CHAPTER - 6
CHAPTER 6

Responses to Caste Conflicts in Rural Tamil Nadu

The present chapter tries to analyze the different types of caste conflicts and tensions in rural areas of Tamil Nadu. For the specific purpose of the study, we have focused on two studied villages such as Mangapuram (Village-1) and Urvudaiyan Kudiruppu (Village-2) to understand the escalation and continuation of four major conflicts, Melavalavu (1996), Sivakasi (1997), Chidambaram (1999), Pudhukottai (2000) and Police attack on Dalits in Tirunelveli (1999). The Chapter also tries to analyze the pattern and causes of violence and most importantly how they have different groups and organizations i.e. Dalits, caste Hindus, political parties, Human rights organizations.

Social tension in Mangapuram: 1996 – 1997

Mangapuram is a part of Ra9japalyam where more than 700 Thevar families and 250 Pallar families reside. The violence was ignited by the murder of a Dalit, when he was returning to Rajapalayam with his fellow-villagers after attending a conference addressed by Dr. Krishnaswamy in Madurai. According to the available reports, the Thevars assaulted them and following this, 150 Pallar houses were set on fire. The Pallars turned the other cheek, reconstructed their burnt dwelling places and started a new life.¹

Even before the start of the Madurai Conference, tension was mounting in this area. Krishnaswamy alleged that under the pretext of checking vehicles for weapons, the police were attempting to prevent his followers from attending the Conference. Still, everything appeared normal when the Dalit organization held its Conference after taking out a procession which passed through the Goripalayam junction where Thevars alleged that the statue of Muthuramalinga Thevar (a prominent Thevar leader). Was desecrated by Dalits and Thevars used 108 pots of milk to ‘cleanse’ the statue. Many observers dispute the allegation that the processionists threw chappals at the statue. The armed policemen stood around to guard it and the police Commissioner himself was present. The series of incidents that took place in the

Kamarajar District in the next few days after the murder of Philip left 10 dead (six of them Dalits) and several injured. Among the worst hit were about 150 families who got uprooted from their homes in Mangapuram. About, 500 Dalits fled when their houses, mostly thatched huts, were razed by a mob in a broad daylight.\(^2\)

During this violence, the Thevars also suffered huge property loss when Dalits showed resistance and retaliated against them. The assertive Dalits could not tolerate the discrimination and atrocities perpetrated against them. In fact, their assertiveness had injected a newfound confidence among them. A bandh was observed in the Kamarajar district, in response to a call from the Thevar Peravai to protest against the "desecration" of statue in Madurai. It led to further violence in the commercial towns of Sattur, and Sivakasi. It also erupted at Aruppukottai in the Kamarajar and Theni in the Madurai districts in March 1996 which gave a new dimension to the caste conflicts in the southern parts of Tamil Nadu.\(^3\) Further, the escalating tensions led the Pallars to request for the police protection in the early May, 1997. As a result, several police officers were deployed in the area. In a renewed violence, resistance was shown by Pallar and they destroyed several Thevar houses and on May 12, 1997, ten Pallars were promptly arrested. The Thevars also retaliated on May 15 by throwing petrol bombs into the Pallar residential areas.

On June 9, 1997 the Pallars of the village asked the District Collector to provide them with adequate protection against future attacks from the Thevars. The Collector replied that they could not be considered as victims because they stood to fight on par with Thevars. Also, in a concealed threat he added, "This is not enough for you! If only the police attack, will you run out of the villages!"? On June 10, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, a Thevar, attempted to force the Pallars to flee out of the villages. On the same day, hundreds of Thevar villagers also attacked the Pallars and set their houses on fire. As most of their houses had razed to the ground, the Pallars took refuge in the nearby villages.\(^4\) Apart from the efforts made by the civil society and other Dalit leaders, the Government has also set a commission to resolve the existing problem of Dalit and caste Hindus.

\(^2\) S.Viswanathan, "Caste Flare-up" Front Line, April 5, 1996, p.25.
\(^3\) Ibid p.26.
Social Tensions in Urvudaiyan Kudiruppu 1995-1997

Urvudaiyan Kudiruppu is part of Tirunelvli Taluk of Tirunelveli district. This village is inhabited both by Pallars who are numerically (more than 400 households) than Thevar (200 household) and traditionally the Dalits (pallars) used to dominate by the caste Hindus (Thevar) despite of the their numerical strength. Due to Dalits educational and economic upward mobility and realization of their socio-economic and political relative deprivation in comparison with caste Hindus, the Dalits started asserting for their rights against latter’s domination. There were several incidences of conflicts have been taken placed between the Dalits and caste Hindus, among them the 1995 to 1997 caste conflicts were essential to trace out the dynamics of social relationship existing among them. The caste violence broke out in Tachanallur near by Urvudaiyan Kudiruppu over the tearing some posters of AIADMK, which ultimately led to the killing of AIDMK MLA’s brother (He is Thevar by caste) on 5.8.1995. The incidence of violence soon spread to Urvudaiyan Kudiruppu where persistent hostility was later on escalated and finally killing of another Dalit of that village subsequently it resulted into violent protests by the Dalits against the cast Hindus of the same village. 5

In an another incident that took place on 4.8.1997, one dead body of a person called Shanmugam was found in a well. He was from a Thevar community. Three days after this incident by suspecting the Dalits, the caste Hindus murdered the Dalit community person. This incident again resorted to the creation of unpleasant scene and set fire on houses caste Hindus and again retaliation shown by the caste Hindus resulted into sever caste clashes. The whole series of violence incident and more than five murders have been taken place between each others which includes destruction of houses also. 6 It is important to note that during the mid 1999’s when the AIADMK was in power the caste Hindus continued their assault on the Dalits because the community is the back bone of AIADMK politics in southern district. On the other hand, the leaders like John Pandian and Krishnaswamy became the rescuer of the their own community during the caste violence through the political mobilization is quiet

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5 Caste clashes in southern districts of Tami Nadu: An overview, Report on causes, course and effect of communal violence, SOCO Trust, Mother Teresa Women’s University, Tamil Nadu, 1991
6 Ibid p.32.
evident where Dalit have taken a strong resistance against the caste Hindus domination and assaults. As a result, the caste Hindus have displaced themselves from the village and stayed near by their own community in Thachanallur.

In the case of Thevar side, Dr. N. Sethuraman, the elected president of the Thevar Peravai stated that caste clashes in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu to self seeking politician who want to become leader overnight. In addition, he criticized the responsible person including Dalit leaders who are involved in southern districts clashes and further revealed the idea of reverse untouchability whereby the Dalits have now started treating the caste Hindus indifferently. On the contrary, the Dalit leaders they defended their stand on the Dalit assertion and political mobilization for the welfare of the Dalits in rural Tamil Nadu. Moreover, to prevent further caste violence, the government had taken step to arrest the aggressor of both the sides of the communities and they have been booked under the Goondas and National Security act. Here, most of the Dalits have not got the justice and also PCR Acts were not properly registered by the government official due to the nexus between caste Hindus and government part as revealed by the Dalits respondents from the studied village.

Caste Tension in Melavalavu (1996-1999)

Caste violence occurred in 1997 in Melavalavu village which is situated eighteen kilometers away from Melur in Madurai district. This village accounts for 45 percent of population belonging to Dalit community, who are mostly agricultural landless labourers, But the Kallars who account for only 40 percent of the total population of the village population dominate the economy, polity and social life of the village. In June 1997 six Dalits were killed by the caste Hindu and others were injured while they were returning from courts.

Political rivalry between the Dalits and Kallars seems to be the immediate for cause aforesaid violence. According 81st amendment act, and article 243-D certain seats were reserved for the Dalits and women in the three tier Panchayat Raj Institutions. By chance, the Melavalavu Panchayat fell under the reserved constituency. The Kallars who had enjoyed the village resources like common property of the village fish ponds, forest produce, temple land etc. because of their access to power in the PRI's did not like it. They saw their monopoly over their

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7 Ibid., pp. 55-65
resources was getting over. Hence they prevented Dalits not to contest in the coming election of Panchayat. But the assertive Dalits empowered by the constitutional measures filled up their nominations. They were attacked by the caste Hindus. Dalit colony was burnt and they suffered injuries, lost property as well. It is shocking to understand that the administration could not ensure protection to Dalits and restore confidence among the Dalits so that would happen to them if they take part in elections which is their legitimate constitutional right. Therefore, carrying further caste violence by the caste Hindus and Dalits and withdrawing their nomination and elections to Panchayats in the Melur reserved constituencies were cancelled. Finally with great administrative pressure and from various quarters i.e. from government, SC and ST commission, National Human Rights commission, etc. and elections were held, but the caste Hindus retorted to another tactics of resistance and boycotted the elections and also attacked the polling booths. Further, the vindictive and violent nature of caste Hindus came to fore in 1997 when despite a Dalit’s election to the Panchayat office, the caste Hindus did not allow him to access to Panchayat building to carry out the functions of his office. This was facilitated because the Panchayat building was situated in the caste Hindu Thevars colony. And, when the Dalits approached the collect join it orate, six of them were hacked to death by the caste Hindus.

Caste tension in Sivakasi (1997)

Another case of Caste violence erupted with Dalits and Caste Hindus-specifically Thevars and Nadars in Virudhunagar. The exact issue of confrontation was naming of a Transport Corporation after the name of a Dalit icon-Veeran Sundaralingam for the area. The caste Hindus-Thevars and Nadars launched a violent protest against the naming of the corporation. The situation went out of control and police opened fire in which three Marvars (Thevars) died. Further police also arrested two Thevars (Maravar) youth as well. The death of three youth and burning of 15 buses on the opening day of the corporation can ascertain the intensity of the conflict.

The Sivakasi violence had not even subsided that another case of caste violence emerged in the meantime in Madurai. There seems to be a correlation between Sivakasi incident and this, because here the Thevars are in minority (about 10 families only). Firstly, they lodged a complaint against Dalits who are in Majority
(5000 in population) had desecrated Thevars statutes at Kandamanur village. It was an allegation, which Dalits denied. But Thevars and other caste Hindus attacked Dalits and destroyed their property. If this was not enough, police arrested towering Dalit leader Dr. Krishnaswamy who was coming to visit the riots affected areas. This incident escalated the violence further. The Dalits started protesting in a number of districts but its intensity was more in the southern Tamil Nadu.

Though, the caste violence in these villages emerged on a different pretext but they had a cause as well. If we analyze various reports of different organizations that collected facts from the riots affected areas, we come to know these causes easily. Metaphorically, these reports revealed that Dalits are demanding self-respect and honour, share rights. (Maanam, Mariyathi, Pangu and Urimai). But materially, when translated it comes to demand for share in public resources, waste lands, public bounds, entry into temple, reservations in the public services, thoroughfares, for erecting statues, renaming of public offices after the names of the Dalits icons etc. The implications of such demands are far reaching not only for Dalits and Thevar but also Dalits society as a whole especially in the wake of monopoly of the caste Hindus virtually in every field i.e. economic, political and social spheres and virtually, marginalization of the Dalit from the same. But the castes Hindus understand these implications and therefore they do not allow this to happen peacefully. They do not want to give up monopoly so easily.

Chidambaram Caste Conflict 1999

Chidambaram is situated in the northern part of Tamil Nadu and is about 200 km. away from the south of Madras. Most of the Paraiyars Dalits are landless labourers and depend upon the caste Hindus in general and the Vanniyars in particular for their livelihood. Hence Dalits and caste Hindus have unequal relationship. In this village also, as elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, caste Hindus dominate and monopolise economic, social and political power. But as the society has changed, there has been assertion among the Dalits, which is not accepted by the caste Hindus cordially and they have kept a conflicting relationship with the Dalits. This particular incident of caste atrocity is a reflection of conflicting relationship which occurred in September 1999. To capture political power and monopolize it, caste Hindus represented by political parties KMK and PMK prevented the Dalits from casting their votes. When Dalits did
not weed to it, caste Hindus resorted to violence and crime. More than 25 villages were gutted, a thousand huts were set on fire and number of people were injured.

It is a fact that during later part of 1990’s two Dalit political parties ‘Putiya Tamizhagam’ and Dalit Panther of India had become politically visible. These parties started organizing Dalits independently that to for the first time in the history of Tamil Nadu politics. Though the Republican Party had same miniscule presence in Tamil Nadu, but these parties have shaken the very basis of already decimated congress, DMK, AIADMK. The Dalits leaders of the Dalit parties lead a concentrated campaign declaring all these parties as anti-Dalits. To prove the point they reflected that it was because of DMK and PMK who were part of National Democratic Alliance, DPI and PT were kept out side the NDA. Apprehensive of losing the power, the Vanniyars, who were representing newly formed PMK in alliance with DMK prevented Dalits to caste their votes. In the subsequent violence over 100 Dalit houses were burnt and large portion of their property was destroyed. The police though failed to curb the violence rescinded 504 persons and out 504, 400 were from Dalit community which speaks the business of police administration. The connivance of police and the caste Hindu is a fact which manifested not only in Tamil Nadu but whole of India.

The other aspect of the violence is that even after incurring maximum loss because of arson and loot for instance in Alampakkam Dalit did not get any compensation. Secondly, despite repeated requests of number of Human Rights organisation and Dalit organisation election officer in the state did not countermand the elections. The protest against the caste violence was supported by other mainstream political parties like Tamil Manila Congress and Left parties. The appeal to National Human Rights Commission and National Commission for scheduled caste and scheduled tribe to help in getting the compensation for the Dalits and urgent release of the Dalits held by police also fell on deaf ears. Above all the Dalits leaders were banned from visiting the riot affected areas. Hence we can see the caste Hindus try to disrupt the democratic process and political improvement by using physical force, violence and intimidation of Dalits.

Caste Violence in Pudukottai, 2000

Yet another caste violence which has significant impact on the democratic process and society in rural Tamil Nadu was recorded from Themmavu, of Tanjarur district.
Themmavur, a village which is located 12 km away from Chengipatti on the road from Pudukkotai in Thanjarur district. It comprises 18 hamlets with a total population of about 3,000 persons. Four of these are exclusively Dalit hamlets. There are 500 Dalits in the adjoining Themmavur village. Agriculture constitutes the primary source of livelihood in the village. Majority of the Dalits depend on the caste Hindus for their survival. The village witnessed caste violence on 17 May 2000. In the violence about 30 Dalits, including 7 women and at least 30 others suffered injuries; 36 houses of Dalits were badly damaged in the vicious attacks by the caste Hindus. The attackers were so violent that they did not spare even women and children.

The Themmavur village is a grim reminder where the caste oppression and regressive feudal values, including the Jajmani system, remain a bitter fact of life. The attack on 17 May 2000, followed tension whipped up by the Dalits refusal to subject them to symbolic oppression by the caste Hindus. In the Dalits' perception, to be called exclusively to perform the task of drum beating for temple festivals and for death ceremonies is a symbolic reiteration of their oppressed social status. Dalits have protested against the performance of these duties of drum beating. In a meeting with the Pudukottai Revenue Divisional Officer and Thashildhar, an agreement was finalized according to which Dalits would not be required to beat the drums at the festival, while they will perform other tasks as usual. But, soon after the meeting, the dominant faction among the caste Hindus told the Dalits that if they do not beat or play the drum in the festival ceremony they would not be allowed to participate in the festival. The assertive Dalits lodged a complaint with the support of a caste Hindu petty shop owner with the administration. The administrative members gave these reports and suspected violence. Hence a police sub-inspector with some constables was posed to avert conflict. But the security provided for was only for the duration of the festival and was withdrawn as the ceremony was over. Shortly after the police force was withdrawn the petty shop-owner who had helped Dalits to lodge the complaint was attacked along with the Dalits by caste Hindus. Then the caste Hindus went on a rampage in the Dalit settlement, damaging houses, and looting food, utensils and jewellery and injuring the number of Dalits as stated above.

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9 Ibid., p.104.
The inquiry by some organizations reported that the Dalit victims of violence were brutally attacked by dominant caste Hindus. The attackers did not spare women and children as well. They attacked women even on their private parts. They threw away their food material causing many problems to the children who had gone without food days together. The caste Hindus warned Dalits not to call their guests to their home. The Dalits were terrified so much that they were afraid to return to their homes even after the situation became normal in the words of victim who aptly narrated the situation, according to him. Is it possible for us to go back and live securely in the village again? We get our water from the caste Hindus Street and are now afraid to drink it.

Different political organisation protested against the caste-Hindus attack on the Dalits and inadequate protection given by police and any other government machinery to the Dalits of the areas. The government sanctioned a nominal relief of Rs.1,000 for each victim. But the tension in the village was still palpable, and the Dalits had not been able to work, lacking adequate protection from further attacks. Till recently the Dalits have not been able to get.

Atrocities on Dalits in Dindigal, Trichi and Tirunelveli, apart from the aforesaid cases of caste conflict Dalits have been ill treated within the Hindu social order by the caste Hindus. On fifth September 2002 the village Kanndampatti in Dindigal district a Dalit agricultural worker was forced to drink wine-for having lodged with police a complaint of tress pass against Hindus. If this was not enough to humiliate Dalits at Thinniyam village in Trichi two Dalits, were forced to feed each other's human excreta. The crime the two Dalits committed was that they stood by another Dalit who was engaged in a prolonged struggle against a forever Panchayat president.

A significant proportion of atrocities on Dalits have been committed by police in the state. The most glaring example of brutal police atrocity can be seen where the police lathi charged on a procession taken out in support of agitating Manjolai' tea workers in Tirunelvi on 23 July 1999. This atrocity resulted in the death of thirteen Dalits, and four Muslims. The victims were included two women and a child. The victims died because of drawing as they, along with scores of others ran into the river.

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10 Ibid, p.104
to escape the lathi blows of the policemen who descended on them from all directions. The processionists had marched to the collectorate to demand an early solution to long-pending wage-related disputes and the release of 652 estate workers who were lodged in jail following a demonstration. They also demanded the state government to take over the administration of the tea estate, run by the Bombay Burma Trading Company (BBTC). The important point here to be noted is that most of workers were Dalits, and were kept as bonded labours. It is interesting to note that Dalits leader of Pudhiya Tamizhagam (PT) along with others were leading this movement. Police did not spare them and attacked. But the volunteers protected their leaders. But the police opened fire and lathi charged the masses. Krishnaswamy argued that all these attacks by the police were pre-planned because they want to save the tea mill owner.

Though the police took action against the silent tea mill workers and number of Dalit workers were drowned to death escaped police atrocity in Thirunelveli i.e. another case of atrocity on Dalits by caste Hindu, the police remained mute spectator while caste Hindus were committing atrocities on Dalits. The attack of the caste Hindus were so brutal that Dalits of Managapuram in Rajapalayam shelter in another village in Sundrajpuram.

In yet another case of atrocity by the police on the Dalits is reminded of Nalumodai Kinaru of Chidambararam district in 1992. The police leaving all humanity aside attacked Dalits in the morning 4.30 am while they were fast asleep. The police were searching for illegal areas. Instead of peaceful search the police looted and damaged the properties of Dalits the police did not spare women and child as well.

There can be a number of cases to prove the high handedness and partisan role played by Tamil Nadu press but I think these many cases will be more than enough to prove the point. We can observe a general trend that in the event of atrocities on the Dalits in the village, administration led by police always plays a partisan role and connive with caste Hindus against Dalits. In addition to that, in a conflict in urban or semi-urban area such as Thirunelveli-police sides with the mill owners or the upper strata. The police of the state, as elsewhere in the country, are partisans against Dalits more than one way.

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At the outset, police will reverse lodge a complaint of Dalits in the event of a clash or conflict of Dalits with the caste Hindus as we found in our study, where the respondent told the same. The respondents also told that the police have always failed to protect the Dalits in the event of a clash with the caste Hindus and Dalits. The irony is that in most of the caste conflicts police has a suspicion of caste conflict is going to occur. Yet they don’t take any measure to avoid damage done to the life and property of the Dalits. Thirdly the police though do not lodge Dalit complaints of Dalit treating them as conclude up or face. But even if they lodge complaint they do not carry out instigates in right earnest. They can be seen in sitting in the caste Hindu locality further demoralizing as revealed a sizable number of respondents. Number of respondents revealed that they had to approach directly or through different constitutional bodies like NHCR, SC/ST Commission, Parliament including political parties to get our complaints registered. That is why first superintend of police once removed that the police had the biased mind because they all belong to caste Hindu category. Similarly in 1992 case of Chidambaram Supreme Court of India had represented for the high handedness of the police in Tamil Nadu. The delayed justice to Dalits is also a problem for the Dalits some times it may not at all. For instance, out of 750 cases in Tamil Nadu during 1992-1997 conviction rate was very low.

Conclusion
The caste conflict in rural village is rampant. So much so that in 1997, 118 villages were declared sensitive of caste conflict by the government. If we observe objectivity of the caste conflicts in the research setting and two sample villages follow a general pattern averages. One there has been total domination and monopolization of caste Hindus in the realm of politics, economy and society. The Dalits are highly dependent on the caste Hindus. Because the caste Hindus have been traditionally dominant and they do not like the Dalit assertion, which is emerging because of democratic process. The respondents in the village told that they would not take what ever is given by the caste Hindus. Hence there is an independent assertion. Secondly, political process from Panchayat to parliament has given extra democratic space for Dalit assertion. Dalits want to take part independently without caste Hindu patronage as revealed by the members of Pallar community in the two villages where the present study was conducted. This has become the prime cause of Dalit conflict with the caste Hindus.
The third pattern which emerges from the study of the conflict in the two sample villages is that police and general administration have failed to protect life and property of the Dalits. Secondly it was narrated by the villages from the Dalit community that the police has always sided with the caste Hindus. This allegation of the Dalits was recorded by other than Supreme Court of India, when it reprimanded the Tamil Nadu police for siding with caste Hindus. Moreover the fact that the police side with the caste Hindus can be substantiated by the incidences of non registration of atrocity cases on the Dalits. The cases are registered by the police only after an external pressure is applied. Even if the cases are registered then investigation takes time or it is not done at all. Hence the culprit goes free which victim suffers.

The forth pattern which has emerged from the caste conflict in the two villages of the study and substantiated by the other examples of village is that after each conflict most of the political parties pay their lip services. The ruling party does so by convincing some compensation for the victims. While parties in opposition by criticizing the ruling party in and out of the assembly. These parties also criticize the government for lack of economic development of the regime as well. Further, in the long chain of lip services lots of enquiring commissions are set up but without any concrete results steps are taken to curb the violence. But the ironical part of this lip service is that the recommendation and guidelines of the constitutional bodies like National Commission for Human Rights and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Commission are never taken seriously and implemented, which undermines their authority. This brings also to fore the status of laws and legislations promulgated to curb the atrocities-like anti-atrocity Act 1989, PCR Act 1955 etc. Lack of stringent implementation of laws have rendered all of them ineffective.

The fifth pattern which can be deduced from the existing pattern of number of atrocity cases emerging out of caste conflict is delay in justice to the aggrieved party. Apart from the delay by the police in investigation, there are no proper arrangement of special court and layer for dispensing justice to the aggrieved party. Though, there is a special provision for the same in the atrocities Act 1969. The former chairman of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Commission accepted that this problem exists throughout the country. In practice session courts are designated as special courts in this case. But they are already over burdened. Hence more number of Judges and persecutors required. It is because of delayed justice that victims tend to compromise.
Last but not least, in the whole process of caste conflict and restoration of peace, restoration of law and order and peace talks, occupy the center stage. Some where caste based crime is given secular role and have caste related animosity and hatred never gets highlighted. The political parties, the government, the civil right groups etc. all of them raise the issue of loss and development in economic terms. The socio-psychological loss incurred by the Dalits never catche their imaginations and hence no measure is taken to heal these wounds. These socio-psychological wounds are detrimental for the mobility and assertion of the Dalits because their community gets demoralized and it takes some time to come out o the shock. That is why Dalits in the village from where the data was collected refused to go back to their village even after the conflict subsided. It is a matter of important observation whether the government, social, political and constitution bodies consider this factor, along with others, when they are reasoning the caste conflict between Dalits and caste Hindus.