CONCLUSION

The present work on the Dalit Movement in Tamil Nadu has attempted to trace the experiences of the Dalits in the late colonial, and post colonial Tamil Nadu. The Dalit community transformed from a state of land servitude into an agricultural community. Though the community depended primarily on agriculture for their survival, a small section among them also provided the labour force in the industries. The Dalits were scattered throughout the Tamil districts of Madras Presidency and they constituted the largest group among the ‘untouchable’ agricultural labouring classes. They were for long treated as ‘untouchables’ and their social inferiority was utilized by the caste Hindus to maintain their economic dominance in the agrarian sector. The Dalits had also been considered as agrestic slaves in Tamil Nadu, treated as property or commodity and that transactions involved in their sale, mortgage or transfer, had to be registered in legal documents. Sale deeds executed at the time of their disposal. However, it is extremely doubtful whether sale of slaves remained an established practice in the early part of colonial rule in Tamil Nadu. Nevertheless, praedial slavery in the Tamil country, continued till the end of the Nineteenth Century and the landlords were successful in preventing the Dalit landless labourers from acquiring lands.

The Dalits at the outset were not a homogenous caste and were divided into several occupational sub-castes, with differentiated social and ritual rankings, But this lack of homogeneity did not stand in their way of building up
a communitarian identity towards the end of the Nineteenth Century. The Christian converts, as well as, the community men returning from their stints as coolies in the overseas plantations played an important role in building up an identity which often went beyond the differences in terms of occupation and social standing. In other words, it was the shared experience of insult and exploitation that was utilized by the community leaders in the late Nineteenth Century to build up a distinct, if not an exclusive Dalit identity. This identity sought to project a united communitarian identity for all the ‘untouchable’ communities in Tamil Nadu.

The legislative measures such as Act V of 1843 as well as the Indian Penal Code of 1861 prohibited slavery, but could not improve the condition of the erstwhile agrestic slaves. The mirasidars and the other landed groups opposed all attempts on the part of the government, and the missionaries to settle the Dalit labourers on waste lands. They believed that permanent occupancy rights over these lands would reduce the dependence of the Dalit labourers on them, especially on matters related to housing, thereby encouraging them to take the advantages of a free labour market. Despite such opposition, Dalits in some cases could raise themselves to the level of tenants and sub-tenants. At the same time, the Dalit coolies returning from the overseas also invested part of their savings in acquiring lands, Such efforts were particularly noticeable in North Arcot district, where the Dalits purchased lands to take the economic benefits of groundnut cultivation. In North Arcot, ownership of these lands did not prove to be of any advantage to the Dalit
peasants, because they were mostly dry lands, devoid of all irrigation facilities. However, the problem of landlessness remained far too big an issue to be ignored by the official classes.

The government’s policy of assigning lands to the ‘Dalit families’, as well as, to the Christian missionaries for setting up ‘Dalit settlements, inspired the Dalit community leaders to raise their grievances before the government. The Dalits utilized the community mouthpieces, such as the Paraiyan and associations like the Pariah Mahajana Sabha and the Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha to demand special concessions from the colonial government. The latter was requested to enhance grants for the Dalit schools, initiate provisions of mid-day meal schemes and scholarships and ensure the representation of the Dalits in the public services. The Dalit community leaders also requested the government to undertake legislation for fixing hours of work, as well as, wage rates for the depressed class “coolies” eking out their livelihood in the industrial areas of Madras, Madurai and Coimbatore. Their emphasis, however, remained more on issues arising out of the dominance of the mirasidars in the Tamil countryside. Subsequently, the Dalit conferences provided the Dalit community leaders to enter into temporary understanding with upper caste reformist Hindus, for projecting their grievances in a more cohesive manner before the government.

The evolution of the distinct Dalit identity was largely a handiwork of the community leaders, who in most cases had received their schooling in the
missionary educational institutions. These leaders by organizing the ‘dalit’ conferences tried to make the Dalits’ conscious of their ‘low’ social standing, as well as, the economic exploitation perpetrated on them by the caste Hindus. The Dalit community leaders reacted more sharply to the iniquitous socio-economic order, as they felt the superior castes had been refusing to grant them a higher social status. In the early years of the Twentieth Century, the grievances of the ordinary labouring members of the Dalit community converged with the frustrated social and political aspirations of their economically and socially well-placed community leaders. In a sense, it was this integration of such diverse streams of consciousness that resulted in the construction of a new self-image of the community. Such developments found expression through the usage of terms such as ‘Athee Dravida’ in Tamil Nadu. The task of creating this ‘Athee Dravida identity was also closely linked to an intellectual pursuit that sought to rewrite the history of the Dalits. The advocates of the ‘Athee Dravida’ or ‘Adi Dravida’ identity published several monographs to establish that the ‘Adi Dravidas’ represented the earliest civilization of south India.

The Dalit conferences brought in greater solidarity and cohesion within the Dalits. These conferences provided the community leaders to interact with their rural supporters. The Dalit community leaders also utilized these conferences to redefine their attitude towards Hinduism. Their strong anti-Brahmin bias, as well as, their criticism of the Brahmanical notion of untouchability generated a sense of collectivity among the Dalits. The Dalit
social reformers such as Swami Sahajananda appealed to the fellowmen to follow the tradition of Nandanar. On the other hand, there were other reformers who insisted that Dalits needed to develop their own modes of worship and reject the Brahmanical ideals of *karma* and *jati*. The majority of the Dalit leaders, despite their strong anti-Brahmin opinion were reluctant to snap their links with the Hindu society. As in the case of many other ‘untouchable’ communities, opinions prevailed among the Dalits that accommodation within the main structure of the Hindu society would legitimize their claims to a higher social status.

The Dalits displayed an awareness to gauge the power relations prevailing in the society. Incidentally, different sections within the community sought to interrogate it in different ways. The upwardly mobile sections of the community in the early years of the Twentieth Century seemed to be more interested in acquiring political power through participation in institutional politics, which according to some historians had become “the new determinant of power relations in a colonized indigenous society”. This possibly explains their eagerness to seek patronage from the colonial government, which at least theoretically made no distinction along the lines of caste. The new regime was believed to have been a providential blessing guaranteeing an egalitarian rule and promising the end of a repressive social order. The Dalit community leaders took part in a strong campaign to establish the point that colonial patronage alone would ensure them a position of both power and honour within the new polity. In fact, their strong emphasis on colonial patronage initially
brought them closer to the Justice Party’s slogan of a homogenous ‘non-Brahman bloc’. Their distrust and alienation from mainstream nationalism under Congress leadership possibly to a large extent explicates their logic to ally with the upper caste non-Brahmin elite in the Madras Presidency.

However, in an age, which was marked by a show of numerical strength, the Dalit leaders, as the main propagandists of the Dalit movement, could hardly neglect the interest of their followers engaged in menial occupations in the rural and urban localities. The backwardness of the Dalit labouring class was utilized by the community leaders to extract greater privileges from the colonial state.

The Dalit community leaders often justified their demands for institutional patronage in the name of social justice. Their dependence on their followers also forced them to review their relationships with the Justice Party. The importance of preserving a sort of symbiotic relationship with their ordinary followers was realized by the Dalit leaders during the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills strikes of 1921-1922. The differences of opinion between the dominant Justicites and the ‘Dalit’ leaders over the functioning of the Labour Department, led to a break in the non-Brahmin-Dalit alliance. Subsequently, the ‘Dalit’ leaders expressed the opinion that there could only be temporary understandings with the non-Brahmin elite to gain greater concessions from the colonial state.
The break with the Justice Party also coincided with the demand of the Dalit leaders to gain a greater deal of representation in the various elected bodies. The Dalit leaders demanded increased representation of the ‘untouchable’ communities in the legislatures. However, group rivalry and political factionalism prevented them from speaking in a single voice on such issues. The intense groupism in Dalit politics became evident during the Simon Commission’s visit to Madras in 1928. While a section of the ‘Dalits’ under the leadership of M.C. Rajah had their own opinions about the principle to be followed in the case of their representation, the others led by R. Srinivasan differed in their opinions on this issue. The differences between the soft liner and the hard liner Dalit politicians were also accentuated by the popularity of E.V. Ramasamy’s slogan of *Samadharma*. In the early 1930s, the Congress’s call of Civil Disobedience as well as Ambedkar’s attempts to emerge as the sole spokesman of ‘Dalits’, gave rise to a large number of splinter groups, all of which claimed to represent the interests of the ‘Dalits’. The colonial state preferred to play one group against the other to counteract the influence of the Congress. Despite this groupism as well as the government’s covert attempt to keep them away from the Congress, the nationalist appeal did influence the Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu. Despite their initial indifference to the Congress’s Harijan propaganda, the sympathies of a section of Dalits towards Gandhi’s anti-untouchability programme brought them closer to the elite Congress leaders. Gandhi’s Harijan tour of Tamil Nadu in 1934, indirectly forced the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee develop an
understanding on the alternative political ideology that was being expounded by the Dalit leaders. On the eve of 1937 elections, the Congress accommodated many ideas that were integral part of the Dalit political philosophy. In other words, this sort of incorporation of parts of the alternative ideology proved to be the most important factor behind the victory of the Congress’ ‘Dalit’ candidates in the seats that had been reserved on the basis of the Poona Pact.

However, this Congress-Dalit bonhomie did not prove to be a permanent affair. In fact, caste as well as class contradiction prevented the ‘Dalits’ from reposing their full trust on upper caste leadership of the nationalist movement. The differences between the Dalits and the upper caste nationalists were reinforced by the British government. The government during the early 1940s, extended a series of concessions to keep them away from the nationalists. The Dalit leaders, for a short period of time, sank their political differences and pleaded for the abrogation of the provision of joint electorates. They unanimously agreed that the two tier system of elections, as envisaged by the Poona Pact, had been of little benefit to them. It had only benefited the Congress in electing its own candidates in the reserved constituencies, who were not the real representatives of the Dalits. There were also complaints that the Congress’ hold over the upper castes had prevented the anti-Congress ‘scheduled caste’ associations from electing their own candidates, though they had garnered the majority of the votes in the primary elections. The Congress
dismissed such allegations and stated that the popularity of the All India Depressed Classes League exceeded that of the other Dalit organizations.

Yet, the groups owning allegiance to the anti-Congress Dalit leaders could not sustain their hold over the Dalit population in Tamil Nadu over a long period of time. The differences among them gave the Congress an opportunity to woo their rural supporters. The establishment of several local-level organizations, alongside the active involvement of Dalit Congressmen, placed the Congress at an advantageous position vis-à-vis the MSCF. The smooth and speedy selection of candidates in the 1946 elections put the Congress in a commanding position. The election results clearly showed that the ‘Dalits’ had voted almost en bloc for the Congress.

The Dalit politics in the years following 1947 reveals several other interesting details. The dalit politics disintegrated along lines of personality, ideologies and strategies. The Dalit political elites found it difficult to assert an alternative ideology that was opposed to mainstream politics; they rather expressed their preferences to align with the more dominant political streams, operating within the province and the nation. Apart from the Congress, the Dalit leaders also entered into coalitions with the Dravida Kazhagam (D.K.), Communist Party of India (C.P.I.), as well as, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (D.M.K.). Their links with the communists remained fairly strong in the early 1950s. The peasant movements in Thanjavur revealed such political linkages. However, the alliance between the C.P.I. and the M.S.C.F. underwent a decline
following the Pannaiyals Protection Ordinance of 1952. The inability of the Communists to organize rural protests made the dalit agricultural labourers restive. Subsequently, their allegiances shifted to the Congress, which under the leadership of K. Kamaraj announced various schemes for the upliftment of the marginal groups. The Congress allied with the Praja Socialist Party (P.S.P.) and supported the Bhoodan movement to counter the influence of the Communists. The Congress’ efforts were aided by a split in the M.S.C.F. The Buddhist leaders felt that rather than aligning with the Communists, the Dalits would gain more advantages by aligning with the Dravidian parties. Indeed, there was a short-lived alliance between the D.M.K. and the M.S.C.F. But, after a split in this alliance, the M.S.C.F. leaders favoured a merger with the Republican Party of India (R.P.I.), which had emerged as the mouthpiece of the Dalits at the national level.

No doubt, this long political experiences of the Dalits from the dawn of the Twentieth Century to the mid-Twentieth Century was varied in terms of hopes, expectations and gains. While they had been able to redeem themselves from a state of agrestic bondage, the chains of exploitation were not yet completely broken. The dream of the Dalit leaders for an egalitarian order remains still distant. But, there is always a beacon of change. The nation state despite its weaknesses remains a rallying point of political forces which are broadly in favour of a system of governance which guarantees social justice and social empowerment. The political empowerment of the socially underprivileged groups has been only partially realized, though social equality
still seems to elude them in their daily life. The road to equality continues to be a tortuous one for groups like the Dalits. Nonetheless, the services of the Dalit leaders like M.C. Rajah, R.Srinivasan and others continues to inspire them as a symbol of resistance and a hope for better future.