CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several empirical studies have been conducted on caste and class conflicts in India besides a number of related works based on theoretical presentation. The discussion in this chapter is based on certain selected literature, which is related directly or indirectly to the present study. The various literature reviewed in this chapter are taken from books, articles in various journals and reports including Enquiry Commissions.

Jeyaram in his paper entitled “Caste and Hinduism: Changing Protean Relationship” brings out the interface between caste system and Hinduism. He asserts that the religious basis of caste system may disappear, its rigour may weaken, but its social (kinship) basis will persist. Its group connotation would gain strength. Even if Hinduism may lose meaning for the hierarchy and inequities of the caste system, its cultural crux would persist and crystallize. To him, Hinduism will be benefited more by the survival of caste system than the caste system by Hinduism.¹

J. Bandopadhyaya in his paper entitled “Untouchability, Casteism and Social Revolution” explains the various aspects of untouchability in the light of caste system. He argues that mass mobilization for economic development has not taken place since independence mainly owing to traditional social barriers caused by casteism and untouchability. He also comments that various reform movements did not pay much attention to countering caste system and untouchability. According to him, the

removal of casteism and untouchability altogether is possible by a voluntary mass mobilization in order to generate pressure on and support for the Government, and to utilize the machinery of the Government for social revolution. Other papers on “Caste Hindu violence against the Harijans” by Sachchidananda and “Atrocities on Harijans–Case Study” by M.R Khan and S.S Singh attempt to highlight various atrocities committed on the Dalits by the Caste-Hindus in northern India.

M.M. Dass in his paper on “A National Penitence-Removal of Untouchability” discusses various problems of the Scheduled Caste people in Northern India. He also explains the constitutional and legal provisions for protecting them and welfare measures extended to them by both the Central and State Governments. What is required, to him, is a change in their attitudes.

An edited work entitled The Untouchables in Contemporary India by J. Michael Mahar throws light on various aspects of untouchability. He points out that Galanter’s analysis of Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955, invites assessment of relative effectiveness in the methods of Gandhi and Ambedkar. A related paper by John Mencher finds that caste is used as an effective system by the upper and land owning groups to exploit the labour force from lower and landless caste groups. Moreover the upper caste people have suppressed the emergence of class

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2 J. Babdopadhaya, et. al., Untouchability, Casteism and Social Revolution (Varanasai: Gandian Institute of Studies, 1978).
5 Mahant Mahabir Dass, A National Penitence-Removal of Untouchability (Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1976).
consciousness among the lower caste people because the former are afraid of threat to their entrenched status.\(^7\)

The book entitled *Ex-Untouchables* by Harold R Isaacs provides a detailed account of various dimensions of the Scheduled Caste people in India. He points out that marriage remains the most formidable barrier in the path of any one who wishes to escape his caste. Inter-caste marriage among the Caste-Hindus is not up to an appreciable extent. Such marriages involving Scheduled Castes are still extremely rare.\(^8\)

Sriram Nikm, in his book on *Destiny of Untouchables in India*, deals with untouchability and its prevalence across India. He explains the relationship between caste system and untouchability and also attempts to trace the origin of untouchability from Dr. Ambedkar’s point of view. He completely endorses the argument put forth by Dr. Ambedkar that the untouchables must migrate to cities or inhabit new villages consisting exclusively of them because the villages are still controlled by customs and the traditional way of life.\(^9\)

Sukhardeo Thorat in his article on “Oppression and Denial: Dalit discrimination in the 1990s” examines the enactments of constitutional provisions in India to protect the rights of the *Dalits*. Human Rights violations against the *Dalits* committed over a period of 42 years since 1955 culled from secondary sources are

\(^7\)John P. Mencher, “The caste system upside down, the not-so-mysterious east” Current Anthropology Vol.15, No.4 (1974).


enumerated. The author has painstakingly analyzed the crimes and atrocities committed against Scheduled Castes between 1981 and 1997 separately in four States viz., Karnataka, Andra Pradesh, Orissa and Gujarat\textsuperscript{10}.

Samuel Jeyakumar, in his work on *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion* explains the plight of *Dalits* and the *Nadars* in Tamil Nadu in post decades. They were considered degraded and defiling caste people. They were prevented from entering Hindu temples and using public wells. Their women were kept half-naked, not allowed to cover the upper portion of their body. In short, they were dehumanized and deprived of all human rights. They were primarily landless agricultural laborers suffering at the hands of their upper–caste landlords. They used to work from dawn to dusk in the paddy fields, but the wages they received mostly in terms of kind was hardly sufficient to sustain their livelihood. They were treated as untouchables all over Tamil Nadu. The author also discusses the social status of the *Dalits* and their social aspirations.\textsuperscript{11}

James Massey in his book entitled *Dalits in India* discusses in detail the historical routes of the *Dalits* and Christian *Dalits*, their identity and basic rights. They have even lost their self–identity as full human beings because of the long suppression. He also explains their present problems and sufferings which had the


sanction of religion directly or indirectly. He concludes that they are aspiring for liberation from the fetters imposed by the upper Caste-Hindus.\textsuperscript{12}

James Massey in another work discusses the Dalits in terms of their minority position and conversion to other religions as an escape from oppression and an attempt to establish a new lease of life based on social justice. He also explains the reason for establishing a just society as envisaged by Dr. Ambedkar. This society, to him, should be based on liberty and equality. According to Massey, the call given by Dr. Ambedkar to the nation continues to alert the people of India, especially the Dalits to face the challenges before them with determination.\textsuperscript{13}

Besides several issues, Dipankar Gupta observes, agrarian relationship between the labourers and land lords has been the crux of agrarian tensions across India. For instance, the main reason for caste atrocities in Bishrambur was the right of share croppers over cultivated land, and the Kurmis (a middle caste group) were the main attackers. The Kurmis were supported by several upper-caste land lords to attack not only the Scheduled Caste people, but also the Yadavs (a lower caste group) who are closer to them and traditionally considered to be of the same rank.\textsuperscript{14}

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\textsuperscript{13}James Massey, \textit{Dr.B.R. Ambedkar: A Study in Just, Society} (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), pp. 8-123.
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Ghanshyam Shah mentions that in Gujarat, the Bereyas and Kolis who are of the same rank often unite with the Rajputs to oppose the Batidars in Marathwada. The Mahars (a Scheduled Caste) were attacked by certain powerful castes.

Bela Bhatia explains a massacre at Bathani Tola, a hamlet in Bihar. Central Bihar had been the scene of frequent violent clashes between castes in which invariably the Dalits were subjected to untold miseries. The incidences of murders, desertion of villages, burning of houses and physical assaults on even women and children by the Rajputs and the Bhumihars were common phenomena in Central Bihar. To peak them all was the Bathani Tola massacre in the afternoon of 11 July 1996 in which 19 Dalit women and children were massacred. All details of the massacre and the socio-economic background against which the massacre occurred have been vividly presented by Bela Bhatia. The laxity on the part of the public administration in dealing with such violent incidents, that has given rise to a doubt of connivance, is also highlighted by him. The questions how the poor are even denied dignity in death? and how castes and classes haunt them till death? are answered by him. He claims that the Bathani Tola incident is the “worst massacre” in the recent history of Central Bihars.

Caste and Class wars have became a common feature in Bihar. That caste wars in Bihar took a new turn in the form of agrarian conflict leading to extreme political adventurism is well brought out by Tilak Gupta in “Caste Complications in Agrarian

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Conflicts”, while tracing the incidents leading to the *bara* massacre in which 37 people were hacked to death in February 1992. The target was the *Bhumihars*, who constitute an overwhelming majority in the Gaya-Jahanabad region but they are mostly small but absentee land owners. The attackers were the Maoist Communists.\(^{18}\)

Ambrose Pint discusses the agonizing conflict between the *Dalits* on the one hand and the *non-Dalits* on the other in Idapanur village in Karnataka. The election of a *Dalit* candidate for general category had led to harassment of the *Dalits* at the hands of *non-Dalits*. The *non-Dalits* laid siege to the *Dalit* habitations threatening to kill them and destroy their property. The situation became so tense that the police resorted to firing that resulted in the death of eight persons.\(^{19}\)

Radhika Ramaseshan in her paper on “Dalit Politics in Uttra Pradesh” analyses the political ramification on caste lives over a period of 40 years since the 1960s and traces the struggle of the *Dalits* to out pour their pent up feelings by aligning with many political parties in Uttra Pradesh, viz. the Congress, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Samajwadi Party and the Republican Party of India. The political awakening of the *Dalits* who numerically accounted for 23.7 per cent of the total population enabled them to exert their pressure in capturing power. The author makes a cautious note that unless the *Dalits* acquire control over vital economic resources they would not get the real strength to fight against social and political discrimination.\(^{20}\)


Gopal Guru in his article on “Gowari Tragedy Crisis of Maratha Hegemony” brings to light the apathy of the ruling Congress Party in Maharashtra to the grave incidence of violence on November 23, 1994 and the mindless destruction of the standing crops of Akola District that preceded the incident. About 30,000 Gowaris took out a protest march on November 23, 1994 against the evacuation of the Dalits from the pasture land and for re-allotting the land to them. There was a stampede caused by police intervention in which 113 Gowaris, mostly women and children, died. The author says that the Government adopted a coercive method to control the Dalits.21

Asghar Ali Engineer in his article on “Communal Violence in Kanpur” brings out succinctly the new power equation emerging in Uttra Pradesh where the Dalits, Backward Castes and Muslims together formed a new political force to form the Government. He points out that Kanpur, which has had a long history of communal violence, witnessed a big riot as a sequel to the murder of a BJP leader, on February 9, 1994. In this situation, the army had to be deployed to control the riot.22

Gopal Guru in his article entitled “Understanding Violence against Dalits in Marathwada” analyses the regional causes in the violence against the Dalits by the high castes and traces the course of events succeeding the renaming of the

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Marathwada University as the Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University in which violence was let loose in the Marathwada region.\textsuperscript{23}

It is important here to review some relevant literature on caste and caste conflicts in Tamil Nadu. *History of Tinnevelly* by Bishop Robert Caldwell, an English Protestant Church missionary, and the *District Gazetteer of Tinnevelly* compiled by H.R. Pate, the then English District Collector of Tirunelveli, are resourceful works giving authentic information about contemporary conditions of the district in terms of its history, geography, administrative divisions, caste composition, culture and the socio-economic conditions of the people.

Bishop Caldwell undertook an insightful study pertaining to the political and social history of the then sprawling Tirunelveli District, which now comprises Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, Ramanathapuram and Virudhunagar Districts. He quoted Government records and letters written by responsible persons who had taken part in military expeditions and battles and other books to consolidate his views. However, when he wrote about different groups of people, he did not give authentic evidence to his contentions regarding the origin of various caste people.\textsuperscript{24}

*The District Gazetteer of Tinnevelly* by H.R. Pate gives a detailed account of various caste groups of the district, and the relationship between different caste groups. It also gives a comprehensive account of the social structure of the district in the nineteenth century. Every village had different segments for different groups of


\textsuperscript{24}Bishop R. Caldwell, *History of Tinnevelly* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982).
people to live in. The primary and the most important segment was occupied by the Brahmins, the second segment was occupied by the higher caste groups, the Caste-Hindus, and the last segment, Cheri, was occupied by the Dalits. Pate recorded in the Gazetteer the riots which erupted in Sathur, Kazhugumalai and Sivakasi areas towards the close of the nineteenth century as a result of the Nadars’ efforts to claim elevated social status. Obviously, these were the first-ever caste clashes in Tirunelveli District.\textsuperscript{25}

Robert L. Hardgrave in his book entitled The Nadars of Tamil Nadu provides an analytical account of this caste group. Based on the results of his study, he has also given a sub-title to the book, The Political Culture of a Community in Change. He analyses all the then prevailing shades of opinion about the origin of the caste and also the claim that it had once been a ruling class. While tracing the origin of this caste, he questions the theory of Bishop Caldwell. He refutes Caldwell’s theory that the earliest Nadars had come from Ceylon. He mentions that the earliest Nadars had begun their life in the Teri lands in the present Tiruchendur Taluk of Thoothukudi District and that they had been in the lowest position in the social order. He also discusses in detail its sub-castes.\textsuperscript{26}

David Ludden’s book entitled Peasant History in South India deals with the peasants of Tamil Nadu in general and those from southern districts including Tirunelveli region in particular. He examines the agrarian history of Tirunelveli during the century before 1900. He observes that peasant communities not only

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transformed the rural society but also shaped states and empires, including British India. He argues that peasant activity had propelled changes in South Indian economy, politics and culture so that the peasants could participate effectively in a modern world system of exchange and power relations. He gives a vivid account of the peasant society of Tirunelveli region which is very useful to the present study in terms of agrarian relations of the conflicting castes.²⁷

Police records provide an official version of caste conflict in the study area. Police records comprise the First Information Reports (FIRs) and the Investigation Reports. A First Information Report is the basic document giving details of the occurrence of an incident as soon as the incident is reported. Every FIR is followed by further investigation to verify the veracity of the reported details. These police records can be treated as live case studies of individual incidents. But caution has to be exercised to verify the dependability of the information gathered through the conduct of field study.

Besides the police records, there is another important source providing a fund of information on various dimensions of caste conflict. This is the set of official reports submitted to the Government by Enquiry Committees/Commissions. These enquiries deserve special mention because of their complete focus on caste conflicts. Such conflicts had occurred in certain specific places and got widespread all over in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. These reports form an important source because of (i) the breadth of the issues enquired into; (ii) the objectivity with which such enquiries were conducted and (iii) the protection ensured to those who depose before

such enquiry commissions. The findings gain acceptability because fervor of authenticity goes with the recommendations of Enquiry Commissions. These reports were largely consulted while preparing the dissertation.

The *Report of the Gomathinayagam Commission of Enquiry* deals with the incidents of violence and the consequent police action at *Kodiyanakulam* village in Thoothukudi District.²⁸ The *Report of the High Level Committee*,²⁹ chaired by Justice Mohan for prevention of caste clashes in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, delineates the causes of caste conflicts in general and examines the implementation of the Protection of Civil Act of 1976 in particular. The Commission of Enquiry constituted by the Government of Tamil Nadu in 1999 to enquire into the grave incidents which took place in Tirunelveli in July 1999 resulting in the loss of 17 lives. This was a ‘One Man Commission’ headed by Justice S. Mohan. The report of this Commission that was submitted to the Government in June 2000 throws light on delicate issues like caste rivalry, oppression of the *Dalits*, emotional outbursts of innocent, rural and rustic people and the use of force by the police to restore order. It traces the social history, the values, and the economic balance and describes the caste hierarchy. It brings out the nexus between caste clashes and illicit liquor trade. It also highlights the incidence of individual caste clashes which occurred in different places and provides a vivid description of the clashes between the Caste-Hindus and the *Dalits*. Corrective measures suggested in the report are very useful and helpful to the Government to formulate and implement appropriate policies.


²⁹Report of the High Level Committee for Prevention of Caste Clashes in the Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu, 1998
An article entitled, “One Who Dared to Fight” by S. Viswanathan describes the relentless fight of a Dalit president of a village against a Thevar Vice-President of the same panchayat. When the latter had encroached the Government land and diverted the drinking water to the land, the former was unable to take action against the latter whose caste is dominating in the village because of its numerical majority.\(^\text{30}\)

Another article by S. Viswanathan describes how the Dalit chiefs of local bodies in Tirunelveli District with their endurance and perseverance have withstood the onslaughts of the Caste-Hindus and how the Caste-Hindus have understood the realities of the age and accepted the Dalits as presidents of their panchayats. These two articles give a vivid picture of the caste scenario of Tirunelveli District at the dawn of the twenty-first century.\(^\text{31}\)

Another episode on caste conflict between the Vanniars and the Paraiyars (Dalits) in Koothirambakkam village near Kanchipuram (a Temple Town and Head Quarters of Chengulpattu District of Tamil Nadu) gives an account of the atrocities committed by the Vanniars on the Dalits of the same village. While discussing this the investigator points out that the Vanniars mounted attacks on the Dalits when the latter asserted their access to common resources like the pond in the village. He also points out that the Vanniars had inimical intent for action in future. Further he adds that the Vanniar men had attacked the Dalit boys and girls for pursuing education and


preparing for their examinations. These attacks show that the Vanniars wanted the Dalits to be illiterates and to remain downtrodden position for ever.\textsuperscript{32}

An empirical work related to caste conflict by K.A. Manikumar is directly related to the present study. In his work, he presents the consequences of caste clashes in southern Tamil Nadu. He stresses the need for organizing the Pallas (Scheduled Caste landless labourers) on class lines. According to him, at present, they have realized that if their long-standing grievances are to be addressed by the State, then their protest has to be translated into an electoral force. Therefore, their mobilization in electoral politics is desirable in the present context. He also points out that a broad based unity among various Dalit groups is essential to force the State to uplift them from socio-economic and educational backwardness. However, he makes it clear that the violence associated with the political action would be detrimental to their interest at the end.\textsuperscript{33}

K.A. Manikumar in another paper entitled “Caste Clashes in South Tamil Nadu” discusses the clashes between the Thevars, a dominant agricultural caste, and the Pillars, a chronically oppressed Dalit caste. He attempts to trace the causes and consequences of the conflict between these caste groups. He avers that both the previous and present State Governments have aggravated this conflict through their tactless moves. He emphasizes that unless a basic structural transformation is

\textsuperscript{32}The Investigator himself collected data pertaining to this caste conflict from the village itself. 

attempted through drastic land reforms thereby changing the production relations, violence will continue to escalate across the State.\textsuperscript{34}

Brindavan Moses shows how the revenue and police officials and the high caste people together connived to dislodge the \textit{Dalits} in Karanai village in Chengulpattu District of Tamil Nadu and surrounding villages and to dispose of the Panchama lands measuring about 650 acres which had been assigned to them during the British rule. The lands usurped from poor and ignorant \textit{Dalits} were transferred to other communities with an active connivance of corrupt revenue officials and rich Caste-Hindus. The disappointed \textit{Dalits} installed Ambedkar’s Statute to reassert their legitimate right over the \textit{Panchama} Land. But the District Police Officials, in collusion with the upper caste usurpers, forcibly pulled down and disfigured Ambedkar’s statue on the day of installation. Consequently thousands of agitated \textit{Dalits} gathered demanding action against the erring police officials and reinstallation of the statue at its previous sites. This was followed lathi-charge and exploding of tear-gas shells and shooting of a \textit{Dalit}. Subsequently the police arrested 130 \textit{Dalits} including 20 women and beaten them mercilessly.\textsuperscript{35}

Bjorn Alam’s article deals with some aspects of caste riots in Tamil Nadu. He discusses \textit{Cumbam} Valley riot between the \textit{Kallars} (a Backward Class) and the \textit{Pallars} (a Scheduled Caste) in 1989 in Madurai District. These two castes are rivals to each other across this district. In a similar way, there was a conflict between the \textit{Vanniar} (a Most Backward Caste) and the \textit{Pariyars} (a Scheduled Caste) in 1988...

\textsuperscript{34}K.A Manikumar, “Caste clashes in South Tamil Nadu” \textit{Economic and Political weekly} (September 1997): 2242 – 2243.

across certain Northern Districts of Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{36} It is noted that these two castes were also rivals to each other a couple of decades ago.

Caste prejudices are deep rooted in Tamil Nadu and people would even kill to preserve family or caste honour. For instance, Puthukkooraippettai village in Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu experienced this short of prejudices in 2003. A 25-year old \textit{Dalit} Engineer of the village fell in love with a graduate girl from the \textit{Vanniar} caste and subsequently they registered their marriage at the Registrar’s Office at Cuddalore on May 5, 2003. The \textit{Vanniar}s of the village resented their marriage and tracked down the couple and brought them to the village. They were poisoned to death and burnt by the \textit{Vanniar}s, leaving no evidence of the gruesome incident.\textsuperscript{37}

Hugo Gorringe discusses in detail the \textit{Dalit} movements and democratization in Tamil Nadu. He also highlights the socio-political mobilization of the \textit{Dalits}, and the \textit{Dalit} activism in Tamil Nadu. He concludes that the \textit{Dalit} struggle is not merely concerned with material and political interests, but with refashioning the way in which society is organized and social groups relate to each other. He observes: “In its renegotiation of local hierarchies of power, its rejection of dharma and its assertion of equality it constitutes a cultural revolution” \textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{38}Hugo Gorringe, \textit{Untouchable Citizen, Dalit Movements and Democratization in Tamil Nadu} (New Delhi: Sage, pp. 19-396).
The various literature reviewed in this chapter are relevant to the present study directly or indirectly. They deal with several issues relating to castes and caste conflicts in several States in India and also in Tamil Nadu. However, the focus of this study on caste conflicts in the area under study is diversified covering several aspects of caste conflicts. Besides studying the causes of conflicts, it attempts to explore the consequences of conflicting castes. It also analyzes certain major conflicts occurred between rival castes and discusses conflict resolutions that provide a back ground to work out strategies to bring peace and harmony among the conflicting caste groups. Hence, it is a unique study in several respects.