

Jesuits' Involvement in Grassroot Struggle for Justice and Equality in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Even as evangelization was the goal of the Jesuits' mission, they have been catalysts for the empowerment of the marginalized. With the changing world the Jesuits have been discovering at each new encounter, means to adapt and harness their resources to address issues of subaltern people. When they realized that it was the inhuman caste system marginalize the Dalits more and more, their immediate historical duty was to associate themselves with the downtrodden in their long struggle for their legitimate and equal place in society and rightful claim as a community and as citizens in the country. Thus, the Jesuits responded promptly and creatively to the signs of the times shifting their mission paradigm from 'charity' to 'justice.' In Tamil Nadu the Jesuits ventured into the organized attempts like PALMERA (People's Action and Liberation Movement in East Ramnad Area), IDEAS (Institute of Development, Education Action and Studies) at Madurai, PEAK (People's Education and Action in Kodaikanal hills), KARISAL (Kamaraj district Rural Institute for Social Action and Leadership) at Sivakasi, Social Watch in Chennai, *Pathai* (Dalit Human Rights Centre) at Chengalpattu, DACA, (Doctor Ambedkar Cultural Academy) at Madurai, and other similar initiatives in the most backward areas of the state. Their involvement along with likeminded civil society groups accelerated the struggle of the downtrodden Dalits for equality and justice. Ultimately these initiatives attempted to translate the ideals and values of the Indian constitution into action.

Keywords: Marginalization, Empowerment, Liberation, Equality, Justice

"History of Christianity in India is not a mere eastward extension of the western ecclesiastical history with an emphasis of 'foreign mission' dimension. It is a part of the enchanting mosaic that is called the History of India."¹ This is true. The role of Christianity in the making of the nation and the national development is significant. Because the 'mission' is an essential part of the Christian religion that Indians commonly associate with Christianity.² Christians, who are the sons and daughters of the soil, are part and parcel of this ancient land. Even though they embraced Christianity, their Indianness never faded and it has been greatly appreciated.

The contribution of Christianity to India is substantial. "Schools and colleges, farms and factories, hospitals and clinics, orphanages and deaf and dumb schools and whole host of national, state and local institutions have been built by the Church as its contribution to the national development to economic growth with social justice, to individual flowering and human

¹ D.V. Singh, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. II, CHAI, Bangalore, 1982.

² Jesudasan SJ, *Evolution in Mission: A Case History, Breaking Stereotypes: An Example*, Chennai, 2000, p.1.

well-being,”³ observes Malcolm S. Adiseshiah. While recollecting the Christian contribution to the nation the governor of Karnataka paid rich tribute saying, “We are privileged to have so many Christian institutions to bring dignity of life and knowledge to the poor.... Despite accounting for only 2.3 percent of India’s 1.2 billion people, Christians run nearly 20 percent of the educational, primary healthcare and social welfare centers in the country.”⁴ The sincere appreciation of the governor Hansraj Bhardwaj was not an exaggeration. The legacy of the Christian missionaries is commendable. Though evangelization was their end, they always addressed social issues. The Church history of India is replete with evidences for its involvement among the weaker sections and the marginalized for their empowerment.⁵ Thus Christianity finds meaning in serving the whole nation irrespective of the language, race, caste and creed. As loving service to the humanity is the driving force their service is growing leaps and bounds.

The Jesuits

Among the religious orders the Jesuits occupies a special place for the variety of their services. Jesuit presence in the Indian sub-continent dates back to the early period of the Jesuit Order,⁶ from the arrival of St. Francis Xavier in Goa on 6 May 1542 AD and later to the Pearl Fishery Coast. Roberto de Nobili who tried the ‘adaptation method’,⁷ laid the foundation for the Madura Mission in 1606. Antonio Criminali, the first Jesuit martyr at Vedalai, John De Britto - a ‘Pandaraswami’,⁸ who was a martyr for faith at Oriyur, Constantine Beschi, a distinguished Tamil scholar, were some of the prominent Jesuits who toiled in Tamil country.

Though founded for the service of God, the Jesuits never neglected human problems. With the changing world, the Jesuits have been discovering at each new encounter, means to adapt and harness their resources to face various human issues. They responded to challenges of the subaltern people by working for the empowerment of the downtrodden. Their preferential option for the poor and the underprivileged is well known. Their option for the *Nadars* in the late nineteenth century⁹ and early twentieth century and their special concentration on the

³ S. Malcolm Adiseshiah, ‘Christian Influence in India’, Souvenir of the XIX Centenary Celebration of St. Thomas, Madras, 1972, p. 28.

⁴ Hansraj Bhardwaj, The Governor of Karnataka, Address at the concluding celebration of the Centenary of United Theological College, Bangalore, 8 July 2010.

⁵ Rev. William Tobias Ringle Toubé, and Rev. Charles Mead of the London Missionary Society, who started elementary education for the marginalized women in the Southern Tamil Nadu were instrumental in bringing social revolution in the nineteenth century known as the upper garment movement. Cf. Ponnellan, Therkilirunthu, Makal Veliyedu, Chennai 2001, pp.50-51.

⁶ James Brodrick, *The Origin of the Jesuits*, Loyola University Press, Chicago, 1940, p. 80.

⁷ Adaptation means Inculturation, i.e. A method used by a foreigner who was able to adapt himself to the local situation and customs.

⁸ ‘Pandaraswami’ missionaries were mainly meant for the low caste Christians with whom they lived and served. M. Rathinaswamy, *India after God*, Madras, 1960, p.117.

⁹ Adrian Caussanal SJ and other Jesuits protected the victims of Kalugumalai in 1895 and Sivakasi in 1898. They fought for the legitimate rights of Nadarsin society. Cf. *Les Missions Catholiques – Bulletin Hebdomadaire Illustré de L’oeuvre de la propagation de la Foi*. XXVII. January-December 1895. Also Cf. A Letter of Baomal SJ, Missionary of Palayamkottai. Also Cf. A. Caussanal SJ, *A History of Tirunelveli District*, 1910, p. 40. The Jesuits especially Adrian Caussanal SJ defended the legitimate rights of the downtrodden people in the church, as the parish priest of Vadakkankulam, in November 1910 by taking a bold decision of breaking the wall in the church which separated the caste Vellala Catholics and the downtrodden Nadars. Cf. *Historical Notes on the Tirunelveli District*, Vol. II, pp. 25-27. ii) Peter Leonard SJ, the Bishop of Tiruchirappalli, took all steps to break the barriers in churches in his jurisdiction in

*Kallars*¹⁰ who were of the most backward and denotified caste in the pre-independent period were noteworthy. Thus, the Jesuit activities in these directions assumed various forms such as opening of schools for the underprivileged, struggle for justice on their behalf and ensuring them of the benefits of progress and development.¹¹ Efforts of the Jesuits to safeguard the basic rights of the marginalized people were recognized by others too. “The Jesuits had actively championed the cause of the depressed classes and the *Panchamas* for justice and fought for their basic human rights”¹² corroborates Louis Leguen in 1938.

Tamil Nadu Social Setting

It is an obvious fact that in the Indian social setting, social distinctions have been made more in terms of caste rather than in terms of occupation or economic status even now.¹³ “Indian society, for the past three millennia, has been under the grip of the system of social hierarchy of casteism. For any Indian the context is caste system, “world’s largest surviving social hierarchy” and his/her internal world is conditioned by the values, beliefs and attitudes of that system. It is founded upon the sinful mindset of permanent purity and pollution legitimized in the name of the ‘divine’ conveniently interpreted by the traditional culture of domination. And accordingly, ‘the sacred’ or ‘the impure’ is attributed to one’s birth or origin, and any upward mobility is neither permissible nor possible.”¹⁴

Dr. Ambedkar rightly observes, “Caste divides the Hindu society into various groups with varying degrees of prestige, responsibility and circles of social intercourse. The castes within the caste system are distinguished from one another by the existence of special rights for some groups and disabilities for others....”¹⁵ Any attempt to break this system has been severely dealt with. And this age old evil social institution of caste was all along a great obstacle for socio-economic equality and establishing social justice.

Plight of the Dalits

There had been numerous incidents of inhuman atrocities on the untouchables, the victim of the caste system, including forcing them to consume human excreta, dumping carcasses or other waste matter in their premises, polluting the drinking water used by them, implicating them in false cases, etc.¹⁶ “They were slaughtered in large numbers, degraded, humiliated, and all

1936. This provoked the caste Catholics of the parish making a complaint against the bishop himself to the pope. Cf. *A Petition of the Caste Christians of Tiruchirappalli to the Pope*, on 9 December 1936. (French Jesuits Archives, Vanves, Paris)

¹⁰ C. Montaud SJ, started 54 schools for the backward caste Kallars, who were considered to be the criminal tribes around Usilampatti area. Cf. *Madurai News Letter*, Dindigul, March 1976, p. 11. “Trincal SJ, apart from running schools and hospitals devoted himself concentrating on the Kallars, who were settled in Natham and Melur.” Cf. P. Antoniraj SJ, *Discrimination against Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu*, IDEAS Centre, Madurai, 1992, p. 156.

¹¹ M. Rathinaswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹² Louis Leguen, *Stranger than Fiction, A Hundred Years of the Jesuit Madura Mission*, Souvenir of the Centenary of the Jesuit Madura Mission, July 1938, p. 12.

¹³ S. Manickam, “Depressed Class Movements in South India,” in K. A. Manikumar (ed.), *History and Society*, Madras, 1996, p. 118.

¹⁴ *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. I, ATC, Bangalore, 2010. p. 408.

¹⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Castes*, Bheem Patrika Publications, Julandar 1988. p.87

¹⁶ *Report of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes / Scheduled Tribes* 1998.

kinds of atrocities inflicted on them for centuries. They eke out a miserable existence of poverty, illiteracy, disease, etc.,¹⁷ laments a recent Supreme Court Judgement. Denied access to wealth, education, civic amenities, Dalits as members of the lowest strata of society were condemned to a life devoid of opportunities for either economic or social mobility. Though untouchability remains abolished in the Indian Constitution, the Dalits still continue to suffer discrimination, harassment, and victimization all over India and Tamil Nadu is no exception to it.

Mudukulathur riots in 1954, killing of 42 Dalit labourers at Kilavenmani in 1968, atrocities against the Dalits at Puliyangudi in 1981, at Bodi in 1989, at Kurinjankulam in 1991, at Chengalpet in 1993, at Kodyankulam in 1995, killing of six Dalit contestants in the local body elections at Melavazhavu in 1997, at Gunduppatti in 1998, attacks on Dalits in southern districts of Tamil Nadu in 1997-98, Tamarabarani massacre in 1999, police excess at Sankaralingapuram in 2001, Dalits who were forced to consume human excreta at Thinniyam near Tiruchirappalli in 2002, inability of the civil administration to conduct local body elections for the Dalit panchayats in Pappapatti, and Keeripatti in Madurai district, existence of manual scavenging in the cities of Tamil Nadu are a few appalling examples for the plight of the Dalits.¹⁸ "In the last 15 years, atrocities against Dalits touched their peak in 2012 across Tamil Nadu. As per official data, 2,048 cases registered under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act were pending investigation at various stages in the police stations in Tamil Nadu."¹⁹ Though the Semitic religions in India speak of equality in principle, the Dalits, who embraced such religions with the hope of enjoying equal status and social justice, are still under the clutches the evil of untouchability.

Jesuits' Initiatives for Grassroot Struggle

When the Jesuits realized that it was the inhuman caste system, together with the nexus of socio-cultural, religious, economic and political factors, marginalize the Dalits more and more, their immediate historical duty was to associate themselves with the downtrodden Dalits in their long struggle for their legitimate and equal place in society and rightful claim as a community and as citizens in the country. Inspired by the documents of Vatican Council II in 1965, Synod of the Bishops 1971, Thirty Second General Congregation of the Society of Jesus in 1972, and the Liberation Theology in 1970s, coupled with the dynamic leadership of Fr. Pedro Arrupe, their Superior General and inspiration from the Indian national leaders, the Jesuits in Tamil Nadu ventured in the organized attempts to support the legitimate struggles of the marginalized.

¹⁷ Supreme Court Judgment Criminal Appeal No. 11 of 2011 Kailias and others Vs. State of Maharashtra, Cf. *The Hindu*, Madurai Edition, 12 January 2011.

¹⁸ 19. M.A. Britto, *Vankodumaikalum Satta Amalakkamum*, Doctor Ambedkar Cultural Academy (DACA), Madurai, 2007, pp. 2-53. Also Cf. M. Solomon Bernard Shaw, *Intolerance in Action: A Historical Continuum- An Analysis on Pappapatti, Keeripatti High Drama*, in M.A. Xavier (Ed.), *Toward a Just Society*, Festschrift Volume, Chennai, 2007, pp.45-55; Ilan Kumaran, *Kizharthezhuhirathu Kizhakku Mukhavai*, Thamizhamutham Publication, Madurai, 1996, p.27.

¹⁹ *The Hindu*, Madurai Edition, 10th April 2013. According to the India Human Rights Report 2008, Tamil Nadu police registered 1359 cases of violence under the SC / ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 against the SCs in 2007. It is clear that the atrocities are on the increase. For further details refer *Thorat Committee Report of the Working Group on Empowerment of Scheduled Castes During Eleventh Plan (2001-2012)*, Three Volumes published by Social Watch Tamil Nadu, Chennai, 2010.

PALMERA

PALMERA is an acronym for People's Action and Liberation Movement in East Ramnad Area. It is the name given to a team of Jesuits and their collaborators who were working in the backward area of Ramnad for the empowerment of the Dalits from 1978. The atrocities against the Dalits,²⁰ made the youths to reflect on the need of their coming together. They became organized and started a movement called *Thazhthappattor Nalalyyakam*.²¹ In the historical process of continuous search of the Dalits for their identity, the Jesuits collaborated with them. The newly begun relationship was sufficiently strengthened by cultural programmes, which carried the message of liberation of the oppressed and *sanghams* (associations) were formed in many villages. This awakening shook the people of their age long slumber.

Meanwhile Unchanai killing during the temple festival in 1979 sent waves of physical insecurity and forced the Dalits more seriously than ever to look for ways and means to protect their lives and properties from the onslaught of the landlords and caste Hindus of the area.²² With the help of PALMERA the months that followed witnessed a spurt in the growth of their *sanghams* in the areas.²³ The PALMERA team had begun systematic work in organizing people, forming leaders and bringing them together.²⁴ With the help of the Jesuits the Dalits of the area were organized to the extent of contesting the assembly election.

PEAK

The origin of PEAK (People's Education and Action in Kodaikanal hills), goes back to three Jesuits collaborating with MAITRI²⁵ an NGO which took initiative to liberate, Sri Lankan repatriates from bonded-labour. They organized the people by conscientizing them. The Jesuits made use of the visit of Swami Agnivesh, the national president of *Bandhua Mukhti Morcha* (Bonded Labour Liberation Front) to publicize the issue in the hill. By their continuous protests and legal battles, the Supreme Court ordered the rehabilitation of 157 bonded labour families.²⁶

²⁰ The struggle of the Dalits to get in to the temples in the villages Iravucherry, Kannankudi, and Uruvatti Vallimuthi of Ramnad district in 1954, killings of Immanuel Sekaran a Dalit leader by the dominant caste groups on 11 September 1957 at Paramakudi, and Siluvaimuthu another leader of the community on 6 September 1967 forced them to become organised. Cf. Leaflet issued by the *Aathikka Sathi Ozhippu Kuttamaippu*, Devakottai, 2000, p. 4.

²¹ *Uzhaikum Makkal Iyakkamor Aaiivu*, (Typed Manuscript), Devakottai, 1987, p. 13.

²² The rightful claims of Dalits in celebrating the Unchanai *Ayyanar* temple festival resulted in violence on 28 June 1979. Brutal attacks were made on them by the caste Hindus in the village. Five Dalits were murdered, 29 were injured and properties worth 2 lakhs were looted and destroyed. The violence sowed seeds among the Dalits to become organized to fight for their democratic rights. Cf. Micheal Jeyaraj & Kumar, "P.A.L.M.E.R.A People's Action and Liberation Movement in East Ramnad", X. Irudayaraj (ed.), *Roots and Blossoms*, Vaigarai Publications, Dindigul, 1987, p. 70.

²³ *Jesuit Madurai Province Golden Jubilee (1952-2002) Souvenir*, op. cit., p. 245

²⁴ Annual Letter 1978 - 79 of Rex A. Pai SJ, Madurai Provincial to Fr. Superior General in Rome on 18 September 1979, *Provinciae Maduranensis*, Vol. 1020, 79 / 38, ARSI, Rome. pp. 4-5.

²⁵ MAITRI was an acronym for 'Madras Association for Information, Training Rehabilitation and Improvement'. It was an organization functioning under the care of the CBCI, Commission for Justice and Labour. Jesuit co-operation was sought in the year 1974. Cf. C. Amal SJ, "A Fellowship with Rootless People: MAITRI's Record of Past", *Caritas*, Madurai Province Record, January 1989, Vol. 73, No I, p. 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Supporting the marginalized in the struggle for justice and to march with Dalits, Adivasis, (Pazhiyars and Irulars) repatriates from Sri Lanka and the poor women were the nucleus of the dreams of the PEAK team.²⁷ PEAK team intended that they should become self-sustained, self-reliant and self-ruling. The highly exploited womenfolk of 23 villages were organized through 'women associations' in their respective villages. The geographic area covered by PEAK was whole Kodaikanal hill. Not only social issues but also health problems, cleanliness, gender issues were dealt with. Seminar was a regular feature in the PEAK. They conducted series of training programmes for the Dalits and Adivasi of the hills.²⁸

KARISAL

A sizable number of *Arunthathiyars*²⁹ are living around Sivakasi which is situated around 80 kilometers south of Madurai. The strength of the KARISAL mission (Kamaraj district Rural Institute for Social Action and Leadership) lies in its focus of *Arunthathiyars*, the people who are considered to be socially lowest even among the Dalits.³⁰ The KARISAL started with the objective "to support the *Arunthathiyar* and other Dalit groups in their fight against untouchability and their struggle for social transformation and other human rights."³¹

With the guidance of the KARISAL team the *Arunthathiyars* slowly became organized. A week-long marathon rally in 1995, as an anti-untouchability campaign awakened *Arunthathiyars* in 40 villages in the area.³² Nearly 110 *Arunthathiyar* youth took part in the black flag demonstration at Virudhunagar on 26 January 1997 against the denial of basic human rights for them.³³ Technical centre for *Arunthathiyar* girls which has produced thirteen batches of girls, Packiyam Health Centre which gives health awareness among the people in villages, evening study centres in 27 villages, 32 women self-help groups with the support of the government for their economic independence are functioning today. Quarterly, half yearly and summer education camps and evening classes in villages were regularly used for creating awareness.³⁴ As in other Jesuit social action centres, social analysis classes and seminars on various themes were organized for the leaders of the community.³⁵ "The team had succeeded in creating a sense of liberative

²⁷ Thomas Amirtham, et. al, *People's Education and Action in Kodaikanal (PEAK) - An Evaluation Report*, Madurai, March, 2003, p.3.

²⁸ A Report of the activities of IDEAS July to December 2001, p. 1.

²⁹ *Arunthathiyars* are looked down upon as untouchables of the untouchables. Because in Tamil Nadu they are considered below all other Dalit communities such as *Parayars* and *Pallar*. And *Arunthathiyars* have to serve these communities and other high castes and do the occupations which are considered dirty, defiling and polluting, <http://www.tamilnation.org/caste/ramaiah.htm>. It is clear that caste has not only made the untouchables as victims of the system but also the *Arunthathiyars* as victims of the other victimized. They become the community of doubly dehumanized and victimized by the caste system.

³⁰ Letter of Aloysius Irudhayam SJ, Provincial to the team members on 11 June, 1993, p.1. Also Cf. A Brief Report on the activities of KARISAL Team from June 1993 to May 1996. p. 1.

³¹ Lazar et. al., *KARISAL Evaluation Report*, 12 March, 2000, p. 1.

³² *Madurai News Letter*, Dindigul, June 1995, p. 17.

³³ *Madurai News Letter*, Dindigul, February 1997, p. 12.

³⁴ *A Report on the activities of KARISAL team from June 1995 to May 1996*, p. 1.

³⁵ The team organized leadership and capacity building programmes for animators and youth regularly. For example, a seminar on reservation policy was organized for 250 participants on 16 March 1997. Cf. *KARISAL Log*, March 1997. One day seminar on 'Historic *Arunthathiyar* leaders' on 29 June 1997 was conducted. Cf. *KARISAL Log*, June 1997. The team organized leadership and capacity building programmes for animators and youth regularly.

identity and awareness of human rights among the *Arunthathiyars* especially the youth"³⁶ an evaluation committee affirmed.

IDEAS

In the course of building up a movement the social action centres needed a centre where they could discuss issues, chalk out methodology, develop skills in organizing the movement, mobilize the youth and women of the area, organize leadership programmes and give training for cadre formation, and arrange legal awareness courses. As such a centre was a felt need for both the leaders of movements and the Jesuits, IDEAS, (Institute of Development, Education Action and Studies) was born in 1984 in Madurai.³⁷

Initially the involvement of IDEAS in the Kodaikannal bonded labour problem in 1986 was significant. In the tedious process of a long legal battle in the Indian court of law, its continuous efforts to get justice for the affected people is commendable.³⁸ In collaboration with the national Dalit grassroot movements, IDEAS worked for the yearlong national campaign in 1999. It planned for both local, state and national level programmes. The culmination of the programme 'Black Paper on the Dalits' was released in Delhi on 10 December 1999 on the Human Rights Day. Some Jesuits were involved in preparing the documents.³⁹

The training unit of the centre organized regularly training programmes for various groups like, Dalit leaders, village women and men, activist priests, leaders, college youth and unorganized youth, school teachers, elected panchayat members and presidents. Moreover, other social action groups had used the premises of IDEAS for their training programmes. Every year the centre organized about 70 training programmes on social analysis, human rights, leadership, media awareness, courses on law, street theatre training, and so on.⁴⁰

The publication unit of IDEAS regularly published books in Tamil on subaltern people. Its timely interventions sensitized the target group and served as source materials for the activists and mobilizing the masses towards the struggle for equality and justice. Dr. Ambedkar centenary year celebrations in 1991 caused the emergence of Dalit literature thereafter. Some serious research works are also being carried out every now and then on relevant topics. The proactive role of the publishing unit of IDEAS was acknowledged by Dalit leaders and activists in different secular forums who were working for the same cause.⁴¹ The centre has also produced video and audio documentaries on political and socio-cultural issues. The media unit continued to give workshops on media awareness, media skill training, video for social transformation, and is collaborating with other groups in conducting similar workshops, seminars and courses.

³⁶ Lazar SJ, et. al, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³⁷ Micheal Jeyaraj, *Report of Activities of IDEAS from October 1989 - March 1995*, IDEAS, Madurai, 15 May 1996, p. 1.

³⁸ In filing affidavits in the courts, establishing contacts with the Supreme Court advocates, and other related works were meticulously planned and executed by IDEAS in collaboration with PEAK team.

³⁹ Jebamalai Raja, *History of IDEAS A new venture in the Social Action of Madurai Province 2002*, p. 2.

⁴⁰ *Annual Report of IDEAS 1996-1997*, Madurai p.2. Also Cf. following year reports

⁴¹ P. Kalyani, "*Dalit Aatharavalargal Yenna Seiyalam? - Sila Kuripugal*" (Tamil), Ravi Kumar (ed.), *Dalit Kalailakiyam - Arasiyal*, Neyveli, 1996, p. 212.

Social Watch

This centre was born in Chennai in the context of the Global Summit on Social Development at Copenhagen in March 1995.⁴² It was one of the pioneering initiatives in the area of social policy since then. Realizing the importance of the role of a mediator among grassroots struggles, social research and policymaking, the forum took the initiative.⁴³ It had established itself as the premier budget analysis group in the whole of Tamil Nadu. The international Budget Project Centre for Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington identified the forum as one of the seven major initiatives in India involved in serious budget analysis and policy efforts. Starting from 1996–1997, at every budget session of the State Assembly the budgetary critiques have become a regular annual exercise in social auditing.

As electoral interventions *Tamil Nadu People's Manifesto* was brought out in 1996, involving almost 500 individuals from movements, networks, and civil society groups. It provided a benchmark for civil society groups to confront political parties with their own social development agenda during election campaign. Their publication, 'Parties' Manifestos versus People's Manifesto' in 1999 comparing manifestos of six national parties and six state parties against people's manifesto has been used by major national institutions as training material for monitoring of election manifestos.⁴⁴

Another main work of the forum was that some concrete impact has been created in the field of Dalit budgeting, especially around the special component programme for the Dalits. Starting from a near total ignoring by the government, the consistent lobbying by the forum in collaboration with Dalit movements and networks and Dalit legislators, has forced the government to openly announce, during the budget speech in 2002, a decision to evaluate the special component plan in the state.⁴⁵

Dalit Human Rights Centre (*Paathai*)

In the process of empowering the marginalized Dalit Human Rights Centre at Chengalpettu continues to play a vital role. Direct legal service was rendered in the court of law to the Dalits by taking up cases and appearing freely for the victimized Dalits. The centre provided free consultation services, advice, and guidance to the Dalit victims of caste oppression. Legal literacy and human rights education were imparted to students, youth, women, and village leaders in the districts of Chennai South, Kanchipuram, Thiruvallur, Thiruvannamalai, Vellore, Cuddalore and Villupuram. Young Lawyers Academy, a pioneering venture in Tamil Nadu and the first of its kind for the Dalits, trained and prepared annually 25 candidates, mostly Dalits from rural areas, for law entrance exam. The primary purpose of the academy was to motivate candidates to study law and to serve as lawyers for the marginalized people.⁴⁶ A rural communication media unit has been started to impart media education and imparting skills to Dalit teachers in the art of teaching and learning through street theatre.⁴⁷

⁴² *Budget Analysis, As Social Audit Tamil Nadu Experiences 1995 – 2002*, Tamil Nadu Peoples' Forum for Social Development, Chennai, 2002, p. 5.

⁴³ Xavier Alphonse SJ (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴⁵ *Special Component Plan*, Tamil Nadu People's Forum for Social Development, Chennai, 2002, p. 3.

⁴⁶ *Jesuit Madurai Province Golden Jubilee (1952 – 2002) Souvenir*, *op. cit.*, pp. 361 – 364.

⁴⁷ L. Yesumarian SJ, *Annual Report of Dalit Commission 1998 – 1999*, Chengalpattu, pp. 1 – 5.

DACA

In the continuing struggle of their liberation, the Jesuits constructed Doctor Ambedkar Cultural Academy (DACA) in Madurai in 1994. The vision is "to make the downtrodden to live a dignified life".⁴⁸ Special attention is given on the development of women and children as they are most oppressed and exploited in the society and in the domestic life. A four-fold strategy focusing on social, educational, economic development and health care is followed.⁴⁹ From September 1998 DACA started evening study centres for school going Dalit children in the rural areas of Madurai, Virudunagar, Tirunelveli and Sivagangai districts.⁵⁰ Along with their subjects, social analysis, personality development, motivational classes and life orientation courses were organized.⁵¹ Assistance to the students preparing for competitive examinations and professional colleges was given. The centre conducted regularly seminars for women from sixty villages of the evening study centres on various social themes like 'legal rights of the Dalits' and 'Forming Self-Help Groups for Dalit Development.'

Like these initiatives the Jesuits started AHAL, LAAS, Kalankarai, Amuthu and other social action centres to support the struggle of the marginalized Dalits to establish equality and justice.

Stages

All the activities of the Jesuit involvement among the marginalized can be classified under the following three stages:

Conscientization

Conscientization was the first stage of their involvement, which demanded a lot of pioneering work at the grassroot level. It was their primary task to give awareness to leaders and people, about the existing oppressive structures and social institutions, social contradictions, and problems. Since people thought that their suffering was due to their fate, their thinking pattern had to be changed and to be motivated for transformation. Periodic meetings (weekly and monthly village meetings) for leaders, youth, women, and children, were organized by all the centres. Besides these meetings, annual celebrations of the hostel, the women's *sangam*, youth groups and in the repatriate villages, were made use for the purpose of conscientisation. Literary competitions were conducted on the social themes. Ambedkar celebration was a regular feature since his birth centenary year in 1991. While recollecting the contributions of Jesuits in the area leaders commented, "We all have grown with help of the PALMERA training, and it helped us to form a force by ourselves."⁵²

Mobilization

The Jesuits realized that the commitment to bring about a radical change in the prevailing unjust structures of society had demanded political involvement, of which mobilization of the powerless

⁴⁸ *DACA Work Report*, *n. d.*, p. 14.

⁴⁹ A Short report on DACA's Development Intervention through VIC, December 2005, pp. 10 – 11.

⁵⁰ *DACA Work Report*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁵¹ Tamil Nadu Women's Development Project – NGO information report by Madurai Jesuit Downtrodden People Welfare Trust, Madurai, 14 October 2005, p. 2.

⁵² Paul Mike, PALMERA 25 *aam aandu Niraivu Vizha Munnal PALMERA Urupinar Kuttam*, Devakottai 21-22 October 2004, p. 21.

for struggles is very important.⁵³This mobilization concerns dealing with power and authority. It implies organizing people towards an action. Action includes confronting the oppressive systems and fighting for the rights of the people.⁵⁴ It is a long process, as mobilization at the grassroots had to be evolved in its historical context. Hence it was a historical necessity for the Jesuits in social action centres to collaborate with the social movements of the locality, which were working for the same end: building an egalitarian human society.⁵⁵ In his analysis about action groups and social transformation, D. N. Dhanagare states that the emergence of a large number of groups who have been trying to educate, conscientise and mobilize different sections, particularly the oppressed poor, was one of the important developments in India since 1960.⁵⁶

An increase in the number of their *sanghams* (associations) in villages made these movements stronger and enabled them to take up legitimate struggles for equality in their respective areas. Professor Ghanshyam Shaw says, "The number of struggles launched by the poor and oppressed sections of the society has increased during the last two decades."⁵⁷ As regards the modus operandi the movements opted for non-violent struggles which are constitutionally allowed. They believed in these constitutional means. On 11 September 1993 villagers of Gundupatti led a struggle and blocked the road at Perumalmai, in Kodaikanal demanding the government to provide for their basic needs.⁵⁸ The people had to pay a heavy price on 26 February 1998 for having boycotted the election. When they refused to vote in the election they were attacked by the police and the party cadres.⁵⁹

When the PEAK evaluation team discussed the political impact of the centre, it had the following positive points to say: Mobilization of people's strength in terms of women and men's groups was on the increase. This could be noticed in their participation in different forms of struggles to obtain their basic amenities and establish justice and equality. When all the usual methods - appeals, requests, petitions and prayers - went unheard and the authorities did not fulfill their legitimate demands, as the last resort they were forced to organize struggles. Hence, they went in for protest marches, guaranteed by the constitution and with the due permission from the authorities. While doing so they had to face several hurdles.

Participation in Decision Making Process

Social movements search further for the realization of a new society by establishing participatory structures at all levels of society thus a new process is initiated to restore true democracy, and to regain genuine people's power at every level. This discovers the true meaning of democracy as the empowerment of the masses for their self-determination and true autonomy.⁶⁰ Conscientisation and political mobilization, led the people to another level in political thinking i.e. people's participation in decision making process in our democratic nation. In India caste determines

⁵³ Caritas, Madurai Province Record, Vol. 69, No. 2, Dindigul, July 1985, p. 37.

⁵⁴ PALMERA Annual Evaluation 1985-1986, Shembaganur, 26 May-1 June 1986, p. 25.

⁵⁵ Xavier Alphonse SJ (ed.), op. cit., p. 73.

⁵⁶ D. N. Dhanagare, *Themes and Perspectives in Indian Sociology*, Rawat Publications, Jaipur, 1993, p. 47.

⁵⁷ Ghanshyam Shaw, *Social Movements in India, A Review of Literature*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 1996, p. 21.

⁵⁸ PEAK Report, Kodaikanal, 1994, p. 2.

⁵⁹ S. Visvanathan, *Dalits in Dravidian Land*, Narayana Publication, Chennai, 2005, pp. 87 - 90.

⁶⁰ P. Arockiadoss SJ, op. cit., p. 274.

even politics. Many powerless people are excluded from the process for social structural reasons. Their movement realized the importance of this as it felt the need of participating in the elections. The *Harijan* community living in Ramnad district decided to contest the local body elections independently. They tried to break the deep-rooted tradition that only a non-*Harijan* can fight for and hold political positions in society,"⁶¹ noted *Madurai News Letter* of the Jesuits.

Having realized the importance of the participation in the electoral politics in democratic nation to attain political empowerment, the general body of the movement decided to contest the state assembly election of 1984.⁶² Though the candidate was not able to win, it was an achievement to the movement. The Dalits "became politically motivated and became critical of the political parties,"⁶³ says the minutes of the PALMERA evaluation meeting. This led the Dalits to think of possibilities for their political empowerment later. Moreover, it also gave an initial push to the Dalits to form parties later. Following the state assembly election, they contested the local body elections too. Likewise, in the Kodaikanal hills with the training of the PEAK a few Dalits and tribals especially women were able to contest local body elections and could become ward members.⁶⁴ In Chengai region some of the members of the Jesuit supported IACM took part in the local body elections.

Significant Changes

The Jesuits' involvement at the grassroots struggle among the marginalized brought the following significant changes:

Firstly, the centres entered into the life of reality of the oppressed and have attempted to raise the voice of the voiceless. Their initiatives helped the Dalits to get organized and emerge as a force to be reckoned with in social and political spheres. "They were part of the wider movement in search of new forms of social and political action through which the masses would move from the periphery to the centre of development and political process."⁶⁵ Thus Dalit communities moved from powerlessness to feel powerful and to bargain and negotiate with parties thus influencing voting pattern.

Secondly, grassroots level actions helped in bringing about changes in the dependent mentality of the downtrodden masses and in the fossilized socio-cultural practices. The Dalits in rural areas have now gained the courage to say "no" to the age old degrading menial jobs and to refuse to the high castes the right to settle their disputes and to reject the caste discrimination in private and public spheres.⁶⁶

⁶¹ *Madurai News Letter*, Dindigul, February 1982, p. 13.

⁶² *Minutes of the General Body Meeting*, U. Ma. U. I, Devakottai, 1984, p. 7.

⁶³ *Minutes of Post-Election Evaluation Reflection Meeting*, Devakottai, 5 January 1987, p. 2.

⁶⁴ Thomas Amirtham SJ, op. cit., p. 15.

⁶⁵ H. Volken, *Action Groups, Beginning or End of a Dream in Social Activists*, as quoted by Mary, "Grassroot Movements, Utopia or a Sign of Hope for the 1990s", *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XX, No. 115, January 1990, Kottayam, p. 33.

⁶⁶ P. Ramachandran, et. al, *Thrust Towards Community Organization, a Regional Report TASOSS*, Tiruchirappalli, 1989, p. 39. (For example, on 18 April, 1982, the PALMERA convened a meeting at Oriyur for the office bearers of the sixty village *sangams* and passed a few resolutions such as stopping of all social discriminations within the three groups of the Scheduled Castes, refusing to do any degrading traditional job. Cf. *Madurai News Letter*, Dindigul, May 1982.)

Thirdly, the Jesuits were instrumental in creating social space for these oppressed people in civil society through various activities. Therefore, the Jesuit centres can be said to have served as catalysts (along with other factors and forces) for the emergence of number of people's movements.

Fourthly, Dalit women and men contested local body elections and won especially in Ramnad, Chengalpattu, Kancheepuram, Villupuram, Sivagangai, Dindigul, and Virudunagar districts. These leaders, in general, have displayed greater integrity, commitment and social and cultural perspective in their local administration, in spite of strong pressure from caste and communal forces. It was also assisted by the strong Economic empowerment programmes including SHGs that enhanced not only their economic independence but also created an impact in socio-cultural and political spheres.

Finally, publications, documentaries, fact finding studies, serious researches on crucial issues from the centers have helped conscientize the marginalized and sensitize the oppressive groups toward the rights and constitutional provisions of the marginalized communities. They also helped in popularizing, publicizing and lobbying for Dalit causes.

Challenges

When the foundation of age long casteism was shaken due to such liberative initiatives, there were disturbances in the local area by caste people soon after any programme. Repercussion of this uprising began to show its ugly head in the form of intimidation and domestication of these poor untouchables.⁶⁷ The caste people threatened them and in some places they stopped the Dalits from their work. The very identification of the Jesuits with the oppressed led to confrontation with the established power structures. Here in this case too both the Jesuits as catalysts and the people emerging as a force against the oppressive structures had to face threats and challenges. They were targeted many a time. The observation of the National Commission for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in this regard was true. "Whenever the Dalits have tried to organize themselves or assert their rights, there has been a backlash from the feudal lords resulting in mass killings of the Dalits, gang rapes, looting and arson of Dalit villages."⁶⁸ False cases were registered against the people in the Court of law.

In addition to physical assault and police custody, another threat the Jesuits faced was rumours (of conversion) by the caste groups about the Jesuit teams. By spreading such rumours and false propaganda the oppressive forces wanted to demoralize the Jesuits and divert the attention of the people especially the members of the movements. The Jesuits also faced rejection and opposition from the Church circles as the caste Catholics wanted the status quo by perpetuating caste hierarchy in social system. The *Frontline* magazine said, "It was alleged that the Jesuit priest was more into social activism than in spiritual activities."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Madurai News Letter, Dindigul, June 1995, p. 17.

⁶⁸ National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, *Highlights of the Report of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for the years 1994 – 1995*, Government of India, New Delhi, 1997, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Nandagopal R. Menon, "Signs of the Times", *The Frontline*, Volume 22, Issue 12, Chennai, 4 June 2005, p. 59.

Conclusion

Tamil Nadu Jesuits made a definite option to work for the poor which was clearly articulated as 'preferential option for the poor.' History of their involvement in the grassroots struggle for justice and equality is an evolutionary process. It emerged from isolated acts of charity by individual Jesuits, developed into the project phase and finally took the shape of organized endeavour in the form of social action centres. Thus, the Jesuits in Tamil Nadu responded promptly and creatively to the signs of the times shifting its mission paradigm from 'charity' to 'justice.' The involvement of the Jesuits along with likeminded civil society groups facilitated the downtrodden Dalits to strengthen their struggle for equality and justice. Ultimately these initiatives attempted to translate the ideals and values of the Indian constitution into action.

