INTRODUCTION: THE SCOPE, METHODOLOGY AND OVERVIEW.
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The Scope of the Study.

The scope of this study is to make an analysis of the emergence and growth of Indian labour movement. In attempting such an analysis one becomes increasingly aware of the fact that many of the concepts and theories commonly used in analysing the problems of labour in India lose their significance purely from the point of view of their adequacy to explain the caste factor in labour movement. Available evidence may be used to formulate the hypothesis that in India's labour unionism Class Consciousness has become an oblivious factor in the face of another important factor, the ubiquitous Caste Consciousness. The hypothesis signifies that India's caste system engenders cleaves and dissensions in the ranks of labour, and prevents class solidification. Precisely, it states that India's caste system tends to act as an overt-bar to the development of labour on class lines. Though the theory so formulated, applies equally to all labour throughout India, the present work is confined to a micro level indepth study of the historical data pertaining to Madras labour movement during the first half of the present century. The study examines the genesis and growth of the Madras labour in all its manifestations: its orientations and objectives; its bases of support as well as the difficulties it had to contend with. It tries to trace the conflicting phenomena of caste consciousness and class consciousness to the cumulative effects of economic, social, political and religious developments that took place during the aforesaid period.
In its final analysis the work endeavours to comprehend possible generalisations for all India.  

Class-Conscious Labour.

In the struggle for higher wages and better conditions of work, the labour is led to see the important part it plays in the mechanism of production, and to resent more bitterly the opposition to its demands on the part of the capitalists. With the intensification of the struggle, the feeling of resentment develops into a desire for emancipation from the conditions which made oppression possible; in other words,

1/ Prof. Audrey Wipper writes: "The caste-class distinction provides several useful dimensions for distinguishing between... labour movements. In a caste system, the social strata consist of closed social groups arranged in a fixed order of superiority and inferiority. There is no individual movement, either upward or downward, not even through intermarriage, for the castes are endogamous. This leads to a non-accessible elite with membership based purely on ascribed characteristics. Because the strata are closed, there is an absence of cross-cutting loyalties, and hence conflict tends to be inter-strata rather than intra-strata".

"In contrast, in a class system, although the strata are also hierarchically arranged, the classes are far less rigidly marked off from each other. There is both upward and downward mobility. As all individuals are in principle equal before the law, there are no legal restrictions on movement from one stratum to another. Unlike castes, social classes are not closed social groups, but aggregates of persons with similar amounts of wealth and property and similar sources of income. Theoretically, the elites are accessible, as position is based on achievement. Because the strata are open, they are cross-cutting loyalties, and cleavage is not centred solely on inter-strata divisions".

it grows into complete class consciousness which consists not merely in their recognition of the struggle of classes but also in their determination to abolish the class character of the society. At the same time the struggle necessarily leads the labour to effect among its members a higher degree of solidarity. However, the development of unions on class lines is not simple and clear but becomes complicated and blurred when the actualities are faced.

The dynamics of class antagonism and the reasons for their aggravation are analysed by Marx in terms of the interaction of the relations of production and property. The term class, in Marxian usage, stands for 'those broad aggregates of people which can be classified together by an objective criterion - because they stand in a similar relationship to the means of production - and more especially the groupings of exploiters and exploited which, for purely economic reasons, are found in all human societies beyond the primitive communal and, until the triumph of proletarian revolution.\(^1\) A class in Marxist terms thus consists of a


R.LF DAHRENDORF says, "Initially the word 'Class' was used - for example, by Ferguson and Miller in the eighteenth century - simply to distinguish social strata, as we should say today, by their rank or wealth. In this sense the word 'class' can be found in all European languages in the late eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century the concept of class gradually took on a more definite colouring. Adam Smith had already spoken of the 'poor' or 'labouring class'. In the works of Ricardo and Ure, Saint Simon and Fourier, and of course in those of Engels and Marx the 'class of capitalists' makes its appearance beside the 'labouring class', the 'rich' beside the 'poor class', the 'bourgeoisie' beside the 'proletariat' (which has accompanied) the concept of class from its Roman origins)" -(R.LF D JR END ORF- Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1959) p.4)
large group of individuals who have a common interest arising from the fact that they do or do not own productive property or capital.

However, the term 'class consciousness' results from the introduction of a subjective element into the concept of class. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the term 'Class Consciousness' more precisely thus: 'aggressively alienated class identification'. Class consciousness in labour can be said to begin the moment the members of the working class become aware of their class membership, even before being aware of the immediate interests of the class to which they belong. Within the Marxist tradition, class consciousness has generally been defined, in relation to the working class, in terms of a specific commitment to the revolutionary abolition of the capitalist system: a worker who is not thus committed is not, in this sense, class conscious. In the Marxist perspective, the worker is falsely conscious when he fails to perceive that his interests require the abolition of capitalism; but its abolition is not only the condition of the liberation of his class, but of society as a whole. False consciousness, in this sense, is also the failure to realize the universal task which the labour is called upon to perform.

An authentic declaration on Class Consciousness is found in the Communist Manifesto authored by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. It is stated therein: "the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes.

2/ RALPH MILIBAND - "Barnave: a case of bourgeois class consciousness", in ISTVAN MESZAROS, (Ed) - op.cit., p.22
3/ ibid. p.23
Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations (Trades' Unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order 
to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations 
in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional 
revolts. Here and there the contest breaks out into riots. 
Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. 
The real fruit of their battle lies, not in the immediate 
result, but in the everexpanding union of the workers. The 
union is helped on by the improved means of communication 
that are created by modern industry and that place the 
workers of different localities in contact with one another. 
It was this contact that was needed to centralise the 
numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into 
one national struggle between classes. But every class 
struggle is a political struggle.1 However the reformist 
unionism rules out political and revolutionary outlooks in 
the class struggle; preserves the system of employment of 
man by his fellow men; and considers labour and capital not 
as irrevocably opposed to each other, but as two factors of 
society completing each other.

Caste Conscious Labour.

In any quest for information on the Indian theory 
of labour unions, one has to turn to the policy statements 
and manifestoes of the Indian political parties. Most of 
the Labour Unions in India without exception, are mere 
appendages and proteges of these political parties. India's 
labour movement differs from the British labour movement in 
that it has never at any time been a purely economic, purely 
corporate movement. The way it differs from the Western 
reformist unionism has to be studied in depth to understand

1/ MARX, Karl and ENGELS, Frederick - Manifesto of the Communist 
(Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1975 (Reprint), pp.55-6. [party,
India's labour movement in comparison with the movements in other countries. Indian labour movement originated during the colonial era under the sponsorship of the religious nationalists and extremists, who were already engaged in mobilising the masses to fight the British for the attainment of Swaraj. And the colonial administration had adopted a hostile attitude towards Indian labour movement, in view of some assumptions, the adequacy of which needs examination. The originators of the idea of labour movement were rapidly crystallizing nationalistic feelings de novo into a more sophisticated form. Now, in this imperial process, the labour movement became weak and splintered itself into rival factions, gave rise to caste conflicts, and reinforced cleavages of a highly explosive nature, may be considered. The caste system fostered jealousies; fomented factions; and prevented the very union of labour. It is also possible to study the extent to which it kept the labour inert, meek, stunted and poverty stricken, and had the imperialists and capitalists pursued their policy of divide et impera, utilising occupational divisions in their industry on caste lines. What Marx said of Indian communities in the 19th century still seems to be true. He stated: "We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self developing social state into never changing natural destiny and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Hanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow."

It is a fact that the bite of poverty and the reality of oppression are potent forces in keeping alive the revolutionary zeal in the masses. But these factors have no relevance in India's religious and caste ridden society because ultimately, for one reason or other, caste and communal considerations which crop up in labour, shatter the crystallizing class consciousness. It is a common knowledge in India that in a factory or plantation where the employer and a section of the labourers happen to belong to the same caste the latter could be seen developing kinship towards the former and joining hands with him in digging up the labour interests fathoms deep.

Methodology: The Choice of the period, Geographic Area of Study, and archival and other materials.

The period of study covers the first half of the present century (1901-50) with particular reference to the dependent economy of India. The work endeavours to make an indepth study of the undercurrent phenomena of ideological conflicts, stirred up dissensions, and warring factions which pulled the labour in different directions, ultimately subordinating pure trade union interests. The historical data are utilised for the purpose of investigation and interpretation. The period ends just before the commencement of the Constitution of India in 1950. This is a study of the condition in British India and prior to the Republic of India.

Madras city is chosen for studying the aforesaid problem as divergent forces namely, the Theosophists, Justicites, Hindu Revivalists and Communists crossed their swords in the City of Madras. Thiru Vi.Ka., V.O.C., M.Singaravelu, V.Chakkarai Chetty, C.Basudev, Dr.P.Varadarajulu and P.Jeevanandam were the leading lights of industrial labour in Madras. Their contributions to the emergence and growth of the labour movement in Madras is also examined.
The study examines how and why different caste conferences were organised with much fanfare, and resolutions stressing the importance of caste unity and solidarity were passed day in and day out. The study also examines how the limited democracy and franchise provided by the dyarchy of 1919 introduced caste element in the elections. It inquires whether any single caste made an adequate supply of labour. It poses the question whether outside the industry, in all his social activities say, from marriage to funeral ceremony the industrial labour was cribbed by the constraints of his caste. The study examines whether the industrial labour in Madras, just as in other parts of India, ever lived as one class or only as heterogenous caste groups.

Piles of Government Orders, minutes and proceedings of various government departments, correspondence between the Government of India and the Secretary of State for India in London, and the Government of Madras Presidency; confidential Native Newspaper Reports; and Fortnightly Confidential Reports from Madras Government to Government of India preserved in the Tamil Nadu Archives constitute original source materials for the present study.

The personal papers of the leaders of socio-economic and labour movements are also available, and are used. Those who are still alive to bear witness to these events are interviewed to record primary sources of information. The records and documents were consulted to ascertain facts and figures. They reveal the tremendous influence that men and events wielded in a particular period of time, on the lives of people and the country. Research papers and articles published in economic and related journals, such as Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, The Economic Journal, Economic Development and Cultural Change (Chicago-Quarterly), Edinburgh
Review (London), The Indian Textile Journal (Bombay), the Indian Labour Journal, Indian Economic Journal, Indian Journal of Economics, Madras Economic Journal, Mysore Economic Journal, The Indian Annual Register, Proceedings of the Annual Sessions of the I.L.O. Conferences, Proceedings and debates of Indian Parliament, India Legislative Assembly and Madras Legislative Assembly and Council, Documents of the histories of the Congress, Justice, Communist and other parties of India, Evidences (oral and written), and Reports of Royal Commission on Labour in India, reports of the Constituent Assembly, several other committee reports and an exhaustive list of books on the subject constitute the other source material for study.

The aforesaid materials provide a basis for understanding, generalising, analysing and conceptualising causal explanations in this study. Some of the trade union issues are critically analysed and interpreted. The emergence and growth of labour movements from their sporadic uprisings are exhaustively narrated. Attention is given to a sharp focus on the never ending caste vs. class conflict. For this purpose private papers of many who have built the Madras labour movement have been located. As regards persons like Thiru Vi.Ka., Periyar E.V.R., P.Jeevanandam, efforts were made to meet those who have closely worked with them. Thus it was possible to collect their speeches, (tape recorded) and other relevant information which are not otherwise available anywhere. The scholar himself has known personally many who have toiled in the cause of working class in the first half of the century, 1901-1950. Thus, primary materials so obtained were interpreted along with other materials.
An attempt is made to relate them to the economics of poverty. In short, the study seeks to verify the hypothesis that class-consciousness went into oblivion because of caste-consciousness which is ubiquitous in Indian society.

Overview of Caste, Class and Economic Transformation of Labour.

No attempt is made to discuss the origin of caste in this work. But its significance as the foundation of the Indian social fabric cannot be ignored. Every Hindu necessarily belongs to the caste of his parents, and in that caste he inevitably remains. No accumulation of wealth and no exercise of talents can alter his caste status. W.H. Morris-Jones rightly observes: "Caste or sub-caste or community is the core of traditional politics. To it belongs a complete social ethos. It embraces all and is all embracing. Every man is born into a particular communal or caste group and with it inherits a place and a station in society from which his whole behaviour and outlook may be said, in idea at least, to be derived."\(^1\) Caste system with its endogamous caste and its exogamous gotras is a perfect method of preserving what is called in genetics the 'pure line'. The endogamy prevents external hybridization while the internal exogamy prevents the possibility of a fresh pure line arising within the old one by the isolation of any character not common to the whole line. With the preservation of the pure line the perpetuation of all characters common to it necessarily follows.\(^2\)


castes, which make up the population of India, do not assert, that their particular caste is something better than or superior to, the caste of another, but that it is different from that of another, and they would object to eat or inter-marry with the members of a caste notoriously superior just as much as with a caste notoriously inferior, or even with particular sub-divisions of their own caste, separated from them by some imperceptible shade of difference. 1/

The social organisation of the Hindus, in its ideal condition, is based on an assumption of the Law of Karma and Transmigration. According to Hindu belief every event in time, on physical or superphysical planes, is controlled by this law: birth, death, happiness, misery and all inequalities in life are subject to this law. That a man is born in a particular caste, family, of particular parents, at a particular time or place and under particular circumstances is not a mere accident or chance but a preordained one. Accordingly birth in a lower or in a higher caste is the effect of the previous Karma of the individual. 2/

The class phenomenon to which references are given in this study, are different from the distinctions drawn by the Hindu Law givers and their concepts of social structure by which they sought to favour the growth of one community at the expense of another would be shocking to one's self-respect and revolting to every principle of modern liberty.

1/ Prof. Richard D. Lambert writes: "Even the most casual observer cannot miss the sense of discreteness which pervades India's social structure: there is an almost infinite assortment of unique, historically stable fragments, each with a tradition, self-awareness and to a varying extent, internal system. These fragments are separated by social distances running from simple prohibition of intermarriage to the compulsory maintenance of the physical distance. (LAMBERT, Richard D - "Some Consequences of Segmentation in India". Economic Development and Cultural Change (Quarterly), (University of Chicago), Vol.XII, July 1964, pp.416-424.

2/Opinions on the Untouchability Abolition Bill -(Introduced by Rao Bahadur M.C.Rajah) - Paper No.IX - Govt. of India - Legislative Assembly Department (for use of Members only) -1934 p.486.
and justice. The overweening pride of birth and caste and the age-long tendency to dominate over the weaker communities have brought about a kind of mentality in the superior castes which is highly prejudicial to democratic ideals and scarcely conducive to national welfare. The caste prejudices and communal antipathies continue to sway the whole fabric of Hindu society. The traditional occupations imposed by the caste system have not been forsaken even today in favour of the more honourable or more lucrative professions. ¹/ Sherring rightly observes: "A Hindu does not live for himself, but for his caste. He will look upon men and women in the utmost distress with perfect callousness when he knows that they do not belong to his caste.... This extraordinary and anomalous institution sits as an incubus on the Hindu race."

¹/ Professor J.H. HUTTON observes: "the caste system does provide for the various functions necessary to social life, functions ranging from education and scavenging, from govern- ment to domestic service of the most menial kind; and it makes this provision under the sanction of a religious dogma, the belief in kama, which renders the superficially inequitable distribution of functions acceptable as being part of the divine order of the universe and a transient episode in the prolonged existence of the individual soul, which by acquiring merit in one existence may rise in the scale in the next, or which may be suffering from a degradation in caste merely by reason of its transgression in previous life". (HUTTON, J.H.—Caste in India: its Nature, Function and Origins, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1946), p.106
Their social blood has been poisoned, and their social life has been strangled, by the deadly sting and foul embraces of this serpent. It is impossible that there should be any true and widespread public opinion, or any strong united action, among Hindus until this monstrous evil has been destroyed.¹

The crudest forms of Hindu fetishism degrade human civilization and bring about the monstrous fantasies of the Hindus. They worship shapes and figures of strange invention; simple stones of varied shapes; rivers, groves and pools; numberless imps and goblins infesting mountain, forest and stream; imaginary beings of immense power supposed to possess the highest attributes both of good and evil; demons and devils; incarnations of wickedness; sacred cities, sacred books and other sacred objects.² Every caste pays regular


² Larry Collins and Dominque Lapierre in their controversial work, Freedom at Midnight observe: "The pantheon of the Hindus contained over three million deities, a God for every mythic manifestation... God was held manifest in banyan trees, in India's 136 million monkeys, in the heroes of her mythological epics, in her 20 million sacred cows; worshipped in her snakes, particularly Cobras, who each year killed 20,000 of the humans who venerated them", (Vikas Publishing House (Pvt) Ltd., New Delhi, 1976) pp. 249-50
homage to the tools, instruments, or other objects peculiar to the 'functions' out of which it sprang. Hindu fanaticism leads its devotees to perform the most amazing self-tortures, chiefly in South India, and mainly in connection with the worship of Kali in her various forms, in the Mariamman temples. The chief self-tortures indulged in at the Mariamman festivals in South India are the digging of the great Juggernaut, the car of the Goddess, by ascetics pulling it with ropes attached to hooks piercing the muscles of their backs. Some devotees walk miles to a shrine with many pounds of lemons pinned or hooked into the muscles of their bodies. Another common spectacle is that of a man with skewers piercing his cheeks from side to side, undertaken as a vow of silence to paralyse the tongue. The superstitions form a considerable part of their daily interests. They believe in omens good and bad, and look for them as encouragements or warnings on a variety of occasions, such as in journeying from one place to another, or when a marriage is under consideration.

Every one must observe the ceremonies customary amongst his caste fellows at marriages, on the occurrence of a birth or death in his family, and on similar occasions. When a child is born, a Brahmin is summoned, who is sufficiently versed in astrological science. The time of the birth is told to the minute and the Brahmin then draws up the horoscope of the child, going into all the details of its history. This horoscope is carefully kept and is consulted on occasions of importance. When the child is a few days old a name is given, which is generally one of the many names belonging to the gods of the Hindu pantheon. The ceremony of naming is a

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simple one, but it may not be neglected. Manu introduces varna distinctions even in the ceremony of naming the child, which naturally emphasises the low position of the Sudra. According to him a Brahmin’s name should denote something auspicious, a Kshatriya’s name power, a Vaisyā’s name wealth and a Sudra’s name something contemptible. As a corollary to this he states that the titles of the members of the four varnas should respectively imply happiness, protection, prosperity and services.

While Europe was being industrially modernised, India remained in the old-world condition. She was too far from Europe to feel the quickening impulse of inventive progress which, transformed that continent; and centuries of slow evolution had given the social structure of the Hindus a rigidity which made it unfit for the ready reception of a sudden impulse. The caste system had long restricted industrial occupations to the lower castes. The higher classes looked down upon such occupation. According to Manu Dharma Sastra, such respectable people as surgeons, goldsmiths, carpenters, vocalists, tailors, blacksmiths, and dyers are classed in regard to the purity of food prepared by them, with perjurers, thieves and adulteresses. In a community where industries were held in such low estimation, it is not to be expected that their improvement would engage the


2/ MANU: II-31 and III-12, cited in SHARMA, Ram Sharan - Sudras in Ancient India, (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1980) p.219

3/ MANU: IV, 84, 210-16.
attention of the higher castes which could effect it. And the suddenness of the Industrial Revolution in the West did not give the Hindus any time to adapt themselves to the new order of things. English manufactures poured in, and swept the indigenous industries before them. The day of manual skill, in which the Hindu caste artisans excelled, was over. Hand-made manufactures could no longer compete with machine-made manufactures. Hindu artisans had neither the time nor the education to assimilate the mechanical skill of modern Europe. It is not to be expected that illiterate weavers, illiterate dyers or illiterate miners would apply the scientific methods of modern industries to their occupations. Many flourishing centres of indigenous industry dwindled into obscure villages. The displaced artisans had been mostly thrown upon agriculture for subsistence.

The Adi-Dravidas such as Pariars, Pallar, Cherumars were till 1843, hereditary slaves sold with the land or mortgaged. They were the absolute property of their masters and could be employed on any work the masters pleased, the only restriction being that a husband and wife could not be sold separately. ¹ In Tanjore District the 'pannials' mostly Adi-Dravidas were the slaves of the mirasdars, on whom they depended solely for livelihood. The British Government abolished the agricultural slavery in 1844 and declared the labourers free to carry their labour where they pleased or to emigrate, without being subjected to any harassing restrictions. ² Thereupon the Adi-Dravida labourers freely

¹ RAGHAVAJITANGAR, S. Srinivasa - Memorandum on the Progress of The Madras Presidency: During the last forty years of British Administration. (The Superintendent, Government Press, Madras, 1893), p.143
emigrated as 'indentured labourers' to Burma, Straits Settlements, Ceylon, South Africa, Mauritius, and the West Indies where an insistent demand for cheap labour existed. A large number of Adi-Dravidas migrated to the towns; numbers among them had enlisted as sepoys; several had found employment in factories, plantations, railways and also in the domestic establishments of Europeans as cooks, nurses, horsekeepers, gardeners, Chaprassies. As will be seen later, they formed the bulk of the City's unskilled labourers. Christian missionary agencies had also done this class invaluable service by establishing schools and by teaching them to live, whenever their circumstances would permit of it, in a more respectable manner than they had been accustomed to do for ages, and by interceding for their protection and advocating their cause whenever there was any real fancied danger of their being oppressed. And naturally there began an extensive conversion to Christianity and Islam of these lower castes in many of the southern districts of the Madras Presidency.¹/


This kind of mass conversions due to social oppression, of Adi-Dravidas to Christianity and Islam continues to take place even today. Recently there was a mass conversion of thousands of Adi-Dravidas to Islam in three districts of Tamil Nadu. In April 1981, there was a sudden mass conversion of Adi-Dravidas by families to Islam, in Meenakshipuram, a village in the Tinnevelly District of Tamil Nadu. (See, "A Whole Village goes Islamic", The Indian Express, Madras, dated 12 April 1981) p.1.