the people of India. It was the English Poet, Rudyard Kipling, who said that it was the

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‘Whiteman’s burden’ to ‘civilise’ the non-Christians whom the westerners called the heathens and the missionaries who followed the traders (who later became the rulers) established schools for the instruction of Christians and the conversion of non-Christians euphemistically called its civilisation.\textsuperscript{24} The first efforts of the East Indian Companies of the Europe to diffuse education were prompted by religious motives, viz., the evangelisation of Indians and the removal of apprehended trouble owing to the preponderance of the Roman Catholics among the inhabitants of the places where they had settled.\textsuperscript{25}

The Portuguese king John II, on becoming rich and prosperous through trade and commerce\textsuperscript{26} sent Vascoda Gama, who guided by an Arab pilot,\textsuperscript{27} landed in the territory of king Zamorin, on the west coast of India on 21, May 1498 A.D.\textsuperscript{28} It was a sight of great wonder with fearsome look on the countenance for the crowd to sea the Portuguese ships with sailors and priests.\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[25] Narendranath Law, \textit{Promotion of Learning in India by the Early European Settlers}, Delhi, 1915, p.5.
\item[27] C.B.Firth, \textit{An Introduction to Indian Church History}, Delhi, 1988, p.49.
\item[29] \textit{Ibid.}, p.82.
\end{footnotes}
From the beginning the contact was purely commercial and only later Portuguese took up the task of converting the non-Christians. From 5th to 15th century A.D. the Nestorian Christianity of Syrian Church of Persian Empire flourished in India. Vascoda Gama found them to be a powerful military caste and highly respected by all, eventhough they suffered under the Nair Aristocracy, and finally the Jews and the Nestorian Christians fell a victim to the awful barbarics of Goa Inquisition. In 1599, the Church, after 40 years of existence, ceased to exist. The first Portuguese expedition was despatched in 1507 to collect information about the coromandel coast and from then on their commercial ships started sailing to the east and for once they touched a port called Pulicat on the coromandel coast. The first recorded visit of the Portuguese to Mylapore was in 1517. The result was a colony of Portuguese gradually arose in and around Mylapore.

With missionary zeal and commercial motive, the ambitious Portuguese wanted to establish their permanent positions in Asia. Hence Da Gama came to India for the second time in 1500 A.D. accompanied by 8 Franciscan Friars and 8 secular priests, as the

Nestorian Bishops say in their letter of 1504, “they do no travel anywhere without priests.”

This time, when he reached Cochin, he received a deputation of Christians living near Cranganore who pleaded protection against the Muhammadan Arabs who had already established themselves in the fishery coast. This was a great victory to the Portuguese. After that Alfonso Albuquerque was sent to India who captured Goa from the Sultan of Bijapur in 1510 and became the Governor. Albuquerque consolidated the Portuguese empire and trade and even built fortresses at Quilon in 1518 and Cranganore in 1537.

The fishermen community in the western coast of Tamil Nadu, called Paravas, were illiterate and were accustomed to making offerings to idols and to magicians in order to obtain favours and ward off misfortunes. They had village headmen called Pattangattis, who were recruited from the rich and privileged ones whose ideas and justice coincided with their interests. The chief of the village headmen was called Jathi Thalaivan or the Chief Pattangatti.

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35 C.B. Firth, *op. cit.*, p.52.  
37 Ferroli, *op. cit.*, p.84.  
38 C.B. Firth, *op. cit.*, p.49.  
40 Joseph Thikkadath, *op. cit.*, p.158.  
When the Vijaya Nagar King, Kumara Kampana conquered Madurai in 1370, the Muslims escaped to pearl coast and spread their culture in the pearl fishery coast inhabited by the Paravas. These Arab Mahammadans of Kayalpattinam took the coast under lease from Udayamarthanda Verma of Travancore in 1516 and suppressed them.\(^{42}\) Claiming sole right over fishing, the Arab Muhammadans prevented the Paravas from their 'life business' of fishing.\(^{43}\) Having lost their right over fishery, the disgusted Paravas rebelled against them and that led to frequent quarrels and finally to a sudden outburst of clash – the reason being a quarrel between a Parava woman and a Muslim youth. In Tuticorin, a Parava woman who was selling rice cake (Paniyaram) was insulted. So the husband questioned it which led to a great street brawl between the two communities. The Paravas attacked with lethal weapons and killed Muslim women and the frightened Muslims fled away to save their lives.\(^{44}\)

The infuriated Muslims retaliated vehemently with a great vengeance to totally exterminate the Paravas and attacked them indiscriminately killing more Paravas. When the latter complained to the ruling authorities, the Muslims bribed the Hindu ruler Udaya Marthanda Verma of Truvancore and Prince Pandya of Kayattar (under whom they lived)

\(^{42}\) S. Arunachalam, *History of Pearl Fishery of Tamil Coast*, Annamalai Nagar, 1952, p.89.

\(^{43}\) K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *Culture and History of the Tamils*, 1964, p.156.

with valuable gifts and obtained the verdict in their favour, and also continued to persecute the Paravas who were caught between land and sea.\textsuperscript{45}

The desperate Paravas approached one Mr. John da Cruz at Cape Comorin, who was a chetty by caste and a convert from Calicut. King Zamorin sent him an ambassador to Lisbon, where he was converted and baptized and was knighted in 1515 by King John III (1521-27) and was made a member of the Order of Christ.\textsuperscript{46} Pope Leo X in 1514 granted to the Portuguese King and his successors the right of ecclesiastical patronage in their settlement areas and thus arose the Portuguese ‘Padrado’ (patronage) which means the right to present candidates to bishoprics and other ecclesiastical offices and correspondingly an obligation to maintain staff, equip churches and missions.\textsuperscript{47} Hence Zamorin dismissed him and even imprisoned him for the debt he owed to him. Later he took to trading. He was considered the Apostle of Paravas and so they listened to his advice to embrace Christianity so that they could be protected by the Portuguese.\textsuperscript{48} Accordingly, the Paravas took refuge under the Portuguese protection. John da Cruz took a deputation of 15 pattangattis to Cochin in 1535 for presenting the case to Pervo Vaz, the captais.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{46} Joseph Thikkadath, \textit{op. cit.}, p.395.
\textsuperscript{47} C.B. Firth, \textit{op. cit.}, p.52.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, p.396.
They promised to Pero Vaz that the entire community would become Christians, if the Portuguese would protect them and their native rulers. Pero Vaz asked for an assurance that they would all embrace Christianity for the help. So one pattangadi returned to Fishery coast and collected 15 distinguished men of their community, who went to Cochin and declared to the captain that they would become Christians.

At that time the Vicar General of Goa, Father Michael Vaz was there in Cochin and both John da Cruz and Michael Vaz recommended the case to Lope Vaz de Sampayo, the Governor of India at Goa to offer protection to the Paravas and to baptise them. The Muslims tried to prevent it fearing that pearl fishing would go out of their control and requested Pero Vaz not to Christianise them. But Pero Vaz declined the offer of bribes and refused to yield. Under his personal supervision 85 Paravas were baptised by vicar General Michael Vaz with Portuguese names.

In April 1536 Governor Nuno da Gunha, the Vicar General of Cochin, Pedro Gonsalves and three priests reached the coast and baptised men, women and children of about 50,000 and in 1537 further mass conversion took place and by the end of 1537 the entire community accepted Christianity. John da Cruz says that 80,000 souls of 1,60,000

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in Vijayanagar Empire became Christians. Pero Gonsalves, Vicar of Cochin wrote in 1555 that 1000-1500 were baptised in a single day and in the next three years 1,20,000 souls were baptised and when Francis Xavier came to India, he had personally given the missions to him. On seeing the Portuguese fleet, the Muslims meekly submitted and thus the Paravas regained the right to fishing.

The Franciscan priests found the task of preaching and serving the paravas a difficult one owing to the ignorance of their language and hence they requested King John III to send more missionaries in 1536. By 1540 the Portuguese had established themselves firmly in the west coast, with Goa as the centre and stations at Cranganore, Cochin and other places and the Syrians also continued to be friendly with them. It was at this time King John III of Portugal, always solicitous for the progress of faith in his rapidly expanding dominion, appealed to the Pope Paul III. The Roman Ambassador Mascarenhas contacted the Pope through Loyola and got the permission. Thus the first group of Jesuit missionaries consisting of Francis Xavier, Father Paul de Camerino and Francis Mancias arrived India in July 1541 along with Governor Alfonso de Sousa.

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After Goa became the headquarters, the Portuguese extended their influence to Nagapatnam, Santhome, Ceylon and the South East Asian regions. The Portuguese brought Nagapatnam under their suzerainty at the time of Sevappa Nayak of Tanjore (1530-1560). The gratitude of the Paravas for the great help by the Portuguese had a tremendous influence in the South. As the Muslims were subjugated, the Portuguese went about freely with their mission. The Parish Priest Father Michael Vaz baptised nearly 20,000 paravas and later the whole community with their chief became Christians. This led to mass conversion on the east coast. On seeing this, the Vijayanagar ruler Ramaraya became panicky and he conquered the Fishery coast to check the Portuguese. In 1588, Ramaraya even conquered Mylapore and tortured the missionaries.

Inspite of this the Portuguese maintained a cordial relations with Vijayanagar and this is evident from the letter of the Portuguese King Philip III to Venkata I (1585-1614). But Christianity did not make any inroad there. The Portuguese ultimately succeeded in carving out an empire in India through trade and missionary activities.

58 G. Schurhammer, op.cit., p.346.
60 I. Miranda, Father Robert De Nobili’s Mission, Trichirappalli, 1929, p.6.
64 C.I.Casters, Madura Mission, Trichnopoly, 1924, p.15.
Francis Xavier, a Spaniard, of noble birth, studied in the university of Paris and joined the Society. The greatest of the Roman Catholic Missionaries, Xavier arrived in India on May 6th 1542, with a letter from Pope appointing him Apostolic Nuncio (special messenger or ambassador of Pope). His missionary enthusiasm, saintly appearance, zeal for God and holiness, self denial, love of humanity drove him to bear with all difficulties and barriers to advocate the kingdom of God and as a result the number of Christians were increased and many Dioceses were established in places like Cochin Mylapore and Cranganore. After paying his respect to the Bishop of Goa, he wholly devoted himself to the mission. As the greatest missionary of the whole Catholic Church, with a passionate but disciplined nature, profound devotion and earnest loving for the salvation of souls, he had the wise outlook of a statesman and the capacity of a strategist of organisation on a large scale. He knew that it was not his business to settle down as a parish priest of Goa, and he was soon called away to a much larger work in South India.

During the four years he stayed in India he laid the strong foundation for the Church. At the instance of De Sousa, he was asked to go to the Fishery coast to care for the Paravas living in 30 villages from Cape Comorin and Tuticorin. He toured those

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68 C.B.Firth, *op.cit.*, p.58.
villages, instructing and baptising the people; he built small Churches with mud and thatch, conducted Sunday services and appointed catechists to care for them. But he was unhappy to see the old habits of drinking, quarrelling and other heathen practices. When he travelled to Travancore he baptised nearly 10,000 fishermen called Mukkavars from Poovar to Pollam. But during his ministry he never learnt the people's language, and had only the use of interpreters.

He founded the Cape Comorin Mission as he found the Travancore region more receptive to his teachings and later he made Kottar his residential place. It was at this time the Badagas, the Telugu speaking troops of Vijayanagar Empire attacked Unni Kerala Verma, the King of Venad. Francis Xavier helped the king with prayers and moral support. So the king allowed him to carry on his services and also denoted a piece of land to build a Church. As the Christian community in Kottar increased in number, he built a chapel in 1544 which later on was called St. Francis Xavier Church as the strength increased. Then he moved to the Timelveli district to minister to the Paravas who were ignorant of faith and were lacking a Church. He baptised nearly 20,000 Paravas and

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70. C.B. Firth, *op. cit.*, p.60.
71. Ibid., p.61.
74. C.B. Firth, *op. cit.*, p.58.
founded the “Fisheries Mission.” Then he went to Japan and returned to Goa in 1552, and finally died on 3 Dec. 1552 at Sanchen Island near Canton, on founding China Mission.

Thus, the most illustrious missionary, Xavier burned out his brief Indian life in incessant and laborious efforts to bring the forms of Christianity to a people of ignorance. He did something besides ringing his bell through the villages and proclaim the misunderstood gospel. His practical charity exhibited in hospitals and in the abodes of death, his endeavour to establish a college to train native preachers, his tireless effort to reform godless Europeans and their heathen wives forcibly baptised by Albuquerque’s order; his divine aspiration for a holier life and greater nearness to his Saviour – these are the features of life of the Indian Apostle which were a permanent contribution to the cause of Christianity. No doubt, he was canonised by the Pope Gregory XV in 1622 A.D.

The conversion of the Paravas had its impact on the suburbs of Tirunelveli and the interior of Madurai, the abode of Brahminical learning and culture. The Catholic Mission of Tanjore showed greater interest after Francis Xavier who visited Nagapatnam in the

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76 C.B.Firth, *op.cit.*, p.61.
78 C.B.Firth, *op.cit.*, p.61.
16th century. The exact time of the advent of Catholic mission in Tanjore is not clear, but it is doubtful whether Xavier worked in Tanjore. But it was the Portuguese who founded the mission in Nagapatnam and built a Church at Velankanni when they established their settlements there. In the 16th and 17th centuries, there were isolated Christian communities in places like Tranqueber, Cuddalore, Pondicherry, but the numerous concentration of the Christians was in Nagapatnam.

Nagapatnam was a busy commercial centre during the Nayaks and the Portuguese should have settled there sometimes between 1600 and 1630. When the Nayaks attacked Nagapatnam, the Portuguese began to flee, but somehow, 60 Portuguese, 200 Eurasians and 3000 Indian Christians were trapped as they had no boats to escape, which means that some Christians lived there. The Franciscans converted some fishermen at Velankanni. The Fishery coast, a fertile field of all the orders, is still and almost entirely Roman Catholic. The Indo-Europoeans were commonly known as Portuguese on the coromandel coast even if they had no Portuguese blood in them.

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80 Ibid., p.41.
83 Joseph Thikkadath, _op.cit._, pp.195-196.
It was the Franciscans who went there in 1518 founded the Church at Velankanni to ‘Our Lady of Health’ and after them, the Dominicans went there in 1604, the Augustinians went in 1625, but the Jesuits early in 1597 founded Churches at Nagapatnam, Tranquebar, Tirumullaivasal and Karaikal which were all placed under the care of the Jesuits later. As a result Tanjore, Vallam, Nagapatnam, Velankanni are the main centres of worship for the Catholics. By the end of 16th century the Jesuits settled at Mylapore (1595), Nagapatnam (1597) Jingi (1598) and Tanjore (1598). The Jesuit Annual letter of 1602 tells about the origin of Catholic community of Tranquebar.

In 1647 there were three Catholic Churches in Tanjore and subsequently the mission transferred its headquarters to Nondavanampatti near Vallam. From 1675 the missionary activities were extended to Mannargudi and Pudukottai under the missionary, John de Britto. Thus Christianity spread in Tamil Nadu owing to the proselytising activities of various missions like Roman Catholic Missions, Tranquebar Lutheran Mission, the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), the Society for the Propagation of Gospel (SPG) the Methodist Mission and the Weslyan Mission.

And the mission in the coromandel coast started eclipsing when the Danish mission set its foot in Tranquebar in 1620 and later on when the Dutch who were

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88. Ibid., p.198.
89. B.S.Baliga, op.cit., p.155.
Protestants captured Nagapatnam in 1658, they expelled all the Catholics except the Franciscans for fear of the Nayaks of Tanjore as they were very friendly to each other. And yet, the missionary activities were effectively carried out in the interior of Madurai and the suburbs by Robert de Nobili for some time.

**CASTE SYSTEM**

The term "Caste" has not been specifically defined in the constitution of India. The "Caste system then can be said to occur when a society is composed of birth-ascribed, hierarchically-ordered and culturally distinct groups (castes)". A caste is characterised by affiliation by validating behaviour. Caste are endogamous, that is one must marry within the caste. Individuals in a caste system characteristically accept their status, whether high or low as appropriate and the status hierarchy of a caste system is supported and validated by the institutions of the society - the political, occupational, religious and familial and other structures.

Caste corresponds to *Jati* while *Varna* refers to one of the four categories into which the Hindu society is traditionally divided - the Brahmanas, the kshatryas, the Vaisyahs and the Sudras. "Caste as we understand is a social combination, the members

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of which are enlisted by birth and not by enrolment". The system has a tendency for proliferation, the castes in the country being reckoned now as approximately 3000 in number.

The traditional pattern of social stratification in India is unique and has deep roots in peculiar ethnic constellations that have existed for three thousand years. These features have changed from time to time over these millennia. The hierarchical division of castes, the doctrine of Karma, the notion of purity - pollution and crystallization of different social orders contributed to social stratification in the ancient India.

Caste system is unique because its stratification has specific characteristics, namely:

i. hierarchy, based on the principle of purity and pollution;

ii. a hierarchy of social status based on political and economic power; and

iii. the differentiation of kin groups to which an individual belongs by birth. These three axes interact in various ways to stratify the different caste groups in society. Caste has always been a dynamic system and exhibits a process of social mobility.

The situation in India is characterised mainly by three inter-related factors: (i) massive economic poverty; (ii) pluriform religiosity; and (iii) institutionalized inequality of caste system. Of the three factors that determine the social situation of India, Caste is the most significant. Caste gives concrete expression to religiosity and poverty. Those

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98. L. Stanislaus, op.cit., p.xxv.
who could not or would not be filled in the stratification called "castes", which term strictly covered the four varnas, were Panchamas, the fifth class or, loosely, avarnas, i.e. caste outside the pale. Admittedly of indigenous origin and in fact, recognised as the original inhabitants, these were subjected through the ages to restrictions, indignities, and disabilities, to untouchability, unapproachability and even invisibility until gradually they sank into a sub-human existence, misery, squalor and poverty.99

Even fifty six years after independence and the abolition of untouchability by the Republican constitution, social discrimination, oppression and atrocity against the Dalits are still widespread. The vast majority are economically very poor, landless labourers, deeply in perpetual debt, with a proportionally very low literacy rate, and they are condemned to engage in religiously polluting and socially demeaning occupations like scavenging, handling the carcasses of dead animals, or working in leather animal hides.

The Dalits are oppressed and exploited by others. They are dehumanized, defeated, dispossessed and deprived by dominant castes. Dalits live on the periphery of society, and are segregated and scattered. As a result, they have developed a "Wounder Psyche".100 Efforts have been made by Dalits and others to show the situation of Dalits

and their problems in different fields such as (i) Dalit history, (ii) Dalit religion, (iii) Dalit Sociology, (iv) Dalit economics (v) Dalit politics (vi) Dalit movements, (vii) Dalit literature and (viii) Dalit theology.

**DALIT CHRISTIANS IN TAMIL NADU**

The Dalit converts to Christianity were called the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin. This name became common since the First National Convention of Christian Leaders on the Plight of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin in 1978. Christian circles began to use the term Dalit for Scheduled Castes since the end of the 70s and early 80s. The concept and category of the Dalit Christians and their slogan, 'Dalit is dignified' were formulated by the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement in 1985. National Churches and Ecumenical Councils (World Council of Churches) became familiar with the term since 1986. Though the concept and the usage of the term Dalit Christians were common among the Protestants from the end of the 70s onwards, the catholics began to use this term a little later. The National Convention of All India Catholic Union in 1989, decided to refer to the Scheduled Caste Christians, as Dalit Christians. This convention also decided to treat the 90s as "the decade of the Dalit Christians".

103 Times of India, Bangalore, 8 June 1989.
Although Christianity came to Tamil Nadu from the time of Saint Thomas the Apostle, the revival of Christianity dates back to Francis Xavier. Because of the perseverance and hard work of the missionaries, many Tamilians have become Christians, who are the second largest in number after the Christians in Kerala. In the context of Indian society and the caste system and its problem the researcher takes up the situation and conditions of the Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu. It is true that there has been a lot of change since Independence and the situation keeps on changing. To understand the conditions, problems and discriminations against the Dalit Christians, the scholar will mainly consider three research findings namely, Antony Raj, Kananaikil and Fernandes. These studies were done within the period of 1989-93. Each of their studies uses different methods, and has different perspectives and purposes. The magnitude of their research covers a number of persons and their questionnaires are different. They also have limitations in their research. But these findings will help the present study to draw a more comprehensive conclusion on the conditions of the Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu. There is not any other research covering the whole State on the Dalit Christians.

Whenever this study speaks of the 'Church', it refers to all the People of God, including the Clergy, Religious and lay people, each group with its proper role and responsibility. In this chapter the researcher shall consider the existing caste practices in the Christian community and the Government discrimination against the Dalit Christians. These two points are applicable to all the Dalit Christians in the country. Then, the scholar considers their general situations and conditions and some of the common
problems they face in society. This chapter is divided into two sections: (I) Socio-economic condition and (II) Discriminations.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION

1. Numerical Overview in Tamil Nadu:

   According to the 1991 census, Tamil Nadu has a population of 55,858,946. It constitutes 6.6 per cent of the total population of India. The following are the religious, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe composition in Tamil Nadu.\(^{104}\)

   Religious Composition - 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>88.67 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>5.69 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>5.47 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0.17 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes - 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheduled Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Castes</td>
<td>19.18 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Tribes</td>
<td>1.03 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the whole of India, only 2.32 per cent are Christians. Among them, 60 per cent are estimated to be Dalits. Among the Christians in Tamil Nadu, around 65 per cent are Dalits.\textsuperscript{105}

The Tamil Nadu State has 15 Catholic dioceses. They are: Coimbatore, Dharmapuri, Kottar, Kumbakonam, Madras, Madurai, Palayamkottai, Pondicherry - Cuddalore, Salem, Sivagangai, Ootacamund, Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli, Tuticorin and Vellore. Among the other denominations, the Church of South India (CSI) comprises seven dioceses: Madras, Tiruchirappalli - Thanjavur, Coimbatore, Madurai - Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli, Kanniyakumari and Vellore. The Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Methodists, the Pentecostals and many other non-institutional groups are also present in the State. Separate statistics for Catholics and Protestants are not available after 1931. The ratio between Protestants and Catholics would be 1:2.

In Tamil Nadu the castes can be divided into four major groups: the Brahmins, Forward Class (Marpattor Vaguppu), Backward Class (Pirpattor Vaguppu) and Dalits. They are spread over the entire state. Brahmins are more numerous in the Thanjavur district and Madras city. The Forward Class consists mainly of land owners and cultivators; the dominant caste in the Tirunelveli and Thanjavur districts is the Vellalars, in Coimbatore the Gounders, in Chengalpattu the Mudaliars and in South Arcot the

\textsuperscript{105} Statement of the Tamil Nadu Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Madurai, 1994, p.66.
Udaiyars. The Government classifies the Backward Class into two groups: (i) Backward Class (144 jatis) and Most Backward Class (39 jatis). The most prominent among the former are the Gowdas, Kallars, Maravars and Nadars. They are spread all over the State. Among the latter, the Vanniyars are prominent in the South and North Arcot districts and the Meenavars along the Coast.

The Tamil Nadu Government identifies 78 names of Scheduled Castes. Some major castes are duplicated either as synonyms or as sub-castes of a caste. Therefore, the 78 names can be grouped into six broad categories: (i) Paraiyan (Adi Dravida Panchama, Paraiyan, Sambavar and Vettiyan), (ii) Pallan (Devendrakulathan, Kudumban, Pallan, Pannadi and Kadaiyan), (iii) Sakkiliyan (Arunthathiyar, Madari and Pagadai), (iv) Kuravan, (v) Valluvan (Tiruvalluvar and Valluvan), and (vi) others (all other castes not coming under any of the five groups). The first five groups consist of 17 sub-castes and account for 95 per cent of the total population of Dalits in Tamil Nadu while the others account for the rest. They are spread over the entire State. The Chengalpattu and South Arcot districts have a high percentage of Dalits.

In the history of India, the Dalits, who were subjected to severe indignities, disabilities and inhuman treatment, were attracted to religions like Buddhism,

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106 The above classifications are according to Tamil Nadu G.O. MS. No.242, Nutrition Meal Programme and Social Welfare Department dated 28 March 1989.
108 The names of Scheduled Castes according to the Tamil Nadu G.O.MS. No.1546, Social Welfare Department, dated 30 July 1985.
Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. The Christian missionaries in particular gave them shelter, provided them with better living conditions and a better quality of life. There was a change in the converts' way of life but unfortunately, the Christian social order remained more or less the same as the Hindu social order.

It is generally found that even after conversion, whether in villages or urban areas, the Dalit Christians continue to reside in the same quarters as the Dalit Hindus. It is especially so in Madurai, Coimbatore, Salem and Cuddalore. In Madras City, at Pallavaram, Triplicane and Little Mount, families of the Dalit Christians and Dalit Hindus live side by side. In Kumbakonam, in rural areas converts are invariably residing in the same cheris along with their Hindu brethren. Hindu and Christian Dalit members participate in each other's social functions like marriage. It seems that practically they have the feeling that they belong to the same social order despite the differences in religious belief. The Hindu and Christian Dalits maintain their homogeneity in spite of religious difference.¹⁰⁹

A great majority of the converts continue to carry on the same profession or avocation as before. Most of them are as before the conversion, scavengers, railway coolies, manual labourers, mat-weavers, dhobies and leather workers.¹¹⁰ In South Arcot

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 29.
District less than 10% are cultivators, about 60% landless agricultural labourers, 4% skilled labourers or artisans, 20% coolies or unskilled labourers and the rest 6% belong to teaching and other professions. In Tirunelveli they are mostly engaged as labourers both in agricultural fields and factories.

In Salem most of them are cultivators, agricultural labourers, mat-weavers, dhobies, leather workers and scavengers while a few are engaged as teachers and clerks. In Madurai most of them are agricultural labourers or tenants-at-will. In Coimbatore most of them are agricultural labourers, cultivators, mill workers, coolies, domestic servants and peons, and a very few are clerks and elementary school teachers. In Kumbakonam most of them are agricultural manual labourers and daily wage-earners. A few take land on lease and cultivate them; a few are in the teaching line and still a fewer are clerks. In Tiruchirappalli a few hundreds of them are scavengers following their ancestral profession.

At Pallavaram and Little Mount in Madras city there are about 400 scavengers who embraced Christianity one or two generations ago. In North Arcot District most of the Dalit Christians are either tannery workers, or beedi workers or daily cooli workers or railway Khalasis.

Some of the educated persons among them are working as elementary and high school teachers, college professors, nurses, clerks, policemen, attenders and some in defence services. Change of religion has not brought about any appreciable change in the
profession they were doing before conversion, except in the case of a few educated among them, who have been provided with employment in the institutions run by Catholic and Protestant missionaries.¹¹¹

While taking all the castes together, rarely any convert, even today, loses his/her membership with his/her caste. For example if a Vellala Christian could not find a suitable bride or bridegroom in his/her own Christian Vellala community, he/she looks for one in the Hindu counterpart. It is not uncommon that the Christian high castes append their caste suffix to their names. Such caste names are read in the Church at funerals, marriages and other occasions. Normally a convert follows the caste customs and the ceremonies in their life cycle celebrations such as birth, puberty, marriage and funeral. For marriages every caste follows its custom except for the nuptial blessing in the Church. They also follow the food and dressing habits, as their Hindu counterparts. In some instances, if the converts fail to comply with the caste customs, they are ostracized. Hence the practices of social distance, untouchability and social stratification are not uncommon even among the Christians. The existence of the caste practices today in the Christian community can be seen by two supportive view points: (i) the sociologists view points and (ii) the observations of the Church leaders and others¹¹².

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 29.
Firstly, sociological studies have shown that the Hindu beliefs and the practices of the caste system are also in the non-Hindu Communities such as Christians\textsuperscript{113} and Muslims. The scholars such as Bailey, Dumont, Srinivas and Gough point out the existence of caste in the Christian community. Bailey writes, "In spite of the dogma of Christianity and the efforts of the missionaries, the rank of the Christian in the local community continues to depend on the caste from which he was converted. This persists among the Christians themselves even to the third and fourth generations."\textsuperscript{114} Srinivas says that the conversion to Christianity often only changed the faith but not the customs, the general culture, or the standing of the converts in society.\textsuperscript{115} Dumont writes,

"It is beyond doubt that the Untouchables, in accepting conversion, were often responding to the appeal of an egalitarian religion preached by the powerful; but in actual fact their social situation was not improved by it, either in the Hindu milieu, nor even as we shall see, the Christian milieu."\textsuperscript{116}

But Fernandes says, "The discrimination among Christians is not identical to that among their Hindu brethren though it may not be as different as is sometimes thought".\textsuperscript{117}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{113} The Christians include both Catholics and Protestants. But the prevalence of caste distinctions vary in these communities.
\item \textsuperscript{114} L.Stanislaus, \textit{op.cit.}, p.51.
\item \textsuperscript{115} M.N. Srinivas, \textit{Social Change in Modern India}, New Delhi, 1972, p.60.
\item \textsuperscript{117} W. Fernandes, \textit{Caste, Religion and Social Change in India: Christianity and Conversion Movement, in Scheduled Castes and the struggle against Inequality}, New Delhi, 1981, p.138.
\end{itemize}
Secondly, the Christian leaders accept the existence of the caste practices in the Christian community and they have shown a great concern for the social life of the community. The memorandum of the National Convention of the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin in 1978 states:

"It is also found that notwithstanding conversion, caste system with all its prejudices is not destroyed but is unfortunately prevalent among the Christian converts also. They continue to be treated by their neighbours as Untouchables and are victims of the same social and economic disabilities as their Hindu brethren of the same category. These Christian converts follow the same usages, customs, manners and habits of life characteristic to each particular caste. Except in the matter of religious belief, there is absolutely no differentiation between the converts and their Hindu brethren. In a caste-ridden society caste practices and prejudices die hard. Hence the Christians of Scheduled Caste origin suffer from disabilities of the practice of untouchability."

Thus, the convention recognized the existence of the discrimination on the basis of caste. The CBCI statement on caste in 1982 says, "What is known as the 'caste mentality' ¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ The Memorandum prepared by the follow-up Action Committee of the National Convention on the Plight of the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin, pp.4-5.
which often finds expression in action that are manifestly unchristian, are found in the
social life and even infects in some areas the sphere of religious practices". The CBCI
in 1983 again showed its concern for the Christian life. It observes:

"The Caste mentality is still present also in the Christian communities,
where converts from different castes live together in the same parish or
diocese. A sense of equality does not always prevail among them. In
several places, even after generations of Christian life, each group keeps
its identity and tries to perpetuate it."  

After analyzing the continuation of the caste system in the Christian community,
Bishop Azariah (CSI, Madras), says, "... the condition cannot be said to have changed
very much. Most sadly even within the world-renowned and forward-looking Church of
South India there still exist the caste-ridden vestiges of Hinduism".

Gandhiji writes about the Christian converts in the Harijan as follows:
"Whether the Harijan is nominally a Christian, Muslim or Hindu and
now Sikh, he is still a Harijan. He cannot change his spots inherited
from Hinduism, so called. He may change his garb and call himself a
Catholic Harijan or a Muslim Harijan or neo-Muslim or neo-Sikh but his
untouchability will haunt him during his life time".

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While observing the social life of the Christians, Dr. Ambedkar says,

"There are Brahmin Christians and non-Brahmin Christians. Among non-Brahmin Christians there are Maratha Christians, Mahar Christians, Mang Christians and Bhangi Christians. Similarly, there are Paraiah Christians, Mala Christians and Madiga Christians. They would not intermarry, they would not inter-dine. They are as much caste ridden as the Hindus are".  

Although the prevalence of caste practices among Christians and the identification with their castes exists in most of the places, it would be an exaggeration to say that the existence of the caste practices are the same in all the spheres of life as among Hindus, Kananaikil points out,

"... among Christians the intensity of caste practices differs substantially. Caste practices will be found more among groups which are different economically and in social status. For example, one notices intense forms of caste practices among converts from upper castes against converts from lower castes, especially from the 'Untouchable' communities."  


The crux of the problem, proverbially, is that caste consciousness has become part and parcel of the Christians' psyche over the centuries. In brief, the reports of the Government Commissions, the observations of the sociologists and Church leaders and the comments of others point out the prevalence of caste practices within the Christian community. But the strong equalitarian teaching of the Church has influenced social thinking in Indian society. This suggests that Christianity has in some way been influential in weakening the basis for legitimization of caste discrimination, if not the practice of discrimination itself. It is important to note, however, that the caste practices in Christianity are not strictly comparable with caste practices among the Hindus. First of all, the caste practices in Christianity are not legitimized by religion like Hinduism. They are based mostly on social status, economic dependence and social customs prevalent in society. These practices are not integrated into Christian religious beliefs or legitimized by religious norms.¹²⁴

**DISCRIMINATIONS**

Before the Independence of India, as a response to the demands from the 'Untouchable' minority communities, the Government of India (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1936, gave a list of the 'Scheduled Castes'. Here the term 'Scheduled Caste' includes a new specification that 'no Indian Christian shall be deemed to be a member of a

Scheduled Caste'. The implications of using religious criterion for defining a Scheduled caste was not felt immediately by the Indian Christians. In the Constitution of India Article 341(1) empowers the President to give a list of the Scheduled Castes. Exercising his authority, he issued an order as the following:125

1. This order may be called the constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950.

2. Subject to the provision of this order, the castes, races or tribes, or parts of, or groups within castes or tribes, specified in Parts I to XVI of the Schedule to this Order, shall, in relation to the States to which those Parts respectively relate, be deemed to be Scheduled Castes, so far as regards members thereof resident in the localities specified in relation to them in those parts of that Schedule.

3. Notwithstanding anything contained in paragraph 2, no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism, shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste.

The Christian leaders and politicians were quick to notice the discrepancy between the secular nature of the Indian Constitution and the Hindu religious bias in the functioning of Indian democracy with regard to Scheduled Caste converts to Christianity.

125 J. Kananaikil, Scheduled Castes in the Constituent Assembly, New Delhi, 1982, pp.42-43.
Normally, the existential reality of the discriminations against Dalit Christians are known as double discrimination\textsuperscript{126} or the Dalit Christians are called twice alienated.\textsuperscript{127} They are doubly discriminated: firstly, because as Christians they are denied the protective discrimination by the Government and thus denied remedial privileges granted to other members of the Dalits, on the grounds that, as Christians they are no longer disadvantaged and Christianity does not admit a caste system. Secondly, since they are Dalits, they continue to suffer from caste discrimination within the society. The extent and rigour of caste discrimination in the Churches vary from place to place and from Church to Church. Caste discrimination is more evident in South India, where Christian converts from different caste groups live together, than in the North, where the Christian communities are generally homogeneous, drawn from a single group of Dalits or Scheduled Tribes.

Today, Dalit Christians suffer from a six fold discrimination: (i) discrimination by the Government, (ii) by the caste Hindus, (iii) by the caste Christian community, (iv) by the hierarchical Church, (v) by fellow Hindu Dalits\textsuperscript{128} and (vi) by the subgroups of Dalit

\begin{itemize}
  \item[127.] K. Wilson, *Twice Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians*, Hyderabad, 1982, p.76.
\end{itemize}
Christians themselves. The discrimination by the Government was already dealt with previously. The next three would amount to mostly social discrimination. The last two have different dimensions. Briefly, let the scholar mention the last two discriminations.

The Dalit Christians suffer alienation from their own fellow Dalits in the Hindu fold because of religious and cultural differences. Moreover, the Hindu Dalits frown upon the Christian Dalits as their potential competitors in the share of reservations which are given by the Government.\textsuperscript{129} Most Hindu Dalits look upon them with disfavour when they seek Government assistance since they are considered already uplifted by missionary assistance.

Another serious problem with the Dalit Christians is that they are divided among themselves into different subgroups like the Hindu community. In Tamil Nadu there is a fourfold hierarchy of Dalits: viz., Pallans, Paraiyans, Sakkiliyans and Thottis. The lower rung jati is untouchable to the upper jati. “Each of these has rigid and connubial restrictions. And also a general urban/rural divisions are existing, where urbanities claim superiority. On top of it, all the class divisions are added to the many subgroups of Dalits”.\textsuperscript{130} The discrimination is polarised between these subgroups. It is a classical example of the oppressed being ruled by the values of the oppressor.

\textsuperscript{129} Yogendra Kumar, \textit{Dalit Christians Can’t Claim our Share in Reservations}, New Delhi, 1985, pp.6-9.
\textsuperscript{130} L. Stanislus, \textit{op.cit.}, p.55.
The infights are more evident in Andhra Pradesh, where Dalits are polarised mostly into the subgroups of Malas and Madigas.\textsuperscript{131} Azariah says, "The Dalit Christians are divided among themselves into different subjects like their Hindu counterparts. They observe caste discrimination against one another, equally, strongly, if not more like all other Hindus".\textsuperscript{132} The CBCI statement in 1982 also states, "The tensions arising from the caste mentality are not confined to the oppression of the lower caste by those of the higher castes but are also found within the castes themselves".\textsuperscript{133} (It is important to note that Antony Raj’s research does not cover the discriminations which are practised among the different subgroups of Dalit Christians themselves. Neither does Fernandes' research touch this aspect of discrimination. Kananaikil’s research is restricted only to the comparison between the Christian converts and non-converts of the Dalit community).

Dalit Christians are part of the same Indian social fabric, affected by the same social structure and forces like the other Dalits. They are not isolated from these because of their religion. Thus, they suffer from the different discriminations like the other Dalits. The following description would explain the discriminations in Tamil Nadu:

Indian society is a caste-ridden society. Caste prejudices are very deep-rooted in society. Hence one needs to understand that when a Dalit embraces a casteless religion like Christianity or Islam, he or she is still placed in the same position in the caste

\textsuperscript{131} M. Azariah, \textit{The Un-Christian Side of the Indian Church}, Madras, 1990, p.11.  
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Ibid.}, p.11.  
\textsuperscript{133} Statement on Caste by CBCI, 1982, p.45.
hierarchy as in the perception of the society. The Karnataka Backward Classes Commission in 1952 observed,

"A Scheduled Caste might have made some progress, or might have embraced Islam, or Christianity, and thereby the disabilities under which he suffered as a result of untouchability, might have, to some extent, disappeared. But the fact remains that such castes, tribes and racial groups still continue to suffer under other social, educational and economic handicaps and taboos".134

The Mandal Commission too observed, "... even after conversion, the lower caste converts were continued to be treated as Harijans by all sections of the society,".135 As it is seen whenever there is any murder or violence on the Dalits, the dominant castes do not make a difference between the Hindu and Christian Dalits. The incidents of the caste riot in Vilupuram in 1978, the rape and murders in Sankarankulam in 1980, the arson in Uttersanda in 1981 and in Bodinaikenur in 1987, where the non-Dalit Hindus set fire to the houses and indiscriminately killed both Hindu and Christian Dalits without differentiating among them on the basis of their religion, prove the fact stated above.

The Jesuits of Madurai Province made a survey under the direction of Antony Raj in 1989-92 in Tamil Nadu. The random sampling involves 9,000 respondents of the Dalit Christians, Among them 94.5 per cent live in the villages. Using various statistical computations, namely, combined frequency technique, ratio technique and dispersion technique, the research team has tried to gauge the nature and extent of social discrimination. The following table presents eleven questions relating to the nature and extent of discrimination as practised by the caste Hindus, caste Christians, nuns and priests. The research has used 5 point scale to measure the variables to each question. These variables are assigned +2, +1, 0, -1 and -2 values, which indicate high non-discrimination (+2), non-discrimination (+1), neutrality (0), discrimination (-1) and high discrimination (-2). The table 5 gives only the high discrimination frequency, the fifth value. The frequencies are presented in percentage with respect to 9,000 households.

**TABLE 1**

**INDICES OF SOCIAL DISTANCE (FREQUENCY IN PERCENTAGE)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and scaling</th>
<th>Caste Hindus</th>
<th>Caste Christians</th>
<th>Nuns</th>
<th>Priests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Do they visit your home?</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Do they drink water in your home when offered?</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Do they eat in your home when invited?</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Are you able to have them as your close friends?</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Do they accept you as colleagues?</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Do they admit you into their homes?</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Questions and scaling</th>
<th>Caste Hindus</th>
<th>Caste Christians</th>
<th>Nuns</th>
<th>Priests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Do they offer you a seat when you visit their homes?</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Do they address your elders respectfully?</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Do they except submissive forms of address and body postures when you speak to them?</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Do they speak about your caste mentality?</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Do they call you by your caste appellation?</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident from the statistical data to the first eight questions that the caste Hindus show more discrimination than the Christians. Although the Christians show more discrimination than the Hindus to the last three questions, the difference is minimum. The four practices such as (i) mutual house visit, (ii) drinking in a Dalit house, (iii) dining in a Dalit House, and (iv) maintenance of customary respect, the non-Dalit Hindus' discrimination is high. The report says that it is very common to observe that the non-Dalit Hindu boys address Dalit elders disrespectfully.\(^{137}\) For all the eleven questions, their findings show that in terms of mean combined frequency, the discrimination against Dalit Christians by the non-Dalit Hindus is 63 per cent, non-Dalit Christians 60 per cent, nuns 60 per cent and priests 53 per cent.\(^{138}\)


\(^{138}\) *Ibid.*, p.225. A mean combined frequency means, in the five point scale the last two values, the discrimination (-1) and high discrimination (-2) are taken together.
Kananaikil, in his research in Tamil Nadu, says that it found no significant difference in the attitude of the Hindus towards the Dalits in general nor towards the Dalit converts to Christianity. The attitude of the Hindus towards the Dalit Christians is not very different from their attitude towards the Dalits in general. About 71 per cent said that the Dalit converts are treated the same way as the non-converts. Out of 286 valid cases of atrocities committed against the Dalits, he says,

"More than 52 per cent of the cases involved converts and non-convert Dalits. About 16 per cent had only Dalit converts as victims and 4.5 per cent only non-converts were the victims. This suggests that in a majority of the cases no distinction is made between converts and non-converts while atrocities are committed against the Dalits. It also shows that in a number of cases the Dalit converts were singled out for mistreatment".\(^{139}\)

Looking at the various practice of untouchability – at the water sources, at school, and by the Hindu community at large, he says, "Our findings show that no distinction seems to exist in the practice of untouchability against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Caste converts".\(^{140}\)

Bishop Augustine observes that the Dalit Christians living in Cheries suffer from the same humiliations and disabilities as all the Dalit Hindus in the Cheries, at the hands


\(^{140}\) Ibid., p.31.
of other caste Christians and caste Hindus. Thus, it is evident that the Dalit Christians are treated as Untouchables and are subjected to various social discriminatory practices by the non-Dalit Hindus in society.

In Church history one can study how the caste differences and practices have permeated even into the Christian community. For example on 15th January 1925 the Dalit Christians of Tiruchirappalli sent a memorandum to Bishop Alexius Maria Henry Lepierier, Vicar Apostolic for India, enumerating the demands of the dominant castes and the discriminations that they suffer. It stated:

"The absurdity of their pretensions to enforce their distinctions of caste against us in the house of God is only matched by the arrogance with which they put them forward... (1) that we should forever be segregated as untouchables in the House of God. (2) that Holy Communion should be distributed to them, first and that after they have all been served, then and then only the officiating priest should carry the Sacrament to us, (3) that our children, under no circumstances, be admitted in St. Joseph’s College, Catholic Boarding House, the Convents, the Holy Redeemer’s School, the Seminaries and other institutions... The Hindu and the Mohomedan visitors are permitted to enter at every door in the Church. Is it too much to ask for similar freedom for ourselves? We have waited

long and patiently. As Catholics we demand our Catholic privilege for equal treatment in the House of God and for equal educational facilities".\textsuperscript{142}

One cannot bypass the problem as past history. The core of the problem is that caste divisions and practices still exist in the Christian community. The social discrimination they suffer within the Christian community is brought to the focus of many in the Church. The results of the research conducted by Antony Raj and his team reveal the following discriminatory practices in the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Tamil Nadu as existing in some parishes: \textsuperscript{143}

1. The construction of two chapels, one is for the non-Dalits and other for the Dalits. In some parishes liturgical services are conducted separately.

2. Separate seating arrangements are made within the same chapel. Dalits are usually seated in the two aisles of the Church. Even if there are benches or chairs, the Dalits are asked to take their seats on the floor.

3. The existence of two separate cemeteries, two separate hearses to carry the dead bodies are found.

4. Two separate queues are formed to receive the sacred body of Christ. In some places Dalits are asked to receive communion only after the non-Dalits.

\textsuperscript{142} Ib\textit{id.}, p.68.
5. It is forbidden to be an altar boy or lector at the sacred liturgy.

6. The non-Dalits restrict the Corpus Christi procession, Palm Sunday procession, and other processions only to their streets.

7. Dalits are not invited to participate in the washing of feet ceremony during Maundy Thursday.

8. For fear of equal participation in the celebration of the parish patron saint, the parish council decides not to ask any contribution from the Dalits.

9. The feast of the village patron saint is celebrated separately.

While understanding the social situation of the Dalit Christians and the discriminations against them in a Catholic community, the TNCBC issued a statement (1988):

"In the Catholic society in many places, on the basis of caste, there are separate parishes, separate celebrations, separate cemeteries, separate hearses... In many places Church tax is not collected from the low castes. In many councils and parish commissions they are not assigned responsible positions. Eucharistic processions and other processions during feasts are not conducted on the streets of the low castes." 144

It is not easy to count the number of parishes, cemeteries and places of worship, where these divisions, distinctions and discriminations are being practised today. But the above statements categorically explain the discriminatory practices still existing in Tamil Nadu.

144. Statement of the TNCBC, 1987-88, p.68.
The report of the Archbishop Arokiasamy in the CBCI in 1989 substantiates these discriminations against the Dalit Christians. He states:

"In Tamil Nadu, in the predominantly Christian villages, the Harijan colony or cheri is distinct and separate from the upper caste settlement, with all the civic and municipal amenities, such as the hospital and school, being located in the area of the caste Christians. The Church in village is cruciform (Cross shaped) as in most parts of Tamil Nadu and Harijan Christians are in some places required to confine themselves to one wing of the house of God. The CSCO are not allowed to assist the priest or read scriptural passages during Mass and not allowed to enter the Sanctuary. They are also denied participation in the Church choir; when Sacraments such as baptism, confirmation and marriage are being administered, the CSCO have to receive them only after the upper caste Christians have been administered the Sacraments. And they are being discriminated even in death, for CSCO are allotted their own cemeteries or a different corner of the main cemetery. In some places a wall separates the CSCO. Interdining is a sacrilege, while intermarriage is unheard of. No caste Christian enters the home of CSCO. During marriages in upper caste settlements CSCO are given food outside the house, served in little wicker baskets. Caste Christians never attend
weddings in the Cherri. Marriages or funeral processions of CSCO are banned from passing through the streets of the upper caste people.  

Archbishop Casmir (Madras) too wrote in his Lenten Pastoral letter in 1993: “The high caste people do not accept the low castes (Dalits) having human dignity and divine grace, so with this unacceptableness of low castes, the high castes do not give equality in the churches, cemeteries, schools and village feasts.” Though in a few places, the separation of cemeteries is still prevalent, the burial ground in the Tiruchirappalli town which has a wall separating Dalits from others, has become a centre of controversy over many years. Bishop Augustine (Pondicherry) expressed his anguish in Tiruchirappalli, “The social practices like untouchability, separate colonies, not interdining and the continuation of menial occupations continue” in the Christian community.

The result of Antony Raj’s research clearly shows that the practice of discrimination against the Dalit Christians (see above table 1) by the non-Dalit Christians are similar to the non-Dalit Hindus. The high discrimination frequency percentages to all the eleven questions are an indication of social reality. For the last three questions, (i) submissive body form and body posture, (ii) speaking about caste mentality, and

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148 S.M. Augustine, Inaugural Address, p.5.
(iii) calling by the caste appellation, the caste Christians show more discrimination than the Hindus. The discrimination practised by the non-Dalit Christians in terms of mean combined frequency 60 per cent is recorded. Since the Non-Dalit Hindus' frequency is 63 percent, one can say that there is not much difference in the social practices and cultural ethos of the discrimination against the Dalit Christians between the non-Dalit Hindus and Christians.

Fernandes’ research also found similar physical barriers among the Christians from the respondents of the questionnaire. His findings are:

"The upper castes sit in front and the dalits at the back of the Church, where priest sprinkles holy water first on the upper castes or distributes communion first to them. In some villages, only bodies of persons of the upper castes can be carried in the hearse and in some other, the bodies of dalits are not taken to the Church. In some places, marriages of upper caste couples are blessed near the sanctuary and those of dalits on the side etc. In some places, dalits are not allowed to serve at mass or sing in the choir. Others mentioned cases where dalit teachers address their upper caste pupils in the honorific plural while the pupil addresses the teacher in the singular, where the parish priest does not offer a seat even to an educated dalit while a student from an upper caste may be asked to

\[149.\] Antony Raj, \textit{op.cit.}, p.225.
sit etc. Separation of cemeteries are taken for granted and defended by some."\textsuperscript{150}

In his research tour, he found that there was opposition to the washing of the feet of the Dalits at Chellapattidai, near Kanchipuram, on Maundy Thursday, in 1993. The Church was empty when the priest encouraged three Dalits to sit in front in Amarper parish in the Tiruchirappalli diocese.\textsuperscript{151} Bishop Azariah (CSI, Madras) shows his concern that the Dalit Christians are discriminated against and oppressed by fellow Christians within the Church for no fault of their own but the accident of birth. The high caste Christians who are a minority in the Church, carry their caste prejudices even after generations, unaffected by Christian belief and practice.\textsuperscript{152} He also says,

"...looking at the Church of South India, there still exists the caste-ridden vestiges of Hinduism. I have recently learnt with deep pain and shock that specifically in four out of 21 dioceses, two in Kerala and two in Tamil Nadu, separate worshipping centres or Churches are being used for separate congregations in the same locality within the distance of a furlong or two".\textsuperscript{153}

Prabhakar recognizes the problems and oppression of the Dalit Christians in various denominations. He says, “The mainline Churches have become conscious, at least in their governing councils, of the caste contradiction and conflicts in their

\textsuperscript{150} W. Fernandes, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.50-51.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., pp.48-49.
\textsuperscript{152} M. Azariah, \textit{op.cit.}, p.10.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., p.10.
congregations and institutions. Centre for people’s Movement in Madras maintains that in the past, the caste discrimination and domination in the Churches was expressed in a refusal to listen together at a service, to sit together, being buried in the same cemetery; scheduled castes were not invited for weddings, prayer or any other ceremonies / festivals when celebrated by the upper castes. But, it says that now among many Christians these obvious naked forms of caste distinction are not necessarily common, but are practised in a limited way. “No doubt it goes on in a much more subtle manner”.

While studying the social discriminations among the Protestant community at the Sawyerpuram village, in Tuticorin district, Moses underlines that discriminations are practised against the Dalit Christians by fellow Christians (CSI). He says that the Nadars feel that their status of superiority is being challenged now by the Dalit Vathiriyars. On the other hand, the Vathiriyars feel oppressed; they feel that they are being shabbily treated in the Church and Church related institutions by the Nadars.

"According to the Vathiriyars, caste discrimination is being practised outside the Church also, in the secular organisations of the village. The Vathiriyars youths feel strongly that they have suffered this subtle, and sometimes not so subtle but open caste oppression for long".

156. B.C. Moses, Ideological Situations of Christians in India and Christian Response to them: A case study from Tamil Nadu, RS 30, No.2 (1983) pp.26-27. Sawyerpuram is located about 14 miles south of Tuticorin, a port town in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. The Author has written this article, based on the available reports on this mission and of the interviews with a cross-section of the people of this village.
A special attempt was made by Kananaikil to examine the practice of untouchability against Dalit converts by the Christians who are also called co-religionists. He notes, “While 43.2 per cent said that their co-religionists practise untouchability against the Dalits in general, only 36.5 per cent said that they practise untouchability against the converts”. As it is clear, there is social discrimination and untouchability practices in the Christian community. It is evident in the place of worship, cemetery, festivals, etc. But it is difficult to establish the extent of these practices throughout the State.

Although social changes are taking place, the attitudinal change faces more resistance. From the questionnaire results Fernandes says,

"91 out of 188 i.e., 48.4 per cent think that changes have only been external and not attitudinal. Another 38 i.e., 20.2 per cent think that by and large upper castes accept caste and ignore the dalits. Thus 68.6 percent think that changes are only external. Very few even among the dalits say that no change has taken place and only the most fanatical of the upper castes feel that there is no discrimination. These include priests as well as lay persons".  

The changes in favour of the Dalits have been opposed by the dominant castes, especially by the villages where the Dalits work as cheap labourers. He says that the external untouchability practices have weakened, but the basic attitudes remain more or less unchanged. After the clash between Udaiyar and the Dalits in the Bishop's compound in Thanjavur (26 May, 1993), in a conversation with a group of students, Fernandes observed that several repeated "What right do dalits have to manhandle a Wodeyar?" After the discussion he states:

"Such statements coming from a fairly big group of children show the internalization of attitudes that are difficult to ignore. Their contention was not that it was a response to violence against a person, but that dalits had manhandled an upper caste person, and that the latter had a right to respond in any manner they thought fit."\(^{159}\)

He also notes,

"Many statements as well as actions of the interviewers seem to substantiate the statement about attitudes are not changing. An example is the terminology used. Every now and then one could hear lay persons as well as priests using terms that are considered derogatory by the dalits as well as by society in general... Most of the these terms cannot be mentioned here"\(^{160}\)


But he mentions a few of them, what he heard from the non-Dalit Christians. They said, "It is not in their genes to go for higher studies." "They do not know how to look after themselves", "they have accepted the set up of the village and why protest?", "they are not intelligent and are made only for manual work", "Cemeteries have to be kept separate because they do not know how to maintain theirs." Some of the other statements heard were, "You are good with your brawn, not with your brain". "You are dunderheads". "Beef eating pariah can never excel in education." A few of these statements can be attributed to the ongoing polarisation among the castes in the State. Some who were sympathetic to the Dalits' the cause in the past, find it difficult today to take a stand in their favour. Some statements seem to be an expression of the frustration that follows and the remarks come out almost unconsciously. In most cases, however, they are the result of the dominant caste attitudes themselves and not of any frustration. Hence one can say that the basic attitudes have not changed substantially though there are considerable changes in external practices.

Some cases of ill-treatment to Dalit pastors by the dominant caste Christian community are also recorded. In the Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin Conference in Vellore in 1982, the shabby treatment of the dominant caste to Church authorities was stated: "The number of scheduled caste Christian bishops and presbyters in our Churches are very few and they are not accepted in the so-called 'high churches' when the

\[161\] Ibid., p.48.
\[162\] Ibid., p.5.
presbyters are posted in these Churches where the 'high caste' Christians are in majority or in dominant position, they are very shabbily treated and even manhandled by the 'high caste' Christians."

The Social Condition of the Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu reveals that their social status has not changed remarkably even after embracing Christianity. There is not much difference between the living condition of the Dalit Christians and the Dalit Hindus. Though various discriminations are practised against the Hindu Dalits, discriminations practised against the Dalit Christians by the Central Government and the Church are very severe. Hence the Dalit Christians first launched their movement against the Church and the Government.

The economic status of the Dalit Christians are worse than the Dalit Hindus. The government of India guarantees a number of privileges and concessions to the Dalit Hindus, as a result a good number of them have occupied a number of posts both in the central and state governments. To some extent their economic conditions have improved. As far as the Dalit Christians are concerned, they are denied these facilities by the central government. Hence they are always at the mercy of the Church for their economic upliftment.

In due course of time the social equalitarian ideology and the identity consciousness created awareness in the minds of the Dalit Christians against these discriminations. They formed their own organizations and started fighting for their socio, economic and political liberation with other supportive organizations.