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# 'Beyond "Dull and Sterile Routines"? Dalits Organizing for Social Change in Tamil Nadu'

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**Title:**     Beyond 'dull and sterile routines'? Dalits Organising for Social Change in Tamil Nadu.

**Abstract:**

Drawing on fieldwork with Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu, this paper focuses on often neglected aspects of activism. A pervasive lack of resources has rendered Tamil Dalit movements overly incident-sensitive: reacting to caste atrocities rather than pursuing a positive agenda. Movement leaders, thus, concentrate on community-building by means of exclusive rhetoric that is, at times, divorced from the day-to-day concerns of their constituents. High profile events and fiery speeches attract attention and foster collective identity, but are only part of a wider struggle in which the more mundane and everyday aspects of struggle – establishing strong networks, chasing up officials, seeking alternate sources of employment and so on – may be most effective. Changing caste relations, it is argued, requires continual commitment rather than episodic protest. This challenges what we mean by 'movement success' and 'activism'.

**Introduction: Assessing Activism?**

My research in South India explores contemporary manifestations of caste discrimination and the attempts by Dalit (formerly untouchable) – those at the foot of the caste hierarchy – movements to achieve social justice.[1] When India gained independence and became a democratic republic, citizenship rights were extended to hitherto marginalised groups. The Constitution rendered untouchability a punishable offence and reclassified 'Untouchables' as 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs) by reference to a schedule of communities entitled to positive discrimination. Legislative change, however, has yet to transform social relations and SCs continue to face forms of humiliation, exclusion and discrimination (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Frustrated at the slow pace of change activists calling themselves Dalits (literally downtrodden or oppressed) have mobilised against caste.

Early on I interviewed an ex-communist Dalit activist, Sankar, who sought to illustrate the interactional basis of caste and the processes by which group distinctions are maintained. He recounted an incident in which the child of a scavenger (considered impure) requested a drink of water for her young sister. Normally a householder would pour water into a special receptacle, but the child had forgotten to bring a cup:

> Woman (Sankar's neighbour): 'How can I give you the water then?'

Sankar: 'How? In that jug itself! You go to the temple every Friday and say each child is a deity and now you are defying your own statements! The child is thirsty.'

Woman: 'So easy to say that! How can I give her water in our vessel? I'd have to get a new one [because it would be polluted].'

So saying, she withdrew. I then instructed the girl to go to [my house], but I kept back to see how my own family […] would react. So the girl went and tapped at my door and my sister came out – and she too looked round for a vessel! Then I signalled to her and she handed over the water (Interview, 05 December 1998).

The story has a revealing post-script. Asked what *he* did with the 'contaminated' vessel, Sankar replied:

Sankar: A friend asked exactly the same question and I responded: 'I have placed it apart'. When he railed at my hypocrisy, I continued: 'I have set it apart so that when people like you come to visit I can give it to you!'

Friend: "Then", he said, "I'll have to be careful what I drink in your place".

Sankar: I said 'that's your choice, come if you like, or else get lost.

Researcher: He hasn't been back?

Sankar: No, he never came back, but who needs friends like that? (ibid.).

Sankar's tale is instructive on several counts: firstly, in demonstrating untouchability within and between untouchable castes (Sankar is a Pallar, the most developed untouchable community in Tamilnadu, whilst the scavenger is from the least developed Chakkiliyar caste) it illustrates how hierarchical and divisive caste is; secondly, it conveys the banal and routinised ways in which caste boundaries are maintained even in 'progressive' families; and finally it demonstrates how activist intervention can question taken-for-granted forms of behaviour, erode embodied and institutionalised bases of discrimination and refashion the socio-political landscape (cf. Featherstone, this volume). The postscript intimates some of the multiple consequences endured by activists: they may fracture friendships, face social disapproval and confront resistance within their own families (cf. Donner, this volume). It touches on the ways in which activism can come to inform everyday life, but also bears witness to the imperfect join between daily routines and activist identities which is a recurrent theme of papers in this volume. Despite all his ideals, Sankar's family acted in much the same way as his neighbours and would have denied water to the girl without his intervention.

The focus of this paper is on 'activist routines'; it teases out the interplay between daily life and political engagement and reflects on the implications for social struggle. At issue here is what movements define as 'success' and, by implication, what forms of activism might achieve this. In 2000, following anti-capitalist demonstrations in London, an anonymous author (or collective) reflected on the limitations of direct action by self-professed 'activists'. The result was the much cited invocation to 'give up activism', which wrestled with the complex questions confronting radical protestors. The article did not advocate abandoning political struggle, but it problematised how social transformation was to be achieved. It challenged the political efficacy of isolated vanguards and questioned the utility of specific 'actions' against systems of exchange and interaction such as capitalism (or caste). The article opined that activists have become mired within outmoded repertoires of action to such a degree that 'the supposedly revolutionary activity of the activist is a dull and sterile routine - a constant repetition of a few actions with no potential for change' (Anonymous, 2000; cf. Liu, this volume).

Whilst differences between movements of the global North and South are significant (Wood, 2005), the self-reflective analysis of marginal protestors in London resonates for activists on the fringes of the 'periphery'. Dalit campaigners confront the pressing questions of material need, access to essentials, employment and political recognition, but they also grapple with

questions of identity, dignity, authenticity and representation. Dalits have mobilised against caste discrimination since the late 19th Century at least and such struggles have, of necessity taken both expressive and instrumental forms and targeted both political institutions and everyday interaction.

Many of the early Dalit struggles were oriented towards power-holders (monarchs or the British) and took the form of petitions, reports and conferences. The nationalist struggle, however, introduced new repertoires of action that confronted oppressor directly. Following Independence there was a brief hope that the Congress and other parties would embrace the Dalit cause, but their failure to do so engendered mass conversions out of Hinduism and more radical movements against caste practices. In the early 1980s, thus, Dalit protests against untouchability flouting caste codes by walking down high caste streets wearing shoes or smashing up tea-stalls using separate receptacles for Dalits. As Dalit parties have entered political institutions, however, the compulsions of electoral politics have arguably led them to prioritise set-piece public actions (Pai, 2002; Gorringe, 2005). An emphasis on demands and injustices has seen greater weight given to the product rather than the *process* of protest, but the two cannot so easily be divorced. Furthermore, movement programmes have not addressed how inegalitarian structures are reproduced within the home. The debate about *how* activists should act or *what* activism entails is amply illustrated in Sankar's account. Is

political participation sufficient? Should (can) it be separated from day-to-day activity? How should institutional discrimination be tackled? Do public/political demonstrations address the roots of caste discrimination? Is legislative change the answer? How should activists relate to others? In addressing these issues, the paper will set out the context of Tamil Dalit activism and highlight divergent approaches to tackling caste discrimination before returning to the broader question of 'activism' in the concluding remarks.

**The Tamil Context**

In the last decades of the 20th Century, Dalits – who constitute 18% of the population - have organised politically in Tamil Nadu, but this mobilisation has often been on caste lines representing the three main Tamil SC groups; Pallars, Paraiyars and Chakkiliyars. Pallars are the most developed and organised Dalit group, partly due to their higher social status. They are mainly based in the South and West. Paraiyars are the most populous and portray themselves as the most radical. They are concentrated in the central and northern districts. Chakkiliyars, the lowest of the main SCs in terms of material and status indicators, are traditionally landless and are least active politically. They are most numerous in central and western districts. All three are increasingly mobilising on caste lines for representation and resources which brings them into competition with each other and with 'Backward' and

'Most Backward' Classes (BC, MBC). BC is the official term for low (but touchable) castes who suffer from educational and economic backwardness and are entitled to affirmative action. In Tamil Nadu, however, BC groups are often politically influential or landowners and may be jealous of their power (see Gorringe 2005: 58-60).

There is a long history of Dalit mobilisation in the state, but in the post-Independence period Dalit voters and activists were initially attracted by the 'egalitarian' and anti-Brahmin rhetoric of the *Dravida Kazhagham* (Dravidian Federation) and the two Dravidian parties which emerged from it to dominate Tamil politics. Frustration about the absence of social change led to sustained campaigns against untouchability in the 1980s, and the partial success of these movements prompted the formation of more political and assertive organisations in the 1990s led by educated or professional Dalits (Mosse 2009). The largest of these was the Dalit Panther *Iyyakkam* (Movement – DPI), a primarily Paraiyar organisation, led by Thirumavalavan, a former government official. His fiery rhetoric, which promised to return a 'hit for a hit', attracted a large following. The DPI was renamed the Liberation Panthers (*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*) in the late 1990s and transformed into a political party in 1999. Autonomous Dalit movements and parties prompted a violent BC backlash across much of the state, but also gained political recognition (Gorringe 2005; Wyatt 2009).[2]

**A Tale of Two Villages**

Developments in the small hamlet of Vadianpatti in central Tamil Nadu - some 20-30 kilometres from the temple city of Madurai – appear to encapsulate the gains made by recent Dalit mobilisation. Dalits here make up around 10 per cent of the village population and are still largely dependent upon higher castes for employment. They are landless and mostly work as labourers, making them vulnerable to social boycotts which are routinely used to punish caste indiscretions by denying Dalits access to common land (including the bus-shelter), resources (such as the lake or the services of a barber), and employment. Despite this, they have constructed a hall (*manram*) dedicated to the DPI. This brightly painted edifice stands as a concrete manifestation of Dalit assertion and refusal to be cowed into submission. 'We may be confined to the Dalit quarters (*cheris*), served in separate glasses at the tea-shop and have to commute long-distances to find work', as local Dalits aver and the building attests, 'but we will not be enslaved'.

The influence of the DPI is felt in many of the villages along the bus-route that passes through Vadianpatti, but in none is the symbolic presence of the movement as visible. Six kilometres nearer the city, the movement's existence in the village of Muduvarpatti is marked by a tattered bill-board and a flagpole in need of paint. Dalits here are the same caste but are more numerous (25-30

per cent) and are better off than those in neighbouring hamlets: several own land for instance, and their access to surrounding fields and lakes is unfettered by caste conflicts. Whilst the village is still segregated along caste lines, the distinction between settlements is less clear-cut and the '*cheri*' has been integrated into the main village. The 'obvious' conclusion is that Dalit movements are most active on the 'front-lines' of the struggle against caste injustice where activism is most imperative.

Appearances, however, are deceptive. My initial enthusiasm about the bold front of the DPI in Vadianpatti was punctured in a series of discussions with Dalit villagers who revealed it to be a shallow façade. 'No matter how much we have done for the DPI', Bhaskaran – an agricultural labourer, declared, 'the DPI has not done much for us and has not been able to do anything for us' (Group Interview, Vadianpatti 20 March 1999). 'Only if people from the DPI or Government offer us support', Chandran concurred, 'will we be able to do anything. But they are not doing anything' (ibid.). Kamaraj, a DPI activist who was present during the discussion, took issue with this analysis, defended the movement and urged the villagers to do more for themselves, but the local Dalits insisted that the DPI could (and should) do more by way of demonstrations or protests to support their case.

In Vadianpatti, despite (and in part because of) the DPI building, untouchability is rampant:

> If we go to get our hair cut they say "don't show your head around here", if we go to get our clothes ironed they threaten to burn us with irons … we have been trying to obtain our land deeds from the Government but the high castes from the village block such moves (Chandran, Group Interview, Vadianpatti 20 March 1999).

Land remains one of the prime demands of Dalit movements and villagers alike. Movement speeches frequently bemoan Government inaction on land reforms and deplore the inequities perpetuated by the skewed resource base. Here, for instance, Dalits had their demands accepted, only to find that the land promised to them by state authorities has not translated into title deeds (*pattas)* or rights to land use. Similarly, Tamil Nadu has a relatively prosperous non-agricultural sector (Harriss-White & Janakarajan, 1997) and this district has seen a diversification of the job market. In the same way that legislative alterations which do not address existing inequalities are meaningless, however, non-farm opportunities are filtered through caste networks. Vadianpatti Dalits, thus, decried new (state and private sector) enterprises as closed-shops:

The government doesn't appoint us to positions in the dairy or anything like that for the single reason that we would then sit opposite them [higher castes] in a chair. "Can he sit in a chair as our equal?" So none of us has got a position in a society, diary, factory – however many organisations there are we are neglected (Celladurai, Group Interview, Vadianpatti 20 March 1999).[3]

In sum, Dalit 'activism' in Vadianpatti does not extend far beyond the brightly-painted façade of the hall, though even such shows of defiance are significant. Indeed, this symbolic resistance has fostered antagonistic caste relations that mean employment opportunities have been denied and common resources have been withdrawn. Goldstone (2004) and Gorringe (2005) note how social differentiation and mobility within a marginal group can engender resistance. Clearly, Dalits here have been inspired by DPI rhetoric, improved communications (bus routes and media) and by the opportunities to commute elsewhere for work. They demonstrably have the 'power to' resist domination and have more say over their life courses, but their own evaluation of their situation reflects the constraints within which they operate. Bhaskaran captured the prevalent mood in asking:

Can you get anywhere if you place your trust in a clay horse? Listen, if we trust a clay horse when embarking on a journey when we get to

some water - when we descend into the water on a mud horse then what happens? We are going into the sea, only if we ride on can we reach the other side, but here there is no help at all! (Group Interview, Vadianpatti 20 March 1999).

When they abandoned caste duties they anticipated more support but the DPI activists who visited the village to establish an outpost have moved on. Lacking land or influential social networks, they find that their options have been foreclosed by social boycotts and casteist retaliation forcing them to commute long distances for manual labour. Indeed the local DPI 'co-ordinator' was away harvesting sugar-cane. Rather than describing Panther activism as empowering, therefore, it is perhaps best conceived as rendering power visible by challenging taken-for-granted modes of existence and suggesting alternatives (Melucci, 1988).

Vadianpatti Dalits can now conceive of social change, but lack the capacity to fully transform their lives. If such is the state of Dalit 'activism' here, where the gloss paint on the DPI *manram* retains its lustre, it must be non-existent in Muduvarpatti where the symbolic markers of Dalit assertion are so tarnished? Again, appearances deceive. The situation of Dalits here is in inverse proportion to the prominence of their symbolic statements and offers hope that those in Vadianpatti might yet achieve self-determination. Interactions in

Muduvarpatti are characterised by an absence of the tension and anxiety that dominated exchanges with Dalits in the neighbouring settlement. Dalits inhabit public space with confidence and assurance, sitting at tea-shops, running small businesses and occupying the public square. Whereas Dalits in neighbouring villages were confined to *cheris* those in Muduvarpatti utilise common resources like fields and lakes. The reasons were not hard to find:

> Here we are strong in numbers and resources. Here if higher-caste Hindus have 10 acres we have at least 1 or 2. In Vadianpatti they don't even have that (Kamaraj, Interview, 16 March 1999).

Apart from the obvious disparity in resources mentioned by Kamaraj, Dalits here were united and well networked. In Vadianpatti there are divisions amongst SCs and lower-status Dalits ('traitors') remained submissive in return for employment, favours and a quiet life. This undermines attempts at assertion, especially when some Dalits speak on behalf of landlords in court, and facilitates social boycotts. By contrast, partly because Muduvarpatti Dalits have access to land they have maintained a united front.

Such unity, however, is not given but must be continually constructed through negotiation, interaction and dialogue. It requires Dalits to rally round if any individual is threatened, share information, chase up officials and remonstrate

with higher-castes. I witnessed one example of this during an encounter with a group of Dalits heading to the police station, because:

> Alagar: Caste Hindus here beat up some of our lot for picking tamarind. …
>
> Kamaraj (DPI activist): Are you off to the SP [Superintendent of Police]? You know he supports us!
>
> Alagar: No we are off to the DSP.
>
> Kamaraj: No, no. The SP is a rural Dalit from Karnataka. He gives us support, the case will be finished like that (Fieldnotes, Muduvarpatti 15 March 1999).

It is clear here, that 'activism' extends beyond a set-piece demonstration or filing a case. Activists cultivate and disseminate knowledge about important figures, build up networks and deal with issues routinely. Such acts, as Featherstone (this volume) argues, are generative and refashion the political landscape. The above exchange is not a dramatic public event, but such 'activist intervention' is significant precisely because of its mundane nature. Furthermore, since such mobilisation is less confrontational and staged there is less inter-caste animosity. Indeed, Alagar's riposte to Kamaraj is telling:

Alagar: It is OK. The president [of the Panchayat] is fully behind us on this. He says the culprit should be stuck away for some time.

Researcher: What caste is the president?

Alagar: He's a caste Hindu, one of them … but he's still behind us.

(ibid.).

Whilst the exchange here does relate to caste abuses, Kamaraj's intervention captures the tendency for Dalit activists to use the 'discourse of caste and communal tension' to politicise local incidents (Mosse 2007: 26). The more tempered and co-operative approach taken by Alagar can be precluded by the over-determination of caste and extravagant movement rhetoric that threatens to 'kill four of them for every murdered Dalit'. Such assertions can polarise villages along caste lines and stir up a hornet's nest. An analyst who was active in Dalit politics concluded: 'The DPI talk a lot, but they never *do* anything' (Fieldnotes, 23 June 1999).

**Routine Activism?**

The sarcastic evaluation was only partly unfair. The DPI were very effective highlighting abuses, filing court cases, protesting and raising awareness. To this end they held demonstrations, hunger-fasts and rallies. On occasion they blocked roads and railways, felled trees and stoned buses and above all they sought to establish movement outposts in ever more locations (especially

having determined to contest elections). In this, the DPI was a model of 'normal' politics in Tamil Nadu. Each village, urban enclave or public square contains visible markers of political affiliation, with the flags and emblems of political parties being particularly prominent. In seeking to contest the hegemony of established politics, the DPI mimicked the *modus operandi* of their adversaries and held flag-raising ceremonies up and down the state.

These occasions were significant in both material and symbolic terms (Gorringe, 2005), but they were transient events; public performances that needed to be built on if they were to have lasting impact. Thirumavalavan, DPI leader, had an exhausting itinerary and often spent days on the road flitting from one flag-raising to the next. A rolling stone, however, gathers no moss and the danger, in the words of an unkind critic, was that the DPI was building a movement of 'banners, not organisation' (Ratnam, Speech 01 November 1999). The example of Vadianpatti (above) lends weight to this accusation and suggests that the extent of the movement may come at the expense of its depth.

The DPI riposte to this accusation was two-fold. Firstly, that they were run on a shoe-string and lacked the resources to organise systematically. Secondly, that organisation could not be imposed from above; it had to emerge

organically. Kamaraj, thus, remonstrated with Vadianpatti Dalits when they said the DPI did nothing for them:

> DPI? Now, the DPI functions as a buttress for our Dalit people. Without the DPI you couldn't put up this building or anything … but you have to stand strong here, we can't do anything when we are elsewhere (Group Interview, Vadianpatti 20 March 1999).

Events in a neighbouring village reinforced Kamaraj's assertion. A DPI flagpole had been erected in Kodankipatti (further along the road) but Dalits here were few in number and further from a movement stronghold, so the pole was uprooted and cast into a well. The admonishment of local Dalits was a common theme, however. Young Dalit men in Melavalavu (scene of a horrific anti-Dalit massacre), thus, were upbraided for their inaction:

> Palani Kumar (DPI activist): If you had done something against them [BC group] that day they would be scared to use the road. Otherwise you will have to stay as slaves, slaves, slaves! (Group Interview, Melavalavu, 21 March 1999).

DPI cadre, in other words, often agitated an area, raised consciousness and flags (a clear provocation for some higher castes) but lacked the resources or

grassroots mobilisation to sustain a significant presence. The ensuing sense of powerlessness helps explain the attraction of violent rhetoric and the myth of redemptive violence, but aggressive rhetoric and one-off events could reinforce caste antagonism and spark violence. For some activists such conflict was desirable. Ravichandran, a DPI sympathiser and convenor of Marutham Network, articulated this perspective:

> In such a huge democracy so what if another hundred or so people die? If another 1000 huts are razed to the ground – well let them. Due to this our people are starting to think about who our friends and enemies are … In every village now, people have started to resist (Interview, 27 September 1999).

This approach frequently engendered a violent BC backlash as a consequence of which proactive anti-caste movements were forced into 're-activism' (Sami, this volume). The demands for land, reservations and government action, thus, were frequently absent on platforms condemning another atrocity. The DPI, in other words, was issue based but incident sensitive: highlighting atrocities and violence took precedence over organisation building and the establishment of a sustained presence in each locality. Hastily arranged reactive events produced staged performances and public

demonstrations that were every bit as sterile and ineffective as days of action 'against capitalism'.

## Organising for Change

This conclusion is not news to Thirumavalavan. I suggested that Dalits in Vadianpatti and Kodankipatti had imperilled their safety by allying with the DPI and had then been neglected by the movement. The villagers in Kodankipatti, indeed, were hounded from their homes when caste relations disintegrated (Gorringe, 2005: 350). His response was instructive:

> If you ask how the minority areas will get protection – it is when the surrounding areas organise. When those people form organisations, then the minorities will be protected. Because this organisation [DPI] was constructed in Muduvarpatti, the Kodankipatti Dalits gain protection … or at least they gain asylum. It is due to this opportunity to seek shelter that they are putting up a fight in Kodankipatti and Vadianpatti. Were Muduvarpatti not to come forward; were it to lack a movement; were that character to be absent from Muduvarpatti – then there would be no capacity for resistance in Kodankipatti. The protection for minorities, therefore, depends on organisation (Thirumavalavan, Interview, 03 November 1999).

Whilst Thirumavalavan justly cited a lack of infrastructure and resources as impeding organisational development, aspects of movement life suggest the insight into the necessity of organisation is often neglected. In the Madurai office of the DPI, thus, work on a poster was stalled whilst local activists tried to contact the leader. The lack of local decision-making capacity put too much strain on the leader and made the movement much less vibrant. This was reflected in the turnout for public protests at which the leader was not present. Such occasions were drab and colourless affairs in which dutiful campaigners went through the motions without much enthusiasm.

Where the movement had set down roots, the merits of organisation were plain to see: In SMP Colony, a housing estate in Madurai, young affiliates had set up a tuition centre for Dalit children and had mobilised to prevent usurious money-lenders from entering the estate. In Vandiyur, by contrast - a suburb on the outskirts of Madurai – the DPI had wrested 40 housing lots designated for Scheduled Castes from a landlord who was illegally occupying them. This initial victory, however, was a pyrrhic one as land deeds had not been issued and so Dalits were effectively squatting on the land without access to water or electricity and facing constant harassment. One-off actions may secure concessions, but they rarely deliver durable change unless they are followed up and consolidated.

This is seen also in the continuance of patriarchal attitudes and lifestyles amongst DPI leaders and cadre. The dissonance between the public rhetoric of equality and women's rights and the private lives of activists was striking, as was the blatant contradiction between stated aims and practice in the *de facto* organisation along caste lines. Recurrent references to 'Dalit' or to non-caste terminology like 'Liberation Panthers' were important in themselves[4], but of limited value in attaining a caste-free society whilst the movement continued to mobilise caste-based constituencies. Dalit activism, in other words, can be a role that is discarded at the end of the day. Thirumavalavan praises Muduvarpatti as an exemplar, but in the increasing engagement with electoral politics and established parties several respondents felt that the lessons that it offers in terms of sustained, daily engagement and organisation were being ignored.[5]

As Vijay, a Dalit journalist and social observer noted in the run up to the 2009 elections, the two main Dalit parties in Tamil Nadu 'have failed to make constructive negotiations and have even failed to act as a pressure group' (Personal email communication, April 2009). The grassroots mobilisation that was so effective in challenging local practices of untouchability and bringing the DPI to prominence risks being overlooked in the face of political compulsions. Local candidates, thus, were overlooked in the nomination of electoral representatives and wider issues such as the Sri Lankan crisis have

been emphasised at the expense of affiliates' more immediate concerns (Fieldnotes 2010).

**Discussion**

The cases presented above offer snapshots from the Dalit struggle against caste discrimination but they speak to a range of debates about the nature of activism. The social movement literature is replete with discussions of how activists might achieve social change. Given Tarrow's (1998) argument that violence is a resort of the resourceless, we might expect Dalit movements to employ such tactics. Gamson's assertion that 'unruly groups, those that use violence, strikes, and other constraints, have better than average success' (1990: 87), reinforces this position. The reality, however, is more complex. Whilst violence may well be the preferential option of challenging groups, as Goldstone (2004: 344) observes, it is rarely employed by resource-poor activists who 'have little means for effective disruption or violence'. Indeed, caste violence in Tamil Nadu mostly affects the poorest, and Dalit disruption has often alienated supporters and incurred a disproportionate response (Gorringe, 2005).

Gamson's definition of 'success', thus, needs to be scrutinised. His account distinguishes between two main outcomes: recognition as legitimate actors and obtaining new gains (1990: 28-9). In Tamil Nadu the adoption of unruly

means is an established way of gaining recognition, but the price of recognition is the need to conform to recognised forms of politics that rarely challenge the status quo (cf. Chatterjee, 2004; also Dave, Donner, Liu, this volume). The DPI entered electoral competition on the back of disruptive tactics, but many in the movement regard this as a form of co-option that dilutes the movement's initial aims (Gorringe, 2007: 64). Furthermore, an emphasis on violence obscures both the mechanisms facilitating force and its wider implications: following Goldstone (2004) it is clear that disruptive behaviour itself requires organisation. Whilst Dalits in Muduvarpatti disputed caste cases and offered protection to neighbours (even repelling attackers by force), those in Kodankipatti were hounded from home when they transgressed caste norms and those in Vadianpatti were ostracised.

The violence of the weak may be expressive but is rarely effective in instrumental terms and can isolate perpetrators from a wider constituency. From this perspective 'the logic of numbers' is appealing and suggests, as Della Porta and Diani note, that 'social movements should seek to mobilise the greatest number of demonstrators possible. From this point of view, protest stands in for elections' (1999: 174). The DPI certainly buy into this logic and periodically organise large demonstrations of public support. The majority of rallies staged by the movement, however, were pitifully attended

and dispiriting. Kamaraj, for instance, confided that one rally of 50 people had been a 'waste of time' (Interview, 13 April 1999).

In such scenarios, movement scholars often resort to the notion of 'empowerment' (Wagner & Cohen, 1991) as an intangible protest good. Dalits here *have* rejected demeaning forms of work and endorsed radical Dalit politics but, as Kabeer (1999: 462) argues, the essence of empowerment is an enhanced 'capacity for self-determination'. In the immediate term at least, Vadianpatti Dalits' newfound ability to transgress caste norms has constrained rather than enhanced their life-chances. Whilst rejecting casteist prescriptions and asserting themselves fits a liberal reading of freedom, Kabeer cautions analysts not to measure emancipation against 'those meanings which most favour their own values regarding what constitute appropriate choices' (1999: 461). It is clear, that the villagers themselves feel abandoned or betrayed not empowered. They have, rather, been *emboldened*.

Protestors do not materialise out of thin air. Vadianpatti Dalits were not blind to caste dominance and had to be co-ordinated, persuaded, recruited and galvanised. That this requires resources and organisation, especially in this remote and non-digital setting where keeping in touch with village outposts can be a challenge, is often uncelebrated. Andrew's (2001) work on the US Civil Rights Movement is illuminating here in highlighting the painstaking

processes of networking across communities and sub-groups to forge solidarity and create a stable movement infrastructure (cf. Featherstone, this volume). These processes, Andrews (2001: 76) notes, demand the time, skills and commitment of people on the ground if activism is to be sustained. He also emphasises the importance of concerted action, intervention and scrutiny at the *local* level.

National or regional demonstrations of support, grand political alliances and concessions wrung from legislative bodies, Andrews shows, are insufficient in and of themselves. Local elites need to be chivvied, encouraged and pressured into implementing changes. Gabriele Dietrich, activist and academic, concurs: 'it is often the persistent chasing up of officials and harrying of bureaucrats that produces results, rather than the grand demonstration' (Personal communication, 25 October 1999). Drawing on her work with women's groups, Dietrich takes this emphasis on sustained organisation further, pointing to its inherent benefits.

> Apart from marches, demonstrations and conferences which take place regularly in many places, the day to day organisational efforts in local women's *sanghams* (unions) are … of greater importance than their often limited scope suggests. It is these *sanghams* that can deal

with issues like drinking, wife-beating, rape, health problems and *balwadis* (nurseries) (1988: 34).

These accounts invite us to reconsider what constitutes 'success' and shine a light on oft neglected aspects of activism. Put another way, mobilisation which resulted in the election of a Dalit Prime Minister would not in itself herald the eradication of casteism. Indeed, when a Dalit High Court judge in Allahabad retired, successors purified the office before entering it (Raj, 1998: 149). In a context where Dalits face daily indignities and obstacles to full participation in social life, anti-caste activism must address its routine manifestations. The networked Dalits of Muduvarpatti not only challenge banal expressions of casteism, they refuse their marginalisation by occupying public space and interacting with others, seeking caste neutral jobs, educating their children and fostering a spirit of independence in future generations. Pai's (2002) analysis of the most successful and prominent Dalit political organisation in India – the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP, Majority People's Party) - is instructive. Noting the compromises made by the party she argues that it has failed to implement social change and been trapped into the compulsions of sterile political calculation.

According to Pai, the BSP increasingly reflects the ambitions of Dalit career politicians and she differentiates it from grassroots movements that erode the

bases of caste domination (2002: 244). Mehrotra (2006) likewise notes that the successes of Dalit mobilisation in Uttar Pradesh have been more symbolic than material. Dalit parties *have* expanded the parameters of democratic contestation and opened up spaces for dissent – but this work emphasises the significance of mobilisational pluralism and recognises that institutional engagement alone will not eradicate caste and may reinforce caste categories. As the examples above suggest, the relational basis of caste makes it less susceptible to set-piece politics and harder to gauge movement impact. An innovative attempt to measure the influence of activism in a similar situation, therefore, saw hate-crime reporting as a movement 'outcome' (McVeigh, Welch & Bjarnason, 2003). This shifts the parameters of 'success' in viewing activist processes and discourses as important in raising consciousness, keeping an issue alive, inspiring active engagement with institutions and enforcing legislation.

Whilst it is stirring speeches, courageous acts of defiance, large demonstrations or high profile legal or social victories that inspire people to become activists, the back-story to each of these involves tedious meetings and endless encouragement, networking and legwork. Perhaps successful movements, thus, are those fostering active and long-lasting engagement with issues amongst participants. It is crucial therefore, that the DPI should not lose sight of its ground level work as it targets electoral success. Whilst electoral politics requires the DPI to reach out to a wider audience and engage with electoral

allies, the Panthers have used their new found resources to carve out spaces for the articulation of alternatives - working with documentary film-makers, producing magazines, and promoting active local leaders to positions of responsibility – and more could be made of these ventures (Fieldnotes 2010). Robnett (1997) stresses the importance of local organisers and intermediaries between central figures and the grassroots by referring to them as 'bridge leaders'. Equally important, however, are what we might term bridging *mechanisms* amongst activists and between activists, sympathisers and a wider public.[6]

If 'bridge leaders' are informal community activists, bridging mechanisms are the means by which involvement is sustained, dialogues entered into and critiques articulated. These extend from the everyday activities of networking (hanging out together, going to the cinema, lending support to others) to the example of Sankar's intervention at the head of this paper. Both the expressive and instrumental forms of action are crucial in highlighting abuses, suggesting alternatives and reshaping the political terrain (Featherstone, this volume). Combined, such actions can filter ideals into actual practice. This, ultimately, challenges what we think of as activism and who we conceive of as an activist (cf. Chari, this volume). Waving placards and shouting slogans are important aspects of the struggle against caste, but so too are challenging attitudes about

others and sharing cups with scavengers. Were such actions to be co-ordinated they would strike at the relational bases of caste.

**Concluding Remarks**

In closing, thus, we return to the nagging dissonance between activist routines ('constant repetition of a few actions with no potential for change' (Anonymous, 2000)) and the desire to transform social structures and modes of being. Sankar's intervention to secure drinking water for an untouchable child offers a window onto the debate. Simultaneously he reveals his failure to domesticate his politics *and* offers a glimpse of a more sustained and sustainable form of action that is not a distinct role to be discarded like a coat on returning home. In the words of an activist collective, it prefigures 'a politics that isn't left up to specialists, a politics that is not just relevant to but part of everyday life, a politics that doesn't look or feel like politics' (Notes from Nowhere Collective, 2004).

'Give up Activism' is not a call to abandon struggle nor a plea to prioritise practical over symbolic actions. Rather it is an invocation to rethink what we mean by the term 'activist' and, implicitly, how we conceive of 'success'. Where 'activism' is conceived as a specialist role and sequestered off from everyday life, confined to periodic shows of force and a Quixotic tilting at the windmills of caste or capitalism it may be redundant or even counter-

productive. What the evidence presented here suggests is that struggles against caste also need to be embedded in people's everyday lives, concerns and interactions. Neglecting the grassroots to focus on elections, thus, would be mistaken. Dalit parties tend to focus on 'power over' and highlight continuing abuses and forms of domination. In so doing, however, they can neglect the activist tasks of capacity building, articulating alternatives and rendering caste power visible in seemingly harmonious towns and villages. Social change is not something that happens 'out there' but an ongoing process. Activism is not a day-job, in other words, and we should recognise and celebrate the incremental impact and value of quotidian forms of engagement.

[1] Empirical data was collected between 1998-9. The multi-sited ethnography focussed on Dalit activists, motivations, modes of operation, and ideological aspirations across Tamil Nadu. The data consists of 30 group interviews and discussions, 32 formal and 30 informal interviews with activists, leaders, academics and non-participating Dalits. Interviews were complemented by participant observation. A scoping study in January 2010, funded by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, enabled me to update my earlier research and capture attitudes towards the political Panthers.

[2] The DPI has now contested both State and National elections. It gained two seats at the State level between 2001-2006 as the *Vidduthalai Cirruthaigal Katchi* (VCK - Liberation Panther Party) (see Gorringe, 2007). In 2009, its leader was elected to the Lok Sabha as an MP.

[3] The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is making a significant difference in this area, but even here public scrutiny and activism is required to ensure that jobs are shared out and that workers are paid their dues (Narayan, 2008).

[4] On the importance of naming see Liu and Dave (both this volume).

[5] See Liu (this volume) for similar critiques of 'activism' as divorced from day-to-day struggles.

[6] See Chari (this volume) for the importance of people 'on the edges of struggle'.

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