CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator by certain inalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”

- American Declaration of Independence, 1776.

Over two have passed since Thomas Jefferson wrote those memorable words, which are still ringing in history, but a large section of Indian society still regard a section of their own countrymen as inferior. This mental attitude is simply unacceptable in the modern age, and it is one of the main causes holding up the country’s progress.

In the pre-modern period, caste had been a complete dominating force, an extraordinarily intricate and inflexible form of social stratification. Though it accepted occupational mobility and thereby status mobility for certain cases, it was, in one way or another, a closed system. In the contemporary context, it is undergoing rapid changes. Nevertheless these changes are not related to its core elements, but they are mostly related to its functional aspects. There are two schools of thought with regard to caste system. The scholars in one school of thought claim that caste is more or less a stable system and at times it even reinforces itself, whereas the scholars in the other school of thought maintain that caste is undergoing changes and giving rise to class distinctions.¹

The scholars in the former school of thought like Senart,\(^2\) Hotton\(^3\) and Furnivall\(^4\) state that caste is permanent and continues to exist in India in the midst of changes accelerated by modern forces. On the other hand, scholars in the latter school of thought like Beteille,\(^5\) Anil Bhatt,\(^6\) D’Souza\(^7\) and Holmstorm\(^8\) hold that caste is undergoing remarkable changes and giving way to the development of class.

However, these divergent views on caste system are not completely true. At the present time, it is understood that in spite of its obvious presence the caste system accepts changes with regard to its functional aspect by retaining its core elements. It seems to assume new functions in contemporary times in accordance with changing social situations because of its flexible nature. Ghurya,\(^9\) Srinivas\(^10\) and Gould\(^11\) hold a similar view.

\(^6\)Anil Bhatt, *Caste, Class and Politics* (Delhi: Manohar, 1975), pp. 198-199.
\(^8\)Mark Amstorm, “Caste and Status in an Indian City”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 7 (April 1972): 769-774.
Thus caste seems to be a pervasive element in the life of Indians, adapting itself to new situations. It is important to mention that caste cuts across religions. For instance, there are several incidents of mass religious conversions across India, but the converts are still maintaining their caste identity. The influence of caste even today is obviously pronounced in political choices at the time of general elections from the panchayat to the parliament.

Since the origin of caste system, caste conflict has been an inevitable phenomenon in all spheres of life. The obvious reason is that it is the root cause of social inequality. In the social hierarchy, castes are graded not based on one’s accomplishment but on one’s birth. This resulted in ranks such as higher caste, lower caste and untouchable caste. In the course of time, the social distance between higher and lower castes widened and led to thorough social discrimination. The caste people in the apex of social hierarchy started exercising privileges, power and supremacy over the lower caste and untouchable caste people. The latter were subjected to all sorts of discrimination, exploitation and humiliation.

The idea of keeping one section of people from a remaining large section of population is perhaps explained in terms of the concepts of purity and pollution. At one point of time in the history of Indian society, this discrimination became sharp, thereby making untouchability a serious problem. As a result of this, caste conflicts all over India led to violence and bloodshed. Caste system did a great damage to the Backward and Scheduled Caste people besides restricting economic development at large.
As Indian society has already entered into the process of industrialisation, modernisation and westernisation, the suppressed lot have started realizing their rights and privileges. Especially after independence, the realization among them found full expression owing to the impact of social movements. The spread of modern education and political awareness have contributed substantially to the awakening of the marginalised groups.

The Self Respect Movement (Dravidian Movement) launched by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy is a case in point in awakening the Backward Caste and Scheduled Caste people in Tamilnadu to fight against Brahmanism which bred social inequality. He envisaged a society based on freedom and equality and asserted that ‘self respect’ is the only means to attain true freedom (swaraj).\(^\text{12}\)

The system of positive discrimination is linked with competition and conflict between castes. Certain inter-caste conflicts elsewhere in Tamil Nadu can be explained in the light of this discrimination. Caste conflicts of this type are not a new phenomenon in villages of Tamil Nadu. Irschick\(^\text{13}\) and Hardgrave\(^\text{14}\), discuss similar conflicts in the early periods of Tamil Nadu. In recent times, especially in southern Tamil Nadu, there has been a steady increase in the frequency of caste conflict mostly between the Caste Hindus and the Dalits. Conflict is initiated by the land owning upper caste people who have been exploiting and oppressing the Dalits over centuries. Especially, the erstwhile Tirunelveli District (now bifurcated into Tirunelveli and


Thoothukudi Districts) had registered several incidents of caste conflicts in the past decades. The social environment at that time was so conducive that even a trivial incident was enough to cause caste conflict. Those who involved in conflicts were the Maravars (a sect of the Mukkulathors, one of the dominant agricultural castes) and Pallars (Devendra Kula Vellalars, an oppressed Dalit caste over decades). Even now the conflict between these caste groups continues in certain areas of Tirunelveli District but not in a violent way as it was in the past. This district has been identified as a caste conflict prone belt and hence this attempt to study such conflict unleashed in this part of Tamil Nadu. There are several studies on various aspects of caste, but little research has been done on caste conflicts. The present study is an attempt to concentrate on this phenomenon taking several aspects into consideration.

CASTE AND CASTE CONFLICT: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Caste

Caste is an age-old social institution associated with the life of Indians. It is an endogamous unit and its membership is based on birth alone. One’s position in the social hierarchy is invariably decided by one’s birth. It imposes on its members certain restrictions in the case of social intercourse. Its members follow a common traditional occupation and claim a common origin and form a single homogeneous community.\(^{15}\)

Bailey refers to three characteristics, viz. rigidity, purity- pollution and ranking while analysing the caste system in India\(^{16}\). Giving a structural definition of


caste, Yogendra Singh premises his concept on two issues: (i) whether caste as a structural phenomenon is supposed to be Indian in substance and (ii) as a cultural reality whether it belongs primarily to the Indian tradition or whether it crosses Indian boundaries. Based on these two principles, he identifies four types of caste principles, viz. (i) Cultural Universalistic, (ii) Cultural Particularistic, (iii) Structural Universalistic and (iv) Structural Particularistic.  

It is clear from the above analysis that endogamy, heredity, and traditional occupation are the important characteristic features of caste system according to the scholars such as Kathleen Gough, Mackim Marriott, Mayer, and Srinivas. Scholars such as Weber, Hutton, Beteille, Srinivas, Ghurye, Mandelbum and Senart discuss in detail these characteristic features of caste system. The close association of caste with purity-pollution concepts and rituals is very well explained by Dube and Dumont.

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23 Hutton, Caste in India, 1963, pp. 46-70.
25 M.S. Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, 1966, pp.89-177.
28 Senart, Caste in India, 1975, pp. 1-38.
The purity-pollution concepts related to caste system is slowly disappearing in contemporary India due to modern forces. In spite of the changes that the Indian society is undergoing, it seems to be a probable fact that caste system may persist even if the practice of the purity and pollution principle is abandoned. Nevertheless, the idea and practice of the purity-pollution principle are subject to alteration by the legal abolition of untouchability. Jayram says that westernisation and modernisation are eroding the concept of pollution.\textsuperscript{31}

Caste and Sub-Caste

As regards stratification, caste is a large unit and sub-caste a smaller one. In other words, a sub-caste is a part of the caste. Both of them have the characteristic features of endogamy and hierarchy. The rules of a caste are normally applicable to all the members of that larger unit. On the other hand, the specific rules of a sub-caste are applicable to the members of that small unit only. However, sub-castes are the essence of the caste system. They may therefore be considered real units of the caste system.

The decline of caste system is more pronounced in cities than in rural areas. In other words, the dimension of caste is understandably less significant in cities than in villages. However, Jayaram observes, the focus of caste consciousness and caste mobilisation is to be found in the cities and towns rather than the villages.\textsuperscript{32}


Caste Conflict

The term ‘Caste Conflict’ generally refers to a fight, struggle, collision or clash of opponent caste groups. Lewis Coser \(^3\) contends that social conflict is “a struggle over values and claims to secure status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals”. However, from a sociological point of view, John Rex says that conflict is not a random disorder; rather it refers to a meaningful action in pursuit of goals.\(^4\) According to Georg Simmel, conflict is a particular kind of socialisation,\(^5\) whereas for Max Weber, it is a social relationship.\(^6\)

Psychological concepts such as hostility, aggressive impulses and antagonistic sentiments do have a bearing on conflict. In one way or another, conflict involves a relationship in which these aggressive impulses and antagonistic sentiments find expression.

Rapaport speaks of a threefold classification of conflicts: fights, games and debates. In a fight, the opponent is viewed as a nuisance. The main aim is to harm him. In a game, the opponent is viewed as essentially like oneself and the aim is to out


do him. In a debate, the opponent is viewed as an essential one and the aim is to convince him.\textsuperscript{37}

It may also be relevant to consider a set of processes relating to concepts such as resistance, protest, rebellion, revolt and revolution in relation to conflict. Jayaram and Satish Saberwal observe that these processes are associated with relations of dominance.\textsuperscript{38} The elements of power and authority are an integral part of the relations of dominance. The tendency of suppressed caste people to turn down their relationship with dominant caste people may result in open rebellion, revolt, or revolution. Therefore, the caste conflict in such circumstances is inevitable.

Conflicts in contemporary India arise against a historical backdrop which has experienced a mixing of cultural codes. These conflicts may be analysed in terms of various dimensions. There are innumerable inter-personal conflicts in every-day life. Their content varies greatly depending partly on their institutional context like family, work place, market place, etc. They are related to claims over property, status, power and disagreement over role assignment, division of labour, or problems of personality adjustment. Violence may sharpen and intensify such conflicts and ultimately terminate the relationship itself.

The interpersonal conflicts between two individuals is prevalent everywhere. This gives rise to group conflicts. The move from interpersonal to group conflicts involves collective mobilisation. The caste conflict (conflict between two caste groups) is a fitting example for this sort of conflict. The inter-caste conflict in India has become a potential area for sociological research. The opposition between any


\textsuperscript{38} N. Jayaram and Satish Saberwal, \textit{Social Conflict} (Delhi; Oxford University, 1996) p.1-5.
two caste groups (rival caste groups) is found all over the country. For instance, the Reddis and the Kammas in Andhra Pradesh, the Thevars and the Pallars in southern Tamil Nadu are some of the examples of rival castes conflicting frequently with each other. Besides, the attack of non-Brahmins on Brahmins in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the anti-Mandal agitation in the 1990s are also expressions of Pan-Indian caste conflict, reflecting the agitation of Backward Castes against Forward Castes. The rise of caste conflict may be due to the imposition of one’s will on others, jealousy about the development and progress of opponent groups, and narrowing down of the gap between high and low status of the conflicting castes and the like.

In India, a large section of the Scheduled Caste people works as agricultural labourers for their livelihood. A majority of them live on the brink of destitution and therefore they are barely able to feed their families. Similarly, they are unable to break away from the bond of debt. Consequently they put their children to work in order to earn at their tender age instead of sending them to schools. In rural areas, they are still segregated from the Caste-Hindus. They still dig graves, dispose of animal corpse, beat drums during funerals, use separate tumblers in tea stalls and the like. Nevertheless, they are undergoing remarkable changes in the socio-economic, political and religious spheres of life. Their access to education and employment due to reservation has been a major reason for these changes. The political mobilisation of these people has also been an important reason which has undoubtedly enabled them to enjoy their rights and privileges on par with the Caste-Hindus. This phenomenal change is more pronounced in cities and towns than in rural areas.
The development and progress registered by the Scheduled Caste people especially in the socio-economic and political spheres has posed a challenge to the Caste-Hindus all over India. As a result of this, the conflict between the Scheduled Caste people on the one hand and the Backward Caste people on the other, has become an inescapable phenomenon across India. Especially, in Bihar State, this sort of conflict is rampant, resulting in gruesome murders and loss of property. Since the formation of the *Ran-Bir-Sena* by upper caste people in 1994, there have been more incidents of caste violence. Mass killings, lootings, and assaults on women are episodes occurring frequently in the State. Similar caste conflicts and violence have often been reported in some other States of India including Tamil Nadu. The caste conflicts, especially in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, have predominantly been occurring between two caste groups: the *Thevars* (a Most Backward Caste) and the *Pallars* (Scheduled Caste). The changes since the early 1990s have altered the economic relationship between these two caste groups. The *Pallars* have become much less dependent on the *Thevars* in terms of employment in the agricultural sector because the former are substantially benefited by the reservation policy in education and jobs. Added to this, the political mobilisation of the *Pallars* has indeed enabled them to assert themselves in the political sphere. The *Thevars* have responded to the challenge posed by the *Pallars* relating to their hegemony. Consequently, these two caste groups are in conflicts with each other, which sometimes have led to brutal violence resulting in several murders and damage to property on both sides.

In the erstwhile Tirunelveli District caste conflicts between the Scheduled Caste people (*Dalits*) on the one hand and their rivals, the *Thevars*, on the other, were taking place frequently. Even after the bifurcation of the erstwhile Tirunelveli
District, the caste conflicts have been occurring in various parts of Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi Districts. Sometimes, they assumed a monstrous shape causing heavy damage to the life of people and their properties. Human displacement is of course a resultant problem, which causes adjustment problems to the migrants in a new socio-cultural setting. The unending caste rivalries have left those of conflicting castes in grief, fear and anxiety. Consequently, the normal life of those conflicting caste groups and others has been thoroughly affected. Over a period of time, shorter or longer, police contingents have brought the situation back to normalcy by following various strategies. All these aspects of caste conflicts are discussed in detail in the forthcoming chapters.