CHAPTER EIGHT
AREAS OF CONFLICT AND CONVERGENCE BETWEEN THE TRADITIONAL AND STATUTORY PANCHAYATS
As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the establishment of statutory panchayats in all the villages did create a lot of discomfort to the traditional authority found in the villages. Hence, Statutorization of village administration run by politically elected representatives would not have naturally received much acceptance by the villagers in general, and more so in the case of the communities living in the Nilgiris hills.

Such a mingling of an alien form of local administration initiated by the British, with the indigenous Panchayat system that was found throughout India, would not have been conceived as a welcome change. This may be summed up in the term "dualism" which is defined as "the clashing of an imported social system with an indigenous system of another style" ¹.

One of the major effects of dualism is the possibility of the strained feelings between the two conflicting systems to continue. Such a situation has been found to exist in the Nilgiris district where, to a certain extent,

the functioning of the statutory panchayats conflicts with the traditional leadership within the villages. Such a conflict between these two systems can be detrimental to the interest of local development.

In order to illustrate the areas of conflict between these two institutions, a few case studies are given below.

Nanjanad of Ootacamund Panchayat Union is one of the important Badaga hamlets. There are two rival groups within the village, one supporting the Panchayat Board President and the other supporting a fairly troublesome elder. This rivalry has been brewing for the past four years and according to the President none of the developmental programmes initiated by the Panchayat Board has been executed properly during the past four years. For example, the Panchayat Board has been vested with the authority to take care of the village grazing, cremation and playing grounds. When, some of the elders, knowing full well that they have no personal claim over those lands, encroach into those areas, the Panchayat Board finds it difficult to evict them because of the misunderstanding between the statutory panchayat members and the elders. Due to this, the lands that are assigned for grazing cannot be utilized by all the villagers.
Yet another reason for the conflict between statutory panchayat and the traditional elders may arise due to the incapacity of the Panchayat Board to take certain immediate steps to meet a local exigency. For example, if the pipe line providing water supply to the village goes out of order, the President has no statutory power to have the line repaired as he must obtain prior permission of the Panchayat Union for incurring the expenditure. Such a situation will quite naturally affect the cordiality existing between the Panchayat Board and the others. Thus, lack of real power to cater to the needs of the villagers in the hands of the statutory panchayat may be another cause for a conflict.

The third area of conflict may be the nonrecognition of the traditional leadership by the statutory institution. For example, in a village by name Kavaratti the Independence Day Silver jubilee was celebrated by the Panchayat Board, which the elders of the village did not attend, the reason being that they were not consulted before the celebration was fixed. The traditional leadership does have a legitimate claim for recognition as they have been in authority in the past.
The study has revealed the fourth area of conflict as the taking up of contract for executing certain developmental works like construction of School buildings, laying of roads, laying of water pipes and the like. It has been stated in quite a number of case studies that the Panchayat Board members some how obtained the contract thus depriving the elders and other residents of the village from getting the contract. This has also contributed to a general unfriendly attitude to develop between these two institutions.

One basic factor which legitimises the attitude of the traditional leaders over the political leadership resulting in a conflict between the two is the extent to which the former are still considered as "leaders" within the village. In certain cases, more than the villagers, they themselves take for granted that they continue to hold the veins of village administration. The study has revealed the fact that 95% of the respondants approach the traditional leaders for obtaining local needs even though they are in no way legally connected with this area of activity as it is vested in the statutory panchayat.
Having considered the areas of conflict between traditional leadership and statutory panchayat, one has to necessarily consider the areas in which these two conflicting forces converge.

One of the prime factors that brings the two types of leaders is the traditional soil from which they hail. The study reveals the fact that 96.67% of the traditional leaders and 91.67% of the Panchayat Board members have been residents of their hamlets since birth.

Yet another interesting factor is that 58.33% of the statutory panchayat members are acknowledged by the villagers as 'elders'. This important factor which is characteristic of the Nilgiris district indicates another area of convergence. Even in the context of developmental activities, the study reveals the fact that 90.32% of the elders and 92.31% of the elected leaders have testified that the decisions relating to such developmental activities are normally taken in consultation with the elders.

Apart from the fact that both types of leaders are drawn from the same soil, even with regard to their educational level, 70.09% of the elders and 100% of elected leaders have had at least primary level of
education. Hence their similar educational background may also be a contributing factor for these two types of leaders to be bound together. Even with regard to their economic status it is seen that both types of leaders possess property. Economically, they are on a similar plank. Thus, it has been revealed that the basic factors which actuate the convergence between the traditional leaders and the elected leaders are the cultural, socio, economic and educational levels mentioned earlier.

Apart from these factors there are certain areas of activity within the village which cannot be accomplished without the cooperation between the elders and the statutory panchayat. Though the government of Tamil Nadu have entrusted the panchayat institutions with the various kinds of development activities, these cannot be effectively carried out without the cooperation of the local elders. To cite an example, at Yedappalli Panchayat of the Nilgiris district, a primary school was a long felt need among the people there. The Panchayat Board did not have sufficient funds. Hence, the members along with some of the elders decided to collect the necessary funds for constructing the school. A fund raising campaign was made, through
which, about ₹20,000/- was collected, each household contributing a fixed amount. With this money, the school was constructed. Thus, through a cooperative effort, the welfare programme was executed. This is indicative of the fact that when matters of general interest for the village come up for solution, the two systems normally converge.

As seen in the findings of the Survey, the administration of the village panchayats, to a very great extent depends upon the types of leaders both traditional and elected who are at the helm of affairs. Studies on the interaction between traditional and developmental leadership have adopted the 'Action Approach' as a realistic approach to the study of community leadership. According to this method, the decision making process and the focuses on the people involved in the rural Community life can be clearly examined. This would also be helpful for gauging the power directly from the concrete observable behaviour of the participants in the whole process of decision making.

By applying the action approach to the study of the decision making process at the panchayat level in the Nilgiris district, it can be seen that the traditional leaders have, in certain respects, stolen a march over the developmental leadership. It is interesting to note that 95% of the respondents have reposed their confidence in the traditional leaders by approaching them for obtaining their local needs. In the process of decision making, it is evident that the members of the statutory panchayats do not ignore the traditional leaders. Nearly 92% of the statutory panchayat members have testified that the elders are normally consulted before decisions on developmental activities are made by the panchayat Board.

From the study, the general contribution made by the traditional leaders to the various facets of village administration, testifies to the fact that, even though the leaders have no statutory standing, they are able to quite closely associate themselves with the decision making process of the statutory panchayat.

Apart from the fact that the elders have been wielding influence on decision at local level due to the traditional authority, they have been possessing,
the society in which they live also continues to endorse this traditional authority. The reason for this may be the type of relationship between the leaders and the people of the villages in the Nilgiris district. This may be, to a certain extent, similar to the patron-client relationship, stated by Scott. The Patron in this context may either be the developmental leaders who hold the key to rural development or the traditional leaders without whose cooperation the developmental programmes cannot be effectively implemented. The client would be, by large the villagers who are benefitted by the cooperative functioning of the "patron".

The extent to which these two types of leaders can function in Unison can be analysed through the method of "differential perception". According to this method, the degree of recognition among the various types of leaders can be obtained by analysing the mentions of leaders by leaders themselves. The application of this

method has revealed an interesting fact that 61.54% of the members of the statutory panchayat in the Nilgiris district have named the elders as "leaders". On the other hand, if a leader is defined as one who actively participates in the decision making process, the elders cannot be considered as ones actively involved in the decision making process, as it is the prerogative of the elected leaders. At the same time however, the elders are considered as leaders by both the elected representatives and the villagers because they possess the traditional authority recognized by the local people. This can be substantiated by the claim that leadership derives its reputation primarily from position and not participation.

A study on leadership finds an important place in a transitional society like the Nilgiris district where the forces of modernization and tradition interact. Such a study may be indicative of the general social mobility or immobility through leadership mobility.

6. ibid., p. 796.