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Abstract:

In 1999 the largest Dalit movement organisation in Tamil Nadu abandoned a decade long boycott of elections and entered party politics as the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Panther Party, VCK). The focus of the article will be on the processes of institutionalisation both into political institutions and into socio-cultural ways of doing politics. It will chart both how the party has changed as a result of entering formal politics, and the ways in which it has managed to change the institutions it entered. Looking at institutionalisation in this way problematises the usual focus on a party's electoral success or failure and compels us to analyse their political performance within its specific context. I show how institutionalisation in Tamil Nadu has taken particular forms which have some benefits for VCK supporters, whilst also creating a rift between the party and its core support.

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Introduction

This article focuses on the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (Liberation Panther Party, VCK), the largest Dalit movement organisation in Tamil Nadu which transformed into a political party in 1999. The VCK rose to prominence on the back of aggressive and assertive campaigns that portrayed electoral democracy as a sham. In 1999, however, the movement organisation abandoned its poll boycott and contested elections for the first time. In this poll, the VCK entered a Third Front led by the *Tamil Maanila Congress* (Tamil State Congress) that offered an alternative to the two main Dravidian parties – the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Dravidian Progressive Federation, DMK) and the *All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (AIADMK). Since then it has allied alternately with both Dravidian fronts and succeeded in winning three Legislative Assembly seats in different elections and one MP. Following the 2011 Legislative Assembly elections in which the VCK won no seats, only MP Thirumavalavan, the founder leader of the party remained in office. Despite their high profile, however, neither he nor General Secretary Ravikumar were able to win their seats in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014, leaving the party with no elected representatives. Four political representatives over 14 years can hardly be termed a political success, but set against the backdrop of caste discrimination, hegemonic Tamil politics and a chronic lack of resources, the party cannot be said to have failed either. In this article I draw on field work conducted over 8 months in 2012 to offer an assessment of how the party is

viewed today and what this tells us about processes of institutionalisation and democratisation in Tamil Nadu.

At its beginning in the late 1980s the Dalit Panther *Iyyakkam* (–Movement, DPI), as the VCK was then known, was a radical mass movement organisation promising to return a hit for a hit and confront caste atrocities head on. They boycotted elections, castigated all established parties and engaged in forms of violence to defend themselves and retaliate against caste oppressors. This oppositional stance led the movement to be seen as extremist, radical and militant, with innumerable party activists arrested on serious charges and countless obstacles placed in the way of movement organisation. Any dissenting voices within the party were seen as traitors, self-serving individuals or as inadequately conscientised (Gorringe, 2005).

Observers of movements transforming into political parties elsewhere have found that they adopt clearer structures and become more professional (Tarrow, 1998). Tarrow's analysis is persuasive, but Kitschelt (2006, p. 280) introduces the concept of a 'movement party' which resists full institutionalisation and makes 'little investment in a formal organizational party structure'. Roy (2014) likewise notes key differences and emphases between established and insurgent parties. Like them, in my fieldwork in 2012, I found activists criticising the party, bemoaning its policies and harking back to its past glories. From top to bottom of the party, leaders and activists were engaged in an introspective critique. The voices of disillusionment drowned out any narratives of success, posing the question: how did it all go wrong for the political panthers?

This article begins with a review of the literature on institutionalisation and offers an outline of the institutionalisation of Dalit politics in general and within Tamil politics. It then analyses the institutionalisation of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* as a political party within the political culture of Tamil Nadu. I chart the changes that have taken place since the late 1990s, offer an account of their current politics and how they are perceived on the ground. In closing I problematise Gamson's (1990) four-fold categorisation of movement success, and consider the extent to which the VCK have been co-opted.

Routinising Radicalism?

The path from movement to party is a well-trodden one. Indeed, since mass protest is difficult to sustain over time, Tarrow (1998) argues that there is a tendency for movements to become more bureaucratic in their attempt to keep an issue alive. Offe (1990) outlined a three-stage model of institutional transformation in which the enthusiasm and mass appeal of the 'take-off' stage of movement life gives way to 'stagnation' after which movements undergo a process of 'institutionalisation'. Many scholars, like Tarrow (1998) and Jenkins & Klandermans (1995), regard political participation as a core objective of protest groups, again suggesting that what Dryzek (1996, p. 484) calls 'inclusion in, or entry into, the state' is a logical progression for extra-institutional movements. Of course, this may be the ultimate objective, but many new parties succeed only in gaining access to the processes of institutional politics rather than influence over the state as such.

In any given movement, furthermore, Offe (1990) suggests that activists will be divided between those who perceive institutional politics as the next step and those who view

it as corrupt and/or reformist. The process of 'institutionalisation' – whereby movements 'develop internal organisation, become more moderate, adopt a more institutional repertoire of action and integrate into the system of interest representation' (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 148) – is often very contentious as a consequence.

Coy & Hedeen (2005, p. 417) highlight the benefits that can accrue from institutionalisation including material gains, access to influential allies, and wider legitimacy. Institutionalisation, however, also has costs. Movements may become 'bureaucratized and technique centred' with a dilution of movement critiques and tactics (Coy & Hedeen, 2005, p. 407; Suri, 2013, p. 247). It can also, as Piven & Cloward (1971) show, result in demobilisation or co-optation. As Mosse (2007, p. 27) puts it: 'Empowerment depends upon political representation, but such political capacity is gained only at the cost of conceding power to a political system'.

Understanding how movements move from radical actors to political contestants is vitally important in understanding processes of democratisation and combating social exclusion (Tilly, 1998). One must, therefore, note that institutionalisation is not as linear as portrayed in some of the accounts above. Given the very real concerns about the political system and fears of compromise and corruption, many movements try to present themselves as remaining critical of, and somewhat detached from, tainted institutions. Kitschelt's (2006, p. 280) term 'movement party', is appropriate here and characterises a key phase (at least) in which challengers 'try to apply the organizational and strategic practices of social movements in the arena of party competition'.

Engagement in state institutions in this phase, often co-exists with extra-institutional mobilisation. Indeed, Dryzek (1996) notes that inclusion into parliamentary processes may help to sustain a dualistic strategy. Roy's (2014) study of the *Aam Aadmi Party* (The Common Man's Party) charts the means by which activists seek to cast their interventions as extraordinary and novel in contrast to politics as normal. She notes, however, that gaining office problematises the movement character of the party. Kitschelt (2006, p. 288) also observes how the 'institutional premises of territorial representation' encourage movement parties to redefine their objectives so as to broaden their appeal and formalise their structures to enhance consistency.

In a wide ranging study of processes of institutionalisation of environmental movements in four countries, Dryzek et al. (2003) similarly highlight the core trade-off between inclusion into the central decision making bodies of a society, and changes that can 'compromise the "social movement" character of groups' (Dryzek et al., 2003, p. 82). Given that institutionalisation is often seen as a precursor to de-radicalisation (Hensby, Sibthorpe & Driver, 2012), movements need to think through how they will keep supporters on their side during the process of transition. Dryzek et al (2003, p. 103) caution that 'inclusive states are capable of undermining democracy in society as a whole by depleting civil society', and argue that movements should consider whether their institutionalisation would 'leave behind a flourishing civil society'. This is why movement parties so often adopt a dual approach.

Institutionalisation, however, may be forced upon movements or presented as a 'pragmatic necessity' rather than a choice (Dryzek, 1996, p. 484; cf. Suri, 2013, p. 231; Roy, 2014). The VCK felt that they had little option but to affirm their commitment to

democratic processes in the face of state and non-state repression and pressure (Gorringe, 2005). In such situations the question becomes less about why they chose to institutionalise (Dryzek et al, 2003, p. 84) and more about what they have or have not achieved, and how they have been transformed in the process. Dryzek et al (2003, p. 78), suggest that that political inclusion will only be effective when movement interests are aligned with the 'imperatives that define the core of the state' and that where this does not occur, inclusion will result in co-option if it occurs at all. Since one of the VCK's central demands was implementation of the Indian constitution there should not, on the face of it, be any conflict with core state imperatives. Other ideals, such as Tamil nationalism, clearly do clash with these terms. Understanding this conflict requires the localised understanding of inclusion to which we now turn.

Institutionalising Dalit Politics in India

India's democratic system has successfully accommodated oppositional movements – including secessionist ones – but it has struggled to meaningfully address the core demands of social challengers (Swenden, 2016). Lakha and Taneja (2009, p. 316), however, argue that the recent upsurge of lower caste (Dalit and 'Other Backward Caste') groups is reshaping political institutions. Indeed they contend that the political accommodation and electoral successes of such movements signify 'a seismic shift in patterns of political participation and structures of power' (ibid, p. 317). The Indian state – and subsidiary state governments – to this extent is an inclusive one (Swenden, 2016). Autonomous Dalit parties, thus, have been able to keep caste discrimination on the agenda, hold authorities to account and gain impressive electoral victories. Indeed, the Bahujan Samaj Party's (Majority People's Party, BSP) formation of several governments in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (Pai, 2002), led some

commentators to identify a 'Dalit revolution' in northern India even before it won an unparalleled absolute assembly majority in 2007 (Jaffrelot, 2003).

The BSP success signifies an expansion of the public sphere as well as demonstrating the ability of Dalits to wield political power (Pai, 2002; Ciotti, 2009). This is important, as representation and electoral success in and of themselves do not necessarily reflect the interests of the disadvantaged (Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery, 2008; Mosse, 2007). As Fraser (2003, p. 32) notes, such 'politics of identity' can entail the 'displacement of redistribution and the reification of group identities.' Dalit parties, for instance, can entrench caste identities by emphasising the background of parliamentary candidates rather than their policies. Once parties are in positions of power, those who mobilised to demand recognition anticipate beneficial outcomes (Chandra, 2004).

Such changes, however, are difficult for Dalit parties to achieve. As Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery's (2008, p. 1366) detailed ethnographic study of Uttar Pradesh found, 'Dalit new politicians' attempts to co-opt and colonise state institutions are effectively "counter-resisted" by a dominant caste'. In Tamil Nadu, Barnett (1976, p. 299) quotes Dalit leader Satyavani Muthu – founder member of the DMK and cabinet Minister in the Tamil State government – as saying that Dalits, 'should not trust the governments of the day which are dominated by the upper classes and their interests'. Muthu felt frustrated at her inability to affect change and was ultimately forced out of the party. At the national level, Galanter (1984) demonstrates the patchy implementation of existing legislation, and the way in which courts may be used to stymie legislative attempts to advance social change. It is for this reason that Heyer and Gopal Jayal (2009) argue that general programmes such as the Public Distribution System, the Mid-day Meals

Scheme, Employment Guarantee Schemes and basic health and education drives may benefit Scheduled Castes (SCs) more than programmes targeted specifically at them (which face opposition as a consequence). The inability of Dalit parties to determine public policy jars with the increased expectations of followers, resulting in the argument that Dalit politics has 'reached an impasse' (Shah, 2004, p. 131).

In other words, Dalit movements across India are confronting the problems of 'institutionalisation' that has engendered a split between hard-line and reformist activists. Dalit parties seek to retain their movement character, but political engagement can undermine these attempts. Pai (2002), thus, distinguishes between empowerment from 'above' and 'below' and contends that the Party primarily pursues the former, viewing empowerment in purely political terms. This emphasis on political power has led the BSP to ally with parties opposed to Dalit assertion, weakening their attempts to eradicate caste inequalities. In Maharastra, which was at the forefront of post-colonial Dalit mobilisation, Dalit parties have suffered a similar fate (Omvedt, 2003). These examples point to an enduring tension between radical grass-roots movements seeking to transform social relations and political parties seeking electoral success (cf. Kitschelt, 2006; Roy, 2014).

Dalit Politics in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu provides an important case study since it is one of the more developed states in India and has a long history of non-Brahmin politics and legislation (Gorringe, 2012). Tamil governments have been rhetorically committed to eradicating caste for nearly 50 years, but Dalits continue to lag behind in social development indices. The uneven distribution of land-holdings means that 58.5% of Tamil Dalits work as

agricultural labourers and a further 10.2% are cultivators of marginal landholdings. SC literacy rates (63.2%) languish behind those of the general population (76.2%) and Dalit women are further marginalised with literacy rates of 57% (TN Government Statistical Handbook, 2010).

Backward Castes, those just above Dalits in the social hierarchy, have wielded political power in the state since 1967 and portray themselves as countering Brahmin dominance. This has led some (notably Subramanian, 1999) to regard Tamil Nadu as a bastion of social pluralism, but Dalit movements arose in large part because they faced continuing discrimination and were excluded from the body politic (Barnett, 1976). Their emergence mirrors that of lower-caste parties in UP which occupied a space opened up by the failure of the dominant party (Congress in UP) to accommodate the rising aspirations and demands of the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Dalits (Pai, 2002; Suri, 2013).

Autonomous Dalit mobilisation in Tamil Nadu from the 1980s onwards generated a forceful (often violent) casteist backlash that led Dalit movements to advocate violent means (Pandian, 2013; Gorringe, 2005). It is only in the past 15 years that such Dalit movements have entered political institutions in Tamil Nadu. No Dalit party here can emulate the BSP's electoral success, for the socio-political context is very different: in social terms, Tamil Nadu has a tiny Brahmin population and lacks castes hailing from the Kshatriya category altogether. In political terms, the two Dravidian parties have dominated Tamil politics since 1967 and only since 1998 has Tamil politics moved 'from a two and a half party system to bi-polar multipartism' (Wyatt, 2010, p. 1). What both these factors mean is that it is harder to forge cross-caste alliances of marginalised groups, and that one generally needs to ally with one of the Dravidian parties to stand

a chance of winning. Tamil Dalit parties have been to the fore in efforts to alter the political dispensation of the state by seeking to strip Dalit voters away from established parties (Roberts, 2010, p. 18). As they have demonstrated their ability to garner electoral support, the VCK have been included into Dravidian party alliances and afforded political recognition as significant, but marginal, players. 'The time worn response to dissent', as Nandy (1998, p. 51) asserts, 'is to neutralise it by absorbing it into the mainstream'.

The VCK were not the first Dalit party to enter Tamil politics but they have been the most successful, gaining three seats in the smaller constituencies of the State Assembly and one in national elections. It is difficult to gauge support for the party, since it has always contested in alliance with others, but they have held rallies of over 100,000 people in the state capital. Wyatt (2010, pp. 120-1) suggests they can swing the vote in movement strongholds, particularly in the smaller constituencies of the Legislative Assembly. Their political standing became apparent in the state elections of 2006 when they contested from nine (out of a possible 234) seats and cemented an alliance with the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagham*, one of the two main political parties in the state. In 2009 they contested two Lok Sabha seats (from a possible 39), winning one and narrowly losing the other. Their imperfect and asymmetric integration into institutional politics was transparent in that one of their two candidates was a DMK sympathiser who the VCK were persuaded to accommodate (Collins 2015). In 2011, they contested 10 seats in state elections (which many VCK cadre saw as a poor return for their loyalty to the DMK) and in the 2014 national election two seats. In neither of these elections did they gain any seats, but they have clearly gained recognition. The question is whether this inclusion has been co-optive or effective.

Vernacularised Institutionalisation?

Having spent a decade boycotting the electoral process as corrupt and corrupting the VCK have now spent the past decade attempting to carve out a niche for themselves within it. Political organisations do not emerge or operate in a vacuum and comprehending the forms that contemporary Dalit institutions take must, therefore, examine the existing 'rules of the game'. Much of the literature on social movement institutionalisation assumes that there is an established political template, but Michelutti (2007) details the multiple ways in which democratic politics is shaped and influenced by socio-cultural practices, idioms, beliefs and norms in a process that she calls 'vernacularization'. This being the case we should expect processes of institutionalisation to be inflected by local or regional socio-cultural practices too. Movements, we should note, are institutionalised into particular political *cultures* as much as into institutions and this can effect what they can achieve for their constituents.

At first glance the story of the VCK's move to politics might be that of any radical movement anywhere in the world. Time and again I was told that they were 'just another party now'. As Chellappa, a Dalit intellectual who is still in the party put it:

> Now their ideals, demands and ideology have sedimented (*Neertu pogirachi*). We say this in Tamil – when you leave a glass of water and the mud and so on settles at the bottom of the water. Before when they were active they were driven by ideology but now that is stagnant. (Interview, February 2012)

Similarly, Mani, an educated Arunthathiyar, noted how he had become disillusioned:

I was a bit engaged with stuff earlier on, but after a while I realised that all the leaders are the same. Once they became parties and got into politics then they behave just like the other politicians and parties. It is about power and money and less about the principles that got them there in the first place. (Interview, February 2012)

The VCK faces the same accusations of compromise, stagnation and venality that are thrown at any movement that enters party politics. This loss in radicalism and spirit has been countered by increasing professionalisation: the party conducted systematic recruitment drives throughout the late 2000s, with a significant drive in 2009, which sought to raise money (Rs 10 per member) and expand the reach of the party. In a show of organisational efficiency, tens of thousands of people were signed up as members. This was, however, belied in subsequent years by a three-year long inability to get proper membership cards printed and sent out. They are, in this sense, the epitome of a movement party (Kitschelt, 2006).

The slow and uncertain move towards professionalisation is also seen in the lack of party offices anywhere other than Chennai, the continuing delay to the launch of the TV channel promised in 2012, the lengthy hiatus between people filing nomination papers for party posts and the results of the consultation being announced, and in the inability of the leadership to get cadres to even contemplate internal elections. One journalist complained of the trouble he had had trying to get a quote for a story he was writing. He noted that there were plenty of leaders around but no obvious person to approach and no real willingness to speak out. A VCK member retorted:

They are all busy enriching themselves and sticking up posters but they cannot run a decent office – they are not concerned about that. They could have one building where people went for help drafting petitions or cases and it should have a press office section there. (Interview, July 2012)

The VCK *are* extremely professional in some aspects, however. In 2012 they have totally overhauled their web-presence to better show-case what the leader is doing, outline campaigns and issues, and publicise Thirumavalan's parliamentary interventions and the songs of the party. The latter are particularly telling. Some of the video-songs hosted on Thiruma.net (notably Akaran's, 2011, *Tamilar, Tamilar*) achieve a technical and musical sophistication that was completely missing during the movement phase. It is significant, though, that the section of songs is entitled 'Thirumavalavan songs' and almost all revolve around the leader. The institutionalisation of the party has given great importance to allocating party positions, but there is still no established secondary rung leader who can stand in for Thirumavalavan who remains the key speaker, icon and unifying figure in the party.

If anything, becoming a political party has accentuated the leader-centric nature of the party. Many branches at ward level had ceased to be active and women's wings at the local level likewise existed primarily in name. Thirumavalavan's visits to towns and villages still attract and motivate crowds and he remains more accessible than any other leader in the state, but during his tenure as an MP his ability to traverse the state was limited. In his absence, party discipline faltered and factionalism took root in several locations. Being a political leader also imposed certain restrictions. In 2011, thus, following caste violence in the village of Parali Puthur, Thirumavalavan failed to visit

the victims. As he noted: 'Had I gone then things would have escalated. There is no discipline in the party – we would have young men hanging from cars, crowding round and so on. BCs would accept that from DMK or ADMK or even PMK but not from us' (Personal Communication, September 2012).

The VCK here are caught in a double-bind. As a small party they cannot flout police advice with impunity, but the political culture of Tamil Nadu means that support is withdrawn from leaders who are seen as aloof or self-centred. Vernacularisation, Michelutti (2007, p. 654), argues, is 'grounded in local folk understandings and practices of democracy'. As Mines and Gourishankar (1990, p. 763) put it, the privileges accorded to leaders are 'circumscribed by values that subordinate his [sic.] liberty to the common good' (1990, p. 763). Dickey (1993) helpfully distinguishes between the 'politics of adulation' and the 'politics of patronage' here, to explain how politicians may retain followers despite accusations of corruption. The VCK typified the politics of adulation during their movement phase, but some of the adulation has dimmed in the wake of political participation and has yet to be replaced by systematic flows of patronage. Even VCK post-holders, therefore, admitted that 'some of the enthusiasm and urgency has been lost'.

Beyond Formal Recognition

This could just be a case of a party in the throes of change, that is slowly and unevenly putting formal mechanisms into place, but the institutionalisation of the VCK has arguably proceeded along a somewhat different path from that of the movements discussed by Gamson (1990) in the West. In *The Strategy of Social Protest*, Gamson (1990, pp. 28-9) argues that social movements aim at two basic outcomes: acceptance

as political players and the securing of new advantages for participants. On the basis of this, he devises a fourfold categorisation of movement outcomes: groups gaining full acceptance and securing new advantages are seen as successful and are said to have attained a 'full response'; those that are fully accepted but secure no advantages are subject to 'co-optation'; where movements gain many advantages but no recognition they are described as being 'pre-empted'; and finally, those that gain neither acceptance nor advantages, 'collapse'.

Mapping the VCK onto Gamson's criteria, there is little doubt that they have been co-opted. To leave the matter at that, however, would at best tell only half the story. Gamson's writing neglects the social context from which parties emerge. From this perspective, Mitchell's (2014) concept of protest leading to 'political arrival' is felicitous. The concept points towards formal political recognition, but also wider gains such as 'the right to visibility in the public arena' (2014, 521) and the costs entailed in integration to a particular way of doing politics. When asked about the gains of the VCK in its incarnation as a party, Jawahar, an activist and advocate argued: 'If you ask about achievements, then people who can speak their opinions and ideas have entered parliament and spoken up for Dalits on land issues, atrocity acts and so on. One cannot bring about huge changes in five years' (Interview, March 2012).

Jawahar here is foregrounding the issue of public visibility and reach. Likewise, one former Marxist-Leninist member of the VCK took issue with me when I pointed out that VCK members had voted for opposing candidates in some constituencies. In Gamson's terms this would mark a clear failure of the party, but for Devaraj:

At least they [Dalits] are thinking about who to vote for rather than blindly voting for who they are told to vote for.

HG: Did they vote for money before?

Not even money. They would vote because the landlord told them who to vote for and that was enough. It is only now that they are starting to think for themselves and consider who to support.

HG: So in that light, this election is an improvement?

Better than before certainly. (Interview, July 2012)

In both these accounts, the 'gains' spoken of by my respondents are the less tangible ones of awareness raising, advocacy and confidence. In her study of post-Independence Tamil politics, Barnett (1976) notes how the Congress party relied on feudalistic ties of patronage between landlords and labourers to secure votes in the 1950s and early 1960s. It is against this back-drop that the freedom to choose assumes significance. Indeed, in the VCK's first election, they campaigned on the slogan: 'voting for ourselves' (Gorringe, 2005). If Dalit voters are now deciding who to back, rather than blindly following instructions, this in itself may be read as a success. Indeed, despite his cynicism about the VCK, Ramesh, a former Youth Wing leader of the party suggested that other parties can no longer bank on Dalit votes:

HG: So what benefits have there been for Dalit people from Puthiya Tamilagam (PT) and VCK becoming parties?

If you ask about benefits, then at election time they [established parties] give money... That's what is good. If you ask why, they are frightened that he will vote for the VCK and for fear of that they give money. (Interview, February 2012)

The assertion that other parties were compelled to make concessions by the rise of Dalit organisations was reinforced in a subsequent interview with Shantha, a female student from a remote village:

> Listen, in the last elections we are so backward we didn't even get money to vote. Everyone else got money, when I came here [to college] and asked other Scheduled Caste (SC) students they all said that they got money to vote. All we got was a cup of tea! (Interview, February 2012)

It would be mistaken, however, to read this statement in purely material terms. What Shantha is bemoaning relates *both* to material concerns and social status. 'It is because we are not recognised as equals, that we are ignored' was a common refrain. This sentiment was summarised in auto-driver Thennivan's assertion: 'Ambedkar made us human, but Thirumavalavan has made us leaders' (Interview, October 2012). In his eyes, the fact that a Dalit from an autonomous party could become an MP is a significant gain in itself. As Carswell and De Neve (2014, p. 1045) found, respect is as significant as recognition for many Tamil voters, but loyalty 'based on a powerful historical identification with a party or a party leader' remains a significant determinant of voting practices.

Panther Patronage?

Loyalty based on past performance and symbolism per se, however, is insufficient to retain support, so the VCK have had to learn the arts of patronage and using connections. Dhanapal, a local leader from near Madurai, noted:

> Now that we are a party, if we want to hold a protest we get a response from officials, our voices are heard, we have the opportunity to interact with alliance

partners. We've been in the DMK Front and the ADMK Front and so can speak to District Convenors and officials in each district or area. Now the VCK District Convenor and the DMK District Convenor and ADMK convenor have links. So what happens with these connections is that we can deploy them in the interests of the people. (Interview, March 2012)

Similarly, reflecting on the past five years, Gautam Sannah, propaganda secretary of the VCK argued: 'We have created an understanding of the processes to some extent; we have understood how to best use the ruling party' (Sannah 2012). They and their followers could point to jobs, loans, transfers and documents that had been secured through the intervention of the party.

Many are disappointed that this had made the VCK 'just another party', but activist and academic C. Lakshmanan argues that their actions need to be placed within the context of Tamil politics more generally: 'Tamil politics de-politicises the masses. It does not allow them or encourage them to think. It is based on patron-client relationships. On one hand there are the freebies – handing things out – and on the other the collapse of ideology' (Personal Communication, March 2012).

Within this context, 'gains' must be read in socio-political rather than purely political terms. Wyatt (2013, p. 46) notes how the emergent Most Backward Caste party – *Pattali Makkal Katchi* (Toiling Peoples' Party, PMK) – lacked patronage resources itself, but was able to put pressure on the two main parties to revisit their welfare policies. Similarly, the VCK have given Dalits a voice; highlighted discrimination; raised the profile of the Prevention of Atrocities Act; secured some patronage for followers; and

gained recognition and respect from others. Operating within the hegemonic ways of doing politics, however, comes at a price. The universal concerns about compromise have a particularly sharp edge here, where leaders are accused of compromising in cases of caste discrimination. As Vakil, a lawyer, observed: 'Now that they are a party they are in contact with other party leaders. Many of the accused will have party connections and so pressure is put on this lot to drop cases or come to some agreement' (Interview, July 2012).

One NGO worker went further, alleging that: 'When I go to meet cases, I now have three opponents: police, caste Hindus and Dalit parties [who are keen to compromise for a price]' (Interview, March 2012). Allegations and rumours of this nature were pervasive both *within* and outside the party. For all the delight at seeing their leader in Parliament, members of the VCK were surprisingly disillusioned.

Tamil and/or Dalit?

The main explanation for this disillusionment is the adoption of Tamil nationalism. The VCK has always spoken of Tamil nationalism and supported the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in their struggle for a separate homeland in Sri Lanka, but this was always secondary to the Dalit struggle. Now, as the party seeks to broaden its base of support as similar parties have done (Suri, 2013, p. 230), it emphasises Tamil issues and actively seeks to recruit and promote non-Dalits.

Respondents speak in terms of 'Tamil Nationalism', but it is important to note that what they mean by this term is generally the pervasive sense of Tamilness that dominates the cultural politics of the state. The VCK call for a separate homeland for Sri Lankan

Tamils, but there is no talk of secession from the Indian state. It refers instead, as Vera-Sanso argues, to 'an anti-Hindu, anti-North Indian stance [occasionally seen in speeches against northern migrants] and emphasises a common Tamil identity based on... the essentialised "Tamil" values of female chastity, male valour, motherhood and love of the Tamil language' (2006, p. 187). The circulation of such ideas through films, political speeches, newspapers and education and their widespread acceptance, means that 'Tamil nationalism' offers a structured framework through which to widen the VCK's appeal. The logic of the shift in emphasis is clear. As Madurai District secretary Ellallan noted:

> Why should we let them exclude us? We are Tamils too, so we call ourselves a Tamil party. Our people will accept that. If we call ourselves a Dalit party then they will isolate us forever. So we are a Tamil party but we are opposed to caste unlike the other parties. (Interview, March 2012)

The leaders view this as a platform on which to reach out to other castes; secure recognition as a general (not caste) party; reduce caste animosity; draw voters away from other parties; and emphasise their status as Tamils. But ground level cadre see the induction of non-Dalits into party leadership positions as a slap in the face: 'I've been in the party for 20 years, why am I not recognised?' This maps onto an accusation that non-Dalits are merely out to enrich themselves rather than committed to the goals of the party and, in some cases, onto a claim that the VCK has 'abandoned Dalits'.

It is here that the debate about co-optation is most contested. The VCK argue that, unlike any other party, they campaign on common issues alongside others but also protest against caste atrocities. Their 'full recognition' as a *party*, however, has not

meant that political allies stand with them to condemn caste-based atrocities. For all the rhetorical emphasis on social justice and campaigns against caste discrimination the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu remain casteist in outlook and practice. Constituency candidates are decided on the basis of caste arithmetic and seats are allocated to allies on a similar basis (Manikandan and Wyatt, 2014, p. 40).

There are indications that dominant groups are willing to compromise, but dominant caste politicians have launched a backlash and openly called for the repeal of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act and urged members not to marry outside of their caste. Indeed, *Paatali Makkal Katchi* Member of the Legislative Assembly, J. Guru openly threatened retaliation against cross-caste marriages. Mass violence against Dalits is said to have declined, but 'honour killings' are common and there have been several recent attacks on *cheris* (Dalit settlements) that have set light to houses and destroyed or looted goods. Dominant castes are taking refuge in allegations of reverse victimisation to shore up caste solidarity and status. Backward Caste organisations like the *Thevar Community Protection Front* or *Kongu Vellalar Gounder Front* speak of Dalits receiving unfair advantages and preferential treatment. As one journalist noted, however, 'the main issue is the challenge to caste pride and dominance: "these people used to be our serfs and now they are demanding to sit alongside us!"' (Personal Communication, February 2012).

It is against this backdrop that the VCK must be analysed. Despite the rise of Dalit parties, it appears as though the core imperatives of the state were implicitly tied to the interests of intermediate castes. These are the groups that have benefited most from the two Dravidian parties (Barnett, 1976; Subramanian, 1999). Dalit activists point to a

long list of occasions in which Dalit protests and concerns have been forcefully repressed when they were perceived as posing too great a challenge. In 1999 police *lathi* charged a march in Tirunelveli killing 17 people. The police were exonerated of all blame by an official commission. In 2011 police fired on unarmed protestors marking the anniversary of Dalit hero Immanuel Sekaran. Again, the police were absolved of all blame. Such incidents lead to a perception that Dalits will only be tolerated if their actions do not challenge the interests of the dominant castes (X-Ray Manikam, interview, April 2012).

The question is whether the integration of Dalit parties into the mainstream serves to advance Dalit concerns or to silence them. Many activists fear that the latter has occurred. The Tamil nationalist alliance between the PMK and VCK is alleged by activists to have led the Dalit party to remain silent about high profile caste atrocities that we might have expected them to challenge. Party loyalists vigorously contest such accounts – and there were numerous occasions when I learned of VCK protests around issues they were said to have neglected – but the VCK is constrained in its decisions and ability to sustain protests due to a lack of resources. Punitha Pandian, the editor of long-running *Dalit Murasu,* pointed to the VCK's reliance on funding from other parties to explain why there was not more of a protest when VCK Member of the Legislative Assembly, Ravikumar, was beaten up by police in 2007 (Interview, April 2012).

Concluding Thoughts

At a recent seminar discussion on Dalit politics, the prevailing sentiment was summed up by Professor Muthu Mohan, Guru Nanak Chair at Madurai Kamaraj University: 'Do

Dalit parties have a clear political strategy? It seems like they work hard to get to Chennai, raise a flag, launch a paper and then sit there bargaining with other parties. What is the long term goal?' (Fieldnotes, April 2012).

One of the key challenges of institutionalisation has been to move from being a protest movement that *reacted* to instances of abuse, discrimination and exclusion, to a political party that can articulate a coherent vision. Every time I asked anyone what the VCK had achieved, they returned to their movement days and the transformation in attitudes, aspirations and expectations that they engendered amongst the people. When I pressed them on achievements as a *party*, however, people were much less forthcoming. The VCK has clearly established itself as a political player in the state: its symbols are recognised; it has access to some patronage; its leaders are recognised and respected by local authorities and police; its leader is widely recognised – to the extent of being lampooned in the cartoons of popular, non-political weeklies. It is seen as a worthy coalition partner, and is starting to gain wider recognition (Thirumavalavan's invitation to London to address a meeting on Sri Lanka in November 2012 for instance).

The VCK, in Dryzek at al.'s (2003, p. 64) terms, have encountered a 'passively inclusive' state in which 'the reality of access often falls short of the appearance'. Dalit concerns are integrated into the state in the form of legislation, numerous policies and, increasingly, in terms of alliances with Dalit parties. Despite this, the end result of such inclusion leaves much to be desired. When the VCK were allied to the ruling DMK, they had access to DMK leaders, frequently spoke on DMK platforms, and were able to distribute some jobs and handouts. These gains, however, were ad hoc and individualistic rather than significant collective advantages.

The 1989 Prevention of Atrocities act, for example, is a robust and formidable piece of legislation designed to abolish forms of caste discrimination. Its very presence on the statute books is credited by many with subduing dominant castes. Yet the conviction rate for the act is very low. In 2012, the Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, Mukul Wasnik, called the conviction rate of 17.4% in Tamil Nadu between 2008 and 2010 a 'a matter of concern' (*The Hindu,* 2012a). The Minister's comments can be seen as signalling the importance of Dalit issues, but rural Dalits speak of the daily struggle to get cases registered properly and taken seriously. Perhaps the best indication of the VCK's inclusion, therefore, is in the Communist Party (Marxist) decision to launch a campaign against untouchability. Dalit parties may not be winning many seats but they are shaping the political agenda, to some degree.

In Gamson's terms, if the VCK has not gained a 'full response' it has not been totally co-opted either. Its 2012 protests against caste discrimination, the police firing in Paramakudi in 2011, and the desecration of Ambedkar statues demonstrate an abiding commitment to the Dalit cause. The problem is that the party has been overly integrated into the Tamil way of doing politics. The VCK galvanised people who had never voted before in 1999 but is now closely tied to opposition parties and struggles to enthuse its core supporters as it did in the past. As a small – or movement – party it lacks the resources to win people over with material gains, but it is too vociferous on Dalit issues to be fully embraced into ruling coalitions and must fight for adequate representation in elections and feel compelled to temper their speeches on Dravidian stages.

Its core demands may match state imperatives as set out in the constitution, but they clash with unwritten imperatives in Tamil political culture that are shaped by caste and privilege. As its leaders plot out a strategy that will enable them to win elections with the support of others, the cadre at the grass-roots are reduced to singing the praises of their leader and hoping for a return to the glorious struggles of the past in which activists took to the streets rather than negotiating with alliance partners. At best, the VCK's 'political arrival' has 'produced marginal gains, at worst it involves blatant co-optation' as Rani, case-worker in a Dalit organisation, put it:

> There are two main parties here and only they can win. We are like a mouse caught in a cage with a cat – we'll do anything to escape and so we vote for the other party to gain some respite. We need to escape from their coalitions and the pressure that they place on Dalit leaders. We need an alternative politics to develop properly not more of the same. (Interview, March 2012)

Postscript, December 2015

In late 2015, the VCK finally broke ties with the Dravidian parties and joined with Vaiko's MDMK (*Marumalarchi* – Renaissance, DMK) and the Communist Parties in a People's Welfare Front that focused on welfare and united in condemning 'honour killings', corruption and calling for prohibition. Given past electoral results there is little prospect of the PWF seizing power in state elections, but if the alliance endures then it does at least offer the prospect of an alternative politics that may be able to exert pressure on other parties from the outside.

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