CHAPTER V

ASSERTION AND COUNTER AGGRESSION

Assertion and counter aggression could be seen in every movement all over the world. When a society undergoes a transformation over a period of time, such as either from feudalism to capitalism or from capitalism to socialism, the existing hegemonic players immediately react against the newly evolving social processes and such counter reaction is a universal phenomenon. The caste system in India is not an exemption. The British rule in India affected the Indian hierarchical caste system which was stagnant for a long period of time. In order to retain the higher position under the caste hierarchy, the Brahmins and non-Brahmin upper castes made a series of efforts to capture new resources and power, which emerged due to the British presence.

The castes, which were in the middle of the hierarchy attempted to improve their position. At the same time the Brahmins, non-Brahmins upper castes and middle castes together reacted against the actions of the depressed classes, who strived hard to get some basic rights particularly free access of common resources and public sphere, which in turn would liberate themselves
from the clutches of caste oppression. As a result, the dominant castes perpetuated violence on the depressed classes. This chapter explores the non-violent action of the depressed classes and violent attack of the dominant castes.

**Genesis of the Assertion**

The passing of a few resolutions and introduction of certain bills in the Madras Legislative Council, gave birth to Social Disabilities Act and Civil Disabilities Act which were described in the last chapter, legalized the depressed classes’ access to both secular and sacred spheres. Since wells, tanks roads, schools etc., were constructed and maintained by the government and its aid, accessing it became a legal right of the depressed classes. Hence, contrary to the traditional practice of untouchability, which denied all these rights to the depressed classes, they attempted to affirm their modern legal rights to public spaces such as common water resources, government offices, schools, buses, trains and temples. The depressed classes’ movements and its leaders insisted their own people to assert their rights at public domain.

The method of assertion adopted by the depressed classes was non-violent. R. Srinivasan clearly said his position in this regard, when he introduced the bill entitled “use of public roads, wells, etc. by members of the Depressed Classes” on 22 August 1924. He said that “I want to achieve this result not by any violent changes, but only gradually, step by step”.

Migration was one of the crucial factors in asserting socio cultural rights. In the year 1900 some Parayars

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of Ramanathapuram district had migrated to Ceylon, as butlers to British officials and other menial labourers. There they did not experience untouchability, exclusion and oppression. They had got an opportunity not only to earn money but also to enjoy social and cultural freedom including wearing of decent dresses. Due to the outbreak of Great Depression in 1930s some of them returned to their native places with a new mode of dressing. They encouraged their kith and kin to wear upper cloth, which was denied to them by the traditional caste rules.

A similar process among Telugu depressed classes is explained by Satyanarayana, that the Telugu Dalits who migrated to Burma, “did not experience any caste or social discrimination….when they returned to their native places members of the lower castes and Dalits began to question and oppose status quo and caste system as well as play a significant role in the social reform movement in their home country”. He calls it as the “Burma factor”. In similar vein, the Ceylon factor has been a motivation among the Tamil depressed classes to assert their socio-cultural rights.

Education has been another crucial factor to influence socio-cultural assertion. The educated depressed classes began to wear decent dresses. They wore these decent dresses not only in their work places but also in their native villages. They encouraged their fellow people to adopt to the new way of dressing. Depressed classes’ assertion of legal rights together with their changing

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socio-cultural behavior infuriated the dominant castes who unleashed various forms of counter aggression against the depressed classes. The mode of counter aggression varied from threatening, beating, molesting, abducting, stealing, killing, firing, and ostracizing, etc.

**The Counter Aggressors**

Understanding who perpetuated violence on the depressed classes is essential here. According to K.K. Pillai “it is commonly thought that the Brahmins are responsible for the abuses of the caste system. But it is not so. True, they laid the foundation of the caste complex and paved the way for casteism. But in later times the caste-Hindu non-Brahmins were the people who extended them to the extreme limit.”

Similar view was also expressed by Satyamurti in the Madras Legislative Council on 07 September 1926. He spoke on a bill to re-enact the Madras Hindu Religious Endowments Act, 1923 that “the only objection to the entry of the so-called depressed classes into the temples comes from the managers of these temples who are mostly non-Brahmins. They interfere with the exercise of these rights. Read the history of South India aright. You will find that the people who are standing against the entry of the depressed classes in the temples are the Saiva Vellalars and not the Brahmin community. Who are these Brahmins after all in these temples? They are mostly archakas and paricharakas. Ninety nine per cent of the managers of these temples are non-Brahmins.”

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4 *MLCD*, vol. XXXII (07 September 1926).
These two statements did not reveal the reality. Indeed, due to the fear of ritual pollution through the touching of the depressed classes and their properties during violent outburst, Brahmins generally did not participate (touched) in the violence. But, they stood behind the non-Brahmin dominant castes in denying the basic rights to the depressed classes. In the modern period particularly in 1920s and 1930s, the non-Brahmin dominant castes proclaimed some oppressive prohibitory orders against the depressed classes.

The following causes were responsible for the imposition of strict caste rules on depressed classes. The legal rights offered by the British enabled the depressed classes to enhance their position relatively better than the past. Consequently, a few of them relieved themselves from traditional occupations and liberated from the oppression of the dominant castes. Because, the dominant castes feared that if depressed classes become completely elevated it would certainly collapse the hierarchical caste system and lead to the scarcity of low-cost menial labourers.

Again, wearing decent dresses and other ornaments by the depressed classes blurred the explicit caste distinctions and created anonymity. In order to retain their hegemonic position the dominant castes wanted to maintain the hierarchical caste system and continued to keep the depressed classes at the bottom. Thus the dominant castes particularly the Kallars, Udaiyars, Goundars etc issued some prohibitory orders. Although some Kallar castes were clubbed under depressed classes category with untouchables, they oppressed the depressed classes inhumanly by means of violent attack. *Kudiyarasu* news
affirms that the caste rules imposed on depressed classes by the *Nattars*\textsuperscript{5} of Ramanathapuram district during 1930s. They were,

1. All women of the Adi-Dravidas should wear white sarees like widows.
2. They should not wear either Ravikkais or Blouse or in any way cover the upper parts of their bodies.
3. They should not smear saffron paste on their faces.
4. They should not wear flowers in their necks.
5. They should not wear any kind of gold ornaments.
6. All men of the Adi-Dravidas should not wear shirt or any other covering for the body nor should they wear the upper cloth.
7. They should not wear their waist cloths below their knees.
8. They should never use an umbrella either for the sun or for the rain.
9. They should never wear sandals for their foot.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{5} The book, Castes and Tribes of Southern India by Edgar Thurston and K Rangachari, states that 12,000 individuals returned themselves as Nattan in the census of 1901. They called it a "vague term meaning people of the country, reported by some to be a main caste and by others to be a sub-caste of Vellala". Nearly all of them who returned the name were cultivators from Salem possessing the title of Servai, which usually denotes an Agamudaiyan. According to the Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India by Burton Stein (page 110), during the 19th century, Kallars were divided into 10 endogamous divisions by territory (*nadu*). And during the same century, within each Kallar locality, one Kallar sub-division was accorded the title of Nattar and assumed a dominant place in the society.

\textsuperscript{6} *Kudiyarasu* (07 August 1932), p.17.
When the depressed classes defied these orders, the restrictions were reframed and enforced with new vigour. The reframed order consisted of 11 prohibitions, which are delineated by Hutton\(^7\) (1) That they should not wear clothes below their knees, (2) the men and women of the depressed classes should not wear gold jewels, (3) Their women should carry water only in mud pots and not in copper or brass vessels. They should use straw only to carry the water pots and no cloths should be used for that purpose, (4) Their children should not read and get themselves literate or educated, (5) The children should be asked to only tend the cattle of the mirasidar, (6) Their men and women should work as slaves of the mirasidar in their pannais(farms) (7) They should not cultivate the land either as waram\(^8\) or lease from the mirasidar, (8) They must sell away their own lands to mirasidar of the village at very cheap rates, and if they do not do so, no water will be allowed to them to irrigate their lands. Even if something is grown by the help of rain-water, the crops should be robbed away, when they are ripe for harvest, (9) They must work as coolies from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. under mirasidar and their wages shall be for men Re. 0-4-0 per day and for women Re. 0-2-0 per day, (10) The above said communities should not use melam (a drum like Indian musical instrument) in their marriages and other celebrations, (11) They must not use horse for bridegroom’s procession before tying the thali\(^9\) in marriage and they must use their house doors as palanquin for


\(^8\) In the waram system the landlord gives a plot of land on lease to a tenant and shares the harvest with him, taking a proportion of it previously agreed upon.

\(^9\) A thread or gold chain worn by married women is called as *Thali*.
the marriage procession and no vehicle should be used by them, for any purpose. Many authors have quoted these prohibitions imposed in 1930s but these prohibitions, declared by the Nattars, which had been published as early as 1920 in the journal *Adi-Dravidan*. According to this journal “the caste-Hindus” ordered the depressed classes to follow the following prohibitions: do not erect roof during the wedding days, rituals must not be held, do not pronounce the word marriage, gold jewels and silk cloths are not to be worn, only white cloth should be worn, children must not got education and should not build *thinnai* (a raised platform at the entrance of a house).

Like the Nattars of Ramanathapuram, the Kallars of Koothapal and Krishnasamudram villages in Tiruchirappalli district proclaimed the prohibitory orders against the depressed classes. The Udaiyars of Thaluthalai village in Perambalur taluk levied Rs 2 as tax on each Adi-Dravidas to construct an Amman temple. Adi-Dravidas refused to pay the amount citing their impoverished condition and also that they already had a Mariamman temple in their own street. In addition, the Adi-Dravidas petitioned the Collector to admit their children in taluk board schools. On account of these reasons, Udaiyars imposed the following restrictions on Adi-Dravidas:-

1. Don’t give education to their children.
2. Don’t use the vehicles used by the caste-Hindus.

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12 *Dravidan* (02 July 1931), p. 8; *Kudiyarasu* (05 July 1931), p.11.
3. Withdraw the petition demanding school admission for their children.
4. Do compulsory labour to Udaiyars.
5. Don’t take marriage procession.
6. Don’t wear jewels like dominant caste women.
7. Darkhast\textsuperscript{13} lands should be surrendered to the Udaiyars.
8. After the irrigation of Udaiyar fields, remaining water should be used by them.
9. Carrying water without dropping it in the land.\textsuperscript{14}

The Udaiyars compelled the Adi-Dravidas to sign in the above said prohibitory orders. While the Adi-Dravidas refused to do so, the Udaiyars not only blocked the common pathways leading to the lands of depressed classes but also ostracized the Adi-Dravidas i.e. they ordered the rest of the villagers not to have any contact with the Adi-Dravidas and also ordered the shop keepers not to sell any commodities to Adi-Dravidas. Above all, they demolished the Adi-Dravidas’ Mariamman temple and closed their well with soil.\textsuperscript{15}

At Thathaiyankarpatti village, Rasipuram Taluk in Salem district, the Goundars another dominant caste group subdued the untouchables and imposed unbearable rules upon them. The rules prohibited Parayas of that village from cutting their hair, enrolling in schools, and wearing white dhoti. They should

\textsuperscript{13} Darkhast was a scheme introduced by the colonial government in 1863. According to this scheme an individual can apply to the government for the allotment of a plot of waste land. Those lands assigned under these schemes were called as darkhast lands.

\textsuperscript{14} Dravidan (11 December 1931), p.8.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
wear dirty dhoti up to their knee only. Women were prevented from covering their bosom and threatened that they will cut of the breasts of those who violate the prohibitory orders. They were forbidden to wear jewels and footwear and not allowed to carry umbrella, suitcase and books.  

It is very clear that the dominant castes particularly Kallar, Udaiyar, Goundar imposed above said prohibitory orders against the depressed classes. Ambedkar claimed that there is no difference between the prohibitions proclaimed by Manu and Kallars. Time is the only difference. Thus it can be rightly said that both Brahmins and non-Brahmin dominant castes were the counter aggressors who perpetuated violence against the depressed classes. The following section present a description of the violence perpetuated against the depressed classes.

**Psychological Violence**

The depressed classes not only faced physical violence but also experienced psychological violence at the hands of the dominant castes. Ragupathi has sketched this psychological violence against the depressed classes to an extent in his article, though he has not theorized it. He explains that, the practice of untouchability itself is a form of violence that demonstrates hegemony through body language, the way they are looked up on and treated, and the omnipresent fear of violent repercussion made the psychological violence an integral part of untouchability. Thus he says that psychological violence is

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16 *Kudiyarasu (21 February 1932)*, pp.11-12.

everyday experience imposed on the depressed classes by the dominant castes.\textsuperscript{18} The following would stand as a proof to this:

In a letter written to \textit{Kudiyarasu},\textsuperscript{19} Sannasi (Secretary of Devendrakula Sangam and a Supervising Officer of Harijan Service) narrates an incident illustrative of the fact that he was subjected to mental torture by the dominant castes. He was invited to the political conference held at Esanai village in Perambalur taluk. During lunch hour Natesa Iyar, one of the conveners of the conference told Sannasi that a separate place had been arranged for lunch. After a short while Natesa Iyar returned and asked him to sit in the veranda of a house which was away from the conference house. Sannasi waited there for an hour. Then Natesa Iyar came with a plate in which, on a plantain leaf rice, and other dishes put together and asked Sannasi to get down from the veranda and directed him to sit in the open space and dragged the food items with plantain leaf from the plate and placed it in front of him. Sannasi felt humiliated and refused to take food despite his hunger.\textsuperscript{20} If a well-known familiar person like Sannasi was treated by the dominant castes in such a humiliating manner one could imagine the condition of ordinary depressed classes’ people. Thus, the threatening of dominant castes and fear among the depressed classes amounts to psychological violence.


\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Kudiyarasu} (21 July 1935), pp. 10-12.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid}.
Wrath against Fetching Water

Like other productive resources, water too was kept under the control of the dominant castes and the logic of ritual purity and pollution and its embedded system of privileges and denials deprived the depressed classes an equitable access to water bodies. But, after the passing of the G.O. 2660, in 1924 at the Madras Legislative Council, the depressed classes got legal sanction to access all the common water sources, which enabled them to fetch water at public water resources. Being a tropical region with seasonal rains, the restrictive access to water make the depressed classes dependent on the common water bodies during summer. Sometimes, the depressed classes also accessed these water bodies to assert their right. This has caused the depressed classes to face wrath of physical violence by the dominant castes. In some areas, depressed classes approached the government officials requesting to create a water body for themselves. This has been the cause of communal tension between the dominant and depressed communities. Here some important events are described.

At Perungalur, the upper caste people had prevented the Adi-Dravidas by intimidation and threatened them for having approached the district labour officer for having well. On 21st May 1925 the district labour officer sent his special inspector to get a trial well dug. The village munsif and a landholder ordered the work to be stopped and summoned the Adi-Dravidas to meet them in the village. They refused to go to the village and hence a group of dominant caste men beat and chased the Adi-Dravidas out of the Cheri. One man was seriously injured in that incident and had been hospitalized. The cart and bullocks belonging to an
Adi-Dravida were looted. The media particularly Madras Mail and Hindu had published news about these incidents. Commissioner of labour stated that “there was no truth in the allegation that the Adi-Dravidas were prevented from approaching the district labour officer. The truth in the rest of the story is that a land holder and the village munsif, jealous that the Cheri should get a well when the caste village had none, did sent the Thalayari and one or two men to stop the work and to order the Adi-Dravidas to appear before them in the village. The Adi-Dravidas were afraid to come. This enraged the land holder, who owns half the village and has been accustomed to have the people obey him, and after nightfall he sent one of his men into the village, apparently to beat the disobedient Adi-Dravidas. This man caught hold of one man in the Cheri and beat him but he escaped and raised an alarm and nothing else occurred. The cart and bullocks belonged to a land holder who had left them one of the Adi-Dravidas; when this trouble arose, he took them back.”

In Nanjai Magathu Valkai village the depressed classes had great difficulty in getting water for a couple of months in the dry season until water begins to flow in the irrigation channels. They sent a petition to the divisional officer to get water source but it was futile. Then they attempted to take water at a pond which was under the control of dominant caste but were prevented from fetching water by violent means injuring two members of the depressed classes.

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22 Ibid
Enadur water dispute occurred mainly because of the assertion of right rather than water scarcity. At Enadur village in Chengulpattu district, there were three tanks one of which was the Pidari tank. The dispute about fetching water between caste Hindus and the Adi-Dravidas that erupted in 1918 was settled by a compromise. But, the depressed classes again in 16th June 1932 attempted to assert their right to fetch water from the same Pidari kulam. Hence, the dominant caste unleashed violence. They attacked the Adi-Dravida women and broke the water pots carried by them. No warning was given to the caste-Hindus regarding their action. But, the Circle Inspector of Police demanded urgent prohibitory orders under section 144 Cr. P.C. thus the Sub Magistrate Conjeevaram issued an urgent ex-parte order on 3rd July 1932 forbidding the Adi-Dravidas from entering the tank to fetch water. The District Magistrate cancelled 144 Cr. P.C. which however had already expired. He directed the police for further enquiry.

As per the enquiry report, it was stated that “the tank was registered simply as Poramboke. The water of the Anniarkulam was not fit for drinking. There was ample supply of water in the Cheri well which never dries up, but the Adi-Dravidas alleged it was brackish while the caste Hindus not having tasted it cannot rebut the statement.” As the District magistrate was not satisfied with the enquiry report he personally inspected. He said in his enquiry report that “There is ample supply of water in the Cheri well for this small Cheri of at the most 30 houses, and it is quite good drinking water, though not so fruity and tasting of the

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23 G.O. NO 397, Public (09 May 1933).
24 Dravidan (23 June 1932), p.4.
earth, dung, and urine as these people like. Anniarkulam has been probably deliberately allowed to get foul in order to support the Adi-Dravida case as I found the usual inlet had been recently and deliberately bunded up to prevent fresh water coming in. This fresh water comes from the same channel as feeds the Pidarikulam……. The Adi-Dravidas claim was not based on actual usage or custom that they had their own well, and if they like to keep it clean they had their own tank. This dispute is an attempt to assert their rights as ordinary human beings.”

In 1933, at Melarasur village in Lalkudi Taluk Tiruchirappalli district, while the depressed classes’ went to fetch water in a public tank, dominant castes attacked them. The dominant caste people not only prevented them from drawing water from the two lakes in the village but also compelled them to give an undertaking that they will not draw water. While the depressed classes refused to do so they imposed following restrictions on them.

1. The shop keepers compelled not to sell commodities to Adi-Dravidas.

2. Blacksmith, carpenter and potters prohibited to work to Adi-Dravidas.

3. The Adi-Dravidas prevented from drawing water from none of the village lake.

4. Blocked the way lead to their lands.

5. Prohibited the use of public pathway.

6. Banned them from collecting fire woods from the forest.26

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25 G.O. No. 397, Public (09 May 1933).
26 Nagarathuthan (22 October 1933), p.3.
Pushed from Public Pathway

As per G.O. No. 2660, all modern institutions, streets, roads etc. which were established or maintained by the government’s financial aid were declared as public sphere and space. Thus that could be accessed by all people irrespective of caste and religious distinction. Since majority streets habituated by the dominant castes were public streets, the depressed classes attempted to assert their right, to walk and to use the road, street, pathway, school, bus etc. Consequently, whenever and wherever the depressed classes attempted to execute their rights they were attacked by the dominant castes. In 1930 at Singanallur in Coimbatore, a dispute started between depressed classes and the dominant castes over the depressed castes’ right of walking through the Brahmin Street (Agraharam). Singanallur was habituated by Goundans, Naïckars, Uppiliyars, and Adi-Dravidas, etc. The Adi-Dravidas had never passed through the Agraharam. In the village there was an Adi-Dravida school for the Adi-Dravidas alone and a Higher Elementary School for all, both maintained by the Coimbatore Taluk Board.

Early in 1930 the Adi-Dravida boys who passed in the Adi-Dravida School got admission in the Higher Elementary School. This necessitated them to pass through the Agraharam, a public pathway maintained by the union board. But the Brahmins and the non-Brahmin dominant castes prohibited the depressed classes’ students from passing through the Agraharam. The boys brought this news to their home and it was taken to the notice of Civic and Social Workers Association. Important persons visited the locality and condemned the activities
of Brahmins and non-Brahmin dominant castes. The dispute was amicably settled by the intervention of police.\textsuperscript{27} On 2\textsuperscript{nd} July 1930 five more Adi-Dravidas boys went with their parents for admission in the school. In the middle of the Agraharam one Sami Ayyar obstructed and assaulted them. Subsequently, this issue became serious between two parties. The Adi-Dravidas filed a complaint against the assault. The matter was reported to the Secretary of the Civic and Social Workers Association. They requested the police protection to send the boys to school. But the police did not give protection. Thus the parents themselves took their boys to school. They were allowed to pass through the Agraharam but the parents were assaulted on their return in the middle of the street by both Brahmins and non-Brahmins, a Brahmin priest receiving blows from the Adi-Dravidas in self-defence.\textsuperscript{28} This incident was reported to the Collector, Sub-Inspector, Deputy Superintendent of Police. Police enquired the matter and stayed there for the night. In the morning they heard the cries of Adi-Dravidas in their Cheri. The Constable ran to the spot and on his way he found a caste man with a spear and stick which he grabbed but had not arrested that man. Subsequently, more than 400 dominant castes people entered the Cheri and unleashed violence against the Adi-Dravidas. Muniswami Pillai, Ex M.L.C and Secretary of Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, visited the Adi-Dravida quarters. He reported this violence to the government. According to him, “On entering we were surrounded by many of the poor Adi-Dravida men, women and children and they related what all happened on the 5\textsuperscript{th} morning. Everyone was shedding tears

\textsuperscript{27} G.O. No. 291, Public (23 March 1931).

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
and was panic stricken. I found most of the houses were damaged badly. Big
stones were thrown on the house roofs made of manga tiles and several holes
have been made on the house roofs for entering into houses. The roofs of some
of the houses have been completely strike off. In some houses, walls have been
broken into for entering houses. I understand more than 400 caste people
surrounded the Cheri and enter into the Adidravida houses and mercilessly hit
young and old with sticks and spears. I was shown a house where in some seven
Adi-Dravidas were hiding under the flat below the roof and the caste men have
forced the spear through them to bleed causing grievous hurt. Houses were
entered into by forcibly breaking open the roofs. I heard the money kept in boxes
in the houses was stolen away. The atrocities committed by the caste Hindus
which is against all laws of a civilized country. Women and children especially
pregnant women were made to run for saving their lives and some school boys
were threatened and they were afraid of going to school. Then I went to Adi-
Dravida School and Higher Elementary School where I found not a single Adi-
Dravida boy was present. Then I went to the government hospital at Coimbatore,
to see the wounded Adi-Dravidas there were five seriously hurt and one of them
over 60 years of age. If the lower subordinates in the police rank had taken a
little interest to afford protection to the Adi-Dravidas such atrocities would not
have come about.”

29 At Thathaiyangarpatti village, Rasipuram taluk in Salem
district six children were beaten while going to school via public street.
30 Pallars of Thachchanallur in Tirunelveli sought permission from caste Hindus (Konar,
Pillaimars) to convene the Amman temple procession through the public road. As it was opposed by the caste Hindus, riot broke out between two communities. Numbers of people were wounded in this clash.  

At Chettykurichi in Ramanathapuram district a trouble broke out between the Pallars and the Reddis. The Pallars had to take their dead bodies, through portions of land belonging to the Reddis. It was opposed by Reddis. Hatred feelings between two castes had been growing stronger during 1925. From 8th September to 16th September four cases of arson were reported in which the Pallars set fire to hayricks belonging to the Reddis. On 22nd September 1925, Reddis who were suspected to be people of Madura district, brought in by the local Reddis, went to Pallapacheri in the middle of the day set fire to it and 40 houses were burnt. At the same time Vellian, one of the Pallar leaders was attacked and seriously wounded with knives. He died the following day. Another Pallar who was with Vellian also attacked with knives inflicting two cuts but on crying out that he did not belong to Pallapacheri, he was allowed to escape. 

**Pushed from Bus**

Travelling by bus was impossible to the depressed classes. Whenever they desired and attempted to travel by bus they were pushed out of it. Numerous incidents illustrate this. On 21 May 1925, S.Nallappan, teacher in Adi-Dravida Night School, Aliputhur, Chengam post, Tiruvannamalai, North Arcot district on behalf of the Adi-Dravidas, namely Chinnaswami and his wife paid the bus fare

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31 *Dravidan* (20 January 1931), p.5.  
and purchased tickets for getting into the motor bus which was running from Tiruvannamalai to Samalpatti by name Pachayappan Motor Service. They wanted to go to Samalpatti from Chengam.

On knowing these two persons as depressed castes the motor bus agent dragged them down abusing all sorts of vulgar and unbearable objectionable words. They demanded to return the bus fare from the agent but the driver and other caste people also joined and said that they would be kicked if payment was demanded. Above all, they said motor bus was polluted and hence money could not be refunded. This was reported to the Chengam police station and they said that they would make enquiries when the motor bus returns. These poor two Adi-Dravidas waited for the return of the motor bus and when it returned one head constable got the money from the motor people and handed over to the Adi-Dravidas.  

Salem district Pachapatti Municipal Elementary Adi-Dravida School teacher, S. Periyathampi travelled in a car on 21 April 1932 with his family members from Pachapatti to Kadaiyampettai. On the way, the driver came to know the caste of the teacher. He scolded him with filthy words and dragged down the family from the car. Periyathampi questioned this as he paid for his journey only to receive a reply from the driver that “Paraya you need car I never carry Parayas in my car”. These incidents illustrate the untold hardships that the depressed classes faced in their attempt to access public transport.

34 Kudiyarasu (24 April 1932), p. 25.
Torched the Temple Festival Rights

Temple is considered as a sacred public sphere, where the entry of depressed classes and their participation in the festivals were prohibited. Even after temple entry was permitted, innumerable violent attacks occurred in the temple premises, where the depressed classes were ill-treated by the ‘high’ caste people. When they claimed equal rights, the dominant castes vehemently opposed by imposing physical attack. Two incidents can be noted here to indicate the nature of opposition faced by the depressed classes.

In Viranam village near Salem the depressed classes claimed rights to participate in the Mariamman temple festival. This temple had got a car festival followed by a procession in the month of March and this lasted for about a fortnight, the car and the procession taking place on the last three days. In the month of January on the day after pongal (Tamil festival) there was another performance called bulls play going on annually in front of the temple. The trouble was with regard to the right of Parayas in the matter of these festivals. The Parayas also contributed a share (1/8) in the expenses of the temple. Traditionally, the Parayas role in the car festival had been to beat drum and to put a long log of wood to the back wheel and work it as a fulcrum to move the car in starting and whenever it stops on its way. The practice had been for the Parayas to work the fulcrum for one wheel only while the other wheel and its fulcrum were handled by Goundars, the dominant caste. With regard to the bulls play, the bulls to be handled were held by ropes one on each side of the bull’s neck. The Parayas used to hold a rope on one side while the Goundars used to hold the other
side. In lieu of these services whether for the car festival or bull play there was no fixed remuneration but food, rice, drink etc. were given. The Goundars of all the 7 hamlets took part in these festivals. Some Goundars thought that it was not dignified for them to be engaged in working the fulcrum of the car and holding the rope of bulls along with the Parayas. Thus the Goundans tried to prevail upon the Parayas to give up working the fulcrum and holding the bull. As a result quarrel erupted between the Parayas and Goundars in 1923. The animosity became acute at the time of bulls play in 1924.

On the report of the police, Salem Stationary Sub-Magistrate passed an order which prohibited Parayas from performing any role in the festival. During the car festival in March 1924 trouble was again anticipated regarding the claim to work the fulcrum. Both the groups came to an agreement in the presence of the Sub-Magistrate to celebrate the car festival independently on different days, the Paraya will perform after the Goundars did and no objection was raised to the Parayas beating tom-tom and drum while the Goundans performed the festival. But Paraya persons particularly Kuppan, Vyapuri, Koolu, and Selamban who possessed some lands did not agree to give up their rights in the festival and remained aloof.

In January 1925 when the bulls play festival came again. On the day of the festival when the bull of the Goundars was brought Kuppan brought the bull of the Paraya for play. There was rioting in which stones were freely thrown by

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35 G.O. No. 1239, Public (19 December 1925).
36 Ibid.
both parties. The Parayas’ houses were torched.\textsuperscript{37} The Goundars entered into a conspiracy with the Chakkiliars, one of the depressed classes, to cause harm to Paraiyars. On 11 February 1925 during the midnight around 200 Goundars went to the house of Kuppan and his brother. They threatened them that “you fellows petition against us and so on” and stabbed to death Vaiyapuri brother of Kuppan. They set fire to two huts and took away about 17 bulls and cows owned by Kuppan and his brothers. Two days after the body of Kuppan was found hanging in a tree. The victim’s families shifted their dwelling to the adjacent village of Ayodhyapatnam for fear of further injury. Though number of incidents occurred in support of murder, the police investigation and medical evidence concluded it as a suicide.\textsuperscript{38}

Chithanoor, a Village near Devakottai was inhabited by the Pallars, Paraiyars and Nattars. The Pallars of that village worshiped at a temple called Poisollar Iyannar, which deity, the Nattar also worshiped. Enmity was developing the 1930s over a cultural celebration called \textit{Kuthirai Eduppu}. It was the practice to carry clay horses in procession and subsequently placed them at the temple. The Nattars claimed the exclusive right to perform this ceremony, while the Pallars maintained that they had a similar right.\textsuperscript{39} Hostility broke out on this issue and, hence a prohibitory order was issued against the Pallars by the Joint Magistrate of the district. The celebration of temple festival by Nattars passed off without disturbances on 07 August, 1934 and on the same day the

\textsuperscript{37} G.O. No. 1239, Public (19 December 1925).
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} G.O. No. 1110, Public Confidential (07 November 1934).
Pallars represented by Poochi and Vellayan presented a petition to the Joint Magistrate, Devakottai, Ramanathapuram district for celebrating the *Kuthirai Eduppu* on 22nd and 23rd of the same month and prayed police protection. The Circle Inspector was prepared to provide the necessary protection, if the Joint Magistrate permitted the Pallars to celebrate the festival. The Joint Magistrate received his report on 16 August 1934, but before he passed orders, the rioting happened.40

The Nattars on 16 August, 1934 entered the Pallar street and broke the two mud horses kept there by Pallar for celebrating the *Kuthirai Eduppu*. They threatened an Adi-Dravidar School woman teacher. Then the mob moved to another Pallar street where there was a mud horse and broke it also. When the Pallars opposed the violent activities of Nattars riot broke out. When the Nattars began to attack the Pallars, Poochi and others went to help their fellowmen. In the course of the fight, Poochi, aged 50, was killed.41

**Cultural Assertion and Counter Aggression**

The educated depressed classes who migrated to Ceylon and other foreign countries in search of modern occupation returned to their homeland with decent dress. They also instigated their fellowmen and women folk to wear such dresses particularly shirts and jackets respectively. Irged by this new form of civilization the dominant castes first threatened them not to wear shirts and jackets and then

40 G.O. No. 1110, Public Confidential (07 November 1934).
41 *The Hindu* (18 August, 1934).
attacked them. Numerous violent attacks broke out in Devakottai, Ramanathapuram district in the beginning of the 1930s.

Eluvankottai is a village situated a few miles away from Devakottai. There during mud horse festival, Kallars ordered that while the depressed classes ladies making kulavai\textsuperscript{42} sound before the deity they should be present with bared breast without wearing any dress in the upper part of the body. As it was refused by the women and their men boycotted the festival. But they were compelled to pull the car. While pulling the car they were attacked by the Kallars for the cause of wearing shirts. Thus the depressed classes again boycotted the festival. To punish those who refused to obey their order heavy fines were imposed on them. The depressed classes complained it at the police station. The Police warned the Kallars. Even then, the Kallars imposed a sum of Rs 60 fine on depressed classes for making complaints on them. During Kandadevi village temple festival also the Kallars again ordered the depressed classes men and women to remove their upper cloth.

The Police sub-inspector was also present at the festival. But his presence did not benefit the depressed classes. He also advised depressed classes to obey the orders of Kallars to maintain peace and order. A few people have accepted it but some depressed classes opposed it. Thus the infuriated Kallars burnt the depressed classes’ huts and destroyed the grain pots and stolen 75 goats, 35 hens

\textsuperscript{42} In Tamil Nadu generally during celebrative rituals the women folk making a rhythmic sound by inserting and shaking a finger under the tongue called as Kulavai.
and the thali of two depressed classes’ women.\textsuperscript{43} At the Kandadevi festival struggle was again started owing to certain depressed classes people appearing in jackets and shirts with the support of one section of dominant castes. By blaming the depressed classes the dominant caste on 4\textsuperscript{th} July 1932 proceeded to attack the depressed classes’ quarters.\textsuperscript{44}

Between 30 January 1932 and 08 June 1932 nine criminal cases connected with the trouble were registered in the station. Of the nine cases, five were treated as false. In addition there were 12 assaults between 15 May 1932 and 26 June 1932, which were recorded in the general diary.\textsuperscript{45} Dravidan and Kudiyarasu news papers describes the series of events occurred in Devakottai region that “Devakottai depressed class people had been suffering for 2 1/2 years by the atrocities of Kallars. The Kallars had stolen the thali of two Adi-Dravida ladies and from the Adi-Dravida man Rs 15 and a watch stolen by the kallars. In Kallangudi near Devakottai a man belonging to the Kallar community raped a Devendrakula Vellala lady.”\textsuperscript{46} The same situation was prevailed in other districts also.

In Erumanur village near Viruthachalam Kesavan, a depressed classes converted Christian, had been working as a school teacher for 15 years, and his family members were beaten by the Udaiyars when they appeared in public place with shirt and jacket. Kesavan brought the matter to the notice of police but they

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Dravidan (16 December 1930), p.2.
\item \textsuperscript{44} G.O. No. 611, Public (08 November 1932).
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Kudiyarasu (21 May 1932), p.7.
\end{itemize}
did not take action against Udaiyars telling that there was no witness. After that the furious Udaiyars induced their depressed classes’ servant to attack Kesavan. It was complained to the Magistrate court. The Magistrate imposed Rs 15/- fine on the Adi-Dravida servant. After this incident he was transferred to some other area and another depressed class teacher appointed his wife Danapakkiam used to wear blouse. Whenever she went to fetch water, Udaiyar caste youngsters belonged to that village together teased her that “ravikkaikara para christhaval” (Paraya Christian lady with a blouse). While Danapakkiam was eight months pregnant, on her way to fetch water, she was attacked by dominant castes’ youth. The women who accompanied her admitted Danapakkiam to the hospital.  

In Periakulam taluk, Kulapuram village near Bodinayakanur, caste-Hindus prohibited the depressed classes from wearing shirts and upper cloth. In Thathaiyankarpatti village, Rasipuram taluk Salem, two depressed classes teachers were beaten for wearing clean dress.

**Suppression against Suffixing**

Violence imposed on depressed classes while they used the same suffix of dominant caste people’s name such as ‘Pillai’ and ‘Nayudu’. Pillai was a caste title suffixed with the name of both depressed classes and dominant castes. Duraisamy Pillai and Ganapathi Pillai were Adi-Dravidas belonged to Moolakulam, Chennai. They, along with their wives, relatives and a cook Raju

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48 *Dravidan* (23 December 1930, p.7.  
48 *Dravidan*, 02 March 1932, p.6.  
Mudaliar, a dominant caste person, went to a marriage function of their relative Kuppusamy Pillai of Mathuranthakam.

On their way back to their village the cook Rajumudaliar went to liquor shop. There he was beaten severely by the dominant caste Veda Reddi and Periya Angu for cooking at the Adi-Dravida marriage. While the accompanied Adi-Dravidas went to file a complaint they were blocked by more than 100 dominant caste people and they tied them together in a tree and beaten with sandals asking about the title Pillai suffixed with their names mentioned in the marriage invitation that “are you entitled to have Pillai title?”. The tied Adi-Dravidas were not released for about two days. They also seized the thali of Adi-Dravida ladies. After two days they were compelled to sign in two papers and then released.  

**Violence in Diaspora**

The people who migrated to other states and abroad were accompanied by their caste identity and its function. The dominant castes tried to enforce caste oppression wherever they settled. During colonial period both the dominant castes and the depressed classes migrated to Bombay, where the former attempted to enforce their domination on the depressed classes. The Adi-Dravidas of Tharavi in Bombay convened a meeting on 29th May 1937. With a view to collapse it one Esaki Thevar, a dominant caste man, beaten the Adi-Dravida participants with sandal and rebuked them with intolerable filthy words.

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While it was complained to the leader of the Thevar caste, around 60 Thevars again threatened the Adi-Dravidas through sending a letter in which they used all filthy words against them. They also threatened that they will burn down to ashes alive in Bombay and their relatives in their native villages. They rebuked the Adi-Dravidas that although they were only 60 members, it’s enough to kill thousands of Adi-Dravidas in Tharavi.\footnote{Kudiyarasu (04 July 1937), p.14.}

**Attack against Supporters**

People who supported the cause of the depressed classes were also subjected to violent attacks by the dominated castes even though they belonged to higher castes. Kallathur was a village in Tiruchirappalli district where Swami Veeraragavan, who devoted his life to help the depressed classes was threatened, and his house was stoned, his sister-in-law was assaulted and some Adi-Dravidas were beaten. Sinna Rengasamy Chettiyar who had always been working in Vettakakaranpudur and surrounding villages in the Pollachi taluk, Coimbatore district for the cause of labourers was assaulted for protesting against the high-handed act of dominant caste.\footnote{G.O. No. 402, Law General (05 February 1923).}

Police remained inactive against the crimes perpetrated by the dominant castes, and instead, they fabricated cases against the victims. The following incident proves that. Mr.Swaminathan, General secretary of Indian Adi-Dravida Public Workers Society complained against the policeman at Viruthachalam that “On 22.6.1925 while I had been at Viruthachalam police station an Adi-Dravida,
named Raman, residing at Pinjanoor Cheri, Viruthachalam taluk came and prostrated before me, saying that his house has been destroyed by some Adi-
Dravidas themselves at the instigation of two caste men Ponnuswamy Uddiyar and Poomalai Uddiyar by name and he told me that he submitted a petition to the authorities concerned on this matter. A Head Constable who was in charge of the station promised to enquire the case in my presence and redress the grievances of the poor petitioner. No sooner had I gone out, then those two caste men came to the police station and instigated the police to terrorize the petitioner and his relatives. A constable was sent out by the same head constable and the poor petitioners were brought to the station at about 9 p.m. They (3 men and 2 women) were beaten and thrown into the police custody.”

Though there were numerous such incidents during the study period few examples have been quoted elaborately.

Defence Action

Defending themselves from the atrocities of dominant castes, depressed classes deserted their villages and took shelter in forests and their fellow peoples’ home in the nearby villages to save their lives. They sent telegrams to government authorities, particularly to the police and sought their protection. Sometimes the depressed classes’ leaders informed the government prior to the outbreak of violent attacks to safeguard their people. When R. Srinivasan introduced the bill for accessing public resources and spaces in the Legislative Council, R. Veerian stated that “Unless the government come forward and send a

batch of police constables to see that the depressed take water from the public wells, I do not think they will be bold enough to have free access to the public wells’.\textsuperscript{54} Even though this demand was rejected, the depressed classes asserted their rights. As a result violence broke out. During violence, they lost their belongings. They were physically and psychologically wounded and in some cases they lost their lives too. Indeed, depressed classes had no other way than depending upon the government for their protection. In a very few communal conflicts the depressed classes began to attack caste-Hindus either for self defence or for retaliation. A serious riot broke out between the Adi-Dravidas and the Mudaliars of Angambakkam village in Conjeevaram regarding the cultivation of lands on 10\textsuperscript{th} September 1928. The relationships were strained and culminated in active hostilities when the Adi-Dravidas attempted to cultivate grazing ground. The other villagers resented and dispensed with the services of the Adi-Dravidas and tried to engage the services of outsiders. Some Mudaliars entered the Cheri of the Adi-Dravidas and damaged roofs of houses; broke utensils etc and caused considerable loss to the Cheri people. The man who suffered most was Kuppan ex-service man, his house was ransacked and his table, chair and other furniture damaged. He took shelter in a room and when the window of that room was damaged by the assailants he opened fire in self-defence. In which two killed on the spot. The rest of the injured two died later on. He was found guilty and given a life sentence.\textsuperscript{55}  

\textsuperscript{54}MLCD (22 August 1924), p. 827.  
\textsuperscript{55}HFM, Vol. 106, p.120.
In Karamanikuppam village in south Arcot district a communal dispute broke out when caste Hindus objected to Adi-Dravidas to take the procession during Masi Magam festival through the main street passing the Siva temple and caste Hindu quarters. Sub magistrate also prevented them to use that road. At once Adi-Dravidas silently carried their goddess to a place near the quarter of the caste Hindus; left the deity on the spot and assembling a short distance from the place where the deity was left; began to throw stones at the caste-Hindus and the police came to prevent the procession.\textsuperscript{56} Since the British India government was not ready to safeguard the depressed classes those who were in trouble people took the defense action against their oppressors. With this, the following chapter attempts to explain the government response towards the depressed classes’ movement.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{HFM}, Vol.106, pp.718-719.