

The Fights of the Forsaken Kings:
Caste Conglomeration, Heroism, and Sovereignty in
Contemporary South India

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ABSTRACT

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This ethnographic and archival study offers insight into Dalit identity politics, Tamil ethno-nationalism, and affective understandings and experiences of sovereignty in contemporary Tamil Nadu, South India. It is an in-depth exploration of the recent history and present moment of inter-caste conflict that plagues Tamil Nadu, despite the fact that it is India's most urbanized state, and among its wealthiest and most industrially developed. Over the course of the past thirty years, spectacular and brutal murders, riots, and police repression have regularly characterized the relationships between groups of politically affiliated individuals we call castes. I historicize and contextualize such incidents, tracking the changing phenomenology of caste as it intersects with the gendered politics of Tamil ethnic identity.

In order to do so, I examine the formation of caste conglomerations, which I define as intentionally incorporated political bodies attempting to situate themselves relationally in the context of rapid demographic and technological changes, and the breakdown of formal, intergenerational models of caste differentiation and hierarchy. The practices of intercaste relations in Tamil Nadu, are not disappearing, but are asserting themselves in new and sometimes violent ways as the economic realities and inhabitable spaces of many formerly distinguishable castes become increasingly alike. Responding to the anxiety of disintegrating hierarchy, what were once localized, relatively independent castes are uniting as political bodies that attempt to identify themselves in relation to each other, competing mimetically in a cycle of recursive opposition.

I focus on two increasingly visible caste conglomerations – the Devendras and the Thevars – who have been embroiled in a violent conflict in Tamil Nadu since the late 1950s. The recent experiences of the Devendras who are officially classified as Dalit (“untouchable”), and the Thevars who were once socioeconomically dominant in much of Southern Tamil Nadu, exemplify the changing socioeconomic dynamics that foster caste conglomeration. Although the ancestors of many landowning castes ruled over the laborers they relegated to untouchability, their recent economic decline relative to the “untouchables” has unsettled what were once clearly demarcated social hierarchies. A new and unstable economy of collective rank is developing to fill this vacuum, as the self-fashioned leaders of caste conglomerations construct their identities. The process of caste conglomeration dissolves antecedent boundaries of caste even as it reconstitutes castes as larger and therefore more powerful groups, thus simultaneously demonstrating both the fluidity and intractability of caste logics.

The identitarian claims of caste conglomerations are carved into the new urban spaces they inhabit with visual and auditory signifiers, which are heightened during memorial celebrations of recently remembered caste history. Caste heroes who embody the often conflicting Tamil masculine ideals of selfless courage and refined civility play an important role in such acts of representing history through which caste conglomerations proclaim the dignity they are owed in the present through the glories of their past.

I explore this process as it is energized by the antagonistic power struggle between the Devendras and the Thevars. The still tenuously united Devendras fight back against their relegation to Dalit status by claiming that they have been misclassified in the caste order, and that they are not, in fact, Dalits. Instead, they are the original people, and therefore rightful

rulers, of the Tamil country. The Thevars who are a slightly older conglomeration of three previously endogamous but similarly ranked castes, counter such claims with their own claims to Tamil sovereignty, contributing to the unintended fallout of Tamil ethno-nationalism, or Dravidianism.

Dominating state-level politics since the middle of the twentieth century, Dravidianism has attempted to configure a united non-Brahmin identity, which might have dissolved the boundaries between the vast majority of Tamil castes. It has instead resulted in widespread, caste-based competition over Tamil identity. The Devendras are increasingly vying for power through the idiom of Tamil identity, distancing themselves from Dalits (themselves an enormous caste conglomeration founded on the disavowal of caste), despite the Dalits' electoral success. In tracing the Devendras' strategy, my dissertation locates the boundary of pan-Indic Dalit political identity, suggesting that the Dalit category inadequately describes the experiences of formerly "untouchable" groups who are drawn, like many others, to the powerful calls of ethnicity.

Such struggles of caste, entangled with ethno-nationalism, demonstrate the yearning for sovereignty that has arisen alongside the distrusted state. The parties and caste organizations of the Devendras and Thevars, like those of other rapidly multiplying caste conglomerations, reflect the desires of the disempowered, and operate as parastate authorities offering material benefits, collective pride, and transactions with government agents, which are troubled by the conglomerations' need for legitimation that only the government can offer. These complicated processes of negotiating new and relatively unstable economies of power drive the questions of my dissertation, which unfold through the stories of Tamil men who experience the forces of caste identity and the government in their everyday lives.

Caste conglomeration is not another example of Sanskritization through which castes ascend the social ladder by emulating those above them. Instead, the process I examine is competitive, mimetic, and recursive, presupposing the relative equality brought about by economic changes and by the promises of the democratic nation-state. While one generation ago, there were stark differences between landowning castes and the laboring castes now known as Devendras, today, Devendras have the resources to compete in terms of their public visibility, levels of education, and historical claims. In fact, their assertions are so resounding that Thevars sometimes follow Devendras in their strategic calls for recognition. I do not, however, discount the brutalities of Thevar violence against Devendras, but instead aim to shed light on the social context of such acts. It is the profound anxiety of growing similarity, rather than difference, that erupts in the excess of violence.

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Notes on Transliteration

Many Tamil words were transliterated following the spellings and diacritical marks standardized by the University of Madras Tamil Lexicon. However, words that already have recognized Anglicized forms were transliterated accordingly. Many proper nouns, such as personal names, caste names, names of parties, and names of organizations are Anglicized with some regularity by the Tamil communities that employ them, and I have adhered to their standards. For example, I use the more common Tamil spelling “Immanuvel” to signify the name that is usually written Emmanuel in English.

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**Changing Contours of Caste Practice and Identity:
Scholarship, Politics, and Tension in the Tamil Country
Chapter One**

Paramakudi's central bus station vibrates with the blaring of horns, rings with the high-pitched, rhythmic cries of salespeople, and bustles in the cloud of dust kicked up by the turning of wheels and the shuffling of sandals and bare feet. Busy from early morning until late at night, it is one of the center points of commerce in the small city located in Southeastern Tamil Nadu. Individuals from a wide range of caste and class backgrounds mingle there to buy and sell all types of inexpensive goods and "gift items", consume hot and cold beverages and snacks, and arrive from and depart to other parts of Tamil Nadu. Due to the travel that my research entailed, I came to know the bus station and the small shops around it well. I was there one evening perusing a row of kiosks stocked with "branded" electronic equipment of questionable authenticity and "foreign items", such as biscuits, deodorants, and colognes that had been imported from various Gulf countries.

In the midst of small talk with a Muslim shopkeeper, I overheard commonplace bargaining over the price of a cellphone escalate into a thinly veiled threat. A tall young man (in his 20s) stood in front of an open kiosk facing a shopkeeper. He held his fist parallel to his shoulder, and shook it according to the cadence of his speech. He demanded: "Sār, what, sār [Tamilized version of the English word "sir"]? Give me a good price? For what are you making the price such a rip off?" Similar to the initial position of the arm poised to slam a hammer or gavel, the young man's gesture falls into the Tamil symbolic order of bodily comportment. The commonplace gesture is an expansive hyper-demonstrative sign that adds emphasis to a vocalized question. It can also replace the use of speech in the interrogative, itself serving as the

question. As in the case of the young man, the gesture may also indicate indignity and the sardonic tone of an obviously rhetorical question.

The young man's indication of his frustration quickly slipped into a display of anger as his voice rose. Shaking his fist faster and furrowing his brow, the young man insisted, "What, sār? That price is such a rip off. It's not ok. You're asking too much." The shopkeeper replied, "No sār, it's a fixed price. I can't lower it." At that point the young man paused and raised his eyes to meet those of the shopkeeper. He clenched his jaw and said a little more quietly, "Nān Andipuram, dā" (literally, "I am Andipuram, dude"). The shopkeeper removed the cellphone from the counter, turned his back to the young man, and pretended to attend to the shelves behind him. The young man stormed off, back onto the main street, as nearby shopkeepers, shoppers, and I turned to watch. Buses whizzed by, honking their horns and blaring their music, and the other shopkeeper and I returned to our conversation without commenting on the scene that we had quietly witnessed.

By reflecting on this intercaste exchange in the bazaar, we gain insight into understandings and subtle invocations of caste identity in the everyday lives of Tamil men in urban areas. The shopkeeper was Muslim, a religious identity that stripped him of caste according to the dictates of Hindu orthodoxy, but that in practice operated as an endogamous unit with close political affiliations, much like modern-day caste conglomerations. I found that Muslims in Paramakudi were afforded a relatively high status evidenced by the ways they were respectfully addressed, the absence of slander against them, and the admiration that they were afforded on account of their successful businesses.

The young man, by contrast, hailed from a caste that is now referred to as Dalit (literally, “crushed”), but that used to be counted among the many “untouchable” castes.¹ He is a Paraiyar, one among millions of people who have historically been subjected to such extreme levels of social alienation, discrimination, and abuse that the English word pariah descended from their namesake. While there have been moments of Paraiyar rebellion in recent (and probably in more distant) history (Gough 1969), the socioeconomic conditions to which they have been subjected have prevented them from gaining any kind of sustained collective power until about the past fifty years. As Surgeon-Major W. R. Cornish wrote in the 1871 census, “the British administration has freed them, as a community, from the yoke of hereditary slavery, and from the legal disabilities under which they suffered; but they still remain in the lowest depths of social degradation. The Christian missionaries, to their undying honour be it said, have, as a rule, persevered in breaking through the time-honoured custom of treating the Paraiya as dirt” (Cornish 1871, 201). Even more damningly, as Rupa Viswanathan argues, the Paraiyars were entrenched in a system of slavery maintained by the collusion of colonial rulers and wealthy landlords (2014). At the same time as missionaries claimed to be liberating the Paraiyars, they were actually helping shackle them to a system of slavery that would ensure their impoverishment for generations to come (ibid.).

Although he was relatively poor by Paramakudi’s standards, such was not the condition of the frustrated young man in the bazaar who had not done a day of agricultural labor in his life. He was, at least theoretically, free to enter the economy of Paramakudi or of any other town to which he could make his way. He probably would have faced careful and underhanded discrimination on the basis of his caste, though he could also have hidden his caste identity in

¹ As I discuss below, Dalit is a pan-Indic term that was popularized by B.R.O. Ambedkar. It has Sanskrit roots, and literally means “crushed”. It is widely used to refer to castes throughout India that were formerly classified as untouchable.

order to attempt to avoid such discrimination. The shopkeeper, for example, may have known or assumed the young man's Paraiyar identity by his appearance, or from the awareness of families that small city residents often gain through word of mouth or prior interaction. Whether he knew the young man's caste or not, the shopkeeper was initially amenable to doing business with him. When the young man approached the shopkeeper aggressively, as is common in bargaining contexts in Tamil Nadu, the shopkeeper responded respectfully, acknowledging the young man's equal status by calling him sār. The shopkeeper's response that he could not (rather than would not) lower the price was also well aligned with the etiquette of bargaining in Tamil Nadu.

Though it is not free of discrimination or favoritism on the basis of caste, the commercial sphere in which profit rules is the most caste blind area of public life; perhaps, we could think of its vision of caste identity as blurry rather than blind. Caste identity did not necessarily regulate the moment of bargaining in the bazaar that I recounted above, but was, instead brought into the exchange by the young man when he said, "I am Andipuram, dude". In other words, "I am from Andipuram, dude."

A poor neighborhood in Paramakudi, Andipuram is inhabited primarily by Paraiyars to whom the young man was referring. He threatened by deploying his Dalit identity, which afforded him the power of the tough guy, of the rogue who would, in collaboration with his caste fellows, resort to violence. In many parts of Tamil Nadu, Dalit masculinity has come to be identified with rage and unbridled violence, with lawlessness and sheer force. While the fear of the male, Dalit body is partially rooted in the insecurity and chauvinism of the higher castes who fear the "contamination" of their bloodlines, it has also risen out of Tamil Dalit political discourse in which heroism and valor have been idealized.

While the Muslim shopkeeper refused to acquiesce to the young man's subtle threat in this instance, in other moments, especially in those moments in which he might encounter a group of young Dalit men, the shopkeeper would not be so quick to turn his back on them. The fears of shopkeepers of many castes and creeds are clearly demonstrated when men they consider Dalit gather for the annual memorial celebration of their local caste leader every September in Paramakudi. In the days leading up to the celebration, the other castes of the town seem to vanish, making themselves invisible until the festivities are over.

Such fears are not, however, awoken solely by Dalit gatherings. Instead, the ceremonial meetings of many Tamil non-Brahmin castes stir up angst among outsiders because they are platforms for loud assertions of passion, militancy, and rebellious power against "the establishment". The iconography announcing such events oftentimes features men dressed in the garb of warriors of the past and present, carrying weapons ranging from sickles and scythes to assault rifles to handguns. Densely and repetitively placed in the areas in which caste ceremonies are held, such icons initiate claims to sovereignty over space, which reach their climax at the loud and flashy events when the shots and booms of firecrackers and fireworks, and the blaring songs that recount the glories of caste history through heavily amplified speakers constitute the aggressive soundscapes. Giving faces to the signifiers of caste aggression are men, usually in droves, who dance with abandon. Shirtless men, men in matching t-shirts, men with color-coordinated bandanas wrapped around their heads dance to the rhythm of the big drums that they beat. Men shout into microphones as they raise and shake their fists, eliciting impassioned cheers from the audience. Such unbridled energy sometimes exceeds its own intentions, resulting in acts of violence against outsiders and against the police who are almost always deployed to maintain

order at such events. It is not too much of a surprise then that outsiders tend to avoid the celebrations of other castes, receding from the spaces in which they arise.

Tamil Masculinity and Caste Politics: Populism and Power

What is more surprising is the ubiquity and uniformity of such caste-based functions, which have rapidly multiplied over the course of the past thirty to forty years. My dissertation historicizes assertions of caste power that are loudest at such functions, understanding them as caste politics regardless of whether or not they officially engage with electoral democracy. I explore Tamil politics writ large as a fundamentally gendered configuration, which has shaped what it means to be a Tamil man today. I argue that Tamil ethno-nationalism, which arose in the early half of the twentieth century, precipitated the idealization of *vīram* – heroism and limitless bravery – as a defining feature of Tamil masculinity. Responding to their relegation to the periphery of the linguistic, cultural, and geographic consolidation of the nascent Indian nation, Tamils turned to *vīram* to fight back, and to revitalize the imagined “retrotopia” (Prasad 2014, 19) in which they were unquestionably sovereign.

I turn to political theorist Ernesto Laclau in order to understand Tamil ethno-nationalism, demonstrating that it follows the logic of populist politics, constituted by the alienation of “the people” from power (2002). Such perpetual alienation energizes the ideal of *vīram* as unyielding aggression, a kind of hyper-masculinity always close to the threshold of violent excess. In the Tamil country, which is always in some sense marginal to the Indian nation buttressed by *Hindutva*, the Tamil people have become endowed with *vīram* that persists as the prevailing affective idiom of Tamil political mobilization.²

² Literally, “Hinduness”, *Hindutva* is the predominant form of right-wing Hindu nationalism that increasingly characterizes the rhetoric and practice of India’s central government.

Vīram was not, however, the only ideal that developed along with the imagined past of the glorious Tamil kingdom that had been pulled into decline by malevolent outsiders. Prestige, honor, and agrarian civility, as described by Anand Pandian (2009) were also demanded of men to supplement their heroism with established authority, with power for which they did not have to fight. Such models of masculinity were more easily aligned with understandings of modernity, which were becoming increasingly predominant as Tamils entered the world of electoral democracy, and stepped onto the stage of global capitalism. The intersecting and sometimes clashing ideals of Tamil masculinity created a profound tension for Tamil men, which continues to bear down on them in the domain of politics.

While the tension at the heart of Tamil masculinity troubles the world of Tamil politics in general, it is particularly pronounced in the domain of caste politics in which men transact in a competitive representational economy rooted in valued ideals, such as vīram, honor, prestige, and agrarian civility, which have come to define Tamil-ness itself. In effect then, the competition between many non-Brahmin castes manifests as a fight over who is authentically and truly Tamil. Various castes depict themselves as supremely Tamil by asserting the value of vīram and demonstrating the prestige and authority that they claim to already have.³

Such symbolic battles are fought on the ground of new intercaste spaces that have grown rapidly over the course of the past fifty years. In places like Paramakudi, caste ceremonies are fights over visibility, claims to space, and, importantly, expressions of the desire to be recognized. Growing towns are not spaces of utter anonymity and individual freedom in which the old patterns of exchange, physical contact, and labor relations fully disintegrate, but are instead spaces in which the dynamics of social hierarchy are being perpetually negotiated and

³ The purity and primordial power of the Tamil language, feminized as the divine mother of her people, is not the focus of my dissertation, and has been explored by others (Ramaswamy 1997; Bate 2009). The language is, however, regularly deployed as an index of prestige, honor, and respectability.

renegotiated. Caste as social hierarchy, as a system of ranked power, is undergoing change, though it remains a prominent part of everyday life.

Over the course of two years living in Paramakudi (2012-2014), I did not observe the practices of caste rank in patterns of exchange, ritual performances, or explicit regulations on movement and consumption. The classic examples of separate cups for Dalits at tea stands and restrictions on the usage of public facilities, such as water sources, were not in practice. Older, easily recognizable economies of caste hierarchy had thus dissolved in Paramakudi as they have in many other places in India, opening up space for the new and unstable economies that I examine in this dissertation. In today's Paramakudi, all castes move through the town to engage in commerce, and to attend the same temples.⁴ While neighborhoods are divided on the basis of caste with a few exceptions, intercaste mingling prevails on the surface of public life.⁵

New and unsettled practices of intercaste interaction ensure that caste relations are tense, and that caste-based violence remains a regularized part of life in Paramakudi. In fact, Ramanthapuram District, in general, and Paramakudi, in particular, are notorious for intercaste violence, clashes with the police, and rioting. Whenever I discussed my plans to live in the district with friends and acquaintances from other parts of the state, they described the area as “backwards” and “dangerous”, and advised me to rethink my decision. I did not, however, find myself entrenched in the dangerous competitions and conflicts between castes, which are at the heart of my research.

My observations of and conversations with the people of Paramakudi, in addition to the archival material I examined, led me to believe that intercaste conflict in the region since the

⁴ Somewhat ironically, church parishes rather than Hindu temples in Paramakudi are sharply distinguished on the basis of caste. As Corinne G. Dempsey demonstrates, caste consciousness is common in Christian practice in contemporary India (2002).

⁵ Caste-based divisions between neighborhoods were not complete. Some houses, especially those on the outskirts of particular neighborhoods transcended the tacit boundaries of caste.

mid-twentieth century is largely due to rapid demographic changes that have upended forms of caste domination that long characterized the region. The shifting balance of power between two of the areas' most populous castes, the Thevars and the formerly untouchable Devendras, both of whom I discuss below, has precipitated an increase in violent clashes since the middle of the twentieth century. Comprised of various subcastes, which used to be endogamous, the Thevars count the area's regional kings amongst their ancestors. Not surprisingly, Thevars once held significant proportions of the area's land, which was worked with the help of Devendra laborers who Thevar landowners ensured were at the bottom of the region's socioeconomic system.

But the economic realities of Southeastern Tamil Nadu, and of most of India, have changed. Obviously, the Thevar lineage of kings has been disenfranchised. What is more, agriculture, which was never particularly lucrative in Ramanathapuram District, has all but died in the wake of changes ushered in by the Green Revolution and by more recent social welfare policies. While on average Thevars are still wealthier and hold more political power than their formerly untouchable neighbors, their unquestionable and absolute domination of the area surrounding Paramakudi has declined significantly. They wistfully remember the era of their grandparents and violently oppose the increasing proximity of the descendants of laborers who they once lorded over.

The Thevars have fought against their decline by intentionally merging a number of their subcastes into a political unit with a sense of shared history and a collective vision of the future. They have sought to empower themselves by coming together into what popular discourse has deemed a mega-caste. I will refer to such a unit as a caste conglomeration, defined as heterogeneous castes with some similarities that were once separated by geography and patterns of kinship, but are now united in concerted efforts to consolidate power. Having merged more

recently, the Devendras are also a caste conglomeration seeking power. Because they have been called untouchable, access to such power opens up only as they make themselves anew, asserting dignity in their past, present, and future, much to the chagrin of their Thevar neighbors.

I prefer the term caste conglomeration because it points to the intentional and strategic motivations of such formations, and because, as I explain below, it is different from caste substantialization, which others have defined as the unification of caste groups on the basis of their shared corporeal substances, rather than their coded behavior (Barnett 1977; Dumont 1966, 228). Conglomeration, by contrast, rests on the redefinition of castes according to mutually reinforcing corporeal substances *and* behaviors, which draw together units that were once separated by geography and marriage patterns. In a sense, conglomeration dissolves antecedent boundaries of caste even as it reconstitutes castes as larger and therefore more powerful groups, thus simultaneously demonstrating both the fluidity and deep entrenchment of caste logics.

The process of caste conglomeration that I elucidate in Tamil Nadu is similar in some ways to the political organization of the diverse and populous North Indian Yadavas, a middling pastoral caste (Michelutti 2004). As anthropologist Lucia Michelutti demonstrates, the Yadavas have empowered themselves by uniting to increase their numeric strength in the game of electoral politics that they have been winning, at least in Uttar Pradesh (*ibid.*, 49-50). They have built a shared identity on the basis of their claims that they descended from the deity Krishna, and that they have a “natural” inclination towards democratic politics. With an extensive and well-coordinated caste organization that stretches across state lines, the Yadavas portray themselves as “‘born’ to rule in a democratic context” (*ibid.*, 52).

The caste conglomerations I examine in Tamil Nadu are different not only because they are younger and less organized, but because they are, by definition, beyond the boundaries of the

electoral democracy. The leaders of caste-based parties in Tamil Nadu do not project images of themselves as future prime ministers because they know that rallying behind the flag of caste is actually an obstacle to electoral success. In Tamil Nadu's demographic landscape, no single caste or caste conglomeration is large enough to gain power beyond their local constituencies. What is more, founding a political entity on caste identity ensures that individuals identifying with other castes are loathe to join.

Remaining, for the most part, outside the doors of the legislative assembly and parliament, caste conglomerations imagine themselves as kings of the glorious past. Such images align well with the heroism of Tamil ethno-nationalist populism, and also reveal something else beneath the surface of politics in Tamil Nadu. Many Tamil non-Brahmin men of the lower middle and lower classes have lost faith in the electoral democracy that is supposed to represent "the Tamil people". They remain instead opposed to "the establishment", perpetually fighting back against their powerful oppressors. They thus constitute a powerful parastate force that can challenge the authority of the government.

Exerting force, acting as gangsters or musclemen to empower the oppressed is also an expectation that Yadavas demand of their political leaders, and is, in fact, a common feature of party politics throughout India. As political scientist Paul Brass notes, politicians are often the link between criminality/corruption, the police, and society (1997). Likewise, Thomas Blom Hansen's study of the Shiv Sena, the Hindu nationalist party that was instrumental in uniting various castes that came to see themselves as Maratha, demonstrates that muscular, even violent assertion can precipitate electoral success (2001).

The Tamil case is, however, unique in that caste conglomerations are in perpetual tension with the government. Rather than finding a stable place within it by establishing successful

political parties, as have the Yadavas and the Marathas, caste conglomerations often exercise parastate authority in opposition to the government. They adopt the idiom of Tamil militant heroism, solidifying their caste identities through conglomeration, and thereby guaranteeing their alienation from state power.

But the processes of caste identity politics also come with material benefits. Statewide Thevar and Devendra caste conglomerations provide networks that serve to fill gaps in services that might otherwise be offered by agents of the state, such as protection, arbitration, and adjudication. In so doing, caste leaders sometimes serve as a liaison between their caste fellows and government staff, such as the police, who are often the reason that their caste fellows need protection and mediation in the first place. Effective caste leaders leverage the parastate forces that they may command as threats against government power that they can unleash at will.

Such hard-nosed negotiations are further complicated by the fact that association with the government offers the prestige that is demanded by Tamil ideals of masculinity. With its incomparable wealth, displayed in lavish celebrations and monuments, the Government of Tamil Nadu embodies authoritative prestige, and is thus courted as an ally that can underwrite the honor of a man and his caste.

My dissertation sheds light on the conflicted relationships that increasingly conglomerated castes have with the government and with each other as their male leaders formulate their collective identities and political strategies according to ethno-nationalist understandings of what it means to be a Tamil man. Even internally, the process of caste conglomeration is riddled with the tensions of Tamil masculinity that demand both unbridled heroism and honorable civility.

Methods and Objectives

While the endurance of violence against the formerly untouchable castes throughout India is highly objectionable, my dissertation project is not aimed at exposing such injustices, nor do I intend to rebuke practices and indigenous understandings of caste identity that assert the systematic ranking of people as essential and even laudable. In theory, I agree with Gerald D. Berreman's contention that "stratification – the systematic ranking of categories of people, especially in their access to livelihood and power – is pernicious ... in that it is painful, damaging and unjust, and ... consistently experienced as such by those who are deprived and oppressed" (1979, 289). My personal agreement with Berreman, obviously shaped over the course of a privileged life in the United States, does not, however, form my dissertation into political advocacy for two reasons.

First, I do not believe that ranking, which is endemic to collective identity, is absent from any large and complex society in the world. Especially in areas that are overseen by a recognized government, which is by definition a collective of people with a superior ranking, the organization of natural human differentiation cannot be free of collective hierarchy. I do not portend to offer an alternative to stratification in South India or anywhere else.

Second, the vast majority of my interlocutors understand caste as an identity and a system of practices upon which their society rests. They do not seek to annihilate or even to upend the ideology of caste hierarchy, but rather assert their dignified position within the antecedent structure of systematic, collective ranking. Following my interlocutor's lead, I attempt to bracket liberalism's false promise of equality, which leads to the presumption that all institutions of caste are fundamentally immoral.

My exploration of status negotiations that define new caste conglomerations are, nonetheless, troubled by a few ethical quandaries. Formulated in explicit opposition to others,

caste conglomerations tend to rely on the political waste of others who are barred from the possibility of inclusion. This exclusionary formation of group identity reinforces the Thevar caste conglomeration, which insists on its indubitable superiority over “untouchables”, and is even more prevalent in the newer and more fragile Devendra conglomeration. In asserting their distinguished lineage, the Devendras elevate themselves above (other) Dalits, especially the Paraiyars with whom they share rural, and even more so, urban spaces. I do not aim to justify the obviously problematic and dangerous political implications of this move, nor do I seek to indict the Devendras for their exclusionary statements and actions. Instead, I track this process of polarization as a common feature of caste conglomeration, pointing out that, at least in terms of the Devendras and Paraiyars, it could be otherwise. As we will see in later chapters, some Devendras reject exclusionary tactics, hoping to ally themselves with Dalit groups.

Nonetheless, many Devendras, even those who hope to ally with Dalit groups, avow their royal ancestry. My interlocutors oftentimes sought to convince me of this, and entreated me to share the stories they told me, to represent them, their relatives, their towns, and their native villages to audiences in America. The representations they requested were clearly specified, as they directed me to present them as the descendants of the great Tamil kings, rather than as the descendants of agricultural laborers. They wanted me to relay the message that they are not, in fact, Dalit to an American audience that could, from their perspectives, help legitimate their claims.

Although I found myself sometimes hoping to prove them right, I did not locate any empirical evidence in the archive or in the inscriptional record that could help me buttress their claims. Even when I searched for inscriptions cited in one of the best-known, self-published

Devendra history books, I found nothing. I cannot currently attest to the historical kingship of the Devendras.

Nevertheless, the data I located in the archive suggests that the Devendras' categorical relegation to the status of "untouchable" is dubious. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century archival material refers to a dispersed population of "Pallars" who would not have been considered "untouchable" by virtue of their occupations. Many Pallars of the period were agricultural laborers, while others worked in offices. According to such documents, Pallars did not transact with polluting substances, such as bodily discharges, corpses, and leather, which dominant castes consider to be the grounds of untouchability.

I avoid referring to Devendras as Dalits, not just because their occupational histories problematize their classification as "untouchable", but also because many Devendras refuse to be collapsed into a category defined by victimization, deprivation, and perpetual humiliation. Most of my interlocutors repeatedly reminded me that they are not Dalits, and urged me to avoid calling them Dalits in my writing.

Attempting to honor their wishes without sacrificing the integrity of my research, I recognize and represent the Devendras' refusal to be crushed by the Thevars or by anyone else throughout this dissertation. I demonstrate that the Devendras are a unique caste conglomerate-in-the-making, attempting to stand independently, as they grow closer to the Thevars they oppose. I trace the Devendras' processes of history-making, earnest searches for alternative truths, and attempts to inhabit dignified histories that have the potential to offer upward mobility.

At the same time, the invariably competitive economy of caste ensures that Devendra mobility does not come solely from within the community. I cannot present the Devendras as a caste conglomeration truly liberated from the stigma of Dalit status because upward mobility,

movement out of the Dalit category, is constituted by the recognition of such a movement by other castes. If others approach the Devendras as Dalits, they remain, in a sense, Dalit. Ultimately, Devendras are not Dalit and Dalit at the same time, and it is this terrain of negotiation that I interrogate in this dissertation.

My dissertation topic emerged organically out of friendships forged over several years of visiting a small village in Sivagangai District called Onaiyur (in this text), which is constituted primarily by populations of Devendras and Thevars. I began visiting Onaiyur in 2004 in order to conduct ethnographic research about Māriyamman, the capricious mother goddess who is common to many villages of South India. In Onaiyur, her temple is owned and operated by an extended Devendra family, though other castes come to propitiate her during her annual festival.

Noticing the relationship between Onaiyur's castes in the context of temple worship, I began to ask questions about the marked economic differences between the Thevars and Devendras, as well as the ways in which caste-based social exclusion has limited the space the Devendras can occupy and the resources they can use. It took some time, but eventually suppressed stories of intercaste violence rose to the surface. Until recently, many Devendras worked for Thevar landlords as agricultural laborers, and were subjected to threats not only on their livelihoods, but also on their lives if they were insubordinate. There was a sense, however, that things had changed, and I wondered how and why.

Given the vocal and electorally successful efforts of Dalit political activism in contemporary Tamil Nadu, I was surprised to find that my Devendra friends did not align with the leaders of such efforts. Instead, they refused the very idea of victimization, the notion that they had been crushed, and turned to a past marked by heroism, honor, and dignity. My friends in Onaiyur were eager to tell me about the kings, warriors, and landowners of the Devendra past

who proved that the Devendras' untouchability was a recent misconception rooted in the pernicious ideologies of outsiders who had invaded the Tamil country.

I came to realize that such assertions are not at all limited to my Devendra friends in Onaiyur, but are instead iterations of a widespread movement of historical reconstruction, as well as political mobilization that has united economically and demographically diverse Devendras throughout the state. Over the course of about the past thirty to fifty years, small regional groups of endogamous sub-castes, which have been broadly referred to as Pallars in government documentation and scholarship, have become increasingly united as a result of their upward economic mobility and their use of new technologies that facilitate transportation and communication. Calling themselves Devendras, they are becoming a caste conglomeration on the basis of their claims to a shared history, and are actively engaged in self-consciously constructing both a cultural and political identity. As I explained above, the process of caste conglomeration is not exclusively Devendra, but is widespread. I came to realize that it is, in fact, a competitive process of increasing intensification energized by the fights of various castes for dominion over the Tamil country.

As I was the fortunate recipient of information that would contribute to the development of my dissertation (and, it was assumed, my career), some of my interlocutors asked me what I would do for them, which is a fair question that inspired me to think about the value of my perspective. My position as a white American, I decided, helped me gain unique insights into the greatest ambitions of my interlocutors, as I was most commonly told stories about caste histories and intercaste relations that they wanted to share with the world outside the casteist ways of being and seeing that are endemic to Tamil Nadu and to India. Oftentimes my primarily male interlocutors would look over at my pen and paper to ensure that I was properly recording the

information they provided, including their names and the names of their villages. They expressed their desire for me to spread my knowledge of “the true history of the Devendras” or “the true history of the Thevars” with people in the United States and beyond, and eagerly provided me privileged access to documents, oral histories, and aesthetic artifacts that would bring me the insights they could help guide.

My female gender identity proved to be both a barrier and a bridge. I was excluded from many entirely male informal gatherings in which joking and drinking occurred openly, and other versions of the truth that I could not see probably unfolded. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which my position as a woman ensured that I gained insight into the ideals that Tamil men wanted to embody. They consistently showed me their proud public faces that they knew were untarnished by any knowledge of what goes on in all male spaces.

Gender was not the only glaring difference that informed my relationships with my interlocutors. I was also an outsider on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, and caste. I believe that such differences were, for the most part, assets, as I was assumed to be unbiased, lacking legible affiliations of my own.

My primary residence during the fieldwork I conducted from 2012 through 2014 was in the Krishnanagar neighborhood of Paramakudi in Ramanathapuram District, Tamil Nadu. It was the base from which I often travelled with my friends and acquaintances throughout the state for political demonstrations, interviews, ritual commemorations, village festivals, and family affairs.

I also often stayed in the nearby and relatively large city of Madurai (population: 3,038,252 (Census of India 2011)) where I had rented a second apartment for the duration of my fieldwork. The local police did not approve my residence in Paramakudi because it has no university with which I could be officially affiliated. A relic of the British Raj, India requires

foreign nationals to register their addresses with the local police, and research scholars must be affiliated with universities in order to meet the criteria for foreigner's registration. The local police department's strict adherence to this rule, which I have seen relaxed in another instances, may have had something to do with the fact that Ramanathapuram District is seen as a "hot" area, that is, one prone to violence. I maintained my second address for the police, though I always returned to the small, white tiled apartment that had become my home in Paramakudi. I spent many hours in that apartment looking out at the still and desolate landscape that extended beyond the movements of the neighborhood.

Because it is only occasionally reached by the rains of the monsoon, Ramanathapuram District remains parched under the blazing sun for most of the year, and is a difficult place for small-scale farmers to prosper. A few have managed to coax growth from the resistant soil, surviving on their meager yields.⁶ Ramanathapuram District also lacks industrial development, rendering it one of the poorest regions of the state with high rates of unemployment. The most recent census reported that only about one third of Paramakudi's approximately 95,000 residents were employed (Census of India 2011).⁷

Despite its bleak condition, I grew fond of the landscape in and around Paramakudi, and was ceaselessly impressed by its people whose kindness and generosity contrasted sharply with stereotypes about their proclivity for violence.⁸ I often observed the scenery, as I stared out the

⁶ "The southern zone of Tamil Nadu, comprising the districts of Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli, Dindigul, South Madurai and Pudukottai, is under the rain shadow region, having a prolonged dry climate" (Geetalakshmi and Dheebakaran 2010, 70).

⁷ It is difficult to report exact numbers on the basis of the 2011 Indian Census data, which contains inconsistencies. In different places, the population of Paramakudi is listed as 95,579, 84,321, and 103,800 (Census of India 2011). The population of workers is reported to be 35,561 (ibid.).

⁸ Many Tamils conceive of a sharp divide between the more fertile, more industrially developed, and wealthier Northern Districts, and the more arid, poorer lands of the Southern Districts. While there is no consensus on the line that divides the two regions, one could say that Dindigul and Pudukkottai Districts mark the Northern most points of the Southern half of Tamil Nadu. The Southern region is imagined, not completely incorrectly, to be a dusty, desert wasteland, left barren by the heat and light of the sun. The roughness of the Southern landscape is for many, especially outsiders, at a peace with the qualities of its people who are characterized as harsh and unrefined at best,

windows of government buses, or drove along on my rusty, sputtering moped. The earth of the region was a rich reddish brown that stretched out endlessly in every direction, its expanse periodically interrupted by small cement houses and earthen huts clustered near tall, impossibly thin palm and coconut trees.⁹ Thorn bushes (*prosopis juliflora*) were the predominant vegetation that lined the roads and spread into and in between many of the small habitations.¹⁰ More dramatically, the flat plains were interrupted by enormous granite boulders that shot up several hundred feet without foothills to ease their ascent. With red and brown striations, the boulders seemed simultaneously at home and alien to the region. Knock kneed semi-domestic goats climbed the boulders awkwardly searching for vegetation usually in vain. Crows flew overhead, occasionally perching adeptly on the thorn bushes, as black, bony water buffalo were driven by the long sticks of equally bony shepherds. At the end of the short harvest season in February, women in colorful saris sorted rice paddy and red peppers that they neatly arranged on the hot black tar of the road to dry out.

The Curious Case of Tamil Nadu

Although Paramakudi and Southern Tamil Nadu in general are poor relative to the more fertile Northern half of the state, Tamil Nadu is among India's wealthiest and most industrially developed states (Okada and Siddharthan 2008, 3). As of 2012, 11.26% of the population lived

and dangerous and violent at worst. In contemporary cinema, images of outlaws in the Southern reaches of Tamil Nadu coincide with and compound commonplace stereotypes. As D. Karthikeyan points out, Madurai Formula films or 3M films (Murder, Mayhem, and Madurai) were first produced in the 1980s and have become increasingly common. Such films based in or around the Southern city of Madurai glorify the *aruvāḷ* (the sickle shaped scythe) as the weapon of choice for Tamil men, and "a corresponding mythology of a society based on martial pride and honour" (Karthikeyan 2011). Excessive in the brutality they portray, which often emerges in the wake of intercaste romance, 3M films presume that Southern Tamils are prone to caste bigotry and "primordial violence" (ibid.).

⁹ In January of some years (when there is sufficient rain), the earth of Southern Tamil Nadu transforms from reddish brown to the luminous, bright green of rice paddy. The stunning squares of paddy remain for about a month before they are harvested.

¹⁰ In Tamil, this type of thorn bush is called *cīmai karuvēlam*, "foreign babul". It is native to Central America and was introduced in South Asia only in the nineteenth century. In Tamil Nadu, these plants dominate the landscape of the arid districts like Thoothukudi, Ramanathapuram, Dharmapuri, and Vellore. Initially they were considered a boon to these arid regions as their wood provided a valuable source of livelihood when agriculture failed. But now they are widely regarded as an invasive species making these regions even more arid than they were before.

below the poverty line, which is slightly less than half the national average of 21.92% (Government of India 2013, 6).¹¹ Based on additional factors, including education and life expectancy, as well as income, the UN's Human Development Index ranked Tamil Nadu 6th out of India's 25 states (Suryanarayana et. al. 2011, 9; 16).

Despite Tamil Nadu's transcendence of the agricultural economy, and its relative freedom from the pressures of poverty, social relations within the state continue to be heavily influenced by caste identity. According to K. Srinivasan, the former director of the International Institute of Population Studies, Tamil Nadu leads the Southern states with 97.04% of the population preferring marriage within one's own caste (2015). Of course, changing definitions of "one's own caste", which I highlight in this dissertation, complicate such self-reported statistics. What Srinivasan show us is not the dynamic pattern of endogamy, but instead the degree to which research participants believe that endogamy *should* be the norm; in other words, the emphasis they place on "caste purity."

The self-reporting of married women in Tamil Nadu is revealing. Throughout India, the percentage of married women in the age range fifteen to forty-nine who reported marrying within their same caste was 89%. In Bihar, it was also 89%; in Uttar Pradesh 88%, in Kerala 80%, and in Tamil Nadu 97% (ibid.). Note Kerala's relatively low rate of marriage within caste, which, we might assume has something to do with the fact that it is consistently ranked number one on the Human Development Index, outstripping its neighbor Tamil Nadu. Perhaps higher standards of education and income contribute to Kerala's acceptance of intercaste marriage. Such a logic would lead us to believe that the acceptance of intercaste marriage in Tamil Nadu would be

¹¹ In Tamil Nadu in 2012, earning less than 880 rupees (approximately \$16.50) per capita per month in rural areas and less than 937 (approximately \$17.50) in urban areas would put an individual below the poverty line (Government of India 2013, 5). The poverty line according to the national average was less than 816 rupees (approximately \$15.50) per capita per month in rural areas and less than 1,000 (approximately \$19) in urban areas (ibid.).

much higher than in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, which are among the poorest and least developed states in India. However, Tamils seem steadfast in their preservation of caste-based endogamy, despite relatively high standards of living.

Also telling is the pervasiveness of intercaste conflict in Tamil Nadu, which has plagued the state since at least the 1990s. Clashes between Dalit castes and those castes that spurn them are a persistent problem comparable only to the situation in Bihar in terms of endurance, severity, and frequency (Narula 1998).

So what are we to make of the enduring and even increasing importance of caste identity in Tamil Nadu? Its centrality, I contend, is due to economic and demographic shifts that have upended established social structures over the course of the past fifty to one hundred years, and to the trajectory of Tamil politics that began to unfold with the rise of the Indian nation.

Caste: Locating its Boundaries and Unearthing its Essence

In order to track the changing manifestations of caste identity and practice, I must first define the term as I use it. I understand caste as an unstable manifestation and sign of ranked social status that intersects with wealth, political power, and Hindu notions of ritual purity and privilege, and that takes the form of broad-based groups that relate to each other as kin.

While it is difficult to define caste as a phenomenon and as an identity, as several generations of voluminous scholarly literature indicates, endogamy is its most basic, common formulation across time and space. However, as I demonstrate below, the idea that endogamy is prescribed according to immutable rules is fallacious. The boundaries of caste are dynamic, shifting profoundly in the civic and political spheres that I investigate in this dissertation, and they generate, in part because of their dynamism, intense and enduring conflicts.

The quest to understand caste as a distinct social system commenced during colonial rule when Western scholars depicted it as *the* central and abiding organizing principle of Indic civilization since time immemorial. Castes were studied, catalogued, compared, and classified by the agents of colonial rule (oftentimes both scholars and active administrators) who understood them as races (Risley 1892; Thurston 1909)¹², inherited occupational classes somewhat akin to medieval guilds (Hutton 1946), or fundamentally religious categories based on Hindu notions of ritual purity (Senart 1896, 164; Bouglé 1908, 9). While complex and narrowly delineated racial divisions did not have much staying power, two races defined in colonial literature continue to inform popular understandings of caste on the subcontinent: 1) The dark-skinned Dravidians who predominate in the South are the aboriginals and occupy lower caste positions. 2) The light-skinned Aryans who are more populous in the North occupy higher caste positions, and their ancestry can be traced back to Eastern Europe. Naturalized differences between these two racialized categories are taken for granted in the discourse of Tamil ethno-nationalism that arose in the twentieth century, as I discuss below.

Not surprisingly, given their alleged consanguinity, late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century colonial scholars were particularly interested in the scriptural Sanskrit language. They gave currency to explanations of social structures in ancient texts, which had hitherto been

¹² Sir Herbert Hope Risley (1851 – 1911) and Edgar Thurston (1855 – 1935) published extensive studies on the castes and tribes of India, which were intended to help the colonial regime govern. Their approaches reflect the rise of evolutionism following Darwin, as they sought to trace different stages of human development. Envisioning castes as biologically distinct races, Risley argued that the origins of the castes of India could be traced back to the divisions between seven basic racial types that were found on the Indian subcontinent: the Mongoloid, the Dravidian, the Indo-Aryan, the Turko-Iranian, the Mongolo-Dravidian, the Aryo-Dravidian, and the Scytho-Dravidian (1903). Risley relied methodologically on anthropometry, that is, the measurement of human bodies, which was utilized in early anthropology to correlate, physical, psychological, and racial traits. Anthropometry was used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to argue that the head sizes of particular races demonstrated their inferior intelligence. While Thurston's seven-volume encyclopedic text did not take into account the seven racial categories that Risley had listed, it did rest on the assumption that there was a division between at least two races in India. The Dravidians who predominated in the South were the aboriginals and occupied lower caste positions, while the Aryans who were more populous in the North occupied higher caste positions, and could be traced back to Eastern Europe.

known only to a very small scholarly elite.¹³ One of the first Sanskrit texts translated into English (Jones 1794 in Bühler 2011), the *Manusmṛti* (200 BCE – 200 CE), “The Laws of Manu”, presented a system of occupationally based stratification called *varṇa* (literally, “color”), which divided society into four distinct groups (Flood 1996, 56). The (1) priestly Brahmin caste stood at the head of society, followed by (2) warriors and rulers (*Kshatriyas*), (3) merchants and agriculturalists (*Vaiśyas*), and (4) servants (*Śūdras*).

The concept of *varṇa* also appeared in the even more esoteric *Ṛgveda* (1500 BCE – 1200 BCE), a text comprised of ritual hymns, which was translated into German by Max Müller for publication in 1856, and into English by H.H. Wilson for publication in several volumes between 1850 and 1888. The text contains the *puruṣasūkta* (“the hymn of the cosmic being”), which refers to the aforementioned four *varṇas* emerging from the head, shoulders, stomach, and feet of a mythical primordial being. Importantly, both texts refer to another class, *pañcama* (literally, “fifth”), which is excluded from the *varṇa* system and from the body of the primordial being. The loathed *pañcama* class came to be associated with the most oppressed and socially excluded castes throughout India, despite their diversity – the “untouchables”.

While the four-fold *varṇa* system is quite distant from the realities of caste on the ground, especially in South India where the terms are still barely in use, hierarchical, ranked understandings of occupations have continued to have currency until very recently. The relative dignity afforded a caste’s occupation, which is partially based on the degree of physical pollution it entails, heavily influences a caste’s status. For example, Hindu “priests” occupy the highest caste, while sweepers and leather tanners are amongst the lowest.

¹³ The idea that there was a Hindu canon was itself a colonial fiction. In fact, the diverse set of practices and beliefs that colonists referred to as Hinduism was not a singular entity. Hinduism as a religion in the European sense with texts and a particular dogma was created in the colonial encounter.

Despite its distance from the complicated practices of social hierarchy in its own time, the legacy of earlier scholarship cannot be ignored, as it has profoundly influenced the development of caste identities in the politics of modern India. Bernard Cohn goes so far as to argue that caste was solidified as a concept by the British codification of it (1996). His student, Nicholas B. Dirks, extrapolates from Cohn's argument, contending that British colonial control of India for two hundred years pivoted on its creative manipulation of the caste system that it helped construct. According to Dirks, caste as it is known and lived today owes itself in part to the colonial imagination and its drive to know, control, and rule (Dirks 2001). Such efforts reached their apex with the inception of the Census of India in 1861, which was initially faced with the problematic localization, fluidity, and unwieldy nature of the category the administration called caste (ibid., 198-227). Census commissioners attempted to delineate an orderly and definitive hierarchy out of diverse social identities that failed to meet their expectations. In the end, the colonial classification of castes "had unprecedented effects on the social realities it claimed merely to represent" (ibid., 196).

While colonial interventions may have strengthened or solidified caste identities, they also contributed to the dynamism and discursive tensions that continue to constitute caste as it is lived and understood. As M.S.S. Pandian argues, the colonial project of classification, which encouraged people to identify with their castes, also allowed them to question and create new forms of identification (2007, 10-11). Caste took on a new speakability as colonizer and colonized participated in the process of producing categories, which Pandian presents as a shift of caste from the ontic to the epistemic realm (ibid., 12). Drawing on E. Valentine Daniel, he notes that "people had to invent new practices, meanings, and identities to negotiate the crisis in *semeiosis*, which was brought in by colonialism, a crisis which had rendered the old world and

its old words unfamiliar” (ibid.). Amidst the shift from what Pandian calls “just being to redefining society itself”, the discourse of caste that had been developing in scholarly and administrative circles was given new directions by those living within it (ibid.).

Caste: Changing Boundaries and Elusive Essence

Despite the politicization of caste to which Pandian refers, colonial fixations on and fantasies about caste, culminated in the publication and wide circulation of French anthropologist Louis Dumont’s famous book *Homo Hierarchicus* in which he depicted caste as a fundamentally religious system. Dumont defined caste as the systematic and hierarchical separation of groups in terms of marriage, contact, and work, which is patterned by overarching religious concerns (Dumont 1966, 21).¹⁴ The system of separation is, he claimed, reliant on the intersecting dichotomies of purity and pollution, on the one hand, and status and power on the other. Status is located in the pure domain of the Brahmin, while power is held by the king (ibid., 72). Political power is not, however, on par with sacred status; status ultimately triumphs because the king is ever-reliant on the Brahmin to underwrite his authority (ibid., 165-7).¹⁵

Around the same time that Dumont published *Homo Hierarchicus*, other scholars were engaged in studies of caste as a religious system centered around the Brahmin (Marriot 1965;

¹⁴ Dumont drew on some of the assumptions of his predecessors, such as Senart and Bouglé, but did not criticize caste as a principle or practice (1966). Instead, he argued that hierarchy is a requisite component of human sociality; its absence results in pathologies like racism (Dumont 1966, 236).

¹⁵ Although Dumont is remembered as an Orientalist who helped maintain the idea of spiritual India, in a much less famous work that he published prior to *Homo Hierarchicus*, *A South Indian Subcaste: Social Organization and Religion of the Pramalai Kallar* (original French in 1957; translated into English in 1986), he recognizes the impossibility of religious primacy. He argues that India is not a simple political society in which the king should be foregrounded, but rather, a complex “politico-religious situation” (Dumont 1957, 57). Dumont indicts Arthur Hocart for resolving “this conflict”, that is, the conflict between the political and the religious, “unjustifiably by elevating the Kshatriya [warriors and rulers of the four-fold varṇa system] as divine king, initiator and receiver of his cult. His argument,” Dumont goes on, “is no less ideal than ancient texts that resolve the conflict in favor of the Brahmin. Resolving the conflict in favor of either conceals the fact that there is no question of either but of both” (ibid.). Evidently, Dumont himself doubted the exclusive predominance of the Brahmin with which his work is associated. As T.N. Madan explains, the king in Dumont’s account did not stand in isolation but was enmeshed in a cosmo-moral configuration, which linked him to gods, Brahmins, and subjects (2006, 55).

Lewis 1958). Importantly, such studies were firmly located in villages, which were examined as hermetically sealed environments in which social structure could be seen in its “pure form”.

However, in contrast to studies that bore Orientalist baggage by representing caste as a stable system, new understandings of caste as a dynamic practice also emerged in this moment. McKim Marriott’s explicitly anti-Dumontian interactionist approach, through which he argued that caste is constituted in a complex web of exchanges and behaviors across caste lines, exemplifies such approaches (1965). According to Marriott, members of different castes learn about and recreate caste order in moments of interaction, such as exchanges of food and bodily comportment in the presence of members of other castes (1965; 1966).

Importantly, Marriott and others recognized that in this complex web of exchanges, caste is not the sole determinant of individuals’ understandings of their ranks (Beteille 1965; Marriott 1965; Srinivas 1966). Instead, Marriott argued, differences of wealth, power, and tribe give rise to asymmetrical interactions (1965, 20, 73). Such intersectionality and the ambiguity that coincides with it makes room for significant resistance from those on the lower end of the caste hierarchy. As Marriott noted in his 1965 work, there is much disagreement especially among lower castes as to which caste should occupy which unique rank (*ibid.*, 46).

Probably the best-known Indian sociologist to this day, M.N. Srinivas, like Marriott, investigated the practices of caste as constitutive of relative status, focusing on the issue of lower caste attempts to reorient their rank. He coined the term Sanskritization to refer to a process by which low, middle, or tribal groups change their customs, rituals, and ways of life to emulate those castes widely considered to be superior to them. Such changes, Srinivas noted, are often followed by public claims to a higher position in the caste hierarchy, which are directed at other castes and/or at the government (1956; 1966). While Sanskritization does not necessarily require

the emulation of Brahmins, it usually refers to upward mobility that is sought by adopting the markers of Brahmin purity that other upper castes may also bear, such as vegetarianism and the observance of particular pan-Indic religious rituals.

My dissertation builds on antecedent accounts of status claims that castes make in what they say and in what they do. Castes, as groups, perpetually create and reproduce themselves in patterns of interaction both internally and vis-à-vis other castes. As Gerald Berreman pointed out, referring to human relations cross-culturally, “a social hierarchy is continually redefined, affirmed, challenged, and validated by interaction even as interaction is continually constrained by hierarchy” (Berreman 1967, 359). My dissertation explores such tense, agentive moments of ideologically entangled, interaction in the context of radically increased physical mobility, which ensures that instantiations of caste in practice transcend whatever boundaries had been thought to exist between different villages, and between rural and urban life.

The dynamic practices of caste assertion that I explore cannot be classified according to the phenomenon of Sanskritization identified by Srinivas, which relies on the centrality of the Brahmin. According to the logic of Sanskritization, various castes shed the practices that preclude them from Brahminical Hindu purity, such as meat-eating, consuming alcohol, and permitting widow remarriage, as they adopt markers of Brahmin purity. The acts of castes at the heart of my study do not follow this pattern. Not only are Brahmins scarce due to vast demographic changes, but the ubiquitous resonance of the anti-Brahmin and Dravidian movements has built a model of dominance explicitly founded on the rejection of the Brahmin. In fact, demonstrations of non-Brahmin dominance are often constituted by intentionally flouting rules of Brahminical authority, which are replaced by aspirational assertions of almighty Tamil rule.

The processes of caste assertion and conglomeration I identify can be more fruitfully compared to the concept of substantialization originally coined by Dumont himself, and further elaborated by Steve Barnett. Despite Dumont's insistence that there had been no "essential transformation of the [caste] system" in which "the political-economic domain is encompassed in an overall religious setting," he noticed that castes in modern India were forming into independent units defined by their shared substances (1966, 228). In the albeit secondary (according to Dumont) political-economic domain, competition had replaced interdependence, and "structure seems to yield to substance, each caste becoming an individual confronting other individuals" (ibid., 227). There was in twentieth-century India, Dumont conceded, a "universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical, and in competition with one another; a universe where caste assumes the appearance of a collective individual" (ibid., 281).

In his study of the Kontaikatti Velalars (henceforth, KVs), a wealthy, landowning, vegetarian, agricultural caste, Barnett builds on Dumont's concept of substantialization, which he suggests is more than an epiphenomenon of contemporary caste. He notes that castes have become ethniclike, "marking a transition from caste as a holistic, interdependent, transactionally ranked hierarchy to caste blocs as substantial ... independent, attributionally ranked units in a plurality" (Barnett 1977, 403). Essential to this process, according to Barnett, is the disintegration of particular codes of conduct, especially occupational ones, that not only separated the KVs from other castes, but also distinguished them from Velalars of other regions with whom they would not intermarry.

For the KVs, the process of substantialization arose along with the South Indian cultural nationalist movement and the influx of KVs to Madras where they attained lucrative posts in the colonial administration (Barnett 1977). Recently urbanized KVs, hailing from various villages

throughout the region, built networks of solidarity on the basis of caste in opposition to Brahmins with whom they were in economic competition. The advantages of increased numbers elicited the desire for further consolidation. At a Madras-based caste association meeting in the late 1920s, Barnett tells us, KVs passed a resolution supporting the intermarriage of Velalars across the Tamil country (ibid., 403). This was a radical move, upending the ranked order within Velalars that had long been clearly delineated.

According to Barnett, consolidation relied on a fundamental shift in the ways that Velalars thought of themselves. Their identity came to be defined by the ultimate shared substance – blood – rather than by codes of conduct to which they used to adhere (ibid.). One was a born a Velalar, and thus need not behave like one in order to be incorporated into the Velalars’ newly expanded kindred network. In Barnett’s words, the fact that “KV identity [was] seen as this heritable, inviolable substance changed the KV caste into a KV ethniclike regional bloc, a transition from caste as holistic, interdependent, transactionally ranked hierarchy to caste blocs as substantial ... independent, attributionally ranked units in a plurality” (ibid., 408). This transformation, which the leading Madras KVs explained as a necessary adaptation to the general chaos and moral laxity characteristic of the *kali yuga*, was seen as social reform, a step forward in the new colonial order of things (ibid.).¹⁶

Despite their rhetorical insistence on shared substance, the KVs in Barnett’s study remained divided on the basis of class. Those at the top, educated and primarily urban KVs tended not to intermarry with the poorest KVs found in some parts of rural Tamil Nadu. Nonetheless, the ideal of shared substance led to unprecedented networks of solidarity that could facilitate class mobility, and thus alter patterns of intermarriage. As Barnett tells us, there were

¹⁶ According to Brahminical understandings of time as cyclical and ethically fluctuating, we currently inhabit a period of vice, characterized by strife, discord, and contention.

also intermediate groups with ties in both the city and the countryside that served to bridge the gaps between regions and ways of life (ibid., 403).

The Velalar ethnic bloc was not, however, in Barnett's opinion, sustainable because of the contradictions inherent in its status-conscious strategies. While insisting on the shared substance of their "brethren" regardless of conduct, KVs in Madras tried to maintain their predominance over other non-Brahmin castes through transactions and other public displays of prestige (ibid., 407-8). "This hedging, presenting contradictory identities in different contexts," Barnett writes, "is really a kind of holding action and cannot be sustained in the urban setting" (ibid.).

Precisely this kind of hedging is practiced among urban Devendras today. While the Thevars are also founded on seemingly contradictory strategies of identity construction, I focus here on the Devendras because their unification is more recent, and because they raise important questions about the limits of Tamil ethnic/caste bloc formation. As discussed above, I call the process in which they are engaged conglomeration, thus differentiating it from substantialization, because the incorporation that I examine is based on both substance and coded behavior, which are not contradictory, but rather mutually enforcing. Devendra leaders attempt to unite populations already involved in very diverse occupations by insisting on their occupational consistency in the glory days of the past, which they performatively relive in moments of ritualization.

The resonance of the term conglomeration with images of large profit-making enterprises is in some ways intentional. Conglomerates often consist of businesses in diverse fields uniting, and acquiescing to a parent organization and its brand. However, the process of conglomerating is not smooth and seamless, which is, of course, the reason legal representation plays a key role

in such endeavors. As various branches vie for control, leadership remains fragile and inherently unstable, always vulnerable to challenges from formerly independent chiefs.

The delicate balance that defines the process of conglomeration is precisely what the Devendras as a regional (pan-Tamil Nadu) entity are currently facing. Their sometimes competing leaders assert Devendra unity in the face of diversity and discord as they work to design a flag around which their caste fellows can rally. In so doing, they stake claim to the Tamil country by asserting 1) their descent from the cherished Tamil kings of the medieval era, and 2) their hereditary expertise in the cultivation of rice paddy, which, they claim, has continuously sustained the Tamil people from the dawn of their civilization.¹⁷ While ruling and cultivating may seem, at first glance, to be at odds, the incipient Devendras attempt to integrate both coded behaviors as indicative of their rights over the Tamil country, and, importantly, of their embodiment of the ideals of courage and virility, on the one hand, and honor and civility, on the other hand. Because such ideals have come to index legitimate power in the Tamil country through the ideological trajectory of Dravidianism, which I explore in chapter three, they are claimed by other castes that are similarly conglomerating through assertions of befittingly coded behavior projected onto the past.

Importantly, the relationship between coded behavior and caste-as-substance, which is inherited and inviolable, is not one of tension or ultimate incommensurability, as Barnett suggested, but one of mutual reinforcement. I draw on the work of Daniel, whose work I mentioned above and discuss in more detail below, to highlight the process of interdependency characterizing the intersections of code and substance for castes today. Castes are understood,

¹⁷ While there were other millets and complex carbohydrates grown and consumed in Tamil Nadu prior to the Green Revolution, today white rice is by far the greatest source of calories in the the region. Consumed in some form at every meal, the word for cooked rice is used interchangeably with the word for food. It is thus not surprising that rice occupies a privileged place in the popular imagination, and is understood to have been the fuel that drove the development of Tamil civilization from time immemorial.

Daniel argues, to have particular corporeal qualitative substances shaping the characters of their members, which are drawn in part from the land upon which they live; that is, in the case of Daniel's interlocutors, the soil of their native villages (1984). For the widely dispersed and rapidly urbanizing castes at the heart of my study, the admixture of place and corporeal substance has opened up to the influence of action. The actions of the Devendras in the past, as courageous kings and noble cultivators, shape the inherited character traits of their descendants who then engage in similar behaviors. The character of a caste then, is not defined by the group's native soil, but rather by the actions of their forefathers. Coded actions have transformed from instantiations of rank in a broader economic system of interdependency to constitutive elements of internal, inheritable substances that include, not just one's blood, but one's character or essential personality traits.

This relatively new understanding of the relationship between caste identity and personhood as both corporeal and behavioral, substance *and* code, helps explain newly arising and rapidly multiplying caste heroes who are increasingly celebrated by a number of non-Brahmin caste conglomerates in the making. Drawn from recently authored and/or recently recognized accounts of the past, caste heroes demonstrate the ability of action to shape inheritable substances, thereby affirming and facilitating the processes of conglomeration I examine.

Caste conglomerations, like the Devendras and Thevars, rely in part on their caste heroes who stand as icons of their respective identities, and indexes of their collective eminence. It is not surprising then that caste conglomerations seek not only recognition of, but wide acclaim for their heroes. They attempt to consecrate and canonize their heroes through new forms of mass media, including the construction and display of imposing billboards, and the circulation of

publications, websites, online videos, and songs. Assertions of ancestral heroism are most prominently displayed during annual events at which caste fellows gather to celebrate the lives of their caste heroes who are almost always depicted as courageous and virile, on the one hand, and honorable and civil, on the other hand.

In this dissertation, I offer in-depth explorations of Devendra and Thevar caste heroes, and the events at which they are celebrated. Such events, I demonstrate, are key moments for the constitution of caste conglomerations, as previously endogamous subcastes unite in their ritual practices and understandings of history. What is more, the Devendras' and Thevars' hero celebrations help drive the mimetic competition that Dumont recognized in "substantialized" castes. They are venues for recursive one-upsmanship, drawn together by their endless bids to outdo each other. Devendras and Thevars compete over whose caste hero was braver and more righteous – a competition that is particularly potent because their most renowned heroes came into conflict in 1957, setting off one of the deadliest intercaste riots in recorded Tamil history.

In addition to diverging from the antecedent concept of substantialization by highlighting the symbiotic relationship between substance and code, I push the boundaries of the process of the political incorporation of castes by focusing on the Thevars and the Devendras whose ability to reach mimetic parity with traditionally higher castes, such as the KVs of Barnett's study, is questionable. While long dominant in the Southeastern reaches of the Tamil country, in the wider expanse of the region, the Thevars are not associated with the honor and civility that is almost synonymous with the Vellalars (who are wealthier, on average).¹⁸ To substantiate such claims, which they do sometimes make, Thevars look to their heroes of the past. Unlike the KVs of

¹⁸ As I discuss in Chapter Two, the ancestors of the individuals of Southeastern Tamil Nadu who refer to themselves as Thevars dominated the region as kings, chieftains, and soldiers. Their dominance was both demonstrated and constituted by the conspicuous honors they received in temples. However, over the course of the past century, their status has declined significantly, and they are often regarded with disdain by the upper castes that dominate the Northern reaches of the state.

Barnett's study who viewed substantialization as politically and financially expedient, progressive reform (1977, 403), the Thevars posit their strength in action and in numbers as something that was always already there.

Even more that the Thevars, the Devendras' construction as a caste conglomeration is built on the foundation of history because they must seek sufficient legitimacy to overcome their classification by others as "untouchables". The particularly pointed stigma that the Devendras face as untouchable drives their feverish research, publication, and instruction, as they work to ensure that the Devendras and others know "who they really are."

Their efforts raise important questions about the processes and limits of caste-based political incorporation, which I examine in this dissertation. Prior to the 1970s, the Devendras politically united with other castes relegated to untouchability, joining the most populous and geographically dispersed caste conglomeration on the subcontinent – the Dalits who, despite limitless diversity, unite on account of their shared experience of and staunch rejections of their oppression.¹⁹ However, many of today's Devendras disavow Dalit identity, despite the evidence of its power in electoral victories in the North Indian State of Uttar Pradesh and in Tamil Nadu. As with conglomerations in other contexts, the Devendras' absorption into the pan-Indic Dalit category is vexed by the opposition of some of their leaders who refuse to identify themselves as untouchable.

The Devendras' internal, competitive struggles bespeak the nature of caste politics and the abiding problem of untouchability, which, despite the efforts of attorney and national leader Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, remains a potent source of stigma and a key determinant of socioeconomic status. It troubles the efforts of the Devendras to conglomerate in mimetic

¹⁹ While formerly untouchable castes throughout the subcontinent do not necessarily intermarry, the Dalit category aims to incorporate them on account of their shared history and contemporary economic conditions.

opposition to other non-Brahmin castes like the Thevars, pointing to the need for further examination of the formation of castes into political blocs akin to ethnicities.

Ambedkar's Approach

Ambedkar who was himself a victim of untouchability adopted a range of strategies to upend it, and is ultimately remembered for establishing Dalit identity. The new moniker, he hoped, was part of the process of liberation through which former “untouchables” would claim power within the new nation-state.

Early in his career, Ambedkar believed in the ability of democratic institutions to upend the systematic exploitation and oppression of India's “untouchables”. Strongly opposing Gandhi's defense of caste practices as essential components of “Indian tradition” (Dirks 2001, 260)²⁰, Ambedkar insisted on the destruction of caste writ large, but, at the same time believed that such a process could not be set in motion without the establishment of reservations on the basis of caste. He also rejected Gandhi's term for the “untouchables” – Harijans (“Children of God”) – on account of its patronizing and paternalistic implications, and instead popularized the term Dalit (“crushed”), which is believed to have appeared first in the writings of the non-Brahmin activist Jyotiba Phule (1827 – 1890).

Ambedkar initially approached caste as a system of economic exploitation that was justified by religious scripture. Drawing on his training as an economist, he argued in *Annihilation of Castes* (1936) that castes were not the “natural” outcome of the division of labor,

²⁰ Gandhi had insisted on the maintenance of “Indian tradition” as the nation was coming into being, despite its multiple fractures and faultlines. Denying that Brahmin domination was antithetical to the uplift of the “untouchables” who he called Harijans, Gandhi conciliated the Brahmins with whom he shared the Congress. He claimed, at a meeting in Madras in 1921 that Brahmins “could pride themselves on taking the first place in self-sacrifice and self-effacement and that they should remain the custodians of the purity of our life” (Dirks 2001, 260). At a later speech in Madras in 1927, he upheld the four-fold varna system, and claimed that a ban on intermarriage and interdining was essential to the ideal system, although he maintained that caste had nothing to do with high or low status (ibid.).

but were instead rooted in the division of *laborers* according to dogma rather than natural aptitudes. In *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945), Ambedkar took his argument one step further, claiming that “as an economic system, it [the caste system] permits exploitation without obligation. Untouchability is not only a system of unmitigated economic exploitation but is also a system of uncontrolled economic exploitation” (Ambedkar 1945, 196-97). Ambedkar thus interpreted untouchability as a form of unchecked slavery, propelled by its own avarice.

However, he believed that the momentum of economic exploitation could be allayed through the establishment of reservations, that is, rules of positive discrimination, which would allow the long oppressed to develop economically by way of their preferential treatment in education and employment. The British had already established such policies in order to ensure proportionate representation in government jobs, and had applied them on a national level with the Communal Award of 1932, which ensured the reservation of seats within the transitioning government of British India by granting separate electorates to the Forward Castes, Lower Castes, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, and Untouchables (Menon 1998, 49). Gandhi adamantly opposed the policy on account of his fear that it would breakup Hindu society, and fasted in protest, but Ambedkar and other minorities strongly believed in the efficacy of reservations.²¹ Although Gandhi and Ambedkar were initially at loggerheads, they compromised with the Poona Pact in September of 1932, which ensured the

²¹ While his ambivalent approach to caste does not resonate as powerfully today as the voices of Gandhi or Ambedkar, India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru followed largely in the footsteps of the former, which is not too surprising given the fact that Gandhi named him his political heir. Nehru was a Brahmin, self-declared Hindu agnostic, and secularist, but, at the same time, took the idea of India as a Hindu nation for granted by declaring the predominance of Indo-Aryan culture (Omvedt 2006, 13). He condemned caste whole-heartedly, and disliked its intrusion into politics, but justified it by tracing its history to a utilitarian division of labor. Like Gandhi, he believed that caste-based mobilization and allowances like reservations were divisive (ibid., 14). Nehru was ultimately averse to the idea of caste holding India back from its development as a modern, secular nation.

reservation of seats for the “Depressed Classes” (a term for “untouchables” at the time) within the Hindu electorate. Ambedkar enshrined the policy of reservations as he drafted the Constitution, though he included the caveat that such policies should be reviewed every ten years.

During most of his career, Ambedkar maintained a faith in democracy and the economic development it could offer that is not surprising given the ideologies he encountered as a student in the United States and England. He began his studies at Columbia University in 1915, and finished his Ph.D. in economics in 1927 under the supervision of the secular humanist John Dewey who had written extensively on the topic of democracy (Behar 2016). While pursuing his studies at Columbia, Ambedkar also enrolled for the Bar Course at Gray’s Inn (in London) and at the London School of Economics where he wrote a doctoral dissertation about the Indian rupee, which he completed in 1923. All of his studies and experiences led him to define democracy as “a form and method of government, whereby, revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed” (Das Ed. 1977, 61). For Ambedkar, democracy was the path to upending India’s religiously sanctioned economic exploitation and attaining much needed social transformation. Finally, it is important to note that Ambedkar did not intend to empower Dalits exclusively. Instead, he consistently advocated for the unity of leftist, non-Brahmin forces (Omvedt 1995, 47), and was troubled by the failure of leftists and non-Brahmins to join with Dalits (Jaffrelot 2003, 423).

The ultimate absence of class-based unity and the persistent forms of oppression that continued to plague Dalits precipitated Ambedkar’s return to the issue of religion during the latter half of his career. At a conference in Maharashtra in 1935, he famously declared that he would not die a Hindu because of the injustices it upheld on the basis of caste, and was then

approached by leaders of different faiths who invited him to convert (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2004, 221-244). Ambedkar eventually settled on Buddhism, establishing the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha (“the Buddhist Society of India”), and writing his final work *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in 1956 (Quack 2011, 88). On October 14th, 1956, Ambedkar organized a formal, public conversion ceremony overseen by a Buddhist monk for himself and his supporters in Nagpur, Maharashtra. Ambedkar, his wife, and about 500,000 of his acolytes converted together (Ganguly 2005, 257). On December 6th, 1956, Ambedkar died in his sleep at his home in Delhi.

While Buddhism did not expand beyond a small minority of Dalits who were mostly native to Ambedkar’s home state of Maharashtra, his legacy within Dalit politics and within the politics of caste in general should not be underestimated. Ambedkar helped define caste as a system of economic exploitation that is inextricably linked to Hinduism. He also ensured that debates surrounding caste practices and identities have remained central to the Indian nation-state to this day.

According to Anupama Rao, Ambedkar built Dalit statements into the foundation of the Indian nation-state (2009). She challenges the assumptions of scholars within subaltern studies who suggest that Dalit voices are muted by the state (Mayaram et. al., 2005), arguing instead that caste-based grievances are at the heart of Indian politics (Rao 2009).²² While Ambedkar did not

²² While Rao’s primary task is elucidating the transformation of Dalits from stigmatized subjects to citizens who have played a constitutive role in organizing the terms of Indian liberal democracy, she also attempts to explain the underlying logic of contemporary caste violence. According to Rao, the spectacular elements of recent anti-Dalit violence are highly significant. It is no coincidence that violence against Dalits often occurs along borders that Dalits used to be prevented from crossing, such as the threshold of the temple and the doors of the panchayat – and involve the liberal handling of polluting substances, such as blood. These performative elements of anti-Dalit violence, Rao contends, signify ritual degradation and articulate archaic forms of political discipline that are not fulfilled by the contemporary disciplinary state (Rao 2009, 36). In contemporary India, the tension between the modern disciplinary state and older forms of sovereignty is played out in moments of spectacular violence. Dalit voices in the Indian state are muffled by the brutal repression of para-state forces beyond the walls of government offices.

succeed in upending untouchability, he did make redressing it an important and ongoing conversation throughout India.

For those castes formerly known as “untouchable”, including the Devendras, Ambedkar signifies the progress that can be attained through education and the official channels of the modern, democratic state. Although Ambedkar himself was ultimately disenchanted by the nation-state that he helped build, he remains standing as a sign of the development of Dalits through their achievements and accomplishments. Many contemporary Dalit activists, such as Thirumavalavan who leads the electorally successful Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (“Liberation Panther Party”, henceforth, VCK), follow Ambedkar in their denunciations of Hinduism and the economic oppression endemic to caste. Although they have been crushed, they can make themselves anew by embracing democracy and the opportunities it offers. Ultimately, the work that Ambedkar did over the course of his career helped build Dalit identity as a modern departure from the religiously rooted oppression of the past. Always depicted in a light blue suit and wearing thick glasses, Ambedkar stands as a signifier of the respectable future of contemporary Dalits.

Importantly, Ambedkar also expanded the practice of asserting political identity through name changing by renaming all “untouchable” communities Dalits. Resolute in his disdain for Gandhi’s paternalistic epithet – Harijan (“Child of God”), Ambedkar chose to redefine such communities with a name that highlighted their physical suffering under the weight of caste oppression. Although the term Dalit was in a sense an admission of victimization, it also constituted an assertion of agency through which Dalit communities would compel others to recognize them according to their desires. To a certain degree, Ambedkar’s project of renaming worked. In outlets of official public discourse, such as government communications, media

platforms, and scholarship, the term “Dalit” came to replace terms like “untouchable”, Harijan, and even “Depressed Classes” (the predominant official term used by the British government).

The deep implications of renaming can be elucidated through Judith Butler’s insights into the complicated dependence of subjectivity on naming. According to Butler, language, in this case the utterance of a name, creates and sustains the body of the subject (1997, 5). “One comes to ‘exist’ by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the other. One exists not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being *recognizable*” (ibid.). In naming and classifying various castes, the Indian government (which echoed the British administration), and ordinary people who address castes beyond their own make the diverse populations they encounter recognizable as discreet collectivities, in a sense, bringing them into being according to their own assumptions and imaginations. “Tentative ontological status”, Butler claims, depends on “the call of recognition that solicits existence” (ibid., 26). There is a primary dependence on language against which the subject cannot protect her or himself (ibid.). However, as Butler argues in the context of other types of illocutionary acts, pronouncements like naming must be backed by some type of authority in order to be efficacious (ibid., 16). Insulting name calling, for example, only penetrates the addressee if coming from an other with the authority to do so; being called silly by an unknown toddler does not have the same effect as being called silly by one’s boss. The subject, Butler tells us, is dependent on the utterances of another, but not just any other; an other with authority.

At the same time, the creation of collective subjects through the process of naming castes also endows them with agency by allowing them to exist at all. Collective subjects defined on the basis of caste owe themselves, at least in part, to colonial classification and the way it was taken

up, both by successive regimes and related institutions, *and* by those who were so classified in pursuing their own projects.

The names “Untouchable”, “Harijan”, and “Depressed Classes” that Ambedkar rejected were rooted in the historicity of prior instances of their utterance (ibid., 50-51). Although such names helped constitute Dalits as collective subjects, they were also synonymous with their lowly status, used to insult them, and to describe their allegedly polluting nature. To call someone “untouchable” was to refer to past abuses, and was therefore a threat to the body of the (in this case collective) subject (ibid., 5). Ambedkar repudiated such threats, refusing to allow others to make Dalits recognizable according to their own presumptive categories. Instead, he created a new and therefore initially unrecognizable class of subjects who came to be known as Dalits over time.

Ambedkar’s own *a priori* authority borne by way of his position as the nation’s first Minister of Law and Justice and as the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee is essential to keep in mind in attempting to understand this process. A less authoritative figure may not have been able to elicit recognition.

However, as I discuss in the chapters to follow, the term Dalit remains contested: some non-Dalit castes continue to use the term Harijan, while some castes known by others as Dalits refuse that epithet. The term Dalit has itself come to carry the stigma and disdain that had been expressed in older titles like “Untouchable”. Many caste groups situating themselves above Dalits on the basis of their allegedly superior purity augment older forms of discriminatory disdain with their indignant attitudes towards Dalits’ acceptance of “government handouts”. For Devendras and for many Tamil Dalits, Ambedkar’s attempt to build a new subjectivity through the term Dalit thus remains unfinished. Many of them turn instead to assertions of Tamil ethno-

nationalism as they attempt to abolish their classification as “untouchable”. Ultimately, Ambedkar’s project of redefining Dalits by refusing their subjection to older, externally dictated identities has not yet come to fruition.

Caste and Self-Respect in the Tamil Country

In order to understand the somewhat independent discourse of caste that arose in the Tamil country as Ambedkar was attempting to work within and through the legal channels of the Indian state, we must explore the work of Periyar E.V. Ramasami Naiker (1879-1973, henceforth EVR) who is usually credited with starting the Dravidian (“Southern”) Movement. Commonly referred to simply as Periyar, literally, “the great one”, EVR hailed from a wealthy industrialist family of the respected Balija Naidu community, and joined the Indian National Congress in 1919. He resigned in 1925 on the basis of his opposition to Gandhi’s ultimate acceptance of caste-based norms and practices, and his belief that Congress was only serving the needs of Brahmins. Upon leaving the Congress, EVR declared his heretical political credo: “No god; no religion; no Gandhi; no Congress; no Brahmins” (McDermott 2014, 429). His insistent atheism made him even more radical than Ambedkar, but it has not proven to be the most enduring element of his political stance.

EVR’s efforts, collectively referred to as the Self-Respect Movement, were aimed at obliterating the prejudices of the caste system and destroying religion through rationality. He produced a transitive critique of Hinduism, Brahmins, Sanskrit, and the Indian nation by appropriating the old Orientalist proclivity to consider all four as one unit, and creating an imagined foe against which “the Tamil people” could struggle (Pandian 2007, 212-213). In so doing, he claimed to fight for the downtrodden of every ilk, including women, and spread his revolutionary ideas in an earthy, plebeian Tamil garnished with parables and proverbs at public

meetings held throughout the Tamil countryside (ibid.). He also spread his ideas through hyper-literalist readings of Hindu texts and condemnations of Brahmins' perpetuation of material injustices (ibid., 194-5). He led processions in which the effigies of beloved Hindu deities, such as Ram, were beaten with slippers. He produced plays of the Ramayana in which he presented Ram as cruel and cowardly and Sita as morally loose.²³ Over time, EVR's movement became conflated with Dravidianism – the Tamil-centric, anti-Brahminism that gained ground during the latter half of the twentieth century, and that continues, mostly in name, to dominate the state's political platforms today.

EVR did not establish Dravidianism. Three non-Brahmin leaders, Dr. T.M. Nair (1868-1919) and C. Natesa Mudaliar (1875 – 1937) who were members of the Madras Legislative Council, and Pitti Theagaraya Chetti (1852-1925) who was an attorney, formed the South Indian Liberation Front in 1916 in response to the measurable economic advantages and prestige that Brahmin communities maintained during the last few decades of the colonial regime (Irschick 1969, 21; 47; Washbrook 1976, 85-6)²⁴ Believing that collaboration between non-Brahmin groups was necessary to challenge Brahmin hegemony, Nair and Chetti attempted to create a collective of Dravidians who would unite on the basis of their common enemy. It is

²³ The Hindu Epic, the Ramayana, is probably the most broadly recognized religious text in South Asia. Especially following televised reproductions starting in the 1980s, the Ramayana became the definitive text in popular understandings of Hinduism.

²⁴ According to the 1921 census, male Tamil Brahmins were by the far the most educated population, boasting a literacy rate of 71.5% in Tamil and 28.2% in English (Irschick 1969, 58). This was no doubt related to the fact that Madras, the capital of the Presidency, and thus the city that received disproportionate shares of colonial wealth and infrastructure, also became *the* center for higher education in South India. Both a cause and effect of their high rates of educational achievement, Tamil Brahmins were overrepresented in positions in the colonial administration, which had for the first time allowed Indians to become higher-level administrators between the 1890s and 1920s in an attempt to tighten its control over the increasingly chaotic Presidency (ibid., 60). Known as the Indianization Reforms, these policy shifts overwhelmingly benefited Brahmins, who together comprised only 3.2% of presidency's total population, and who gradually filled the great majority of administrative and educational positions then open to Indians (ibid., 5). While Telugu Brahmins also reaped the rewards of this new system, the dominance of Tamil Brahmins in the administration was even more pronounced. In 1921, Tamil Brahmins occupied the most administrative positions, Vellalars and Telugu Brahmins occupied the second place, and Balija Naidus (EVR's Kannada-speaking caste) and Nairs (Malayalis), the caste from which T.M. Nair hailed, were tied for third (ibid., 13). In positions concerned with law, instruction, and academics, the pattern was similar (ibid.).

important to note that at this point, Dravidianism was not wed to the Tamil language, but instead included the four predominant Southern languages (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada) in contradistinction to Sanskrit and Hindi, which were purportedly spoken by Brahmins.²⁵

The multilingualism of Dravidianism makes sense in light of the fact that it arose several decades before the linguistic division of states.²⁶ All of present-day South India was the Madras Presidency, so the vague horizon of state power that early Dravidianists sought fit into a political geography that had already been mapped out by the colonial state. They envisioned their affiliation not on the basis of language, but on the basis of being Dravidian, a racial construct that owed itself to colonial scholars like Risley and Thurston who I discussed above.

Departing from the multilingual, Pan-Southern vision of his predecessors, EVR transformed Dravidianism into a Tamil-centric movement, becoming a key figure in the development of Tamil national identity that was forged at the time (Ramaswamy 1997; Mitchell 2009). While he was not particularly interested in promoting the Tamil language and spoke Kannada at home, he was invested in creating a united front of “Dravidians” and did so by appealing to Tamil-speaking populations who consolidated on the basis of language. At his most radical moments, EVR called for the establishment of a Dravidian nation (“Dravida Nadu”) in which there was no distinction between Tamil and the other three languages. In his bid for the nation, he wrote,

²⁵ Of course, South Indian Brahmins spoke and continue to speak South Indian languages at home. Nonetheless, they are more likely than others to know Sanskrit and Hindi.

²⁶ The South Indian Liberation Front produced their political publications in a number of languages. Nair, a native speaker of Malayali, and Chetti, a native speaker of Telugu, oversaw the publication of English (*The Justice*), Tamil (*Dravidian*), and Telugu (*Andhra Prakasika*) newspapers that focused on non-Brahmin grievances (Ramaswamy 1997). They submitted the non-Brahmin Manifesto to *The Hindu* and *New India*, two Indian nationalist English-language newspapers, for publication on December 20th, 1916. The Manifesto declared that India was not ready for independence because political autonomy would result in the tyranny of the Brahmins over the non-Brahmins. By 1917, the South Indian Liberation Front had become renamed the Justice Party after its English paper, which provided news in the language spoken by almost all elites of the Madras Presidency.

Some of our pandits declare that these four languages emerged from one, that they are four sisters that emerged from one mother's womb. This is utter nonsense. There was only one daughter who was given birth to by Tirāviṭattāy [Mother Dravida], and her name is Tamil. We have given it four different names, because the language is spoken in four different places. But in all four places, it is Tamil that is spoken (E.V. Ramasami 1962, 12-13 in Ramaswamy 1997, 105).

EVR thus fed directly into the burgeoning sentiments of Tamil devotion that had arisen in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Sumathi Ramaswamy argues, new “discourses of love, labor, and life” coalesced around the Tamil language during the traumatic process of nation formation, constituting what she calls *tamiḷpparru* (literally, “Tamil devotion”) (1997, 5-6). Tamil speakers began to demonstrate intense devotion to Tamil when they felt the threat of the possible incursion of Hindi and the elite predominance of English (ibid.). *Tamiḷ parru* reached its zenith, she goes on, when the Tamil language came to be imagined as the originary locus of affective life – the mother. Tamils imagined and depicted the Tamil language as their supreme mother goddess in a variety of widely circulated print materials, which were a testament to deep-seated anxieties about her demise. The Tamil goddess, *Tamiḷttāy* (literally, “Tamil mother”), elicited the devotion of her faithful sons who eagerly sacrificed themselves when they sensed that their mother was threatened by the incursion of Hindi. When the Indian state was on the brink of formation, and the Congress government of the 1930s suggested introducing Hindi into schools in the Tamil region, images of *Tamiḷttāy* threatened and attacked by other languages proliferated (ibid., 101-106). “Aiming to provoke the filial passions of Tamil speakers, her devotees circulated stunning images of *Tamiḷttāy* being violated” (ibid.).

Adamant in his opposition to religion and “superstition,” EVR went on to explicitly oppose *tamiḷpparru*, which he called madness (E.V.Ramasami 1962, 7-17 in ibid., 107).²⁷

²⁷ In 1962, EVR published his rationalist attack on the feminization and deification of Tamil in a pamphlet entitled *Tāyppāl Paittiyam* (“the madness over mother’s milk”), which despite its venomous aspersion of *tamiḷpparru*, was not enough to stop the devotees of Tamil from counting EVR as a hero amongst them (E.V.Ramasami 1962, 7-17 in Ramaswamy 1997, 107). The pages of the pamphlet were colored with biting vituperation. EVR argued that Tamils content with imbibing their “mother’s milk” were “diseased with irrationalism, superstition, and traditionalism, so much so that one recoiled from the nasty odor of religiosity and orthodoxy that emanated from them”

Nonetheless, his militant anti-Brahmanism and accompanying aspersion of Sanskrit fostered a rise in zealous devotion to the Tamil language. During the 1920s and early 1930s, Tamils devalued Sanskrit and demonstrated *en masse* against the inclusion of Hindi in public school curriculums, which they associated with the Brahmin hegemony emanating from North India. Although not every demonstration directly involved EVR, his work significantly inspired protesters, and he did often lead agitations. In 1937, he organized the first of a series of agitations protesting the introduction of compulsory Hindi education in public schools. It lasted three years, involved fasts, conferences, marches, and picketing, and resulted in the death of two protesters and the arrest of 1,198 persons, including women and children (Sarkar 2008, 396). Amidst the agitations, in 1939, EVR became the head of the Justice Party, which he transformed into the Dravida Kazhagam “Dravidian Association” (henceforth, DK) in 1944.

EVR envisioned the DK as a social reform association, aimed at eradicating the ills of caste through whatever means necessary. By the 1950s, he had reigned in some of his more grandiose demands in order to attract a broader base of constituents, although he remained opposed to participating in electoral politics because he did not want to lose sight of the radical ideology he promoted. Today, EVR’s wariness continues to resonate in commonplace understandings of politics as an inherently dirty and often violent undertaking. Like many people throughout the world, Tamils without strong party affiliations are wary of politicians whose integrity is always already in question.

EVR’s aversion to the dimming effects of electoral politics did not, however, slow the momentum of Dravidianism’s march to the polls. In 1949, one of EVR’s closest associates C.N. Annadurai split from the DK and started the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam “Dravidian Progress

(E.V.Ramasami 1962, 7-17 in *ibid.*, 239-240). He went so far as to demand that his followers speak English because it had scientific utility and lacked the “‘barbarism’” of Tamil (*ibid.*, 240).

Association” (henceforth, DMK) – an electoral party, which rose to power in 1967. By 1972, it had produced another ideologically identical splinter party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (henceforth, AIADMK). Since then, the two parties have become bitter rivals, periodically alternating their reign, and ensuring the impossibility of any other party’s rise to power through electoral alliances, clientalism, and the earnest allegiances and even devotion they have elicited.

While EVR’s adamant atheism and aggressive tactics prevented him from attracting a mass following in his lifetime, the DMK advanced, at least in part, through its thoughtful self-promotion in popular cinema (Pandian 1992), which I discuss in chapters to come.²⁸ Militant anti-Brahmanism and opposition to the North Indian Hindi hegemony that is thought to dominate the Indian nation-state remain important legacies that deeply influence caste-based political mobilization in Tamil Nadu. EVR’s fight against the government, and his refusal to engage with the democratic state as a political party continue to echo in the rhetoric of caste-based mobilization that I explore throughout this dissertation. EVR also set a robust precedent for the critique of caste and religion, and helped construct a fixed oppressor and enemy against which “the people” continue to struggle.

However, after decades of Dravidianist rule in the Tamil country, it has become clear to Dalits that neither North Indians nor Brahmins are entirely responsible for the violent exclusion

²⁸ Probably the most beloved and prolific Tamil actor of all time, Marudhur Gopalan Ramachandran (henceforth, “MGR”) appeared in hundreds of films between the late 1950s and the late 1970s. After he joined forces with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in 1962, MGR elicited mass support for the party in part because of the onscreen persona he cultivated. He presented himself as a swashbuckler, a courageous ruffian whose excessive violence was balanced by tender caring. Developed with the help of other Dravidianist leaders, MGR’s persona was that of the people’s savior, the Robin Hood who always protected the interest of the common man. On film, he fought for the rights of poor agricultural laborers and oppressed urban workers, and was thus able to gather an unparalleled mass of fans who related to him with familial affection. Once in power, MGR brought his onscreen persona into the streets by establishing policies that demonstrated his munificence. He instated the sale of rice for 1 rupee per kg, and was hailed for the success of his Nutritious Meal Program, which continues to provide free lunches for school children to this day. Despite the fact that his rule was also deeply authoritarian, characterized by police brutality and an intolerance of dissent, MGR is remembered as revolutionary leader (Dickey 2007; Pandian 1992).

they continue to face. Instead, both leading Dravidianist parties have become constituted by dominant castes with little interest in including Dalits in their visions of non-Brahmin Tamil identity (Pandian 2007). Many contemporary Dalit political voices, such as those emanating from the aforementioned VCK, have taken up the form of Dravidianism, that is, of militant anti-Brahmanism and Tamil devotion as a repudiation of mainstream Dravidianist parties and the forms of exclusion upon which they have grown (ibid.).

For the Devendras at the heart of my study, assertions of primordial Tamil identity are a manifestation of fighting Dravidianism with its own tools. Even for the Thevars who are well represented within the AIADMK, claims to true Tamil identity can manifest in battle cries against their Devendra neighbors *and* against the (often ineffective) political establishment. Many Tamil castes posit the true Tamil ethnic identity they claim in opposition to Dravidianist political parties, which they accuse of diluting or denigrating authentic Tamil identity.

Caste in Conversation

As they are discussed in Tamil Nadu today, caste identities, affiliations, and practices bear the discursive weight of the past – of racialized categories developed in colonial anthropology²⁹, of Ambedkar’s battle for inclusion, and of the faint glimmer of egalitarianism that remains in the rhetorical texture of Dravidianism. The modern voices of anti-caste activism that spurn the caste system as a cruelty rooted in the pre-modern past, following antecedent leaders like EVR and Ambedkar, along with the official policies of the Indian state that render discrimination on the basis of caste illegal, ensure that the discussion of caste in the mixed company of day-to-day life is rude at best and deeply offensive at worst.

²⁹ Perhaps the best reminder of the influence of colonial discourse is the word caste itself, which is used in Indian English. It is derived from the Portuguese word “*castas*”, meaning race or lineage, which overlapping communities of colonizers, missionaries, and scholars adopted from sixteenth-century Portuguese travelers to describe the social relations they found on the Indian subcontinent.

At certain points during my research, I experienced such hesitations and uncertainties as a lingering suspicion of my motivations, and as an implacable silence that I could not overcome. Friends often told me to avoid discussing the topic in public, and advised me to describe my research as an investigation of “Tamil culture”, rather than an examination of the dynamics of caste politics. I followed their advice and smiled when they introduced me to others as a student of Tamil culture. One of my insightful interlocutors – a fifty-something-year-old, mid-ranking government employee, and a transplant from a village near Paramakudi to Chennai – described the tacit proscription on informal, public discussions of caste. He told me in a mix of Tamil and English that caste today is like a spring coiled under the pressure of forced silence. When caste does slip out from under silence’s weight, it shoots up with the dynamism and velocity of built up tension released. Indeed, it is a topic that can quiet a room, lead to impassioned assertions, or elicit memories of grief, depending on the context.

Obviously, discussions of caste are not completely untenable. In addition to the conversations I had with those interlocutors who came to trust me, multiple venues of caste-based politics offered ample opportunities to explore what could otherwise be an eschewed topic. Caste is frequently a prominent component of political rhetoric, as it is printed in party publications and shouted into microphones, as well as woven into the texts and voices of many popular media outlets. There is also wide array of caste-based political parties in Tamil Nadu today, ranging from those that state their aim to be the destruction of caste to those that aim to protect dominant castes, which, they claim, are being cheated out of opportunities by reservation policies. For the most part, leaders and cadres of such parties discussed their opinions about caste with me, though there were limits to their willingness, especially around election time. Non-

electoral caste associations in Paramakudi were an even greater source of such discussions, though they too could become quiet at moments of high political risk.

When caste was discussed, “*jāti*”, which the Madras Tamil lexicon glosses as “family, clan, race; Hindu caste; [and] kind, class, species” (Tamil Lexicon 1924-1936, 1367), was the term most often employed.³⁰ One’s *jāti* provides a shared name, a system of endogamy, as well as shared corporeal substances. As E. Valentine Daniel points out, *jāti* can refer to a type or breed, and is also applied to animals, organic, and inorganic materials (Daniel 1984, 3). Daniel draws on the ethnographic fieldwork that he conducted in rural Tamil Nadu in the early 1980s to argue that *jāti* imparts particular bodily substances, which are partially drawn from the specific diets that members of each *jāti* maintain and the land upon which they live, and which determines the underlying character of each member of a given *jāti* (ibid.). *Kuṇam*, defined by the lexicon as “attribute, property, quality; character; fundamental quality” (Tamil Lexicon 1924-1936, 983) is the word that Daniel uses for character, and, importantly, is the word that my interlocutors used to describe their own *jātis*, as well as others.³¹ According to many of my interlocutors, each *jāti* has a *kuṇam*, such as being hot tempered, greedy, gullible, or studious, which suffuses its members.

However, the relationship between the character of a given *jāti* and the soil of its *ūr* – village or native place – has changed, unsurprisingly, in the contemporary urban context. While some Paramakudi Devendras and Thevars trace their *ūrs* back to the villages their parents or grandparents once inhabited, many of them report Paramakudi as their own, native *ūr*. For Devendras whose families fled their *ūrs* on account of intercaste violence, this is almost always

³⁰ The lexicon actually refers to the Tamilized version of *jāti* – *cāti*. Although the term *jāti* has Sanskrit roots, my interlocutors pronounced the “j” rather than employing the Tamilized version.

³¹ The elite, agricultural caste with which Daniel worked, for example, are thought to possess the *kuṇam* of craftiness and scheming intelligence (1984, 93).

the case. They link the type of people that they are, the substantive qualities of their being, to the new urban spaces they negotiate rather than to the soil of the agricultural past. Possibilities that were unavailable in the rural context are thus opened up, and previously inconceivable assertions arise in the streets.

In Paramakudi, the violent fallout of new urban contentions has become naturalized, an expected everyday reality. *Jāti piraccanai* (“caste problem”), a term I heard often when broaching the topic, referred euphemistically to intercaste violence, such as the murders that regularly followed intercaste marriages and the riots that followed caste-based political mobilization. Everyone knew what *jāti piraccanai* meant. In and around Paramakudi, news about violent incidents, which would spread rapidly through the town, would automatically evoke the question: “which *jātis*?”

Despite the fact that intercaste violence was naturalized in Paramakudi, many of my friends in rural areas were apt to deny the continued salience of *jāti*, at least partially because they feared my judgment of them as “backwards.” I conducted preliminary dissertation research in Onaiyur, a village of 3,655 individuals of which 595 hail from castes considered Dalit (Census of India 2011). Located 61 kilometers from Paramakudi and 21 kilometers from the larger city of Madurai, the village is not isolated, but is nonetheless tightly knit. Members of the village’s Dalit community whom I have been visiting since 2004 (for undergraduate research) lived in their own neighborhood, but nonetheless assured me that *jāti* was a practice of the past that had no place in today’s Tamil Nadu.

For example, my friend Mariyammal, a retired agricultural laborer in her sixties who had become relatively wealthy after her son joined the police force, had been happy to share her personal life history with me, but when I turned the topic to *jāti*, she clenched her jaw and shook

her head. She lowered her voice. “We do not have caste in this village [ūr]. There are no problems like that in our village [ūr]. All are the same. We have the same blood [She pointed to the veins in her wrist.]. Before in Tamil Nadu, there were problems like that. But today things have changed.” Encountering me – a white, Anglophone researcher (unfortunately) reduplicating colonial curiosity and questioning – my friends in Onaiyur initially responded by attempting to hide the realities of jāti, which would belie the primitive or “backwards” nature of Tamil society.

Something else, which probably would have persisted had a Tamil person been talking to Mariyammal, emerged in her attempt to relegate jāti to the past. The liberal ideal of equality, which has developed over the course of the past century in South Asia, has instituted a normative proscription against the most conspicuous forms of caste domination, which enabled Mariyammal to deny the endurance of the institution itself. Today it is illegal and uncommon to find lower caste and Dalit women half-clothed, or to see them denied the “right” to wear shoes or jewelry. They are not regularly subjected to public floggings as punishments for their “disobedience”. Knowing this, Mariyammal allowed such emblematically horrible aspects of jāti to stand in for the institution as a whole, and was thus able to note the progress from then to now. While horrific acts of violence continue to brutalize Dalit communities, they are seen to be transgressions of the norm that upholds modern society.

Despite Mariyammal’s hopeful acceptance of the party line, jāti piraccanai had, in fact, occurred in the village relatively recently. After I stayed in the village for two months, perhaps finally proving that I was a real friend of the community, I had a kind of ethnographic breakthrough. Late one night, I was sitting with Mariyammal and five of her female friends on

the floor of her porch attempting to chew the betel nut they had given me.³² The area was a gathering place for middle aged and elderly women and sometimes men where they sat at night, enjoying the breeze and discussing the latest village news. That night, the conversation was focused on me – the girl who had come to Onaiyur so many times from America. Giggling at the red betel juice that was dripping down my chin, they asked me what I had eaten that day in the morning, afternoon, and evening. I began my account of my meals as Pandi, a friend and cousin of many of my female companions, as well as one of the most consistently drunk men in the village, approached the porch. “Hello, sir,” I said pressing my hands together in the gesture of respectful greeting. Everyone laughed at the formality of the greeting I offered Pandi. “So you’re the one studying our jāti,” Pandi said, although he had met me several times before. He sat down and joined the crowd.

I responded in jest, “Yes, I am trying to study jāti, but no one will tell me about it.” I reposed the questions I had asked many times before, and addressed them to no one in particular. “How are jāti relations in this village? Have there ever been any problems, any jāti piraccanai?” At first, everyone insisted that there were no problems in the village as per status quo. Then Pandi chimed in, “We wouldn’t work and then they came here and they burnt down all of our houses.” Without further prompting, Kartammal, a friend and relative of Mariyammal who was about the same age, recounted, “They came here from down over there with their big sticks and they came right into our homes and they beat us. Then they burnt down our houses.” After Pandi and Kartammal’s initial comments, the others joined in with remarks and recollections that were equally vague. The specifics of individuals involved, dates, times, and the order in which events unfolded were not easily revealed. I had to ask many pointed questions to piece together what

³² The areca nut, which is the seed of the areca palm, has long been chewed in South India, and has very mild psychoactive effects. It is commonly referred to as betel nut in English. The term areca probably originated from the Tamil word *atakkai* during the 16th century when Dutch and Portuguese sailors took the nut to Europe.

remains to me a hazy image of jarring violence.³³ Apparently, the landowning Thevars had reacted violently to the Devendras' refusal to work for them.

Throughout Tamil Nadu, the thorny issue of intercaste relations is negotiated with carefully selected language. Sometimes my interlocutors would avoid uttering the word *jāti*, instead using the word *camutāyam*, which the Madras Tamil Lexicon defines as “company, assembly; collection of things” (Tamil Lexicon 1924-1936, 1302). In its everyday usage, I might gloss *camutāyam* as “society”. People meant caste when they referred to their *camutāyam* or talked about others' *camutāyam*, but I never heard anyone say *camutāyam piraccanai*; when referring to intercaste violence, the word *jāti* was almost always employed. The term *camutāyam* effectively shed the negative connotations of *jāti*, its most horrific manifestations, because it was broader and more ambiguous. It was employed to refer to Tamil society – “Tamil *camutāyam*”, and also when people would ask me about my *camutāyam* – “America *camutāyam*”.

Government Subjection

Despite the empowering intentions of the term Dalit, and denials of the endurance of *jāti* as a structure of violent, systemic oppression, the government's practice of classifying castes for the sake of organizing the distribution of reservation benefits continues to ensure that *jātis* as collective subjects rely on the recognition and recognizability of state agents. The government's administrative categories have the unintended consequence of reinscribing hierarchical difference and the social stigma that adheres to those on the low end of the legally mandated spectrum.

National-level classifications, which date back to the Raj, have grown to include four main categories, and are ambiguously defined, despite their wide acceptance. The Scheduled

³³ I found no information in old news reports or in the Tamil Nadu Government Archive referring to this incident, which is not surprising given the chronic underreporting of rural intercaste violence.

Castes include the various castes known in everyday parlance as Dalit, which were officially defined as the Depressed Classes prior to The Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1936, which renamed them. “Social, educational, and economic backwardness arising out of the historical custom of untouchability” was the basis of inclusion within the original list of Depressed Classes, which can and has been altered since the drafting of the Constitution (Jha 1997, 2). Today 16.2% of the Indian population falls under the Scheduled Caste classification (Census of India 2011).

Comprising a small percentage of the population, the Scheduled Tribes (8.2% of the population (Census of India 2011)) are even more opaquely defined. The “definition” of the term Scheduled Tribes first appeared in Article 366 (25) of the Constitution of India as follows: “such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of this constitution” (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2012). Article 342 elides the task of definition with a top-down solution: “The President may, with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a state, after consultation with the Governor thereof by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall, for the purposes of this constitution, be deemed to be scheduled tribes in relation to that state or Union Territory, as the case may be [sic]” (ibid.). Simply put, a Scheduled Tribe is a Scheduled Tribe if the president says so.³⁴

Considered better off than the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the Other Backwards Classes also have vague constitutional roots, and are subject to change. They are

³⁴ The Ministry of Tribal Affairs claims that the “criterion followed for specification of a community, as scheduled tribes are indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness,” but admits that “this criterion is not spelt out in the Constitution” (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2012).

interchangeably referred to as the Other Backwards Classes and the Backwards Classes. The National Commission for Backwards Classes refers to Article 340 of the Indian Constitution to describe its own history, but the article defines Backwards Classes only in so much as it makes provisions for the appointment of a commission:

The President may by order appoint a Commission consisting of such persons as he thinks fit to investigate the conditions of the socially and educationally backward classes within the territory of India and the difficulties under which they labour and to make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken by the Union or any State to remove such difficulties and to improve their condition and as to the grants that should be made for the purpose by the Union or any state and the conditions subject to which such grants should be made, and the order appointing such commission shall define the procedure to be followed by the Commission ... (The National Commission for Backwards Classes accessed 2016).

When the first Backwards Classes Commission was appointed in 1953, its members suggested that in the concession of educational and employment benefits the “most backward” communities within this broader classification be given preference over others (Radhakrishnan 1990). By then, the government of Madras, as Tamil Nadu was known at the time, had decided that some of the Other Backwards Classes were almost as backwards as the Scheduled Castes, but could not be classified as such because they did not meet the criteria of untouchability (ibid.). In February of 1957, Tamil Nadu split the classification into Other Backwards Classes and Most Backwards Classes. Other states have since followed suit. As such classifications came into effect, those castes that were not eligible for reservation benefits came to be known as Forward Castes.

While caste classifications are intended to guide economic policy, they also inadvertently mimic and reinforce patterns of jāti-based status, determining symbolic capital that is inversely related to potential financial benefits. Governmental classifications are a prominent part of everyday life for people in Tamil Nadu, as 69% of the state’s population – the highest proportion of any state in India – receive reservation benefits (Venkatesan 2013). The most go to the Scheduled Tribes, followed by the Scheduled Castes, followed by the Most Backwards Classes,

followed by the Other Backwards Classes.³⁵ Designations are etched onto the ration cards that almost everyone uses to purchase groceries at affordable, state-regulated rates, and required on job applications, school registration forms, and many other types of government documentation that help constitute India's notorious red tape. The designations that determine reservation benefits thus become the primary language in which individuals communicate with the government.

Government classifications are also a part of everyday parlance, employed to make hierarchical distinctions between groups of jātis on a less granular level. When discussing caste, especially in the context of electoral politics and government-operated institutions, many of my interlocutors distinguished between Scheduled Castes, "SCs", and Other Backwards Classes/Most Backwards Classes, which were collectively referred to as "BCs". Their blanching of referential specificity is ironically both a euphemism, as well as a re-entrenching of the emergent opposition between the Dalit and "non-Dalit" caste blocs that have major implications for electoral politics.

Government classifications also reinforce the hierarchical logic of jāti because the criteria for being counted among the Scheduled Castes – being historically subjected to discrimination on the basis of untouchability – is no secret. Regardless of where they lived, my older, SC interlocutors often described the painful discrimination they experienced in the language of government classification, rather than jāti. I frequently heard that SCs were made to sit outside of their schools, or were not allowed to eat with their BC peers. Even some who had managed to get government jobs described discrimination on the basis of their SC classification. They were not given raises or promoted; they were not treated with respect because they were SCs. Even in

³⁵ Despite the fact that the Tamil Nadu's system of reservations has been challenged in the Supreme Court because it offers minority benefits to the majority, it has been upheld many times. Most, recently, in 2013, the Supreme Court upheld Tamil Nadu's 69% rate of reservations (Venkatesan 2013).

Onaiyur, specific jāti names were sometimes forgone in favor of the government's broader umbrella terms, which allowed a simple division between Dalit and non-Dalit, untouchable, and "touchable". I saw the tensions of this bifurcation become naturalized when young boys and teenagers would play BC vs. SC cricket after school in the fallow fields around Onaiyur.

Ultimately, the division between BC and SC reduplicates the division between "Caste Hindu" and "Untouchable" that has long helped define understandings of caste in scholarly literature, and that continues to appear in India's English-language press (Times of India 2016). While many Muslim and Christian communities are counted amongst the BCs, they are often referred to by their religions so that the term BC generally points to non-Dalit Hindus, or Caste Hindus. Of course, that dichotomy implies that the Scheduled Castes are not, in fact, Hindu, and that they are casteless. They are defined exclusively in terms of their oppression as Dalits. They are crushed, and their state as crushed objects can stigmatize them, rather than endowing them with the agency that Ambedkar asserted.

The sustained hierarchy between BC and SC is one of the many reasons that I mostly refer to the BCs of Tamil Nadu (especially in its Southern reaches in which Forward Castes are a sparse minority) as dominant castes. While they may be poor enough to warrant reservation benefits, such castes work to maintain their ascendancy over their SC neighbors who are read as inferior by virtue of their historical poverty and their contemporary access to generous reservation benefits.³⁶ The term dominant castes also allows me to circumvent any potential confusion that may arise from calling them Backwards Classes. Vis-à-vis their Scheduled Caste neighbors, the Backwards Classes are usually dominant.

³⁶ Although reservation benefits have, to a certain degree, altered the material realities of caste hierarchy, their limitation is partly due to the fact that they oftentimes remain unfulfilled. There are very high percentages of vacancies in reserved government posts for both the Other Backwards Classes and Scheduled Castes throughout India (Times of India 2015).

The Shifting Ground of Caste

All across Tamil Nadu, as well as in many parts of India, the relative balance of various castes, that is, those considered high, middling, or low, is changing, and this massive structural shift has created the conditions of possibility for clashes between the Scheduled and dominant castes that I examine in this dissertation. What we find on the ground of contemporary Tamil Nadu is dominant castes asserting supremacy and grasping for sovereignty, which would have been more difficult to attain in the presence of the highest and wealthiest castes, such as the Brahmins and Vellalars. The dominant castes proclaim their superiority to the Scheduled Castes who have themselves entered a new period of assertiveness on account of their rise out of rural poverty and their entrance into urban economies.

Such competitive and sometimes dangerous assertions are facilitated in part by the growing power vacuum that began to open up in the nineteenth century when Brahmin communities, which top the caste order according to the standards of Hindu orthodoxy, initiated a massive rural-to-urban migration (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008, 171). Progressively pushed by indebtedness and land sales, and pulled by new opportunities in education, salaried employment, and business, Brahmins have departed for the big cities (especially Madras/Chennai), causing a social revolution in the countryside (ibid., 176). Additionally, thousands of Tamil Brahmins have moved to other parts of India during the twentieth century, as well as to foreign countries, leaving high estimates of the Tamil Brahmin population in 2001 at 1.5 million out of Tamil Nadu's population of 62 million (ibid., 171). Although this cannot be confirmed because neither the government of India nor any other organization systematically collects reliable statistics about castes that do not receive state benefits, patterns of migration for the wealthiest, formerly landowning non-Brahmin castes are probably more moderate versions of Brahmin migration.

Those with education and white-collar ambitions are likely to leave behind their decreasingly profitable fields, and head to wherever job prospects are best.

The lower castes, that is, the Scheduled and Backwards Classes (dominant castes for my purposes) are also moving to cities, although they are not necessarily clustered within the largest cities where the rents are highest. Compared to upper caste elites, castes like the Thevars and Devendras are more likely to be found in small cities like Paramakudi. Because they are poorer on average, they also tend, more than their upper caste counterparts, to sustain supplementary agricultural work, and to live in multiple locations, migrating seasonally to wherever employment is available, whether that is Singapore or a nearby village.

Of course, all of this migration is inextricably linked to what is generally called Tamil Nadu's urbanization, which is an overarching concern of my dissertation, and a pertinent and pressing issue not just in India, but throughout the world. According to Harriss et. al. of the School for International Studies at Simon Fraser University, Tamil Nadu is now India's most urbanized state with 49% of its population living in urban areas (2006, 29-30). While its cities are indeed growing, the simple dichotomy between rural and urban embedded in such statistics does not make sense in Tamil Nadu because of seasonal migrations, as well as the development of small urban centers, in addition to the cosmopolitan metropolises that are often the subject of scholarship focused on urbanization. A significant proportion of India and a significant proportion of the world live in relatively small and seasonably variable cities like Paramakudi.³⁷

My examination of Paramakudi complicates popular assumptions about rural "tradition" and urban "modernity". As sociologist Monika Krause points out, in much of the scholarly

³⁷ As of 2011, about 1.8 billion people (half of the world's urban dwellers) lived in cities or towns with fewer than 500,000 people (UN 2012). Such cities accounted for 55% of the urban population in "more developed regions" and 50.2% of the urban population in "less developed regions" (ibid.). Although India still has the world's largest rural population (about 857 million), approximately 410 million Indians live in what are considered urban areas (UN 2014). Of urban dwellers about 25% live in urban agglomerations with populations over one million (Census of India 2011).

literature and popular discourse, at least in English and in Romance languages, discussions about urbanization have been “overlaid with normative concerns about modernity – it was in cities that observers found individual freedom, the public sphere, and cosmopolitanism on the one hand, and it was in cities that they found anomie and anonymity, crime and poverty on the other hand” (Krause 2013, 234). Krause seeks to avoid such platitudes by arguing that the increasing density of populations that we call urbanization could be understood differently. People flocking to cities, Krause reminds us, “carry the past in their habitus and the places they come from, the immediate and more distant past, regional and international journeys” (ibid., 238). While the most remote places are now connected through market forces, “we have never been urban in the way urbanists imagined us to be, in terms of the persistence of informal social relations, the natural, the problem of food and livelihoods, basic need, and complex dependencies that nevertheless enable survival” (ibid., 243).

Violent attempts to eradicate the persistence of elements normatively considered rural within cities are evidence of the inability of populations to fit into the neat categories of rural and urban (ibid., 239). India’s infamous “slum clearance” projects, which were infused with a new energy when Narendra Modi stepped into office in 2014, and were also adopted by his tenuous political ally and Tamil Nadu’s former Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalithaa (in office until her death in 2016), exemplify India’s doomed efforts to extricate the rural from the urban (Mariappan 2016). Similarly, New Delhi’s failed attempt to remove urban cattle following the petition of citizens in 2002, and several court orders since demonstrate the inevitable amalgamation of the country soil and the city streets in India, and throughout much of the world. Because of their relatively simple demographic compositions compared to large cities, small cities like Paramakudi provide clearer insight into the false dichotomy between rural and urban.

Not surprisingly, caste-based settlement patterns that can trace their roots to rural areas are often recreated in India's cities (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2008). Tamil Brahmins in Chennai (formerly Madras), for example, often live in Brahmin enclaves, and even limit their movement on the basis of their understandings of caste purity (ibid., 182). However, the settlements and movements of urban populations are not so predictable for other castes whose departure from the agrarian order destabilizes their rank (ibid.). Former non-Brahmin landlords may risk declining status, while former praedial laborers may be afforded opportunities to recreate themselves. In such climates, caste is anything but a fixed system. It is not the self-evident, pre-epistemological lifeworld that Debjani Ganguly (2005, viii) assumes it to be, but is instead, a site of perpetual contestation and conflict. While rules of intercaste interaction may never have been stable and unambiguous, as Dirks has argued (2001), debates surrounding such rules are particularly fervent at our current moment in history.

Since Brahmins now have very little influence on agrarian life, and continue to stand in the shadow of Tamil ethno-nationalism that rose to outshine them during the decades preceding Indian independence, intercaste friction is largely a non-Brahmin affair. This escalating friction is related not just to the aforementioned assertiveness of the dominant castes, but to the recent socioeconomic development of some Scheduled Castes. Although their advances are moderate, especially when we consider the perpetuity of economic discrimination and violence, Scheduled Castes' rates of literacy, employment, and wealth have risen (Thorat and Newman 2010; Narula 1999).

Such progress is often vehemently opposed by castes like the Thevars that are considered to fall somewhere on the lower end of the caste spectrum within greater Tamil Nadu, but which are dominant within particular locales. With the decline of agricultural profitability and the

increased educational and social mobility of their former laborers' descendants, the Thevars have recently experienced a deterioration of their status, which they cling to with urgency and determination. Although economist T.G. Jacob and film scholar Pranjali Bandhu claim that a good number of families within those castes (Backwards Classes/dominant castes) “are as poor as the Dalits themselves” (2009, 68), such castes continuously oppose Scheduled Castes in official political spheres, and in the violence they perpetuate on the streets.

The Devendras and The Thevars: Drawn Together by Enmity

While other castes often enter the discussion, the Scheduled Caste Devendras and the dominant caste Thevars are the central concern of my dissertation. Both castes have undergone significant changes in terms of their identities and internal organizations over the course of approximately the past sixty years. The Devendras used to be called Pallars, but have recently demanded a name change in order to publically assert their broader aim to cut ties with the abuses they suffered in the past. In doing so, they face their vulnerability to recognition, which, as I discussed above, determines their position as collective subjects. Since the government has repeatedly refused to recognize their new title, many Devendras are compelled to record their caste as Scheduled Caste “Pallar” in official government documents, so that they may receive reservations and other state benefits, thereby acquiescing to their susceptibility to external identification. Nonetheless, as I discuss in the chapters to follow, the Devendras are working to depart from Dalit subjectivity, and to create themselves as misunderstood and misrepresented dominant caste subjects whose honor must be excavated from the ruins of recent history.

The history of the Pallars is vaguely recorded on the pages that informed and empowered the colonial administration. Although such pages are tainted by Orientalism, ethnocentrism, and unabashed racism, they are the only detailed studies of nineteenth and early twentieth-century

jāti identities and practices accessible today. The *Ramnad District Manual of 1890*, which was intended to help keep the notoriously unstable region under control, noted that the Pallars were found everywhere in the Estate (roughly contemporary Ramanathapuram and Sivagangai Districts), and suggested that their name was derived from the word “*pallam*: a pit or low lying ground as it is possible that originally such ground was allotted for their residence” (*Ramnad Manual of 1890* (Rao), 37).³⁸ “Probably remnants of old races,” according to the Manual, they had been “conquered and enslaved” (*ibid.*). The Pallars had become “praedial labourers ... employed exclusively in the cultivation of paddy lands” (*ibid.*). Since their women were “considered to be particularly skilled in planting and weeding”, they alone were employed for such work if available (*ibid.*).

In order to present his vision of the Pallars, the aforementioned scholar-administrator Edgar Thurston drew on the *Ramnad District Manual*, and also referred to similar administrative resources focused on neighboring Tanjore (present-day Thanjavur) and Madura (present-day Madurai) Districts. While he was certain that the Pallars were skilled praedial laborers, Thurston wavered on the question of their relative rank. In his *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India*, Thurston noted that Pallars had separate areas of villages in which they resided, but suggested a more flattering etymological root for their name (1906, 442). Their expertise in wet cultivation, which is always carried out on low ground, explained their caste title (*ibid.*). Thurston also quoted the Tanjore District Manual of 1883 in order to suggest that the Pallars had risen out of antecedent slavery: ““The Palla women expose their body above the waist – a distinctive mark of their primitive condition of slavery, of which, however, no trace now exists”” (*ibid.*). In his much more widely read *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Thurston described in detail the wedding

³⁸ I have selected this unorthodox style of internal parenthetical citation for *The Ramnad District Manual of 1890* because the author is cited as unknown in library catalogues throughout the United States, but is identified in the text itself).

rituals of particular groups of Pallars that suggested their access to resources, and noted that in the area around present-day Coimbatore they were employed in a number of positions, including “cultivator, gardener, cooly [day wage laborer], blacksmith, railway porter ... tax-collector ... office peon” and magistrate (1909, 475). Thurston’s account suggests that only certain sections of the geographically dispersed population referred to as the Pallars would have been considered “untouchable” by virtue of their occupations.

However, Thurston recognized that Pallars lived in very poor conditions in some areas. He included a long quote from the Manual of the Madura District (1868) that bespoke their suffering. The manual described them as:

a very numerous, but a most abject and despised race ... Their principal occupation is ploughing the lands of more fortunate Tamils, and, though nominally free, they are usually slaves in almost every sense of the word, earning by the ceaseless sweat of their brow a bare handful of grain to stay the pangs of hunger, and a rag with which to partly cover their nakedness. They are to be found in almost every village, toiling and mowing for the benefit of Vellālans, and others ... Personal contact with them is avoided by all respectable men, and they are never permitted to dwell within the limits of a village [center]. Their huts form a small detached hamlet (1909, 473).

The caste that Thurston refers to as “Vellālans”, which I will call Vellalar, as per its contemporary members’ standard spelling, is a genteel, landowning caste that spans present-day Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Sri Lanka. The name Vellalar, which probably means “lord of the floods” (*vellam* “flood” + *āllar* “lord or ruler”) suggests their long-term association with agriculture, though by the time of Thurston’s work, they did not themselves perform much of the physical labor demanded by the crops (*ibid.*, 474). Labor was left to the Pallars.

The great regional variation that Thurston observed sometimes correlated with, but was not entirely determined by, the division of the Pallars into what Thurston called endogamous “sub-divisions”, which we might call *jātis* on account of their prohibitions on intermarriage (*ibid.*, 476). Thurston named some sub-divisions, though he offered the caveat that all the sub-divisions were too numerous to count. He provided translations or etymological theories

explaining the titles of those that he noted. Some of the titles were familial, such as Aiya (“father”), Ammā (“mother”), Anja (“father”), and Atta (“mother”) (ibid.). Others simply named the particular territories within which the sub-divisions lived, including “Konga ...Manganādu ... Sōzhia ... [and] Tondamān” (ibid.). One name – “Kadaiyan” – meant lowest or last (ibid., 477). Finally, one of the subdivisions cited by Thurston, “Dēvendra” referred to the Hindu deity Indra, the “king of the gods” who that section of Pallars claimed as their ancestor. Thurston mentioned a few mythological accounts of the relationship between Devendra/Indra and the Pallars, including the belief that the deity created them for the purpose of performing labor on behalf of the Vellalars, and a narrative in which a droplet of Indra’s sweat fell on a plant from which arose the first Pallar child (ibid., 474). He also noted that some Pallars claimed that they were of Indra’s lineage, as had the Kallars, a sub-caste within the “dominant” Thevar caste conglomeration, which I explore below.

Today, locally rooted endogamous units have become all but obsolete, as the upwardly mobile Pallars, following a general pattern in postcolonial India (cf. Vanniyars, Gounders, Thevars, Nadars, Yadavas) have started to become what I call a caste conglomeration. They have been continuously engaged in a widespread effort to forge statewide unity in opposition to the oppression that they faced at the hands of the dominant castes since the missionary-educated Pallar leader Perumal Peter founded the Poovaisya Indira Kula Vellalar Sangam (“Organization of the Flowering/Blossoming Vaisya Vellalars of Indra’s Lineage”) in 1924. It was at that point that the Pallars first subordinated the differences amongst themselves in order repudiate the painful experiences of their history and create themselves as a larger, unified group. They renamed themselves, the Devendra Kula Vellalars (“Vellalars of Indra’s Lineage”), staking claim

to both the agrarian civility of the Vellalars who Pallar populations used to serve, and to the Hindu valor of the king of the gods.

Following Perumal Peter, a number of leaders, including Immanuvel Sekaran (1924-1957), John Pandian (born ca. 1960), and Dr. K. Krishnasamy (born 1954), have ensured that many contemporary Pallars refer to themselves as Devendra Kula Vellalars. At the same time as the Devendras have attempted to unite under the banner of their new name, they have also worked on validating their new identity by etching it into the annals of history. A lineage of both independent and institutionally affiliated Devendra scholars, which descended from Deva Asirvatham (1920 – 2007), has grown since the 1970s. A deputy collector in Thanjavur District, Asirvatham published *Moovendar Yar* (“Who Are the Three Kings?”) in 1977 and *Pallar Alla Mallar Aam Mannar* (“Mallars, not Pallars, Yes Kings”) in 1991.

Asirvatham was the first to claim that the people formerly known as Pallars and labelled untouchable were, in fact, the descendants of the ancient and medieval Tamil kings, the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandiyas, and were known as the Mallars prior to the sixteenth century. Asirvatham’s arguments, which he bases on literary and contemporary cultural evidence, are reiterated by his many acolytes; the most vocal among them are a retired engineer turned history scholar Gurusamy Siddhar, and a professor in the Tamil Studies Department at Bharatiar University in Coimbatore, D. Gnanasekaran. While those who subscribe to what they call Mallar Iyam (“literally, Mallarism”) have at times opposed the Devendra epithet, they nonetheless contribute to the Devendras’ effort to sever ties with their Dalit past and recreate themselves as a dignified caste.

The Devendras’ political and scholarly assertions, which together constitute what might be called the Devendra Movement, profoundly influence the way members of the caste see

themselves. Of all the Devendra interlocutors with whom I spoke, both in formal interviews and informal conversations (at least one hundred and fifty), only three of them mentioned any of the endogamous subdivisions cited by Thurston. All three of them who did so were above the ages of fifty-five, and none of them listed more than three subdivisions. Devendras of younger generations do not even seem to be aware of the divisions within their caste; instead, they describe their entire caste conglomeration as the forgotten kings of yesteryear. Of course, Devendra unity is facilitated by the ease with which people communicate in the age of increased literacy, affordable printing facilities, the internet, and cellphones. Devendra websites detailing their history abound, as do matrimonial websites, and Devendra-themed YouTube videos and songs. Decreasingly localized and increasingly unified, the contemporary Devendras are a caste conglomeration fighting against their inclusion within the much broader, nationwide Dalit political umbrella.

The Thevars who are, unlike the Devendras, already widely recognized as a single caste conglomeration, have similarly united despite significant internal differences. Today the Maravars, Kallars, and Agamudaiyars who were understood as three different jātis less than sixty years ago call themselves the Mukkulathors (“three united clans” (Muthulakshmi 1997, 11)), and have taken on the caste title Thevar (“heavenly immortals” (S. Ramakrishnan 1992, 582)). While neither the *Ramnad District Manual of 1890* nor the various sources cited by Thurston mention the term Mukkulathor, a complex web of interconnections and alliances does seem to have characterized the relationships between the three for at least the past century and a half. The *Ramnad District Manual of 1890* claims that the Agamudaiyars and the Maravars were closely connected, evidenced by the marriage of Maravar chiefs to Agamudaiyar women (Ramnad District Manual of 1890 (Rao), 30). The castes did not, however, merge, as the children of such

marriages belonged to the mother's caste (ibid.). Drawing on Andrew John Stuart's *A Manual of the Tinnevely District in the Madras Presidency* of 1879, Thurston notes overlapping epithets. Amongst the Maravars, "Agamudaiyan and Kallan are returned as sub-divisions by a comparatively large number of persons" (Thurston 1909, 24). Similarly, "Maravan is also found among the sub-divisions of Kallan" (ibid.). Thurston concludes that "there can be little doubt that there is a very close connection between Kallans, Maravans, and Agamudaiyans" (ibid.). The nature and details of the historical connections between the three groups is complicated and beyond the scope of this dissertation.

However, in order to understand their current situation, it is essential to note the positions that they occupied in relatively recent history. In the area that is present-day Ramathapuram District, Maravar hereditary chieftains attained recognition by the much wealthier Nayakkar kings who ruled from Madurai in 1604 (Mohan 1986, 2). Deemed the Sethupathis, "guardians of the bridge", the chieftains came to be known for their ruthlessness and implacability in the face of imperial powers, including the British, and have descendants still living in the city of Ramanathapuram.³⁹ A feud over succession to the throne led one of the Sethupathis to found an independent kingdom in Sivagangai in 1730. His descendants, the Tondaiman Kallars of neighboring Pudukkottai, officially ruled their region from the 17th century onwards. As Dirks notes, they maintained a system of privileged landholding that favored all three of the present-day Mukkulathors, which evidences the primacy of the political (as opposed to the religious) in Tamil social structure at the time (1987). While the Agamudayars ("Householder" or "Landholder") did not ascend the throne, they were afforded the benefits of high status on

³⁹ The bridge referred to in the Sethupathi's name could have been a bridge connecting the Ramanathaswamy Temple in Rameswaram, which is an island, to the mainland of the Tamil country, or a bridge connecting Rameswaram to the nearby island of Lanka.

account of their proximity to the Maravars and Kallars. They were and continue to be referred to with a second epithet: *Servaikkarar* (“Captain”).

The royal authority held by sections of the Maravars and Kallars was complicated by their reputation for hostility and aggression, and their criminalization under the British. Part of their infamy was rooted in the perpetual power struggles that characterized the tumultuous times of Sethupathi rule. In addition to their eventual refusal to pay tribute to the Nayakkars, infighting within the Sethupathi lineage was common. As historian Lennart Bes notes, “Hardly any of the eighteenth-century Setupatis secured his position without a struggle; none of them held absolute power” (Bes 2001, 556).

Maravars beyond the Sethupathi fold were also deemed threatening on account of the martial roles they played in the Southern kingdoms and their prominence within the indigenous mode of policing – the *kāval* (“protection”) system. Maravars, whose name means “he who does not forget” and Kallars dominated the hereditary *kāvalkārars* (“protector”) positions through which they earned income and “power, social status, and prestige” (Ravichandran 2008, 1-2).⁴⁰ As the custodians of the people and their belongings, *kāvalkārars* were highly influential and commanded both respect and fear ...” (ibid., 3). Perhaps some of the reason that they elicited fear was their tendency to leverage their power to steal and cattle lift, acting as the very thieves against which they were supposed to protect (Price 1996, 62).

⁴⁰ There is not a consensus on the meaning of the Maravars’ name. Thurston quotes the census commissioner of 1891, H.A. Stuart: ““There exists among them a picturesque tradition to the effect that, in consequence of their assisting Rāma in his war against the demon Rāvana, that deity gratefully exclaimed in good Tamil Maravēn, or I will never forget, and that they have ever since been called Maravans. But, with more probability, the name may be connected with the word maram, which means killing, ferocity, bravery and the like, as pointing clearly to their unpleasant profession, that of robbing and slaying their neighbours. In former days they were a fierce and turbulent race, famous for their military prowess. At one time they temporarily held possession of the Pāndya kingdom, and, at a later date, their armies gave valuable assistance to Tirumala Nayakkan. They gave the British much trouble at the end of last [eighteenth] century and the beginning of this [nineteenth] century, but they are now much the same as other ryots (cultivators), though perhaps somewhat more bold and lawless”” (1909, 583).

Even more than their Maravar counterparts, Kallars, whose name means thief, were notorious for marauding, theft, and violence. The *Ramnad Manual of 1890* reports that the Kallars used to be a “troublesome predatory class of people. Robbery in gangs with open violence and stealing by burglary were their chief professed callings. Some of them still continue to do so” (Ramnad Manual of 1890 (Rao), 30).

After destroying the *kāval* system through the progressive introduction of a new police administration starting in 1802, the British implemented the Criminal Tribes Act of 1911, which effected large swaths of the Maravar and Kallar populations (Ravichandran 2008, 9). The act severely limited their movement, requiring them to sign in at police stations daily, made them vulnerable to police abuse, and brought with it the stigma of criminality. Around the same time, the British established agricultural reform programs for Kallar populations in order to “cultivate them inside and out” (Pandian 2009). As Anand Pandian demonstrates in his exploration of the lives of Piramalai Kallars, programs, such as the Kallar Voluntary Settlement that started in 1917, aimed to settle and control Kallar populations and in so doing valorized agrarian lifestyles as civilized and morally upstanding. Colonial efforts were complemented by older indigenous images of the agrarian cultivator as the “paragon of virtue and civility in the Tamil country”, and resulted in the establishment of a particularly vexed Kallar subjectivity defined by a paradoxical agrarian civility balanced with a natural savagery (ibid., 19).

In the wake of criminalization and civilizing projects, the Thevars began to consolidate as a conglomeration under the leadership of a wealthy landlord, self-fashioned Hindu renunciant, and Indian nationalist, Muthuramalingam Thevar (1908 -1963). Raising his voice from his home base in Ramanathapuram District, Muthuramalingam constructed the Mukkulathors as a martial caste of former kings ready to rise up against the British. The ferocity and valor with which he

endowed them continues to characterize Thevar identity politics today. The tone that Muthuramalingam set inspired his caste to proclaim their descent from Indra, and from the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandiyas – claims that are also made by the Devendras. It is not, in fact, clear whether such grandiose claims were made by the Devendras or Thevars first, but what is clear is the progressive intensification of such claims in the context of ongoing competition and violence. As such assertions intensify, the two conglomerations become increasingly alike by virtue of their mutual enmity.

The Thevar caste conglomeration has in some senses sublimated antecedent difference, as their title has been accepted by the government and has been incorporated into popular parlance. Like the Devendras, they have established websites detailing their history, statewide matrimonial websites, and Thevar-themed YouTube videos and songs. Since they are probably the largest voting bloc in Tamil Nadu, they have a lot to gain through their unity. They are not, however, united behind one political party, but are instead divided between many. The same goes for the Devendras. Both caste conglomerations remain somewhat fractured as they navigate the convoluted discursive history of their own castes and of caste structure writ large in order to present themselves as traditional Tamil heroes who are also modern and civilized.

Chapter Map

Based mostly on ethnographic and archival materials, this dissertation begins with an analysis of the spatial dynamics of caste politics in Paramakudi. In the second chapter, I explore instantiations and assertions of caste power as they emerge in urban settlement patterns, and are influenced by the profound changes in occupation and status undergone by the Devendras and Thevars in recent years. I also offer insight into such castes' contemporary political and socioeconomic disappointments, which tend to heighten their assertions of traditional power. For

many residents of Paramakudi, a nagging feeling of abandonment by the Government of Tamil Nadu, a wistful sense of being left behind India's rapid development, troubles assertions of distinction and authority, fostering nostalgic longing for the glories of the imagined past.

In the third chapter, I examine the construction of Tamil masculinity in the resonant rhetoric of Dravidianism, which has become the hegemonic idiom of politics in Tamil Nadu in the twentieth century. Dravidianists claimed heroism and bravery as quintessentially Tamil, and deployed their excesses in passionate forms of political demonstration aimed at protecting the Tamil language and her people. But they could not ultimately upend other, gentler masculine ideals like honor and prestige, which continue to inform Tamil masculinity today.

The fourth chapter begins my survey of the contemporary conflict between the Devendras and Thevars, which can be traced back to a confrontation between Muthuramalingam Thevar and the aforementioned Devendra leader Immanuel Sekaran in 1957. The dispute, which led to the murder of Immanuel and to one of the worst intercaste riots in recorded Tamil history, is revived on an annual basis when Devendras and Thevars performatively reiterate the originary conflict, and stake claim to territory through competitive practices of aesthetic occupation. In this chapter, I recount my own experiences at the memorial event for Immanuel in 2012 in order to demonstrate that it plays a crucial role in the Devendras' project of caste conglomeration, providing a structure through which they share their story, come together despite their differences, and seek the recognition of other castes and the government. In the preparation for, celebration of, and denouement of the memorial event, Devendra men negotiate with each other and with the government, and in so doing develop their identity as a caste conglomeration. In ritually remembering their caste hero, they do not just represent their caste conglomeration, but instead contribute to its constitution.

In Chapter Five, I focus on the ritual productions of the Devendras that have multiplied in recent years, following the growth of the memorial event for Immanuel. I elucidate the complexities, successes, and challenges of the strategies the Devendras employ to carve out a dignified, even glorified space for themselves in competition with the Thevars. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Catherine Bell and Stanley J. Tambiah, I argue that the Devendras deploy the preexisting Tamil sense of ritual, including public gift giving and an aesthetic of splendor, as they contest their lowly status in the eyes of outsiders through ritual negotiation.

I turn to the Thevars in Chapter Six, shedding light on their vacillating and complicated relationships with state authorities, as they assert their power as a caste conglomeration. I demonstrate the tension between young Thevar men and the police that has been an abiding reality since they were labeled criminal by birth during the late colonial period. However, I contrast the underlying tension of their alleged criminality with the government-approved and even encouraged glorification of the Thevars' caste hero Muthuramalingam. I argue that Muthuramalingam is exalted by the Thevars on account of what they understand as his national-level eminence, and his ethically superior and divine nature. Such understandings enable the Thevars to trump the Devendras, and, importantly, to recast the history of Thevar caste domination as magnanimous, paternalistic love for the "Harijans" (Scheduled Castes). Importantly, their ability to garner government recognition for their caste hero, which is an obvious ploy by political parties to gain the Thevar vote, nonetheless reinforces the Thevars' position as a dominant caste.

The seventh and final chapter is an ethnographic account of the fallout of intercaste and state violence. Following several incidents of intercaste violence in 2012, agents of the state bore down heavily and unjustly on Paramakudi's Devendras. However, the Devendra caste

conglomeration fought state terror, advocating for their caste fellows through trans-regional networks. I demonstrate the success of their mobilization by comparing their condition to that of their Scheduled Caste Paraiyar neighbors who faced the same injustices at the same time, but who were not well-connected to a caste conglomeration that they could rely on for support. The operations of the Devendras as a caste conglomeration were not, however, entirely harmonious. Instead, they demonstrated that the leadership of the Devendras is contested for a number of reasons. Individuals of the diverse conglomeration do not always share interests or visions of upward mobility. What is more, the demands of heroic, yet rational Tamil masculinity that are woven into the fabric of Dravidianist discourse are nearly impossible for a single individual to embody.

Chapter Seven also tracks the unification of dominant castes that rose to fight Devendra power, refusing to recognize the degree to which the Devendras had become like them. In 2012 and 2013, dominant castes joined together on an explicitly anti-Dalit platform, accusing Scheduled Caste men of preying on “their women”, and castigating the state for favoring the Scheduled Castes. They built their movement along populist, Dravidianist lines by constructing themselves as “the people” fighting “the establishment”. A triangulated struggle thus emerged with each of the three points – the Devendras, the dominant castes, and the state – fighting each other.

My dissertation demonstrates that in today’s Tamil Nadu, the troubled category of caste does not rely on Hindu notions of purity and pollution, ritualized exchange, or even wealth, but on the appropriation and recognition of political power. Various castes are fighting for sovereignty that government systems of reservations, heavy handed policing, and even democracy itself ensure is projected onto the glorious Tamil kings of the past.

Space, Status, and the State: Desiring Distinction on the Ground of Paramakudi

Chapter Two

Comparing themselves to me, many of my friends in Paramakudi described feeling stuck in the town, and assured me that I would inevitably leave them behind. My friend Aarthi – a thirty-something year-old unmarried woman living with her mother – succinctly expressed such sentiments when one day, out of the blue, she said: “You can leave this place, go wherever you want freely. But we are only here. Where can we go? This is our place [ūr]. There is no place else for us ... You can go anywhere. You won’t come back to Paramakudi ... You won’t think of us” (my friend, 2013). Sitting on the floor of Aarthi and her mother, Muthammal’s house, eating idly (steamed rice cake) that they had generously prepared for me, I was taken aback by Aarthi’s statements mostly because of the sad truth they revealed. While I do think about her all the time, the mobility, occupational and marital options available to me render my experiences of places and people very different from Aarthi’s. She is stuck in Paramakudi, left to think of the people who pass through it for many reasons. To be an unmarried woman of Aarthi’s age in Tamil Nadu is uncommon and generally frowned upon. Her single status opens her up to gendered scrutiny about her chastity, which limits her movements and her public interactions with others, and ensures that she is most comfortable being seen with her mother and her married older sister. The second of two daughters with no living father, Aarthi is also limited by her family’s finances. Although Muthammal and Aarthi are wealthier than many of their neighbors, they haven’t found a suitable husband for the latter because they lack sufficient goods and money for the dowry.

But Aarthi’s sense of inertia and imminent abandonment is not rooted exclusively in the dearth of marriage prospects she faces. The sentiments she shared echoed those I heard from others, male and female, young and old whose lamentations were linked to their understandings of Paramakudi and to their unstated needs to be amongst their caste fellows. The denizens of

Paramakudi described their town as “bad, rough, poor, and dangerous”, and were apt to compare it unfavorably to larger cities in Tamil Nadu, India, and throughout the world. Thanks to travel and television, they were well aware that Paramakudi is just a small dot on the map, considered relatively unimportant even within its own state. Nonetheless, they claimed Paramakudi as their own, and, importantly, such claims were collective. When Aarthi told me, “this is our place [ūr]”, she gestured with her hands, pointing to the area directly surrounding her home. The “our” to which she was referring was not just her family, but her neighborhood, which is constituted, almost exclusively by Devendra families. Caste-based neighborhoods like Aarthi’s provide a sense of collectivity, safety, and protection, but they also enclose their residents, limiting intercaste interactions and mobility. My ability to move anywhere because of financial resources, and also because I remained outside the normative bounds of caste, family, and lineage was read as an opportunity and freedom that my friends were not afforded.

In this chapter, I examine the historical and recent dynamics of caste in and around Paramakudi. First, I survey the demographic shifts and contemporary distribution of castes in Paramakudi, demonstrating that the conflicts, alliances, and hierarchical claims endemic to rural instantiations of caste are embedded in its urban landscape, which is, nonetheless, undergoing significant change. Second, I explore the historical authority of sections of the present-day Thevars, highlighting the constitution of political power through rituals that bestowed status and honor, and the success of their enduring resistance to imperial powers that preceded the British. Since their disenfranchisement under the Raj, the Thevars have tried, I argue, to reassert their authority through practices of agrarian domination, which are increasingly difficult to enforce. No longer assured of their access to Devendra bodies, contemporary Thevars cling to assiduous

endogamy in order to delineate the boundary between them and the Scheduled Castes, which is slowly becoming unclear.

Third, I explore the Devendras' attempts to deny their identification as Dalits, and to sever ties with other jātis that have historically been assigned the same lowly rank. Inspired in part by their upward mobility, the Devendras claim descent from the imperial kings of the medieval Tamil country who, not incidentally, were the overlords of the Thevar chieftains. They also assert their historical agricultural supremacy along with a certain kind of morally upstanding agrarian civility that bespeaks their status as “traditional” Tamils and their position as thoroughly modern liberal subjects. The acceptance of the Devendras' assertions rests on their ability to distinguish themselves from other Scheduled Castes. I focus in particular on their self-conscious divergence from the Paraiyars whose political strategy remains rooted in the Dravidianist and liberal principles of Dalit solidarity. The Devendras, I contend seek recognition from other castes and also from the state, which is a major factor in the shifting dynamics of caste status explored in this chapter because it is both a sign and a manifestation of super-local power. Since the state can operate as an opportunity or an impediment, it occupies an ambiguous space as a foe and a potential friend with which various castes must negotiate.

Fourth and finally, I examine the feeling of abandonment that many of my interlocutors expressed as a manifestation of state failure and the slow rate of economic development in the region. The Thevars, Devendras, and Paraiyars at the heart of my study court the favor of the state, which holds the key both to economic opportunity and to the cultural capital of recognition. Despite their best efforts, they are perpetually rejected, left with a forlorn feeling of abandonment that overshadows caste struggles in marginal areas like Ramanathapuram District. This chapter offers some insight into the central role of the state in caste struggles, and into the

affective relationships that develop between individuals and the government in a young, large, and unwieldy nation like India.

Paramakudi's Historical Demography and Present-Day Geography

Intercaste relations are carved into the ground of Paramakudi, which has long been a center of craftsmanship and commerce, and which has grown into a small city over the course of the past one hundred years. A minister of the princely state of Ramnad and the *Ramnad Manual of 1890's* author, T. Rajaram Rao, attributes the existence of Paramakudi town to the migration and settlement of a caste of Surat silk weavers that he calls Pattunulkarans ("silk thread people") who primarily lived in Ramanathapuram and Paramakudi.⁴¹ Their ancestors, he goes on, were induced to migrate from present-day Gujarat and settle in the district by Nayak kings (16th -18th centuries) (Ramnad Manual of 1890 (Rao), 37). The weavers to which he refers, who are today called the Saurashtras, produced "fine silk and clothes for native wear" (ibid.). But the production of clothing was not the sole raison d'être for Paramakudi. Because it is lodged halfway between the large and ancient city of Madurai and the site of the renowned Ramanathaswamy Temple, Paramakudi had long been a rest stop for pilgrims (ibid., 39). However, the extension of the South Indian railway to Tuticorin in the late nineteenth century meant that pilgrims passed through Paramakudi expediently, though it remained a large town with a middle school and a church (ibid., 126; 139).

In addition to the textile industry that Paramakudi once housed, agricultural decline has greatly contributed to the town's growth. Mushrooming from 9,287 in 1891 to 19,437 in 1921, Paramakudi's population growth began in the wake of prolonged agricultural failure due to

⁴¹ The Sourashtras or "Paṭṭanūlkārar" (literally, "silk thread people"), as they are sometimes called in Tamil Nadu, migrated from their original homes in present-day Gujarat to Madurai and other places of Tamil Nadu four or five hundred years ago. They speak their own language, Sourashtra, which is related to Gujrati, and are still known to be skillful weavers.

drought and shortsighted British policy at the end of the nineteenth century (Census of India 1921).⁴² Even for those who could subsist on agriculture, the understandable loss of faith in its stability led to the migration of throngs of people from villages to towns and burgeoning cities. The growth of Paramakudi's population continued at approximately the same rate from 1921 until 1961, but rose sharply between 1961 and 1971. According to the 1971 census, which includes a table of population variation since 1901, the population was 21,942 in 1931, 24,497 in 1941, and 30,075 in 1951 (Census of India 1971, 216). Between 1961 and 1971 it rose from 34,521 to 48,880, an unprecedented spike that cannot be attributed to reproduction alone. While the surge in population from 1961 to 1971 has yet to be matched, Paramakudi's growth has continued at about the same rate from 1981 through 2011 (1981: 61,149; 1991: 72,321; 2001: 84,321; 2011: 95,000) (Census of India 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011).

The state government's agricultural policies help explain the demographic change in Paramakudi between 1961 and 1971. As Joan Mencher writes, the Indian food crisis of 1966, which mostly affected the area now known as the Hindi belt, inspired the Central Government to demand greater food production in all of the states (1974, 311). In Tamil Nadu, the government created agricultural development programs, including the introduction of high yield seeds and pesticides that they extended only to owners controlling large swaths of land. This strategy, Mencher goes on, increased economic disparities, allowing the rich to flourish, and the poor to slip further into poverty (*ibid.*). It makes sense then that Paramakudi's population would rise

⁴² The Great Famine of 1876 – 1878 during which 5.5 million people across the Indian subcontinent lost their lives, not surprisingly, affected Paramakudi's demographic development. It probably caused Paramakudi's population to dip to 9,287 from 10,740 between 1881 and 1891 (Census of India 1921). The Great Famine was not suffered solely in the Madras Presidency, and cannot be entirely attributed to crop failure. In addition to an intense drought resulting in crop failure in the Deccan Plateau, the commodification of grain and the cultivation and export of cash crops under the colonial regime precipitated and prolonged the deadly famine, which reached from India's Southernmost point to Bengal (Tirthankar 2006, 385).

significantly and suddenly, as the rural poor made their way to the cities in search of education and opportunity.

In order to understand the development of Paramakudi, it is also essential to explore its caste composition. The distribution of castes in Paramakudi in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remains uncertain, although the colonial government's administrative manuals of the area give us some clues. The *Ramnad Manual of 1890* reports high populations of Vellalars (100,469), and lesser populations of "Paraiyas" (33,472), "Chetties" (13,184), and Brahmins (10,187) within what is today Ramanathapuram District (Ramnad Manual of 1890 (Rao), 26).⁴³ J.H. Nelson's *The Madura Country, a Manual*, which covers a broader region rather than focusing exclusively on what was then called the Ramnad Estate, offers more depth and diversity. Nelson lists 164,801 Vellalars, 154,022 Pallars, 123,244 Kallars, 100,902 Paraiyars, 102,370 Yadavars, and 79,896 Maravars (Nelson 1868, 108-110). In an albeit much later text, the 1972 *Gazeteer of Ramanathapuram*, Nelson's figures are corroborated. The text's author, Ramaswami, lists the Kallars, the Maravars, and the Agamudaiyars who he describes as "the virile communities with martial traditions", and claims were "the earliest inhabitants" of the area (Ramaswami 1972, vi).⁴⁴ Importantly, unlike his predecessors, he identifies them with each other, referring to them as the "Mukkulattar" (Ramaswami's spelling of Mukkulathor) (ibid.). By 1972, the making of the Mukkulathor/Thevar caste was well underway. Nadars, Ramaswami tells us, were also well-established at the time, succeeding in trade and commerce (ibid.).

The caste composition of Paramakudi today reveals some continuity with the demographic records of the late nineteenth century, as well as those of the 1970s. Contemporary

⁴³ Rules of transliteration from Tamil to English were not at all standardized in the 19th century. Paraiyas = Paraiyars, Chetties = Chettiars.

⁴⁴ This *Gazeteer* was originally published during Ramaswami's tenure as state editor (1961 to 1968), but was updated by the new state editor, Amirthalingam, in 1972 (Ramaswami 1972, v).

government records do not, however, allow us to tabulate precise numbers. Before 2011, the last record of population by caste (other than regularly produced lists of Scheduled Castes and Tribes) was undertaken by the British Raj in 1931. Most of the contents of The Socio Economic and Caste Census of 2011 have not been released, and the data that has become visible to the public is riddled with hundreds of thousands of errors (Times of India, 2015).

According to my own observations, as well as numerous discussions with local interlocutors, there are very few Vellalars and Brahmins in Paramakudi today. Known as a mercantile community since at least the early colonial period, the Chettiars (Rudner 1989; Schrader 1996) dominate Paramakudi in terms of both economic and cultural capital. They sell housewares and jewelry, beauty supplies, clothing, and printing services. They are neighbors with the few Brahmin families that remain in Paramakudi, and inscriptions of their names and their photographs decorate the town's two largest temples, the Suriyanaraja Perumal Temple and the Muthala Parameswari Temple, acknowledging their significant donations. Chettiars also own and operate the most prestigious matriculation (private) school in Paramakudi.

The Saurashtras who I mentioned above because of their important role during the establishment of Paramakudi are much less populous than the Chettiars but also wealthy. They are respected because their businesses constitute a significant proportion of Paramakudi's economy. While Rao claims that the Saurashtras "keep altogether aloof from other castes" and "are considered by Tamils to be a very low caste" (Ramnad Manual of 1890 (Rao), 37), in today's Paramakudi, they retain the legacy of their ancestor's weaving skills, and are afforded the deference that often comes with wealth.

Like the Saurashtras, the Nadars of Paramakudi are modest in population but impressive in assets.⁴⁵ They own many of the businesses in Paramakudi, including gift, clothing, and houseware shops, as well as a gas station. Muslims own some of the town's businesses, though their wealth does not often reach the height of the aforementioned castes. They are like the Saurashtras in that they are considered to be somewhat external to the Tamil caste system, but remain ranked in alignment with their relatively significant wealth.⁴⁶

The overlapping hierarchies of caste and wealth are evident in Paramakudi's contemporary settlement patterns. The highest ranking and wealthiest castes are clustered in the center of town, while poorer and lower ranking castes are found on its outskirts. The map of Paramakudi (Figure One) helps clarify the geography I am about to explain.

⁴⁵ As I discussed in the introduction, the recent history of the Nadars is interesting because of their shifting status. As Robert L. Hardgrave Jr. demonstrates, the Nadars have, more than any other caste in South India, experienced the impact of vast socioeconomic changes over the past two hundred years (1969). In the early nineteenth century, high-caste Hindus relegated Nadars to an extremely low status on account of their occupations as toddy-tappers and climbers of the palmyra palm. They suffered severe social disabilities and were among the most depressed communities in the Tamil country. However, their sensitive response to social and economic change over the past century and a half, especially the educational opportunities offered by colonial Missionaries, has allowed the Nadars to become one of the most successful groups in the South, in both economic and political terms. Many of my ambitious and upwardly mobile Devendra interlocutors pointed to the Nadars as an example of the shift in status that the Devendras seek.

⁴⁶ Although socially isolated from the dominant Hindu communities by their faith, Muslims are on average wealthier than most other communities in Paramakudi. They own many shops and businesses, holding the third position in local commerce behind the Chettiars and Nadars. Although their caste status is somewhat ambiguous, they see themselves and are seen by others as superior to the Scheduled Castes because of their wealth and governmental classification as an Other Backwards Class community.

In Tamil Nadu, and throughout India, there is a great diversity amongst those who adhere to the Muslim faith. Fourteen percent of India's population or roughly one hundred and seventy-two million people identify as adherents (Census of India 2011). Islam arrived on the Southwestern and Northwestern coasts of India (present-day Kerala and Gujarat) with Arab traders as early as the seventh century AD. Islam arrived in North India in the twelfth century with Turkic invasions and has since become an integral part of India's religious culture. There are between three and four million Tamil Muslims in India who are largely urban traders.

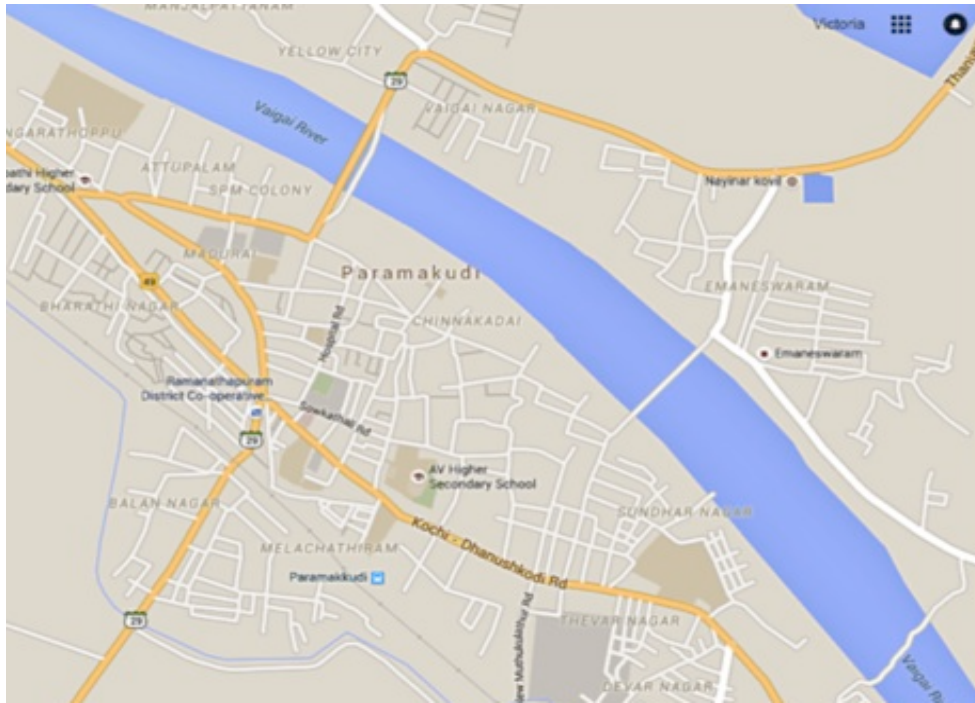


Figure One: Map of Paramakudi

Entering the town from the rural road that leads to the big city of Madurai, as I often did, one notices the progressively increasing number of tea and food stalls, of brightly colored but sometimes faded cement houses, of women carrying small grocery items in their plastic baskets, and of men standing in crowds engaged in conversation. Dust surrounds the paved rural road – the Kochi-Dhanushkodi Road – that leads to a small bridge over what was once the Vaigai River. Filled with refuse, the riverbed is a bounty for the goats, pigs, and dogs that eat there throughout the day and night. Just beyond the bridge is a very busy intersection called *ainji mukku* (literally, “five corners”), which is lined with two-story commercial buildings that house a tailor’s shop, two bakeries, a travel agency, a browsing center (internet café), and a gift shop. Ainji mukku witnesses loud and busy commerce, the comings and goings of pedestrians, buses, motorcycles, mopeds, and bicycles in the early mornings and evenings before it is left in the silence of the night. If one continues straight down the broad Kochi-Dhanushkodi Road, one finds more rows of two-story commercial buildings housing various shops and businesses, as well as three

restaurants. After about a half mile, one reaches the large Paramakudi bus station on the right hand side, which is lined with shops and food stalls, and abutted by a small bazaar. The shouts of the bus conductors, summoning people onto the various buses fades into the background, as Paramakudi shrinks in the rearview mirror.

Of course, Paramakudi is not limited to the view of the passerby. If our hypothetical observer turns left at ainji mukku, instead of continuing down the Kochi-Dhanushkodi Road, she enters what we could call “downtown Paramakudi”. The area is densely populated with two-story homes, shops, and temples. There is an open-air fruit, vegetable, and flower market that becomes visible as soon as she veers away from ainji mukku. Its smells and sounds make themselves known as she passes through, happening upon a series of chicken stalls right beside the market. As she continues walking, she will find a street full of clothing shops, another street glimmering with jewelry shops lined up like a hall of mirrors, and another street shining with the brass and silver of new cookware. Amidst all the commerce, two grand temples complete with towers reach into the sky as the smoke of fragrant camphor and incense wafts from their open entrances.

Although their homes are clustered together according to caste, the Chettiars, a very small number of Brahmins, Saurashtras, and Nadars live relatively close to each other in downtown Paramakudi. The Saurashtras also have another settlement across the river in Emaneswaram. All engaged in business, the interactions of Paramakudi’s richest castes are characterized by tolerance. Probably because of their religious identity, Muslims are somewhat isolated, despite their wealth. They primarily live in Melachathiram, which is close to the railway station and to the Andipuram and Krishnanagar neighborhoods that I discuss below.

The Thevars who in Paramakudi hail almost exclusively from the Maravar and Agamudaiyar subcastes, are even more isolated than their Muslim counterparts. Their homes are in Vaigai Nagar, Thevar Nagar, and Devar Nagar, which are all on the outskirts of the town – an interesting fact given their traditional roles as village guards, and their reputed unruliness, which I discussed in the introduction. Unlike the neighborhoods of all the other castes in Paramakudi, two of theirs bear their caste title (Thevar and Devar are two different transliterations of the same word). They are thus singled out, marked as different. The names of their neighborhoods may operate as warnings to other castes to keep off Thevar lands. Thevars are not, however, isolated from others in terms of their occupation of public space. The Thevar Mahāl, their caste meeting house and event space, is centrally located in SPM Colony, which is just North of what I have called downtown. It is very close to one of Paramakudi’s two movie theaters, Ravi Cinema Hall, which is owned by a prominent Thevar businessman. Thevar businessmen also own one of Paramakudi’s three hotels, and an active construction company. Although they do not match the Chettiars or Nadars in terms of their wealth, many of them are on the higher end of Paramakudi’s economic spectrum.

Two minority communities of relatively high status, the Yadavas and Udayars dwell outside of downtown Paramakudi, and close to but apart from the Thevars. Paramakudi’s small Yadava population is found in Singarathoppu, where a few streets of large, gated cement houses lead to a temple and wedding hall that stretches back to the river. Traditionally pastoral people, linked at least in name to the populous and powerful North Indian Yadav caste, Tamil Yadavas are listed amongst the Government of Tamil Nadu’s one hundred and eighty-five Backwards Classes, and are thus officially on par with their Thevar counterparts in terms of their

socioeconomic development.⁴⁷ The Yadavas of Paramakudi with whom I spoke do not, however, envision themselves alongside their Thevar neighbors, but instead see themselves as superior on account of the “peaceful” pastoral occupations that they traditionally held, their pan-Indic presence, and the special relationship to Lord Krishna that they claim.

While the Udayars (also classified as an Other Backwards Class) do not boast any North Indian counterparts, they are nonetheless a relatively wealthy and high status group within Paramakudi and the surrounding area. In the town itself, they live amongst the Muslims of Melachathiram though they monopolize particular streets upon which there are no Muslim homes. In the past, they were primarily agriculturalists, oftentimes holding small swaths of land, and today many of them are educated and involved in various business ventures. Many Udayars converted to Catholicism under the influence of Portuguese missionaries in the late seventeenth century. In Paramakudi, the large Catholic Church conspicuously located on Kochi-Dhanuskodi Road is owned and operated by Udayars.

The town’s two populous Scheduled Castes – the Devendras and the Paraiyars – live on the West side of the Kochi-Dhanuskodi Road where different sights, sounds, smells, and sentiments hang in the air. If our hypothetical traveller turns right at ainji mukku, onto the Muthukulathur Road, she passes two lines of shops, one on each side of the road.⁴⁸ But these are

⁴⁷ North Indian Yadavs are officially classified as a Backwards Class, but they have accrued significant status due in part to their self-advocacy during the final decades of the colonial regime. Founded in Allahabad in 1924, the All-India Yadav Mahasabha united disparate local groups from Bihar, Punjab, and what is now Uttar Pradesh, and initiated a campaign of social reform that aimed to heighten their status by likening their caste practices to the practices of Brahmins (what M.N. Srinivas called Sanskritization (1952)). The program included campaigning in favor of teetotalism and vegetarianism, as well as promoting self-education and the adoption of “Yadav” as a last name. The Mahasabha also sought to encourage the British Raj to recruit Yadavs as officers in the army, and incited the wealthier members of the caste to support the rest of the community through charitable donations for scholarships, temples, educational institutions, and intra-community communications (Jaffreot 2003). My Yadava interlocutors in Paramakudi named the All-India Yadav Mahasabha when I asked them about the leadership of their caste, and argued that the powerful organization bespeaks their relatively high status.

⁴⁸ The Road, Route 29, is simply referred to as the Muthukulathur Road in Paramakudi. There are 25.7 kilometers between the two towns, and Muthukulathur is much smaller than Paramakudi with a population of 14,130 as of 2011 (Census of India 2011).

different from most of the shops in Paramakudi. They are small, simple wooden stalls within which their owners sit, hawking their wares to passersby. After the shops, she reaches a railway crossing complete with warning lights and gates. If the gates are down, the wait can last up to fifteen minutes, during which the traffic of motorcycles, mopeds, bicycles, and pedestrians becomes backed up. Horns honk, a few people duck under the gates, and run across the tracks, pulling their vehicles beside them. Once the gates lift, she is carried by the frenzy of traffic, but soon finds herself in a less densely populated neighborhood. Houses and shacks, some in various stages of disrepair, are set back from the road. On the right side of the road, many houses are under construction. After about a quarter of a mile, she reaches a four-story purple apartment building on the right. Its ground floor is home to a small shop, and it looks across the street at a one-story, modest, brick building, a two-story building housing another shop and an apartment, and a large, well-kept stucco house surrounded by a gate. If the traveler continues down the road, she quickly finds that she has left Paramakudi, and reentered the desolate rural landscape.

Secluded from the rest of Paramakudi by distance and by the railway tracks that must be crossed in order to enter, the settlements on the East and West sides of the Muthukulathur Road are called Andipuram and Krishnanagar, respectively. Despite having been settled first, Andipuram is the poorer of the two neighborhoods. It is comprised of more shacks and one-room cement blockhouses than Krishnanagar, which is in a state of more rapid development. Not coincidentally, Andipuram is inhabited primarily by Paraiyars, while Krishnanagar is inhabited primarily by Devendras.

The recent physical development of Krishnanagar is a testament to the Devendras' upward economic mobility. As some Devendras have accrued wealth through government employment, business ventures, and remittances from work abroad, they have built relatively

luxurious homes for themselves in Krishnanagar. When I lived there, the neighborhood often hummed with the excitement of new construction, which I witnessed as I walked along the disorderly footpaths that wound through the burgeoning area. The density and speed of construction ensured that building materials, such as wooden planks and bricks, rendered the paths that stretched out behind my building dynamic and disorienting.

The aforementioned purple apartment building that I called home offers an example of the Devendra development to which I am referring. Built by Devendra owners in 1997, it was inhabited entirely by their caste fellows (with the exception of me), many of whom were married women whose husbands worked in metropolitan Chennai or abroad (in Gulf countries, Singapore, or Malaysia). There were also a few young couples who were waiting for the construction of their permanent homes to be completed. My landlords, a husband and wife in their mid-fifties who had migrated to Paramakudi from a nearby village, ran the small shop at the base of the building with their teenage daughter and occasionally also their slightly older son. They sold items of everyday convenience, such as soap and small packets of shampoo, as well as basic groceries, such as potatoes, coconuts, and garlic from behind their counter. While they did not suffer a shortage of customers, I was warned by some of my neighbors to keep a distance from my landlords because of their history as peddlers of hooch, which rendered them morally dubious.

The building itself was a community within the greater neighborhood of Krishnanagar, often abuzz with lively conversations between women. When silence prevailed, they hung their laundry, swept the halls, or looked out over the shared balconies and rooftop. Children ran around excitedly in the evenings, and were escorted to their school buses by their mothers in the morning. During the day, most of the building's residents left their shutters open and their doors

ajar to take advantage of the passing breeze. We were generally well-informed about each other's habits, though I tried unsuccessfully to maintain a modicum of privacy.

While the purple building was in some ways a point of pride, bespeaking Devendra development, it was also occasionally described and experienced as a disappointment because it did not reach the pinnacle of the Devendras' upward mobility. Constructed of cement blocks and stucco, the building was four stories tall, far outstripping other buildings in the neighborhood, and matching the tallest buildings in downtown Paramakudi. Its height, my landlady told me, would have been unimaginable to her grandmother who only rarely traveled beyond the boundaries of her native village. In 1997, it was counted amongst the grandest buildings in the town, but its lack of fresh running water, Western toilets, and glass windows ensured that it had been surpassed by nearby buildings over the course of the past two decades. Women had to line up at the pump in front of the building every morning to fill their water vessels, which they carried up the stairs on their hips and heads to provide sufficient water to their homes. Since the pump only ran for a few hours a day, waiting in line was necessary if one planned to drink, cook, or eat. In addition the use of shutters rather than glass on the buildings' windows meant that people had to choose between letting in dust and mosquitos, and blocking the light and breeze. Generally speaking, my neighbors endured a lingering sense that the purple building was an improvement over rural options, but was not the most convenient or comfortable place to live.

Vacati was the word I most frequently heard in depictions, comparisons, and complaints of and about living conditions. Fairly accurately glossed as convenience and comfort, the word can refer to a range of facilities from a gas-lit stove, to a refrigerator, to running water, to television, to beds, to a reliable flow of electricity, and even to air conditioning, depending on the

perspective of the speaker. Families and individuals that have vacati are well-off, though not necessarily extremely wealthy. They are comfortable, as we say in English.

The oldest daughter of Muthammal who I mentioned above had been married into a life of vacati. A government employed structural engineer, her husband, Manikandan, had amassed wealth significant enough to furnish his home, which was only a five minute walk from Muthammal's, with indoor plumbing, a Western toilet, ample wooden furniture, a washing machine, and an internet connection. He owned a small economy car in which he, his wife, and his two school-age sons were sometimes escorted by a driver, though he knew how to drive. Manikandan provided Pooja with fine jewelry and saris in which she walked contentedly through Paramakudi, oftentimes accompanied by her Muthammal and Aarthi who were also well-dressed thanks to her husband. In 2013, Pooja and Manikandan commenced work on an addition to their home. They had enlisted a local construction company to add another story to their house, which would include more common space, two additional bedrooms, and another bathroom. Eagerly showing me the progress, they jokingly told me that one of the additional rooms would be mine. Upon completion, theirs would be one of the largest single-family homes in Krishnanagar, surpassing the recent construction of its neighbors for the time being.

Amidst the construction, Pooja's neighbors were also excited to show me the additions to their homes. A young couple with a six-year old son had just built a small but well-equipped house, which was visible from Pooja's home. The husband, who was a police officer, did not socialize much with Pooja's family, though his wife was Pooja's close friend. When I had two American visitors with me, the officer's wife ushered us from Pooja's house, where we had relished a meal, to meet her husband and see her house. Her husband earnestly showed us every detail of the house, from the swing on the enclosed front porch to the shiny granite

floors and running water. He even showed the male friend among us his framed family photos and decorative knick-knacks. The hopeful enthusiasm of upward mobility was made manifest by newly constructed houses swelling with consumer goods.

Thevar Domination and Decline

Local Thevars do not welcome the Devendras' visible upward mobility, which moves in opposition to the Thevars' relative disenfranchisement. While in general they are still economically and politically more powerful than the Scheduled Castes, the Thevars lament their slip from the authoritative positions that they held prior to the final decades of the British regime. A wide range of communities within the mega-caste that today call themselves Thevars dominated the precolonial political dynamics of Southeastern Tamil Nadu, which were linked to broader spheres of power within South India through ritual performances that constituted status and honor (Price 1996, 4).

The integration of Maravar chieftains (ancestors of small sections of the present-day Thevars) into the more expansive political dynamics of the Tamil country, historian Pamela Price explains, stretches back at least to the medieval era, during which two imperial powers, the Pandyas (roughly sixth - ninth centuries CE) and Cholas (roughly seventh - thirteen centuries CE), ruled from the fertile river valleys of the Vagai and Kauvery, respectively. The leaders of both empires built temples in the Maravar-dominated region as a part of their efforts to expand their dominion (ibid., 10 -11). The Maravars eventually paid tribute to the Pandya Kings, though they maintained a tight hold on matters of local importance (Ramaswami 1972, 70-72). Their acceptance of and participation in the ritual cycles of imperial temples nonetheless "indicates the early interest of local elites in forms of worship and political control and processes of economic development found in river valleys" (Price 1996, 4).

The imperial powers maintained their influence not just through the organization of force, but also through their ritual performances.⁴⁹ As Price explains, the order of political hierarchy was constituted and maintained by ritual practices in which the highest ranking human rulers transacted in the ritualized exchange of substances, such as flowers, food, and incense, with the highest ranking deities, and their inferiors transacted with lesser deities and with each other (ibid.). Such material exchanges, termed *mariyātai* (“Civility, courtesy, reverence, respectful behaviour to a superior” (Madras Tamil Lexicon 1924-1936, 3089)), publically instantiated the “moral order of the cosmos and correct relations among human beings in a domain” (Price 1996, 15). Status and honor displayed through *mariyātai* thus constituted political power over which the Maravars perpetually competed.

In addition to participating in imperial rituals, the connection of the Maravars to the wealthier and more populated river valleys is evidenced by their integration into various forms of Tamil literature that were produced there. In Caṅkam literature (ca. third century BCE – third century CE) – the corpus of ancient poetry widely considered the highpoint of Tamil literary production – countless references to the dry, barren landscape of the Maravar country are made. What is more, the birth of Masathiar, a female poet of Caṅkam literature is associated with the village of Okkur, which is in the region (ibid., 11). The Maravar country also figures prominently in the medieval period of Hindu resurgence energized by devotionalism and direct

⁴⁹ Local chieftains were woven into a decentralized, dynamic structure of political organization shaped like a mandala (from Sanskrit *maṇḍala* “disk”) – an intricate, patterned web of connections oriented around a center and enclosed by an outside border. As Stanley J. Tambiah argues, the mandala with its satellites arranged around a center was “an archetype for the organization of (sacred) power in ancient and medieval South Asian society” (Price 1996, 14). In the Tamil country, Price points out, the mandala was explicitly referenced; the region over which the Cholas exerted influence was called the Cholamandalam, just as the area dominated by the Pandyas was called the Pandyamandalam (ibid., 15).

contact with divinity known as the *Bhakti*⁵⁰ Movement.⁵¹ Beginning in the Tamil-speaking region in the seventh century, Tamil Śaivism, that is, devotion to Śiva, was developed by sixty-four poet-saints known as the Nāyaṃmārs (literally, “teachers”). Some of the most renowned among them – Gnanasambandar, Manickavasagar, and Sundarar visited temple sites in the Maravar country and composed hymns in praise of the deities that were imminent there (ibid.).

Attributed to the poet Cēkkiḷār, the oft-cited, twelfth century hagiographical text on the Nāyaṃmārs – the *Periya Purāṇam* (“Great Story”) – also refers to the Maravar country, recounting the birth of one of the saints, in the village of Ilayangudi (ibid.).

While such instances indicate that the ancestors of the present-day Thevars were not secluded from the broader political dynamics of the Tamil region, other references in the Caṅkam corpus indicate that those known as the Maravars were on the periphery of normative society and considered threatening because of their heedless ferocity. They exhibited the fearless heroism of the prototypical warrior who features so prominently in much of Caṅkam literature, but were prone to the excesses of blood lust, in their roles as highway thieves and forest bandits. In a collection of poems known as *Kalittokai*, which is a section of *Eṭṭuttokai* (“eight anthologies” ca. 200 BCE – 200 CE), we find the Maravars and the land they inhabit described as follows:

A mournful way deserted even by the birds,
Where dwell the fierce-eyed Maravar
With their robust bodies,
Terrible strength,
Tiger’s look,
Bound bows,

⁵⁰ The Sanskrit word *bhakti* is derived from the root *bhaj*, which means “divide, share, partake, participate, to belong to” (Cutler 1987, 1).

⁵¹ Previously mediated by the ritual practices of Brahmins, the diverse expressions of religiosity that we define as Hinduism, underwent an unprecedented sea change set in motion by a number of diverse bards who crisscrossed the subcontinent declaring their direct, intimate relationships with the deities. At least one hundred “bhakti saints” composed and performed countless poetic verses articulating their love for their chosen deities through the established affective models of lovers, mothers, fathers, and friends. While the ethos of bhakti had spread throughout South Asia by the fifteenth century, it had arisen in the Tamil region much earlier, in the seventh century.

Curled hair,
Just waiting to do evil:
They will take the life of wayfarers
Even when there is nothing to steal,
Just to see their bodies twist in dying (Kalittokai 1.4, Schulman 1980, 289)

In *Kuruntokai* (attributed to Uṛaiyūr Mutukorran), which is also a section of *Eṭṭuttokai*, a friend warns a lover on his way to elope about the presence of the Maravars:

Don't go there
With your girl,
She's like a young she-elephant.
Forest bandits are at the fence,
Long ringed lances
Gripped as in the heat of battle ... (Kuruntokai 390, Ramanujan 1985, 66)

The threats posed by Maravars in Caṅkam literature resonate with the local political landscape of the medieval era. As I mention in the introduction, a small section of Maravars, the Sethupathis, had ruled the area of present-day Ramanathapuram District from at least the sixteenth century onwards. Their long reign, historian Lennart Bes explains, was characterized by infighting and violence, and ubiquitous “robbery, plundering, and destruction” (2001, 544). There was a fundamental instability endemic to the Sethupathis’ kingdom, which Bes attributes, at least in part, to its geography:

Consisting of largely semi-dry plains and forests dominated by Maravas, Ramnad was a frontier kingdom par excellence. Contrary to ... its northern neighbour Thanjavur ... with its densely populated, fertile river valleys and large-scale wet land agriculture, in Ramnad sedentary areas like towns and farmlands were limited in size and surrounded by jungles and their wandering inhabitants. The inner frontier complete with its destabilizing influences was therefore omnipresent in the kingdom (ibid., 546).

Internal instability made the Maravar country difficult to control, despite the ambitions of numerous imperial and colonial powers that sought to expand into the region because of its strategically important proximity to Sri Lanka. The period from the twelfth to the mid-fourteenth centuries was punctuated with multiple expansionist campaigns, as King Parākramabāhu I of Lanka staked claim to the area, and was overthrown by Malikkafur, the general of the Delhi Sultanate shifts in 1311. Beginning in 1334, a series of Muslim kings, who declared themselves

independent, ruled much of today's Southern Tamil Nadu. However, the Vijayanagara Empire, which rose in opposition to the Muslim kings, conquered Madurai in 1358. They did not attempt direct rule, but instead developed the model of ritual rule that had been adopted by the Pandyas and Cholas, declaring Prince Kumara Kampana viceroy, and immediately appointing Nayak Kings as underlords. Importantly, amidst all these broader political struggles, the Maravar country continued to be ruled by hereditary chieftains (Ramaswami 1972, 70-76).

When the Vijayanagara Empire began to disintegrate in the mid-sixteenth century, the Nayaks forged relations with the Sethupathis, at first attempting to rule them. In 1538, Nagama Nayakka declared his independence from the Vijayanagaras, and began an unsuccessful campaign to settle the Maravar country. Visvanatha Nayaka who succeeded Nagama instead created alliances with the Maravars and other local chieftains, selecting seventy-two chiefs, who he tellingly called *pāḷaiyakkārars* ("men of the military forts"). Not unlike earlier rulers, the Nayaks attempted to exert their influence on the *pāḷaiyakkārars* through the distribution of honor and status in the forms of gifts bestowed during public ritual performances. While all seventy-two *pāḷaiyakkārars* were privy to the honor and status of gifts like gold, elephants, turbans, and titles, the Sethupathis ranked the highest. (Dirks 1987, 49-10; Price 1996, 16-17).

The Nayak-period system of *pāḷaiyakkārar* integration did not, however, bring stability to the region. Intense competition prevailed amongst rulers of various domains, and military engagements were frequent. As Schulman and Dirks argue, the authority of precolonial Tamil kings was tenuous at best, and kings perpetually faced the attacks of their rivals who claimed equal legitimacy and power (Schulman 1980, 306; Dirks 1987, 245). Such enduring challenges incited, Price claims, a kind of hypersensitivity to real or unintended insults (Price 1996, 25). Of

course, “a direct relationship exists between honour in the eyes of others and a man’s existential worth and social identity” (ibid., 22). Ambitious pālaiyakkārars sought the recognition that could constitute their status.

At the same time, the perpetual competition amongst local rulers motivated higher-ranking rulers to rely heavily on ritual instantiations of status and honor in their attempts to build allegiances and align interests (ibid., 17). They happily bestowed status-generating gifts, which represented their desire for the solidarity required for them to exert their influence. In a sense then, the system of bestowal and recognition was self-perpetuating, as both giver and receiver were inherently motivated to continue ritual performances.

Of course, as Mauss teaches us in his influential study of gift giving and reciprocity, there is no true gift; the giver always expects a return (1925). The Nayaks were no exception to the Maussian rule. They demanded annual tributes of their underlords, as well as military support. Their demands were not, however, sustainable because the gift of survival given to them by the strong military of the Sethupathis far outweighed the ritual honors they had given in the past or could give in the future. Eventually, the Sethupathis broke free of the Nayaks whose authority had been diminished by their dependence.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the army of the king of Mysore invaded the Nayak city of Madurai, and Raghunatha Sethupathi mobilized a huge army to save the kingdom. The King of Madurai, Tirumalai Nayaka, was so grateful that he granted valuable gifts to the Sethupathis and revoked their obligation to pay tribute. He also bestowed Raghunatha with a title, naming him Tirumalai Sethupathi, and thus incorporating him into the royal lineage, while also inadvertently demonstrating the Sethupathi’s authority. As Bes argues,

The new privileges granted the Setupatis, meant to honour them but also to keep them under control, clearly indicated how powerful they had grown. The dynasty was only nominally subordinate to the Nayakas. Raghunatha Setupati’s new status did indeed mark the withdrawal of Ramnad from owing

loyalty to the Madurai kings. When the Nayakas faced other hostile attacks, the Setupatis usually refused to send their army. Madurai's subsequent punitive expeditions were mostly doomed to failure defeated by the Maravas' shrewd use of their intimate knowledge of the Ramnad landscape ... At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Ramnad had grown into an "independent" kingdom in the sense that for all practical purposes the Setupatis served no overlord (Bes 2002, 549).

The consolidation of Sethupathi rule did not usher in an era of peace and stability.

Instead, power struggles continued unabated. In addition to competitive turbulence within the Sethupathi community, the entrance of European colonial powers added another dimension to the conflicts that the Maravar chiefs had to negotiate (ibid., 556). Through a treaty in 1759, the Sethupathis allowed the Dutch to have trading settlements, although they did not initially permit them to have fortifications. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Nawab of Arcot had established his sway over Madurai and Tirunelveli, and attempted to expand his influence into present-day Ramanathapuram District, but local kings, including the Sethupathis asserted their independence. Although the Nawab served the Nizam of Hyderabad whose Muslim-dominated princely state was the richest in India, and retained dominion, at least in name, until 1947, the Sethupathis and other Maravar chieftains refused to acquiesce. In fact, they joined with the Dutch East India Company against the Nawabs who were credited by the British East India Company. When Nawab Mohammed Ali, supported by the Company, attempted to extend his dominion in the Southwest of the Tamil country, Puli Thevar ("Tiger Thevar"), a local Maravar chieftain who controlled a portion of present-day Tirunelveli District, spearheaded a protracted resistance. The rebellion persisted from 1757 to 1761 when it was finally snuffed out by the British nominated governor Yusuf Khan. Soon after the defeat of Puli Thevar, the Nawabs in concert with the British overpowered the Maravar chieftains, including the Sethupathis, and seized control of the area. In 1792, the Sethupathis formally surrendered because they could not afford to pay the taxes that the British demanded (Ramaswami 1972, 96).

The Thevars' tolerance of foreign rule was, however, short-lived. To the Northeast of Puli Thevar's former dominion, the Maruthu Brothers of the aforementioned Agamudaiyar subcaste, in alliance with the Sethupathi princess of Ramanathapuram, Velu Nachiyar, ruled a small territory centered at Sivagangai.⁵² On June 10th, 1801, they issued a proclamation of independence from British rule at the Trichy Thiruvarangam Temple.⁵³ On October 24, 1801 they were captured at Cholapuram and hanged in the Fort of Tirupputhur within their own territory (*ibid.*, 100).

Despite the political chaos of British rule and the embarrassment of defeat, the Sethupathis continued to receive acts of ritual reverence fit for royalty. Rao recounts court etiquette according to which the (Kallar) Raja Tondaiman of Pudukottai, the (Maravar) kings of Sivagangai, and the eighteen chiefs of the Thanjavur country (of various castes) were required to demonstrate the utmost humility in their encounters with the Sethupathis. They were required to stand before Sethupathi royalty with the palms of their hands joined together and stretched out. Similarly, Kattaboman and other Nayaka chiefs were obliged to prostrate themselves in full length before the Sethupathis, and, after rising, to continue standing in their presence (*Ramnad Manual of 1890 (Rao), 32*).

The ritual honors that the Sethupathis accrued did not, however, stop their situation from deteriorating. Muthuramalinga Sethupathi who ruled from 1862 – 1873 was fully occupied in

⁵² In addition to their alliance with the Sethupathi Princess, the Maruthu Brothers were embedded in the socio-political culture of Ramanathapuram. They were both born in the Sethupathi Kingdom, and their father was a general in the army of the Sethupathis. According to popular belief, they were both trained in Tamil martial arts at a training center for the Ramanathapuram Army.

⁵³ Almost simultaneously, in present-day Toothukoodi District, Veerapandiya Kattabomman of the Nayak community, refused to acquiesce to the British rule. With the help of his general, Veeran Sundaralingam, of the Pallar community, he resisted the British from 1794 to 1799. Kattaboman met the same fate as the Maruthu brothers, while Sundaralingam is widely believed to have lost his life in the process of blowing up a British ammunition facility in the same year. The East India Company also succeeded in reducing the Sethupathi's estate to a tax-paying zamindari in 1803. Despite their formal surrender to the British, local tradition dictates that the Sethupathis funded Kattaboman (Ramaswami 1972, 98).

litigation (due to outstanding taxes) until 1868. Estate debts had increased alarmingly, and he applied for government aid. The estate was taken up under government management, after which Muthuramalinga Sethupathi died leaving two sons.

The elder, Bhaskarasami Sethupathi, was four years old so the estate was taken over by the Court of Wards. Bhaskara attained majority on the third of November 1889, and the estate was handed over to him in November of 1890 (*ibid.*, 266-268). While the lineage of Ramnad's royalty continues to this day, visible on the SUV of one of the would-be heirs, which is adorned with a vanity plate that says "Raja of Ramnad", their authority perished long ago.

As I explain in the introduction, the more modest ancestors of today's Thevars also lost their authority to act as guards, and were disgraced through the Criminal Tribes Act of 1911, which effected large swaths of the Maravar and Kallar populations (Ravichandran 2008, 9). The act restricted their movement, made them vulnerable to police abuse, and brought with it the stigma of criminality. Around the same time, the British established agricultural reform programs for Kallar populations in order to "cultivate them inside and out" (Pandian 2009).

Struggles in Agrarian Relations

Despite and perhaps because of their decline in other socioeconomic domains, the Thevars have asserted their dominance in the agrarian context over the course of about the past one hundred years, though it is difficult to gauge the timeframe of their assertions because of sparse documentation. According to Human Rights specialist R.M. Pal, Devendra and other Scheduled Caste bridegrooms used to be required to "offer" their virgin brides to the high caste village headmen prior to the consummation of their marriages (Pal 1992, 19). As law scholar Smita Narula tells us, women were "raped as part of caste custom or village tradition" (1999,

30). Such demands on new bride(grooms) have, however, declined significantly over the course of the past fifty years. In fact, many of my Scheduled Caste interlocutors referred to landlords' claims to their brides as "a cruel practice of that time long ago," and saw the relative rarity of such incidents today as evidence of their upward social mobility.

Nonetheless, the "tradition" of sexual violence as a form of caste domination continues in other, more spontaneous and less ritualized forms today. Rapes are often the jarring repercussions of lower castes' emergent political voices. For example, women of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have been raped "as part of an effort by upper-caste leaders to suppress movements to demand payment of minimum wages, to settle sharecropping disputes, or to reclaim lost land" (ibid., 31). Relatively random acts of sexual violence against Dalit women by upper caste men also continue as an ever present threat and painful reality of Dalit life upholding an unstable economy of intercaste violence.

The use of sexual abuse as a technique of economic, political, and social domination is, of course, not unique to Tamil Nadu. It is very common across time and space with examples ranging from the practices of slavery in the Americas to the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda to the abuse of female domestic workers throughout the world, and remains relatively common across South Asia today.⁵⁴ In some rural contexts, its historical normalization is evident in everyday adages. "You have not really experienced the land until you have experienced the Dalit women" is a popular saying among the [high caste] landowning Jats" of North India (Fontanella-Khan 2014).

In Tamil Nadu, and in many other parts of South Asia, Backwards Class men normalize and even naturalize their domination of Scheduled Caste women as a legitimate extension of

⁵⁴ According to the People's Union for Civil Liberties' analysis of Uttar Pradesh's crime statistics for 2007, 90 percent of rape victims in 2007 were Dalit women (Fontanella-Khan 2014).

agrarian relations. The prominent Thevar leader quoted below evinced such attitudes in an interview with Human Rights Watch, a nonprofit organization based in Madurai. He denied that Thevars' sexual advances are, in fact, abusive through his paternalistic visions of their interdependency with their grateful, even dotting Scheduled Caste workers:

In the past, twenty to thirty years ago, *harijans* [Dalits/Scheduled Castes] enjoyed the practice of 'untouchability'. In the past, women enjoyed being oppressed by men. They weren't educated. They didn't know the world. Ladies would boast to others that my husband has more wives. Most of Dalit women enjoy relations with Thevar men. They enjoy Thevar community men having them as concubines. It is not done by force. That's why they don't react. They cannot afford to react, they are dependent on us for jobs and protection. Harijans formerly enjoyed their masters ... 'Untouchability' was there in various forms ... now in 95 percent of places, 'untouchability' is not practiced. Thevars never say anything against them. Without Dalits we cannot live. We want workers in the fields. We are landholders. Without them we cannot cultivate or take care of our cattle. But Dalit women's relations with Thevar men are not out of economic dependency. She wants it from him. He permits it. If he has power, then she has more affection for the landlord (Human Rights Watch interview 1998 in Narula 1999, 31-32).

Despite his attempt to elide the dehumanizing cruelties of caste-based labor relations by eroticizing sexual subjugation, the Thevar leader did not manage to maintain his representation of sexual violence as consensual, peaceful interdependence. Instead he admitted that Scheduled Castes had no other options. They could either starve or allow access to their female bodies. To repeat his words, "That's why they don't react. They cannot afford to react".

Importantly, acts of sexual violence that are inscribed on the bodies of Scheduled Caste women constitute and reinforce the relative positions of various castes in an idiom that is explicitly gendered. Scheduled Caste women are deeply shamed by acts of sexual violence that shatter the chastity they are compelled to maintain. Their male counterparts also experience the shame of their failures to protect women who are thereby debased. As Kannabiran and Kannabiran argue, "demonstrating control by humiliating women of another caste is a certain way of reducing the 'manhood' of those castes" (2003, 254).⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Caste violence that falls on the backs of women is not limited to intercaste relations, but also impacts gendered interaction within castes. As Kannabiran and Kannabiran convincingly argue, "gender within caste society is ... structured in such a manner that the 'manhood' of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the degree of passivity of the women of the caste" (2003, 254).

Although Scheduled Castes (and Tribes) throughout South Asia often remain in lower socioeconomic positions than others, they have, in recent decades, struck back against the emasculating oppression that they faced at the hands of the dominant castes. Their assertions have been made possible, in part, by shifts in the dynamics of agrarian relations that have ensured that they *can* afford to react.

Their increased literacy and connectivity due to relatively new technologies like cellular phones and the internet, have allowed Scheduled Caste laborers to reject the demands of dominant agrarian castes, and instead seek out other forms of employment in large cities like Chennai, as well as in large towns like Paramakudi. In many cities and towns throughout the state, Scheduled Castes have created digital networks and physical enclaves to welcome their caste fellows from rural areas. The Scheduled Castes themselves are the first to mention the strides they have made in terms of their educations and occupations, although they are aware that they have a long way to go before they can close the chasm that used to ensure their docility. In addition to the new livelihoods they have been able to adopt, the Scheduled Castes' break with the agrarian past is marked by their integration into the rhythms of urban life, which ensures their proximity to other castes. Even in a place with well-known and well-defined, caste-based settlement patterns like Paramakudi, the Scheduled Castes cannot always be segregated. Individuals of various castes mingle on modes of public transportation, in movie theaters, in restaurants, and in the market place.

The Scheduled Castes' urbanization and upward mobility is also facilitated by government policy. I am referring here not to reservations, which are beneficial but limited by their often poor implementation, but to The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005, which is locally known as “nūru nāḷ vēlai” (“one hundred days work”).

The law aims to secure livelihoods in rural areas throughout India by guaranteeing the “right to work”. It provides at least one hundred days of paid employment (Rs. 183 per day in Tamil Nadu) in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work overseen by the government, such as highway construction, water harvesting, and soil conservation.⁵⁶ Well implemented in Tamil Nadu, the act ensures that the Scheduled Castes need not draw income from their labor on fields owned by dominant castes, like Thevars who are nostalgic for the days when they had a very inexpensive labor pool available to them. One of my interlocutors, the Thevar (Kallar) headman of a village in Sivagangai District referred longingly to the “old times” when the “Harijans worked for us like a little brother works for his big brother”. Calling the Scheduled Castes of his village Harijans, which they consider offensive, the landlord also marked a strong family bond between his own caste and theirs, which had regrettably been broken. Dominance was cloaked in kinship.

Loath to work their own lands and unwilling or unable to match the wages offered by the government, many Thevar landlords leave their fields fallow. In Southeastern Tamil Nadu, their labor pool often remains empty even if they do match government-provided wages because they cannot guarantee one hundred days of work due to the climate and soil quality in much of Tamil Nadu, and because the projects executed under the auspices of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act are rarely urgent. Government workers can take their time and the bureaucrats overseeing them have no vested interest in completing projects. As my village-dwelling Devendra friends told me, they have plenty of time to nap while they work for the government, unlike when they work for the landlords.

⁵⁶ The wages of the national-level act are fixed by states. Kerala has consistently provided the highest wages, reaching to upwards of Rs. 400 per day, while Bihar’s wages are the lowest, hovering around Rs. 150 per day. Programs in some of the poorer Northern states like Bihar have been troubled by wage embezzlement. Tamil Nadu consistently tops the country in terms of performance. It employs the highest number of workers, and has low rates of corruption (Sivakumar B 2015).

Marriage and Murder

Thevars, and other dominant castes, are troubled by their dwindling ability to assert their supremacy over the Scheduled Castes. They cannot take their access to Scheduled Caste bodies for granted, but instead must face the increasingly organized and effective resistance of the Scheduled Castes. Moments of resistance are, however, often met with brutally violent attacks that signify the Thevars' desperation, as they attempt to reassert their "entitlements."

Marriage and sexual contact have become the locus of the dominant castes' efforts to protect their eroding authority partially because they are considered "private" matters outside the jurisdiction of the state. As Partha Chatterjee argues, the inner domain of the home has been fiercely guarded in postcolonial India because it is understood to protect the pure, inner self, which is superior to the material interests of public political currents by virtue of its disinterested spiritual essence (1989). Today, the defensive sentiments of the (post)colony remain powerful, as dominant castes attempt to maintain segregated practices of marriage and sexual contact. Unlike issues of labor and education, for example, the government can do very little about marriage, which has become the line of control between castes.

Although it is difficult to affirm because of underreporting and police corruption, violence arising in the wake of intercaste marriage seems to have increased in recent decades (Chakravarti 2003; Chowdhary 2007; Vishwanath and Palakonda 2011). The list of postnuptial killings in Tamil Nadu over the course of just the past four years is quite long, especially for a state that is considered to be amongst the most socially and economically advanced states in the country.⁵⁷ Some of these murders, which often lead to intercaste rioting, become highly publicized, although they are never shocking.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ It is very difficult to determine the precise number of murders incited by intercaste marriage, in part because of the inconsistent usage of the English term "honor killing". I have avoided it in the discussions of postnuptial murder

An outbreak of violence in and around the town of Bodinayakkanur (Theni District) in 1989 illustrates the centrality of sexuality and marriage to intercaste conflict today. In August of 1989, in the village of Meenakshipuram (a few kilometers from Bodi), a sixty-year-old, female Devendra leader organized a procession demanding higher wages (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 2003, 254). The village's Thevar (Kallar) landlords raped and killed her (ibid.). John Pandian, a Devendra leader whose life and work I explore in later chapters, arrived in the village soon after the incident, and organized a meeting to speak out against such acts of violence. In his speech, he abused the Thevar panchayat president and made suggestive remarks about intercaste marriage (ibid., Ganeshram 1989). Almost immediately after the meeting, a riot broke out, and hundreds of homes were torched. Lasting several weeks, the riot resulted in a death toll of thirty people, eleven of whom were killed by the police. Thevar landlords initially reacted to a challenge to their domination of agrarian labor relations by turning to the time-honored practice of sexual subjugation, and then released the full force of their rage at the suggestion of intermarriage. The Devendras fought back.

The potential danger of intercaste marriages does not, of course, stop them from happening. Though rates of intermarriage are still low, at least according to official statistics, which I discuss in the introduction, they are increasingly possible because of the processes of urbanization and the development of the Scheduled Castes that I aim to highlight here.

The liminal spaces of colleges, in particular, open up opportunities to the Scheduled Castes and diminish the hegemony of formerly dominant castes not only by way of the upward mobility they enable, but also by way of the intercaste love affairs they can foster. Colleges,

that I recount here because I think it is best reserved for cases in which the (usually female) victim's own family ends her life because of the dishonor her immodesty has brought to the family. The murder of a man of a particular caste by those of a self-professedly superior caste is of a different nature. It is a public battle cry, a desperate claim to manhood unlike the quiet expiation of dishonor from the inside.

⁵⁸ Recently, cases of intercaste postnuptial killing have not been limited to, nor even primarily located in Tamil Nadu's Southern Districts, which are widely presumed to be more casteist than their Northern counterparts.

Constantine Nakassis demonstrates, provide young people with a space to mingle beyond their families' line of sight, thereby enabling the articulation of forms of relationality and intimacy outside the caste-inflected adult order of things (2014). It is not surprising then that they are often the scenes of love affairs that would probably not develop elsewhere.

The case of Divya and Ilavarasan in 2012 caught the attention of numerous media outlets, sparking public debates, but ultimately fading into the static of the broadcasting din. Divya, from a wealthy Vanniyar (dominant landowning caste) family, and Ilavarasan, from a poor Scheduled Caste family, met in college, fell in love, and married on October 14, 2012 in Dharmapuri District, despite the objections of her parents.⁵⁹ Divya's father's suicide on November 7th triggered caste clashes and unrest in the surrounding area, which continued for several months. Divya was forcibly separated from Ilavarasan by her remaining family. On July 4th, 2013 Ilavarasan's dead body was found laid out alongside the train tracks in Dharmapuri Town (Indian Express 2013). According to the police, he too committed suicide, although Ilavarasan's parents have publically rejected such a conclusion on account of the unfamiliar handwriting on the suicide note allegedly recovered by the police (ibid.).

A new case of postnuptial intercaste murder in Udumalpettai Town of Tirupur District, which was committed on March 14, 2016, caught the attention of Indian media, and even made it into the British press (Halkon and Nagaraj 2016). Caught on closed caption television, the incident involved Sankar – a Dalit engineering graduate, Kausalya – a Thevar engineering student, and three men who had been hired by Kausalya's family, according to her own account (Janardhanan 2016). Sankar and Kausalya who met in engineering college had married eight

⁵⁹ Classified as a Most Backwards Class since 1989 due to their own mobilization, the Vanniyars are legally entitled to higher percentages of reservations than those castes that fall under the Backwards Class category. However, as early as in 1833, the Vanniyars had ceased to accept their "low caste" status. In preparation for the 1871 census, they petitioned to be recognized as a warrior caste. Today they are considered lowly by the wealthiest and most urbane castes, but nevertheless envision themselves as vastly superior to the Scheduled Castes. Like the Thevars, they are relatively wealthy, landowning, and politically organized.

months prior against her parents' wishes. They paid handsomely for their defiance that day when three assailants armed with sickles attacked them as they exited a shopping center. Sankar was hacked to death in broad daylight, and the attackers immediately fled the scene on their motorbike. Leaving behind Sankar's lifeless body, Kausalya who also suffered serious injuries in the attack was rushed to the hospital. Her father surrendered himself to the police, seeking protection, rather than admitting to any crime (Halkon and Nagaraj 2016). In this case, not just the Dalit boy, but also the higher caste female transgressor faced violence.⁶⁰

Of course, the sad fate that Sankar and Kausalya met is not the only option for intercaste couples. A dear friend of mine in Paramakudi, Kathir, who we will meet again in a later chapter is of the Devendra caste, while his wife hails from the Vanniyar caste. They met in college, and got married. Although her parents and other relatives cut her off, she remains happily married with two young children.

The enmity between the Thevars and Devendras in Southeastern Tamil Nadu renders their intermarriage extremely rare. I never met a Thevar-Devendra couple, and witnessed the bilateral, emotionally charged resistance to such a union at a family affair I attended with my Devendra friends. One might assume that the Devendras would be more amenable to their caste fellows marrying into the Thevar caste on account of its allegedly higher status, but the acceptance of "marrying up" is not the attitude I found on the ground. Instead, I felt the

⁶⁰ The injury of Kausalya during the attack on Sankar is minor compared to the periodic murder of dominant caste girls who marry or even befriend boys of the Scheduled Castes. Also in 2015, in Ramanathapuram District, a 17-year-old girl, whose parents opposed her love affair with a Scheduled Caste youth died under mysterious circumstances (Kolappan 2015). Her death harkened back to the murder of another 17-year-old dominant caste girl in Ramanathapuram for the same reason. The girl was killed in 2008, and her mother and grandmother were arrested for her murder in 2012 (Kumar 2012). In the body of this chapter, I have excluded killings in which the girl of the higher caste is murdered by her own family because such instances of murder are of a different order and are in need of a deep analysis somewhat different from, but related to, the one I am undertaking here. Unambiguously referred to as honor killings in the contexts of the Muslim world and the global North, instances of female directed intrafamilial murder are inextricably linked to the value of chastity as a guarantor of the family's prestige and moral reputation.

Devendras' strong resistance to such marriages energized by the commonly held belief that the Thevars would never accept them.

Peter's Rejection

Close friends throughout my tenure in Paramakudi, Peter and his family invited me on a trip to the *vaḷaikkāppu* (literally, “bangle protection”) of Peter's niece, specifically his brother's daughter. The *vaḷaikkāppu*, which is observed publically in an event hall if sufficient resources are available, is a celebration of the auspiciousness and good fortune of a pregnant woman, and requires that friends and relatives present cash gifts to wish the unborn child and her immediate family well.⁶¹ I rode to the event with Peter, his wife Mary, and one of Peter's male friends, Nataraj, for about three hours in the white SUV that had been hired for the occasion. On the way, our young driver played cinema songs off the pen drive he had inserted into the stereo, and Peter and Nataraj shared the titles of the films with me. Some of the current films were entertaining, the two men agreed, but they were no match in quality to the films of the past, such as those starring the late Dravidianist political leader MGR (Marudhur Gopalan Ramachandran) (1917-1987).

We arrived in the town where the *vaḷaikkāppu* was held, and parked in front of the event space, or *mahāl*. Probably owned by locals of the wealthy Chettiar caste, according to Peter's conjecture, the *mahāl* was nonetheless open to anyone who could afford to rent it. It was a new, yellow, cement block building fitted with a black granite staircase that was lined with shiny bannisters leading to the entranceway. The interior of the building had been decorated with colorful streamers that hung from the ceiling and were taped to the walls. As is usually the case at such rites of passage in Tamil Nadu, rows of folding metal chairs were placed facing the

⁶¹ Sometimes the *vaḷaikkāppu* is held at home. When that is the case today, the family's inadequate financial resources are usually the reason.

wooden stage where the honored couple was seated. The pregnant woman, who was wrapped in a red sari and bedecked in gold jewelry, almost matched the red velveteen and golden throne upon which she sat.

I followed my friends to the front of the stage where the pregnant woman's female cousin presented us with betel leaves smeared with sacred ash within which we wrapped the cash we then ceremoniously handed to the mother-to-be. We posed for pictures with the couple who then sent us upstairs to the dining hall. Mary and I enjoyed the grand feast that was served to us by hired help while Peter and his friend joined a group of men that had gathered behind the mahāl to socialize. After the banana leaves off which we ate had been cleared, we descended the stairs and sat amongst many women and a few men on the metal chairs that had been pulled out of their rows and redistributed into clusters to facilitate conversation.⁶² Mary gladly explained my presence as a researcher and family friend to their relatives, friends, and acquaintances. After an hour or two, Peter and Nataraj reappeared with the faint smell of alcohol on their breath, and began to escort me around the building to meet many others with whom Mary was not familiar. Amidst our conversations, I saw a couple in their twenties enter the building along with their toddler. Peter glanced up at them, immediately shot his eyes to the tiles of the floor, and abruptly bid farewell to those with whom we were speaking. After summoning Mary on our way out, we rushed towards the car. The young woman, dragging her child in tow, followed Peter who kept on walking forward determinedly. "*Māmā, māmā* [uncle, uncle] please talk, please talk to me," she entreated him as she tapped persistently on his upper back. She sobbed, and tears began to stream down her cheeks, but Peter refused to turn around, and we shuffled along quietly with

⁶² It is customary to eat off banana leaves in South India, though today plates are used in many homes except on special occasions.

him. He shooed the grief-stricken young woman who I later realized was actually his niece off his back, stepped up into the passenger seat of the SUV, and slammed the door shut.

While Mary, Nataraj, and I watched from the backseat, Peter's niece reached her upper body through the open window that Peter did not have time to close. She grabbed onto Peter's shoulders and shook him vigorously, shouting, "Māmā, talk to me, please talk, talk to me māmā," over and over again. The little boy who was beneath my line of sight did not make a sound. Peter's eyes welled up, and he started to cry. He pushed his niece out of the car, and yelled at her: "Go! Go. Get away from here," as he extended his arm out of the window frame, pointing. Eventually she left, and he rolled up the window, and began to weep. With his head in his hands, his sobbing grew louder. I felt uncomfortable watching Peter – a thirty-something year-old man of impressive stature – reach a point of such utter despair, and fidgeted nervously. My fellow passengers, however, seemed politely unfazed at first. But as Peter began to slam his hands onto the dashboard with the force of rage, simultaneously gasping for breath in between sobs, all of our bodies jolted involuntarily.

After a few minutes, Peter told the driver to proceed. I was confused at the scene that had unfolded so I turned to Mary with an inquisitive look. Before I could say anything Mary explained: "That girl ran off and married a Thevar boy." Peter chimed in tearfully, "She went and married into that [Thevar] community, and they will not accept us. Even if we accept them, they will never accept us. I have not seen her since then, and I will not talk to her ... Those devils [picācu], they will never accept us," he repeated.

Peter's devastation arose from his assurance that the Thevars would neither accept the Devendras as their equals nor recognize the Devendras in their own terms. For the Thevars, Peter inferred, the Devendras were not the forgotten kings they claimed to be, but remained the

untouchable Pallars who were lowly and polluting by nature. Peter's steadfast rejection of his niece must also be understood within the context of the institutionalized forms of sexual violence historically employed by Thevar landlords in the agrarian domain. Peter spurned his niece's acquiescence to her Thevar husband, and by extension the Thevar caste because the Devendras' relative freedom from Thevar sexual domination of is a sign of their recent upward mobility. As Peter later told me, his "niece's marriage is pulling the Devendras back down."

Peter may be particularly disturbed by his niece's marriage because of the normative rules of Tamil kinship that dictate the relationship between them in many castes, including Devendras and Thevars [except for Kallars]. Peter is his niece's *māmā*, her mother's younger brother, who is an ideal marriage partner for her (Clark-Deces 2014, Trawick 1990, 78). If he is unmarried because he is already married, she would ideally marry his son. Even when these conventions are not realized, they structure the relationship of a girl to her maternal uncle from the time of her birth, as the uncle is expected to uphold special financial obligations for the sake of his niece. For example, he must offer generous gifts during her ear piercing ceremony when she is a toddler, during the celebration of her first menses, when she is married, and at her *vaḷaikkāppu*. Unlike the niece whose rite of passage we had travelled to celebrate, Peter had painfully rejected the niece who had intermarried. The blow he endured was particularly forceful because the niece that could have been with him had given herself to a man of the caste that rejected him.

Peter indulged the embittered grief that he expressed with alcohol. He and Nataraj took out a bottle of Old Monk rum and began to consume it with abandon. They asked the driver to search for old tunes on the radio to which they sang along with gusto that gave way to grogginess, as the return trip progressed. The nonchalance with which they attended to the

aftermath of the emotionally charged encounter suggests the generic nature of such an event, that it did not need to be processed, discussed, or reflected upon because it was expected. It had happened before, and would certainly happen again. As the men eventually sung themselves to sleep, Mary looked over at me, rolling her eyes with a sense of light-hearted resignation that she probably figured I would share on account of being female.

Dalit Fracture and Devendra Distinction

While Peter and many of his caste fellows despair others' refusals to recognize them, they continue to work to generate recognition, in part through their efforts to distinguish themselves from other Scheduled Castes. Over the course of the past thirty years, the Paramakudi Devendras of Krishnanagar have broken their solidarity with their Paraiyar neighbors, increasingly refusing to identify with them. While some Devendras allied with the Paraiyars during the surge in Dalit activism of the early 1990s, which was inspired by the centennial celebrations of Ambedkar's birth, they soon asserted their independence, as they insisted on their royal lineage.

The Devendra's insistence is an attempt to dispute their conflation in many colonial and post-colonial discourses and documentations, and in the popular imagination of dominant castes and the policy of government authorities today. Even scholarly literature tends to merge the two distinct Scheduled Castes, which have faced similar but not identical historical realities.

In her investigation of the late colonial period, Rupa Viswanathan argues that the Devendras (Pallars in this context) were conflated with the Paraiyars and other Dalit castes under the Raj in name and in terms of the enslavement to which they were subjected. "By the 1890s," she writes, "the caste name Paraiyar was Anglicized to Pariah ... and was used as an inclusive term by officials to refer to all Dalit castes, not just Paraiyars" (2014, 3). She goes on to argue

that all three large Tamil Dalit castes – Paraiyar, Pallar, and Chakkiliyar (Arunthathiyar)⁶³ – were subjected to the same brutal practices of enslavement under the Raj.⁶⁴ While the impossibility of distinguishing between various Dalit castes holds true in a number of documents, such as the reports of the Collector of Chingleput District in 1891, which refers to the “Pariah classes” (Viswanathan 2014, 95-98), other colonial documents that do not make their way into Viswanathan’s study do distinguish between Pallars and Paraiyars, suggesting that their historical experiences were different.

In overlooking the differences between Dalit (Scheduled) Castes, Viswanathan reinforces the conflation against which the Devendras fight. To her, they are all Dalits, crushed under the weight of historical oppression. Viswanathan starts her book with a caveat; she insists that Paraiyar is a “cruel word”, though she uses it in keeping with the historical context at the heart of her study. “Dalit” should, according to Viswanathan, be the term used to refer to communities like the Paraiyars and Paraiyars. She assumes that the term Dalit has the liberatory effect that Ambedkar had intended, but in so doing assigns the Devendras a name and identity that they reject.

⁶³ Arunthathiyar is the third largest (after the Paraiyars and Pallars) SC community found in Tamil Nadu. In 2009, the Government of Tamil Nadu designated Arunthathiyar an umbrella term for the Arunthathiyar, Chakkiliyan, Madari, Madiga, Pagadai, Thoti, and Adi Andhra communities (Tamil Nadu Government Gazette 2009), but the office of the Registrar-General, which oversees the census, does not recognize all of those communities as one.

⁶⁴ Viswanathan’s arguments about the systematic subjugation of the ancestors of today’s Scheduled Castes hold true for countless individuals (2014). Certainly, the masters of the Tamil country’s praedial slaves did not discriminate on the basis of caste title. Instead, they readily exploited those whom they relegated to the bottom of the caste hierarchy with the tacit approval of the Madras Presidency’s colonial government, which refused to interfere in the “religious matters” of the natives. The political economy of the late colonial Madras Presidency, Viswanathan argues, rested on the cooperation of the colonial administration with the land and slave owning castes who remitted some of their revenue to the government (*ibid.*, 4). While lifelong and even intergenerational enslavement, cloaked in the saffron robes of “Hindu tradition”, was the fate of many Devendras and Paraiyars, there were nonetheless other possibilities for members of both castes. As I demonstrate below, small percentages of both castes were literate and landowning. Ultimately, there were and continue to be nuances at the basis of the relationship between Devendras, Paraiyars, and Caste Hindu society. In my critique of Viswanathan, I do not intend to deny the brutal oppression faced by today’s Scheduled Castes. Instead, I aim to honor the wishes of most of my Devendra and Paraiyar interlocutors who wish to be understood as distinct castes.

The *Ramnad Manual of 1890* differentiates between the Pallars and Paraiyars, not just in name, but also in terms of their occupations (Ramnad Manual of 1890 (Rao), 34). Rao claims that beating the *parai* drum was the Paraiyar caste's "traditional occupation" (ibid., 36) – a view that remains commonly held today, and that is supported by the name Paraiyar ("person of the *parai*"). Because it requires contact with cow hide and is usually played to announce deaths, as well as during funerary rites, the occupation of *parai* playing is considered lowly and polluting. Rao notes that the Paraiyars had taken to other occupations, including "praedial slaves, scavengers, burners and buryers of corpses, [and] musicians", but that their work, nonetheless, remained "menial and degrading" (ibid.). "They are", Rao goes on, "despised by all but a few of the lowest classes of natives, their touch defiles, and their mere presence is believed to taint the air" (ibid.). They are obliged to live apart from their employers in separate quarters called the 'Paracheri' and must never come near a Brahmin or Vellala or indeed any respectable man" (ibid.). Although Rao suggests that the Pallar and Paraiyar castes are "probably remnants of old races", his account of the Pallars' occupation is different. He notes that they are "praedial labourers ... employed exclusively in the cultivation of paddy lands. "Their women", he goes on, "are considered to be particularly skilled in planting and weeding, and in most parts of the country, they alone are employed in these operations if available" (ibid.). While agricultural laborer is hardly a high-status occupation, it does not carry the same stigma as playing the *parai*, scavenging, or burning and burying corpses. Rao's account suggests that the Pallars and Paraiyars did not share the same status in the late nineteenth century.

The Indian Censuses of 1891, 1901, and 1911 also differentiate between the Paraiyars and Pallars. While in 1891 both castes appear under the subheading "Field Labourers", the narrative account in the census suggests their heterogeneous historical development. The 1891

census enumerator of the Madras Presidency⁶⁵ details the ritual rights and obligations that the Paraiyars maintained within certain villages⁶⁶, and argues, on the basis of Pallar subcaste titles, that it “seems not improbable that the Palla[r]s are representatives of the old Pallavas ...” – kings who ruled part of what is today Southern India between the 6th and 9th centuries CE (ibid., 244-247). In differentiating between the two castes in the census of 1901, the Superintendent of Census Operations Madras, W. Francis notes that the Paraiyar’s population (867,966) is almost twice the size of the Pallar’s population (449,505) (1901, 107). Per capita rates of literacy amongst the Paraiyars are, however, significantly lower: 4,356 (Paraiyar) and 5,483 (Pallar). The Census of 1911, part of which was drafted by the Superintendent of Census Operations, J. Charles Molony, coincides with its predecessor by noting the “enormous [numerical] strength of the Tamil Paraiyans”, who are at the receiving end of missionary efforts to improve their condition (Molony 1911, 161).⁶⁷ Overall, it seems that between 1891 and 1911 the Pallars were in a higher socioeconomic position than the Paraiyars.

The 1921 Census, drafted by Superintendent of Census Operations, G.T. Boag, further elucidates the historical divergences of the Paraiyars and Pallars by noting their heterogeneous ambitions. Contending that the greatest potential for misrepresentation in the census is rooted in the castes’ own ambitions, he attests to the demands of petitioners at the beginning of each period of data collection (1922, 152-153).⁶⁸ Interestingly, amongst the aspiring castes are the

⁶⁵ The name of the census enumerator is not listed in the text.

⁶⁶ The census enumerator offers examples of the Paraiyars ritual duties. In Thanjavur, the Paraiyar headman was required to mount an elephant with the deity during an annual Śaivite festival. In many villages, Paraiyars also had ritual duties to establish village boundaries (Census of India 1891, 244-245). For another example of the Paraiyar’s historical roles, the census enumerator refers to an annual “festival of the goddess of Black Town” in which a Paraiyar was chosen to represent the bridegroom” (ibid., 245).

⁶⁷ Interestingly Molony goes on to worry that the Paraiyar’s consciousness of their better condition in the past might lead to their “rude reactions” (Census of India 1911, 161).

⁶⁸ Boag was responding to criticism of European missionary and government enumerations of caste due to their inaccuracy, incommensurability with “Christian rule”, and their potential to inflame rivalries between castes (1922, 152-3). According to his account, European enumerations and analyses of caste are the only accurate and effective way to collect data.

Paraiyars who, according to Boag, want to be listed as Adi-Dravida – “Primordial Southerners” – rather than their antecedent caste titles (ibid. 153-5). The Pallars are, by contrast, absent from the list of petitioners. It seems then that at the time of the census the Pallars were not actively advocating to elevate their status as they are today.⁶⁹

In addition to their heterogeneity, the Paraiyars and Pallars have been described as rival castes by colonial administrators and contemporary scholars. The 1924 Census of Pudukottai State, an independent princely state that bordered the Trichinopoly, Tanjore, and Ramnad Districts of the Madras Presidency, refers to the tensions between the two castes.⁷⁰ Like many scholars and colonial administrators before him, the text’s author, R. Krishnamachari, notes that that both the Pallars and Paraiyars were ostracized by “the higher castes”. According to Krishnamachari, the Pallars, however, insisted that they were superior, and their insistence helped foster “constant friction between these two communities” (Krishnamachari 1924, 110).⁷¹ Writing about the same place and period, Nicholas B. Dirks elucidates the conflicts between Pallars and Paraiyars that were inextricably linked to the networks of dominance and submission endemic to village life. Both castes were entangled in patron-client relations with the dominant castes of the village – the Maravars and Kallars – who they served. Although the Pallars were “generally considered to be higher in status than Paraiyars in the state”, both the Pallars and Paraiyars were subjected to social and spatial exclusion (1987, 201). Their lives were,

⁶⁹ Perhaps the Paraiyars, whose population was considerably greater than their Pallar counterparts, could have more of an impact on the government than other “depressed classes”. Or perhaps the stigma that they faced was more profound than the dishonor that faced the Pallars who therefore deployed less action to improve their status.

⁷⁰ Pudukottai State, which as surrounded by the Trichinopoly, Tanjore, and Ramnad Districts of the Madras Presidency, was an independent princely state ruled by the Tondaiman Kings of the Kallar caste. They came to power due to their alliance with the Sethupathi Kings of Ramnad, and maintained their reign by allying with the Nayaks of Madurai, and later with the British East India Company in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They were independent, mostly in name, until 1947.

⁷¹ The terms Palla, Pallan, and Pallar refer to the caste I call Devendra, which is still officially (in government documentation) known as Pallar. In Palla, the r or n have been disregarded as they often are in informal speech. The r humanizes the noun, referring to a Pallar individual with respect, while the replacement of the final r with an n is the informal, almost flippant way of referring to an individual of lesser status than oneself. The same goes for Paraiya, Paraiyan, and Paraiyar.

nonetheless, overseen by their respective villages' dominant caste, which provided headmen to adjudicate their disputes. Importantly, this form of dominance meant that Pallar and Paraiyar disputes were often not their own. Dirks claims that:

Any disputes among or between Kallar lineages often brought about disputes among or between the respectively dominated Pallar or Paraiyar lineages ... One of the strategems of dominance was the displacement of conflict. The patrons shifted the unpleasantness of conflict on to a dependent group, thereby avoiding the indignity and messiness of infighting while simultaneously displaying their dominant power over subordinate groups (1987, 274).⁷²

Since the territorial and economic patterns of agrarian domination common during the colonial period have largely broken down, the entrenchment of the Devendras and Paraiyars in the conflicts of the dominant castes is unlikely today. Instead, they are engaged in their own independent conflicts with the dominant castes whose hegemony they challenge by way of their upward mobility. As economist T.G. Jacob and film scholar Pranjali Bandhu demonstrate, today's Devendras and Paraiyars live in heterogeneous geographical, economic, and political situations. The Devendras predominate in Southern Tamil Nadu where they are in perpetual conflict with the economically and politically powerful Thevars.⁷³ The Paraiyars, the most populous of the Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu, predominate in Northern Tamil Nadu where they face the opposition of the Vanniyars who are now at the same or lower levels of economic

⁷² In a sense then, Pallars and Paraiyars were allied with the dominant castes in the villages they inhabited, as they came to stand in for them like the soldiers of a conscriptive army. Such compulsory alliances and rivalries were part of the more pervasive system of endogamy and territorial distribution that divided the Pallars and Paraiyars according to the subcastes and settlements of the dominant castes (Dirks 1987, 273). Some scholars have argued more broadly that intercaste affinities were dictated by the bifurcation of all Tamil castes into two large aggregates – the left hand castes and the right hand castes, which were in constant tension with each other (Beck 1972; Pfaffenberger 1982; Moffatt 1979). According to such views, the Pallars were a left hand caste, while the Paraiyars were counted amongst the right hand castes.

This division does not, however, shape relations between the two castes today. It was mentioned to me only once or twice over the course of two years of ethnographic research and a grand total of three and a half years living in Tamil Nadu. Even during Dirks' fieldwork, which he conducted from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, it was only the Pallars and Paraiyars who had an "inkling" of knowledge about the division between left and right hand castes (Dirks 1987, 274). Other castes were unaware of this distinction, which did not seem to impact their lives (ibid.).

⁷³ The violence that erupted between the Devendras and Thevars in the 1990s was the worst that Southern Tamil Nadu had seen since the 1950s. More deadly than what had happened in the Northern half of the state, Jacob and Bandhu described it as a civil war situation (2000, 44-49).

development, according to Jacob and Bandhu. The Northern Paraiyars are also “educationally and socially in a better position” than their Devendra counterparts. “The proximity to Chennai and the early educational activities of the missionaries has made them more at par [sic] with the rest of society” (Jacob and Bandhu 2000, 48). While Jacob and Bandhu’s perspective may be valid in the context of Northern Tamil Nadu, the relative positions of the Devendras and Paraiyars in the Southern districts are reversed. The more populous Devendras hold more education, political power, and capital than their Paraiyar counterparts.

Independent of their conflicts with declining but still dominant castes, the relations between the Devendras and Paraiyars continue to be tense and complicated, oscillating between poorly documented violent clashes and political solidarity. For example, in the Southern District of Virudhunagar in 2008, an incident of eve-teasing led to a conflict between local Devendras and Paraiyars, and the murder of one Paraiyar woman. As NDTV reported, mutual animosity did not end after her death, but instead resurfaced in 2010. After a heated exchange between a group of Devendras and Paraiyars who were riding a mini-bus, a thirty-two-year-old Devendra man was hacked to death by his Paraiyar neighbors. The news of his murder spread quickly, inciting a group of Devendras in Pudupatti village of Virudhunagar District to attack local Paraiyars. One person was murdered, and several were injured before the police arrived, and fired into the air to disperse the crowd (NDTV 2010). Although it is a fictionalized account (a novel), renowned Dalit author Bama’s *Vanmam* (“Vendetta”) addresses the Devendra-Paraiyar conflict in the context of the village in which she lived (2008). Her novel, which has been criticized by preeminent Dalit activist Gail Omvedt for harming the Dalit struggle because of its divisiveness, elucidates the internal tensions between Devendras and Paraiyars, which are, according to Bama, galvanized by Caste Hindu domination (ibid.).

Like Omvedt, many Dalit activists and scholars are loathe to discuss conflicts between the Devendras and Paraiyars or between other castes that are part of “the Dalit community” because they deeply complicate and compromise the liberal, humanist camaraderie that the Dalit Movement requires. I experienced this aversion firsthand while working in the Tamil Nadu Government Archive in 2014. A preeminent, American-educated scholar of South Indian descent who was also conducting research approached me to inquire about my project, and I told her about the historical assertions and strategic formulations of identity that were circulating amongst my Devendra friends. She seemed immediately disappointed and disenchanted, as I explained that the Devendras were disavowing their identification as Dalits, and were instead staking claim to a long forgotten royal lineage that they sought to revitalize. Shaking her head, she said, “That’s really too bad.”

For entirely different reasons, individuals of the dominant castes tend to envision the Devendras and Paraiyars, as well as all of the seventy-four other Scheduled Castes native to Tamil Nadu, as a single unit. The Thevars, Yadavas, Chettiars, and Udayars with whom I spoke over the course of my research sometimes referred to their Devendra neighbors as Dalits, but more often referred to them as Harijans – the outdated term championed by Gandhi, which is today considered patronizing and offensive⁷⁴. Others abbreviated Pallar and Paraiyar, referring to them in one breath as PL and PR. When I pressed my interlocutors to distinguish between the Scheduled Castes, especially between the most well-known and populous Pallars, Paraiyars, and Arunthathiyars, they sometimes acknowledged the heterogeneity and hierarchy within the trio. Their commonplace tendency to lump all Dalits together was, however, much more common.

⁷⁴ As I discussed in the introduction, the term Harijan, which means “child of Hari/Vishnu”, was introduced by Gandhi prior to the widespread advent of the Indian Independence Struggle.

Their refusal to recognize the Scheduled Castes' independent histories, identities, and realities bore down heavily on the Devendras and Paraiyars, and aggravated the friction between them.

Besides vocalizing their sweeping generalizations about “Harijans”, members of dominant castes are indiscriminate in selecting their targets during caste clashes. Oftentimes, conflicts between Devendras and Thevars result in the death of Paraiyars, just as clashes between Paraiyars and Vanniyars can result in the death of Devendras. Tendencies to target members of both castes as if they can stand in for each other are reflected in the way such incidents are reported in news sources. Newspapers and newscasters refer to Dalits and Scheduled Castes, rather than to caste names or titles. By contrast, the preferred titles of the dominant castes, such as Thevar and Vanniyar, often appear in the media.

Thus undifferentiated, Devendras and Paraiyars continue to face the everyday stigma and violence of the Dalit condition, which is well documented by Human Rights Organizations, scholars, and news sources (Narula 1999, Rao 2009, Viswanathan 2014). Brutal rapes, murders, and violent attacks that go unpunished are often their common fate, especially in cases of intermarriage between Devendras or Paraiyars and dominant castes. Fighting against such flagrant oppression, the Devendras and Paraiyars have at times joined together in solidarity.

The early days of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (“Liberation Panther Party”, henceforth VCK), which was then known as the Dalit Panther Iyakkam (“Dalit Panther Movement”, henceforth DPI) mark one such moment in political history. The DPI was formed in Tamil Nadu in 1982 as a conscious descendant of Maharashtra’s Dalit Panthers of India – the revolutionary anti-caste organization and Dalit literary and artistic movement that was at its height in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷⁵ The DPI’s founder, Malaisamy, was a Devendra by caste, and a

⁷⁵ Founded by Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar in Mumbai in 1972, the Dalit Panthers were inspired by the Black Panther Party of the United States from which they derived their name, and who acknowledged and supported them

practicing advocate in Madurai District who aimed to unite disparate Scheduled Castes over the general issue of untouchability (Wyatt 2010, 117). Although it is difficult to determine the degree of Scheduled Caste diversity within the early years of the organization, by the mid to late 1990s, it had become an almost exclusively Paraiyar party. Under the leadership of Thol. Thirumavalavan (a Paraiyar by caste) who renamed the party and initiated its participation in elections, the VCK grew to become one of the most powerful Dalit outfits in the country. Its support base today remains overwhelmingly Paraiyar, and has shifted from Madurai and the Southern Districts to Chennai and the Northern Districts, where Paraiyars are the predominant Scheduled Caste.

Importantly, the period of the VCK's expansion coincided with the establishment of the Puthiya Tamilagam ("New Tamil Country", henceforth PT) by Dr. K. Krishnasamy in 1996. Krishnasamy continues to advocate for the rights and welfare of the Devendras who are his priority, although he claims to support all Scheduled Castes (Krishnasamy interview 2013). Despite his assertion, the Devendras and Paraiyars are politically fractured. I learned during the countless conversations that I had over the course of my research that Devendras do not generally support the VCK, while Paraiyars do not generally support the PT.

Paraiyar Reflections on Devendra and Dalit Politics

A discussion between my research assistant's forty-two-year-old brother, Murugan, and me illustrated the political tensions between the Devendras and Paraiyars as he saw them unfold

through the US Black Panther Newspaper, which circulated weekly throughout the world from 1967-1980. The members of the Dalit Panthers brought it to its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s mostly through a literary movement, which emerged to fill the vacuum created in the Dalit politics of Maharashtra by the splitting of Ambedkar's Republican Party into many factions. In addition to the renaissance in Marathi literature and arts that they initiated, the Dalit Panthers practiced radical, militant politics outside the framework of both parliamentary and Marxist-Leninist models, fusing Ambedkar, Phule, and Marx. Crucially, the Dalit Panthers popularized the term 'Dalit' as a name for formerly untouchable communities.

in the Paramakudi region throughout his lifetime. The two castes initially joined in their militant opposition to caste oppression, but then fractured due to the different strategies that they have adopted in attempting to empower themselves. The Devendras try to rise up by distinguishing themselves from other Scheduled Castes with whom they have long been associated, while the Paraiyars claim to align themselves with the liberal ideals that characterized early Dravidianism, and that are widely thought to be the markers of modernity. The political alliance between the Devendras and Paraiyars is not, however, fully severed but remains in a tenuous state today.

My Paraiyar research assistant, Mohan, beseeched me many times to interview Murugan who, Mohan claimed, knows a great deal about the history of caste and intercaste conflict in and around Paramakudi. Rather than interviewing Murugan over the phone, I waited until he was released from the Central Prison in the Northern Tamil Nadu town of Salem after serving a sentence of more than ten years while his wife, a teacher, raised their son and daughter, who were about sixteen and fourteen in 2013.

I was not in Paramakudi on the day of Murugan's homecoming in December of 2013, but I heard from Mohan and some neighbors that a thick crowd from all over the town gathered along Muthukulathur Road in Andipuram to welcome him back. Members of Murugan's immediate family told me that he was admired throughout Paramakudi because of his heavy involvement in the *kalavarams* of the past, though I suspect that the affection he attracted emanated mostly from the Scheduled Castes. Kalavaram, which literally means "confusion of mind; perturbation; perplexity", is the term most often employed to refer to riots and large-scale moments of violence especially in intercaste contexts (Madras Tamil Lexicon 1924-1936). For some, Murugan was heroic because of his fearless engagement in such deployments of force on behalf of Scheduled Castes, as well as the connections with other Dalit leaders that such acts of

heroism helped foster. Others, usually acquaintances with whom Murugan was not particularly close, told me that he had accrued māṇam (“greatness; honor”) and mariyātai “civility, courtesy, reverence, respectful behaviour to a superior” (Madras Tamil Lexicon 1924-1936, 3089) because of his time in prison (ibid.). Whether a righteous fighter or a long-suffering prisoner, Murugan earned honor and respect for his rebellion against caste and state authorities. Such honor and respect was not, however, enough to keep him out of prison.

Murugan knew well that he was ultimately subject to the state – its heavy hand could kill, but its extended hand could offer prosperity. In fact, he had built his home in Sivagangai (48 kilometers from Paramakudi) where I met him on a plot of land that he had been granted by the Government of Tamil Nadu prior to his conviction. One among many such plots, his had become available through a state-level social welfare scheme that distributed land to landless individuals of Scheduled Castes. Such distributive welfare schemes are common in contemporary Tamil Nadu. While the land the government distributes is usually of the poorest quality, it nonetheless offers the Scheduled Castes the opportunities of ownership. Most of the plots near Murugan’s house were left vacant because they were ill suited for agriculture, and because financial limitations prevented people from building houses on them. Murugan was one of the lucky ones. He was happy to have a home where he could live peacefully with his family, building a life that would contrast sharply with his time in prison.

Nonetheless, when I finally met Murugan in January of 2014, he advocated vehement and violent opposition to the government because of its interdependency with casteist ideology and practice. As we sat together in folding metal chairs behind his house, Murugan eagerly shared his strong opinions with me, insisting that violent struggles were necessary precursors to liberation. In so doing, he also narrated the political consolidation and dispersal of the Devendras and

Paraiyars, as they negotiated their oppositional force and claims to power within the overarching regime of caste.

When I asked Murugan the very open-ended question: “Please tell me about jāti”, he immediately referred to the most infamous kalavaram that the region has seen in recent history – the Muthukulathur riots of 1957, which I discuss in Chapter Three. I asked him when the riots started, wondering if he could provide examples of intercaste violence prior to the events of 1957, and he turned towards the present rather than reaching farther into the past. He described the riots that bloodied the ground of Southeastern Tamil Nadu during his lifetime. Smiling broadly, he recounted the events of his first kalavaram:

I was at the head of the first kalavaram. There was a [legal] case against me for that. They [Thevars] would come and call us by our caste and say nasty [“*acinkam*”] things. Satyamurthy [Thevar] was the minister. They would come to our area under that A[IA]DMK minister. They would bring him. We bombed them. Mohan was the one carrying the bombs around. Then there was a huge kalavaram. The police were shooting us. There were five thousand people behind us. There were five hundred police. They came and beat us on our street. There is still a [legal] case related to that.

Dismayed by Murugan’s story, I asked him why such moments of intercaste violence continue to arise. “It’s our street,” Murugan replied, “so they should not come. They shouldn’t come to our street. It’s not about jāti. They used to come and say nasty things and throw rocks [at us].” For Murugan, defensive fighting protected the neighborhood from the dishonor of public verbal and physical abuse. While Murugan explicitly denied the relevance of caste to the violence he described, his mention of “our” street, which in colloquial Tamil refers to the entire neighborhood, indexed the Paraiyars and Devendras who exclusively inhabit the area. When I sought further clarification by asking directly who is “us” and who is “them”, Murugan filled in the deictics with SC (Scheduled Caste) and Thevar. Importantly, by using the government’s official umbrella term, Murugan conflated the Paraiyars and Devendras with each other and with other Dalit communities with which they are implicitly allied.

Even more important is the way that Murugan's disavowal of caste bespeaks a mode of liberal subjectivity that is at the core of many instantiations of Dalit activism from EVR and Ambedkar to Thirumavalavan and Omvedt. By telling me that fighting was not for him and his allies a matter of jāti, Murugan offered an implicit comparison between the SCs and the Thevars they fought. For the SCs, Murugan inferred, jāti was not what was at stake. Instead, the conflict was centered on the protection of territory and property and the maintenance of respect and safety. The Thevars, by implied contrast, were motivated by the caste fervor that marked them as bigoted, narrow-minded, and even primitive. While Murugan may in some ways care about caste, the contrast he drew in the context of conflict questioned the dominant ideology of caste within which his community (understood both broadly and narrowly) has been consistently excluded and oppressed.

Thevar aggressors were not, however, the only enemies in Murugan's story. Importantly, the state, understood to be in cahoots with the Thevars, was featured in Murugan's account of the conflict. The AIADMK's Ramanthapuram district secretary V. Sathyamurthy was, of course, a representative of the government, but he was also a Thevar, and his power bespoke the symbiotic relationship that is widely believed to flourish between Thevar and state authorities of the AIADMK party.⁷⁶ Likewise, police forces amongst whom Thevars are thought to predominate came to Murugan's neighborhood and beat his caste fellows, *but* they could not ultimately defeat them. The Scheduled Castes refused to be outdone. Finally, the legal case, which Murugan mentioned, illuminated the complex tensions embedded in India's judicial system, as it remains deeply entangled with upper caste and police authority. The case stood as a threat for both

⁷⁶ Especially under the leadership of current Chief Minister Jayaraman Jayalithaa, the AIADMK is widely believed to afford preferential treatment to the enormous Thevar voting bloc. During Jayalithaa's three tenures as Chief Minister, her close friend and confidante Sasikala Natarajan of the Thevar caste was thought to wield power behind the scenes. Jayalithaa has publically extolled the virtues of the historical Thevar leader U. Muthuramalingam Thevar.

Thevars and Scheduled Castes, which had not yet amounted to anything probably because of the long backlog (sometimes decades) typical of Indian courts.

Nonetheless, with enthusiasm and animation, Murugan recounted the forceful power that he and his comrades' accrued by virtue of their cooperation. Gathering five thousand people behind them, Murugan boasted, the SCs asserted their power with bombings and counterattacks. For Murugan, the unified force of the SCs was (almost) unstoppable.

With a sense of lament, Murugan recounted the former unity of the Scheduled Castes of Paramakudi. Andipuram, which had been established by one of Murugan's ancestors (according to the accounts offered by him and his family), was originally a refuge for the Devendras who fled from nearby rural areas and were offered protection by their Paraiyar "brethren". Before the Devendra-dominated Krishnanagar neighborhood was built across the street, the Devendras had escaped the abuses they faced at the hands of the dominant castes in Paraiyar-dominated Andipuram. Murugan further elaborated: "The PL [Devendra] and the PR [Paraiyar] were together, even the Chakkiliyar [another SC caste] ... They [Devendras] used to be renters in our houses. We used to call each other *aṇṇaṇ*, *tambi*, *maccaṇ* ("big brother, little brother, brother-in-law") ... Then they wanted to organize, but there wasn't a leader. There was no centralization."

Interesting here is Murugan's claim that the two distinct Scheduled Castes used kinship terms to refer to each other. Such terms marked their closeness to each other, not only as political allies, but also as *jātis* defined by their particular substantive character. Since kinship is ultimately the basis for the complex endogamous units we call castes, Murugan's citation of kinship terms implies that Devendras and Paraiyars treated each other as if they were of the same caste.

However, they are not. According to Murugan's account, their fracture is rooted both in the two castes' heterogeneous historical experiences, and in the naturalized differences between the jātis, which render their divergence almost inevitable. Aware of the potency of jāti as an affiliation and predisposition, Murugan seemed resigned to an interminable anticipation of unity:

Everyone is waiting for one jāti. There is a brotherhood sometimes but mostly people fight for their own jāti. The three people [most populous Scheduled Castes] will not accept one leader. In Thiruma's party [the VCK], there are only some PL. In Krishnasamy's party it is the same but the opposite ... It's just like that. That is the nature of jāti.

Murugan claims that the internal dissonance within what could be a Dalit community is also due in part to the different traditional occupations of the castes. He astutely pointed to the British colonial administration's misguided attempt to fuse the Scheduled Castes together. For Murugan, such attempts go against the grain of the castes' vocations and modes of production, which greatly impact their contemporary political affiliations:

In the schedule [list], there were both the PL and the PR. The Arunthathiyar also came from the Telugu area. The British put them all together. They each had different modes of production. The PL and PR did agriculture. The PR would join the movements of others, like they joined Marxism. The PL won't do any kind of service, only agriculture. They're organized, they have protection. They're in villages.

Although Murugan recognized that at some point both castes were agriculturalists, he deemed his own caste – the Paraiyars – more cosmopolitan and politically successful than their Devendra counterparts. He recognized that the Devendras are the predominant Scheduled Caste in Ramanathapuram District, but assured me that the Paraiyars are responsible for the political advances in Dalit politics emanating from cities. According to Murugan, “The PR followed Ambedkar to get the majority of reservations. They were in cities. All the major Dalit leaders are PR ... The culture of Ramnad came to be more like PLs. It is a PL area.” Thirumavalavan and the VCK attest to Murugan's claim, having enjoyed impressive electoral success. The concentration of Paraiyars in Northern Tamil Nadu, closer to Chennai (the capital) gives credence to Murugan's assertion that they have been successful political advocates and leaders.

Not unlike the contrast he drew between the Scheduled Castes and Thevars, Murugan's depiction of the Devendras marked them as comparatively "traditional" – that is, observant of caste and other forms of ostensibly rural sociality. According to Murugan, the Devendras refuse to join with the VCK because they are "proud people" (*perumai paṭṭavarkaḷ*). As in English, pride is considered a positive feature when it is possessed and displayed with restraint. However, the word *perumai* (literally, "bigness"), which I discuss in Chapter Four, is a lot of the time deployed as an insult directed at arrogance and/or intractability. The Devendras, Murugan implied, were proud of and insistent about their caste, unlike the Paraiyars who, possessed of education and urban civility, were cooperative and forward-thinking.

Murugan was not, however, fully disparaging the Devendras, but instead cautiously subscribed to some of their claims about their glorious history. Subtly depreciating the glory of the Devendras' past, by pointing out the centrality of historical circumstance, Murugan nonetheless argued that the Devendras' role as agriculturalists allowed them to rise as kings. He looked through the lens of Marxist theory to explore the Devendras' shifting position:

Urban civilization forms only after agriculture. That's why he [the Devendra] is called *kudumban* ["family man"]. He started the family.⁷⁷ I thought about this when I read Engels' *Family, Private Property, and the State*. Like Engels said, when it was just agricultural society, there was equality ... The situation as it is now only came later ... Whoever had agriculture as their hereditary occupation would be the first. They [Devendras] could have been kings but now that epoch is over. The Pallars: they don't know any other occupation.

Self-educated in Marxism, which he mapped onto the conditions of caste in contemporary Tamil Nadu, Murugan afforded the Devendras an illustrious past despite the fact that their *perumai* was an impediment to unity.

In the end, he dreamed of an armed struggle, a unified revolution of the oppressed castes that conformed to his own version of orthodox Marxism and that echoed EVR's advocacy of self-respect (*cuya mariyātai*). He castigated India's redistributive policy of reservations, as a

⁷⁷ *Kudumban* (literally, "family man") is a title held by a sub-caste of Devendras.

kind of opiate of the masses, and derided those who rely on it: “We don’t want or need to beg. Now it’s just the politics of begging. There are no struggles. They should fight. I believe that there should be fights. We should fight. There should be a big struggle. Changes have come because we have fought. We need to keep fighting. It’s not enough.” Shifting fluidly between the pronouns they and we, Murugan reunited the Scheduled Castes in his rhythmic call for the deployment of force. He also inadvertently pointed to his own personal involvement, which would subside as he settled down, but would be taken on by younger generations of Paraiyars, Devendras, and other castes long subjected to the cruelties of uncompromising hierarchy. As a unified force, the Scheduled Castes, Murugan implied, should not receive the government’s “gifts” that would mark them as inferior, but should instead maintain their collective self-respect in the enduring struggle against oppressive authorities.

While there is a great deal of diversity amongst Paraiyars in terms of their approaches to political ideology and practice, Murugan’s outlook on the Devendras and on Dalit identity reiterates similar perspectives that I heard in interviews and in casual conversation, and that I saw in the subtler movements of everyday life. Like Murugan, most of my Paraiyar interlocutors referred to the Devendras as Pallars, and did not accept their claims to superiority. They consistently referred to themselves and the “Pallars” as Dalits. Many, unlike Murugan, also refused to validate the Devendras’ claims to royalty, accusing them of fabricating such stories as political strategies. Generally speaking, Paraiyars were much more likely than their Devendra counterparts to call for the destruction of caste writ large by any means necessary. They did not aim to raise their own status within the structures of caste, but instead aimed to topple the whole system. Following the cries of the leader they widely accepted – Thirumavalavan who himself followed the echoes of EVR’s assertions – they advocated a fight for the “original Tamil people”

understood to be Dalit communities. At the same time, they negotiated the tension between the modern, liberal subjectivity they deployed against caste and the Tamil tradition for which they longed.

The Devendras' Disavowal of Dalit Identity

Devendras' approaches to caste politics, which are, like Paraiyar perspectives, complicated by diversity, tend nonetheless to be organized around a few central themes. The Devendras insist that they are not, in fact, Dalits, and that they have a hitherto obscure history that demonstrates the truth of their high status. The vast majority of my interlocutors refused to call themselves Dalits, and reprimanded me when I made that mistake early on in my research tenure. Although the appellation was established and is often deployed to fight casteist stigma, Devendras experience it as degrading, and increasingly refuse to accept it. The government classification – Scheduled Caste – also carries stigma, but Devendras prefer it to Dalit when referring to themselves along with other groups within the same official category.

The Devendras underwrite their nomenclature with historical claims. Paraiyars and many Dalit communities throughout the subcontinent point to their literary history, which has long been suppressed by high caste hegemony, and to their flourishing modern literary traditions as evidence of their intellectual achievements. They have not, however, matched the Devendras' systematic, widespread, and public revision of accepted history aimed at achieving a higher status revitalized in their contemporary political actions. As I discuss in the following chapters, the Devendras' historical claims are supplemented by their visual, audio, and even olfactory assertions through which they stake claim to status vis-a-vie territorial domination.

Part of the Devendras' strategy of raising their status depends on their ability to distinguish themselves from other Scheduled Castes. In interviews and conversations, my

interlocutors often contrasted themselves with Paraiyars, in particular, because they are high in population and close in proximity. My interlocutors told me that the Paraiyars traditionally play the *parai* drum and eat beef, while the Devendras do not and have not engaged in such “polluting” occupations, nor would they eat beef, which is forbidden according to the dictates of Hindu orthodoxy.⁷⁸ While they did not accuse the Paraiyars of roughness or lawlessness, which they themselves adopted in certain contexts, they did establish for themselves a kind of agrarian civility that located them at the center of traditional Tamil society, and that simultaneously allowed them to claim that the values of contemporary humanism and liberalism were always already practiced by them. Supplementing their gentility were their assertions that they had descended from the great kings of the medieval Tamil country who were known for their valor and wealth.

Of course, the Devendras’ claims that they were both agriculturalists and kings seem at first glance to be incommensurable. However, some of my Devendra interlocutors, like Murugan, alleviated potential doubts by suggesting that kingship was the inevitable outcome of agricultural primacy. Others implied that there must have been social classes within the Devendras or skirted the issue entirely through their innovative understandings of chronology. There was, nonetheless, tension amongst the Devendras surrounding the issue of dual ancestry; some wanted to emphasize the Devendras’ agricultural civility, while others focused on the Devendras’ royal lineage.

⁷⁸ The prohibition on the consumption of beef in India is politically charged and relatively recent, despite perceptions that beef has never been consumed amongst Hindus because cows are sacred animals. In the late nineteenth century, the cow protection movement demanded an end to the slaughter of cattle in British India, as the early sentiments of Hindu nationalism swept across the nascent nation. With support from the Hindu revivalist organization, the Arya Samaj, cow protection societies were established in various regions, and the British asked Muslims who wanted to slaughter cattle to register. The movement antagonized many Muslims who saw it as a tool of Hindu oppression, and riots broke out in 1893.

The opinions and socioeconomic circumstances of Cheran that I explore below cover a wide range of topics within the Devendras' internal debates and are shared by many. They are not, however, representative of all Devendras amongst whom there is not a consensus regarding history. As I argue in later chapters, the Devendras' identity is in the making, internally contested, but developing nonetheless.

A married father of three in his mid-thirties, Cheran was my neighbor during my fieldwork. He lived on the first floor of a four-story apartment building that he was in the process of building in Andipuram, and had gotten wind of my arrival and research project almost as soon as I appeared. He came to my apartment with a book in hand *Meendezhum Pandiyar Varalaru* ("The Resurgent History of the Pandiyas"), which I explore in Chapter Three (Senthil Mallar, 2014). He sat in one of my plastic chairs, and accepted the coffee I offered him.

Answering my questions, Cheran first discussed his own personal history. Cheran's parents were agriculturalists who, with the guidance of village elders, realized that the meager and decreasing profits available through farming were insufficient, and that their children would be much better off working for the government. Education was, of course, a prerequisite for such upward mobility. Since there were no opportunities for quality formal education in his village, Cheran's family moved to Paramakudi where they enrolled their children in school. Although his parents "could not show the way" because they had "very little knowledge", according to Cheran, he gained employment in the government. He works as an assistant at a local municipal office, which affords him status and a reliable income.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Cheran works in Paramakudi's Sub-Registrar Office. He registers documents of the revenue courts, various statutory documents, property records, and documents related to the conduct of elections, relief and rehabilitation, land acquisition, and various other matters of local governance.

Cheran quickly launched into his account of Devendra history, which he based on recently published literature, and his own sensibilities about Devendras' "natural" predispositions. He asserted the preeminence of the Devendras on account of their traditional agricultural occupation, and their kingship, explicitly drawing on the recent lineage of Devendra scholars, which descended from Deva Asirvatham (1920 – 2007), a Deputy Collector in Thanjavur District who wrote *Muuventar Yaar* ("Who Are the Three Kings") and *Pallar Alla Mallar Aam Mannar* ("Mallars, not Pallars, Yes Kings"). Importantly, Cheran, like most of my Devendra interlocutors, was eager to point me to the newly published literature (much of it self-published) about Devendra history, listing the names of many authors and their texts, which he wrote down for me. The proliferation of the Devendras' version of their history in printed form establishes added legitimacy that they wanted to show me. They were also eager to mention the credentials of the texts' authors amongst whom there were doctors, engineers, and high-ranking government staff.

Both of Asirvatham's most widely read texts claim that the ancient and medieval Tamil kings, the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandiyas who had been the overlords of the Maravar chieftains are the ancestors of the Devendras. Asirvatham's other contentions are: the "Pallars" were known as the Mallars prior to the sixteenth century, and they were not untouchables but skilled agriculturalists. Notice that, the ownership over one's name projected into the past remains central here. The Devendras refuse the Pallar title and the subjectivity tinged with stigma that it bears. Asirvatham's arguments, which he bases on literary and contemporary cultural evidence, are reiterated by his many acolytes, including a retired engineer (trained in the United States) turned history scholar Gurusamy Siddhar, and a professor in the Tamil Studies Department at

Bharatiar University in Coimbatore, D. Gnanasekaran.⁸⁰ Together their work is the foundation of Maḷḷar Iyam (“literally, Mallarism”) to which Cheran wholeheartedly subscribes. While the Mallar title is a point of contention and is not in everyday usage, the agrarian history of the Devendras is widely asserted.

The implications of the Devendras’ agrarian history may be understood by way of Anand Pandian’s claim that the agrarian cultivator has long been considered the “paragon of virtue and civility” in the Tamil country (2009, 19). Pointing to Tamil literary history, the dynamics of colonial rule, and to contemporary understandings of ethics, Pandian argues that the life of the cultivator is both demonstrative and generative of moral preeminence (ibid., 41-46). The farmer is endowed with the virtues of civility, propriety, restraint, toil, and sympathy, which stand in opposition to the wildness, savagery, and violence of particular communities that used to be itinerant and sovereign (ibid., 26). Pandian focuses in particular on the Piramalai Kallars (a particular subcaste), though perceptions of them could be applied to Kallars in general. Through a colonial and missionary-supported project, the Kallars were, however, “settled” on agricultural lands and impelled to cultivate both the land and their moral selves. The Kallars at the heart of Pandian’s study toiled to uplift themselves, at the same time as they hoped their children would escape from the labor of agriculture (ibid., 160-163). Ultimately, they maintained their underlying savage selves, which they found at the core of their subjectivity (ibid., 56-58).

The Devendras’ declarations of their agrarian history draw on similar, deep-seated ethical undercurrents, and their insistence on their forgotten royalty resonates with the Kallars’ maintenance of their sovereignty, at least in spirit. Calling themselves Vellalars (Devendra Kula Vellalars), the Devendras align themselves with the caste that is understood to best exemplify the

⁸⁰ Cheran referred specifically to certain authors, including Deva Asirvatham, Gurusamy Siddhar, and D. Gnanasekaran. He told me that he learned the “news” about his community by reading close to sixty, recently published books on the topic.

refinement, generosity, and cultivated virtue of Tamil agrarian civilization (Pandian 2009). Their trajectory is, of course, quite different from that of the Kallars. The Devendras claim that they already are civilized farmers, and they combine the virtues of their agrarianism with claims to divine power and liberal values, underwritten by literary references.

Like the aforementioned Devendra scholars, whom he admires, Cheran pointed to an understudied body of Tamil literature called *Paḷḷu* poetry, which was written in the sixteenth century, to highlight the Devendra's time-honored agricultural role. As Pathmanathan explains, the principal theme in *Paḷḷu* poetry "is the social and economic status of the Pallar, a community of agricultural workers tied to the farms in bonded service" (2007, 44).⁸¹ Not surprisingly sidestepping the issue of bondage, Cheran wistfully described the comparably peaceful and egalitarian lives of the Mallars in a bygone era:

Now this concept of the agriculturalist, of the way we lived and the society we formed, is found in ... *Mukkūṭarpaḷḷu* [one book of Paḷḷu poetry produced in the eighteenth century].⁸² Back then we were the farmers, and we ploughed ... It means that our women were indeed equal in this community. They have value/worth. The thing is that when we were farming, our women were standing right next to us being able to do everything that we were doing. We had to get down in it as far as our work was concerned. Paraiyars were there too; their women also had to get down and move with their work. That's how it is with their manual labor ... Mallar is the name of the precious, great heroes and the big gathering of farmers.

Interestingly, Cheran stressed gender equality as central to the story he told about caste, painting a picture of the Devendras according to the dictates of agrarian virtue and EVR's Dravidianism, as well as the liberal ideals with which it is intertwined. Back then, Cheran inferred, we were all equal. We were virtuous and hardworking. Cheran's narrative demonstrates that the Devendras are morally upstanding, progressive, and advanced, rather than backwards and brutish, thus reclaiming a form of respectability that they are now denied.

⁸¹ Despite its focus on the lives of bonded laborers, Paḷḷu poetry is comedic.

⁸² As Indira Viswanathan Peterson tells us, "throughout the eighteenth century ... rulers of provincial kingdoms [including Maravars] commissioned works in all the minor genres. The most important examples of the Paḷḷu (e.g. *Mukkūṭarpaḷḷu*), which related to labor relations in the agricultural economy, were produced in Tirunelveli ..." (2008, 63)."

In addition to Cheran's egalitarian and utopic representation of the Devendras' past, which was somewhat at odds with his claims to royalty, Cheran staked claim to ritual practices that are taken to be central to "Tamil culture" today. He bolstered the cultural currency of the Devendras' agricultural past by tracing the origins of Tamil festivals back to them. According to Cheran, the statewide Ponnerpoottu Thiruvilla ("Golden Plough Festival") during which the Earth is ploughed for the first time of the year was

In the olden days, the Mallar's holy day, which has recently been turned into the holy day of the Tamils ... They disguised our farmers' day as Tamils' day. If you want to bring the concept that is behind this day out, people in villages still know about our traditions and civilization. They'll know straight away, that this is our day. Then if you go somewhere where they're seeding, the songs that come up, those village songs, have been pointed out by many authors as part of our history.

Agricultural festivals and quotidian conviviality often attributed to "Tamil culture" are, for Cheran, the rightful domain of the Devendras.

When I asked Cheran about the caste title Devendra Kula Vellalar, which is used much more widely than Mallar, he offered an answer that neatly fit into his vision of the Mallar's bucolic past: "We made that king [the Hindu god Indra] our only ancestral deity. For that we celebrate the Indra festival." Interesting here is the way that Cheran's veneration of the Hindu god Indra as his community's only king displaces the terrestrial Thevars (Maravars), who ruled his area during the period of Pal!u poetry's production (Peterson 2008, 63). Cheran went on: "Because Indra was the ancestral deity that showed [us] the way, they have started to call us Devendras." Cheran did not, however, present the name shift as a recent phenomenon. He projected the ongoing struggle to be accepted as Devendra Kula Vellalar rather than as Pallar into the past, rendering it a foregone conclusion, a fait accompli. Referring to the name change, he told me that it was "specifically in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [when] that offensive was there ... It's been registered in the official documents in my department. Within them, what they point out is that the Devendra Kula Vellalars who belong to the Kudumban

[Devendra subcaste title] community have registered this name. Devendra Kula Vellalar is one of our divisions.” Again, the fact that the Devendras’ petition to change their name was printed, “in the official documents” is highlighted by Cheran. Even more importantly, according to Cheran’s account, the name change was recognized by the government, as it had been registered in a government office. The Devendras had thus received recognition from the highest contemporary authority.

As we have seen, the trajectories and talking points that Murugan and Cheran followed in response to the same questions that I asked about jāti were very different. Murugan advocated Dalit unity and insisted on the necessity of violent struggle, while Cheran focused on the glories of the past and craved official recognition for the Devendras. In the end, they both sought dignity for their respective castes, but the strategies they adopted were different. Although the Devendras should not, according to Cheran, need to fight for the authority that they always already have, he knows all too well the violence that they face at the hands of local Thevars and the police. In the chapters that follow, the vulnerability of the Paramakudi Devendras, including Cheran, will become increasingly conspicuous.

Abandoned By the State

Despite their ambitions for recognition and the profound impact of the government on their everyday lives, my interlocutors hailing from all three of the castes discussed above expressed feelings that the government had abandoned them, leaving them to withstand poverty and deprivation, as Northern Tamil Nadu, urban India, and the rest of the world developed rapidly. They, their parents, or grandparents had left their villages in search of something better, but the promise that education and city living had initially extended remained unfulfilled.

For the Paraiyars and Devendras, such feelings were rooted, at least in part, in their living conditions, which were improving at a rate slower than they had hoped for. As I mentioned above, the residents of Andipuram are, on average, poorer than their neighbors in Krishnanagar. Most residents cannot afford to improve their homes, which usually lack the *vacati* (convenience and comfort) of running water, glass windows, and furniture. Watching the televisions that they have acquired through government welfare schemes, families see advertisements for the air conditioning units, washing machines, and even dishwashers that are far beyond their reach. Much to my discomfort, questions about the *vacati* I had back in America often arose following such commercials.

There were, however, a few exceptional cases of upward mobility within Andipuram. A handful of families, including Cheran's, were in the process of raising their level of *vacati*, as they built new homes or made additions to the homes in which they were already living. Almost all such families were Devendra, rather than Paraiyar, and had been living in Andipuram prior to the development of Krishnanagar across the street. Importantly, the outward appearance of their upward mobility, namely, construction was halting. I often saw work on buildings frozen due to limited funds, as families and potential residents waited expectantly. The construction on Cheran's building, for example, which was already under way in 2012, had not been completed by June of 2014 when I left Tamil Nadu.

Similar situations troubled Krishnanagar, despite its residents' attempts to differentiate themselves from Paraiyar-dominated Andipuram. Krishnanagar's existence as a separate enclave bespeaks the early moments of such attempts. In the mid 1980s, the area where Krishnanagar currently stands was occupied by a pond that the residents of Andipuram, which was founded in the 1960s, used for washing their clothing and household items, and bathing. Krishnanagar was

established when upwardly mobile Devendra populations departed from their villages and lives as agricultural laborers, and settled in Paramakudi to avail themselves of more lucrative work. Instead of settling in Paraiyar-dominated Andipuram, they distinguished themselves by filling in what was left of the dried up pond, and building their own neighborhood across the street. Importantly, they assigned their neighborhood a different and more Sanskritized name, Krishnanagar that refers to the Hindu deity Krishna who is particular beloved in much of Northern India.

Despite the aspirations inscribed in its name, the local government does not distinguish Krishnanagar from Andipuram, classifying them both as slums. According to the City Corporate Cum Business Plan of Paramakudi Municipality in 2008, both areas are slums on account of their poor infrastructure. Administrators reported: “None of the houses in the slums have individual toilet facility and they depend on community toilets. Most of the roads are damaged due to heavy rains ... damaged roads, inadequate street lights and poor housing conditions are the issues in the slum areas” (Paramakudi Municipality, 2008). Besides its failure to distinguish between the conditions in the two neighborhoods, the report on the slums is inaccurate. Community toilets never existed in the area, and some houses did have indoor facilities prior to 2008. Others relied on the open fields behind their neighborhoods or on makeshift outhouses enclosed by palm fronds. The roads were not damaged, but simply never existed. Instead, there were only narrow dirt paths that wound through the neighborhoods.

The government’s tendency to liken Krishnanagar to Andipuram coincides with the perceptions of those who live outside the neighborhoods. Paramakudi residents refer to both

areas as Andipuram, refusing to acknowledge the developmental and caste differences between the Devendras and Paraiyars. Many are not even familiar with the name Krishnanagar.⁸³

The local government's paternalistic classification of neighborhoods does not compel it to provide the services of the social welfare state, leaving Krishnanagar and Andipuram unkempt, and rendering the area difficult to navigate or regulate. Even Pooja's husband, the government-employed structural engineer I referred to above, had to face the challenge of poor infrastructure. He and his neighbors widened one of the paths into Krishnanagar in order for him to park his car beside his home, but the makeshift passage remains precarious because of its susceptibility to deep ruts. Visitors to Krishnanagar and Andipuram park outside of the neighborhoods on the main road.

Depending on their moods and the conditions of their particular families, many of my interlocutors expressed great disappointment at the physical state of the neighborhood. They described the area as "bad", "rough", "poor", and "not ok", often accompanying their complaints with gestures encouraging me to have a look around. My friends pointed to the scorched earth and then moved their hands up to the sky, delineating a line of vision from the dust and gravel, to the crowded, partially constructed homes, and up to the sky that was dominated by the hot sun above. There was, thus, a forlorn feeling tinged with frustration and inertia that tugged at the excited ambitions of upward mobility. Krishnanagar and Andipuram had been abandoned, bereft of the recognition that their residents sought.

The Devendras and Paraiyars were not the only Paramakudi residents who felt neglected by the state that claimed to be their benefactor. The Thevars, whose relatively recent

⁸³ Contrarily, Krishnanagar, and not Ponnaiyapuram, appears on Google Maps, which gathers its data from government records. In this case, the government obscures Ponnaiyapuram's existence perhaps because Krishnanagar is wealthier, thus bespeaking the government's effectiveness.

socioeconomic descent I discussed above, told me that the government had disregarded them by establishing social welfare schemes exclusively for the Scheduled Castes.

The president of Paramakudi's predominant Thevar caste association, Karpusami, expressed his dismay at what he saw as the government's unfounded favoritism towards the Scheduled Castes, as his friends nodded in agreement, chiming in from time to time. Initially wary of discussing jāti issues, Karpusami eventually agreed to meet me at the Thevar mahāl, their caste meeting hall and event space. When I arrived the morning of our meeting, I waited in the lobby until he and his two friends appeared, and ushered me into a secluded meeting room that could only be entered from a small door behind the building.⁸⁴ All three of the men were middle-aged, well-off professionals who shared their disappointment with the government and their resentment towards the Scheduled Castes, as did many of the other Thevars I spoke with over the course of my research. When the topic of local intercaste violence arose, Karpusami blamed the Scheduled Castes who, he implied, did not deserve the benefits they received:

They [individuals of Scheduled Castes who he called Harijans] do this; make fights because that's the kind of inam ["race"] they are. They've come up. They think that they should not go back down ... Just for an example, I'll tell you. There are many without houses in high jātis. Harijans are given houses for free. The government gives them houses but not to anyone from other jātis. They've been keeping their reservations so the other jātis go down. This is a reserved constituency. It has been for fifty years. There is that MLA [member of the legislative assembly] – Sundarajan and he's from their community. But has their community grown and developed? No.

Karpusami's complaints about preferential treatment are all too familiar, reminding us of the protests against the implementation of the Mandal Commissions in 1990, primarily in North India, as well as decades of conservative antagonism against affirmative action in the United States.⁸⁵ But there is more to Karpusami's grievances than a sense of indignation at the

⁸⁴ The meeting room doubled as the control room for the electricity in the building.

⁸⁵ In 1980, the Mandal Commission, which was established in 1978, recommended a 27% reservation quota for Other Backwards Classes. If implemented, its recommendations would result in a 49.5% quota in government jobs and public universities. When Prime Minister V.P. Singh tried to implement its recommendations in 1989, protests of Upper Caste groups swept the country, leading to violence, the destruction of public property, and at least two self-immolations.

opportunities that the Thevars allegedly lose because of the government's preferential treatment of the Scheduled Castes.

Karpusami and many of the Thevars from Southern Tamil Nadu feel the disintegration of their sovereignty and economic domination as the state watches with indifference. When I asked Karpusami to tell me about the character (“kuṇam”) of his jāti, he turned immediately to the past: “Back then, the Thevars protected everyone. People would be afraid if they saw us. We protected; we protected property and cows and goats. We were fearsome.” Karpusami went on to lament the poverty of Ramanathapuram (Ramnad) District, which, he claimed, could and should be alleviated by the government:

Back then in Ramnad District, there was agriculture. Now it's much less. Everyone goes to foreign countries to make money. There have been economic changes so everyone goes to foreign countries. If they have studied [are well educated], then they'll go to America. It's a very poor, destitute district. The reason for all the problems in Ramnad is poverty. The chance for work; there is no chance for work. If you look at men from the age of sixteen, they'll be drinking ... Industries need to be brought to the area. Agriculture is no longer profitable.⁸⁶ For one acre, we need to spend so much. You can't make any money with agriculture. You can only make money if ten people from a family go to work. An MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] or MP [Member of Parliament] can do something about this.

According to Karpusami, the state fails not only to offer economic opportunity, but also to protect its subjects. He explained the existence of the Thevar caste organization in Paramakudi as a necessary form of protection against what he sees as the aggression of the Scheduled Castes: “There is no organization in Paramakudi without jāti. If some Harijan hits us, we need to have protection. Even people who say they don't want jāti, [who say that] everyone is the same, go to jāti organizations.”

In the end, Karpusami, Cheran, and even Murugan offer us a vision of the area neglected by the state and thus in need of caste as a form of solidarity, dignity, and protection. Karpusami and Cheran expressed feelings of being left behind in Paramakudi, stuck there simply because

⁸⁶ Despite the fact that agriculture in Ramanathapuram District never was particularly profitable, Karpusami noted its decline, which is, at least in part, a result of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005, which I discussed above.

they had nowhere else to go. Murugan advocated a violent struggle against the intertwined authorities of the state and upper castes, which required Dalit unity. The social welfare state, despite remaining the primary means through which wealth and stability could be found, had nonetheless failed Paramakudi, leaving her in the dust.

Feelings of abandonment were aggravated by the extreme shortage of electricity that afflicted Southeastern Tamil Nadu from 2012 through 2013. The power crisis, which was worse than any shortage that had hit South India since the 1990s, was not isolated to Tamil Nadu, but was a nationwide problem related to increased demand, policy failures, and in some cases, corruption.⁸⁷ In Paramakudi, we experienced unscheduled power cuts between ten and sixteen hours a day, which led us to wile away most of our hours dozing off on the granite, cement, or earthen floors of our homes. Especially during the summer months when the temperature hovered around ninety degrees Fahrenheit, we stopped our activities in sync with the whims of our fans. Obviously, power cuts induced a sharp decline in Paramakudi's commerce, as it brought trains and electronic equipment to a standstill, disabled streetlights, and meant that work after dark could only be accomplished with the light of candles and battery-powered lanterns.

With more free time on their hands, Paramakudi residents had plenty of opportunities to complain about the power cuts, which became a common topic of conversation. Since electricity is provided by the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board, which touts the motto, "Powering the Progress of Tamil Nadu", the government became the object of blame and disdain, and the source of profound, personalized disappointment. "The government is not concerned about us. They are not interested," my friend lamented. Many of my neighbors accurately pointed out that power

⁸⁷ North India has often been hit the worst by power outages, which periodically leave hundreds of millions of people without power. Undersupply has to do with the growth in demands for consumer goods, such as refrigerators and air conditioning units. Corruption and policy failures also contribute to India's power shortages (Badkar 2012). The summer of 2012 saw some of the worst outages in the nation's history (Pidd 2012; Hardley and Harris 2012).

cuts to conserve energy, or “load shedding”, are limited to two scheduled hours in Chennai, and are the worst in the poorer Southern Districts like Ramanathapuram. Others subscribed to a kind of conspiracy theory about the delays facing the government’s completion and operation of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in nearby Tirunelveli District. Construction on the plant had begun in 2002, but faced several delays due to the protests of local fishermen and villagers who opposed the plant because of the environmental dangers that it presented. It did not become operational until October of 2013. Some of my interlocutors in Paramakudi insisted that constant load shedding was the government’s way of demonstrating the plant’s necessity, and chastising “the people”.⁸⁸ I joined in the commiseration, finding myself in agreement with their feelings of abandonment and resentment, as I frittered away hours waiting for the power to return.

But my experience of power cuts and any other inconveniences I faced in Paramakudi was fundamentally different. I could leave at will, and knew that my time as a resident was limited. What is more, I didn’t have any expectations of the Tamil Nadu Government; it hadn’t promised *me* progress. Although I complained about the power cuts along with my friends, they knew that I was just an interloper, and that I too would eventually abandon them. As Aarthi told me, “You won’t come back to Paramakudi ... You won’t think of us.”

⁸⁸ Some Devendra organizations were directly involved in protesting the opening of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant. Chandrabose, the leader of the Marxist, Leftist Tiyagi Immanuvel Peravai, who I discuss in Chapters Three and Four, led several demonstrations at the plant’s prospective site. John Pandian, the leader of the Tamil Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (“Tamil People’s Progress Party”), who also appears in Chapters Three and Four, protested the opening of the plant, though not directly at its site.

The Tensions of Tamil Masculinity

Chapter Three

During the first year of my fieldwork in Paramakudi, I befriended Murthi, a junior attorney and the secretary of Paramakudi's largest and most influential Devendra caste organization, the Paramakudi Devendra Panpaatu Kazhagam ("Paramakudi Devendra Cultural Party"). In addition to countless informal conversations we had, I also sat down with Murthi for a structured interview to gather his comments on the Devendras' caste identity and on the intercaste dynamics of Paramakudi and Tamil Nadu. He presented me with an image of the Devendras as primordial Tamils, the heroes of the Tamil country who remained locked in a conflict with the Thevars who were outsiders, having relatively recently migrated to the area from a faraway place. While the specifics of the Thevars' history that Murthi presented were somewhat unique, his insistence on the primacy of the Devendras as the ancient and therefore rightful rulers of the Tamil country was in line with the assertions of his caste fellows, young and old, rich and poor with whom I spoke over the course of my research. For Murthi, as for the vast majority of my interlocutors, state power heavily influences the trajectory of intercaste relations in the past, present, and future.

In the moments leading to our conversation in my apartment, Murthi ensured that the door was open lest anyone suspect any unsavory activity, and then sat on one of my plastic chairs. He could speak loudly and freely as he shared his opinions with me because all of the building's inhabitants were Devendra. I started, as per my standard approach to interviews, with casual conversation, asking Murthi about his personal history. The only son of agricultural laborers from a nearby village, Murthi had studied law in the large, cosmopolitan city of Bangalore (Karnataka state), which, he assured me, had a good climate, but was riddled with corruption and lacking in culture ("*panpātu*" = panpaatu). He had returned to Paramakudi immediately after his

studies not only because of Paramakudi's superior culture, but also because he wanted to practice law for the sake of his caste. Murthi's belief in the culture of Paramakudi is significant because it bespeaks his identification with the ideal of agrarian civility that was wed to Tamil identity in the early twentieth century. As Anand Pandian argues, the discourse of Tamil nationalism, drawing on a long literary history in which the cultivator was at the center of the moral and social order, coalesced with European cultural imperialism resulting in the creation of *panpātu* (literally, "good quality").⁸⁹ The term was not coined until the mid-twentieth century (Pandian 2007, 49)

For Murthi, *panpātu* was not, however, the domain of all of Paramakudi's residents. The trouble that non-Tamils had caused in the town bespoke their lack of culture. In fact, Murthi had faced legal trouble prior to his studies due to a violent conflict between the Thevars and Devendras. After explaining his interest in developing his criminal law practice, Murthi launched into his description of a *kalavaram* (conflict, especially caste conflict) that broke out in 1995: "In 95, when I was studying in eleventh, they caught me and put me in jail because of this *jāti kalavaram* ... On November 1st, they exploded a bomb. Right here on *ainji mukku* ["five corners"] ... Within this [fight], they caught me and put me in [jail]."

I asked Murthi how long he was in jail, and he continued indignantly:

Thirteen days ... For that bomb exploding and igniting, on that basis, they caught me and put me in [jail]. But I wasn't involved. I wasn't involved in that event. [I was] a little boy then ... I was studying [in] eleventh [grade] then ... I'm studying eleventh and I come straight out to see casually for amusement. I came to see what was happening. They took me and put me in jail. Then there were about ten or twelve cases. They were cases against this community. People who were a little involved in this community. Right when I was studying in college, when I was studying in college, [I decided that] I will stand in all places before the issues of this community.

The unfounded legal cases against the Devendras inspired Murthi to study hard so that he could stand up for his community, and probably also helped him formulate the insistent Manichean division that he drew between the Tamil Devendras and the "foreign" Thevars. "They", the Thevars who need not even be named because of the automatic association that

⁸⁹ The term *panpātu* was actually coined in the mid-twentieth century (Pandian 2007,49).

Murthi draws between them and violent aggression, set off a bomb at ainji mukku, Paramakudi's main intersection, which serves to divide the Scheduled Castes from the rest of the town. The Thevars thus reinforced the exclusion of the Scheduled Castes and demonstrated their own power. The police, Murthi went on, unjustly arrested and prosecuted Devendras, thereby preventing them from protecting themselves. Murthi blames such moments of intercaste violence and their fallout squarely on the Thevars who he depicts as amoral criminals who invaded to reap the wealth and power of the Tamil country and its rightful rulers. When I asked Murthi how and why conflicts arise between the Thevars and Devendras, he assured me that:

Only the Thevars bring trouble. They're a crowd of demons ("*picācu*"). Then, we opposed them. We and they have different songs in (our) hearts ("*maṇacu*") ... We need to go further into the past. We need to go one hundred years before. The Thevars are not the hereditary people of this land. They are people who were in Andhra ... They're people who came from the Telugu land. They still are, in fact, in Nagaland. Have you seen? They're in Nagaland ... Nagaland – The state in the northeast.

Inferring that the Thevars had come to the Tamil country through Andhra and were originally from the far flung state of Nagaland, Murthi placed them not only outside the bounds of Tamil society, but also on the margins of the Indian nation. The "seven sister" states in India's Northeastern corner, of which Nagaland is one, are exceptional in terms of their linguistic, ethnic, and religious composition, as well as their political inclinations. Except for Assam where the primary language is Assamese and Tripura where it is Bengali, the region has a diverse population that the government considers "tribal" and that speaks numerous Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic languages. While Assam, Manipur, and Tripura are predominantly Hindu, Christianity is the major religion in the other states. The area has suffered from internal warfare and secessionist insurgency for decades, counting over five thousand five hundred deaths from political violence between 2005 and 2015 (Pokharel 2015).

Using the language of terrorism, which has been liberally employed in Indian and foreign media coverage of the insurgencies, Murthi went on to vilify the Thevars who he identified with

a Northeastern ethnic group and conglomeration of tribes called the Nagas. In so doing, he emphasized their alleged barbarism and aggression: “In Nagaland, there’s all that terrorism. That group of Nagas who were in that area. They even have people who eat people. They eat corpses ... They’ll even eat the dead body of a corpse⁹⁰ ... They’re cruel people. And on top of that, they torture and keep it as a secret.”

I asked Murthi where he was getting his information and he claimed that there are “documents” validating his points. He also pointed to the behaviors he attributes to the present-day Thevars:

Even today, they take pleasure in others suffering. If you go to jails and do research in Madurai, Chennai, or Coimbatore ... If you went to jails in southern Tamil Nadu and did research, they’d be full of Thevars. They steal. They’re thieves. In the records of their lives, it’s just like that. That’s really the fight that our community is having with them individually ... We won’t steal. My family/hereditary occupation is not stealing. They’re thieves. They beat all the people of other communities and take their belongings. Now you’re here. They would beat you, take your cell, and run away. They’re threatening and thieves. Saying, I will kill you, he will take your earrings, nose ring, and all the things you have of economic value. For protection from that, we only have us. We only have us. If we weren’t here, all the people of other castes, they couldn’t be near them.

Murthi’s certainty that “we only have us”, that the Devendras are the key to protecting “all the people of other castes” aligns with his assertions that his caste is comprised of the virtuous heroes of the Tamil country. Their civilized character and defensive stance ensures that they stand in direct opposition to the Thevars. When I asked Murthi to tell me about the culture (“*kalāccāram*”) of his jāti, peacefulness and congeniality, and also courage and self-sacrifice prevailed:

Our society is [comprised of] farmers ... We think that there shouldn’t be any disturbance ... Now next to our community, the Yadavas ... are here, what they say ... Whatever is for them is ok. If the community called the Pillaimars (Vellalars) was here, that’s ok. Even if the Chettiars are here, we think that they shouldn’t get any disturbance. The only work we really know is agriculture ... Kingship is our ancestry. Two thousand years ago, we were really a royal dynasty ... Then the ones who mixed other languages invaded and came to Tamil Nadu ... thousands and thousands came to Raja Raja Cholan and his son Rajendran Cholan. Like that, when generation after generation was passing by under our rule, the people of the other language, Telugus, invaded and after those in the line of our dynasty were defeated and our kings were captured, we joined with the earth and did agriculture ... we really know how to do that work, we became enslaved to the earth.

⁹⁰ According to historian Michael Fredholm, some Naga tribes practiced headhunting and preserved the heads of enemies as trophies through the nineteenth century and as late as 1969 (1993).

Murthi's narrative reconciled the Devendras' heritage as agriculturalists with their claims to kingship and, despite his royal ancestors' defeat, ensured that they were endowed with *vīram*. Defined by the Madras Tamil Lexicon as “heroism, bravery”, and “strength, might”, *vīram* is for Murthi a defining feature of the Devendras' essential character, their *kuṇam* (1924-1936, 3757). When I asked Murthi about the *kuṇam* of his *jāti*, he replied: “We have *vīram*. We are of the lineage of kings so we protect ... we are the citizens of the soil ... The Telugu people took an army and defeated us. Because they beat our kings, they oppressed us ... There were many people among us who protested.”

Murthi's “Telugu invaders” who could be a reference to the Nayak kings described in the previous chapter stand as predecessors to the Thevars – outsiders who unjustly oppressed the Tamils/Devendras. Although the Devendras were initially defeated, they would, Murthi was certain, rise again, to rule over the land that was rightfully theirs.

While *vīram* has become naturalized as a defining feature of Tamil masculinity so much so that Bernard Bate defines it as “virility” and “manliness” (2009, 238), its centrality to the identities of people like Murthi has a political history.⁹¹ The idealized notion of *vīram* is, I demonstrate, rooted in the development of Tamil ethno-nationalist discourse, which began to arise at the turn of the twentieth century. The fervent voices of Tamil nationalists adhering to otherwise divergent political strategies agreed on *vīram* as a primordial element of Tamil masculinity that was necessary to defeat the forces that had been keeping Tamil down. In elevating *vīram*, they drew on the *longue durée* of Tamil literary history, dating back to Caṅkam literature (first century CE to third century CE) – the corpus of ancient poetry widely considered

⁹¹ *Vīram* has Indo-European roots and is probably etymologically related to virility. It is likely that the Tamil word descended from the Proto-Indo-European word *wiHrós* most likely by way of the Sanskrit word *vīr*, which has a similar, if not identical meaning. Its cognates include the Latin word *vir*, the Lithuanian word *vīras*, the Old Irish word *fer*, the Old Norse word *verr*, the Old English word *wer*, and many others (Harper 2001-2016). It is thus not but is instead a word and conceptual image with a complicated, cross-cultural history.

the highpoint of Tamil literary production, which was “rediscovered” and popularized at the beginning of the twentieth century. Within Caṅkam literature, the figure of the *vīraṅ* (humanized form of *vīram*) figured prominently. He was the courageous warrior whose *vīram* thrust him into acts of excessive violence that most often led to the loss of his life.

There is in Caṅkam literature, as well as in contemporary understandings, a conflation of the *vīraṅ* and the young king who fights and ultimately dies for his land. His refusal to acquiesce is a kind of sovereignty in that it brings him beyond the boundaries of society itself, and sustains his position as a warrior or king who cannot be subjugated. What is more, his death maintains his community/nation, affirming its cohesion, legitimizing its convictions, and strengthening its self-respect (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005). Dying for “the cause”, the *vīraṅ* gives life to his compatriots. For Murthi, possessing the quality of *vīram*, save for being the self-sacrificial *vīraṅ* himself, is the best way to assert the sovereignty of the Devendras, which he projects into the past.

Given its excessive demands, it is not surprising that Tamil nationalists of the past and present have other ways of asserting their strength. They claim *māṅam*, which the Madras Tamil Lexicon glosses as “honour, dignity; chastity; pride, eminence” as a defining feature of Tamil masculinity (1924-1936, 3188). A lot like the word “honor” in English *māṅam* has moral and gendered sexual connotations. It is demonstrated with honesty and integrity, as well as with chastity and sexual purity. It is held by individuals who guard the boundaries between themselves and their kin and others who always have the potential to violate, embarrass, and humiliate. The honorable individual or group must guard themselves from outsiders who may try to identify them as they do not want to be identified, to name them something that they are not. Of course, *vīram* and *māṅam* overlap in many ways since dying on the battlefield to sustain

others is probably the most honorable way to go. But māṇam departs from vīram in that it is, like paṇpāṭu predicated on control. It is often a matter of doing the right thing, which requires adhering to the order of things, and to the way things ought to be, according to whatever or whomever has the power to determine the ought of any given place or time.

The strength of Tamil identity and the various castes that claim it as their own is also drawn from *kauravam*. Although the Madras Tamil lexicon defines it as “dignity, eminence, honour; pride” (1924-1936, 1206), making it roughly equivalent to māṇam, I would like to adopt Melanie Dean’s definition – “prestige” – in its stead (2013, 185). *Kauravam* does not have the ethical connotations of māṇam and is more visible and mutable. It can be developed, as Dean argues, by consuming high-priced goods, and can raise the status of such consumers within their local communities (ibid.). Association with wealthy and/or high status individuals can also raise one’s *kauravam* as long as such associations are seen by others. *Kauravam* is thus deeply connected to seeing and being seen. Although it is less conspicuous, māṇam also requires the recognition and acquiescence of others. Both māṇam and *kauravam* index manliness in the Tamil context, and are developed through perpetual assertions and negotiations that must be validated by pre-established authorities and norms, which are often caste-based. Long alienated from mainstream society, castes like the Devedras seek the honor and prestige that they cannot take for themselves.

When I urged Murthi to reflect on his own personal socioeconomic progress, by noting his advance from agricultural labor to advocacy within a single generation, he emphasized education, which marks the earnest cultivation and prestige of his caste: “We have progressed a lot ... One needs education; that’s mostly everybody’s thought. Within our society [caste]

everybody needs to study. We give the first importance to education. That's the basis of it. We really studied. We all study.”

For Murthi, education is the key to wealth, knowledge, and capability, which all increase the *māṇam* and *kauravam* that the Devendras are able to accrue. Switching to the English word, “education”, which indexes Murthi’s knowledge of the prestigious language, he explained the changing experiences and perceptions of the Devendras:

Education, we progressed in education, education. Now in all kinds of ways, we have wealth as a people. We have monetary wealth. We have authority (“*atikāram*”). We have knowledge. We have capability. Whoever opposes cruelly and beats us, he won’t do that now because there is some respect (“*mariyātai*”) for us. For that reason, having seen our growth, the other societies are jealous.

In addition to their contemporary rates of education, which afford them better life chances and the recognition of other castes, the Devendras’ past – their royal lineage must, according to Murthi, be leveraged to accrue the honor that is rightfully theirs. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the Devendras’ claims to their royal lineage compels them to distinguish themselves from other castes that are widely considered Dalit. Murthi does not want the Devendras to be afflicted with the stigma of the Scheduled Caste label and the reservations (similar to affirmative action programs) that the label affords them. He does, however, recognize the enduring need for further economic development, and so demands a separate reservation, one that is singular and unsullied, for the Devendras. When I asked about the relative costs and benefits of the reservations that are offered to the Devendras and other Scheduled Castes by the government, Murthi insisted:

I’m a kingly society. I don’t accept statements that I am SC ... our people are staying behind in economic development so I think there is an urgent need for reservations. I think that’s urgent. It’s that I’m not ready to accept the filth/nastiness (“*āsingam*”) that that other jātis bring [to us]. Our history says that I am a king. I ruled. It says I am a king. But at the same time our people need this space reserved. On that basis, we are not SC. The Devendra Kula Vellalars need/want a separate reservation. We shouldn’t have a reserved seat on the basis of being a Scheduled Caste. We need a separate reservation for Devendra Kula Vellalars. Economically, there needs/must to be a central spot reserved. Still many of our people in villages don’t have their own land. They don’t have the necessary conveniences to run their lives. That’s why it’s my opinion that they need reserved spots in representatives of the people and government jobs.

Ultimately, Murthi who is certain of the *vīram* of his caste fellows hopes to build the honor and prestige of his caste through displays of wealth, ritual performances, the accomplishments of education, and government recognition. While the image of *vīram* must be maintained, building the other two virtues is an ongoing project in which Murthi and many of his caste fellows are engaged.

In this chapter, I argue that developments in Tamil ethno-nationalism have fostered the rise of *vīram*, which must be deployed to revitalize the “retrotopia” (Prasad 2014, 19) that was defeated and upended by malevolent invaders. Nevertheless, ideals developed in Tamil ethno-nationalism require the nobility of Tamil kings, as they are remembered, agrarian civility, as described by Pandian (2009), and the global, cosmopolitanism of modern urbanity. Such ideals, which can both intersect and clash, create a profound tension at the heart of Tamil identity, especially as it frames masculinity.

After recounting the persistent and relatively uniform expressions of *vīram* amongst a number of castes, I explore the work of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (1879 – 1973, henceforth, EVR) whose antagonistic populism helped make *vīram* a defining feature Tamil manhood. EVR began to constitute “the Tamil people” as always already opposed to an external power that necessitated the deployment of courageous and ruthless Tamil men who would defeat the enemy oppressor through any means necessary. As I discussed in Chapter One, the oppressor against which EVR advocated violent struggle was the Brahmin who he construed as an invader who had ideologically enslaved the Tamil people with Hinduism and the hierarchies endemic to it. EVR insistently endorsed atheism, rationalism, and egalitarianism to oppose the evils of North Indian Hinduism, and free the Tamil people.

While the image of Tamil vīram outlived EVR, his radical anti-Hindu views receded into the background even in his own lifetime because, I contend, they could not be reconciled with the ideals of honor and prestige that had defined (at least late) pre-colonial political identity, and that were validated by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Śaiva reform movement and the Tamil literary movement with which it was intertwined. Śaiva reformers and zealous Tamil scholars balanced vīram with honor and prestige by drawing on historical heroes, saints, and farmers. They created Tamil masculinity infused with courage, but uplifted by superior ethics.

Finally, I turn back to Dravidianism after EVR, arguing that Marudhur Gopalan Ramachandran (1917-1987, henceforth, MGR) succeeded in creating “the Tamil people” for which EVR had laid the foundation. Drawing on the work of film scholar M. Mahdava Prasad, I explore MGR’s ability to draw mass support by simulating Tamil sovereignty without challenging preconceived notions of hierarchical authority. MGR presented, I contend, a balanced performance of masculine ideals that helped him become the Tamil leader par excellence. He defended “the people” through his heroic courage, at the same time as he accrued honor and prestige through spectacular demonstrations of wealth and power. Importantly, the MGR model set the standard for political rhetoric and mobilization in the Tamil country. The caste leaders and politicians with whom I worked competed over the martial valor and prestige that would mark them as primordially Tamil because such ideals define political power in Tamil Nadu. As Prasad notes, “the parliamentary mode of political reproduction is only one of the elements that make up the political order of independent India” (2014, 25).

The True Tamil Caste

Despite Murthi’s claims, the Devendras do not have a monopoly on vīram as a naturalized element of their kuṇam, nor are they the only caste seeking honor and prestige. In fact, a number

of non-Brahmin castes are remarkably similar in the claims they make and the performances through which they seek to uphold such claims. Such castes speak in the voice of the Tamil warrior, attempting to surpass each other in their martial masculinity. For the Thevars and Devendras who are physically and socioeconomically close, the game of competitive mimesis becomes urgent. They raise their voices to silence each other, refusing to be outdone.

Prior to the private meeting at the Thevar Mahāl (meeting house) that I referred to in the previous chapter, I attended an eventful general meeting upstairs in the main hall that offered insight into the Paramakudi Thevars' self-image. They insist on maintaining the memory of their relatively recent kingship, and also see their "natural" and ineluctable endowment with *vīram* as so powerful that it is a potential liability.

I was invited to the meeting by a retired principal who had come to a "browsing center" (internet café) where I was searching the Internet a few weeks prior. He inquired as to what I was doing there, and I told him that I was conducting research about the various "societies" in Paramakudi. He informed me about the general meeting, and gave me the office phone number of the mahāl. When I called to confirm the meeting the day prior, the administrator who answered the phone told me that I could come, wait in the office until the meeting was over, and then talk with the leaders. He said that the meeting would not be useful to me, and warned me that: "*karamā pecuvaṅke*" (literally, "they speak with spiciness/hotness"). For those reasons, he insisted that I talk with the leaders after the meeting, while I thought that witnessing the "spicy" speech might be particularly interesting.

The following day, I arrived at the mahāl early, and waited outside for the retired principal, Saravana, to arrive. He ushered me in, and we sat on folding metal chairs facing the stage while other (mostly middle aged) Thevar men milled about. Prior to the leaders taking the stage,

Saravana provided me with some background information: “Here in Paramkudi,” he told me, “there are many communities. First there was the Sethupathi of Ramnad – a Maravar. He gave land to all the different communities. He gave land to the Saurashtras, the Chettiars, and the SCs. He gave land to everyone, but he didn’t give any land to us.” I asked Saravana why the Thevars were excluded from the Sethupathis’ generous practices and he, like Murugan in the previous chapter, pointed to the dignity of self-sufficiency: “Because we don’t go around extending our arms begging.” Giving primacy to the Sethupathis, Saravana reinforced the honor that he claims as the rightful domain of all Thevars.

Saravana continued explaining the characteristics of the Thevars, interestingly using the scientific language of genetics. “Another thing is,” he went on, “in this community, unity is very poor. Everyone wants to be a leader. We have the genes [English word] of the “vīraṅ” so there is fighting and a problem with unity. The SCs, they have the genes of slaves, so they all get together and want to rise up. They have unity and leadership.” Although the Devendras and Paraiyars themselves lament the fragmentation of their respective communities, for Saravana, they have a tendency towards solidarity because of their innate rebelliousness, rooted in their enslavement.⁹² The Thevars are also unruly, according to Saravana’s account, but their rebellions are directed at no one in particular and everyone all at once. They cannot consent to each other because they all have the conceit of leadership typical of the vīraṅ. Their courage and implacability ensure that solidarity is ultimately impossible.

⁹² The tendency towards solidarity that Saravana attributes to the Scheduled Castes is very different from the “slave mentality” that African American activists have lamented. For example, in his autobiography, Frederick Douglass explains, “I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and as far as possible, to annihilate his power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right” (1845, 108). The inherent rebelliousness that Saravana assigns to the castes he calls “Harijans” is antithetical to the ignorant contentment noted by Frederick Douglass.

Eventually, the meeting started, as the group's various leaders ascended the stage. Flower garlands and shawls were ceremoniously draped on the leaders by attendees as acts of *mariyātai* ("respect") before they took turns at the microphone. There was, however, loud and perpetual interference, which prevented me from understanding what they were saying. After a moment of silence for four members of the Sangam (group or club) who had died that year, there was a discussion of the budget that led some of the younger men in the crowd to stand up and head to the top of the staircase leading to the exit. They remained there, shouting at the men sitting in the audience and the leaders on the stage. For thirty minutes, a heated argument continued, as the younger and older groups yelled at each other, creating a din through which I could draw no words or sentences. The noise subsided when the young men finally stormed off. Their elders laughed aloud, looking at each other with the amused resignation of parents throwing their hands up when their children misbehave. The meeting proceeded as various audience members took turns giving speeches, which focused primarily on the recent financial growth of the community, evident in the construction and ongoing improvement of the Mahāl. The largest and grandest in Paramakudi, the Mahāl is a point of pride for the Thevar community.

After the meeting, I tried to understand the conflict as we headed downstairs to the dining hall where a full meal was to be served. Lowering my voice, I turned to Saravana and asked him what had happened. He told me that "those guys (*pacankal!*)" had been refused membership because they were "rowdy types", and because they had not paid the requisite five-thousand-rupee (about one hundred US dollars) membership fee. Saravana thus implied that relative wealth and civility were required for full inclusion in the Thevars' primary venue for local politics. Although he had noted the recalcitrant essence of Thevars writ large, the rowdy, poor, young guys who detracted from the prestige and honor of the caste could not be tolerated.

Downstairs, Saravana introduced me to Kaviventhan who was the district secretary of the AIADMK, one of the two political parties that have dominated the Tamil political scene since the late 1960s. He eagerly offered insight into the history of the Thevars as he envisioned it. “We were the kings”, he told me. “We had lots of riches and were protecting the people. We were the Sethupathi Rajas. When the British came, they tried to divide and conquer us but they couldn’t conquer the Thevars. They couldn’t control Mukkulathor houses [families]. They beat the Harijans so the Harijans became poor.” According to Kaviventhan, the Thevars’ *vīram* saved them, enabling them to maintain their primacy as protectors and their prestige as wealthy kings.

But, Kaviventhan explained, the Thevars’ *vīram* could also pose problems, as it prevented the caste from achieving political solidarity. When I asked Kaviventhan what had happened upstairs, he replied simply that “the Thevars are just like that” (“Thevars *appaṭi tān*”). “Like what?” I asked, and he went on, “Because they have the character of *vīram* and are threatening, they fight with each other. They won’t get behind one leader.” Standing beside us, Saravana wiggled his head in agreement.

Although I did not have the opportunity to focus on a wide variety of castes over the course of my research tenure, the news I read about them, and the exploratory conversations I had with them led me to realize that claims to *vīram*, honor, and prestige are common to a wide range of Tamil castes. The Udayars, who I mention in Chapter Two, are one such caste. Classified as an Other Backwards Class, they constitute a small minority of Paramakudi’s population, but are relatively wealthy, and the Christians among them own and operate the large Catholic Church on the prominent Kochi-Dhanushkodi Road. Their *mahāl* is not, however, so easy to locate. Perhaps trying to draw my attention away from the Thevar-Devendra conflict that is so central to intercaste relations in Paramakudi, the president of the Thevar Sangam, Karpusami, suggested

that I talk to the Udayars. He arranged for me to meet with their caste leaders at their mahāl, which, he told me, is near ainji mukku.

When I arrived at the intersection of the five corners, I asked a few different people for directions, but they were unaware of the Udayar Mahāl's location. Eventually, someone sent me in the right direction, and I headed down a small lane into a residential area behind one of the main roads of the busy intersection. I located the very small mahāl, which was about one thousand square feet, in front of which five middle-aged men were standing beside their two white SUVs, waiting for me.

They ushered me in, sat me down, and somewhat warily provided me with insight into their understandings of their history and present position, as well as their ambitions for the future. Their tales of courageous kingship and genteel agrarianism were all too familiar. "Our hereditary work is agriculture," one of them began. "We are from [the] Thanjavur area, but we migrated [here] four hundred years ago. We're traditionally kings and captains who fought for kings." Another man chimed in, "We're scholars, military [personnel], [and] agriculturalists." The hereditary roles the Udayars claimed underwrote their vīram, as well as their honor, which was well placed in the wealthy, fertile river valley of Tamil Nadu's rice belt, the Thanjavur region.

Although the Udayars in Paramakudi did not make such claims, many of their caste fellows who have published about their history on internet blogs and the like, not surprisingly claim descent from the medieval Chola kings (Thanabal 2011; Ila 2011). For example, a blogger who goes by the name Thanabal wrote: "Rajaraja Chola I ... also called as Arunamozhi Udayar ... is one of the greatest emperors of the Tamil Chola Empire who's [sic] ruled between 985 and 1014 CE. He established the Chola Empire by conquering the kingdoms of southern India expanding

the Chola Empire as far as Sri Lanka in the south, and Kalinga (Orissa) in the northeast ...” (Thanabal 2011).

Instead of referring specifically to the Cholas, the Paramakudi Udayars referred to the singular or unique respect (“*taṇi mariyātai*”) – that they earn by virtue of their civility, which they contrasted with the behaviors they attribute to the Thevars and Devendras. When I asked them about the intercaste situation in Paramakudi, the youngest man among them explained: “We think that those fights are coming for no reason. There is no need at all for these functions [caste oriented events]. We don’t look at jāti or have any jāti problems. We’ll go to their [points in the direction of Andipuram and Krishnanagar] functions, even eat at their houses. We maintain a singular respect because we don’t go to [engage in] needless fights (“*vampu*”).”

Despite the fact that he was emphasizing their ethical supremacy, one of the older men stopped his younger caste fellow before he had concluded his explanation, steering the conversation away from “jāti problems”. The older man focused instead on the Udayars’ educational and economic achievements to underscore the respectability they had accrued not just by avoiding the caste-based fights that belong in the past, but by working honestly and earnestly: “We work hard,” he began. “We’re all good. We even have our own houses [we own our homes]. We got education through the priests. We got schools. We have all the Christian schools. We get education without paying money so everyone [in our community] has studied [is educated].” Much to the annoyance of the older man, which was evidenced by his grimace, the younger man returned the interruption, continuing: “The thing is, those communities, the Thevars and Devendras, they go to [engage in] fights. They both want to show their strength, but we are quiet and peaceful. There is no need for that for us today.”

The Udayars' march into modernity does not, however, detract from their martial valor, which remains latent in their caste's impressive organization. The Paramakudi Udayar Sangam, which now serves the approximately four hundred and fifty Udayar families in the town, was first established in the early 1980s as a branch of the antecedent state-level, Chennai-based organization, which the Paramakudi Udayars date to one hundred years ago. "We were the first to have a mahāl," one of the older men told me. "Back then, people first started to come to town for work. At night, there was no bus facility. They needed a place to sleep so we built this mahāl. There weren't many Udayar relatives living here so there was no place for people to go. Workers would stay here at night, before going back to their villages." In addition to facilitating the upward mobility of the Udayars, which continues today as the Sangam "helps people study in medical colleges and IITs", the Sangam serves as a para-state force that offers protection to its caste. According to my interlocutor, "the goal of the sangam is to help our people. If fights come, we will fix them so people don't have to go to the panchayat [local juridical body] or to the police. Also it keeps our society united ... In villages, people help each other, but what about in town. That's what our sangam is for. We protect each other" The Paramakudi Udayar Sangam, which is connected to seventy branches throughout the state thus upholds lines of caste-based solidarity that were typical of rural life, bespeaking the salience of urban rurality that I discussed in Chapter One. Probably because they are not regularly embroiled in intercaste conflict, the Udayars do not directly deploy vīram, but instead maintain it as an ever-present weapon.

As I left the mahāl, thanking the Udayar gentleman for their time, I took one last look at the entranceway and noticed a framed, hand-drawn picture hanging above it. The picture featured a warrior, clad in the fine robes and turban of a king, riding a horse. His sword was drawn, and held up, ready to strike as his horse galloped to the left of the frame. Beneath the picture, the

words “Paramakudi Udayar Sangam” had been printed in block letters. The Udayar warrior, I came to realize, was an iteration of a generic hero that many non-Brahmin castes similarly employed to make commonplace claims to kingship and naturalized courage.

Numerous, heterogeneous castes throughout Tamil Nadu revise their histories and construct their identities through heroic warriors that are remembered for their valiant fights against oppressive forces, usually the British. Some are referred to in vague and relatively obscure oral narratives, while others are the focus of numerous publications and ritual performances. The Scheduled Caste Arunthathiyars and the Other Backwards Class Kongu Vellalars (Gounders), for example, make similar assertions through the ritual practices that they have established over the course of the past thirty years. Both castes host annual events at which they gather to venerate their caste heroes. Ondiveeran (veeran = vīraṇ) who battled the British in the army of the aforementioned leader Puli Thevar is remembered and celebrated annually on his death anniversary by his Arunthathiyar caste fellows in his native village in Tirunelveli District. The event, which is growing in terms of participants, was made grander when the government built a life-size statue of Ondiveeran (died 1771) after the caste’s petitions and protests (The Hindu 2011). Likewise, Dheeran Chinnamalai (1756 – 1805), one of the local-level kings who fought against the British East India Company, is annually honored by his Kongu Vellalar caste fellows on his death anniversary (Hindu 2013). The Yadavas (also an Other Backwards Class in most areas) similarly honor Maveeran (“great hero”) Alagamuthu Kone, another “freedom fighter” in his native village in Tuticorin, garlanding the large statue that was built in his image on the anniversary of his death (The Hindu 2015). Finally, the Nadars (former toddy tappers), amongst whom there seems to have been no rebel fighters, stake claim to the lineage of the Pandians, and celebrate an annual day of reverence for “Karate Selvin Nadar” – a political leader who was

killed in 1997. Many of the publications and posters advertising the event describe him as a “one man army” and a Tamil *vīraṇ*.

While celebrating the lives of one’s ancestor on the anniversary of their death is a common feature of Hindu ritual practice, the observance of the death anniversaries of caste heroes, such as those mentioned here has special significance. Caste heroes index the martial masculinity of their castes, which in turn indexes their Tamil authenticity. Caste heroes are celebrated with much pomp on their death anniversaries as martyrs who sacrificed themselves in the fight for Tamil sovereignty. Oftentimes, the language of martyrdom emerges in the rhetoric surrounding caste heroes whose *vīram* took them beyond the limits of life, and transcended the oppression of foreign rule. Their *vīram* is itself a type of sovereignty.

Dravidianism and the Development of the Heroic Tamil Warrior

The centrality of *vīram* to constructions of Tamil masculinity owes itself, at least in part, to the early iteration of Dravidianism developed by EVR. As I discussed in Chapter One, EVR’s efforts, collectively referred to as the Self-Respect Movement, were aimed at obliterating the prejudices of the caste system and destroying religion through rationality. In order to do so, EVR produced a transitive critique of Hinduism, Brahmins, Sanskrit, and the Indian nation by appropriating the old Orientalist proclivity to consider all four as one unit, thereby creating an imagined foe against which “the Tamil people” could struggle (M.S.S. Pandian 2007, 212-213).

Political theorist Ernesto Laclau’s definition of populist logic is a useful heuristic device for analyzing the process through which EVR laid the groundwork for the Tamil people. Laclau claims that the concept of “the people”, which is at the heart of populism, relies on its exclusion from the power of the elites. He describes this as “the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating the ‘people’ from power” (2007, 74). The people do not drive the populist

movement but instead rely on it for their constitution as a collective political subject. Within this process, an important affective dimension emerges; the people are compelled to identify with some powerful symbol or ideal, which Laclau calls an empty signifier. Building on Freud, Laclau envisions the empty signifier as individuals' projections of their ego ideal onto an other. As a number of individuals affix their ego ideals onto the same object, they come to identify themselves with one another (*ibid.*, 57). The people, then, emerge already inextricably linked to each other on the basis of deep, primordial desires.

Not overwhelmingly popular in his own time, EVR may not have succeeded in creating a stable empty signifier that coincided with the ego ideals of "the people". He was, however, very effective in his construction of an internal antagonistic front that fostered the rise of the Tamil warrior. The task of designating the Brahmins as the empowered enemy reinforced by Hinduism, Brahmins, Sanskrit, and the Indian nation was relatively easy for EVR who drew on the work of Dravidianist discourse that preceded him. The construction of the Tamil people, however, posed some problems because of the elitist legacy of Dravidianism's earliest moments, and because EVR's egalitarian radicalism was out of sync with the people it tried to constitute.

Although EVR is widely considered the "father of Dravidianism", it actually began with two non-Brahmin leaders, Dr. T.M. Nair (1868-1919) and Pitti Theagaraya Chetti (1852-1925) who formed the South Indian Liberation Front in 1916 in response to the measurable economic advantages and prestige concentrated amongst Brahmin communities during the last few decades of the colonial regime. (Irschick 1969, 21; 47; Washbrook 1976, 85-6). Regardless of the fact that they were themselves part of the tiny peasant elite, which experienced a steep rise in literacy rates between 1901 and 1921, the concerns that fomented Nair and Chetti's movement were

based on deeply entrenched inequalities that had been reinforced if not initiated by the logistical practices of colonial governance.

According to the 1921 census, male Tamil Brahmins were by the far the most educated population, boasting a literacy rate of 71.5% in Tamil and 28.2% in English (Irschick 1969, 16).⁹³ Both a cause and effect of their high rates of educational achievement, Tamil Brahmins were overrepresented in positions in the colonial administration, which had for the first time allowed Indians to become higher-level administrators between the 1890s and 1920s in an attempt to tighten control over the increasingly chaotic Presidency (Irschick 1969, 60). Known as the Indianization Reforms, these policy shifts overwhelmingly benefited Brahmins, who together comprised only 3.2% of presidency's the total population, and who gradually filled the great majority of administrative and educational positions then open to Indians (*ibid.*, 5).

While Telugu Brahmins reaped the rewards of this new system, the dominance of Tamil Brahmins in the administration was even more pronounced. In 1921, Tamil Brahmins occupied the most administrative positions, Vellalars and Telugu Brahmins occupied the second place, and Balija Naidus and Nairs (Malayalis), the caste from which T.M. Nair hailed, were tied for third (*ibid.*, 13). In positions concerned with law, instruction, and academics, the pattern was similar (*ibid.*).

Believing that collaboration between non-Brahmin groups was necessary to challenge Brahmin hegemony, Nair and Chetti attempted to create a collective of "Dravidians", literally "Southerners" who would unite on the basis of their common enemy. It is important to note that at this point, Dravidianism was not wed to the Tamil language, but instead attempted to include the four predominant Southern languages in contradistinction to Sanskrit and Hindi, which were

⁹³ This was no doubt related to the fact that Madras, the capital of the Presidency, and thus the city that received disproportionate shares of colonial wealth and infrastructure, also became *the* center for higher education in South India.

allegedly spoken by Brahmins.⁹⁴ In fact, The South Indian Liberation Front produced their political publications in a number of languages. Nair, a native speaker of Malayali, and Chetti, a native speaker of Telugu, oversaw the publication of English (*The Justice*), Tamil (*Dravidian*), and Telugu (*Andhra Prakasika*) newspapers that focused on non-Brahmin grievances (ibid.). They submitted the non-Brahmin Manifesto to *The Hindu* and *New India*, two Indian nationalist, English-language newspapers, for publication on December 20th 1916. The Manifesto declared that India was not ready for independence because political autonomy would result in the tyranny of the Brahmins over the non-Brahmins. Perhaps more tellingly, by 1917, the South Indian Liberation Front had become renamed the Justice Party after its English paper, which provided news in the language spoken by all elites of South India.

Despite their identification and castigation of a common enemy, Nair and Chetti could not successfully construct a Dravidian people because they could not present or embody an ego ideal with which a wide array of very diverse communities and individuals could identify. They were too far removed without even a common language to share with “the people” in order to bring them together. As Laclau argues, the identification between members of a group is impossible within populist logic unless “there is some positive feature that both leader and led share” (2005, 59). The leader must “participate in that very substance of the community which makes identification possible” (ibid.). Not only were Nair and Chetti removed by their elite financial positions, but their shift to English marked their movement as impossibly distant from “the people” they hoped to attract.

Though he too hailed from an upper caste and class family – the son of industrialists of the Balija Naidu caste – EVR presented his Self-Respect Movement as a fight for the rights of the

⁹⁴ Of course, South Indian Brahmins spoke and continue to speak South Indian languages at home. Nonetheless, they are more likely than others to know Sanskrit and Hindi.

downtrodden. He had joined the Indian National Congress in 1919, but resigned in 1925 on the basis of his belief that the Congress was only serving the needs of Brahmins. He then started the Self-Respect Movement, touring the countryside to preach his message. Despite the fact that he spoke Kannada at home, EVR fed directly into the burgeoning sentiments of Tamil devotion by deploying poetic, aesthetically appealing, and accessible Tamil at public meetings throughout Tamil South India. Famous for his speeches, EVR invited all to listen, as he broadcast his revolutionary ideas in an earthy, plebeian Tamil garnished with parables and proverbs (M.S.S. Pandian 2007, 212-3).

As I argued in the first chapter, part of EVR's success in constructing the Tamil people in opposition to Brahmin hegemony can be attributed to the fact that he inadvertently tapped into *tamilpparru* ("Tamil devotion") (Ramaswamy 1997, 5-6). During the traumatic process of nation formation in the early decades of the twentieth century, historian Sumathi Ramaswamy explains, new "discourses of love, labor, and life" coalesced around the Tamil language (1997, 5-6). Tamil speakers began to demonstrate intense devotion to Tamil when they felt the threat of the possible incursion of Hindi and the elite predominance of English (Ramaswamy 1997). Although he did not explicitly promote the Tamil language, EVR's militant anti-Brahmanism and accompanying aspersion of Sanskrit fostered a sharp rise in zealous devotion to it. He acted as a leader in the 1930s when Tamils demonstrated *en masse* against the inclusion of Hindi in public school curricula, which they associated with the Brahmin hegemony proceeding from North India (Sarkar 2008, 396).

Amidst the agitations, in 1939, EVR became the head of the Justice Party, which he transformed into the Dravida Kazhagam ("Dravidian Party") in 1944. Importantly, EVR did not establish the Dravida Kazhagam as a political party, poised to participate in electoral politics, but

instead envisioned it as a social reform association, aimed at eradicating the ills of caste through whatever means necessary. EVR and the DK remained ever opposed to the centers of power, posturing themselves as the people standing against the government, which was, they contended, monopolized by Brahmins.

They could not, therefore, spend their alienation and oppression through democratic means, but relied instead on the forceful heroism of the idealized warrior who would rise to represent the Tamil people. EVR poised himself, the DK, and “the Tamil people” in raging opposition to those outside the scope of his movement, reifying a Manichean world of us versus them. In so doing, EVR sometimes insisted that he would settle for nothing less than full Tamil sovereignty.

Originally intended to provide critical information to the colonial government about current events and potential instability in the region, The Fortnightly Reports of the Government of Madras, offer a record of the violent opposition for which EVR called. During a meeting at Poodalur in April of 1954, EVR reiterated his oft-stated contention that *agraharams* (Brahmin neighborhoods) should be set ablaze and Brahmins killed so that Dravida Nadu (Dravidian Nation) could be achieved (Government of Madras 1954, 46). The following year, he toured Tanjore and Ramanathapuram Districts (Government of Madras 1955, 25). At a meeting at Kumbakonam, he followed his condemnation of the violent activities of Communists with a call to arms. He advised “the audience to arm themselves with petrol and matches in addition to knives to get rid of Brahmans when called on to do so” (ibid.). Importantly, EVR’s rhetorical violence was not only directed at Brahmins, but instead at anyone he perceived to be obstructing his path. During his seventy-sixth birthday celebration with his party cadres, he called for the expulsion of Brahmins and North Indians the region from who, according to him, were the exploiters of the Tamil people (Government of Madras 1954, 109).

More surprisingly, as EVR's career advanced, he diverged widely from his predecessors Nair and Chetti by striking out against other South Indians. In the mid-1950s, EVR changed his appeal for a Dravidian State to a demand for a Tamil State, claiming that the Malayalees, the Kanarese, the Muslims, and the Christians would dominate the Tamils, and should instead be expelled (*ibid.*). Interestingly, his formula for a Tamil State excluded Christians and Muslims, thereby implicitly conflating Tamils with Hindus since by this time very few people had taken vows of atheism.

Nonetheless, EVR did not waver from his steadfast atheism, which he declared with characteristic belligerence. He struck out against Brahmin dominance by mocking Hinduism with hyper-literalist readings, and condemning Brahmins for their perpetuation of material injustices (M.S.S. Pandian 2007, 194-5). In addition to his publications and fiery speeches on the topic, EVR led processions in which the effigies of revered deities, such as Ram, were beaten with slippers. He also deconstructed mainstream Hindu praxis and belief with his notorious plays of the Rāmāyaṇa in which he presented Ram as cruel and cowardly and Sita as morally loose.⁹⁵

EVR's jarring critiques of religion were linked to his violent opposition to elite power built into the machinery of the state, which was exerted in attempts to silence him. Arrested and imprisoned several times over the course of his career, he called on his followers to emulate his steadfastness in the face of state power. EVR also chided audiences in Tiruchirappalli and Madurai for allowing the passage of the Dramatic Performances Act, which effectively criminalized his heretical, re-interpretive dramas. Having just returned from his tour of Burma and Malaysia, he reminded his audience that if he had been there "the Bill would not have been passed so easily without shooting [and] lathi charge" (Government of Madras 1955, 7).⁹⁶

⁹⁵ EVR's criticism of Sita by questioning her chastity is at odds with his vision of women's equality.

⁹⁶ Lathi refers to the batons or clubs carried by the police in the UK and in many former British colonies.

Not surprisingly, EVR also censured devotion directed at the Tamil language, which, as I mentioned above, arose at the moment of nation formation, and continued to gain momentum as it was energized by anti-Brahmanism and opposition to the introduction of Hindi in schools. To reiterate some of the history I covered in Chapter One, *tamiḷ parru* reached its zenith when the Tamil language came to be imagined as the originary locus of affective life – the mother. Tamils imagined and depicted the Tamil language as their supreme mother goddess in a variety of widely circulated print materials, which were a testament to deep-seated anxieties about her demise. The Tamil goddess, *Tamiḷttāy* (literally, “Tamil mother”), elicited the devotion of her faithful sons who eagerly sacrificed themselves when they sensed that their mother was threatened by the incursion of Hindi. When the Indian state was on the brink of formation, and the Congress government of the 1930s suggested introducing Hindi into schools in the Tamil region, images of *Tamiḷttāy* threatened and attacked by other languages proliferated (Ramaswamy 1997, 101-106). “Aiming to provoke the filial passions of Tamil speakers, her devotees circulated stunning images of *Tamiḷttāy* being violated” (ibid.).

Tamiḷttāy was extremely effective in mobilizing her heroic sons to fight for her protection. A few even sacrificed their lives for her, as they protested what they saw as the decline of their beloved language in the mid-twentieth century. Ramaswamy’s memorable account of Chinnasami’s suicide and those that followed illustrates the extremity of their devotion:

It was a quiet, cool January dawn in the South Indian city of Tiruchirapalli in the year 1964. A can in his hand, a man named Chinnasami left his home – leaving behind his aging mother, young wife, and infant daughter – walked to the city’s railway station. On reaching there, he doused himself with its contents and set himself on fire, shouting out aloud, “*inti oḷika! tamiḷ vāḷka!*” (Death to Hindi! May Tamil flourish!). Chinnasami’s example was not lost. A year later, to the date ... history repeated itself: five other men burned themselves alive ‘at the altar of Tamil.’ Three others died just as painfully – not in a raging blaze, but by swallowing insecticide – also for the sake of Tamil, they declared in their own last words (ibid., 1).

Perhaps the efficacy of *Tamiḷttāy* is one of the reasons that EVR was initially amenable to her, at least as a symbol. In 1926, he “insisted that Brahmans had sold out ‘*Tamiḷttāy*’s chastity’ to

traitors of Tamil by introducing Sanskrit words into it” (EVR 1985, 84 in Ramaswamy 1997, 195).⁹⁷

However, as EVR’s career developed, he hardened his antipathy towards anything resembling religion. He demanded that every “true Dravidian pledge”, “I will” not worship images anymore; I will not go to temples where images of divine forms are placed” (Anaimuthu 1974, 317 in Ramaswamy 1997, 127). He also made it clear that he was adamantly opposed to the depiction of the Tamil language as a goddess (ibid.). At a public meeting held in Coimbatore in July of 1939 cited by Ramaswamy, EVR’s refusal to accede to *tamilpparru* was unambiguous:

I do not have any devotion for Tamil, either as a mother tongue or as the language of the nation. I am not attached to it because it is a classical language, or because it is an ancient language, or because it was the language spoken by Shiva, or the language bestowed upon us by Agastya ... Such an attachment and devotion is foolish. I only have attachment to those things that have qualities that have utility. I do not praise something just because it is my language or my land or my religion or because it is something ancient (Ramaswamy 1997, 235).

EVR’s statement was probably inspired by his own implication in the proliferation of *Tamilttāy*. Some of the earliest material manifestations of the goddess appeared during the anti-Hindi protests of the 1930s that he organized. “When he was arrested in 1938, “thousands of his followers protested by carrying in a procession a giant statue of *Tamilttāy* in a posture of mourning through the streets of Madras” (Visswanathan 1983, 236 in Ramaswamy 1997, 235).

Remaining firm in his stance, EVR published his rationalist attack on the feminization and deification of Tamil in a pamphlet entitled *Tāyppāl Paittiyam* (“the madness over mother’s milk”) in 1962 (E.V.Ramasami 1962, 7-17 in Ramaswamy 1997, 107). The pages of the pamphlet were colored with biting vituperation, as EVR argued that Tamils content with imbibing their “mother’s milk” were “diseased with irrationalism, superstition, and traditionalism, so much so that one recoiled from the nasty odor of religiosity and orthodoxy that emanated from them” (E.V.Ramasami 1962, 7-17 in Ramaswamy 1997, 239-240). He went so

⁹⁷ Again, EVR’s employment of the language of chastity seems antithetical to his vision of women’s equality.

far as to demand that his followers speak English because it had superior utility and lacked the “barbarism” of Tamil (ibid.).

EVR’s insults were not, however, enough to stop the devotees of Tamil from counting EVR as a hero among them. He was and continues to be remembered as one of the most dedicated warriors in the fight to protect mother Tamil. He has been lionized for his leadership in the anti-Hindi agitations and counted amongst the ranks of those working “to reinstate the lost privileges and honor of Tamil” (Ramaswamy 1997, 241-242). According to Ramaswamy, EVR’s consistent opposition to Brahminism, Hindi, Sanskrit, and North Indian domination, despite his numerous slippages and political turnabouts, ensures that Tamil devotees see him “as a fellow traveler in their own struggle against these forces” (ibid., 241).

EVR’s militant approach also ensured that he maintained his opposition to the government, which could not stake claim to him as the Tamil devotees had. As the ideas of the party grew more prominent, other leaders, such as C.N. Annadurai who I discuss below, sought to bring the DK into the mainstream of electoral politics. They were, however, met with EVR’s resistance due to his contention that the party’s participation in elections would dim its ideology. EVR maintained his belief in rationalism and his distaste for religiosity, which ultimately ensured his distance from the followers he hoped to attract. After Annadurai established the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (“Dravidian Progress Party”) in 1949, the DK began its descent into obscurity, and many of EVR’s more radical ideas faded into the background. New Dravidianist leaders devalued rationalism and atheism, and elevated the virtues of honor and prestige in a manner very distant from EVR’s initial assertions.

The Dravidianist departure from EVR’s ideas, as well as his relative obscurity in his own lifetime, may be attributed in part to his rejection of devotionalism (Subramanian 1999, 40), and

the elitism underlying his acceptance of the English language. The centrality of devotional sentiments to the formation of the fledgling Tamil people is evident in the appropriation of EVR by the protectors of Tamilttāy, while his explicit rejection of the Tamil goddess bespeaks the disconnect that prevented him from completing the project of constituting the Tamil people. EVR's acquiescence to English, which he even promoted at times, also demonstrates his distance from the population, the vast majority of whom could not speak English. The elitism of the earliest Dravidianists who eventually settled on publishing in English resonated with EVR on this issue.

The modern reform and resurgence of Śaivism, which proceeded and overlapped with EVR's movement was also a major impediment to the popularization of EVR's ideology, though some of its proponents periodically aligned with him in the fight for a Tamil nation. Starting at the end of the nineteenth century, Śaivism underwent a period of self-conscious reformation led by educated non-Brahmin elites who were, in part, responding to colonial critiques that had labelled the tradition barbaric. In so doing, they tailored Śaivism to fit into new definitions of respectable religion delimited by colonial discourse, emphasizing and popularizing texts, which were, of course, at the heart of Christianity and other "religions of the book". As they strongly asserted the sacredness of Tamil texts, and posited their liturgical use as essential to the proper practice of Śaivism, Tamil became a holy language (Ramaswamy 1997, 25).⁹⁸ Its sanctification led Śaiva scholars and revivalists to become key players in the anti-Hindi agitations (Kannan 2010, 63-71).

However, EVR's public criticism of the *Periyapurāṇam* as well as the Tamil version of the Hindu epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is attributed to the thirteenth century bard Kampan, alienated

⁹⁸ The question of the status of Sanskrit alongside or compared to Tamil posed a problem for reformers who at first attempted to balance the two ancient and sacred languages. Arumuka Navalar (1822-1879), a vocal reformer and prolific translator, asserted the centrality of Tamil to Śaiva liturgical practice. Nonetheless, he cited the Sanskrit Vedas and Āgamas, along with the Tamil corpus of sacred poetry as demonstrative of the truth of Śaiva Siddhānta (Śaiva philosophy).

the Śaivite contingency, leading to a break within the Dravidian Movement. Responding to EVR's outcries, a group of leaders, including P. Balasubramanian (editor of *The Sunday Observer*), R. K. Shanmugam Chettiar, P. T. Rajan, C. L. Narasimha Mudaliar, Damodaran Naidu, and K. C. Subramania Chettiar, formed a rebel faction aimed at removing him from his position as president of the DK (Ravichandran 1982, 19-21). On December 27th, 1943, the rebel group convened the party's executive committee, and censured EVR for not holding an annual meeting after 1940 (ibid).

Ultimately, EVR's (theoretical) egalitarianism and goal of upending caste subverted deep-seated understandings of honor and prestige that remain intertwined with caste status and with the institutions of religion. Besides having no material basis, EVR's ideas constituted too sharp of a divergence from antecedent social structures (Prasad 2014, 34). Such jarring radicalism ensured that EVR could not be the empty signifier onto which the people could project their ego ideal. He rejected the sovereignty that they sought, which, they were led to believe, could be achieved through the democratic structures of the state. The Tamil warriors EVR helped create ultimately left him for a leader who elicited their devotion and embodied the sovereignty of "the people".

Despite the fact that he is usually referred to as Periyar "great one", the men at the center of my ethnographic research retain a somewhat vague image of EVR as a sign of Tamil nationalism. They sometimes include his image on their caste-centered publications, noting, when I ask, that he fought for the rights of the Tamil people against the Brahmins and North Indians. While they are aware of his more radical inclinations, only a very minute proportion of my interlocutors avow atheism. However, a minority of Devendra activists in Paramakudi follow EVR, along with Ambedkar, in their calls for the destruction of caste writ large. In the end,

EVR's antagonistic opposition to elite power expressed through courageous heroism has had the most lasting influence on "the Tamil people" that a wide array of castes claim to be.

Śaiva Heroism Sustained

In order to depict a clearer picture of the ideals that caste leaders and their acolytes emulate to substantiate their positions as primordial Tamils, I must return to the Śaiva reform movement that preceded and overlapped with the dawn of Dravidianism, and to some of the medieval Śaivite beliefs that its leaders sought to revitalize. Śaiva reformers promoted and popularized the texts associated with the sixty-three medieval Śaiva saints known as the Nāyaṅmārs ("teachers") who helped endow "the Tamil people" with courageous and self-sacrificial devotion. The devotees that emerge in the poetry and tales surrounding the saints are so zealous that they exhibit the excesses of vīram, which resonate with descriptions of warriors in the literature of the Caṅkam period, and which inspire actions of much later advocates of Tamil ethno-nationalism. However, the connections between the saints and orthodox, Brahminical temple ritual, which are expanded and reinforced by modern reformers, as well as the links between Śaiva reform and agrarian civility, accord Tamil devotees with the honor and prestige that also suffuse contemporary political assertions of Tamil identity.

The ideals exemplified by the Nāyaṅmār figures are rooted in the ethos of the medieval Bhakti Movement – the period of popular Hindu resurgence during which direct access to the divine was (at least theoretically) opened up to any truly earnest devotee regardless of wealth, caste, or gender. The movement started developing in the Tamil region earliest – in the seventh century, and was centered on two deities, Śiva and Viṣṇu, although I focus here on Śaivism because of its modern reform and resurgence, and because it is the predominant practice of the castes that are the focus of my dissertation. Up until the seventeenth century CE, bhakti (from the

Sanskrit *bhaj* “to divide, share, partake, participate, to belong to” (Macdonell 1929)), arose from a number of different centers and was directed at a number of different deities whose devotees crisscrossed the subcontinent, declaring their direct, intimate relationships with their gods through poetic songs. Such bards fundamentally altered the prevailing structure of the heterogeneous expressions of religiosity that we define as Hinduism by challenging the position of Brahmins as ritual mediators who had exclusive access to the divine. Bards and the lay devotees they mobilized began articulating their love for their chosen deities who they related to intimately as lovers, mothers, fathers, and friends.⁹⁹

While in the Tamil context affable, tender, and even romantic love characterized some relations of religious devotion, the Nāyaṅmārs (as they are remembered) represented an explicitly violent model of devotion, as they fearlessly sacrificed everything including loved ones and their own lives to serve their lord. In fact, the valorization of violence in the twelfth century hagiographical text usually referred to as the *Periyapurāṇam* (“great story”) is so extreme that it has been the subject of much debate within Śaiva communities and etic scholarly circles (Hudson 1989; Monius 2004; Vamadeva 1995). Nonetheless, the *Periyapurāṇam* remains the single most important source of stories about the Nāyaṅmārs, some of which are known to most of my interlocutors, although a very small proportion of them have read the text. The tales of the Nāyaṅmārs circulate orally, and are represented in songs, films, and pictures that grace the prayer rooms of many Tamil homes. Probably the most widely known story of the Nāyaṅmārs today, the tale detailing the life of Tiṅṇaṅ who later comes to be known as Kaṅṅappār (literally, “dear one of the eye”) exemplifies the heroic self-sacrifice promoted by the *Periyapurāṇam*.

⁹⁹ There has been scholarly debate about the nature and origins of bhakti. Madeleine Biardeau and Jeanine Miller argue that bhakti was neither a reform nor a sudden innovation, but the continuation and expression of ideas already found in the Vedas and Upanishads (1994, 89-91; 1996).

The broad parameters of the story are as follows. A hunter of low birth, Tiṇṇaṇ stumbles across a Śiva *liṅga* one day while hunting in the forest, and is overcome with his love and “almost maternal concern for the well-being of the lord” (Monius 2004, 149).¹⁰⁰ He wants to propitiate Śiva, but since he does not know how to “worship properly” according to the dictates of Hindu orthodoxy, he pours water from his mouth onto the *liṅga*. He also offers Śiva the meat of the animals he hunts, including swine flesh, which is considered highly polluting. Since Tiṇṇaṇ’s devotion is so true and deep, Śiva accepts the offerings. After a Brahmin trained in Vedic ritual observes Tiṇṇaṇ’s acts and is horrified, Śiva appears to the Brahmin in a dream, commanding him to observe the true test of Tiṇṇaṇ’s devotion. The lord wills blood to pour from his eye, and “while the concealed Brahmin looks on in amazement, a despairing Tiṇṇaṇ gouges out his own eye to heal the gushing wound on the eye of his beloved image” (v. 827 trans. Monius 2004, 149). When Śiva’s other eye begins to bleed, Tiṇṇaṇ raises his arrow to gouge out his other eye, but “Śiva cries out for him to stop, calling him ‘Kaṇṇappar’” (v. 832 trans. Monius 2004, 150). The oft-told and artistically depicted story of Kaṇṇappar eloquently portrays the ideal of heroic devotion that drives not just the stories of the *Periyapurāṇam*, but the ethos of Tamil Śaivism writ large. Kaṇṇappar is eager to sacrifice his body, and it is his eagerness that renders him an ideal devotee despite his birth.

The connection between devotional self-sacrifice and *vīram* is articulated by the author to which the text is attributed, Cekkilar. As Monius points out, a number of Nāyaṇmārs are depicted with the language of heroism: “Tiṇṇaṇ ... is repeatedly described in royal terms of grandeur, his tribal chieftainship likened to the reign of a great monarch ... his hunt for wild boar likened to battle. ‘his strength like that of a victorious male lion of fiery eyes’ (v.705) ... Tiṇṇaṇ wears the anklets of the hero ... (v. 711) and is several times referred to as ‘the heroic one’” (ibid., 150).

¹⁰⁰ Phallus or phallic object worshipped as Śiva.

Interestingly, the ideal of Tamil heroism that the Nāyaṅmārs represent was constructed in response to the incursion of a “foreign enemy” against which “the Tamil people” were constituted. Medieval Śaivism thus presented an apt precursor to reformers and activists who helped reconstruct the Tamil people at the moment of nation formation. In the medieval case, the enemy was not, however, the “North Indian” Brahmins, but the Jains whose influence was rising in the Tamil country.

As historian of religion Anne Monius explains, the *Periyapurāṇam* was written in response to the *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* (“Cīvakaṅ, the Wish-Fulfilling gem”), which is attributed to the Jain monk Tiruttakkatēvar and dated to the tenth century (Zvelebil 1995, 169-171). Tiruttakkatēvar, tradition dictates, was challenged to write a text about love, which was generally outside the scope of topics covered in the writings of the renunciant Jains. He took on the challenge much to the delight of the Chola king who subsequently became deeply interested in the text (Monius 2004, 126). Indeed, the *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* was original and novel in its creation of a “literary ethos of ironic – even humorous” dismissal of the predominant themes of Tamil literature up to that point, namely, love and war (ibid., 139). Through the trajectory of the text’s narrative and the literary techniques of excess, according to Monius’ analysis, Tiruttakkatēvar condemned emotional experience.¹⁰¹ In fact, in a manner unsurprising given its underlying Jain message, the

¹⁰¹ Although the text initially seems incommensurable with the Jain cannon because of its focus on love and violence, which are antithetical to its world rejecting orientation, what may at first seem to be an engagement with or even an embrace of earthly life is, in fact, a condemnation of it as horrific and disgusting (Monius 2004, 129-139). Tiruttakkatēvar renders grotesque that which is glorified in the renowned body of ancient Tamil literature called Caṅkam through excessive, over the top description. In Monius’ words, “the text is extremely explicit, almost painfully graphic, in sexual imagery and *double entendre*, not to mention vivid depictions of the gruesome horrors of the cremation ground (place of the hero’s birth) and the battlefield (where Cīvakaṅ defeats many a foe)” (ibid., 129). Instead of the nuanced subtleties typical of the akam (inner) poems of the Caṅkam corpus, we find in the *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* coarse descriptions of women’s genitals, women’s eyes described as spears, and their breasts described as hot and cruel (ibid., 130). The battlefield is similarly caricatured through hyperbole. Instead of “subtle, even haunting images of war”, Tiruttakkatēvar’s description of the “battlefield’s ‘deluge of blood’ makes a mockery of the violence of war” (ibid., 131).

story culminates in the hero, King Cīvakaṅ, realizing the illusory nature of the world of pleasure and pain and renouncing the life of love, lust, and violence that he had seemed to relish.

Importantly, by the twelfth century during which Cekkilar wrote the *Periyapurāṇam*, Tiruttakkatēvar was not alone in his disapproval. Instead, Cekkilar faced a number of voices critical of love and violence, and of the sexuality and aggression intertwined with them. A new genre of court literature called paraṇi lamented the gruesome horrors of war, mocking the would-be hero, and bringing the “wry treatment of war through literary excess ... to full fruition” (Monius 2004, 136).

It was in this moment of questioning and castigation that Cekkilar wrote the *Periyapurāṇam* for his royal patron, the Chola king Anapāyaṅ who he hoped to lure away from the *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* and the Jain soteriology it propounded. In so doing, he refused to relinquish the affective ethos of love and war woven into the fabric of Tamil literary production up until that point. The Tamil people that Cekkilar helped build through the figures of the Nāyaṅmārs embraced the passions of earthly life, asserting their corporeal power as they stood opposed to the Jains.

Cekkilar was not the first Śaivite to voice opposition to the Jains. In fact, references bearing similar sentiments are found in *Tēvāram* (“garland for the god”), a collection of the songs written by three of the most celebrated Nāyaṅmārs, which was compiled in the tenth century. As scholar of religion Indira Peterson argues, the Nāyaṅmārs referred to Śaivism as *the* Tamil religion and juxtaposed it to the heretical and “foreign” faiths, of the Prakrit-speaking Jains and Buddhists (Peterson 1989, 12). For example, a Nāyaṅmār by the name of Campantar, saw the Jains’ lack of knowledge of Tamil as one of the markers of their heresy and suggested that their presence was a threat to the Tamil language and the Śaiva/Tamil people. He wrote, “With Araṅ [Śiva]

of Ālavāy by my side, I will easily defeat those filthy Jain monks who wander like elephants in a rut ... loudly declaiming in the corrupt Prakrit tongue ... and know[ing] neither good Tamil nor the Sanskrit language” (TVR III: 297.2).

The model of Tamil Śaiva devotion that the Nāyaṅmārs exemplify was revitalized by late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Śaiva reformers who were also fighting the spread of a foreign faith, Christianity. Reformers like P. Sundaram Pillai (1855-1897) and Marimalai Adigal (1876-1950) promoted the sacred texts of Śaivism inadvertently creating a canon parallel to the ones promulgated by the “religions of the book”.

Arumuka Navalar (1822-1879), one of the best-known reformers and a prolific translator, published the first prose rendition of Cēkkiḷār’s *Periyapurāṇam* in 1852, significantly helping spread the stories of the saints he so revered. He envisioned the Nāyaṅmārs as ideal devotees, claiming that, “the models of piety provided by these saints would inspire Śaivites to remove their ignorance” (Hudson 1995, 104). The ruthless, selfless, and even “fanatical” devotion that was thus championed contributed to the idealization of vīram within Tamil ethno-nationalism. Like the Nāyaṅmārs, devotees of the Tamil nation would gladly sacrifice their lives.

While a survey of Tamil literature is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to note that the precedent for the ideal of courageous self-sacrifice in the texts of and about the Nāyaṅmārs was already set in the Cankam corpus, which is rife with martyrs who are glorified for losing their lives on the battlefield. In fact, as Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam argues in the context of the reanimation of the vīraṅ ideal in Sri Lankan Tamil ethno-nationalism “the hero, like the [Christian] martyr, is destined for death; living heroes and living martyrs are oxymorons. Greek heroes should, in an idealistic view, die young and in the prime of their strength in order to be useful for the community; similar ideals are found in Cankam literature” (2005, 115).

Such images reemerged from a period of obscurity at the turn of the twentieth century due in part to a collaborative project shared by wealthy Thevars and Vaiṣṇavite Brahmins (Aiyangars). In 1901, a wealthy landlord by the name of Pandithurai Thevar, who was motivated in part by his opposition to British rule, called on his cousin Bhaskara Sethupathi – the king of Ramnad – to fund the establishment of the Madurai Tamil Sangam (group or club, from Caṅkam). Heeding Pandithurai’s request, the Sethupathis appointed their court pundit, R. Raghava Aiyangar to head the new Sangam, and to unearth the collections of manuscripts preserved by families of traditional Tamil poets and scholars. Aiyangar’s successful research led to the popularization of classical literature, which had been little known for about fifteen hundred years (Sivaram 1992, 17-8).¹⁰² Part of the broader intellectual movement that was inextricably linked to Śaiva reform, and that was later termed the Tamil Renaissance, Aiyangar also helped create a class of Tamil scholars through a well-organized and prestigious system of examinations, and published a journal, *Senthamil* (“pure Tamil”) (ibid., 20).

Interestingly, it was Indian nationalism rather than Tamil nationalism that motivated Pandithurai Thevar and R. Raghava Aiyangar who would have been alienated from the Dravidianist ideology that developed a few decades later on account of his Brahmin identity. Aiyangar, somewhat ironically, contributed more to the militarized framing of Tamil ethno-nationalism than to any sense of Indian national identity. His loyalty to the Maravar Sethupathis, who had patronized his family for generations, emerged in the particular values he selected in the vast corpus of literature. “He conceived of a martial heritage that was unique to the Tamil country constituted by the Chera, Chola and Pandya kingdoms in South India, and [that] was – according to him – far superior to the military powers of north Indian peoples” (ibid.). In the

¹⁰² Although initially funded by the Sethupathis, other Thevar leaders soon came to support the Sangam. By 1907, support came from Thondaiman, the Kallar king of Pudukottai, the Maravar Zamindar of Singam Patty, and a Kallar leader by the name of Goplasamy Rajaliar (Sivaram 1992, 17).

context of the growing Swadeshi Movement, Aiyangar lauded the heroic mothers and martial sons of classical Tamil literature, who, he asserted, were of the Maravar clan. According to Aiyangar, who remained ardently devoted to one of the oldest ruling Maravar clans of the Tamil country, Maravars were exemplars of the highest Tamil virtue, *vīram* (ibid.).

Śaiva Gentility

But the power of Śaivism did not rest on *vīram* alone. Instead, Śaivism afforded its adherents the honor and prestige that comes from proximity to royalty and the Brahminical ritual order that upholds it. While the medieval period is marked by the “Tamilization of Śaivism” (Peterson 1989, 12-18), it is important to note that the process of coupling Śaiva devotionism and Tamil identity did not necessitate the exclusion of Sanskrit. In *Tēvāram*, the Nāyaṅmārs enthusiastically praised the Tamil language for its sweetness, purity, and antiquity, claiming Tamil as sacred because it is the language in which Śiva chose to reveal himself, and the language that should be used to praise him.¹⁰³ A Nāyaṅmār called Appar reminded Śiva that he never failed to worship him with the sounds of Tamil: “I have never failed to worship you with flowers and incense and water, never failed to sing you in melodious Tamil songs” (Appar TVR IV: 1.6). They sometimes even saw Śiva as an embodiment of sacred Tamil. However, in such visions, Sanskrit was featured alongside Tamil as an equally holy language. Appar is thought to

¹⁰³ The veneration of the Tamil language and land to which it is intimately connected does, however, have even the older roots. As Tamil literary scholar Eva Wilden notes, the coolness (as in pleasing and refreshing) and goodness of the Tamil language are mentioned a few times in the Caṅkam corpus (2009, 121). Likewise, the Tamil speaking region, which “has long been defined with great geographic precision”, is worthy of praise, according to historian of religion Anne Monius (Monius 2015, 266). The introduction to the fifth century grammar text, *Tolkāppiyam*, which defines the conventions of Caṅkam poetry, refers to “The virtuous land where people speak Tamil ... bound by ‘Vēṅkaṭam in the north and Kumari in the south’” (*Tolkāppiyam* trans. Wilden 2009, 10), reflecting the boundaries of the contemporary Indian state of Tamilnāṭu” (ibid., 266). Evidently, despite the region’s multilingualism, which included Sanskrit, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, and a number of Prakrits, there was at least a vague Tamil consciousness that wed language to place as early as the fifth century.

have written, “See the god! ... See him who is Sanskrit of the North and southern Tamil and the four Vedas! ... See Śiva!” (Appar TVR VI: 301.1).

The Nāyaṅmārs’ praising of Sanskrit and the Vedas makes sense in light of the fact that their devotion was intimately linked to major temple centers throughout the Tamil country. While Peterson notes that the Nāyaṅmārs’ pilgrimages to well-established temples within the Tamil region helped carve their hymns and hagiographies into the Tamil landscape (Peterson 1989, 21), she does not highlight the translocal political power dynamics into which the Nāyaṅmārs were drawn by virtue of their involvement in major temples. The Nāyaṅmārs and the Tamil Śaiva community they helped build worshipped Śiva as a king in temples that were themselves deeply connected to imperial monarchies and the spheres of influence they maintained. As historian of religion Gavin Flood explains, in the medieval Tamil country, kings, such as the Cholas, built grand regional temples within which an extensive and complex temple culture developed (2003, 118). Temples were not only places of worship, but centers of political power and great centers of learning possessing a distinctive sense of sacredness (ibid.; Shulman 1980). Śaivism then became “aligned with an ideology of royal power and the king was thought to embody the power of the Lord” (Flood 2003, 217). Such an ideology was, of course, upheld by Brahminical ritual, as the symbiotic relationship between Brahmins and their royal patrons developed. The Nāyaṅmārs did not stand opposed to such preeminent models of authority and sovereignty, but instead were embedded in them.

During the modern period, reformers evinced ambivalent and inconsistent attitudes about the tension between the entrenchment of Tamil Śaivism within Brahminical Hinduism and the sanctification of the Tamil language and people. Arumuka Navalar, for example, asserted the centrality of Tamil to Śaiva liturgical practice, citing the Tamil corpus of the Nāyaṅmārs’ poetry

and the Sanskrit Vedas and Āgamas as demonstrative of the truth of Śaiva Siddhānta (Śaiva philosophy). Today the performance of *Tēvāram* remains central to worship in the Brahmin-operated temples of Tamil Nadu, complementing Sanskrit ritual utterances.

However, not all Śaiva reformers wanted Tamil to stand alongside Sanskrit. A prolific scholar of Tamil and Śaiva Siddhānta, Marimalai Adigal started the Pure Tamil Movement in 1916 with the aim of extricating Sanskrit loan words from the Tamil language in order to return it to its unadulterated state. He sought to revitalize Tamil Śaivism, which, he contended, had been harmed by the “Aryan Brahmins” (Venkatachalapathy 1995, 761). Many other Śaivite scholars joined Adigal, harkening back to a pre-Aryan Tamil society in which Tamil scripture monopolized religious thought and practice, and the Vellalars (the dominant agricultural caste from which many of them hailed) occupied a preeminent position.¹⁰⁴ In so doing, they followed Adigal in working to establish the inextricable link between “Tamil culture” and the virtues and practices of the region’s agrarian citizenry that Anand Pandian has examined (2007; 2009). Adigal described the “virtues of the Vellalas [his own caste] – their refinement of feeling, their generous giving, their sympathy for the suffering of all living creatures – as the fruit of agrarian labour” (2007, 48), and it was his model that came to be a defining feature of Tamil identity throughout the complex process of building “the Tamil people”. Drawing both on colonial models of civility and on the rich tradition of ethical cultivation embedded in extant Tamil literature, proto Tamil nationalists asserted the righteousness of “the Tamil people” as hard-working, humble farmers. Of course, the model of agrarian civility that Pandian explores runs counter to visions of the heroic warrior, which were emerging at the same time.

¹⁰⁴ The voices of the Śaiva Reform Movement were not always in harmony. As A.R. Venkatachalapathy explains, conflicts between moderate and conservative of Śaivites were common, as they disagreed on a number of issues, including wearing markers of religious affiliation on the body, the observance of caste distinction within temples, and the maintenance of particular ritual practices, such as the dedication of Devadasis (temple dancers with specific ritual duties) (Venkatachalapathy 1995, 763-764).

This tension at the heart of Tamil identity also ran through the political mobilization of Adigal and his many acolytes who were initially aligned with EVR's Self-Respect Movement. Their promotion of the ideals of agrarian civility was at times trumped by their dedication to Tamil. In fact, in 1931, Adigal "claimed that the self-respect movement came into being by adopting his views and principles" (Venkatachalapathy 1995, 762). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Śaiva activists united with the Self-Respecters in moments when they shared a common cause, namely when the threat of compulsory Hindi loomed large (ibid., 765-766). However, as I mentioned above, EVR's radicalism managed to upend the already tenuous relationship between the atheistic Self-Respecters and the devout Śaivites. In addition to the rebel faction that formed within EVR's own party following his public criticism of the *Periyapurāṇam* and the Tamil version of the Hindu epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Ravichandran 1982, 19-21), his censure also offended Śaiva activists who had earlier managed to compartmentalize EVR's atheism for the sake of Tamil (Venkatachalapathy 1995, 767).

Importantly, the Śaivas and Self-Respecters also differed in their political tactics. The Self-Respect Movement used "coercive agitational tactics to achieve its programme. The Śaiva elites could never think beyond safe, constitutional methods" (ibid., 766). Evidently, the bellicose heroism advocated by EVR did not sit well with Śaiva elites who refused to relinquish their deep-seated understandings of and desires for honor and prestige. However, the underlying principles of Tamil Śaivism remained compatible with and productive of Tamil *vīram*, which continued to energize the complex dynamics of Tamil ethno-nationalism for decades to come.

MGR As the Ideal Tamil Man

Attracting the devotion of Tamil-speakers like no other politician before or since, Marudhur Gopalan Ramachandran (henceforth, MGR) (1917-1987) provided the ego ideal that EVR did not by gracefully balancing the ideals of *vīram*, honor, and prestige. He was the image onto

which Tamil people could project their desires, as he rose to film stardom with an onscreen persona defined by courageous self-sacrifice and invincibility that did not ultimately challenge the hierarchical status quo (Dickey 2007) MGR came to be known as Puratchi Thalaivar (“revolutionary leader”) for the change he allegedly effected, and he was continuously reelected until the end of his life when he had accrued eleven years as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu. His death sparked unrest, rioting, and suicides across the state, demonstrating the deep devotion he elicited (The Washington Post 1987).

Despite the fact that he became the most beloved Tamil nationalist leader ever, MGR was not a native Tamil speaker. He hailed from the Malayali Nair caste, and was born in Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) to which his parents had moved after his father, a magistrate, had made political enemies in Kerala (Veeravalli 2013, 4). MGR’s father died soon after his birth, and his mother took him and his brother to India where they struggled to get by. Both boys acted in the Madurai Original Boys Company where they were given three square meals a day (ibid., 6). According to his somewhat doting biographer, MGR excelled in acting because of his fair skin, which constitutes physical beauty more than any other single feature in contemporary South India (also the case in many parts of South Asia and the world) (ibid., 7). As a young man, MGR was a supporter of Gandhi and the independence movement, but his views changed after his entrance into Tamil cinema through which he met Muthuvel Karunanidhi (b. 1924) and Conjeevaram Natarajan Annadurai (1909-1969). Both men were involved in the industry and at the forefront of the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, “Dravidian Progress Party”), which had split off from EVR’s DK (Dravida Kazhagam, “Dravidian Party”) in 1949. They saw MGR’s rising star power as a useful vehicle through which to spread the message of the party.

The fact that MGR was not a native Tamil speaker may have been “excused” by the Tamil people he helped create because of the implicit understanding that he chose to be a Tamil, and because his Malayali heritage made him an ostensibly neutral figure in the conflicts between various Tamil parties, factions, and castes. As I experienced countless times over the course of my research, the adoption of the Tamil language and customs is the greatest compliment one can pay Tamil-speakers whose emotional connection to their language remains palpable. MGR who could have been a star in Malayalam chose to rule the Tamil country just as his supporters chose him. His success may also be understood as an instance of Bonapartism as described in its classic case by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Like Bonaparte, MGR’s outsider status meant that he was not tethered to any of the different groups or factions, in this case castes, that he attempted to bring into a popular alliance. He stood apart and above the divisions in society, claiming to unify the “authentic people” (Chatterjee in conversation 2016).

MGR’s inculcation and promotion by Karunanidhi and Annadurai was central to his ascent not just because they connected him to party machinery, but because they helped create the throne of Tamil royalty upon which MGR sat. Both of them used their great literary talent as orators, playwrights, and poets to build the Tamil neoclassical aesthetic that demonstrates the antiquity and authenticity of “Dravidian civilization” (Bate 2009). At the moment of their split from the DK and the inauguration of mass suffrage, Bernard Bate explains, Karunanidhi and Annadurai exceeded Adigal’s efforts, developing a stylized form of Tamil that they called *centamiḷ* (literally, “pure Tamil”) for political speeches. They employed old words and tropes, and self-consciously referred to the antiquity of the Tamil language in performances of spectacular linguistic acumen that were offered to large, largely illiterate audiences who thus came to project Tamil antiquity and the specter of ancient Tamil civilization onto their illustrious

leaders (ibid., 13). Karunanidhi and Annadurai also formulated the difference between proper and improper along the lines of *cemmai* (“pure”) and *kochai* (literally, “vulgar”) Tamil (ibid., 17). *Cemmai* iconically signified the grand, ancient Dravidian civilization, while *kochai* signified the current moment of Aryan (North Indian/Brahmin) nationalism and the degeneration it had caused (ibid., 65). Turning back to La Clau’s framework, one can see how the Tamil neoclassical aesthetic, which Bate calls the Dravidian aesthetic, drew Tamil people together on the basis of their deeply felt aspirations to greatness.

The success of *centamil* cannot, however, be solely attributed to the logic of populism. As Bate argues, Dravidianist mobilization reiterates practices of hierarchical relationality that can be traced to earlier moments of Tamil history. Political speeches employ the ancient cultural logic of hierarchical intimacy within which affectionate, pleasurable relationships between servant and served, devotee and god, and subject and king are ritually constructed (ibid., 117). Praise, for example, is employed within oratorical spectacle as a ritual activity that produces hierarchical intimacy (ibid., 120). The devotee moves ever closer to the praised as she/he publically performs affection and reverence for the beloved idol and shares in the emotional outpourings of the performance (ibid., 120). While the erotic elements of medieval devotionism are markedly absent, the ethos of *bhakti* I discussed above deeply influences the aesthetic development of Dravidianism (ibid., 136). Today, hyperbolic accolades and highly affective tributes remain a key component of political speeches in Tamil Nadu. In a wide variety of contexts that I witnessed over the course of my ethnographic research, political leaders were praised in the same manner as kings and deities. It is, in fact, very common to actually call leaders “king” and “god” as a kind of title employed in the context of introductions at political gatherings.

As Dravidianist leaders were in the process of inventing ancient Tamil speech, they also saw an opportunity to promote the party through the relatively new medium of film. At first, Prasad tells us, DMK films spread party propaganda and general lessons in egalitarianism, atheism, and rationalism in films that were otherwise indistinguishable from prevalent genres of folklore or social melodrama centered around the normative patriarchal family (2014, 8). Such films did not attract mass devotion because, I contend, they were, like EVR himself, too distant from the desires and aspirations of the audiences they attempted to reach. It was not until the rise of MGR as an independent charismatic entity, which coincided with entrance of the DMK into parliamentary politics, that films produced by the party had great success (ibid.). In fact, MGR's films became so successful that there was a "reversal of relations between the propaganda message and the charismatic bearer of the message. It is as if charisma had reverted to its role as message in itself, subsuming all other messages of a concrete nature related to party ideology" (ibid., 9).

Prasad describes MGR's ascent as a cine-political phenomenon that created a virtual sovereignty for Tamils who were otherwise alienated from the parliamentary political process (ibid.). Often playing quasi-historical regional kings of a bygone era, MGR and other South Indian stars that Prasad discusses created alternate national sovereignties to challenge the supranational Indian state, which attempted and continues to attempt to forge a national identity that trumps the linguistic and cultural diversity within its borders (ibid., 17). The stars' ability to do so, Prasad goes on, depends on the cultivation of the star image through the careful calculation of public interactions, which ensures his separation from viewers, as well as from other celebrities. After the star is thus cultivated, his appearances in films are mere appearances

outside the scope of filmic narrative, comparable to royalty appearing on the balcony. “It is then that ritual is introduced, and a virtual political order instituted” (ibid., 26).

But the power of MGR’s stardom eventually transcended the virtual. The spectacular success of the film *Nadodi Mannan* (*The Vagabond King*, 1958, dir. M.G. Ramachandran), in which MGR played both a king and a peasant, helped launch the DMK into office (ibid., 9). Although Annadurai stepped into the position of chief minister in 1967, the film actually marked the rise of MGR above the party (ibid., 47).

The film’s narrative trajectory presents MGR as both the harbinger of democracy and the king possessing absolute power. Set in an imaginary kingdom called Ratnapuri, the film opens with MGR greeting “the Tamil community”, which is significant given the recent formation of the state of Tamil Nadu (ibid.).¹⁰⁵ He then goes on to consistently fight for “the people” as both revolutionary peasant and righteous king. Since the previous king had died without naming any successors, Marthandan (MGR), is chosen in a quasi-democratic fashion by the majority of the imperial council. The kingdom, however, faces political troubles as violent protests erupt along with demands for democracy. An activist fighting for a democratic government, Veerangan (MGR), marches to the palace condemning the monarchy, but is arrested and imprisoned. He is subsequently pardoned and released on the occasion of the coronation of Marthandan. Following a complicated plot twist, Veerangan meets Marthandan and tells him about the horrible condition of the poor. Although the just king promises to help, he is then poisoned and disappears, leaving Veerangan to take the throne. As king, Veerangan ushers in reforms to uplift the poor. Eventually, Marthandan returns, and issues a proclamation pronouncing Ratnapuri to be a democratic nation.

¹⁰⁵ The single most extensive change in boundaries since the independence of India in 1947, the States Reorganisation Act of 1956 established the states of India along linguistic lines.

As Prasad explains, *Nadodi Mannan* and many films like it allowed MGR to offer subaltern viewers a share in the democratic order that he could effect only by virtue of his supremacy.

According to the logic of such narratives,

monarchy is to be abolished by the monarch himself . . . As king, he will implement what, as peasant leader, he envisions as a future without inequalities. ‘Monarchy will end with me’ [MGR says in *Nadodi Mannan*]. This statement is both an affirmation of revolutionary change, and an assertion of the indispensability of the last monarch. His apotheosis alone will ensure the passing of the age of monarchy and the advent of equality (Prasad 2014, 56).

MGR thus offered his followers a revolutionary *viraṅ* who also maintained the honor and prestige of well-established forms of authority.

Onscreen MGR was not just the king of the glorious past, but was also a virtuous farmer who, Pandian recalls, brought superior morality to his changing village, which had been impinged upon by the forces of urbane immodesty and arrogance, as well as the greed indexed and symbolized by the use of pesticides. The most famous song in the film that Pandian recounts, *Vivasayi* (“The Farmer”), which was released in 1967 when the DMK was first elected to office, summarizes its morally didactic ambition: “Searching out for the best of land, we too must sow some seeds – in the hearts of the people of the country, it is honesty that we must grow” (2007, 60). MGR thus endowed the Tamil sovereignty he represented with the ethics propounded by Śaiva elites. The Tamil people were to be cultivated like the land they worked.

Nevertheless, the triumph of the party was, Prasad goes on, experienced as a moment of revolutionary transformation, as the virtual Tamil sovereignty emanating from the screen became reality on the ground. The fantasies of spectators had been realized. In Prasad’s words,

It is as if the fantasies that spectators could indulge in as long they were aware that these were only fantasies (which is the case with individual fans’ relation to their favorite stars) had suddenly turned into reality, so that the fantasy itself now occupied the position of the formerly repressive agency whose presence had necessitated the detour through fantasy identifications. We are thus no longer in the realm of individual, intrapsychic fantasy, but in concrete programmes of political utopia (or *retrotopia*, to coin a neologism) realized in the social world and affecting even those who never participated in the fantasy (ibid., 19).

Despite the brilliant radiance of the DMK's rise, the policies written and enacted in its shadowy offices diverged from the original goal of Tamil sovereignty. The Tamil nationalist platform that had been the basis of Dravidianism was suppressed, as leaders compromised with Indian nationalism (ibid., 35). This remains the case today, although the retrotopic specter of the glorious Tamil nation continues to be the primary rhetorical device of political parties in Tamil Nadu.

Even fissures within Dravidianist parties, which continue to be frequent occurrences, do not harm the solid ideological bedrock of Dravidianism because they are rooted primarily in interpersonal conflicts. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, other DMK leaders became threatened by MGR's star power, which had become independent of and superior to the power of the party. Karunanidhi sought to marginalize MGR by suspending him for anti-party activities in 1972 (ibid., 38). Much to the surprise of his opponents, MGR used his suspension as an opportunity to launch his own party in the name of Annadurai – the ADMK, which later became the AIADMK. Karunanidhi and his supporters responded by highlighting MGR's status as a "foreigner" since he was a native speaker of Malayali, and accused him of trying to turn Tamil Nadu into another Kerala (ibid., 35). Nonetheless, MGR's popularity grew, and he was elected chief minister in 1977.

According to Prasad, MGR's electoral success was due to his popularity among the poor and disenfranchised. The constituents of the DMK and the ADMK were split between those with caste and class interests and those who put their faith in the simulacrum of revolution upon which such interests had depended for success. The "dreamers – those who, unable to represent themselves, were willing to back anyone who came forward to represent them" joined MGR (ibid., 39). He thus became the representative of the utopian dimension of Dravidian politics. He

was the king of democracy and the monarch of the dispossessed who was supported by the “vast illiterate, semi-literate and powerless masses” (ibid., 39). MGR attracted beings “that would otherwise find existence, if it can be called that, only in the calorie counts and poverty lines of development experts” (ibid., 28).

Sadly, MGR’s movement from cine-politics to realpolitik ensured that he did not turn out to be the king of democracy that his followers sought. While he established policies that helped the poor, such his Nutritious Meal Program, which continues to provide free lunches for school children to this day, his eleven-year reign has been described as “undoubtedly one of the darkest periods in the contemporary history of the state” (Pandian 1992, 39). It was characterized by deeply entrenched authoritarianism, police abuse, and an intolerance of dissent (Subramanian 1999; Dickey 2007).

Maintaining the Masculine Ideal

Many of my friends and acquaintances in Paramakudi who lived through the period of MGR’s rule are aware of its unseemly underbelly, though they are loathe to criticize him. In addition to the fact that the details of MGR’s despotism are hazy, my interlocutors’ almost uniform tendency to focus on his filmic career maintains the fiction of his infallibility. I was told countless times that MGR’s films and the songs he sang within them marked the highpoint of Tamil cinema. Many of my interlocutors had memorized some of “MGR’s” songs and sang them with the revolutionary zeal that they were intended to bear. Others described the characters he played in movies with the excitement that they must have felt the first time they saw him in such roles. Importantly, for such enthusiasts, MGR remained in the world of fantasy, ruling over fictive kingdoms that did not challenge the delicate balance of *vīram*, honor, and prestige that MGR sought to embody.

Even for those who explicitly support the AIADMK (the latest incarnation of the ADMK), the challenges of living up to the ideal masculinity that MGR presents onscreen are palpable. One of my Devendra neighbors in Paramakudi, Ethiraj is exceptional in his public endorsement of the AIADMK, which is currently thought to be a bastion of Thevar dominance, though he aligns with his caste fellows in his assertions that the Devendras are the rightful sovereigns of the Tamil country. When I asked very generally, “What do you think of MGR?”, he depicted the late chief minister according to the same ideals that he attributed to the Devendras, and inadvertently drew my attention to the internal vexation of the standards of Tamil masculinity established by the demanding voices of Dravidianism.

He was a good leader, a great leader with millions of people behind him. We call him the revolutionary leader [“puratchi talaivar”]. He struggled for the poor people like we were back then. He even started out poor. That’s really MGR. No one could beat him, but then when he got old, he became sick. He went to your county, to America to get treatment.

“Is that so?” I said, employing the Tamil sign of active listening. “Yes, it’s like that,” Ethiraj went on. “He was a big/great man. He had a gold watch and his sunglasses and a lot of money and property. Everyone gave him mariyātai.” Of course, MGR’s death at the hands of a disease and his reliance on wealth meant that he could not really embody *vīram qua vīram*. He was not the pure, heedless, self-sacrificial warrior upon which his followers could depend. Instead, he required the prestige and honor that had typically been the domain of the higher castes.

Ethiraj went on to describe the Devendra people in remarkably similar terms, which resonate with the opinions of Murthi that I shared at the beginning of this chapter. A middle-aged man with three grown children who had retired from his position as a low level government bureaucrat, Ethiraj believed in MGR as a fighter for “the people”, and could, perhaps validate his view with his own success. His parents had been agricultural day laborers whereas his generation had achieved *vacati* (convenience/comfort). Ethiraj’s upward mobility could not, however, be

solely attributed to MGR's leadership. Instead, he explained, "by way of our *vīram*, the Devendras have risen up. We have fought those who say they are the high castes. We have fought them without fear". Like so many of his caste fellows, Ethiraj also asserted the primacy of the Devendras in terms of traditional markers of honor and relatively novel markers of prestige. He advised me, "You must go and see all the temple inscriptions where it is written that the Devendras are the Pandian kings. The Pandians are called by the Devendra title." As I was leaving following our interview, Ethiraj gestured towards his two-story house, surrounded by a gate behind which there was a shiny car. "You see how much we have progressed, how much we have come up," he said. Like MGR whose consumer goods and ability to travel to the US for medical treatment marked him as a big/great man, Ethiraj had acquired the prestige that comes along with relative wealth.

While Prasad may be correct in pointing out that MGR's initial appeal was concentrated primarily amongst the poor, his argument does not explain the overturning of the caste and class division between the DMK and ADMK that soon rendered the latter the more elite party. Such a reversal is made possible, I contend, by the institution of Dravidianism as *the* framework for doing politics in the Tamil country. There simply is no other option besides Dravidianism, which is performed by all parties in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Even the Tamil iteration of the Congress Party, which is otherwise a moderate Indian Nationalist Party, mobilizes in a voice not unlike MGR's.

The Dravidianist hegemony is rooted in MGR's successful completion of the populist logic that started with EVR. He was, unlike EVR, able to sustain the image of the Tamil people, standing courageously opposed to external power without dismissing the honor and prestige, which were already deeply embedded in precolonial understandings of authority. Tamil kingship

and religious devotion, which have long been intertwined, found expression in the figure of MGR who toned down the DMK's calls for atheism, and could thus welcome devotion fit for a deity. The ego ideal of Tamil masculinity and sovereignty that MGR embodied continues to have purchase today.

**Owning the Past, Claiming the Present, and Imagining the Future:
The Aesthetic Occupation of Paramakudi and the Construction of the Devendras
Chapter Four**

Along with thousands of Devendras throughout the state, I woke up excited on September 11th, 2012. It was the morning of the *Tiyāki Immaṇuvēl Tēvētiraṅ Niṇaivu Viḷā* (“Memorial Festival of the Martyr Immanuel Devendran”) who is remembered as the single most important leader of the Devendra caste. While some of my younger Devendra interlocutors claim that the memorial event has been observed annually since 1958 (the year after Immanuel’s death) when they were not yet born, there is evidence of a large-scale function in Paramakudi only from 1988.¹⁰⁶ None of my older interlocutors offered me an exact date of the event’s establishment, though they were certain that it had developed into a significant size by the 1980s. Nevertheless, my younger interlocutors wanted to project the honoring of Immanuel into the past thereby proclaiming its authenticity and underscoring its legitimacy. Immanuel is not, for them, a recently celebrated figure but a hero who was recognized at the moment of his martyrdom.

The event has grown enormously over the course of about the past twenty years, becoming the epicenter of the transformation of previously diverse and endogamous sub-castes of Pallars into the Devendra mega caste. It is the venue in which the Devendras constitute themselves, enacting the various ideals that they claim as their own, as well as negotiating the tensions embedded in ideals, such as the excesses of *vīram* on the one hand, and the propriety of *māṇam* on the other hand. Its various names evidence the intersecting yet divergent ways in which it is framed by Devendra leaders. In addition to being the *Tiyāki Immaṇuvēl Tēvētiraṅ Niṇaivu Viḷā* (henceforth, *Niṇaivu Viḷā*), it is also referred to as the Immanuel Guru Puja, roughly, “the Worship of the Spiritual Teacher Immanuel”, and the *Tiyāki Immaṇuvēl*

¹⁰⁶ According to the plaque it bears, the construction of Immanuel’s gravestone, which is the event’s focal point, was completed in 1988.

Tēvētiraṅ Vīra Vaṇakkam Nāl, “Day of Hailing the Heroic Martyr Immanuvel Sekaran”, whose vīram and ethical excellence both evidence and inspire the same traits in today’s Devendra men.

The September 11th Niṇaivu Viḷā emulates the memorial celebration of the Thevar caste leader Muthuramalingam Thevar, which grew to a sizable scale about ten years earlier.¹⁰⁷ Referred to as the Muthuramalingam Thevar Guru Puja (“the worship of the spiritual teacher Muthuramalingam Thevar”) or Thevar Jayanthi (a term that usually refers to the birthday celebrations of the gods), the event is observed every year on October 30th in Muthuramalingam’s native village of Pasumpon, Ramanathapuram District. Today it is an event of enormous scale, receiving government support, heavy media coverage, and tens of thousands of participants who travel from various regions of the state to pay homage to their caste hero. Befitted with a plethora of billboards, flags, and decorations, the Guru Puja helps constitute the assertive Thevar identity that it simultaneously celebrates. It is important to note that in observing the Niṇaivu Viḷā, the Devendras instantiate a mimetic competition with the caste(s) that once subordinated them.

2012 was the first time I participated in Paramakudi’s function to which I had been directed by various Devendra interlocutors in the villages and towns of Tamil Nadu. The fame of the event had reached those who had never seen it live by word of mouth and the small posters and publications that accompanied such conversations, as well as by way of reporting in local newspapers and on local television stations. Karthammal, an approximately seventy-year-old Devendra agricultural laborer from a village about forty-five kilometers outside of Paramakudi

¹⁰⁷ Although many Thevars claim that the Guru Puja has been celebrated continuously since the first anniversary of Thevar’s death – October 30th, 1964 – the event did not reach a scale large enough to be recognized by the government until 1977. The aforementioned Public Department of the Tamil Nadu Government, which attends to matters concerning the general administration of the state including issues of law and order, takes note of the function for the first time in Government Order 2287 of October 26, 1977, and continues to monitor the function to this day.

who had, nonetheless, never been there told me, “If you want to know about Devendras, you have to go to Paramakudi on September 11th”.

The morning of the event, I awoke to the vibrations and sounds of loud speakers that blared throughout Andipuram, shaking the area with songs recounting the glories of the Devendra past. Although the lyrics were not entirely decipherable over the vibrations of the bass, the names of important Devendra figures, such Immanuvel Sekaran, Sundaralingam, and John Pandian were unmistakable, as they were repeated loudly and rhythmically over and over again. I headed to the Mahāl, which is located on the main Madurai-Rameswaram Road, about halfway between the bus stand and the railway tracks that must be crossed to enter Andipuram.

En route I was progressively saturated with visual stimuli, as I was surrounded by images of Devendra heroes on “flexboards” – large (8x8 at the least) digitally printed posters mounted on wooden or metal frames and “cut-outs”, enormous anthropomorphic flexboards of human figures that can stretch the length of three stories (Jacob 2011; Vaasanthi 2006). The signs became increasingly dense as I approached ainji mukku (five corners, and swelled into an impenetrable wall as I turned onto the main road. The larger-than-life men stood tall or walked straight ahead as their eyes stared out at any passersby, addressing them directly. Some of them carried weapons, including guns, sickles, and swords. Others bore the royal regalia of the kings of yore. Towering over me in all directions, the heroic figures were imposing nearly impossible to ignore (Figure Two).



Figure Two: Some Flexboards and the Procession at the 2012 Tiyāki Immaṇuvēl Tēvētiraṅ Niṇaivu Viḷā

I continued to move beneath the arresting signs and through the heroic soundscape towards the Mahāl. There I found local Devendra leaders with whom I had already become acquainted, in addition to a group of Devendra leaders who had arrived from Chennai. The men from Chennai were not, in fact, Chennai natives but located their ūrs (“native place”, “village”) in Ramanathapuram District.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, their work and residence in the cosmopolitan city of Chennai distinguished them from the crowd. Not only did they have the largest watches and the shiniest shoes, but they were also offered the most comfortable chairs in the Mahāl, as well as a continuous flow of coffee and biscuits. The leaders of the Devendra Kula Vellalar Panpaatu

¹⁰⁸ As E. Valentine Daniel explains, the relationship between a person and the soil of his or her ūr, or native village is “one of the most important relationships to a Tamil.” Daniel defines ūr as a “spatio-territorial concept” that is: “(1) inhabited by human beings who are believed to share in the substance of the soil of that territory, and (2) a territory to which a Tamil cognitively orients himself at any given time” (1984, 62-63). The ūr is thus person centric and contextual rather than delineated according to a fixed boundary. For example, in greater India, a Tamil person may refer to Tamil Nadu as their ūr, while in the United States that may refer to India. Nonetheless, in the narrowest sense of native village, one’s ūr is a defining feature of one’s subjectivity.

Kazhagam, Paramakudi's aforementioned caste association, eagerly introduced me to the urbanites.¹⁰⁹ Thangam – a sprightly man in his seventies and his middle aged assistant engaged me in conversation immediately. With smiles on their faces, they assured me that they come to the function every year. Thangam invited me to have lunch at the home of his friend Ganesan, and I accepted.

Of course, the enthusiasm of their engagement with me was shaped by my position as an American, female, foreign researcher focusing on the event, as well as on the “culture” of their caste. I was offered an intensified version of the hospitality usually extended to guests because my presence was, in this moment and throughout my research tenure, a sign of the eminence of the Devendras. Their stories had reached America, and were important enough that I had come to gather further information. The eminence I thus represented ensured that I was welcomed with great warmth. However, my position as a female also put a certain distance between my almost entirely male interlocutors and me. I was not invited into the inner circle of male socialization where drinking might take place, and where more intimate, conflicted and unflattering sentiments might circulate. Instead, I was faced with the public faces of Devendra men who usually shared the stories that made them proud. I was nonetheless able to view the *Ninaivu Viḷā* through the enhanced lenses given to me by my interlocutors.

I headed to the *Samadhi*¹¹⁰ – the site of Immanuel's grave, which was (and always is) the focal point and pièce de résistance of the whole event. En route I passed hundreds of police officers, some on foot, some in patrol cars, and others in an apparently indestructible steel riot

¹⁰⁹ Devendra Kula Vellalar Panpaatu Kazhagam: “Devendra Kula Vellalar Cultural Association”

¹¹⁰ Samadhi (Sanskrit: समाधि), also called samāpatti, refers to a state of meditative absorption achieved through ritual practice, study, and devotion in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and yogic schools. Usually attained by saints and highly accomplished practitioners and devotees (who sometimes become gods themselves), Samadhi marks the end of earthly life (death, according to non-believers). The term Samadhi also refers to the place where the act of Samadhi occurred, which is often marked by a statue or stone. It is interesting that Immanuel is likened to a saint in the nomenclature referring to his gravesite. A grave is called *kallaṟai* for ordinary people who have not reached meditative absorption.

patrol vehicle. The officers looked at me with curiosity, which they may have alleviated by misidentifying me as a Dalit activist or reporter from another part of India or abroad. Though several officers and their vehicles were gathered around the Samadhi, none of them approached me.

The Samadhi, which was built in 1988, consists of a black granite grave about ten feet long, on which there is an inscription that says, “Devendras’ Shining Martyr, Martyr Immanuel Sekaran, appearance [birth] 9.10.1924, disappearance [death] 11.09.1957”.¹¹¹ It stands alone in a dusty space of about one quarter of an acre, and is surrounded by a wall and gates on each side. Despite general neglect over the course of the year, on the occasion of September 11th, the Samadhi was surrounded by a raised platform that was used as a stage, and bedecked with hundreds of fragrant and colorful garlands. An enormous flexboard featuring Immanuel’s face on a postage stamp, and the name of the caste association, “Devendra Kula Vellalar Panpaatu Kazhagam, Paramakudi”, stood as the background. Just to the right of the stage, if one were looking at it from the front, stood a simple, smaller flexboard about seven feet tall and fifteen feet wide. It featured seven headshots against a black background, and the words, “vīra vaṇakkam”, “heroic welcome” [from vīram], had been printed in bold bright white letters across the top. Underneath each headshot, the name of the pictured individual and their native village appeared in the same white font. These were the men who had lost their lives in a police shooting on the occasion of the event and in the public space of ainji mukku the previous year when officers shot into a crowd of Devendras who were protesting the arrest of one of their leaders, John Pandian. The shooting, which had been defended as a necessary act of protection by the chief minister Jayaram Jayalalitha, and which had been decried by Dalit groups throughout the

¹¹¹ Referring to birth and death as appearance and disappearance in formal contexts, and especially in print, is the norm. Interestingly, this terminology suggests that to be alive is to be seen.

state, was becoming incorporated into the cultural memory of the Devendras.¹¹² They were recasting a moment of victimization as a moment of heroic martyrdom.

In this chapter, I explore the making of the Devendras through the *Niṇaivu Viḷā*. I argue that the ritualized memorialization of Immanuel's death is a means through which the Devendras build their conglomerated caste identity and proclaim a virtual sovereignty that reflects their upward mobility yet bespeaks the fact that the Devendras are not, in fact, sovereign. They are subject to the restrictions of the state and to its draconian acts of violence, as well as to the ongoing attacks of dominant castes. The virtual sovereignty they ritually perform does, however, empower them through generating the self-respect they need to stake claim to *vīram*, prestige, and honor, and therefore to their positions as both primordial Tamils and "modern" citizens.

I begin this chapter by first discussing the internal politics of the Devendra Kula Vellalar Panpaatu Kazhagam of Paramakudi that intensify as its members prepare for the event and negotiate the restrictions and authority of the state, which they must court not only out of fear, but also out of a desire for recognition. I also demonstrate the ways that such identity politics play out on the individual level for Devendras who are in the midst of great socioeconomic change. Second, I examine the story of Immanuel as it is recounted by my Devendra interlocutors. I argue that it is demonstrative of the Devendras' reformulation of their history in order to refuse victimization and assert their ultimate victory as the heroes of the Tamil land. Recounting and reliving the story of Immanuel, as they remember it, Devendra storytellers inhabit Immanuel's aggressive assertions, and imagine themselves as courageous and authoritative. Third, I explore moments of intercaste violence between the Devendras and

¹¹² On September 11th, 2011, Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha responded to the recent murders in the Legislative Assembly. She claimed that the Paramakudi episode was the "culmination of a chain of events" triggered by defamatory graffiti against Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar (*ibid.*). She did not denounce or question the authority of the police or refer to the long history of violence against Dalits in the area (Geetha 2011).

Thevars, demonstrating that in such moments both castes oppose the state and fight for symbolic sovereignty that sometimes overlaps with, but is ultimately independent of government rule.

Fourth and finally, I return to the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā, arguing that it amounts to a Devendra occupation of Paramakudi through which they transform memories of devastating intercaste violence into their heroic victories, and claim the ideals of Tamil masculinity developed within Dravidianist discourse as their own. The iconography and ritual processes that color the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā, help the Devendras redefine themselves, though state power heavily influences the outcomes of such redefinitions.

Tense Moments in the Mahāl

Because of the police shooting that resulted in the death of seven Devendra men in 2011, 2012 was a particular tense year for the Paramakudi Devendra Panpaatu Kazhagam (henceforth, “the Kazhagam”) – the predominant caste organization in the town that oversees the preparation and celebration of the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā. Comprised entirely of middle aged and older men, the Kazhagam manages the Mahāl, which is rented out for events during most of the year, but which becomes the central office for planning the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā around July. The Kazhagam is charged with the responsibility of designing and distributing invitations for the event, as well as decorating the Samadhi, and overseeing the production of flexboards and cutouts to fill some of the town’s space, which they also share with other Devendras, Devendra organizations, and political parties. Throughout July and August, the Kazhagam holds public meetings that are attended by Devendra men from the surrounding villages and towns and sometimes also from other parts of Tamil Nadu. It is the space in which Devendra men negotiate their identity as a caste deeply connected to the soil of Southern Tamil Nadu yet stretched across the state. They

work also to master the delicate balance between valiant heroism and other types of honor and prestige that are linked to agrarian civility and also to modernity and urbanity.

Only a few days before the event, on the September 9th, I headed to the Devendra Mahāl to attend the preparatory meeting about which Murthi, the junior attorney and secretary of the Kazhagam who I discussed in the previous chapter, had informed me. As I ascended the Mahāl's short, concrete staircase, I passed the golden bust of Immanuel and two seated, sleepy looking police officers who had been posted there to prevent "problems" for an entire week surrounding the function. I entered the spacious, well-worn hall, and walked to the far side of it where about fifteen Devendra men were sitting in folding metal chairs, deeply engaged in conversation, so much so that my presence did not draw much attention. Not long after I greeted the men and took my seat, an officer who I later learned was the Deputy Superintendent of Police (the head of the police of Ramanathapuram District), and two assisting officers entered the hall. A few of the men rose from their chairs, while others stayed seated.

Standing before the semicircle of Devendras, beside his two attendant officers, the DSP began: "We have to make sure that the situation of the roads is safe. There should be no problems so some roads must be avoided. We will block some of the roads because the people should not pass through areas that are restricted. If there is a problem ..." The DSP was cut off by protests from the audience. Karuppiah, the president of the Kazhagam, raised his voice above the others. "But sār [Tamilized version of sir], it is very important that people pass through those areas. There is no other way. Sār, people will be coming from all over Tamil Nadu." Talking over Karuppiah, the DSP continued, "You should not put big flexboards here and there and everywhere. They will not like that, and there could be some problems." With that, the officers turned on the heels of their big black boots and headed to the door. A few weak cries of, "Sār,

but sār ...” trailed behind them, but the officers did not turn around. Karuppiah looked down, sighed, and shuffled out the door behind them.

Karuppiah’s somewhat docile reaction to the demands of the police can be attributed in part to his disposition and personal history. He spent most of his life in a village where he was primarily an agriculturist, and also took up the low level government post of village administrative officer when he was in his forties, which led to his selection for the position of Kazhagam president in 2011.¹¹³ In addition to the small span of Karupiah’s tenure as president, which probably contributed to his geniality, he was soft-spoken and somewhat timid even in the context of his own home where I visited him several times. He quite neatly embodied the ideal of the humble farmer unlikely to start any trouble, and was criticized by many of his caste fellows, including some of his relatives, who told me that Karuppiah was unfit to be president on account of his gentle nature.

However, Karuppiah’s acquiescence to the police was also indicative of a split within the Kazhagam between those who advocated radical militancy and revolution, and those who supported electoral politics and juridical processes as their preferred approaches to change. The first group, which was led by the former president of the Kazhagam, along with his friends and supporters who had roles within his administration, aimed to flout the government’s authority in the spirit of EVR, Dalit organizations like the aforementioned VCK (Freedom Panthers Party) under the leadership of Thirumavalavan, and other global representatives of revolution like Karl Marx. They pitted the Devendras against “the establishment”, and at times advocated the annihilation of caste through whatever means necessary. The second group, represented by

¹¹³ According to the Government of Tamil Nadu, the village administrative officer “is the basic level administrative functionary.” Some of his/her duties include maintaining revenue records, tax collection, reporting important happenings in the village to higher authorities, and setting up polling booths for elections” (<http://www.tnpscportal.in/2014/04/Role-of-Village-Administrative-Officer-VAO.html>).

Karuppiah, his administration and their followers, was loath to resist the government through which, they believed, their upward mobility was and could continue to be facilitated.

The events that unfolded at the Mahāl reflected the divide between those who wanted to oppose the government, and those who saw cooperation with state authorities as both necessary and desirable. After Karuppiah followed the police out the door, the other men sat murmuring amongst themselves until they were interrupted by Chandrabose's entrance into the hall. Despite his small stature, Chandrabose is a great figure in the Paramakudi Devendra community because of his relatively early involvement in the Devendra's mass political assertion. He is a household name, recognized by Devendras and various Dalit castes in many parts of Southern Tamil Nadu. In 1988, he established the Tiyagi Immanuvel Peravai, an atheistic, leftist Dalit Rights Organization, which was instrumental in increasing the size and visibility of the event on September 11th. As he told me another occasion, "the reason for this event is really me!" In the Mahāl, all eyes were on Chandrabose as he stood in front of the circle and demanded with his fist raised in the position of aggressive interrogation, "What happened?" Murthi, who also happens to be Karuppiah's nephew, attempted to explain, "Sār, the police came and have told us that we must do it a certain way. They are saying that we must do this and that; that we shouldn't go there, where they [Thevars] are." Chandrabose cut Murthi off with a scolding. "For what reason? Why would you accept the police saying such a thing?" he shouted. "Why? For what reason should we listen to them?"

Chandrabose sat down, and in his distinctly nasal, penetrating voice began to recount the trajectory of confused commands to which the Devendras had been subjected by local government authorities: "OK, so, on the 21st [of August], the Collector said we were not allowed to put up any flexboards. On the 30th, he said we could. Then there was a meeting on the 26th.

They [the officials at the Collectorate] said, ‘talk to the SP [Superintendent of Police] about flexboards’. Murthi went and talked to the SP.” At that point in Chandrabose’s monologue, Karuppiah quietly reentered the hall and sat down. Chandrabose continued without acknowledging the official president’s entrance: “The Collector and SP say that whenever they put up flexboards, there are problems, but we must put the flexboards up. We must put them up!” Karuppiah interjected, “No! We must do what they say. If the Collector has given orders, we must do as he says.” Quick to rebut, Chandrabose shot out of his seat and began yelling, “No, that’s not ok. What they [the authorities] have said is not just!” In a flash, everyone sprung from their seats, and began shouting at each other. The volume and speed of overlapping voices made it impossible for me to understand each person’s words with precision, but what I did understand is the intensity of emotions and disagreements that suffuse the preparation for and performance of the function. Devendra men deeply desire to fill the landscape with signs of their caste’s strength, but they also must negotiate the restrictions of state authorities, as well as the legitimacy that alignment with the state affords them.

As the energy of the heated argument began to dwindle, the leader of a nearby Devendra village organization, raised his hand, pointed his finger, and shouted, “We’re going on the road even if they arrest us!” The vocal density and volume in the Mahāl rose again, and Chandrabose headed towards the door in frustration. Sateesh, who is exceptional in that he maintains a close friendship with the leaders of both the anti-establishment and pro-establishment factions of the Kazhagam, ran after Chandrabose, and convinced him to stay with words that no one else could hear. As Sateesh and Chandrabose were crossing the hall to rejoin their caste fellows, many of whom remained engrossed in dwindling argumentation, one of the officers who had been guarding the building entered the Mahāl, and demanded, “What is happening? I heard noise.” A

small faction of the group, including Chandrabose, Karuppiah, and Murthi crossed the hall to attend to the police officer, while the others sat down quietly. The officer left after a very brief discussion, and Murthi closed the door behind him. The conversation resumed, albeit in hushed tones. Ultimately, the group agreed to send representatives to the taluk office to talk to the inspector.¹¹⁴ Karuppiah suggested that they send five people, and the group turned to Chandrabose imploring him to act. Sateesh beseeched him, “Sār, you must go, sār. They will listen to you.” Chandrabose acquiesced and he, Karuppiah, Murthi, and Murugan departed without further discussion. The meeting unceremoniously ended, and we all filed out of the Mahāl.

The meeting in the Mahāl, one among many such meetings that I would attend over the course of my research tenure, offers insight into the internal politics of the Kazhagam, which are reflective of the gendered tensions that trouble the development of Devendra identity. Devendra men want to be seen in the aggressive images of their flexboards. They want to associate with, even embody the boldness of Immanuel and modern-day legends like John Pandian who are also likened to each other. But unbridled defiance is broken by the insistence of some men that they abide by the government’s restrictions not only to avoid its exercise of force but also to accrue the authority that comes along with its recognition.

The latter motivation is partially rooted in the ideal of kauravam, which I defined as “prestige” in accordance with Dean’s gloss (2013, 185), and which I linked to association with wealthy and/or high status individuals. Representatives of the government are particularly effective in bestowing kauravam because of the wealth and high status that the state, as the nexus

¹¹⁴ The Taluk Office houses the municipal body that falls between the district and the village in terms of administration. It oversees land records and related matters. Its jurisdiction includes an area of land including a city or town that serves as its administrative center, as well as other smaller towns and villages. Paramakudi is the administrative center of its taluk.

of modern-day power, bears. For example, when government agents participate in one's political and religious functions, the status of the state itself appears as a supporter. For the Devendras who are in the process of deciding how they will dictate the "correct" behavior of their caste, refusing to comply with the government would signal a rejection of the recognition it may offer.¹¹⁵ It is no surprise then that some Devendras call for compliance. But the Devendra leaders in the Mahāl clashed over the issue of appeasing the government because some of them refused to reign in the excesses of vīram (heroism, bravery), which are thought to be the natural endowment of the originary Tamils that they claim to be. From the perspective of the vīran ("hero"), acquiescence to the government's orders profoundly transgresses the sovereignty that is his birthright.

The tension that can arise between vīram, on the one hand, and kauravam, on the other hand, is not limited to the Kazhagam, but instead troubles the fledgling caste conglomeration throughout the state. What is more, it is not just a matter of disagreements and negotiations between Devendras, but is also a source of vexation for individuals. A conversation I had with Thangam, the older man who had travelled from Chennai to Paramakudi for the event, aptly demonstrates the individual-level tension that burdens Devendra subjectivity.

As I mentioned above, Thangam had been eager to share his story with me from the moment of our initial meeting. Prior to extending the invitation to lunch, Thangam and some of his admirers shared glimpses of his personal biography as we sat in the Mahāl. Thangam was born in a village near Paramakudi, notorious, like so many of the villages in the area, for assiduous practices of untouchability and intermittent eruptions of brutal intercaste violence.

¹¹⁵ The gift of recognition from the government may be viewed through the lens of Marcel Mauss' classic understanding of the nature of gift giving. Recognition requires the reciprocal gift of obedience (1925, 1954).

However, as he and his admirers reiterated, he is now a *periyavaṅka*, a “great, large one”.¹¹⁶

College educated in Chennai and retired from his prestigious post as Income Tax Officer, he is the president of the Sagotharar Marumalarchi Nala Sangam (Brothers Renaissance Good Organization), an assembly of upper crust, mostly Chennai-based Devendras, including high court judges, members of the Tamil Nadu legislative assembly, doctors, and professors.¹¹⁷

After my morning visit to the Samadhi during the 2012 Niṇaiṇu Viḷā, I returned to the Mahāl to meet Thangam as per his instructions. He was there, sitting on an aluminum chair and reading some documents, from which he glanced up when I arrived. We set out immediately. I treaded along the dusty alley behind the main road, observing Thangam’s purposeful gait. Like so many Tamil men of high standing, Thangam walked with his back arched, his stomach pushed forward, and his arms swinging loosely. He turned to me with a smile, raised his thin right arm, and asked, “You know [about] the shooting last year?” He referred to the police shooting that had occurred exactly one-year prior: “I ran from the police!” He looked up, spitting out indignant laughter. “Can you believe it was like that? A man of my level, of my education and age had to run from the police.” I shook my head from side to side in agreement with his incredulity, though I was puzzled by his smiles and laughter. With another cackle, he continued. “There was blood! There was even blood on my *vēṣṭi*, and all over.”¹¹⁸ I ran straight to their house.” He pointed to Ganesan’s house as we approached it.

Thangam who already accrues and displays *kauravam* through his position as a government employee and a wealthy urbanite, referred to the dire situation in which he was entangled at the Niṇaiṇu Viḷā the previous year to evidence the masculine power he

¹¹⁶ Although *periyavaṅka* is a plural noun, literally meaning “great ones” or “big men”, my interlocutors often used it to refer to singular individuals. As is the case with the usage of pronouns, the usage of the plural *periyavaṅka* to refer to one person is a way to emphasize honor and respect. Such usages are something akin to the royal we.

¹¹⁷ Notably, nowhere in the name of the organization is there an indication that it is comprised of Devendras.

¹¹⁸ A *vēṣṭi* is (in Tamil Nadu) the usually white sarong that is worn by men, particularly on special occasions. It is widely understood to be “traditional” Tamil attire.

demonstrated as he withstood the force of the police. While he did have to run from them, he later laughed in the face of danger that was so close that it splattered on his clothing. Thangam's account was an attempt to lay claim to raw vīram, which may otherwise have been contained by the demands of civility befitting of his job and financial standing.

Upon entering Ganesan's house, it was obvious to me that his was a life of relative comfort. His home featured upholstered furniture and a table and chairs, which were nonetheless inadequate to the task of accommodating all of the guests who were flowing into the house. We sat in a row on the floor behind banana leaves that had been laid out for dining, and were disposed of and replaced for each new guest.¹¹⁹ Like prasadam in a Hindu temple – the meal and blessing that is distributed freely to devotees after prayer – or like the meals distributed to pilgrims in rest houses, plentiful food was served to many waves of guests, invited and uninvited, known and unknown.

Although all the guests were Devendras, or at least presumed to be, there were representatives from a wide range of economic classes. Ganesan's house and the festival in general were thus spaces in which otherwise heterogeneous Devendras united to negotiate who they were as a caste. Agricultural laborers, auto-rickshaw drivers, and construction workers sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Thangam and his friends from Chennai. Almost everyone engaged in asking and answering questions about their native villages and about their presence or absence last year. All were served generously by the women of the house, who circulated to distribute seconds and thirds as is customary. Not only an array of vegetables, but expensive mutton and chicken were served to the appreciative guests as compliments to the chefs mounted.

Unsurprisingly, as the meal progressed, certain voices rose above others. Thangam and a few

¹¹⁹ South Indians eat on banana leaves. Although metal plates are now common, formal events, such as weddings, generally require the use of leaves.

other men of means came to dominate the conversation. To no one in particular and everyone at once, Thangam began talking. “This year, I am helping to prevent problems,” he began, euphemistically referring to last year’s shooting. “I met with the cabinet minister to discuss these matters. He is a good man, but he is criticized by our people.” “Why?” I asked, hoping to gain insight into the political conflicts that trouble Devendra mobilization. “Our custom is to plough and fight!” Thangam bellowed with a smile as he shot his left fist into the air. The others looked on, also smiling.

With such comments, Thangam asserted the *vīram* of the Devendras without sacrificing their agrarian civility cultivated with the plough. He attributed the dispositions he inhabits to his caste fellows with whom he was sharing a meal, thus inviting them to model the ideals that he and many other Devendras project onto the figure of Immanuel.

Immanuel, the Model Devendra Man

The personal history of Immanuel as it is remembered by Devendra interlocutors with particular passion on September 11th and also more subtly throughout the year underwrites their claims to *vīram*, as well as their ethical predominance over the Thevars. It is demonstrative of the Devendras’ reformulation of their history in order to refuse victimization and assert their ultimate victory as the heroes of the Tamil land.

Though details were usually vague and subject to some changes, the general outline of the Immanuel story was consistent among my Devendra friends and acquaintances who recounted it with the narrative amplitude that Walter Benjamin probably would have appreciated (Benjamin 1936, 89). Benjamin’s claim that the art of storytelling does not involve the dissemination of information (raw data), but instead relays an experience that is shared in the moment of telling, was reflected in many accounts of Immanuel’s story that I heard over the

course of my research (*ibid.*). This was not a tale that was explained didactically or reflected upon with extra-narrative comments. It was one that was relived in the tone and tenor of the voices and in the bodily movements that recounted it.

Ponnammal, the retired principal and widow who I mentioned in the previous chapter, offered me insight into the empowering effects that recounting Immanuel's story can generate. One hot, bright morning, I was sitting with Ponnammal and her daughter Devi at their house, bemoaning my failure to locate precise information about Immanuel. Ponnammal, who continues to bear the pedagogical tone of her former position as a government school principal, met my frustration with her own. She loudly and slowly explained what she sees as a very clear-cut chain of events. "There was Immanuel, right, and he and Thevar [Muthuramalingam] were at a meeting at Mudukulathor [sic].¹²⁰" "The Congress meeting, right?" I asked misguidedly.

Ponnammal continued evenly:

Yes and they were both in the Congress. You see, Thevar came in and Immanuel did not stand up. He sat, like this, with his legs crossed, and his foot pointing towards Thevar. Like this! ... And Thevar said something wrong and Immanuel extended his hand like this, like this. No one else would say anything except for Immanuel. But then they [the Thevars] got mad at his bravery, at his *vīram*.

As Ponnammal told the story, she reenacted Immanuel's gestures, crossing her legs and pointing her foot, as well as her finger, thus reiterating Immanuel's rejection of Thevar supremacy and his own "untouchable" subjectivity.

Muthuramalingam Thevar was a wealthy landlord and Indian nationalist who is revered by today's Thevars as a leader whose supremacy borders on divinity. He and his acolytes would have expected Immanuel to abide by the imperative to stand when a superior (and sometimes also an equal) enters a gathering, which is common to many contexts throughout the world. Immanuel's crossed legs, we are to assume, would have offended Thevar who considered

¹²⁰ The meeting was not in Mudukulathor, but in the town of Ramanathapuram.

himself superior on account of his caste, wealth, and age. While sitting with one's legs crossed is not an act of assertion in and of itself, it signifies the cross-legged individual's superiority over co-present others whose feet remain more humbly affixed to the floor. Even more offensive to Thevar sensibilities is the idea that Immanuel pointed his foot and finger at their leader. Pointing your foot at someone is an act of aggressive disrespect and insult in South Asia, and directing one's index finger at another is again a sign of superiority akin to a mother or boss wagging her or his finger in scolding.

It is important to note that Ponnammal focused on Immanuel's corporeal movements in her mimetic narration, thereby actively sharing in his subversion, despite being born just after his death. She first referred to what Immanuel did with his body, and then only inferred that he also uttered something orally: "Thevar said something wrong and Immanuel extended his hand like this, like this. No one else would say anything except for Immanuel." Even when Immanuel did speak, it mattered very little what he said because he had already spoken with the gestures that Ponnammal mimicked. She narrated the story with her body, sitting "like this", with her legs crossed, and extended her hand and her finger with the zeal that she ascribed to Immanuel. While she pointed her foot at the wall, rather than at me, her performance of such an offensive posture nonetheless marked her potential for aggressive assertion.

The deep significance of such an act for Ponnammal must be understood in the context of her personal history. A woman, a widow, and a Devendra, Ponnammal faces intersecting stigmas that reach back to the early moments of her childhood and that stretch into the future. While the most overt forms of discrimination on the basis of untouchability have been largely eradicated in Tamil Nadu, Ponnammal and many of my older interlocutors remember their overt, systematic exclusion from public spaces, such as water pumps, temples and tea stalls, as well as their

isolation from caste Hindu children during their school days. Ponnammal began and completed her studies sitting outside in the schoolyard where she could be prevented from coming into physical contact with her dominant caste classmates. Remarkably she ended up working as a principal of a school, and her imitation of Immanuel's corporeal assertion reflects the confidence that arose with her upward mobility.

Immanuel himself was not so fortunate. After his fateful meeting with Muthuramalingam Thevar, he was shot and killed by a group of Muthuramalingam's followers in broad daylight as he stood at a bus stop in Paramakudi. My interlocutors consistently described his murder as martyrdom carried out for the sake of the community.

Drawing a line across her neck, above which she bore a grimace that she exaggerated probably to ensure my understanding, Ponnammal told me that "they killed him, those goondas, right over there in Paramakudi at the bus stop. He was a great martyr for our community [literally, he did a great martyrdom for our community]." Ponnammal and many of my Devendra friends and acquaintances thus maintained the *vīram* and asserted the honor of Immanuel. In discussing the broader context of intercaste violence in 1957, they emphasized and imitated Immanuel's transgression, and tended to downplay his murder and the outbreak of violence that followed it. Accounts of such moments of violence could suggest that the Devendras were both vulnerable and brutal.

The Intersections of Caste and Party Politics

Immanuel's murder was the immediate impetus that precipitated the Mudukulathor riots (also called the Ramnad riots), the deadliest period of intercaste violence in the recent history of Tamil Nadu. Notorious throughout the state, the violent outbreak is one of the primary reasons for commonly held stereotypes that the people of Southern Tamil Nadu are particularly prone to

primordial violence. Contrary to such archetypal assumptions, the riots have a complicated backstory that is rooted in the loss of Thevar power that accompanied the transition into electoral politics, as well as Muthuramalingam's extremist populism through which he attempted to reverse their decline. Muthuramalingam's movement and the conflict with the Devendras that followed it underline the intercaste struggle for authority that occurred alongside the development of parliamentary democracy, and against the incumbent government.

Following a logic similar to the one that became reified as the basis of Dravidianist politics, Muthuramalingam pitted the "people" against the Congress establishment that had attracted Immanuvel into its fold. He posited himself as a representative of the rural masses, although he hailed from a wealthy landowning family, initially focusing his energies on the disadvantages suffered by the Thevars in the wake of the Criminal Tribes Act (henceforth, CTA) of 1920, which I discussed in the second chapter.¹²¹

He started a massive campaign to abolish the CTA, which helped draw diverse sections of the incipient Thevar caste conglomeration together. He also appealed to the frustration of profound socio-economic losses under the weight of colonial rule by agitating for increased rights and wages for workers at local mills.

Importantly, Muthuramalingam was vehemently opposed to colonial rule, at first joining the Indian National Congress in 1936. He did not imagine "the people" in opposition to North Indians and Brahmins, but instead pitted them against colonial rulers and their powerful and wealthy indigenous collaborators. However, by 1939, Muthuramalingam had lost faith in the Congress because of its failure to withdraw the CTA, and joined Subhas Chandra Bose's

¹²¹ In accordance with their fears of political instability and banditry, as well as their incapacity to incorporate nomadic practices into the economics of empire, the Raj implemented the CTA in order to limit the movements of Maravars and Kallars (Thevar subcastes) in Madurai, Ramnad, and Tirunelveli Districts. The law required "criminal tribes" to register with their local police departments on a daily basis and thus subject themselves to the hardship of needless travel and surveillance.

Forward Bloc, a new, leftist, nationalist party formed by a schism in the Congress.¹²² In India's first general election in 1952, Muthuramalingam contested as the Forward Bloc candidate for the Aruppukottai constituency in the Lok Sabha election and for the Mudukulathur constituency in the assembly election. He won both seats and chose to vacate his position in the Lok Sabha. He adopted the exact same tactic in the 1957 election, and again won both seats. However, in 1957, he chose to keep his Lok Sabha seat and vacate his seat in the assembly. As per the usual practice, the empty seat Muthuramalingam left in the assembly necessitated a bye-election.

Wanting to retain the seat for his party, Muthuramalingam intensified his criticism of the incumbent government in the months leading up to the bye-election.¹²³ We find detailed records from this period in the government archive. For example, a confidential Government Order of the Public Department¹²⁴ filed on November 30, 1957 details the Chief Minister's concern over Muthuramalingam's sharp censure of his administration and his character.¹²⁵ The order begins with the Chief Secretary's report that the Chief Minister, Kamaraj Nadar, had requested that Muthuramalingam Thevar be investigated for defamation on the basis of his speeches. In order to commence investigation, the Superintendent of Police provided the details of a public meeting of the Forward Bloc held at Peraiyur (Ramanathapuram District) on June 28, 1957 before an enthusiastic crowd of seven thousand. Muthuramalingam began the speech he delivered there by castigating the Congress Party for their baseless criticism and unjust practices. Kamaraj Nadar,

¹²² Muthuramalingam was also opposed to the Justice Party because they too had refused to abolish the CTA.

¹²³ Muthuramalingam persistently voiced his opposition to EVR's DK (Dravida Kazhagam), the Congress, and the Communists (Government of Madras 1956, 79).

¹²⁴ The Public Department which functions under the direct control of the Chief Secretary deals with important matters concerning the General Administration of the State. In addition to arranging administrative meetings and implementing welfare schemes, the department is in charge of law and order issues, including the State Human Rights Commission (<http://www.tn.gov.in/department/24>).

¹²⁵ Government Orders, or GOs as they are more commonly known, are collections of documents that deal with a particular action of the government. All the documents that pertain to a particular action, such as letters, transcripts of phone calls, petitions, and affidavits are collected by departments that undertook the action and stored as compact archives. The Finance Department, the Public Department, and the Home Department all produce GOs.

he claimed, favored the merchants of the Nadar community, who were once “paupers” and had become rich by exploiting agriculturalists. Relying on the “good heart of the people” rather than the “black marketeering and counterfeiting” of the Congress Party, Muthuramalingam promised to fight back. The Home Minister had said that he would put Muthuramalingam down, “but”, Muthuramalingam maintained, “nothing can be done by the ... government. Even the British government couldn’t put me down.” Thevar concluded his speech with a warning. He vowed to fight to establish “real freedom in the country” by ending the Congress party, and predicted the coming of the “third world war” (Thevar 1957 in GO 3358).

A few hours later, in Kamuthi (Ramanathapuram District), Muthuramalingam made similar claims in his address to a crowd of about one thousand two hundred spectators. He warned ministers not to circulate false propaganda against him, and threatened violence in the event of improper elections: “If the elections are not conducted properly, the union government will not hesitate to condemn the Madras government and the imminent third world war will begin in Mudukulathor Taluk” (Thevar 1957 in GO 3358). Interestingly, Muthuramalingam called on the power of the nation-state to overcome his regional opponents, which makes sense given the fact that the Forward Bloc was and still is a national-level party. But Muthuramalingam’s Northern allies never came to support him. He and his followers were left on their own, clinging to the caste-based power that had declined under the pressure of the democratic elections that brought former “paupers” like the Nadars into important leadership positions.

Violent Eruptions at the Obstructed Crossroads of Sovereignty

It was in the context of such frustrated war cries that intercaste violence broke out, and agents of the government stepped in as another force against which both the Thevars and

Devendras fought in their attempts to establish the sovereignty that they claimed as their birthright. At that time controlled by Kamaraj Nadar, the government closely monitored Muthuramalingam's activities in the interregnum period between his election and the Mudukulathor bye-election. Another confidential Government Order of the Public Department reported that "communal ill-feeling" intensified in the context of the election, in which the Nadars supported the Congress Party, while the Thevars supported anyone who ran against them. After the general election, tensions continued to rise because of Muthuramalingam's "inflammatory speeches inciting his community men to harass the Nadars and Harijans [Devendras and probably also Paraiyars]" who had offered their support to the Congress in large numbers. There had been an increased influx of petitions from "Harijans" claiming that the Thevars had been harassing them, interfering with crop production, and subjecting them to all forms of social boycott (GO 3139, 1957).

Probably written and definitely approved by Anna George who was Deputy Secretary to the Government of the Public Department at the time, the GO includes derogatory remarks about the Thevar caste and a flattering portrayal of the Nadars that bespeaks the bias of the government, as well as stereotypes about Tamil Nadu's Southeastern region:

The predominant community in the backward coastal taluks of Ramanathapuram district is the Thevar community, otherwise known as the Maravars. They consist mostly of illiterate criminals and highly communal minded [sic] people ready by nature to take offence at the least provocation. Another feature of this community is their strong personal loyalties to their leader, Sri U Muthuramalinga Thevar M.P., whose word is law to the whole community. For years there has been communal ill-feeling between the Thevars and the Nadars another enterprising and prosperous business community of the same district (GO 3139, 1957).

Despite the close surveillance of the government and the election of T.V. Sasivarna Thevar of the Forward Bloc in the bye-election, the situation continued to deteriorate. Thevar domination persisted and came to be directed primarily at Devendras and Paraiyars perhaps because the Nadars no longer posed any electoral threat. Oddly, the Public Department does not

analyze this shift, which is stated matter-of-factly: “the Thevars now took to harassing the Harijans instead of the Nadars” (ibid.).

Thevar aggression against Devendras and other Scheduled Castes was probably related to the results of the elections, which significantly shifted the balance of power in the state. Mostly due to the opportunities offered by reserved constituencies, members of Scheduled Castes were well represented among the victors of the legislative assembly elections in 1957. In fact, their numbers equaled those of the “Unscheduled Backward Classes” – a designation that includes Thevars and Nadars. Eighty-five individuals of Non-Backward Classes, eighty individuals of Unscheduled Backward Classes, eighty individuals of Scheduled Castes, and one individual of a Scheduled Tribe were elected (Hanumanthappa 1962, 4). Perhaps even more disturbing to Thevar chauvinists were the petitions filed by members of Scheduled Castes and reviewed in the Madras High Court. Following the bye-election, V. Arunagiri filed an election petition (No. 480, 1957) challenging its result on the grounds that Sasivarna’s men had committed offenses at the time of polling (Aiyar 1959, 201-202). Evidently, many Devendras whose ancestors had worked for Thevar landlords had risen to challenge them.

In order to ease rising communal tension, the Collector of Ramanathapuram convened a peace committee on the tenth of September 1957 – a practice that is still protocol under similar circumstances today.¹²⁶ The Public Department recorded the conflict that arose in the meeting, which bolstered enmity rather than ushering in peace (GO 3139, 1957):

During this conference, an altercation took place between Sri Muthuramalinga Thevar and Sri Emmanuel, a Harijan leader, which would indicate the attitude adopted by Sri Muthuramalinga Thevar and his followers to the Harijans of that area in general. The incident is that Sri Muthuramalinga Thevar is reported to have asked Sri Emmanuel, Secretary of the Harijan Welfare Association, Mudukulathur, at the conference whether he could pose himself as a leader of the same stature as himself and whether his assurances on

¹²⁶ Often abbreviated to Collector, the District Collector is the foremost Indian Administrative Service Officer in charge of revenue collection and general administration of India’s districts. The position was established under British rule.

behalf of his community were worth having. Sri Emmanuel seems to have retorted that though he was not of the same stature as Sri Thevar yet [sic] he could represent his community and speak on its behalf (GO 3139, 1957).

This official report is very different from Ponnammal's account, which is nonetheless the predominant version told and retold in pamphlets, songs, speeches, posters, and conversations. In addition to the comparative ease with which it can be visually rendered, the popular story recounted by Ponnammal obscures Immanuel's acquiescence to Muthuramalingam. Immanuel did not, according to the Public Department, posit himself as a leader whose stature was equal to that of Muthuramalingam – *yet*. The popular version of the story also serves to attribute Immanuel's martyrdom to a greater offense than merely asserting his right to represent his own community. If the government's account of the meeting is correct, Immanuel was killed for a very minor infraction.

On the eleventh of September 1957, Immanuel was murdered in Paramakudi (GO 3139, 1957; GO 3418, 1959). Immanuel spent the night at the house of another local Devendra leader, Perumal Peter in the nearby village of Peraiyur after the meeting of the Peace Committee, and headed out the following day, despite his host's warnings. He had intended to go to a function at the Tamil Evangelical Liturgical School in honor of Bharatiyar (1882-1921), the famed independence activist and social reformer. After Immanuel arrived in Paramakudi to transfer buses, he stood under the arch next to the bus stop to smoke. As Perumal Peter's nephew put it, "the attackers were already there and took advantage of this moment to put an end to Immanuel." Immanuel thus became a martyr, shot and killed for his caste.

It is important to note that Perumal Peter who like Immanuel was educated, adjudicated disputes, and worked for the social uplift of his caste is not remembered with such zeal among the Devendras. This has to do with his peaceful death. Unlike Immanuel, he did not die as a

martyr, and thus could not be the ultimate *vīraṅ* whose spilled blood could infuse his community with new life.

Muthramalingam Thevar and eleven others were accused in the case. Muthuramalingam was charged with abetment or instigation of a murder, and was later acquitted. Of the remaining eleven, all were acquitted save three whose sentences were reduced from the death penalty to life sentences after an appeal (GO 3418, 1959).

News of Immanuvel's murder spread quickly, setting off the deadliest communal riots in the remembered history of Tamil Nadu. Violence erupted in Arunkulam, a village about twenty kilometers outside of Paramakudi, following a conflict over a song. According to the Public Department,

At about 11A.M. on 13-9-1957, a Maravar [Thevar] mob attacked Harijans [Devendras and maybe Paraiyars] of Arunkulam Village with velsticks [spears] and aruvals [scythes] and murdered 5 of them including one woman. They also set fire to 24 Harijan houses and threw four of the dead bodies into the fire. The crime was a retaliation by the Maravars against the Harijans because the latter had objected to the singing of a song in praise of Sri Muthuramalinga Thevar in a drama which was enacted at Arunkulam the previous night ... The incident referred to ... had its sequel. The Harijans in their turn gathered together, attacked the Maravars of Arunkulam murdered three of them including two women, set fire to the Maravar houses and threw the dead bodies of Maravars into the fire. 3 Maravars killed. As a result of both the incidents, 9 Harijans and 2 Maravars injured. (2 Maravars died later in the Hospital) (GO 3139, 1957).

The Government Order continued with a list of incidents, the details of which became increasingly sparse and unaffected as the list proceeded. Only the burning to death of "Harijans" inside a church warranted somewhat detailed description:

14-9-1957 Oorakudi ... There was a clash between the Maravars and the Harijans at about 7A.M. Six Harijans were injured; two of them seriously ... 16-9-1957 Ilanjambur and Veerambal ... At about 6A.M. on 16-9-1957 the Maravars of Ilanjambur and Harijans of Veerambal clashed with each other. 4 Maravars including a woman and two Harijans died. 17 Harijans and 2 Maravars were injured. Maravars are reported to have used fire arms. 4 Maravars and 2 Harijans killed. 17 Maravars and 2 Harijans were injured. 16-9-57 Erulandipatti and Senthakottai Mudukulathur. A mob of armed Maravars burnt nearly 60 houses in Erulandipatti and Senthakottai Villages. 3 Harijans including one woman were killed and a Harijan woman was seriously injured. 3 Harijans killed and one Harijan injured. 19-9-1957 Tirupachetty ... A mob of about 500 men entered Tirupachetty Village and set fire to Harijan houses. Not known. 19-9-1957 Nallur ... A Maravar mob is reported to have set fire to Harijan houses. Not known. 19-9-1957 Tiruppavanam Vadi and Piramanoor ... An armed crowd of Maravars set fire to 50 Harijan houses. Not known ... 20-9-

1957 Veerambal ... About 200 Maravars of Ilanjambur and surrounding villages armed with deadly weapons including guns attacked the Harijans of Veerambal who took shelter inside a Church. Maravars smashed the Church windows, set fire to the doors and shot the people inside with their guns ... Two Harijan males killed. 22 harijan males and 10 Harijan females injured.

Attacks, counterattacks, and moments of wanton destruction amounted to a small-scale war between the Devendras and Thevars. But they were not the only factions sustaining the conflict. There was another enemy who posed a threat to the Thevars in particular – the police. In several instances that were concurrent with those described above, civilians faced the police; the people faced uniformed violence, the power of the state. The first shot rang out in Keelathooval, a small village on the road connecting Paramakudi to Mudukulathor. The official record of the event differs markedly from local, civilian accounts. According to GO 3139,

On the fourteenth, a Police party consisting of 4 sections of the Special Armed Police under the command of an Inspector of Police went to Kelathooval with the purpose of apprehending the accused in the Emmanuel murder case ... About 1000 Maravars all armed with deadly weapons surrounded the Police Party and attacked them, Two P.Cs. one Lance Naick and Jamedar were injured. Under the orders of the Inspector of Police, the Police Party opened six rounds of fire. Five Maravars were killed. A large quantity of arms were seized [sic] (GO 3139, 1957).

Not surprisingly, the Public Department records this as a moment of self-defense.

However, the popular consensus amongst both Thevar and Devendra communities today is quite different. Locals remember the police entering the village, facing the resistant Maravars, and remanding five of them. The five victims, various friends and acquaintances told me, were blindfolded, lined up, and shot from behind.

The conflict did not end in Keelathooval.¹²⁷ The Government Order provides another long list of incidents:

¹²⁷ In addition to the accounts I quote above, there were at least three other police encounters: 5. 20.9.1957 Malavarayanandal ... An armed gang of 500 Maravars went about setting fire to Harijan houses and looting properties in Pachari Kaloarani and surrounding villages. A Special Armed Police Party under the lead of Inspector of Police Manamadurai encountered the mob at Malavarayanandal at 5P.M. on 20.9.1957. Police party demanded surrender [sic] of arms. Mob defied the police and hurled lethal weapons upon the police and also pelted stones upon them. Taluk Magistrate, Sivaganga ordered police to open fire. Three rounds were fired. Mob still advanced towards the police party. Three more rounds were fired. One person fell down injured. He died on the way to hospital. One Marava died on the way to hospital. 21.9.1957 Kakoor ... At about 2A.M. ... a police patrol consisting

17-9-1957 Keerandhai ... [in] the evening ... about 1000 armed Maravars had gathered at Keerandhai for the purposes of attacking the surrounding villages. The mob was encountered by a Special Armed Police Party. The mob rushed towards the Police party and attacked them with deadly weapons, such as, bows, arrows, aruvals, velsticks, swords, battle axes and also fire arms. The police opened 7 rounds of fire killing three persons [and] injuring two. On their way to Keerandhai, the mob is reported to have set fire to some Harijan houses in Muthendal Village. 19-9-1957 Perambacheri ... At about 10P.M. ... a police party noticed huts burning in Perambacheri Village. Party went to the village. About 100 armed Maravars surrounded an advance party of police and attacked them. Police had to open 9 rounds of fire in self defence [sic]. Details not known. 20.9.1957 Ulithimadai ... The Inspector of Police Kamudhi went in pursuit of a band of Maravars who were going about setting fire to Harijan houses in some villages in Narikudi Police Station limits. He was accompanied by a Malabar Special Police Party. The Police Party under the lead of the Inspector encountered armed Maravars at Ulithimadai at about 10 A.M. on 20.9.1957. The mob attacked the Police party with deadly weapons. The police opened fire. Four persons were killed. Four Maravars were killed ... (GO 3139, 1957).

The reports immediately following the riots of 1957 demonstrate that the Thevars opposed the government, as they attempted to reconsolidate the authority that they once held in the region. The police attacked and killed Thevars with impunity under the leadership of Kamaraj Nadar, ensuring that their sovereignty was imagined and deeply craved. The alignments of the overlapping authorities of caste and government in the late 1950s were thus quite different from what we see today. Now there is an overrepresentation of Thevars in the police force (Menon et al 2003, 121), and the excessive use of force by the police is overwhelmingly exercised against the Scheduled Castes. This shift is due in part to the offense taken by many dominant castes to the perceived audacity of the Scheduled Castes who have asserted the honor of their past and have come to occupy public spaces in unprecedented ways. Nevertheless, state force is something with which all caste-based political bodies must contend as they negotiate their shifting statuses and assert their sovereignty, despite the fact that they are not ultimately autonomous.

of two sections was fired at. Assailants are supposed to be armed Maravars. Police returned five rounds of fire. No casualties. 21.9.1957 Veerambal ... On seeing torch lights being flashed near Veerambal at about 4A.M. on 21.9.1957 a police party went out to investigate. When police party were about 100 yards from the spot, they were fired at, thrice. No casualties. Police returned four rounds. Assailants are supposed to about 400 armed Maravars who were fleeing from Kakoor [sic] (GO 3139, 1957).”

The Mudukulathor riots were not the last moments of intercaste violence related to Immanuvel. In fact, violence mars the Niṇaivu Viḷā so regularly that it is anticipated. As the month turns from August to September, some of Paramakudi's Devendras send their teenage children to stay with relatives, and the police begin to build their reinforcements. Extra vigilance continues in the region through the first or second week of November on account of the Muthuramalingam Thevar Guru Puja, which is held on October 30th every year.

Oftentimes conflicts between the Devendras and Thevars that begin at other times of the year reach their climax in the weeks surrounding the celebrations of the two caste heroes. For example, the violence that plagued 1997 and 1998 was particularly intense in the late summer months of 1998. Violent clashes between the Devendras and Thevars had first arisen in May of 1997 following the state government's announcement that it would name one branch of the state transportation system the Veeran Sundaralingam Transportation Corporation.

Sundaralingam Kudumbanar, who was posthumously given the honorific title Veeran (vīraṇ) Sundaralingam by his Devendra caste fellows, was an 18th-century general of the army of Veerapandiya Kattabomman, the local-level ("little king") of the area.¹²⁸ Sundaralingam died fighting the British East India Company, and some Devendras claim that he killed himself in the attack, acting as an ancestral prototype of the selfless martyr, who thus, to their minds, paved the way for the present-day heroes of their struggle.¹²⁹ While the vast majority of Devendras cannot provide any more information than that, they depict Sundaralingam as a primordial forbearer,

¹²⁸ Referred to as palaiyakarars, poligars, or "little kings", officials charged with the administration of particular areas became independent rulers after the breakup of the Vijayanagara Empire. Later, the British system of indirect rule empowered them to collect taxes and administer the rule of the Raj.

¹²⁹ The story of Sundaralingam also echoes the political tactics employed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – the collective of militant Tamil insurgents that fought for an independent Tamil nation in Sri Lanka up until their defeat by the Sri Lankan government in 2009. The Tigers are famous for their ruthless tactics among which suicide attacks are one. While the war in Sri Lanka was largely isolated from the political dynamics of Tamil Nadu, today the Tigers and especially their late leader Velupillai Prabhakaran stand as symbols of Tamil vīram taken to the extreme.

whose *vīram* is evidence of their own. Sundaralingam, like Immanuvel, exhibits the ideal of *vīram*, which is legitimated by his connection to state power. His *vīram* is channeled into the protection of the South Indian kingdom against a foreign colonizer, and is thus evidence of his righteousness and Tamil authenticity.

The recognition of their ancestor by the contemporary government was a boon for the Devendras, validating their claims to honor and prestige. The transport corporation would have placed Sundaralingam on par with the most eminent of Tamil figures whose names also appeared on government buses. Among many other preeminent Tamil figures, the Chera, Chola, and Pandiya kings of the ancient period, and Kattabomman himself also had transport corporations in their names. Importantly, the Veeran Sundaralingam Transport Corporation would also raise Sundaralingam up to the status of the Maruthu Pandiya Brothers – the Thevars’ own anti-colonial freedom fighters, who had already received the honor of a bus corporation named after them.

Thevar reactions to the government’s proposed recognition of the Devendra hero were strong. Within one day, numerous buses had been damaged and the Devendra leader Dr. Krishnaswamy was arrested in Theni. Violence escalated quickly, opening up the space for intercaste murders as well as police brutality, which seemed at first to be caste blind in its indiscriminate use of force. Both Dalits and Thevars lost their lives to the bullets of the police.

Protesting the arrest of Krishnaswamy, Dalits observed road blockades throughout the region, which the District Collector of Virudhunagar advised them to disperse. The Collector himself is said to have fired into the crowd that had not heeded his advice, injuring one. Nonetheless, blockades and demonstrations continued throughout the region. On the 5th of May, police fired into a crowd of protesters at Thuraiyur in Tirunelveli district, killing two youths.

Meanwhile, local Thevars continued to protest the renaming of the transport corporation. On the 7th of May, about five thousand Thevars gathered at Puvanathapuram junction near Sivakasi to present a memo to the sub-collector demanding the withdrawal of the name. One hundred policemen were deployed to halt the procession, failed, and fired into the crowd, killing three. The Thevars organized another demonstration on the 13th of May at Senthaiyapuram in Tirunelveli, and a clash followed. A special police task force, which had been deployed to the area proceeded to attack people indiscriminately, including women and children, prior to looting their homes. On the 16th, Palani Kumar, a Dalit youth was killed in a police firing at Thideernagar. Killings, retaliations, and police brutality continued steadily for months (Menon et al 2003).¹³⁰

Violent conflict reached its most gruesome pinnacle on June 30th, 1997 in the town of Melavalavu (Madurai District). The government declared the town a reserved constituency for Scheduled Castes in 1996, and the following year Murugesan, a Paraiyar man, was elected to the position of panchayat president. Members of the local Thevar constituency forcefully reasserted their strength in an act of brutal violence executed on a public bus, the very same space that had been contested a few months prior.¹³¹ Kumar, an eyewitness who was injured in the attack, recounted the event to representatives of Human Rights Watch:

There were nearly forty of them. They were all Thevars. They stabbed Murugesan on the right side of his belly. It was a very long knife. From outside the bus Ramar instructed the Thevars to kill all the Pariahs. Among twelve, six were murdered on the spot. They pulled all six out of the bus and stabbed them on the road with bill hooks more than two feet long.¹³² ... Five Thevars joined together, put Murugesan on the ground outside the bus, and chopped off his head, then threw it in a well half a kilometer away ... They deliberately took the head and poured the blood on other dead bodies (Narula 1999).

¹³⁰ Underneath the heavy hand of the state, Devendras and Thevars fought each other. It was a triangulated conflict.

¹³¹ Reserved Constituencies are areas in which political positions are held for members of particular groups (Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Backwards Classes, Anglo-Indians, and women) based on their relative percentage of the population in a given area. General candidates cannot contest from within these constituencies, which exist for parliamentary, assembly, and municipal elections.

¹³² A billhook is an agricultural tool with a hooked blade. It is usually used for cutting small woody material like shrubs and branches.

Murugesan and his friends, who were Paraiyars rather than Devendras, were the hapless recipients of the Thevar backlash that followed the inauguration of the Veeran Sundaralingam Transportation Corporation.¹³³ The Thevars failed to distinguish between the two Scheduled Castes not only because they refused affirmative recognition, but also because they were aware that both castes, indeed Scheduled Castes writ large, were ascending as they fell. Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi responded to the horrors of Melavalavu by revoking the new title of the transport corporation, and more broadly, by enacting what Paneerselvam calls “a large scale renaming,” which had come into effect by July 3, 1997 (1997). He declared that caste specific figures and names would no longer be used to name public institutions or spaces.

Despite Karunanidhi’s attempts to ease tensions, the momentum of violence in Ramanathapuram District continued to increase as September approached. On July 17th Pandithurai, a Scheduled Caste man of Usinakkottai was hacked to death on his way home at night. On July 24th, in Mudukulathur, Thevars looted and burnt down Scheduled Caste houses. The following day Mudukulathur’s statue of Muthuramalingam was found damaged. On the 26th, Thevars and Scheduled Castes clashed in front of the police station and one Scheduled Caste man was killed. By the 28th the scene had shifted to Paramakudi. Thevars stole thirty goats from Scheduled Castes on July 28th, and Vellaichamy, a Yadhava, was murdered on the 29th.¹³⁴ The police responded by entering Andipuram, and attacking Scheduled Castes. No one was killed, but many Scheduled Caste homes were destroyed. On August 4th, the body of a Thevar youth was found in a well at Thachanallur. Later that day police opened fire on Scheduled Caste protesters, killing a nineteen-year-old girl, and injuring a bank employee. On August 9th,

¹³³ Devendras, Thevars, and Paraiyars were not the only groups involved in the communal violence of 1997. Conflicts also broke out between Nadars and Dalits, between Naidus and Dalits, between Yadhavas and Dalits, and between Muslims and Thevars (Menon and Banerjea 2003, 127-139).

¹³⁴ Yadhavas are classified as an Other Backwards Class in many parts of Southern Tamil Nadu but their status tends to be slightly higher than that of the Thevars. Their traditional occupation is goat and cow shepherding.

Chellathurai, a Devendra teacher, was murdered at Thachanallur, immediately leading to an outbreak of violence in the village. A seventy-year-old Thevar was murdered, a Scheduled Caste man was murdered, and sixteen buses were set on fire (Menon and Banerjea et al, 138-139). The violence that troubled Thachanallur drew the militant Devendra leader John Pandian to the village, and led to the migration of a number of Devendra families out of the village (Gorringe 2005, 142). Many of them ended up in Paramakudi.

In 1998, violence resurged not long after Devendra assertions at the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā, which was celebrated amidst heavy police presence (Narula 1999, 122). As Gorringe notes, Professor Gnanasekaran, a social historian from Neyveli University, addressed the crowd at the function, stating proudly, “We are no longer slaves” (ibid., 142). In the following weeks, which were also the moments of the Thevars’ preparations for and performance of their parallel and larger scale celebration of Muthuramalingam, caste mobilization surged. Thevars responded to a statewide Dalit conference held in Chennai by organizing a rally on October 4, 1998 in Ramanathapuram District. According to Smita Narula of Human Rights Watch,

That afternoon, streams of lorries carrying Thevar youths were seen heading toward Ramanathapuram. On the way, several vehicles stopped at roadside villages and Thevars entered Dalit and Muslim hamlets throwing petrol bombs and ransacking houses. Two women were killed. Thevar youths claimed that they were provoked, allegedly by Dalits placing barriers on the road. As news of the attacks spread, Dalits retaliated” (1999, 121-122).

“Scores of houses burned to the ground”, hundreds of people were rendered homeless, and eleven people were killed in Ramanathapuram District (Gorringe 2005, 142).¹³⁵

Territorial Occupation and Becoming Devendra

The violence that the Devendras have faced and continue to face inspires the aesthetic sensibilities of September 11th, which are dominated by assertive *vīram* and the official markers

¹³⁵ Gorringe does not seem to have found records detailing the number of destroyed or damaged houses. I have also been unable to find data from government or news sources.

of legitimated authority. By aesthetic here I refer to both its etymological connection to sense perception and feeling, as well as to its more commonplace definition as an approach to art, taste, and the beautiful.¹³⁶ The Niṇaivu Viḷā, I contend, amounts to an aesthetic occupation of Paramakudi, as the feeling of Devendra presence and power comes to reign the town, at least temporarily overturning forms of casteist domination that plague Devendra memory. In fact, the orchestrators of the event aim to overshadow such memories with a new version of the past in which the Devendras were, are, and always will be victorious.

Deleuze's distinction between becoming and history is a germane framework for thinking about the Devendras' revisions of the past. In becoming, Deleuze tells us, the subject leaves behind history, instead taking her/his place within its events:

There are two ways of considering events, one being to follow the course of the event, gathering how it comes about historically, how it's prepared and then decomposes in history, while the other way is to go back into the event, to take one's place in it as in a becoming, to grow both young and old in it at once, going through all its components or singularities. Becoming isn't part of history; history amounts only the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become,' that is, to create something new (Deleuze 1995, 170-171).

The Devendras take their place in the events of the past to make themselves anew through their creation and experience of the Niṇaivu Viḷā. The creative process of becoming is not, however, a path of seamless synergy. Instead, the process of becoming Devendra is a matter of complicated and often tense negotiation that occurs throughout the year, but is heightened as the calendar approaches September 11th.

In addition to participating in the heated discussions in the Mahāl that focused primarily on the Devendras' use of space vis-a-vie government restrictions, the secretary of the Kazhagam, Murthi, also oversaw the development of the events' aesthetics. He helped managed the types of feelings that the visual signs of Devendra occupation command, again keeping government

¹³⁶ From Greek *aisthetikos* 'sensitive, perceptive' and *aisthanesthai* 'to perceive, to feel.'

restrictions in mind. I gained insight into this process one day after enjoying lunch and fielding Murthi's wife's questions about America at their home.

Immediately after I attempted to awkwardly explain marriage practices in America, Murthi returned our attention to the Niṇaivu Viḷā. He emphasized the importance of the event to Devendras: "That day," he told me, "Paramakudi is our town, and everyone can see it ... Immanuel is our vīran, our leader ... Devendras come from all over Tamil Nadu to pay respects. And even you have come from America."¹³⁷ Murthi's animated statements about the event revealed his excitement and underlying anxieties about the Devendra occupation that was underway. He noted the temporal specificity of "*that day*", inadvertently limiting Devendra domination. But a moment later he made a general, universal claim unmarked by deitics pointing to the past or future – "Paramakudi is our town" – thereby revealing the Devendras' ambitions to stake claim to the area. Murthi also emphasized vision here as the *sin qua non* of recognition. He noted that "everyone can see it", pointing to the way territorial sovereignty rests on the vision of others. Everyone – not just the Devendras – must see their sovereignty, and ensuring visibility is one of the goals of the event.

Murthi's statements were stopped short by the entrance of four adolescent men, who introduced themselves as the leaders of the Paramakudi Devendra Kula Vellalar Youth Organization. They were wearing t-shirts that graphically displayed the name of their organization, as well as the iconic image of Immanuel sitting cross-legged and exposing the bottom of his sandaled foot. Respectfully addressing Murthi as "sār" (Tamilized "sir"), they presented him with printed proposals for flexboards and cut-outs that they hoped to erect for the event. Since Murthi was the secretary of the Kazhagam, it was his duty to retrieve police

¹³⁷ Original Tamil: "Anta nal Paramakudi enkal ur. Ellarum enkalai parkkamutiyum ... Immanuel enka vīran, enka talaivar. Anjali seya mulucuTamil Nadilurentu varuvanke. Ninkelum Americavilurentu vantirkinge."

approval for the event's flexboards and cut-outs. If he did not, local Devendras believed the police would dismantle the visual markers of Devendra dominance and may even arrest their creators. After a cursory glance, Murthi looked up at the boys and raised his fist in the inquisitive gesture that also sometimes indicates frustration or indignation. "Why have you put this big picture of John Pandian [in the proposal]?" Murthi demanded. "Take it out and the rest is ok. I'll bring it and get permission." Insisting on the disappearance of John Pandian – the notoriously violent Devendra leader whose forceful tactics have ensured his incarceration several times – Murthi confined visual representations of Devendra identity to those that he thought would meet the approval of government authorities.

Pandian who I discuss at length in chapters to come is widely considered one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest militant Devendra leader to have successfully mobilized the caste in its fight against the Thevars. As Murthi explained, "John Pandian is our big brother. He's the one who taught us to stand up and fight back against them [the Thevars]. He told us to show our *vīram*." Embodying the ideal of *vīram* as he flouts the demands of state sovereignty, Pandian is known for his violent, effective means in his attempts to upend Thevar dominance. As Devendras throughout the Southern Tamil Nadu assured me, John Pandian used to be the dependable guardian of the community; if Devendras faced any trouble, he would arrive immediately to set things right. However, in the preparations for the 2012 *Niṇaivu Viḷā*, Pandian had to be pushed into the background. As Murthi told me after the young men departed, "we shouldn't put up pictures of John Pandian. The police won't allow it because of the problem, the riot [kalavaram] of last year."

Murthi thus revealed the challenges of making Paramakudi belong to the Devendras under the perpetual threat of the heavy-handed state. Nevertheless, as the signs of Devendra

sovereignty were progressively erected, it became increasingly clear that caste leaders had not entirely obscured assertions of *vīram*, honor, or prestige. They snuck such representations into visual markers in subtle and overt ways over the course of the days leading up to September 11th. By the cover of night on the 8th, 9th, and 10th, flexboards, cutouts, and flags, were mounted by the representatives of caste organizations, political parties, and Devendra villages. Young Devendra men who were responsible for much of the clandestine work gathered excitedly each evening, and eagerly waited for nightfall. They then began their aesthetic siege of Paramakudi. For others, each morning brought sudden apparitions of Devendra leaders, politicians, historical heroes, and flags, which became progressively denser as September 11th approached. The power of such images was not, however, rooted in their swift appearances, as they rose in a flash. As opposed to art historian Preminda Jacob's contention that the ephemeral nature of political images can partially account for their potency, the Devendra images of Paramakudi rose over the course of a few days, becoming more and more powerful every morning like a resting army gathering troops.

On the morning of September 9th 2012, three enormous, identical flexboard archways featuring the contemporary Devendra leader Suba Annamalai and Immanuel himself appeared to mark the beginning, middle, and end of the area in which the parade would take place on the 11th (Figure Three).¹³⁸ Although, or rather because, Annamalai does not have a great support base when compared to someone like the aforementioned militant leader John Pandian, his newly established party made its presence known during the event. They funded a number of signs throughout the town. Stretched across the main road that extends to Madurai in one direction and to Rameswaram in the other, Annamalai's archways required that the procession of Immanuel's

¹³⁸ Suba Annamalai is the founder and president of Mallar Nadu, a political party, which contested elections in 21 constituencies in March of 2011.

devotees pass under them in order to reach the gravesite at which the event would culminate. The archways were markedly dense, covered with images that filled their horizontal and vertical axes. In front of a red and green background, Suba Annamalai and Immanuvel were likened to each other by their proximity and imitative postures. Each appeared three times, mirroring each other's posture, and pose. A waving Subha Annamalai appeared above a waving Immanuvel Devendra, a sitting Suba Annamalai above a sitting Immanuvel, and a standing Suba Annamalai above a standing Immanuvel. They both wore the neatly pressed white *vēṣṭis* and shirts that are markers of status, which I discuss below.



Figure Three: Archway Featuring Suba Annamalai at the 2012 Tiyāki Immanuvel Tēvētiraṅ Niṅaiṅu Viḷā

Although he was represented only once, contained in a graphic frame above his name, as in a portrait, the late Devendra leader Pasupathi Pandian also accompanied Annalamai and

Immanuvel. Pasupathi led Devendra leaders in the Thootukudi area, sometimes in collaboration with John Pandian, and was murdered in 2012. He has since become revered as a martyr for the caste, and has been celebrated at his own Niṇaivu Viḷā in his native village.

Importantly, the archway also featured text describing the event in the eyes of the Annamalai and his followers. Augmenting commonplace understandings of the function as a day of reverence and remembrance, the archway referred to the event as the “Mallar’s Political Rising Day” in tremendous red and green fonts.¹³⁹ Red and green have been adopted by Devendras across the state as their caste colors, which, I have been told many times, represent the red blood spilled in wars and the bright green grass of rice paddy. Below the announcement, in smaller white fonts, was a reference to the murders of the previous year: “Please join us in honoring the vīram of the seven martyrs who gave their lives on the martyr’s memorial day.” Although comparatively small, graphic portraits of the deceased lined one vertical post, giving faces to the martyrs who demanded honor. Their faces were encompassed by graphic gold frames, miniaturized versions of the frame that encircled Pasupathi who occupied the space directly above them.

Popular understandings of their deaths and the death of Pasupathi endow them with the honorable vīram that ensures that they did not die in vain, but instead for the benefit of “their people”. Thus read as completely selfless, the ultimate sacrifice made by martyrs tends to liberate them from ethical blame of any kind. For example, many of my interlocutors from different areas and economic classes assured me that Pasupathi was the best Devendra leader of recent times because of his honesty, integrity, and genuine devotion to “the people”. The

¹³⁹ Some Devendras call themselves Mallars, claiming that as their original name, which morphed into Pallar over time. There argument is plausible in light of the phonetic relationship between the “p” and “m” sounds. There has been some internal controversy over the most appropriate and authentic name amongst Devendra scholars, activists, and politicians.

inculpability of martyrs is appropriated by political leaders like Suba Annamalai through association in visual representations, as well as in writings and songs.

By the morning of the 10th, a panoply of political leaders had joined Suba Annamalai in images of martyrdom and heroism that populated the town. Many cutouts and flexboards of well-known Devendra figures, including but not limited to Sundaralingam, Dr. Krishnasamy, John Pandian, and Pasupathi Pandian displayed ferocity and aggression through the physical postures that they adopted and more overtly through the weapons that they carried. However, not all of the leaders who stared out into the town were defined by the force of their *vīram*. Instead, Devendras sought legitimacy of a different sort by identifying themselves with leaders whose intellectual accomplishments were widely recognized. Usually appearing alongside or in the background of grander images idealizing *vīram* were less conspicuous images of Ambedkar, EVR, and Devanaya Paavanar, the prolific Devendra Tamil scholar who is well-known amongst his caste fellows. This is not to say that there is not overlap between the various ideals of Tamil masculinity advanced on signs of Devendra occupation. A medical doctor, Dr. Krishnasamy who established the influential, predominantly Devendra Puthiya Tamil Agam (“New Tamil Country”) political party and is a member of the legislative assembly embodies the authority of economic and educational status, while EVR demonstrates the ruthless aggression of his political tactics.

Some of the flexboards and cutouts were sponsored by political parties, but most of them were financed by caste-based organizations in specific villages, towns, or cities, thereby advancing the beliefs and desires of civil society. Typically announcing their sponsorship in the largest and most colorful fonts, such organizations made the presence of their locales known, and sometimes included a line or two about the great sacrifice of Immanuel. Not surprisingly, given

its location, the Devendra Kula Vellalar Panpaatu Kazhagam had put up the most signs, including a cut-out of Immanuel dressed in his military uniform that reached to the height of Paramakudi's three-story buildings (Figure Four).



Figure Four: Cut-out of Immanuel in His Military Uniform Sponsored by the Devendra Kula Vellalar Panpaatu Kazhagam at the 2012 Niṇaivu Viḷā

The success of the Devendra occupation hinged not just on the sizes of individual cut-outs and flexboards, but on the sensory saturation that was effected by the sum total of Devendra signifiers experienced together. The dense marking of public space, what Bernard Bate calls “sensory saturation” (Bate 2009, 80), had been progressively swelling in the days leading up to event, finally bursting open on September 11th during which the caste’s high status vis-à-vis other castes was strongly asserted.

As Diane Mines argues in her analysis of Tamil temple festivals, “density” – material excess manifest in enormous offerings of food, maximally stacked jewelry, and maximal, repetitive offerings of goats, cloth, and other valuables – is converted by worshippers into a scale of value (ibid., 163). “The scale may be understood as relative ‘bigness’ (*perumai*), and village residents display it and openly compare it hierarchically (this is bigger than that, etc.)” (ibid.). In the context of Mines’ work, a high value of *perumai* bespeaks the power of the god to effect change in the world, as well as the prestige of the village (ibid.).

In the world of (at least officially) secular politics, the employment of density as an iconic signifier of *perumai* follows the same logic. Public political meetings of Dravidian Parties, Bate explains, are characterized by excessive numbers of repetitive signs lined up one after the other, which saturate the viewer’s visual field (Bate 2009, 78; Marriott 1968).¹⁴⁰ Aural signs, like blaring loudspeakers, are also part of the sensory saturation that Bate recalls overwhelming his body (2009). Together the degrees of visual and aural saturation are “directly proportional to a

¹⁴⁰ The overwhelming experience of sensory saturation that Bate describes is in some ways reminiscent of Kant’s concept of the mathematical sublime. Kant describes the feeling that arises when one is confronted with something so large that the imagination cannot comprehend it. Reason demands that it be comprehended and imagination tries but fails. In Kant’s words: “Just because there is in our imagination a striving to advance to the infinite, while in our reason there lies a claim to absolute totality, as to a real idea, the very inadequacy of our faculty for estimating the magnitude of the things in the sensible world [viz., imagination] awakens the feeling of a supersensible faculty in us” (1790, §25, 250). The dense aesthetic experiences, the infinite repetition of images, and the cognitive dissonance of sensory overload at Tamil political events create the conditions of possibility for a brief reaction of the mathematical sublime.

particular organization's or individual's 'greatness' (*perumai*), 'name' or 'renown' (*peyar*) ... 'weight' (*kanam*), etc" (ibid., 78). The orchestrators Niṇaivu Viḷā made such assertions through the pervasive Devendra signifiers that were enlivened by the sea of red and green clad people that poured into Paramakudi on the day of the event.

Underneath the Icons: Overt Assertions and Subtle Subtexts

Devendra assertions were, however, internally vexed by the ever-present, triangulated tension between the "traditional" demands of *vīram* and agrarian civility, as well as the restrained gentility that is assumed to be a prerequisite of modernity. Images of Immanuel, representations of past conflicts, and visual claims to official recognition demonstrated this complex process of vexation and attempted reconciliation.

The frequency with which Immanuel was represented in his military uniform bespeaks the importance that his contemporary followers attribute to his role as a soldier. Although Immanuel only spent a few years in the British Indian army, in today's images, he often dons a military uniform fitted with the pins and medals of a well-decorated soldier. In such images, he appears standing up straight, or marching towards the viewer, demonstrating the pride and dignity of a man who has been honored by the authorities of the nation. Immanuel-as-soldier thus legitimates the Devendras' assertions by pointing to the official state recognition that they had already achieved in his lifetime.

Even more frequently, Immanuel appears in another guise that primarily indexes his *vīram* as he challenges Thevar authority (Figure Five). In such images, he appears sitting cross-legged, wearing the pure white, Oxford-style shirt, crisp *vēṣṭi*, and leather sandals that mark respectability in the contemporary Tamil country. A long, unstitched cloth that is usually white with a gold border, the *vēṣṭi* is wound around the waist and reaches below the ankles like a

sarong. It is considered traditional formal wear for Tamil men. While the white Oxford-style shirt with which it is matched would not have been worn prior to the colonial period, it is now part of the uniform that bespeaks ideal Tamil masculinity, and that was worn almost exclusively by dominant caste communities until approximately the last thirty years. Respectably clad Immanuvel extends his hand and pointed index finger out towards the viewer, referring to the well-known story of his conflict with Muthuramalingam Thevar during which he refused to see the Thevar leader as worthy of respect superior to his own. Some larger flexboards feature Immanuvel in both forms, emphasizing his heroism. Regardless of his posture and clothing, Immanuvel's eyes are wide and his mouth is straight, refusing to reveal even a hint of a smile beneath his well-trimmed moustache.



Figure Five: Immanuvel in Various Guises at the 2012 Nīṇaivu Viḷā

Many images of Immanuel, especially those that invoke the conflict between Immanuel and Thevar represent an entire scene of action through which the Devendras reiterate Immanuel's unspoken statements. There are complex, heteroglossic visual spaces condensed into the iconography of the images that thus ensure that they are not just images, but image-acts that instantiate Devendra assertion. Immanuel and today's Devendras appropriate the force hitherto monopolized by the dominant castes in order to repudiate the hierarchical strictures that generate and enforce the conditions of possibility for the subjection of the Devendras. Images of Immanuel pointing his foot and finger offend Thevar sensibilities by refusing to acknowledge their alleged superiority. This is, of course, a dangerous game of aesthetic deployment that can and sometimes does provoke Thevar attacks.

The potential danger of such images is recognized by the Devendras. Danger is the foremost reason given by the police for the restrictions they put in place, and it seems to loom over the late night preparations for September 11th. It is even recognized by the artists and designers of Immanuel images who strategically, or perhaps unconsciously diminish Immanuel's overt corporeal affront. It is common to find Immanuel's pointed foot and the bottom of his sandal obscured by a small group of tigers, which are self-explanatory symbols of *vīram* that displace the bodily sign (Figure Six). Such images supplant the inherently performative image of Immanuel's extended foot with "symbols that do not entangle an addressee, which do not, in fact, address per se, but instead adorn Immanuel and embellish *his* image" (Nakassis in conversation 2016). In a sense, the ferocious tigers bow to Immanuel; he has overpowered and tamed them. Immanuel does not, however, release the full force of his symbolic attack, as Devendra artists prevent him from pointing his sandaled foot directly at the Thevars and at the broader public.



Figure Six: Immanuel with Tigers at the 2012 Niṇaivu Viḷā

Nonetheless, another flexboard that only appeared once, unlike those featuring Immanuel flanked by tigers, asserted Devendra heroism by referring to the aforementioned conflict over naming the Tamil Nadu bus corporation after Sundaralingam. It featured Sundaralingam and Immanuel resolutely flanking the latest model of government bus (Figure Seven). The former appeared atop a white horse galloping towards the viewer. His head was topped with the golden crown and his body was draped with the garb of a medieval Chola king. He held his sword, which he must have used in battles to defend the South Indian kingdom, high above his head in his right hand. On the other side of the bus, Immanuel appeared in the white vēṣṭi, shirt, shoes, and watch that marked his respectability. He was walking towards the viewer.



Figure Seven: Flexboard at the 2012 Niṇaiṇu Viḷā Presented by the Association of Scheduled Castes and Tribes of the Tamil Nadu Government Transportation Corporation

The Devendra heroes proudly framing the bus made the flexboard tell a story. It reminded Devendras and any other local passersby of the intercaste violence in which ninety-three people had been killed following the government's proposal for the establishment of the Veeran Sundaralingam Transport Corporation in 1997. It did not, however, recount a tale of defeat at the hands of violent Thevars or police officers. Sundaralingam and Immanuvel on the flexboard asserted Devendra victory that they extended into the future. Their presence next to the newest government bus compelled viewers to draw connections between them and the essential infrastructure of the state. They suggested, despite the official prohibition on the use of caste names for government structures and places, that the Veeran Sundaralingam Transport Corporation would rise again.

The text on the flexboard pointed to its complex intersections with the state, not just as a symbol of authority, but as an active wielder of the power to determine the organization of public space. While we might think that the government would prohibit the display of such an image given the incendiary issue that the bus represents, the flexboard had actually been presented by government staff – the members of the Association of Scheduled Castes and Tribes of the Tamil Nadu Government Transportation Corporation. The association’s name was clearly printed across the bottom of the board. The text across the top read: “We lovingly welcome all of you who have come to pay a visit to the national leader Martyr Immanuel Sekaran’s Guru Puja Festival.” Greeting the incoming crowd, the Association of Scheduled Castes and Tribes of the Tamil Nadu Government Transportation Corporation asserted Immanuel’s importance as a martyr for the entire nation. Their invocation of the nation makes sense in light of the fact that they are already automatically allied with others around the country who also fall within the Scheduled Castes and Tribes designation. While many Devendras resist their classification as a Scheduled Caste, insisting that it is a mistake that must ultimately be amended, they tend to defer to their official designation by necessity, when there is no other option. For example, the members of the Association of Scheduled Castes and Tribes of the Tamil Nadu Government Transportation Corporation would not be able to join any other caste-based association within their department. Instead of lamenting this fact, they use their official designation to expand the importance of their caste hero to a national level. The members of the Association of Scheduled Castes and Tribes of the Tamil Nadu Government Transportation Corporation use their position as government staff to assert Devendra identity in the public space of Paramakudi, Tamil Nadu, and India.

The Devendras' symbolic references to the government in order to legitimate their status claims were not limited to government staff. In fact, the Devendra Kula Vellalar Panpaatu Kazhagam displayed evidence of the government's recognition and approval by selecting a depiction of Immanuel's face on a postage stamp to grace the grand flexboard that served as the backdrop of the Samadhi (Figure Eight). Because paying respects at the Samadhi was the culmination of the pilgrimage for devotees and politicians, the picture of the stamp featuring Immanuel's face was photographed more than any other image at the event, and was thus easily shared and preserved as evidence of the government's recognition, the official stamp of approval for Immanuel as a leader of national significance.



Figure Eight: Samadhi at the 2012 Ninaivu Vil

Despite its assertive ambitions, the stamp also inadvertently articulated a moment of the state government's betrayal. It was issued by the central government in 2010 in the wake of the mainstream Dravidianist AIADMK party's appearance at the Niṇaivu Viḷā. Standing on the stage on September 11th of 2010, then minister of the AIADMK Party, Mr. Nayinar Nagendran "assured [the audience] that 'Immanuel Sekaran's anniversary would be announced as a government function, as soon as 'Amma' comes to rule'" (Tiphagne et al 2011, 14). Government functions, which receive financial and logistic support from the government, such as the provision of emergency medical care and drinking water, and which are usually observed as days of leave from work and school, are rendered legitimate and important by official recognition.

Although recognizing the Niṇaivu Viḷā probably would have garnered a great deal of support for the AIADMK, Amma (literally, "mother") J. Jayalalitha, who became Chief Minister (again) in 2011, did not make good on her minister's promise. Instead, she defended the actions of the police when they killed seven Devendras during the 2011 Niṇaivu Viḷā. The AIADMK's abandonment of the Devendras is not surprising given their close association with prominent Thevar families at least since the early 1990s when Jayalalitha began to consolidate her power. Knowing this all too well, Devendras have rarely aligned with the AIADMK. They have nonetheless continued to display the commemorative stamp as a befitting emblem of Devendra honor and prestige, as well as the eminence with which such ideals are intertwined. Immanuel's depiction on a stamp enables him to go anywhere despite the Tamil Nadu government's refusal to celebrate him officially.

Devendra Coalescence and Its Resonance

The events that colored Paramakudi on September 11th ensured that the story of Immanuel would spread to the most distant corners of Tamil Nadu, thereby increasing the

visibility of the Devendras defined by the masculine ideals they claimed to inhabit. For participants themselves the event generated unity through the feelings of *communitas* famously described by Victor Turner. Devendras who did not directly participate nonetheless experienced the glory and grandness of the event through photographs, videos, and even news reports, which forced even the Devendras' greatest adversaries to recognize them.

After I had dined with diverse Devendras at Ganesan's house, I followed Thangam back to the Mahāl in front of which a large crowd had gathered to watch the procession that was passing by. A younger man pulled out two chairs for Thangam and me, and we sat high on the step in front of the building watching the crowd that steadily poured in from all over Tamil Nadu. Becoming increasingly loud and dense as the afternoon progressed, the mass pushed its way towards the Samadhi. In structure and form, the spectacle resembled the processions that are the sine qua non of village temple festivals in the Tamil country.¹⁴¹ Clusters of people danced to rhythmic drumming, sweating as they were hit by the scalding white rays of the sun, while spectators watched. This division of roles was not, however, static. People entered the procession from the sidelines, as pilgrims stepped aside to take breaks and drink water. Women carried bunches of neem leaves, which are ubiquitous at temple festivals because of their cooling properties.¹⁴² One woman fell into an ecstatic state of semi-consciousness. Her body twisted and

¹⁴¹ Hair tonsure was another practice on September 11th that was reminiscent of Hindu temple worship. Women especially donate their hair to deities as sacrificial offerings. Their hair is cut by barbers who are stationed outside temples. Likewise, on the far end of the yard surrounding Immanuel's Samadhi sat a barber, who cut the hair of some zealous devotees.

¹⁴² Tamils' understand heat and coldness as properties of their bodies, the world around them, and the otherworld of the divine. Temperature is a determining factor in the health of individuals and society. Heat is generally considered dangerous, and is found in particular foods and beverages, such as alcohol, meat, and mangoes. Such substances are to be avoided in times of religious purity and by individuals who tend to have overheated bodies. Coldness is thought to have soothing and healing properties, and is found in neem, coconut milk, and turmeric (among many other substances). Such substances are applied to the body to heal illnesses, such as skin disorders and fevers, which are the result of overheating. Deities, especially goddesses, pass through a cycle of temperature throughout the year. When the goddess is hot, disaster befalls the village. People become ill and crops fail. The goddess must be cooled down during temple festivals, which usually take place during the hot season. At such festivals neem and other cooling substances play a major part in rituals of propitiation.

contorted sharply, and she shook violently as she stumbled by. Her actions resembled those that typically characterize possession by a deity in a temple context. As two female attendants rushed to prevent the possessed woman from falling, Thangam winced, looking displeased by the apparent conflation of temple processions with the movement towards the Samadhi. He turned to me with his by then familiar smile and said, “Them, those people. They don’t even know what they’re dancing for.” I nodded out of habit, though I was not sure if I agreed.¹⁴³

As it honored the fallen hero Immanuvel and the growing identity of the Devendra caste, the procession was not, of course, identical with celebrations that would typically be oriented around the deity of a temple. What most obviously distinguished it from temple festival processions was the pervasive use of banners that displayed the names of villages, organizations, and political parties. Most groups were led by a few individuals carrying banners that bore such information. The convergence of Devendras from all across Tamil Nadu was thus reiterated in the form of writing. For spectators, both those who were present and those who would watch the recorded festivities on screen, this legibility geographically expanded the Devendra occupation. Through the experience of multiple villages, towns, and cities converging at Paramakudi, Devendras could imagine their occupation blanketing the state.

“Today,” Thangam went on, “Paramakudi is for us only. It belongs to the Devendra Kula Vellalars only.” He pointed in front of us, to the crowds that continued coming, and to the densely packed flags, flexboards, cutouts, and streamers that colored the streets. “But tomorrow if you come back, that’s it. It’s all over. It shall be over. That’s it.”¹⁴⁴ Like Murthi, Thangam explained the function as a signifier of Devendra ownership, visibility, and eminence that was nonetheless temporary.

¹⁴³ I actually shook my head from side to side, which is the equivalent of nodding in much of South Asia.

¹⁴⁴ Thangam’s original Tamil: “Inraikku. Paramakudi enge ur tan. Devendra Kula Vellalarukku contam tan. Ana nalaikku tirumpivantal atu kitaiyate. Avalavu tan. Muticcac. Mutikkum. Avalavu tan.”

In some ways, Murthi and Thangam's statements about the temporally limited nature of the Niṇaivu Viḷā are absolutely right. The performance of the festival does not prevent the Devendras from facing the ever present threats of dominant castes and the state. It does not assure the Devendras that other castes recognize their status as anything other than Dalit or Scheduled Caste. However, its performance helps constitute the Devendras as a united caste defined by its emulation of the masculine ideals of vīram, honor, and prestige. Part of this process is accomplished through the rise of *communitas* in the ritual of the procession.

According to Turner, *communitas* emerges in successful ritual moments, as the differentiations of societal structure are broken down, and all pass through the same experience at once. In this stage of anti-structure at the heart of the ritual, individuals recognize a generalized social bond that overcomes the ranked differences between them; in the case of the September 11th procession, the distinctions between women and men, young and old, and rich and poor (Turner 1969, 360).¹⁴⁵ The transcendence of societal distinctions, for Turner, is a temporary moment of cathartic release that ultimately strengthens society's stratified structure when rituals come to a close. Later anthropologists, such as Roy Willis, have further developed Turner's notion of *communitas*. Willis argued that those enveloped within ritual attain a "relational quality of full, unmediated communication, even communion, which arises spontaneously" (Willis et al. 1999, 103 in E. Turner 2012, 100). Fixed boundaries of selfhood, dissipate as a "sense of everything flowing within the all-encompassing rhythm of the drum arises"(ibid.).

While the ethnographies and analyses of Turner and Willis are both geographically located in Zambia, I experienced feelings akin to their descriptions in Paramakudi along with the

¹⁴⁵ Turner actually mentions "caste" as one of the distinctions that societies maintain in their structure, which is temporarily broken in successful ritual moments (1969, 360).

dense crowd that was lurching towards the Samadhi energized by the beat of pounding drums. I had plunged into the slowly moving sea of people after hearing Thangam's warning that the Devendra occupation would end with the day. The smell of coconut oil and whiskey hung in the air, and the bright red and green of the devotees' clothing blocked the view ahead. Upon reaching the bottleneck of the gate in front of the Samadhi, the crowd was squeezed into a packed mass of sweaty, agitated energy. A continuous cyclical chant (like at a protest) overlaid the grunts of the push. Over and over we chanted, "Vīra vaṇakkam, Vīra vaṇakkam, Immanuvel Sekaran Vīra vaṇakkam, Vīra vaṇakkam, Vīra vaṇakkam, Immanuvel Sekaran Vīra vaṇakkam ...". "Hail to the hero [vīran], hail to the hero, hail to the hero Immanuvel Sekaran." The pressure mounted from behind, and the wooden fence split apart, hitting to the ground as people rushed over it.

Because of my position as a white, foreign, woman well-acquainted with the leadership of the Panpaatu Kazhagam, I was immediately ushered into the "VIP section" by Peter, an active member of the group who was nonetheless more involved under the leadership of the leftist, radical leader Chandrabose who I described above. Only moments after I found a place to stand behind the fence surrounding the VIP area, which was still standing, my acquaintances from the Mahāl offered me a plastic chair, which I gratefully accepted. From my privileged vantage point, I watched groups ascend the platform and perform *añjali* – a sign of reverence and worship undertaken by raising one hands and joining them together in prayer position above the head. Participants in the event performed *añjali* the moment they reached the gravestone and then immediately placed offerings of heavy intricate garlands on the grave. During the early part of the day, Peter held the microphone that had been attached to large, amplified speakers in order to announce the names of the cities, towns, and villages from which participants hailed. His

announcements, which were synchronized with the laying of the garlands, and immediately followed by the cheering of the crowd, were acts of ensuring the recognition of Devendras from around the state. In theory, all Devendra participants were given the same opportunity to share in the glory of Immanuel, and to receive the praise that he elicited.

The volume and enthusiasm of cheering was not, however, uniform. When representatives of villages and towns known to have been effected by intercaste violence took to the stage, the crowd's volume soared. The Devendras of the aforementioned villages of Amaichiyapuram, Thachanallur, and Melavelu who had ostensibly experienced horrific forms of intercaste violence were met with the cries, shouts, and whistles of spectators. The crowd became so rambunctious at such moments that the leaders of the Panpaatu Kazhagam struggled to control them, standing in front of the stairs below the gravestone and physically blocking people from rushing the stage. The fervor that arose at such moments was a release of the Devendras' collective outrage at the events that had unfolded in the 1997 and 1998. It was also another instantiation of their refusal to be victimized. They celebrated the endurance of the Devendras in the face of violent suppression at the hands of the dominant castes and the state. They rejoiced at the Devendras' heightened ability to fight back because of their transcendence of the bonds of rural servitude and their elevated educational achievements and political awareness.

The Devendras also experienced a token moment of ascendancy over the police during performances of añjali, which provided another reason to rejoice. Although ten police officers, equipped with riot gear, stood near the gates, in the VIP section, and at the corners of the yard around the Samadhi, they were not actively involved in crowd control. I asked Murthi, who was guiding his fellow caste leaders in their regulation of the entrance to the stage, why the police

officers were not helping and he replied in an instant: “It’s good that they don’t do anything. We don’t want them to participate, to be involved here. Didn’t they shoot their guns at us last year? Didn’t they kill seven people? It’s good that we do this on our own. That’s really how it should be.” Murthi, along with the other Devendra men of the Kazhagam, and probably the vast majority of Devendras from around the state, expressed his distrust of the police and his disdain for their murderous acts. For him, it was self-explanatory that the event should be run by Devendra leaders who maintained structures of authority that were parallel to and detached from the state. In the moment of the ritual event, the power of Devendra leaders was well-established, but when such leaders joined the ritual, they also joined with the spirit of the crowd.

In addition to the Devendras who represented the places from which they had come, individuals of various castes from all over Tamil Nadu represented their political parties at the Ninaivu Vizha. They performed añjali like everyone else, but, for the most part, did not receive the enthusiastic reactions that arose in response to the ritual performances of Devendra groups because the Devendras were (justifiably) skeptical of their intentions. The Devendras knew well that the participation of many of the parties was business as usual rather than any genuine reverence for the Devendras or their hero. Like the AIADMK in 2010 and 2011, such parties hoped to gain Devendra votes, but would not follow their participation with any further action. Notably, the AIADMK did not send a representative in 2012 perhaps because of the negative reactions that were certain to arise from the Devendras in the wake of the events of 2011. Seven Devendras had been murdered during the reign of J. Jayalalitha and AIADMK.

It is important to note that despite the Devendras well-founded distrust of most political parties, they grant such parties permission to participate in the event. In fact, the leaders of the Kazhagam explicitly invite most of Tamil Nadu’s political parties, are notified of who will

attend, and then compile a list of participants, which they share with the police in August. The Devendras' eagerness to invite politicians of many stripes is rooted in their desire for recognition and legitimation. Whether or not the Devendras agree with political leaders who attend, their participation increases Devendra visibility, as political parties are alerted of the event, which is more likely to be printed in papers and broadcast on television if politicians are present. The participation of political leaders also grants legitimacy to Immanuel and the Devendras, as it proves that such leaders assent to their importance.

Despite the relatively tepid reactions they received, on September 11th, representatives of various political parties stepped onto the stage, shouting the chant: "Vīra vaṇakkam, vīra vaṇakkam, Immanuel Sekaran vīra vaṇakkam, vīra vaṇakkam, vīra vaṇakkam, Immanuel Sekaran vīra vaṇakkam ...". A broad range of political parties was represented, including the AIADMK's rival, the DMK.¹⁴⁶ Parties with smaller support bases approached earlier, while those with wider appeal among Devendras came later, ensuring that excitement built over the course of the day. While the DMK is one of Tamil Nadu's two most powerful parties (the other being the AIADMK), the electoral support for them among Devendras is simply a byproduct of the caste's disdain for Jayalalitha and the AIADMK. The Devendras' lacking enthusiasm for the DMK was evident when local-level ministers of the party ascended the stage, facing a quiet crowd. Of course, the effort of the DMK itself hardly helped. Instead of contributing to the performative pomp of the event, DMK leaders had sent little-known ministers who only had a small banner with which to represent themselves.

¹⁴⁶ Leaders of the larger political parties arrived in convoys of SUVs, which drove down the main road, and stopped at the mahāl, where they got out and waved to the crowd. They stopped again in front of the gate to the Samadhi, which they approached on foot. They chanted, paid tribute, posed for pictures, and climbed back into their SUVs. While some stayed to give interviews to local news sources, most completed their performances quickly.

Leftist and anti-caste parties were well represented, but they too were received with lukewarm reactions. Dressed in black, a group of about five communists ascended the stage, chanting “tīṅṅāmai oḷippu, jāti oḷippu, tīṅṅāmai oḷippu, jāti oḷippu” (“destroy untouchability, destroy caste, destroy untouchability, destroy caste”). Immediately following them, another black clad group ascended the stage. They represented the DK – the relatively obscure and still adamantly atheist party of EVR.¹⁴⁷ They shouted their assertion that there is no god and praised Immanuel. Although Thirumavalavan could not attend because he had been imprisoned for activism in another context, emissaries of his aforementioned pro-Dalit and anti-caste outfit – the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (“Freedom Panther’s Party”) paid tribute to Immanuel.¹⁴⁸ Even the Tamil Nadu branch of the notoriously elitist Bharatiya Janata Party (henceforth, BJP) sent representatives to perform añjali on the occasion of September 11th, despite (and because of) the fact that they do not receive much support from the Devendra (or any other SC) community.¹⁴⁹ A nationwide, rightwing Hindu party that usually finds support among Brahmins and the upper castes, the BJP is weak in Tamil Nadu and so must attempt to elicit support wherever it can.

Unlike the representatives of the vast majority of local parties, representatives from two North Indian parties generated excitement, not only at the event but in the weeks leading up to it. I was told by Devendra friends and acquaintances from Paramakudi that big and important political leaders from North India would participate in the Ninaivu Vizha. While most of them

¹⁴⁷ The DK – Dravida Kazhagam – is the original Dravidianist party that followed the Justice Party. It remains devoutly atheist and does not attract a great deal of support.

¹⁴⁸ Thirumavalavan (born 17 August 1962) is the current president of the VCK, and a Member of Parliament in the 15th Lok Sabha. He rose to prominence in the 1990s as a Dalit leader, and entered politics in 1999. He focuses on eliminating caste based oppression, which he argues can be best achieved through Tamil Nationalism. At the time of the 2012 event, he had been arrested for protesting the construction of the Kudankulam Power Plant, which had been an inflammatory issue for Dalit and leftist organizations because of the pollution (a challenge to the livelihood of fishermen) it would cause to the area.

¹⁴⁹ The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party is well-supported in North India but has not succeeded in gaining much traction in the South. It’s idealization of the Aryan past is anathema to the political identity of most Tamils.

were not known by name, they nonetheless marked the recognition of the Devendras on the national level, thereby bespeaking the caste's importance, eminence, and honor.

Emissaries of the pro-Dalit and anti-caste, Bahujan Samaj Party (“People’s Movement Party”), which has grown into the third largest national party in India, were met with loud applause and the snapping of cameras, as they garlanded Immanuel’s gravestone, took the microphone, and addressed the crowd. Wrapped in the turban that marked him as Sikh (and exotic in the Tamil context), one of the representatives of the party predominated with his speech in English, which a small minority of the crowd could understand: “We are very happy to be here to honor Immanuel Sekaran – a great hero who fought for the Dalit people”. Although many would not consent to the description of Immanuel as Dalit had they been asked, those who had understood cheered along with those who hadn’t because of the great honor marked by the participation of the Bahujan Samaj Party. A party with significant national importance had sent representatives all the way to Paramakudi.

Unlike other North Indians, Ram Vilas Paswan, eight-time Lok Sabha member and leader of the Lok Janshakti Party (“People’s Life Power Party”), which has a considerable following among Dalits of Bihar, was known by name to the Devendras of Paramakudi. Had they not known about him prior to the preparation for September 11th, they were very likely to be familiar with him on the day of the event thanks to the flexboards in which he had been featured (Figure Nine). Paswan and his associates passed through the gate holding their banner of Hindi and English letters. The crowd roared. This leader who had direct access to government power had travelled a great distance to honor Immanuel and all that he signifies.



Figure Nine: Flexboard Featuring Ram Vilas Paswan at the 2012 Niṇaivu Viḷā

After the departure of the Lok Janshakti Party, the rest of the afternoon eked by comparatively uneventfully for the spectators who watched village after village party after party, and organization after organization honor Immanuvel and the Devendras. The bin of small plastic pouches of water that had been provided by the Kazhagam was empty, and murmurs spread through the crowd. The questions of the moment: When would Dr. Krishnaswamy arrive? When would John Pandian arrive?

Just after nightfall and several hours after his arrival had become a pressing topic of conversation, Dr. Krishnaswamy was pushed through the gate by his cadres, who had formed a circular barrier around him. The crowd clamored and cheered and many of us in the “VIP section” stood up on our chairs to get a better view. Dr. Krishnaswamy, the founder and leader of the Puthiya Tamilagam (“New Tamil Country”), which has become progressively more Devendra-centric since its establishment in 1996, had the attention of the crowd. After he was

handed the microphone, Krishnasamy immediately reminded the crowd of the previous year's deep disappointments. Not only did the AIADMK fail to make September 11th a government function, but they also failed to protect the Devendras from violence. In Krishnasamy's words, "after two years, they still have not done it. And last year, Devendra men were killed by the police. A [memorial] pillar should be erected for the martyrs," he declared evenly. The crowd whistled and cheered in enthusiastic agreement, and Krishnaswamy slipped away into the idling vehicle that was waiting for him outside the gate. A man who embodies prestige and respectability by virtue of his education, position as a medical doctor, and membership in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly (elected 2011), Krishnasamy's grievances and lamentations legitimated those of his less powerful caste fellows. He directly addressed their desire for recognition by referring not only the need to establish a government function, but also to the need to construct a monument for the Devendra martyrs whose deaths had contributed to the cause.

John Pandian's Tamil Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam ("Tamil People's Progress Association") was slated to arrive last. For about the first hour after Krishnasamy departed, the event's participants waited patiently, but the volume of the gathering rose as time passed. Some people called their friends and family who were at the entrance of Paramakudi, which Pandian and his entourage would have to pass en route to the Samadhi. Others fanned themselves to fight the humidity and mosquitos. About an hour and a half went by before the sound of approaching drumbeats and chants indicated Pandian's arrival. As the words became audible, the crowd at the Samadhi joined in: "John Pandian – vaḷkka Immanuvel Sekaran – vaḷkka ... Immanuvel Sekaranukku vīra vaṇakkam, vīra vaṇakkam, John Pandianukku vīra vaṇakkam ...", "Long live

John Pandian, long live Immanuvel Sekaran, hail to the hero Immanuvel Sekaran, hail to the hero, hail to the hero John Pandian.”

A man of considerable height, John Pandian was visible above the crowd, his face illuminated by the spotlights directed at the Samadhi. His wife, Priscilla Pandian, who was bedecked in a shimmering silk sari and heavy gold jewelry for the occasion, accompanied him. They were both surrounded by a protective circle of cadres that deflected the fans and devotees who frantically reached to touch them. The crowd erupted when Pandian approached the Samadhi and ascended the stage, exceeding the sounds that had rung through the air throughout the day. A chorus of piercing whistles accompanied chants of, “John Pandian – vaḷkka! John Pandian – vaḷkka!” “Long live John Pandian! Long live John Pandian! Pandian’s mouth remained unbent and his eyes were wide as he stared out into the crowd. He raised his hands above his head, clasping them together in the sign of reverent prayer and obsequious greeting for several seconds, and the crowd’s excitement soared. He had performed añjali to the crowd itself, honoring the Devendras as if they too had made the ultimate sacrifice that they attribute to Immanuvel. Pandian then descended the platform and approached the flexboard featuring the pictures of the victims of the previous year’s police shooting. He performed añjali before them. As Pandian laid down garlands before the flexboard of the fallen heroes, the gathering reached its deafening zenith, which continued as he swiftly departed. The Niṇaivu Viḷā was over, and quiet returned as the people slowly began to gather themselves up and make their way home. There was no closing speech, no formal goodbye, but instead a gentle departure that allowed the power of the event to persevere.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ As Constantine Nakassis notes, Tamil events in a range of contexts “go out with a whimper and not a bang.” When films are viewed in the theaters, for example, the lights go on and people start to file out after the climax even as the film is finishing. According to Nakassis, “the event is constituted in its repeatability and familiarity, not in some kind of grand finale, even as there is, in fact, a grand finale, one which everyone is exhausted to reach” (2016).

Ultimately, the ritual construction of the Devendras as a caste conglomerate is not limited to September 11th, but instead resonates throughout the year in various aesthetic forms, oral narratives, and smaller scale ritual performances that emulate the Ninaivu Vizha. Contra Turner's claim that pre-established social stratification is enforced in the aftermath of ritual, the feelings and sensations of unity that define *communitas* extend beyond the event, drawing otherwise socioeconomically diverse Devendras together into a collective identity that is still maturing. The claims and debates that underlie the preparations for and activities of September 11th continue in less spectacular forms throughout the year.

Although the most overt and aggressive signs of the Devendra occupation had disappeared by the morning of September 12, 2012, traces of the Ninaivu Vizha continued to hang in the air. The leaders of the Paramakudi Devendra Panpaatu Kazhagam and their adolescent assistants, under the cover of night, had hastily dismantled and torn down flexboards, flags, posters and cut-outs, clearing the dense aesthetic that they had established a few days prior. However, forgotten flags continued to wave and discarded pamphlets tumbled along the dusty road in the wind. Fragments of posters that had not been torn down from the walls to which they were affixed remained intact, showcasing Immanuel's piercing stare and the words that remembered his heroic martyrdom.

The spirit of the Ninaivu Vizha also continued to spread beyond Paramakudi. In addition to the proud conversations that circulated during the event, participants purchased Devendra-themed merchandise to learn more about Immanuel and the Devendras, and to display in their homes. Books, pamphlets, CDs, DVDs, VCDs, posters, pictures, stickers, and decals were sold at stands that had sprung up along the "parade route" and just outside the fence surrounding the Samadhi. Signifiers of Devendra identity, such as framed pictures of Immanuel and

Sundaralingam, thus helped constitute that very identity, as they became incorporated into patterns of everyday life (Figure Ten).



Figure Ten: Picture of Immanuvel and Sundaralingam Also Featuring Ambedkar Purchased at the 2012 Niṇaiṇu Viḷā

More conspicuously, the annual performance of the Ninaivu Vizha has paved the way for the establishment of a number of increasingly popular analogues through which the Devendras make further claims on space, on time, and on history¹⁵¹. Over the course of the past fifteen to twenty years, Devendras have established a large-scale celebration of Immanuvel's birthday on October 10th in Paramakudi and a Ninaivu Vizha for Sundaralingam in his village in

¹⁵¹ Even the recently deceased Devendra leader Pasupathi Pandian has been and will continue to be ritually remembered in a Vīra Vaṇakkam Nāl at his village in Thoothukudi District, which was first observed on January 10, 2013, a year after he was murdered. Devendras are in the process of establishing an annual ritual cycle that reinforces their cultural memory and draws otherwise distant caste fellows together.

Thoothukudi District on April 16th. Many Devendras have also begun to celebrate the Sadhya Vizha, the coronation day of the medieval king Raja Raja Cholan (947-1015 CE) in Thanjavur as part of their claim that he is their ancestor. On November 2nd, Devendra groups from all over Southern Tamil Nadu travel to Thanjavur to participate in the Sadhya Vizha, which is, not incidentally, also celebrated by Thevars for the same reason. In their efforts to outdo each other, the Devendras and Thevars are becoming more and more alike, rising as two groups of royal warriors whose claims to the glory of the past are carried into the future.

For the Devendras, assertive identitarian claims are relatively new, and have been made possible by the caste's significant economic gains over the course of the past one to two generations. They have the means to access inexpensive digital print, audio, and communication technologies, which are themselves new, and are thus able to proudly display their heroes in ways that would not have been possible in the context of the Thevar-dominated villages of Southeastern Tamil Nadu. In the democratic, modern Indian state their theoretical equality ensures that their claims about the past, present, and future are (also theoretically) protected by law.

What is more, the ability of the state to set the law of the land and to monopolize the region's single most powerful force endows it with a superior status through which it can grant or deny the legitimacy that the Devendras seek. The Devendras court representatives of the state to sanction the Ninaivu Vizha and to endow it with the honor and prestige that those with power (and wealth) can bestow. However, they are well aware that representatives of the state do not always exercise their power in ways that are beneficial or just. Instead, for Devendras and for many of India's most vulnerable people, the state "inspires both fear and promise ... the state is like an abusive father whom you can never abandon" (Luce 2007, 84).

It is not surprising then that the Devendras and the Thevars imagine themselves as sovereign rulers engaged in battles over power that are independent of the agendas. They fight each other in the symbolic and also in the physical realms, unleashing violence when one caste questions or offends the other's claims to sovereignty and honor. In so doing, they both find themselves standing as "the people" opposed to state power. It is through such a structural idiom that the Devendras claim that they are the originary heroes of the Tamil land that must simultaneously demonstrate the gentility that indexes status in both older forms of agrarian Tamil society and in the modern nation-state.

**The Beginning of the Devendra Ritual Cycle: Internal Reconciliation and External
Opposition
Chapter Five**

Although relative quiet seemed to have befallen Paramakudi in the aftermath of the Niṇaivu Viḷā, the months of September and October 2012 were marked by a flurry of Devendra political mobilization and self-conscious celebrations of Devendra history and culture throughout the state. Leaders worked to maintain the momentum of September 11th by extending conversations about the Devendra caste – its history, its heroes, its future – to other arenas. Ideas and strategies circulated throughout Tamil Nadu by way of a vast network of Devendras, which transcended geographic and economic boundaries. The Devendra network was not, however, univocal, but was instead fractured on ideological grounds. In addition to the divergent practical prerogatives of various leaders, the tensions between vīram and prestigious honor and between Dalit solidarity and Devendra exceptionalism were brought into sharp relief during the surge of Devendra activity following September 11th, 2012. Internal fractures complicated Devendra attempts to ascend the deeply entrenched social hierarchy of modern-day Tamil Nadu. However, their opposition to the dominant castes that held them in low regard united the Devendras, despite their heterogeneity.

At the same time as the Devendras were immersed in their deliberative organizing, Thevar leaders and groups were preparing for the largest and most significant annual celebration of their caste – the aforementioned Muthuramalingam Thevar Guru Puja, which is observed every year on October 30th in Muthuramalingam’s native Pasumpon, Ramanathapuram District.

¹⁵² Before preeminent audiences at the event, the Thevars attempt to assert their power through displays of their wealth and astounding numbers. They promote and performe historical

¹⁵² According to his devotees, Muthuramalingam was born and died on the same day – October 30th. While Thevars insist on this claim, which adds an otherworldly element to Muthuramalingam’s life history, Devendras deny its truth.

narratives about their mastery and control of the Tamil land in a vast aesthetic occupation that is strategically and aesthetically parallel to the Niṇaivu Viḷā. The claims of both castes are thus entwined in a thick web of interdependent enmity that reaches into the past and future.

In this chapter, I focus on the ritual productions of the Devendras that emerged in the period between September 11th and October 25th in order to elucidate the complexities, successes, and challenges of the strategies they took up to carve out a dignified, even glorified space for themselves prior to the rise of the Thevars that was soon to follow. Drawing on the work of ritual theorist Catherine Bell, I argue that the Devendras drew on preexisting Tamil standards of ritual, including public gift giving and an aesthetic of splendor, as they contested their lowly status in the eyes of outsiders. First, I examine the proceedings of an annual meeting of a Devendra caste organization in Chennai at which the Devendras' high status was asserted not only through ritual productions, but also through conspicuous references to the wealthiest section of Devendras who have, indeed, gained prestige through their high-paying government jobs. In so doing, I demonstrate the divisive class differences within the Devendras that are discounted by those at the higher end of the socioeconomic spectrum. While they tend, not surprisingly, to be more troubling to those on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, differences are reconciled by a shared sense of history and by the Devendras' opposition to dominant castes, especially the Thevars.

Second, I explore the celebration of Immanuel's birthday in Paramakudi as a moment of political consolidation. Focusing particularly on the ritual productions overseen by the aforementioned Devendra leader Chandrabose, I demonstrate that increasingly exceptional calls for Dalit solidarity may be reconciled with assertions of kingship by some (especially rural) Devendras who are not ideologically wed to either vision. Even for those whose visions differ

greatly, opposition, conflict, and even competition with other castes draw the Devendras together in particular moments.

Third and finally, I examine the *Sataya Viḷā* – the annual celebration of the coronation of Raja Raja Chola, a well storied medieval Tamil king. He ruled from Thanjavur, which continues to be the center of a wealthy region with high agricultural productivity. I argue that the *Sataya Viḷā* provides the stage for the Devendras to assert their royal lineage, which is, importantly shared with dominant castes that make the same claims. The event is thus the venue for direct ritual competition between various castes, which are in the process of staking claim to kingship. They do not, however, come into direct, physical conflict, but instead fight over space through their production of rituals and the aesthetic forms that uphold them. In covering the *Sataya Viḷā*, I also explore the strategies adopted by the militant Devendra leader John Pandian who steps into kingship at the same time as he makes himself a man of the people. In the end, I argue that the ritual world created by the Devendras effectively constitutes them as a caste conglomeration, united by their shared history despite their current heterogeneity. Rituals also help the Devendras gain the dignity for which they aspire by normalizing their visibility and rendering their claims unsurprising to others. As the element of shock progressively disappears, their claims move towards the realm of convention.

Ritual Strategy and Significance

The complex and ever-changing ritual cycles of both the Devendras and the Thevars, which I attend to in this chapter, may be seen more clearly through the lens of Catherine Bell's concept of ritualization. Bell departs from antecedent anthropological and sociological definitions of ritual that, she contends, misguidedly classify ritual as mere action in opposition to thought (1992). According to Bell, the underlying dichotomy of thought and action, which

suffuses ritual studies, generates a series of homologized, often hierarchical oppositions that come to include the relationships between theorists (who think) and unconscious actors (who act mindlessly) (ibid., 47).¹⁵³

Bell advocates the study of ritual, not as a universal object in need of definition, but instead as a culturally specific, active strategy, which she calls “ritualization” (ibid.). At its most fundamental level, “ritualization is a way of acting that differentiates some acts from others” (ibid., xv). Bell draws on Bourdieu, his concept of the “socially informed body” in particular, to ground ritualization in embodied experience. Bourdieu endows the socially informed body with “its tastes and distastes, its compulsions and repulsions, with, in a word, all its *senses*.” These senses, Bourdieu goes on to explain, include ‘the traditional five senses – which never escape the structuring action of social determinisms – but also the sense of necessity and the sense of duty, the sense of direction and the sense of reality, the sense of balance and the sense of beauty, common sense and the sense of the sacred, tactical sense and the sense of responsibility, business sense and the sense of propriety, the sense of humor and the sense of absurdity, moral sense and the sense of practicality, and so on’” (ibid., 80). The collective “sense of ritual,” Bell contends, “would be a vital addition to this list” (ibid.). The collective sense of ritual, which Bell sees as essential to ritualization relies on preexisting notions of the types of acts that constitute ritual,

¹⁵³ Bell covers a broad range of social theorists in her interrogation of the discursive framework that shaped ritual studies. In addition to the obvious culprits – Durkheim who defined religion as the combination of beliefs and rites (1992, 20), and Levi-Strauss who homologized his division between ritual and myth to the division between acting and thinking (ibid., 19) – Bell also unpacks the works of Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz. She demonstrates the ways that they more subtly rely on the Cartesian dualism. For Turner, according to Bell, ritual embodies aspects of structure and antistructure, mediating or orchestrating the opposing demands of *communitas* and formalized social order (ibid., 21). *Communitas* – the domain of action – is thus harmonized with the thinking world of social order (ibid.). In his ambitious attempt to explain meaning in cultural phenomenon, Geertz too defines ritual as the fusion of two aspects of culture, namely the division between ethos and worldview. Ethos – disposition, underlying attitude towards self and world – and worldview – cognitive existential aspects of culture – are integrated in ritual action. As Bell points out, the division between ethos and worldview is analogous to the difference between action and thought (ibid., 26).

which vary across time and place. Ritual is thus hardly universal, as the forefathers of anthropology would have had it, but is instead quite specific.

The exercise of ritualization by socially informed bodies does not mean that ritualization is an autogenetic process. Instead Bell highlights the cognizant agency of actors as they employ “strategies ... for setting some activities off from others” (ibid., 74). Ritualization, Bell goes on, is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities (ibid.). While one’s predetermined sense of ritual certainly impacts such efforts, ritualization can itself move in the opposite direction, sending tremors through the context from which it emerged. Importantly, Bell identifies what she calls power at the heart of ritualization. Power here is embedded in the pre-established social sense of ritual, and in the intentional deployment and reorganization of that power. Bell writes:

When analyzed as ritualization, acting ritually emerges as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures ... ritualization is a strategy for the construction of a limited and limiting power relationship. This is not a relationship in which one social group has absolute control over another, but one that simultaneously involves both consent and resistance, misunderstanding and appropriation (ibid.: 7-8).

Strategies of ritualization drive the Niṇaiṇu Viḷā, the Muthuramalingam Thevar Guru Puja, and many other smaller scale but structurally similar functions as mobilizing castes work to set the activities of their events off from daily life. They draw on the symbolic order of ritual that precedes them, but at the same time create something new. At the Niṇaiṇu Viḷā, the formal elements of temple processions and ancestor worship are adapted to new content as the honoring of Immanuel is sacralized. Thevar strategies are similar. At Muthuramalingam Thevar Guru Puja, well-established features and elements of Hindu temple festivals are spectacularly deployed to demonstrate caste power. But the events of both castes are conducted on contested grounds. Outsiders to each respective caste are often loath to accept their claims to power through

ritualization. Even politicians who grace caste events with their presence do not often recognize their extraordinary nature. In a sense then, moments of ritualization are incomplete; they fail to establish the sacredness, even the specialness, to which they aspire. However, the success of ritualization for insiders, i.e. for individuals in each respective caste, may shift power dynamics in the long term because such individuals feel the rise of their caste, which they begin to deploy in the quotidian realm.

Although Bell's work reflects the focus on agency that was prevalent in the social scientific literature of the 1990s, she nonetheless recognizes the limits of ritualization.¹⁵⁴ She draws on Michael Pye to call ritual a "blunt tool" that has a limited impact. Ritualization cannot, for example, generate an agenda of problem-solving or policy-making (*ibid.*, 212). For Bell, the limits of ritualization are rooted in part in the attachment of the power of ritualization to a particular office rather than an individual (*ibid.*). Such power only loosely accrues to the individual actor. Certainly, this argument makes sense in the context of a priest and bishop or of a president and secretary of state.

While in many contexts the power demonstrated and constituted by ritualization accrues to a particular office, the power underlying and generated by ritualization in the context of caste mobilization is more generalized. Ritualization claims and produces power on behalf of the entire *jāti* since individuals of the same *jāti* are inextricably linked by the qualitative, substantive likeness of their bodies and by their ostensibly shared history. The potential power of ritualization is thus not limited to the uncertain office of the caste leader, but instead bleeds into

¹⁵⁴ The interest in agency as opposed to structure in the social scientific work of the 1990s is evident in the works of Archer (1995), Bourdieu (1990), Lawson (1997), and Turner (1995) among many others. A discussion of agency in a context similar to the one at the heart of this study is found in Dirks' "Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact" in which he claims that ritual is a site of subversion because of its "political permeability ... that makes possible a succession of contested performances, readings, and tellings" (Dirks 1994 (1988), 21). He emphasizes the powerful agency of ritual actors to overturn the order of things (at least temporarily), but also recognizes the way that the very same rituals can reinforce the status quo (*ibid.*).

the entire caste as if its members were all one immediate family. Power is limited instead by the degree to which outsiders recognize it.¹⁵⁵

The Devendras' and Thevars' ritualized attempts to establish power may be understood as efforts to transform struggle into convention, to normalize their claims and move them into the domain of habit.¹⁵⁶ Both castes draw on the features of rituals that already structure Tamil religio-political spaces in order to facilitate their entrance into the non-confrontational realm of the established order. In a sense then, their acts of ritual resistance are also acts of acquiescing to the powers that have long cast a shadow over them.

Tamil Ritual

Many of the ritual forms upon which the Devendras and Thevars draw are inextricably linked to the Tamil masculine ideals of honor and prestige, as well as to the respect that such qualities generate. Despite the ancient tradition they invoke, all of these ritual forms have been reified by the loud voices of Dravidianism, which have risen from the 1920s onwards. Ritualized gift-giving and aesthetic signs of grandeur are two such forms that have that often emerge in

¹⁵⁵ While I do agree with Bell's claim that ritualization is the product of self-conscious strategizing, I do not aim to discount the role of *communitas* in determining the power of a ritual for those within it. As I discussed in the previous chapter, a feeling of spontaneous union and immersion in a collective can arise as *communitas* is generated in a ritual moment, which, in my opinion, may or may not reinforce preexisting social structures in its denouement.

¹⁵⁶ In tracking the transformation from struggle to convention, I draw theoretically on the work of nineteenth century semeiotician Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's later work is particularly useful. In his second Harvard lecture delivered on April 2nd, 1903, he presents his triadic semeiotic system phenomenologically in order to "draw up a catalogue of categories and prove its sufficiency and freedom from redundancies, to make out the characteristics of each category, and to show the relations of each to the others" (EP II, 148 (CP 5.43)). Firstness is the pure presentness of the phenomenon, without any reference to anything else. To whom or what the object is present is not formulated. As Peirce explained, it is the phenomenon "such as it is, utterly ignoring anything else" (EP II, 150). We may think of Firstness as feeling without cognitive association. Beyond the immediacy and presence of Firstness, Peirce locates Secondness, "the element of *Struggle*" (EP II, 150). In his examples, we see exertions of effort whether willful or unwillful, the resistance of the body to the world and vice versa, or, most simply, action and reaction. Pushing against a half open door, being hit on the head by the ladder of a passerby, or seeing a flash of lightening in an otherwise dark sky are all moments of Secondness. As Peirce writes, "The sense of shock is as much a sense of resisting as being acted upon. So it [Secondness] is when anything strikes the senses" (EP II, 151). Classifying Thirdness most basically as thought and representation, Peirce then goes on to track the ways that thought becomes conventional (ibid.). Thoughts that follow patterns of regularity, which Peirce believes are inevitable, enter the domain of convention or symbol, and are no longer registered consciously (ibid.). They no longer strike us like the ladder or the lightening in the sky.

caste-based mobilization for not only the Devendras and Thevars, but for many other castes that take on similar ritual strategies. The ubiquity of such rituals bespeaks the hegemony of Dravidianism in the Tamil country. At the current moment, there seems to be no way to do politics outside of the discursive net of Dravidianism.

Ritualized gift giving in the Tamil country long predates Dravidianism, though it's the architects of Dravidianism that helped sustain it. As Dirks argues, gift-giving has been employed to establish and solidify royal power since the Pallava period (6th – 9th centuries CE) (1993). With the expansion of the Vijayanagara Empire, Dirks contends, we see the development of transactional networks that extend the province of the gift as a mode of statecraft beyond the borders of single localities (ibid., 29). The enduring logic of such gifts mark those on the receiving end as deserving and respected by the sovereign, and by implication by his subjects. In the temple context, for example, priests and officiants typically give *mutal mariyātai* (literally, “first respect”) to high status families who are also usually financial supporters of their temples. The gifts of *mutal mariyātai*, including flower garlands, shawls, and fruits are expected by such families, and are given publically to signify, reinforce, and in a sense establish their social distinction,¹⁵⁷ as many scholars of India have demonstrated (Dumont 1986, 155-159, 417; Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976; Dirks 1993; Mines 2005, 81).

Such acts of public gift giving are not limited to temples, but are incorporated into many contexts, including the “secular”¹⁵⁸ performances of political spectacles.¹⁵⁹ Honored guests

¹⁵⁷ The Madras Tamil lexicon provides a number of definitions for *mariyātai*: “civility, courtesy, reverence, respectful behaviour to a superior; 2. Caste rules or customs; 3. Continuance in the right way, propriety of conduct, rectitude; 4. Justice; 5. Way, manner; 6. Boundary, limit; shore; 7. Reward”. Denoting respect, the behaviors that afford respect, and the respect that must be shown to superiors, *mariyātai* is inextricably linked to caste. Interestingly, there is an ethical component embedded in *mariyātai*. It is to be just and do the right thing.

¹⁵⁸ By putting secular in scare quotes, I do not mean to abide by the old Orientalist adage that subcontinental society is defined by the sacred. Instead, I want to point out that the division between sacred and secular is a false dichotomy. Since at least the medieval era, great kings of South India were worshipped as deities and vice versa.

receive recognition and gifts as photographs are snapped to memorialize and share moments of distinction with others who may not be immediately present. Importantly, honor is not just accrued by receivers, but also by benefactors who create spheres of obligation around them through their patronage.¹⁶⁰ The gifts they give must be repaid through reciprocal gifts, work, and/or loyalty. What is more, the benefactor gains status in an ethical sense as he/she is endowed with the attributes of generosity and selflessness.

Signs of wealth and grandeur, which Bernard Bate locates at the heart of the Dravidian aesthetic, are another component of Tamil ritual that is drawn upon by caste leaders and politicians of many colors (2009). In addition to the sensory saturation that I discussed in the previous chapter, grand, even excessive material profusions of Tamil rituals serve to index wealth and power. Clearly, either the patrons are themselves quite wealthy or they have the power to access others' resources – their money and/or their labor. The proliferation of visual, auditory, and even olfactory (the smell of burning incense, for example) signifiers is a part of the sense of Tamil ritual that marks the extraordinariness of an event.

The Tamil word for temple – *kōyil* – actually means “house of the king”. Today’s successful political leaders often receive the royal treatment that is similarly bestowed on deities.

¹⁵⁹ As Clark-Decès notes, distinction is almost always at the heart of the Tamils’ acts of formalized gift giving (2014, 40).

¹⁶⁰ Of course, the works of Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille beckon acknowledgment here. Mauss’ *The Gift*, which was published for the first time in 1925, is one of the first sociological texts to analyze practices of gift exchange. Examining the customs of societies he calls archaic, Mauss finds that the common practice they share is reciprocal exchange (the cycle of giving and receiving gifts). According to Mauss, gifts, which occur between groups rather than individuals, are “total phenomena” because their logic suffuses all aspects of society, including politics, economics, religion, law, morality, and aesthetics, and is therefore the basis of social solidarity (1925). In his analysis of what he calls “general economy”, Bataille builds on, yet departs from Mauss by envisioning gifts as a way in which societies expend their excess resources without forfeiting the value of those resources. A surplus of resources, which Bataille traces back to the munificence of the sun, at certain points, “cannot be employed for the growth of productive forces ... but the squandering of this surplus itself becomes an object of appropriation” (1991, 72). Those who squander acquire prestige, which “is ultimately a source of profit” (ibid.). In the context of South Asia in particular, Gloria Raheja and Nicholas Dirks examine gift exchange. According to Raheja, who examines ritual prestations among the Gujars of Pahansu, the village’s socioeconomic order is constituted by the flow of inauspiciousness and impurity from the center to the periphery of the village through gift giving (1988). Dirks, who explores medieval and early modern kingship in South India, identifies a particular type of royal power defined by networks of gift giving in the Pallavas (6th – 9th centuries), which reached its apex during the Vijayanagara Empire (1336 – 1646). (1987, 29).

Crucial for my argument here is the way such aesthetic sensibilities endow all things “traditional” with honor, respectability, and righteousness that, as in so many other nationalist discourses, has dangerously declined in the moment of contemporary, late capitalist, globalized society. When individuals or groups inhabit the Dravidian aesthetic, they demonstrate their connection to tradition and the superior values that were once upheld. They come to embody the glorious past for which so many Tamils yearn.¹⁶¹

Under the broad umbrella of ritualized gift giving and the Dravidian aesthetic, there are many subtler and more specific tactics that are deployed as conventions of ritualization. Features of temple processions and ancestor worship, staged announcements, garlands, shawls, and honorific titles that are already regular features of the magisterial Dravidian aesthetic are taken up by the mobilizing castes as they attempt to step into conventional modes of power. The Devendras and Thevars repeat their acts of ritualization at multiple events throughout the year, building power through the hypnotic effects of habituation. However, the Devendras especially, but also the Thevars, remain very much on the boarder dividing stunning struggle from accepted convention. Other castes must accept the Devendras’ and Thevars’ rituals in order for them to complete their task, but, as Bell writes, the world of ritualization is defined by negotiations of power, and the forces of consent and resistance (1992, 8).

¹⁶¹ In explaining the Dravidian aesthetic as a kind of neo-classicalism, Bate focuses on Tamil oratory. He demonstrates that Dravidianist political orators since the second half of the twentieth century have been employing an archaic, poetic form of Tamil, which has come to be known as *centamiḷ* (“fine” or “beautiful” Tamil), as the basis for their claims to the purity and glory of an imagined past (2009). They boost and confirm their status by speaking with the majesty of ancient monarchs, as they are imagined, and in so doing create *centamiḷ* in opposition to the vulgar, informal Tamil of the everyday that has been subjected to the corrupting forces of modernity and the Indian nation. One of the features of *centamiḷ*, Bate goes on, is its employment of phonic and metrical reduplication – the poetic, patterned repetition of sounds and rhythms, which, interestingly, is at a peace with the repetition embedded in the visual aesthetics of Tamil ritualization (ibid., 59). Both the visual and auditory elements of ritualized Tamil politics are components of the Dravidian neoclassical aesthetic, which arose at the birth of modern electoral politics, producing the Tamil tradition that they claim to represent (ibid.).

Intracaste contestation with respect to strategy and ideology also complicates the process of ritualization, occluding the solidification of convention. The prerogatives that undergird caste mobilization are not, as I have shown in previous chapters, univocal, but are instead in a state of argumentation and indecision for both the Devendras and the Thevars. But such ambitions trouble their equally strong claims to *vīram*, which usually run against the grain of preestablished institutions of power on behalf of “the people”.

Chennai’s Cakōtira Maṟumarcci Nalacaṅkam: the Devendra Elite

Just a few days after the dissolution of the Niṇaivu Viḷā, I observed strategies of ritualization at a Devendra caste community center, or mahāl, in Chennai. Thangam (mentioned in the previous chapter) had invited me to the annual meeting of the Cakōtira Maṟumarcci Nalacaṅkam (“Brothers Renaissance Betterment Association”) – a Devendra caste organization constituted primarily by wealthy urbanites. While Thangam and his associates are proud of their elite membership, the Cakōtira Maṟumarcci Nalacaṅkam is also closely affiliated with the much more plebeian Devendra Kula Vellalar Panpattu Kazhagam in Paramakudi. The leaders of the Kazhagam, one of whom is Thangam’s nephew, were in attendance on September 16th, solidifying their relationships with their wealthy caste fellows upon whom they called when a crisis arose about five weeks later.

Although Thangam requested my presence at the meeting, he did not assist me in the logistical organization of my last-minute trip. Instead Raja, a driver, factory worker, and avid follower of the aforementioned militant Devendra leader John Pandian, invited me to stay at his family home. I had met Raja on the eve of the event in Paramakudi through a neighbor, and was thankful to have his assistance. He was born and raised in Southern Tamil Nadu, in Sivagangai District, but resides primarily in a rented, two-room, cement block apartment in Ambattur, a

developing industrial neighborhood on the Northwestern outskirts of Chennai. I stayed with Raja, his wife, and two sons, in their apartment, which is typical of a significant population of Devendras who have migrated from the southern reaches of the state in search of economic opportunity.¹⁶²

Several blocks surrounding Raja's apartment building are inhabited almost exclusively by Devendras, many of whom are relatives by blood and/or marriage. Some of Raja's cousins and best friends live within "calling distance" as they say in Tamil, and many of the men among them are supporters of Pandian. Ambattur, Raja explained, is a "Devendra village", but "there are other periyavaṅka among the Devendra jāti who work in government jobs" and live in wealthier, more prestigious areas of Chennai.¹⁶³

On the morning of the meeting, after Raja's wife ensured that my clothing and hair were in proper order, Raja brought me to the Caṅkam's mahāl reminding me along the way that I would be meeting very important people there. He listed the names and occupations of some of the periyavaṅka, competing with the shrill songs about John Pandian that shook the speakers of his determined, little car. Raja pulled up to the building, and parked next to other vehicles on an otherwise empty plot that abutted the mahāl. Many of the vehicles, which included Mercedes, BMWs, and an assortment of SUVs, were fitted with red and green Devendra flags that topped their antennas.

Although the mahāl is located slightly closer than Raja's area to the wealthy Anna Nagar neighborhood, it is nonetheless on a bumpy unpaved road lined with leather tanning factories. It

¹⁶² According to the Census of India, 11.49% of the 466,205 individuals residing in Ambattur are classified as Scheduled Caste and Tribe (2011). Of those, I am not certain how many are Devendra.

¹⁶³ The term periyavaṅka (literally, "big people") is a reference to individuals of high status and prestige.

is very far (about twenty kilometers) from what we may consider the “center” of Chennai.¹⁶⁴ As of 2013 (I returned for another visit), the construction of the mahāl remained unfinished. It had a cement foundation and a staircase leading to an untiled roof that was slated to become another story. The front side of the building was completely open, lacking walls of any kind. Neither windows nor doors had been installed. The process of construction began more than a decade ago in 2000, but was stalled due to insufficient funds, Thangam informed me.

Raja shuffled along behind me as I approached the incomplete building, greeting many of the men I had met in the Paramakudi area along the way. I received and presented greetings with the formal gesture of clasping hands in the position of prayer, while Raja was acknowledged with simple head nods. The building’s open entranceway was surrounded by tables that were full of books and pamphlets about Devendra history and culture. I already knew many of the authors and publishers who manned the tables because they had also sold their materials at the event in Paramakudi a few days prior.

Passing through the entranceway, I entered the spacious hall of bare cement, which was nonetheless filled with around two hundred folding metal chairs. Half full at that early point in the festivities, the seats faced a temporary stage that was decorated with banners naming the Cakōtira Maṛumalarcci Nalacaṅkam and its leaders, a framed, graphic print of Immanuel pointing his finger and foot, and a larger print of Ambedkar wearing his usual blue suit and glasses. Eight older men sat on plastic chairs occupying the stage. They were each called to the microphone by Thangam at various points throughout the day.

¹⁶⁴ Having grown out of an agglomeration of villages, Chennai is a sprawling city with no clearly defined center. However, the most expensive real estate in Chennai exists in the areas where there are also the most businesses, government, offices, and foreign embassies. Those areas are within a roughly square-shaped stretch of land enclosed by neighborhoods called Nungambakkam, Triplicane, Mylapore and T Nagar.

Thangam, who was the master of ceremonies, stood behind a podium, clutching a microphone and addressing the crowd. After a grand and lengthy welcome, he began recounting the story of the mahāl:

Now we have this place for our mahāl. They doubted us as we gathered the money to build it. Together, we bought the land and now we have our mahāl that we are building step-by-step ... before, in that era, we would meet somewhere – at the base of a banyan tree or at the base of a neem tree. The one who established this association was a high court judge, and even he had to talk to the police. He said, ‘I am a high court judge, I do not lie’ ... little by little, we have progressed. We gathered the money to get cement and building materials. Our mahāl is progressing, step-by-step. It will have many stories and be one of the biggest mahāls in Chennai ... We were put down for many centuries, but now we are rising up again. We are the people of the soil. We are the people of the Tamil land. Although the people of our jāti pray to many different gods – Hindus, Muslims, and Christians – all of our parents were agriculturalists.

Thangam’s description of the mahāl’s progress refers also to the upward social mobility of his jāti. In the face of antagonistic outside forces, the Devendras have begun to consolidate their wealth and build a monument to their own strength.

The Devendra’s development evidenced by the mahāl is, for Thangam, a natural progression because they are recovering their caste status. He endows his caste fellows with the ultimate honor of Tamil agrarian civility, asserting that they are “the people of the soil”. As I discussed in previous chapters, the cultivator is at the heart of Tamil civilization according to popular understandings, which have been influenced by missionary and colonial efforts to “settle” and “morally uplift” particular castes. Thangam’s claim to honor and respectability is also indicated and upheld by his refusal to victimize his jāti. He locates their oppression unambiguously in the past, contending that they are already a united front despite their many religious affiliations. For Thangam, Devendras are restoring their rightful position, which once rested on their agricultural success, by moving into modern-day centers of power, namely government offices. Thangam’s inspiring introductory speech was met with the enthusiastic cheers of the increasingly large crowd.

He then turned to a long list of the names of guests that he welcomed to the event. Each name was preceded by formal titles, and, not surprisingly included the honored guests' fields of study and occupations. For example, a high court judge would be welcomed as, “*Tiru Selvaraja MA, High Court Judge, Avarkaḷē.*”¹⁶⁵ With the exception of me, all the honored guests were government employees. Those who were not sitting there already were called to the stage one-by-one to receive shawls that are typically given as gifts at political events and public celebrations. As per common practice, the donors draped the shawls upon the shoulders of their individual recipients as photos were snapped.

Not long after the lengthy process of ritual honoring, Thangam handed the microphone and another list to a sub-collector who had been sitting on the stage.¹⁶⁶ The sub-collector began announcing the names of Devendra students who had scored high marks on their exams. They too – the new generation of upwardly mobile Devendras – were called to the stage to be publically recognized. They were presented with monetary gifts for their extraordinary performances.

The sub-collector handed the microphone to another one of the men on the stage – the former president of the Cakōtira Maṅumalarcci Nalacaṅkam. More spectators filed into the hall and sat down as the former president, the sub-collector, and Thangam ceremoniously exchanged shawls. Then the former president began to tell a story:

I first came to Madras [old name for Chennai] to study in college. I came from my small village and didn't know anything here. Thangam sir helped me find a hostel to stay in and I stayed here and studied well ... There are many like us. Our association has one thousand members. There are lawyers, collectors, judges, professors, IAS, and IPS amongst us.¹⁶⁷ We have progressed ... whatever party is in power, the DMK,

¹⁶⁵ Avarkaḷē is, in this case, the second person plural. Its use to refer to a single individual is a sign of profound respect, something like the royal we.

¹⁶⁶ Subordinate to the position of collector, which I discussed in the previous chapter, the position of sub-collector is another holdover from the period of company rule. The sub-collector has separate charge of a division of the district under the authority of the collector and answers to her or him.

¹⁶⁷ IAS stands for Indian Administrative Service, which is the premier administrative civil service of the Government of India. IAS officers take an extremely competitive exam called the Civil Services Examination and hold the most high-power in the Union Government as well as in state and public sector undertakings. IPS refers to

ADMK, MMK, PMK etc, they do not know our strength. With education our society will advance. We'll be well formed [read: established].

The former president's superlative claims were met with applause that filled the room. Like Thangam, the former president had assured himself and others that the Devendras had already established their power. They had reclaimed their authority and only sought to make their reconsolidation known. Of course, the former president's shift to the future tense (also the habitual tense in Tamil) at the end of the passage cited here is indicative of the uncertainty of his claims. Through education Devendra society *will advance* and *will become established*.

After further announcements of thanking and honoring, which moved to the recognition of the association's donors, Thangam took hold of the microphone to introduce a book and its author. The book, a six hundred and twenty four-page tome, *Meendezhum Pandiyar Varalaru* ("Resurgence of the Pandian Kings' History") had not yet been published officially, although a few self-printed copies circulated around Tamil Nadu. The book was penned by self-styled Devendra leader K. Senthil Mallar, who had a small following mostly in his native Thoothukudi District. In the text, Mallar claims that the Devendras were the original settlers of the fertile river tracts of Tamil Nadu who rose to prominence as the Pandian kings. Although they were enslaved by invaders in the seventeenth century, Senthil Mallar goes on, the Devendras will rise again to reestablish their rightful possession of the Tamil country. Thangam held up the hardcover, glossy book, which draws on Tamil literature, ancient inscriptions, 16th – 19th century literature, and recent history, to make its arguments. Thangam emphasized the book's importance: "This

the Indian Police Service, which is also a nationwide service of the Government of India. IPS officers are highly respected because they are recruited from the state police cadres and from the same rigorous Civil Services Examination. Because of a perpetual shortage of police officers in India, the Ministry of Home Affairs proposed the creation of a less demanding examination in 2012 (Union Public Service Commission 2012).

excellent book written by the wise researcher Senthil Mallar should be in every Devendra home. We must know about our true history that has been suppressed.”

The association’s accolades for *Meendezhum Pandiyar Varalaru* were followed by lunch, to which Thangam invited everyone with an announcement on the microphone. The crowd began to file upstairs to the open roof slowly, as I went to find Raja who was standing outside amongst a small group of young men. I invited him to lunch, but he declined, saying that he would wait until others had eaten. On the roof, which had been befitted with a tent and was staffed with servers, vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals were provided in generous portions. Many of the meeting’s participants, mostly the periyavaṅka who were being served during the first seating, spoke with me, inquiring about the goals of my research and my impressions. A journalist from Coimbatore asked me in English if I found the people in Paramakudi to be “backwards”. After attempting to answer the loaded question sensitively, I became immersed in a conversation with Thangam and a few of his associates. Thangam told them that I had been inquiring about the community’s leadership, and opinions immediately surfaced. One man lamented, “There are so many leaders ... there is John Pandian, Krishnasamy, the Communist Party of India Marxist ... there is no unity.” “They fight amongst themselves” another man interjected. Similar complaints circulated until Thangam ended the conversation, addressing me, “but you should not see such things. They are not important to our Devendra culture or to our history of descent from the kings.” Regardless of their current entanglements, the Devendras were retroactively united on the basis of their history.

After lunch, the crowd thinned out. Those of us who were left returned to our seats as the program continued. The speakers focused mostly on the need to raise additional funds for the construction of the mahāl, thanking those who had already given and urging others to donate.

One man, Ravichandran, who works as a mid-level government civil servant, departed from discussions of the mahāl. He delivered an impassioned speech that reinvigorated the small audience:

We must rise up. Our little brother John Pandian was riding a bus through some villages and he was told that he could not get off somewhere because of the Kallars [Thevar subcaste]¹⁶⁸. There were so many of them there. Although that was the case, because that was the case, he insisted on getting down there. It is time for us to have our freedom ... now we can say that we are the Pandians [kings].

At the mention of the Pandian kings, the crowd exploded into applause, cheers, and whistles.

Ravichandran continued after a brief pause:

The Maravars [Thevars]¹⁶⁹ try to put us down but they cannot. We're not SC. We're the people of the soil. Other people approach Ram Vilas Paswan and say, 'They did this. They did that.' We should not do that ... With Martin Luther King Jr., there is also Malcolm X. He was uneducated. He was in jail. In jail, he studied Islam. You should study Malcolm X's history. You must study his history ... They do not see us as we are. One may be a better speaker than Ambedkar but they are afraid to speak because they are Pallar [Devendra] or Paraiyar ... Ambedkar says we rise up through study. Immanuel, who martyred himself at such a young age ... should not be seen as a Pallar leader, but as a leader for everyone. He was a leader for all of mankind.

The crowd seemed as satisfied as I was with the speech that was packed with emotional assertions. Ravichandran started out by celebrating and stoking vīram, encouraging Devendras to be courageous, to flout Thevar domination like their little brother John Pandian. Ravichandran referred to Pandian as *tambi*, “little brother” because he is significantly older than the heroic leader. Perhaps not so incidentally, referring to Pandian as such had the effect of bringing his defiant deeds within reach of the people. After all, if a little brother can do it, so can his older brother. For Ravichandran, the violence that often rises out of vīram is a necessary component of Devendra mobilization. He went on to connect the movement of the Devendras with civil rights activism in the United States – an analogy that has been made many times by Dalit activists since

¹⁶⁸ Recall from Chapter One that the Kallars and Maravars are two of the castes within the Thevar caste conglomeration.

¹⁶⁹ See footnote 17.

Ambedkar.¹⁷⁰ Instead of turning to the Black Panthers, who have been the model for the Dalit Panthers of India and its various offshoots, such as the VCK, Ravichandran turned to Malcolm X who he described as a self-starter, a man who rose up through his self-directed study. Ravichandran thus distanced himself from the Paraiyar-dominated VCK and other Dalit outfits. While Ravichandran did not mention Malcolm X's advocacy of violent means, he subtly inferred that a violent figure is a necessary complement to a peaceful activist by juxtaposing Martin Luther King Junior and Malcolm X as have so many before him. As Hannah Arendt wrote, "out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience" (1970, 53). Violence, Ravichandran suggested, is an efficient way to deconstruct the dense thicket of hierarchical caste power.

But Ravichandran did not suggest that the Devendras should rely on violence alone. Like Thangam, he staked claim to the righteousness of agrarian civility for his jāti by naming them as the sons of the soil. He also refused to victimize the Devendras, associating cries for help with "other people". He subtly referred to Dalit castes by noting that such castes turn to Ram Vilas Paswan, saying, "They did this. They did that." Paswan, an Indian politician from Bihar who has been a member of the Lok Sabha eight times, and had just been one of the star participants of the *Nīṇaivu Viḷā*, presents himself as a defender of Dalit rights. But Ravichandran claimed that the

¹⁷⁰ Ambedkar's years as a student in New York (1913 – 1927) inspired his comparisons of caste to race in the United States. Historian Daniel Immerwahr explains this process well:

In his energetic skewering of the caste system, Ambedkar compared caste repeatedly to slavery, which he came to understand not only as an affront to human dignity, but particularly as an obstacle to a vibrant society based on liberty and equality. 'An ideal society,' he wrote in 1937, echoing his mentor, 'should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association'" (Immerwahr 2007, 278).

Ambedkar's analysis continues to inform Dalit activism to this day. The Dalit Panthers of India, for example, self-consciously adopted the language of the Black Panthers with whom they felt akin. They operated as a revolutionary anti-caste organization in Maharashtra in the 1970s, and are the forefathers of today's Dalit Panthers of India – the political party headed by Thirumaavalavan.

Devendras should not turn to him for assistance. Ravichandran suggested that the Devendras don't need representatives like Paswan. They are, after all, the descendants of the almighty Pandian kings and the leader "for all of mankind" Immanuel.

The event concluded with Thangam urging the audience members to donate to the association and repeating his gratitude. After saying goodbyes and exchanging contact information, I found Raja outside standing by his vehicle. We headed back down the bumpy, labyrinthine lanes that led to Raja's neighborhood.

As Raja drove us towards his home, I asked him what he thought of the day's proceedings. He replied: "Much of this is for the periyavaṅka, the people with money ... they will invite you to their homes to eat, but not me ... It is good. The association is good, but for people like us there is another path. There is standing up and fighting, following our big brother John Pandian."

The proceedings and reactions to the Cakōtira Maṅumalarcci Nalacaṅkam's annual meeting illustrate the complex relations between Devendra individuals throughout the state as they merge into a caste conglomeration with the help of new technologies that enable the movement of information at unprecedented speeds, and the ease and affordability with which print materials can be produced ensures.

While the platform underway within the Cakōtira Maṅumalarcci Nalacaṅkam is able to exert influence throughout the state, it sometimes alienates Devendras at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum whose everyday experiences and long-term ambitions are different.¹⁷¹ This feeling of estrangement between the rich and poor Devendras is mutual. Most tellingly than the name of the Cakōtira Maṅumalarcci Nalacaṅkam – "Brothers Renaissance Betterment

¹⁷¹ The members of Cakōtira Maṅumalarcci Nalacaṅkam could be considered members of the "creamy layer" – the term used mostly by those who oppose India's reservation (affirmative action) policies to highlight their alleged injustice and hypocrisy.

Association” – lacks any references to the Devendra caste, suggesting that the association aims to distance itself publically not only from the Dalit and Scheduled Caste labels, but also from commonplace assumptions about the Devendras in the broader milieu of Tamil caste identity politics.¹⁷²

Immanuel’s Birthday: Taking Back Paramakudi

Back in Paramakudi, to which I returned after a few days of meetings with associates of both Raja and Thangam in Chennai, my Devendra friends were anticipating the anniversary of Immanuel’s birthday, which falls on October 9th. Birthday celebrations are a befitting opportunity for Devendra resurgence, albeit on a scale much smaller than that of September 11th. On the morning of October 9th, images of the aforementioned leader Subha Annamalai reappeared in another attempt to gather support for his newly formed political party, Mallar Nadu (“Mallar Country”). While the images that Annamalai installed for the October event were subtle and sparse compared to those on display at the Niṇaiṇu Viḷā, they nonetheless continued to identify Annamalai with Immanuel. For example, a flexboard (about fifteen feet tall) that had been placed a few meters down the road from the mahāl enroute to the samāti featured images of the bodies of both leaders clad in traditional whites, standing in a single file line (Figure Eleven). Immanuel, who was adorned with a thick flower garland, stood behind Annamalai who seemed to be emerging from him. Wearing sunglasses and a smile, Annamalai walked towards the viewer.

¹⁷² The Cakōtira Maṅumalarcci Nalacaṅkam under Thangam’s leadership may also tend towards Sanskritization, simply put, the caste’s emulation of Brahminism. Cakōtira is a Tamilized version of a Sanskrit word. More tellingly, Thangam himself boasted of the “pure vegetarian” eaten in his home when I went to visit him.



Figure Eleven: Subha Annamalai at the Celebration of Immanuel’s Birthday, Paramakudi, 2012

Word had spread throughout Devendra Paramakudi that Annamalai would arrive at the mahāl on the morning of October 9th. By ten o’clock, a small crowd of mostly young men stood in front of the building. They waited silently amidst the speakers that they had set up for the occasion. As rhythmic songs praising Immanuel blared on repeat, the men and I gazed at our watches and phones, waiting. Finally a convoy of white SUVs pulled up to the mahāl and parked. Annamalai and his acolytes rushed towards the golden bust of Immanuel that marked the entrance to the building. The bust, which had been given as a gift by Annamalai a few years prior, received thick garlands of colorful flowers as shouts of “vīra vaṇakkam” echoed through the hall. Photos were snapped, and Annamalai and his entourage climbed back into their SUVs

without further ado. I followed the convoy to the Samadhi (gravesite) where the same, simple ritual was performed.¹⁷³ After another round of photos was taken, Annamalai and his acolytes left Paramakudi.

Annamalai had sent a message without any speech. His *kauravam*, his image as a *periyavaṅka*, was claimed by the presence of his vehicles. Obviously expensive but available on the Indian market for a few decades now, SUVs are the vehicle of choice for many *periyavaṅkas*. Government ministers and the wealthy are driven in SUVs, usually Tatas and Mahindras, in the pure white color that matches their *vēṣṭis*. To arrive in a lesser (cheaper) vehicle would be unbecoming of their status. There is also a direct correlation between the number of vehicles one can attract and retain in a convoy and one's *kauravam*. Not surprisingly, the more vehicles a leader has following her or him, the more *kauravam* she or he both accrues and demonstrates. Convoys are such an important marker of status that I have often seen leaders hire empty vehicles to follow them as they make appearances throughout the state. Fortunately for Annamalai, he was able to fill the vehicles that followed him. He also succeeded at asserting his connection with Immanuel, the embodiment of *vīram* complemented with the honor and respectability he draws from his image as a soldier and national-level leader.

After Annamalai's departure, there was a lull in celebratory activity as most people headed to their homes for lunch and rest. The celebrations resumed after sunset on a fallow field in front of the government hospital and next to a small temple. Importantly, said field abuts *ainji mukku* (literally, "five corners"), which is the crossroads of the town's major thoroughfares¹⁷⁴. The road that goes from Madurai to Rameswaram and is punctuated by the bus stand, bazaar, and

¹⁷³ Usually used to refer to a site where a Hindu saint or holy person merged with the divine, a Samadhi is marked by the presence of a stone or memorial at which devotees may pay homage. I described Immanuel's Samadhi in greater detail in the previous chapter.

¹⁷⁴ In addition to the Madurai-Rameswaram and the Paramakudi-Mudukulathur roads, another smaller road begins at *ainji mukku* and makes its way to Paramakudi's market.

Devendra mahāl crosses over the road that leads from Paramakudi to Mudukulathur there. By far the busiest road in town, and, also the primary reason for the growth of Paramakudi, the side of the Madurai-Rameswaram road is a maximally conspicuous place to hold an event.

The Devendras thus called attention to themselves as throngs of buses, mopeds, bicycles, and cars inched by in the evening traffic. As you may recall from previous chapters, beyond ainji mukku, on the Paramakudi-Mudukulathur road are the town's poorest neighbors, including Andipuram, which are overwhelmingly inhabited by Scheduled Castes. The celebration stood just beyond the boundary of Devendra Paramakudi, calling other castes to take notice of the Devendras as they stepped outside of their own domain.

Chandrabose, who I mentioned in the previous chapter, worked closely with his acolytes to host the evening birthday celebration for their fallen hero Immanuel. Although the event was humble compared to the ecstatic outpourings of September 11th, it afforded Chandrabose the opportunity to propagate his vision of what he calls the Dalit struggle. Since 1988, he has been mobilizing on an atheistic, leftist, Dalit rights platform through the organization that he founded – the Tiyagi Immanuel Peravai, (literally, “Martyr Immanuel Assembly”). In addition to his leadership of the assembly, Chandrabose has been instrumental in increasing the size and visibility of the September 11th event.

He headed the Paramakudi Devendra Panpattu Kazhagam for several critical years collaborating with men who have become his associates and supporters. However, Chandrabose became a controversial figure in Devendra circles in and around Paramakudi in the early 2000s, and was defeated in the kazhagam's election in 2011. Many of his caste fellows had turned against him on ideological grounds. Increasingly powerful and common, the Devendras' claims that they are the descendants of kings long misconstrued as Dalits run counter to Chandrabose's

increasingly exceptional emphasis on the Devendras' suffering and material deprivation under the crushing weight of caste hegemony. Chandrabose likens the experiences of the Devendras, who he calls by their old moniker – Pallar – to the experiences of other Scheduled Castes and oppressed peoples throughout the world, and advocates solidarity and rebellion for all such groups. Importantly, his self-proclaimed goal is the destruction of caste writ large, rather than the establishment of a higher status for Devendras.

While Chandrabose's convictions are opposed by many of his caste fellows, he was nonetheless able to attract a significant crowd to fill the plastic chairs on the field at ainji mukku. Most of his followers hail from nearby villages, and some of them took advantage of vans that he sent to pick them up. In total, about two hundred and fifty people, including approximately fifty women sat facing the stage that had been erected for the event. The primarily rural composition of Chandrabose's following is important to note, as it suggests that residents of Tamil Nadu's villages are more amenable to identifying as Dalit and uniting with other Scheduled Castes. This may be due to the more overt forms of caste-based discrimination that persist in some villages, as well as the relative prevalence of poverty in rural areas. Chandrabose's followers may feel that uniting with others facing similar challenges makes the most sense, and may be energized by the urgency of their situations. However, such communities, in this case, many of the same individuals, also participate in the Niṇaivu Viḷā at which they are sure to imbibe the pride of their former kingship, and the power of their vīram. They are able to reconcile status claims upheld by history with calls to solidarity that are typical of Dalit political discourse.

Before the speeches had begun, the Tiyagi Immanuvel Peravai's message was clearly stated. Strands of green and red flags hung overhead. Although the flags' hues matched the archetypical Devendra flags that had colored the town the previous month, they had one

conspicuous difference. Each flag was marked with one blue star. The star is also found on the blue and red flag of the Dalit Panthers of India – Thirumaavalavan’s outfit, which is the most powerful Dalit party in South India. Chandrabose, who worked with Thirumaavalavan during the early part of his career and maintains a friendship with him, likens his movement to the Dalit Panthers of India who similarly adduce their atheism and advocacy of Dalit rights as human rights. Through this subtle aesthetic choice, solidarity was established. The decorations adorning the stage also bespoke the principles of the Tiyagi Immanuvel Peravai. Standing to the left and right of the stage, two flexboards presented busts of Ambedkar and Immanuvel respectively. The same size, the flexboards equally honored Ambedkar – the single most important and powerful signifier of Dalit rights activism throughout the nation – and Immanuvel – the local hero who is associated with the Devendras in particular. The backdrop of the stage was a grand banner, which featured the following text: “October 9th opposition to caste power day on the 89th birthday of the martyr Immanuvel.”

The speeches clearly indicated Chandrabose’s stance in form and content. Unlike the meeting of the Cakōtira Maṟumalarcci Nalacankam and most other caste and political organizations, this one did not include any demonstrations of ritualized gift-giving or gratitude. No necks were garlanded as camera flashes went off nor were any shawls bequeathed. Unceremoniously, Chandrabose’s associate and close friend Arun took hold of the microphone and began:

Today we remember Tiyagi Immanuvel Sekaran here. He made a great sacrifice not only for our community but for all oppressed people. He fought against caste power, and we, the Tiyagi Immanuvel Peravai do the same today for all the Scheduled Castes and all the oppressed people ... Like Ambedkar, Tiyagi Immanuvel Sekaran was a great man. He saw the people suffering and wanted to make it right. He wanted to destroy their suffering and establish equality. We must follow in his path and oppose caste power on his birthday on October 9th, which should be a great and excellent function in Tamil Nadu. They do not help us but only keep us down ... They shot and killed Immanuvel on September 11th, 1957, and then last year they shot and killed seven of our Pallar men right here on anji mukku, there was the horrible killing. We must destroy caste, the power of the Brahmins, the power of the high castes, and come to live without

caste in the Tamil country ... Our friend [*tōlar*] Chandrabose is fighting against the caste authority and the injustice in our villages ...

Arun's well-received speech effectively articulated the assembly's approach. For the Tiyagi Immanuvel Peravai Immanuvel, Immanuvel is a signifier of Dalit struggle and empowerment analogous to Ambedkar. Both demonstrated their courage and superior characters by effecting positive change in the world. They fought for the invaluable goal of equality, which is fundamentally valuable. Immanuvel, Ambedkar, and the activists who follow in their footsteps fight against "them", the unnamed enemy that stands opposed to "the people". As I discussed in Chapter Three, Laclau's understanding of populist mobilization is informative here. The enemy is constructed in opposition to the people whose powerful bond rests mostly on the Manichean divide between the oppressor and the oppressed. Standing on the very spot upon which this conflict was mercilessly manifest, Arun urges the people to fight against domination. Finally, he locates Chandrabose in the lineage of noble fighters, as he calls his *tōlar* to take the microphone. Arun's choice of words here is significant. He calls Chandrabose *tōlar*, which means close friend, instead of any honorific title or even the more informal *aṇṇa* "big brother", which is a common appellation for well-respected wielders of power, as we have seen. *Tōlar* is the term used by communist parties and outfits since it is egalitarian, unmarked by any differentiations in status. Again, Chandrabose and his associates locate themselves within antecedent leftist movements.

Chandrabose stood up and took the microphone. As the sounds of clapping dwindled, he began his address:

Today, October 9th, we must remember the great *vīran* Tiyagi Immanuvel Sekaran who sacrificed his life fighting for us Dalit people. He fought against caste and we too must also oppose caste. We must create a struggle to destroy caste as our great father Periyar [EVR] did before us. Today the high caste people still control the land and the businesses, but we must change this situation. We must rise up and fight ...

At that point in Chandrabose's speech, the sky opened up, unleashing a sudden downpour. The audience members ran for cover, most of us ending up in the staircase of the nearby government hospital. Chandrabose's assistants scrambled to save the speakers and equipment that had projected Chandrabose's speech moments before. The function thus ended more unceremoniously than it had begun.

Although the October 9th event had been cut short by the rain, it nonetheless built supportive momentum for Chandrabose who intended to continue his activism in the rural areas surrounding Paramakudi. The nature of Chandrabose's activism, which is not uncommon for caste leaders, is worthy of exploration. Under the auspices of his assembly, Chandrabose engages in what he calls "problem solving" on a regular basis. When Devendras are in conflict with other castes or with each other, Chandrabose and his associates, one of whom is an attorney, are either called in or arrive on their own accord after getting wind of the news. Like a judge, Chandrabose usually summons the opposing parties for a discussion. He hears both sides of the story and comes to a decision, which often involves the return of property or the payment of reparations. Keeping conflicts out of state hands, he thus establishes his role as a para-state juridical authority. Chandrabose's work as an unofficial judge affords him ample opportunities to advance his overarching vision, which he also readily shared with me. A self-proclaimed Marxist, he believes in economic, social, and gender equality. He is opposed to the accumulation of personal property, such as land and gold, which he proudly told me that he does not possess. He is also hostile to the established authority of the state. As he reiterated to me several times, he is engaged not in politics ("*araciya*") but in a movement ("*iyakkam*"). He and his followers boycott elections, and highlight the casteism and violence of the state in their monthly magazine, *Mārram* (literally, "Change"). Their frequent, combative protests against the government related

to issues as diverse as nuclear power, women's rights, and land reform indicate their opposition to the establishment.

Chandrabose's model for Devendra mobilization at least theoretically refrains from the claims to gentility and respectability that animate many of the caste's leaders and activists. As in his aforementioned speech, Chandrabose summons his caste fellows to struggle and fight. He does not call on them to recognize the truth of their historic authority, which has been suppressed by antagonistic forces. Likewise, for Chandrabose, Immanuvel is first and foremost a *vīran*. He is not a well-decorated soldier or an acknowledged authority figure of any kind, but is instead a selfless hero who courageously gave his life. Chandrabose places himself within the ethic of heroism and calls on others to follow him. However, despite his best efforts, Chandrabose does not remain in the fiery, passionate domain of the *vīran*. He has accrued *kauravam* as a leader whose established authority urges others to heed his opinions. Without *kauravam*, his juridical activities would not be efficacious.

Amongst the leaders and most vocal members of the Kazhagam, however, Chandrabose's authority is called into question. Many Paramakudi Devendras openly disagree with his opinions and strategies. In fact, the cleavage of the Devendra Paramakudi community into two ideological camps – those who identify the Pallars as Dalits and those who identify the Devendras as kings – coincides with Chandrabose's defeat in the Kazhagam. This conspicuous division ensured that the leaders and many members of the Kazhagam were not present at Chandrabose's function on October 9th. However, when the community reached a point of crisis a few weeks later, ideological differences were cast aside as Devendras in Paramakudi and throughout the state banded together.

Contesting The Throne of the Past on Today's Uneven Terrain: Raja Raja Chola's Coronation Day

On October 25th, Devendras from various districts gathered in the city of Thanjavur to seize another opportunity to ritually affirm their status. They expanded their connection to the comparatively humble Immanuvel by asserting their descent from the medieval king Raja Raja Chola. They inserted themselves into the celebration of the king's *Sataya Vilā* – the purported anniversary of his coronation in 985 CE.¹⁷⁵ The revered king Raja Raja Chola, whose exceptional greatness is signified by the reduplication of the title Raja (literally, “king”), was responsible for the construction of the resplendent Brihadeeswara Temple, which stands tall at the center of Thanjavur, attracting pilgrims from all over the world. An architectural masterpiece and one of the largest in India, the temple is a point of wistful pride for Tamils who imaginatively recollect the glory days of the Tamil country.

As Sumathi Ramaswamy argues, the domination of the positivist, rationalist discourse of modernity endows those who are (relatively recently) incorporated into its dominion with feelings of disenchantment and profound loss (2004). Such grief-stricken individuals and communities in the Tamil context labor to recreate “the pristine origin of their beloved language and land in a moment of absolute plentitude and perfection that is now forever lost” (ibid., 136). Attitudes towards the Brihadeeswara Temple evinced by Tamils from many walks of life indicate the loss and fights against it to which Ramaswamy refers.

On one occasion I visited the temple with my research assistant, Mohan, and noticed him gazing around the temple grounds in awe. As we entered the building, he looked up at the enormous brass entryway and doors and said, “Look at that. Look at what they did back then during the reign of Raja Raja Chola. Now look at what we have. We only have garbage!” The

¹⁷⁵ *Sataya Vilā* (literally, “*Satayam* festival”) refers to the birth star of Raja Raja Chola, which is *Satayam*. Some believe that the festival honors his birth anniversary, though most believe that it is a celebration of his coronation day.

disappointments of Mohan's contemporary life – his unemployment, the failing infrastructure of Southern Tamil Nadu, including the piles of garbage on the road, the frequent power cuts, and the ubiquitous water shortages – motivate his pining valorization of the accomplishments of a bygone era. He yearns for something better that has been lost to the world but that can be seen in the monuments of the past.

Today, the conventional Brahminical Brahideswara Temple observes a Śaivite ritual cycle, celebrating Śiva throughout the year, as well as hosting the Sataya Viḷā for three days every October.¹⁷⁶ During the celebration of Raja Raja Chola's Sataya Viḷā, Brahmin priests meticulously perform special pujas, as classical Carnatic music and Bharatanatayam (classical Indian Dance) enliven the temple grounds. Scholars and major donors to the temple ascend a temporary stage to deliver addresses about the glories of the temple, Chola reign, and Tamil history writ large, after which a grand meal is served to all participants.

Thanjavur is a befitting location for such constitutive commemorative dramatizations because of its location in the Cauvery Delta, “the rice bowl of Tamil Nadu”. The fertility of its land ensures that the region is one of the wealthiest areas in the state, and also one of the most peaceful. It is not known for intercaste or political violence, and its abundant rice paddy also carries the symbolic value that is attributed to agrarian civility. Agricultural life is associated with the cultivated and guileless people of the “traditional” Tamil country. For people from the

¹⁷⁶ The Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department manages and controls temple administration within the state Tamil Nadu. It was established in 1923 under the Madras Presidency. Complementing the department, Brahmin officiants oversee the ritual repertoire of Tamil Nadu's many large Śaivite temples according to the Śaivāgamic tradition. The Śaivāgamas are a collection of twenty-eight texts thought to have been revealed by Śiva himself, and are the scriptural basis for the philosophy of Southern Śaivism, Śaiva Cittānta. In the course of Śaivism's growth in the south around the sixth century CE, the essential teachings of the Āgamas were passed from teachers to their disciples.

more tumultuous Southern regions, the Thanjavur area is thus an idyllic scene that preserves the superior values and victories of times past.

The relative peace that abides in Thanjavur is indexed by the shared space of caste signifiers, which I witnessed as I walked through the town that radiated out from the temple. I did not see one caste's aesthetic occupation of the area, but instead saw many castes making conflicting claims to the space of Thanjavur as an icon of royal glory and agrarian civility.

Posters that were pasted on the walls along the roads featured leaders of various castes. One presented an image of John Pandian walking towards the viewer, dressed in white and wearing black sunglasses (Figure Twelve). Across from him were images of the faces of his wife and some of his party leaders, and above him stood an image of the gold statue of Raja Raja Chola, was to be the center point of the Devendras' version of the Sataya Viḷā. The king was befittingly bedecked with jewels and a tall crown, standing with one hand on his hip and the other on his sword. The statue featured in the posters replicated the statue that was at the center of the Sataya Viḷā for the Devendras. In addition to the text that labeled the faces, the green text across the top of the poster read, "Māmallar Rācarāca Tēvēntira Cōḷar ...", the "Great Mallar Raja Raja Devendra Chola".¹⁷⁷ The already unabashed poster had further clarified its point by giving the king Devendra titles. Next to the Pandians' poster, the group supporting Kavidasan – a local Devendra leader whose base of support is in nearby Pudukottai – sent a similar message (Figure Thirteen). Against a green background stood a bust of Kavidasan. On the top right corner stood the statue of Raja Raja Chola. Again the king was referred to as "Māmallar Rācarāca Tēvēntira Cōḷar". Importantly, both posters also prominently featured text that seemed to announce one of the aims of the Devendras' celebration of the Sataya Viḷā: "cilai mīṭbu bōr", "the war to rescue the statue", which I discuss below.

¹⁷⁷ As we recall, Mallar is another caste title that has been adopted by the Devendras.



Figure Twelve: John Pandian's Poster at the Sataya Vilā of 2012



Figure Thirteen: Kavidasan's Poster at the Sataya Vilā of 2012

The next poster down, which belonged to the Vellalars, similarly claimed Raja Raja Chola according to caste affiliation, but did not mention the war to rescue the statue (Figure Fourteen). It had been pasted by the V.O.C. Peravai – a Vellalar caste organization named after the caste leader Valliappan Olaganathan Chidambaram Pillai (1872–1936)¹⁷⁸. On the left side, it featured the statue of Raja Raja Chola, above which small busts of the late Sri Lankan Tamil leader Velupillai Prabhakaran¹⁷⁹ and of the great Tamil, nationalist poets Bharatiyar (1882-1921)¹⁸⁰ floated. Prabhakaran – embodying the brute force of Tamil *vīraṅ* – and Bharatiyar – representing the respectability of scholarly Tamils – hovered above Raja Raja Chola like his ideas or inspirations. On the right side of the poster stood Saravanan, a contemporary leader of the V.O.C. Peravai, who appeared in whites and sunglasses walking towards the viewer. He stood beside text that read, “*cōḷa paramparaiyē aṅṅa Saravaṅaṅ*”, “big brother Saravanan of the Chola lineage!” Like the Devendras, the Vellalars drew a direct connection between their living leader and the brilliant relic of a better time.

¹⁷⁸ The Vellalars are a numerous and diverse landowning, agricultural caste that retains a great deal of status and respect within Tamil Nadu. Vellalars do not generally fall under the Most Backwards Class reservation category. The Vellalars revere Valliappan Olaganathan Chidambaram Pillai (1872–1936) as their caste hero. A member of the Indian National Congress on and off throughout his life, Chidambaram Pillai is depicted as a freedom fighter because of his relatively docile dispute with the company over shipping rights. He started a shipping company off the coast of Madras, directly competing with British interests, was charged with sedition, and then imprisoned for four years and exiled for six. While Chidambaram Pillai may be understood as a savvy trader who faced the injustice of the company, it is striking that his caste fellows depict him as a Tamil political leader, giving him the title Kappalottiya Tamizhan (“Tamilian who drove the ship”).

¹⁷⁹ Of course, Prabhakaran has nothing to do with Raja Raja Chola or the V.O.C. Peravai. He signifies the epitome of Tamil *vīraṅ*, steadfastly withstanding great danger and sacrificing everything for the “Tamil people”, and is thus an emblem that has been taken up by a variety of castes in a variety of contexts. .

¹⁸⁰ The Vellalars probably deployed Bharatiyar, whose full name was Chinnaswami Subramania Bharati (1882-1921) because of his status as a great Tamil poet. Ironically, Bharatiyar was opposed to caste, which he designated as a social evil.



Figure Fourteen: V.O.C. Peravai’s Poster at the Sataya Viḷā of 2012

Next to the Vellalars poster, a long, horizontal yellow and red poster full of text and lacking anthropomorphic images, claimed Raja Raja Chola for the Vanniyar caste – another populous landowning community that was, unlike the Vellalars, designated as a Most Backwards Class after successful agitations in the 1980s.¹⁸¹ The writing across the top of the banner read, *vaṇṇiyar kula cūriyan! Terku āciyāvaiyē katti āṇṭu vāṇuyar periyakōyil tanta, pulikoṭi vēntaṇ vīra Vaṇṇiya Rāja Rāja Cōḷa.....*, “Son of the Vanniyar lineage! The tiger flag king who in the era of building all of South Asia gave us the heavenly big temple, the heroic [vīra] Vanniyar Raja Raja Chola.

The Vanniyars thus expanded the Chola king’s dominion, or at least his greatness, to all of South Asia and claimed descent from him.

¹⁸¹ The Vanniyar’s claim to descent from Raja Raja Chola is at a peace with their colonial-period claims. As Lloyd I. Rudolph notes, in 1833 Vanniyars ceased to accept their “low caste” status, and tried to get an order passed in Pondicherry affirming that they were not the descendants of a low agricultural caste. In preparation for the census of 1871, they petitioned to be recognized as member of the Kshatriya Varna of Sanskritic Hindu society. By 1931, the term *Vanniya Kula Kshatriya* appeared on the Madras census (Rudolph 1984). Somewhat counterintuitively, more recent decades have seen the Vanniyars petition to avail themselves of more government benefits. In the 1980s, they successfully agitated to be reclassified from Backwards Class to Most Backwards Class.

While I did not happen upon their announcements the day that I was in Thanjavur, the Most Backwards Class that is central to this dissertation – the Thevars – made similar claims. Both my Devendra and Thevar friends assured me that the Thevars assert their descent from Raja Raja Chola, and draw parallels between their contemporary leaders and their royal ancestors. They too pay homage at the Sataya Viḷā.

It is crucial to note that the incongruous claims of the alleged descendants of Raja Raja Chola do not just appear in print media, but are also enacted in ritual performances over the course of the three-day Sataya Viḷā. The various castes do not, however, appear to pay homage on the same days. While they are well aware of each other's appearances, the timings of their arrivals and departures are regulated by the local police. The castes share the space of Raja Raja Chola – the golden monument of their royal past – but not the ritual moments in which they step into his role.

For about the past ten years, Devendra enthusiasts and activists have been gathering at Thanjavur for the Sataya Viḷā with the logistical help of the Thanjavur Devendra Association. The Devendra coronation celebrations in 2012 were multifaceted, providing another example of the Devendras' internal negotiations. In the morning, the Thanjavur Devendra Association gathered for a formal conference about their history and literature at the same time that John Pandian prepared to travel through the rural areas of the region en route to a stage that awaited him. My own fascination with the illustrious Pandian drew me into his entourage, much to the chagrin of the Thanjavur Devendra Association.

I approached the Hotel Tamil Nadu – the relatively expensive hotel where Pandian and his associates were staying – around ten in the morning. It was easy to find because of the rows of red and green flags that had been affixed to its wall, and the throngs of men whose

camouflage of red and green clad intermingled with the waving flags. I greeted the familiar faces of people I had met in Paramakudi and Chennai on my way to the door. The inside of the hotel too was packed with Pandian's fans, although most of these men were clad not in red and green t-shirts, but in white *vēṣṭis* and shirts suited to their higher status. Some of them ushered me upstairs to the crowded lobby of Pandian's suite where he was sitting with his son Viyango. Smiling, they answered the questions of a magazine reporter who leaned eagerly towards them holding a microphone. The reporter addressed Pandian as "sār", the Tamilized version of "sir", and Viyango as "doctor". Although only in their early twenties Viyango and his sister (absent from this scene) were enrolled in private medical college.¹⁸² After a few photos were snapped, Pandian invited me into his room to meet his wife.

His wife, Priscilla Pandian, was sitting on the unmade bed wrapped in a jeweled red and green sari. Her gold wedding necklace, rings, bangles, watch, and earrings shimmered in the dim light of the room. Her female servant, Lalitha, was braiding Priscilla's hair. As Lalitha affixed a string of jasmine to her braid, Priscilla turned to welcome me in Tamil and in strained English. Priscilla, who has a law degree, is very involved in John's political life and admired by many of his followers because of her higher education. The men in the room, including John, Viyango, and a few of their assistants sat watching cricket until John requested tea. One of the assistants set out to answer his request but did not return for about thirty minutes. When he did finally return, John turned his eyes from the television and raised his voice, "This is how long it takes to get tea around here!" He threw his hands up in exaggerated frustration as his assistant lowered his gaze to the floor.

¹⁸² It is normal for residents of Tamil Nadu to attend medical college in their early twenties because there are no prerequisite post-secondary degrees required prior to entrance.

After swallowing tea in a room that was silent save for the announcer of the cricket match, we trotted downstairs to the line of white SUVs that sat idling in front of the hotel. I climbed into a vehicle with John, Priscilla, and Lalitha. Lalitha's husband, Narendra, who is also a valued employee of the family, drove the car. En route to the function, John practiced delivering his speech in the hushed voice of an actor rehearsing his lines to build his own assurance. Restlessly shaking his leg, he gazed at the printout of his speech as Priscilla and Lalitha slipped into sleep. We passed the entrances of a few villages that were marked with adjacent flexboards featuring Immanuel and Muthuramalingam Thevar. John turned to me and commented, "You see that. That never happens in our area." Indeed I have never seen images of Immanuel and Muthuramalingam Thevar so close to each other in the districts of Southern Tamil Nadu because of the infamous enmity between the two castes and the police surveillance with which their mutual antipathy is intertwined.

As we approached Pattukkottai, where the function was held, huge images of John himself materialized on colorful flexboards (Figure Fifteen). In some, his wife appeared beside him, though she was often portrayed on a much smaller scale, floating in the margins. Other flexboards also featured Immanuel and the statue of Raja Raja Chola standing proudly as if asserting their approval for the Pandian family. The commanding images of John depicted him in various guises that each bespoke his power. Like powerful Dravidianist political leaders of the past, he often wore black sunglasses that contrasted with his formal whites. He was sometimes featured wearing a crown and flower garlands, smiling beatifically. As we passed the images, smiles flashed across John's face, and I asked him if he had known about the flexboards beforehand. He had assumed they'd be there, but did not have any clues about their design, nor did he contribute any funds for their construction. John stared at the images, grinning, and then wiggled

his head in approval. He told me that the people of the area had done a good job. In a sense, the flexboards featuring John were offerings, ritual gifts given to him by his admirers who thus positioned themselves as his subjects. Since, as Mauss famously reminded us, there is no such thing as the pure gift (1925), the ritual gifts John received indicated his subjects expectation that he would lead and protect them.



Figure Fifteen: Image of John Pandian Near Thanjavur, 2012

Before reaching Pattukottai, we passed a statue of Ambedkar that stood looking down upon a bus stand. Our convoy stopped and John and a few of his attendants got out. One of them handed John an oversized flower garland, which he placed on Ambedkar's neck as we all

clapped. A small crowd that had gathered at the bus-stand cheered before we swiftly departed. While John officially asserts the Devendras' royal lineage, his assertions do not prevent him from honoring the paradigmatic Dalit activist, Ambedkar. John attempts to negotiate the delicate balance between *vīram*, prestige, and honor knowing that he needs both force and authoritative power to reify his position as the predominant Devendra leader.

The enormous tent that had been assembled for the event was surrounded by another sea of green and red, which parted when we pulled up in our row of vehicles. As we exited the SUVs and attempted to make our way to the tent, throngs of men closed in on us. The Pandians' assistants formed a human barrier to facilitate our restricted movement, and Lalitha held my hand. The crowd bellowed repetitively in unison, "John Pandian *vāḷka* ["long live John Pandian"], John Pandian *vāḷka*! Napoleon, Napoleon ..." The Pandian family and their closest associates mounted the stage as the chanting broke into a frenzy of cheering and applause. Lalitha and I sat in the front row, and I turned to her to ask about the invocation of Napoleon. I had never heard John referred to by that moniker and suspected that I had misheard. But no, John Pandian is indeed likened to Napoleon, the bellicose commander of nineteenth-century Europe.

The incumbent Thanjavur District secretary of John's Party, the Tamizhaga Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam ("Tamil People's Progress Association"), initially took the role of master of ceremonies, as other important functionaries of the party ceremoniously garland each member of the Pandian family with thick, heavy strands of jasmine, and wrapped their shoulders in expensive silk shawls. John and Viyango bent their heads to receive golden crowns fitted with red and green tassels.¹⁸³ Then John and Priscilla sat down on oversized thrones of red velvet and gold plated metal, and their crown prince sat beside them on a smaller throne (Figure Sixteen). As at the meeting of the Cakōtira Marumalarcci Nalacaṅkam and at the meetings of so many

¹⁸³ Made of paper and tin, the crowns they received were symbolic in substance.

other political and caste organizations, the first hour of festivities consisted of more ritualized gift exchanges of garlands and shawls, connecting the party functionaries to each other by publically establishing the bond of mutual respect.



Figure Sixteen: John, Priscilla, and Viyango Pandian in Pattukkottai in 2012

When the supply of garlands and shawls had finally been exhausted, the Pandians' various functionaries took turns speaking at the podium. Their brief speeches about John and sometimes also about his wife were, not surprisingly, full of accolades. The party's youth secretary of the Thanjavur District delivered an eloquent speech that moved along the dialectic of masculine ideals, incorporating the struggles of *vīram* with the conventions of *kauravam*. He forcefully asserted the Devendras' position as the "rightful heirs" to the Tamil throne, as he incited them to fight off the hegemony of outsiders. Staring out into the captive audience, he began:

Look at the government! Do you see even one Tamil person running the government? They are all from other states. That's the shameful situation we're in! We – the descendants of the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandians – are being ruled by outsiders. We, the sons of the soil, the Tamil people, are being ruled by people from the other states. The DMK, the ADMK and all those parties are for the Dravidars – the Dravidars only, but we are the Tamil people.¹⁸⁴

The youth secretary thus bequeathed all the glories of the Tamil past to the Devendras who he claimed had descended from all three great royal dynasties of medieval South India. He accused the current government of a type of colonial rule, lording over Tamil Nadu despite being outsiders. Indeed, the Chief Minister Jayalalitha is originally from Karnataka, though that is not common criticism leveled against her. The secretary nonetheless attempted to pull the people together as nativist revolutionaries fighting against oppressive external powers.

He then pointed to the enormous banner behind him, which bore the name of John Pandian's party, the town and district of the meeting's location, and the title of the meeting, “ceyal vīrarkaḷ kūṭṭam”, “vīrars' action meeting”.¹⁸⁵ The banner also featured a large image of John Pandian's bust in a white, button-down shirt, his head tilted slightly to the side, his expression serious, and his eyes pointing straight at the viewer (refer back to Figure Fifteen). A bucolic green field stretched out behind him beyond which some foothills peaked into a darkened sky. Rising up behind the left side of the hills, disproportionately large like the bust of Pandian, was an image of a white building loosely resembling Fort St. George – the old seat of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly.¹⁸⁶ In front of the right side of the field and small in comparison to the scale of Pandian and the legislative assembly was an image of one of the Brihadeeswara Temple's most famous architectural features – the maṇṭapam (pavilion)¹⁸⁷ that holds an eighty-ton, granite statue of Nandi (Śiva's sacred bull). On the top right corner of the banner, floating in

¹⁸⁴ By Dravidar the youth secretary means South Indians from other states who are not native Tamil speakers.

¹⁸⁵ Vīrar as opposed to vīraṇ is a more honorific title. Vīrar may be roughly translated as “venerable vīraṇ”.

¹⁸⁶ The building in the image is architecturally simpler than Fort St. George. It is a generic, white colonial building.

¹⁸⁷ In Indian architecture, a maṇṭapam is a pillared outdoor hall or pavilion usually used for rituals and feasts.

the clouds above the darkened sky stood a small image of Immanuel's truncated bust also wearing a white shirt and staring sternly back at the viewer. He appeared at the end of the party's name, which was printed across the clouds in red and green font, like a stamp of approval.

The speaker gestured towards the text, referring specifically to the words Tamil *makkal*, "Tamil People", and raised his voice:

You see! We the Tamil people [Tamil *makkal*] will be the Tamil rulers. We will change from the Tamil people to the Tamil rulers, as we once were ... John Pandian, our *vīra talaivar* ["heroic leader"], will lead us to victory. If they hit us, we hit back! In every house, for every family, there is a lineage deity, but for us there is only John Pandian.

The crowd cheered and clapped as the speaker continued his accolades. He closed by enthusiastically shouting above the ongoing applause, "Having this American lady come and be with us today is a great victory for us!"

After his speech, a string of speakers made similar pronouncements. The tone and content changed when the Pandian family took their turns at the podium starting with Viyango (John and Priscilla's son). He started off shakily, telling the crowd that he is not accustomed to giving speeches, as this is his first foray into politics. He went on, somewhat surprisingly to discuss the health concerns that face the Devendra community. He encouraged the audience to refrain from drinking and smoking as an assistant distributed a handout featuring the dangers of both "bad habits" to the large audience. Statistics were animated by an image of a man hanging lifeless with a taut rope wrapped around his neck. The audience clapped appreciatively in response to the "doctor's" wise advice.

Priscilla Pandian, who the Pandians' fans refer to affectionately as *anni*, "elder brother's wife" and who John Pandian has named the general secretary of his party, spoke following her

son.¹⁸⁸ She approached the podium, walking slowly and deliberately, swaying with the intricate folds of her sari. She took the microphone and stated out into the crowd:

Who are our Devendras, they ask. They say we are *tālntupaṭṭavaṅka*¹⁸⁹. They call us Dalits. But the truth that has been hidden will come out! We Devendras are the descendants of the three kings indeed! We are the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandians ... Who has the *vīram* of the king? Who will be there only for you? Who is our leader? John Pandian, only John Pandian. They kept him down. They imprisoned him, but now, in this era, John Pandian will come to bring you up. For our society, like Immanuvel Sekaran Devendran, he will struggle alongside you!

The rhythm and poetry of Priscilla's speech excited the crowd, which began an auditory crescendo as she made her way back to her seat and John sauntered towards the podium. John, as one of his long-time followers told me, has become a skilled orator since his release from prison in 2010. As I saw on the car ride en route to the meeting, John is actively honing his public speaking skills. Bracing both sides of the podium, he spoke powerfully:

We the Devendras are the Tamil people. We the Devendras are the sons of the soil. They have called us *tālntupaṭṭavaṅka* but we the Tamil people, the sons of the soil, are indeed of the lineage of the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandiyas. We the Devendras are the three kings! ... You call me big brother. I am not like other political leaders who make you wait, saying they will come at four and coming at six. You must come to the statue of Raja Raja Chola at four o'clock. If I say four o'clock, I will be there at four o'clock. Please, everyone come to pay homage to our forefather the great Raja Raja Chola!

Reminding the audience that they call him big brother, John pointed to his kinship relation to them, thereby asserting the close affective bond that they share. He told them that he would attend to their needs, being there for them when he said he would, in this case at four o'clock. Importantly, by contrasting his reliability with the unreliability of others who would make their followers wait for hours, John told us that he is a man of the people. He does not, he assured us, see his time, and therefore his status, as superior to that of his followers.

As John ended his speech, the crowd reached the height of its excitement and the VIPs on stage were swiftly ushered to the SUVs that waited idling. Lalitha and I trotted after them,

¹⁸⁸ Priscilla Pandian has had a political career in her own right, although she works in close collaboration with John and their closest associates. In 2009, when John was still in prison, she contested a parliamentary election in Ramanathapuram District for the Bahujan Samaj Party – a North Indian pro-Dalit party. She failed to win a seat.

¹⁸⁹ As I discussed in Chapter One, "*tālntupaṭṭavaṅka*" means "people who are/were put down". The term is commonly employed to refer to groups otherwise known as Dalit.

finding our way to one of the vehicles just in time. We set off, and for at least ten minutes, everyone in the car was quiet, probably exhausted from the efforts of the day. John, who was sitting in the front, broke the silence as he turned back to me and asked, “So there is no comment from Victoria? What did you think?” I told him that I was happy that I had understood the speeches, and noted how delighted the people seemed at having received a visit from John Pandian. En route we stopped at a guesthouse, which ordinarily accommodates out-of-towners who visit for weddings and other special events. About thirty men, women, and children dressed in their best faux silk finery were poised to greet us. They led the women – Priscilla, Lalitha, and me – into a large back bedroom where we sat on mats in front of banana leaves (used as plates) that had already been laid out for our convenience. While Viyango, John, and Narendra ate in the front hall, we were also served a bountiful meal of well-prepared rice, vegetables, prawns, crab, chicken, and mutton. Numerous hosts rushed between the two rooms continuously scooping more and more food onto our leaves from the large steel vessels that they carried. Sufficiently stuffed, we folded our leaves, and made our way into the hall where the men had also finished eating. We posed for photographs and thanked our generous hosts, who insisted instead on thanking us for the visit. We set back out for Thanjavur, rejoining our convoy of SUVs, and John smiled delightedly, remarking, “That’s a good village (ūr). No problem. They gave us good food and everything like a grand wedding.”

John and his party had been imbedded into a ritual world that did not end with our meal, but instead continued as we proceeded down the road. At the entrances to a few of the villages that were marked with images of John along with green and red flags groups of men stood awaiting our arrival. They summoned us off the main road into the center of their neighborhoods. John alighted and greeted his fans, posing for photographs and holding babies that were handed

to him for his blessing. The villagers smeared his forehead with auspicious turmeric and kumkum that they took from steel trays that are ordinarily employed for ritualized acts of welcoming, as well as the distribution of gifts at occasions like weddings and temple festivals. The presence of John Pandian was marked as a special moment in time, sacred and extraordinary. At one village, a funeral was underway, and John was called in to give his blessings to the family. Eventually, we returned to the Hotel Tamil Nadu in Thanjavur, and the family, Lalitha, and Narendra went to the suite to take a nap. I thanked them and headed out to the statue where the Pandians would rejoin me in a few hours.

Easily identified by their green and red clothing, a large Devendra crowd had gathered in front of the statue, which had been decorated for the occasion. A few tables of books and pamphlets, many of which I had already seen at the aforementioned Devendra events, textually supported the connection that the Devendras were eager to draw between themselves and their royal forefather. The golden statue – an image of Raja Raja Chola with one hand on his hip, heavily bejeweled, and holding a sword – indexed the space and moment of ritualization as it had been fitted with hundreds of decorative lights and a temporary staircase and stage that connected its elevated space to the earth (Figure Seventeen, Figure Eighteen). Devendra men (and a very small number of women) ascended the stage to garland the statue in small groups united on the basis of their villages, towns, or political affiliations. Although the ritual space had not been equipped with a microphone to announce the devotees as they ascended the stairs and placed their garlands, many of the onlookers could identify their caste fellows and informed each other when there were doubts. By the time the Pandian family arrived, only Raja Raja Chola's face and crown peered out from beneath layers of flowers.



Figure Seventeen: Statue of Raja Raja Chola in Thanjavur (Photo Credit: Binyamin S.)



Figure Eighteen: Decorated Statue of Raja Raja Chola in Thanjavur in 2012

It was after six o'clock when the Pandian family arrived in their red and gold carriage, which harkened back to the triumphant days of the Chola kingdom (Figure Nineteen, Figure Twenty). Pulled by two bright white horses that wore ornamented bridles and decorative

feathers, the carriage bore conventional signs of past royalty as it is imagined. Two golden peacocks stood at the back of the seat and a red, tasseled umbrella was open above. The crowd grew as young men appeared suddenly to welcome the Pandian family with their drumming, cheering, whistling, and wild dancing. The police gathered in their stead. Flags waved and flashes went off as Pandian made his dramatic entrance, standing tall in front of the peacocks and umbrella, waving to the boisterous mass that had come to fill the street. The Pandian family descended from their carriage and approached the statue surrounded by assistants who protected them from the crowd that pressed in on them. They prostrated the statue together, holding onto the garland simultaneously as they hung it around Raja Raja Chola's neck. The crowd cheered wildly and then dissolved as the Pandians and their carriage pulled back out into the night.

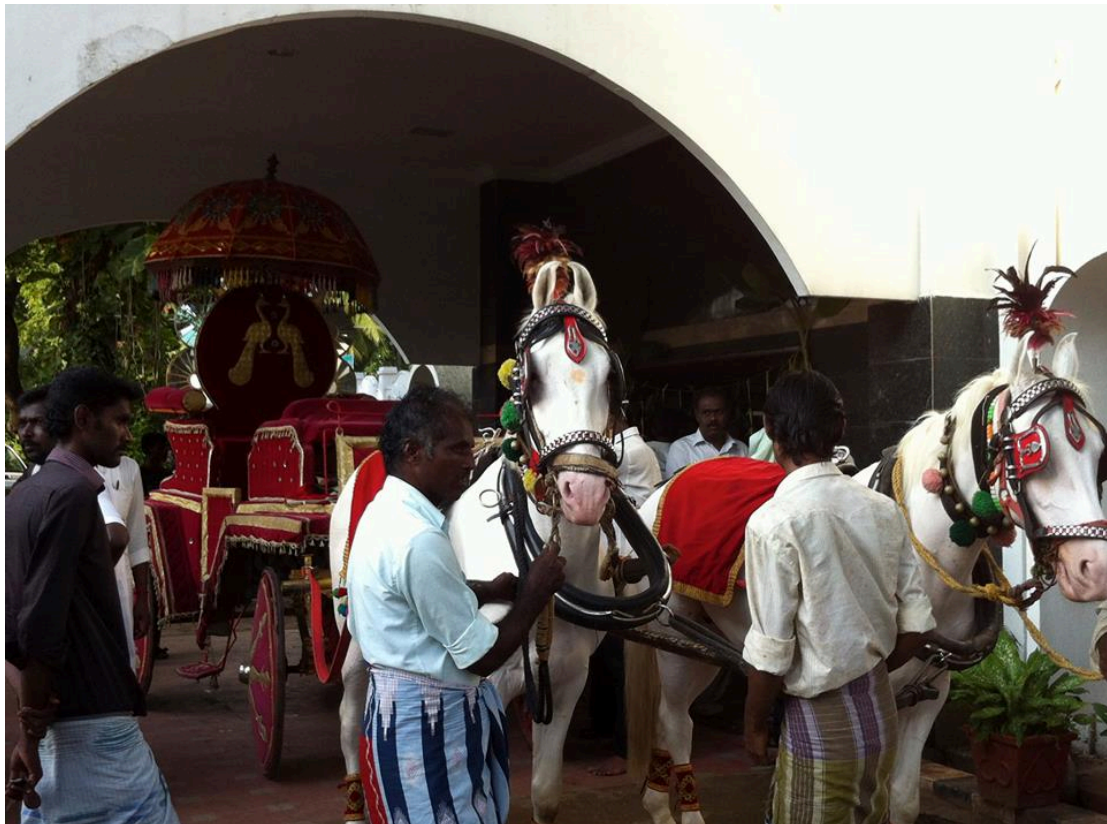


Figure Nineteen: The Pandians' Chariot, Thanjavur, 2012



Figure Twenty: John Pandian Standing On His Chariot, Thanjavur, 2012

At the Sataya Viḷā, the Devendras performatively inhabited the honor of the king who appeared holding the sword of the vīraṅ. They struggled in the creation of new rituals that controverted the rituals of other castes who had paid their homage to *their ancestor* a day or two prior. Their strategies of ritualization were not, however, autochthonous, but instead drew on the Tamil sense of ritual that includes a particular visual aesthetic and ritualized gift giving. In accordance with Bell's theory, the Devendras' ritualization constructs a limited power relationship as they declare their primacy as the alleged descendants of Raja Raja Chola. Of course, their supremacy as the rightful rulers of the Tamil country is contested powerfully by other social groups who often refuse to consent to the Devendras. Negotiations of power The

rituals of the Sataya Viḷā are thus energized by the competitive struggles of caste-based mobilization.

Interestingly, the Devendras' attempts to ritualize their actions and elevate themselves expand into more long-term claims that they make about the symbolic uses of space. They understand the Sataya Viḷā at least in part as a struggle to rescue or recover the statue of Raja Raja Chola. As I mentioned in my description of the signage above, "the war to rescue the statue" (cilai mīṭbu bōr) is an explicitly stated goal of many Devendras, who described the issue to me in a number of contexts before, during, and after the Sataya Viḷā. The wait for the Pandians' arrival provided ample opportunity for such discussions. One middle-aged man turned to me and declared, "This Raja Raja Chola statue should be inside the temple [meaning the whole complex including the temple grounds]. Here it is next to the road. They keep it outside." I asked him who kept it outside and he continued, "Those Brahmins and high caste people keep it outside of the temple. They keep the king who built the temple out here and we are struggling against that."

The "war" the man described is an apt metaphor and metonym for the Devendras' forceful claims to pre-established power, their reach for conventional authority as they remain in the domain of struggle. The stated aim of their campaign is to "rescue" the statue – an act that implies that the statue did at one point occupy its proper position within the temple, but was cast out. The statue thus already has the power that the Devendras are merely attempting to recuperate. Their attempts to reclaim are, however, reliant on the force of vīram as they must engage in a "war". This process is becoming easier.

In a few ways, the Devendras' rising ritual cycle is an effective strategy of empowerment. First, in its capacious diversity, it manages to reconcile various viewpoints and strategies that are

at odds with each other. Though Devendra leaders like Chandrabose and Karuppiah, as well as their close followers, may be at odds with each other, less ideologically committed Devendras can locate themselves within both perspectives, as they formulate their own feelings on the Devendras' history and current status. Second, the profusion of repetitive Devendra rituals throughout the year normalizes them. The increasingly common aesthetic markers and staged rituals of the Devendras become less and less surprising as they are repeated, thereby moving towards the accepted convention that they seek. Third, socioeconomically diverse Devendras are drawn together through the processes of *communitas*, as well as the shared history that they proclaim. Otherwise heterogeneous, primarily agricultural castes that had been labeled Pallars are thus transforming into the consolidated Devendra caste conglomeration.

However, the Devendras progressive empowerment does not go unnoticed or unquestioned. In Southeastern Tamil Nadu, Thevars especially are struggling to upend the Devendras claims, which often develop in tandem with their own. They refuse to accept the Devendras' claims to honor, increasing the volume of their own ritual memorializations of their fallen heroes. The ceaseless cycles of oneupsmanship in which the two castes engage intensifies their competitive claims and mutual enmity.

Thevars Take Up Their Old Honors and Arms

Chapter Six

Just two days after the close of the Sataya Viḷā, the Thevars entered a period of intensified ritual mobilization. It began with their celebration of the Marudhu Pandiyar's Guru Puja (spiritual teacher worship) on October 27th in two towns that are about thirty kilometers away from Paramakudi – Manamadurai and Kalayar Kovil (both in Sivagangai District).

The Marudhu Pandiyar brothers are well known amongst Tamils on the subcontinent, and are celebrated with particular enthusiasm by their Thevar caste fellows for their bravery and martyrdom. They were born in 1748 and 1753 respectively in what was then the independent state of Ramnad, and trained to be soldiers in the Ramnad army. After the British deposed the king of Ramnad, Muthuramalinga Sethupathi and seized administration of Ramanthapuram, they made Mangaleswari Nachiyar the zamindar, or local leader/landlord. She died soon thereafter, and the brothers took over. They paid regular revenue to the East India Company until 1801 when they staged a rebellion in collaboration with Kattabomman, the Palayakkarrar (local king) of Panchalamkurichi (Kumar 1994, 12). Lieutenant Colonel Agnew of the Madras Government captured the Marudhu Pandiyar brothers, had them hanged, and was then employed to “disarm the inhabitants [of the area], with a view to future peace” (Agnew 1808, 47).

I did not know about the Marudhu Pandiyar brothers' Guru Puja at the time of its performance in 2012 because my friends were mostly Devendra during the first year of my research tenure. However, the news about the violence that marred the event spread throughout Southeastern Tamil Nadu within a day of its performance. During the occasion – the day marked off as exceptional through ritualization – two Thevar men stabbed and killed a police sub-inspector by the name of Alwin Sudhan. On October 30th, one of the two main suspects, Prabhu, and his accomplices surrendered before a court in the nearby town of Tirupur. Both the other

main suspect, Bharathi, and Prabhu were remanded and imprisoned in Madurai. A month later, they were shot and killed by a team of Armed Reserve Police who alleged that the two had attempted to escape (Srikrishna 2012).

The incidents involving the police and Bharathi and Prabhu bespeak the troubled relationship between the Thevars and state authority as the caste struggles to solidify its power. Thevar clashes with the police are common, just as they were in the late colonial period and in the mid-1950s. The police kill with impunity backed by the authority of the state, which far outstrips the potential power of any single caste conglomeration.

Nonetheless, the aforementioned Muthuramalingam Thevar Jayanthi, which is the best-known and supported caste event in the state, and probably in all of South India, demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between the Thevars and government authorities that symbolically counter balances the draconian actions of the police. Grandly celebrated every year on October 30th in Muthuramalingam's native Pasumpon (Ramanathapuram District), and simply referred to as Thevar Jayanthi, the event demonstrates the Thevars' sphere of influence, which extends far beyond the boundaries of Pasumpon. The event receives government funding, is a government holiday in Ramanathapuram District, is heavily publicized throughout Southern Tamil Nadu, and receives state level news coverage.

The official recognition that the event receives coincides with other ways that the state government has publically honored Muthuramalingam. In 1985, the area that was then called Ramanathapuram District was trifurcated into Kamarajar District (present-day Virudhunagar), Muthuramalingam Thevar District (present-day Sivagangai), and a smaller area, which retained

the name Ramanthapuram District.¹⁹⁰ After the intercaste violence that rocked Southern Tamil Nadu in 1997 and 1998, which I discussed in Chapter Four, Chief Minister Karunanidhi changed the names of Kamarajar and Muthuramalingam Thevar Districts. This was part of his policy to remove caste names and the names of caste leaders from all government properties and institutions in an attempt to check intercaste violence. Nonetheless, Muthuramalingam continues to receive public recognition. In 2008, the main arterial road Chamiers was renamed Muthuramalingam Thevar Road, and graced with a statue of the late leader. Such forms of public government recognition also occur on the national level. On October 1, 2002, a life-sized statue of Muthuramalingam Thevar was unveiled in parliament by then president A.J.P. Abdul Kalam (The Hindu 2002).

In recent years, the Muthuramalingam Thevar Jayanthi has become an enormous and politically significant event, attracting tens of thousands of devotees, as well as important figures including the former chief minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram (AIADMK) and her longtime opponent Muthuvel Karunanidhi (DMK). Especially during election years, party royalty flocks to Pasumpon to show their support for the Thevars. In 2014, the Economic Times of India reverently reports that, “Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam (AIADMK)... paid homage to *freedom fighter* [emphasis mine] late Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar at his memorial at Pasumpon ... [and] inaugurated a feast in connection with the ceremony” (Economic Times of India, 2014).¹⁹¹ M.K. Stalin, the leader of the DMK (Tamil Nadu’s other major party), “also paid homage to the leader and later told reporters his party had started several welfare schemes in the name of the late freedom fighter” (ibid.).

¹⁹⁰ K. Kamaraj who hailed from the Nadar caste was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1954 to 1963, and a Member of Parliament from 1952 to 1954 and from 1967 to 1975. He has been posthumously claimed by fellow Nadars as a caste leader.

¹⁹¹ O. Panneerselvam was briefly in power as interim Chief Minister when the leader of his party, Jayalalitha, was imprisoned for being found guilty in a disproportionate assets case that had been tried before a special court in Karnataka.

In this chapter, I examine the Thevars' vacillating and complicated relationship with state authorities, as they assert their identity as a caste conglomeration that is, compared to the Devendras, well recognized. I first analyze the violence surrounding the Marudhu Pandiyars' Guru Puja as an example of the tension between young Thevar men and the police that has been an abiding reality since they were labeled criminal by birth during the late colonial period. I contrast such events with the government-approved and even encouraged glorification of the Thevars' caste hero Muthuramalingam. I argue that Muthuramalingam is exalted by the Thevars on account of, what they understand as, his national-level eminence, and his ethically superior and divine nature. Such understandings enable the Thevars to easily trump the assertions of the Devendras, and, importantly, to recast the history of Thevar caste domination as magnanimous, paternalistic love for the "Harijans" (Scheduled Castes).

This chapter also offers insight into Thevar aggression against the Devendras and other Scheduled Castes in the context of competitions over visibility, recognition, and acceptance. Prior to the Jayanthi, Thevars occupy Paramakudi with visual signifiers of their heroes', and by extension their own, power. Flexboards rise up to conquer Paramakudi and surrounding areas. The locus of the event itself, Muthuramalingam's native Pasumpon, is completely overtaken by the power of his caste fellows on October 30th. In 2012 (and 2013), I participated in the Jayanthi in order to compare it to my experiences of September 11th in Paramakudi. I found that Thevar Jayanthi is demonstrative of a more complete and stable caste identity that is more easily impressed on the town. The Thevars make Pasumpon serve them, and attempt to expand their sovereignty to the surrounding region, including Paramakudi. For my Scheduled Caste friend with whom I attended the Jayanthi in 2012, assertions of Thevar sovereignty are frightening, or at least unsettling. However, as we will find at the end of this chapter, fear does not prevent the

Devendras from striking back against the Thevars as the latter trespass on what the former see as their spaces.

Like the Niṇaivu Viḷā, the extraordinary nature of Thevar Jayanthi in 2012 was indexed and established by visual markers that began to appear a few days before the 30th. Thevar images came to progressively populate Paramakudi, despite the fact that the town is thirty-seven kilometers away from Pasumpon. By the morning of the 30th, the same Madurai-Rameswaram road that had been marked with Devendra images was occupied by flexboards featuring Muthuramalingam, often flanked by the Maradhu Pandian Brothers and Subhas Chandrabose, the national leader who I discuss below (Figure Twenty-One). The ground of Paramakudi thus became a contested terrain claimed by both opposing castes in the name of their heroes. The Thevars symbolically attacked the Devendras by eclipsing Immanuvel with Muthuramalingam and other heroes of their caste.



Figure Twenty-One: Flexboard in Paramakudi Featuring Muthuramalingam, the God Murugan, the Marudhu Pandiyar Brothers, and Subhas Chandrabose

The text on the flexboard featured above (Figure Twenty) makes its purpose to stake claim to Paramakudi, and to all of Tamil Nadu, very clear. The yellow text across the top reads: “The Festival of the Lineage of the Three Kings”, and the white text across the bottom reads: “The Big Maravar [Thevar subcaste] Country”.¹⁹² Within what looks like an official proclamation, the green and red text reads: “Political Festival, the Festival of Many Men, the Government Festival”. The Thevars thus suggested that *their* government in *their* country recognizes *their* men.

Muthuramalingam’s connection with Chandrabose and his national-level party extends his sphere of influence beyond the Tamil country. Called by the honorific title Netaji throughout India, Chandrabose is a complicated figure whose ideology and anti-colonial activism spanned international borders.¹⁹³ He was an Indian nationalist and prominent figure of the Indian Independence Movement throughout his life (1897-1945), advocating armed struggle against the British Empire and complete self-rule for India’s people. Bose was twice-elected President of the Indian National Conference, and founded and presided over the All India Forward Bloc. He also founded the Provisional Government of Free India, which he led alongside the Indian National Army from 1943 until his death in 1945. Although Chandrabose was controversial in his time due to his disagreements with Gandhi, he is remembered by most Thevars and many other Indian citizens as a national hero whose *vīram* helped usher in the era of independence.¹⁹⁴

Muthuramalingam’s connection to Chandrabose is thus an effective means through which the Thevars empower their caste hero to be a leader of the entire nation. In the signs announcing

¹⁹² Up until the formation of states and districts in independent India, the Southeastern region of what is today Tamil Nadu was called “the Maravar Country”.

¹⁹³ During World War II, Chandrabose hoped to capitalize on British weakness by staging armed attacks in India. He traveled abroad seeking and eventually receiving the support of Nazi Germany and Japan.

¹⁹⁴ Chandrabose led a younger, more radical, wing of the Indian National Congress in the late 1920s and 1930s (Stein 2010, 325). However, he was ousted from Congress leadership positions in 1939 on account of his disagreements with Gandhi and the Congress high command (Low 2002, 297).

the Jayanthi in 2012 (and in 2013), Muthuramalingam was conspicuously and repeatedly connected to Chandrabose who appeared, as he usually does, as a bespectacled bust clad in the uniform of the Indian National Army pensively gazing out into the distance.¹⁹⁵ He was always smaller than Muthuramalingam in scale, standing as a supporter in the background. Chandrabose also often appeared alongside a coterie of Thevar heroes, including the Maradhu Pandiar Brothers and Puli Thevar (the local rebel king discussed in Chapter Three), and was equal to them in size and often on their same plane (Figure Twenty-Two). He was thus subsumed within the Thevar caste, rendered a caste fellow, as well as an ally.



Figure Twenty-Two: Flexboard in Paramakudi Featuring a Number of Thevar Heroes and Subhas Chandrabose

¹⁹⁵ Somewhat unexpectedly, the aforementioned radical Devendra leader Chandrabose bears the name of the national leader who is intertwined with the history of Thevar politics.

At the same time, Chandrabose was needed to legitimate the Thevars' assertion of national-level power, which was clearly articulated in a flexboard that had been erected by one of the caste's political organizations. The board, which was located directly across from the main entrance to Paramakudi's central bus station, featured a multi-colored map of India complete with the names of each state printed in Tamil (Figure Twenty-Three). Muthuramalingam Thevar stood up straight, in front of the map, blocking one's view of peninsular India. He was wearing a white vēṣṭi and shirt, as well as a garland made of *rudrākṣa* seeds, which are used as prayer beads in Hindu practice.¹⁹⁶ Above and to the right of Muthuramalingam's head, on top of Northeast India stood the Marudhu Pandiyar brothers bearing their muscular chests and holding swords. Above and to the left of Muthuramalingam's head, over Northwest India, a bust of Jayalalitha floated alongside a smaller bust of Karunanidhi. The claims of the interconnected images were easily discernable. Muthuramalingam was, according to the flexboard, eminent not only in Tamil Nadu, where he commanded the presence of the state's two most powerful political figures, but also across the nation, which he overshadowed with his sanctified body.

¹⁹⁶ *Rudrākṣa* (Sanskrit, "Rudra's eyes"), is a seed traditionally used as prayer beads in Hinduism. It is believed to provide support to those who are constantly on the move and who eat and sleep in a variety of places, such as ascetics. It is typically worn in strands by men undertaking austerities, but can be held by anyone in moments of prayer.



Figure Twenty-Three: Flexboard of Muthuramalingam Thevar in Front of the Subcontinent

The beatification of Muthuramalingam was not visible only in his attire, but also in his close association with the Hindu deity Murugan. Another flexboard featured Muthuramalingam reclined in a chair beside small busts of Puli Thevar and Murugan floating beside him (Figure Twenty-Four). His association with Murugan here, on many other visual signifiers, and in oral circulation extends Muthuramalingam's dominion beyond the nation and maps it onto the entire world, which is presided over by the gods. Something else, something much more aggressive, was also happening on this flexboard. Muthuramalingam was seated comfortably with one of his legs crossed over the other, mirroring the posture in which Immanuel is often represented. While Muthuramalingam's foot did not directly point at the viewer, the appropriation and

inversion of Devendra aggression was apparent. The Thevars balanced aggression and spiritual glory in their layered depictions of Muthuramalingam.



Figure Twenty-Four: Flexboard Featuring Muthuramalingam Reclined with Crossed Legs

Muthuramalingam Thevar: Warrior Saint

In addition to his paramount role in uniting the otherwise heterogeneous Thevars in opposition to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1920, which I discussed in Chapter Two, Muthuramalingam Thevar’s status as an exalted idol (for his own caste fellows) is due to the sacred and national power that he embodies. A phrase that I found on many flexboards and that circulated widely in Thevar circles neatly synthesizes this sentiment. According to many Thevars, Muthuramalingam said that country (dēciyam) and god (dēvam) were his two eyes¹⁹⁷.

¹⁹⁷ Such references to the eye as that which one holds most dear are common in Tamil, and somewhat akin to the English, “apple of my eye”.

Muthuramalingam's life history reinforces such depictions of his inextricable link to nation and god.

Hailing from a wealthy landowning family related (by blood) to the Sethupathi Kings, Muthuramalingam also had ties to Tamil Brahmin communities, which directly led him to the nationalist leader Chandrabose. When he was embroiled in lengthy legal battles over the inheritance of the family's properties in the 1920s, Muthuramalingam hired S. Srinivasa Iyengar – of the high-status, Vaiṣṇavite Brahmin sect – to represent him. Iyengar ensured that he won his property case in 1927, and a close friendship grew between the two. Muthuramalingam came to emulate Iyengar in his nationalist political interests. In fact, it was Iyengar who brought Muthuramalingam to a meeting of the Indian National Congress held at Madras in 1927, and introduced him to Chandrabose (Bose 1988, 78). Muthuramalingam accompanied Chandrabose on his journey back to the latter's native Bengal, and subsequently became one of his closest companions and allies.

Muthuramalingam's connection with Chandrabose is highly significant because it elevates his influence and authority to the national level, while simultaneously associating him with the *vīram* of the Indian independence struggle. His far-reaching eminence endows Muthuramalingam with prestige (*kauravam*) that his present-day devotees emphasize in contrast to what they see as the narrow influence of Immanuvel.¹⁹⁸

As one young Thevar man told me as we stood at a Thevar-owned browsing center (internet café) in Paramakudi,

[Muthuramalingam] Thevar was not just a leader for the Thevar people but for all of India. He fought for all *jātis* (castes). He was in jail in Chidambaram because he fought for freedom. He fought for all communities, not just Thevars. Functions can only be government functions if they [the leader] fought for

¹⁹⁸ Chandrabose was also born into the high-status Kayastha caste, which evolved in Bengal from a category of officials or scribes.

all communities. Their [the Devendras'] function will not become a government function. Back then he [Muthuramalingam] was fighting for freedom. That's not for regular people. He was not a regular person.

The young man leveraged Muthuramalingam's status as a national-level leader to delegitimize the Niṇaivu Viḷā and to justify the Tamil Nadu government's support for Thevar Jayanthi. His insistence would not be necessary if the Thevars authority went unquestioned. Their moment of ritualization remains a struggle that must be defended through reiterations of distinction.

Depictions of Muthuramalingam as a religious leader also demarcate his distinction as an individual of exceptional principles and actions. In addition to his popular association with the god Murugan, Muthuramalingam is, as a person, understood to have been deeply principled and devoutly religious. He gains ethical clout by adopting what his biographer K. Bose calls, "the saintly idiom in politics" (Bose 1988, 79), which Bose himself reiterates in eulogizing Muthuramalingam's life. Bose contrasts Muthuramalingam with his father, who had two wives and was rumored to have spent profligately. He even likens Muthuramalingam to a Hindu ascetic claiming that the virtuous leader "detested his father's extravagant ways so he was resolved to be a bachelor all through his life" (ibid.).¹⁹⁹ While Bose does not draw a connection between Muthuramalingam's saintly idiom and the ethos of Chandrabose, popular perceptions of Muthuramalingam's religiosity affirm parallels. Chandrabose emphasized the importance of the Bhagavad Gita, which remains the touchstone of the mostly urban, Sanskritic form of the diverse beliefs and modes of ritualization that we somewhat erroneously call Hinduism.²⁰⁰ The obligation to fulfill the duties specific to one's station in life, including one's age, caste, and gender, is the overarching theme of the Bhagavad Gita, and also seems central to

¹⁹⁹ Muthuramalingam's father married a total of four times. After Muthuramalingam's mother died, he took another wife who also died. He then married two additional women at the same time. According to contemporary accounts that circulate amongst Thevars, Muthuramalingam disdained his father for what he saw as lascivious behavior.

²⁰⁰ It is only over the course of the past century or two that the Bhagavad Gita has come to be seen as a central text of "Hinduism", which is itself erroneously construed as a unified, dogmatic, scriptural religion. Knowledge of the Gita, a Sanskrit text, was probably quite limited until Orientalist academic writing, missionary critiques, and the activism that such critiques incited (Robinson 2006).

Muthuramalingam's life, as it is idealized and remembered. Chandrabose's vaguely universalist, egalitarian vision of Hindu "spirituality" in which he emphasized social service and reform (Bhuyan 2003) also makes its way into hagiographies of Muthuramalingam.

For many Thevars, Muthuramalingam's righteous spirituality enables him to simultaneously index their opposition to intercaste violence, and their support for the "traditional" order that rules and rituals of caste uphold. Dually honorable on account of his sense of duty and selfless generosity, the figure of Muthuramalingam thus manages to underwrite caste and circumvent accusations of Thevar violence. Consider the following description of Muthuramalingam, which a wealthy, middle-aged Thevar politician shared with me:

So [Muthuramalingam] Thevar's father had this problem with ladies. He went around with this lady and that lady ... so Thevar decided not to marry and became a devotee of Murugan. He had so much devotion and was so disciplined. He also helped the poor a lot. He gave the SCs all his land. The SCs are the ones who give Pongal to Thevar at his temple before his festival can start.²⁰¹

My interlocutor went on to highlight Muthuramalingam's transcendence of *jāti unṛvu*, "jāti feeling", which refers here to discrimination against or the mistreatment of the lower castes.

What would in today's Indian English be referred to as casteism, is defined affectively in Tamil parlance. According to my interlocutor, Muthuramalingam not only dismisses the *jāti unṛvu* of his father but also exhibits another kind of caste feeling – paternalistic affection for the SCs:

You see, [Muthuramalingam] Thevar was not one who had *jāti unṛvu* – his father had [*jāti*] *unṛvu*, but not him. All those thirty-two villages that his father held, he would not give them to SCs. [Muthuramalingam] Thevar gave them to the SCs. He helped them a lot, and in those thirty-two villages of SCs he is a god. The occurrence of this [*jāti*] problem is only in Paramakudi. It doesn't happen over there. [It is] only in Paramakudi.

Muthuramalingam's paternalistic care for the SCs is echoed in many of my interlocutors' nostalgic reflections on their own rural pasts. Bala – a Thevar man in his forties who was raised

²⁰¹ Pongal, which is overcooked rice allowed to boil up and overflow out of its vessels, iconicizes the joy and excess of plentitude. It is typically offered to deities during temple festivals, and is also at the center of a Tamil harvest festival that is named after it. Pongal is probably the most widely celebrated festival in Tamil Nadu today.

in a village but now runs a construction company in Paramakudi – told me about his own family’s magnanimous treatment of their “Harijan” employees²⁰²:

When I was young, there was no rain. We had nothing. They worked for us, the Harijans, but we also had nothing. It was Deepavali, and we had no harvest that year. My father didn’t get any of us in our own house any clothes. But he got them [the employees] all new clothes. That is how much we loved and cared for them [“nēcitōm”].

Through the idiom of righteous love, Muthuramalingam Thevar and his caste fellows are able to glorify the “olden days” when their domination, they claim, went unchallenged.

Such claims are, however, largely imaginary. As we may recall from the discussion in Chapter Two, Muthuramalingam had a vexed relationship with state authority in his own lifetime. His bombastic rhetoric brought him the government’s sharp surveillance and draconian punishments for much of his political career. He passionately protested the Criminal Tribes Act of 1920, which had counted his caste fellows among the black sheep of the colonial state, and threateningly predicted the coming of the “third world war” (Thevar 1957 in GO 3358). He thus presented himself as an impetuous *vīraṅ* (hero), standing opposed to the established legal and social order of the Madras Presidency. Perhaps the actions of Thevar “rowdies” like Bharathi and Prabhu who killed Alwin the police officer follow the conventions of Muthuramalingam’s combative disputes against state authorities.²⁰³ Ultimately, the Thevars’ dialectical deployments of nationally-sanctioned eminence and unruly *vīram* are at the heart of their ritually constituted identitarian politics.

Vīram Rising at the State-Sponsored Thevar Jayanthi

I participated in the Thevar Jayanthi of 2012 with the help of Subramanian – a journalist, Dalit activist, and scholar whom I had met at the *Niṇaivu Viḷā* the month prior. He and his driver

²⁰² He refers to his family’s Scheduled Caste employees with the dated and offensive term Harijan. Dalits and Dalit organizations have officially opposed this Gandhian term since the 1950s.

²⁰³ The English word “rowdie” is often used in Tamil to refer to individuals we might otherwise call hooligans, goondas, or gangsters.

picked me up in the morning at my home in Andipuram, and I slipped away from my neighbors, telling them that I had some important work to attend to in Madurai. I had not told any of my Devendra or Paraiyar friends where I was headed lest they encourage me to avoid the event. Enroute, Subramanian warned me to be careful, stay close to him, and avoid talking to anyone in the large crowds that we were about to encounter. Subramanian who is half Paraiyar became increasingly nervous as we approached Pasumpon, which was on October 30th a space of Thevar power. While Thevars could not be fully sovereign in the Indian nation-state, the Thevar Jayanthi was as close as they could come to absolute power.

We saw signs of the Thevar conquest planted proudly along the road to Pasumpon. Flexboards displayed the familiar faces of Muthuramalingam, Chandrabose, and the Marudhu Pandiyar brothers, sometimes along with images of temples, lions, and major politicians like Jayalalitha. The entrances to Thevar villages that were guarded by wooden billboards or statues of Muthuramalingam year round had been decorated for the occasion with the addition of flower garlands and flags bearing the Thevar colors – yellow and green or yellow and red²⁰⁴. The flags waved in the wind, competing with the dust that had been kicked up by packed white SUVs zooming by at high speeds. Mostly young men, the passengers added to the rush of colors as they hung out of windows and sunroofs displaying their color-coordinated t-shirts, flags, headbands, and bandanas. They shouted rhythmically yet wildly “Muthuramalingam Thevar, vāḷka. Muthuramalingam Thevar, vāḷka (‘life’) ...” (“Long live Muthuramalingam Thevar. Long live Muthuramalingam Thevar ...”).

As we approached the entrance to Pasumpon, the crowd of devotees increased in density and volume. Hundreds of vehicles lined up on the single lane road, sitting at a standstill as

²⁰⁴ The Thevar’s adoption of yellow is significant because yellow is the color that represents Hindu orthodoxy and renunciation, which has been taken up enthusiastically by the Hindu right.

motorbikes, bicycles, and throngs of people on foot passed by. We rolled down the windows and heard the rising din. While the crowd was mostly men, there were more females and children than had been in attendance at the Niṇaivu Viḷā. Sweat dripped down their brows and dampened the clothing they had worn for the special occasion as they pressed forward determinedly as if on a pilgrimage. The crowd paid no heed to the vehicles that encompassed it. The bright green rice seedlings that sprouted in the square paddy beside Pasumpon's main road were visible only in faint flashes as our vehicle inched forward amidst men, women, and children. Fallow plots held the legs of flexboards that had been planted along the way.

As is often the case, flexboards were redundant, displaying the exact same images again and again, establishing “sensory saturation” (Bate 2009, 80), which I discussed in the previous chapter. Material excess made manifest the ‘bigness’ (“*perumai*”) of Muthuramalingam, of the village residents, and of the Thevars as a jāti. Importantly, a slew of political leaders also gained *perumai*. For example, Vaiko, the founder and leader of the popular Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (“Dravidian Renaissance Progress Party”), which he established after he was ousted from the DMK, aggrandized himself by erecting matching flexboards of different shapes and sizes (Figure Twenty-Five).²⁰⁵ He appeared in the reduplicated images of the boards with his hands clasped together in reverence, wearing the white clothing and black sunglasses that are characteristic of Tamil political leaders. His downward facing head was pointed towards the left, while a garlanded, golden statue of Muthuramalingam stood beside him facing the right. The image of Muthuramalingam looked down on Vaiko and out to the viewers in order to bestow his grace.

²⁰⁵ Vaiko founded the MDMK after being ousted from the DMK in 1994, which he had joined during his student days. As a DMK cadre, he was elected thrice to the Rajya Sabha and attracted the attention of many in parliament.



Figure Twenty-Five: Flexboards Demonstrating Vaiko’s Efforts at Thevar Jayanthi, 2012

As we slowly crept along the road, Subramanian periodically glanced down at his cellphone. When we pulled onto the dusty patch of land in front of Muthuramalingam’s memorial, Subramanian’s driver showed our press-pass to the two police officers who approached the car. As at the Niṇaivu Viḷā, there was a very strong police presence at the event, which reminded participants that the sovereignty they claimed had not been realized.²⁰⁶

I followed Subramanian through the crowds as we made our way towards the two buildings at the center of the event – the Thevar memorial (“*ninaiviṭam*”) and the Thevar Temple (“*kōyil*”). Standing side-by-side, both buildings overflowed with throngs of devotees and police officers. Subramanian glanced around nervously, checked his phone again, and then asked me

²⁰⁶ As many as 6,000 police personnel were deployed in Pasumpon on the occasion of Thevar Jayanthi in 2015 (The Hindu 2015).

where I wanted to go. I had expected him to lead the way, as it was my first time at the Jayanthi. He informed me that it was his first time too. We meandered the grounds for a while amidst vendors selling snacks and souvenirs from their colorful, but well-worn wooden carts and young men dancing feverishly to beating drums. We saw a group of about twenty young men performing a style of dance called Tēvar Aṭṭam (“Tēvar Dance”), in which dancers to move rhythmically in unison, while enduring the wounds of small spears that are punctured through both sides of the body and left suspended throughout the dance (Figure Twenty-Six).²⁰⁷ Usually performed as an offering to the deity at temple festivals, the extreme physical austerity of Tēvar Aṭṭam as an homage to Muthuramalingam bespoke his divine power. The dancers gyrated ecstatically for hours, suppressing their grimaces as blood poured down their sides. Spectators cheered them on.

²⁰⁷ Tēvar Aṭṭam is a type of Tamil folk dance commonly performed during village temple festivals.



Figure Twenty-Six: Young Men Performing Tēvar Aṭṭam at Thevar Jayanthi, 2012

Performances of reverence at the memorial were ardent but less demanding. The memorial, built by the DMK government in 1971, looks like a small, humble village house topped by an old-fashioned clay tile roof and oriented around an open-air courtyard (Bose 1980,133). Subramanian and I entered, and joined a layered queue of devotees who were circumambulating the building's interior, stopping at the framed photos and graphic prints of Muthuramalingam that lined the walls (Figure Twenty-Seven). Their stops were brief, but earnest. Some of them hung small flower garlands on the frames, and others smeared the glass with sacred substances, such as ash and turmeric just as they would for images of deities or their deceased relatives. Whether or not they had come with offerings, Muthuramalingams' devotees pressed their hands together in prayer as they gazed at him in various guises. In the images, he

appeared in temples, dressed in the robes of a religious mendicant, on stages flanked by Chandrabose, and in an office with a pen in his hand poised above a piece of paper on his desk. He looked back at the viewers until they were ushered along by the police who shouted coarsely to prevent overcrowding.



Figure Twenty-Seven: Muthuramalingam Memorial at Pasumpon

After we were spun out on the other side of the memorial house, Subramanian and I surveyed the increasingly crowded grounds. Devotees were still pouring into Pasumpon by the thousands. The festival space, which was at least ten acres, surrounded us with flexboards, flags, vendors, and a sea of people in every direction. Dominating the horizon above all other signs of Thevar predominance were three enormous tents that had been fabricated for the event, and that were each marked with the different banners of the groups that they housed. One of them, which was beginning to fill up as 1PM was approaching, called itself the “*Akila India Mukkulattōr Pācaṛai Aṅṅtāṅa Pantal*”, which translates (awkwardly) to the “All India Mukkulathors’ (Thevars) Tent of the Encampment for the Distribution of Food”. A bust of Muthuramalingam Thevar surrounded by a halo of white light peered out at the viewer from above the tent. Below

the central text, smaller fonts affectionately invited guests. It read: “Loving/loved Relatives! All of you come ... [ellipsis in original]”. Another one of the tents housed the All India Moovendar Munnani Kazhagam (“All India Three Kings Lead Party”) – the Thevar party founded by the medical doctor N. Sethuraman of Madurai in 1998. Although there were not any orations at the time that Subramanian and I were passing by, the tent was fitted with a grand stage and large speakers and Sethuraman himself was slated to speak in the evening.²⁰⁸ The third tent housed the cadres of Vaiko, the aforementioned leader of the MDMK, and emitted the rhythmic speech of poetic orators. We did not enter the tent, but saw the relatively modest crowd build up.

The Thevars’ diversified and dispersed use of space spoke to the normalization of their event if we compare it to the Niṇaivu Viḷā of the Devendras. The Niṇaivu Viḷā, we may recall, was oriented almost entirely around the Samadhi to which all traffic flowed and from which everyone departed. The Jayanthi, by contrast, generated a fuller, more permanent feeling of Thevar occupation. In addition to the various memorial buildings that had been erected, the sturdy tents indicated that the Thevars were not just passing through. They had options of political speeches and performances to attend, and places to eat. Pasumpon had come to serve them as one big family.

Much to the chagrin of Subramanian, the government too had come to serve the Thevars. He pointed out the facilities that attested to the government’s support of the event as we continued walking around the festival grounds. Temporary public water fountains, garbage cans, and even a small medical clinic had been installed in Pasumpon. Subramanian directed me to

²⁰⁸ Sethuraman’s party has not had much electoral success. In the Tamil Nadu legislative assembly elections of 2001, the All India Moovendar Munnani Kazhagam launched one candidate in an alliance with the DMK in the constituency of Thirumangalam who did not win a seat. In the 2006 elections, the party contested in 5 constituencies in an alliance with the BJP all of which they lost. Since August of 2006, the Party has been in alliance with the AIADMK.

take a picture of the medical clinic, and exclaimed indignantly, “You see that. They do not do that for any Dalit events. You will not see that at Paramakudi ... The government only supports these Thevars. They give them [the Thevars] water and support and this small hospital.” After I photographed the government-supported clinic, Subramanian was again apprehensive. He asked me what I wanted to do, and I suggested that we head to the temple. Subramanian’s enduring discomfort showed me that he was afraid to be at the center of Thevar power where their desires to assert their sovereignty were heightened.

When we arrived, we saw the Thevar temple surrounded by a vast confluence of people (Figure Twenty-Eight). The devotees, almost all of whom were men, stood in a mass that had been squeezed between two parallel lines of metal fencing. They pressed forward towards the temple, while the police officers on the outside of the fences stood unmoved. The temple was a pavilion-like structure, open air on all sides with a memorial stone contained within a wrought iron enclosure at its center. Three temple officiants, all bearing their chests, as is common practice for South Indian Hindu priests, guarded the open gate of the enclosure. They received offerings of garlands, coconuts, rose water, and incense from the devotees who stopped momentarily, seeking the divine blessing of Muthuramalingam. The devotees stretched their necks and pressed against each other in order to get a glimpse of the sanctified stone before jostling through the temple with the urging of more police officers who stood at the edges of the well-trod stone floor. Subramanian and I approached the scene from the back, skipping the line with the help of his press pass, and standing next to the photographers and reporters who had gathered in small packs to stare at the devotees through the lenses of their cameras. Subramanian stood with his arms crossed in front of him, shifting his focus between the crowd and the top of his sneakers.



Figure Twenty-Eight: Muthuramalingam Temple at Thevar During Thevar Jayanthi, 2012

Three young men approached us. They were all wearing red and yellow t-shirts on which “Thevar TV” had been printed, and were carrying heavy equipment, including both a video and SLR camera, and a microphone and speakers. Thevar TV, I later learned, is a Youtube channel dedicated to the proliferation of Thevar history according to the increasingly popular opinions of about ten young and middle-aged men who manage the station. I greeted the team from Thevar TV formally, and Subramanian shook his head less decorously. Then one of them turned to me and announced, “I’ve seen you give an interview, and what you said is wrong. What you said about Muthuramalingam Thevar is really wrong. He did not kill Immanuel nor was he the reason for Immanuel’s death. You said that and they say that, but it is not true.” Subramanian shuddered, looking up at the young man abruptly, and I stood baffled. The man repeated himself, and then explained that he had seen a video of me providing my opinion on the conflict of 1957, which one of my Devendra interlocutors had posted on YouTube unbeknownst to me. I

awkwardly apologized and attempted to explain, “Please forgive me, sir. Please don’t mistake me. That’s what I thought so I said it. I’m just doing research.” My accuser did not look satisfied. He glared at me intently until Subramanian interjected: “She is only a student. She is still learning and just said that.” “But one must not say such things,” The Thevar man insisted. Subramanian shook his head in agreement, and told the man that we had to go. We walked away and as soon as we were out of ear shoot, Subramanian said, “You see how they are. You must be very careful with what you say, who you talk to, and where you go.” Subramanian’s fear was rubbing off on me.

Although the Jayanthi was far from over, Subramanian suggested that we leave before the rush of men who would arrive after dusk.²⁰⁹ We found our driver standing outside the car, and headed out of Pasumpon on the same main road we had travelled to enter. Enroute we saw thick traffic heading in the other direction, and throngs of devotees clad in yellow marching in unison, singing and chanting forcefully. I heard Muthuramalingam’s name and references to the three medieval Tamil dynasties (the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandiyas) in overlapping choruses of increasingly hoarse voices, though I couldn’t make out much else. When a group of young men, who looked particularly organized in their single file line and their matching yellow outfits marched by chanting, Subramanian turned to me and interjected, “Do you understand what they are saying? They are saying, “Thirumavalavan’s wife is the whore of Tirunelveli” (“Thirumavalavan *ponṭaṭi*, Tirunelvelikki *vaipatti*”)! The small, fervid band of Thevars insulted “the Dalits” who they heedlessly depicted as one unit. They verbally attacked Thirumavalavan probably because he is by far the most visible and influential Dalit leader in the state, although they ignored the fact that he has very little support from the Devendra community. They also brushed off other realities of Thirumaavalavan’s life. As Subramanian reminded me,

²⁰⁹ At political events in Tamil Nadu, drunkenness is common amongst men from the evening onwards.

Thirumavalavan is not married, and does not live in Tirunelveli. Nonetheless, their slogan was a powerful insult to Thirumavalavan and thus to Dalit (including Devendra) masculinity. The obvious implication is that Thirumavalavan is not man enough, is not powerful enough, to control his (imagined) wife.

Masculinity itself is contested in the ritualized competitions of the Devendras and Thevars, which draw them ever closer together. Such events are the primary spaces in which Tamil men demonstrate the masculine ideals of *vīram*, honor, and prestige that were reified by the ethno-nationalist discourse of Dravidianism. The high stakes of such competitive claims ensure that they can easily become violent.

The Brutal Endgames of Intercaste Competition

The verbal aggression of the young men was inconsequential compared to the violence that erupted at about the same time in and around Paramakudi. Just after we heard the aspersion of Thirumavalavan, Subramanian received a phone call from one of his colleagues. Wrinkles of concern shot across his face as he shook his head attentively saying, “ok, ok, ok”. When Subramanian hung up the phone, he immediately turned to me and told me that there had been murders in Paramakudi. He didn’t have many confirmed details, but knew that a group of Devendras had attacked a van of Thevars with sticks and stones in the village of Pambuvizhanthan, which was in very close walking distance to my home in Krishnanagar. In Andipuram, the Scheduled Caste enclave I described in Chapter Two, another group of Devendras had stoned two Thevar men to death. I sat in stunned silence, in the insulating quietude of shock after Subramanian told me the news.

The closer we got to Paramakudi, the more police officers and cars we saw. At the entrance to the town, the police had created a checkpoint where we were stopped. Subramanian

showed the police his press pass and explained that I was a “foreign lady” who had been living in Paramakudi. After a brief moment, the officers waved us through, and we entered the town slowly, a lone civilian vehicle in a sea of police cars. Silence hung heavily over the town: the streets were empty and all the shops had been shuttered, although we arrived before 4:00 PM. As we entered the abandoned intersection of ainji mukku, we noticed another police blockade along the road to Andipuram. Temporary steel barriers spanned the road and about ten police officers and another ten heavily armed riot police officers stood or sat in plastic chairs on both sides of the road. The officers stopped our car and Subramanian again presented his press pass as a mark of his authority. This time the officers did not immediately acquiesce. Instead they told Subramanian that we could not enter because it was unsafe. Luckily for me, Subramanian continued to plea with the officers, again telling them that I was a “foreign lady” who resided in Paramakudi, and that I needed to gather my belongings and vacate the premises. After some deliberation, the police agreed to let us travel down the road.

We passed through the eerie quiet of Andipuram’s vacant main street, and pulled into the unpaved driveway of my building. Directly across the street, three police officers were standing over pools of dark red blood that were drying on the pavement amidst the remnants of a motorcycle mangled almost beyond recognition. We stepped out of the vehicle and saw a group of women huddled together behind the locked gate of my building’s downstairs hallway. They sat silently staring out of the spaces between the bars with weary eyes. When the landlady who was sitting among them saw me, she signaled with the urgent wave of her hand, telling me to leave the area without opening her mouth. I told her that I had to gather my stuff and then would be heading to Madurai to stay there for a while. As I was gathering my belongings, my phone rang. It was Ajith, my friend and neighbor from across the road. He exclaimed, “Tori, you must

get out of here! It is not safe. Get out of the road and leave Paramakudi!” Evidently watching me from the alleyway of his house, Ajith expressed his concern. I finished packing my bags, and swiftly departed. Unlike many of my friends in Andipuram and Krishnanagar, I had somewhere else to go.

We drove back through the blockade and checkpoints onto the road to Madurai. Our trip was silent except for the sound of typing as Subramanian texted furiously with his colleagues. When we arrived at my apartment in Madurai, I told my Brahmin landlord and landlady what had happened, and they turned somber but unsurprised. My landlord, always inquisitive, curious, and knowledgeable, replied, “Well, it always happens like this during these jāti guru pujas. It will be ok. The government should do something.”

Over the course of the next several days, I learned much more about the series of violent incidents, euphemistically referred to as “tension” in official government statements, that began on the morning of October 30, 2012. Subramanian and local newspapers, in addition to my friends in Paramakudi with whom I exchanged regular phone calls, filled me in on the details. At 11:15 AM, in Pambuvizhanthan, a group of about fifteen Devendra men bearing sticks and stones attacked a van full of young Thevar men who were on their way to Pasumpon. Many fled the scene, running into the surrounding fields, but the driver succumbed to injuries sustained in the attack. Later that day, at 2 PM, on the main road of Andipuram (Mudukulathor Road) — two young Thevar men on a motorbike were waylaid by another group of Devendra men²¹⁰. The travelers were swiftly pushed from their vehicle onto the pavement where they received blows to the head with stones large enough to kill them. According to witnesses, it was only about five minutes from the initial encounter to the death of the travelers. In retaliation for the murders in

²¹⁰ Since Pambuvizhanthan and Ponnaiyapuram are less than a kilometer apart from each other, it is possible that the same Devendra men were involved in both incidents.

Andipuram, within an hour, two Devendras were severely hacked with sickles in downtown Paramakudi. The victims were, however, lucky enough to survive their hospitalization. At 9 PM, sixty-seven kilometers away, in Madurai, a petrol bomb was hurled at a van full of Thevar passengers. All twenty passengers were injured and five died over the course of the following few days. The next morning in Tiruchuli, which is halfway between Madurai and Paramakudi, yet another troupe attacked. A group of “at least forty persons, all armed with lethal weapons” entered what *The Hindu* (newspaper) calls the “Dalit colonies”, and attacked and injured seven Dalit men (Sundar 2012).²¹¹

Evidently, the castes’ efforts to empower themselves by asserting authority and demanding sovereignty were not just ritually enacted. The killings that began near Paramakudi were acts of Devendra resistance against the Thevars’ attempts to occupy shared urban space around and on October 30th. With the flexboards that asserted their superiority, the Thevars had occupied the area aesthetically, but they would not, the Devendras contended, extend Pasumpon into Devendra-dominated areas like Pambuvizhanthan and Andipuram.

Once men had been killed on account of their castes, the momentum of tit for tat was energized. The violent acts of Devendras and Thevars were intended to be competitive struggles against each others’ claims, but they transcended such intentions, multiplying rampantly, ultimately swallowing the intent that bore them. Conventional authority and sovereignty remained unsettled, and continue to be repeatedly wrenched apart by the explosive force of violence.

²¹¹ Since *The Hindu* designates the victims “Dalit”, I cannot say for certain that they were Devendras, but given the distribution of the population and the ongoing feud, it is very likely that they were.

**The Triangulated Struggle for Status and the Search for Leadership: Caste-Based
Networks and Tenuous Lines of Solidarity
Chapter Seven**

Attempts to settle the elusive perimeters of authority continued to develop in the aftermath of the jarring episodes that bloodied the earth in and around Paramakudi. As the police bore down heavily on the Devendra people, the state unambiguously denied them the authority that they claimed in other contexts, and struck them with fear and suspicion. In response, the Paramakudi Devendras banded together to assert themselves through complicated negotiations with the state's authority. At the same time, dominant castes, including the Thevars, joined forces to fight the Devendras and the state, which they accused of unjustly backing Dalits. While the state stood up to quiet the Thevars and the other castes with which they were joined, the Devendras' most eminent statewide leaders did not come to the rescue of their caste fellows in Paramakudi, but instead worked to build authority in other domains, distancing themselves from the violence of the murders in and around Paramakudi.

In this chapter, I argue that the Devendras responded to state terror through the trans-regional networks of their caste conglomeration, which they mobilized to advocate for their caste fellows who had been falsely accused and arrested. I demonstrate the success of their mobilization by comparing their condition to that of their Paraiyar neighbors who faced the same injustices at the same time, but who were not well-connected to a caste conglomeration that they could rely on for support.

The operations of the Devendras as a caste conglomeration were not, however, entirely harmonious. Instead, they demonstrated that the leadership of the Devendras is contested because no single individual can meet the dissonant demands of Tamil masculinity established and upheld by Dravidianist discourse. Competition between leaders occurs largely in the symbolic

domain in which they attempt to accrue status and prestige for themselves and for their castes through performative acts of authority. Engaging with the law and its representatives is one effective performative act that my Devendra friends undertook as they demonstrated their overlapping ambitions to gain the status of leadership.

Unwilling to accept the Devendras' publically expressed ambitions, some vocal members of the dominant castes united to oppose them. What they refused to recognize, I contend, was the degree to which the Devendras had become like them. They joined together on an explicitly "anti-Dalit" platform, accusing Scheduled Caste men of preying on "their women" because intercaste unions would ultimately dilute their dominance. They also fought the state, building their movement along populist lines by constructing themselves as "the people" fighting the establishment, which they accused of favoring the Scheduled Castes. A triangulated struggle thus emerged with each of the three points – the Devendras, the dominant castes, and the state – fighting each other.

The major, electorally significant Devendra leaders – John Pandian and Dr. Krishnasamy – responded to the triangulated struggle by attempting to accrue status for their caste without fighting the state. Their more genteel battle for authority helped exonerate them of responsibility for the violence in Southeastern Tamil Nadu, and thus eased their maintenance of complicated alliances with the government. I focus mostly on John Pandian in making this argument because he made himself accessible to me, and because he is currently much more popular among Devendras than Krishnasamy. Asserting his visibility at a function he held in a wealthy section of cosmopolitan Chennai, John Pandian and his wife demonstrated authority, denuded of violence, claiming that the former would help the Devendras attain political authority through official, legally sanctioned means.

John Pandian's relationship with the Government of Tamil Nadu is, however, ultimately interdependent. He cannot easily advocate on behalf of the Devendras because his power and authority over them is reliant on his amicable relationship with the state, which overshadows his image as a rogue representative of "the people". Knowing this, he has tried to trump the power of government granted authority with Hindu religious power, which he asserts in the context of Brahminical Hinduism. Krishnasamy, by contrast, remains in the domain of this world, demonstrating his power as a Member of the Legislative Assembly advocating for legal change.

Importantly, neither John Pandian nor Krishnasamy offered their assistance to the Devendras in Southeastern Tamil Nadu who were suffering under the cruel reign of injustice. Their absence resonated deeply with my friends in Paramakudi who ultimately felt abandoned. Left in the dust and scorching sun of their town, my friends had only the local representatives of their caste conglomeration to turn to. Officially sanctioned government power, it seemed, would do nothing for them even if it was held by their own caste fellows.

Facing Fear

For a few months following the murders of October 30th, the people of Andipuram and Krishnanagar faced the warrants, nightsticks, and guns of the police. Night after night, police officers entered Andipuram, dragging men from their homes as their wives and children screamed and wailed in protest and despair. During the day, the air hung heavily. People exchanged furtive glances before directing their eyes at the dusty earth and proceeding to simulate the actions of normalcy. In the evenings, my female neighbors and I stared out over the edge of our building's balcony, watching police cars lurch down the otherwise empty streets until the cries of agonized families carried with the wind pushed us back behind the doors of our apartments.

As the terror continued for several weeks, the populations of Andipuram and Krishnanagar changed dramatically. Many men and some entire families fled the area. The families that lost their male members were looked after by male friends or relatives who came from other towns and villages to stay in Paramakudi. Such substitute patriarchs stood watch over Devendra women and children, sitting outside their houses in shifts to observe the movements in the neighborhood around the clock. At my building, the front gates were securely padlocked every night.

In addition to arrests and dubious charges, the Devendras and their neighbors were distressed by the state government's institution of Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) of 1973, which empowers a magistrate to prohibit an assembly of more than ten people in a given area.²¹² The law is decreed regularly enough in Ramanathapuram District for its residents to immediately associate the numbers 144 with a ban on assembly, potential arrest, and imprisonment. During November, 144 obstructed the meetings of Devendra activists, but they managed to organize regardless. Fear and suspicion, however, colored the course of their meetings and the nature of sociality in Paramakudi writ large.

The pall of fear that suffused much of Paramakudi had a profound impact on my friends and neighbors, as well as on the course of my research. In the weeks following the murders in Andipuram, many once eager interlocutors left town, and stopped answering my calls, and those who stayed behind became reticent. By contrast, the fights between the young couple who lived across the hall from me – Parvati and Siva – reached an all-time high in terms of their volume and intensity. Voices rose and doors were slammed. Their two school-age children spent hours in

²¹² The controversial section of the code was first drafted under the British Raj, and was often enacted to stop nationalist protests during the Indian Independence Movement. Today it is often used to prevent protests and demonstrations (Celestine 2013). For example, it was imposed in 2012 following the Delhi gang rape, but was then lifted because the Delhi High Court found its use contrary to the fundamental rights of citizens.

my apartment, drawing and watching television, and Siva eventually left. Amidst the turmoil, Parvati once came to my residence for tea and gave me some insight into the situation. I already knew that money was one of their problems because I had lent them some and had heard various references to money in their fights, but I did not realize the role of the police in their circumstances. Parvati explained: “We are having such trouble with money. He doesn’t go to work and now he can’t go because he is afraid of the police. He doesn’t earn any money or do anything and he won’t even buy me new clothing.” My landlady, Lakshmi, also experienced hardship in this moment of extended anxiety. Her husband had left Paramakudi to stay with friends in another town two days after the incident. Lakshmi stayed behind to single-handedly run the building, the shop at its base, and their family. I asked her how she was doing several times a day in coming and going to and from the building, and she shared her exhaustion and worry.

For many of the men of Andipuram, the distress caused by state sanctioned police force had the opposite effect. Instead of becoming strained with overwork, they were waiting around tormented, frittering away time in hiding. Murthi, the aforementioned secretary of Paramakudi’s Devendra Panpattu Kazhagam, had fled town with his wife and two young sons immediately following the double murder. Although he did not answer my phone calls, I heard that he was fairing well from my friend Kathir and Karpusami, the president of the Kazhagam. His wife and children returned to Paramakudi after a few weeks, but they kept their distance from me.

For men who remained in Paramakudi, fear hung heavily and movement was limited. I went to my friend Peter’s house in early December, and felt the chilling fear of quietude that contrasted starkly with the jovial sounds that had enlivened the home in September and early October. The curtains were drawn, most of the lights were off, and the door that I had earlier

found open was locked. Peter scanned the area in front of his house hurriedly as he opened the door and invited me to sit down in the living room. While his wife, Mary, cooked in the kitchen, Peter and I sat next to each other in his tall-backed wooden and velveteen chairs. I felt nervous in the silence, and looked down at my fingernails. Peter shook his leg restlessly and glanced at his phone. After a couple of very long minutes, Peter told me about the problems he faced:

On my way to and from work, I have to speed by the Thevar areas in fear. They are threatening to kill me. They gather and stand on the side of the road when I drive by. They even put a bomb behind an auto [rickshaw] and were going to set it off as I passed by, but I was able to pick up enough speed to avert it. They have tried to kill me five times in the past few weeks. The police have called to inform me that I am on a hit list along with Chandrabose. I should be careful and avoid passing through the Thevar areas. I have to take a different route to and from work.

Luckily, Peter's two sons and a daughter were not in danger because they were away at boarding school. They studied in one of the districts of Northern Tamil Nadu where, Peter assured me, they would get a better education. "Down here around Paramakudi, there are no good schools. Up on the North side, it is more developed so my children will study better and get better educations."

I asked Peter if the police had provided him with protection. Since he is a teacher at a government school, I wondered if he might receive the support of the local authorities. He shrugged his shoulders, saying that the protection they offered was insufficient. They had given him a particular number to call in case he had any problems, which would amount to nothing in the instance of a sudden attack. "What will they do?" He asked rhetorically. "I am nothing to them. They are not concerned."

In the prolonged crisis that followed the murders in and around Paramakudi, it was clear to the Devendras that the state was not its guardian or patron, but instead its unjust oppressor. The state's dishonest and draconian response made it the enemy against which the people fought, and ensured the dissolution of its ability to underwrite status. The state could no longer be trusted, but it was greatly feared because of its unhesitating employment of force.

At first only in the possession of the police and a few of Paramakudi's attorneys, the list of seventy-four people accused bespoke the dishonesty of the state, which was hardly a great surprise to the Devendras. There was no relationship between those actually involved in the violence and the names of the hapless individuals that appeared on the list. The number of names on the list far outstripped the number of people involved in the murders at Andipuram and Pambuvizhanthan, and included women, children, and students who were definitely not present at the moments of the incidents. What is more, Chandabose, the aforementioned leader of the Tiyagi Immanuvel Peravai, was on the list of the accused despite the fact that he had been in Madurai for the entire month. It was clear to the Paramakudi Devendras that Chandrabose was on the list because of his position as a community leader. The baselessness of an accusation against a man named Malairaj was even more indubitable. As *The Hindu* reported, Malairaj, son of Mayalagu of Paramakudi died on March 29, 2011, but had been included on the list of accused by the Paramakudi police (The Hindu 2012).

Although everyone was well aware that the list of the accused was baseless, they also felt that its power was very real. Whispers and rumors about "the list" swept through Paramakudi, along with the suspicion and fear that shadow anxiety. In response, distressed Devendras reached to the eminent among them, mobilizing a statewide network of caste fellows in their efforts to push back against wrongfully deployed state force. Kathir, the best-known Devendra attorney in Paramakudi, became a key player during the crisis, and was keen on discussing the injustice that the community faced with me. Just beyond ainji mukku and across the street from the Paramakudi police station, Kathir's building, which housed his home and office, became the headquarters for the Devendras who faced false cases and arrests. The network that spanned out

from Kathir also became a key intermediary between the Paramakudi Devendras and the state, although disagreements sometimes troubled mobilization.

Unlike my interactions with some of my former interlocutors, my interactions with Kathir and his associates surged in the months of November, December, and January, as they wanted to show me the reality of the Devendras' plight. They also sought to leverage my perceived ability as a white, Anglophone foreigner to influence the course of government action. Kathir invited me to his building regularly, and my neighbors and friends sought me out to get the privileged information that they thought I had. I did get a hold of the infamous list after asking Kathir a few times, although I was by no means the only one who came to possess it.

Facing Fatality and Fighting the “Law”

On the morning of Thursday November 8th, I was preparing to type up some notes when my housekeeper – Karthika – arrived bearing a look of concern that I had not seen on her face before. “Do not go outside today”, she exclaimed. “They’ve killed a guy and thrown him under the bridge.” I pressed her for further information, and she told me that he was a thirty-five-year-old man by the name of Thirumal who had one young son, and who she had known in passing. Saying nothing else, Karthika stepped into the open-air hallway outside my apartment, put on her rubber sandals, and began to sweep away the dust that relentlessly returned every day. I staggered back to my desk, opened my computer, and typed as per my usual routine. I was interrupted by the rise of clamoring voices. A second later, Karthika stood at the apartment door and called me out to the common balcony at the end of the hall to watch the fight that had broken out at the bus stop beneath my building. A crowd of women stood yelling at each other, gesticulating wildly with their hands, as we watched expectantly. While the cacophony of the argument made it impossible to understand its content, Karthika assured me that it was somehow

related to the murder of Thirumal. The quarrel diffused within about ten minutes and Karthika and I returned to our routines, pretending we weren't disturbed.

Later in the day, I hopped onto my moped to go to Kathir's office, and drove along the empty road under thick grey clouds that hung overhead casting shadows on the stores that had shuttered early. When I arrived, Kathir's second-story office was open and strewn with legal books and notepads, but devoid of people. I stood waiting and looked out over the balcony at the police station, which was overflowing with officers and military personnel and surrounded by their numerous vehicles. Suddenly concerned that the police would notice and question my presence, I returned to Kathir's office, sat in a metal and plastic chair below posters of Ambedkar and Prabhakaran, and leafed through my notebook. Eventually, Kathir's eight-year-old son arrived and told me that his father had returned and was waiting for me in his home downstairs.

Kathir was sitting on his wicker sofa talking on his cellphone when I entered the house, and his wife, Ancy, stood to welcome me, insisting on serving me tea as I waited. Sweat dripped down our faces (especially mine) as we sat in the still air unstirred by the fan. The electricity was out as it often was that year. Kathir brought his phone call to a conclusion, as I sipped my tea, and then began to expound on the current situation in a tone of jest that surprised me: "Please see, Victoria, that there are so many problems here, always so many problems in this place. I want to take my family and go to America. Maybe I can do research about your culture." I joined his giggling, uncomfortably aware of the hundreds of years of violent imperialism that offered me the mobility that he had been denied. Luckily, his wife cut into the moment of tense laughter, lamenting, "For him, there is no peace." As if on cue, Kathir's phone rang and he began responding to questions about Thirumal, whose corpse had been left under the bridge, the police, and the false cases that terrorized the Paramakudi Devendras. A string of phone calls came in

succession between which Kathir provided me with some details about the murder. Thirumal's friends had found his body beneath a bridge that the Tamil Nadu Government had recently constructed next to Immanuel's gravesite. His throat had been slit and he had been turned on his side so that he appeared to be sleeping peacefully on the riverbank. Thirumal had been the secretary of John Pandian's political party, the TMMK, in the nearby town of Mudukulathur where, Kathir explained, he had been engaged in "social work" to benefit the Devendras. In the context of caste leaders, social work usually refers to arbitrating disputes (by whatever means necessary), various forms of brokerage, and "getting things done."

The particular location of Thirumal's body after the murder is significant. The killers had disposed of him underneath the government-sponsored bridge that had ensured access to Immanuel's Samadhi. The placement of the corpse thus marred the point at which the government had recognized the importance of Immanuel and his caste fellows. The culprits had sent a message: this is what happens when you assert yourselves, when you make yourselves visible.

As Kathir expressed his certainty that the murder was committed by local Thevars, two men from Thirumal's village entered the house. They offered greetings to us, and were then welcomed to sit down. They told Kathir that they were afraid that they would be implicated in the murder of Thirumal, and asked for help. Kathir easily agreed, and took notes as they spoke. For Thirumal's friends and neighbors, the abuses of the police were a pervasive source of dread that they were eager to relieve. One of them began: "The police came and tried to arrest me for the Andipuram murders. They held me, but then others said that I'm a good man and they let me go." The unofficial authority of reputation in this case helped Thirumal's friend, but the very real potential of police force backed by state power loomed large for these men and so many other

Devendras in the Paramakudi area. Kathir asked them if they had any other cases pending against them, which would of course increase their chances of arrest, and then assured Thirumal's friends that he who would try to clear them of implication in the cases. He assured them that their affidavit's would be sent to the superintendent of police by registered post.

Despite his willingness to help his caste fellows without charging any fees, as he reminded me, Kathir distanced himself from the violence that Devendras had committed. Such acts cast doubt on the prestigious civility that Kathir had worked so hard to achieve and maintain. After the men of Thirumal's village left, Kathir provided me with his perspective on the incidents at Andipuram. I asked him what happened the day of the Thevar Jayanthi and he lifted his fatigued eyes from the text messages on his phone. He began by referring to the roles of the police in the incident: "That day, there were police on the North side of the road by ainji mukku and on the South side. There were three thousand police officers here. Andipuram is a restricted area, but the Thevars passed through on their bikes unknowingly." "But why did the police let them through? How did that happen?" I asked. "Yesterday," Kathir continued, "Two police officers were dismissed in relation to this incident. They [the Thevars] shouldn't pass through that area, but murder is not a solution." Kathir shook his head in dismay. "He has no peace", Ancy chimed in. "He shouldn't be doing this work."

For Kathir and his family, the stress of intercaste turmoil and state aggression extended into a heavy fear that I felt hanging over their home. I asked Kathir how long he thought that the conflict and legal proceedings would continue and he frowned, saying that they could go on for decades. "They may even kill me", he said nonchalantly, half grinning with a mixture of resignation and dark humor. Ill-equipped to respond to Kathir's macabre joke, I was grateful when Ancy interrupted the moment of silence with her complaint that the window in the hallway

was open. She ordered her son to close and lock it, and then drew the curtains herself. Her fear seemed to resonate with Kathir who then sent his son to fetch his friend and next door neighbor, Ram. Kathir's son returned quickly, as per his father's directions, with Ram in tow. Kathir then used Ram's phone to make a few more calls, fearing that his phone was tapped. Kathir and his family felt threats pressing in on them from all sides. They were afraid of Thevar violence, the police that hovered right in front of their house, and the chaos of the conflict. Danger, it seemed, could come from anywhere.

Despite their fear, Kathir and his family sustained some hope that justice would prevail. When the electricity finally did return, suddenly illuminating the house and propelling the fans, Kathir's son turned on the television around which the family eagerly gathered to watch the news. They sighed in disappointment as the news of Thirumal's murder flashed across the bottom of the screen in writing for just a few seconds. They had hoped that media attention on the murder would bring a fairer inquiry. Kathir invited Ram and me upstairs to his office where one of his young assistants awaited us. He produced the list of the accused, which I had requested earlier, and began to read it aloud as his assistant took notes. After reading the seventy four names, Kathir sent Ram out to make copies of the list. He gave me a copy, bid me farewell, and insisted on sending Ram to escort me back to Andipuram. I wondered why Kathir had so readily shared the list with me. Perhaps he thought that my position as an American researcher would give me some clout with the authorities.

Suspicion Rising

Ram and I drove through the dark quiet of ainji mukku, which was heavily populated by idle police officers and military personnel, but entirely devoid of civilians. When we pulled onto the dusty patch of land in front of my building, we found my landlady, Lakshmi, and one other

woman sitting on plastic chairs in the former's shop. The shop was open, but it had been strategically arranged in preparation for sudden closing. The counter, which usually stood slightly outside the perimeter of the shop, stood at a diagonal so that the retractable aluminum shutter could be pulled down at any moment. When Lakshmi and her friend saw us, they immediately stood up and looked at us with eager eyes. Lakshmi gestured to call us over to the counter where she asked us in a shaky whisper if we had the list: "Did you see the list? Is my name on it? Someone said that there is a Lakshmi on the list." Ram answered her entreaty immediately: "No that is another Lakshmi, R. Lakshmi who lives over there." The pointing of Ram's finger away was a great relief to Lakshmi, whose face illuminated with a smile.

Ram left, and I sat with Lakshmi and her friend on plastic chairs that we pulled out from the shop. Lakshmi immediately called her husband to share the good news, as she smiled broadly. She hung up, and we sat in silence enjoying the breeze that had begun to blow through Paramakudi as the cool season was approaching. Before long, our eyes turned to a police car that was creeping down the road. It parked directly across the street from us, and two officers set out into the back alleys of Andipuram. We looked at each other and then down, saying nothing. About ten minutes later, the police emerged escorting an elderly man who walked between them compliantly.

For weeks, the soundscape of Andipuram was dominated by shouts and whispers, by resistant rage and acquiescent fear. On the gusty afternoon of November 19th, I sat with my neighbor Raji in front of the store at the entrance to her home watching the occasional bus or car roll over the spot on the road that was stained with blood. Ajith approached us from across the street and Raji gestured to him to sit down. Out of work, Ajith had plenty of time to spend with us. Raji immediately launched into a discussion of the pressing issue of the day – the aggression

of the police. She began her comments without providing the context that we already shared: “They [the police] were dressed in plain clothes when they arrived last night. They interrogated my husband, but we just said that he had gone to the hospital that day”. Ajith wagged his head to show his approval for Raji and her husband’s tactic for deflecting the police. Throughout the duration of the crisis, many of “the people” banded together in their opposition to the police and the state that upheld it. They did not seek approval or compromise, but instead aimed to deceive and fight the police through their noncooperation.

That night around 1AM, as I learned from Karthika the following morning, the police had taken Ajith down to the station and interrogated him. They had asked him about Thambi, his cousin, who he claimed that he did not know. That same day, my phone rang continuously with calls from my research assistant and Ajith’s brother, Mohan, but I was not able to answer because I was occupied interacting with people at Kathir’s office. I returned Mohan’s calls in the evening, and was surprised when he asked me what was happening in Andipuram. He wanted to know if his family was implicated in the murder cases. Initially, I wondered why he called me rather than his relatives, but quickly realized that using me as an intermediary was the safest way to avoid potential police interference. I told Mohan everything that I had heard from Karthika – that Ajith was fine and that nothing had happened to Thambi.

The following day, I went to Thambi’s parents’ house, which he and his wife shared, and I was greeted by Thambi’s mother Chellam. I immediately noticed that she looked exhausted. I asked her how she was and she responded incredulously, “Didn’t you know, Thambi was inside [in prison]? You didn’t know?” I matched her incredulity with my own, and inquired further. Thambi, Chellam informed me, had been arrested on the night of the 19th in his wife’s village where he had gone to hide. He was remanded for twenty-four hours until he was released on bail.

After providing me with this information, Chellam calmly returned to the kitchen to delve back into her cooking, but was interrupted when her friend and neighbor arrived unexpectedly.

Chellam returned to the hall to sit with us, and continued her elaboration of the previous days' events:

We were all down at the station last night. Priya [Thambi's wife] was crying and crying, and so I was I. We begged them to let him go. We begged and begged. At first they said, 'get out of here lady', but they didn't have his name. It only said Thambi [which is a nickname] and the father was listed wrong too ... His name is Ishaan. They can only take him if they have his name. They came and took him from the village.

Chellam's friend wondered how they had even found Thambi, and she replied by pointing her arm towards the adjoining house where Ajith and his family reside: "Them. They had taken Ajith and questioned him, 'who's Thambi?'" Chellam's friend extrapolated: "Oh, OK. Then he said, 'my uncle's son'." "Yeah, just like that," Chellam confirmed. Chellam was accusing her own nephew (in this case, brother-in-law's son) of betraying Thambi's identity. What I aim to point out by exploring this case is the difference between what the Devendras and what the Paraiyars experienced in the period of police oppression following Thevar Jayanthi in 2012. Ajith, Thambi, and Chellam all hail from the Paraiyar caste, and were thus alienated from the conscious efforts to build solidarity among the Devendras, which helped strengthen them, despite the fear and danger that threatened them.

Implication in the charges against the accused did not beget solidarity for the Paraiyars of Andipuram, but instead created a circuit of suspicion even between close relatives. Misgivings about me also rose to the surface during the arrests. At Chellam's house that afternoon, her older sister who was visiting from out of town, emerged from the bedroom to join the conversation despite her sleepy eyes. She turned to me, raised her arm vertically in the inquisitive gesture, and demanded, "Why didn't you go to the [police] station to help?" I responded honestly that I did not know what was happening at the time. Believing that I could have influenced the police with

the clout I ostensibly possessed as a white American, Thambi's family was disappointed in and momentarily suspicious of me.

Such wariness ran deeper as it flowed from the Paraiyars to their Devendra neighbors. Chellam continued her grievance: "All the periyavaṅka (big people) are fine and safe – the big leaders – Murthi and Chandrabose. But they are coming and taking away people like us." "They took my son too," Chellam's friend interjected, "He's a teacher. He was teaching in school and they went and took him off the school ground ... It has been fifteen days. He's up there in Salem [in the state prison]." As the conversation proceeded, Chellam told us that Thambi had gone to the police station earlier that day to thank them for releasing him. He had kowtowed to the powerful force of the police, departing from the audacity of *vīram* that is at the heart of Tamil masculinity. Relinquishing his masculine pride, Thambi had shown gratitude for the justice served by the establishment. Journalist Edward Luce's claim that Indians have become resigned to saying thank you for what is rightfully theirs is apropos here (2007).

The Paramakudi Paraiyars in particular are subject to the capricious whims of the state because they are not connected to a powerful para-state network. Although the head of the VCK, Thirumavalavan, hails from the Paraiyar caste and is easily the most influential Dalit leader in the state, the Paraiyars of Paramakudi receive little to no practical benefits from his party.²¹³ They are also peripheral to Devendra organizations, and so are not made a priority in such organizations' efforts to rebel against state violence.

Organization and Opposition

In contrast to the Paraiyars' divisive web of suspicion, the Devendras banded together during the crisis in attempts to strengthen themselves. They organized collectively, as they

²¹³ As I discussed in Chapter Two, Thirumavalavan's power certainly boosted the Paraiyars' morale and pride, but the Paraiyars of Paramakudi received little to no logistical support from Thirumavalavan's party.

generated tactics to approach the state through official bureaucratic channels, which bespoke their eminence, but also illuminated their internal struggles.

Such internal conflicts were not matters of suspicion regarding the trajectory of the crisis itself, but instead were defined by long-term questions about the nature of the ideal Devendra leader. The Devendras demanded a ruler who would be righteous, eminent, and honorable, but who would also demonstrate the ferocity and ruthlessness of raw vīram. Of course, the impossible balance that had to be maintained by the leader meant that there was a perpetual power vacuum that many of the locally eminent tried to occupy. Internal competition did not, however, unravel the fabric of unity that materialized at the moment of collective crisis.

I observed the Devendras' activism when I joined the group on their trip to Ramanathapuram to petition the court for the bail of their relatives, friends, and caste fellows. I arrived at 9AM on January 7th, as I had been directed by Kathir who I found sitting at his desk reviewing a number of documents quietly. I said nothing, waiting for him to finish, but was soon interrupted by his lighthearted complaint about the situation in which he was deeply embroiled: "There was the problem and now they are getting punished. I am also getting punished." He laughed. "There's a case against you?" I asked. "No, no it's just all the work."²¹⁴ Kathir saw his work as an obligation he was fulfilling for his caste fellows. He claimed that "they need the knowledge and weight I have as an attorney".

Despite the knowledge and weight he bears as an attorney, Kathir's lack of English proficiency is a major handicap to the advancement of his career. "I want to know English," he began. "I know a little, but not enough to help improve my position. I want to know English, but I studied only in Tamil medium. I am a very poor man. They think that if someone knows English, they are very smart, but in America even the beggar knows English." I replied by

²¹⁴ A case was filed against him the following month.

alerting Kathir to the various mother tongues that people speak in America, though I agreed with him in terms of the prestige that English offers in Tamil Nadu despite the deeply-felt legacy of Tamil nationalism. He went on to clarify the specific limitations that he faces as a monolingual attorney. He cannot find work at the state-level high court, but instead is relegated to cases in the taluk and district-level courts, which pay very little. “I tried to work in the high court [the Madurai branch of the Madras high court], but my knowledge of English is very poor. No one called me for work. I cannot work there because I don’t know English.”

When Kathir finished explaining his predicament, we descended the stairs and stood outside on the side of the dusty road. Kathir checked his watch and then called Karpusami, the aforementioned leader of the Devendra Kula Vellalar Panpattu Kazhagam, whom he teased for his tardiness. “What sār? You always come late. What happened? Why haven’t you come yet, sār?” Karpusami and their mutual friend Mani arrived just after 9:30, and Kathir continued to gently mock the former. “You see, sār,” Kathir said with feigned seriousness. “I always tell you to come a half hour earlier [than necessary] because you always come late.” They both chuckled, though the lightness of Kathir’s teasing barely masked his undermining of Karpusami’s authority.

Karpusami’s position as the head of the Kazhagam had been called into question not only in this moment, but several times and by several of his caste fellows throughout my research tenure, as I discussed in Chapter. Murthi, the secretary of the Kazhagam and Karpusami’s nephew told me in confidence, “Karpusami is a waste. He is not a big leader that people are afraid of. He doesn’t know how to be a leader.” Kathir agreed, telling me that the Devedras need, “a strong leader. Someone who can stand up for the community instead of sitting and just being

like Karpusami.” Evidently, Karpusami’s mild manners and gentle nature were incongruous with some of his caste fellows’ visions of the ideal caste leader as an awe-inspiring *vīraṇ*.

Despite his reservations, Kathir collaborated with Karpusami and with Mani during the car trip, which functioned as an unofficial space for political organizing. A fifth passenger – the father of a young man who had been charged and imprisoned for his alleged involvement in the murder at Pambuvizhanthan – joined us on the journey to Ramanathapuram. He arrived last, carrying neatly bundled documents, and was ushered into the rear compartment of the white Maruti SUV in which we rode, while I was invited to sit in the front. As soon as we departed, Kathir began to discuss issues facing the community that had been silenced in the public sphere by the threat of 144.

For example, he was prosecuting a case of verbal denigration under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act²¹⁵. Some Devendra youths, Kathir explained, had been abused with vulgar words (“*acinkam colratu*”) by a dominant caste group in a nearby town. Others asked if the accused had been remanded and arrested; they had, Kathir reported with a smile.

Kathir’s legal battles were not limited to his own caste. He protested the death of a young Chettiar man by the name of Venkatesh who was killed while in custody in Paramakudi.²¹⁶ Enroute to Ramanthapuram, we stopped several times to distribute copies of the pamphlet that Kathir had drafted to publicize the death of Venkatesh. Publically decrying police brutality

²¹⁵ The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 is an act of the Parliament of India enacted to prevent atrocities against said groups. The act’s preamble states that it aims to “prevent the commission of offences of atrocities against the members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, to provide for Special Courts for the trial of such offences and for the relief and rehabilitation of the victims of such offenses and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto” (Government of Indian 1989). The act defines “atrocities” according to a number of stipulations, including, “an expression commonly used to refer to crimes against Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India”. It “denotes the quality of being shockingly cruel and inhumane, whereas the term 'crime' relates to an act punishable by law” (National Coalition for Strengthening SCs & Sts 2010).

²¹⁶ The Chettiars, who are one of the most financially successful and high status castes in Paramakudi, do not come into conflict with the Devendras. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, they do not tend to be involved in caste conflicts.

helped the Devendras build the momentum of their opposition to state authority as they advocated for their caste fellows. With determination, they shared all the information they had about the current crisis effecting their caste with Devendra leaders in the villages between Paramakudi and Ramanathapuram. With 144 preventing the Devendras from meeting in a large group and the common fear of police phone taps, the stops we made served as an effective means to share crucial information. We stopped at the homes of Devendra headmen throughout the area, which were often relatively comfortable and fitted with green and red flags. Karpusami and Kathir took the lead, reporting mostly on the cases that faced the Paramakudi Devendras. Importantly, their visits also included fundraising, resulting in their accrual of thousands of rupees over the course of the morning.

Soon after our final stop, we pulled into the long, clay driveway of the Ramanathapuram district courthouse and collectorate, which exudes power despite its state of disrepair. I followed the men as they entered confidently and headed down a corridor to the courtroom that they seemed to know well. Mostly male and a few female attorneys milled about, wearing their floor-length, black robes and carrying bundles of documents. A crowd had gathered outside the courthouse, though it was well-guarded by men in anachronistic, British-period uniforms befitted with tall red-tasseled hats, gold pins, and shiny black boots. We were greeted and briefed by Bala, a Ramanathapuram-based attorney senior to Kathir who is related to members of the Devendra community in Paramakudi. Complicating Kathir's claims to a pivotal role, Bala was, in fact, handling most of the details of the Andipuram and Pampuvizhanthan cases.

Nonetheless, Kathir left for a few minutes and returned wearing his black robes, which were required attire for attorneys in the courtroom. After receiving the clearance of the guards, he and Bala entered the courtroom, and the rest of us attempted to peer inside through a half-

open window that was mostly blocked by a wall calendar. On the far right side of the long room, the judge sat on his bench, which was flanked by two tables at which his typists and assistants sat. Stretching out from the bench and reaching to the far left of the room were rows of chairs completely occupied by attorneys who were called to the bench in succession, but who nonetheless crowded towards the front of the room. We saw Bala and Kathir approach the bench. Bala did most of the talking as Kathir presented some documents for review. They were dismissed and returned to join us in the hallway after less than ten minutes. Bala told us to depart for Madurai posthaste because the case had been filed there. I wondered why we had not known this before or if it had been necessary to come to Ramanathapuram at all. Not wanting to disturb what seemed like a very sensitive moment, I did not ask.

We stopped on our way to the courthouse in Madurai to see an attorney whose office on the outskirts of town had recently been constructed. It's neatly painted stucco exterior, marble floor, and velveteen chairs spoke to the attorney's success, and the large framed print of Ambedkar on the wall signaled his commitment to Dalit rights. His three assistants paused, looking up from their work to greet us and offer us tea. They informed us that "sār" (sir) would not be back to the office until the evening, but that he had left some documents for us, which Kathir eagerly received, before we departed.

When we arrived at the courthouse, which was architecturally similar to the one in Ramanthapuram and in a better state of repair, we headed to straight to the photocopy room. Again, my friends new the way well. From the copy room, we headed directly to the office of one of the high court judges who invited us in with the wave of his hand, but did not stand up. He listened briefly to the men complain that many of the accused had nothing to do with the incidents, though his unresponsiveness indicated his impatience and disinterest. After only a few

minutes, I followed my companions' lead as they stood up. Karpusami subtly slipped a few thousand rupee notes into the front pocket of the judge's button-down shirt, and we were on our way. With the help of an interconnected network of Devendras, Karpusami and his friends had made things happen. They had collected the documents and financial resources to ensure that "justice" was served. Throughout the journey back to Ramanathapuram, the men received phone calls from friends and family members who wanted reports on the situation.

While the father of the young man who was arrested was present throughout the proceedings, he did not play an active role. He stood in the background, letting the others handle the process of negotiating with the authorities because he did not have their aptitude or know-how. When we arrived in Paramakudi, he hopped out of the back of the SUV, and thanked Kathir and Karpusami profusely.

The following morning, I decided to join my friends on another journey to Ramanathapuram, which I had overheard them discuss during the car ride home the previous day. In addition to the same men who had been there the day before, Karpusami's cousin Ganesan was present. Ganesan had regularly attended meetings of the Kazhagam, despite the fact that he split his time between Paramakudi and Chennai.

Enroute, we pulled into a small village and stopped in front of one of its largest and newest houses. I was told to wait in the car with the driver while my friends headed in to talk to the leader of the village's Devendra community. They brought the leader the newly printed Kazhagam calendar, which featured Immanuvel and Ajithalingam against a background of bright green rice paddy. In addition to delivering news, this visit, I later learned, crucially augmented the funds that they had raised and used mostly to pay bribes the previous day. Cash was also necessary for attorneys' fees and for the collection of the *muṅcāmāṇ* (literally, "before stuff"),

which is given to the legal authorities as a guarantee when an individual is released from prison. The process of collecting capital for *muṅcāmāṇ* was undertaken by the Kazhagam during their trips around Southern Tamil Nadu, and during their discussions with their Chennai-based friends and relatives who delivered their support through bank transfers. Again, the Devendras had built a state-wide network that seemed not only to increase their visibility but to get things done.

However, not much seems to have happened that day at the courthouse. After we met Bala there, he and Kathir waited three hours to speak to the judge for only a few minutes. Defeat hung heavily in the air on the way home so I was hesitant to ask questions.

Later that week, in another discussion with Kathir, I learned that the judge handling the case was, in fact, a member of the Devendra community. Kathir had been aware of that fact for months, and was certain that the judge's *jāti* in combination with the Devendras' reticence would ensure that those who had been incarcerated would be acquitted. As in many cases involving caste conflict, there was a lack of witnesses because caste fellows were unwilling to incriminate each other. Ultimately then, the accused would be released regardless of the Devendras' leadership, organization, and activism. Why, I wondered, did Kathir, Karpusami, and their allies, who were well aware of the very likely outcomes of the cases, exert so much effort in their opposition to the state? Of course, the bribes they paid and the *muṅcāmāṇ* they collected expedited the release of Devendra prisoners, but their seemed to be another motivating factor at work.

The Devendra leaders who were petitioning the agents of the state accrued prestige (*kauravam*) through their performative engagements with authoritative power. They demonstrated their education, knowledge, and shrewdness as they navigated the spaces of the state on behalf of their caste fellows. They mastered and submitted the requisite paperwork,

correctly interpreted the often confusing proceedings of the court, and got results fast. Their eminence was also undergirded by their interactions with the distinguished members of the Cakōtira Maṟumalarcci Nalacankam, the aforementioned Devendra caste organization in Chennai from which they collected funds. During this period of intensive activism, they were in constant contact with their wealthy caste fellows in Chennai. The Paramakudi Devendras' ability to receive the responsive acknowledgement of state officials and of the members of the Caṅkam bespoke the breadth and depth of their authority, which, in turn, endowed them with prestige.

The prestige at stake in the legal proceedings of November through January fostered the development of a faint competitive friction between some of Paramakudi's Devendra leaders. Karpusami especially was increasingly challenged as some of his friends and caste fellows came to question his role as the leader of the Kazhagam. Not only was he considered insufficiently fear-inspiring, but he was also subjected to the criticism that he, as Kathir put it, "is just a simple village man with very little education".

Opposition of Other Castes

At the same time as the Devendras were organizing in opposition to the state, a few dominant caste leaders began their own censure of state policy and practice. Intercaste conflict thus became a triangulated struggle defined by tensions between the Devendras, the dominant castes, and state authority. Importantly, dominant caste resistance was expressed through the same idiom of vīram that upheld Devendra mobilization. Positing themselves as "the people" standing in opposition to the establishment, the Devendras and the dominant castes came to mirror each other in their mutual opposition and in their opposition to the state.

In December of 2012, Dr. S. Ramadoss, the leader of the Pattali Makkal Katchi ("Hardworking People's Party"), formed the Anaithu Samuthaya Padukappu Peravai ("All

Communities Protection Federation”). The Peravai’s platform was both explicitly anti-Dalit and openly critical of the state. Ramadoss claimed that he aimed to protect other communities from Dalits’ aggression, seduction of non-Dalit women, and misuse of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act²¹⁷. He blamed state authorities for allegedly pandering to Dalits.

Although the PMK is primarily a party of the Vanniyar caste, an Other Backwards Class constituted mostly by landowning agriculturalists who have dominated many villages of Northern Tamil Nadu, Ramadoss succeeded in appealing to a number of dominant castes, including Thevars, during the meetings of the Federation that he held in Madurai, Coimbatore, Erode, Tirupur, and Chennai. The first meeting of the Federation, which was held in Chennai on December 2, 2012, was attended by “leaders and representatives of Nadars, Vanniyars, Thevars, Gounders, Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam [Progress Association], Mudhaliars, Pillais, Yadavs, Reddiar, and other small caste group formations”, according to K.S. Durairasu of *India Today* (Durairasu 2012). At the meeting, Ramadoss demanded dilution of the law aimed at curbing Dalit atrocities, claiming that it is systematically misused. He also “accused Dalit youth of fomenting social tension by filing false complaints under the law and ensnaring girls from other castes with bogus professions of love.” (Kolappan 2012)

Importantly, Ramadoss’ alarmism and accusations came in the wake of another surge in intercaste violence that scarred Tamil Nadu in 2012. Roughly concurrent with the violence that ensnared the Paramakudi area, an attack on a Dalit community in Dharmapuri District followed the marriage of an Adi-Dravida (Paraiyar) man Ilavarasan (23) to N. Divya (20), a Vanniyar woman. The couple eloped to a temple to get married in October, and then approached the Deputy Inspector General of Police (Salem District) for protection, which he assured them he would provide. Despite the assurance of the police, a kangaroo court convened, and “directed

²¹⁷ I referred to the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act above in footnote six.

Ilavarasan's family to return the girl ... The girl refused to go with her father, who later hanged himself at his house ... And then, the mobs went on the rampage" (Arivanantham 2012). The attack, which took place on November 7, 2012, was directed at three Scheduled Caste colonies and resulted in the complete destruction of about two hundred and sixty houses, which were burnt to the ground. The following year, on July 4, 2013, Ilavarasan's corpse was found beside the railway tracks in Dharmapuri. He is thought to have committed suicide.

Ramadoss and his party's implication in the violence that unfolded in late 2012 brought him into direct conflict with the aforementioned Dalit leader of the VCK, Thirumavalavan. The latter accused Ramadoss and his cadres of instigating the destruction, and Ramadoss retorted without hesitation. In a press conference held on November 18th, Ramadoss alleged that the violence was a direct result of the actions of VCK members who advised Ilavarasan's family not to send Divya back to her family. He further charged that VCK leaders and members were encouraging Dalit boys to stalk Vanniyar girls, and demanded government intervention to stop such acts (New Indian Express 2012).

Ramadoss and Thirumavalavan's mutual accusations marked the former's sharp rejection of Scheduled Caste leaders and parties with which he had allied in the past. In the 1990s, Ramadoss and John Pandian entered an electoral alliance. Pandian had run in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly (Mudukulathur Constituency) on the PMK ticket in 1991, and the two leaders had garnered support with the help of their slogan, "Northern Vanniyars, Southern Pallars" in many areas of Tamil Nadu. More recently, in 2004 and 2009, Ramadoss entered an electoral alliance with Thirumavalavan himself. However, Ramadoss made it clear in the words and actions of late 2012 that such alliances were no longer desirable. The increasing likeness of the Vanniyars and other dominant castes to the Scheduled Castes was what Ramadoss and his

allies couldn't stand. Expressed as their dismay over intercaste unions, the underlying fear of dominant caste men was the erosion of their dominance as they became closer and closer to those they have long looked down on from above.

Of course, Ramadoss did not succeed in attracting all men of the dominant castes. In accordance with the protection of the Scheduled Castes enshrined in the Constitution, mainstream, well-established parties publically opposed him. At a protest held in Chennai on December 3rd, 2012, the DMK, CPI(M) (Communist Party of India Marxist), CPI (Communist Party of India), and MDMK, warned that opposition to intercaste marriage and the Prevention of Atrocities Act would prevent amity between the castes and potentially lead to violence. The aforementioned leader of the MDKM Vaiko "said it was unbecoming of a leader of a political party to ridicule inter-caste marriages and the modern dress code of Dalit youth" (The Hindu 2012). Significantly, M. Karunanidhi, Tamil Nadu's five-time chief minister and leader of the DMK, said that campaigning against Dalits "is a dangerous trend" (ibid.). "Asked whether the PMK leader had resorted to such a move [anti-Dalit campaigning] to increase his vote bank, Mr. Karunanidhi said caste politics was dangerous and [that] Dr. Ramadoss was playing with fire. He went on to say [that] the government should act against those who indulged in caste politics" (ibid.). Karunanidhi thus unambiguously criticized Ramadoss. Equally significant is the fact that the AIADMK – the DMK's main opponent and the incumbent party in 2012 – was not present. Evidently, the AIADMK was loath to touch the troublesome seeds of caste conflict, or was quietly supporting Ramadoss.

Nevertheless, as the party in power, it was not long before the AIADMK came down on Ramadoss with punitive action. Following a meeting of the Anaithu Samuthaya Padukappu Peravai in Madurai on December 20th, the District Collector Anshul Mishra sent a notice seeking

explanation from Ramadoss on charges of making inflammatory speech (The Times of India 2012). 144 was instituted in many districts throughout the state. This time it was intended to prevent Ramadoss and his organizations from meeting.

By April 2013, the government seemed to have forgotten the dangers that they earlier attributed to Ramadoss. They granted the PMK and the Vanniyar Sangam (Group or Association) permission to hold a youth festival in Mamallapuram near Chennai with some stipulations, such as the prohibition of alcohol. The festival was nonetheless marred with violence. According to the police, PMK cadres paused at a bus stop near the Dalit village of Marakkanam en route to the festival, where they consumed alcohol and assaulted the villagers. Two were killed and the PMK cadres fled the scene (The Times of India 2013). Following the incident, “Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa categorically blamed the violence on the PMK and Ramadoss’ ‘hate speech’ at the party’s youth conference” (Ians 2013).

Ramadoss strongly resisted Jayalalithaa’s accusations, and violated government orders to hold a protest at Villapuram on April 30th, 2012, at which he demanded further inquiry into the incidents. He and his party president G.K. Mani were arrested during the protest, and rioting ensued in the area. According to The Times of India, about 853 vehicles were damaged, including 14 buses and 2 private lorries that were burnt to ashes by cadres of the PMK (Hemalatha 2013). The driver of a private lorry was killed, and 111 people sustained grievous injuries due to stone pelting (ibid.). Acts of calamitous vandalism continued until Ramadoss and G.K. Mani were released from prison in Tiruchirappalli eleven days later.

Ramadoss consciously performed his loud opposition to the state establishment as a drama in which he inhabited the role of the brash hero dashing himself against the heartless walls

of power. He knew well that he would be arrested when he planned the protest for April 30th, and staged his arrest for all of his cadres to see. The Hindu reports:

The entourage of Dr. Ramadoss left his Thailapuram residence by road in the morning and when it reached the Katpadi Railway Gate here the strong posse of police personnel posted there blocked it and told the PMK leader that they were arresting him.

Dr. Ramadoss told them that since party cadres were awaiting him at the railway junction he would like to go over there and get arrested. Accordingly the police let the convoy reach the junction and no sooner did the leaders arrive at the venue, the police directed them to board the vehicles kept ready there (The Hindu 2013).

As Ramadoss boarded a police van, he turned around to wave to his cadres, who snapped photos and shouted in support. Ramadoss, the parties' other leaders, and some low-ranking cadres who joined voluntarily were taken away in State Transportation Corporation buses, which had been deployed for the arrests. In total, 361 were held in prison for eleven days.

After they were all released, Ramadoss continued to perform the battle between forcefully deployed established power and righteous, selfless resistance. As soon as he was discharged from prison, "He claimed he and his partymen [sic] were not provided basic amenities in the prison. 'I was in the prison for 12 days without any basic amenities and we suffered,' he told reporters" (The Economic Times 2013). He also blamed the AIADMK, claiming that their desire to build a Dalit vote bank had precipitated their "war" against Vanniyars (The Hindu 2013).

Ramadoss' dramatic attempts to reestablish what he saw as the dwindling power of the dominant castes were not very successful. He and his party continued to rally and organize for the remainder of the year, and in 2014, Ramadoss' son Anbumani Ramadoss won a seat in the Lok Sabha (Dharmapuri Constituency). Anbumani's success was, however, somewhat exceptional; the PMK did not win any other seats.

After the election, Ramadoss sought to revive the organization under the slightly different name, Anaithu Samuthaya Periyakkam ("The Great Organization of All the Communities"). He

met leaders of the group in Puducherry on June 23, 2014, including G. Nagarajan of the Kongu Vellalars (Gounders) and B.T. Arasakumar, the founder and leader of the overwhelmingly Thevar dominated All India Forward Bloc ²¹⁸ (The Times of India 2014). However, his movement had already lost momentum along with the decrease in high profile intercaste conflicts in 2013.

Nonetheless, the anti-Dalit sentiments that Ramadoss helped foster continued to color the opinions that some of my Thevar interlocutors shared with me well after the downturn of the Anaithu Samuthaya Padukappu Peravai. On November 9, 2013, I sat with Kaviventhan, the aforementioned middle-aged Thevar man who was the Ramanathapuram District secretary of the AIADMK. Having met again at the Thevar mahāl in Paramakudi, we discussed Tamil Nadu's political situation and the dynamics of intercaste violence. Since 2013 was much more peaceful than 2012, I found that Kaviventhan had become increasingly candid. Right after exonerating the Thevars of caste domination by claiming that "Harijans became poor" because they had been "beaten" by the British, Kaviventhan went on to claim that their position has changed:

This is not today's situation ... [Muthuramalingam] Thevar had a lot of land and they [Scheduled Castes] worked it for him ... Now it's not the case ... Harijans are IAS [Indian Administrative Service] and IPS [Indian Police Service]²¹⁹. Now there's no chance to have jāti [discrimination]. When Harijans didn't have money, they were called without respect, 'Hey ṭa, hey ṭī, come,' but can I go and call a big IAS and IPS officer, 'Hey ṭa, hey ṭī? No.'²²⁰

According to Kaviventhan, the Scheduled Castes are no longer discriminated against or disrespected on the basis of jāti because of their recently heightened socio-economic status.

They are therefore undeserving of the preferential treatment they are afforded by the government. Kaviventhan aligns himself with Ramadoss by censuring the Scheduled Castes for

²¹⁸ As I discussed above, the All India Forward Bloc was founded as a leftist offshoot of the Congress by Subhas Chandrabose of West Bengal. In 1948, it became an independent opposition party, and Muthuramalingam Thevar became the president of its Tamil Nadu state unit.

²¹⁹ The jobs of the Indian Administrative Service and Indian Police Service are the highest paying and highest status government jobs in India.

²²⁰ Masculine and feminine respectively, ṭa and ṭī are terms of informal, slang address, which are roughly parallel to dude.

their alleged greed, and denouncing the unjust favoritism of the government. He makes the same arguments that have been made in India many times before, and in the United States with respect to affirmative action.²²¹ According to Kaviventhan, the government's reservation policies and dispersal of free goods and services to Dalits precipitate the fall of other castes: "There are many without houses in high jātis," he began. "Dalits are given houses for free. The government gives them houses, but does not give them to anyone from other jātis. They [Dalits] have been keeping their reservations so the other jātis go down."

Kaviventhan's ethical censure extends to his portrayal of Dalits as needlessly violent. I asked him why intercaste fights endure today, and he responded, "They do that. They create fights because that's the kind of race they are. They've come up. They think that they should not go back down." To describe Dalits as constitutionally prone to fighting, Kaviventhan used the word "inam", which the Madras Tamil Lexicon defines as a "class; group, division, kind; species; sort", but which in everyday parlance most often corresponds with the English word "race" (1924). However, in the same breath, he mentioned their conscious decision to engage in fighting to preserve their improved position. Whether innate or learned, Kaviventhan tried to convince me of the alleged Dalit tendency towards violence, of which he was assured. "You must have seen their function," Kaviventhan went on. "They have a function for that Immanuel, but he was just a regular guy. He didn't do anything for them ... They are creating needless

²²¹ Examples of the conservative backlash that often follows positive discrimination abound in a number of contexts. In India, the riots following attempts implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in 1989 exemplify this tendency. Sharp criticism arose from wide sections of the public, and colleges across the country held massive protests. A Delhi University student committed self-immolation in protest of the government's actions, sparking a series of self-immolations by other college students. This led to a formidable movement against job reservations for Backwards Castes in India. In the United States, arguments against affirmative action have been made since its establishment in the 1960s. The landmark Supreme Court case – Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978) – upheld affirmative action, but led to mass protests, which continue to echo in the neoconservative rhetoric of today.

fights²²². On that day [of the Immanuvel function] everything in Paramakudi will be closed because of fear. All the people of every jāti will be afraid.”

It is hardly surprising that Kaviventhan patently expressed his support of Ramadoss. He first defended Ramadoss’ righteousness by claiming that, “Dr. Ramadoss saw all the jātis together. He wanted them to be unified but they [Dalits] cheated him. They fight with everyone else, even with the Yadavas and the Pillaimars.”²²³ Perhaps anticipating my knowledge of Ramadoss’ political marginalization, Kaviventhan eagerly pointed out the Scheduled Castes’ supposed defiance and the danger they posed. “The political situation is very bad,” he continued. “They [Dalits] get revenge by filing [legal] cases against others. All the others are afraid of them.” But legal cases are not the only reason to be afraid of Dalits. Emulating Ramadoss, Kaviventhan tried to convince me of the sexual immorality of the Scheduled Castes, “Dalits are quarreling and getting our girls, and then many girls are dying. Isn’t that wrong? Should they do that?” he asked rhetorically. Kaviventhan concluded our discussion by describing the need for Ramadoss’ anti-Dalit organization: “That’s why Ramadoss started his organization. All the jātis need to get together to protect our girls, to protect ourselves. The Dalits are cheating us and trapping us.”

Asserting Status Elsewhere

The influence over legal matters that the Devendras both exerted and performed in the wake of the murders in Paramakudi did not entirely succeed in raising their status, as people like Kaviventhan rejected them for allegedly manipulating the system and malevolently violating the women of other castes. The Devendras remained, for Kaviventhan and like-minded individuals

²²² Kaviventhan used the capacious word *vampu* to refer to needless fights. Among other things, *vampu* can refer to “instability, uselessness, worthlessness, a wanton act, dalliance, or quarrel” (Madras Tamil Lexicon 1924-1936, 3493).

²²³ The Yadavas and Pillaimars are dominant agricultural castes. They are not usually involved in intercaste conflicts.

violent and morally depraved, hardly worthy of any respect. Nevertheless, the Devendras continued to fight for the respect that they deserved, albeit in other areas, both geographically and conceptually. I found that towards the end of 2012 and throughout 2013, the two highest profile Devendra leaders – John Pandian and Dr. Krishnasamy – distanced themselves from Paramakudi’s problems in order to build their honor and authority in other domains.

In December of 2012, I travelled to Chennai to observe a function hosted by John Pandian who had not been to Paramakudi since September. Named the Mupperum Viḷā (literally, “Big Three Festival”), the event was held at a large and well-known venue known as Kamaraj Arangam, which is located on an upscale stretch of Chennai’s main thoroughfare, Anna Salai. It was attended by about three hundred people. On the day of the event, the portion of Anna Salai surrounding Kamaraj Arangam was populated with signifiers of Devendra preeminence, including green and red flags and flexboards depicting a bust of Pandian wrapped in the white robes and the white cloth that signifies first respects at a Hindu temple (Figure Twenty-Nine). A few yards down the road, a larger board featured Pandian’s glowing face beside much smaller busts of his constituents from Southern Chennai. Compared to the flexboards visible at Paramakudi’s Niṇaivu Viḷā and at the Sadhya Vizha in Thanjavur, these images of the Pandians were small. They were also noticeably less aggressive, featuring softer images of John smiling, rather than glaring at the viewer. He did not appear with weapons or amongst tigers, but with his wife and caste fellows.



Figure Twenty-Nine: Flexboard Featuring John Pandian and His Wife in Chennai

What is more, the Pandians' attempt to aesthetically occupy the area around Kamaraj Arangam did not reach the sensory heights of the Devendra occupation of Paramakudi. Anna Salai was a contested space. Buses, trucks, cars, motorcycles, mopeds, and bicycles whizzed by on the busy road outshining John's signifiers with their colors, flashy notices, and the advertisements they bore. The widely known red and black flags of the DMK flew alongside John's flags, detracting from their effects. Unlike Paramakudi, Chennai could not be occupied fully on the occasion of the Mupperum Viḷā. Its size and sociopolitical diversity ensured that it remained a space of multiple, simultaneous sensory experiences. Nonetheless, the fact that

John's outfit, a "Dalit party" according to many castes, could visibly assert itself amidst competing signs was a feat in and of itself. The Pandians' party had received the sanction of the local authorities, as well as the tacit consent of the other residents of the locale, to boldly signal its presence.

The hosting of the Mupperum Viḷā at Kamaraj Arangam is also significant. Not only is the space centrally located and easily recognized, but it is often used to host Carnatic (South Indian classical) music recitals and dance performances that are attended by Chennai's upper crust/caste elites. On the occasion of the Mupperum Viḷā, the space was reoriented to bespeak the force and power of the Devendras. Unlike in the spaces of Anna Salai and greater Chennai, the Devendras succeeded in mounting a sensory occupation directly outside and within the Arangam. As my auto rickshaw pulled into its driveway, the loud snapping of firecrackers punctuated the commotion of multiple, simultaneous conversations. Hundreds of red and green clad men had gathered outside the event hall, awaiting their leader who eventually arrived in the now familiar convoy of white SUVs decorated with red and green flags and decals. John, his wife, and their close associates exited their vehicles to the sounds of shouts and cheers and the explosion of more firecrackers. I followed all of the spectators in to take our seats in the event hall's main theater. Loud music blared from speakers set behind the aisles, as Pandian and the "VIP"s took their seats on stage.

As always, the first hour of the event was occupied by formalized accolades, expressions of appreciation, and exchanges of gifts. Numerous party officials spoke, emphasizing the glorious past of the Devendras, speaking optimistically about their imminent resurgence, and congratulating each other for their service to the Devendra people. The murders and their aftermath in Paramakudi remained unmentioned. However, the promulgation of peace subtly

addressed the elephant in the room, countering accusations that the Devendras are prone to violence. One district secretary lamented the endurance of intercaste violence, and called for the unification of the Tamil people:

Loving siblings, from 1990 through 1997 there were two hundred murders that were [inter]caste murders. There were more than five hundred [inter]caste riots. This should not continue in the Tamil land. We of the Tamil Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam are struggling determinedly because all the jātis must be Tamil people. I am departing having asked all of you to give us cooperation for that.

A sharp divergence from Pandian and his party's frequent assertions that the Devendras are the sole descendants of the medieval Tamil kings, and therefore the rightful sovereigns of the Tamil country, the district secretary called his "loving siblings" to unite with their fellow Tamils in an effort to diffuse violence. The following speaker similarly told the audience that "the members of the Tamil Makkal Munnetra should not be violent people. They should be working hard for the unity and sovereignty of this [Tamil] country." The next speaker extended his predecessor's advice to an assertion. Instead of demanding that the audience refrain from violence, he suggested that they always already did. "The brothers [and sisters] of the Tamil Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam are not violent people," he loudly assured the participants. The officials thus fended off accusations like those arising from Ramadoss at the same time as they distanced themselves and the party from the incidents at Paramakudi, and encouraged their party cadres to avoid the legal battleground of Southeastern Tamil Nadu.

Priscilla Pandian's speech departed from those of the party's other officials in that she did not directly encourage pacifism or refer to the peaceable nature of party cadres or of Devendras in general. Instead she focused on the plight of the Devendra people and her husband's success in emboldening them to comport themselves with pride and self-respect. She invoked history and kingship denuded of the wild recklessness of *vīram*. While she depicted her husband as munificent and selfless, references to violence and force were notably suppressed. Victory, but

not fighting, was mentioned. Priscilla approached the podium with careful steps, and evoked the expectant silence of the audience as she pulled the microphone down towards her mouth and began:

Welcome to the people of the very special Tamil history to the Mupperum Viḷā of the Tamil Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam. For those who suffer poverty, for those relatives who toil, for those who suffer much hardship, for all those who join the Kazhagam today, we have he who answered our prayers, our great Tamil king who will make us victorious.

She went on to invoke Ambedkar and “father Periyar” (EVR) as pioneers who inform the TMMK’s current movement. Priscilla thus likened the Devendras to Dalit castes fighting for their rights, but never used the word Dalit. She steadied the delicate balance of vīram and respectability that had been unsettled by the violence in Paramakudi.

Priscilla Pandian’s explanation of the Mupperum Viḷā’s tripartite raison d’être sustained her veneration of her noble husband. The components of the big three, she told the audience, were the leader’s birthday, his success in encouraging his people to “keep their heads up”, and the release of the party’s first monthly magazine:

The first thing is the birthday of the leader on November 30th. Knowing that, many people have asked us how we will celebrate. When we look back many years into the history of our leader, we see that he struggled to help the people with problems. He gave voice to the people who suffered hardship, who were poor. Just for that he experienced much affliction, our victorious leader. For having brought those people to stand tall, we of the Kazhagam have decided to call this the day of standing with your head up [proudly stretching your head up high].²²⁴ That is the second reason for this festival ... For that second matter, the Kazhagam has worked for twelve years and is approaching its thirteenth year ...

Priscilla thus depicted “our leader” as the paragon of virtue; righteousness and selflessness embodied. Notably, he gave “voice” to the people rather than courage, arms, or force. He taught them to stand up proudly, but not to fight.

In addition to the components of the big three to which Priscilla referred, the event’s title, Mupperum Viḷā, alluded to the three kings of the Tamil golden age – the Mūvēntar, whose regal grandeur was reflected in the opulence of the event.

²²⁴ The Tamil command to “keep your head long” (talai nīṇṭa), which Priscilla employed, is comparable to the English expressions “keep your chin up” and/or “hold your head up high”.

In his own speech, John continued to develop the respectability of the Devendras who need not resort to force to consolidate their political authority. He focused on his party's magazine, and on the Devendra's rising authority achieved through conventional, peaceable means:

The magazine's name is the *Turn Of the Corner*. We are always only at the turn of the corner. That is why I invite you to tell others about the speedy release of our monthly magazine ... We Devendra people must rise up to get political authority. We have advanced so much with our educations. At that time, we were poor people in the villages, being held down by the other castes. Now we have become educated. So many of us have elevated, important jobs. We work in the government and as lawyers and doctors. Slowly, slowly, we are getting political authority. We must stand up and take back the Tamil country by uniting as the descendants of the three Tamil kings.

The Blurred Lines of Insecure Authority

I remained in Chennai for a few days after the event, during which I went to the Pandians' urban abode to inquire further about the Mupperum Viḷā, and to seek the Pandians' perspectives on the incidents that had rocked Southern Tamil Nadu. The road to their apartment, which is located in a rapidly developing area near the upscale Kodambakkam and Nungambakkam neighborhoods, is marked with an enormous red and green billboard featuring John's smiling face. It helped my research assistant, Mohan, and me find the complex in which the Pandians' apartment is located. Once on the grounds, I wondered which apartment housed the Pandians, and was relieved to benefit from Mohan's sharp eye, as he identified the residence by the police cars parked in front of it. When we approached the apartment, we woke up a guard armed with a semi-automatic assault rifle who had been napping on the front porch. Startled, he told us to wait while he went inside to seek permission for our entrance.

A few minutes later, we were inside sitting on the Pandians' plush, red velveteen sofa quietly sipping tea as we awaited the leader's arrival. He sauntered down the stairs clad in his

lungi and wrinkled white tee-shirt, apparently having just arisen from a nap.²²⁵ He greeted us with a grin, sat down, and called for some more tea and snacks, which were soon delivered by two female servants. In the meantime, Priscilla walked by and glanced at us. I stood up to greet her formally, but she kept walking towards the kitchen in step with the rhythmic rustling of her sari. I congratulated Pandian on the Mupperum Viḷā, and he proudly told me that he and his party cadres were already busy working on the next issue of their magazine. He thought that the turn out to the event could have been better, but was eager to share the party's news through the distribution of the magazine, and through the videos that his party cadres were posting on YouTube. By the time I had shifted my questions to the situation in and around Paramakudi, Priscilla had returned to the room and was sitting on another sofa several feet away from us. She appeared to be doing some paperwork, which she looked up from every few minutes to observe our conversation.

Priscilla remained suspicious and wary of me throughout my research tenure, which is not surprising given the politically sensitive conversations in which I was regularly engaging her husband. Depending on who I reported to, my conversations with John could have led to further legal trouble for a man who had already been implicated in numerous cases. Nonetheless, for about a year, John seemed eager to talk to me, excited by the recognition that I could bring him.

That day, I casually asked Pandian what he thought of the situation in Paramakudi and if he would be going there to help. He replied:

What can I do? In Paramakudi, there are always those problems. There are [inter] caste riots and problems with the police. Saying they are Dalits, the police kill Devendras. That happens often, almost every year. I may go there, but what can I do? They will arrest me and put me in jail. I already was in jail for fifteen years and my wife raised our children alone. Now it is time for me to be with my wife and children ... They [Devendras] shouldn't kill people and create those problems, but I can't do anything about it.

²²⁵ A *lungi* is a sarong worn by men in many parts of South and Southeast Asia. In Tamil Nadu, it is an informal garment usually worn in the house and to sleep.

At that point in our conversation, Priscilla looked up at her husband and met his eyes. He stopped speaking momentarily, and then changed the subject to a discussion of violence and race in America. Clearly, John aimed to distance himself and his party from the outbreak of violence in Southeastern Tamil Nadu. He did not want to be hit with the heavy hand of the state that had come down forcefully on him before.

But, I suspected, there was something else at play in John's estrangement from the situation in the Southeast. As I discovered over the course of many conversations and experiences with him, John has developed a precarious but symbiotic relationship with agents of the state, which he does not want to jeopardize. He leverages his position as a para-state authority amongst his caste fellows to extract benefits for himself and others. Although there are ever shifting limits and uncertainties that challenge what he can accomplish, the threat of the potential force John commands can motivate agents of the state to provide for him. After our discussion about America, Pandian proudly showed me the state-of-the-art security and surveillance system that had been installed in his cluttered home office by the Government of Tamil Nadu. Above a desk piled with prints and photos of the Pandians, honorary medals, shawls, books, and magazines, four flat screen TVs that had been mounted on the wall displayed videos of the quiet apartment complex outside. I later learned that the Pandians' full-time guards had also been provided by the state government. Apparently, protecting the Pandians was a significant enough concern for the government to bear the cost of at least two guards at any given time, who were charged with watching over the family since the time of Pandian's release from prison in 2010.

When in December I joined John on an excursion to his country home in the Yelagiri Hills, a popular vacation destination a few hours from Chennai, I discovered that he is also able

to summon a police escort at will. I arrived at his apartment with my friend who was curious and kind enough to accompany me, and we piled into the back of his BMW, sitting three across along with an armed guard whose rifle pressed up against my thigh. John sat in the front next to the driver, and made a call informing the person at the other end that we were departing. We pulled out of the complex's driveway to join three police vehicles, one of which was equipped with lights and a siren that had been turned on. They drove out in front of us in a triangular formation, as other cars moved out of the way. After travelling briskly through Chennai, we drove onto the smoothly paved, four-lane National Highway 4, and John made another phone call to one of the drivers of the escort, asking him to speed up. John turned around to smile at us as we accelerated. "They give me an escort for travel," he informed me. Before long, we stopped at an upscale rest stop, and John, hospitable as always, insisted on treating us to coffee and snacks. While we were eating, a family approached us smiling widely. "Greetings sār, are you John Pandian?" The father asked. John happily affirmed, and picture taking ensued.

When we left the restaurant, I asked John if the family was Devendra, and he replied, "No, they are some other jāti, but everyone knows who I am." John was proud to have been recognized and aimed to maintain his notoriety. Certainly, the police escort helped John make himself known more widely. He travels through Tamil Nadu like an important dignitary inextricably linked to the prestige and power of the state.

But, much to John's dismay, not everyone was attuned to the authority he attempted to broadcast. Just past the rest stop, we reached a toll booth, and the collector asked us to pay. Pandian snapped to attention, "Don't you know who I am?" He shouted. "You don't know who I am?" He repeated himself, and then resorted to insults, "Let us through, you dog! What do you

think you're doing asking us for money?" The collector lifted the gate and waved us through, as Pandian muttered further insults under his breath. All three of us sat quietly in the back.

In addition to increasing his visibility, the government's relationship with Pandian manifested in the opportunities he had to negotiate with agents of the state. During our first interview, which took place in September of 2012, I witnessed Pandian exert his influence, as he arbitrated with the police on behalf of a desperate mother. I was sitting in the living room of his palatial house in the Southern town of Tirunelveli, when a middle-aged woman appeared. With tears in her eyes and her mouth twisted in a grimace, she prostrated herself before John, and told him that her son had been arrested. John stopped our interview and invited me to join him and his attendants on a trip to the police station.

We arrived in a caravan of white SUVs from which we descended before the station's attendants rushed us passed a crowd of patiently waiting people. We entered the office where the Superintendent of Police was seated behind his neat, oversized desk, and he greeted us with a waggle of his head, gestured for us to sit down, and asked John to explain the problem. We were given tea by the superintendent's assistant as John replied rather simply and briefly that a young man had been arrested unjustly and should be released. The superintendent shook his head in agreement, and urged us to finish our tea. As we stood up, he assured John that the issue would be taken care of, and respectful greetings were exchanged. We went outside, again passing the congregation of patient petitioners, where the mother of the accused accompanied by a crowd of her friends and relatives handed John a wad of cash wrapped in a betel leaf, as is customary when offering money on a special ritual occasion like a wedding or a birth.

Importantly, John's ability to influence government agents is interdependent with his ability to influence the Devendra people. Simply put, the more he can help his caste fellows

determine the actions of government agents, which is part of the duties he refers to as “social work” (in English), the more power he has over them. Conversely, the more power he has over Devendras, the more government agents are willing to heed his demands. The government of Tamil Nadu is wary of John’s potential to gather the force of thousands behind him. However, there is a cost associated with John’s ability to leverage his support base to influence the government. The government is able to maintain a campaign of close surveillance by offering the Pandians benefits. Obviously, the higher authorities of the Government of Tamil Nadu monitor the Pandians through the security guards they employ, the escorts they send, and perhaps also the surveillance system they installed. John’s relationship with the government thus limits his ability and/or his desire to act against the establishment. He is confined in golden handcuffs.

Divine Sanction

Well aware of his predicament, John has also tried to build ritually enforced religious authority. Every January since his release from prison in 2010, John has made a pilgrimage to the holy city of Palani during Thai Poosam – the annual celebration of the deity Murugan. Along with his cadres, he enters the temple complex, which is closed to others during his visit, and receives mutal mariyātai, the ritual honor of “first respect”, which is constituted by sanctified gifts from the Brahmin officiants who oversee the temple.

On the day of 2013’s event, I joined John and his followers as they ascended the mountain that is topped with the temple. We excitedly packed into the cars of the rickety gondola at the mountain’s base, glancing back at the foothills and bright green rice paddies as we rose. At the top of the mountain, we followed John, who was dressed in the white robes and white head wrap that marked his honor, as he marched towards the temple’s inner sanctum (Figure Thirty). The officiants were prepared for our arrival, and called John, a few of his closest associates, and

me to sit down on the floor in the deity's line of sight. They performed an elaborate puja complete with mantras, coconuts, and flowers, and then handed John a silver tray upon which they had placed the gifts of first respect. John carried the tray of flower garlands, shawls, incense, and fruits, which had been sanctified through their contact with the deity, as his followers snapped photographs.



Figure Thirty: John Pandian and His Acolytes in Palani, January 2013

John attained religious prestige by receiving the gifts of mutal mariyātai, which are given to families of high status who are also usually financial supporters of the temple. As many scholars of India have demonstrated, mutal mariyātai is distributed publically to signify, reinforce, and in a sense establish social distinction (Dumont 1986, 155-159, 417; Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976; Dirks 1993; Mines 2005, 81). It is truly remarkable that John Pandian – a Devendra and a Christian –received the gift of ritual recognition from Brahmin priests. Throughout our visit to the temple, even I felt an exciting surge of triumphant glee, as we

transgressed the notoriously impermeable boundaries of Hindu orthodoxy. John must have been exhilarated. He trumped his proximity to the government with his proximity to Brahminical authority and to the gods, transcending the power of the state, which had proved itself to be capricious. Importantly, John had selected the deity the Thevars associate with Muthuramalingam, thus standing as a direct affront to them. Even if the government could confine him, John's ritual performance implied, he could not be defeated in the sacred space of Hindu religiosity. He managed to elicit respect from Brahmin officiants, and was thus on a higher plane than the secular power of the state and of the Thevars.

Nevertheless, as I have drawn on Bell to argue, negotiations of power and the forces of consent and resistance are embedded in the process of ritualization. John's landmark receipt of mutal mariyātai did not occur unprompted. Instead, as he told me, he, "convinced the leaders of the great Palani Murugan temple to bestow mutal mariyātai on him through numerous discussions and petitions." He also cited the infamous brass plate inscription of a 1526, which has become a major piece of testimony for Devendra writers and activists since about 2010. Referred to in many recent Devendra politico-historical publications, the inscription on the plate allegedly lists major Devendra donors to the temple, whose names, writers and activist argue, prove that the Devendras were the original masters of the shrine in Palani. Popular opinion dictates that John Pandian himself removed the plate from a rest house enroute to the temple, but he did not confirm that for me. Nevertheless, he claims to have the inscription in his possession, stored safely in one of his homes.²²⁶ According to his own account, the inscription was key evidence that worked to convince the authorities that he deserves mutal mariyātai.

²²⁶ The inscribed brass plate, which is famous amongst Devendras, may be mythical. I have never seen it, and I asked a number of writers and activists who refer to it in their work if they have seen it; they have not. As I was sitting on stage at one of the meetings of the Cakōtira Maṅumalarcci Nalacaṅkam, I asked another honored guest who was sitting beside me if he had seen the brass plate, and he replied, "There is no brass plate. We say that

It is important to note that the struggle for first respect that John apparently won is tenuously linked to his relationship to government authorities, and is not without its limitations. Although Pandian did not mention it, the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department of the Government of Tamil Nadu oversees the administration of the state's major temples, including the one at Palani, and must have contributed to the decision to offer Pandian mutal mariyātai. He was thus unable to sidestep completely the power of the government. What is more, the timing and procedure of the ritual detracts from the authority it claims. Mutal mariyātai is given to Pandian on the day following the climax of the festival when most of the devotees have already departed, and, as I mentioned above, the temple is closed to outsiders on the day of the event. In the end, Pandian's attempt to embody sanctified authority through ritual performance remains contested. He has not yet naturalized his receipt of mutal mariyātai according to the intercaste, Tamil sense of ritual. He has, however, consolidated his authority and power over a number of his own caste fellows without involving himself in the strife that faced Southeastern Tamil Nadu.

Paramakudi Abandoned

Even more than John Pandian, Dr. Krishnasamy distanced himself from the crisis facing Southeastern Tamil Nadu towards the end of 2012. He did not visit the area, nor did he make any public statements about the events as they unfolded.

Although I was never able to establish a close relationship with Krishnasamy, as I had with John Pandian, I did manage to get an appointment to see him at the beginning of December of 2012. He invited me to the hospital he owns in the prosperous town of Coimbatore, which is located towards the Northern half of Tamil Nadu's border with Kerala. Upon arrival, the

because it brings the people a happy feeling." I too have my doubts about its existence because Pandian never showed it to me despite my multiple requests.

receptionist told me to wait for the doctor to call me into his office. I waited, reading over some questions I intended to ask him, until the receptionist led me to his office about forty-five minutes later. He looked up from his desk, which was piled with neatly stacked papers, and invited me to sit down in English. He seemed, not surprisingly, given the legal ensnarement of the Devendras, suspicious of my presence, and immediately asked me questions about my intentions. After I explained my project, he told me not to audio record our conversation. I did, however, furiously take notes as we engaged in a restrained discussion.

I asked Krishnaswamy a few broad questions: “What do you think about the situation in the Paramakudi area? What will you do to help the Devendras in that region?” His reply was mostly in English though he did switch to Tamil at a few points:

Down there, there are some rowdy elements. They will get into fights with the young fellows of other castes. One side will say, ‘we’re the big ones’ [periyavanke], and then the other side will say, ‘we’re the big ones’. They fight senselessly, and then there are some problems with the police. It is a very rough area, and it is also poor so there is not much employment. The men stand around on the road and at tea stalls so some fights arise ... There is not much that I can do about such things. There is nothing that I can do by going there ... I am an MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) and work with the government to improve the economic situation.

Without saying anything further about the conflict, Krishnaswamy shifted to a description of his party – the Puthiya Tamilagam. He told me about the establishment of the party and about their petitions to officially change the Pallars’ caste name to Devendra Kula Vellalar. The authority he claimed was clearly rooted in established forms of power like his official government position and his role as a medical doctor. Ultimately, Krishnasamy was already respectable and did not need or want to associate himself with the force of *vīram*. He claimed to work directly with the government to improve the Devendras’ condition, though he was somewhat dismissive of his caste fellows in Southeastern Tamil Nadu.

The willful absence of John Pandian and Krishnasamy from the legal proceedings of late 2012 certainly effected the feelings and perceptions of my interlocutors in Paramakudi. Many of

them lost trust in their state-level leaders, and some disavowed caste politics writ large. I had a particularly memorable conversation with the wife of Peter, who I discussed in the first section of this chapter, on the same occasion I referred to above. After he shared the details of the threats he faced while we sat together in the living room, I joined him and his wife, Mary, for dinner in their dining room. As we ate, I tried to sustain our conversation about caste and Devendra mobilization by asking about state-level leaders. Peter told me that Priscilla Pandian, who he referred to as “Anṇi” (literally, “elder brother’s wife”), had stayed with his family when John was in prison and she was contesting elections in Ramanathapuram District. “Back then,” he said wistfully, “we were very close friends with the Pandians”. Mary continued to eat in silence.

After Mary and I cleared the dishes, we returned to the living room to sit down. Without prompting, She unleashed an impassioned invective:

Jāti is a waste. John Pandian and all his people are a waste. Jāti is a waste. Does jāti provide you with food? Does jāti earn money for you? Does jāti ensure that your kids study? Does jāti take care of your kids and ensure that they succeed? Does jāti keep you and your family safe? Does it protect you or bring you happiness? Then what’s jāti? What does it do? Jāti is a waste. We even study jāti. Jāti is a waste.

Hoping that she would elaborate on her aversion to jāti as a paradigm for political mobilization, I asked Mary what she thought of Devendra leaders. Her reply bespoke her distrust and disappointment: “Did anyone come to Paramakudi and help us when the police were coming, when young students were being taken from their houses? Did they come to help us? Did they say anything? What did John Pandian do for us? What did Krishnasamy do for us? Then what’s a leader? Who’s our leader? What leader?” Peter sat silently. He did not interrupt or disagree with his wife.

Ultimately, the Devendras of the Paramakudi area felt abandoned by the politicians who claimed to lead them. They lived for several months in the air that had been tainted with fear and suspicion, hiding from the police, as their local leaders accrued prestige by acting as

intermediaries between the Devendra populace and state authorities. At the same time, other castes mobilized against Devendras, and in so doing came into conflict with the powers of the state. State-level Devendra leaders, by contrast, were loath to involve themselves in the perils of challenging the Government of Tamil Nadu. Instead, they sought other, more amicable methods in their attempts to consolidate power.

From the end of January through April 2013, the male Devendra population of Paramakudi slowly returned, and the pace of the town reached normalcy. All but one of the fourteen men who had been arrested for the murders at Andipuram and Pambuvizhanthan were acquitted, and moved back into their homes.²²⁷ The local shops bustled, and the pall of fear that hung in the sky slowly blew over. Interestingly, by April, the double murder on the road of Andipuram had been recast as an accident. Whenever I asked about it, and whenever it was casually mentioned, it was referred to with the English word “accident”. Perhaps the fear of police repression precipitated the change in terminology, but I suspect that the shift had more to do with the Devendras’ self-image. Apparently, roadside attacks have no place in the lineage of honorable kings.

²²⁷ As Kathir had predicted, all of the accused in the case were eventually acquitted. The judge was Devendra and there was a lack of witnesses. Devendras, like all castes, are very hesitant to incriminate their caste fellows.

Epilogue: The Disappointing Dynamics of Electoral Politics

The story of the Devendras and their Thevar adversaries' pursuit of recognition and authority continues to develop. Both caste conglomerations assert their sovereignty through their rapidly developing ritual cycles, and their carefully considered negotiations with dominant political parties and the supreme state power they signify.

The Paramakudi Devendras remain, however, wary of electoral politics, assured that such efforts will only disappoint them. Their widespread belief that “politics” is a field of moral depravity, attracting self-interest and greed is rooted in their well-founded feelings that they have been abandoned by the leaders that are supposed to represent them, and in the fact that the enormous strength of the DMK and AIADMK machinery ensures that all other parties remain marginal. As in the United States, democratic representation in Tamil Nadu has been restricted to two options.

The Indian General Election, which was held on April 24, 2014, just a few weeks before I concluded my fieldwork, demonstrated the diverse ways that Devendras throughout Tamil Nadu approach mainstream electoral politics, as well as the rejection of such processes by the Paramakudi Devendras.

In response to insistent invitations from Senthil Mallar, the aforementioned author of *Meendezhum Pandiyar Varalaru* (“The Resurgent History of the Pandiyas”), which many Devendras consider an essential account of their history, I travelled to the city of Theni to join the campaign trail in the surrounding area. Located in the beautiful Ghats of Southwestern Tamil Nadu, Theni District's high population of Devendras inspired Senthil Mallar to contest a seat there. He had become somewhat of a local hero after spending a short period of time in prison on account of the sedition case that had been filed against him by the AIADMK government in June

of 2013. After banning *Meendezhum Pandiyar Varalaru* and destroying many of its copies, the case was filed against Mallar and his father-in-law who were arrested and imprisoned.

According to the government gazette covering the case, the text carried demeaning remarks about the leaders of other castes, which could inflame intercaste tension and potentially lead to violence (Karithkeyan 2013).

On the morning of April 18th, I arrived, as I had been directed, at the Hotel International Theni to meet Senthil Mallar and his acolytes who were holding a press conference in the main event hall. They had made the small city's most expensive hotel the home base of their campaign.

I ran into one of Senthil Mallar's fans at the building's entrance, and he told me that Immanuel's daughters had rented a room upstairs. Assuming that the daughters of the Devendra legend had come to support Senthil Mallar, we headed to their room to greet them. Immanuel's oldest daughter who I had met before answered the door, and invited me into the room, all but ignoring my companion who headed off to the press conference. I sat across from her on a wooden armchair, and immediately asked what she thought of Senthil Mallar. Immanuel's eldest who is known by her nickname "Baby" responded negatively, much to my surprise: "Don't go with that guy," She implored me. "We're with the Congress, my father's party." Remembering that Immanuel had indeed been an activist in the Indian National Congress, I realized that the Devendras had come to compete with each other in Theni District. Having bathed and dressed, Baby's younger sister and nephew joined us, encouraging me to campaign with them, as Senthil Mallar continuously called my cellphone. I promised to join them the following day, and headed off to find Senthil Mallar, much to their disappointment.

The small press conference, which had been attended by only about thirty-five people, was coming to a close as I arrived, though Senthil Mallar welcomed me. He ushered me to the podium, instructing me to endorse his book, *Meendezhum Pandiyar Varalaru*, assuring the crowd of its empirical truth. After I tried falteringly to describe the book as “interesting” and “useful”, the conference tapered off, and we slowly made our way to the line of white SUVs idling outside the hotel, ready to escort us around the district. I was invited to join Senthil Mallar and a few of his greatest supporters, including a government schoolteacher and her husband, in the SUV in which he rode. As we set out from the city, Senthil Mallar, who had only decided to stand in the election a few weeks prior, turned to me to explain his position: “I’m working for the pride and greatness [*perumai*] of this community. We’re stuck in the Scheduled Caste List. We’ve sent people like Krishnasamy ... to the Legislative Assembly but with no effect.” Standing in a common constituency (one with no reservation policy), Senthil Mallar opposed not only the Congress Party, but the AIADMK and DMK, which were both represented by Thevar candidates.

We stopped in a number of villages, and were received with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Although not every village seemed to embrace Senthil Mallar’s announcements about his candidacy, the statements that consistently elicited cheers from the crowd underscored the ways that the mainstream parties had cheated “the people”. Senthil Mallar encouraged people to fight back, not with arms, but with clever thinking and artfully retributive justice: “They say that a Mallar [he prefers this term to Devendra] can’t stand in a common constituency,” he shouted. “But they cheat us; they hide the truth from us. With three lakh [300,000] voters, we have a chance. We have a chance. We could win. That’s why I’m standing.” Senthil Mallar went on to suggest an approach for fighting back against established parties:

The other parties will come and give you money. Take the money but don't vote for them. Take the money. You think this is wrong but it is not wrong. How they have cheated you, and how you have suffered! Take the money and if you think it is wrong, take five rupees and wrap it in a yellow cloth and put it in the temple of your family deity.

From village to village, Senthil Mallar's answer to the corrupt practice of vote buying was met with cheers of excited approval.

Senthil Mallar projected an image of himself as morally superior, operating above the greedy muck of normative politics, which at least a few of his followers accepted. When he had stepped out of the vehicle to talk to some potential voters, the aforementioned schoolteacher turned to me and said: "Our leader Senthil Mallar doesn't take money from anyone. It's not about money for him. Most political leaders, they just want money. But he just wants to help our society/caste [camutāyam]." In addition to his steadfast ethics, the schoolteacher appreciated Senthil Mallar for enlightening the Devendras, informing them of their true identity: "He is a great leader for us," she went on. "Before Senthil Mallar we didn't know. We didn't know who we really are. We thought we are lowly, that we are 'Untouchables'."

Night had fallen by the time we headed back to the city of Theni, and the schoolteacher and I were exhausted, yawning and dozing off as we traveled down the dark road. At one point Senthil Mallar broke the silence to ask the driver to pull over on the side of the road. Seeming to come out of nowhere, two men on motorcycles pulled up behind us, and Senthil Mallar got out to talk to them. All three of them disappeared into the nearby woods for almost an hour. When Senthil Mallar returned to the car, no one said a word and we carried on as if nothing had happened. I don't know what transpired during Senthil Mallar's clandestine meeting, and he ensured that the mystery endured.

The following day, I returned to Hotel International Theni to join the Congress representatives, as I had promised, but was immediately accosted by some of Senthil Mallar's

followers at the hotel's entryway who brought me to meet him. The white clad men who were taking pictures, reviewing documents, and chatting in Senthil Mallar's room all turned to look at me as I entered. Still energetic, Senthil Mallar called me over to sit beside him on the bed that was being used like a conference table, and eagerly explained his position as we all listened. I took notes that documented Senthil Mallar's rejection of the Devendras' Dalit status and classification as a Scheduled Caste, as well as the connections he drew between the disgrace that had befallen the Devendras, the failures of mainstream parties, and the destruction of "Tamil culture":

Other parties have cheated us. I went straight to Chennai and turned in a petition with the demand that we should be classified as Most Backwards Class instead of Scheduled Caste. We should be given a 10% reservation. We're not Dalits. They shouldn't call us by that lowly and disgraceful [kēvalamana] name. We're sons of the soil. We're of the Chera, Chola, and Pandiya lineage. They all said they would look at the petition and pass a go ... My goal is to beat the Congress and the DMK. The Congress is the worst party. They are against the Tamil people. They want to destroy Tamil culture.

Senthil Mallar's rejection of the Congress was unsurprising.²²⁸ The Congress has consistently been a centrist party of the Indian nation unappealing in the Tamil country due to the predominance of Dravidianism. Despite Senthil Mallar's disdain, I did manage to sneak away to rejoin Immanuel's descendants as they too headed out on the campaign trail with the Congress candidate, Arun.

The Congress campaign lacked the energy that Senthil Mallar and his group had demonstrated, and seemed more cynical in its approach. As we travelled from village to village, some of which I had been to the day before, Baby spoke into the microphone, reminding the Devendras that her father had "fought for their rights" and "become a martyr for the sake of their progress". Her voice weakened as our travels stretched into the afternoon, and she seemed increasingly disinterested. Theni was not the first district she and her sister had covered for the

²²⁸ Senthil Mallar's reasons for rejecting the DMK are less obvious. My astute research assistant suggested that Senthil Mallar may have been funded in part by the incumbent AIADMK, which he did not criticize.

Congress; they had been campaigning for two weeks. They did, nonetheless, seem threatened by Senthil Mallar about whom they asked many questions. They were worried that I was publically endorsing his campaign, and urged me not to pose in photos with him. Baby asked me if Senthil Mallar had criticized the AIADMK, and I told her that he hadn't. "That's how it is," she told me. "They're paying him. They're paying him to split the vote."

But Arun and his allies did not claim to be above the financial dynamics of electoral politics in Tamil Nadu. At each village, Baby spoke while Arun rushed to put one hundred and five hundred rupee notes into the outstretched hands of many Devendra villagers. At one village, I heard some people muttering something about Sonia Gandhi, and Baby and her sister giggled as we pulled out. "They think you're Sonia Gandhi's daughter," Baby laughed. "If anyone asks, just say that you are." I must admit that I was personally disappointed in the events that I saw unfold in Theni District. My cynicism was growing along with the feelings of the Devendras in Paramakudi.

My friendship with the aforementioned Devendra leader John Pandian had dissipated by April of 2014. Neither he nor his close associates took my calls from January of 2014 onwards at least partially because they were busy preparing for the election, which, like most elections in India, would be a particularly charged and dangerous moment. Through following the news and persistently checking in with my Devendra friends I did, however, find out that John Pandian would be contesting a seat in Dindigul District in an alliance with the AIADMK. My Devendra friends in Paramakudi seemed to disapprove of John Pandian's strategy, as the AIADMK was notorious for its close association with Thevars and for its justification of violence against the Devendras and other Scheduled Castes, such as the police shooting that had killed seven Devendras in 2011. When I asked the Kathir, the attorney who had played a role in protecting the

Paramakudi Devendras in late 2012 and early 2013 what he thought of John Pandian's approach, he replied bitterly, "You see that. That's really how it is. That's politics. He'll go with anyone. It's all just money now." By pointing out that financial greed dominated politics "now", Kathir gestured towards a better time in the past when perhaps that was not the case.

Since none of my Devendra friends who supported John Pandian's party, the TMMK, were planning on joining him on the campaign trail, I hired a driver and headed to Dindigul on my own on April 21st. Luckily, my driver was willing to help me find the TMMK's small entourage after we had been tipped off by some gentlemen in a prominent tent topped with the AIADMK flag. The tent, which had been erected just outside the small city of Dindigul, was the home base for the various candidates campaigning in alliance with the AIADMK. Its interior bore the flags of all the various parties that had allied with the AIADMK, including the TMMK and a few different Thevar parties.

After we caught up with the TMMK group, recognizable by the flags that had been affixed to the antennas of each of their white SUVs, we followed them into a village that was eerily quiet. I was surprised that a crowd had not turned out to hear John Pandian speak, despite his dubious alliance with the AIADMK. After all, I had on several occasions heard John Pandian's followers refer to him as a king and a god. The desolation of the village allowed John Pandian to spot my car and summon me up to his vehicle with the wave of his hand. We pulled up beside him with our windows rolled down. He did not welcome me with the impish grin I had come to know well, but instead immediately asked, "Victoria, what are you doing here?" As I began to explain that I had come to see his campaign, I realized that I did not recognize the faces of any of the men who were travelling in his entourage. His friends and family were notably absent.

John Pandian's unfamiliar companions, nonetheless, began to set up a speaker to help amplify the speech he was about to give while he waited in the car. Before they had a chance to straighten up the speaker's entangled cords, about fifteen red and green clad men emerged from their humble village homes, and quickly reached to the ground for sticks and stones, which they began hurling at the men working on the speaker and at the line of white vehicles waiting to begin. "Go, go!" they shouted, shewing John Pandian out of their village. "You've cheated us!" they screamed. "You're a waste!" In a chaotic rush, the speaker was shoved back into the car, and we all turned around, scrambling out of the village as sticks and stones continued to hit the rear ends of our cars. Thinking that this was an interesting, if depressing, development in the Devendras' political tribulations, I convinced my driver to continue following John Pandian's caravan. However, we were unable to enter the next three villages that John Pandian hoped to address. Each village was blocked by a strong line of men who turned us away. Having entered an alliance with the AIADMK, John Pandian was rejected by "his people". After the third village, John Pandian gave up, and headed back to his home in Tirunelveli.

The final Devendra candidate I briefly followed was Subha Annamalai who was running in Ramanathapuram District. I met him at the entrance to the Devendra-dominated neighborhood in which I had resided, Krishnanagar, on the evening of April 22, 2014. He sat in an unassuming pick-up truck that had been decorated with flags and signs and had been fitted with a loud speaker for the occasion. Only four other men had joined him, and they all seemed excited that I too was apparently supporting their campaign. Almost immediately, Annamalai reminded me of the situation that I knew all too well: "John Pandian had some problems yesterday. Guys, our guys, attacked his car." I told Annamalai that I had been there, and he warned me to stay away.

He told me that John Pandian's reputation had hurt his own, perhaps trying to explain the failure of his campaign to elicit support.

After his brief explanation, we began to make our way through Krishnanagar, standing up in the back of the truck. As we bounced along the rutted dirt roads, Annamalai spoke into the microphone, repeating his pitch, "Vote for Immanuel's loving little brother, vote for Immanuel's loving little brother. Give our people a chance." One of Annamalai's supporters who I was standing beside told me to wave to the people, and I tried to oblige, but there was no one to wave to. Not a soul was standing outside on the hot muggy night, and every door seemed to be firmly shut. I was shocked that Annamalai had attracted no audience given the enthusiastic crowd that had come to see him when he had visited six months prior to celebrate the anniversary of Immanuel's birthday, which I discussed in Chapter Five. Indeed, Annamalai was well known in Paramakudi, as his face had graced so many flexboards in the town over the course of several consecutive years.

The Devendras of Paramakudi had, however, lost faith in the dirty game of "politics" that had yielded no results. As we pulled out of the last street in Krishnanagar, Annamalai encouraged me to come see him speak the following day in a village where he had real support. He then explained the disheartened state of the Devendras, which I could easily understand after stealing just a small glimpse of the election process. Looking out in the distance, Annamalai lamented, "For seventy years we've been trying to run in the election, and no one will give us a seat. They will only let us stand in the reserved constituencies [those that are reserved for the Scheduled Castes]. Those constituencies are for Scheduled Castes, but we are not a Scheduled Caste; we have nothing to do with them."

In 2014, the AIADMK won the election by a landslide, consolidating their nearly absolute power throughout the state. They also continued to show their support for the Thevars, probably one of the voting blocs that is critical to keeping them in power. In October of 2014, the AIADMK sent their most prominent ministers to pay respects to Muthuramalingam, as did the DMK in an act of competition with their longtime rival.

Meanwhile, the Devendras still have not managed to get official recognition for their status as a caste conglomeration. They have not given up, but have instead adopted new tactics. On September 16th, 2015, a delegation of Devendra Kula Vellalars met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi. They requested national recognition for the unification of all their “sub-castes” under a single tag, and were allegedly supported by the Prime Minister and his Hindu Nationalist party, the BJP, which has long been unpopular amongst Scheduled Caste populations in Tamil Nadu. While the future of the Devendras is unclear, their attempt to trump state-level politics and gain national support is a courageous move that may, in the long run, win them the recognition and authority that they have long desired.

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