Chapter - I

Introduction
CHAPTER- 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction:

India is an agricultural country with nearly 70 per cent of its people depending on it either directly or indirectly to eke out their living. Majority of them live in rural areas and are by and large landless agricultural labourers. Generally, illiteracy is very widespread among them; ignorance follows illiteracy, which acts as stumbling blocks to economic and social liberation- the dream of our early political and social reformers.

On the other hand, India chose a political system in which all decisions should be taken with the concurrence of the elected representatives of the people, which is the hallmark of democracy and through which the aspirations of the people are to be fulfilled. The Democracy of any country centres around the people. In other words, people are sovereign in a democracy.

In a democratic system there is a greater scope for the functioning of the market forces. In such a system, the market economy principle would be followed. In a market economy, normally there would be disadvantages to the weak and marginalised people. Nevertheless, the Government at the centre and the States have to protect and safeguard the interests of the people in matters like employment, income, housing and social security etc.

Any meaningful Government has to work for bringing about an egalitarian society by reducing the gap between the rich and the poor. Further the income differences between the rich urban and the poor rural people should be narrowed down. The Government would ensure social justice to all the sections of the people in the rural areas. But to our disappointment, the most affected persons in the rural areas are the Dalits irrespective of their religions.

Planning in India is democratic in nature. Some of the aspects of the Five year Plans of the erstwhile Soviet Russia were incorporated in the early plans at the instance of the
first Prime Minister of India, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru and the main architect of the Second Five Year Plan, namely Mahalanobis. However, Indian Plans are different from the Soviet and Chinese Plans, because there are elements of democracy, transparency and freedom to all to appreciate or criticise the Indian plans.

During the Second Five-Year Plan, the spelt out objective was to attain a socialistic pattern of society. The ambitious dream was that in due course, democratic social change would take place so that every Indian would enjoy the benefits of economic prosperity, which would ensure the liberation of the underprivileged from all kinds of enslavement. All the Five-year Plans of India have reiterated the importance of removal of poverty, unemployment, inequality, illiteracy, ignorance and disease. More importantly, the Five year Plans, from the first plan to the ninth plan, have underlined the need for improving the economic conditions of the poor especially the people whose interests suffered at the hands of the powerful and affluent groups for hundreds of years. Hence, Indian planners have set the goal of uplifting the underprivileged sections of the society.

(Though the Five year Plans have changed slightly the awesome specter to some extent, the size of population that is till mired in poverty in absolute numbers has not come down) but has gone up to 320 million, according to the official estimate of 1993-94. The Dalits of the rural areas have been the victims of these problems and their socio-economic conditions are miserable in spite of the enormous efforts taken to uplift their socio-economic conditions.

(The formulators of the Five year Plans pinned high hopes on the trickle down theory of economic development and firmly believed that the poorer sections would get the benefits due to them and thereby their economic conditions would improve. Further, they set the specific goal of removing the obstacles and barriers to the progress of the weak and marginalised sections in rural areas. The weak and marginalised sections in the rural areas are mostly the Dalits.)
1.1. Approaches:
Quite a few of the programs were aimed at the rural poor and their uplift even community-wise. One of the earliest attempts was Community Development Programme (CDP) launched in the First Five-Year Plan itself. It was a magnificent attempt based on co-operative partnership between the Government and the people for the all-round development of the people in a particular area. With the commencement of Panchayat Raj, this idealist approach should have helped the developing communities all over the country and thus brought prosperity to the starving poor. This was USA sponsored and supported program. This was a success story in USA. By the Third Five year Plan the entire country was covered with Community Development Blocks which became the units of planning, co-ordination and development for rural people with a focus on integrated rural development, comprising agriculture and allied activities, rural industries, education, health, social welfare, etc. In this process, the need to take special measures for benefiting the poorest sections of the population and for development of backward and the disadvantaged areas was felt.

And so the next step was to initiate programs like Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA), Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labourers (MFAL), Crash Scheme for Rural Employment, Pilot Intensive Rural Employment Program, Food for Work Program, Drought Prone Areas and Desert Development Programs and the Minimum Needs Programs. These programs targeted the poor and brought some benefits to the poor. But the socio-economic condition of the poor and the downtrodden were not improved much.

The third step was taken after the Fifth Plan. The focus was a little modified in the Sixth Plan; that is, attempts were made at tackling the problems of the deprived sections of the population due to severe poverty and unemployment. Geographical areas were further consolidated, rationalized and expanded. The Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP) replaced the SFDA and MFAL. Under this program, income based criteria for identification of the target group was prescribed. The program mostly aimed at providing skills through training of rural youth for self-employment. A special program for the economic betterment for rural SC/ST women was developed. The Food for Work
Program was restructured in the form of a wage employment program known as the National Rural Employment Program (NREP). The Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Program (RLEG) was launched in 1983-84 with the specific objective of ensuring up to 100 man days of employment per annum to at least one member of each rural landless household. These programs of the Sixth plan were continued in the Seventh and Eighth plan.

Thus development activities have been in operation for the last fifty years. The creation of an egalitarian society and the establishment of a socialistic pattern of society has continued to remain the basic objective of the planned development. Indeed, efforts were made to remove all the hurdles, which came in the way of the advancement of weaker sections particularly the SCs and STs attaining meaningful participation in the new life and acquiring an equitable position in the national life. Unfortunately, while all these activities were carried at enormous cost, the targeted poor and the underprivileged remained untouched. There followed the Ninth Plan claiming to revitalize the Eighth Plan programs by ushering in a new era of people oriented planning in which the Government and the people, particularly the poor, can fully participate. The process of development contemplated empowering all the disadvantaged sections of the population especially the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and development through planning; planning should not only be an instrument of economic growth, but as accepted by all, it should also be an instrument of social integration and the uplift of the downtrodden. Though the Indian society consists of many tiers of social groups both in caste, community and ethnic terms, the preferential option should go to the people who are poor or made poor. Any planning has to be done from the above perspective of down to earth policy, if at all the Government really thinks of building a just and egalitarian India. And any planning has definitely to recognize the needs of the poor.

Among the poor, a huge bulk of them belong to the class known as the Dalits. They are socially and economically backward; they do not have access to modern education, the benefits of social service and basic requirements like drinking water, health services and employment opportunities. It is inevitable in the case of democratic India to have special care for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. The Indian Constitution has
recognized the need for the Government of India to protect and specially care for the Dalits. The Ninth Plan has proposed to empower the poor and the rural administration through Panchayat Raj bodies in rural areas.

On the political side, efforts have been taken to uplift the Dalits. Reservation policies have been created in all the fields. Concessions and benefits have been given to the Dalits. Land Reform was introduced to distribute the excess or surplus land to the landless ploughing agricultural coolies who are mostly the Dalits. The nationalised banks were asked to give loans to the downtrodden on priority basis. Though a little progress has been registered, still the condition of the Dalits has not improved much. Illiteracy, unemployment, indebtedness and bondedness have been the situations among the Dalits. The vacancies in the main Government offices have not been filled up due to lack of the qualified Dalits.

On the social side, though untouchability is a crime, still untouchability is prevailing in rural villages even after fifty years of independence. Though the Untouchability Act has been enacted even the elected Dalit representatives in some areas are not able to enter the Panchayat Union Office and occupy the chair. In some places in Tamil Nadu, the high caste people have murdered the elected Dalits. Further Dalits are denied their human rights and dignity and they are being ill treated in several ways, like keeping separate vessel for them in tea stalls in some conservative and orthodox villages. There is a discrimination even in the case of burial grounds.

Since the introduction of the Eighth Plan, ‘Human Development’ has been identified as the main focus of the Indian Government. It is, therefore, proper and significant to evaluate the socio-economic condition of the underprivileged and weaker sections like the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes who are living mainly in rural areas and remain unorganized. It is against this background this research on 'a socio-economic study of the unorganised SC/ST (DALIT) workers in rural areas with a special reference to Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu has been undertaken.
1.2. The Problem of the study:

There are about 1000 Hindu lower castes registered in India. Many of their names are synonymous. Some of the castes number several million members each. Census of India 1991\(^1\) gives this figure:-"The largest of these castes are the Chamar (one quarter of the number of the scheduled Castes), Bhangi, the Adi dravida, Pasi, Madiga, Dusadh, Mali, Koli (Kori), Mahar, Adi-Karnataka, Mamasshudra and others. Each Indian State has its own list of Scheduled Caste. For example, the list of Karnataka consists of 65 such castes, Orissa has 88, TamilNadu has 74, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh have 60 each and so on".

Among the Indian States, 15 major States of India, each having a population of more than 10 million each, together contain about 97 per cent of India’s population. "Among these 15 States, the highest percentage of Scheduled caste population is in Punjab 57 million (28.31%), West Bengal, 15.1 million (23.62%), Uttar Pradesh 29.3 million (21.05%), Haryana 3.3. million (19.75%), Tamil Nadu 10.7 million (19.18 %), Rajasthan 7.6 million (17.29%), Karnataka 7.4 million (16.38%), Orissa 5.1.million (16.20%), Andhra Pradesh 10.6 million (15.93%), Bihar 12.6 million (7.41%), and Assam 1.3 million (7.40%)".\(^2\)

The bulk of the SCs, that is 84%, live in the rural areas. These are agricultural workers, sharecroppers and peasants owning small plots of land. Douza Victor\(^3\) says "The biggest social class of these castes comes from agricultural workers (48.2% of those employed). Among the Harijans the ratio of agricultural workers is particularly high in Bihar, Assam, Tamilnadu, Panjab and Kerala".

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\(^2\) Ibid.,p.3.

Looking at the conditions of the Scheduled castes in the present day India, one could find that a few among adi-dravidas own and cultivate land. According to the 1981 census\(^4\), “41.97 % are workers. Of these, 60.68 % are referred to as agricultural labourers, 18.65 % are referred to as cultivators, 5.04% are engaged in other household industries, 2.19 % are engaged in livestock keeping and 13.44 % are engaged in various other occupations. Their link with the market is direct as well as through middlemen”.

This study is mainly concerned with the socio-economic condition of the unorganised SC/ST or (Dalit) workers in rural areas with special reference to Tirunelveli district, which is in Tamil Nadu. The census of 1991 shows that there were 10,7,12,266 Scheduled caste people and 74,194 Scheduled Tribe people among 5,58,58,946 people in Tamil Nadu (nearly 20.20 per cent). According to the 1981 census, SCs and STs were only 18.34 per cent. Therefore, there had been 1.84 per cent increase in the population of Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes within a decade. According to the 1991 census, in Tirunelveli district, the percentage of the Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes is 17.89 and 0.36 respectively of the total population of the district.

The total population of the rural people in Tirunelveli district is 1,708,656 (68.30%). Out of this rural population, 353056 were Scheduled castes and 5543 were Scheduled tribes, accounting for 78.53% rural population. Going by these numbers, the SCs and STs would account for a sizeable proportion of the total population in this district. The presence of the large number of Scheduled caste people in rural areas makes the study imperative, for, this study would estimate the magnitude of the problems and analyse them also.

The greatest treasure that democratic India gave her people was the Constitution of India based on Justice, Liberty and Fraternity. It is also the cornerstone of our Democracy. The Preamble to the Constitution contains the ideals and aspirations of the people of India, the fundamental rights, and the great purposes, objectives and policies underlying the various provisions of the Constitution. The ideals enumerated in the preamble are of

great significance particularly to the SCs and STs. Jose Kannaikal in his article *Constitutional Provisions for Scheduled Castes* points out that "Part III of the Constitution deals with the Fundamental Rights. Article 5 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth mentioning specifically SCs and STs. Article 17 abolishes untouchability. Part IV contains the Directive Principles of State Policy. Special reference should be made to Article 46, which refers to the special care of SCs and STs. This article is central to the socio-economic framework designed by the Constitution. It compels the State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections particularly the SCs and STs. Part VI, especially articles 152-237 concern the matter of appointment of ministers in certain states. There are also other such constitutional provisions, all meant to protect, help and promote the welfare of the SCs and STs." 

Since economic strength is the basic requirement for the general uplift of the human family, starting from the day of Independence, every kind of assistance has been rendered to these two sections of India for economic and social uplift. But after fifty years of such efforts, these Dalits have advanced but marginally. Oppression and suppression have not abated: nearly 85 per cent of these people living in rural areas have not experienced much of the projected improvements in their economic and social status even today.

In India extensive studies have been undertaken on unorganized labourers in both the industrial and agricultural sectors such as cigarette making, match factories, palm tree toddy tapping labourers, etc. There are several sociological and political studies on Dalits. But elaborate economic studies are not available especially the specific study on the socio-economic condition of the unorganised Dalit (the lowest in the caste system of India) workers in rural areas. The present work is a small attempt in this direction. It is a study restricted only to Tirunelveli district given the limited time and resources. Besides giving the general socio-economic condition of the Dalits, this research also focuses its attention on a comparison of the socio-economic condition of the sub-castes of the Dalits.

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that is the Pallars, the dominant group, the Parayars, an intermediate group, and the Sakkiliars, the lowest caste in Tamil Nadu and also the conditions of the Dalit Hindus and the Dalit Christians.

1.3. **Caste system:**

In the early stages of the formation of society, men and women were not regarded and treated as individuals, but as members of a particular group. Groups of men and women related by blood constituted the units of the early society. India's society continues to be organised in groups. Individuals are subjected to a collective standard, to live in harmony with the group, subordinating their individual interests. Groups are of many kinds: tribes, village communities, castes, joint families (i.e. owning of property jointly by the group composed of many kin families not separately by individual members). This pre-eminence of the group is both a weakness and a strength of the Indian society: weakness because of the caste system that it has engendered and strength because the individual believes in and endeavours to promote the cohesion of the group.

A unique consequence of this group phenomenon was the caste system. It is claimed by some that caste is unique and not found elsewhere in the world. It is a simplistic claim and can not be associated with certainty. According to Sebastian,⁶ "Caste is a system of stratification rooted in occupationalized dimension of labour, in no way different from social stratification associated with the old world high civilizations. It is based on aspiration-oriented stratification found in many parts of the world. What is unique is not that caste originated in India, but that the specific Brahmanical theodicy that went with it was unique and a stroke of genius, because it constructed a rational ethical thought and was not the result or by-product of economic determination. The theodocy was the doctrine of Karma. The innovators of this theodicy were the Brahmins and the success of their mission lies in the fact that the basic moral and cosmological concepts out of which it was constructed became universally diffused through all of the sectarian varieties of Indian religious experience and penetrated into all cultures that were dispersed over the Indian subcontinent".

The practice of caste is unique because of the extreme social segmentation, which it produces; it is also unique because it is not a purely social system but is so closely interwoven with Hinduism as to have certain religious elements. Each member of the Hindu community belongs to one or the other of over 2,000 castes, which divide people into groups arranged in a complex system of social differentiation. A caste creates a bond of union between its members, but the system splits up society into sections, which, owing to the prohibitions not only against intermarriage but also against eating, drinking and even smoking together, prevent social fusion more perhaps than any other institution in the world. The caste system thus at once unites and divides thousands of groups, but its salient feature is mutual exclusiveness, for each caste regards other castes as separate communities with which it has no concern. The system does not however preclude association for common purposes or social intercourse; for subject to the restrictions, which it imposes on mutual hospitality and matrimonial connections, members of different castes may be on terms of intimacy or even friendship. The caste system is the antithesis of the principle that all men are equal, for, there is a hierarchy of castes based on the principle that these people neither are nor can be equal. The different castes rank as high or low according to the degree of honor which the Hindu community as a whole confers on a particular group. The Brahman forms, as it were, the apex of a pyramid in which other castes are superimposed in layers, one upon another. A man belongs to, and, except in rare cases, remains till death in the caste in which he is born. O'Malley 7 observes, according to the Karma doctrine "a man's caste is determined by his past existence. Though his caste is fixed unalterably in this life, he may be reborn in a higher caste as reward for righteous conduct and faithful performance of duty".

1.3.1. Origin of the Caste in India:

India, a country with a lot of traditions, culture and beauty, has an unwanted, ugly and inhuman structure called CASTE SYSTEM. One cannot but feel ashamed of the caste

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system in India. The caste system discriminates the human persons and stratifies them into different groups.

The classification of caste in society is found in the Laws of Manu. This is a Brahmanical work of comparatively late date (its present form is ascribed to between the second century BC and the second century AD), which is regarded by the Hindus as the highest authority on their social institutions and family law. According to the Laws of Manu, \(^8\) "the caste system owes its origin to the four Varnas: Brahmans, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra whose origins are as follows: Brahman sprang from the mouth of the deity, Kshatriya was created from his arms; the Vaishya was formed from his thighs and Sudra was born from his feet". There is also another category of people who don’t come under any of these above caste groups. Historically they were called the fifth group of Panchamas or the Untouchables. They are called the ‘the Outcaste or the Untouchables or the Unseeables.’ There are hundreds of codes of conduct written for them. Now these people call themselves DALITS.

The four castes eventually developed into a social mosaic of 3000 sub-castes, with the Untouchables at the bottom of the list and actually outside the list. Such a rigid caste system is not found anywhere in the world outside India. A person is born into a caste. Once born in that caste, his status is predetermined and immutable. Birth decides any talent the person may develop cannot alter one’s status and this or wealth the person may accumulate. Similarly, the caste in which a person is born predetermines what vocation the person will pursue. One has no choice. Birth decides the occupation of the person in question.

**1.3.2. Classification of occupations:**

The Laws of Manu even classified the occupations of each group. "There were four classes ranged in order of precedence, viz. Brahmans are assigned divinity and the other six duties of studying, teaching, sacrificing, giving alms, and receiving gifts to the end that the Vedas might be protected. To the Kshatriyas were assigned strength and the

duties of studying, sacrificing, giving alms, using weapons, protecting treasure and life, to the end that good government should be assured. To the Vaisya were allotted the power of work and the duties of studying, sacrificing, giving alms, cultivating, trading and tending cattle, to the end that labour should be productive. To the Sudras were given the duties of serving the preceding three classes and they also obtained a living by handicrafts". These four classes were called Varnas; a word meaning colour, which undoubtedly had racial implications. The distinction among the four was, however, not based on race but partly on occupation and partly on religion. Below these four classes again was a fifth class consisting of degraded races, known as Panchamas or Chandal, which were regarded as completely outside the pale. The caste system splits up society into a multitude of little communities, for every caste, and almost every local unit of a caste, has its own peculiar customs and internal regulations. The caste system even governs such matters as diet; it lays down marriage laws; it regulates to some extent the actual means of livelihood. That is why most of the dwelling places of the Chandals or Panchamas are on the eastern side of the villages near where the dead bodies are burnt or buried.

1.3.3. Survival of the Caste System:
The caste system survived for centuries because the religious leaders transmitted the Hindu Scriptures to the common people and attributed the caste system to divine ordinance. Any breaking of this system, individually or collectively was tantamount to breaking the divine law. Painstakingly, every dimension of the divine ordinance of caste was included in the Scriptures. One could see this, for example, in the Bhagavad Gita, which is regarded as the noblest of all the Scriptures. The caste system having thus become sanctioned by the Scripture, it came to be accepted even by the outcastes themselves. In the words of Dr. Ambedkar, another ploy to make caste acceptable to all was the strategy of introducing an extensive system of 'graded inferiority', providing everyone with an inferior grade immediately beneath him. Thus, so long as the Brahmin was at the top, with no other caste above him, his superiority over all was secured. Below him the Brahmin had the Kshatriya - and below him was the Vaisya and below him the

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9 Ibid., p.57.
Sudra - and the Sudras had the untouchables beneath them. Thus each caste had at least one group beneath them. This compensated for the humiliation of having someone above them. This 'graded inferiority' made the entire system tolerable.

1.3.4. The concept of purity and impurity:

Another important aspect of the Laws of Manu is the conception of purity and impurity. It is the key to many of the apparent enigmas of the caste system, and Dr. Ketkar\(^1\) regards it as the chief principle on which the system depends. "The Brahman is at the top of society because he is pure and more sacred than other castes, while Mahar and Parayan are at the bottom because they are impure. Thus purity is the pivot on which the entire system turns. Rank, social position, economic condition has no direct effect on the gradation from the standpoint of caste... Caste in India is strong and rigid because the ideas of the people regarding purity and pollution are rigid". In traditional India the higher the caste, the higher was its class position and power. The Panchamas were considered as untouchables and placed at the bottom of society. They had the least wealth and power. They lived in separate hamlets or cheris set in the paddy fields at some distance from the villagers to whom they were attached.

1.3.5. Naming the Untouchables:

The Dalits are called by different names in different parts of the country. The Caste people gave them these names as expressions of contempt. They include Dasa, Dasysa, Raksasa, Asura, Avarna, Nisada, Panchama, Chandala, Harijan, and Untouchable. Each of these names has a history and background. Besides these names, there are a number of other titles or names, which have been given to them at the level of the regional language. For example, Chura in Punjab (North West India), Bhangi or Lal Beghi in Hindi (North India), Mahar in Marathi (Central India), Mala in Telugu, Paraiya in Tamil and Pulayan in Malayalam (South India). These names carry within them the two-term contrast of "we-the pure" and "you-the impure". In response to these insulting labels, the Untouchables have chosen to give themselves a name and this is Dalit, which refers to

\[^{10}\text{Ketkar, S.V. } \textit{History of Caste}. \text{(N.Y.: Ithaca, 1909). pp.121-122.}\]
the hardship of their condition of life. This name is a constant reminder of the age-old oppression. The term is also an expression of their hope to recover their past self-identity. If today the Dalits are reduced to a life of abject poverty and treated as polluted human beings, it is the non-Dalit that must be seen as the agent of their dehumanisation.

The Dalits were named 'the Depressed Classes' and 'the Scheduled Castes', in the Scheduled Caste Act of India, 1935 and provided special government protection and scholarship aid since they suffered from religious and civil disabilities. Thus the British Government in India later defined them as the 'Scheduled Castes'. Mahatma Gandhi named them 'Harijans' which means 'Children of God': but the Dalits did not welcome this term because it did not adequately describe their condition. In every State of India they were given different names. In Tamil Nadu after 1950 they were called 'Adi Dravidas'. It was finally left to the Untouchables to coin a new name for themselves. Jyotiba Phule, a poet from Maharashtra State, called his people "Dalits". In order to bring the Untouchables under one umbrella Dr. Ambedkar, the leader of the Untouchables advocated and reaffirmed the meaning of the word "Dalits".

### 1.4. Meaning of Dalits:

Socially, Dalits were placed outside the four-fold graded caste system of Indian society. They were below the Sudras and served the caste people in dirty and menial tasks like the carrying and cremation of corpses. For centuries, they were made to bear extreme disabilities. Their occupations required them to handle unclean objects, which made them entirely lose the dignity of a human being. Finally they reached a state of being a 'no people,' an 'un-people'. The Dalits formed the inner core of the poor and became socially out-caste, ritually unclean, hence untouchable. Socially and culturally, economically and politically, they have been subjugated and marginalised throughout the past three thousand years of human history.

The term 'Dalit' has roots in Sanskrit where the root 'dal' means 'to split, crack, open'. This Indo-European root appears in German and English in the form of 'dal' or 'tal', meaning 'cut'. In English, 'dale' is a valley, a cut in the ground; in German, 'thal': a tailor is one who cuts; 'to tell a tale' is the same as 'to cut a tally', the cut-marks made by the
shepherd on his staff when counting sheep. 'Dalit' has come to mean things or persons who are cut, split, broken or torn asunder, scattered or crushed and destroyed. By coincidence, there is in Hebrew a root 'dal' meaning low, weak, poor. In the Bible, different forms of this term have been used to describe people who have been reduced to nothingness or helplessness. The present usage of the term Dalit goes back to the nineteenth century, when a Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1826-1890), used it to describe the Outcastes and Untouchables as the oppressed and the broken victims of our caste-ridden society. Under the charismatic leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), this term gained greater importance and popularity. During the 1970s, the followers of the Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra gave currency to the term 'Dalit' as a constant reminder of their age-old oppression, denoting both the state of deprivation and the people who are oppressed. This term for them is not a mere name or title: for them it has become an expression of hope, the hope of recovering their past self-identity. The term has gained a new connotation with a more positive meaning. It must be remembered that Dalit does not mean caste or low-caste or poor; it refers to the deplorable state or condition to which a large group of people has been reduced by social convention and in which they are now living.

In Tamil Nadu where this research is conducted, the Dalits consist of the Parayars, the Pallars and the Sakkiliars. The largest caste among the Dalits is the Parayar group, which is identified with drum beating community. Slightly above them in the social stratum are the Pallars. Both the Parayars and the Pallars are agricultural workers and practically slaves, though most of the Pallars own agricultural land and livestock. The Sakkiliars are connected with leatherwork and footwears. They are generally of Telugu origin. They tan the hides supplied by the Parayars and make them into shoes. Like the Parayars and Pallars, they are considered highly polluted people.
1.5.0. Life situation of the Dalits in the 19th century:
As noted earlier most of the Dalits, particularly the Parayars and the Pallars, are agricultural labourers who rank below the rest of the people. Kathben Gough\textsuperscript{11} observes that "they live in separate hamlets on the outskirts of the villages, and are still called Pannaiyal (farm men) or attached labourers. The relationship between the pannaiyal and his master is open slavery (adimai). These Dalits are composed entirely of hereditary agricultural slaves. They are mainly engaged in cultivation and in building and providing the materials for temples, roads and irrigation works. There was also a tradition in Tamil Nadu that the communities of slaves were attached on a hereditary basis to villages, as were the village cattle. When a village was sold or given away with royal approval to merchants, its share cropping tenants, slaves and cattle were automatically sold with it unless they were expressly removed and placed elsewhere by the State".

There are two Tamil terms, which the administrators might have used: "pannaiyal" or permanent farm servant and "padiyal", or hired farm servant receiving wages in kind. There is also a Tamil word for slave, "adimai". It may well be that this word was originally used of those who could be transferred separately from the land, while "pannaiyal" was used of those permanently attached to the land. But if there had ever been such a distinction, by the nineteenth century it seems to have become blurred: the term "pannaiyal" was used more frequently than 'adimai'. "But here too the administrators preferred to use the names of the agricultural labour castes, Pallan and Parayan: further proof, if any were required, of the functional role of caste in Tamil Nadu".\textsuperscript{12} Many times even the Collectors and the Government helped the landlords, the upper castes. "As late as 1830, the Collector of Trichinopoly wrote to the Collector of Salem for help in bringing back ten Pallans who had absconded from their masters: They are the slaves of the soil and as such are not at liberty to leave the estate to which they belong. The owner of the estate, a Brahmin, is quite unable to cultivate the lands without their help. The land must lay waste and the Government be losers".\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Chinglepet Records. Vol.467., Page.113
\textsuperscript{13} Report of the Select Committee on the Affair of the East India Company., 8.11.1830.
There is a wealth of evidence that "pannaiyals" were sold and mortgaged in all the nine Tamil districts. In 1819 for example, "Pallans in Trichinopoly were usually sold with land, and should they be sold away from it, they were never taken involuntarily from their villages. They might be sold at prices between Rs.15 / 8as and Rs.35 and their services could be mortgaged as well; female Pallans, on the other hand, the Collector reported, were never sold".14 This custom was virtually prevalent in Tanjore, Devacottah, Madura, Chinglepet and Tinnevelly. “If there were Brahmins as mirasdars they did not employ slaves but hired labourers. They employed Pallis or villeins and the non-Brahmins employed Pallans and Paraiyans or slaves, but this is almost certainly a theoretical rather than an actual distinction, there is at least one reference to an actual case where a Brahmin held Pallans as serfs".15

One message is clear. The serfs were often in debt. Moreover there were hereditary relationships between masters and workers and indeed it was not unknown for the descendants of labourers to claim work as a right from the descendants of former employers.

After all, there were certain advantages about servitude; from one point of view, an obligation to work could be construed as a right to employment. According to Dharma Kumar16, “The resemblances between the actual social and economic conditions of the free and the unfree were doubtless reinforced by the fact that they frequently came from the same caste. All through the agrarian structure of things, the connection between occupational status and caste was still firm”. Therefore the agrarian serfs and slaves were drawn from a few castes such as the Pallans and Paraiyans which may be termed the agricultural labour castes. The first assumption is that most members of these castes were in fact agricultural labourers, whether free or unfree. As for the Tamil districts, “the Law Commission Report on Slavery of 1841 contains some figures of the number of slaves.

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14 Collector, Trichnopoly to Board of Revenue, 1.7.1819; Trichinopoly Records, vol, 3677., pp.151-160.
For example Madura the Magistrate stated in 1843 that the slaves of all kinds were a trifling proportion to the whole population, but the Census of 1841 showed that the Paraiyans and Pallans were 16 per cent of the population. In Tinnevelly the Collector estimated in 1842 that the slaves formed 38 per cent of the whole population but this was so much higher than the proportion in other Tamil districts that the 1841 Commission referred the question to his successor, who stated that the census of 1821-22 showed the number of Pallans, Paraiyans etc., to be above 16 per cent of the total population. The agricultural labour castes were mostly Pallans and Paraiyans whereas Ellis stated that the agricultural slave castes were the Pallans and Paraiyans. In Tamilnadu the five main castes which were definitely agricultural labour castes are Pallans, Paraiyans, Cheruman, Mala and Holeya. "In Tinneveli it was reported in 1835-36 that a landholder had 500 slaves, for each of whom he received a fixed quantity of grain per day. Of 1080 villages in Tinnevelly, the Collector reported in 1817 that there were 37,494 mirasdars, of whom 20,553 cultivated the land entirely by themselves; 13,708 cultivated the lands entirely by Parakudis; 2514 used both Parakudis as well as Pallans (serf), or let the land out; and 359 leased their lands out".

1.5.1. The situation of the Dalits in Tirunelveli District in the 19th century:

According to David Ludden in the early history of Tirunelveli, "half a dozen jati groups who by their numbers and productive activity defined the social geography of agrarian Tirunevelli, together they made up about two thirds of the population in 1881:

- the Shanars 18 per cent
- the Pallars and Pariahs 17 per cent
- the Maravas 9 percent
- the Vaduga cultivators (Kamas, Reddis and Kambalattans) 8 per cent,
- the Vellalas 8 per cent and
- the Brahmins 4 per cent.

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17 Ibid., p. 52.
The transactional ties within and between these jatis established the substantive social basis of agricultural development.

Again according to him, “high caste status is a symbolic resource; it is derived from a cultural proximity of the humans to the divine. Therefore, high status, in south India, became a valued means to gain material wealth. In this connection, Brahmins became disproportionately rich and powerful, though small in numbers, as the land-owning dominant caste in many of the richest irrigated villages in Tirunelveli as also throughout Tamil Nadu. Vellalas developed a high status jati category precisely by patronising the Brahmins. They owned large tracts of land. Therefore, the Brahmins and the Vellalas dominant caste alliance established firm control of the West zone, which has rather a high potential for production of paddy. Maravas and Vadugas succeeded in keeping a large percentage of key agricultural transactions under their effective control. They established another firm control on the black soil of the Northern Dry Zone, which is good for cotton cultivation. Shanars, that too Nadars came to possess some dry zone lands. But at the lowest extreme of the ranking system, untouchable Pallas and Pariahs could at best hope for relative independence as peasant cultivators.  

In villages, the poorer the tenant, the greater would his dependence be upon Mirasudar, for capital and food advances. The poorest of these, of whom the Pallars and Pariahs clearly constituted the majority, could at best establish themselves as sharecroppers. Without capital or crop by which to repay debts, they would have to repay with family labour. With nothing to barter for food, but their toil many Pallar and Pariah families became perpetually bonded to Mirasudar families or to whole Mirasudar villages. Thus the Mirasudar landed elite retained its status and the landless social stratum constituted mostly of Pallars and Pariahs remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Even the property rights depended upon the maintenance of group boundaries and relations of hierarchy among groups in agrarian society, which kept low caste families in their place. Among these lowly folks were Shanars and still lower were the Pallars and

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 65.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 93.
Pariahs who lived primarily on the streets within the boundary of Mirasudar villages but set apart at a distance to express their extreme lowliness and exclusion from high caste residential space. Labour itself became lowly because of agricultural economy and also because of the physical low levels of fields and channels. Since these labourers lived in low-lying fields, they were called palla-kudi people or Pallars. Thus, the Pallars performed almost all the most gruelling works in paddy cultivation of Tirunelveli District. Besides this, the Pallars and the Pariahs had to perform building and repairing works as a group. They also dug, hauled and piled dirt and rock. Groups of men would plough, manure and thresh, whereas groups of women planted, weeded, harvested and hauled to both threshing floor and storage. These groups also built roads, temples and other buildings. Therefore men mostly worked with stone and earth, while women looked after seed and grain.

In those days the Dalits did not control their own conditions of labour but worked in groups under the supervision of state agents or village managers. They became the daily wage workers (coolies or Kooliyal). From the common stratum of India's population, Agricultural Labour Castes (ALC) constitute the bulk of the Dalit population of all parts of the country down to the village level, which partake of the typical Indian agricultural civilisation.

In fact, from what has been said above, it may be seen that India's agricultural economy is built on the bones of Dalit agricultural labour castes and cemented with their blood and sweat. If India makes a claim that there is increased agricultural production to the extent of 182 million tons, it is mostly due to the contribution of these agricultural labourers who belong to both sexes. The contribution of Dalit women in this connection is also considerable. But the producers do not get adequate food for want of purchasing power and due to absence of job opportunities.

Therefore the growth of the Dalit labour since independence has been phenomenal. Unequal land distribution made the Dalit to be dependent. They just managed to live a hand-to-mouth existence. They worked sometimes as contract labourers; sometimes as
casual labourers and sometimes as migrants and at other times even as bonded labourers. This dependence and nothingness left them unorganized and uncared for.

The Dalit agricultural workers are economically and socially backward. They may be divided into four types:

a) Landless labourers who are attached to the landlords;
b) Landless labourers who are personally independent but who work exclusively for others;
c) Petty farmers with tiny bits of land who devote most of their time working for others; and
d) Farmers who have economic holdings but who have one or more of their sons and dependents working for other prosperous farmers.

1.6. The specific problems faced by the Dalits today:

A) In every region, Dalits form the numerically largest group of agricultural labourers. About two thirds of the bonded labourers of India are also Dalits.

B) Another socio-economic feature of Dalits today is that their share in India's agricultural land holdings is very low and still lower is the share in its irrigated land holdings. This is not by accident. But it is the deliberate outcome of the working of the Indian caste system. For example most of the agricultural lands in India are in the hands of high caste people belonging to the three varnas. Such a situation has persisted even after stringent land reforms were introduced in free India. As it is, today nearly the top 10 per cent of people owns 34 per cent of land; 37 per cent of land is under the next grade of 30 per cent of people. Only 9 per cent of the land
belong to the other 33 per cent of people. This is the worst mal-distribution. The remaining 27 per cent of the people are landless. Most of the Dalits fall within the last category. Under such pathetic circumstances, Dalits swell the ranks of casual labour or attached labour and even bonded labour.

C) There are some parts of India, where formal rules prohibit ownership of land by the Dalits or cultivation of land by them on their own. In such areas, people are bound to be the slaves and serfs of the landowners or of the high caste people. Even if they possessed and cultivated lands, they would not be allowed to avail themselves of the facilities of like water for irrigation from rivers, tanks, canals etc. Instead they would have to depend upon rainfall. That is why they have become highly vulnerable and eventually fall into the category of agricultural wage labourers.

D) Almost all the available labourers in a village are utilised and the wage rate paid to them during the peak-harvesting season often compares favourably with the industrial wage rate. However, these labourers are forced to look for odd jobs during the slack season. This happens to be a common feature in all the Dalit villages in our country.

E) During the peak periods they migrate from areas where there is surplus labour-force to areas where labour force is relatively scarce. In the slack season there is heavy migration of such labour from rural to urban areas or other project areas.

F) The landless Dalit labourers are unorganised. They are unable to develop any bargaining power due to the fact that there is no concentration of landless agricultural labourers on a farm continuously for a long period of time. They could find employment opportunities on a sufficiently large scale only during the busy seasons. The prevalence of illiteracy among them often prevents them from understanding their rights and responsibilities and hence any organisation of landless agricultural labourers is hardly possible.
Another problem faced by the Dalits is that they are often more concerned with getting any kind of employment rather than obtaining satisfactory wages and conditions of work. This is due to high levels of unemployment and under-employment in the agricultural sector.

The Dalit rural labourers are mostly illiterate and superstitious. They hardly own anything. They have too many children, mal-nutritioned and unhealthy ones.

The Dalit rural agricultural workers are seasonal workers. They do not have continuous work. On an average a farm labourer finds employment for about 200 days in a year and for the rest of the year he or she is idle. Unemployment and under-employment are two important factors responsible for low income and consequently for the low economic position of the agricultural workers in India. The nature of work in agriculture is such that a farm labourer cannot get work continuously. There is single cropping which means work only for six to seven months in the year.

The Dalit agricultural rural labourers are heavily indebted. Normally, the farm labourers borrow from the landowners and moneylenders by pledging themselves to these and eventually become bonded labourers in many areas. Naturally they are forced to accept lower wages.