CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Title of the Study

Social Structure and Religious Conversion in Two Districts of TamilNadu—A Diagnostic Study

3.2 Statement of Problem

Sorokin has pointed out that all permanently organized societies are stratified. Most societies of the world have had their type of what Ward calls “the Lowly”. The Romans had their plebeians, the Spartans their heitos, the British their villains, the Egyptians their slaves, the Americans their Negroes, and the Germans their Jews. So, the Hindus have ‘untouchables’ and the girijans. Slavery, Serfdom, Villainage have all vanished. But untouchability still exists.

Untouchability is a social problem created out of social stratification, in which, status and occupation are predetermined. The low caste people have a low status in society. Their only fault is their ascribed character as low caste. On the basis of this social discrimination, social segregation is prevailing in the Hindu social order. Low caste people occupy the lowest position in social exchange. This kind of social structure will affect the functioning of society.
In a capitalist society, resources are unequally distributed. So, conflict or revolution occurs in such a society. But, in India, social, status is differential due to the perpetration of the system of social structure unequally distributed. So, conflict occurs between high caste and low castes. Revolution may be perceived as their social, protest occurring in the form of religious conversion.

This can be proved in Marx’s conflict propositions: “The more unequal is the distribution of scarce resources, in a system, the greater is the conflict of interests between dominant and subordinate segments in a system”. The more subordinate segments become aware of their true collective interests the more likely are they to question the legitimacy of the existing pattern of distribution of scarce resources.

So, the low caste people become aware of their rights by means of educational, economic betterment. By using Government policies and programmes, they are in a position to raise questions against the legitimacy of high castes. It results in caste conflict in rural areas.

The more the deprivations of subordinates the more likely they are to join a conflict. The caste conflict is a notorious problem in Tamilnadu. Due to this people have lost their properties and life. Consequently the victims are attempting geographic migration from rural to urban areas by which caste based identity is abolished to a great extent.
But those who have land or immovable property or are engaged in agricultural works with a strong inclination to remain in the villages are not in a position to migrate but resort to religious conversion from Hinduism to either Christianity or Islam. The Scheduled Caste people in Tamilnadu due to the compulsion of circumstances and abject conditions are led to religious conversion. Religious conversion is undertaken with the hope of seeking educational, employment security to the low caste people. As such religious conversion is considered a response to the prevailing social structure and precarious social conditions identified with the Scheduled Caste people who have been subjected to a number of discriminations at the hands of caste Hindus and feel alienated from the social mainstream.

In this context the present research makes an attempt to study comprehensively this social phenomenon of religious conversion in two districts of Tamilnadu.

3.3. Objectives

The objectives of the present study are

1. To investigate the social structure and intercaste disharmony precipitating transformation of religious faith.

2. To examine the circumstances leading to and the factors behind the religious conversion among the Dalit community in two districts of Tamilnadu.

3. To study the inter-caste perception and practice of social distance promoting animosity leading to caste clashes.
4. To analyse the impact of religious conversion on society and social relationships between and among caste groups.

5. To suggest suitable measures towards prevention of caste hatred and promotion of a just social order in society.

3.4. Operational definition

3.4.1. Social structure is a structure of rural social life which includes caste, caste organization, family and peer group etc. Structure underlines the relatively static relationship of the above social units, the more or less enduring patterns of social arrangements within a particular society (Collin’s Dictionary of Sociology 1991: 597)

3.4.2. Religions conversion is a dynamic, multifaceted process of religious change. Conversion is sudden, radical alterations in people’s beliefs, behaviour and affiliations. It refers to renouncing one’s religion and adopting another.

   Religious conversion means a change of religion from one faith to another with corresponding change in attitudes, motivation, character and morality.

3.4.3. Tamil Nadu is one of the states in the southern part of the Republic of India.

3.4.4. Diagnostic study refers to scientific differentiation among various conditions or phenomena for the purpose of accurately classifying these conditions. The study is based on the frequency with which something occurs or with which it is associated with some thing else.
3.5. Research design

Designing is a primary part of every research activity which determines the format of the proposal and its outcome.

The present study is diagnostic in nature and based on primary and secondary data. It aims at exploring the factors behind religious conversion, and the impact of conversion. The present researcher felt that there is no need for any specific hypothesis for this study, since the objectives are conceptually clear.

3.6. Selection of study area

The research being diagnostic, the present researcher carried out the study in two districts of Tamilnadu, namely, Dindigul and Coimbatore, where religious conversion had occurred in the past.

Accordingly, in the identified districts, two clusters, namely Palladam cluster in Coimbatore District and Batlagundu cluster in Dindigul District were purposively selected on the basis of concentration of religious conversion which took place within a gap of minimum 2 years and maximum 5 years, with a view to ensuring representativeness of the cluster.

3.7. Pilot study

Pilot studies had been conducted by the present researcher in some of the problematic areas where conversion had taken place so as to cover certain general particulars,
social and economic aspects of life, organization of caste members and political participation. In addition, the present researcher had also gone through pamphlets booklets and journals published by various authors and Government and non-Government organisations.

3.8. Universe

The converted mass, religious and caste leaders formed the universe. For this purpose two districts, namely, Coimbatore and Dindigul had been chosen from which one cluster each was selected in each district on the basis of the strength of conversion and practice of social discrimination.

3.9. Sample design

After conducting the pilot studies and discussions with religious leaders, caste leaders, political leaders and other knowledgeable leaders, the researcher purposively selected two districts for conducting the present study. On the basis of this 100 respondents each were purposively selected from Dindigul and Coimbatore Districts for the purpose of empirical investigation. In addition, focus group discussion was also adopted in this study. Accordingly, two clusters, namely Palladam cluster in Coimbatore District and Batlagundu cluster in Dindigul District were selected on the basis of concentration of religious conversion. In addition focus group discussion was also adopted in this study.
3.10. Sources of data

The data bases for the present study consisted of both primary and secondary data.

Primary data were collected from the respondents by the present researcher using personal interview schedules and other supplementary techniques like interview guide and focus group discussions etc. were also adopted.

Besides, the present researcher consulted many official reports, articles, pamphlets, books, journals, mimeographed and published documents extensively for the present work.

3.11. Tools of data collection.

In order to collect the required information from the respondents, a personal interview schedule incorporating the objectives and related aspects was prepared. Two separate interview guides were also prepared for the purpose of investigation among non-converted Dalits and caste Hindus.

3.12. Pre-test

The constructed interview schedules were put to field test with a few converted and reconverted respondents in order to test their suitability and relevance. Later, the schedules were edited and standardised based on the results of the pre-test.
3.13. Data editing and coding and analysis

After the data collection was over, the schedules were scrutinized for the removal of errors and omissions. After the editing work was over, the classification of data was taken up. Later, on the basis of available data, the data were coded and entered into a master table for consolidation and subsequent analysis. Conventional statistical tools such as average and percentages were employed for data processing and analysis.

3.14 Scope and limitations

The research was specifically focused on social structure, religious conversion in Tamilnadu, circumstances leading to religious conversion, factors behind religious conversion, and impact of religious conversion. The research was also focused on measures to control caste clashes and social discrimination, promoting a just social order and suggestions to eliminate forcible conversion in future.

Hesitation, non-cooperation and difficulties on the part of converts and religious leaders in revealing certain sensitive and crucial information were the major limitations of the present study. The researcher had to spend much time on winning the confidence of the respondents, persuading and motivating them in such way that they came out with reliable responses.

3.15. Reference period

The reference period of the present research was July 2001 to November 2004 and the field work was carried out from July 2003 to March 2004.