Chapter III
Social Change vis-à-vis Pallars in Tirunelveli

A peep into history of south Tamil Nadu has revealed that violence has featured markedly in the social life of the people of this region at every stage of their material progress. In this section the incidents of social violence and their fallout over a period of 150 years since 1800 in south Tamilnadu is surveyed. How violence has been a precursor to social change in the region is shown.

The Christian missionaries set the trend in favour of social protest in south Tamilnadu. The early missionaries regarded caste feeling and caste exclusiveness as serious obstacles for the growth and spread of Christianity. Therefore, as the agents of social change, they endeavoured to eradicate certain obnoxious social customs practiced in the name of caste. They targeted the depressed class people for the evangelization movement. In public congregations and private conversations, they educated the low caste people to fight caste exclusiveness. Among the castes that responded to missionaries' attempt to organise a protest movement,

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1 See G.A. Oddie, Social Protest in India (New Delhi, 1979).
the Nadars were prominent. The Nadars provided the first large movement to Christianity in south Tamilnadu.2

For sometime social ostracism proved to be an obstacle to conversion. However, as the converts multiplied they found themselves numerically sufficient to form colonies of their own. The emergence of villages like Mudalur (First Town) Megnanapuram (Village of Wisdom) Anandapuram (Village of Great Joy) Suvisesapuram (Village of the Gospel), Prakasapuram (Village of light) is illustrative of this phenomenon in Tirunelveli district.3 The conversion phenomenon infuriated the upper caste Hindus who embarked on an offensive against the converts. This sparked off clashes in Sawyerpuram and Nazareth which were exclusive Christian settlements. A serious disturbance broke out in 1829 at Nallur, near Nazareth, where St. Schaffter had taken up residence, leading to the destruction of temples and devil pyramids nearby.4 About 100 upper caste men were arrested and kept in judicial custody on the orders of an European Magistrate of the District

2. J Waskom Pickett, Christian Mass Movements in India (Lucknow, 1933).


The arrests and the subsequent court trails prompted the Court of Directors to intervene. Orders were issued to end persecution and provide protection to the converts. The court of Directors' prompt action served as the chief impulse for the spread of Christianity.

In the beginning the conversion brought in its wake loss of work, destruction of property, withdrawal of credit and the like to the converts. But as the Christian movement spread and old social fabric got ruptured, the converts began to feel secure both socially and economically. The Nadars, in particular, who were confined to drawing the juice of the toddy palm, fermenting and selling it started entering into school teaching and became pioneers in the introduction of new occupations.

Meanwhile, the sustained campaigns carried on by the English missionaries against caste exclusiveness resulted in a judicial pronouncement of far reaching consequence. In 1958, the Sadr Adalat court proclaimed that all public roads are open to all, for


6 Waskom Picket, Christian Mass Movements in India, P. 129.
passing to and fro, whether dead or alive.7 In the light of this judicial verdict, an earlier order of a collector issued in tune with the prevailing custom then, in 1853, required to be rescinded. The death of a Pellar (Devandarkula Vellalar) near Nellaiappar temple offered an opportunity for appropriate administrative action in the matter. The high caste Vellalars always opposed the low caste people’s movement through town streets and hence their funeral processions had to pass through paddy fields to reach the crematorium. Now, in the context of court’s ruling, the upper caste people entertained apprehension and so they closed their shops and gathered in the streets to prevent the dead body of the outcaste from being carried through town streets. The news reached the Collector who sent and ‘armed body of sepoys’ to clear the obstruction. The sepoys resorted to firing in which ten people were killed and many more wounded. But custom changed overnight to accommodate the demand for freer access to town streets.8

A series of famines that struck Tamilnadu in the last quarter of 19th century facilitated conversions. Earlier the relief operations used to be undertaken by the state in times of famines and pestilence. But in the latter half of the 19th century the colonial

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7 Quoted in David Ludden, *The Peasant History in South India* (New Delhi, 1993), p.188.
8 Ibid., pp.189-191.
state adopted laissez faire policy even in famine relief operations. In north India, Arya Samaj provided aid to those affected by famines and thereby preempted any movement for large scale conversion. In the south, such relief measures were adopted only by the Christian missionaries and hence mass conversion to Christianity became possible during this period in Tamilnadu. It has been calculated that during the period from 1871 to 1901, the growth rate of Christian population in the Madras Presidency was over four times greater than that of population as a whole. The total population increased by 22.2 per cent while number of Christians rose by 90.6 per cent.9 There is every reason, thus to believe, that a large scale conversion should have taken place among the depressed classes of south Tamilnadu during this period. However, the most striking phenomenon of this period was the caste clashes between Maravars and Hindu Nadars.

The Maravars, as cultivating tenants and sharecroppers, lost heavily during this period of famines. In contrast, the Hindu Nadars, taking advantage of the changing social scenario, had taken to trade and thrived during these days of scarcity. The black soil which was considered useless till the mid 19th century was found

suitable for cotton cultivation and few Nadar families that possessed black soil land took to cotton cultivation. The short lived cotton boom in Tirunelveli (1861-1865) made these Nadar families prosperous. The economic prosperity accrued to Hindu Nadars prompted them to clamour for an elevated social ranking. The Nadars' assertion that centred around temple entry programme posed a threat to the then existing social customs. The Maravar gentry, under whose custody the temples remained, played the role of guardian of status quo and resisted the move of the Hindu Nadars. As Nadars pressed their right to enter temples in Kamudhi, Kalugumalai and Sivakasi, caste riots broke out in these places in 1885, 1895 and 1899 respectively. Though the Nadars lost their case in courts, the passing of the Temple Entry Indemnity Act of 1938 had foregrounding in these riots.

The next stage of social upheaval was set by the outbreak of Great Depression in 1929. The socio-economic conditions created by the Depression emboldened the deprived sections of the society to defy the time honoured social customs. The Hindu Nadars staged a banner of revolt in Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram districts

against their non-nadar oppressors. To cite an instance, in the village of Cintamani, Sankarankoil taluk of Tirunelveli district, the Hindu Nadars rioted against non-nadars in 1932. Nadars had not been allowed to take out religious processions in the streets of other castes such as Brahmins for a lone time. They decided to confront the non-Nadars on the issue of taking out their Mariamman procession along the Brahmin Street. The non-Nadars gathered together to stall the procession through violent means which resulted in clashes. The police had to open fire to control the situation, in the process of which five were killed and a few were wounded.11

The hallmark of social protest of 1930s was the assertiveness of Dalits (Devendrakula Vellalars) as evidenced in Ramanathapuram district. A contemporary government report vividly recorded the events: “The movement of Adi-dravidas towards their emancipation is almost a mass movement. At several places in the district (Ramnad) time-honoured obligations of degradation were thrown aside and the concerted efforts of higher castes to resist and suppress the movement led to the situation which were with difficulty controlled by the police”.12 The defiant attitude of the

11 G.O. No. 348, Public General (Mis.) dated April 28, 1933.
Devendrakula Vellalars signaled social change in Ramanathapuram region.

On the contrary, in the present Tirunelveli Kattabomman district where caste clashes of 1995 predominantly figured, such a militancy was totally absent. A perusal of records has brought to light a few disputes, one at Keezhapattam village and the other at Kondanagaram, which were quickly settled by the police. Similarly, the Muthukulathur riots of 1957 in which Immanuel, a dalit leader, was murdered by the Maravars had no great repercussion in the present Tirunelveli district.

The assertive dalit, thus, seems to be a recent phenomenon in Tirunelveli Kattaboman district. A small section of the Devendrakula Vellalars who had for long remained landless agricultural labourers have been recently empowered to at least a small extent as a consequence of access to education and government jobs. The relative affluence of Kodiyanukulam, for instance, is explained by monetary repatriation form the gulf countries, where some of them have managed to find employment.13 Another dimension to the assertion of Devendrakula Vellalars is the emergence of political organisations among them. John Pandian’s

13 Interview with the residents of Kodiyanukulam on March 14, 1996
Devendrakula Vellalar Sangam, the militant Thiyagi Immanuel Peravai (named after the martyr of 1957 Muthukulathur events) and Dr. Krishnaswamy's outfit Federation of Devendrakula Vellalar organizations have to a great extent politicised the Devendrakula Vellalars. The emergence of assertive Devendrakula Vellalars has meant that they would not take discrimination lying down.

An important feature of 1995 riots was, for the first time in this part of Tamilnadu, the Devendrakula Vellalars who chronically suffered deprivation and distress responded to upper-caste violence. While earlier generation of them may have taken discrimination lying down, the new breed of youth, especially with the backing of caste organizations, have attempted to defend themselves and even counter-attack. It should be noted, however, that wherever Devendrakula Vellalars are dependent on Maravar peasants for livelihood, they have tended to remain submissive. Similar is the case of Parayars and Chakkiliyars, two dalit castes which are a minority in the region.

II

One of the Mackenzie Manuscripts records an oral tradition in which the Pallars are said to be 'mountain people' who settled in the plains. Professor Ludden thinks that the change of
place might have been necessitated by wars with Pandyan rulers. Ludden adds that it might have also been probable that primitive Pallar cultivators from the hills or plains might have voluntarily exchanged their precarious independence for better-fed subservient status in irrigated villages.14

Devendra Kula Vellalar is a dignified word used in lieu of Pallar as a part of their attempt to attach divinity to their birth. It is claimed that they were created by Devendra, the king of Gods, to labour for Vellalars. The inscriptions dating to the seventeenth century, one from Karivalamvandhanallur (Sankarankoil Taluk) and another from Srivilliputhur (Virudhunagar district), refer to them as “Devendra Kutumpan” and the “son of the celestial woman”. This title appears only in the seventeenth century records. Pallas and Pariahs worked in the mud in paddy fields and lived in separate, polluted, neighborhoods.15

Before 1843, the year in which serfdom was abolished in India, Pallars were agricultural serfs of landlords of the dominant castes. In Thanjavur they were attached to Brahman households and in Tirunelveli to Vellalar landholdings. A defiant Pallar could be

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14 David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India* (Delhi, 1989), p.91.

coerced to return to his master. He could not change the village of his residence and could opt for no other work. The Pallar agricultural serfs received their daily wage in grain and gifts on special occasions. Their work was also more arduous, for, men and women performed practically the whole work of grain cultivation of a village.16

The compiler of Tanjore District Gazetteer noted the relics of serfdom that existed at the beginning of the twentieth century as follows: 'Now, as then, the Pannaiyal is usually paid in grain and not in money, he is given presents on festive occasions and is often in debt beyond recall to his landowner. Moreover, when an estate is sold the 'right' of the landowner over the panniyal (i.e. the debt due by him) is often also transferred in the document which transfers the ownership of the land'.17

The condition of Pallars is brilliantly portrayed by the Sociologist G. Oppert: The Pallars are an industrious, hard working and hard worked land labourers found mostly in the Madras Presidency and especially in the southern districts. They toil uninterruptedly to enrich their master, the actual owners of the land (soil) and they were until very lately not much better than bond slaves. The time is not remote when the owners of the ground even

regarded them as their property as helots belonging to the land. Continued bad treatment and exposure to all kinds of hardships have been their sad lot and it is only natural that the condition should have eventually told on their mental and physical development, but it speaks, on the other hand, much for the superiority of their original nature that in spite of all the miseries endured they have been able to retrieve their position under a tender government and now starting again with fair prospect of improvement.18

The Tirunelveli district collector S.R. Lushington found the Pallars enterprising. He observed that ‘despite the scanty means of subsistence, the Pallars in their eagerness to obtain relief from affliction in bondage, usually contracted their wants to the mere preservation of their lives with an expectation that the accumulation of their savings might enable them to purchase freedom at a not distant future’.19

The Pallars had a strong community life. Each Pallar street had one headman who formed a link between the Brahmin and the Pallar streets. He had the authority to summon street members for collective

public services such as channel-digging, road repairs and transplanting. He called the offenders for trial before the Brahmans in the village temple yard, represented the Pallars' grievances to their landlords and presided over monthly and occasional assemblies of adults (married men) of his street. The headman also witnessed marriages and divorces between persons of different streets or different villages. In the Devendra Pallan Cheri, headmen and assemblies of all the streets gathered to resolve disputes between members of different streets.20

The intervention of the street assembly and its headman extended very far into Pallar life. At the slightest sign of individual nonconformity or in the minor crisis of family life, street members sought the intervention of the headman to maintain order. Thus, the Pallars had a strong ties of kinship and caste solidarity within the locale.

III

The European Christian missionaries, though interested in evangelization of the religion, attacked the superstitious beliefs and the caste atrocities of those days and created a new awareness among the outcaste groups. The issue of caste exclusiveness raised by them caught the imagination of depressed classes of south

Tamilnadu who were considered to be polluting casts. The Pallars invariably took to Catholicism. The catholic religion provided self-respect to this deprived section of the society. Yet another factor which created a new awareness among the dalits was the impact of emigration. Emigration was considered a great teacher of self respect. When the Indian emigrant crossed the seas, a growth of independence and self respect on the part of the depressed classes was evidently found. When a dalit found himself treated on his own merit like every one else, he realized his potential and worth. He started asserting his rights as a human being and therefore the existence of emigration currents in colonial India contributed to most to the growth of consciousness among the depressed classes in India.21

Bhu Vaishya Indira Kula Sangam was the first organized effort of the Pallars who came under the influence of any of the above two. The founder of this caste association was Perumal Peter who had his early education in Penang and later served as a school master in Rangoon. At the outbreak of the First World War he returned to his native village Peraiyoor and settled down as a practitioner in indigenous medicine. The first conference he organized was held in 1922. Representatives from 150 villages of

Ramanathapuram district met at Sengottaipatti in Muthukulathur Taluk. There was one more conference of the same persons in the same village. One anna from each household was collected in villages that were represented in the conference to meet the travel and food expenses of the participating members.

The resolutions passed in the two conferences related to getting education for male and female children of Pallar community, giving up the caste related obligations such as drum beating and beating the breast by dalit women in funerals of caste Hindus in villages, and forbidding the practices of tattooing, child marriage and polygamy among the Pallars. The Sangam was formally registered in 1923. Perumal Peter took to Christianity in 1925. He advocated conversion with the conviction that it would enable their caste people to earn self respect by christening their children according to their own desire and wearing dress of their choice. He also thought that by embracing the religion of the ruling class the Dalits could hope to secure the intervention of the District Collector and the Superintendent of Police in their favour to protect them from atrocities by caste Hindus.

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21 Census of India, Madras, 1931.
22 V. Alex, *Karisalil Or Oorani(Tamil)* (Madurai, 1995), pp 3-46.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
Perumal Peter started the Tamilnadu Liberated Lutheran Christian Union in 1954 with the object of pressing for the educational rights and reservation in jobs and representation in policy making bodies for his caste. He stressed the importance of education and took steps to start a high school in Perayoor in 1956 (July 17). The Pallars who rallied behind Perumal Peter later joined Immanuel Sekaran when he organized the Depressed Classes League in Muthukulathur and Paramakudi region. But, then they were under the spell of the Congress and worked for the Congress party against Muthuramalinga Thevar's Forward Bloc Party. Perumal Peter's hope Immanuel Sekaran's life was cut short by the murder orchestrated by the Maravar leader Muthuramalinga Thevar.

In Tirunelveli Indira Kulathiba Vellalar Aikya Sangam confining its activities in the district was set up in 1933. The objectives of the Sangam were to protect their kinsmen from caste oppression, to create awareness amongst them to have education, to motivate them to take to trade and business and lobby for basic facilities in Pallar villages. The Sangam became defunct shortly after its birth and it was revived in 1956. When it met on October 12, 1957, it demanded stringent action against those responsible for the
attacks on Dalits and financial relief for the victims of caste violence.26

The Pallars of Thanjavur were organized on class lines by the Communist Party of India. It does not mean that there was dearth of caste associations for Pallars in Thanjavur. Marianathan a Nannilam school teacher attempted to organize Pallars and Parayars in Palankudi Makkal Munnetra Sangam (Scheduled Castes Development Organization) in the late 1940s. However, the caste-class nexus was so overt in Thanjavur that the Communists had no difficulty in mobilizing the Dalits on class lines. The Vivasaya Thozhilar Sangam (Agricultural Labourers Association) formed in 1939 succeeded in getting the bonded labour abolished and enhancing the wages of the landless labourers who belonged to the Pallar caste.27

During the all-India elections of January 1952, the Brahmans reportedly directed, and bribed, their own non-Brahman tenants and labourers to vote for the Congress Party. But, many of them voted for the local Communist candidate who won the election.

Some Vellalar, Kallar and Naidu landlords who had previously lent

25 V. Alex, Karisatii Or Oorani
support to the Dravida Kazhagam in opposition to the Brahmans, were found themselves allied with Brahman landlords against the pressures of tenants and labourers.28

Pallars and Paraiyars had transcended all caste restrictions except endogamy in Thanjavur district. Although their immediate interest was to obtain higher wages and fixity of tenure they believed that Communism would ultimately bring about an equal division of land between households of all castes and would totally abolish caste restrictions. It was also the hope of the communist leadership that such class conflicts, whatever their outcome, will in the future increasingly weaken the identities of castes.29

When we analyze the changes that have taken place in the aftermath of three decades of struggles in which the Pallars played a prominent part, it is known that their struggles helped end social oppression. But the government’s tenancy legislation and land ceiling laws designed to bring about fundamental changes in land ownership relations were circumvented by the landholders to the detriment of the intended beneficiaries. Therefore structural transformation, a desideratum for eliminating the present unjust

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socio-economic conditions, is elusive.30

IV

There was no state-wide caste organisation to fight for the interests of the Pallars until 1967 when Tamilnadu Deenrakula Vellalar Sangam with Madurai as headquarters was started. The proclaimed objectives were to strive for educational development as well as the economic progress of the Community by forging unity among the caste people all over the state. The organization could not make much headway and hence the need for the birth of a similar organization with Tiruchirappalli as headquarter in 1983. The activities of this Association are brought to light by its monthly journal Indirar Kural.31

The new-found assertiveness amongst Pallars is traced to attempts made by the Dalits to take part in mainstream party politics. The Pallars began to contest elections to the state legislature exclusively on their political platform as early as 1970s. In 1977, Perayoor Muniyasamy lost the Muthukulathur Constituency only by

29 Ibid.
a margin of 400 votes. The murder of a Pallar leader, a school teacher, Chelladurai in 1982 caused a void which was filled by John Pandian of Tirunelveli who founded the All India Devendra Kula Vellalar Munnetra Sangam in 1983. John Pandian and his lumpen followers helped shore up the sagging morale of the Pallars in the erstwhile Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli districts. His popularity prompted Pattali Makkal Katcheri leader Ramdoss to field him in the 1991 general election under his party's symbol. It is no mean achievement that John Pandian secured second position next to the winning candidate of the AIDMK-Congress combine.

In the meantime Dr. K. Krishnaswamy a medical doctor in Coimbatore had floated his Tamilnadu Federation of Devendrakula Vellalars Sangam in 1985. It took ten years for him to come to political limelight. Krishnaswamy's Devendrakula Vellalar Federation, John Pandian's Devendrakula Vellalar Sangam and the Thiyagi Immanuel Peravai (named after martyr of the 1957 Muthukulathur events) helped to politicise the pallars and made them assertive. The emergence of assertive pallars has meant that they would not take discrimination lying down. South Tamil Nadu has its own share of discrimination against dalits.

33 Ibid.
1995 should be considered watershed year for the dalit movement in the state. The news of disfigurement of the statue of Pasumpon U. Muthuramalinga Thevar, the much deified leader of the maravars, in the wake of pallar and maravar clashes at Veerasigamani, set the stage for the unleashing of violence on the dalits. While earlier generations of dalits may have taken these things lying down, the new breed of youths especially with the backing of dalit organizations began to retaliate. Street fighting, stabbing, bomb-throwing and arson became order of the day. In the first week itself at least 18 persons lost their lives and property worth a few crores of rupees, apart from the scores of public transport buses that were torched or damaged, were destroyed. For over five months incidents of caste riots and violence were being reported on an almost weekly basis.34

The entire course of events showed the complete inability of the state machinery and polity to respond to the situation. The government of Tamilnadu maintained a deafening silence as the law and order situation collapsed for days together. What was most distressing was the role of the police. At many places, while rampaging mobs attacked dalits, the policemen were silent onlookers. Little was done to prevent or take action against the

people involved violent incidents. At the same time, the police under the pretext of an all-out search for suspects and weapons, conducted midnight raids in many villages. Kodiyankulam, which was providing leadership to the neighboring villages was the scene of such brutal action. The Kodiyankulam people held out a threat conversion to Islam.35

The unflinching support of Kodiyankulam villages prompted Dr. Krishnaswamy to contest from Ottapidaram Assembly (reserved) constituency as a candidate of the Devendrakula Vellalar Federation in alliance with the Janata Party led by Subramanian Swamy in 1996. Dr. Krishnaswamy contested in the Janata Party symbol. Dr. Krishnaswamy won, defeating the AIADMK, DMK and the MDMK candidates. Although the dalits voted for the DMK in almost all the constituencies, they rejected the DMK, the AIADMK and the MDMK candidates in Ottapidaram from where Dr. Krishnaswamy contested. Again, in Srivilliputhur, Rajapalayam and Vasudevanallur constituencies where the Dalit candidates of Devendrakula Vellalar Federation contested (on the Janata Party symbol), they did reasonable well against the DMK and the AIADMK candidates although they were defeated. In Srivilliputhur, E.M. Guruswamy of Devendrakula Vellalar Federation came third after

35 K.A. Manikumar, "Caste Violence in South Tamil Nadu", Economic and Political Weekly, September 6,
the AIADMK and the Communist Party of India candidates. At Rajapalayam (reserved) constituencies, K. Dhanuskodi of Devendrakula Vellar Federation emerged fourth after the Tamil Manila Congress, the Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) candidates. After Kirshnaswamy’s election to the provincial legislature even those who had distanced themselves from such organisations have begun to rally behind him in a big way.

The mood of the dalits in southern districts was continued to be in favour of their caste organisations, particularly of Krishnaswamy’s Federation of Devendrakula Vellalar Sangams. Their disillusionment with the mainstream political parties such as the Congress, the DMK and the AIADMK was also manifest. M. Meenakshisundram, a dalit peasant in Valukkalotti of Arupukottai Constituency reflected this mood where in 1998 a by election was due. He said, ‘I am a DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) party member. I have about a dozen dhotis with borders that have DMK colours (black and red). Although I do not have the heart to say this, I do say that I will not vote of the DMK candidate now. A man belonging to our community has raised the banner of

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revolt. We would like to watch how he shapes up. We will vote for the candidate belonging to the party founded by him.'37

In order to better understand the conflicts and highlight the aspirations of the dalits, reflected in their growing solidarity, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University conducted a two-day seminar (in March 1997) with the financial assistance from the Ministry of Welfare, Government of India, and New Delhi. The office-bearers of the Associations belonging to all dalit casts namely Devendrakula Vellalars, Parayars and Arundathiyars, prominent dalit activists of the non-governmental and women's organisations, the newly elected dalit panchayat union presidents, representatives from trade unions of left political parties, dalit intellectuals, youths and students, numbering in all about 200, participated.

The deliberations brought into sharp focus a wide range of issues concerning the dalits. What was astounding was that even after one and a half years of dalit struggles and resistance most of the participants were raising the human rights issues like practice of separate glass tumblers for dalits in tea stalls, non-provision of drinking water facilities, denial of access to village tanks and public roads, absence of cremation ground or approach road to cremation

37 Ibid., Quoted by K.A. Manikumar "Caste as an Instrument for Political Mobilization."
ground and lack of toilet facilities for women in dalit housing colonies. The fact that the government has not bothered to tackle even these human rights problems helps us understand as to why dalits have rejected all mainstream political parties and are rallying behind their caste leaders.

In the aftermath of caste clashes, the dalits living in several villages are determined not to work in Maravar land. This, however, has not affected the Maravar cultivators very much because landless labourers of other dalit caste groups are not in solidarity with the Pallar labourers. This aspect stresses the need for organizing the landless labourers on class lines. Besides these dalits who form the majority of the downtrodden today are to be pulled out of the moorings of misery, ignorance and idleness if they are to integrate with the mainstream.