CHAPTER IV
PROFILE OF THE CONFLICTING CASTES

Tirunelveli has been one of the educationally advanced districts in Tamil Nadu. Its headquarters, Tirunelveli City, more specifically its southern part, Palayamkottai, is called by the southerners the ‘Oxford of South India’ because of the establishment of good old institutions of higher learning such as St. John’s College, M.D.T. Hindu College, Sarah Tucker College and St. Xavier’s College.

Bishop Robert Caldwell notes that there is no authentic study to trace the history of Tirunelveli region. While writing about the original inhabitants of this region, he mentions that they are identified with the people of Neolithic age. It is believed that the Brahmins came from north, the Nayakars and other Telugu caste people are also from north, the Vellalas from the Chola country, the Thevars from the Ramnad area, and the Shanars (Nadars) from Ceylon. Such traditions, it is believed, are too uncertain to be of much ethnological value. It is a noticeable circumstance that there is no tradition of the Pallars and Parayars. It may be inferred that these caste groups were already in the region when other bands of immigrants, represented by the other tribes arrived. Now the people of the district, like their counterparts in the rest of the century live, divided into rigid social groups by the meandering lanes of castes and sub-castes.

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SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Social stratification on the basis of castes is something unique to India and Tirunelveli District is no exception to this generality. During the Vedic period, society was divided into four Varnas (Chatur Varnas); and slowly crept in the practice of each varna dividing itself into jatis (castes) and each caste branching off into sub-castes. From time immemorial social inter-mingling had been strictly confined to each sub-division. In inter-caste conflicts in Tirunelveli and elsewhere, the identity of sub-caste was ignored and the hostilities were usually between two larger caste groups.

Since the main focus of the present study is on ‘Inter-Caste conflict’, it will suffice to highlight the major castes in the area under study. The norm for selecting the castes is either the numerical strength of the caste in question or the involvement of a particular caste in the conflict. A preliminary study undertaken by the investigator helped in scouting and identifying the castes, which were directly involved in caste-conflicts during the study period. An attempt is made in the succeeding section to present a brief profile of each caste involved in caste conflicts.

BRAHMINS

If one were to name a caste not directly involved in caste conflict, the Brahmin caste would figure prominently. The Brahmins who flourished once in rural and urban settlements had gradually dwindled in number since thousands of them had left their traditional habitats seeking better pastures elsewhere in metropolitan cities.
and overseas countries. Their out migration which started in the 1960s gained momentum in the 1970s. The generic name ‘Brahmins’ include two sub-sects, Iyers and Iyengars. The streets, agraharams, occupied by the Brahmins were exclusively earmarked for them. None other than a Brahmin can live in an agraharam. Old agraharams are now devoid of the Brahmins or have only sprinkles of them co-existing with numerous non-Brahmin caste people. This is indeed a welcome change in caste system.

In the pyramid of social structure, by custom and force, the Brahmins had come to occupy the uppermost layer which conferred them a number of privileges—privileges by birth. Social supremacy and higher economic status were associated with them. Those who took to agriculture were owners of lands, baring the functions of tilling and toiling relegated to non-Brahmin castes, notable among them were the Scheduled Caste people. As the custodians of knowledge, if not wisdom, they were the major beneficiaries under the English system of education introduced by Lord Macaulay. This gave them the distinct advantage of almost monopolizing jobs in Government offices, courts and educational institutions. The tenants and peasants, under the overlordship of the Brahmins, paid major part of the produce as ‘rent’ and remained content with the meager left-ever to eke out a miserable living. In their assumed role of protectors and interpreters of dharma, they acted as arbiters of social functions and as intermediaries between the deities on the one hand and devotees on the other. They formed a ‘leisure class’ and all good things that go with leisure and affluence like pursuit of higher learning and fine arts like music and dance became an exclusive domain of the Brahmins. No wonder agraharams thrived in peace and
prosperity while the surroundings were rampant with caste bickering. The former remained to be islands of peace unshaken by external bickering.

However, the *Brahmins* actually participated, if not in caste conflict, in pre-independence political agitations. Several *Brahmins* together with some other socially forward castes people (like *Saiva Pillai*) had formed an underground organization, *Abinava Bharat Samaj*. This organization had, according to the records pertaining to the murder of Collector Ashe, planned to murder all the English officers in India on the coronation day of King George V. R. Vanchinathan, a Brahmin from Shenkottai Taluk in Tirunelveli District, shot dead the Collector Robert William D’ Escourt Ashe. In brief the *Brahmins* were found to be active in the political front, but obviously remind non-participants in caste conflict.

**CASTE-HINDUS**

The term *Caste-Hindus* is not a homogeneous, but heterogeneous social group bearing a common label. Except the *Brahmins* who are at the apex and the Scheduled Caste at the bottom of the social hierarchy, all the rest of the caste groups are identified with the term *Caste-Hindus*. The socio-economic status of the constituent castes in the Caste-Hindu fold differs widely. Within this fold mostly the *Mudaliyar*, the *Saiva Vellala Pillai*, the *Reddiar* and the *Naidu* are socially and economically better than the *Thevar*, the *Konar*, the *Paravar* and the *Nadar*. Nevertheless, the latter caste groups have been registering socio-economic and educational development since the 1960s. A detailed account of those caste groups involved in the caste conflicts is given below.
VELLALARS

The common titular name Vellalar normally applies to Mudaliar, Karkattar, Pillaimar, Kottai Pillaimar and Illathu Pillaimar in the district. They are believed to have migrated to this part of the State from Thondaimandalam. They claim that they are on par with the Brahmins in the social scale. They constitute over nine per cent of the population in the Tirunelveli District. Though H.R. Pate mentions that the variety of their occupations was infinite, they are engaged in cultivation.

In the past, the Vellalars were the largest land-owning caste in the district. They were employed in several Government departments. Besides, a majority of the merchants, shopkeepers, lawyers and even priests belonged to this caste. In the Government services, they were the nearest competitors to the Brahmins. It was from this caste that most of Dalavoys (military chiefs) were drawn and they were the chief advisers and administrators of most of the Palayakarars (Poligars) like Kattabomman.

Even now in matters of religion, they compete with the Brahmins. They have their own religious institutions and mutts at different places in Tamil Nadu. The heads of these religious institutions hail invariably from the Valalar caste. Now, more than six decades after Independence, there is a remarkable change in the structural aspects of Vellalar caste. The Vellalars are by nature a peace-loving people, but when provoked, they stand up to resist any onslaughs flung at them. The Mudaliars form a class into themselves and most of them are economically well to do. They are also known for their munificence and philanthropy.

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2Pate, Tirunelveli District Gazetteer, 1916, pp 86-147.
They evinced a deep interest in art and literature. They had founded one organization called *Saiva Sabha* in Palayamkottai Town in Tirunelveli District to promote the study of their spiritual cute *Saiva Siddantham*.

Like the Brahmins, they perform *sraddhas* to appease their departed souls and invoke the spirits of their ancestors on new moon day. They, like the Brahmins, observed untouchability while interacting with the depressed caste people and preferred to educate their children in their exclusive institutions in the past.

Though they were basically a landowning caste people, they are like the Brahmins, pursued new ventures in tune with the changing fortunes of time. Several successful businessmen and industrialists sprang up from the caste. They were the forerunners of the Justice Party which spearheaded the cause of non-Brahmins during the pre independence time. They, like the *Nadars*, imitated the Brahmins to elevate themselves socially by taking in Sanskrit learning.

But their love for Tamil language and its culture never abated.

The *Vellalas* in the Southern District of Tamil Nadu have the general titular name *Pillai*. Especially the *Saiva Pillais* are pure vegetarians because they are highly religious. Generally they do not prefer occupations involving physical labour. Therefore they are considered superior among the *Pillais*. However, the *Kodikal Pillai* and *Illathu Pillaimar* are non-vegetarians who go for manual work. They are included in the Schedule of Backward Classes. Normally the *Pillais* do not allow diverse and widow marriage.

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NAIDUS (NAICKERS)

The *Naidus* are Telugu speaking people. Several centuries ago, these Telegu speaking people had migrated from Andhra Pradesh, a neighbouring district of Tamil Nadu. Their successors are now concentrated in Kovilpatti, Otta piraram, Vilathikulam and Sankarankoil Taluks of Tirunelveli District. Each of the group has its own sub-divisions. Bishop Caldwell says that the founders of Vijayanagara Kingdom were Telugus and they made Telugu the language of their administration. They sent their expeditions to all parts of South India. Being recipients of royal honour and patronage, the early settlers occupied favoured positions all over Tiruchirapalli, Madurai and Tirunelveli Districts. The *Naidus* were hard working farmers and they made use of the scanty rainfall during the north east monsoon and grew cotton in the black soil which they called *Karaisal Nilam* (black soil). Pate describes the *Naidus* as a fine, sturdy, hardworking people.

The *Naidus* style themselves *Naickers*. They are a forward community. This caste has three broad subdivisions: the *Kammass* (Forward Community), the *Balijass* (Forward Community) and the *Kavarriss* (Backward Community). However, all of them dine together and have certain common customs. The *Kammass* claim superiority over the other two divisions of the *Naidus* because they are economically well to do.

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8 Pate, *Tinnevelly District Gazetteer*, 1916.
THEVARS

Thevar caste in Tirunelveli District constitutes about twenty per cent of the population. It is said that no other caste in Tamil Nadu could have attracted the public and Government attention as this one. The members of this caste are noted for their robust build and readiness to take up physical challenges. This trait in their character might have endeared them to the conquerors of Tamil Nadu in bygone days, the Nayakkars. The rulers who had their headquarters in distant place such as Madurai entrusted the policing work of small areas to select members of this caste and this earned them the name, Kavalkar (Guards).

During the British rule, in certain places in the southern part of the Madras presidency, occurrence of thefts and robberies was found to be more frequent. The Government held the Thevars from local areas are responsible for such acts. One draconian device adopted by the then Government to quell the disturbances was to notify the local Thevars as criminal tribe in the gazetteer which instructed the notified tribes to subject themselves to police verification every day. Especially Kondiyar Kottai Maravars were treated as criminals in the pre-independence period. This obnoxious practice was dispensed with immediately after independence. The notified tribes were denotified and were allowed to move about freely. Now, the denotified tribes are given special concessions by the Government. However, they engage mostly in agriculture operations.

The Thevars from a division of Mukkulathor like other two divisions, viz., Kallar and Agamudaiyar. All the three are collectively called Mukkulathor. The term
Thever is general title of Maravar who are predominant in Tirunelveli District. They more or less resemble the Kallars in several respects with regard to social life. Like the Kallars, they also have the practice of Thiruthukattuthal (divorce by caste panchayat) and widow marriage.

The other sub-division, Agamudiyar, is said to be closely related to the Maravars by descent. They also mostly resemble the Maravars in terms of their appearance, habits and customs. However, they do not follow the practice of Thiruthukattuthal and widow marriage. Agriculture is their primary occupation. They consider themselves superior to the other two divisions of the Makkulathors because the former are better than the latter in terms of economy and education. As regards the present study, the Thevars in Tirunelveli District find a prominent place in the list of conflicting castes. Though each sub-section kept up its identity in the past and did not entertain marriage alliances between the sub-sects, now most of the Thevars sink such differences. Members of the three sub-divisions are allowed membership to Thevar Peravai, the umbrella organization of the Thevars. The Thevars and the Dalits had never been at peace with each other. The frictions between them, though perennial, were volatile peaking at certain points of time and being dormant sometimes with unusual calm.

It is observed that the Thevars are rivals to the Pallars, especially in southern districts of Tamil Nadu. The conflict between these two caste groups is a frequent phenomenon in these districts. This may perhaps be explained in terms of educational attainments and economic development of the Pallars in recent decades. They worked for personal freedom and emancipation from the fetters of the Thevars who have been
conflicting with the former even for trivial matters. The reason is that the *Thevars* could not digest the all-round improvements in the life of *Pallars*, their one-time tenants and coolies. This attitude of *Thevars* drove the *Pallars* to defy them and the consequence was violent clashes between the two caste groups. The frequent physical attacks on the *Pallars* by the *Thevars* gave birth to a new crop of leaders who took aggressive postures to the attackers.

**KONARS**

Old records including Tirunelveli District Gazetteer have *Idayan* as the name of this caste. Numerically it is a less populous caste in the district, but found distributed all over the district. In former days, the main occupation of this caste people was rearing cattle, particularly cows, and hence the name *Idayan* (sheppard). Besides this, they were engaged in agriculture work. Their main source of income was derived from selling milk and agriculture. But now, like all other castes, the members of *Konar* caste are evincing interest in education and taking up different occupations. The caste has also founded a string of educational institutions to patronize the educational needs of its members. Leaders of this caste successfully established an identity with the popular north Indian caste of *Yadavas* and rechristened their caste with the same name (*Yadavas*) after Independence.

**NADARS**

This caste is numerically a large one in Tirunelveli District. The *Nadars* constitute a majority in Radhapuram and Nanguneri Taluks of Tirunelveli Districts and Srivaikundam, Tiruchendur and Thoothukudi Taluks of the Thoothukudi District.
Since the beginning of the last century shanan was the other name for Nadars, which was in public parlance not commanding social respectability in those days. As this caste was considered a half-polluting one, it was allotted the third block of the village for its habitation. The fourth one was for the so-called untouchables, Pallars and Parayars, who had to live in cherries (slums), located outside the village proper. The Brahmin’s agraharam was in the first block and Vellalars, Thevars, and Konars occupied separate areas in the second block.

The Nadars eked out a humble living by tapping palm juice from palms’ flower buds and producing jaggery by boiling the juice. But this caste people struggled at different points of time during the nineteenth century to make it clear that they could not reconcile themselves to the social degradations to which they had been reduced to or to act as servants to the other caste groups. The Nadars today do not recognize sub-divisions among them as their ancestors did. Tirunelveli District Gazetteer lists five such sub-divisions. Karukkumattaiyan which derives the nomenclature by their profession they predicated, viz. palm tree climbing; Menattan which indicates the land they lived in, viz. Nanjinadu (the present Kaniyakumari District); Kodikal Nadan which takes the name of the main crop (betel leaves) they raised; Kaveripurathan which refers to the land from which they had migrated, viz. Cauvery river valley and Pulukka Shanan which is a contemptuous name for those who served and were sub-servant to other castes.9 The Nadars claim that they had been originally the ruling class and custodians of native medical science and martial arts and those they fell from grace at a later period. Hardgrave was critic about the efforts which the Nadars had taken to sanskritize their community in nineteenth

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9Pate, Tinnevelly District Gazetteer, 1916.
century. However, the historians and researchers have not convincingly explained how and why the *Nadars* alone were experts in the *Siddha* System of medicine and the *Nadars* alone strode through the length and breadth of Tamil Nadu as experts in *Varmam* (a system of knowledge dealing with various aspects of nervous system).\(^{10}\)

Whatever the *Nadars’* claims about their distant past, they were discriminated in the nineteenth century and during the first three decades of the twentieth century both in Tamil Nadu and South Travancore. They were denied entry into temples and also deprived of certain civil rights. But the *Shanars* who had rechristened themselves as *Nadars* by nineteenth century were not prepared to put up with such humiliations. The *Nadars* retaliated against the Caste-Hindu oppressions, which resulted in arson and bloodshed on both sides. It was during these years that Protestant Christian missionaries from England converted a large number of people from this caste into Christianity, offering protection under the law, guaranteeing dignity in their life.

The converted *Nadar* women wore blouses, and all aspiring *Nadar* children and youth were provided with facilities by the missionaries to get education. The missionaries also established strings of educational institutions to help the children of *Nadar* converts. One such institution is Scott Christian College at Nagarcoil, which was established in 1899.

Two major caste organizations of Nadars- *Nadar Mahajana Sangam* and *Dakshinamara Nadar Sangam* – have helped enormously to uplift the caste during the last few decades. As Pate mentions in his gazetteer, the *Nadars* love freedom and

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\(^{10}\)Ibid.
peace and work hard to come up in life, but later circumstances and developments in the recent past had distracted them into conflicts with members of the other castes in their villages.

**PALLARS AND PARAYARS (SCHEDULED CASTES)**

The Pallars (Devandra Kula Vellalar) and the Parayars (Adi-dravidars) had all along been at the lowest rung of the social ladder. While the Brahmins occupied the top layer of social hierarchy, the Pallars and the Parayars who remained the lowest of the low were treated as untouchable and were made live in secluded and degraded places called cheris (slums). Apart from these two castes, there is a similar group, Arunthathiars or Chakkiliars (lather workers) who suffered the stigma of untouchability. The living conditions of the Pallars and the Parayars today are far better than what they were about two centuries ago. But, a lot of Arunthathiyars continue to be wretched. Members of this caste in the past were required to do menial and unclean works, at times even demeaning dirty functions. The Pallars and the Parayars work in the paddy fields of the Caste-Hindus for long hours for meager wages. The beginning of the nineteenth century saw a kind of awakening among these people.

Every village has a cheri, a segregated place for their living. India’s Independence and economic development and reservation in educational institutions and Government services for their children have brought about certain changes in their lives. As a consequence, many of these people had migrated to towns and cities. Nevertheless the atrocities done to them by the Thevars have contributed substantially
to their migration. For instance, a series of conflicts between the Pallars and the Thevars in southern districts of Tamil Nadu in general and erstwhile Tirunelveli District in particular have pushed the Pallars out of their residential areas and drew them to cities and towns for security and also for securing employment to sustain their livelihood. The strained production relations in the agricultural sector (the strained relations between the land owing Thevars and the Pallars, agricultural workers) and the socio-economic improvement in the life of the Pallars seem to have formed a base for the inter-caste tensions in the district.

Some of their leaders claim that their caste had not been lowly placed in the remote past. The Devendrakula Vellalars (Pallars) were once landholders enjoying a pre-eminent position in the society and that they were reduced to the present deplorable condition during the days of Nayak rulers who confiscated their lands and forced them into servitude.

PARATHAVAS (PARAVARS)

The fisher folk living on the East Coast are called the Parathavas or Paravars. The southern part of the East Coast of Tamil Nadu is the home of Tamil-speaking Paravars. The region between a little north of Kanyakumari and Thoothukudi is the eastern border of Tirunelveli District and of this, the region between Rameswaram and Kanyakumari which is the Gulf of Mannar is popularly called Pearl Fishery Coast. The much sung Korkai port, the capital of the ancient Pandya Kings, had flourished in this area and the ancestors of the present day Paravas had been the master-divers who had fished the costly pearls, the nacre found in the oyster fish.
The Paravars inhabiting the coastal belt are generally poor but strong fish workers. A sizeable section of them converted into Christianity. They get agitated even at the slightest provocations. The rich members of this caste were traders, brokers, contractors and boat owners during the British period. But the rich Paravars of present day who prefer to be addressed as Fernandos have diversified their activities. Most of the saltpans on the coastal belt are in the hands of rich Paravars. The more enterprising of them took to raising prawns and shrimps in fresh water lakes adjacent to the coast when prawn-farms were made popular in the 1980s. The prawns and shrimps rose in such fresh water lakes were exported to United States and European countries. Consequently this job turned out to be a money-spinner. The unscrupulous act among the enterprising Paravars is that they make money by plundering coral reefs. Ecologists have warned the adverse effects of cutting and removing the coral reefs found along the coast. Moreover the Government has also banned the removal of coral reefs. Yet these plunderers continue to indulge in this illicit practice and make huge money out of it. There are hardly any farmers among the Paravars.

These Paravars were once oppressed people. But unlike the Pallars and the Parayars who suffered the untouchability stigma for centuries at the hands of Brahmins and Caste-Hindus, the oppression undergone by the Paravars had a different origin. They were treated as sworn enemies by the Muslims living in the coastal areas. The Muslim - Paravars disharmony has its root in the power struggle between these two communities in the pearl fishing centres in East Cost. The Muslims

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11 Pate, Tinnelvelly District Gazetteer, 1916.93, pp.121, 122.
with the support of Pandia Kings captured those centers situated in Tiruchendur-Thoothukudi coastal areas. The Paravars who were monopolizing the pearl fishing over centuries lost their control over this occupation when the latter over powering them with the help of a large contingent of Muslims drawn from various parts of southern districts. The Muslims took control over the pearl fishing centres and drove the Paravars away from their settlements in costal areas. However, after several years, the Paravars were able to recapture the pearl fishing centres with the help of Portuguese Army with a condition that the entire Parava community should embrace Christianity. Consequently, the Paravars took to Christianity and still they continue to remin in this fold\textsuperscript{12}. These people take pride even now in proclaiming that their ancestors had been the first in Tirunelveli to embrace Christian Faith.