



## Discrimination of Dalit Christians: A Social Justice Perspective

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Available online at: [www.isca.in](http://www.isca.in)

Received 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2014, revised 5<sup>th</sup> January 2015, accepted 6<sup>th</sup> February 2015

### Abstract

*The region of Tamil Nadu which consists of multi dimensional character and multi-layered structure attracted the attention of many social scientists particularly in the issue of discrimination against Dalit Christians. In this region Conversion to Christianity took place among all the communities, However, conversation among Dalits took very widely (70% of the converted Christians are Dalits) in order to improve their socio-economic status in the society. The; studies conducted by various social scientists reveal that the change in religion significantly improved their economical and educational status of Dalits. But the caste discrimination systematically followed against the Dalits even after conversion to Christianity. The present study focused on such an issue took place in Eraiyur village of Villupuram distrcit, the Dalit Christians of about 150 families complained that they were discriminated against in offering worship at the Annai Shahaya Mary church at Eraiyur. Since Vanniyar Christians constituted majority, numbering about 2000 families, they go preference in all church functions and Dalit Christians were relegated to the background. This study provides a precise analysis of Dalit discrimination and demonstrates between the two communities in concerned with social justice perspective. In the concluding section explicit implications for future policy development are presented that are designed to ensure that Dalit Christians are not further discriminated.*

**Keywords:** Social Justice, Caste, Discrimination, Vanniyar, Dalit.

### Introduction

Social Justice is a concept that originates in philosophical talk however is broadly utilized as a part of both ordinary language and Social Sciences<sup>1</sup>. The concept analyzed by various social scientists like David Hume, John Rawl, John Stuart Mill, David Gauthier, Karl Marx, Von Hayek, David Miller and several others<sup>2</sup>. From their perspective social justice is a property of social framework appeared differently in relation to those frameworks that encourage arbitrary or unnecessary suffering, exploitation, abuse, tyranny, oppression and discrimination. However, they analyzed the concept of social justice in terms of racial differences, exploitation, power politics and gender inequality, but the situation in India is different viz., caste. The term social justice defined by social scientist in India as it connotes just and fair treatment to the people constituting a society<sup>3</sup>. Social justice has noteworthiness in the connection of Indian culture which is isolated into Castes and Communities and they make dividers and obstructions of superiority on the premise of prevalence and mediocrity such disparities posture serious risk to Indian government. In the preamble of our constitution also stated clearly that to secure to all citizens justice<sup>4</sup>. It means all citizens in India should be treated equally irrespective of caste, religion and gender. However still it continues as the reflection of traditional caste practices. The concept of social justice takes inside its compass the goal of uprooting imbalances and managing equivalent chances to all subjects in social, monetary and political issues<sup>5</sup>. One approach to comprehend social justice is to analyze social injustice acts.

Social injustice incorporates social issues that include the individual, the family, the community, the more extensive society and even the worldwide community. It alludes to unfair treatment or disparities that have come about because of casteism, racism, sexism, socio-economic, sexual orientations and other religionisms, all of which influence personal satisfaction. Social justice constitutes the right to equality and fairness<sup>6</sup>. Social injustice may be experienced in a variety of different ways, ranging from personal affronts to broader kinds of violations that are institutionally based. A social injustice may be a clear and overt inequity – such as denial of entry to a public road based on caste or religion or discrimination to avail some of the facilities provided by the institutions<sup>7</sup>.

Social injustice may emerge when there is an absence of acknowledgement and resistance for contrasts, for example, resilience for distinction in caste and social gathering, religion, socioeconomic status. These intolerances may prompt separation, bias, unfair treatment and now and again, interpersonal violence. Along these lines, social justice is controlled by social conditions, and by definition it incorporates ideas of equity, fairness and righteousness. Basically, social justice is a reaction to social conditions that deliver disparities in how individuals in any given society to gain access and rights to advantages and disadvantages<sup>8</sup>. To illustrate social injustices, we have chosen a two incident, one of which is Dalit funeral procession through the church's main street and another is to bring the car procession of Our Lady of Rosary through Dalit

residential area in Eraiyur village, Ulundurpet taluk, Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu. The main issue is that Dalit Christians funeral procession through the side street of the church and the Vanniyar Christians funeral procession through the main street of the church for ceremonial mass. The annual car procession of the church goes through the Main Street and Vanniyar residential area only. Why this discrimination and inequality taking place? To answer this question the study analyzed the actual situation by collecting information from church office, newspaper and police records as secondary sources. The views of the both groups were collected as primary data in order to understand the nature of the problem.

## Description of Eraiyur incident

Eraiyur is a Catholic Christian village situated near Ulundurpet in civil District of Villupuram, Tamil Nadu. It have one of the biggest parishes in the Archdiocese of Pondicherry - Cuddalore and has a population of nearly 16,000 people, of which Catholics belonging to the Vanniar caste group are about 12000, Dalit Christians about 2000 and the rest are Hindu Dalits<sup>9</sup>. Agriculture is the chief occupation of the Eraiyur village. The greater part of the agricultural land is claimed by Vanniars and the vast majority of the Dalits are landless farming workers relying on the Vanniars for their livelihood. As the decades progressed, discriminations on the basis of caste like separate feasts, separate Thumba, separate cemeteries, and separate places in the church - have been in practice. The Church that should have been the first to break this kind of discriminations has encouraged such violations of human dignity by mere

indifference. Indeed in the parsonage the Dalits have to stand and talk (or they need to sit separately) while the others could sit and converse with the priest<sup>10</sup>.

The case studies clearly signifies that from the period of the conversion until 1998 there is no incidents of open conflict took place between the upper caste Christians and Dalit Christians (case 1) in the Eraiyur village. However, discrimination by the upper caste against Dalit Christians is reported in the church prayer meetings for the long time, through vigorous preaching by the church authorities it disappeared. But the problem came in different form like practices in outside the church. The two main incidents happened have serious attention one is Dalit funeral procession through Main Street which leads to church (figure 1) and another problem is to bring the car procession of Our Lady of Rosary through Dalit residential area. Here the question is why this problem is not raised for the past 100 years, why now it becomes so serious. The problem is above mentioned two incidents or some other reason behind the scene is main focus of this study.

The dominant caste - Vanniars reside on both the sides of the main street which leading to church (see figure 1) and it has been the custom that this street was not used by the Dalits for marriage or for funeral procession (case 2). The local Dalits have been using the side road coming from their street up to the Church. As long as this tradition is observed, everything went well but problem started when there began.

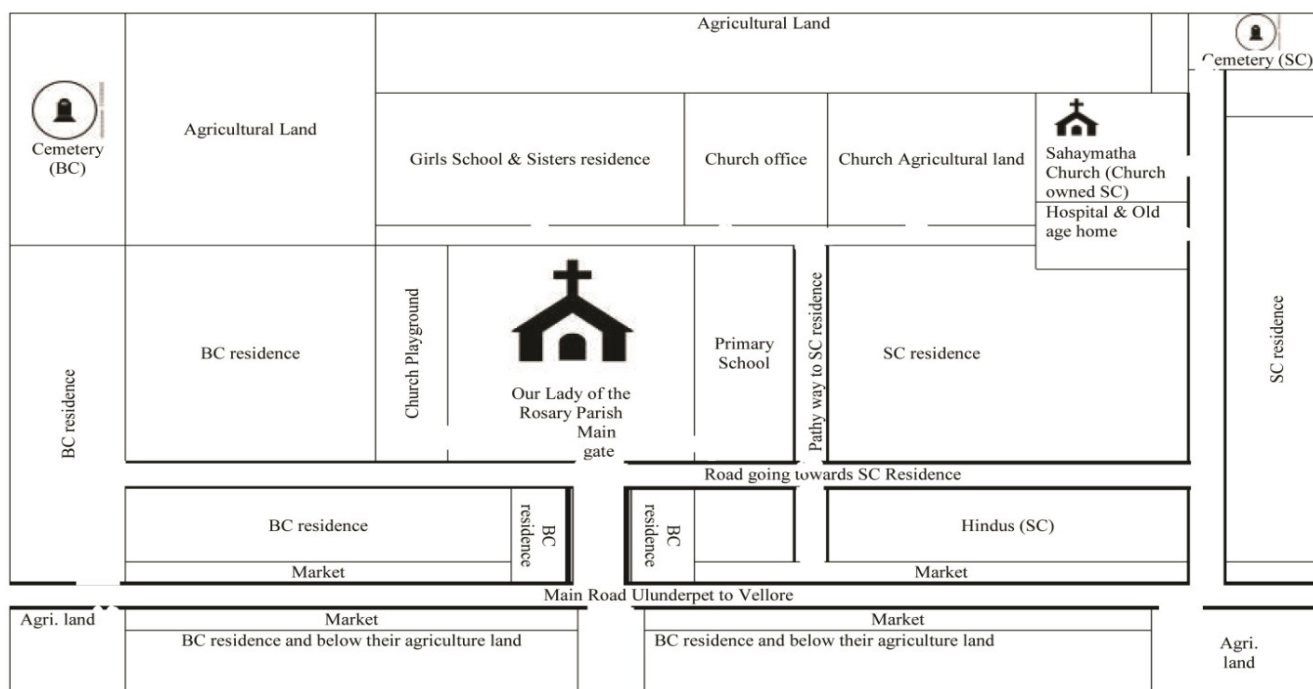


Figure-1  
Eraiyur village structure

a threat to this tradition. This is the main issue that has triggered the conflict between the two caste groups. But, the analysis of cases, interviews with church authorities reveals that the starting point of the issue is vanniya Christian boys teased the Dalit girls in the church playground. The incident observed by the Dalit youths, the fight between vanniya youths and Dalit youths provoked. The church authorities have not taken much seriously this issue and by influence of the political parties the problem becomes so serious. This incident becomes major issue for other consecutive problems.

Another subsequent incident occurred in February 15, 1999 that the mother of the Local Dalit priest passed away and a couple of days before the demise of his mother, she allegedly articulated to take her body through the Church Main road. At the point when, indeed such an endeavour was made on 16<sup>th</sup> February, the Dalit rank gathering sat on the primary road and obstructed the burial service parade, mishandled the Archbishop Messenger utilizing unsanitary dialect and assaulted the individuals who came in parade with stones. Communicating its failure to control the swarm that was getting more stunning, the police asked for the Archbishop to induce the Dalit to take the funeral procession on customary route. In the event that the Archbishop demanded taking the principle course, the police contended, there would be a peace issue. So the body was taken straight to the Dalit cemetery where the Archbishop commended the mass and covered the body.

There are various peace meeting and committee constituted to bring the normal situation in the village but all the efforts were unsuccessful and vanniya Christians were not ready to allow the Dalit funeral procession through the main street. In order to overcome from this situation, Dalit Christians constructed separate Parish dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Help (Sagaya Madha Chapel) and started functioning from 9<sup>th</sup> December 2007. A priest of Chenglepet diocese celebrated mass in the Sagayamadha Chapel, baptized two children and distributed First Holy Communion to a child, illegally, that is, without due permission. The Dalit Christians announced for themselves that Sagayamadha Chapel as their new parish Church. In meantime some of the Dalit catholic Christians changed their faith to Protestantism and started separate mass in Dalit residential area (case 1). Further this also created great disturbance among the Catholic Church authorities.

The same gathering met the Vicar General (V.G) in the Archbishop's House Pondicherry and requested for permission to organize a week by week Mass in Sagayamadha Chapel. The V.G prompted them to surrender their 'confrontationist approach' and guaranteed to do the needful in counsel with the Archbishop. He likewise asked them not to welcome priest any more from outside for ritualistic festivals and educated them to enlist the absolutions in the area Baptism Register with the Parish Priest. In any case they didn't change their ways and kept on inviting Priest from outside the bishopric and these Priests added fuel to flame inciting the rank gathering for a meeting.

Not fulfilled by the choice of the Archbishop, the Dalit gathering requires a "Quick unto Death" till the Archbishop authoritatively perceives the "Sagayamadha Parish" made by them as a separate church. A couple of them went to the degree of setting up notices against the Vanniya Christians and their pioneers in this manner inciting them to a meeting. The Eraiyur issue, which so far remained an issue of the local Church, has now come to be politicized. Posters convey slogans against the Archbishop and the caste gathering were glued on the dividers of the area church and in different spots amid the evening time.

The above episode is the straw that broke the camel's back that made a circumstance of precariousness and strain inciting the displeasure of the vanniya caste gathering. Which prompts an attack of annoyance and feeling, they hurried to the lanes of the Dalit individuals and assaulted and created substantial harms to their homes and properties. Sudden episode of riots raised and aggregate calamity everywhere. The circumstances got to be wild and police needed to mediate with lathi charge. At last the police turned to firing in which two youngsters from the Vanniya standing gathering fell victims (case 5) and many others from both sides got injured and have been admitted in the hospital. The village was kept under curfew<sup>11</sup>.

Emulating the uproar hung on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2008, a Peace gathering was held with the delegates of the Vanniya and Dalit Christians. The gathering was managed by Honorable Minister for Higher Education and Superintendent of Police, Villupuram District, alongside Revenue Officials took an interest in the gathering. A few ministers speaking to the Archbishop likewise took an interest in it. It was proposed and acknowledged in the gathering that the issue of a different area for the Dalit Christians at Eraiyur was to be considered in the Senate gathering of the Archdiocese of Pondicherry – Cuddalore to be hung on thirteenth March 2008. The Diocese agreed to conduct prayers at Sagayamadha Chapel once in a week on Monday.

The Archdiocesan Senate gathering was hung on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2008 in the Archbishop's home. It was collectively chosen in the gathering that the Dalit Christians at Eraiyur would not be conceded a separate parish on caste basis, as it would go against the spirit of the Gospel message and the standards of the Church. A Committee comprising of six priests including the Vicar General and two laypeople was constituted. This Committee was to visit Eraiyur on 15<sup>th</sup> March, hold converses with five representatives of the Vanniya group and the Dalit group respectively, meets and comforts the influenced gatherings on both sides. It was their obligation likewise to research the purposes for these untoward occurrences and propose to the Archbishop the well-suited measures to be taken. The meeting of the Archbishop of Pondicherry – Cuddalore along with the priests took place on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2008 discussed the issue of Eraiyur village and unanimously resolved that: i. The church road, namely the main street prompting to the Parish church at Eraiyur, town is to be uninhibitedly utilized by all the Catholic devoted, regardless of rank, for purposes of marriage,

burial service and other regular festivals. ii. The Eraiyur Parish church should have one common burial service car (thoomba) kept in church premises under the authority of the church and is to be utilized by all the Catholic devoted without any caste discrimination. iii. Membership for the parochial feast is to be gathered from all the Catholic families irrespective of caste. iv. Notwithstanding the standard route followed so far, the Sagayamatha car procession will be further stretched through the Kurumbar street upto the Assisi Hospital. v. The church should establish common cemetery which is open to all the Catholics regardless of caste.

These resolutions were executed from March 20<sup>th</sup> 2008 by the implementation advisory committee constituted by the Archbishop. Be that as it may they were just at the level of declaration that was ambiguous about their execution. Genuine execution at the parish and village levels had not been endeavored. Despite what might be expected, a portion of the endeavors in the past were even foiled by priests belonging to upper castes. For instance, some Dalit priests did not allowed to read the pastoral letter of Archbishop Casmir of Madras-Mylapore.

Another major incident of discrimination took place in the annual car procession which carrying a statue of sagayamatha is very popular and important festival at Eraiyur catholic village. Every year the festival will be conducted in the month of May. The car procession normally goes through the residence of Vanniyar Christian community and it was in practice for the long time. When the issue of using Main Street arises simultaneously Dalit community demands that the car procession should goes through their streets, but Vanniyar community highly protested. After long-time peace committee meeting and government orders the Parish Council then announced that the car festival will be celebrated from May 21 to 30, 2010 (see case 2). The first day (21<sup>st</sup> May 2010) was allotted to the Dalits. When the Dalits gathered in large numbers for the celebrations, only one of the four festive cars was given by the Parish Council, and the car looked unattractive as there was no decoration. Contrary to the custom, the Church was not specially illuminated with colorful bulbs for the festival, and the statue was not provided for the car. The Dalits therefore brought the statue of Sagayamatha from their chapel and conducted the car procession through the traditional route as well as the streets in the Dalit settlement. To the utter dismay of the Dalits, large-size colourful posters were pasted at Eraiyur and the neighbouring villages on the following day, announcing the village festival on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2008. This deeply irked the Dalits, and they refused to participate in the 'village festival'<sup>12</sup>. The discrimination continues in spite of all govt. order and peace meetings.

In Eraiyur the requests of the Dalits that the main road prompting to the church be tossed open to the Dalits, that there be a common thumba and a common cemetery and that the parochial feast be celebrated by all the groups are not shameful

requests. They didn't expect any glories from the church authorities, however their desire reasonable and equal treatment in all the activities of the church (see case 3). Thus in no way the Church has genuinely endeavored to help the Dalits in the reclamation of their fairness and reasonable treatment. These individuals, who structure most of the Christian populace, as they get to be more mindful of their hardships, feel more disappointed and frustrated at the Church. It is dismal that the individuals who ought to have been the champions of human rights and nobility are truth be told the ardent guardians of caste and communal discriminations.

### **Case studies on Dalit and Vanniyar Christian community of Eraiyur Village**

**Case-1:** Sahaya Mary, (name changed) aged 62 farm laborer from Dalit community, visiting the Parish Church since childhood. Her parents also converted Christians. Her husband also agricultural laborer and they have two children (one son and a daughter). Her son is working as teacher in the primary school run by the Church. She attends all the prayers and functions from her childhood. She said that, initially we are sitting separately on one side of the Church, called as "Para salai". Further she said that we are not allowed to walk on the main street leading to the Church. Instead we have to use a side street that led to the Church gate. We are not allowed to bury the dead bodies in the common cemetery. Our burial ground is beyond the village and only can access through broken path. In addition, the funeral car parked inside the Church building can be used only by Vanniyars. She also added that, "We were told not to touch any upper caste person, not to get too close to them, not to talk to them". She also told that under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme we were employed as daily laborers to clean and deepen the pond. Close to the work spot the only water source available for drinking purpose was the wells owned by them. During the work while we tried to draw water from the wells they stopped us and refused access to water. We were not allowed to consume our food under a shaded tree which belonged to them also. We also requested the local Catholic priests to have separate Church but it also rejected on the ground that a village can have only one Parish Church. She also told that, if water will not come in their street means they cannot go for the upper caste street and take water. Finally she told that, we should obey to the upper caste Christians always. If we do not obey to them, the problem will come. There are no much major problems between Vaniyars and us for a long period until 1998. A minor problem in the year 1998 for taking the dead body procession via main road and a major attack by Vanniyar community on us took place in 2009 for displayed posters to claim the equality in the church and Sahaya Matha car to proceed via our residential area. After the investigation by the govt. authorities, police officials, church committee and village committee, the problem is now solved. The festivals and daily activities in the church going on peacefully. But the relationship between us and the Vanniyar Christians is not like earlier because of the court case had filed

against the Vanniyar community against SC/ST (prevention of atrocities) Act, 1989 for discriminating us from Church activities and participation in festivals.

**Case-2:** Mr. Antony, (name changed) aged 60, is working as a sweeper in the Church. He told that he is attending the all the Church activities from his childhood. He also accepted that there has been caste discrimination after the conversion to Christianity also. He told that, after the violence the village festival came in the month of May 2009. Previously the Church will not collect any money from our community. But this time they told us to collect the money with concession. But we took as a prestige issue and we mobilized Rs. 18000 and handed over to the Parish Council. This is the first time they accepted our money and it gave a feel that we have a right to participate in the village festival. They announced that the feast will be celebrated for ten days from May 21 to 30. The first day was allotted to us. When we gathered in big number to celebrate the festival, out of four festive cars only one was given to us by the Parish Council. The car looked unattractive as there was no decoration. He also added that the Church, which was specially decorated with colorful bulbs, did not light up the bulbs. A statue was not provided to be placed in the car. So we brought the statue of Sagaya Matha from our chapel and conducted the car procession through the traditional route as well as the streets of our settlement. Further he told that the next day large size colorful posters were pasted in the village and in the neighboring villages, announcing the village festival to be celebrated on May 30 and 31. Finally he told that this irked them and they refused to participate in the village festival.

**Case-3:** Mr. Joseph (name changed) aged 35, who graduated from Madras University, and he is a Dalit activist. His parents are converted Christians. He told that he has faced many prejudice as a Schoolboy. It gave him a thought that in future he should fight against the injustice, which presence in his village. He told that after his education, he came to village to prepare his community to fight against the injustice. But it created the tension in the village and he was forced to move away from his village. He is so angry that although the constitution has banned "Untouchability" it continues to be practiced in different ways in his village. He told that the public offices like Panchayat office, Electricity, Telephone are located in their settlement. He stated, "Every time with fear and anxiety we enter these offices". Further he told that providing education will not change the situation. He also told that, we are always suppressed in the village especially during the festival times. He added a statement "There is no big change after we came to Christianity. We have very good names; we read Bible and got to Church instead of temples". Finally, he asked a question to us, "In a demographic country is it wrong to use the common road?"

**Case-4:** Mr. Arokiadas (name changed) aged 67 a retired teacher from the Vanniar community, shared his unhappiness with the Dalit Christians. His wife is not working and children are well settled (two sons, one son is working in a bank and another son

working in software company in Bangalore) and they married. He told he has ancestral property about 5 acres and cultivating sugarcane. He employed Dalit Christians in his land. He told that previously they are not behaving like this. They will obey all our orders. But now it becomes different. He too added, we never treated the Dalit Christians as equal to us. They should sit separately in the Church. They should not walk in the main street which leads to Church. Further he explained that our community has separate funeral van and graveyard. But they do not have funeral van but they have separate graveyard too. When he spoke about the festival, he told, "We cannot allow them to have two cars and make decorations as we are doing because it will give a same status". He too expressed that at any cost, we do not want to treat them equal to us. Further he told that we are the majority of the population in the village. So, we have the right to enjoy the privileged status in the village. He too expressed his views about the "Sahaya Matha Church" which was built by Dalits. He told that the Parish did not approve their Church and it should not allow also. Finally, he told that they should know their place in the society and according to that only they have to live.

**Case-5:** Mr. Selvaraj (name changed) aged 28; working as an active member of their community based association belongs to a Vanniyar Caste. He told that all the problems in the village were due to Dalits only. Further he told that we are living in one-side of the road and the other side of the road they are living. In the festival time they told that the festive-car should be extended up to their street. But, traditionally there is no practice like that. But they made a lot of protest and from the Collector office the order came, it has to be extended. Keeping in mind, that the other-side of the road our people also there, we agreed to extended. But, it happened in the left side of the Church. After this, our people those who are living in the right side of the Church, they too argued that the festive car should be extended more in their side too. It becomes major issue which leads to the conflict. He told with anger, "When the Police came and fired, it was our two people who died". So it increased the volume of the conflict. Further he stated that, "Caste is more important than religion. Even if it is for only an hour we will live and die as Vanniyars".

**Case-6:** Miss. Jancy (name changed) aged 33; a graduate in the discipline of Physics also belongs to the Vanniyar community. She has two daughters those who are going to School. Her husband is working in a private company. She told that "We have allowed them to use the road. They are creating the trouble". When I asked how in a free country one group could dictate to others on the use of a public road. She replied that, "I don't know. It's been like this...but we have not allowed them". She further told that the peace of the village was collapsed by them. Now a day, we are allowing them to sit together with us in the Church and use the main road. Yet they construct a new Church and creating problems. When I asked about the common funeral van and graveyard where all Christians irrespective of their past Hindu caste identity can be buried, she replied, "it will take long time for a common graveyard".

## Conclusion

In this concluding section I wish to constructively and tentatively reflect on social injustice happened to Dalit Christian community in Eraiyur, Tamil Nadu. When religious conversion took place among Dalit Communities to Christianity due to extreme discrimination faced in the Hindu-based society since conversion to another religion did not change their outcaste status within Hindu-based society. But more insulting and hurting was fact that caste discrimination also found a foothold in the Christian community<sup>13</sup>. Indian Christian from upper caste communities worked hard to keep caste practices within the church. Thus, social relations, outside the church, continued to function according to the traditional caste conversion that was well established<sup>14</sup>. When pressed to change such caste-based social practices within the Christian community there was open revolt by upper caste Christian converts. Two incidents are quoted to support this assertion in the previous section.

Dalit entry into the new symbolic vision of Christianity did not eventuate into a real world of equality, freedom and fair treatment (case 3). There were, however, theological resources in the newly embraced religion that could be used to construct such an alternative worldview.

Further more social equity in India is the result of social injustice play in our caste system and social structure is the wellspring head for social injustice<sup>15</sup>. It is tragic that even sixty eighth years after freedom social equity is still an inaccessible dream not within the reach of the masses<sup>16</sup>. Social justice is not characterized in the Indian Constitution however it is relative idea taking in its wings the time and circumstances, the individuals their backwardness, hard work, blood and tears. Notwithstanding, the Constitution of India acquires a renaissance the idea of social equity, correspondence and decency when it weaves a trinity of it in the preface, the central rights, and the mandate standards of state approaches and this trinity is "the center of the duties to the social unrest"<sup>17</sup>.

**Policy and recommendation:** Based on these facts, the following policy measures should be framed and effectively implemented to bring equal and fair treatment of Dalits in Eraiyur:

Local governments should take necessary steps to ensure the abolishment of discriminatory practice of "untouchability", prevent caste-motivated abuse, and prosecute State and private actors who are responsible for such practices or abuses. Moreover, in compliance with article 46 of the Constitution, the government authorities is encouraged to implement, inter alia, affirmative measures to advance and protect these groups.

The full implementation of the 1989 Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, the 1995 Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes Rules (Prevention of Atrocities) and the 1993 Employment of Manual Scavengers Act.

The local governments should continue its efforts to carry out comprehensive public education campaigns to prevent and combat caste-based discrimination.

Local governments should provide civil remedies in the event of violations; ensure that procedures are simplified so that responses are appropriate, timely, child-friendly and sensitive to victims; include provisions to protect from discrimination and reprisals those who expose violations; and vigorously pursue enforcement.

Local governments should take specific measures to raise awareness both among the public and among government officials, teachers, and media practitioners on discrimination based on accessing public places, road, such as through internal training and public campaigns. Areas of attention should include not only the print and broadcasting media but also alternative avenues of information dissemination, such as local oral information through theatre, songs, etc.

Local governments should, wherever necessary, review or enact libel, slander, and hate speech laws to explicitly prohibit and punish libelous and slanderous speech or speech inciting discrimination, hatred, or violence based on work and descent.

Local government should investigate all alleged cases in which members of affected communities have been denied certain facilities or access equal to that received by other people and heavy punishment accorded to those discriminating the Dalits from accessing or availing common facilities.

The media, religious, instructive and cultural institutions and different parts of civil society, ought to help revising the spread of negative pictures of influenced groups, and attempt to manufacture the limit of those groups, and in addition perceive the commitments of influenced groups to the advancement of society.

Local government ought to make all important moves to guarantee equivalent access to legal solutions for affected groups, including the provision of lawful support or other kinds of support to public interest organizations representing the interests of those subject to discrimination.

The above mentioned policy measures should be implemented by the state in compliance with church authorities in order to bring social justice to Dalit community not only in the case of Eraiyur but wherever the Dalit discriminated on the basis of caste irrespective of religion.

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