CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION
Chapter VI

Conclusion

In the previous chapters, we have seen how the problem of agrestic servitude brought into focus by the Humanitarians and Evangelists in England, eluded a permanent solution even after hundred years of relentless efforts in Tamil Nadu. The traditional system of caste feudalism remained basically the same.

The early colonial administrators did not want to disturb the traditional social order and infact the main effect of the British Raj was ‘to strengthen Indian caste feudalism’. The Pro-Landlord Policy of the Colonial Government was the main reason for the perpetuation of agrestic servitude in Tamilnadu. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1843 legally abolished slavery in Tamilnadu but it failed to tackle the social roots of agrestic servitude. In fact, subsequent legislations such as Compulsory Labour Act of 1858 and Breach of Contract Act of 1858 infact legitimised the bondage of labourers.

Land Application Rules of the Government, by giving priority right to mirasidars and pattadars to acquire waste lands, prevented the labouring classes from gaining land ownership. Casteism determined the status of individuals in society and caste rigidity was peculiarly stronger in the 19th Century Tamilnadu than
elsewhere. But the traditional social order began to give a little way to pressures
given by economic factors generated by capitalistic mode of production, increasing
interest shown by the christian missionaries in elevating the status of the downtrodden,
the spread of education, the positive role played by the Press and above all an
awakening among depressed classes. All these created a favourable climate for
socio-economic change in Tamilnadu.

By the close of the 19th Century both conservatives and liberals unanimously
agreed that the problem of the untouchable agricultural labourers was really serious.
But each perceived the problem in his own way.

Conservatives like Srinivasa Ragava Iyengar felt that the Hindu society had
no role to play in ameliorating the condition of the untouchables. In his memorandum
he makes his point clear when he says that "Further amelioration of the condition of
this class must be the outcome of educational agencies employed in connection with
missionary enterprise: and indeed the best thing that can happen to them is conversion
to either Christianity or Muhammadan religion, for there is no hope for them within
the pale of Hinduism".

The elites among the depressed classes correctly understood that their degraded
position in society was due to the imposition of caste in the Tamil Society by the
Brahmans in the bygone days. This mute, exploited section of the society had begun
to resent social inequalities. There was a perceptible change in the attitude of the
educated untouchables which was different from that which Rev. G.E. Phillips
describes, as follows,

"Most of the outcastes are not troubled by their degradation, and have not only no serious desire to rise, but even no serious belief in the possibility of rising". "We are paraiah", is their answer to all suggestions as to possible improvement. 3

Now depressed classes had started rallying under leaders like Iyothee Thoss and Erattamalai Srinivasan who were bold enough to oppose the evils of caste system. They identified the Brahmans as their enemies. Erattamalai Srinivasan raised objections to the holding of Civil Services Examinations simultaneously in India on the ground that if examination were to be held in India it would enable more Brahmans to occupy posts in administrative and legal fields and by virtue of these posts, Brahmans, would continue their policy of oppressing the untouchables. 4 Iyothee Thoss concurred with Srinivasan. Both of them were of the opinion that Brahmans were responsible for keeping the untouchables as slaves in society.

Iyothee Thoss in his open letter to Srinivasa Ragava Iyengar stated, "The antipathy of those who call themselves Brahmans towards those who are called ‘paraiah’ is notorious; and it is no secret that the Brahmans have been always placing every obstacle in the paraiah’s way to progress; while you sir, a Brahman, have now come forward with a report on the paraiahs as if you meant thereby to plead their cause. Our people, therefore, are beset with a grave doubt whether any good or evil may be the result of your report". 5 Iyothee Thoss’ decision to embrace Buddhism was obviously an expression of his resentment to Hinduism in which caste is an
integral part. In his letter to Srinivasa Raghava Iyengar he said that Christianity and Muhammadan religions also accommodated caste.

Missionaries viewed the problems of the landless labourers from a religious as well as humanitarian point of view. According to missionaries it was the responsibility of everyone with means, to ameliorate the condition of the depressed. The work of the missionaries among the Panchamas was partly economic, partly social and partly educational. They had lent their assistance to enable the thrifty individuals to hold land and the missions themselves in some cases bought lands for them. The United Free Church Mission had founded three peasant settlements to improve the condition of the community. The most important settlement was at Melrosapuram in the Chingelput district started in 1893. Here was a school in which boys were taught agriculture, the extraction of plantation fibre, rope making and blacksmith’s work so that they might be able to mend their implements. Missionaries thought that without economic backing the untouchables would not be free in the true sense of the term.

These developments were not palatable to G. Subramania Iyer, the Nationalist. He made a political issue of these Christian settlements when he remarked that, “To enable ministers of a foreign religion to acquire property in the country and from the income of that property to extend the work of prosylytism aiming at the undermining of the indigenous faith does not look altogether like a rigid observance of a policy of neutrality.” Hindu society had no answer to the problem of the untouchables. At
times, the Hindu religious reformers like Ramanuja for example, came forward to give religious equality to the untouchables but they were not willing to give social equality to these people.  

The Madras Government even at the close of the 19th Century was not willing to ameliorate the economic condition of the untouchables. It decided to improve their condition through education, a venture involving less risks. Caste was an important factor which even the Colonial Government could not neglect. Due to these constraints, the Madras Government was hesitant to implement its policy of assigning waste lands to the panchamas. Though a decision to assign waste lands to the depressed classes was taken in 1892, there was no follow up action from the Government. Only in 1902 the Government decided with regard to the assignment of waste land throughout the presidency. It also empowered the Collectors to allot waste lands to the Panchamas.

Government had been very cautious in taking away Mirasi rights from landlords. Thus only in 1909, Government's support for the collection of Swatantram, by the mirasidars was withdrawn. Only in 1918 the claims of the mirasidars and adjacent pattadars over waste land were finally abolished, clearing the way for the depressed caste members to possess land. By 1918, the Government had made several grants of waste land to the depressed classes for dwelling and cultivation. Missionaries also obtained nearly 4000 acres of land for the purpose of establishing agricultural settlements. Still, by 1920, as per the statement of the Government itself
not much had been done in most districts to carry out the Government order for the assignment of waste land. In the 1920s the depressed classes received 237,000 acres of land from the Government. By 1931, the total amount of lands assigned came to about 340,000 acres and that accounted for only 1.2 percent of the total patta. Another problem confronted by these poor people was that the lands assigned in most cases were of a poor quality. Hence there was not much scope for improvement in their lives.

Under these circumstances, the Padiyal and Pannaiyal Systems had to continue even in the 20th century. This is evident from what F.R. Hemingway the editor of the Tanjore District Gazetteer wrote in 1906; "Now as then the pannaiyal is usually paid in grain and not in money, he is given presents on festive occasions and is often in debt beyond recall to his landowner. Moreover, when an estate is sold the 'right' of the land owner over the pannaiyal is often transferred in the document which transfers the ownership of the land".

The condition of the untouchable landless labourers continued to be wretched even in the first decade of the present century. Rev. G.E. Phillips writes as follows:

Most of them are agricultural labourers and had no land of their own. They are commonly paid a wage of two pence or three pence in addition to a little food at midday. As long as this wage is steadily coming in, a man will manage to feed himself and his wife and family on it, and he will lead a very cheerful life. But there are several months in which there is practically no work to be done on the land. After the harvest had been
reaped and threshed, the hot weather comes on; there is neither ploughing nor sowing to be done and the ground is as hard as iron. Then the outcaste had to wander away to look for some work, carrying stones for some Government road near his village, or going to the nearest seaport town to load coal or work in a tannery, or do any other unskilled labour which is available. Often for a week together he finds nothing to do, and for months even of a very normal year he and his family have to live on one meal of grain per diem ... The coolie is poorer and hungrier due to lack of work on occasions of monsoon failure; his little boy’s ribs are more conspicuous and his stomach strangely protuberant because he has been eating every unwholesome scrap of food he could come across." 13 In times of universal scarcity the first and the heaviest sufferers were the class of landless labourers.

Poor outcastes found it very difficult to retain their ownership right on land during times of crisis such as famine. Rev. G.E. Phillips describes how an untouchable loses his land to the money lender due to poverty and ignorance.

"Even if he has an acre or two of poor land - and he is highly favoured if he has more the probability is that after a bad season, at the next sowing time he has neither seed nor money to buy it. To save himself from starvation, he borrows upon any terms which the village caste men like to impose. A common rate of compound interest for such small loans is that of one anna (=1d) per rupee (=16 annas) per month, which works out at 75 percent per year and to get that, he has to mortgage the only security which
he possesses, namely, the title - deed of his land. Add to this the fact that he cannot read or write, and that if the unscrupulous money lender writes down on the stamped paper recording the loan thirty rupees when he has lent only fifteen the poor borrower puts his mark at the foot and is none the wiser - and it will readily been seen how difficult it is for the depressed classes to retain ownership of land.\(^{14}\)

Mr. J. Gray, who in 1916 - 18 made a special enquiry into the conditions of the labouring classes belonging to the untouchable castes came with a startling report which states that many of the paraihags in Chingleput district were slaves under the name of padiyals. While discussing the condition of the padiyal, Mr. Gray said, ‘Although nominally a free agent he (paraiah) is in reality bound to his master by a debt which in most cases he scarcely hopes to repay’\(^{15}\) It is clear from the Gray’s report that the practice of executing man - mortgage bonds by agricultural labourers continued to be in practice. The report of the Royal Commission on Labour of 1927 also reveals that pannaiyals in Tamilnadu were in a state of bondage.\(^{16}\) Bonded slavery continued throughout the colonial period and vestiges of bonded slavery are visible even today.

If bonded slavery continues even in 20th century inspite of the assault made by many progressive economic and social ideologies, it is because the caste based social order is still a force to be reckoned with.
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