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Recalling Democracy: Electoral Politics, Minority Representation, And Dalit Assertion In Modern India

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the entanglements of Dalit (formerly "untouchable") activists in southern India with the ideas and practices of democracy. The research seeks to understand how democracy is understood, experienced, and put to use by marginalized groups to communicate political demands, represent their interests, and participate in deliberative processes from which they have been excluded. This project chronicles the political transformation of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, VCK or Liberation Panthers Party, from an outwardly militant social movement into electoral politics, charting its transition from boycotts to ballots. Through an ethnography of democratic integration and minority representation, the dissertation analyzes a layering of political strategies whereby VCK organizers struggled to represent Dalit concerns: legal advocacy, contentious street politics, and electoral democracy. Drawing upon more than three years of fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, India, hundreds of interviews with party organizers, and a wide breadth of primary and secondary source materials, the project illustrates that formal integration within electoral democracy does not inherently bolster minority representation, but, from the perspective of VCK leaders, it mired their party in a web of complex negotiations that compromised its early platform and undercut its capacity for robust minority advocacy. A diachronic study of the VCK demonstrates that democratic politics does not necessarily erase, but may compound existing forms of inequality as its experience is mediated by prevailing socio-economic disparities premised on caste, class, gender, race, and religion. Altogether, the dissertation nuances our understanding of how democracy is understood and experienced by marginalized social groups, at once accounting for its powerful social imaginary and potent political vocabulary while remaining attentive to its limitations when approached as the principal platform for minority representation.

RECALLING DEMOCRACY: ELECTORAL POLITICS, MINORITY

REPRESENTATION, AND DALIT ASSERTION IN MODERN INDIA

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Lisa Mitchell

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INTRODUCTION

Dalit Assertion and the Politics of Modern India:

Entanglements with Democracy, Elections, and Representation

In the weeks preceding August 15, 1997, India prepared lavish celebrations to mark the golden jubilee of Independence. In the national capital, New Delhi, organizers choreographed a commemorative program in parliament that re-enacted scenes from the freedom struggle, a re-staging of history replete with A-list vocals from Lata Mangeshkar and Bhimsen Joshi paired with redacted audio-recordings of landmark speeches by national icons like Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose.[1] In the southernmost state of Tamil Nadu, M. Karunanidhi, the presiding Chief Minister and head of the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) party, pledged to redress what he considered a historical injustice against the Tamil people. Charging that the Tamils had not been allotted sufficient attention in popular accounts of the freedom struggle, Karunanidhi, or *Kalaignar* (the Artist) as he is known, pledged to set the record straight and pen a history of the vital contributions of "*Dravida desam*," or the Dravidian nation, to Indian Independence.[2] Addressing the press following a public rally in Trichi, he appealed to Tamil Nadu's Dalit leaders (ex-untouchables), who proposed to observe Independence Day as a "black day," to call off their planned *bandh* (general strike) and partake in the jamboree.[3] The chief minister reportedly opined that *bandhs* had become routine in recent years, lamenting that such disruptions of law and order were all too often orchestrated "for flimsy reasons."[4]

On July 27, 1997, against the backdrop of national preparations for India's golden jubilee, Thol. Thirumaavalavan, chairman of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* (Liberation Panthers), Tamil Nadu's largest social movement representing Dalits, dispatched postcards to district secretaries across the state. In handwritten correspondence, he extolled the movement's "very successful uprising" in Chennai the previous week, but emphasized that the rally-cum-procession, which had brought the state capital to a standstill on July 23rd, was only the initial step in the movement's two-pronged response to the recent atrocity in Melavalavu, where an upper caste gang

had murdered a Dalit panchayat (village council) president along with his five associates on June 29, 1997.[5] Addressing his district secretaries, Thirumaavalavan wrote, "For the next phase, it is critical that you assemble a minimum of thirty district-level organizers and convene a planning committee to prepare for the approaching August 15th protest."[6] Concurrent with nationwide preparations to commemorate the golden jubilee of Indian Independence, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers planned to burn the tri-colored national flag in protests across the state to highlight, as one organizer recalled, "that our community had not yet received independence from bonded servitude and casteism."[7]

In preparation for the *bandh*, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* party workers distributed handbills and posted colorful wall posters in Dalit colonies across the state. One poster, which depicted the tri-colored national flag set ablaze, declared August 15th "the golden jubilee of independence for caste fanaticism," while another posed a pair of rhetorical questions: "Do casteist gangs not run rampant here? Does the national flag not flutter amidst the smoldering ashes of the *cheri* (Dalit colony)?"[8] The movement's provocative propaganda not only attracted intense media scrutiny, but elicited strong rebuke from state authorities, some of whom pledged to incarcerate *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers under articles of national security legislation should they follow through with their plan to torch the national flag.[9] As the chorus of state criticism reached a crescendo, even threatening to disband the movement outright, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers relented in their proposal and, instead, proposed to burn effigies representing the Indian nation, or *desiya kodumbavi*.[10] Alerting the press to this alteration in plans on August 11, 1997, Thirumaavalavan seized the opportunity to juxtapose the Independence Day celebrations with the ground reality of "oppression meted out to Dalits."[11]

Concurrent with the golden jubilee celebration, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers conducted parallel rallies that drew attention to the plight of India's Dalit citizens and exposed the state government's failure to ensure basic rights and redress quotidian practices of untouchability.[12] In propagating their *bandh* in Dalit communities, movement activists questioned, "How can our people residing in *cheris*

(Dalit colonies) be declared free when they even lack the freedom to wear *chappals* (sandals)?"[13] Further, Thirumaavalavan declared in *Dalit*, a vernacular journal:

> A free society is a society without domination, exploitation, and repression. The only society that can celebrate Independence is one that is able to determine its own political and economic livelihood. Does this right exist for the Dalit people? Still today, the Dalit people have not received liberation from the prison of the *cheri*. There is no rule of law here; instead, caste reigns. In Uttar Pradesh, a Dalit woman was paraded naked. In this condition, it is a travesty to celebrate the golden jubilee and identify it as Independence. The murders occurred in Melavalavu because the Dalit people opposed the hegemony of local caste fanatics. The Dalit people, who continue to live without freedom, consider such [Independence Day] celebrations to be shameful acts.[14]

As *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* activists conducted parallel rallies across Tamil Nadu on August 15, 1997, police battalions descended upon Dalit colonies and engaged in a *lathi*, or wooden baton, charge to disrupt their activities, arresting hundreds of movement activists in the process.[15]

In 2009, I met with M. Yallalan, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Madurai District Secretary (rural), at a public park in Arasaradi, Madurai. Situated on an open field circumambulated by residents enjoying a brisk evening stroll, the monotonous din of traffic drones on in the distance. Seated across from me, Yallalan discusses the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* electoral turn and recounts its transition from an extra-parliamentary movement into a political party in 1999. As he chronicles the movement's pre-electoral phase, Yallalan hails my attention to the golden jubilee protest to juxtapose the idea of freedom and, as he suggests, the promise of democracy, with the lived experience of Dalits across India. Recounting the 1997 golden jubilee celebrations, he recollects how teachers distributed sweets and miniature tri-colored flags in classrooms while bureaucrats and politicians draped floral garlands around busts of M. K. Gandhi, often considered to be the father of the Indian nation, and conducted elaborate flag-hoisting ceremonies.[16] "All of this," he emphasizes, "was to celebrate the fact that we had gained Independence."[17] Yallalan proceeds, "The rest of India celebrated its freedom, but a section of the people still couldn't wear *chappals* (sandals) and experienced myriad forms of caste discrimination. We wanted to

highlight that this much-acclaimed 'freedom' was never extended to our people in the *cheri.*"[18]

Recounting the logistics of the Independence Day *bandh*, Yallalan recounts, "While the government celebrated the golden jubilee of its Independence, our organizers traveled from one colony to the next and organized a protest that we called *sudandhirak kodumbavi erippuppor,"* which translates as 'the war to burn the effigy of Independence'. "We constructed figurines that represented the Indian nation and set them on fire in our colonies and public spaces across Tamil Nadu."[19] In defiance of the state government's warning, he recalls that some activists even draped these effigies in the national flag prior to setting them ablaze in crowded public streets. Yallalan stresses that *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* cadre used the occasion to entreat local communities to ponder what it means to celebrate freedom in a country that had failed to safeguard their basic rights enshrined in the Constitution. Independence had been won, he suggests, but freedom deferred. Following a short pause, I asked Yallalan why his movement entered electoral politics a brief two years after the golden jubilee protest. He responded without a moment's hesitation, *"We needed to show that there was no democracy."*[20]

Objective of the Study

This dissertation examines the entanglements of Dalit activists in southern India with ideas and practices of democracy. The research seeks to understand how democracy is understood, experienced, and put to use by socially marginalized groups to communicate political demands, represent their interests, and participate in deliberative processes from which they are excluded. This project chronicles the transformation of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (VCK), or Liberation Panthers Party, from an outwardly militant social movement into electoral politics, providing an ethnographic account of democratic participation and minority representation in modern India. Today, the VCK, whose name and inspiration draw from the Black Panthers of America, factors among the largest political parties representing Dalits (formerly "untouchables"), who comprise roughly 180 million, or nearly one-sixth of

India's 1.2 billion inhabitants. In Tamil Nadu, Dalits, who comprise more than 20% of the state population, remain concentrated in rural areas where they work primarily as landless agricultural laborers.[21] Despite constitutional safeguards and affirmative action programs introduced to promote their uplift, Dalits continue to lag in virtually all development indicators and experience myriad forms of discrimination.[22] By juxtaposing successive strategies deployed by VCK organizers to represent Dalit concerns—legal advocacy (1982-1992), mass agitational politics (1992-1999), electoral democracy (1999-present)—the project culminates from more than three years of in-country fieldwork, extensive interviews with party leadership, and a wide range of vernacular primary and secondary source materials to present a historically sensitive and ethnographically informed study of democratic integration and minority representation in modern India.

Without filtering my study through a western paradigm, the project draws on ethnography from the global south to inform our understanding of democracy more generally, as normative theory and lived-experience, by conveying how historically marginalized communities interface with, navigate, and at times contest its institutions. Academic scholarship and popular discourse have often interpreted the expansion of minority participation in elections as a triumph in itself that signals a more 'inclusive' society. A study of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics further nuances our understanding of the uses, constraints, and limitations of electoral democracy in affording a platform for socially marginalized groups to advocate their concerns and provides a lens into alternative strategies of political representation that operate beyond the electoral framework. The dissertation title, "Recalling Democracy" refers not only to the firsthand recollections of democratic politics proffered by my interlocutors, literally how they recall their experience of democracy, but it concurrently conveys an underlying anxiety that pervaded our conversations, an abiding concern that democracy, which they had once heralded as a means to achieve social and political equality, had ultimately proven faulty, perhaps warranting a recall.

This project offers two core contributions to our understanding of popular politics, minority representation, and democratic practice. First, the study provides a

longitudinal account of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition from boycotts to ballots, tracing the development and use of different strategies of political representation designed to advocate Dalit concerns. A diachronic study of VCK politics enables us to examine a layering of representative strategies across time without treating electoral democracy as its default, natural, or most effective expression, but as one among its possible forms. Secondly, the project contributes a unique perspective to the anthropological study of democracy in India and across the developing world. While existing scholarship has examined the integration of minority groups in electoral politics and the broad range of ideas and practices that are now associated with democracy in popular discourse, less attention has explored this theme through the personal narratives of the political leadership representing historically marginalized groups. To fill this void, this project examines how the leaders who navigated the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition into electoral democracy recount their experience of democratic politics and, thereby, considers how this contact generates new understands of the relationship between democracy, elections, and representation. As a whole, this dissertation demonstrates that democratic integration does not necessarily bolster minority representation, but, as the experience of democratic politics is always mediated through existing forms of inequality, such strategies may undercut robust minority advocacy when used as the primary instrument for articulating the political grievances of marginalized groups.

Strategies of Representation

The conventional view of political representation regards it as a device to facilitate decision-making processes in large groups that are unable to engage directly in policy deliberation.[23] This view often casts representation as a relation between two constituted entities, the representative and the represented, such that the former is authorized and held accountable through elections. In her seminal study of the subject, *The Concept of Representation*, Hanna Pitkin maps the semantic terrain of representation, providing a taxonomy that continues to inform scholarship today. For Pitkin, a paradox lies at the very heart of representation as it consists of "the making present of

something which is nevertheless not literally present."[24] Her work meticulously catalogues four "views" of representation (formalistic, symbolic, descriptive, and substantive) that capture the multiple forms that it may assume.[25] Rather than proposing to clarify its internal contradictions, Pitkin encourages us to embrace the underlying paradox of representation and defines genuine representation as a "substantive acting for others," stipulating that representatives must wield sufficient autonomy *yet* also act in a responsive manner to those that they represent.[26] Pitkin's account provides an enduring conceptual vocabulary to discuss different aspects of political representation, but, by her own admission, her emphasis on elections as the primary mechanism for authorization and accountability mistakenly assumed a natural congruence between representation and democracy.[27]

Pitkin's contribution features as a mainstay of political theory, but, from the 1990s, a group of feminist and African-American scholars honed their critique on her claim that descriptive representation, which is when representatives are said to 'mirror' key attributes or traits of those represented, undercuts substantive representation and democratic accountability.[28] Operating with the normative assumption that democratic institutions require an equitable representation of difference, these theorists raised questions in regards to institutional design, querying how to make representative institutions more equitable and responsive to the chronic problem of social exclusion. In her defense of descriptive representation, Jane Mansbridge argues for its capacity to strengthen democratic accountability in environments where minority interests have not yet crystalized and political contexts characterized by deep-seated mistrust.[29] Taken together, these scholars formulated a rejoinder to Pitkin's critique of descriptive representation that inquired how to make representative institutions more responsive to minority interests, but their studies, which focused exclusively on western society, constricted their frame of analysis to forms of elected representation and democratic institutions.

More recently, scholarship has broadened our analysis of political representation outside of democratic institutions and beyond a narrow focus on electoral mechanisms in order to account for its changing, global dynamics. Andrew

Rehfeld calls for a general theory that disaggregates our study of political representation from representative government in order to reckon with the wide range of individuals and organizations claiming to engage in the work of representation today.[30] Similarly, Laura Montanaro scrutinizes contexts in which claims of representation are made by individuals and groups not formally authorized through elections. Her work takes seriously the salience of "nonelected actors" to practices of political representation, noting that their claims are often made "in response to representative deficits produced by the institutions of electoral politics and by disparities in political weight and efficacy."[31] Taken further, Jennifer Rubenstein proposes a theory of "surrogate accountability" that considers how these nonelected actors might promote democratic accountability under conditions of severe inequality where less powerful groups would, under the conventional model, lack the capacity to sanction elected representatives and powerful authorities.[32] Taken together, these scholars stretched our analysis of representation beyond its conventional emphasis on democratic institutions and an electoral mechanism in order to account for varying dynamics of representation across the globe.

In an account of current literature in the field, Matthias Lievens observes, "representation is now increasingly seen as a construction of the represented, as a form through which the invisible is made visible."[33] Instead of describing representation as a relation that makes present what is not actually present (i.e., Pitkin), Lievens draws upon the thought of Jacques Rancière to project the work of representation in terms of a discursive process that renders visible what may otherwise have gone unnoticed.[34] Building on what has since been termed the "constructivist approach," Michael Saward calls for "shifting our frame of reference in order to explore what is going on *in* representation," in order to inspect its dynamics and "examine representation as a creative process that spills beyond legislatures."[35] Hence, Saward proposes structuring our study around "the representative claim," that is "seeing representation in terms of *claims to be representative* by a variety of political actors, rather than (as is normally the case) seeing it as an achieved, or potentially achievable, state of affairs as a result of election."[36] In effect, he suggests that "a conception of representation which stresses its

dynamic, claim-based character, its performative aspects as well as its narrowly institutional ones, and its potential for radical extension, can open up new ways for us to think about political inclusion and a more pluralistic representative politics…"[37] Unsettling Pitkin's classic paradox, this new approach to political representation does not merely consist of the *re*-presentation of what is nevertheless absent, but entails a discursive process that renders visible what was previously unseen.[38]

This dissertation presents an empirical study that extends recent innovations in our study of political representation and provides an ethnographic lens into the strategies, practices, and methods through which historically marginalized groups such as India's Dalits make claims on state authority. The project looks beyond the conventional dyad of representative/represented and instead calls our attention to the 'how' and 'where' of political representation; that is, I study representation not as a concrete social fact or relation between two entities, but as a dynamic process in an attempt to uncover its variable modes of transmission and the multiple spaces of its articulation. Through a longitudinal study of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics, the project examines a layering of political strategies over the span of nearly three decades whereby Dalit organizers sought to represent their constituents' interests.[39] In juxtaposing different strategies of political representation across time, the study considers distinctive techniques through which movement leaders articulated Dalit grievances and struggled to insert these concerns on policy agendas. The study conveys how close attention to spaces and methods of representing minority concerns, including those that eschew a conventional focus on elections and formal institutions, enable us to understand how, in a context marked by severe inequality, historically marginalized groups engage in deliberative processes by recourse to a diverse repertoire of representative strategies designed to heighten their visibility and amplify their voice. Further, this approach enables us to examine movement among forms of "electoral" and "nonelectoral" representation, presenting this engagement as a dynamic process rather than a binary distinction.

The following chapters provide a diachronic account of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics that chronicles a layering of representative strategies whereby party activists

attempted to intercede on behalf of their community and represent Dalit interests. From the early 1980s, the first wave of movement activists espoused legal advocacy as a technique to articulate political demands, submitting official petitions through formal institutional channels that raised their concerns and sought to remedy their grievances. But, as institutional channels proved unresponsive and its membership expanded, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers retained their commitment to legal advocacy and extended their platform to encompass mass agitational politics. From the 1990s, movement organizers embraced contentious street politics as an additional means to articulate Dalit concerns and, therefore, embraced the public sphere as a complementary forum to express their grievances and make political claims. Confronted with the 'liberal' use of stringent national security laws in the late-1990s, movement leaders tentatively entered electoral democracy as an alternate strategy to advocate Dalit interests. This movement from legal advocacy to agitational politics and then electoral democracy does not signal a radical aberration of early movement politics or imply that one mode of political practice supplanted what had come before, but rather denotes a layering of representative strategies in response to an evolving political landscape. A close study of these strategies across time enables us to evaluate the challenges associated with representing minority concerns under conditions of severe inequality and, thereby, to revisit the popular correlation between democratic participation and political representation.

A Democratic Revolution?

At the cusp of decolonization, Jawaharlal Nehru, who would soon feature as the nation's first Prime Minister, opined that caste was antithetical to the very project of democracy in India. In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru wrote:

> In the context of society today, the caste system and much that goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive, and barriers to progress. There can be no equality in status and opportunity within its framework, nor can there be political democracy, and much less, economic democracy. Between these two conceptions conflict is inherent, and only one of them can survive.[40]

For Nehru and many of the western educated reformers and liberal elite who filled the ranks of the early Congress Party, caste was envisioned as a residual, immutable vestige of tradition that, despite jeopardizing the expansion of democracy in India, would eventually buckle and yield to the idea of modern citizenship and economic progress in due time.[41] But, political developments in the ensuing decades gave ample reason to pause and reassess this early prognosis.

Beginning with M.N. Srinivas in the late-1950s, Indian sociology observed a transformation of caste coincident with the expansion of democratic politics, acknowledging the reorientation of a purportedly vertical caste 'system' structured on a principle of hierarchy into horizontal congeries of caste divisions that had adapted to the quantitative logic of electoral politics. In an early essay, Srinivas challenged conventional wisdom, which had forecast the enervation of caste following the development of modern economic and political systems, to suggest quite the opposite: caste was not waning in tandem with the development of Indian democracy, but rather experiencing a "horizontal consolidation."[42] Subsequent studies by A.M. Shah and D.L. Sheth extended Srinivas' early observations, taking note that caste had proven surprisingly malleable in its interface with democracy, prompting both authors to pronounce that caste was no longer moored in a vertical hierarchy, but had in fact been rearticulated through horizontal alliances to augment the political stature of preponderant groups.[43] Tracing this development, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, Rajni Kothari, and Robert Hardgrave contributed empirical studies that investigated how caste federations adapted to the exigencies of electoral politics by broadening and leveraging their social base.[44]

By the latter decades of the twentieth century, many caste associations had transformed into political parties. While the years surrounding the submission (1980) and implementation (1990) of the Mandal Commission Report are reputed to have been a driving force for a "recalcitrance of caste" in the political arena, such scholarly approaches to the heightened visibility of caste in electoral politics was, at first, Janus-faced.[45] Although some pundits interpreted the newfound salience of caste in electoral politics to be a corrosive element that contributed to heightened levels of corruption

and a criminalization of politics, the dominant thrust in academic literature envisioned caste as an integral aspect of modern democracy, if not a democratizing force in its own right.[46] While scholarship posits the prominence of caste in contemporary politics, it differs markedly in its treatment of post-Mandal politics, deliberating what these changes have brought to bear on the everyday functioning of representative institutions.[47] Driven chiefly by studies on shifting patterns of electoral participation and marked changes in the social profile of elected representatives, recent scholarship repudiates critics who interpreted the prominence of caste in post-Mandal politics as emblematic of the ill-health of democracy, arguing instead that it had contributed to a more equitable distribution of authority. In effect, these scholars maintained that the politicization of caste had spurred a 'democratization' of the political system.

Regardless of normative assessments, whether framed as a narrative of decline or a tale of the advent of popular democracy, lower caste voters have redrawn the contours of democratic politics from the late-1980s. Though electoral turnout has not increased dramatically, Yogendra Yadav noted, "the social composition of those who vote and take part in political activities has undergone a major change. There is a participatory upsurge among the socially underprivileged, whether seen in terms of caste hierarchy, economic class, gender distinction or the rural-urban divide."[48] Likewise, Zoya Hasan detected "a dramatic upsurge in political participation," which she discerned particularly "among the socially underprivileged in the caste and class hierarchy."[49] Not only do social minorities now exercise their franchise in record numbers, but the period witnessed the formation of autonomous political parties advocating on their behalf.[50] In a study of how these developments altered the social composition of state assemblies and the national parliament, Christophe Jaffrelot borrowed an expression from former Prime Minister V. P. Singh when he trumpeted a "silent revolution," referring to a "mostly peaceful transition" of political authority whereby the "plebeians" began to dislodge an entrenched elite from elected office.[51] Considered together, these scholars captured a critical moment of transition in modern Indian democracy, which they conveyed through a new, and ostensibly optimistic, lexicon.

But, subsequent studies tempered the ebullient tenor of these earlier works. For instance, Surinder Jodhka argues that the relationship of caste to democracy cannot be captured in "a single, general thesis," but must consider caste politics contextually and remain attentive to local power structures and patterns of material access. He cautions that what is often referred to as a 'democratization' of the electoral arena in fact denotes the entrenchment of particular caste interests in state institutions, which routinely serves to undermine the democratic aspirations of alternative groups. As a corrective, Jodhka calls for a "differentiated discussion" on caste and democracy that takes into account a "diversity of effects that political mobilizations by different caste groups can produce for the working of democracy."[52] Recent anthropological studies lend ethnographic weight to Jodhka's contention, illuminating how caste competition is rearticulated through democratic politics and directed towards securing preferential access to state resources and opportunities.[53] Among these studies, Jeffrey Witsoe illustrates how networks organized around caste "connect state institutions with local relations of dominance and subordination… producing a state unable to impartially deliver services and enforce individual rights."[54] His account conveys the uneven effects and "markedly undemocratic" outcomes often generated by caste politics, noting that "a "democratization" of power did not result in an equal empowerment for all, or even most, subaltern groups."[55]

In addition, anthropologists have called our attention to the micro-level dynamics of caste politics and its interface with popular conceptions of democracy. In her study of caste politics in Uttar Pradesh, Lucia Michelutti considers how "ideas and practices of democracy become embedded in particular cultural and social practices and in turn become entrenched in the consciousness of ordinary people."[56] She argues that a focus on "the practices and ideas of local people" provides a necessary corrective to existing literature preoccupied with "macro-level explanations of 'transition' and 'consolidation' which stress the roles played by institutions and elites."[57] "Importantly," she writes, "this new literature on the anthropology of democracy draws attention to the daily lives and political struggles of people living in non-elite sectors of society."[58] While Michelutti's study affords critical insight into processes by which democracy,

both as an idea and set of practices, becomes "vernacularized" within a given milieu, it posits an uncomfortable dichotomy of "popular" and "elite," which, if understood not as a binary but as relational categories, enables us to account for myriad other subject positions. Although anthropological studies have often focused on the popular understanding of democracy among 'ordinary' people, presenting it as a foil to that of traditional "elites," scholars are yet to provide a sustained analysis of how political organizers representing marginalized groups experience its institutions and, further, how this contact informs their understanding of democratic practice.

My project contributes a complementary vantage point to this research agenda, conveying ethnographically how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers experience democratic institutions and investigating what this brings to bear on their understanding of democracy, electoral politics, and minority representation, both in terms of normative theory and everyday political practice. Whereas existing literature often treats democratic integration as a *telos* or examines how caste groups make instrumental use of the election platform to gain preferential access to state resources and benefits, less attention has considered how these new political figures conceptualize democracy *vis-à-vis* their exposure to its institutions and, as of yet, no account has provided a longitudinal study tracing the development of these perspectives across time. This dissertation attempts to do both through a diachronic study *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics, charting its evolution from a social movement into party politics and providing an ethnography of democratic participation that investigates how Dalit organizers interface with democratic institutions. Further, the project demonstrates that democratic integration does not inherently bolster minority representation, but, as its experience is necessarily mediated by prevalent social disparities based on caste, class, gender, and religion, democratic politics may actually serve to compound existing forms of inequality.

Deconstructing 'Dravidianism'

Before proceeding further, the dissertation requires an overview of Tamil Nadu politics to provide historical context for the emergence of autonomous Dalit parties.

Popular discourse often narrates the political history of Tamil Nadu as a hagiography of the Dravidian Movement, opening with the distinguished career of E.V. Ramasamy (EVR), a fiery iconoclast popularly known as *"Periyar,"* or the 'Great Sage'. But, in fact, the seeds of Dravidian politics were sown in the provincial countryside during the late-nineteenth century when a "tiny élite of rich peasants," to borrow the phrase from David Washbrook, consolidated their grip on agrestic labor and the village economy, gradually expanding their economic portfolios to include credit, banking, and trade in addition to commercial agriculture.[59] Over time, this emergent class of village magnates migrated to growing market towns where they founded political and economic associations and gradually integrated into municipal government. It was some of these individuals who, in the early twentieth century, fronted the startup capital for the South Indian People's Association (1916), popularly known as the Justice Party, an early tributary of the Dravidian Movement.[60] The Justice Party provided a political platform for an emergent cluster of influential landowning castes to demand the political stature and social status that they felt was commensurate with their rising economic position.[61]

As Marguerite Ross Barnett observed, patterns of urbanization, class formation, and capital accumulation in the countryside gave rise to new political aspirations among upwardly mobile groups that had experienced mistreatment at the hands of Brahmins and perceived an apparent asymmetry in their developing economic stature and stagnant social position. Seeking improved access to formal education and government employment, they began to lobby British authorities for augmented access to avenues of development and cited as evidence their relative deprivation to the Brahmins, who featured prominently in colonial administration and academic institutions. Borrowing a term from colonial philology, this cluster of upwardly mobile non-Brahmin castes referred to themselves as "Dravidian," an ethnicized concept that, as Karthigesu Sivathamby has argued, provided the "cultural glue" for a consolidated platform that, while purporting to speak for "non-Brahmins," articulated the interests of select affluent, intermediate castes.[62] In sum, the growth of Dravidian politics was not so much a new phenomenon in the early decades of the

twentieth century, but an extension of earlier caste-driven politics emanating from the countryside where an emergent class of economically mobile caste groups advanced its collective interests through an ostensibly inclusive, yet highly restrictive, rhetoric of "Dravidianism."

The emergence of E. V. Ramasamy, an iconic leader and political provocateur born into a wealthy merchant family in Erode, and the formation of the Self-Respect Movement proved a watershed moment in the history of Dravidian politics. In 1925, EVR founded the Self-Respect Movement, an early precursor to the *Dravida Kazhagam* (DK), commonly called the Dravidian Movement. Later rechristened *"Periyar,"* meaning the "Great Sage," EVR professed principles of rationalism, self-respect, and caste eradication, blaming societal ills on the disproportionate influence of Brahmins in the late Madras Presidency. In particular, he launched a vitriolic critique of Brahmin authority through inflammatory rhetoric that pitted a reified 'Non-Brahmin' majority against a small Brahmin minority preponderant in colonial administration and educational institutions. The 'Brahmin' provided a malleable trope for Davidian politics, signifying a foreign 'other' distinguished by religion (Hinduism), language (Sanskrit/Hindi), and apocryphal claims to ethnicity (Aryan); in essence, the 'Brahmin' provided the foil against which 'Dravidian' was counterposed.[63] As an effect, EVR's politics kindled an incipient ethno-nationalism that carefully glossed caste divisions rife within Tamil society and provided a social dichotomy that structured subsequent politics: "Brahmin" and "non-Brahmin."

In 1949, C.N. Annadurai, a DK activist and an acclaimed scriptwriter, flanked by celebrated personalities in the Tamil film industry, led a breakaway faction of DK members into party politics when he established the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Dravidian Progress Federation), or DMK. Keen to seek their fortune in the newfound era of electoral democracy, DMK leaders harnessed the power of cinema and galvanized popular support through their unique brand of cultural nationalism that found a receptive audience in the early decades of post-Independence India.[64] Then, in 1956, the States Reorganization Act redrew territorial boundaries with an intent to establish more linguistically homogenous states in southern India; this, by

implication, ensured a chiefly Tamil-speaking electorate in present-day Tamil Nadu.[65] Language politics soon turned the tide in favor of DMK. Although intermittent anti-Hindi agitations had gripped Tamil Nadu since the 1930s, tensions came to a head in 1965 when DMK politicians alleged that the central government conspired to renew its earlier commitment to "impose" Hindi as the national language. Speaking in a classical idiom evoking Tamil antiquity, DMK leaders stoked popular sentiments through an impassioned defense of an apotheosized 'Mother Tamil'.[66] As a testament to its broad social appeal, in 1967 the DMK featured among the first regional parties to wrest power from the Indian National Congress in state government.

Following his death on February 3, 1969, Annadurai was succeeded by M. Karunanidhi, a celebrated screenwriter known simply by the moniker "*Kalaignar*" (the 'Artist'). Alarmed by the precipitous rise of cinema stars through party ranks, the DMK patriarch cast his eldest son, M. K. Muthu, in party-sponsored films as a shrewd endeavor to curb his rivals and consolidate his family's position in the party structure.[67] Whereas Muthu's acting career soon faded to oblivion, M. G. Ramachandran (MGR), an early DMK ally, converted his silver screen reputation as a patron of the poor into a real-life political persona.[68] Sensing a plot to arrest his rising stature in the party and convert his extensive fan base into Muthu supporters, MGR rattled sabers and raised allegations of rampant corruption against DMK leadership. Dismissed from the DMK in 1972, MGR converted the widespread network of cinema fan clubs established in his name into an extensive grassroots political infrastructure and, casting himself as the genuine heir to the principles of the late DMK founder, launched the *Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Anna's—ADMK), to which he later added the prefix "All India" (AIADMK).[69] With MGR at its helm, the AIADMK drubbed the DMK in the 1977 Tamil Nadu assembly polls, but health ailments cut short his tenure as Chief Minister. Following MGR's death on December 24, 1987, his former leading lady in the cinema field, J. Jayalalitha, consolidated her position in the party, over which she presided until her passing in 2016.[70]

From the late 1980s, however, Dravidian parties faced an insurgent challenge from 'below'. Whereas the DMK and AIADMK had peddled a monolithic vision of a

'casteless' Tamil society, the release of the Mandal Commission Report (1980), which endorsed a controversial extension of reservations (affirmative action benefits) to members of backwards caste groups, occasioned a wave of quota politics that undermined the Dravidian parties' capacity to gloss caste-specific issues. Appeals to "Mother Tamil" failed to resonate as the vernacular of Tamil politics shifted from cultural nationalism to the politics of the backwards castes. First, in 1980, Dr. S. Ramadoss founded the *Vanniyar Sangam*, an fusion of twenty-seven Vanniyar organizations representing Tamil Nadu's largest caste community, under a single-point agenda: he demanded an exclusive reservations quota for Vanniyars in government employment and academic institutions.[71] After demonstrating the sheer depth of his political support through a 1987 road *roko* (obstruction) protest that crippled transportation infrastructure and caused food shortages in the state capital, Ramadoss launched the *Pattali Makkal Katchi* (PMK), or Toiling People's Party, in 1989, which siphoned Vanniyar votes from Dravidian parties, especially the DMK, and often played the role of spoiler in tight elections.[72]

The following year, in 1990, national celebrations honoring the birth centenary of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a prominent Dalit icon, law-maker, and chief architect of the Indian Constitution, spurred an upwelling of Dalit mobilization. Across the 1990s, Dalit activists and intellectuals launched virulent critiques against both Dravidian parties, refuting their rhetoric of a 'casteless' Tamil society and raising allegations of endemic anti-Dalit bias. Pledging "to turn the history of Tamil Nadu politics on its head," Thol. Thirumaavalavan, among the most prominent figures of this new generation of Dalit activists, mobilized his community through impassioned rhetoric, often couched in a militant idiom, that envisioned political power as an "asset" and beckoned his community to demand their due share. By the end of the decade, the largest Dalit movements in the state, namely Dr. K. Krishnasamy's *Pudhiya Tamizhagam* (New Tamil Society; PT) and Thol. Thirumaavalavan's *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* (Liberation Panthers), had gatecrashed the electoral arena and entered party politics.[73] This transformation of non-electoral caste organizations into political parties posed a sustained challenge to the DMK and AIADMK, not only undermining

their capacity to speak on behalf of a 'unified' Tamil community, but charging their leaders with shunting political concerns of social minorities and catering to a handful of affluent, numerically preponderant intermediate castes.[74]

The relationship of Dravidian parties to an uptick in caste-based mobilization and reported incidents of inter-caste violence from the late-1980s has been subject to scholarly debate. While Narendra Subramanian contends that Dravidian politics effectively curtailed what could have been an explosion in sectarian conflict, interpreting its decline as a catalyst for alternative forms of political mobilization, others including John Harriss diagnose the rise in caste violence, and particularly acts targeting Dalits, as symptomatic of Dravidian politics, which, by privileging the interests of powerful intermediate castes, sowed the seeds for caste conflict dating back to its foray into electoral democracy. For Harriss, democratic politics prompted an "ideological regression" of Dravidian politics, which relinquished its earlier commitment to a radical social agenda and, instead, pandered to numerically preponderant backwards caste groups, often at the expense of comparatively more marginalized and less electorally mobilized segments (i.e. Dalits). My reading of events echoes Harriss' contention that the growth of caste politics is not antithetical to an earlier Dravidian platform, but its natural extension. Dravidian parties abetted the consolidation of intermediate caste clusters as significant vote-banks and often pitted caste groups against each other in electoral politics.[75] In effect, heightened levels of caste mobilization did not occur despite Dravidian parties, but as a logical consequence of their politics.[76]

Although the emergence of caste-based parties splintered key Dravidian vote banks, the DMK and AIADMK acclimated to the electoral terrain. By the late 1990s, Dravidian parties had come to rely on political coalitions to contest elections, wooing erstwhile rivals with lucrative alliance pacts and, at times, allegedly financing select parties to contest elections independently with an aim to split votes in their favor.[77] Dravidian parties have maintained their dominance, abetted by their influence over state institutions, extensive party infrastructure, and vast economic portfolios believed to span construction, real estate, media, liquor, and private education, with additional

revenue streams allegedly derived in relation to illicit mining and quarrying activity.[78] Further, both parties dealt adroitly with successive national governments, leveraging their support at the center to secure influential ministerial berths and procure resources to sustain state patronage networks.[79] Flush with financial means, the DMK and the AIADMK did not so much crowd out recent political contenders from the electoral arena as much as they made use of party coffers and cadre to position themselves as the twin gateways into state politics, entrenching themselves as the chief custodians of the financial means and organizational machinery critical for election campaigns, thereby enabling them to set the terms of coalition politics. Cast against this backdrop, the following chapters examine the emergence of autonomous Dalit parties and their impact on the changing landscape of Tamil Nadu politics.

Source Materials & Methodology

Across five chapters, this project examines the transition of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* from boycotts to ballots, scrutinizing the diverse strategies used by VCK organizers to represent Dalit concerns and advocate social and political equality. Initially operating in 1980s Madurai, Tamil Nadu as the *Dalit Panther Iyakkam* (Movement), a small collective of Dalit activists drafted legal appeals that petitioned state authorities for the delivery of rights, impartial administration of law, and equitable access to economic and social development. As membership expanded and its early model of legal advocacy foundered, often failing to elicit an official response from state authorities, movement organizers embraced mass agitational politics as a complementary means to make political claims, engineering tactical disruptions of critical transportation infrastructure as an alternative strategy to amplify their voice, augment their presence, and intensify pressure on bureaucrats and politicians to address their demands. Following stringent security measures that impeded collective mobilization and restricted public assembly in the late-1990s, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers tentatively waded into the crowded arena of electoral democracy as an alternative strategy to represent Dalit interests and legitimize the movement in the eyes of state authorities, who they feared might dismantle their organization. Cognizant that

electoral politics may stipulate compromises that undercut robust Dalit advocacy, VCK leaders entered electoral democracy in 1999 intent to transform the upwelling of Dalit support into a vote-bank in order to "capture power" and augment their leverage in political negotiations.

This analysis of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition from boycotts to ballots draws from more than three years of research in southern India, extensive interviews with party organizers conducted across a decade, and a wide breadth of primary and secondary source materials. My initial exposure to the party and familiarity with its core leadership date back to a year of study in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, through the UW-Madison Year in India Program (2007-2008). As an undergraduate, I conducted the first round of interviews with leading VCK figures, now ten years in retrospect, which provides a longitudinal perspective to this study. As a second-year doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania, I returned to Madurai for an intensive year of Tamil language study with the American Institute for Indian Studies (AIIS), which afforded sufficient latitude to extend my networks in the party and conduct further interviews with VCK party executives, district organizers, and local operatives (2010-2011). Then, building atop this foundation, the bulk of the research collected for this dissertation occurred over thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork from May 2013 to May 2014 in affiliation with the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP). In addition to protracted periods in the field, I conducted abbreviated research tours during winter (2008) and summer months (2012; 2016).

While affiliated with IFP, I committed the majority of my field research traveling across the state, sometimes in the presence of VCK operatives, to attend political functions, observe rallies, and conduct interviews with a diverse cross-section of party operatives. Rather than assuming the conventional role of the ethnographer embedded at a dedicated field-site, I preferred to stay mobile during fieldwork and, thereby, embedded myself in the community of social activists at the center of my study.[80] This mobility permitted me to engage a wide range of party functionaries and conduct targeted research tours at multiple field-sites across Tamil Nadu such as Madurai, Chidambaram, Cuddalore, Perambalur, Villupuram, Tiruvallur, and

Chennai. Moreover, this mobility in the field delivered an unexpected boon: I encountered party members who joined the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* at different phases in its development and who worked in disparate regions. As I discovered, many of these individuals maintained a personal archive of original documents related to early movement activity in their district and readily shared these materials to advance my research, providing access to primary source materials never before reviewed by scholars. Following an interview, longtime organizers fetched boxes of original documents from household cupboards and, upon brushing off a thick layer of dust, retrieved early documents including original photographs, wall-posters, handbills, political pamphlets, intra-movement correspondence, and meeting minutes in addition to clippings from vernacular periodicals and newspapers that covered seminal events. With their permission, I digitized more than 500 pages of primary materials and nearly 300 pages of rare secondary sources that contribute invaluable depth and add context to this study.

Further, the dissertation project draws substantively on secondary sources published in the English press. Most newspaper reports contained herein were gathered from activists in the field or accessed through the microfilm archive housed in the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania and the international periodicals collection in the Perry-Castañeda Library at the University of Texas at Austin. The chapters utilize statistical reports on elections compiled by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and my transitions of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* political oratory, that is, published transcripts of speeches delivered at party rallies and available for sale at a bookstall adjacent to the party headquarters in Velachery, Chennai.[81] These translations are my own and, therefore, I assume full responsibility for their accuracy. Considered together, this dissertation culls a breadth of primary and secondary source materials, extensive interviews with party organizers, and ethnographic fieldwork in order to provide an empirical study of minority representation and democratic participation that draws primarily on the perspectives of long-time operatives and party leadership, that is, the figures who navigated the movement's transition from social protest to party politics. Stitching together a

narrative from disparate sources and fragmentary archives, this project contributes an ethnographic view on democratic politics and minority representation through a diachronic study the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* in Tamil Nadu, India.

Chapter Outlines

The dissertation contains five chapters, each of which opens with a review of theory tailored to its core intervention. The first three chapters present different approaches adopted by VCK organizers to represent Dalit interests and make political claims on state authority. The first chapter examines the movement's initial platform of legal advocacy, the second focuses on its subsequent embrace of mass agitational politics, and the third charts the movement's entry into electoral democracy. While these chapters, as outlined below, are organized chronologically to bring into focus the various strategies of political representation used by *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers to advocate Dalit interests, this is not intended to imply that one strategy supplants the next as the movement developed, but to call our attention to a layering of political strategies across time that enables us to evaluate why VCK organizers emphasized particular models of representation at specific junctures in response to a changing political landscape. The final two chapters delve deeper into how VCK leaders recall their direct experience of electoral politics and discuss its relationship to democracy. These chapters convey why these individuals discuss their electoral participation with severe trepidation, concerned that compromises stipulated by electoral competition have come at the expense of robust Dalit advocacy. Altogether, the project provides an ethnographic study of democratic integration and political representation, drawing foremost on perspectives of Dalit leadership and long-term political operatives.

The first chapter (1982-1992) examines the initial program of the Tamil Nadu *Dalit Panther Iyakkam* (movement), the early predecessor to the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*. As a small collective of Dalit lawyers, public-sector employees, and student activists, movement organizers lobbied government bureaucrats and political authorities to fulfill their professional obligations to Dalit citizens, submitting formal legal petitions through institutional channels. I present early DPI politics in terms of a struggle to

avail fundamental rights through a legal platform that demanded equitable access to social and economic development. In describing this early program, I draw principally on primary materials compiled by Vinoth Ambedkar, the son of M. Malaichamy, the inaugural DPI Chairman in Tamil Nadu. This archive consists of letters, legal petitions, political pamphlets, rally handbills, and wall posters that I have translated from Tamil to English. I supplement these materials with personal interviews taken with leading DPI activists and secondary sources such as local newspapers, vernacular journals, and rare, locally published and circulated political pamphlets. Combining historical and ethnographic methodologies, I examine early VCK attempts to employ legal advocacy as a principal instrument in lobbying for the delivery of basic rights, equitable administration of law, and equal access to avenues of social and economic development. Ultimately, the futility of this initial paradigm affords the backdrop against which to consider the movement's subsequent turn to mass agitational politics.

The second chapter (1992-1997) investigates the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* embrace of mass agitational politics in supplement to its early legal advocacy. As the movement mobilized a mass cadre base, its activists engineered tactical disruptions in the public sphere to capture public attention and command broad media coverage. They embraced provocative, public displays of organizational strength that disrupted the ebb and flow of everyday life as a deliberate strategy to amplify their voice and communicate demands to higher echelons of state authority. Drawing from a repertoire of action including *peranikal* (protest marches), *dharnas* (hunger fasts), transit *rokos* (blockages), *bandhs* (general strikes) and unlicensed assemblies, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers executed tactical disruptions in the public sphere, focusing on critical transportation infrastructure, to amply pressure on authorities to redress specific occurrences of caste violence and recognize their grievances. The chapter draws upon primary materials such as political pamphlets, handbills, intra-movement correspondence, original photographs, newspaper microfilm, and Tamil-language journals, as well as in-depth interviews with VCK organizers. Conjoining primary sources with ethnography, the chapter conveys how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers recollect this radical phase of movement politics. Assembling these perspectives, I

convey their perspectives on why tactical disruptions in the public sphere provided an effective means to augment minority franchise and expand democratic participation.

The third chapter chronicles the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition from boycotts to ballots, attending to internal debates as well as external dynamics that spurred the organization toward electoral democracy at the turn of the millennium. Focusing on a three-year span preceding the movement's electoral turn (1997-1999), I investigate how movement organizers evaluated the relative merits of direct electoral participation. Whereas a small number of VCK leaders pressed for an underground struggle, envisioning a militant movement in the likeness of the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE), a clear majority of its leadership advocated a turn toward electoral democracy as a strategy to convert the upwelling of popular support into a vote bank that would serve to augment their leverage in negotiations with political authorities. Drawing on interviews with VCK leaders ranging from its chairman and general secretaries to long-term grassroots activists, the chapter examines different views of democratic participation that came to the fore at a critical juncture when organizers tread hesitantly towards the electoral arena. Synthesizing ethnography with primary and secondary source materials, the chapter provides a diachronic perspective on democratic integration, conveying why movement organizers reappraised their initial adherence to electoral boycotts and came to regard the state less as a recipient of petition (i.e., chapter one) or object of protest (i.e., chapter two), but as an ensemble of institutions that demarcated a new locus of political struggle.

While the opening chapters chronicle different strategies deployed by *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers to advocate Dalit rights—legal advocacy, agitational politics, electoral democracy—the final two chapters provide ethnography of direct electoral participation. The fourth chapter focuses on the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* tenure in electoral democracy (1999-present), conveying how VCK organizers recall their experience of democratic politics today, now fifteen years after their electoral turn. Although the movement has enjoyed some, albeit limited, electoral success, winning three seats in the state legislature as well as a berth in parliament, party leaders express concern that compromises stipulated by electoral competition have tempered their

movement's earlier robust Dalit advocacy. To enter electoral politics was not to enter democracy, they claim, but to approach the electoral platform as a strategy, albeit not one entirely of their choosing, to realize what they understood to be core democratic principles such as *panmaittuvam* (pluralism), *samattuvam* (equality) and *urimaikal* (rights).[82] While upholding an idea of democracy premised on these principles, they pinpoint tensions that inhere at the interstices of electoral politics and democratic values, identifying instances where electoral considerations undercut their capacity for robust minority advocacy. The chapter conveys ethnographically how Dalit activists evoke democracy as the battleground of their struggle for equality, selectively drawing on its political vocabulary and social imaginary to energize their political program and call for the extension of democratic principles from the domain of theory into the contested arena of social life.

Finally, the fifth chapter presents ethnography from the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election to illustrate how VCK candidates navigate the contested terrain of an election campaign. Across four weeks, I tailed VCK General Secretary D. Ravikumar throughout his parliamentary bid in Tiruvallur District of northern Tamil Nadu. The chapter draws on this experience to provide ethnography of electoral participation, investigating how a VCK candidate experiences an election campaign as a minor player within a powerful coalition. In particular, the chapter conveys how caste, to which direct electoral appeals are banned by the Election Commission of India (ECI), surfaces on the campaign trail to structure vote-canvassing techniques, political rhetoric, and a marked division of campaign labor. The chapter examines instances where direct electoral participation appears to silence the very voices presumed to be 'surging' within India's expanding democratic arena, or as Ravikumar quips, how the election campaign may render Dalit candidates as "mute spectators" of their own campaigns.[83] The chapter concludes with an ethnographic account of what VCK leaders perceive to be critical flaws in the present system of electoral reservations. Combining ethnography, election materials, and interviews conducted during the campaign, the chapter explores the institutional challenge of providing for substantive

minority representation in electoral democracy and conveys how Dalit organizers

conceptualize this dilemma today.

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[1] Hasan Suroor, "Parliament re-enacts birth of freedom," in *The Hindu*, August 16, 1997, p1.

[2] Staff Reporter, "He decides to wield the pen," in *The Hindu*, August 7, 1997, p4. Also, see: Special Correspondent, "CM's plea to Dalit, PMK leaders," in *The Hindu*, August 9, 1997, p4. Karunanidhi's proposal is ironic as DMK party leaders, himself included, had previously called for Tamil Nadu's succession from India.

[3] "Dalit" refers to downtrodden communities across India previously referred to as "untouchables."

[4] Special Correspondent, "CM's plea to Dalit, PMK leaders," in *The Hindu*, August 9, 1997, p4.

[5] Thol. Thirumaavalavan to district organizers of Perambalur District (personal letter): July 27, 1997.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Arulraj, interview by author, January 11, 2014.

[8] *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, *"sudhandhirak kodumbaavi erippup poor"* (war to burn the effigy of Independence), wall poster, August 1997; *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, *"Aagasdu 15 – saadhiveri sudhandhara poonvizhaa"* (August 15th – the golden jubilee of caste fanaticism), wall poster, August 1997.

[9] Staff Reporter, "DPI withdraws agitation plan," in *The Hindu*, August 12, 1997, 4. Additionally, the Tamil Nadu Arundhathiyar Democratic Front (TADF) organized a "half-naked celebration" in which activists wore black loincloths to draw attention to the "hollowness" of the golden jubilee celebration. See: "Arunthathiyars plan stir," *The Hindu*, August 12, 1997, p5.

[10] Staff Reporter, "Dalits plan to burn tricolor in Chennai," in *The Hindu*, August 8, 1997, p4.

[11] Staff Reporter, "DPI withdraws agitation plan," in *The Hindu*, August 12, 1997, p4.

[12] Arulraj, interview by author, January 11, 2014; A. Kannan, interview by author, January 1, 2009.

[13] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009. At the time, in many villages upper castes enforced a local custom forbidding Dalits from wearing footwear, headwear, and pressed (ironed) clothing in their presence.

[14] *""samattuvapuram – kāndi kāla mōsadi": "viḍutalai siṟutaigaḷ amaippāḷar tirumāvalavaṉuḍaṉ ōr nērkānal,"* (Equality Society –Deception from the Time of Gandhi Era: An interview with Thol. Thirumaavalavan, Organizer of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*), in *Dalit*, Issue 4, September 1998: 13. Translation by author.

[15] A. Kannan, interview by author, January 1, 2009; Arulraj, interview by author, January 11, 2014. Arulraj claims that 95 Madurai-based *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* activists were arrested for participating in the protest.

[16] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[17] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[18] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[19] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[20] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[21] According to the 2011 Census, Dalits comprise nearly 14.5 million of Tamil Nadu's more than 72 million inhabitants, thereby comprising 20% of the state population and 7.2% of the total Dalit population across India. In Tamil Nadu, Dalits comprise 25.55% of the rural population. Further, Dalits in Tamil Nadu have experienced a 20.8% rate of decadal growth, higher than the all-India average population growth of 17.7%. Nearly half of India's entire Dalit population is situated in the states of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu. According to a 2007 survey by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), Other Backwards Classes (OBCs) comprise nearly 41% of the national population. In Tamil Nadu, state government statistics peg this figure at 68%. See: "OBCs form 41% of population: Survey." *Times of India*. September 1, 2007; Sandhya Ravishankar, "OBC community in focus before Tamil Nadu assembly polls." *The Economic Times*. January 10, 2016. Due census categories, it is difficult to ascertain the precise population of individual Dalit castes, as the census records specific caste names (i.e., Paraiyar) and ethno-constructivist identifiers (Adi-Dravida, or original Dravidian) as distinct caste categories.

[22] A 1999-2000 NSSO survey reveals that approximately 75% of all Dalits are either "completely" or "nearly" landless and the majority of the rural Dalit population continues to rely on wage laborer, most often tending the lands of intermediate caste landowners. Sukhadeo Thorat, *Dalits in India: Search for a Common Destiny*. New Delhi: Sage, 2009. Subsequently studies now place this figure at 70%. See: V.K. Ramachandran and Madhura Swaminathan, *Dalit Households in Village Economies*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2014.

[23] Matthias Lievens (2014), "Contesting Representation: Rancière on democracy and representative government," in *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 122, No. 1: 3-17. Also, see: Adam Przeworski, Susan Stokes, and Bernard Manin (eds.), *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[24] Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967: 143.

[25] In summary, "formalistic representation" refers to institutional arrangements that provide for authorization and accountability of representatives. "Symbolic representation" signifies how a representative may "stand for" that which is represented. "Descriptive representation" refers the manner in which representatives may mirror key traits or attributes of those represented. And, finally, "substantive representation" pertains to the actual activity of representation, examining the ways through which a representative "acts for" those represented.

[26] Pitkin 1967, 209; Also, see Suzanne Dovi, "Hanna Pitkin, The Concept of Representation," in Jacob T. Levy (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Classics and Contemporary Political Theory*. Dovi writes, "If the representative has all the power, the system is dictatorial. If the represented have all the power, representatives are merely the mouthpieces for the mob. Pitkin wants autonomy for both."

[27] Hanna Pitkin (2004), "Representation and Democracy: Uneasy Alliance." In *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3: p337.

[28] Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; Mellissa S. Williams, *Voice, Trust, and Memory: Marginalized Groups and the Failings of Liberal Representation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998; Jane Mansbridge (1999), "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent "Yes","" in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 3: 628-657; Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

[29] Jane Mansbridge (1999), "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent "Yes","" in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 3: 628-657.

[30] Andrew Rehfeld (2011), "The Concepts of Representation," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 3:640.

[31] Laura Montanaro (2012), "The Democratic Legitimacy of Self-Appointed Representative," in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 74, No. 4: 1106.

[32] Jennifer Rubenstein (2007), "Accountability in an Unequal World," in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 3: 616-632.

[33] Lievens (2014) 4

[34] As Jacques Rancière writes, politics "consists of making what was unseen visible; in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech…" See: Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Edited and Translated by Steven Corcoran. London: Continuum, 2010: p38. Also, see: Jacques Rancière (2006), "Democracy, Republic, Representation," *Constellations*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 297-307.

[35] Michael Saward (2006), "The Representative Claim," in *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol. 5: 298. Emphasis in the original; Also see: Andrew Schaap, Simon Thompson, Lisa Disch, Dario Castiglione, and Michael Saward, "Critical Exchange on Michael Saward's *The representative claim*," in *Contemporary Political Theory* (2012), Vol. 11, Iss. 1: 109-127.

[36] Saward (2006) 298. Emphasis in the original.

[37] Saward (2006) 299

[38] Michael Saward, *The Representative Claim*. London: Oxford University Press, 2010: 174.

[39] I use the term "constituents" to refers to a group defined by community (i.e., Dalits) rather than territory. In his recent work, Andrew Rehfeld has rethought the concept of "constituency" and unmoored the idea from its traditional association with territory. See, Andrew Rehfeld, *The Concept of Constituency: Political Representation, Democratic Legitimacy, and Institutional Design*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

[40] Jawaharlal Nehru. *The Discovery of India*. New York: The John Day Company, 1946 (1992): 254.

[41] Sudipta Kaviraj, *Politics in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[42] See: M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*. Bombay: Media Promoter and Publishers, 1962, pp. 74-75. Quoted in: Surinder Jodhka, "Changing Caste and Local Democracy: Assertion and Identity among the Dalits in Rural Punjab," in David Gellner and Krishna Hachhetu (eds.), *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbours*. Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008, pp. 328.

[43] A.M. Shah (1982), "Division and Hierarchy: an Overview of Caste in Gujarat," in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 16:1, 1-33; D.L. Sheth (1999), Secularisation of Caste and Making of New Middle Class," in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 34/35: 2502-2510; D.L. Sheth, "Caste and Class: Social Reality and Political Representations," in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.), *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*. London: Anthem Press, 2004; D.L. Sheth, "Caste and democracy: the politics of exclusion and inclusion," in Rehberg, Karl-Siegbert (ed.), *Soziale Ungliechheit, kulturelle Unterschiede: Verhandlungen des 32. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in München*. Teilbd. 1 und 2. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verl., 2006.

[44] Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph (1960), "The Political Role of India's Caste Associations," in *Pacific Affairs* Vol. 33, No. 1; Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967; Rajni Kothari (1994), "Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29(26): 1589-1594; Rajni Kothari and Rushikesh Maru (1965), "Caste and Secularism in India: Case Study of a Caste Federation" in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp: 33-50; Robert Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969.

[45] See "Chapter One" in Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam, *Power and Contestation: India since 1989*. London: Zed Books, 2007.

[46] Yogendra Yadav summarizes these two distinct narratives of Indian democracy; see: Yogendra Yadav, "Representation," in Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta (eds.) *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India*. Delhi: Oxford, 2010 (2013): 347-360; As an example of the early consternation over the ways in which lower-caste groups entered democracy, consider Pranab Bardhans note that, "…more and more mobilized groups in the democratic process have started using their low-caste status for making a claim to the loot," referring to state jobs and benefits. See: Pranab Bardhan, "Sharing the Spoils: Group Equity, Development, and Democracy," in Atul Kohli (ed.), *The Succes of India's Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[47] See: Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*; For alternative interpretations of this 'communalization' of politics, see: D.L. Sheth, "Caste and Class: Social Reality and Political Representations," in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.), *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*. London: Anthem Press, 2004; Dipankar Gupta, "The certitudes of caste: When identity trumps hierarchy," in Gupta ed. *Caste in Question: Identity or hierarchy?* Contributions to Indian Sociology Occasional Studies, Sage Publications, 2004, ix-xxi.

[48] Ibid. Also see: Yogendra Yadav, "Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge: trends of bahujan participation in electoral politics in the 1990s," in Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava and Balveer Arora (eds), *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 120.

[49] Zoya Hasan, *Democracy and the Crisis of Inequality* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2014), 444.

[50] Pradeep Chhibber, *Democracy without Associations: Transformation of the Party System and Social Cleavages in India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001); Suhas Palshikar, K. C. Suri, Yogendra Yadav (eds.), *Party Competition in Indian States: Electoral Politics in Post-Congress Polity* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[51] Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003); Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (eds.), *Rise of the Plebeians?: The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[52] Surinder Jodhka (2008) "Changing Caste and Local Democracy: Assertion and Identity among the Dalits in Rural Punjab," in David Gellner and Krishna Hachhethu (eds.), *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratisation in Nepal and its Neighbors*. Delhi: Save, 2008: 343, 346.

[53] For example, see: Craig Jeffrey and Jens Lerche, "Dimensions of Dominance: Class and State in Uttar Pradesh," in C.J. Fuller and Veronique Benei (eds.), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*.

London: Hurst & Company, 2001. Also: Craig Jeffrey (2002), "Caste, Class, and Clientelism: A Political Economy of Everyday Corruption in Rural North India," in *Economic Geography*, Vol. 78, No. 1, pp. 21-41.

[54] Jeffrey Witsoe, *Democracy Against Development: Lower-Caste Politics and Political Modernity in Postcolonial India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, p12, 10.

[55] Witsoe 189.

[56] Lucia Michelutti (2007), "The vernacularization of democracy: political participation and popular politics in North India," in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 13: 653.

[57] Ibid. While Michelutti's study affords valuable insight into processes through which democracy, both as an idea and set of practices, becomes "vernacularized" within a given milieu, it posits an uncomfortable dichotomy of "popular" and "elite," which, if understood not as s binary but as relational categories, enables us to account for a myriad other subject positions that do not fit discreetly into either category.

[58] Lucia Michelutti, *The Vernacularisation of Democracy: Politics, Caste and Religion in India*. London: Routledge, 2008: 2.

[59] David Washbrook (1973), "Country Politics: Madras 1880 – 1930," in *Modern Asian Studies*, 7:3, p482. For an account of how these upwardly mobile agrarian castes controlled agrestic laborers, see Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion and the Social in Modern India*. New York: Columbia, 2014.

[60] Robert Hardgrave notes that wealthy landowners endowed ₹100,000 to the South Indian People's Association, which enabled access print capital in order to "voice the grievances of the non-Brahmin through English and vernacular journals." Robert Hardgrave, *The Dravidian Movement*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965, p13.

[61] Eugene Irschick, *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s*. Chennai: Cre-A, 1986.

[62] Karthigesu Sivathamby, *Understanding the Dravidian Movement – Problems and Perspectives*. Madras: New Century Book House Ltd., 1995, p34.

[63] M.S.S. Pandian. *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2008).

[64] Marguerite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[65] Emma Mawdsley (2002), "Redrawing the body politic: federalism, regionalism and the creation of new states in India," in *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 40, Iss. 3: 34-54.

[66] Bernard Bate, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic: Democratic Practice in South India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997).

[67] Vaasanthi, *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars: The World of Tamil Politics*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2008: 56. Also see: Robert Hardgrave, "Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK." *Asian Survey* 13, no. 3 (1973): 288-305.

[68] M.S.S. Pandian, *The Image Trap: M.G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992).

[69] Sara Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Preminda Jacob. *Celluloid Deities: the visual culture of cinema and politics in south india* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).

[70] MGR renamed added the "All India" prefix during the Emergency following the circulation of rumors suggesting that regional parties would be banned by the ruling Congress government.

[71] Vanniyars, which are concentrated in Tamil Nadu's northern districts, constitute an estimated 12% of the state population and comprise nearly one-third of the electorate in some constituencies. Across the 1980s, the *Vanniyar Sangam* mobilized Vanniyars though a politics that underscored the relative deprivation of their community and demanded a separate reservation quota. Today, Vanniyars are classified as a Most Backwards Class (MBC).

[72] Historically, the DMK performed best in the state's northern districts. Because Vanniyars are concentrated in this region, the political growth of the *Pattali Makkal Katchi* posed the greatest challenge the DMK. See: Wyatt 99, 102; S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha (2002), "A response to John Harriss," in *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 40:3, p120.

[73] Whereas *Pudhiya Tamilagam* drew support primarily from Dalit-Pallars in the state's southern districts, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* drew its core support among Dalit-Paraiyars in the north. From 1992, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* also operated under the name *Dalit Panther Iyakkam* (DPI). In 2006, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* formally registered with the Election Commission of India (ECI) and became *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (VCK), or the Liberation Panthers Party. Prior to 2006, VCK candidates contested under the election symbol of allied parties.

[74] Scholarship lends credence to this correlation of Dravidian politics with backwards caste interests and has questioned the commitment of Dravidian parties to the most marginalized social segments. See: John Harriss (2002), "Whatever Happened to Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu? A Reading of Current Events and the Recent Literature on Tamil Politics," in *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 40: Iss. 3: 97-117.

[75] The caste geography of Tamil Nadu enabled Dravidian parties to pit locally powerful intermediate castes against Dalits in the electoral arena, exacerbating already contentious inter-caste rivalries. While Dalits are numerically preponderant across the state, comprising 20% of the population, the state's largest Dalit castes are most often less numerous than the locally dominant intermediate caste. Dalit-Pallars and Thevars are concentrated in southern districts, Dalit-Paraiyars and Vanniyars in northern districts, and Dalit-Arundhathiyars and Goundars in western districts.

[76] Yet, I offer the caveat that, *pace* Harriss, the early Dravidian Movement used caste annihilation as a rhetorical trope, focusing solely on collapsing caste distinctions separating upwardly mobile backwards caste communities and Brahmins, and only nominally included the most marginalized castes (i.e., Dalits) in their political program. Subramanian offered a similar critique: Narendra Subramanian, "Identity Politics and Social Pluralism: Political Sociology and Political Change in Tamil Nadu," in *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 40, Iss. 3: 125-139.

[77] Leading VCK organizers contend that the Dravidian parties have, at times, paid smaller or emergent parties to face elections independently with an intent to split votes in their advantage. These officials claim that the AIADMK financed the early PMK to split Vanniyar votes in northern districts, an earlier DMK stronghold, where Vanniyars were viewed as a staple DMK vote-bank.

[78] John Harriss and Andrew Wyatt, *Business and Politics in Tamil Nadu*, Simons Papers on Security and Development, No. 50/2016, School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, March 2016.

[79] Editorial. "Perfecting Patronage," in *Economic & Political Weekly*, XLV:50 (2010): 9.

[80] This decision reflects Theodore Bestor's suggestion that, instead of privileging fieldworks, to choose a network where the researcher's contacts are strongest and then allow that network to expand over the duration of field research. See: Theodore C. Bestor, "Inquisitive Observation: Following Networks in Urban Fieldwork," in *Doing Fieldwork in Japan*, edited by Theodore C. Bestor, Patricia G. Steinhoff, and Victoria Lyon Bestor. Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2003: 315-334.

[81] Some of my translations of VCK speeches are available at www.plcflash.wordpress.com

[82] I suggest that electoral politics was not entirely of their choosing because many leading VCK figures contend that the liberal use of national security legislation (e.g., NSA) and similar pre-emptive detention laws (e.g., Terrorism and Disruptive Activities (TADA) Act and the Goondas Act) against their district organizers and local cadre had crippled the movement's capacity to operate by the late-1990s.

[83] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013.

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CHAPTER ONE

Recasting Land, Labor, and Local Economy:

From *Dalit Panthers* to *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, 1982-1992

</div>

Introduction

On December 6, 1982, A. Malaichamy convened the inaugural state conference of the Tamil Nadu *Bharatiya Dalit Panther* (BDP), known locally as the *Dalit Panther Iyakkam* (DPI) or Dalit Panther Movement.[1] In preparation, he coordinated with local Dalit public sector employees, lawyers, and student activists to publicize the introductory conference across Madurai District. In pre-circulated handbills, Malaichamy beckoned his Dalit "brothers and sisters" to extend their support, exhorting local communities, "We must struggle for our rights and raise our voice against the injustice that has been done to us."[2] Malaichamy utilized the maiden DPI conference, likely the earliest mass assembly of Dalits in Madurai District, to demand the impartial administration of law and delivery of rights. Among the core grievances, he charged the state government with undermining Dalit development by fobbing off his community with welfare subsidies in place of enforcing the extant laws and recognizing their rights. In bolded text, Malaichamy proclaimed, "Our rights have been refused in the name of percentage-wise subsidies. This is detrimental to our economic condition."[3] Further, he underscored that the DPI had not entered the political arena to petition for augmented welfare benefits or provisional concessions, but to demand that the state fulfill its mandate to Dalit citizens, which he understood as the delivery of rights, abolition of caste discrimination, assurances for basic physical security, equal opportunity to participate in the economy, and the implementation of constitutional prerogatives promoting Dalit development.

After Malaichamy's sudden death on September 14, 1989, his firebrand successor, R. Thirumaavalavan, maintained his predecessor's emphasis on rights-based assertion.[4] In an early interview published in *Kalki* magazine, a Tamil weekly, Thirumaavalavan echoed Malaichamy's contention that state officials had fobbed off Dalit communities with welfare concessions in lieu of enforcing their basic rights.

Alleging that political parties had grown anxious due to his movement's consolidation of Dalit support, he surmised:

> The politicians are worried and, on this basis, they are announcing concessions. They think that they can satisfy us with such concessions. But, we are demanding rights. We want equal rights to living and participating in society commensurate to those enjoyed by the caste people… *If the government and the dominant castes are ready to offer alms to us, it is because they consider this preferable to sharing rights equally among us*.[5]

Both Malaichamy and Thirumaavalavan, more than fifteen years apart, advanced a model of Dalit politics not predicated on extracting augmented welfare or wrangling concessions from the state, but foremost concerned with the enforcement of existing rights.[6]

These two vignettes, drawn from the historical record of Tamil Nadu Dalit politics, contrast with the popular representation of lower caste assertion, which frequently depicts collective forms of protest that generate a visible and often disruptive public presence. It is presumably through such modes of political practice, which Partha Chatterjee has termed "political society," that "subalterns" are said to deploy a calculative rationality that instrumentally leverages their electoral franchise to broker tenuous concessions with state authorities and access welfare subsidies that sustain their precarious livelihoods.[7] While in agreement that social groups lacking inherited capital often regard the democratic state as a primary conduit for social and economic development, I caution that we cannot reduce their politics to collective demands for augmented welfare or provisional state benefits, and must attend to the substantive foundations undergirding such appeals. As this chapter demonstrates, Dalits approached the state less as a dispensary of welfare than as the adjudicator of law and guarantor of rights. And, as we shall see, early DPI organizers first espoused legal advocacy as a platform to petition state authorities through institutional channels *qua* democratic citizens. As these channels proved unresponsive, DPI organizers expanded their program to encompass mass agitational politics as a complementary means to make claims on state authority, amplify their voices to centers of power, and demand recognition as democratic citizens.

Focusing on a ten-year period from 1982-1992, this chapter examines the initial stage of popular Dalit mobilization in Tamil Nadu. It shows that, across the 1980s, Malaichamy and his associates advanced a program concerned foremost with the administration of law and delivery of rights. Although the DPI later embraced a tactical deployment of mass agitational politics in the 1990s, this mode of political assertion did not provide a starting point for the early movement. Rather, DPI politics originates in legal appeals submitted through formal institutional channels that entreated government authorities to fulfill their professional obligations, seeking to remedy their grievances and redress specific instances of discrimination. These demands often pertained to the rights of Dalit laborers, equitable access to public resources, and the non-implementation of the reservations policy intended to bolster the social and economic development of their community. Throughout the 1980s, DPI organizers advanced a program of legal advocacy that, in citing pertinent laws and constitutional prerogatives, lobbied state officials to fulfill their obligations to Dalit citizens. As these petitions proved futile, DPI organizers re-appraised and expanded their early program to embrace alternative, and increasingly confrontational, styles of political engagement as a complementary strategy to represent their constituents and make claims on state authority.

Writing Dalit Assertion

In *The Politics of the Governed* and his subsequent works, Partha Chatterjee (2004) highlights a critical disjuncture between actually existing democratic practice and how it has been conceptualized in liberal theory.[8] Seeking to capture "a *new moment* in the democratization of Indian politics and society," his distinction between civil and political society provides an entry point for thinking alternative forms of engagement deployed by differentiated groups of citizens.[9] Chatterjee describes political society as the domain where 'subalterns' make claims on the state not as full rights-bearing citizens, but as population groups whose collective demands that often "transgress the strict lines of legality" and often involve claims "grounded in violations of the law."[10] It is through such tenuous negotiations in political society, where marginalized

populations make use of "a large range of connections" and "exercise their franchise as an instrument of political bargaining," that these groups wrest tentative concessions from governmental agencies and gain access to the welfare subsidies that sustain their precarious livelihoods.[11] Of course, these concessions are best understood as products of political expediency rather than formal, recognized rights.

Whereas political society serves as the primary mode of political participation for large swathes of India's poor and underprivileged, Chatterjee characterizes civil society as "the closed association of modern elite groups, sequestered from the wider popular life of the communities, walled up within enclaves of civic freedom and rational law."[12] He envisions civil society "as an actually existing arena of institutions and practices inhabited by a relatively small section of the people."[13] In effect, civil society provides an avenue of political engagement accessible to a "demographically limited" stratum of middle class and urban elite.[14] Whilst civil society encapsulates the normative ideals of liberal modernity, political society provides the murky terrain upon which democratic politics actually "takes place on the ground in India."[15] Attending to how marginalized population groups navigate dense networks of political clientelism and broker tenuous concessions with authorities, Chatterjee encourages us to consider how nominally recognized citizens experience democratic politics through everyday negotiations that occur outside the purview of liberal democratic theory.

Chatterjee's contribution continues to animate scholarship on popular politics in South Asia and beyond, but scholars have called into question the limits of his analytical framework.[16] Critiques tend to either disrupt his dichotomization of society into distinct domains or challenge his attribution of particular styles of political engagement to discreet populations. For example, Nivedita Menon (2010) unsettles the dichotomy of civil and political society when perceived as *separate* domains, populations, and practices, suggesting instead that these heuristics be interpreted "as *conceptual distinctions* rather than as actual *empirical groupings*" and, therefore, as representing "two styles of political engagement that are available to people—the former style is more available to an urbanized elite, the latter to the rest."[17] Whereas Menon accentuates divergent *styles* of engagement, Aparna Sundar and Nandini

Sundar (2012) advise against classifying discreet population groups as either civil or political society, pointing to instances where marginalized groups draw selectively from both repertoires. Significantly, Sundar and Sundar stress that the poor and underprivileged not only stake "contingent claims to livelihood or recognition," but share "a common idea of citizenship" and frame political demands on the basis of property rights and law.[18] Taken together, Menon and the Sundars caution that attributes of political society cannot be ascribed to discreet populations, which, despite myriad forms of engagement, routinely advance rights-based claims grounded in law.

Although civil and political society provide enduring heuristics that distinguish styles of political practice, the latter has most often been interpreted in a manner that hitches subaltern assertion to welfare functions of the postcolonial state and, in doing so, elides robust scrutiny of the substantive basis motivating much political claim making today. While Chatterjee acknowledges that "the culturally equipped middle class" is better suited to navigate the political system than "the poor or underprivileged," his account portrays subaltern demands as "grounded in violations of the law" and foremost concerned with issues related to "habitation and livelihood as a matter of right."[19] That is, subaltern political claim making is presumed to draw upon an understanding of rights whose legitimacy derives not from formal interpretations of legal statutes or constitutional norms, but instead through what he terms "the moral assertion of popular demands."[20] On the contrary, as this chapter demonstrates, early DPI organizers approached the state less as a dispensary of welfare than as the adjudicator of law and guarantor of rights, adopting legal advocacy as a primary strategy to petition state authorities *qua* democratic citizens and articulate claims grounded in law.

This argument resonates with contemporary scholarship examining how Dalits take recourse to law in their struggle for dignity and equal rights. In her analysis of depressed class politics in the late Madras Presidency, Rupa Viswanath documents attempts whereby an earlier generation of Dalit leaders petitioned colonial administrators to enforce what they perceived to be fundamental rights.[21] Further, recent ethnographic studies stress the centrality of law and advocacy to Dalit

movements today. As Suryakant Waghmore observes, Dalits routinely approach the state in their struggle for justice, seeking to draw caste contestations out of systems imbued with 'traditional' authority and into modern liberal institutions.[22] In their study of western Tamil Nadu, Grace Carswell and Geert De Neve illustrate how Dalit movements invoke the law and combine litigation with social mobilization to oppose caste-based offenses and contest chronic asymmetries in inter-caste relations.[23] Further, Suryakant Waghmore and Jens Lerche have both examined instances where Dalit activism inflects global human rights discourse, investigating the utility and limitations of transnational advocacy for Dalit mobilization.[24] Drawing upon varied methodologies and diverse field sites, these studies highlight the salience of legal advocacy and rights delivery as a constant feature of Dalit politics. This chapter contributes an additional perspective to the existing literature, demonstrating how the early DPI sought to utilize legal advocacy as an instrument to represent Dalit interests, lobby for equal rights, and demand equitable access to the means of social and economic development.

Chapter Outline

Focusing on the period of 1982-1992, this opening chapter chronicles the emergence of the *Dalit Panther Iyakkam* (DPI) in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. I examine early DPI politics in terms of a struggle to avail basic rights through a legal platform that advanced demands for equitable access to social and economic development. In describing this early program, I draw principally upon primary materials in the Tamil language such as personal missives, formal petitions, photographs, and original movement propaganda such as handbills, rally pamphlets, and wall posters.[25] To supplement these primary sources, I integrate a breadth of secondary source material including Tamil newspapers, vernacular journals, early interviews, and small locally published and circulated pamphlets. Further, I incorporate personal conversations with early Dalit Panther and *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers to convey how these individuals recollect their initial program and why they recall their early politics in terms of a

democratic assertion that demanded the delivery of rights, equitable administration of law, and equal access to avenues of social and economic development.

This chapter opens with a discussion of the development of the Tamil Nadu *Bharatiya Dalit Panthers* (BDP), more commonly referred to as the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) or Dalit Panther *Iyakkam* (movement). First tracing its antecedents in the northern state of Maharashtra, I examine how networks forged through kinship and labor migration contributed to a widening sphere of Dalit activists across India and facilitated the DPI's initial expansion to Madurai, Tamil Nadu, in 1982. Yet, in contrast to the confrontational street politics espoused by its counterparts in Maharashtra, the early DPI in Tamil Nadu addressed issues pertaining to Dalit rights, labor security, and economic access by way of legal petitions submitted through formal, institutional channels. Initially operating as a *de facto* labor union that concentrated on the travails of Dalit employees in the public sector, the DPI gradually expanded its political program to promulgate popular rights-based awareness and promote Dalit access to higher education and technical training.

Next, this chapter traces the origins of the DPI's successor, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, or the Liberation Panthers. After the death of A. Malaichamy, the inaugural DPI Tamil Nadu State Convener, on September 14, 1989, movement activities stalled until a handful of early activists conferred leadership upon Thol. Thirumaavalavan at a modest ceremony convened on January 21, 1990. Rechristened as *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* shortly thereafter, movement activists embraced a provocative model of political assertion and projected an ostensibly militant culture in the likeness of the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE) in neighboring Sri Lanka. Attentive to the socio-economic plight of Dalit communities, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* intervened directly following instances of caste discrimination and into economic disputes as it amassed a cadre base across Madurai District. The movement not only demanded that state authorities safeguard Dalit rights, but intervened directly in anti-Dalit violence and discriminatory practices that they felt impeded Dalit development, often concentrating on matters related to local political economy.

Finally, the chapter concludes with ethnographic material that conveys how DPI organizers recollect their early politics as a form of democratic assertion that demanded the delivery of fundamental rights, administration of law, and equitable access to social and economic development. In our conversations, early movement leaders acknowledge that untouchability was not strictly characterized by social stigma and caste hierarchy, but predicated on a basic principle of exclusion that structured differentiated access to the local economy and state resources. Despite shifting strategies in Dalit mobilization, from a petition based politics to popular mobilization, these demands remained a constant feature of early movement politics. An account of early DPI politics not only provides a window into the initial phase of DPI activity, but also a backdrop against which to consider its subsequent development. Prior to inspecting the contents and principal issues advanced by these early appeals, the chapter first situates the emergence of the Tamil Nadu DPI within its broader historical context, investigating how networks forged by kinship and migrant labor integrated an expanding, pan-national sphere of Dalit activists.

Precursors in Maharashtra

In the mid-twentieth century, revolutionary ideas bloomed amidst the squalor of Bombay's sprawling *chawl* tenements. Dalit youth, some of whom were the first generation to attain postgraduate education through reservations, observed that the lived reality of caste belied their aspiration for social progress.[26] They embraced literature as a medium to express their revulsion with the present state-of-affairs and convey their frustration at the slow pace of socio-economic change. Toward the end of the 1960s, a new wave of Dalit literary production flooded Maharashtra, stretching well beyond its early epicenter in Bombay. Collectively referred to as the Little Magazine Movement, these poets, authors and street artists deployed a range of literary forms to express their aversion to the Congress government and caste system, as well as their dismay with the state of Dalit electoral politics. Noted for flouting literary conventions in a language often steeped in vulgarity, literary magazines such as *Vidroh* (Revolt) and *Magova* (Search/Hunt) provided vehicles through which Dalit

poets decried their subjection to ritual indignities and routine humiliations and critiqued the political, social, and economic crises besetting their community.[27] In particular, their writing assailed the ruling Congress Party, described as nothing more than a continuation of earlier feudal rule, the caste system, interpreted as a by-product of the Hindu religion and its *varnashrama dharma*, and the ineffective leadership of the Republican Party in the post-Ambedkar era, which, they alleged, had compromised core principles in exchange for nominal political status.

In 1972, prominent Dalit writers from the Little Magazine Movement congregated to discuss the stagnation of Maharashtrian Dalit politics and explore alternatives to the Republican Party. On September 9, 1972, these poets expanded their literary assertion to encompass political action and formally launched a new kind of Dalit organization at a public meeting at Siddhartha Nagar, Bombay. Drawing their name and militant demeanor from the Black Panthers of America, they christened themselves Dalit Panthers. 'Dalit', the past participle of the Sanskrit verb "dal" meaning "to split or crack," referred to those who are "broken or reduced to pieces generally."[28] Not merely descriptive, these young men and women embraced the term 'dalit' to signify "a new oppositional consciousness."[29] Thus, as Eleanor Zelliot writes, "Dalit implies those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is in the term itself an inherent denial of pollution, karma, and justified caste hierarchy."[30] Endorsing an electoral boycott, the Dalit Panthers mounted a virulent attack on the Indian government, caste system, and Hindu religion. Disavowing M. K. Gandhi's model of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, the Dalit Panthers embraced provocative displays of public dissent that sometimes culminated in violent altercations with backwards caste communities.

The Dalit Panthers espoused a radical political agenda in their 1973 manifesto. Drafted by Namdeo Dhasal, one of the movement's primary ideologues, the document conveyed early synergy between Dalit Panther and Communist politics, particularly with the Naxal movement emanating from West Bengal. The manifesto designated enemies of Dalits as 'power, wealth, price; landlords, capitalists, money-lenders and their lackeys; those parties who indulge in religious or casteist politics, and the

Government which depends on them."[31] Further, it dismissed Congress rule as no more than a thin democratic veil cast over an earlier feudal system that had subjugated Dalits for centuries. Conveying the Panthers' disillusionment with the present political order, the manifesto signaled the movement's expanding political ambition, declaring, "Change of heart, liberal education will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant mass will come the tidal wave of revolution."[32] Acknowledging the futility of "legalistic appeals, requests, demands for concessions, elections, *satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance)," the Panthers embraced provocative displays of public dissent alongside confrontational street politics that aggravated communal tensions with rival groups including the Hindu and Maratha majoritarian *Shiv Sena,* which was closely interlinked with local police.[33]

From 1967, agrestic upheaval drove hordes of rural migrants into Bombay's crowded slums, an influx of urban poor that peaked in 1972 following a severe statewide drought. The Panthers' critique of the present political order and their community's socio-economic stasis found a receptive audience among these migrants, many of whom sought employment and security. In coming years, Dalit Panther politics fused an acerbic appraisal of the Congress government with labor politics brought them into alignment with Communist movements.[34] For example, Dalit Panther organizers exerted their muscle in mobilizing their community behind the 1974 Communist-led labor strikes in Bombay's textile mills. Shortly thereafter, the confluence of Dalit and Communist labor politics came to a head during the 1974 *Lok Sabha* By-election in central Bombay when the Dalit Panthers' bonhomie with the Communists pitted them against the Congress, *Shiv Sena*, and Republican Party.[35] On January 5, 1974, the Dalit Panthers convened a public meeting at Ambedkar Ground in Worli where their leaders were expected to declare the movement's stand for the upcoming election. The assembly devolved into chaos when non-Dalit youth residing in adjacent *chawls*, accompanied by *Shiv Sena* supporters and backed by local police, disrupted the rally and an all-out riot engulfed the BBD *chawls* of Worli.

Ultimately, the apogee and near collapse of the Dalit Panthers coincided in 1974. Through a display of strength in the Worli Riots and its effective boycott of the *Lok Sabha* by-election, in which the participation of almost 20,000 Dalits contributed indirectly to a Communist victory, the movement demonstrated commanding influence over a substantial share of Bombay's Dalit electorate, not to mention considerable sway among the city's informal labor market. Yet, this fusion of labor with radical politics contributed to its precipitous decline. The Dalit Panthers incited the ire of the ruling Congress party, which capitalized on the suspension of democratic procedures during Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency (1975-77) to dismantle its infrastructure and incarcerate its core leadership.[36] Dalit Panther leaders defied Emergency rule, but heavy-handed police repression drove the movement underground. Moreover, strong state pressure exacerbated an already contentious rift between leading Dalit Panther ideologues, Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale, which further sapped the movement's early vitality and spurred its swift fade from prominence in Bombay politics.

Beyond Bombay

Following the termination of the Emergency in 1977, core Dalit Panther organizers including Arun Kamble, Ramdas Athawale, S. M. Pradhan, and D. Mhaske founded the *Bharatiya Dalit Panther* (BDP).[37] From the 1980s, the BDP expanded beyond its initial epicenter in Maharashtra through kinship and labor migration networks linking its organizers with an expanding sphere of Dalit activists across India. Discussing these efforts, Ramdas Athawale informed me on February 22, 2014, that, by the early 1980s, the organization had established branches in nearly twenty states across India including Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. Referencing Tamil Nadu, Athawale recounted the active participation of Tamil Dalits in his movement, many of whom had migrated from Madurai and Tirunelveli to Dharavi, a sprawling slum in central Bombay. Twice yearly, national networks of Dalit activists converged in Nagpur to participate in massive public ceremonies commemorating the birth and death anniversaries of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on April 14th and December 6th, respectively.

On one such occasion in the early 1980s, Athawale's supporters introduced him to A. Malaichamy, a Madurai-based law student and *Dravida Kazhagam* youth-wing coordinator, who he subsequently recruited to usher the movement into Tamil Nadu. Born March 11, 1954, Malaichamy, the son of a government clerk, became the first college graduate in his family when he completed a Bachelor of the Arts (B.A.) in economics at Madurai Wakf Board College. He joined Madurai Law College in 1981 and received board certification from the Bar Council of Tamil Nadu in 1984.[38] While still working toward his *Juris Doctor* (J.D.), Malaichamy formally accepted responsibility as state convener in Tamil Nadu at a public ceremony presided over by Arun Kamble at *Kāndiccāl Tiḍal* in Dharavi, Bombay, on April 24, 1982.[39] After accepting his role in the *Bharatiya Dalit Panther*, referred to in Tamil as the *Dalit Panther Iyakkam* (DPI), or Dalit Panther Movement, Malaichamy resigned his position in the *Dravida Kazhagam* to concentrate exclusively on the challenges besetting local Dalit communities.[40]

On September 18-19, Malaichamy organized a public symposium at *Tantai Periyar Maligai* in Tallakulam, Madurai, to chart the future direction of the Tamil Nadu *Bharatiya Dalit Panther*, which was more commonly referred to by it English name, the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI) or Dalit Panther *Iyakkam* (movement). To bolster attendance, the DPI solicited donations from Dalit government employees that provided participants with lodging and meals. The symposium agenda foregrounded a core principle that governed subsequent movement politics: the DPI had not entered the political arena to lobby for augmented welfare subsidies, but to demand the impartial administration of law and delivery of rights.[41] On the symposium agenda, Malaichamy wrote:

> Today, the oppressed people expect humanitarianism and basic human decency from others; but, rather than providing a means for our people to live in this country, they are offered only a percentage-wise quota. Our rights have been denied in the name of subsidies (*saluhai*); this is detrimental to our economic condition.[42]

The 1982 symposium set the tone for subsequent DPI politics, demanding rights delivery in unequivocal terms and declaring that Dalits would no longer be fobbed off with state subsidies. But, Malaichamy acknowledged the challenge of instilling rights-based awareness among local communities, writing, "Presently, the oppressed people live without physical and economic security and suffer such intense hardship that they do not even have time to think about their rights. Even the few who understand their rights are unable to attain justice. For them, justice is an unreachable horizon."[43]

Building momentum, Malaichamy convened his movement's inaugural state conference on December 6, 1982, at Tamukkam Ground in Madurai city.[44] The function occurred in the presence of Savitha Ambedkar, wife of the late Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Ramdas Athawale, both of whom were national *Bharatiya Dalit Panther* organizers, alongside BDP leaders from neighboring states. The state conference touted an ambitious political agenda that aimed to coordinate national Dalit cooperation, petition the enforcement of reservations policy, demand the eradication of untouchability, and consolidate Dalit communities to safeguard their physical and economic security. In handbills, Malaichamy proclaimed:

> Our oppressed people will gather *en masse* waving flags and shouting slogans. We have lived as slaves of caste Hindus for too long, without *kanji* (plain rice gruel) to eat, without clothing to wear, and without a house to live in. We must struggle for our rights and raise our voice against the injustice that has been done to us.[45]

Presenting the Dalit Panthers as an alternative to current political parties, Malaichamy stressed the importance of an autonomous organization to advocate Dalit concerns:

> No political party in our land will struggle on our behalf. All political parties in our country are under the control of caste Hindus. We, ourselves, must be ready to struggle to claim our community rights. We must ameliorate our present condition in which we are broken and shattered into pieces.[46]

Summoning his "brothers and sisters to extend their cooperation," Malaichamy beckoned Dalit communities to "flow like an ocean's waves to the first state

conference… May our people join hands and participate in the conference with great passion! May battalion upon battalion set off for Madurai."[47]

In the following year, Malaichamy began preparatory work for a second state conference slated for September 19, 1983, at Tamukkam Ground in Madurai. In preparation, Malaichamy convened public meetings across Madurai and neighboring districts to network with Dalit politicians and local social organizers. For example, he convened a public meeting at Tiruccuḷi-Paccēri Community Hall on August 13, 1983, with Ukkirapandiyan, an ex-MLA from Pārttibaṉūr, R. Pandiyan, a former panchayat leader near Tirucculi, and local social movement organizers to publicize the event among local communities and garner support from Dalit elders.[48] At these meetings, Malaichamy distributed handbills stressing that the DPI's second state conference aimed to promote rights awareness and Dalit solidarity to collectively safeguard the community's physical and economic security.[49]

In the months preceding the conference, Malaichamy again solicited donations from Dalit government employees and DPI supporters pooled funds in local communities to commission private transportation services, hiring lorry and bus operators to ferry participants to the venue. In a letter describing groundwork for the day's event, Malaichamy claimed that more than 500 lorries had been commissioned to carry supporters from surrounding districts to the conference venue in Madurai city.[50] But, on the day of the function, DPI organizers discovered that a majority of lorry and private bus operators, who had already collected an advance deposit, buckled under pressure from police and reneged on their commitments. Throughout the district, police obstructed the passage of private vehicles commissioned by the DPI, detaining them well before the venue and directing their passengers to return home. DPI leaders nevertheless conducted the inaugural state conference before a projected crowd of around ten thousand, but the ceremony ultimately fell short of the grandiose expectations envisioned by its organizers.[51]

Following the conference, Malaichamy remonstrated to representatives in the state assembly and national parliament, citing a "government conspiracy" to obstruct Dalit mobilization. In an undated letter from 1983, he wrote:

We had completed preparations to assemble approximately 2 lakh people. But, the police department conspired, planned, and obstructed [our] efforts]. They stopped [our] people everywhere, declaring that they should not arrive in lorries. In some places, the police department intimidated and threatened the [private vehicle] owners to ensure that lorries or buses should not be leased to Harijans. The police immediately instructed the lorry owners who had taken an advance [deposit] to return the money to the oppressed people. The police entered the houses of our comrades who had coordinated the transportation and harassed them. In all, more than 300 lorries were detained in this manner. The poor people, even though they subsist without adequate food, pooled their hard-earned money to book lorries and participate in their community's conference, but the government, intent to impede their consolidation, conspired and obstructed [their efforts]. Within the present context, the very people who are deprived of their rights are even prevented from assembling to petition for their rights.[52]

Underscoring the state government's inconsistent treatment of caste organizations, Malaichamy pointed out that Madurai-based ministers had endorsed and participated in a recent conference convened by the Mutharaiyars, an influential landholding community. Dubbing the affair "a government conspiracy against the Dalit people," Malaichamy wrote, "We think that the government banned our activities to prohibit us from condemning forms of discrimination including social prejudice, murder, swindling, and rape that are spreading in Tamil Nadu against the Dalit people."[53] Entreating elected representatives to redress the situation, he concluded, "We request with great humility that you speak in your parliament/assembly about this grave injustice… We believe that you will bring forward a favorable solution for our problems."[54] There is no record of any response to Malaichamy's request.

Petitioning State Authority

Despite projecting itself as a state-wide organization, DPI activity was generally confined to Madurai District and surrounding areas where it enlisted early support from Dalit public sector employees in the banking, transportation, and insurance sectors as well as from local lawyers and student activists. Early DPI backing cut across sub-caste lines, drawing participation from the state's three largest Dalit groups:

Arundhathiyars, Paraiyars, and Pallars. Initially, the DPI relied heavily on public sector employees who, barred from direct political activity, preferred instead to finance its activities. In contrast to the provocative brand of street politics deployed by its counterparts in Maharashtra, the DPI drafted legal petitions that, in citing relevant laws and constitutional provisions, appealed to pertinent authorities to redress their grievances. A comprehensive review of Malaichamy's personal documents reveals that he submitted formal appeals seeking to remedy known abuses of reservations policy, resolve complaints of workplace discrimination, and avail greater access to education and economic opportunities.

Malaichamy attempted to leverage his capacity as DPI chairman to pressure state officials to perform their duties and redress specific Dalit concerns. For example, on October 26, 1983, Malaichamy petitioned the Tamil Nadu Director of Adi-Dravidar and Tribal Welfare to rescind its stipulation of 90% attendance for availing SC/ST scholarships. On January 18, 1984, K. Arumugam, Director for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, responded to Malaichamy, informing him that the matter had already been raised and 'the orders of the government are awaited,' intimating that bureaucratic gridlock made the change unlikely, at best. Then, on December 6, 1985, Malaichamy wrote to the administrative director of the Pandiyan Transportation Federation, stating, "We are distressed upon learning that your administration has not fulfilled the 18% quota allocated for oppressed people hailing from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities as per the Tamil Nadu government's reservations policy."[55] Not only had a mere 5% of the reservations quota been implemented, he alleged, but SC/ST employees had been barred from entering managerial positions and strictly appointed to low-level posts such as gardeners and sweepers. He objected:

> State and central governments allocate reservations for SC/ST people to uplift those who, having lived without equality due to casteism, have been subdued and suppressed in our society. It is enshrined in the Constitution and written into law by Dr. Ambedkar that SC/ST people will only attain equal footing in society through the reservations system. State and central

governments should observe this legal obligation and fulfill reservations quotas.[56]

He proceeded to request "with affection" that the director act expediently to satisfy "our lawful and reasonable appeal and fulfill the 18% reservations quota for the SC/ST people."[57] Again, there is no record of Malaichamy having received any response.

Beyond petitioning the enforcement of quotas, Malaichamy drafted formal appeals that lobbied higher authorities to redress specific abuses of the reservations system. For example, in an undated 1985 letter, Malaichamy exposed a specific instance of abuse and petitioned successive tiers of state authority to rectify the situation. Malaichamy charged that Dr. K. Rajmohan of the Illathu Pillaimar caste, a Backward Class (BC) in Tamil Nadu, furnished a forged Scheduled Tribe (ST) certificate to gain admission to medical college. In his appeal, Malaichamy alleged that Rajmohan, a relative of ex-mayor Muthu Pillai, exploited channels of personal influence to matriculate in M.B.B.S. and D.C.H. courses under the ST quota.[58] Malaichamy claimed that Rajmohan again presented the forged certificate when he joined the Public Health Clinic (P.H.C.) at Samayanallur where, despite the counterfeit having been detected, the doctor remained in service due to "some politics and extraneous influence." Requesting swift intervention, Malaichamy wrote in stilted English:

> If B.C's are make utilise such privilege of S.C and S.T. it will affect the whole SC and ST Society. So, I pray to the Honourable Government of India and kind request that you may take necessary action against the said Doctor according to the principle of natural Justice.

To increase pressure on local officials, Malaichamy directed his appeal to P. N. Bhagwati, the presiding Chief Justice of India, and copied national, state, and district-level government offices including SC/ST Commissions in New Delhi and Madras, Tamil Nadu Directorate of Vigilance and Anticorruption, Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission, Tamil Nadu Department of Health and Family Welfare, and District Collectors in Madurai and Tirunelveli.[59]

Attempting to position the DPI as a *de facto* labor union, Malaichamy also addressed the concerns of Dalit public sector employees. For example, on receipt of an undated 1985 letter from Dalit employees at Madurai Mail Motor Service (MMS), a branch of the Post & Telegraph Department, Malaichamy sought to leverage his role as DPI chairman to intervene in a workplace dispute between Dalit employees and department managers. In their letter, Dalit employees decried abuse at the hands of company managers who, they alleged, referred to them by their caste names and derided them with derogatory slurs such as "the crowd that cleans latrines," "dogs," and "asses."[60] Further, they related that management explicitly forbade them from raising the matter before the SC/ST Workers' Union and then foisted false disciplinary reports against them after they registered a formal complaint. At their behest, Malaichamy wrote to the Chairman of the Madurai Post & Telegraph Department on September 12, 1985, to request a personal consultation: "A five-person team from our movement wants to meet with you to discuss discrimination in your workplace and general problems faced by SC/ST employees at Madurai Mail Motor Service."[61] Five days later, on September 17, 1985, K. Santhanam, Assistant Director of Postal Services Madurai Region, stonewalled the effort, responding: "Sir, I am directed to inform you that only recognized unions/Associations are entitled to have any meeting/interview with Administration regarding service matters of P&T employees and hence the question of grant [sic] of any interview to you for the purpose mentioned does not arise."[62]

As reconstructed from a fragmentary archive of personal letters and legal appeals, these early documents provide a representative sample of how Malaichamy attempted to leverage his role as DPI chairman to lobby state authorities to redress Dalit grievances. He pressed hiring managers to fulfill existing reservation quotas, urged state officials to rectify known abuses of the reservations system, and sought to intervene on behalf of Dalit public sector employees to remedy their grievances of workplace discrimination. Printed on DPI letterhead with an image of Dr. Ambedkar opposite a snarling panther, Malaichamy forwarded his appeals to different branches and multiple tiers of state and national government, likely an attempt to ratchet up

pressure on local officials to take decisive action. Considered together, these original materials provide an intimate account of the initial phase of DPI politics in 1980s Tamil Nadu. But, preserved documents signal that petition-based advocacy waned from 1986, possibly due to the ostensible failure of these early appeals to motivate state officials to uphold the laws they were tasked to uphold and intervene on behalf of Dalits.

Retiring the pen

Malaichamy initially approached the state as the adjudicator of law and guarantor of rights, utilizing the DPI as a platform to petition authorities to redress specific instances of caste discrimination and lobby for the delivery of rights. But, as the decade progressed, he appears to have retired the pen and reappraised his early program. From 1986, preserved documents indicate an attenuation of DPI petition politics, but this need not imply an enervation of the movement. On the contrary, Malaichamy appears to have lost confidence in the impartiality of state officials to enforce the laws they were tasked to uphold and, instead, focused his energy on developing a political constituency, networking with Dalit organizations, and promoting Ambedkarite philosophy in local communities. Throughout his tenure as DPI Chairman, Malaichamy convened biannual public ceremonies that commemorated Ambedkar's birth and death anniversaries on April 14th and December 6th, respectively.[63] A holistic review of materials distributed at these functions reveals an expanding list of DPI office bearers and external collaborators. For example, a handbill distributed at a movement rally on June 11, 1989, identifies the widest breadth of DPI functionaries including taluk, panchayat, and village-level leaders, indicating a gradual institutionalization of the early movement.[64]

Although the early DPI likely experimented with agitational politics, the preserved record is too fragmentary to convey a definitive account. Still, allusion to a handful of striking instances surface within the archive. In his earliest recorded intervention, Malaichamy spearheaded a public rally protesting the murder of a local Dalit man in Māṇikkampaṭṭi village who was killed on January 17, 1983, for drawing

water from a public well located in an upper-caste settlement.[65] Several months later, on July 23, 1983, Malaichamy coordinated joint action with Ambedkarite organizations and local Dalit students to dispute the encroachment of public lands earmarked for Dalits in Peruṅguḍi village near Madurai. Following a protracted silence, the archive reveals that, on November 8, 1987, Malaichamy organized a public procession in Melur taluk to protest the murder of Kandan, a DPI activist killed for challenging the allotment of local granite tenders, or leasing contracts on government resources.[66] Malaichamy exhorted Dalits to bring their families and join the protest *en masse,* charging that Dalits had been barred from staking claim to local resources and, thereby, from participating in the local economy (1987). Then, on March 30, 1988, the DPI organized a public rally to demand a formal inquiry into the murder of S. Paakkiyam, a cobbler from Mēlavācal colony in central Madurai who was killed for her staunch opposition to the local arrack (illegal alcohol) production that she charged with preying on Dalit families and livelihoods.[67]

Despite offering only fleeting references to agitational politics, preserved materials demonstrate that Malaichamy's political interventions extended well beyond the DPI platform. Malaichamy established charitable trusts to create new avenues for economic progress, improve access to education, and promote professional development among Dalit communities. For example, in 1985, he launched the Madurai Milk Society in collaboration with Dalit bank managers to provide microcredit loans for Dalits to purchase cows and initiate small-scale milk production. A. Ravikumar, a Madurai High Court lawyer and early DPI associate, recalled on January 6, 2014, that Malaichamy founded the milk society with the explicit intent to nurture an emergent class of Dalit entrepreneurs. Later, on December 6, 1985, Malaichamy inaugurated the Ambedkar Educational Society (AES) at a ceremony commemorating the death of the Dalit icon.[68] Offering a range of free educational services, the organization specified seven core objectives[69]:

- To strive for the educational development of the oppressed people
- To motivate the oppressed Dalit people to study further by increasing the accessibility of education and spreading awareness about its benefits.

- To extend educational amenities in every way possible to all students who cannot afford to receive an education
- To provide training for interviews and examinations for students who are applying for employment
- To confer awards upon Dalit students who excel in secondary and higher secondary schooling to encourage them in their studies
- To provide educational training to eradicate discrimination against the oppressed people by the central government based on their birth and to illuminate the path of their liberation

Among its staple offerings, the society provided academic training geared toward Dalit students who had passed their plus-2 exams and intended to pursue advanced degrees.

To sponsor early AES activities, Malaichamy solicited donations from Dalit public sector employees. AES handbills identify V. Karuppan, a Dalit officer in the Indian Administrative Service (I.A.S.), as its primary patron. When I spoke with Karuppan, he stressed that AES held a strategic long-term vision that prioritized education over immediate economic gains, recalling how Malaichamy viewed education as key to inculcating political awareness and promoting social and economic development. Karuppan acknowledged early resistance to the AES mission, noting, "Many people prefer to restrain the working class by limiting their education. They fear that their local labor force will be spent if these people develop."[70] But, he stressed, "Whereas uneducated workers are easily preyed upon, we knew that educated workers would demand their rights as well as higher wages."[71] Karuppan emphasized that AES fostered a robust collaboration between Dalit activists, government employees, and local communities through activities that commemorated the educational achievements of Dalit students, provided free access to academic and professional training, and instilled a popular appreciation for education as a critical asset for social and economic development.

From Dalit Panthers to *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*[72]
In 1988, A. Malaichamy chanced upon a news caption in *Tarāsu*, a Tamil political magazine, claiming that the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) party intended to allot a seat in the upcoming 1989 Legislative Assembly Election to R. Thirumaavalavan, a

young Dalit government employee who recently relocated to Madurai on April 4, 1988.[73] But, as is often the case with political weeklies, the article liberally blended fact with speculation. Thirumaavalavan, publicly employed as a grade-two scientific assistant in the Madurai Forensic Science Department, had in fact requested an assembly seat from the DMK. Yet, his request was denied, which was hardly surprising considering his lack of financial means and political pedigree. However, this was not the first occasion that Thirumaavalavan was brought to Malaichamy's attention. Earlier, Malaichamy's younger brother Vijayan, an advocate at Madras High Court, informed him that Thirumaavalavan, his former classmate at Madras Law College, had recently accepted a government posting in Madurai. In a letter, Vijayan elaborated upon Thirumaavalavan's commitment to social activism as well as his capacity for impassioned oratory that had enraptured students at pro-*Eelam* rallies during their school days.[74] When Malaichamy first met Thirumaavalavan, he knew that he was speaking with his brother's acquaintance, but he also thought he was meeting a future DMK candidate.

Thirumaavalavan accepted Malaichamy's invitation to participate in DPI events, but participated in only a handful of meetings in addition to the professional coaching courses offered by the Ambedkar Educational Society.[75] Thirumaavalavan recalls that when he arrived in Madurai the Dalit Panther of India was, at least from an operational standpoint, defunct as Malaichamy instead channeled his efforts through the Ambedkar Education Society.[76] But, their collaboration was short-lived. On September 14, 1989, Malaichamy's sudden death brought his independent endeavors and DPI activity to a standstill. Following several months of inactivity, Thirumaavalavan contacted Ramdas Athawale, national convener of the *Bharatiya Dalit Panthers*, to coordinate a remembrance ceremony for Malaichamy, but Athawale conveyed with regret his inability to attend any funerary arrangements.[77]

On December 31, 1989, Thirumaavalavan convened a modest condolence meeting to commemorate Malaichamy's achievements at Tamukkam Ground in Madurai. During the meeting, a handful of DPI cadre from Melur, the largest *taluk* in Madurai District, insisted that Thirumaavalavan assume DPI leadership and revive

the defunct movement. During our conversation on November 4, 2013, Thirumaavalavan recalled how a group of activists from Melur pressed him at that meeting to assume responsibility as the next DPI chairman. At first, he rebuffed their request, citing his unfamiliarity with local politics and emphasizing that, as a newcomer to the city, he lacked the local connections required to sustain the movement.[78] Suggesting that a condolence meeting was not an appropriate venue to deliberate on such topics, he instructed the cadre to organize a separate meeting to determine the DPI's future course. Shortly thereafter, at a modest gathering on January 21, 1990, that drew no more than twenty early supporters, Thirumaavalavan accepted leadership of the DPI at Traveler's Bungalow, a government guesthouse in Mapalayam, Madurai.[79]

After assuming leadership, Thirumaavalavan contacted Ramdas Athawale to apprise him of recent events and discuss the movement's future direction. Athawale requested that the Tamil Nadu DPI merge with the recently launched *Bharatiya Republican Party* in order to consolidate Dalit organizations across India in a public display of solidarity prior to the centenary of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's birth.[80] Drawing instead from his personal background as a student organizer of Tamil *Eelam* politics, Thirumaavalavan spurned Athawale's request for national consolidation and, rather, anchored the movement in Tamil Nadu to focus on quotidian problems faced by local Dalit communities and, in particular, on price hikes, usury, poverty, and caste discrimination. When recalling the circumstances in 1990, Thirumaavalavan reaffirmed that he met Malaichamy on only a handful of occasions and candidly admitted his unfamiliarity with the history, politics, and principles of the *Bharatiya Dalit Panthers*, acknowledging that his background drew from student politics pertaining to issues of Tamil sovereignty. Not only was he unfamiliar with Dalit politics, Thirumaavalavan was a newcomer to Madurai who lacked social networks and a broader knowledge of the city.

Thirumaavalavan assumed leadership of the DPI at a seminal moment for Dalit politics across India. In the year of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's birth centenary, national and state government initiatives translated, published, and propagated Ambedkar's

biography and his lifeworks in vernacular languages across the country. As S. Anand of Navayana Press writes, "Even those not directly exposed to the political philosophy of Ambedkar, those who had not read his works, became alive to a certain Dalit consciousness."[81] Thirumaavalavan acknowledges that the Ambedkar centenary spurred his movement's growth, noting, "After the Ambedkar Centenary, many youth who had digested the emerging politics began to take Dalit movements into their own hands."[82] While the centenary infused fresh life into Dalit social organizations and promoted rights-based awareness among local communities, Thirumaavalavan suggests that it also instilled dissatisfaction among the youth regarding the present state of Dalit politics. He recalls, "Ambedkarite movements typically concentrated their attention on the demands of the oppressed people's middle class and, in particular, on issues such as reservations and matters related to [welfare] concessions."[83] But, he alleged that his movement operated with a different aim, acknowledging, "We were taking into our own hands the problems of our people who endure violence on a day by day basis."[84]

Thirumaavalavan focused on grassroots mobilization and tailored the organization to address quotidian forms of caste discrimination, often targeting impeded access to the local economy. From 1990 until early 1992, Dalit Panther activities operated locally on a modest scale. Upon completing their professional obligations, Thirumaavalavan and his associates cycled to Dalit colonies across Madurai city and outlying areas to mingle with residents, inquiring about their problems and inculcating rights awareness. Paavalan, a government engineer who volunteered alongside Malaichamy and Thirumaavalavan in the Ambedkar Educational Society, recalls that under Thirumaavalavan the Dalit Panthers generated rights-based awareness and actively intervened in recurring problems confronting local communities. In doing so, Paavalan recalls that Thirumaavalavan secured popular support behind the movement.[85]

In contrast to Malaichamy's DPI, which intervened on the behalf of Dalits but never maintained a consistent presence within local communities, Thirumaavalavan focused on popular grassroots mobilization that integrated local communities within

the movement. Senkannan, a DPI activist who accompanied Thirumaavalavan on his local tours, recalls:

> In the evening hours after completing their day's work, Thirumaavalavan and his associates would visit Dalit colonies across Madurai city. One day Tallakulam, another day K. Pudur, another day Pandalkudi, another day SIT Colony. Like that, each and every day, he used to travel with his associates by bicycle or public bus to meet with Dalit communities and inquire into their daily problems. They convened propaganda meetings and requested that the people join their movement.[86]

Senkannan recalls how local communities embraced Thirumaavalavan, perceiving him as an ostensibly simple young man with unwavering dedication. In our conversations, early supporters recounted similar memories of Thirumaavalavan seated on the ground, eating *kanji*, a plain rice porridge, and conversing with the people about their problems.[87]

While these individuals commented on his approachable demeanor, they also acknowledged that his public speeches were markedly different than the oratory of his predecessors. As a student enrolled in Presidency College and Madras Law College, Thirumaavalavan honed his rhetorical skills at pro-Tamil *Eelam* rallies, in which he collaborated with the DMK student wing. In the 1990s, Thirumaavalavan began to fashion an ostensibly militant movement culture for the Dalit Panthers. As movement ranks continued to swell, he inaugurated the first DPI branch at Tallakulam on April 14, 1990, conducted in public view beneath a banner reading "*vidutalai kidaippadu yuttattal, pudiya vidikal pirappadu irattattal*," or "liberation will be attained through war, new horizons will be born through blood." The movement unveiled its flag: two thick, conjoined, red and blue stripes with a white star in the center. The star's five points represented the organization's five-fold objectives: caste annihilation, Tamil nationalism, women's emancipation, anti-imperialism and the liberation of the proletariat.[88] Upholding the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE) as a model of rights-based assertion, his speeches, both in terms of content and style, energized local communities and mobilized youth behind the movement.

The Dalit Panthers spread in an unorganized and decentralized manner, often at the initiative of local youth. When they ushered the movement into their residential colonies, Thirumaavalavan joined them alongside local DPI supporters to inaugurate the branch through a flag hoisting ceremony.[89] In 1992, with implicit reference to the LTTE, he dubbed DPI cadre as *"vidutalai siruttaigaḷ,"* or liberation panthers. At first, the movement bore both names interchangeably, Dalit Panthers and *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, until the latter assumed prominence by the mid-1990s.[90] Thirumaavalavan infused an ostensibly militant culture of political assertion in residential Dalit colonies, referring to its local branches as *"mugam,"* or military encampments, and dubbing its subsequent land rights struggle as a *"mannurimai por,"* or a land rights war. As the movement expanded, its supporters occupied prominent, public spaces by organizing *peranikal*, or protest marches, which they called as *anivahuppu*, or military parades, through the streets of Madurai. Frequently, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers conducted these early processions to commemorate the birth and death anniversaries of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.[91]

In the 1990s, while its provocative language captured public attention, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics gravitated toward questions of local economy. Initially, the movement staged public demonstrations to call attention to quotidian challenges confronting Dalit communities such as price hikes, usury, practices of untouchability, and impeded access to public goods. But, early movement activities were not entirely limited to public assemblies highlighting the socioeconomic plight of Dalit communities. An long-term activist who requested anonymity recalls that Dalit communities shared a common grievance regarding the predatory practices of local moneylenders, including their aggressive and sometimes violent techniques to collect repayment on usurious loans. Ravikumar, former *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Madurai District (city) Secretary, recalls that moneylenders "used to loan money, particularly at the time of festivals, with exorbitant interest rates. Then, they would return after wages had arrived and demand interest payments. At times, Dalits were beaten and even locked in their huts to pressure them to fulfill their debts."[92]

In response, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers first mobilized affected communities and marched *en masse* to local police stations to register a First Information Report (FIR) against errant moneylenders. If, or more often when, police neglected to redress the issue or declined to record the FIR, a mandatory first step in criminal procedure, a handful of Dalit activists took matters into their own hands. In direct retribution, two prominent moneylenders were severely beaten. Local activists familiar with the matter recall that direct reprisals temporarily quelled tensions between moneylenders and Dalit communities and, moreover, publicly projected the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* as a social and economic safety net for the Dalits. As one early member underscored, "the people brought their complaints to us and they integrated in our movement to safeguard their interests. In this manner, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* was gradually born in Madurai."[93]

Chennagarampatti

As the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* consolidated an urban base across Madurai city, the movement ventured further into nearby villages. Pandiyaraja, an early roommate and close confidant of Thirumaavalavan, recalls that the time was ripe to mobilize Dalits in proximate villages due to a gradual restructuring of the agrarian economy.[94] He notes that rural Dalits once worked primarily as landless agricultural laborers, frequently accepting food grain as a form of payment under *"panda marru murai,"* a system of exchange.[95] Yet, he points to a shift in labor patterns in the late-1980s when Dalit agricultural laborers progressively abandoned the fields and secured work in Madurai city as daily wage laborers, most often in the burgeoning construction industry. Early supporters contend that this transition to labor-commuting began to sever "feudal relationships" with landowners, thereby enabling the movement to forge inroads in local villages.[96] Yet, when the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* mobilized rural Dalits they encountered a different set of challenges. While both rural and urban Dalits were often excluded from meaningful participation in the local economy, rural communities complained not of predatory moneylending or harassment in the workplace, but more

commonly of wages paid not in cash but in kind, physical harassment by locally dominant castes, and impeded access to public land and resources.[97]

Throughout the 1990s, "tenders," or leasing rights over government owned property, featured among the most contentious socio-economic issues. A *tender* refers to a temporary lease on government land and/or resources availed through a competitive, public auction. Thayappan, an early movement sympathizer, insists that when Dalits transgressed local custom and applied for these leasing contracts, communal tensions sometimes exploded into caste riots that engulfed the entire district. He recounts:

> At that time, it was not safe for a Dalit to participate in these auctions because members of locally dominant castes monopolized government resources… Tenders existed for agricultural land, temple lands, mango groves, whatever land and resources belonged to the government. This included tamarind trees on the roadside; there were even tenders for road maintenance. As per custom, the dominant castes utilized these facilities for exorbitant profit. They prohibited Dalits from participating in *tender* auctions and, in effect, barred us from experiencing even a meager share of the local economy."[98]

Similarly, Paavalan recounts, "At that time it was customary for only caste Hindus to be eligible for participation in leasing-auctions to make use of and profit from public lands," further averring that these communities regarded such lands as their "birthright."[99] When Malaichamy's DPI had earlier contested the exclusion of their community from the local economy, their activities elicited a violent blowback from locally dominant communities.[100] In the early 1990s, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* confronted a similar response.

In July 1992, caste tensions reached a crescendo across Madurai District following the dual murder of Ammasi and Velu, two Dalit men residing in nearby Chennagarampatti village who had entered a *tender* auction to harvest tamarind fruit on local Ammachigundu Ayyanar Temple lands owned and leased through the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Board, a branch of the Tamil Nadu State Government.[101] As per custom, participation in the *tender* auction was restricted to a limited section of the dominant Kallar community. Over the past year, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* had amassed a strong base within Melur Taluk, Madurai District, and

expanded into adjacent villages including Chennagarampatti. In 1992, when preparations were underway during May and June for a *tender* auction for rights to harvest tamarind fruit along the roadside, local movement cadre exhorted Ammasi and Velu to flout prevailing custom and enter the auction. Shortly after securing the *tender*, both individuals submitted a joint petition to local police detailing allegations of crop sabotage by members of the locally dominant Kallar community. In lieu of filing a First Information Report (FIR), local police organized inter-community peace talks, the first of which occurred on July 3, 1992; seven Dalits and no Kallars participated. On July 5, 1992, while returning from a second peace talk, which Kallar leaders similarly boycotted, an upper caste mob intercepted their bus *en route* and, wielding agricultural instruments, bludgeoned to death Ammasi and Velu.[102]

The Chennagarampatti dual murder was a watershed event for *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics. In response to the violence, Paavalan recounts:

> They took the issue to the public platform and staged a demonstration against the state, demanding that the state government intervene and take action against the culprits. Only then, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* became quite popular among the people. In fact, it was a turning point through which they organized the people as a movement against the caste Hindus on the one hand and the state on the other.[103]

The dual murder revealed the DPI's tenuous position *vis-à-vis* the state. The movement vented its fury not only against dominant caste magnates who monopolized local resources and orchestrated violent reprisals when Dalits transgressed 'custom', but also toward state authorities for an apparent unwillingness to safeguard Dalit rights and ensure basic security. In the wake of the dual murder, Thirumaavalavan recalls that he mobilized ten to fifteen different Dalit outfits around Madurai, but this early attempt at collective action failed to elicit a response from the state.[104] Moreover, as *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers continued to argue over the following decade, the government's failure to investigate the matter and apprehend the culprits further emboldened the criminal nexus behind local anti-Dalit violence.[105]

As authorities continued to drag their feet without intervening directly in the matter, Chennagarampatti provided a clarion call for the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, whose ranks had begun to swell in and around Madurai city. Paavalan recalls that the Chennagarampatti murders focused DPI activity squarely on the theme of *mannurimai*, or land rights, which energized its political agenda throughout the 1990s. He recounts:

> *The Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* used Chennagarampatti to mobilize our people under a banner of land rights, saying 'You have been living for generations, both landless and politically powerless, so you must be allotted land to cultivate agriculture and sustain your livelihoods. We must fight to capture these lands. We should live equal to the caste Hindus, politically, socially, economically.' The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* established itself as a popular movement through this event.[106]

While *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* publications and political rhetoric commemorate Ammasi and Velu as the Chennagarampatti "martyrs," the 1992 dual murder focused early movement politics on themes connected with land rights, including access to public lands and state resources. Prior to considering this new political platform, let us first consider the broader context surrounding the movement's emergence.

A Shifting Equation

On October 13, 2013 I met with VCK General Secretary Sinthanai Selvan at his home nestled just off the national highways running through Villupuram, Tamil Nadu. Selvan charts an intellectual genealogy of realignments in Tamil Nadu electoral and extra-parliamentary politics, discussing tensions that surfaced between Marxist-Leninist (M-L) movements, Tamil Nationalist organizations, and the Communist and Dravidian parties surrounding the question of caste. "The communists," he claims, denoting political parties as well as underground movements, "did not concern themselves with matters pertaining to caste, but rather collapsed caste within a broader agenda of class struggle."[107] Then, referring specifically to underground M-L movements, Selvan contends that they not only elided the caste question, but focused too narrowly on the national question and, in doing so, were unable to adapt to contentious ethnic and regional issues. In particular, Selvan harkens back to the 1980s

when a heightened demand for Tamil *Eelam*, or a sovereign homeland, gained traction across Tamil Nadu following "Black July" (1983) in neighboring Sri Lanka, an anti-Tamil pogrom that witnessed widespread violence against the island's Tamil minority.[108] Noting the presence of Tamil nationalist movements across Tamil Nadu in the 1980s and early 1990s, Selvan underscores that the brutality of Black July pressed the Tamil nationality question to the forefront of state politics, which in turn exacerbated fissures among some Marxist-Leninist cadre operating in Tamil Nadu.[109] Selvan recalls:

> At the time, I felt an ideological resonance with the Tamil nationalist organizations; these were LTTE supporters based here in Tamil Nadu. But, there was always a lingering question in my mind, 'I may support Tamil nationalist groups on an ideological level, but what is their role when Dalits are affected?' This question remained with me.[110]

In particular, Selvan recounts that the popular outcry against Black July, when placed in juxtaposition to domestic politics, exposed fault lines among these movements' Dalit cadre who, at that time, observed heightened levels of caste violence in Tamil Nadu.[111] Further, he concedes, "While speaking about atrocities in Eelam, the Tamil nationalists never spoke about Dalit atrocities here in Tamil Nadu."[112] This, he points out, became eminently clear in 1992 following the dual murder in Chennagarampatti.

As our conversation turns away from extra-parliamentary movements, Selvan recalls that many Dalits like himself had lost faith in the Dravidian parties (DMK; AIADMK), which had long espoused, if only rhetorically, a radical anti-caste agenda. "The Dravidian parties," he notes, "always compromised on caste. They opposed Brahmanism, but never challenged Hinduism and its associated caste structure. While they may have supplanted Brahmins from political power and converted Sudras into a powerful community, they were not concerned about the Dalit people."[113] Likewise, current *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers are quick to acknowledge that the Dravidian parties' egalitarian rhetoric rarely translated into practice, an allegation they evince by highlighting that Dalits were not allotted significant portfolios or ministerial berths within Dravidian governments prior to the growth of autonomous Dalit parties. For

example, Tamizharasan, a local organizer in Chingelpattu, stressed this point and emphasized that prior to the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, "the Dravidian parties, both the DMK and AIADMK, only allotted ministerial positions to Dalits in the Adi-Dravidar Welfare and Dairy Milk ministries."[114]

Further, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a political upsurge surrounding the initial submission (1980) and, in particular, the subsequent implementation (1990) of the Mandal Commission Report, which, advised extending reservations in government and educational institutions and provided fresh impetus for caste-based mobilization among Tamil Nadu's Backwards Classes (BC). Selvan recalls, "The VP Singh government created a special classification called the "Backward Classes," this became the primary category of mainstream politics. The rights of backward classes, reservations for backward classes; these became the mainstream political issues, but these rights never included Dalits."[115] While an earlier Dravidian politics of "non-Brahminism" was forged in counter-opposition to the Brahmin, he notes that the political upwelling of Backward Classes developed in counter-opposition to Dalits, who were sometimes derided as "government Brahmins."[116] Selvan emphasizes that in the 1980s and largely in response to provisions recommended by the Mandal Commission Report, backwards class mobilization across Tamil Nadu shifted the entire vernacular of state politics from "non-Brahmin" to "Backwards Class," a process further abetted by the conversion of previously non-electoral caste associations into formal political parties.[117]

When the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* emerged as a social movement in the 1990s, Selvan acknowledges that Dalit support was scattered among Dravidian parties, Tamil nationalist organizations, Communist parties, and a handful of Marxist-Leninist factions. While the Ambedkar Centenary (1991) generated a popular upsurge of Dalit activism across Tamil Nadu, Selvan contends that there was not a strong centralized Dalit movement to absorb this upwelling of support. He recalls, "Dalit youth had lost their faith in the Communist parties. They had lost their faith in the Dravidian movement, the Communist movement, the Tamil nationalist movement," and, moreover, they recognized "an absence of strong leadership willing to take up Dalit

causes."[118] In consequence, he recounts, "Many of these individuals were drawn to Thirumaavalavan and the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*."[119] Regardless of their political inclination, Dalit activists observed how caste-bias pervaded existing political structures and came to acknowledge that although political and social movements profited from their support, they rarely voiced Dalit concerns in a meaningful way.[120]

Upon its formation in 1990, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* drew Dalit support from across the political spectrum and this confluence of activists from divergent backgrounds ignited internal debate regarding the trajectory of the movement.[121] While the commitment to Dalit liberation remained steadfast, the route to liberation proved more contentious. A. Kannan, an early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizer based in Madurai, recalls, "One thing was clear in our minds; our goal was Dalit liberation. It could be any sort of struggle—armed or unarmed—but that was our only mission, to liberate our people."[122] Some early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* members, including a handful who came out of extra-parliamentary movements, pressed for an armed struggle to liberate Dalits and argued that the upheaval of the present political system and establishment of a new social order was required to truly emancipate the Dalits. Although this 'call-to-arms' resonated among some cadre, movement leadership mooted the prospect of an armed struggle.[123] Recollecting this internal discussion, Sinthanai Selvan recalls, "When only a few people were there, some individuals contemplated various forms of revolutionary struggle," and underscores that the consolidation of popular Dalit support precipitated a different kind of strategy.[124]

In tandem with the movement's precipitous growth, media persons routinely pressed Thirumaavalavan on the nature of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics, sometimes projecting the movement as a militant outfit in the likeness of other extra-parliamentary groups.[125] In differentiating his movement, which operated in plain view of the public, Thirumaavalavan clearly stated, "We do not engage in premeditated violence."[126] He elaborated, "Let me speak truthfully, I do not have any intention, not even in the slightest, to become a leader by disturbing peace and instigating violence."[127] Thirumaavalavan qualified his discussion of "peace," not by framing it in contradistinction to violence, but by querying conditions that may project an overt

facade of social harmony, which he alleges is often misconstrued as peace. He continues:

> If oppressing the weaker sections produces peace, is this an authentic peace? Just as a family may appear, on the surface, to be a happy family despite, in private, the woman lives on the receiving end of her husband's violent blows. In there actually happiness in that family? If she raises her voice against her husband's violence, would many in our society not deem her an unruly woman? This is the question that we are posing.[128]

Referring to a discernable growth of anti-Dalit violence in Tamil Nadu, Thirumaavalavan warned, "We cannot tolerate this continuously," stressing, "While a common peace may be desirable, at the same time, our people's democratic rights must be protected. We operate with this awareness."[129]

Claiming Rights

On February 24, 2014, Tada Periyasami retrieves materials from a rusted filing cabinet.[130] He slaps a thick layer of dust off the old documents, lightly soiled by dirt, oxidation, and hand oils, before proceeding to narrate the transformation of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* from a small outfit confined to Madurai city into a *'pakka',* or premiere, Dalit movement across Tamil Nadu. I sit beside him on his house veranda as he avidly thumbs through an extensive personal archive of early wall posters, newspaper articles, and personal letters, elaborating upon critical events and circumstances surrounding the movement's expansion in the early 1990s. As the afternoon progresses, Periyasami, who served as a *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* general secretary from 1992 - 2004, provides a firsthand account of the movement's emergence and expansion, a development that he discusses in terms of a rights-centric program that intervened directly in matters related to social and economic exclusion. He first introduces his political background and provides a synopsis of the political climate in 1990s Tamil Nadu before delving into a protracted account of early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics.

Periyasami's political background began with communist politics in the 1980s. Having first entered the Students' Federation of India (SFI), a prominent CPI(M)-

affiliated student movement, and then, upon completing a diploma in tractor mechanics at the Government Industrial Training Institute (ITI)–Ariyalur, Periyasami joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), or CPI-(ML), as a grassroots organizer. After five years of underground activity, including collaboration with Tamil nationalist groups active in the state, Periyasami's political activity reached an abrupt standstill due to his entanglement in a bomb blast case. In 1987, Periyasami was convicted and sentenced to capital punishment under the National Security Act (NSA) for allegedly abetting a bid to target a passenger train. After three years of incarceration in Madurai Central Prison accompanied by a lengthy appeals process, he was acquitted of all charges in 1990.

After his exoneration, Periyasami observed that a new political climate had surfaced in Tamil Nadu. When we spoke, he recalls that the 1980s witnessed the gradual enervation of Marxist-Leninist politics across the state, which he attributes both to increased police action targeting M-L movements and a gravitation of underground movements toward the question of Tamil nationalism. Periyasami pinpoints "Black July," referring to an anti-Tamil pogrom in Sri Lanka in July 1983, as a watershed event for Tamil nationalist outfits in Tamil Nadu.[131] While Marxist-Leninist and Tamil nationalist organizations continued to operate in the state during the 1990s, Periyasami alleges that, to the displeasure of their Dalit cadre, both movements bracketed caste concerns while pursuing broader agendas of class struggle and ethnic sovereignty, respectively. He recounts, "They evaded the caste question; no one was even raising the issue," which, he suggests, generated resentment among Dalit cadre who came to view the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* as a political alternative.[132]

Although Periyasami began collaborating with Thirumaavalavan as early as 1990, he formally joined *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* in 1992 following the dual murder of Ammasi and Velu in Chennagarampatti. Periyasami identifies this caste atrocity as a seminal moment for Tamil Nadu Dalit politics and, visibly riled, he proclaims, "After Chennagarampatti, what did the communists do? What did the Tamil nationalists do? Nothing! It was a caste problem so they simply ignored it!"[133] The failure of these movements to step forward and address the issue aggravated latent resentment among

Dalit cadre. Periyasami, who coordinated *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* activity alongside Thirumaavalavan from 1992, recalls that many of his former associates filed into the movement's ranks following the Chennagarampatti dual murder. He recounts, "In the early 1990s and, in particular, following the Ambedkar Centenary (1991), the caste question resonated more strongly among Dalit cadre within Marxist-Leninist and Tamil nationalist movements," many of whom were attracted to the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* ostensibly militant demeanor and, like Periyasami himself, joined the movement *en masse*.[134]

Reflecting on the growth of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, Periyasami recounts that the movement was initially confined to "Madurai and roughly fifty surrounding villages," but, from 1992, the movement "spread rapidly on an issue-basis to areas where casteism and caste dominance were most pronounced."[135] He recalls that early movement activities were centered on providing immediate response to instances of caste violence and discrimination including restricted access to public resources, drinking wells, temples, public streets, ration shops, and *tender* auctions alongside quotidian practices of untouchability. Yet, when the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* intervened directly in these matters, he acknowledges that its activities frequently elicited a violent blowback from the locally dominant caste. While Periyasami professes that the Chennagarampatti dual murder "ignited the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* in Madurai," he emphasizes that it was not an isolated incident, but rather a disconcerting pattern that replicated as the decade progressed.

Periyasami rummages through the stack of material and retrieves an early pamphlet distributed during the movement's "*mannin maindarkal anivahuppu*," or the sons-of-the-soil military parade. Clasping the document, he locates a passage that enumerates instances when Dalit attempts to secure tenders on government owned lands and resources were met with a violent backlash. He reads aloud a section from the early pamphlet:

> The oppression and exploitation of caste fanaticism continues unabated across Tamil Nadu. Recently, because the *cheri* people requested their due share in the tamarind tree tender in Vazhudhaavuur Villupuram, caste fanatics killed the

innocent Arumugam. In 1992, because the *cheri* people secured a *tender* among tamarind trees in Narasingampatti village near Madurai, caste fanatics torched sixty huts and then proceeded to make a mockery of our people's plight… [in the same year] two innocent men, Ammasi and Velu had their throats slit for taking a lease on temple lands in Chennagarampatti village.[136]

Viduthalai Chiruthaigal leaders such as Periyasami often alluded to the Chennagarampatti murders and other atrocities to evince how caste structures access to the local economy.[137] In response, early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics gravitated to issues surrounding equitable access to these government owned, yet publically leased lands and resources.

Acknowledging that caste clashes peaked concurrent with the development of his movement, Periyasami recalls, "when we gathered to mobilize our people and condemn instances of caste violence, riots would erupt."[138] But, he categorically refutes the common interpretation that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* spread through violence, succinctly stating, "We cannot say that we spread because of violence, we spread because we demanded our rights; because we began to claim our rights."[139] Periyasami notes that a sole emphasis on caste violence and atrocities as catalysts of Dalit mobilization ignores how caste conflicts were often precipitated by Dalit demands for equitable economic access. He recalls, "We wanted our rights as prescribed by law. We were allotted reservations, but the posts were not filled. We were promised rights to government properties, but they were denied… as a people, we demanded that the government abide by its own rules and follow its own laws; the government was not implementing its own laws!"[140] For Periyasami, the heightened level of caste violence was not itself a byproduct of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* mobilization as much as it was a result of collective Dalit attempts to avail constitutionally prescribed rights and secure equitable access to public goods and the local economy.[141]

Periyasami emphasizes that throughout the 1990s land rights served as a focal point of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* political program. Frequently referred to as '*mannurimai por*', or the "land rights war," movement organizers did not define land rights narrowly to denote property ownership, but more broadly in terms of equitable access to publicly held lands and resources.[142] Indeed, early movement materials, in

which rights to land surface as a central theme, corroborate Periyasami's recollection. For example, consider demands issued at one of the movement's largest rallies:

> Because we have been refused our right to request a *tender* and take a lease on government property and resources, it is not possible for our people to experience economic development. While this property is referred to as public resources, in practice powerful individuals hailing from the dominant castes monopolize these resources.[143]

The pamphlet proceeds to expose the caste-bias in land allotments and tender auctions administered by government authorities, stating:

> Many resources are leased out by the Home Ministry through local government for things like tamarind trees, black babul, palmyra, bulrush used for thatched roofing, fisheries in lakes, belonging to the Home Ministry. Even though these leases are allocated through a 'public' auction, it has become a custom for caste Hindus to procure exorbitant profit by taking these tenders at a heavily devalued rate and then re-leasing them at a much higher rate. The cheri people are neither permitted to participate in these *tender* auctions nor procure even a meager share of their profit…[144]

The pamphlet alleges that Dalits were not only barred from participating in *tender* auctions but, moreover, many government lands had already been usurped by the locally dominant castes:

> A recent government report on the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department reveals that among five lakh acres of land, four lakh have been encroached; it said that only the remaining one lakh acres are auctioned for lease… Moreover, the Forestry Department auctions leases for resources including many lakh acres of cashew nut forests, mango and guava groves, and eucalyptus trees. The cheri people are similarly denied permission to take a public share among these leases… Additionally, contracts auctioned through the Public Works Department as well as TASMAC store leases provided through the Home Department are administered in the same way; the *cheri* people are barred from participation.[145]

Not only were Dalits barred from participating in *tender* auctions and prevented from claiming a share of local economic productivity, the document moreover correlates Dalit landlessness with the community's chronic impoverishment.

As our conversation draws to a close, Periyasami discusses early movement politics as a rights-based assertion targeting questions of local political economy. He discusses caste bias not only as a basis for social exclusion, but moreover as a determinant of economic access and, in effect, an impediment to social development. This point became exceedingly clear, Periyasami stresses, during Dalit attempts to secure *tenders* to public lands and resources. He emphasizes:

> Let us think about *tender* rights and issues surrounding public lands; for example, the right to harvest tamarind fruits from the trees. We had been denied our right to access these *tender* auctions. We had been denied our right to access public lands, to access public spaces. We could not acquire, or even submit, applications for these public contracts. We could not fish in public ponds. The Dalit people could not avail any of these rights. In response, we, as a movement, began speaking about our rights, particularly our right to land. We demanded that these rights be granted to our community.[146]

Periyasami underscores that early movement politics were not premised on availing augmented government concessions or introducing new legislation, but rather petitioning state authorities to fulfill their legal, reneged obligations to Dalit communities. Periyasami recalls, "We pressed rights-based issues. At first, our people were not familiar with their rights. We ensured that they understood their rights and then, collectively, we demanded their implementation."[147]

Conclusion

Analyses of 'subaltern' politics often accentuate 'illiberal' forms of political practice as the primary, if not the preferred, means whereby marginalized populations make claims on state authority. While recognizing the contribution of "political society" to our study of popular politics, this chapter demonstrates that such a paradigm did not provide a starting point for the Dalit Panthers in 1980s Tamil Nadu. In fact, it was only after the movement's early advocacy foundered that the *modus operandi* of DPI politics gravitated beyond official channels of legal redress and, over the following decade, expanded to encompass forms of mass agitational protest that indeed, as Chatterjee writes, sometimes "transgress strict lines of legality."[148] One might postulate

that DPI organizers entered political society after futile attempts to lobby state officials through formal institutional channels. But, to suggest such a transition would imply a rupture and overemphasize the style of political engagement at the expense of its substance. In the 1980s, state institutions were neither inaccessible to DPI leaders nor lacked the capacity to redress Dalit grievances; instead, they were simply unresponsive. Shifting strategies of Dalit mobilization do not merely highlight alternate styles of political practice, but expose the challenge of representing the Dalit grievances to state authorities and eliciting a meaningful response. Although DPI politics retained its focus on legal advocacy and rights delivery, its paradigm expanded to embrace extra-legal techniques as movement organizers engineered tactical disruptions in the public sphere, which, in the 1990s, they came to regard as a complementary, if not more conducive, arena to make political claims.

This chapter examined early DPI politics as a rights-based assertion that responded to incidents of caste discrimination, exposed violations of reservations policy, and lobbied for equitable access to education and economic development. Initially, DPI organizers submitted written appeals invoking pertinent laws that petitioned state authorities through institutional channels to listen to their demands and redress Dalit grievances. Early DPI politics was neither predicated on availing augmented welfare provisions nor wrangling tentative concessions from authorities, but rather advocated the delivery of basic rights alongside an impartial administration of law. In hindsight, it appears that Malaichamy may have underestimated the degree of political pressure required to motivate an intractable bureaucracy to adhere to its own laws. But, he lobbied the state from an unfavorable bargaining position, lacking a mass cadre base and proven electoral clout. Preserved documents signal the futility of DPI advocacy from 1986 as Malaichamy appears to have diverted his energy to projects vesting less faith in the impartiality of government. In his final years, Malaichamy fostered political awareness in Dalit communities and established charitable trusts designed to advance their social and economic development.

Following the revitalization of the defunct *Bharatiya Dalit Panthers* in the 1990s, later rechristened the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, movement leaders believed that legal

rights were unlikely to be attained in the absence of robust social pressure.[149] Highlighting the inability of Dalits to avail *tender* rights, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers emphasized that caste-based exclusion structured differentiated access to the local economy and, thereby, served as a primary impediment to their community's development. As institutional channels of redress proved unresponsive to their grievances, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* refashioned its program and leveraged its expanding support base to amplify its voice and compel state authorities to remedy, or at least acknowledge, its demands. Of course, this tactical shift is unsurprising, because political representation is not strictly predicated on making political claims, but must prioritizes being *heard* and, therefore, often requires a means of expression that effects an audience in order to elicit a response from authorities.[150] As the decade wore on, movement organizers came to view the state less as an adjudicator of rights, and, thus, as a recipient of petition, but rather as an antagonist and, in effect, an object of protest; a shift in political orientation that the following chapter chronicles in detail.

An account of early DPI politics seemingly entails a narrative of barren attempts to induce state authorities to implement existing laws and policy directives. Considering this, how do we interpret these early efforts that ostensibly failed to actualize substantive rights? In her analysis of rights claiming as performances of democratic citizenship, Karen Zivi (2012) represents such activities as generative moments in themselves:

> '…it is through the making of rights claims that we contest and constitute the meaning of individual identity, the contours of community, and the forms that political subjectivity take. Rights claiming is a practice that allows us to question and reconstitute the very meaning of what is common or sensible and what is not, and this is, as some democratic theorists remind us, precisely what it means to engage in democratic politics.' (Zivi 2012, 119)

Zivi reminds us, "Democratic citizenship comes for the doing—the making of rights claims rather than the having of rights," a move that looks beyond a one-to-one correspondence of rights claiming and rights delivery.[151] The futility of its initial program does not signal a failure of early DPI politics, but marks an initial stage of

concerted political activity that generated a powerful political imaginary, fostered an

emergent conception of democratic citizenship, and cultivated fertile terrain for mass

mobilization in the following decade.

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[1] Early materials refer to the Tamil Nadu movement as the 'Dalit Panther of India' as well as '*Dalit Panther Iyakkam*' (Dalit Panther Movement), both of which share the DPI acronym. Primary materials list August 23 as the date of the inaugural state conference, but individuals familiar with the early movement insist that the event was convened on December 6, 1982, to mark the death anniversary of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

[2] A. Malaichamy (1982b), *Bāratīya talitpēntar iyakkam (oḍukkappaṭṭa ciruttaikaḷ) tamiḻnāḍu muḍal mānila mānāḍu aḷaippu* (handbill). [Invitation for the First State Conference of Dalit Panther Movement (Oppressed Panthers) of Tamil Nadu]; A Malaichamy (1982c), *Bāratīya talit pēntar iyakkam (oḍukkappatta cirutaigaḷ) tamiḻnāḍu muḍal mānila mānāḍu aḷaippu* (handbill). [Invitation for the First State Conference of Dalit Panther Movement (Oppressed Panthers) of Tamil Nadu].

[3] A. Malaichamy, *Dalit Panther Movement - Dr. Ambedkar Front Grand Uprising Symposium* (flyer). Undated (1982).

[4] Early DPI cadre cite a brain aneurysm as the cause of Malaichamy's death and recall that a full autopsy was not conducted. His son, Vinoth Ambedkar, cites three attempts on his father's life in the year of his death (1989), just prior to the Ambedkar Centenary. In one instance, persons of the locally dominant caste drove pass Malaichamy on their motorcycles, driving in the opposite direction and straddling him on both sides, they held a rope between themselves and forcefully dismounted Malaichamy from his motorcycle.

[5] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan Sreenivasan, in *Kalki*, November 29, 1998, p78.

[6] Malaichamy and Thirumaavalavan use the same Tamil term, "*saluhaikaḷ*," meaning concessions or subsidies.

[7] Recognizing the inherent ambiguity of "subaltern," I use the term here because Chatterjee frames his writing of political/civil society in terms of an interaction between "elite" and "subaltern" domains.

[8] Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004; For Chatterjee's recent work on political society: Partha Chatterjee, 'The Debate over Political Society,' in Ajay Gudavarthy (ed.), Re-framing Democracy and Agency in India: Interrogating Political Society. New York: Anthem Press, 2012: 305-322. Partha Chatterjee, *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. Partha Chatterjee, 'Democracy and subaltern-citizens in India,' in Gyanendra Pandey (ed.), *Subaltern Citizens and their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA*. New York: Routledge, 2010: 193-208.

[9] Partha Chatterjee, "The Debate over Political Society," in *Re-framing Democracy and Agency in India: Interrogating Political Society*, edited by Ajay Gudavarthy, New York: Anthem Press, 2012: 307.

[10] Chatterjee 2004, 40, 64.

[11] Partha Chatterjee (2008), "Democracy and Economic Transformation in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 43 (16): 57.

[12] Chatterjee (2004) 4

[13] Ibid. 38

[14] Ibid. 39

[15] Ibid. 41

[16] For a collection of scholarship in critique 'political society' and includes Chatterjee's response, see: Ajay Gudavarthy (ed.), *Re-framing Democracy and Agency in India*. London, Anthem Press: 2012.

[17] Nivedita Menon, "Introduction." In *Empire and Nation: Essential Writings: 1985-2005*, edited by Partha Chatterjee. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010: 11-12.

[18] Aparna Sundar and Nandini Sundar, "The Habits of the Political Heart: Recovering Politics from Governmentality," in Ajay Gudavarthy (ed.), *Re-framing Democracy and Agency in India: Interrogating Political Society*. New York: Anthem Press, 2012: 286, 274.

[19] Ibid. 67, 40, 59

[20] Ibid. 41

[21] Rupa Viswanath, The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

[22] Suryakant Waghmore, Civility Against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India. New Delhi: Sage, 2013.

[23] Grace Carswell and Geert De Neve (2015), "Litigation against Political Organization? The Politics of Dalit Mobilization in Tamil Nadu, India." *Development and Change* 46 (5): 1106-1132.

[24] Suryakant Waghmore (2012), "Beyond Depoliticization? Caste, NGOs and Dalit Land Rights in Maharashtra, India." In *Development and Change* 43 (6): 1313-1336; Jens Lerche (2008), "Transnational Advocacy Networks and Affirmative Action for *Dalits* in India." In *Development and Change* 39 (2): 239-261.

[25] Vinoth Ambedkar, the youngest son of A. Malaichamy, provided the bulk of these primary materials.

[26] Janet A. Contursi (1993), "Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community," in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (May 1993): 325. Also, the term "dalit" become common parlance through Dalit Panther politics in Maharashtra.

[27] Juned N. M. Shaikh (2011), *Dignity and Dalit Social Imaginaries: Entanglements of Caste, Class, and Space in Mumbai, 1898-1982* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest (Accession No. 3485548)

[28] Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar 3rd Edition 2001 (1992), p267.

[29] Ram Rawat, Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India. Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2011: 2.

[30] Zelliot 267.

[31] Contursi, 326-7.

[32] "Dalit Panther Manifesto" in Barbara R. Joshi, *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*. Delhi: Zed Books, 1986, p146.

[33] Quoted in Joshi 144.

[34] Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

[35] Edward A. Rodrigues and Mahesh Gavaskar, "Emancipation and Dalit Politics," in Sujata Patel and Jim Masselos, *Bombay and Mumbai: The City in Transition*. Delhi: Oxford, 2005, pp. 137 - 160.

[36] During the Emergency, a twenty-one-month period spanning 1975-77, state authorities utilised the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) to detain nearly 100,000 members, supporters, and sympathisers of opposition political parties, journalists, scholars, and activists. See: Arvind Verma, 'Police Agencies and Coercive Power,' in Sumit Ganguly, Larry Diamond, and Marc Plattner (eds.), *The State of India's Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007: 130.

[37] Janet A. Contursi (1993), "Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (2): 320-339.

[38] As stated on the original certificate, the Bar Council of Tamil Nadu certified, '*Sri* A. Malaichamy was admitted as an advocate on the Roll of the Bar.' Roll No. 275, 1984.

[39] On January 6, 2014, Malaichamy's youngest son, Vinoth Ambedkar, informed me that this meeting served to inaugurate the Tamil Nadu branch of the *Bharatiya Dalit Panther*; See: Malaiccāmi, A. 1982a. *Bāratiya talit pēntar tārāvi kiḷai - aṉṉal ambētkāriṉ 92-vaḍu piṟanḍa nāḷ viḻā & mutalāṇḍu niraivu viḻā poḍukkūṭṭam* [Most Esteemed Ambedkar's 92nd Birthday Day Festival & First Year Commemoration Festival General Meeting]. Translation by author.

[40] It appears that Malaichamy maintained strong rapport with the *Dravida Kazhagam* over the following years, as evinced by his 'self-respect,' or inter-caste, marriage to M. Madhuravalli performed by DK Chairman K. Veeramani on July 1, 1985. As 'Bharatiya' was treated as a Hindi word for 'Indian', the Tamil Nadu branch translated the term to 'India', hence *Bharatiya Dalit Panthers* (BDP) became the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI); this does not suggest a split in the movement, but simply a translation of the Hindi name.

[41] A. Malaichamy (1982d), *Talitpēntar iyakkam – Dr. ambētkār pēravai eḻuccimikka karuttaraṅkam*. Handbill, 1982. [Grand Uprising Symposium of the Dalit Panther Movement - Dr. Ambedkar Forum].

[42] Malaichamy 1982d

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[43] Malaichamy 1982d

[44] Early materials refer to the Tamil Nadu movement as the 'Dalit Panther of India' as well as '*Dalit Panther Iyakkam*' (Dalit Panther Movement), both of which share the DPI acronym. Primary materials list August 23 as the date of the inaugural state conference, but individuals familiar with the early movement insist that the event was convened on December 6, 1982, to mark the death anniversary of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

[45] A. Malaichamy (1982b), *Bāratīya talitpēntar iyakkam (oḍukkappaṭṭa ciruttaikaḷ)tamiḻnāḍu muḍal mānila mānāḍu aḻaippu* (handbill). [Invitation for the First State Conference of Dalit Panther Movement (Oppressed Panthers) of Tamil Nadu]; A Malaichamy (1982c), *Bāratīya talit pēntar iyakkam (oḍukkappatta cirutaigaḷ) tamiḻnāḍu muḍal mānila mānāḍu aḻaippu* (handbill). [Invitation for the First State Conference of Dalit Panther Movement (Oppressed Panthers) of Tamil Nadu].

[46] Malaichamy 1982b, 1982c

[47] Malaichamy 1982c

[48] A. Malaichamy (1983a), *Talitpēntar iyakkam (oḍukkappatta cirutaigaḷ)tāḻttappaṭṭōr mānila mānāḍu ālōsanaik kūṭṭa aḻaippitaḷ* (handbill). [Invitation to the Advisory Meeting for the Dalit Panther Movement (Oppressed Panthers) Oppressed Person's State Conference]

[49] A. Malaichamy (1983b), *Talitpēntar iyakkam tāḻttappaṭṭōr mānila mānāḍu aḻaippiḍaḷ* (handbill). [Invitation to the Oppressed People's State Conference of the Dalit Panther Movement].

[50] A. Malaichamy (1983c), *Tāḻttappaṭṭa makkaḷukku manila aracin caticeyal* (personal letter). [The state government's conspiracy against Dalits]. Letter to Tamil Nadu Members of Parliament and the State Legislative Assembly.

[51] P. Kambar Māṇikkam, Bāratīya talit pēntar iyakkattin mānila amaippāḷar, valakkariñar a. malaiccāmi B.A.B.L, avarkaḷin vīra varalāṟṟu vāḻkkai curukkam. [Synopsis Commemorating the Life of Dalit Panther of India Movement State Organiser, Advocate A. Malaichamy, B.A. B.L.]. Madurai: Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary, 1989, p3.

[52] Malaichamy (1983c)

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

[55] A. Malaichamy. Letter to the Administrative Director of Pandiyan Transportation Federation. 1985a.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

[58] M.B.B.S. denotes a bachelor's degree in medicine whereas D.C.H. refers to a Diploma in Child Health, a postgraduate field of specialization.

[59] As reported in *The Hindu* on September 13, 1982, a central government report acknowledged the widespread circulation of bogus SC/ST certificates and directed state governments to rectify the problem.

[60] Madurai Post & Telegraph Motorservice SC/ST Employees letter to A. Malaichamy. 1985.

[61] A. Malaichamy, Letter to Director of Postal Services - Madurai Chairman. 1985b.

[62] K. Santaṇam, Letter from Assistant Director of Postal Services Madurai Region to A. Malaichamy. 1985.

[63] A. Malaichamy (1986), *Bāratiya talit pēntar iyakkam (oḍukkappaṭṭa ciruttaikaḷ) tamiḻ nāḍu cāti oḻippu mānāḍu* (handbill). [Dalit Panther Movement of India (oppressed panthers) Tamil Nadu Caste Annihilation Conference].

[64] A. Malaichamy (1989), *Bāratiya talit pēntar iyakkallin cārpil caṭṭamēḍai ambēṭkār avarkaḷin 99-vaḍu piranda nāḷ viḻā – aḻaippiḍaḷ* (handbill). [Invitation to Ambedkar's 99th birthday festival on behalf of the Dalit Panther of India Movement].

[65] Māṇikam 2

[66] Māṇikam 4

[67] Māṇikam 3

[68] A handbill distributed at an event convened by the Ambedkar Educational Society on October 10, 1988, at Tamil Nadu Hotel, Alagar Kovil Road, Madurai, lists A. Malaichamy as Secretary of the Ambedkar Educational Society and V. Karuppan (I.A.S.) as its chief patron. The function drew the attendance of Dalit officers in the Indian Administrative Service (I.A.S.) and Dalit employees in

departments including Railways, Labour, Horticulture, Income Tax, and Telecommunications (Malaichamy 1988).

[69] Malaichamy 1986b; Mānikkam 1989, 5

[70] V. Karuppan, personal communication, March 13, 2016

[71] Ibid.

[72] In an early interview taken by the *Dalit* journal in 1998, Thirumaavalavan confirms, "Since 1992 we have been operating under the name Liberation Panthers." Cadre and movement propaganda often referred to the movement by both names, *viḍutalai siṟuttaigaḷ* and DPI until the mid-1990s. See: *""samattuvapuram – gānḍhi kāla mōsaḍi" – "viḍutalai siṟuttaikaḷ" amaippāḷar tirumāvalavanuḍan nērkānal,"* ("Samatthuvapuram – Deception in the time of Gandhi" – An interview with *"Viḍuthalai Chiruthaigal"* Chairman Thirumaavalavan," (1998) in *Dalit*, Issue 4, pp9-13. Translation by author.

[73] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013. Pandiyaraja, who shared a rented room with Thirumaavalavan in the K. Pudur neighborhood of Madurai, corroborated this account in an interview with the author on January 9, 2014. Thirumaavalavan's father changed his name from Ramasamy to Tholkapian in a VCK ceremony that replaced non-Tamil names with "pure" Tamil, which thus altering the initial preceding Thirumaavalavan from "R." to "Thol."

[74] Vinoth Ambedkar, interview by author, January 6, 2014. *Eelam* refers to the demand for a sovereign Tamil *Eelam*, or homeland, in Sri Lanka.

[75] From his recollection, Thirumaavalavan estimates that he attended only two or three DPI meetings prior to Malaichamy's death.

[76] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan Sreenivasan, in *Kalki*, November 29, 1988, pp. 1-4, 77-78. Also, "Samatthuvapuram – Deception in the time of Gandhi" – An interview with *"Viḍuthalai Chiruthaigal"* Chairman Thirumaavalavan," (1998) in *Dalit*, Issue 4, pp8-13.

[81] S. Anand, *Touchable Tales: Publishing and Reading Dalit Literature*. Navayana Press: Chennai, 2003, p1.

[82] Interview with R. Thirumaavalavan in *Dalit*: Issue 4, September 1998, p10.

[83] Interview with R. Thirumaavalavan in *Nandan*, June 16-30, 1998: p17.

[84] Interview with R. Thirumaavalavan in *Nandan*, June 16-30, 1998: p17.

[85] Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[86] Senkannan, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[87] Mohammad Yousef, interview by author, November 7, 2013; Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013; Thayappan, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[88] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[89] Gnanapraghasam Mathew, interview by author, January 25, 2014.

[90] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014; Gnanapraghasam Mathew, interview by author, January 25, 2014.

[91] In the early 1990s, the DPI conducted similar procession to commemorate the death anniversary of Malcolm X, signaling the movement's inspiration drawn from the American Black Power Movement.

[92] Ravikumar, interview by author, January 10, 2014. Moreover, Ravikumar recalls that such loans were given with interest rates upwards of 25 percent.

[93] Senkannan, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[94] Pandiyaraja, interview with the author, January 9, 2014.

[95] *panḍa māṟṟu muṟai* refers to a system of payment-in-kind in which food grains were given *in lieu* of a monetary payment for physical labor.

[96] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[97] Pandiyaraja, interview with the author, January 9, 2014. Rupa Viswanath similarly illuminates how Dalits have historically availed differential access to village resources, including pastoral lands, roads, and water resources. See: Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014; also: Rupa Viswanath, "Silent Minority: Celebrated Difference, caste difference, and the Hinduization of independent India," in Steven Vertovec (ed.), *Routledge International Handbook of Diversity Studies*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2014, pp140-150.

[98] Thayappan, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[99] Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[100] For example, consider the murders of S. Pakkikam and Kandan.

[101] See Meena Kandasamy, "footnote 2," in Thol. Thirumaavalavan, trans Meena Kandasamy, *Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of the Liberation Panthers*. Delhi: Samya, 2004, p 230.

[102] Mohamad Imranullah S., "Caste clash case transferred to Karur," in The Hindu September 7, 2007. www.thehindu.com; Also, for a synopsis of the dual murder in Chennagarampatti, see: Meena Kandasamy, "footnote 2," in Thol. Thirumaavalavan, trans Meena Kandasamy, "*Uproot Hindutva: The Fiery Voice of the Liberation Panthers*," Delhi: Samya, 2004, p 230.

[103] Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[104] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[105] For example, the same man responsible for plotting the Chennagarampatti murders was later responsible for the Melavalavu murders, where a Dalit panchayat and his five associated were murdered in Melur.

[106] Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[107] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013. An early Marxist-Leninist cadre, whose name I withhold to protect confidentiality, echoed Selvan's point in a separate conversation: "From my perspective, Marxist-Leninist movements were a failure in Tamil Nadu for two reasons. Firstly, the M-L movement could not adapt to local issues. There were two major local issues here. Firstly, there were caste issues and they couldn't provide an answer as to how they would address the caste problem. Secondly, there was the question of Tamil nationalism, which is specific to Tamil Nadu. The Marxist-Leninists were asking questions about an Indianization of politics, there was a crisis among the people in Tamil Nadu and they would not even face the question of Tamil nationalism."

[108] Regarding the three-day anti-Tamil pogrom commonly referred to as Black July, Bina D'Costa writes, "An estimated 3,000 Tamils were killed and more than 150,000 became homeless in mob violence that continued in Colombo for three days." See Bina D'Costa, "Sri Lanka: The end of war and the continuation of struggle," in Edward Aspinall, Robin Jeffrey and Anthony Regan (eds.), *Diminishing Conflicts in Asia and the Pacific: Why Some Subside and Others Don't*. London: Routledge, 2013, p104. For a comprehensive account of events leading up to Black July, see: Stanley Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

[109] An early activist familiar with Tamil Nationalist politics, whose name I withhold to protect confidentiality, recalled, "At the national level, M-L movements fought for self-determination, but they were only speaking about Indian revolution," noting that such movements elided the question of Tamil sovereignty.

[110] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[111] In the absence of a comprehensive record of caste violence in the 1980s, it is difficult to confirm my respondent contention that the 1990s gave rise to heightened level of violence. Yet, it should be noted that many of my respondents expressed a similar point of view, alleging that the intensity and frequency of caste clashes peaked in the 1990s. For an account of anti-Dalit violence from 1995, see: S. Viswanathan's articles on caste violence across Tamil Nadu in the 1990s, which were initially published in *Frontline*, have been independently compiled and published. See: S. Viswanathan, *Dalits in Dravidian Land: Frontline Reports on Anti-Dalit Violence in Tamil Nadu (1995-2004)*. Delhi: Navayana, 2005.

[112] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[113] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[114] Tamizharasan, interview by author, October 11, 2013. Tamizharasan proceeded to suggest that the emergence of autonomous Dalit political parties had forced Dravidian parties to allot additional and more meaningful posts to Dalits, yet he acknowledges that Dalits continue to lag behind other communities. Similarly, a leading Congress Party organizer emphasized, "If you take the registry from any [Dravidian] government, whether it be the cabinet of MGR, Karunanidhi or Jayalalitha, just view the portfolios that were given to Dalits: Minister of Adi-Dravidar Welfare, Minister of Dairy Welfare; Dalits were never given any important portfolios such as industry, home or local administration." Name omitted to protect confidentiality, interview by author, November 2013.

[115] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[116] In separate conversations, early VCK organizers recall that a founding figure of the state's largest OBC party referred to Brahmins as "cultural brahmins" and Dalits as "government brahmins," suggesting that Dalits were coddled by the state.

[117] Moreover, across the 1980s and 1990s, state agencies spearheaded a crackdown against alleged underground outfits, especially through legal means such as anti-terror legislation including POTA, which pressed many individuals from underground activity into caste-based movements.

[118] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[119] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[120] Sinthanai Selvan alleges that communists subsumed caste beneath a broader rhetoric of class struggle and that Tamil nationalist organizations similarly elided mentioned of caste while advancing demands for ethnic sovereignty.

[121] Internal debates centered on the style of movement politics. Some organizers suggested converting the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* into a militant, underground movement whereas others espoused a less conspicuous form of belligerence, instead encouraging Dalits to retaliate directly when confronted by caste violence.

[122] A. Kannan, interview by author, January 1, 2008.

[123] In our conversation, Thirumaavalavan underscored that he never intended to lead an armed movement. He emphasized that two paths exist, "the path of Ambedkar (a parliamentary approach) and the path of Prabhakaran (a militant approach)," emphasizing that only the former provided a viable option for his movement in the 1990s due to the stringent state measures taken against "extra-parliamentary movements." Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[124] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[125] In a detailed account of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, Hugo Gorringe provides an incisive commentary on how some discourses come to define specific groups such as the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* as "violent." See: Hugo Gorringe (2006), "Which is Violence?: Reflections on Collective Violence and Dalit Movements in South India," in *Social Movement Studies: Journal of social, Cultural and Political Protest*, 5 (2): 117-136.

[126] R. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan, *"Aḍanga maṟupōm, attumīṟuvōm!"* (We will refuse to be restrained, we will transgress barriers!), in *Kalki*, November 29, 1998, p4. Translation by author.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Originally named Veelum Periyasami, he began collaborating with *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* following his release from Madurai Central Prison in 1990 and formally joined the movement in 1992. First arrested under the National Security Act (NSA) in 1987, he was subsequently charged under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, which is popularly known as TADA, in 1994, upon which he assumed the name Tada Periyasami. For details on the case, see Staff Reporter, "One gets life, 5-year RI for other in railway track bomb blast case," in *The Hindu*, June 28, 2012. www.thehindu.com.

[131] The period saw the growth of the *tamiḻ nāḍu viḍutalai paḍai* (Tamil Nadu Liberation Army) and the *tamiḻ makkaḷ viḍutalai paḍai* (Tamil People's Liberation Army), both associated with Tamizharasan, an earlier Naxalite leader. For more on "Black July," see Staff Reporter, "Remembering Sri Lanka's Black July," 22 July 2013. www.bbc.co.uk

[132] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[133] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[134] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[135] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014. Until 1994, Periyasami recalls that Dalit Panthers and *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* were used interchangeably. By mid-1990s, the latter had gained prominence.

[136] *Sons of the Soil Procession* (pamphlet). Procession conducted on November 16, 1998, in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu.

[137] Pandiyaraja, interview with the author, January 9, 2014; Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014; Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013; Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, May 2, 2014; Paavalan, interview by author, December 10,

2013; Senkannan, interview by author, December 7, 2013; Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[138] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[139] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[140] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[141] Thirumaavalavan emphasized this point in an early interview (1998) with *Kalki*, a Tamil weekly, in which he reportedly stressed, "Regardless of where you look, the ration shop, the school, the hospital, no matter what it is, none of them will be placed next to a cheri. All of them are kept in the caste Hindu residential quarters." R. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan, *"Aḍanga maṟupōm, attumīṟuvōm!"* (We will refuse to be restrained, we will transgress barriers!), in *Kalki*, November 29, 1998, p4. Translation by author.

[142] It should be noted that Dalits have historically been denied land ownership. See Rupa Viswanath and Ramnarayan Rawat's detailed analyses on the subject: Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014; Ramnarayan Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*. Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2012.

[143] Viduthalai Chiruthaigal. *Sons of the Soil Military Parade* (pamphlet). Procession conducted 16 November 1998 in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu.

[144] Viduthalai Chiruthaigal. *Sons of the Soil Military Parade* (pamphlet). Procession conducted 16 November 1998 in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[147] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[148] Chatterjee (2004) 40, 64.

[149] Ibid 77.

[150] My contention that politics relies not simply on claim making, but affecting an audience corroborates work by Talal Asad and Rupa Viswanath. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Palo Alto: Stanford, 2003, p185. Rupa Viswanath, "Being Seen and Being Heard: The Depressed Classes, Political Representation and the Extrapolitical in Colonial Madras," presented at the Workshop "Extrapolitics: Indian Democracy and the Political Outside." University of Goettingen, December 5, 2012.

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CHAPTER TWO

Missed Connections:

Disruption and the Methods of Deliberation, 1992-1997

Introduction

In the early morning hours of Saturday, February 12, 1994, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*
activists clutching colorful movement flags gatecrashed the Madurai Junction Railway
Station, congregating on the railroad tracks and delaying the departure of the
Chennai-bound *Vaigai Express* by ten minutes.[1] While police struggled to detain this
initial group, dragging activists one-by-one back atop the platform, a second batch of
Viduthalai Chiruthaigal cadre swarmed the railway station and picketed the tracks of the
Kanyakumari Express, delaying the train by more than forty minutes. As chaos engulfed
the station, a third squadron of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* cadre attempted to gatecrash the
railway junction to stall the departure of the *Tirupathi Express*. Barring station entry to
this third group, which the *Indian Express* estimated at 200 persons, city police
hurriedly locked the entrance gates and erected a line of barricades to stall the
advancing crowd.[2]

 When activists stood their ground and collectively refused to withdraw from
the entrance, a scuffle erupted between police personnel and *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*
cadre. Amid the ruckus, Arumugam 'Theepori' Murugan, a prominent *Viduthalai
Chiruthaigal* firebrand, seized a microphone from a nearby van and exhorted the
activists by chanting movement slogans over a loudspeaker. As the police battalion
observed fresh batches of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* cadre converging upon the station,
officers descended upon the demonstrators and aggressively dispersed the crowd with
a *lathi* (wooden baton) charge. In retreat, activists defaced nearby signboards
prompting shop owners to swiftly shutter their storefronts as the melee spilled into the
bustling West Masi Street situated in the heart of Madurai's commercial center. From
the street, movement supporters improvised a road *roko* (blockage), obstructing traffic
and pelting government buses with small stones and nearby debris.[3] In all, five batches
of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* supporters spearheaded by local leaders descended upon

Madurai Junction Railway Station, generating a crowd that some observers estimated at 1,000 strong.[4] After suppressing the protest, city police re-mobilized and conducted raids on Dalit colonies across the city to nab prominent movement organizers, culminating in an estimated 250 arrests.[5]

The rail *roko* sent tremors across Madurai as the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, which had existed previously as a relatively unknown outfit, captured media attention over the following days. Local newspapers featured the *roko* agitation as front page news, while *Makkal Kural* (People's Voice), a Chennai-based nightly, published the story in the state capital under the headline, "Riot and lathicharge in Madurai Railway Station; 250 people arrested."[6] On the following day, the *Indian Express* reported, "The entire area in and around Madurai railway junction looked like a war-ravaged place and traffic was disrupted for more than four hours."[7] Media outlets elaborated eyewitness accounts of police excess and carried stirring images of city constables brandishing *lathis* over subdued, discernably incapacitated *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* supporters. *Dinamalar*, a popular Tamil daily, printed a graphic photo of three activists carrying a colleague, visibly in trauma, to the hospital while the local edition of *Indian Express* circulated a photograph of an activist, clearly immobilized on the cement floor, shielding himself from flailing police batons.[8] The caption read, "One of the agitators reportedly involved in Dalit violence in Madurai city on Saturday being 'mobbed' and caned by police men."[9] A separate article struck a more empathic tone, decrying brutality, "Setting an unwelcome precedent, the city police on Saturday went almost berserk and thrashed innocent bystanders, and even some journalists, indiscriminately during the lathicharge resorted [sic] ostensibly to disperse the Dalit demonstrators near [the] railway station."[10]

The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* conducted the rail *roko* agitation to demand the arrest of Bal Thackeray, the charismatic and controversial leader of the Maharashtra-based *Shiv Sena* (Army of Shivaji), and to insist that his movement, a rightwing *hindutva* outfit, be banned after widespread anti-Dalit violence followed in the wake of his vociferous opposition to renaming Marathwada University in honor of the late-Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a national Dalit icon and chief architect of the Indian Constitution.[11]

Newspapers accurately conveyed these demands, noting that the movement conducted a rail *roko* agitation calling for "the arrest of Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray" and a "ban on the Shiv Sena."[12] When Thirumaavalavan addressed the media on February 16, he reiterated these demands and condemned the heavy-handed police response against his movement cadre, which he described as a violation of *manita urimaikal*, or human rights, as well as an unprecedented display of police excess. Further, he announced that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Women's Wing, which had participated in the rail *roko*, would conduct a *perani* (protest march) followed by an indefinite *unnavirutam* (hunger fast) to petition the immediate release of 114 movement activists who remained in police custody.[13]

The Madurai rail *roko* featured among the first instances of an innovative *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* political strategy centered on capturing public attention and commanding media coverage through tactical disruptions of the public sphere that articulated movement demands to higher authorities and captured media attention to broadcast its presence across the state. This early rail *roko* offers a glimpse into this new paradigm that soon ushered the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* into the limelight of Tamil Nadu politics. In marked contrast the early Tamil Nadu Dalit Panthers' platform of legal advocacy discussed in the previous chapter, which entailed the submission of formal petitions through institutional channels, this new brand of mass agitational politics compelled state authorities to respond, or at least acknowledge, Dalit grievances. In the 1990s, these strategic forays into the public sphere adapted to concurrent changes in the Tamil Nadu media landscape and, in particular, the widening circulation of daily newspapers. While the 1994 rail *roko* agitation left many supporters hospitalized, it also sparked extensive media coverage that kindled the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* budding reputation for robust Dalit advocacy and broadcast its presence across the state.

More than twenty years after this early protest brought central Madurai to a standstill, Thayappan, who was attending college in Tirunelveli at the time, recalls learning about the rail *roko* through flyers distributed by *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* activists in surrounding districts. Recounting how supporters publicized the protest through

handwritten posters pasted on city, mofussil, and inter-district buses, he details the day's logistics:

> Our people arrived in groups; first one batch then the next, like that from morning until afternoon; each of these groups consisted of a core of our cadre hailing from a particular *cheri* (Dalit colony) in Madurai city. We organized this protest strategically and, in the end, it was quite successful… This was among the landmark events that made the movement popular because, on the following day, it was headline news in Madurai and all over Tamil Nadu.[14]

Recounting his participation, Nataraj Ambedkar recalls, "When we conducted the rail *roko*, we disrupted all the day's trains. Our intent was to delay train departures so travelers would miss their Bombay connections in Chennai."[15] He continues, "Police lost their patience and lathi charged many *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* supporters; they returned bandaged and bruised to the *cheris* (Dalit colonies)."[16] With a smile, Nataraj recalls that news of the *roko* agitation spread like wildfire, disseminated within and beyond Madurai through print media and word of mouth. "The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*," he emphasizes, "had arrived."[17]

Democracy Interrupted?

Theories of participatory democracy identify the public sphere as a critical site of political action and critique. In his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas examines how congregational spaces including salons and coffeehouses provided early fora where citizens engaged in free public discussion.[18] This classic formulation portrays the public sphere as a space of voluntary association where private citizens join in rational discussion as equals. Successive critiques, however, including those proffered by Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, have challenged the degree of inclusivity once posited by Habermas and called into question his emphasis upon speech as the sole medium of rational deliberation and political communication.[19] In response, critics have underscored that not all voices are heard equally, if at all, and, as Michael Saward writes, the dominant concern of democratic theory in recent years has concerned "who gets to deliberate, where and

how…"[20] Thus, if we accept the centrality of the public sphere as a critical arena for political debate, the question naturally arises, 'How do historically marginalized groups contest its exclusionary norms and participate in deliberative processes critical to a democratic society?'

Recent scholarship extends our theorization of the public sphere to encompass emergent forms of political practice and engage critically with how we might accommodate ostensibly 'disruptive' activities, including those ostensibly in violation of liberal norms, within our theorization of democratic practice. For example, road and rail *rokos* (blockages), *peranikal* (protest marches), *dharnas* (hunger fasts), *gheraos* (encirclement of officials), *bandhs* (general strikes), and unlicensed assemblies feature prominently as modes of being political that may appear, at times, to grate uncomfortably with normative understandings of liberal democracy. By reorienting our focus from political institutions to local and sometimes extra-legal modes of political participation, recent scholarship has examined the myriad forms of everyday practice through which historically marginalized communities exercise democratic franchise, represent their concerns, and come into contact with state authorities. These practices are not strictly premised on making political claims, but must prioritize being heard and, therefore, often require a means of expression that effects an audience. This chapter queries how ostensibly 'disruptive' spatial occupations may serve as integral components of democratic practice that, when deployed tactically, augment minority franchise in a context of severe inequality where the law is suspended or administered inequitably.

Recent ethnographic studies, spurred by popular occupations from Zuccotti Park to Tahir Square, refocus our attention on the public sphere as a primary site of political struggle. In a comparative ethnography of the Occupy and Oaxaca movements, Ivan Arenas examines how physical acts of spatial occupation generate new forms of community and political subjectivity, arguing that "the production of a collective subject takes place through encampments and the modality of the assembly."[21] In the context of urban India, Thomas Blom Hansen considers how the public sphere provides the contested terrain upon which emergent communities are

imagined, mobilized, and rendered visible through acts of political performativity.[22] In effect, Hansen reorients our focus from democratic institutions to public culture as the formative political space of Indian democracy. He proposes, "Performances and spectacles in public spaces—from the central squares to the street corner in the slum… must move to the centre of our attention," in order to "chart and understand how political identities and notions of rights and citizenship are formed and given life through acts of representation."[23] Taken together, these ethnographic studies encourage us not only to accept the salience of the public sphere as a primary site of political action and critique, but moreover to consider the variable means and media whereby differentiated groups of citizens inhabit this space alongside the generative effects produced through collective acts of spatial occupation.

In her recent analysis of everyday political practice in modern India, Lisa Mitchell traces genealogies of common protests including alarm chain pulling on public transportation, road and rail *rokos, dharnas*, *bandhs*, and *gheraos* to query how these quotidian practices "can help us to understand where and how individuals come to engage with representatives of the state, and the specific means and media through which they choose to communicate their concerns and opinions."[24] While these ostensibly disruptive tactics are often "ignored or dismissed as signs of the "ill-health" of a democracy," Mitchell advises that we interpret them as strategies of political communication deployed by social groups that often lack direct access to state institutions. In effect, Mitchell underscores that these disruptions are often not intended to undermine public debate, but to make one's presence *seen* and one's voice *heard*. Her work enables us to conceptualize how tactical disruptions of public space feature among the ways of exercising democratic franchise in modern South Asia.

This chapter explores how physical acts of spatial disruption were utilized to augment minority franchise and advance rather than foreclose democratic possibilities in 1990s Tamil Nadu. A close analysis of how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* activists engineered tactical disruptions in the public sphere as an integral component of a broader political strategy casts light on the means and media through which historically marginalized groups communicate their demands to state authorities and

participate in debates from which they have, hitherto, been excluded. While such methods of political participation may appear to grate uncomfortably with liberal democratic norms, these disruptive tactics feature among the early attempts to represent Dalit concerns and participate in deliberative processes that my interlocutors deemed critical to the functioning of a democratic society. Envisioning representation not strictly as an articulation of demands, but a corporeal act that effects its own audience, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* turned to tactical disruptions of the public sphere to facilitate communication with state authorities and advance what its leaders perceived to be a democratic program premised on the equitable administration of law and delivery of rights.

Chapter Outline

This chapter investigates the relationship between physical acts of spatial disruption and democratic practice in 1990s Tamil Nadu, India. The chapter assembles information from the private archives of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers that contain original letters, photographs, rally handbills, political pamphlets, and wall posters. To supplement these primary materials, I incorporate personal interviews taken with early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers and supporters across eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, India, and in prior years. Additionally, the chapter integrates early newspaper and journal articles published in the English and vernacular press collected from activists during fieldwork as well as through archival research in the newspaper microform collection housed in the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania and the international periodicals holdings in the Perry-Castañeda Library at the University of Texas libraries. Combining ethnography, primary materials, and print media sources, the chapter interrogates how the early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* strategically engineered tactical disruptions in the public sphere to advance what they understood to be a democratic program that made political claims on state authority and demanded recognition as rights-bearing citizens.

In the previous chapter, I chronicled early *Dalit Panther Iyakkam* (DPI) politics in Tamil Nadu, elaborating upon how the movement pressed legal demands through

official channels that petitioned government authorities to fulfill their stated obligations to Dalit citizens. The ultimate futility of this early program prompted *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers to pursue an alternative method to safeguard Dalit rights and secure political recognition. As the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* mobilized a mass support base, movement activists engineered tactical disruptions in the public sphere in order to capture public attention and command broad media coverage. They embraced provocative, public displays of organizational strength that disrupted the ebb and flow of everyday life as a deliberate strategy to amplify their voice and communicate their demands to higher echelons of state authority. Selectively drawing upon a broad repertoire of political action including *peranikal* (protest marches), *dharnas* (hunger fasts), transportation *rokos* (blockages), *bandhs* (general strikes) and unlicensed assemblies, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers executed tactical disruptions in the public sphere to represent Dalit concerns and ratchet up pressure on authorities to redress specific incidents of caste violence and recognize Dalits as rights-bearing citizens.

In what follows, I first examine the expansion of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* in 1990s Tamil Nadu through a close analysis of its early protests and style of political media, which included impassioned oratory, bellicose slogans, and militant iconography. In conversation with early activists, I consider how this self-fashioned militancy signaled the arrival of a new kind of Dalit movement that projected Dalits as assertive political subjects who demanded recognition as such. I draw upon these conversations to convey how movement organizers perceived their early activities not strictly as a manifestation of popular dissent, but as a strategy of visibility and political communication that ensured Dalits were seen and their voices were heard. When these early activities routinely failed to elicit an amenable solution, or even as simple response, from state authorities, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers turned to tactical disruptions in the public sphere as a deliberate effort to represent Dalit concerns, command media attention, and broadcast its voice and visibility across the state. The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* utilized this political paradigm to bypass local officials and appeal to higher tiers of government authority.

Next, I dissect the anatomy of a protest, which I present not as an isolated, collective act, but as an accrual of concerted activity that articulated specific demands directed to pertinent authorities. With this aim, I provide a specific example through which to consider *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Chairman Thol. Thirumaavalavan's early contention that the very act of protest provided Dalits with "the means to speak clearly to the state."[25] In chronicling the movement's response to the 1997 joint murder of Murugesan, a Dalit panchayat president, and his five associates in Melavalavu, Madurai District, I exhibit how the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* executed a series of tactical disruptions in the public sphere with the explicit aim to project its voice to centers of political power. I offer a critical reading of materials distributed at these protests to consider how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers deployed fierce rhetoric couched in a militant idiom to advance what they heralded as a democratic program. Despite exhorting Dalits to "march on Chennai like a war battalion," movement organizers conducted a mostly peaceful procession that culminated in the presentation of a memorandum to the Tamil Nadu Governor that listed specific political demands.[26]

Finally, the chapter concludes with an ethnographic account of how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers recall their early protests. Although anti-Dalit violence was a recurring feature of Tamil Nadu politics in the 1990s, it does not serve as the primary register through which my interlocutors recollect their early activities. While they acknowledge that violence against Dalits provided the immediate context for movement expansion, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers discuss their politics through a motif of voice, emphasizing that they organized tactical disruptions of public space as a deliberate political strategy to ensure that Dalits were seen and, moreover, that their voices were heard. Alluding to DPI politics in the previous decade, they underscore that this new paradigm proved more effective than institutional channels in communicating demands to state authorities. Assembling the perspectives of early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, I convey how these individuals recall their early protests and why they turned to tactical disruptions of the public sphere as a means to represent Dalit concerns, augment minority franchise, and expand democratic franchise in 1990s Tamil Nadu.

The 'New' Media

On January 20, 1990, movement organizers of Tamil Nadu's then defunct *Dalit Panthers Iyakkam* (DPI) conferred leadership to R. Thirumaavalavan, who soon thereafter, in 1992, rechristened the movement as the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, or Liberation Panthers.[27] Upon completing his workday at the Department of Forensic Science, Thirumaavalavan and his associates traveled by public bus or bicycle to Dalit settlements across Madurai District, convening public meetings on house verandas or common areas in Dalit colonies and delivering impassioned speeches that instilled rights-based awareness among their residents. Beginning with the inaugural flag hoisting ceremony in Thallakulam on August 14, 1990, movement iconography surfaced in Dalit *cheris* (sērikaḷ), or residential colonies, across Madurai District. Paavalan, who factored among the movement's earliest supporters, recalls:

> Thirumaavalavan traveled throughout Madurai and surrounding areas to instill political awareness among our people. They had never tasted political authority; they were denied access to political power and lacked influence within local politics. Thirumaavalavan instructed them to consolidate themselves as a political force and exhorted them to struggle to capture political power. He emphasized, "Our people are landless and powerless; socially, economically, politically. We must seize our rights."[28]

When inaugurating a new movement branch, Thirumaavalavan hoisted a red and blue flag with a white star at its center to designate the colony as a *mugam*, or military encampment, of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*.[29] As the movement spread, do did its iconography as its flags and wall murals surfaced in Dalit *cheris* across Madurai District.[30]

When Paavalan recollects these early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* meetings, he recalls that Dalit youth such as himself, "were impressed by Thirumaavalavan's speeches. We were drawn to his ideology of caste annihilation and the emphasis he placed on seizing our rights."[31] Yet, Paavalan emphasizes that it was not only the rhetorical content of these early speeches, but also their outward militancy that appealed to Dalit youth.[32] These early speeches, fashioned in a Dravidian style of political oration yet laden with

militant slogans, presented the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, as an inspiration and political model, exhorting Dalits to rise up and seize their rights.[33] During my fieldwork, many respondents corroborated Paavalan's observation, citing the movement's style of political oration and its self-fashioned militancy as primary conduits that attracted early supporters. Moreover, they emphasize that the speech-act itself, a powerful symbol of Dalit assertion, became a principal feature of early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* assemblies.

In our conversations, my interlocutors recalled how Thirumaavalavan exuded defiance atop the makeshift stage, re-enacting images of him twisting the tips of his mustache into skyward pointing spears and thrusting his fist into the air, exhorting Dalits to rise up and seize their rights, insisting: *"adanga maru, attumiru, timiri ezhu, tiruppi adi!"* (Refuse to be restrained, transgress barriers, rise up in struggle, and hit back!).[34] As one supporter recounts:

> Thirumaavalavan was proclaiming *'tiruppi adi!'* (hit back) and twisting his moustache. This may have been a customary practice for others, but it was the first time that we, as Dalits, were doing this and proclaiming *'adanga maru!'* (refuse to be restrained); his words alone created a revolution. In the history of revolutions across the world, most people were armed with guns or other weapons, but, for us, our language was our revolution. Because the caste Hindus shackled our people with chains of dependence, we didn't have the guts to rise up. This was the first time for it to happen. The phrase, *'tiruppi adi'* itself started a revolution. It did not advocate violence; it was for our protection; it was for our defense.[35]

Elaborating further, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* General Secretary D. Ravikumar locates the novelty of his oration not only for its rhetorical content, but also in the way that it refashioned Dalit subjectivity. He recalls, "Thirumaavalavan's oration was key. There were no other Dalit leaders like him. The earlier generation of leaders were so humble, so restrained, but he was a firebrand."[36]

As *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* membership expanded, so did its locus of activity, which extended beyond the spatially confined Dalit *cheri* through physical and visual forays into the public sphere. Beginning in its first year, movement organizers staged *peranikal*, or protest marches, to commemorate the birth and death anniversaries of Dr.

B. R. Ambedkar alongside global icons such as Malcolm X. Initially modest in size, these marches traversed the city and, in doing so, solidified connections across otherwise spatially disconnected Dalit colonies. *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* General Secretary Sinthanai Selvan stresses that these processions featured prominently "among the strategies that we used to mobilize Dalits and establish linkages among our people."[37] As the movement's physical presence expanded within the public sphere, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers fashioned a new style of media that similarly occupied the city's visual landscape, promulgating its presence across Madurai.

Acknowledging that early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* iconography captured public attention and amplified its visibility, Senkannan describes one particular strategy that reaped dividends:

> Movement organizers utilized public transportation to spread their propaganda. They pasted small banners that featured a militant slogan wrapped around an image of a snarling panther. They placed them on all three sides of city buses in the early morning hours. This activity proclaimed their message and heightened their popularity across Madurai.[38]

Activists pasted these flyers, which were originally hand painted and later typeset, to public transportation as a means to publicize upcoming rallies and bolster its visibility across the city. Recalling this change, an early sympathizer emphasizes the difference between the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* and its predecessors. He remembers that, in the 1980s, the DPI's visibility was confined to small pockets of support in and around Madurai, but, when he returned to Madurai in the early 1990s, he recalls observing the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* presence throughout the city. "At the time," he recounts, "wall posters were not so popular, but movement activists used this form of media effectively. They also started scrawling attractive slogans directly onto walls and painting elaborate murals," adding, "This is how the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* initially captured public attention in Madurai."[39]

With its propaganda circulating across the city, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* consolidated Dalit communities through physical acts of spatial occupation and protest that solidified an interconnected social geography. Movement organizers staged

protests, most often before the Collector's Office, that made specific demands on state authority. M. Yallalan, an early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* District Secretary in Madurai, recalls that the movement staged public protests that called for state authorities to intervene in the daily challenges confronting Dalit communities. Among these issues, he pinpoints restricted access to public goods and services, caste violence, price hikes, and routine practices of untouchability including a "two-tumbler" system as recurring targets of early protests.[40] Providing a specific example, Yallalan recalls when movement activists spearheaded a procession, which they referred to as *aṇivahuppu*, or a military parade, that culminated in a mass assembly before the Collector's Office. There, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* activists placed a large cauldron filled only with water over an open fire to symbolize how recent price hikes had prevented them from purchasing food staples.[41] He recounts, "We were chanting, 'The water is boiling, but where is the rice?'"[42] Yallalan adds, "We spearheaded these protests to address major issues confronting our people who, at that time, were voiceless."[43]

While *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers avow that their early protests spread rights-based awareness among Dalit communities and sensitized them to pressing political issues, they acknowledge that their activities, more often than not, failed to produce an amenable solution. Just as the earlier DPI's legal petitions were met with silence, early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* protests often failed to elicit a response from local authorities. Beyond the alleged indifference of local authorities, Senkannan recalls, "Our people were totally ignored by the mainstream media. Initially, they paid no attention to us; they never carried news of our movement. They wouldn't even carry a small bulletin about our protests or activities."[44] He correlates the limited success of early protests with the movement's inability to effect an audience. But, with a wry smile, he affirms, "We came to understanding this," emphasizing that the early organizers "developed a new strategy to capture public attention by deploying tactics available to people's movements at the time," citing as an example *salai mariyal*, or road *roko* agitation.[45] Organizers couch their discussion of this strategic adjustment within a broader discussion of concurrent developments in print media.

In the 1990s, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers observed changes in the state's print media landscape, spurred by a steady advancement in print technology coupled with infrastructural development. Historically, the circulation of daily newspapers grew extensively following the termination of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, which suspended democratic governance for three years between 1975-77.[46] From 1976, which marked a nadir point of press freedom in India, to 1981, newspaper circulation increased nationally by 65 percent, an expansion from roughly 9.3 to 15.3 million copies a day.[47] By 1988, daily circulation had grown to 22.6 million copies a day, reaching 28.1 million by 1992.[48] The development of offset printing in the 1980s spurred economies of scale, enabling a single printing center to produce 25,000 copies of a 16-page newspaper within an hour.[49] While these advancements in print technology enabled expanded print-runs, simultaneous infrastructural developments, particularly in road transportation, facilitated the mass transport and deeper penetration of newspaper dailies.[50] Then, in the early 1990s, the availability of computing technology coupled with the domestic production of offset presses allowed newspaper-printing centers to crop up across the state in smaller towns, thereby decreasing the distance of transportation and enabling local editions.[51]

From 1994, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers engineered tactical disruptions in the public sphere as a deliberate strategy to command media coverage and, thereby, to broadcast their voice and effect a mass audience. In particular, movement organizers targeted prominent roadways and key nodal points of transportation networks in order to amplify the effect of their activities. An early manifestation of this strategy (described in the chapter introduction) occurred on February 12, 1994, when *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers conducted a rail *roko* agitation at Madurai Junction. While both English and Tamil language newspapers printed images and published articles chronicling the event, select media outlets even carried the story as headline news. Following the railway *roko*, a temporary lull overtook movement activity as many *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* supporters remained in police custody for their participation in the protest.[52] Following their release, movement organizers orchestrated another provocative display of organizational strength: an airport *roko*

designed to blockade the tarmac of the Madurai airport and obstruct outgoing flights to New Delhi, the nation's capital.

The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organized the airport *roko* to protest a recent attempt by the Supreme Court to intervene in Tamil Nadu's reservations policy, an affirmative action program that earmarks posts in government and educational institutions for individuals hailing from historically disadvantaged castes. Although reservation quotas were capped nationally at 50 percent, Tamil Nadu adhered to, at least in principle, a 69 percent reservation policy accessible to a projected 87 percent of the state's population.[53] In an attempt to standardize reservation policies across states, the Supreme Court ruled on November 16, 1992, that the total reservations quota must not exceed 50 percent in Tamil Nadu. In addition to protesting against the legal amendment, Dalit activists pressed for an extension of the existing reservation policy to include women and religious minorities, who, like Dalits, lacked equitable representation in government bodies and educational institutions.[54]

At eight o'clock on the morning of July 22, 1994, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* cadre congregated before the statue of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in Perungudi and marched towards the Madurai airport, which serviced major domestic hubs across India. The movement organized the *roko*, according to Paavalan, in an attempt to "halt all aviation operations" with an explicit intent "to rattle the central government, those sitting in New Delhi."[55] In a flyer (Appendix) circulated among Dalit colonies prior to the rally, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* announced a *roko* agitation to demand the reversal of the recent Supreme Court decision to cap reservation quotas.[56] Moreover, the movement insisted that allotments be determined on the basis of population ratio and applied to promotions and managerial posts. Further, the movement called for a separate inner-quota for women alongside the extension of reservation benefits to religious minorities, including Muslims and Christians. Although police disrupted the procession and booked rally participants *en route*, activists are again quick to point out that local newspapers carried stories and images of the mass procession.[57] Likewise, the movement spread its own media in subsequent days, pasting posters (Appendix) on

city walls and public buses that read, "A DPI airport obstruction in Madurai over the reservations issue; R. Thirumaavalavan and 5000 *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* arrested!"[58]

The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* rail and airport *roko* agitations of 1994 stand in stark contrast to early movement politics in their style of physically occupying the public sphere. These tactical disruptions of transportation systems and roadways consolidated the movement's burgeoning reputation as an assertive social movement, while simultaneously capturing media attention and broadcasting its visibility across the state. *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers underscore that newspaper coverage provided an initial vehicle through which the movement spread beyond Madurai District, recalling, "Dalit people outside of Madurai only came to know about Thirumaavalavan through the print media and, in particular, through newspaper coverage of VCK protests."[59] Thayappan corroborates this account when he recounts, "In the south, we learned about the movement through newspapers that covered their events – the rail *roko* in Madurai and the procession toward the airport. Both activities were highlighted in print media."[60] The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* militant speeches and iconography coupled with its provocative public presence signaled the arrival of a new kind of Dalit politics that projected their community as assertive political subjects and, according to early activists, that expressed an ideology of agitation, or *kalavarattattuvam*. When long-term activist Thalaiyari recalls this seminal period, he quotes a recurring argument in Thirumaavalavan's early speeches, stating: "Thirumaavalavan stressed, 'Every community is guided by ideology. Just as Christians are guided by the Bible, let Dalits be guided by an ideology of agitation.'"[61] But, the movement's radical rhetoric and rapid growth grated uncomfortably with the prevailing social hierarchy.[62]

The Cultural Economy of Caste

Sinthanai Selvan, a *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* General Secretary, couches his discussion of the movement's expansion within a broader conversation regarding the modification of village economies spurred by an outward flux of labor migration as Dalits sought non-agrarian employment in nearby cities and towns. Selvan points to Pongal, a four-day

harvest and livestock festival celebrated across Tamil Nadu, as exemplar of how a new pattern of labor migration interfaced with an ingrained socio-economic order. While he acknowledges that Tamils generally "commemorate Pongal as a festival that showcases our culture," he contends, "in practice it also served to reinforce a feudalistic agrarian structure and, in doing so, to renew the caste system."[63] Over the following hour, Selvan discusses why Pongal featured as a perennial fault line for *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics as well as a catalyst for its expansion, demonstrating ways in which Pongal celebrations rendered visible caste relations as well as their transformation across the 1990s.

To commence the Pongal holiday, Selvan recalls that local upper castes boiled the first rice of the season in an open pot filled with milk to symbolize how the sun's warmth provides for a bountiful harvest. Once this initial ceremony had ended, Dalit laborers visited local landholders, asking, *"Ayya, pal pongiccalaa?"*, inquiring respectfully, 'Sir, did the milk boil over?', a euphemism used to request a share of the harvest, referring to a nominal donation. Selvan continues, "Customarily, the landholder replied, *"Ah, ah, pal pongiccu. Ingee va,"* or 'Yes, the milk boiled over. Come here,'" at which Selvan gestures as if small money was placed in the shirt pocket of the laborer. He pauses to recollect his thoughts before proceeding, "Every Dalit laborer visited the landowner in this manner. It was a demeaning exercise. It was not simply begging; it was an annual enactment of cultural subordination."[64]

Selvan acknowledges that this practice gradually diminished as Dalits gradually severed their economic dependence on local landowners and Dalit families secured supplementary income through labor migration, often non-agrarian employment in cities or nearby towns. Additionally, Dalit students left their native villages to pursue advanced studies. Selvan elaborates:

> At that time, many Dalits migrated to Bangalore and Bombay, and even locally to Coimbatore, Chennai and Trichi. These migrants, many of whom were university students or laborers employed either by small businesses or in the construction or hotel industries, would purchase a fresh shirt to commemorate Pongal. Fashioning new clothes, shoes, and even sunglasses, they returned to their native villages with a new identity during the festival season. Upon their

return, they performed *puja* in the local temple and, passing upper castes in the streets, they would ask, *"Nalla irukkiringalaa?"* (Are you well?). Caste elders could not digest this transformation.[65]

Selvan underscores the significance of this transformation, describing how Dalits returned to their native villages emboldened and refused to perform traditional displays of subservience. "During every Pongal festival, each and every time," he stresses, "there will be a clash. We would inquire with each other, *"Pongal kalavaramaa?"*, meaning 'Did a Pongal riot occur?'[66]

As our conversation turns to movement expansion in the state's northern districts, Selvan recalls that the movement expanded quickly in a decentralized manner, most often in the wake of instances of anti-Dalit violence that became emblematic of the decade's politics.[67] In particular, he attributes the movement's precipitous growth to its novel media (described in the previous section), referring jointly to early protests, visual iconography, rhetorical content and oration style, all of which projected a self-fashioned militancy that appealed to Dalits across the political spectrum, particularly the youth. Further, he points to the movement's hardline response to anti-Dalit violence, which he then casts in stark relief to an earlier, more reticent generation of Dalit leaders. Selvan underscores that, as the decade progressed, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* amassed a strong cadre base that embraced its provocative forms of protest and highlights the importance of Dalit youth in spreading the movement during the festival season. Similarly, Thirumaavalavan underscored this point in an early interview, "Following the Ambedkar Centenary, a new generation of young Dalit leaders emerged who, having digested the emergent politics, were frustrated with Dravidian movements. They took Dalit movements into their own hands and transformed the culture of Dalit politics."[68]

Similarly, Maria Johnson, who collaborated with the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* as a law student in Madurai, recounts how the movement's refashioning of Dalit subjectivity inspired Dalit students such as himself. He recollects, "It was easy for Dalits to discuss *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics amongst themselves in the city," noting that Adi-Dravida, or Dalit, student hostels on university campuses and densely

populated urban colonies housing Dalit laborers provided residential spaces where they conversed at length about these issues. But, when these individuals returned to their native villages, Johnson recalls that they arrived with audiocassettes of Thirumaavalavan's speeches and journals detailing the movement's politics.[69] As a consequence, many Dalits residing in rural stretches of northern Tamil Nadu, who had neither met Thirumaavalavan nor attended a *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* rally, heard his speeches broadcast over public announcement systems commissioned during holiday festivals.[70] These individuals spread *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* media and, at times, hoisted the movement flag in Dalit colonies, providing a visual manifestation of Dalit assertion that frequently elicited a violent blowback from locally dominant castes. As these clashes intensified, movement organizers underscore, "We, in the name of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, entered those areas and provided our organization's protection and assistance to affected communities."[71]

As the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* gained traction across northern districts, particularly in the wake of caste violence, Tada Periyasami, a native of Thittakudi, recalls that the movement spread through strong inter-village networks already present in the region. "You see," he says,

> the people throughout this area are interconnected; there are many marriage alliances. My wife and my mother are from nearby villages. Just as there are joint households, there are joint villages. We understood that even though our people are scattered geographically, they are still interconnected. Marriage alliances established bonds among the villages. We built upon these bonds when we travelled from village to village and organized our people through protest.[72]

This interconnectedness was key, he emphasizes, to propagate the movement and coordinate mass rallies. "We did not own cell phones. So, as soon as an issue arose, we distributed posters and flyers throughout Dalit colonies. In the beginning, we wrote directly on walls and public buses to spread our materials and propagate our message from one village to the next."[73]

Over coming years, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* spread rapidly across the state's northern districts, most often following in the wake of caste violence or, after 1995,

police violence targeting Dalit communities. When the movement responded to specific incidents of violence or in support of a particular issue, it collaborated with local Dalit organizations. Then, as the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* developed, it absorbed many of these smaller, local movements. Punitha Pandiyan, editor of *Dalit Murasu*, acknowledges this when he recalls, "Once the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* had gained momentum, so many people and organizations, including small Ambedkarite movements that dotted the countryside, merged with the VCK."[74] However, the movement's fortification within the state's northern districts began in Thittakudi, Cuddalore District, where, in January 1995, caste clashes erupted during the Pongal holiday when Dalit youth installed a flag of the Republican Party of India, founded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, alongside the flags of other political parties in the main village quarter.

Turning Points

Thittakudi

By his own admission, Thirumaavalavan acknowledges that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* first established its presence in the northern districts in January 1995 following caste clashes in Thittakudi, Cuddalore District. During the Pongal holiday, Dalit youth in proximate villages attempted to hoist a flag of the Republican Party of India, a Dalit political party with multiple factions stemming from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's *Scheduled Caste Federation*, in a public square alongside the flags of other political parties. This symbolic act drew the ire of locally dominant castes, including Vanniyars and Mudhaliyars, which promptly demanded its removal. When the Dalits refused, a scuffle ensued between the two groups, which they reported to *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers who scheduled a public meeting in Thittakudi on January 18, 1995. When local authorities, who share the caste affiliation of the locally dominant castes involved in the melee, banned the public assembly, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* cadre organized a road *roko* that upper castes, backed by local police constables, forcefully dispersed before descending upon the town's largest Dalit settlement. While dominant caste persons approached from the front entrance, police entered through the rear, firing

and injuring several *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* supporters.[75] Amidst the commotion, two Dalits, Ramesh and Shanmugam, were killed by police fire and many others were hospitalized.[76]

Sithan, an early organizer in Cuddalore, recalls that the altercation ushered the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* into the region. While the movement possessed a growing support base in Dalit colonies across the district, many of these individuals had neither met nor seen an image of Thirumaavalavan, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* chairman. Yet, shortly after the outbreak of violence, Thirumaavalavan arrived on the scene to spearhead a public rally and address affected communities. Sithan recounts that he was in Krishna Hospital of Cuddalore town visiting Mahendran, a movement supporter wounded by police fire, when a young man entered the ward proclaiming, "Thirumaavalavan has come!" Sithan followed the man outside where, unable to recognize his leader, he asked, "Which man is Thirumaavalavan?" After a pause, the young man replied, pointing, "He is." Sithan recalls, "I was surprised to be facing a young man whose moustache had barely begun to sprout and with only stubble for a beard; He was probably in his early 30s, sitting on a two-wheeler alongside Sinthanai Selvan."[77]

Recounting the incident, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers emphasize that the Thittakudi violence sparked the movement's expansion across the northern districts of Tamil Nadu.[78] In particular, Thirumeni, an early Cuddalore District organizer, underscores that Thittakudi marked "the first time that the government," referring specifically to local police constables, "was involved directly in attacking our people, even deploying lethal force," noting further, "These events initiated a wave of public protests across the northern districts."[79] In response, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organized local Dalit movements and announced a full day *bandh* (general strike) across Cuddalore and Villupuram Districts.[80] Noting the importance of the public demonstrations that followed, Sinthanai Selvan avers that, from his recollection, it was the first time that an occurrence of anti-Dalit violence ignited protests not only locally, but across the region and in neighboring districts. Thittakudi provides an emblematic example of how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* expansion occurred in tandem with incidents of

caste violence and demonstrating how, as Thirumeni stresses, "the movement developed through its response to such atrocities."[81]

Melavalavu

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution formally converted its democracy into a three-tier political system, introducing formal elections within village councils, or panchayats, throughout the country.[82] Initially floated by the Narasimha Rao government in 1991, the amendment passed Parliament in 1992 and then, in 1993, received ratification by the required two-thirds of state assemblies. In proportion with each state's population of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), the amendment reserved positions in panchayats across the nation such that individuals from SC/ST communities may contest elections. This initial round of panchayat elections was especially contentious in Tamil Nadu, where panchayat presidents are elected directly by popular vote as opposed to other states where an elected panchayat council selects the president. In 1996, the village of Melavalavu, nestled in Madurai District proximate to Chennagarampatti, was among the first reserved panchayats in the state to hold elections. For the first time in village history, only Dalits would be permitted to vie directly for presidency of the local panchayat, the highest-ranking position on the village council.[83]

In promising to install a Dalit as panchayat president, the 73rd Amendment incited staunch opposition from the locally dominant Thevar community, which resorted to tactics such as intimidation and violence in an effort to undermine electoral procedures. Originally scheduled for October 1996, three Dalits filed nomination papers to contest the election, but soon thereafter rescinded their candidacy in light of escalating hostility with some local Thevars, who vowed to organize a social and economic boycott if a Dalit were to assume responsibility as panchayat president. *Times of India* reported that prominent Thevar leaders had warned that if a Dalit were elected, landowners from their community would fire all Dalit farmhands, prohibit their access to public drinking wells, and prevent their cattle from grazing on unutilized lands.[84] The following month, elections were rescheduled and again

cancelled when a group of Thevar men reduced several polling booths to ashes on the day prior to voting.[85]

The deteriorating situation in Melavalavu posed a dilemma for *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers who, while still adhering to a policy of electoral boycotts dating back to the earlier DPI, observed keenly as the first round of reserved panchayat elections unfolded in Melavalavu and across Madurai District. Thirumaavalavan recalls multiple occasions when K. Murugesan, who factored among the initial candidates in Melavalavu, visited him in Madurai prior to polling. He recounts, "Murugesan and others visited me in my room at Thallakulam to request my organization's support. I told him, 'No, we are not participating in elections; we will maintain our distance. You can proceed on your own behalf and decide as you see fit.'"[86] But, Thirumaavalavan recalls that Murugesan again returned to reiterate his intent to contest the polls and insist that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* endorse his candidacy.[87]

As the political situation grew more volatile, Thirumaavalavan faced mounting pressure from within the movement ranks to support Murugesan. He recalls that grassroots organizers including M. Yallalan, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Madurai District Secretary who monitored rural affairs, advised unequivocally that the movement discontinue its electoral boycott immediately and exerted strong pressure to back Murugesan in the face of upper caste hostility. Yallalan argued, "If a Dalit cannot even come to power in a reserved constituency, what is the point of boycotting elections? Should we not instead utilize our organization's strength to help Dalits seize political power?"[88] As similar critiques surfaced, Thirumaavalavan relented and advised his cadre to back Murugesan in Melavalavu.[89] Recollecting this decision, Thirumaavalavan recounts, "Although we decided not to contest the election, we advised our people how to vote in the election," adding, "This was our first step toward electoral politics."[90]

Following direct state intervention, polling took place in Melavalavu on December 30, 1996, under the gaze of a 250 strong police presence.[91] Because local Thevars boycotted the election, Murugesan, the only candidate to file nomination

papers, was declared the village's first Dalit panchayat president. Yet, over the initial five months of his tenure, Murugesan was unable to fulfill his duties as Thevar men *gherroed* (encircled) his office to impede his entry and he received repeated, anonymous threats. Despite a deteriorating law and order situation, the ruling *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) government, the party that Murugesan supported, disregarded his appeals for police protection. In fact, it was only after Murugesan reportedly sought physical security from the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* that the state government provided a single armed guard.[92] On June 29, 1997, when Murugesan and his associates were travelling on a bus to Dindigul, a group of Thevar men from Melavalavu village intercepted the bus at an intermediate stop, forced Murugesan and his associates off the bus and, in broad daylight, hacked them to death with agricultural shears in the public street.[93]

The Anatomy of a Protest

M. Ravikumar, an advocate at Madurai High Court and former *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* District Secretary (city), recalls, "The Melavalavu joint murder was the single most important event for the growth of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*. This was the event that really brought the people together."[94] Although initial reports referred to the atrocity simply as a "murder of bus passengers," altogether eliding mention of caste or elaborating the broader political context, subsequent *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* protests secured statewide attention on the issue.[95] While Murugesan's murder precipitated popular unrest and protests across the state, what was particularly notable, as multiple sources observed, is that the Melavalavu atrocity was "the first time that caste-related violence in the southern districts [had] repercussions in a northern district."[96] In the absence of a rigorous investigation in the days following Murugesan's murder, Dalit communities across Tamil Nadu, including *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* cadre, took to the streets in protests that included sporadic incidents of damage to public property.

According to *Dinamalar*, movement activists reportedly set fire to a public bus in Neyveli. The newspaper carried a photo of an incinerated bus still immersed in flames above a caption reading: "*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* members hurl a petrol bomb in

Neyveli and set ablaze a Thiruvalluvar bus. In the photo you can observe the bus burning."[97] The paper reports that "a violent gang" consisting of twenty young men supporting the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* set the bus ablaze in the early morning hours of July 1, 1997.[98] Without referencing the Melavalavu murders, the paper quotes the District Superintendent of Police: "The bus was burned in Neyveli to condemn *a few incidents* that occurred in Madurai," who assured the public that police authorities would immediately conduct "a rigorous investigation in order to apprehend the individuals who burned the bus."[99] Further, the article continues, "Police found a notice at the scene of the incident attributed to supporters of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* with the following message: 'In condemning atrocities committed against the Dalit people in Madurai, we will instill panic across the Tamil Nadu'."[100] To conclude, it references recent instances of damage to public property, noting that three bus windshields were shattered in nearby Thittakudi to denounce what the report glossed as a "Madurai riot."[101]

In response to the Melavalavu murders, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* first organized a protest march across Chennai to condemn the state government's inaction and draw attention to four additional reserved panchayats where elections had been indefinitely postponed as no Dalits re-filed nomination papers due to coercive measures by locally dominant castes.[102] *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers across northern districts of Tamil Nadu pasted wall posters in Dalit colonies alerting the residents to the upcoming rally in Chennai, which the movement referred to not as *perani*, or a protest march, but as *anivahuppu*, a military parade. Colorful posters (Appendix) flooded Dalit colonies across the state publicizing, "The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* grand military parade to condemn the Melavalavu assassination."[103] The posters instructed *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* supporters to assemble at Thevu Thital near the Chennai Central Railway Station by two o'clock on the afternoon of July 23, 1997, informing them that the marching procession would proceed through Chennai's bustling city center as far as Kannigapuram, nearby to Kalaignar Karunanidhi Nagar, or simply K.K. Nagar, a commercial and residential neighborhood in southern Chennai well serviced by public transportation.[104]

Prior to conducting the marching procession across central Chennai, movement organizers first distributed small pamphlets to Dalit communities across Tamil Nadu. A close reading of this material provides insight into how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers deployed a new style of impassioned rhetoric shot through with militant allusions to strike at the sentiments of Dalit communities while conveying political and rights-based awareness. The movement's language operates on multiple levels, at once comedic and acerbic in deriding the perpetrators of the Melavalavu joint murder as "a cowardly gang with murderous rage" and "barbarians from the Stone Age."[105] Although these references may attract the reader's immediate attention, the pamphlet proceeds to outline precisely what transpired in Melavalavu and then discuss these events within a legal, constitutional framework. Taken collectively, this language navigates a fine balance between militant revolt and democratic assertion that came to define *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics in the 1990s.

The pamphlet commences with an account of the murder that does not spare graphic details of Murugesan's death. It reads, "Recently on June 30, 1997, six persons including Madurai-Melavalavu panchayat leader Comrade Murugesan were traveling in a bus when they were intercepted by a rowdy gang that, rapt by casteist fury, slit their throats in an act of murderous rage."[106] Having elaborated upon the circumstances surrounding the murder, the material juxtaposes this atrocity with national preparations that were currently underway to commemorate the golden jubilee of Indian independence, accentuating the irony that the Melavalavu atrocity occurred at a time when prominent national politicians were clamoring that "they will appoint a Dalit as President of the Republic!"[107] To conclude the introductory section, the pamphlet reads, "Caste fanatics, refusing to accept a Paraiyar who was elected as panchayat president by the people as per the laws of the political system, conspired and murdered him in broad daylight."[108] Emphasizing, "Having observed the murderous rage of this cowardly gang, true democrats and any compassionate human being would be disgusted, they would scorn these actions."[109] Yet, as the material acknowledges, the murder elicited nothing more than an uncomfortable silence from the state government.

Next, the pamphlet stresses the democratic aspirations of Murugesan, who "contested the election and had the guts to enforce the right (*urimai*) of reservations as sanctioned by law without fearing death threats from fools who insisted that, despite it being a reserved constituency, Dalits should not file nomination papers. Having become the panchayat leader, Melavalavu Murugesan is a martyr who raised his head and became a great hero."[110] Juxtaposing the democratic aspirations of Murugesan alongside the retrogressive demeanor of locally dominant castes, the material demonstrates that the atrocity cannot be viewed in isolation, stating, "Not only in Melavalavu but across Madurai District, caste fanatics intimidated and obstructed the Dalit people from filing nomination papers in panchayat constituencies including Pappapatti, Kirippatti, Kallippatti and Nattamangalam."[111] Further, "Persisting unto the present day, it is disgraceful that in Tamil Nadu nomination papers have still not been filed in these constituencies despite having announced elections for the third consecutive time."[112] But, without holding dominant castes solely responsible for the failure of democratic procedures, the narrative heaps its condemnation on the state government.

The pamphlet places direct responsibility for the Melavalavu murders on the state government, alleging that the government "lacks a backbone" and "hesitates even to take action against caste fanatics such as those [in Melavalavu]."[113] Upon enumerating specific instances of prior anti-Dalit violence, the narrative alleges, "In a context in which so many murders have occurred, the police department and revenue authorities maintain their apathy and continue to sluggishly mishandle the problem in Melavalavu."[114] Next, the pamphlet underscores that even though the "problem was brought to the attention of higher authorities and the chief minister himself… this political structure has been built by dominant caste fanatics, so what interest would it have to act against them?"[115] Further, it queries, "Without shaking up the political structure, how else can we defeat dominant caste fanaticism?"[116] Prior to articulating a set of demands to state authorities, the pamphlet issues a final appeal to Dalits to participate in the Chennai rally. It reads: "Those caste fanatic thugs may have killed our revolutionaries, but they did not conquer them! Murugesan, the revolutionary,

stood firm like a mountain alongside his comrades! He conquered in principle!"[117]
Finally, in bolded letters, the text exhorts Dalits, "We will keep tally of our martyrs –
but now, we must maintain focus on our democratic responsibility! Set off for Chennai
like a war battalion!"[118]

While *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* couched its rhetoric in a militant idiom, the
pamphlet advanced a democratic program, culminating in six *korikkaikal*, or demands,
presented to government authorities.[119] Among the demands, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*
insisted that the prime accused be apprehended immediately and charged under the
Goondas Act as well as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of
Atrocities) Act (1989). Additionally, it called for a CBI investigation into the matter,
an endeavor to supersede state-level officials and appeal to federal authority.[120]
Moreover, the movement insisted that the government designate Melur as an "atrocity
prone area" and ensure the livelihood and security of its Dalit residents "as prescribed
by law."[121] Further, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* commanded the government to convene
elections in reserved panchayats in Melavalavu and across Madurai District, where
recent communal violence had foiled democratic procedures, and instructed pertinent
authorities to rescind current National Security Act and Goondas Act cases lodged
against its cadre who had participated in a *roko* agitation on July 4th, 1997, related to
the Melavalavu murders.[122] Finally, in what appears to have been a taunt targeting the
very notion of state sovereignty, the text calls on the government to allocate weapons
to Dalits residing in atrocity-prone areas to provide for their self-defense.

On July 23, 1997, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, in coordination with Dalit
organizations across Tamil Nadu, conducted a protest march that traversed the dense
arterial roads of central Chennai. Paavalan recounts that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*
anticipated the state's response, recounting, "Thirumaavalavan selected northern
Madras as a rallying point because Dalits thickly populate the area. At every turn, our
people were present to welcome Thirumaavalavan and *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* cadre."[123]
Moreover, he points out that the rally's points of origin (*Theevu Thidal*) and completion
(Kannigapuram) were proximate to prominent city markets, Vyasarpadi and
Koyambedu, respectively; areas densely populated by Dalit migrant laborers. A

photograph (Appendix) of the procession published in *Dinamani* the following morning displays throngs of Dalits stretching beyond the camera's frame, many of whom were waving colorful *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* movement flags. The image rests above the caption, "A protest march conducted in Chennai by the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, a Dalit organization, to condemn the murder that happened recently in Melavalavu, Madurai District."[124] Similarly, *The Hindu* reported: "All shops along the procession route…downed shutters. Most of the youth were armed with sticks and shouted slogans…"[125] While media coverage represented *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* rallyists as "miscreants" who "turned violent" and created "unruly scenes," referencing incidents of damage to public property, the rally's mass attendance coupled with the visible anger of its participants prompted media outlets to provide further explanation, thereby generating coverage of the Melavalavu murders that did not merely gloss the atrocity as "a few incidents" or a "Madurai riot."[126]

Next, on August 6, 1997, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* banded together with more than thirty Dalit organizations across the state to convene a larger marching procession across Chennai, traversing a five kilometer route from Valluvar Kottam in Nungambakkam to Raj Bhavan, the Governor's Palace, via Little Mount and Saidapet.[127] In an account published in *Frontline*, S. Viswanathan writes, "What was perhaps the largest ever mobilization effort by Dalit organizations in Tamil Nadu was severely curtailed by state action," noting that "The procession presented an unusual spectacle – the police force far outnumbered the rallyists, and the entire procession route looked like a curfew-bound area."[128] Similarly, as reported by *The Hindu*, "The entire route resembled a "bandh" or curfew area with all business and commercial establishments and educational institutions remaining closed."[129] As if bracing for large-scale violence, police guarded petrol pumps along the route and business establishments not only downed metal shutters, but covered glass storefronts and windowpanes with "canvas, cloth or polythene sheets."[130]

Anticipating an attendance of one lakh (100,000), Viswanathan affirms that the Tamil Nadu government marshaled the strength of 20,000 police officers to line the procession route, even enlisting specialty units such as Rapid Action Forces (RAF)

alongside police reinforcements from the neighboring states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.[131] Further, his detailed account elaborates upon the strict protocol that governed the rally's execution. Police authorities stipulated:

> Pedestrians should be allowed to cut across the procession once in 10 minutes at all road junctions; the police should ensure a gap between every 500 persons; the participants should not travel in vehicles, but walk in the procession and they should not be allowed to enter any shop, hotel, residence or any public place en route.[132]

In the days preceding the rally, police officials scoured the state, arresting in preventative detentions 4,000 Dalit organizers and grassroots activists, who they labeled as "anti-social elements."[133] Further, officials reportedly threatened the owners of transportation companies contracted to ferry participants to the rally, triggering many of them to renege existing commitments. On the day of the procession, city police erected twenty-nine checkpoints around the city's perimeter at which they detained an estimated 600 vehicles, effectively barring the participation of their occupants. Moreover, allegations surfaced that 2,000 Dalit activists traveling on the *Nellai Express* were detained in Trichi, while hundreds more on the *Kanyakumari Express* were hindered in Dindigul, resulting in hundreds of arrests.[134]

Although strong countermeasures effectively barred most Dalits from participating in the rally, an estimated 7,000 Dalits participated in the procession. As planned, rallyists marched to Rav Bhavan and presented a memorandum to M. Fathima Beevi, retired Supreme Court Justice and present Governor of Tamil Nadu, that enumerated caste atrocities committed against Dalits, listed 22,000 villages across Tamil Nadu where practices of untouchability purportedly continued, criticized the government's inaction on recent instances of anti-Dalit violence, and demanded that a Supreme Court judge, preferably a Dalit, conduct an official inquiry into the matter tasked with recommending "effective structural changes in the police administration."[135] For this final request, presiding Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi reportedly responded that he had "no comments to offer."[136]

While the Chennai rally was the largest event that the movement coordinated in response to Melavalavu, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* continued to spearhead protests across Tamil Nadu. On November 24, 1997, the movement convened a protest march in Madurai. In its coverage, *Dinamani* began by acknowledging the rally's objective, stating, "The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* conducted the rally demanding the arrest of the prime accused in the case related to the murder of six persons, including Murugesan, the former panchayat leader of the Melavalavu panchayat council."[137] Participants assembled at Madurai Junction and then marched through Simmakkal, Yaanaikkal, Kalbaalam and Goripalaiyam before closing with a rally before the Madurai District Collector's Office. In his speech at the rally, Thirumaavalavan reportedly stated, "Because, even up to the present, security has not been provided for our Dalit people living in the Melur area, the Dalit people from these villages in Melur taluk have been murdered."[138] He reproached state authorities because "no proper investigation [had] been conducted in regards to the murderous incidents that occurred in these three places."[139] Seeking to supersede obdurate local police officials, he demanded that the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) launch a formal investigation into the murders and charge the culprits under the National Security Act. In addition, Thirumaavalavan petitioned the state government to provide compensation for the victims' families and those who had lost houses and property during recent anti-Dalit violence in the state's southern districts.[140]

In supplement, *Dinamani* published two photographs (Appendix) adjacent to the article. The first image displays two long queues of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* supporters, mostly women, marching through central Madurai.[141] The other image conveys the imposing presence of the police battalions assigned as a 'security detail' to monitor the rally. Against a backdrop of officers standing shoulder-to-shoulder atop fortified police buses delimiting the procession route, additional officers patrol the ground below. The caption reads, "Police engaging in a protection force on Monday in Madurai's Goripalaiyam area for the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* walking procession."[142] The irony that police protection was not afforded on their behalf, but to surveil their protest against anti-Dalit violence that called on authorities to safeguard their security

was not lost on those who participated in these early protests. In fact, the photograph provides a source of amusement for movement activists today who jest, albeit with a shade of truth, that in the 1990s it sometimes seemed as if more police attended *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* rallies than its own movement cadre.

On Visibility and Voice

In the 1990s, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* emerging visual and physical presence elicited a violent blowback from locally dominant communities.[143] Academic and media accounts that chronicle caste clashes often portray the tumultuous period through a paradigm of violence and resistance. For example, M.S.S. Pandian writes, "The political biography of Tamil Nadu during the 1990s was marked by increasing caste conflicts between the backward castes and the Dalits," a development that he attributes to "the fact that the backward castes [did] not any longer exercise ideological hegemony over the Dalits in Tamil Nadu and they [had] to affirm their authority through dominance mediated by violence."[144] While Pandian's claim that backward castes had once exerted ideological control over Dalits lacks evidence, he aptly observes that they turned increasingly to violence to reassert what some perceived as their eroding dominance. Similarly, in contributions to *Frontline*, S. Viswanathan records an unprecedented surge in anti-Dalit violence across Tamil Nadu from the mid-1990s, which he attributes to "a growing Dalit resistance to caste oppression and caste Hindus' increasing intolerance of Dalit assertiveness."[145] Taken collectively, Viswanathan's articles locate a recurring catalyst of anti-Dalit violence in Dalit attempts to enter the public sphere and encroach upon backward castes' control over local political and economic affairs.[146]

Pandian and Viswanathan's accounts resonate with those proffered by early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, who similarly acknowledge that caste violence intensified as Dalits asserted themselves within local politics and staked a claim for equitable economic access. For example, Thayappan elucidates a common perspective among my interlocutors when he suggests, "Each and every moment of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* expansion coincided with an atrocity. Every major turning point coincided

with a massacre or murder."[147] Similarly, D. Ravikumar, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* General Secretary, points out that caste-based atrocities increased in tandem with mounting Dalit assertion, citing as evidence the National Human Rights Commission's *Report on Prevention of Atrocities Against Scheduled Castes (2004)*.[148] While organizers and supporters alike may contextualize the movement's emergence through reference to landmark instances of anti-Dalit violence, violence itself does not serve as the primary idiom through which they recollect early movement politics. Rather, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers discussed their politics in terms of voice, not as individual utterances but as collective acts that amplified and carried their demands to pertinent authorities.

  This idiom of voice was particularly pronounced during a conversation with Gowtham Sannah in his office at Madras High Court. When Sannah, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Propaganda Secretary, reminisces about the political climate during the movement's formation, he recalls:

> At the time, there was a vacuum for Dalit politics [in Tamil Nadu]. Although there were many small leaders, they lacked the courage to raise a resolute voice to press our demands before the government. The Dravidian parties considered these [earlier Dalit] movements as subordinate political forces. These Dalit voices failed to even register as sound in their ears.[149]

Whereas Sannah contends that the previous generation of Dalit leaders and movements had faltered or were simply ignored, he asserts, "The VCK gave a voice to Dalits."[150] Following a punctuated silence, he underscores, *"Because our voice was very small, we were compelled to make our activities very loud in order to project our voice to centers of power."*[151] Through a motif of voice, Sannah highlights that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* embraced disruptive forms of political participation to ensure that Dalit communities were seen and their voices were heard. For Sannah, voice is not limited to individual utterances, but encompasses collective acts capable of amplifying its message and projecting political demands to authorities.[152]

  When *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers discuss their early protests, often detailing tactical disruptions of public space that obstructed roadways and

transportation systems alike, two themes recur in our conversations. Firstly, they underscore that collective acts of disruption proved more effective than formal institutional channels in conveying their voice to pertinent authorities. To evince this claim, they emphasize that disruptive forms of political activity enabled them to command media attention, albeit not on their own terms, and broadcast their presence and message across the state. Moreover, they allege that disrupting law and order compelled government authorities to intervene and listen to their demands. Secondly, they highlight that the physical act of protest itself generated new understandings of rights and citizenship among Dalit communities. While acknowledging that a Dalit occupation of the public sphere was not entirely novel, they accentuate that the style and demeanor with which these individuals now inhabited public space had undergone a marked transformation. Further, they emphasize that this new style of Dalit political participation not only conveyed demands to state authorities, but the physical form of its expression, the collective act of protest, refashioned Dalit subjectivity and re-presented Dalits as rights-bearing citizens who demanded recognition as such.

In response to anti-Dalit violence in the 1990s, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers implemented an escalating model of protest that intensified until relevant authorities took cognizance of their demands. In our conversations, organizers recall that their intervention began with the submission of a written petition to local authorities. M. Arivudainambi, an early organizer of Cuddalore District, recounts that if the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* failed to remedy an issue locally through institutional channels, organizers adopted an increasingly confrontational approach that ratcheted up pressure on authorities to redress, or at least acknowledge, their demands. He recalls, "We staged protests before the Collector's Office, the police station, the taluk office. If an amenable solution still was not reached, we conducted *rokos*."[153] Further, Sinthanai Selvan underscores that local community participation was integral throughout this process, recounting, "Whenever an atrocity took place, we first organized the people by conducting a people's forum and then, with the people's strength, we spearheaded *rokos* and protest marches."[154] As the decade progressed, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers turned increasingly to *rokos* (transit blockages),

peranikal (protest marches), and related activities that clogged dense arterial roads and disrupted transportation networks as a strategy to either intensify pressure on local officials or supersede these officials altogether and appeal directly to higher authority.

Drawing upon his experience, Tada Periyasami alleges that early protests were not simply manifestations of Dalit discontent, but also served as available fora where Dalit communities articulated demands for an equitable administration of law alongside the delivery of rights. He recalls, "The people were demanding that their government abide by its own rules and enforce its own laws... When an atrocity occurred, we staged *bandhs*, *rokos*, and *perani*. We pressed our demands through these protests."[155] These tactical disruptions of the public sphere captured media attention, which organizers claim provided a visible means of political participation that amplified their voice. This is among the reasons why Thirumaavalavan once emphasized, "Without first showcasing our strength, we cannot lobby [those in power]."[156] Likewise, K. Krishnasamy, another prominent Dalit organizer in the state, reached a similar conclusion when he underscored, "For each and every incident we *had* to come to the streets to highlight the issues; it was because of such protests that the media would follow and only then were we able to settle *some* issues."[157]

This contention that disruptive politics were not simply more effective, but, moreover, necessary to redress problems resonates with a personal account provided by Kani Amudhan, an early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Deputy General Secretary in Madurai. Referring to the 1990s, Amudhan recalls that local police were resistant to even file a First Information Report (FIR), a mandatory first step in criminal proceedings, at the behest of Dalits. Confronted by obdurate local officials, he recounts that *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* activists perceived a need to supersede these officials and appeal to higher echelons of authority if they were to secure an amenable solution.[158] Amudhan recalls, "We realized that creating a law and order problem forced higher levels of police and state authority to intervene. If a law and order problem was not created, there was a general belief that the state would not solve, or even address, our problems."[159] He adds further, "Disrupting law and order compelled police and government officials to convene peace talks and at least hear our

grievances."[160] Corroborating Amudhan's account, Sinthanai Selvan affirms that early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* protests "compelled police and state authorities not only to deal with a law and order problem, but also with our demands."[161] He stresses, "We had no alternative but to exert strong pressure in order to force them to take decisive action."[162]

In our conversations, my interlocutors not only allege that tactical disruptions compelled state authorities to respond to Dalit grievances, but, in different registers, they employ a motif of 'voice', emphasizing that the tactical disruptions of public space provided a means of political participation that ensured that their voices were, at the very least, heard. For example, Arul Joseph and M. Ravikumar, both advocates in Madurai High Court, stress, "Road *rokos* forced government and police authorities to intervene and, moreover, these activities compelled them to listen to our demands."[163] The advocates acknowledge that Dalits generally lacked professional and kinship ties to individuals in local government and law enforcement, which effectively limited their points of access to formal institutions and representatives of the state. This, they suggest, compelled the movement to deploy a brand of "intensive politics," referring to road *rokos* and similar disruptive tactics, to communicate with authorities and ensure that their grievances were heard.[164] Moreover, Arulraj, the movement's first district secretary, recalls that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* strategy at times even gained the begrudging "respect" of local authorities. He smiles when he affirms that once the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* had demonstrated its willingness to stage provocative demonstrations and court arrest, local authorities became more responsive to its demands, knowing that its cadre would swarm the streets if action were not taken.[165]

When Vanni Arasu, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Spokesperson, reminisces about these early protests, he emphasizes that such collective acts not only made claims on state authorities, but also reinforced popular notions of rights and democratic citizenship. When Arasu recounts the movement's expansion during the 1990s, he recalls, "When our youth inaugurated *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* branches in their native villages, they projected an assertive, powerful image of our movement. And, as a consequence, they became more visible."[166] Further, Arasu stresses the capacity in

which they "became visible," emphasizing that Dalits presented themselves as rights-bearing citizens through the collective act of protest, itself a powerful symbol of Dalit assertion. He recalls, "There were so many different struggles, we can point to the Melavalavu massacre and the many murders that followed Dalit attempts to secure *tenders* on public lands. We spearheaded vigorous protests in response to each atrocity and our movement spread through these activities."[167] Acknowledging that political activism and rights-based awareness generated a resounding impact among Dalit communities, Arasu opines further, "In fact, the protests themselves inspired the people."[168]

When they recount their early politics, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers emphasize that the physical act of protest cannot be reduced to a public assembly where Dalits congregated *en masse* to recite grievances and make political claims on state authority but, moreover, served to solidify emergent notions of citizenship among their community. When Tada Periyasami recounts these early protests, he acknowledges how these collective, physical acts engendered a notable effect among Dalit communities, recalling, "At first our people were not familiar with or even aware of their rights. We informed them that we are human beings and therefore we also have rights. We exhorted them to understand their rights and, moreover, to demand their delivery."[169] These public assemblies, he recalls, presented Dalits as democratic citizens and provided a public forum in which they learned about their rights and came to demand their implementation.[170] Elaborating further, VCK chairman Thol. Thirumaavalavan underscores, "we consolidated our people and staged these protests to claim our rights," and, in doing so, he suggests that early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* protests were not simply premised upon being heard, but also being seen and, moreover, being recognized as democratic citizens.[171]

Conclusion

In a recent essay, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, "Disorder in public and everyday life—a culture of disrespect for the law, in other words—has come to be a major ingredient of Indian democracy."[172] Elaborating further, Chakrabarty acknowledges that the

sources of disorder, acts that are by nature disruptive and sometimes grate uncomfortably with normative tenets of liberal democratic theory, have become entrenched aspects of democratic life in modern India. But, could we press this observation a step further and query whether disorder, or presented differently, disruption, might not simply be integral to democracy but, furthermore, a vehicle for its expression? This chapter has provided an account of the early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* conveying how movement organizers perceived tactics of spatial disruption not as antithetical to democratic order, but rather as a means of participation afforded their community, which otherwise lacked meaningful access to state institutions.

An analysis of early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics exhibits how movement organizers used a spatially disruptive method of corporeal politics to represent Dalit concerns and advance a program that augmented minority franchise and strengthened democratic participation in 1990s Tamil Nadu. When movement organizers reminisce about this seminal period and recount the turbulent decade in their own words, they describe their early politics in a manner reminiscent of what Chantal Mouffe earlier termed "radical democracy," namely as a political project seeking to realize the promise of equal rights and citizenship that lies at the heart of liberal democratic theory.[173] Recollecting this phase of movement activity, my interlocutors discuss their politics foremost in terms of a struggle to project their voice to centers of state power with the explicit aim to force their hand and secure amenable solutions. Without disavowing the legitimacy of the state, they orchestrated provocative, public protests and engineered tactical disruptions in the public sphere in order to demand that the rights and security of Dalit citizens, assurances they perceived as essential to democratic governance, be safeguarded.

In retrospect, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers assert that their movement's self-fashioned militancy in addition to its hardline response to caste violence instilled a heightened degree of political awareness among Dalit communities and contributed to a more robust understanding of rights and democratic citizenship. Yet, in 1997, the joint murder in Melavalavu exposed not only a blatant failure of democratic procedure,

but a fault line of early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics. While the atrocity served as a clarion call that drew Dalits *en masse* to the movement, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* mass demonstrations, although amplifying its voice and conveying its demands to upper echelons of state authority, ultimately fell short of securing an amenable response.[174] In fact, the denouement in Melavalavu village prompted *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers to reevaluate their position *vis-à-vis* the state and placed under scrutiny their efficacy in lobbying state authorities from outside of formal institutions. The challenges confronted by the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* across the 1990s, and particularly at Melavalavu, provoked spirited debate on the relative merits of direct electoral participation. A brief two years later, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers charted their movement's turbulent transition into electoral democracy, which provides subject matter for Chapter Three.

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[1] Evening newspapers carried initial reports of the rail *roko*, publishing photographs with detailed captions. See: *Maalai Murasu* (Madurai), February 12, 1994, and *Makkal Kural* (Chennai), February 12, 1994, *Maalai Malar*, February 12, 1994. More extensive reporting followed over the coming days. In separate conversations, Thayappan, Paavalan and Yallalan, all of whom participated in the roko, provided accounts that corroborated newspaper sources, which provided the basis for the above description.

[2] *Indian Express* (Madurai), "Dalits clash with police in City: Railway property attacked." 13 February 2014. See also: *Dinamani* (Madurai), "General Public and Reporters injured in lathi charge," February 13, 1994 (Original in Tamil, translation by author); *Dinamalar,* (Madurai), "Violence, Lathi Charge in Madurai Railway Station," February 13, 1994, p10.

[3] I use the Hindi term "roko" due to its widespread use across Indic languages. My respondents use the term, but tend to prefer its Tamil equivalent, "*mariyal*," which carries the same meaning of blockage or obstruction.

[4] Thayappan, personal correspondence, June 23, 2015; M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[5] *Makkal Kural* (Chennai), "maḍurai reyil mariyalil kalavaram, taḍiyaḍi: 250 pēr kaidu" [Riot, Lathi Charge in the Madurai Railway Obstruction: 250 Persons Arrested], February 12, 1994. Translation by author.

[6] *Makkal Kural* (Chennai) 12 February 1994. Translation by author.

[7] *Indian Express* (Madurai), "Dalits clash with police in City: Railway property attacked," February 13, 2014.

[8] *Dinamalar* (Madurai), 13 February 1994. *Indian Express* (Madurai) 13 February 1994.

[9] *Indian Express* (Madurai) 13 February 1994.

[10] Express News Service. Indian Express (Madurai). "What went wrong during Dalit demonstration." *Indian Express*, Undated, 3.

[11] Although initially proposed in 1978, the name was only changed on January 14, 1994. This elicited sharp rebuke from the Maharashtra-based *Shiv Sena*, which spearheaded public protests that incited anti-Dalit violence. Following the centenary celebrations of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's birth, Dalit movements across India spearheaded protests to counter the *Shiv Sena's* opposition. See Chapter 7 of Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern*

India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. See Chapter 5 of Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009.

[12] *Indian Express*, "Dalits clash with police in City: Railway Property attacked," February 13, 1994. Also see, *Indian Express*, "Dalits to observe fast inside jail," February 14, 1994.

[13] *Dinamani* (Madurai), "madurai taḍiyaḍi: visāraṇai kuḻu amaikka kōrikkai" ["Madurai Lathi Charge: Demand to create an inquiry committee], February 17, 1994, p9. Translation by author. Also see *Indian Express* (Madurai), "Dalit to observe fast inside jail," February 13, 1994, p4. *The Hindu* (Madurai), "'Rail roko' stir turns violent," February 12, 1994, p3.

[14] Thayappan, personal correspondence, June 23, 2015; Paavalavan, an early VCK supported who participated in the rail *roko* protest, corroborated Thayappan's account. Paavalavan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[15] Sundaram N. Ambedkar (Nataraj), interview by the author, 12 January 2014.

[16] Sundaram N. Ambedkar (Nataraj), interview by the author, 12 January 2014.

[17] Nataraj's account of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* "arrival," resonates with Lisa Mitchell's analytic of "political arrival," which refers to "the formal or informal recognition and acceptance of the legitimacy of a group, an action or a movement *as* political—in essence, its visibility or ability to be seen." Lisa Mitchell (2014), "The Visual Turn in Political Anthropology and the Mediation of Political Practice in Contemporary India," in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 37:3, p521. (emphasis in original)

[18] Jürgen Habermas, trans. Thomas Burger. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1989.

[19] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992 (sixth printing 1999); Michael Warner (2002), "Publics and Counterpublics" in *Public Culture* 14:1. Duke University Press: Durham. For a more recent critique, see: Francis Cody (2015), "Print Capitalism and Crowd Violence beyond Liberal Frameworks," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 35, no. 1: 50-65; Francis Cody (2011), "Publics and Politics," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 37: 37-52.

[20] Michael Saward (2009), "Authorization and Authenticity: Representation and the Unelected," in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 17, No. 1: 2.

[21] Ivan Arenas (2014), "Assembling the multitude: material geographies of social movements from Oaxaca to Occupy," in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32(3): 433-449.

[22] Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1999. Also see: Thomas Blom Hansen, "Politics as Permanent Performance: The Production of Political Authority in the Locality" in John Zavos, Andrew Wyatt, and Vernon Hewitt eds, *The Politics of Cultural Mobilization in India*. Oxford: Delhi, 2004.

[23] Hansen 24

[24] Lisa Mitchell, "'To stop train pull chain': Writing histories of contemporary political practice" in *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 2011(48), p474.

[25] R. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan, *"Aḍanga marupōm, attumīruvōm!"* (We will refuse to be restrained, we will transgress barriers!), in *Kalki*, November 29, 1998, p3. Translation by author.

[26] "*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* grand military parade in Chennai in condemnation of the Melavalavu assassination," p3. (pamphlet) Translation by author.

[27] In an interview taken by *The Dalit* journal in 1998, Thirumaavalavan confirms, "Since 1992 we have been operating under the name 'Liberation Panthers'." Cadre and movement propaganda often referred to the movement by both names, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* and DPI until the mid-1990s. See: ""*samattuvapuram – gāndhi kāla mōsaḍi*" – "*viḍutalai siruttaikaḷ*" amaippāḷar tirumāvalavanuḍan nērkānal," ("Samatthuvapuram – Deception in the time of Gandhi" – An interview with "*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*" Chairman Thirumaavalavan," (1998) in *Dalit*, Issue 4, pp9-13. Translation by author.

[28] Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[29] I translate *mugām* as "military encampment" rather than alternatives such as "barracks" or "garrison" to underscore the term's connotation that it provides accommodation for frontline troops during an active conflict.

[30] The Dalit colony, or *cheri*, is customary segregated from upper caste residential quarters in both rural and urban environments.

[31] Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[32] Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[33] For a detailed description of Dravidian political oration, see Bernard Bate, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic: Democratic Practice in South India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

[34] In an early interview (1998) with *Kalki*, Thirumaavalavan elaborated upon his language, stating, "Our motto is, 'We will refuse to be restrained; we will transgress barriers'. This means we will refuse to yield to this caste society; we will transgress barriers imposed by casteism that have been with us for such a long time. This does not mean that we will act against caste as [in the sense of violence against] a particular individual." See: R. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan, *"aḍanga maṟupōm, attumīṟuvōm!"* (We will refuse to be restrained, we will transgress barriers!), in *Kalki*, November 29, 1998, p3.

[35] Che Guevara, interview by author, May 1, 2014.

[36] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013. Similarly, Sinthanai Selvan confirms, "Early *Viḍuthalai Chiruthaigal* stage oratory was entirely different from the previous generations of Dalit leaders. Crafted with a Tamil literary orientation, these speeches were ferocious and engaging." Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[37] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[38] Senkannan, interview by author, December 7, 2013. Sinthanai Selvan recalls that movement supporters painted these posters by hand, but Selvan notes that advancements in printing technology and, in particular, the shift from typesetting to computerized printing enabled organizers to print bulk flyers in a very short period of time. Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[39] F. Jose, interview by author, February 18, 2014. Moreover, Sinthanai Selvan emphasizes that this media strategy adapted to parallel advancements in media technology, recalling, "Previously, the printing press was mechanical, they needed to collect and set all of the letters prior to printing, but with the arrival of digitized technology in the early 1990s, we were able to visit the press and immediately collected a hundred, two hundred, even a thousand notices." Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[40] Traditionally, Dalits were prohibited from drinking from the same tumblers as non-Dalits, but rather used either disposable items such as coconut shells or a separate set of tumblers that they were expected to wash and return afterwards (for use by other Dalits). In 2008, *The Hindu* reported that the two-tumbler system was still practiced in villages across Tamil Nadu. See Staff Reporter, "'Two-tumbler system' in village: High Court orders notice to six teashops," in *The Hindu* (Chennai Edition), March 28, 2008. Moreover, Yallalan notes that Dalits were often prohibited from entering caste Hindu villages to receive public services, denied admission to temple festivals, instructed to remove footwear and headwear when passing through an upper caste settlement or 'common' road, and often barred from drawing water from public wells. M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[41] *Viḍuthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers often called *perani* (protest marches) as *aṇivahuppu* (military parades) to accentuate the movement's militancy.

[42] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[43] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[44] Senkannan, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[45] Senkannan, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[46] For an account of India's State of Emergency (1975-77), see Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

[47] Robin Jeffrey (1987), "Culture of Daily Newspapers in India: How It's Grown, What it Means," *in Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 22, No. 14, p607. For a general overview of mass media in India, see: Victoria L. Farmer, "Depicting the Nation: Media politics in independent India," in Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava, and Balveer Arora (eds.), *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. New Delhi: Oxford, 2000, pp254-87.

[48] See: Robin Jeffrey (1993), "Indian-Language Newspapers and Why They Grow," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 38, pp. 2004 - 2011. Also: Robin Jeffrey (1997), "Tamil: 'Dominated by Cinema and Politics'," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. 6, pp. 254 - 256.

[49] Jeffrey (1993), 2002.

[50] Robin Jeffrey (1997), "Tamil: 'Dominated by Cinema and Politics'," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. 6, p254.

[51] Jeffrey (1993), 2001. Further, Jeffrey notes that following its launch in 1942, *Dina Thanthi* (Daily Telegraph), a prominent Tamil daily, relied upon public buses to transport its paper across the state from a distribution center in centrally located Madurai to provide fresh news, whereas a Tamil paper originating in Madras may have reached southern towns 24 hours after leaving the press, therefore the news arrived already stale.

[52] As early *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* slogan goes, "*sirai siruttai oyveṭṭum kuhai*", or 'Prison is the den where the panther takes rest.'

[53] J. Venkatesan, "TN justifies 69 per cent quota law in Supreme Court," in *The Hindu*, April 2, 2013. www.thehindu.com. Accessed: July 10, 2015.

[54] The Seventy-Sixth Amendment (1994) to the Constitution of India, ratified on August 31, 1994, superseded the 1992 Supreme Court ruling and enabled the continuance of Tamil Nadu's existing reservation quota. Moreover, the Amendment exempt the Tamil Nadu quota from further judicial scrutiny.

[55] Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[56] "*vimāna maṛiyal pōr: 69 sadam vēṇḍām! ataiyum tāṇḍiyē!…*" (Airport *Roko* War: We do not want 69 percent, extend it even further!…) (flyer)

[57] Sundaram N. Ambedkar, interview by author, January 12, 2014. Also, Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[58] Until the mid-1990s, The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* used acronyms DPI and VCK interchangeably, but typically printed both on movement propaganda. The number of arrests, which the wall poster cites at 5,000, could not be independently verified.

[59] Senkannan, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[60] Thayappan, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[61] Thalaiyaari, interview by author, August 14, 2016.

[62] For a comparative account of how the Dalit Panthers refashioned of Dalit subjectivity from the passive subjects posited by Gandhi's 'harijan' into assertive political actors, see: Nicolas Jaoul, "Politicizing victimhood: the Dalit Panthers' response to caste violence in Uttar Pradesh in the early 1980s," in *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 11, No. 2, 169-179.

[63] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013. While not referring specifically to Pongal, but more generally to earlier cultivation techniques, Gowtham Sannah states, "The traditional agricultural system protected the caste system by thrusting the Dalit people into subservience to non-Dalit landholders." Gowtham Sannah, interview by author, February 18, 2014.

[64] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[65] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013. The grammatical structure of *"nalla irukkiṛīngalā?"* conveys respect on behalf of the speaker. Yet, this greeting was interpreted as adversely by locally dominant communities not because of its grammatical structure, but due to its departure from an early custom of referring to local landlords with a respectful title such as "ayyā," or sir, an exchange that would have occurred without eye contact. In noting this, Selvan emphasizes that the transformation was not simply detected through language, but through bodily comportment.

[66] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[67] M.S.S. Pandian (2000), "Dalit Assertion in Tamil Nadu: An Exploratory Note," in *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, Vol. 13, No. 3&4, pp501-517.

[68] ""*samattuvapuram – gāndhi kāla mōsaḍi*" – "*viḍutalai siruttaikaḷ*" amaippāḷar tirumāvalavanuḍan nērkānal," ("Samathuvapuram – Deception in the time of Gandhi" – An interview with "*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*" Chairman Thirumaavalavan," (1998) in *Dalit*, Issue 4, p10.

[69] Similarly, Punitha Pandiyan, editor of *Dalit Murasu* (taḷit murasu), recalls, "Once the youth embraced the movement, it spread quickly. They acquired audiocassettes of Thirumaavalavan's speeches and circulated them amongst themselves. They purchased small publications in cities and small town, read them and then distributed them further." Punitha Pandiyan, interview by author, December 5, 2013.

[70] Sakkiya Kabir, interview by author, January 27, 2014.

[71] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[72] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[73] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014. Further, Periyasami notes that the movement solidified linkages across Dalit settlements through bicycle and walking processions that progressed from one village to the next.

[74] Punitha Pandiyan, interview by author, December 5, 2013.

[75] Sinthanai Selvan notes that the Vanniyar and Mudhaliyar castes densely populated the area, both of which are locally dominant communities with a recent history of altercations with Dalits.

[76] Two Dalits were murdered: Shanmugam, employed as a coolie in Chennai's Koyambedu Market, and Ramesh, a student at Annamalai University in Chennai, both of whom had returned to their native Thittakudi for the Pongal holiday.

[77] Sithan Sivabalan, interview by author, December 21, 2013. Sithan recalls accompanying Thirumaavalavan and movement cadre to the local police station where Thirumaavalavan proceeded to berate head officials, asking, "Why do you only assault and shoot Dalits?" and demanding that they "beat both sides!"

[78] Thirumaavalavan and Periyasami, the two leading *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers in the 1990s, hail from villages in the Thittakudi area of Cuddalore District.

[79] Thirumeni, interview by author, December 13, 2013.

[80] Sinthanai Selvan, personal communication, June 13, 2015 and June 21, 2015.

[81] Thirumeni, interview by author, December 13, 2013.

[82] Advocates of decentralization argue that a devolution of power to locally elected bodies deepens the roots of Indian democracy and provides local avenues for substantive democratic participation, while critics advise that a devolution of power to such bodies may facilitate elite capture and apply a thin veneer of democracy to legitimate entrenched, local interests. For a synopsis of the debate, see: Rani Mullen, *Decentralization, Local Governance, and Social Wellbeing in India: Do local governments matter?* New York: Routledge, 2012, and Peter Ronald Desouza, "The Struggle for Local Government: Indian Democracy's New Phase," in David Gellner and Krishna Hachhethu (eds.), *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbors*. Delhi: Sage, 2008.

[83] As Melavalavu village is near Chennagarampatti village, where two Dalits were murdered following their request for *tender* rights over local lands, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers familiar with the matter contend that the same individual was responsible for both murders and, therefore, if the state had intervened in Chennagarampatti, the Melavalavu massacre could have been avoided. In an early interview (1998) with *Nandhan*, Thirumaavalavan emphasized this point: "During the [present] DMK government, even if you kill Dalits in bunches, you can come out of prison within six months on bail. Today, the dominant caste fanatics firmly believe this…" Thirumaavalavan, "viḍutalai siṟuttai – tirumāvalavan siṟappu pēṭṭi: rattakkalaridan eṅgaḷ aṉuhumuṟaiyā?" (Is bloodshed our approach?: Special Interview with Thirumaavalavan – *Viduthalai Chiruthai*), in *Nandhan*, June 16-30, 1998, p16. Translation by author.

[84] Staff Reporter, "6 Dalits hacked to death in Madurai," *The Times of India*, July 3, 1997.

[85] The violence in Melavalavu piqued the attention of VCK activists as well as the state media. A. Kannan recalls that VCK members led by Thirumaavalavan spearheaded agitations throughout the Madurai district to raise awareness about the situation in Melavalavu. A. Kannan, interview by author, January 1, 2009.

[86] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[87] Thirumaavalavan recalled Murugesan saying, "You may be boycotting elections, but I am going to contest. Instruct your cadre to support me. I am not bothered by the Kallars' threats." Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, May 2, 2014.

[88] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2009.

[89] Thirumaavalavan emphasized, "Murugesan was a DMK man, he was not *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*." Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013. Similarly, Ravikumar, an advocate at Madurai High Court and former *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Madurai District Secretary (city), noted, "Murugesan was a DMK man, but the DMK did nothing for him; they neither supported him politically nor provided protection. The VCK expressed its public support for Murugesan's candidature." Ravikumar, interview by author, January 10, 2014.

[90] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[91] *"Mēlavaḷavu: oppāri ōlaṅgaḷ sērikku maṭṭumilllai!"* (Melavalavu: there are not only howls of lamentation in the *cheri*!), in *Cheri*, November 1997, p3. Translation by author.

[92] During an interview for *Kalki*, Elangovan acknowledges this point in a question directed to Thirumaavalavan. R. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan, *"Aḍanga maṟupōm, attumīṟuvōm!"* (We will refuse to be restrained, we will transgress barriers!), in *Kalki*, November 29, 1998, p78. Translation by author.

[93] S. Viswanathan, "A brutal assault," in *Frontline*, July 25, 1997.

[94] Ravikumar, interview by author, January 10, 2014.

[95] Staff Reporter, "Fifteen rounded up for murder of bus passengers," in *The Hindu*, July 2, 1997: 4. Also: Staff Reporter, "Jayalalitha condemns bus passengers' killing," in *The Hindu*, July 2, 1997: 4. Both stories were written on July 1st and released in the July 2nd Chennai Edition of *The Hindu*.

[96] S. Viswanathan, "A brutal assault," in *Frontline*, July 25, 1997. Also see: M.S.S. Pandian (2000), "Dalit Assertion in Tamil Nadu: An Exploratory Note," in *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, Vol. 13, No. 3&4, pp. 501 – 517. Sinthanai Selvan also acknowledged this point in an interview. Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[97] *"Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* hurl a petrol bomb in Neyveli, Thiruvalluvar bus catches fire," in *Dinamalar*, July 2, 1997.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid. emphasis by author.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid. The veracity of this anonymous letter attributed to *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* supporters cannot be confirmed. While the movement's militant reputation lent popular credence to such allegations, Thirumaavalavan explicitly denied the charge in an interview with *Kalki*. See: R. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan, *"Aḍanga maṟupōm, attumīṟuvōm!"* in *Kalki*, November 29, 1998, p3. Further, regardless of whether or not violence is reciprocated, anti-Dalit violence and related attacks against Dalit communities are routinely glossed in the Tamil press as a caste clash (*jati mōḍal*) or riot (*kalavaram*) rather than as an attack (*tākkuḍal*).

[102] Elections were indefinitely postponed in Pappapatti, Kirippatti, Kallippatti and Natamangalam, all of which are reserved constituencies, following instances of violence and intimidation from locally dominant castes.

[103] "The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* grand military parade in Chennai to condemn the Melavalavu assassination." (wall poster)

[104] Ibid.

[105] *"mēlavaḷavu paḍukolai – cennaiyil māperum viḍutalai siruttaigaḷin kaṇḍana aṇivakuppu"* (*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* grand military parade in Chennai in condemnation of the Melavalavu assassination), p2. [Pamphlet] Translation by author.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid. "Paraiyar", one among the seventy-six communities designated as Scheduled Caste in Tamil Nadu, refers to Murugesan's specific caste.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid.

[112] *"mēlavaḷavu paḍukolai – cennaiyil māperum viḍutalai siruttaigaḷin kaṇḍana aṇivakuppu,"* pp2-3. Translation by author. Following the murder of Murugesan and his associates in Melavalavu and in the face of continued upper caste threats in nearby panchayats, no Dalits filed nomination papers in many reserved panchayat elections across Madurai District. Similar instances of intimidated were reported from across India, see: P. Sainath, "Less panchayat, a lot of Raj," in *The Hindu*, July 5, 1998: ii.

[113] *"mēlavaḷavu paḍukolai – cennaiyil māperum viḍutalai siruttaigaḷin kaṇḍana aṇivakuppu,"* p2, 3. [Pamphlet] Translation by author.

[114] Ibid.

[115] *"mēlavaḷavu paḍukolai – cennaiyil māperum viḍutalai siruttaigaḷin kaṇḍana aṇivakuppu,"* p3. [Pamphlet] Translation by author. The pamphlet attributes the murders to a chronic indifference on the behalf of state authorities to the plight of Dalits and bemoans a double standard such that Dalit activists are

booked under the stringent Goondas Act, a non-bailable offence, while the prime accused of Melavalavu remained at large.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Since its inception in the early 1990s, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* routinely demanded a CBI, or federal-level inquiry, into instances of caste violence due to concerns over the impartiality of local state officials. For example, see: Staff Reporter, "'Atrocities against Dalits continuing'," in *The Hindu*, February 2, 1999: 4. Staff Reporter, "VCK stages demonstration," in *The Hindu*, July 14, 2015: www.thehindu.com.

[121] *"mēlavaḷavu paḍukolai – cennaiyil māperum viḍutalai siruttaigaḷin kaṇḍana anivahuppu,"* p4. [Pamphlet] Translation by author. Moreover, pointing to the government's inability, or rather implying its outright unwillingness, to ensure Dalit safety in Melur, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* proposed that the government allocate weapons to Dalits in atrocity-prone areas to provide for their ability to protect themselves.

[122] In Frontline, S. Viswanathan notes that during the July 4th statewide *bandh* (general strike) called by Dalit organizations across Tamil Nadu, including *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, "about twenty state-owned buses were set ablaze in different parts of the state." S. Viswanathan (ed.), *Dalits in Dravidian Land: Frontline reports on Anti-Dalit violence in Tamil Nadu (1995-2005)*. Delhi: Navayana, 2005, p84. Also see: Special Correspondent, "16 arrested under NSA," in *The Hindu*, July 11, 1997: 3.

[123] Paavalan, interview by author, December 10, 2013.

[124] *Dinamani*, July 24, 1997.

[125] Staff Reporter, "Procession turns violent at Purasawalkam," in *The Hindu*, July 24, 1997, p3.

[126] Staff Reporter, "Procession turns violent at Purasawalkam," in *The Hindu*, July 24, 1997, p3. Former Chennai DGP A. X. Alexander recalls that VCK supporters damanged 62 buses during the Melavalavu protest. A. X. Alexander, interview by author, 2016. When, following the protest, Thirumaavalavan entered Alexander's office with a tote-bag in hand, the latter asked in jest, "eṉṉadu? Tuṇḍā? Guṇḍā?" meaning, What's in the bag, a shawl or a bomb? A rare glimpse into the tense, yet occasionally jocular relations between activists and police officials. Alexander claims to have intervened on behalf of the VCK to the Tamil Nadu governor to request that the Chennai rally was granted a permit. Needless to say, he was irritated by the damage to public property.

[127] Staff Reporter, "Dalit rally passes off peacefully," in *The Hindu*, August 7, 1997, p4.

[128] S. Viswanathan, "Extreme Measures," in *Frontline*, September 5, 1997, pp33, 34.

[129] Staff Reporter, "Dalit rally passes off peacefully," in *The Hindu*, August 7, 1997, p4.

[130] Ibid.

[131] Separate articles published in *The Hindu* newspaper corroborate the details of Viswanathan's account. See: Staff Reporter, "Dalit rally passes off peacefully," in *The Hindu*, August 7, 1997, p4; Special Correspondent, "Dalit Federation's 'warning'," in *The Hindu*, August 7, 1997, p1; Special Correspondent, "Dalits have proved CM wrong: Jayalalitha," in *The Hindu*, August 9, 1997, p4.

[132] S. Viswanathan, "Extreme measures," in *Frontline*, September 5, 1997, p33.

[133] S. Viswanathan, "Extreme measures," in *Frontline*, September 5, 1997, p33. Following the rally's conclusion, Jayalalitha, chairperson of the opposition AIADMK party, remarked that the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister had created a "fear psychosis" leading up to the rally that proved ultimately both repressive and unnecessary. See: Special Correspondent, "Dalits have proved CM wrong: Jayalalitha," in *The Hindu*, August 8, 1997, p4.

[134] For a comprehensive account of the rally, See: S. Viswanathan, "Extreme measures," in *Frontline*, September 5, 1997, 33-34.

[135] S. Viswanathan, "Extreme measures," in *Frontline*, September 5, 1997, p33; Special Correspondent, "Dalit Federation's 'warning'," in *The Hindu*, August 7, 1997, p1.

[136] Special Correspondent, "CM's plea to Dalit, PMK leaders," in *The Hindu*, August 9, 1997, p4.

[137] "The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organization's procession in Madurai," in *Dinamani*, November 25, 1997. Translation by author.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Additionally, the article notes that police were posted to guard statues of caste leaders in sensitive areas including Melur, Othakkadai, Thirumangalam and Usilampatti.

[141] The photo rests above a caption reading, "The protest march demanding the arrest of the prime accused connected to the Melavalavu murders undertaken by *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* on Monday in Madurai." *Dinamani*, November 25, 1997.

[142] *Dinamani*, November 25, 1997.

[143] In an early interview (1998) published in *Nandhan*, Thirumaavalavan was asked to clarify to whom the phrase "*ādikka jatiyinar*," or the dominant caste people, referred. He responded, "The dominant caste does not denote a single, specific caste. It refers to whichever caste is in control. Vanniyars in the north, Thevars in the south, Goundars in the west, these are groups that establish their authority through continuous violence." He proceeded to note that these groups not only exercise local authority, but also that "political parties concentrate their attention only on these three castes," hence local dominance backed by state power. See: Thirumaavalavan, "viḍutalai siṟuttai – tirumāvaḷavaṉ siṟappu pēṭṭi: rattakkalaridaṉ eṅgaḷ aṉuhumuṟaiyā?" (Is bloodshed our approach?: Special Interview with Thirumaavalavan – *Viduthalai Chiruthai*), in *Nandhan*, June 16-30, 1998, p16. Translation by author.

[144] M.S.S. Pandian (2000), "Dalit Assertion in Tamil Nadu: An Exploratory Note," in *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, Vol. 13, No. 3&4, p501.

[145] S. Viswanathan, "Challenging casteism: Seminar calls for a united response," in *Frontline*, July 25, 1997, p114. Viswanathan proceeds to note that from the mid-1990s Dalits increasingly responded directly to instances of caste violence, which Viswanathan alleges, "marked a qualitative shift in the Dalit response to caste oppression." For an excellent analysis of Viswanath's edited volume and English translations of Tamil Dalit political writing, see: Nathaniel Roberts (2010), "Language, Violence and the State: Writing Tamil Dalits," in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* (SAMAJ). http://samaj.revues.org/index2952.html.

[146] S. Viswanathan (ed.), *Dalits in Dravidian Land: Frontline reports on Anti-Dalit violence in Tamil Nadu (1995-2005)*. Delhi: Navayana, 2005, *passim*.

[147] Thayappan, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[148] Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013. See: National Human Rights Commission, *Report on Prevention of Atrocities Against Scheduled Castes*. New Delhi: National Human Rights Commission, 2004. The Tamil Nadu government commissioned a report on July 16, 1997, to investigate the causes of increased caste conflicts and provide recommendations to remedy the situation. The government subsequently "tabled" the committees report in the state assembly on November 23. See: S. Viswanathan, "The roots of caste conflicts," in S. Viswanathan (ed.), *Dalits in Dravidian Land: Frontline reports on Anti-Dalit violence in Tamil Nadu (1995-2005)*. Delhi: Navayana, 2005, p109.

[149] Gowtham Sannah, interview by author, February 18, 2014.

[150] Gowtham Sannah, interview by author, February 12, 2014. While Sannah appears dismissive of an earlier generation of Dalit leaders, Rupa Viswanath's recent historical ethnography excavates the political careers of some of these individuals, detailing how, despite their sustained efforts, they were often unable to enact the changes for which they struggled. Additionally, D. Karthikeyan and Hugo Gorringe have observed that Sannah's criticism of earlier Dalit leaders has similarly been levied against the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* following its entry into electoral politics. See: Rupa Viswanath, "Being Seen and Being Heard: The Depressed Classes, Political Representation and the Extrapolitical in Colonial Madras," paper presented at the Extrapolitics: Indian Democracy and the Political Outside workshop. University of Goettingen, December 5, 2012; D. Karthikeyan and Hugo Gorringe, "Still Searching for New Directions in Tamil Politics," in *The Wire*, May 22, 2015. www.thewire.com.

[151] Gowtham Sannah, interview by author, May 3, 2014.

[152] In a later conversation, Sannah stressed, "They constitutive element of a democracy is the assurance that each and every voice is heard." J. Gowtham Sannah, interview by author, July 21, 2016.

[153] Mu. Arivudainambi, interview by author, October 20, 2013.

[154] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[155] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[156] ""*Samatthuvapuram – Gandhi kaala moosadi*" – "*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*" *amaippaalar Thirumaavalavanudan neerkaanal,*" ("Samatthuvapuram – Deception in the time of Gandhi" – An interview with "*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*" Chairman Thirumaavalavan," (1998) in *Dalit*, Issue 4, p12. Translation by author.

[157] Dr. K. Krishnasamy, interview by author, September 25, 2013. Dr. Krishnasamy, an early *Dalit Panther Iyakkam* (DPI) district secretary, currently chairs the *Pudhiya Tamizhagam*, a political party representing Pallars, a strata of Scheduled Castes concentrated in southern Tamil Nadu.

[158] Kani Amudhan, interview by author, January 9, 2013.

[159] Kani Amudhan, interview by author, January 9, 2013.

[160] Kani Amudhan, interview by author, January 9, 2013.

[161] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[162] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[163] Devadoss Arul Joseph and Ravikumar, interview by author, January 11, 2013. Moreover, the advocates note, "Today, police are keen to listen to and address our demands before a law and order situation arises."

[164] Devadoss Arul Joseph and Ravikumar, interview by author, January 11, 2013.

[165] Arulraj, interview by author, January 11, 2014. But, as the 1990s progressed, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* acknowledged that movement cadre were increasingly booked under the National Security Act and Goondas Act, non-bailable offences, which may have mooted the gains described by Arulraj.

[166] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[167] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[168] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[169] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[170] Thirumaavalavan articulated a similar stance in an early interview with *Nandan*, where, in 1998, he stated, "The Dalit people are being oppressed by dominant castes to the extent that they cannot even catch the scent of their rights." See: Thirumaavalavan, "viḍutalai siṟuttai – tirumāvaḷavaṉ siṟappu pēṭṭi: rattakkalaridaṉ eṅgaḷ aṉuhumuṟaiyā?" (Is bloodshed our approach?: Special Interview with Thirumaavalavan – *Viduthalai Chiruthai*), in *Nandhan*, June 16-30, 1998, p17. Translation by author.

[171] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[172] Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007), ""In the Name of Politics": Democracy and the Power of the Multitude in India," in *Public Culture*, 19:1, p56.

[173] Chantal Mouffe, "Preface: Democratic Politics Today," in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*. London: Verso, 1995, pp. 1 -16.

[174] Although the initial charge sheet implicated 40 persons in the murder of Murugesan and his associates, only 27 of these individuals were arrested and then issued life sentences in 2001, four years after the crime. Of these convicted offenders, 25 persons were released in 2012, while the prime accused continues to serves, and appeal, his sentence. See: Hugo Gorringe and D. Karthikeyan, "Confronting Casteism?: Apathy and the Atrocities Act," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX No. 4, p74.

CHAPTER **T**HREE

From Boycotts to Ballots:

Reevaluating the 'State' of Politics, 1997-1999

Introduction

On November 4, 2013, I met with Thol. Thirumaavalavan to conduct the first of multiple interviews covering the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition to electoral democracy. In the mid-morning, a puttering auto-rickshaw ferries me to the party headquarters situated in a former elementary school building in the quiet Velachery neighborhood of southern Chennai.[1] Upon my arrival, a handful of movement cadre accustomed to my recurring presence greet me with a cup of milk tea. We retrieve several red and blue plastic chairs from an adjacent classroom and speak informally as I await my opportunity to interview Thirumaavalavan, who they refer to simply as "*talaivar*," or the leader. Community members congregate beside us in an open-air waiting area in anticipation of securing a brief meeting with the VCK Chairman, who at the time served as a Member of Parliament (MP) from Chidambaram, a reserved constituency in northern Tamil Nadu, but was widely perceived as a surrogate representative for all Dalits.[2] Some constituents came to appeal for his direct intervention into personal matters, others to request an official document on his parliamentary letterhead bearing his signature alongside instructions directing state officials to redress a dispute, while still others arrived laden with ornate marriage invitations, angling to confirm his attendance and then schedule the ceremony around his availability.[3] No formal appointment is necessary, only patience.

After attending to a handful of requests, Thirumaavalavan emerges from his office-cum-residence and gestures for me to accompany his entourage as they depart for political business in central Chennai. Taking his cue, I squeeze into an overflowing SUV marked clearly with the party's signature red and blue flag bearing a white star at its center. Thirumaavalavan sits in the front passenger seat, while his secretaries situate themselves to my sides and additional cadre pile into the back. During the trip, these personal assistants vet incoming calls, carefully noting the caller and nature of

inquiry before deciding whether to pass the phone to *talaivar*. Admiring their efficiency, I firmly clench my notebook and audio-recorder as the vehicle deftly maneuvers Chennai's congested roadways at a remarkable speed. Amidst a flurry of telephone calls, Thirumaavalavan falls asleep and, almost in unison, cell phones are placed on vibrate and business continues in hushed whispers, that is, until we approach our destination. We pull up to the *Dravida Kazhagam* (DK) office nestled within the *Periyar Thidal* campus at Egmore. Following his meeting with DK Chairman Veeramani, Thirumaavalavan instructs his driver to navigate the SUV down a quiet residential street. As his assistants alight from the vehicle and enjoy an afternoon rice meal at a nearby restaurant, Thirumaavalavan turns to me, inquiring, "So, what did you want to ask me?"

Over the following ninety minutes, we discuss the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition into electoral democracy. Providing an account of his movement's electoral turn, Thirumaavalavan recalls that the late-1990s was especially critical for his organization, a turbulent period that he characterizes in terms of repressive state measures that, he alleges, were intended to "de-mobilize" his movement. To provide context, he discusses at length the challenge posed by the political consolidation of Vanniyars, a Most Backwards Class (MBC) and locally dominant caste in northern Tamil Nadu, by the *Pattali Makkal Katchi* (PMK), or Toiling People's Party.[4] Recollecting the period, Thirumaavalavan avers, "Just as there may be two blades on a knife, our movement was confronted at once by state terrorism (*arasu bayangaravatam*) on the one side and caste terrorism (*jati bayangaravatam*) on the other."[5] Yet, he contends that the growing bonhomie between the Vanniyar-led PMK and ruling-DMK parties exacerbated the crisis besetting his movement. Dating this process back to 1996, Thirumaavalavan pinpoints its climax in 1998 following the PMK's integration into Dravidian coalitions, which, from his perspective, imbued the traditional caste dominance of the Vanniyars with political authority. Referring to PMK's assimilation into the ruling DMK government, he declares, "At that time, state terrorism became a more developed, better equipped form of caste terrorism."[6]

The State of Electoral Politics

From the origins of social anthropology, the state has proven to be an elusive concept for the discipline. As a testament to the difficulty posed by its conceptualization, early scholars including A. R. Radcliffe-Brown once suggested discarding 'the state' as an analytic in lieu of organizing concepts such as "politics" and "government."[7] More often than not, the state in early anthropology remained conspicuous by its absence and, as Veena Das and Deborah Poole have acknowledged, "primitive or 'non-state' societies" provided the primary units of ethnographic inquiry.[8] When anthropologists did scrutinize political structures as objects of analysis, their accounts tended to examine ostensibly 'traditional' political organizations such as the 'tribe' or 'kingly' political structures.[9] Perhaps taking cues from Radcliffe-Brown, over ensuing decades the state appears to have remained largely absent from anthropological inquiry until, as Jonathan Spencer observes, it resurfaced in the late 1980s.[10]

From the late 1980s, Philip Abrams (1988) and Timothy Mitchell (1991), inspired by the turn to post-structuralism, called into question the ontological coherence of 'the state' as an analytic category. Rather than interpreting the state as a concrete social fact as 'state-centered theorists' had done, Abrams takes seriously the role of the state as an ideological projection, theorizing the state in terms of two distinct components: a state-system, or a "nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in the government," and a state-idea, which is "projected, purveyed and variously believed in in different societies at different times."[11] In effect, Abrams presents the demystification of the state as an objective of academic inquiry, encouraging us to "recognize the cogency of the *idea* of the state as an ideological power and treat that as a compelling object of analysis."[12] Extending Abrams' intervention, Mitchell examines everyday processes through which the state is reified as a coherent entity.[13] Rather than bifurcating the modern state into a related yet distinct material system and ideological construct, Mitchell interrogates how mundane practices generate popular perceptions of the state as distinct from a supposed 'other' (i.e., society, economy). Calling into question the ontological coherence of the state, Mitchell scrutinizes quotidian, iterative practices that reify its apparent boundaries.

Taking cues from these landmark studies, subsequent literature examines ethnographically the "everyday state," re-orienting our focus from 'the state in theory' to 'the state in practice'. Drawing upon fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh, Akhil Gupta (2012, 1995) examines how modern states are produced discursively through quotidian interactions with government bureaucracy, discourses of corruption, and media representations.[14] His account provides a "disaggregated view" of the local state that accentuates contradictions across its multiple actors, layers, and institutions. Rather than interrogating the complex nature of modern states, Gupta focuses instead on how congeries of actors, practices, and institutions come to be imagined as a coherent structure, discursively produced in popular imagination and circulated in mass media. Gupta captures a "dialectic between practices and representations" that conveys how modern states come to be understood in popular imagination.[15] But, without attributing an apocryphal unity to popular conceptions of the state, subsequent studies investigated how the Indian state is experienced in markedly different ways by differentiated groups of citizens, highlighting how caste, class, gender, and religion mediate these encounters.

Accounting for these discrepancies, Rupa Viswanath recently emphasized, "what Timothy Mitchell has called the "state effect"—the manner in which the state, although disjointed and heterogeneous, nevertheless takes on the appearance of unity—varies according to the social location of those subjected to its power."[16] Viswanath's account demonstrates that, from the experience of Dalits in late Madras Presidency, local caste dominance appeared "continuous with that of the state in the governance of laboring populations," a "pragmatic unity" that she refers to as "the caste-state nexus."[17] Similarly, Barbara Harriss-White's (2002) account of the local "actually existing State" in northern Tamil Nadu yields similar findings.[18] Providing a snapshot from the 1980s to mid-1990s, Harriss-White's study explores the dynamics through which the local state "shapes the accumulation possibilities as well as the exploitation and oppression of the lowest castes."[19] Her account evinces how local elites leverage their access to and control over local state institutions to facilitate capital accumulation and reproduce class differentials. In effect, her synthesis of

quantitative and ethnographic methods illustrates how access to the state is mediated by caste, gender, and religion and, further, "shaped by everyday forms of communalism."[20] In sum, her account reveals how state resource allocations come to reflect and sustain concurrent "patterns of class power relations."[21]

In a study of Uttar Pradesh, Craig Jeffrey and Jens Lerche (2001) corroborate Harriss-White's attention to the role of politics in shaping processes of capital accumulation and class reproduction.[22] In early post-Independence India, the authors demonstrate how wealthy Jat landowners capitalized on their preferential access to and control over local state resources to reproduce their class position and facilitate capital accumulation. But, as the authors argue, the role of the local state in these processes underwent substantial revision in the mid-1990s following the precipitous growth of *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP), a predominantly Dalit party, in state politics. The authors chronicle shifting patterns of class formation upon the integration of new political actors including Dalits within local state institutions, conveying how direct participation in electoral politics opened new avenues for historically marginalized groups to contest prevailing power structures in rural Uttar Pradesh. Jeffrey and Lerche contribute to our understanding of how caste-based mobilization not only altered the composition of state institutions, but expanded the physical space of caste contestation by ushering these struggles into the ensemble of state institutions.

In his analysis of Bihar, Jeffrey Witsoe (2011; 2013) considered how electoral democracy "changed the means by which dominant groups were forced to reproduce their dominance," and, in the process, brought about "a very public spectacle of the precariousness of their position in a democracy with universal franchise."[23] Querying how a politics of caste affects the nature of India's democracy, Witsoe argues that social, economic, and political networks organized on a basis of caste "connect state institutions with local relations of dominance and subordination," thereby "producing a state unable to impartially deliver services or enforce individual rights."[24] Conveying how dominant castes consolidate themselves through electoral mobilization, his account depicts its uneven effects and sometimes "markedly undemocratic" outcomes, indicating that "'democratization' of power did not result in an equal empowerment for

all, or even most, subaltern groups."[25] Witsoe's findings resonate with the anthropological literature on caste politics and the state in modern India, portraying how caste networks graft atop political institutions in a way that generates uneven patterns of development and capital accumulation which, by design, favor specific caste constituencies, particularly larger groups among those collectively referred to as "the backwards castes."[26]

Through rich empirical accounts, recent studies provide valuable insight into how modern state institutions come to be reimagined by emergent groups not merely as sites of power, but as the primary loci of political struggle. This chapter contributes an ethnographic perspective to the literature, charting the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition into electoral democracy. Under Malaichamy, early DPI organizers first regarded the state as a recipient of petition, tapping formal institutional channels to lobby state authorities to fulfill their professional mandate to Dalit citizens. Admitting the limitations of this early program, subsequent leaders upheld their predecessors' commitment to legal advocacy, but expanded their repertoire to encompass contentious street politics as a complementary strategy to amplify their voice and register their demands. But, as this chapter demonstrates, the late-1990s presented an altered political reality. At a time when authorities routinely denied their permits for public rallies and utilized stringent legal maneuvers to curtail their activities, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers reappraised their adherence to electoral boycotts and opened a conversation on the merits of formal electoral participation. In 1999, with cautious optimism and a wary eye on the success of rival backward caste politics, movement leaders steered their movement towards electoral politics, which they regarded as a new battlefield to challenge caste oppression.

Chapter Outline

This chapter chronicles the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition from boycotts to ballots, attending to the internal debates and external dynamics that spurred the organization toward electoral democracy at the turn of the millennium. In charting its electoral turn, I draw primarily upon personal interviews with movement organizers over recent

years (2008-2016). In supplement to the ethnography, the chapter integrates a wide breadth of primary and secondary materials including early political pamphlets, handbills, wall posters, and personal letters. Additionally, it integrates newspaper coverage from the Tamil- and English-language press alongside early interviews with movement organizers published in limited-circulation vernacular journals. Synthesizing ethnography with primary and secondary source materials, the chapter provides a diachronic perspective on the democratic transition of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, conveying why movement organizers reappraised their adherence to electoral boycotts and came to regard the state less as a recipient of petition (i.e., Chapter One) or an object of protest (i.e., Chapter Two), but rather as an ensemble of institutions that demarcated a new locus of political struggle.

The chapter begins in the 1980s with a synopsis of the socio-political climate preceding the movement's expansion to the state's northern districts, charting the electoral consolidation of the regionally influential Vanniyar community by the *Pattali Makkal Katchi* (PMK), or Toiling People's Party. Although the three largest Dalit castes are concentrated in different regions with Pallars to the south, Paraiyars to the north, and Arundhathiyars to the west, their presence is most often counterbalanced by locally dominant intermediate castes: Thevars, Vanniyars, and Goundars, which often exceed the population size of Dalits.[27] Keeping a wary eye on Vanniyar consolidation in the north, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers observed how the transformation of backwards caste organizations into autonomous political parties mitigated their efficacy to lobby political authorities from outside of state institutions. Further, movement organizers contend that electoral competition provided parties such as the PMK with enhanced leverage in its negotiations with Dravidian parties and greater latitude to influence political processes, shape policy directives, and secure preferential access to state resources. At a time when stringent legal maneuvers constricted their capacity for collective mobilization, movement organizers began to consider electoral participation as a strategy to countervail the PMK and augment their bargaining power with state authorities who, having shunted the movement's earlier demands, remained keenly attentive to electoral calculations.

Next, the chapter examines key points of contention that surfaced during intra-movement discussions on direct electoral participation. From 1998, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers deliberated whether their movement should enter electoral democracy and, if so, in what capacity. Reiterating their stated commitment to robust Dalit advocacy, organizers disputed the most efficacious means to represent Dalit concerns, influence political processes, and generate ameliorative outcomes. Whereas a handful of activists pressed for an underground movement, a clear majority of its members conceded that the electoral platform could not be avoided, although they struggled to reach a consensus on the nature of their participation. Should they directly contest elections or retain their distance and instead leverage their base to affect electoral outcomes? Upon reviewing intra-movement debates, the chapter introduces external arguments posed to *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers by leading figures of the *Tamil Maanila Congress* (TMC), or Tamil State Congress, who persuaded them to join their electoral coalition ahead of the 1999 General Election. Finally, the chapter concludes with an in-depth account of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* inaugural electoral bid, focusing on Thirumaavalavan's campaign in Chidambaram, a reserved constituency in Tamil Nadu's northern districts.

Exploring the early debates and circumstances surrounding their integration into electoral democracy, this chapter lends an ethnographic view on how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers recount their turbulent transition from boycotts to ballots. Chronicling this seminal period, the chapter conveys how caste came to be re-articulated through electoral politics and why this prompted *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers to reconsider their early perspectives on electoral participation and reimagine state institutions as the primary loci of political struggle. While political commentators often trumpet the participation of marginalized groups within electoral procedures as testament to democratization, the firsthand experience of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers complicates this often-buoyant narrative.[28] In fact, it was not so much the promise of democracy, as much as the looming threat of state repression paired with the consolidation of rival backwards castes that spurred the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* democratic transformation. Moreover, this shift in the form of political

practice, a move from boycotts to ballots, does not necessarily signal a radical aberration from earlier movement politics. Previously, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* leaders had relied on the occupation of the public sphere to amplify their voice, press their demands, and effect an audience, but, with that form of engagement increasingly foreclosed in the late-1990s, they turned to electoral democracy as an alternate means through which to represent Dalit concerns. The following chapter provides an ethnographic account of democratic integration, detailing its underlying circumstances, debates, and contradictions.

Vanniyar Consolidation[29]

On Wednesday, September 16, 1987, the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) inaugurated its new headquarters building, *Anna Arivalayam*, in the affluent Teynampet neighborhood of central Chennai.[30] Constructed at a cost of ₹1.5 crore on a spacious five-acre plot, the ornate structure featured architectural overtones harkening back to the bygone era of ancient Chola kings, a grandiose design to which DMK Chairman M. Karunanidhi himself contributed.[31] In the late afternoon, thousands of DMK office bearers converged on the grounds from districts across the state to attend a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the sprawling three-story complex.[32] The inauguration ceremony commenced with a ninety-minute *perani*, or marching procession, through the capital's main thoroughfares, producing a chaotic scene in which slogan-chanting DMK supporters eked a path through the city's notoriously congested roadways at the peak hour of evening traffic.[33] Upon completing the 4-kilometer procession from Marina Beach to *Anna Arivalayam*, located on Anna Salai, they participated in a formal ceremony dedicating the building to late DMK founder C. N. Annadurai.[34] As midnight approached, party members trickled out of the complex and began what turned out to be a lengthy commute to their home districts, ill-prepared for what they encountered next.[35]

By the early morning hours of September 17, 1987, DMK party members had departed in an assortment of personal vehicles, private buses, and hired lorries that barreled down the national highway and major thoroughfares leading out of Chennai.

As they approached Villupuram, the primary transit junction of Tamil Nadu's northern districts, their progress was immediately stalled by a massive road *roko*, or blockage, conducted by the *Vanniyar Sangam*, a caste association purporting to represent Vanniyars, the largest caste cluster in Tamil Nadu comprising nearly 12 percent of the state population.[36] The *Vanniyar Sangam*, a conglomerate of twenty-seven Vanniyar caste organizations consolidated in 1980 by Dr. S. Ramadoss, organized an unprecedented, weeklong road *roko* to press its demand for a separate 20 percent reservation quota for Vanniyars in state government employment and educational institutions and a 2 percent quota in the central government.[37] To command media coverage, *Vanniyar Sangam* organizers orchestrated the *roko* agitation to coincide with the DMK's much-publicized inauguration ceremony at *Anna Arivalayam*.

Vanniyar Sangam activists obstructed major roadways by reportedly felling "lakhs of trees" along with telephone poles and lampposts.[38] They scattered shards of glass and rolled large boulders across roadways, even digging trenches through major thoroughfares. Further, the agitators used crude homemade explosives to blast culverts, causing extensive damage that authorities estimated would require at least a month of dedicated maintenance.[39] As planned, DMK office bearers were among the first persons encumbered by the protest. In Valavanur, lorries transporting DMK supporters were halted, doused with petrol, and set ablaze, leaving thousands of travelers stranded along the roadside without access to adequate food or water.[40] In Koliyanur, near Villupuram, 250 vehicles, mostly carrying DMK party members, stood bumper to bumper, a stationary fleet that swelled to over 1,000 by the following afternoon.[41] In adjacent areas, *Vanniyar Sangam* activists assaulted individuals who police had instructed to clear roadways, culminating in a police firing that left 11 Vanniyars dead on the first day of the agitation.[42] Recognizing the severity of the situation, the state government dispatched armed police escorts to guide convoys of stranded travelers out of affected districts via alternative routes.[43]

The *Vanniyar Sangam's* road *roko* agitation, which persisted uninterrupted for seven days, crippled transportation to and from the state capital.[44] In response, transportation authorities cancelled most mofussil buses running rural, interior routes

and imposed a curfew that limited public transportation in the state capital from 6am until 9pm.[45] State authorities issued "shoot on sight" orders that authorized police to open fire on individuals caught damaging public property or abetting the *roko*. Even as roadways gradually became accessible, armed police convoys escorted fleets of public buses to their destinations.[46] Shortly thereafter, enhanced security measures were extended to the transport of food grains and essential commodities following the late night arson of a milk tanker within the Ambattur area of Chennai.[47] Over the course of the agitation, limited road transportation coupled with heightened security risks generated severe shortages of basic commodities such as milk, vegetables, and kerosene within Chennai, which sourced many essential goods from the state's northern districts.[48]

As the *roko* progressed, daily newspapers continued to cite fresh instances of violence and the destruction of public property, but *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, in recollecting the agitation, underscore that Dalit communities bore the brunt of the Vanniyars' aggression.[49] *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* General Secretary D. Ravikumar recalls that anti-Dalit violence began on the first day itself, when DMK party leaders and police entered Dalit colonies adjacent to obstructed roadways and instructed the local residents to begin clearing debris. An early newspaper account reported, "police with the cooperation of other departments and members of the public cleared the roads for traffic."[50] Yet, Ravikumar insists that the individuals instructed by police to clear key roads, those glossed by media accounts as "members of the public," were exclusively Dalits.[51] Similarly, Sinthanai Selvan recalls how authorities "used our people as laborers to clear roadways," and, in doing so, converted them into targets of Vanniyar aggression.[52] Having witnessed their cooperation with authorities, *Vanniyar Sangam* activists reportedly warned Dalit residents not to impede the *roko* agitation. When some Dalits refused to oblige this request, their residential colonies were targeted amidst the turmoil of the *roko* agitation, beginning with the arson of 100 Dalit huts in Sundaripalayam.[53]

During the following days, Vanniyar agitators torched Dalit hamlets across the northern districts, including roughly eighty huts in Chitharasoor and in

Mazhavaranoor, more than 75 in Nellikuppam, and an unreported number in Kandarakottai.[54] Although police pledged to distribute rations of rice, kerosene, clothes, and cash to affected communities, their residents remonstrated that the promised aid never arrived and, further, that the District Collector "did not even have the courtesy to get down from his car" when he visited affected colonies.[55] Then, on September 21, 1987, anti-Dalit violence reached a crescendo when nearly 1,000 *Vanniyar Sangam* supporters set fire to Endathur village near Uttiramenur.[56] Two days later, on September 23, 1987, *Vanniyar Sangam* agitators descended upon four villages in Alampakkam, near Cuddalore, and reduced nearly 1,200 Dalit huts to ashes, displacing an estimated 5,000 Dalit residents.[57] In each instance, targeted Dalit communities had earlier impeded the *roko* agitation.[58] In Endathur, Dalit residents confronted 400 *Vanniyar Sangam* agitators armed with what newspaper reports described as "lethal weapons," presumably agricultural tools, and beseeched them to spare four culverts adjacent to the colony, whereas in Alampakkam Dalit residents gathered *en masse* and collectively prevented *Vanniyar Sangam* agitators from blockading nearby roads.[59]

Over the course of the *roko* agitation, police remanded 20,461 persons in custody, a figure that includes roughly 2,500 preventive detentions.[60] Further, police gunfire killed an estimated 23 Vanniyars over the course of the weeklong campaign.[61] Recollecting the incident, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* General Secretary Sinthanai Selvan recalls that the *Vanniyar Sangam* promptly venerated individuals killed by police gunfire as "social justice heroes," constructing elaborate memorials that etched their memory in the local landscape.[62] In his account, Selvan draws our attention not only to the irony of this epitaph, but also to the political afterlife of this early protest, which, he alleges, renders visible how caste contestations had come to be rearticulated through electoral politics. *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, like Selvan, describe the agitation as a "breaking point," which they discuss not as a temporally bound chronology of events, but rather as an *evolving process* that provides a vantage point to consider how electoral politics altered the equation between caste and state.[63] Citing the 1987 *roko* agitation as a paradigmatic example of how caste organizations first

demonstrate their strength prior to entering electoral democracy, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers recall this incident to accentuate the afterlife of the *Vanniyar Sangam's* agitation and, further, what it reveals about the character of democracy.

The Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK)

Fifteen months after the *Vanniyar Sangam's* landmark *roko*, the DMK coalition emerged victorious from the 1989 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Election, a result that analysts attribute to a split in the rival AIADMK party between J. Jayalalitha, the party's future heir, and Janaki Ramachandran, wife of late-AIADMK founder M. G. Ramachandran.[64] While the warring AIADMK camps fractured their otherwise formidable vote-bank, the DMK bagged a remarkable 169 out of 234 seats.[65] Shortly thereafter, the DMK announced a 20 percent compartmentalized reservation quota within the 49 percent quota already allocated for the Backwards Classes (BCs), earmarking these posts for 107 communities classified as the Most Backwards Classes (MBC).[66] Vanniyars, who account for 53 percent of Tamil Nadu's MBC population, were primed to reap its benefits.[67] This gesture toward appeasement bespeaks the DMK's resolve to arrest the *Vanniyar Sangam's* burgeoning popularity among Vanniyars, who had previously been considered a bastion of DMK support and who account for 25-30% of the population across northern Tamil Nadu often referred to as "the Vanniyar belt."[68] Wary to cede ground, the *Vanniyar Sangam* struck a hard bargain and remonstrated against the DMK's overture, outwardly miffed at the prospect of sharing the quota with 106 other communities.

On July 16, 1989, the *Vanniyar Sangam* launched the *Pattali Makkal Katchi* (PMK) ahead of the November 1989 General Election. The party entered its inaugural bid independently, contesting 32 of 39 parliamentary seats and securing a reputable 5.82% of the statewide vote.[69] Though coming out empty-handed, the PMK played spoiler to the DMK in six constituencies and, in effect, helped hold the Dravidian juggernaut to a solitary parliamentary seat. In six constituencies, the PMK polled a greater percentage of the vote than the margin of AIADMK victory over the DMK. Further, the PMK averaged roughly 7% of votes in seats where it contested and

enjoyed particularly strong performances in Vandavasi (19.33%), Arakkonam (21.11%), Tindivanam (22.07%), Chidambaram (23.87%) and, finally, Dharmapuri (29.88%), where the PMK polled considerably higher than the DMK (22.71%).[70] The 1989 *Lok Sabha* Election marked the beginning of a seven-year drought in DMK politics. During the next round of state assembly and parliamentary elections, both in 1991, the PMK again contested independently to demonstrate the magnitude of its support.[71] Although winning only a single seat in the assembly and drawing a blank in parliamentary, the PMK again cordoned off an impressive 7% of the vote share in seats it contested.[72] Further, the PMK secured more than 10% of the vote share in 56 state assembly constituencies.[73] But, perhaps more importantly, the PMK again played spoiler for DMK, which bagged a measly 2 out of 234 assembly seats and lost all 39 parliamentary contests.[74]

Five years later, in 1996, the DMK's fortunes improved when its coalition prevailed in 221 assembly seats and all 39 parliamentary contests, an electoral landslide that analysts attributed to the backing of cinema star Rajinikanth, including his estimated 20,000 fan clubs, as well as a flurry of corruption and disproportionate asset cases lodged against AIADMK Chairperson Jayalalitha.[75] When DMK returned to power, it again sought to appease Vanniyars across the northern districts. The party withdrew nearly 40,000 cases registered against members of the community dating back to the 1987 *roko* agitation and granted ₹3,000 in monthly assistance to the families of individuals who died amidst the protest in addition to a one-time solatium of ₹3 lakh to their families.[76] Raising the ante, the PMK allied with the AIADMK during the 1998 General Election and again played spoiler to DMK, helping the AIADMK coalition to bag 30 of 39 seats and edge the DMK out of its traditional bastion of support in northern Tamil Nadu.[77] To the consternation of DMK organizers, the party once again drew a blank across the northern districts, its victories limited to other regions of Tamil Nadu.[78]

In its initial decade of electoral politics, the PMK established itself as an electoral force to be reckoned with in northern Tamil Nadu. In the following years, the party's shrewd tactical maneuvers paid lofty dividends, including its willingness to

successively alternate Dravidian coalitions and thereby pit Dravidian parties against each other to secure its support. As Andrew Wyatt observes, "the PMK was on the winning side in each of the five elections held in Tamil Nadu between 1998 and 2006," and, further, "participated in all three national coalition governments between 1998 and 2009, giving the party a string of ministerial posts."[79] The PMK complicated the existing electoral arithmetic and augmented its bargaining power with Dravidian parties. Although Vanniyars factored as a locally dominant community across the state's northern districts, already well represented within local politics and bureaucracy, their electoral consolidation by the PMK heightened the concerns of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, who observed how caste calculations influenced not only electoral outcomes, but political procedures. When they reminisce about the *Vanniyar Sangam's* 1987 *roko* agitation nearly three decades in hindsight, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers contend that the PMK's electoral consolidation of the Vanniyar electorate intensified the salience of caste in political calculations and posed an obstacle to Dalit mobilization.

When *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers discuss the late 1990s, they allege that the PMK's consolidation of Vanniyars and subsequent integration into Dravidian coalitions exacerbated the crisis besetting their movement. While their responses reveal an erosion of confidence in state neutrality, their accounts further suggest that they came to view the state not merely as complicit in anti-Dalit violence, but implicated within its production. Although the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* had earlier beckoned Dalits to "hit back" in the face of violence and intimidation, this motto was developed to counteract specific incidents of caste violence, thereby positing a degree of separation between caste violence and state officials. Echoing Thirumaavalavan's evocative language, many organizers describe the integration of rival caste associations within the electoral arena in terms of a merger of "caste terrorism" and "state terrorism."[80] Stated as such, their word choice is not merely evocative, but reveals an evolving perception among *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers in the late 1990s that an earlier distinction between caste violence and state-sponsored violence had grown

opaque. What was previously understood as indifference on behalf of the state, was, by 1998, re-interpreted as collusion.[81]

"Tamil Nadu's Emergency"

On January 9, 2014, I conversed with Kani Amudhan and Selva Arasu, both *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* administrators in Madurai, as they awaited a meeting with the District Collector. Sipping milk tea at an outdoor stall adjacent to the Collector's Office, we first discussed the circumstances surrounding the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* formation before our conversation gravitated toward the movement's electoral transition. I inquired why, in 1999, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* abandoned electoral boycotts to formally enter electoral democracy. "From my perspective," Arasu reminisced, "Electoral politics was not entirely of our own choosing. The formation of the PMK compelled our organization to re-evaluate its earlier platform and ultimately pressed us toward the electoral path."[82] Then, Amudhan interjected, "At that time, the PMK had become an influential party and joined hands with the ruling DMK. The PMK leveraged its position within the DMK-led state government to cripple the growth of our organization. From 1997 until 1999, more than one hundred of our key organizers were detained under the Goondas Act and National Security Act."[83] "In those days, state repression was particularly severe," Arasu confirmed, adding, "It was Tamil Nadu's Emergency."[84]

When Arasu and Amudhan discussed the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition from boycotts to ballots, their accounts construct a parallel between the political climate of late-1990s Tamil Nadu and stringent measures undertaken by Indira Gandhi's Congress Party in the 1970s to suspend democratic procedures and stifle political opposition during the Emergency (1975-1977), a twenty-one month blight on India's democratic record.[85] Arasu references this period not only to make an evocative allusion, but a poignant comparison, albeit on a different scale. During the Emergency, state authorities utilized the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) to detain nearly 100,000 members, supporters, and sympathizers of opposition political parties, a figure that includes the detention of journalists, scholars, and activists.[86] The Janata

Party-led government repealed MISA following its resounding defeat of Congress in the 1977 General Election, which effectively terminated Emergency rule.[87] Upon revoking MISA, India enjoyed the only time in its history as a sovereign state without laws permitting preventive detention until a resurgent Indira Gandhi emerged from the 1980 General Election victorious and her Congress party promulgated the National Security Act (1980).[88]

Viduthalai Chiruthaigal organizers including Arasu and Amudhan recall that the movement reached an impasse in the late 1990s. They recount how state authorities routinely refused permits for their public rallies, thereby crippling the primary vehicle of movement politics and, further, exercised stringent legal maneuvers that, in their own words, threatened to "de-mobilize" their organization.[89] Instead of arresting activists under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), bailable offences that they were prepared to fight in the courts, authorities utilized the National Security Act (NSA) and what is colloquially known as the Goondas Act to arrest key organizers under non-bailable offences for up to twelve-months.[90] Selectively applied, these laws vested District Collectors and Police Commissioners with extensive latitude to preemptively detain any individual for a presumed intent to engage in activity that may disrupt "the maintenance of public order."[91] NSA and the Goondas Act granted authorities what critics have termed "blanket immunity" under which they exercise "unbridled discretion."[92] In contrast to punitive detention, or detention on the basis of acts committed, "suspicion and reasonable probability" provided sufficient grounds for a preventive detention without mandating trial or conviction by a court of law.[93] Further, as Arvind Verma observes, NSA sanctions a detention order if the detaining authority, a District Collector or Police Commissioner, "is satisfied with respect to any person that such an order is necessary."[94]

In our conversation, Thirumaavalavan recounts how the selective application of these laws impeded *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics. He relates how, beginning in 1996, "police, who draw disproportionately from the Vanniyar caste, began targeting our cadre when we entered the northern districts, particularly in Cuddalore and Villupuram."[95] Further, he contends that the situation intensified when the PMK

integrated into Dravidian coalitions, which facilitated its access to upper echelons of state bureaucracy and augmented its bargaining power with political authorities. By 1998, Thirumaavalavan concedes, "We understood that political leaders and police authorities were against us and felt a need to redesign our strategy in order to safeguard our movement."[96] Thirumaavalavan recalls that, as the movement expanded across the state's northern districts where Vanniyars are preponderant, "[PMK Chairman] Ramadoss began filing so many complaints against us and, upon aligning with the DMK, he exerted his influence within the ruling government to detain so many of our frontline leaders under non-bailable offenses, particularly NSA and Goondas Act."[97] "This," Thirumaavalavan alleges, "shook up our movement," conceding, "we came to realize that the struggle alone will not yield fruitful results. It pressed us to begin a conversation on electoral politics."[98]

Similarly, Tada Periyasami, who is widely said to have shared movement responsibilities with Thirumaavalavan from 1992 until his departure from the movement in 2002, stresses that although "state repression" was not necessarily a novel phenomenon, the "soldering of caste and state power" provided their adversaries with mediated access to a new legal arsenal.[99] Periyasami, who was arrested twice under laws purporting to defend national security, recalls, "More than 150 of our organizers were booked under the Goondas Act and National Security Act. Rather than charging us under the Indian Penal Code, cases that we were prepared to fight in the courts, they utilized harsh laws generally reserved for terrorists and habitual criminal offenders."[100] He recollects, "The repressive measures used by the state government elicited a palpable fear that they would brand us as terrorists and dismantle our organization. We checked the pulse of the state and realized that this is how things would continue to progress. This pushed us toward the electoral path."[101]

Beyond preventive arrest and non-bailable detentions, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers allege that the quotidian practices of local state authorities impeded their mobilization strategy, enumerating instances when police refused to grant permits for their rallies despite sanctioning political activities conducted by rival caste organizations and political parties.[102] Providing a paradigmatic example, *Viduthalai*

Chiruthaigal organizers point to circumstances surrounding a proposed September 1998 *bandh* in Cuddalore District. Initially scheduled for September 29, 1998, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers marshaled the support of seventeen Dalit organizations and announced a *perani*, or marching procession, in Cuddalore to advance a five-point agenda: the provision of reservations in local *tender* auctions, an immediate ban on corpse burying and burning professions, proper implementation of the hitherto underutilized Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989), allocation of a reservation quota in the private sector, and a white paper detailing the non-implementation of existing reservation quotas.[103] When Cuddalore District Collector Sandeep Saxena denied their initial request for a permit, organizers postponed the procession until October 26 and, in the meantime, petitioned upper echelons of police authority based in Chennai to override the Collector's decision. With formal approval still pending, they again postponed the procession to November 16. Then, on November 4, Thirumaavalavan met personally with the Director General of Police and next, on November 12, consulted with the Inspector General of Police, who, he alleged, provided his verbal assurance that a permit would be granted shortly.[104]

Then, on November 13, while still awaiting police permission, Thirumaavalavan informed the press that instead of postponing the rally yet again his movement would proceed with its current proposal and conduct the procession without formal authorization. Immediately, local police issued a public notice "warning van and car proprietors that they should not allow their vehicles to be hired to facilitate the procession."[105] Ratcheting up pressure, District Collector Sandeep Saxena reportedly stated, "A ban has been issued for the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* procession. If they violate it, they will be arrested. Also, those who lease vehicles such as lorries, vans, and cars will be arrested and their vehicle licenses will be cancelled."[106] Citing similar rallies conducted in recent weeks by the *Pattali Makkal Katchi*, Thirumaavalavan struck a defiant tone, "Regardless of how many bans are imposed against our movement, we will defy these bans and conduct this rally."[107] On the following day, police officials combed Cuddalore District and rounded up 150

Viduthalai Chiruthaigal organizers including its district secretaries. Further, district police heightened security measures and dispatched nineteen flying squads to intercept participants *en route* to assigned meeting points.[108] The rally was again postponed.[109]

When Thirumaavalavan discussed circumstances surrounding the banned rally in an early interview with the vernacular press, he charged that police officials withheld an explanation for prohibiting the procession, merely offering the pretense, "We banned your procession because the Vanniyars would attack you."[110] Frustrated, Thirumaavalavan stressed the irony of police officials citing their own impotence as justification for a dereliction of duty and, further, castigated state partiality, noting that the same authorities sanctioned a PMK rally the following week.[111] Moreover, he publically surmised that PMK Chairman Dr. S. Ramadoss had leveraged his influence during an October all-party meeting in Chennai where, with the backing of presiding Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and DMK Chairman M. Karunanidhi, the state government promulgated an order prohibiting the public assembly of caste organizations under the pretense that their activities "provoke religious and caste sentiment.[112]*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers understood the implication of the government order, which posited a clear-cut distinction between political parties and caste organizations. Whereas the order prohibited the public assembly of caste organizations under the pretense that their activities stoked communal animosity, provoked violence, and threatened public order, it exempted political parties established explicitly on the basis of caste. In effect, while political parties such as the PMK remained free to mobilize their 'constituents', the government order barred Dalit movements such as *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* from organizing their supporters.[113] Whereas state officials cited the maintenance of law and public order as its key imperative, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers suspected political meddling.[114]

The charged political landscape of late-1990s Tamil Nadu prompted *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers to reevaluate their position *vis-à-vis* the state. In particular, they reappraised their adherence to electoral boycotts in response to the electoral consolidation of the rival PMK. In a 1998 interview, Thirumaavalavan justified his movement's boycotts by arguing that the state only buttressed the hegemony of locally

dominant communities and, therefore, for Dalits to participate in elections was tantamount to "handing over authority and placing it directly into the hands of our adversaries."[115] Regarding the government as "an institution of the upper caste people," he argued that electoral politics served "to protect caste authority."[116] To cast a ballot, he alleged, endorsed the legitimacy of an electoral system that he alleged had, hitherto, shunted Dalit concerns. At that time, Thirumaavalavan opined, "This government acts as a representative of the [present] social structure. No matter how many times we vote and form new governments, the character of the government will persist as a structure that protects the welfare of the privileged class… We will not participate in elections that only serve to renew the caste structure every five years."[117]

As conveyed by early interviews, Thirumaavalavan expressed skepticism regarding the capacity of electoral politics to redress Dalit concerns.[118] The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* did not oppose electoral franchise purely on an ideological basis, but conceded the futility for Dalits, a permanent electoral minority, to generate ameliorative outcomes in a political system that they perceived as inherently majoritarian. Hence, the movement's early position was not strictly in principle, refuting the legitimacy of the electoral system, but also practical, acknowledging their inability to meaningfully alter electoral results. But, as the 1990s progressed, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers reckoned that the transformation of backwards caste organizations into autonomous political parties had raised the stakes of remaining outside the electoral platform. By 1998, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers began to reappraise their outlook on electoral participation, in part prompted by stringent laws (e.g., NSA, Goondas Act) that undermined its organizational structure and crippled its capacity for collective mobilization, which served as the primary vehicle of movement politics. All the while, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers maintain that the PMK had leveraged its electoral clout to influence political processes and stymie their growth in Tamil Nadu's northern districts.[119] Further, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers understood that while state authorities may have earlier shunted their legal petitions, they remained keenly attuned to electoral arithmetic and understood the value of organizations with a demonstrated capacity to deliver, or deny, votes.

From Boycotts to Ballots

Against the monochromatic landscape of vintage silent film, Charlie Chaplin endeavors to sedate a wild horse in *The Circus* (1928). While the horse appears deep in slumber, Charlie stealthily approaches, packs opium into a pipe, and inserts one end of the instrument into the drowsing animal's nostril.[120] But, alas, before Charlie can puff the opium through the animal's nose, the horse exhales deeply and in one strong gust spews a cloud of opium into Charlie's face, rendering him senseless as he reels backwards and, following some signature antics, he eventually collapses. On September 4, 1998, nearly seventy years after its initial release, this classic scene provided a pertinent metaphor when the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* congregated in Villupuram, Tamil Nadu, and convened an executive committee meeting to reappraise their current program and deliberate over their potential integration into electoral democracy.[121]

When movement organizers mulled the prospect of discarding electoral boycotts and converting their organization into a political party, Sinthanai Selvan, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* General Secretary, cautioned against any complete integration within electoral democracy.[122] Addressing those in attendance, he recalls alluding to Charlie Chaplin's experience with the wild horse, recounting, "I informed my comrades that if we attempt to harness the electoral platform, elections will swallow this movement and render us lifeless just like Charlie when he struggled to sedate the horse."[123] Selvan referenced this classic scene to express concern as to whether or not the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* could maintain robust advocacy for Dalit causes and withstand the myriad demands generated by direct electoral participation. Expressing his consternation, Selvan warned that elections might backfire, the electoral platform may force the movement to compromise its hardline positions and collaborate with dominant parties, thereby running the risk of forfeiting support from Dalit communities that had come to regard their movement as an attractive alternative to mainstream politics. Referring to Chaplin's comedic struggle with the wild horse, he

questioned whether electoral democracy might send the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* reeling backwards unto its eventual collapse.

Amidst a protracted discussion, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers deliberated over three primary proposals: one that pressed for an underground movement, a second that advocated, like Selvan, a partial and indirect integration into electoral politics, and a third that proposed converting the movement into a formal political party. Those advocating underground politics, insisting that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* convert its social organization into a militant extra-parliamentary movement, found an unreceptive audience. Moreover, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Chairman Thol. Thirumaavalavan refuted their proposal as both untenable and impractical. Referring to stringent measures undertaken by government and police authorities to stymie the movement's growth, he advised, "A militant approach entailing bombs and weapons was not feasible in the present political climate."[124] In 2009, Thirumaavalavan recounted this early proposal during our conversations, emphasizing that the movement had to choose between "the underground route undertaken by Prabhakaran" and "the path of parliamentary politics followed by Ambedkar," a decision between bullets and ballots.[125] Alluding to the demise of the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE), Thirumaavalavan suggested that Ambedkar's path provided the only viable option for his movement at that historical juncture.

While a handful of cadre did endorse a call-to-arms, most *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers rejected the prospect of an armed struggle, prompting a protracted debate regarding the most effective means to influence political procedures.[126] A large contingent of organizers including Sinthanai Selvan suggested that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* engage electoral politics indirectly. Recognizing that the electoral platform could not be ignored outright, they advised their colleagues to maintain a separate identity as a social movement in order to preserve their political autonomy. Rather than contesting elections directly, they recommended developing a symbiotic relationship with established Dalit parties such as the Republican Party or *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP).[127] Selvan recollects this early position:

I felt that we should not enter directly into elections. Of course, let us participate in the electoral system, but our party need not contest elections straightway. We should support other parties such that we maintain our present politics without diluting our platform. Our party's support should be issue-based: no strong commitments, no alliances, only issue-based support and opposition.[128]

From Selvan's perspective, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* could marshal its support to influence the political process without participating directly in the electoral system.[129] A formal electoral turn should only be considered, he advised, "after another ten or twenty years" and once the movement had consolidated the Dalit vote bank.[130]

In contrast, a third contingent of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers argued that direct electoral participation would provide a tool to expand participation among Dalit communities, some of whom remained leery to join the movement fearing that it may provoke retaliation from local authorities and dominant castes. Further, movement organizers surmised that an electoral turn would alleviate the pressure on their movement by legitimizing its protest in the eyes of state authorities, which they feared may soon dismantle their organization.[131] They underscored the necessity of providing an autonomous Dalit voice within the electoral arena, which, up to that point, they alleged had disregarded their community's concerns. Those in attendance at the executive committee meeting recall how Thirumaavalavan envisioned the state as a primary field of struggle. Sithan Sivabalan, who was among the attendees, recalls a specific example by which Thirumaavalavan supported his position: "If a caste Hindu attacks you with a knife or an iron rod, you can seize a comparable weapon and fight back. But, when that caste Hindu becomes an MLA you cannot oppose him directly. There is caste terrorism and there is state terrorism. To challenge the latter, you must become a political authority."[132] Recounting this early debate, Sivabalan recalls, "Thirumaavalavan's argument convinced me that political authority was necessary to achieve our goals."[133]

Likewise, other *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers recall Thirumaavalavan's comments in favor of direct electoral participation. Thirumeni, a key organizer from Cuddalore District, recounts how Thirumaavalavan lobbied movement cadre:

He told us, "If we want to sit equally with Vanniyars in the local council, state legislature, and national parliament, we must contest their dominance through the electoral system. Everyone is participating in electoral politics: DMK, AIADMK, the Communists. This includes caste Hindus and, particularly, the PMK. Other [caste] communities are organized as political parties, strengthening their authority through elections and reaping its benefits. Why should we carry on boycotting elections and further isolate ourselves? We should enter the political mainstream to continue our struggle and claim an equitable share of resources. We must wage this struggle from within the state structure."[134]

In effect, many *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers took cues from Thirumaavalavan and came to conceptualize the state as a primary locus of struggle. To remain outside the state while rival groups integrated within its ensemble of institutions was to forfeit leverage in making claims on authorities and, in effect, to entrust rival groups with redressing Dalit concerns.

When, more than a decade later, Sinthanai Selvan recounts this seminal discussion on electoral politics, he concludes his account succinctly, "Caste oppression and state oppression were our enemies. We initially boycotted elections, but after ten years we came to believe that political power provided the only viable solution for our problems."[135] Selvan concedes that the movement's early boycotts were of limited use, noting, "Boycotts generated a positive image of our movement among the people, who came to see us as uncorrupted, as warriors, as dedicated activists. But, only our reputation was enhanced; we could not secure firm solutions to our problems."[136] This conclusion became evident, he alleges, when their protests failed to secure an amenable response from state authorities in regards to the violence and malpractice that marred panchayats elections in Madurai District. Following the Villupuram conference, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers issued a press release proclaiming their decision to convert their organization into a formal political party, soon to be renamed the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (Liberation Panthers Party; VCK). Describing the general atmosphere at the executive conference, Selvan estimates that ninety-percent of those in attendance, including himself, eventually backed the movement's proposal to enter electoral democracy.[137] Thirumeni, who had opposed the move, similarly

recalls that most *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* cadre welcomed the announcement with jubilance.[138]

When they recollect these internal debates, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers acknowledge that multiple, contrasting perspectives circulated within the movement prior to its integration into electoral democracy. Most organizers corroborate Thirumaavalavan's contention that pressure exerted by police officials and political authorities corralled the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* onto the electoral path. Yet, they also recount that many party leaders re-conceptualized the nature of political power. While in consensus that the PMK's entry into Dravidian coalitions jeopardized their ability to consolidate Dalits, they also describe how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers came to envision electoral politics as a contested field, repressive at present but with the potential to generate ameliorative solutions for the social and economic development of their community. Balasingam, VCK Headquarters Secretary, recalls a key imperative that Thirumaavalavan impressed on his organizers, "While our people view land, gold, and similar possessions as assets, Thirumaavalavan encouraged them to also regard political power as an asset."[139] Balasingam recounts how movement organizers spread this perception among their supporters, emphasizing, "We realized that once our people came to regard political power as a necessary asset, they will begin to demand their due share."[140]

The Electoral Turn

On March 31, 1996, prominent Tamil Nadu leaders of Indian National Congress (INC) splintered from their national organization and launched the *Tamil Maanila Congress* (TMC), or Tamil State Congress. G. K. Moopanar, the charismatic chairman of the TMC, attributed the schism to the INC's decision to align, in 1996, with the AIADMK, whose chairwoman Jayalalitha faced a flurry of corruption charges related to disproportionate assets. Sensing an unfavorable mood among the electorate, Moopanar parted ways with the INC and launched the TMC as an independent party to contest the upcoming 1996 State Assembly Election and the parliamentary election scheduled for later that year. Moopanar's prudent decision, which anticipated that

both elections would pivot on corruption, paid handsome dividends.[141] The TMC allied with the DMK and bagged an impressive 39 seats in the state assembly and then, later in the same year, won 20 of Tamil Nadu's 39 parliamentary seats in the 1996 *Lok Sabha* Election.[142] Despite its early success, the party's good fortune began to wane and, in 1999, the TMC found itself in a quandary when its primary ally, the DMK, joined hands with the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), a rightwing Hindu nationalist party, to contest the 1999 *Lok Sabha* Election. Promising to oppose "corruption," a slight to the INC/AIADMK coalition, and "communalism," alluding to the DMK/BJP tie up, the TMC turned to Dalit and Muslim organizations across Tamil Nadu ahead of the 1999 General Election.[143]

Assembling an electoral coalition comprised of caste and religious minorities, TMC organizers vowed to usher them "into the mainstream" and pledged "to share power with minority communities not only in politics but also in governance."[144] Yet, the TMC's decision to associate with Dalit parties elicited a tepid response followed by outright hostility, spurring allegations that the TMC was lending credibility to militant caste outfits. TMC Chairman Moopanar refuted this contention, assuring media personnel that no militants were in his coalition and stressing his party's intent to assimilate Dalit communities within democratic procedures from which they were excluded.[145] While Moopanar's public rhetoric underscored the need to integrate caste minorities into electoral democracy, his decision to consolidate Dalits was equally tactical. Although Dalits had earlier provided a reliable vote bank for the Congress in Tamil Nadu, Dalit support progressively gravitated towards Dravidian parties (DMK; AIADMK) from the 1970s. But, after three decades of Dravidian rule, there was little evidence that Dalit concerns featured on the state policy agenda.[146] In effect, Moopanar saw an opportunity to return Dalits to the Congress fold, but, as we will see, he had very little choice at the time.[147] Whereas the TMC quickly solidified ties with the *Pudhiya Tamizhagam*, a predominantly Dalit party with a strong Pallar support base across southern Tamil Nadu, the TMC struggled to draw the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* into its electoral coalition; a responsibility that Moopanar delegated to TMC General Secretary Peter Alphonse.

In November 2013, Peter Alphonse greeted me at his home office and provided a firsthand account of coalition formation ahead of the 1999 General Election. Alphonse recalls, "In 1999, we didn't have many options. As organizers of the *Tamil Maanila Congress* we needed to obtain supplementary vote banks and were under strong electoral pressure to secure additional allies. At the time, the DMK joined with the BJP and we were unwilling to join their coalition. On the other side, [Indian National] Congress allied with the AIADMK, against which we were similarly opposed. Our electoral platform was to oppose both communalism and corruption, so these realignments in the electoral field left us isolated and seeking new allies. We began searching for people who could identify with us and share the electoral dais."[148] Recounting how the TMC courted Dalit and Muslim organizers, Alphonse points to his party's 1999 campaign slogan, "*aḍittaḻa makkaḻukku ātcikum panḍu aḍikāram panḍu*," which he translates, "We will share power with the lower rungs of society in government and in the power structure."[149]

While the 1999 General Election ultimately marked the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* foray into electoral democracy, Alphonse recounts the challenge of convincing Thirumaavalavan to join the TMC coalition. He recalls, "It required great pains to convince Mr. Thirumaavalavan to take the plunge in elections. I along with Mr. Azhagiri, who at the time served as an MLA from Cuddalore District, took great pains to convince Thirumaavalavan to enter electoral politics. Even after four or five rounds of discussions on Marina Beach, he still maintained his reticence. Finally, through tireless persuasion, we convinced him to join with us."[150] Alphonse recounts the core argument he impressed on Thirumaavalavan during these conversations:

> I told him, "Unless you are willing to share power, until you are able to share power, you will not deliver anything concrete to your people. In fact, this is why Ambedkar joined the cabinet, went to parliament, and became a minister. Only then was he able to draft a Constitution favorable to Dalits. If you consider the social benefits accessible to your people, take reservations for example, they all come from the political establishment and are delivered through a political mechanism."[151]

To evince how political integration would enable Thirumaavalavan to deliver benefits to his constituents, Alphonse alluded to Jagjivan Ram, a Dalit minister who served in the cabinets of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, who, he contends, "ensured that Dalits received officer postings in the administrative service, the civil service, and the revenue service."[152] "I impressed on Mr. Thirumaavalavan," Alphonse continues, "that it was only because Jagjivan Ram was fighting from within the establishment that he was able to deliver these benefits. Until you enter the political establishment, even if you organize and address mass public meetings, even if you break social barriers, ultimately the point of delivery is somewhere where you are not connected; you must be connected at these points of delivery."[153] Finally, upon protracted negotiations, Thirumaavalavan aligned with the TMC coalition to contest the forthcoming parliamentary election.

Despite a concerted effort to woo Dalit parties into their fold, Alphonse admits candidly, "Even from the beginning, we knew it was a losing alliance," and recollects, "Many people, including those in our party, never approved of the coalition. They felt uncomfortable with Moopanar standing alongside these people, with his hands on their shoulders. They felt it was unsuitable for a man of his political stature, a respected politician who brokers power in New Delhi, to share the dais with Thirumaavalavan and Krishnasamy."[154] "Some people," Alphonse recalls, "reluctantly accepted the coalition by reasoning, 'Let it go, Moopanar had no other option; he is already at his begging bowl!'"[155] "Others," he recalls, "complained that Moopanar was bestowing legitimacy on these Dalit parties and, thereby, elevating what were nothing other than communal outfits. They complained, 'He is giving them political stature. Thirumaavalavan used to address only colonies in the night, but now he is taken to very big stages alongside former ministers and with full media coverage.'"[156] Alphonse underscores, "We faced strong resistance both from within and outside of our party."[157]

On August 11, 1999, the *Tamil Maanila Congress* formally announced its coalition partners, a list including two Dalit parties, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* and *Pudhiya Tamizhagam*, *Janata Dal* (JD), and *Indian Union Muslim League* (IUML).[158] Promising a platform against corruption and communalism, the TMC reiterated its conviction to

"bring Dalits into the mainstream."[159] Moopanar's announcement not only raised eyebrows, but spurred political analysts to conjecture whether the inclusion of Dalit parties would "prove an asset or a liability" for the coalition's prospects.[160] In response, Moopanar repudiated allegations that Dalit parties would serve as an electoral liability and opined that the consolidation of religious and caste minorities would "usher in a new chapter" to Tamil politics.[161] While Moopanar publically defended his coalition partners and refuted allegations of intra-party turmoil, he acknowledged in private the challenges of persuading his cadre to canvas votes for Dalit parties. In a personal conversation with G. Palanithurai, Moopanar recognized that electoral competition sometimes served to undermine Dalit empowerment, reportedly stating, "In a representative democracy, addressing these vital issues is difficult as the system depends on votes."[162] While conceding that the very presence of Dalit parties may forfeit votes from upper caste communities and his own party members, Moopanar saw an opportunity to recover the Dalit support that once formed a staple of the Congress vote-bank.

1999 General Election[163]

Sinthanai Selvan, who joined Thirumaavalavan in negotiations with TMC organizers, recalls, "At first the TMC offered us five parliamentary constituencies, but we rejected some of them because we didn't have enough money to contest so many seats. How could we contest elections in five constituencies without adequate financial means? In the end, we accepted two constituencies: Chidambaram and Perambalur," where Thirumaavalavan and Periyasami contested, respectively.[164] The campaign period produced palpable excitement among Dalit communities, as reflected by newspaper accounts that cast in relief the present ebullience of the Dalit electorate against its previous "indifference."[165] News reports described the "rousing reception" received by Thirumaavalavan and TMC leaders as they traversed Chidambaram, providing evocative accounts of buoyant Dalit crowds that, on one occasion, waited four hours in a steady drizzle to observe Thirumaavalavan deliver his stump speech.[166] Similarly, Peter Alphonse recalls, "The Dalit crowds were very enthusiastic and cheerful; And,

you always knew when it was a Dalit crowd. When the people were sullen and morose and standing off from the leader, we knew it was a pocket of backwards castes, whose visible indifference was plainly evident."[167]

The intra-party tensions, which Moopanar downplayed prior to the campaign, came to the fore during vote canvassing. "At the time of the election campaign," Selvan recounts, "TMC organizers took Thirumaavalavan inside upper caste villages. If it was a Dalit settlement, our party people accompanied them, but in caste Hindu villages our party vehicles would stall outside the village as Thirumaavalavan entered alongside local TMC organizers."[168] A similar occlusion of their party surfaced in disputes over the location of propaganda. Selvan recalls:

> We could not paste our posters in the caste Hindu area. Even TMC people who lived in those areas advised us, 'There is no need to disturb the peace. Don't worry, we will cast our vote for Thirumaavalavan, but don't place your propaganda here, don't paste his photo here; it will only further antagonize our relations. We will cast our votes as Moopanar instructs; there is no need for you to enter our area for the campaign.'[169]

As Election Day approached, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers recall their frustration that TMC campaign workers arrived every morning to collect their daily *batta*, or election money, but rarely partook in canvassing activities. Or, as Selvan emphasizes, "They simply came to share in the finances."[170]

The 1999 General Election in Chidambaram promised to be a historic event. Whereas in previous years Dalits had regularly signed their voter identity cards outside the polling booth, often exchanging their votes for a ration of biryani or a small sum of money, the 1999 election marked the first occasion when many Dalits would enter the polling station to cast their ballot for a candidate of their choosing.[171] In Chidambaram, Thirumaavalavan's primary competition came from the rival PMK candidate, E. Ponnusamy, who was backed by the ruling DMK party. Further heightening tensions, Dalits had historically been prohibited from entering many upper caste villages in the district and, when permitted entry, frequently did so as laborers following strict social mores.[172] As polling booths were established in government buildings located in upper caste settlements, VCK supporters needed to

enter these contested spaces to cast their ballots. Prior to polling, the TMC submitted a list of "sensitive areas" to district police and Election Commission officials that enumerated "violence prone areas" where the prospect of free and fair polls was particularly threatened.[173]

In Chidambaram, the law and order situation deteriorated as the election approached and palpable tensions boiled to the surface when, on the eve of polling, violence erupted in six hamlets across the constituency.[174] Claiming to quell mounting tensions, Tamil Nadu police conducted a series of preventative arrests across the district and remanded in custody 60 VCK polling monitors including its chief election coordinator on the eve of polling, charging that these individuals conspired to provoke violence.[175] Then, on Election Day (September 5, 1999), *Frontline* reports:

> Since Dalits, who are mostly agricultural workers, could not turn up during the morning hours, non-Dalits came in large numbers to vote. The polling agents of Thirumavalavan were terrorized, beaten and driven out. Dalit voters standing in the queues were intimidated. In the absence of polling agents it became easier for miscreants to manipulate the polling.[176]

Sinthanai Selvan recalls that complaints poured in from across the constituency: Dalit names had been omitted from the voter-registry, Vanniyar men had expelled VCK polling agents forcefully from polling stations and prevented Dalit voters from entering polling booths and the upper caste settlements in which they were located. Recollecting his personal experience, Selvan recalls, "When, in the early afternoon, I entered the election booth with my colleagues, we found that our votes had already been cast. We did not know what to do. Some people rushed outside and improvised a road *roko*, demanding police intervention, saying 'Look! My vote was already cast! See, here is my identity card, but my vote has already been cast!'"[177]

When Selvan ruminates over these electoral proceedings more than a decade in retrospect, he concedes that movement organizers such as himself, buoyed by optimism surrounding their electoral turn, underestimated the obstacles ahead.[178] The Chidambaram election, Selvan recalls, was novel in many respects. "Despite fifty years of independence," he recounts, "the residents of Dalit colonies across Chidambaram

had never cast a vote for a candidate of their own choosing. They were excluded from the electoral system, unable to cast their votes and often prohibited from even entering polling booths."[179] Although the 1999 General Election witnessed a mass upwelling of Dalit support behind the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, Selvan recalls the irony of its electoral rhetoric, "At the time, we were speaking about entering the national parliament in New Delhi, but entering the polling booth itself posed such a tremendous struggle!"[180] Selvan recounts that polling stations, whether located in a village panchayat office, hospital, school, bank, or cooperative society, "were always housed in government buildings located in upper caste settlements."[181] With a wry grin, he demurs, "There was no question of booth capturing; the polling stations were already captured by the system itself."[182]

Post-poll Proceedings

Following Election Day, early media reports carried accounts of "smooth polling" across Tamil Nadu, but noted "a few cases" in Chidambaram of "voters being prevented from going to the booths" and "altercations between polling agents at some booths."[183] In a preliminary account, *The Hindu* reported, "Police sources said the clashes followed allegations by the Dalits of bogus voting by the other group," which culminated in the arson of "houses of both the communities in a dozen villages" as well as a private bus in Sethiathope.[184] But, on the same day, District Collector Sandeep Saxena celebrated a high voter turn-out in Chidambaram and Cuddalore, emphasizing that aside from "a few minor incidents and altercations, polling was peaceful in all areas…"[185] In nearby Villupuram, where Dalit voters had confronted similar circumstances, the District Superintendent of Police Baladandayudhapani boasted resolutely, "There have been no instance [sic] of impersonation or malpractice from anywhere and everyone was respecting the model code of conduct."[186]

While government authorities and election monitors attested to the integrity of polling procedures, the *Tamil Maanila Congress* and its coalition partners remained adamant in their allegation of widespread malpractice, claiming that the ruling DMK party had manipulated "administrative and electoral machinery" to disenfranchise

more than 20,000 Dalits and, therefore, demanded an immediate re-poll in 50 booths across Chidambaram.[187] Further, the TMC claimed that widespread violence had "imprisoned Dalits in their hamlets," thereby impeding their entry into adjacent towns where polling stations were situated.[188] Downplaying the effects of poll-related violence, Tamil Nadu Chief Election Officer Naresh Gupta conceded that violence had erupted across Chidambaram, but maintained that this was post-poll violence and therefore did not impinge upon the integrity of electoral proceedings.[189] Similarly, local police authorities and officials from the Election Commission of India (ECI) clarified their earlier comments, acknowledging the prevalence of violence in Chidambaram, but insisting that violence occurred only after the polls had closed and, therefore, did not deter polling procedures. Although Tamil Nadu's Chief Election Officer confessed that he "did not know the exact timings [of the violence]," he remained steadfast in his assessment and demurred that "mere allegations could not be a ground for ordering a repoll."[190]

Over the following weeks, independent organizations including civil rights groups (e.g., People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Independent Initiative) as well as domestic and international NGOs (e.g., Madurai-based People's Watch; Human Rights Watch) launched independent inquiries into allegations of electoral malfeasance.[191] In its initial press release, the PUCL declared that at least fifty areas were affected by "rigging and booth capturing" and recommended that the Election Commission of India conduct a formal inquiry into the matter and order repolling in affected areas across Chidambaram. Recounting particular incidents in a press release, the PUCL team discovered, "By 3pm the Vanniars had captured the booths and indulged in bogus voting. The caste groupings cut across party lines and polling agents of different parties, including the TMC, who were from the Vanniar community, did not protest at the bogus voting."[192] On September 20, 1999, PUCL submitted an official memorandum to Chief Election Commissioner Dr. M. S. Gill. Citing instances of "booth capturing, bogus polling, physical attack [sic] on Dalit booth agents and voters," PUCL, with the support of former New Delhi High Court Justice Rajinder

Sachar, recommended a re-poll in the entire Chidambaram constituency except for the Mangalur segment where polling was deemed to have occurred peacefully.[193]

A separate inquiry submitted by Independent Initiative, a public interest organization spearheaded by the retired Supreme Court Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer to monitor polling procedures, reported that "In most of the villages visited in Chidambaram constituency Dalit people had been threatened not to cast their vote on polling day… Polling agents belonging to the DPI were attacked and people had been physically attacked, their huts burnt and looted by the upper castes led by the PMK."[194] As Hugo Gorringe notes, although the Independent Initiative's report cited instances of violence on both sides of the caste divide, "the seizing of polling booths, denial of voting rights and the use of violence were mostly confined to villages where Dalits were in a minority."[195] Corroborating PUCL recommendations, the Independent Initiative reported that "at least fifty polling booths had been in the hands of one party and that re-polls should be conducted."[196]

Over the course of a month between polling and ballot counting, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* staged a series of protests and dispatched memorandums to government authorities, including formal petitions hand-delivered to the Tamil Nadu Governor and the President of India. Initially, Thirumaavalavan announced an indefinite hunger fast to ratchet up pressure on authorities to order a re-poll, but he retracted this proposition on the advice of TMC Chairman Moopanar, who had reportedly cautioned him, "the fast might lead to further violence in Chidambaram area," for which the VCK would be blamed.[197] Rather, Moopanar advised Thirumaavalavan "to take the issue to the highest authority in the country, namely the President."[198] Then, on September 21, 1999, Thirumaavalavan along with TMC leaders met separately with both K. R. Narayan, President of India, and G. V. G Krishnamurthy, Chief Election Commissioner, as well as other leading figures including Karthikeyan, Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, and Kameswara Paswan, Vice-Chairman of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, to present their case and appeal, albeit futilely, for a re-poll in Chidambaram.[199]

After tallying ballots, the Election Commission declared Thirumaavalavan as runner-up to the winning PMK candidate E. Ponnuswamy, who received a berth in the national cabinet as Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, by a sizeable margin of nearly 119,563 votes.[200] Citing the possibility of Dalit retaliation, Cuddalore District Collector Sandeep Saxena promulgated an order under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (Cr.P.C.) barring public assemblies as well as entry to Dalit organizers representing nearly twenty Dalit organizations from Cuddalore and Chidambaram districts for a period of two months, starting from the date of issue and persisting through December 15, 1999, citing that their presence may instigate a breach of the public peace.[201] Following a legal appeal, on December 7, 1999, one week prior to the expiry of the Collector's order, the Chennai High Court dismissed the directive with the stipulation that Dalit organizers travel in no more three cars, announce their arrival twenty-four hours in advance, and pledge not to disturb the peace.[202]

Newsweek summarized Thirumaavalavan's inaugural election campaign tersely, reporting: "His electoral bid's legacy was destruction. To scare off Dalit voters, upper caste mobs burned 21 villages in the Cuddalore District, destroying 1,000 huts. They attacked 60 Dalit men, killing one."[203] Yet, the consequences of exercising their electoral franchise persisted past the polling deadline as Dalit communities in pockets across the northern districts endured a social and economic boycott. In some areas, Dalits were barred from entering upper caste villages to access government buildings including fair-price shops, which caused severe shortages of food grains and essential goods in affected colonies.[204] Further, some individuals among backwards castes initiated a social boycott, firing Dalit farmhands and preventing Dalit students from attending the government schools located in their settlements.[205] Presiding Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and DMK Chairman M. Karunanidhi, whose coalition bagged 26 of 39 seats in the election, reprimanded his critics, refuting accusations of anti-Dalit bias and emphasizing the progress Dalits have enjoyed under DMK rule. Dismissing allegations of anti-Dalit bias, the DMK chairman scoffed at how anyone could even

muster such claims during an age in which a Dalit had been appointed President of India.[206]

Conclusion

In February 2014, I met with Vanni Arasu, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Spokesperson, at his residence in the tranquil outskirts of Tambaram, a major transit hub in south Chennai. Over milk tea and *murukku*, a fried savory snack, Arasu does not mince words when he recounts the tumultuous denouement of the 1990s. "We cannot simply frame those years in terms of an inter-caste conflict," he says, "It was not simply PMK versus VCK."[207] "At the time," he continues, "the PMK, seeking to reinforce the traditional hegemony of Vanniyars, viewed electoral politics as a means through which to do so."[208] "Further, and much to the alarm of Dravidian parties," he adds, "the Dalit people joined our movement *en masse*. They were chanting our slogans and pasting our posters in their colonies; they had declared an electoral boycott. The DMK and AIADMK saw the danger we posed to their electoral calculations; they understood that it would become difficult retain their Dalit votes."[209] While Arasu alleges that the PMK instigated violence to polarize the electorate and shore up Vanniyar support, he contends that Dravidian parties quickly adapted to the PMK's emergence, bypassing the concerns of Dalits, who, despite their preponderance in the state's northern districts, lacked an autonomous movement with a proven capacity to deliver votes. *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers observed how the Dravidian parties pandered to caste communities that had consolidated themselves through the electoral process and demonstrated their vote-bank.

When Arasu reaches a natural pause, I interject, "But, why did the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* enter electoral politics? Were alternative options not available to the movement?" He recalls how, after 1996, the ruling-DMK party responded to the PMK's consolidation of Vanniyars by strengthening its ties with the party and then, in 1998, welcoming its erstwhile ally into its electoral coalition. Arasu casts a wry grin as he ripostes, "As Mao used to say, 'Our enemy determines our weapon.'"[210] "In those days," he elaborates, "It was clear that the political climate was not conducive to

guerilla warfare and there was a genuine fear that the DMK would ban our organization. So, in 1999, we entered democracy as a strategy."[211] This was not without precedent, Arasu contends, noting how one year prior in 1998 Hugo Chavez came to power through an electoral mechanism. He recounts, "Chavez declared, 'Our resources are for our own people.' He nationalized key industries and redistributed the nation's wealth. It was a social revolution that didn't require weapons."[212] But, much to the chagrin of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, their transition into electoral democracy occurred briskly and not necessarily according to their own design. By 1996, the epicenter of movement activity had gravitated to Tamil Nadu's northern districts, where the Paraiyar caste, presumed to be the largest Dalit community in the state, is concentrated. A few years later, in 1999, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* sought to convert an upwelling of Dalit support into a vote-bank to augment its leverage with state authorities and countervail the backwards castes.

Taken collectively, accounts proffered by *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers suggest that it was not so much the promise of democracy, as much as the looming threat of state repression coupled with the electoral consolidation of backwards castes that propelled their organization towards elections. Yet, this shift from boycotts to ballots does not necessarily signal a radical aberration from earlier movement politics. The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* had earlier relied on the occupation of public space to amplify its voice, press its demands, and effect an audience, but, with that mode of political engagement foreclosed by the late-1990s, the movement resorted to an alternative strategy to represent Dalit concerns: electoral democracy. Whereas political pundits often trumpet the integration of social minorities within electoral procedures as a feat of democratization, the firsthand experience of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* leaders complicates this often-buoyant narrative.[213] As the next chapter conveys, electoral democracy signals neither a triumph nor a retreat from an earlier program, but an astute recognition of how caste came to be rearticulated through electoral politics. At the turn of the millennium, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers embraced the promise of democratic principles understood in terms of political equality and universal rights, yet

remained acutely aware that electoral politics frequently produces outcomes antithetical to these very ideals.

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[1] The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* manages an office in Velachery, but recently inaugurated a new administrative building in the upscale Ashok Nagar neighborhood of central Chennai. Near the completion of my field research in 2014, Thirumaavalavan inaugurated the Ashok Nagar office with a ceremony that unveiled a bronze bust of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar beside the main entrance.

[2] Thirumaavalavan was elected as a Member of Parliament (MP) during the 2009 General Election. He lost his re-election bid in the following 2014 General Election.

[3] By "constituents," I refer not strictly to Chidambaram Dalits, where Thirumaavalavan served as the presiding MP, but to Dalits from across Tamil Nadu who approach him with requests. From the perspective of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, their core constituents are Dalits in general and not strictly Dalits in a specific district.

[4] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013. VCK General Secretary Sinthanai Selvan and VCK Headquarters Secretary Balasingam similarly use variants of the term "de-mobilization" to convey their perspective that state authorities were not simply impeding *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* expansion across the 1990s, but working to counteract the movement's growth.

[5] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[6] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[7] A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, "Preface" in M. Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (eds.), *African Political Systems*. London: Oxford University Press, 1940: xxiii.

[8] Veena Das and Deborah Poole (eds.), *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2004, p4. Also, see: Joan Vincent, *The Anthropology of Politics: A Reader in Ethnography, Theory, and Critique*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002.

[9] C.J. Fuller and John Harriss, "For an anthropology of the modern Indian state," in C.J. Fuller and Veronique Benei, *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*. London: Hurst & Company, 2001.

[10] Jonathan Spencer observes that the state resurfaces as an object of anthropology inquiry only in the late-1980s. See: Jonathan Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics, and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[11] Philip Abrams (1988), "Notes on the difficulty of studying the state," in *The Journal of Historical Sociology*. Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 58.

[12] Ibid. *79*

[13] Timothy Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," in George Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.

[14] Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. Also, see: Akhil Gupta (1995), "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State," in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 375-401.

[15] Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (eds.), *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006, p. 19.

[16] Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion and the Social in Modern India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014: 14.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Barbara Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. See: "Chapter Four: The Local State and Informal Economy."

[19] Harriss-White 196

[20] Harriss-White *75*

[21] Harriss-White *76*

[22] Craig Jeffrey and Jens Lerche, "Dimensions of Dominance: Class and State in Uttar Pradesh," in C.J. Fuller and Veronique Benei (eds.), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*. London: Hurst & Company, 2001. Also see: Craig Jeffrey (2002), "Caste, Class, and Clientelism: A Political Economy of

Everyday Corruption in Rural North India," in *Economic Geography*, Vol. 78, No. 1, pp. 21-41. Similarly, David Mosse provides an account that corroborates much of Jeffrey and Lerche's argument. Mosse effectively demonstrates that dominant groups and individuals in the countryside use positions within and access to the local state to gain preferential access to and distribute state resources in a way that expands existing networks of clientelism. See: David Mosse, "Irrigation and Statecraft in Zamindari South India," in C.J. Fuller and Veronique Benei (eds.), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*. London: Hurst & Company, 2001.

[23] Jeffrey Witsoe (2011), "Rethinking Postcolonial Democracy: An Examination of the Politics of Lower-Caste Empowerment in North India," in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 113, No. 4, p620.

[24] Jeffrey Witsoe, *Democracy Against Development: Lower-Caste Politics and Political Modernity in Postcolonial India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, p12, 10.

[25] Witsoe 189

[26] See: Barbara Harriss-White and Judith Heyer (eds), *Indian Capitalism in Development*. New York: Routledge, 2015; Barbara Hariss-White, *Dalits and Adivasis in India's Business Economy: Three Essays and an Atlas*. Delhi: Three Essays, 2014; Craig Jeffrey, Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery (2008), "Dalit Revolution? New Politicians in Uttar Pradesh, India," in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 67, No. 4: 1365-1396; Barbara Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 (See Harriss-White's fourth chapter, "The Local State and Informal Economy"); Craig Jeffrey (2002), "Caste, Class, and Clientelism: A Political Economy of Everyday Corruption in Rural North India," in *Economic Geography*, Vol. 78, No. 1, pp. 21-41; Craig Jeffrey and Jens Lerche, "Dimensions of Dominance: Class and State in Uttar Pradesh," in C.J. Fuller and Veronique Benei (eds.), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*. London: Hurst & Company, 2001; David Mosse, "Irrigation and Statecraft in Zamindari South India," in C.J. Fuller and Veronique Benei (eds.), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*. London: Hurst & Company, 2001.

[27] The caste geography of Tamil Nadu is such that the three largest Dalit castes (Pallars, Paraiyars, and Arundhathiyars) are often pitted against the state's largest intermediate castes (Thevars, Vanniyars, and Goundars) in the electoral arena. Pallars and Thevars are concentrated in southern districts, Paraiyars and Vanniyars in the north, and Arundhathiyars and Goundars in the west.

[28] This body of literature tends to focus on the integration of backwards castes, as opposed to Dalits, within electoral democracy. See: Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002; Yogendra Yadav, "Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge: trends of bahujan participation in electoral politics in the 1990s," in Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava and Balveer Arora (eds), *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. OUP: Delhi, 2002.

[29] This section examines the development of the *Vanniyar Sangam* and *Pattali Makkal Katchi* (PMK), for an account of earlier Vanniyar politics, which dates to the early post-Independence era, see: Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

[30] "DMK Rally," in *The Hindu*, September 17, 1987, p3.

[31] S. Muthiah, *Madras Rediscovered: A Historical Guide to Looking Around, Supplemented with Tales of 'Once Upon a City'*. Chennai: East West Books (Madras) Pvt. Ltd., 2004: 89.

[32] "'Anna Arivalayam' to enshrine leader's works," in *The Hindu*, September 17, 1987, p3.

[33] "DMK rally," in *The Hindu*, September 17, 1987: 3.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] P. Radhakrishnan, "Backwards Class Movements in Tamil Nadu," in M. N. Srinivas, *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996, p110-134. The popularly accepted estimate that Vanniyars account for 12% of the Tamil Nadu state population is a projection based off the 1931 caste census. The results of more recent caste censuses had not been released at the time of writing.

[37] R. Vidyasagar, "Vanniyar's Agitation," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 12, 1988, pp507-511; B. Kolappan, "Vanniyar Sangam revives demand for exclusive quota," in *The Hindu*, May 7, 2012. www.thehindu.com; R. Parthasarathy, "Battle on the roads—A Major Stir in Tamil Nadu," in *Frontline*, October 3-16, 1987; Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, February 7, 2013; P. Radhakrishnan, "Backwards Class Movements in Tamil Nadu," in M. N. Srinivas, *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996, p110-134.

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[38] S. H. Venkatramani, "Agitation by backward Vanniyar community rocks Tamil Nadu," in *India Today*, October 15, 1987. www.indiatoday.com; "A week of shortages," in The Hindu, September 24, 1987: 3; Ravikumar recalls that the roko obstructed three major highways: Chennai-Panruti-Kumbakonam, Chennai-Villupuram-Trichirappalli, and Chennai-Cuddalore-Thanjavur, D. Ravikumar, personal correspondence, August 31, 2015.

[39] Staff Reporter, "Bid to damage bridges, culverts," in *The Hindu*, September 23, 1987: 3. Vanniyar Sangam activists also attempted, albeit less effectively, to disrupt railway traffic by rolling boulder across railway tracks and attempting to destroy railway bridges with crude explosives. See: "Boulders on track delay Rockfort Express," in *The Hindu*, September 24, 1987: 3; Special Correspondent, "Road Traffic still disrupted in S. Arcot," in *The Hindu*, September 19, 1987: 1; Staff Reporter, "Bid to damage bridges, culverts," in *The Hindu*, September 23, 1987: 3. These crude explosive devices are often referred to as "country bombs."

[40] S. H. Venkatramani, "Agitation by backward Vanniyar community rocks Tamil Nadu," in *India Today*, October 15, 1987. www.indiatoday.com; Special Correspondent, "T. Nadu reservation stir: 11 killed in police firings," in *The Hindu*, September 18, 1987: 1.

[41] Staff Reporter, "Roads damaged in N. Arcot district," in *The Hindu*, September 18, 1987: 3; Special Correspondent, "Road traffic still disrupted in S. Arcot," in *The Hindu*, September 19, 1987: 1.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] For example, the Thiruvalluvar Transport Corporation, which runs express bus series from Madras to destinations across Tamil Nadu, noted that, as no suitable alternative routes could be used outside of the Villupuram-Cuddalore corridor to access the state's central and southern districts, the corporation suspended the majority of its 500 daily services that carried approximately 50,000 passengers across the state. See: Staff Reporter, "TTC services remain suspended," in *The Hindu*, September 19, 1987: 3.

[45] Staff Reporter, "Milk supply only in the mornings," in *The Hindu*, September 22, 1987: 1.

[46] Staff Reporter, "Agitation affects movement of buses," in *The Hindu*, September 18, 1987: 3; "PTC bus set ablaze," in *The Hindu*, September 18, 1987: 3.

[47] Staff Reporter, "Milk tanker set ablaze," in *The Hindu*, September 23, 1987: 3.

[48] "Shoot at sight order in South Arcot," in *The Hindu*, September 20, 1987: 3; "Milk supply only in the mornings," in *The Hindu*, September 22, 1987: 1; "A week of shortages," in *The Hindu*, September 24, 1987: 3; Spontaneous action for special reservation," in *The Hindu*, September 27, 1987: 4.

[49] Balasingam, interview by author, January 29, 2014.

[50] Staff Reporter, "Situation reviewed," in *The Hindu*, September 18, 1987: 3.

[51] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013. Ravikumar elaborates further on this account in a published monograph. See: D. Ravikumar. *vanmurai jananayagam: 1999 pārāḷumaṉṟat tērtaḷinpōdu ciḍambaram tohudiyil naḍanda kalavaram kuṟitta āyvu.* (Violent Democracy: research report on the riot that occurred in Chidambaram constituency during the 1999 Parliamentary Election). Pondicherry: Dalit Publication (*Taḷit Veliyīḍu*), 2004: 16.

[52] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, February 7, 2014.

[53] "Road blocks cleared," in *The Hindu*, September 20, 1987: 1.

[54] "Shoot at sight order in South Arcot," in *The Hindu*, September 20, 1987: 3; "Police protection for Harijans in S. Arcot," in *The Hindu*, September 21, 1987: 1; Staff Reporter, "Convoy with police escort halted," in *The Hindu*, September 21, 1987: 3; Staff Reporter, "Bid to damage bridges, culverts," in *The Hindu*, September 23, 1987: 3.

[55] Staff Reporter, "Convoy with police escort halted," in *The Hindu*, September 21, 1987: 3. Further, another article goes into further detailing on the relief promised to affected Dalit communities, "District officials were giving to the affected people the usual cash relief of Rs. 400, besides dhotis, sarees, rice, kerosene and other essential articles." See: Staff Reporter, "Police to deal with agitators firmly," in *The Hindu*, September 22, 1987: 1.

[56] Staff Reporter, "Tension after attacks on Harijans," in *The Hindu*, September 22, 1987: 3.

[57] "1,000 Harijan huts set ablaze," in *The Hindu*, September 24, 1987: 1; Special Correspondent, "Fire renders 5,000 Harijans homeless," in *The Hindu*, September 25, 1987: 4. While both reports provide similar figures, the first states that four villages were attacked and 1,000 huts set ablaze whereas the latter states that three villages were attacked and "nearly 1,200" set ablaze. Also, see: Staff Reporter,

"Action sought against persons responsible for Alampakkam incidents," in *The Hindu*, September 28, 1987: 3; Also, D. Ravikumar, *Violent Democracy*, p16.

[58] For instance, prior to the arson in Alampakkam, the Dalit residents appealed to and then reportedly prevented 400 *Vanniyar Sangam* agitators to destroy four culverts in the village. See: Staff Reporter, "Tension after attacks on Harijans," in *The Hindu*, September 22, 1987: 3.

[59] "1,000 Harijan huts set ablaze," in *The Hindu*, September 24, 1987: 1. Ironically, this news item features just below a larger article titled, "No untoward incident in Tamil Nadu on bandh day."

[60] Staff Reporter, "Vanniyar stir ends, but police to continue vigil," in *The Hindu*, September 25, 1987: 1; "11,000 under preventive custody to be freed," in *The Hindu*, September 26, 1987: 3; "Preventive arrests of Vanniyar Sangam activists begin," in *The Hindu*, September 15, 1987: 3; "Govt. gears up to face Vanniyars' agitation," in *The Hindu*, September 16, 1987: 3.

[61] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013; Also, see: S George Vincentnathan, "Caste Politics, Violence, and the Panchayat in a South Indian Community," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 38:3, p500; P. Radhakrishnan, "Backward Class Movements in Tamil Nadu," in M. N. Srinivas (ed.), *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1996.

[62] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, February 7, 2014. Still today, Selvan confirms that the *Vanniyar Sangam* and PMK party conduct annual ceremonies honoring the "sacrifice" of these "martyrs."

[63] Ravikumar refers to the Vanniyar Sangam's road *roko* agitation as a "breaking point" in the history of Dalit politics in the state's northern districts. D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013.

[64] The two AIADMK factions merged the following month, in February 1989.

[65] Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Election, 1989, to the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India. In January 1989, Tamil Nadu political parties contested 232 seats; electoral procedures in two seats, Marungapuri and Madurai East, encountered technological difficulties and subsequent elections were held for those two seats in March 1989. The AIADMK won both seats.

[66] Wyatt 99

[67] P. Radhakrishnan, "The Vanniyar Separatism," in *Frontline*, Vol. 19, Iss. 17: August 17 – 30, 2002. www.frontline.in (Accessed September 15, 2015).

[68] The northern districts of Tamil Nadu are, historically, where the DMK has performed best. In contrast, the AIADMK traditionally enjoyed its support in southern districts. As Vanniyars are most concentrated in northern districts of Tamil Nadu, the political ascendency of the *Pattali Makkal Katchi* posed the greatest challenge the DMK party. See: Wyatt 99, 102. As S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha acknowledge, Vanniyars served as an early staple of the DMK vote-bank in Tamil Nadu's northern districts. See: S.V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha (2002), "A response to John Harriss," in *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 40:3, p120.

[69] Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Election, 1989 to the Ninth Lok Sabha*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India, 1990. www.eci.nic.in.

[70] Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Election, 1989 to the Ninth Lok Sabha*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India, 1990. www.eci.nic.in. Tamil Nadu contains 39 parliamentary constituencies.

[71] The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* has been criticized for not contesting elections independently and, therefore, for no demonstrating its vote-bank across the state.

[72] Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections, 1991 to the Tenth Lok Sabha*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India, 1992. www.eci.nic.in; Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Election, 1991 to the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India. www.eci.nic.in.

[73] Wyatt 107

[74] Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections, 1991 to the Tenth Lok Sabha*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India, 1992. www.eci.nic.in.

[75] Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Election, 1996 to the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India. www.eci.nic.in; Government of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections, 1996 to the Eleventh Lok Sabha*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India. www.eci.nic.in; A. S. Panneerselvan, "Fanning Voter Passions," in *Outlook*, May 8, 1996.

www.outlookindia.com; Rasheeda Bhagat, "Advantage Jayalalitha?" in *The Hindu Business Line*, April 4, 2001: www.thehindubusinessline.com.

[76] Staff Reporter, "Stalin reminds Vanniyars of schemes under DMK regime," in *The Hindu* (Chennai), December 1, 2013: 4. While canvassing Vanniyar votes during the 2013 by-election in Yercaud Assembly Constituency, M. K. Stalin, DMK Treasurer and presumed heir-in-waiting, reminded Vanniyars of the DMK's goodwill gestures to their community. *The Hindu* reported, "Mr. Stalin said that 40,000 cases were registered against Vanniyars when they staged protests to seek reservation when the AIADMK was in power in 1987. But all of these cases were withdrawn after the DMK came to power in 1996. It also granted a monthly assistance of Rs. 3,000 to each of the families of 23 persons who died during the agitation. This was in addition to Rs. 3 lakh [per] family as solatium, he added."

[77] Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections, 1998 to the 12th Lok Sabha.* New Delhi: Election Commission of India. www.eci.nic.in.

[78] Outside its stronghold in Chennai, which consists of three constituencies (Chennai North, Chennai Central, and Chennai South), the DMK coalition only bagged seats in central and southern Tamil Nadu (Nagapattinam, Thanjavur, Tiruvarur, Sivaganga, Kanniyakumari).

[79] Wyatt 97; Also, see: S. Dorairaj, "Can PMK convert support base into votes in TN?" in *The Hindu Business Line*, April 7, 2009: www.thehindubusinessline.

[80] Selva Arasu, interview by author, January 9, 2014; Kani Amudhan, interview by author, January 9, 2014.

[81] Nathaniel Roberts makes a similar point, noting how extra-local authorities including the Government of Tamil Nadu and Dravidian parties "…have joined actively with the dominant castes in violently suppressing Dalits." See: Nathaniel Roberts, "Language, Violence, and the State: Writing Tamil Dalits," in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], Books Reviews, January 21, 2010.

[82] Selva Arasu, interview by author, January 9, 2014.

[83] Kani Amudhan, interview by author, January 9, 2014.

[84] Selva Arasu, interview by author, January 9, 2014.

[85] For an account of the 1975-77 Emergency, see: Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

[86] Arvind Verma, "Police Agencies and Coercive Power," in Sumit Ganguly, Larry Diamond, and Marc Plattner (eds.), *The State of India's Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007: 130.

[87] "NSA, A Weapon of Repression," in *People's Union of Civil Liberties Bulletin*, May, 1981.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013. VCK General Secretary Sinthanai Selvan and VCK Headquarters Secretary Balasingam similarly use variants of the term "de-mobilization" to convey their perspective that state authorities were not simply seeking to arrest *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* expansion in the late-1990s, but actively working to dismantle the movement.

[90] The most consistent piece of legislation used against *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* supporters was popularly referred to as the Goondas Act. The act provided for up to a twelve-month non-bailable detention at the discretion of a District Collector or Police Commissioner. While the act has been augmented continually since its initial release in 1982, its present title is the "Tamil Nadu Prevention of Dangerous Activities of Bootleggers, Forest-Offenders, Goondas, Immoral Traffic-offenders, Sand-offenders, Slum-grabbers and Video Pirates Act, 1982."

[91] Additionally, Cuddalore District Collector Sandeep Saxena interpreted stipulations of the National Security Act broadly to encompass "damage to public property." See: Special Correspondent, "'Government trying to suppress Dalit youth'," in *The Hindu*, June 15, 1999: 4.

[92] "NSA, A Weapon of Repression," in *People's Union of Civil Liberties Bulletin*, May, 1981; Arvind Verma, "Police Agencies and Coercive Power," in Sumit Ganguly, Larry Diamond, and Marc Plattner (eds.), *The State of India's Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007: 125.

[93] Shailendra Kumar Awasthi, *Commentaries on the National Security Act, 1980 (Act 65 of 1980): Comprising State Orders*. Allahabad: National Law Agency, 1983: 1.

[94] Verma 127-8

[95] *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* movement materials frequently refer to the Tamil Nadu police force as "the khaki-clad gang" and as "caste fanatics who wear khaki." See: "*timuka pōlīsiṉ kāttuttaṉam: viḍutalais siṟuttaikaḷ mahaḷir aṇivahuppu – tāḻttappaṭṭōrai nasukkum timuka āṭciyiṉ arasa bayangaravādattaik kaṇḍittu*"

(The recklessness of the DMK police: military parade of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* women condemning the state terrorism of the DMK rule that crushes the oppressed people). February 1, 1999: 3. [rally pamphlet] Similarly, Nathaniel Roberts and Smita Narula corroborate this claim that Tamil Nadu police draw disproportionately from locally dominant castes. See: Nathaniel Roberts makes a similar point, noting how extra-local authorities including the Government of Tamil Nadu and Dravidian parties "…have joined actively with the dominant castes in violently suppressing Dalits." See: Nathaniel Roberts, "Language, Violence, and the State: Writing Tamil Dalits," in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], Books Reviews, January 21, 2010; Human Rights Watch, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables."* New York: HRW, 1999.

[96] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, May 2, 2014.

[97] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, May 2, 2014.

[98] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, May 2, 2014.

[99] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[100] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014. While the Terrorism and Disruptive Activities (TADA) Act lapsed without being renewed in 1995, core parts it resurfaced in the subsequent Prevention of Terrorist Activities (POTA) Act, passed in 2002 and then repealed in 2004. Formerly known as Veelum Periyasami, Tada changed his name after he was sentenced under TADA in 1989. He was acquitted of all charges in 1992 and then subsequently arrested under the National Security Act in 1994. An Amnesty International report published in Frontline stated, "Around 77,000 persons had been arbitrarily arrested under TADA and thousands were tortured with a view of extracting confessions from them. Of those arrested, around 72,000 were later released without having been charged or tried. A decade after the TADA lapsed, 147 persons are still under detention." See: Ilangovan Rajasekaran, "Fear and justice," in *Frontline*, October 3, 2014: 41. While it is difficult to ascertain how many Goondas and NSA arrests occurred, the Tamil Nadu Director General of Police confirmed that 106 Dalits were arrested under both laws from January 1, 1997 – July 15, 1997. See: Special Correspondent, "Detention under Goondas Act: DGP refutes charge," in *The Hindu*, July 18, 1997: 4.

[101] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014. In our conversation, Thirumaavalavan corroborates Periyasami's account, confirming that stringent state measures "shook up our movement as well as our frontline cadre, who believed that state repression would decrease only if we integrated within the electoral system." Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, May 2, 2014.

[102] Sudha Tilak, "Dalit-Vanniyar clashes cause worry in T.N.," in *The Times of India*, November 22, 1998: 8.

[103] Staff Reporter, *"kaḍalūril taḍaiyai mīṟi perani viḍutalai siruttaigaḷ 150 pēr kaidu: mun eccarikkai naḍavaḍikkai"* (*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* marching procession violates ban in Cuddalore, 150 persons arrested in as preemptive detention measures are taken), in *Malai Malar*, November 15, 1998: 1. Translation by author.

[104] Staff Reporter, *"kaḍalūril, tingaṭkiḻamai, viḍutalai siruttaigaḷ taḍaiyai mīru perani"* (*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* marching procession in Cuddalore on Monday to violate ban," in *Malai Malar*, November 13, 1998: 1.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid. The articles notes, "the following arrests were made: in the Cuddalore police sub-division 36 persons, in Virudachalam area 24 persons, in Chidambaram area 20 persons, in Panruti area 30 persons, in Thittakudi area 27 persons, in Chethiyathooppu area 13 persons."

[109] The rally was then postponed to December 6, the anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar's death as well as the date that rightwing Hindu movements demolished the historic Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Today, the VCK commemorates December 6th as Dalit-Muslim Uprising Day.

[110] *"tirumāvaḷavaṉ pēṭṭi – 'kaidukku kāraṇam rāmadās'"* (Thirumaavalavan Interview – 'Ramadoss is the Reason for the Arrest), in *Tamilian Express*, December 9-15, 1998: 4.

[111] Further, Thirumaavalavan alluded to elaborate security arrangements, including 12,000 police personnel and helicopter surveillance, allocated for a "guru puja" convened by Thevar caste organizations, the largest backwards castes community in southern Tamil Nadu. See: Sudha G. Tilak, "Dalit-Vanniyar clashes cause worry in T.N.," in *The Times of India*, November 22, 1999: 8; *"tirumāvaḷavaṉ pēṭṭi – 'kaidukku kāraṇam rāmadās'"* (Thirumaavalavan Interview – 'Ramadoss is the

Reason for the Arrest), in *Tamilian Express*, December 9-15, 1998: 4. For an incisive synopsis of guru pujas, see: D. Karthikeyan, "Contentious Spaces: Guru Pujas as Public Performances and the Production of Political Community," in Hugo Gorringe, Roger Jeffery, and Suryakant Waghmore, *From the Margins to the Mainstream: Institutionalising Minorities in South Asia*. London: Sage Publications, 2016: 194-216.

[112] Thirumaavalavan and other *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers contend that the PMK and DMK began to forge ties following the 1998 General Election. Although the PMK contested the election with the AIADMK coalition, it parted ways shortly thereafter and then contested the 1999 General Election alongside the DMK. See: *"tirumāvaḷavaṉ pēṭṭi – 'kaiḍukku kāraṇam rāmaḍās'"* (Thirumaavalavan Interview – 'Ramadoss is the Reason for the Arrest), in *Tamilian Express*, December 9-15, 1998: 4. Further, Concurrent media reports corroborate Thirumaavalavan's contention of political meddling, writing: "In an all-party meeting convened in Chennai it was said that the [*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's*] public rally should be banned as it would provoke religious and caste sentiment." See: Staff Reporter, *"kaḍalūril taḍaiyai mīṟi perani viḍutalai siruttaigaḷ 150 pēr kaiḍu: mun eccarikkai naḍavaḍikkai"* (*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* marching procession violates ban in Cuddalore, 150 persons arrested in as preemptive detention measures are taken), in *Malai Malar*, November 15, 1998: 1. The all-party meeting was convened at Rajaji Hall Madras. A. X. Alexander, interview by author, July 20, 2016.

[113] It should be noted that Tamil Nadu convened four election (two legislative and two parliamentary elections) within a five-year span from 1996-2001.

[114] When I raised this matter with A. X. Alexander, a former Chennai DGP, he brushed aside VCK accusations, saying that the during protests organized by caste associations a "mob mentality" prevailed that had "no rationale for its behavior." He suggested that these outfits figure that violence will get them noticed." When I inquired why police booked Dalit activists under articles of national security legislation rather than the Indian Penal Code (IPC), he responded that under IPC activists could secure their release on bail in a matter of weeks with legal assistance, emphasizing that they used stronger laws in order to "take the strain" off the police force.

[115] *""samattuvapuram – gāndhi kāla mōsaḍi" – "viḍutalai siruttaikaḷ" amaippāḷar tirumāvalavanuḍan nērkānal,"* ("Samatthuvapuram – Deception in the time of Gandhi" – An interview with *"Viduthalai Chiruthaigal"* Chairman Thirumaavalavan," (1998) in *Dalit*, Issue 4, pp9-13. Translation by author.

[116] Ibid.

[117] R. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan, *"aḍanga maṟupōm, attumīṟuvōm!"* (We will refuse to be restrained, we will transgress barriers!), in *Kalki*, November 29, 1998, p3. Translation by author.

[118] *""samattuvapuram – gāndhi kāla mōsaḍi" – "viḍutalai siruttaikaḷ" amaippāḷar tirumāvalavanuḍan nērkānal,"* ("Samatthuvapuram – Deception in the time of Gandhi" – An interview with *"Viduthalai Chiruthaigal"* Chairman Thirumaavalavan," (1998) in *Dalit*, Issue 4, pp9-13; R. Thirumaavalavan, interview by Elangovan, *"aḍanga maṟupōm, attumīṟuvōm!"* (We will refuse to be restrained, we will transgress barriers!), in *Kalki*, November 29, 1998, p3; *"tirumāvaḷavaṉ pēṭṭi – 'kaiḍukku kāraṇam rāmaḍās'"* (Thirumaavalavan Interview – 'Ramadoss is the Reason for the Arrest), in *Tamilian Express*, December 9-15, 1998: 4.

[119] Special Correspondent, "16 arrested under NSA," in *The Hindu*, July 11, 1997: 3.

[120] Chaplin, Charlie, dir. *The Circus*. United Artists, 1928. Film.

[121] This was the second of two executive committee meetings that debated the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* future trajectory. A separate meeting was convened in Perambalur earlier that year.

[122] In early 1997, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* first convened a general body meeting in Thirumandurai village, Perambalur District, where movement organizers initiated a discussion on electoral politics in light of escalating tensions in Melavalavu. While this early conversation was limited to local body politics, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers passed a resolution that the movement would endorse candidates and advise Dalit communities how to vote without directly contesting elections. But, Thirumaavalavan alleges that the movement was compelled to reconsider its stance following Murugesan's murder. Next, he recalls that the movement organized two executive committee meetings in 1998, the first in Perambalur and the second in Villupuram, during which the movement decided to abandon its electoral boycott and formally contest elections. Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[123] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[124] In a personal conversation with Thirumaavalavan, I inquired why he had not considered a blend of these two approaches and adopted a path resembling Hamas, which possesses separate militant and political wings. He emphasized that a split approach was not viable as the political establishment increasingly viewed his organization as extremists and would have worked to disband the organization had it not fully integrated within electoral politics. During separate conversations, multiple sources indicated to me that police authorities made this clear to Thirumaavalavan. Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[125] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013.

[126] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[127] In opposition to this position, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* leaders conveyed disillusionment with the current generation of Dalit leadership which they felt has sacrificed principles for nominal political status. Further, they were concerned that such movements might usurp their support base without any guarantee of lobbying for *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* positions within the electoral arena.

[128] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, August 2, 2013.

[129] Some opponents refuted this point, alleging that if the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* simply extends its support to established Dalit political parties, these organizations may, over time, absorb the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* support base and render the movement defunct. Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[130] Ibid.

[131] Thirumaavalavan contends that many Dalits supported the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal prior to its electoral turn, but the movement's support base was primary youth. He argues that older Dalits were reluctant to join with the VCK out of fear of potential consequences, including the social boycott. Thirumaavalavan argues that these strata of the Dalit community joined his movement following its electoral turn, feeling safe to publically associate with the movement.

[132] Thol. Thirumaavalavan quoted by Sithan, interview by author, December 21, 2013.

[133] Sithan Sivabalan, interview by author, December 21, 2013.

[134] Thol. Thirumaavalavan quoted by Thirumeni. Thirumeni, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[135] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[136] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[137] Sinthanai Selvan, personal communication, October 21, 2015.

[138] Thirumeni, interview by author, December 7, 2013.

[139] Balasingam, interview by author, January 29, 2014.

[140] Balasingam, interview by author, January 29, 2014.

[141] M.L Ahuja, *Handbook of General Elections and Electoral Reforms*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2000: 173-178.

[142] M.L. Ahuja, *Electoral Politics and General Elections in India, 1952-1998*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1999: 247-249; "Former Union Minister GK Vasan Revives Old Party Tamil Maanila Congress in Tamil Nadu," in NDTV, November 29, 2014: www.ndtv.com (accessed September 22, 2015).

[143] Special Correspondent, "Poll tie-ups: TMC meet inconclusive," in *The Hindu*, June 8, 1999: 4. In the Indian context, "communalism" carries a similar connotation as the American English usage of "sectarianism," referring specifically to caste and religious sectarianism.

[144] Peter Alphonse, interview by author, November 6, 2013; Special Correspondent, "Poll tie-ups: TMC meet inconclusive," in *The Hindu*, June 8, 1999: 4; Special Correspondent, "TMC 'consolidating Dalit bodies'," in *The Hindu*, August 12, 1999: 1; T. S. Subramanian (2001), "Crusading Congressman," in *Frontline*, Vol. 18, Iss. 19: www.frontline.in (accessed: September 22, 2015). Staff Reporter, "'TMC front has no militant outfits'," in *The Hindu*, September 4, 1999: 4.

[145] Staff Reporter, "'TMC front has no militant outfits'," *The Hindu*, September 4, 1999: 4; Special Correspondent, "Protect Dalits from violence, Moopanar tells Govt.," in *The Hindu*, September 8, 1999: 4.

[146] The DMK first ousted the Indian National Congress during the 1967 Tamil Nadu State Assembly Election. Since 1967 up to the submission of this dissertation, the DMK and AIADMK have alternated rule in the southernmost state.

[147] Addressing the defection of Dalit support from Congress, Gail Omvedt writes, "In 1967, 45.2 per cent of the Dalits voted for Congress; this figure rose to 52.8 per cent in 1980. But by the late 1980s, this

share declined; and only 31.4 per cent in 1996 and 29.9 per cent in 1998 voted for the Congress." See: Gail Omvedt, "Dalits and Elections – I," in *The Hindu*, November 5, 1999: 12. While Omvedt's data draws from national polling percentages, the overall trajectory she describes similarly applies to Tamil Nadu.

[148] Peter Alphonse, interview by author, November 6, 2013.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid.

[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Ibid. Further, Alphonse recalls that some TMC cadre even complained, "Moopanar is helping the Dalit candidates more than our own, providing election materials and necessary things for electioneering." Additionally, he recalls that Moopanar instructed him, "These people [referring to Thirumaavalavan and Krishnasamy] are new to politics; they do not have connections; they may not yet understand the intricacies of politics and election management. So, we have to do it."

[158] Staff Reporter, "'TMC will continue dalit forces consolidation process'," in *The Hindu*, August 24, 1999: 4.

[159] Special Correspondent, "TMC 'consolidating Dalit bodies'," in *The Hindu*, August 12, 1999: 1. An initial report that covered the VCK's decision to enter electoral boycotts stated that the party entered electoral politics "in an attempt to defeat the DMK-BJP combine," but noted that the VCK "had no intention of supporting an AIADMK-led front" and would rather field its own candidates in all but reserved constituencies across Tamil Nadu. A subsequent article alleged that the VCK first offered its support to the AIADMK, but, upon receiving a tepid response, then turned to an alliance with the TMC. Special Correspondent, "Dalit Panthers to end poll boycott," in *The Hindu*, June 16, 1999: 4; Special Correspondent, "Dalit Panthers to support AIADMK front," in *The Hindu*, June 30, 1999: 4.

[160] N. Kalyanasundaram, "Dalit upsurge, a new phenomenon," in *The Hindu*, August 24, 1999: 5. Further, Dalit issues received heightened media coverage following June 1999, when the National Commission for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes criticized the ruling DMK government for underutilizing funds allocated by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) for SC/ST victims of caste violence (the DMK spent Rs. 18 lakh against the sanctioned Rs. 50 lakh) as well as for a backlog of 1,012 vacancies in public sector employment reserved for SC/ST beneficiaries. See: Staff Reporter, "SC/STs commission concerned over under-utilization of funds," in *The Hindu*, June 18, 1999: 5; Staff Reporter, "What paper on Dalits status sought," in *The Hindu*, July 1, 1999: 5. Previously, the *Tamil Maanila Congress* (TMC), *Pudhiya Tamizhagam* (PT) and Republican Party of India (RPI) had brought of matter of 1,012 vacancies to the attention of government authorities. See: Special Correspondent, "TMC SC/ST wing's demands," in *The Hindu*, March 26, 1998: 4; Staff Reporter, "White paper urged on SC, ST vacancies," in *The Hindu*, April 14, 1998: 4; Staff Reporter, "What paper sought on SC, ST employment," in *The Hindu*, May 21, 1998: 4. Further, the RPI and PT has organized separate public demonstrations on the matter. See: Staff Reporter, "Puthyia [sic] Tamilagam blames parties for exploiting Dalits," in *The Hindu*, September 13, 1998: 4.

[161] Staff Reporter, "Our front will usher in new chapter: Moopanar," in *The Hindu*, September 3, 1999: 4.

[162] Gnanapathy Palanithurai, *Remembering G.K. Moopanar*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd., 2010: 52.

[163] As per the 2011 Census, Scheduled Castes (SCs), which constitute 28% of the population in Chidambaram, are employed primarily as agricultural laborers. As per the 9th Agricultural Census (2010-11), SCs comprise only 16% of all landholders and manage 10% of operational holdings. Among SC landholders, the average plot size was 0.48 hectare. See: www.cuddalore.tn.nic.in (Accessed February 29, 2016).

[164] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009. Peter Alphonse recalls that Sinthanai Selvan acted as an initial conduit between himself and Thirumaavalavan. Peter Alphonse, interview by

author, November 6, 2013. In an interview, Thirumaavalavan confirmed that the TMC initially proposed to allocate five parliamentary seats. Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, May 2, 2014.

[165] Special Correspondent, "51 p.c. voting in first phase," in *The Hindu*, September 6, 1999: 1.

[166] Staff Reporter, "Our front will usher in new chapter: Moopanar," in *The Hindu*, September 3, 1999: 4.

[167] Peter Alphonse, interview by author, November 6, 2013.

[168] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[169] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009. Similarly, Peter Alphonse recognizes this spatial division of canvassing procedures, but attributes it a social and political awareness of realities at the grassroots level. He states, "Every village is divided between the colony and the caste-Hindu settlement. This division exists in each and every village." He suggests that in Dalit settlements, a VCK leader who is familiar among the people is required to canvass votes in those areas, whereas Dalit candidates must rely upon coalition partners to canvass their votes in caste-Hindu areas, partly because the VCK "does not have political infrastructure in that area." Prior to the execution of the campaign, Alphonse describes how coalition partners participate in a coordination committee to coordinate canvassing procedures with an understanding of local caste demographics. "When Thirumaavalavan contests in Chidambaram, our Congress people will canvass votes for him in caste-Hindu settlements under the condition that *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* cadre canvass colony votes for our Congress candidates in other constituencies." Peter Alphonse, interview by author, November 6, 2013.

[170] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[171] Devanathan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[172] Caste stricture often required that Dalits remove shirts, headwear and chappals, and avoid eye contact when passing through an upper caste settlement.

[173] Staff Reporter, "Security sought for Dalits during counting in Chidambaram," *The Hindu*, October 6, 1999: 4.

[174] R.K. Radhakrishnan, "Uneasy calm in Chidambaram," in *The Hindu*, September 10, 1999: 4. Radhakrishnan writes that violence erupted in Vadakkumelur, Anukampattu, Manavalanallur, Naduthittu, Periyakotimalai, and Alichikkudi on the eve of polling.

[175] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009; Special Correspondent, "DPI leader's appeal to rights organization," in *The Hindu*, October 2, 1999: 2; Special Correspondent, "TMC, DPI team meets Governor, urges end to violence," in *The Hindu*, September 10, 1999: 4.

[176] S. Viswanathan (ed.), "Curbing Franchise," in *Dalits in Dravidian Lands: Frontline reports on anti-Dalit violence in Tamil Nadu, 1995-2006*. Delhi: Navayana, 2005: 146-7.

[177] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[178] For instance, he recalls, "On Election Day, when we discovered that so many Dalit names had been omitted from the election roll, only then did we come to understand the previous procedures for drafting the voter registry." Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[179] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[180] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[181] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[182] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, January 13, 2009.

[183] Special Correspondent, "51 p.c. voting in first phase," in *The Hindu*, September 6, 1999: 1.

[184] Special Correspondent, "51 p.c. voting in first phase," in *The Hindu*, September 6, 1999: 1.

[185] Staff Reporter, "Large voter turnout in Vanniyar belt," in *The Hindu*, September 6, 1999: 4.

[186] Ibid. Further, The Chief Electoral Officer, Naresh Gupta, refuted the PUCL report. The Hindu reports that, in his response to allegations of electoral malfeasance, Gupta retorted, "According to the reports he had received from the Returning Officer, the district Collector and poll observers, there was no obstruction of the polling process and no one was prevented from exercising their franchise, Mr. Gupta said. Polling was in no way disrupted in the areas where repolling had been demanded." Special Correspondent, "CEO denies PUCL report," in *The Hindu*, September 9, 1999: 1.

[187] Special Correspondent, "TMC demand for repoll rejected," in *The Hindu*, September 7, 1999: 4.

[188] Special Correspondent, "TMC hits out at DMK, PMK," in *The Hindu*, September 7, 1999: 4.

[189] Special Correspondent, "TMC demand for repoll rejected," in *The Hindu*, September 7, 1999: 1.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Academic scholarship has sustained these allegations. See: John Harriss (2002), "Whatever Happened to Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu? A Reading on Current Events and Recent Literature on Tamil Politics," in *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 40:3, p107.

[192] Special Correspondent, "PUCL finding," in *The Hindu*, September 9, 1999: 1.

[193] Special Correspondent, "PUCL demands repoll in Chidambaram," in *The Hindu*, September 21, 1999: 4.

[194] Independent Initiative. 1999. *Report About Elections, Attacks on Dalits, Denial of Voting Right, Bogus Voting*. Published by Independent Initiative under instruction from V.I. Krishna Iyer, p21. Quoted in Hugo Gorringe, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu*. Delhi: Sage, 2005: 305.

[195] Gorringe 305.

[196] Gorringe 305.

[197] Special Correspondent, "Dalits forum postpones fast plan," in *The Hindu*, September 9, 1999: 1.

[198] Special Correspondent, "TMC front leaders to meet President, CEC," in *The Hindu*, September 15, 1999: 4.

[199] Ibid.; Special Correspondent, "TMC apprises President of violence against Dalits," in *The Hindu*, September 22, 1999: 14; Staff Reporter, "DPI alleges vindictive steps against Dalits," in *The Hindu*, September 29, 1999: 4.

[200] As per Election Commission of India data on the 1999 General Election in Chidambaram, PMK candidate E. Ponnuswamy received 345331 votes (47.68%) as compared to Thirumaavalavan's 225,768 votes (31.17%), a margin of 119,563 votes. AIADMK-backed candidate T.S. Udayakumar of the Indian National Congress (INC) came in third with 150,794 votes (20.82%). Election Commission of India: www.eci.nic.in.

[201] Special Correspondent, "Dalit organisations protest ban," in *The Hindu*, October 16, 1999: 4; Special Correspondent, "Rally to Raj Bhavan planned," in *The Hindu*, October 22, 1999: 4.

[202] Special Correspondent, "Court quashes bar on Dalit leaders," in *The Hindu*, December 8, 1999: 4.

[203] Carla Power and Sundip Mazumdar, "Caste Struggle," in *Newsweek* (Pacific Edition): July 3, 2000.

[204] R.K. Radhakrishnan, "Uneasy calm in Chidambaram," in *The Hindu*, September 10, 1999: 4.

[205] Special Correspondent, "CPI(M) findings on Chidambaram violence," *The Hindu*, September 17, 1999: 4; Special Correspondent, "DPI leader's charge," *The Hindu*, October 10, 1999: 4.

[206] Special Correspondent, "Karunanidhi Clarifies: 'Moopanar's reaction unnecessary'," in *The Hindu*, September 9, 1999: 4.

[207] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[208] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[209] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[210] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[211] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[212] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[213] This body of literature tends to focus on the integration of backwards castes, as opposed to Dalits, within electoral democracy. See: Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002; Yogendra Yadav, "Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge: trends of bahujan participation in electoral politics in the 1990s," in Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava and Balveer Arora (eds), *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. OUP: Delhi, 2002.

CHAPTER FOUR

"This Electoral System is Opposed to Democracy"[1]:

An Ethnography of Electoral Politics in Modern India, 1999-2014

Introduction

In 2008, I conducted the first what would eventually become hundreds of interviews with VCK organizers over the next decade. As an undergraduate student and novice ethnographer equipped with a tape-recorder, pencil, and notepad, I met VCK General Secretary M. Yallalan, who is tasked with monitoring rural affairs in Madurai District, at a public park in Arasaradi, a short jaunt from the city's bustling Arapalayam Bus Stand. Once we had situated ourselves on the open ground, Yallalan began to chronicle the political history of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, starting with its early roots as a radical social movement in the 1990s. He described contentious early protests, rattled off an extensive list of police detentions, and slowly directed his narrative to the movement's electoral turn in 1999. Sensing a pause in the conversation, I interjected with what I had assumed to be a simple, straightforward question, "Why did your movement enter electoral politics?" Without any hesitation, Yallalan forcefully responded, *"because we needed to show that that there was no democracy."*[2] Then, as if detecting my confusion, he paused to clarify the naiveté of the befuddled ethnographer, informing me that his movement may have entered the crowded arena of electoral politics, but it had not yet experienced democracy. As I logged my field notes that evening, I was struck the manner in which Yallalan counterposed democracy to electoral politics. His comment imparted a lingering impression due to the sheer intensity with which it was spoken and the marked distinction that it drew between what I had taken to be opposing sides of the same coin: democracy and elections.

Six years later, I revisited these pilot interviews after completing my dissertation fieldwork. I reviewed these early transcripts to gauge how they resonated with the viewpoints that I had just encountered in the field. When I asked *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers why they guided their movement into the electoral arena in

1999, they discussed the transition without positing any natural congruence between elections and democracy, wary to conflate the two elements. VCK General Secretary Sinthanai Selvan noted, "In Marx's doctrine, a quantitative change leads to a qualitative change," suggesting that the upwelling of popular Dalit support prompted a shift in movement strategy. When I posed the question to VCK Spokesperson Vanni Arasu, he alluded to the use of stringent national security laws that obstructed movement activity in the 1990s, before wryly declaring, "As Mao used to say, 'Our enemy determines our weapon.'"[3] Couched in allusions to Marx and Mao, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers offered provocative, if not unexpected, points of reference when narrating their transition into electoral democracy, which they vigilantly bisected into opposing elements: elections and democracy. When recalling their experience of electoral politics, they censured its constitutive compromises and proceeded to describe instances where electoral calculations grated against and, at times, even undermined robust advocacy. Nonetheless, they continued to discuss democracy, both as a normative ideal and political objective, as a harbinger of equality, rights, and pluralism. Taken together, these discussions revealed how democracy affords a powerful social imaginary and potent political vocabulary for historically marginalized groups, but, as this chapter demonstrates, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers have grown increasingly skeptical of its alluring promise.

The Anthropology of Democracy

As Dario Castiglione and Mark Warren drolly observe, "democracy suffers from an excess of meaning," which complicates scholarly attempts to narrow its conceptualization and generate a working definition.[4] The indeterminacy of the term and the multiplicity of associations tied to its popular use have proven enduring obstacles to analyses of modern democracy. In the 1940s, Joseph Schumpeter proposed a minimalist definition, presenting democracy as an "institutional arrangement" distinguished foremost by a competitive electoral system.[5] While elections remain a constitutive aspect by most accounts, subsequent scholarship expanded our understanding of democracy beyond the initial preoccupation with

elections in order to examine its core features. For example, Robert Dahl proposed a set of general standards, a sort of baseline criteria or political litmus test intended to gauge the relative health of democracy.[6] Alternatively, Giovani Sartori proposed a pair of questions in his study of democracy that evaluated, first, whether a country is a democracy and, secondly, how democratic it is; that is, as Michael Saward writes, Sartori examined democracy both in terms of a "threshold" and a "continuum."[7] These studies have since been followed by an eruption of indices purporting to measure the degree to which democracy has manifest in a given country and its growth (or decline) on the world stage.[8]

From the 1990s, anthropologists began to query how the ethnographic method can advance our study of democracy. In atypically clunky prose, Clifford Geertz writes, "Political theory, which presents itself as addressing universal and abiding matters concerning power, obligation, justice, and government in general and unconditioned terms, the truth about things as at bottom they always and everywhere necessarily are, is in fact, and inevitably, a specific response to immediate circumstances."[9] Geertz endorses the unique capacity of ethnography to scrutinize these "immediate circumstances" and provide insights that both contribute to and further complicate the often broad strokes of political theory.[10] Apparently taking cues from this observation, anthropologists have questioned what ethnography might contribute to the study of democracy. Although their approaches have varied, they tend to share a central premise that democracy can neither be defined procedurally nor ascribed to a specific set of criteria such as a multiparty system characterized by fair elections and an independent judiciary that ensures basic freedoms of the press and property.[11] Without presupposing the stability of "democracy" as an object of inquiry or tendering an alternative definition, anthropologists have preferred to accentuate its "multivalence" and examine complex processes whereby particular conceptions of democracy come to acquire a normative status.[12]

Cautioning against *a priori* and categorical definitions of democracy, Julia Paley proposes that the ethnographic method is especially well-suited to extend our theorization of democracy through an examination of "local meanings, circulating

discourse, multiple contestations, and changing forms of power accompanying the installation of new political regimes."[13] In her synopsis of the emerging field of study, Paley categorizes anthropological scholarship on the subject within two primary tracks, one that examines the divergence of local understandings of democracy from a normative standard and another that scrutinizes the discursive processes whereby normative conceptions of democracy come into being.[14] Despite their differences in orientation, Paley writes, "What emerges from the synthesis of existing literature is a set of critical perspectives revealing contemporary democracies as enacting forms of power—perhaps less directly repressive than military dictators, but nonetheless falling short of democratic ideals."[15] This unreconciled tension between core principles often ascribed to democracy (e.g., equality, freedom, prosperity, development, universal citizenship) and its actual manifestation within a given milieu factors as a recurring theme in the literature.[16]

In a study of "alternative democracies" in Peru, David Nugent proposes that democracy cannot be understood in singularity but rather apprehended as a contested field of meaning in order to throw light on "multiple and contradictory versions of democracy."[17] Further, Nugent cautions against the commonplace emphasis on "political democracy" and its "overwhelmingly national focus," and instead encourages scholars to assess "why groups change their orientation toward democracy through time" and how democratic systems graft atop existing structures of power.[18] Extending Nugent's contribution, Dilip Gaonkar has examined how variegated understandings of democracy generate an extensive range of political practices. Gaonkar writes, "Democracy as a mode of governance is partially based on people's self-understandings, beliefs, and interpretations, and because these are not invariant across societies, different societies generate interestingly different clusters of practices of democracy."[19] Considered together, Nugent and Gaonkar underscore how a sensitivity to local knowledge systems, a core facet of anthropological inquiry, enables us to comprehend myriad, contested meanings popularly attached to democracy and contextualize its manifold practices. While sharing the authors' contention that our interpretation of democracy cannot be reduced to a proceduralist definition, I caution

that we cannot fully extricate our study of democracy from the ensemble of state institutions and practices that are experienced in dissimilar ways differentiated groups of citizens.

Recent scholarship has extended the anthropology of democracy through ethnographies of the 'everyday' state to consider how individuals experience democratically elected regimes and, thereby, these studies conceptualize ways in which state institutions are reimagined as primary sites for the contestation and reproduction of power. In an account of popular politics in Brazil, James Holston elaborates upon a critical "disjuncture" in democracy, unearthing tensions that surface between its *actual manifestation* as an institutionalized political system and its associated *political imaginary* that energizes the politics of São Paulo's "insurgent citizens."[20] According to Holston, "the realization of citizenship is the central and not the collateral issue of democracy" and, while recognizing its capacity to disrupt "established formulas of rule and their hierarchies of place and privilege," he acknowledges the "insufficiency of democratic politics for realizing democratic citizenship."[21] His account of citizen movements in the auto-constructed peripheries of São Paulo displays how institutional bodies of the state, including its judiciary, emerge as primary sites of political struggle. In the face of "differentiated citizenship," Holston suggests that democracy, as a political system, shifts the equation of power and, thereby, produces new sites for its contestation and a fresh vocabulary for popular struggle.[22]

Similarly, in reference to modern India, Jeffrey Witsoe considers how the introduction of electoral democracy "changed the means by which dominant groups were forced to reproduce their dominance," which brought to the fore "a very public spectacle of the precariousness of their position in a democracy with universal franchise."[23] Examining how the politicization of caste has impacted democratic politics, Witsoe demonstrates that social, economic, and political networks organized around caste affiliation "connect state institutions with local relations of dominance and subordination," thereby "producing a state unable to impartially deliver services or enforce individual rights."[24] His account depicts the uneven ramifications and often "markedly undemocratic" outcomes of what he curiously calls "lower caste

empowerment," indicating that the "'democratization' of power did not result in an equal empowerment for all, or even most, subaltern groups."[25] Rather than extolling the virtues of what is often heralded as a "deepening of Indian democracy," Witsoe cautions, "the rights at the heart of the "liberalism" of liberal democracy require not only a constitutional mandate, but also state institutions capable of enforcing this mandate."[26]

In an early essay, Sudipta Kaviraj investigates a dissonance between the ideals ascribed to democracy and its actual manifestation, questioning, "Why do we assume a connection between democracy and social equality?"[27] Kaviraj emphasizes that "quotidian democratic politics… brings into play a relentless search for contextual majorities" prone to generate contradictions in elected democratic governments.[28] He channels Ambedkar when he recognizes that "caste majorities are by nature permanent, and obviously any permanent majority would make democracy unbearable for other groups."[29] Stressing this strain between the logic of electoral politics and forms of majoritarian rule, he cautions that democratically elected governments are prone to succumb "easily and quickly to the strong temptation of relentless majoritarianism."[30] On a similar note, Anastasia Piliavsky presses us to reconsider "our own fragmented picture of democracy; the gulf between what we think democracy ought to be and what it necessarily is – indelibly and very fallibly human."[31] She writes, "Democracy in ancient Athens, like democracy in the early United States, was a mirror of its own society, which reflected the values espoused by its *demos* and the ways in which this *demos* conceived itself."[32] Rather than accentuating contradictions in the study of democracy, the gap between our normative assumptions and material practices, the authors instead encourage us to stay attuned to its dynamics and what insights this may offer into a given social milieu.

This chapter contributes an alternative vantage point to our study of democracy, providing an ethnographic lens into how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers recall their direct experience of electoral politics and, further, how this interaction informs their understanding of democracy. Without proposing a general thesis of what democracy *is* or *should be*, the chapter conveys how Dalit organizers interface with its

institutions, and why this contact prompts them to interpret an indelible tension between democracy and electoral politics. Describing instances in which electoral competition actually undercuts their capacity as well as their incentive for robust Dalit advocacy, this chapter examines what my interlocutors often understand to be an antagonistic relationship between the two elements. The following chapter offers ethnographic insights into how electoral competition, much like democracy, is experienced in markedly different ways by differentiated groups of citizens. Rather than extracting their conception of democracy from the set of normative values that they ascribe to it, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers instead disaggregate democracy from what is often envisioned as its defining institution: elections.

Chapter Outline

In the 1990s, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* developed into a mass movement whose spatially disruptive brand of corporeal protest (i.e., road, rail, and airport *rokos*) ushered it beneath the limelight of Tamil Nadu politics. Confronted, at once, by a heavy-handed police response to its activities, which selectively utilized national security legislation to incarcerate key movement leaders, and the electoral formation of rival backwards caste associations, the VCK tentatively waded into electoral democracy. In our conversation, VCK organizers acknowledge the futility of lobbying state authorities from outside its formal institutions, observing how political parties representing the backwards castes converted their constituents into vote-banks and, thereby, augmented their leverage in negotiating resource allocations and shaping state policy. Further, VCK organizers noted how caste conflicts were re-enacted within state bureaucracy, impeding the government's capacity to impartially allocate resources and administer rights. In their own words, my interlocutors accentuate a blurred distinction between what they refer to as "caste terrorism," referring to anti-Dalit violence committed by non-state actors, and "state terrorism," denoting the complicit, when not direct, entanglement of state agents in sectarian violence.[33] As caste associations integrated into electoral democracy and forged alliances with the ruling party, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers contend that these leaders capitalized on a

newfound legitimacy as elected representatives to reroute benefits to their caste constituents in detriment to Dalit development.

In the previous chapter, I illustrated how state institutions came to be regarded not only as objects of petition, but as primary sites of political struggle. This chapter examines how VCK organizers recall their firsthand experience of electoral democracy and why they distinguish *jananayagam*, or democracy, from *therthal arasiyal*, electoral politics. To enter electoral politics was not to enter democracy, they claim, but rather to approach the electoral platform as a strategy, albeit not entirely of their choosing, to realize what they understood to be core democratic principles, including *panmaittuvam* (pluralism), *samattuvam* (equality) and *urimaikal* (rights).[34] Today, VCK organizers discuss their direct experience of electoral democracy in terms of a deep-seated "compromise," using the English term. They concede that the pressure to "capture power" through elections has dampened their prior disposition and tempered their capacity for robust Dalit advocacy. But, they do not attribute this to a contradiction in democracy itself, but to a friction arising at the interstices of electoral competition and democratic principles. As they elaborate upon this tension, party organizers relate how "communal majority" features both as the core organizing principle of electoral politics and the chief impediment to the realization of democratic society. In our conversations, VCK organizers conceptualize the central mandate of democracy as a responsibility to foster pluralism and check the ever-present potential for a government of the majority to transform into majoritarian rule.

This chapter contributes an ethnographic perspective that challenges common assumptions in popular understandings of democracy and its relation to electoral politics. It incorporates a wide breadth of source material including ethnography, personal interviews, vernacular and English-language newspaper reports, electoral data compiled by the Election Commission of India (ECI), and political oratory. First, the chapter opens with an account of VCK electoral politics, examining the party's electoral performance alongside the challenges it has faced in the electoral arena since 1999. Next, I draw upon ethnography and translations of recent political speeches to consider how VCK organizers recall their direct experience of electoral democracy and

attend to what they perceive to be a dissonance between *jananayagam* (democracy) and *therthal arasiyal* (electoral politics). In varying registers, these individuals develop a critique of electoral politics, which posits an antinomy between electoral competition and the realization of *unmaiyana jananayagam*, a genuine democracy. In conclusion, the chapter examines how VCK organizers evoke democracy as a component of a broader political struggle to advocate for equality, selectively deploying its political vocabulary and powerful social imaginary to energize their program and call for the extension of core democratic principles from the domain of political theory into the contested arena of social life.

Navigating Electoral Politics[35]

Table 1. VCK Alliances in state and national elections (Tamil Nadu)

State Assembly Elections			Parliamentary Elections		
Year	*Coalition*	*#Seats (won)*	*Year*	*Coalition*	*#Seats (won)*
2001	DMK+	8 (1)	1999	TMC+	2 (0)
2006	AIADMK+	9 (2)	2004	JD(U)+	8 (0)
2011	DMK+	10 (0)	2009	DMK+	2 (1)
2016	PWF+	25 (0)	2014	DMK+	2 (0)

Across more than fifteen years of electoral politics, the VCK has enjoyed marginal success, sending its chairman to the national parliament and three representatives to the state legislative assembly. During this time, the VCK developed in political stature, visibility, and membership, but nevertheless struggled to secure a relative majority of votes to win elections despite aligning with more established Dravidian parties for their financial support, vote-canvassing experience, and extensive party infrastructure. As discussed in the previous chapter, allegations of electoral liability have dogged the VCK in the electoral arena and popular press, with prominent leaders of other parties and media pundits alike surmising that the presence of what is widely perceived as a Dalit party in a political coalition may jeopardize its support among vital backwards caste constituencies. In effect, the more developed and better financed PMK party has most often factored as the ally of choice in the northern districts where its Vanniyar base is preponderant, shuttling the VCK to the opposing coalition as a counterbalance

to the PMK. This has, on most occasions, left the VCK on the losing side of electoral equation. Before presenting ethnography of electoral politics, an account that details how VCK leaders recall their firsthand experience of democratic politics, the chapter opens with an overview of the party's electoral performance since its inaugural parliamentary bid in 1999, which was discussed in Chapter Three.

Although *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers walked away from the 1999 *Lok Sabha* Election empty-handed, the party's electoral debut attracted the attention of established political parties. In Chidambaram, VCK Chairman Thol. Thirumaavalavan secured more than 225,000 votes despite contesting from within a weak third front led by the *Tamil Maanila Congress*, or Tamil State Congress, against better organized and financed Dravidian coalitions. Thirumaavalavan, who was presumed to have secured a substantial majority of the constituency's sizeable Dalit electorate, bagged an impressive 31.17% of all votes cast in Chidambaram.[36] In the neighboring Perambalur constituency, Tada Periyasami, the party's other parliamentary candidate, obtained 85,209 votes.[37] Although Periyasami registered a distant third place finish, his 12.52% vote-share exceeded the margin of victory separating A. Raja, the winning DMK candidate, from his nearest rival, P. Rajarathinam of the AIADMK.[38] Although *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* candidates failed to notch a victory, their performance commanded a sufficient vote share to garner the attention of Dravidian parties and project their organization as a prospective future alliance partner.[39]

Leading into the 2001 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election, political pundits surmised that "the transformation of Dalit movements into political forces has compelled established parties to woo them into their fold."[40] At first, this conjecture appeared well founded when the ruling DMK party lured the VCK into its coalition ahead of the assembly election. But, the DMK's options were limited. The PMK had shifted allegiance to the rival-AIADMK coalition. Then, erstwhile DMK ideologue Vaiko and his recently launched *Marumaralarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (MDMK), or Renaissance Dravidian Progress Federation, followed suit, leaving the DMK in the lurch. Weighing their available options, DMK leaders welcomed the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* into their coalition, trusting that its extensive Dalit-Paraiyar

base would offset the loss of the PMK's Vanniyar vote-bank.[41] Additionally, the DMK roped in Dr. Krishnasamy's *Pudhiya Tamizhagam* (PT), a political party with strong support among Dalit-Pallars in the state's southern districts. Of the 234 assembly segments in Tamil Nadu, the DMK allocated 8 seats to the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* and 10 seats to *Pudhiya Tamizhagam*.[42]

Just as critics had earlier reproached TMC Chairman G. K. Moopanar for aligning with Dalit parties, alleging that such alliances bestowed political legitimacy on "what were nothing other than communal outfits," DMK Chairman M. Karunanidhi met similar criticism in 2001.[43] Whereas MDMK General Secretary Vaiko reportedly harangued the DMK for sacrificing its earlier ideals of social justice and caste eradication by supporting such "casteist outfits," PMK Chairman Ramadoss referred to the state's Dalit parties as "rowdy gangs" when he charged the DMK with "inciting casteist outfits merely for the sake of fetching votes."[44] Further, the DMK alliance with Dalit parties had apparently unsettled some its own cadre, including an unnamed organizer who lamented to the press, "Mr. Karunanidhi has chosen to tread the path of mines which blew away Mr. G. K. Moopanar in the last parliament election."[45] Although political analysts harped on the potential of Dalit voters, who comprise nearly 20% of the population, to influence electoral outcomes, concerns of "electoral liability" shadowed both Dalit parties.[46]

As the 2001 assembly election loomed nearer, media pundits accentuated the novelty of its caste dimension, billing the contest as a showdown between an AIADMK-led coalition enlisting the support of Tamil Nadu's largest backwards caste communities, Thevars and Vanniyars, against a DMK alliance featuring the state's Dalit parties.[47] Political analysts speculated as to whether the DMK's "calculated risk" of aligning with Dalit parties would pay handsome dividends or, alternatively, render "the DMK 'an untouchable' among the backward caste vote banks."[48] Whereas a handful of pundits surmised that Dalit consolidation would yield "a gain for the DMK," most expressed skepticism, anticipating that an alliance with Dalit parties would "alienate" influential backwards castes, including segments which had previously supported the DMK. For instance, Suresh Nambath of *The Hindu*

postulated that caste conflicts between Dalit cadre and DMK organizers, who typically hail from the backward castes, would undermine inter-party coordination, projecting that alliances with Dalit parties "could prevent vote transfer from the major parties to smaller caste-based players."[49] After all, coalition politics is not simply a matter of aggregating vote-banks, but entails serious questions related to social chemistry: will DMK voters support the candidates of alliance partners, and *vice versa*?

Upon tallying votes, Thirumaavalavan emerged victorious from the Mangalore assembly segment, which, at that time, was part of the Chidambaram *Lok Sabha* constituency.[50] The remaining seven *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* candidates came up short, defeated by double-digit margins, with one candidate even losing her deposit.[51] In fact, the 2001 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election registered as a poll debacle for the DMK, whose coalition bagged a measly 37 of 234 seats.[52] As they reviewed election returns, media commentators assessed, "the DMK's pro-Dalit tilt seems to have alienated its own upper caste voters," claiming that the DMK's alliance with Dalit parties had come at the expense of critical OBC constituencies across the state.[53] Whereas DMK candidates appear to have been beneficiaries of Dalit votes, they "were not able to realise the party's traditional OBC votes," which contributed to their defeat.[54] Further, analyses of electoral results suggested that DMK voters had declined to cast ballots for allied candidates in constituencies allocated to Dalit parties, leading a prominent journalist to pronounce tersely, "The DMK's gamble with the Dalit card has failed."[55]

Whereas DMK fortunes improved amid the 2004 *Lok Sabha* Election, the stigma associated with taking onboard Dalit alliance partners likely induced both Dravidian parties to distance themselves from the VCK and PT. Sensing that public sentiment had turned against the ruling-AIADMK government, the Indian National Congress (INC), PMK, MDMK, and Communist parties (CPI, CPI(M)) returned to the DMK's *Democratic Progressive Alliance* (DPA) ahead of the 2004 *Lok Sabha* Election.[56] Flush with allies, DMK Chairman Karunanidhi reportedly informed the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* and *Pudhiya Tamizhagam* that, while he may not have seats to allocate in the forthcoming election, he had reserved a place for them in his heart. Objecting to the move, Thirumaavalavan resigned his MLA post and severed ties with

the DMK, admonishing its chairman with charges of "political untouchability."[57] Next, the VCK and PT approached the AIADMK, which welcomed both Dalit parties to canvass votes for AIADMK-coalition candidates, but declined to allocate seats.[58] Cast out of the DMK coalition and without an offer from the AIADMK, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* and *Pudhiya Tamizhagam* contested the election under the symbol of the *Janata Dal (United)*, or JD(U), which altogether lacked a presence in Tamil Nadu.[59]

In the 2004 *Lok Sabha* Election, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* fielded candidates in eight seats across the northern districts of Tamil Nadu on a JD(U) ticket, with Thirumaavalavan again contesting from Chidambaram. As an added plotline, former *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* General Secretary 'Tada' Periyasami, who joined the BJP after leaving the VCK in 2002, would contest against his erstwhile ally in Chidambaram as the BJP candidate of the AIADMK coalition.[60] Thirumaavalavan fared well in Chidambaram, where he augmented his earlier vote share in the constituency, receiving 255,773 votes (34.41%) as compared to his previous yield of 225,768 (31.17%).[61] Although losing once again to E. Ponnusamy of the PMK, Thirumaavalavan pressed his erstwhile collaborator Periyasami of the AIADMK-BJP front to a distant third place finish with 113,974 votes (15.33%).[62] Aside from his noteworthy performance, other VCK candidates foundered and forfeited their deposits in each of the remaining seven contests.[63] But, despite forfeiting their deposits in most constituencies, the two Dalit parties cordoned off a relative majority of Dalit votes, drawing 41.8% of the statewide Dalit vote against the 36.6% and 21.6% of the AIADMK and DMK, respectively.[64] Regardless, the DMK coalition swept the election, bagging all 39 parliamentary seats in Tamil Nadu as well as another in the adjacent Union Territory of Pondicherry.[65]

The first five years of electoral competition (1999-2004) posed a series of challenges and setbacks for the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*. Although it had demonstrated a reputable vote bank in pockets across the state's northern districts, the party continued to be dogged by concerns that its presence in an electoral coalition may "alienate" critical backwards caste votes. In regards to the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, it was not simply a question of the size of its vote-bank, but concerns over vote-transferability

and social chemistry served to undercut its leverage as a prospective alliance partner. As party leaders acknowledge, contesting from the DMK coalition in 2001 provided a well-oiled party infrastructure and access to campaign finance, both of which VCK organizers deem necessary to bolster their electoral prospects. But, in 2004, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* again found itself on the outside of Dravidian coalitions and, again, walked away without a solitary seat. In response to its popular perception as a "Dalit outfit," the VCK expanded its platform following the 2004 *Lok Sabha* Election to encompass issues related to Tamil nationalism including demands for a sovereign Tamil *Eelam* (homeland); a maneuver widely interpreted as an attempt to appeal to a broader cross-section of the electorate.[66]

In September 2004, Thirumaavalavan and PMK Chairman Ramadoss initiated a gradual process of rapprochement by sharing a joint platform on Tamil nationalism under the banner of the *Tamil Padukappu Iyakkam* (TPI), or the Tamil Protection Movement.[67] Their extra-electoral alliance, which fashioned itself as the custodian of 'authentic' Tamil language and culture, was intended to depress inter-caste conflicts between their respective OBCs and Dalits constituents and cultivate inter-party bonhomie with an eye towards elections, but it also provided a visible platform for the VCK to address matters of 'general' interest beyond the otherwise constrictive repertoire often attributed to Dalit politics.[68] Whereas PMK and VCK party organizers shared a program that pandered to pro-LTTE sentiments and peddled what was often criticized as an opportunistic embrace of Tamil nationalist politics, this attempt at inter-party geniality suffered a decisive blow just prior to the 2006 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election when the DMK refused to allocate seats to the VCK. When Thirumaavalavan objected to his exclusion from the DMK alliance, DMK Chairman Karunanidhi proposed that the PMK allocate seats from its own quota for VCK candidates.[69] In protest, the VCK joined the rival AIADMK coalition, which, on this occasion, accepted the party into its fold.

During the 2006 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election, the VCK contested nine seats from the AIADMK coalition.[70] The DMK maintained its successful coalition from the previous election except for Vaiko's MDMK, which accompanied the VCK in the

AIADMK front. Adding further intrigue into the mix, Vijayakanth, a cinema-star-turned-politician, announced that his *Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam* (DMDK), or National Progressive Dravidian Federation, which he had floated just the previous year, would contest polls independently. With polling agencies reporting a tight election and professing uncertainty as to how the entry of the DMDK would alter electoral arithmetic, the Dravidian parties entered largesse-driven brinksmanship, successively raising the ante by augmenting their election manifestos. When the DMK pledged to peg the price of a kilo of rice issued under the Public Distribution System (PDS) at two rupees, the AIADMK promised ten kilos of free rice per cardholder each month.[71] With pollsters anticipating a split result, the DMK next pledged to provide color television sets to an estimated 54 lakh houses below the poverty line, to which the AIADMK responded by offering a laptop computer to every plus-two graduate.[72] Ultimately, the DMK coalition bagged 163 of 234 assembly seats while notching only a 4.67% higher vote-share over the rival AIADMK coalition.[73] The VCK walked away with a pair of assembly seats and Vijayakanth left his imprint in the electoral arena, securing 8.38% of the statewide vote and a single assembly seat.[74] The cooperation between the AIADMK and VCK quickly soured when, as Thirumaavalavan later charged, the AIADMK fielded candidates during the ensuing local body elections in wards that it had previously allocated to the VCK.[75]

The 2009 *Lok Sabha* Election coincided with the final phase of civil war in neighboring Sri Lanka. While the DMK roped Congress (INC) and the VCK into its coalition, the AIADMK enlisted the support of the PMK, MDMK, and the Communist parties (CPI, CPI(M)). While Dravidian coalitions traded barbs over the inadequacy of their rival's response to the plight of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, they continued to ratchet up pressure with promises of electoral 'freebies' ranging from color television sets to free gas stoves with liquid petroleum gas (LPG) connections.[76] Again, Vijayakanth's DMDK contested polls independently and demonstrated that his party had augmented its earlier vote share. With votes tallied, the DMK coalition had secured 42.54% of the statewide vote, 5.23% more than the AIADMK coalition (37.31%).[77] Again playing spoiler, the DMDK secured 10.1% of the statewide vote

share, attracting more votes than the margin of victory in 24 of the 39 parliamentary constituencies.[78] Victorious, the DMK coalition bagged 28 seats across Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry against 12 seats won by the AIADMK alliance.[79] On his third attempt, Thirumaavalavan won a resounding victory in Chidambaram, defeating E. Ponnusamy of the PMK by nearly 100,000 votes and awarding his party its first parliamentary berth.[80]

Over its first decade of electoral competition (1999-2009), the VCK contested elections from a Dravidian coalition on three occasions (2001, 2006, 2009), notching at least one victory in each contest, whereas the party walked away empty-handed when contesting from a third front (1999, 2004). In each election, the PMK enjoyed the upper hand in alliance negotiations with prospective coalition partners as it had demonstrated a substantial hold on the Vanniyar electorate, was presumed to be better financed and organized, and was not dogged by popular concerns over vote-transferability. In effect, the PMK enjoyed greater latitude in negotiating with its Dravidian ally, often prompting the VCK to join the rival Dravidian coalition – that is, when the opportunity arose. Keenly aware of inter-caste dynamics across the state, Dravidian parties demonstrated a proclivity to pit OBC and Dalit parties against each other to mobilize votes. But, this electoral logic took a brief hiatus in 2011 when the DMK ushered both the VCK and PMK into its alliance, thereby testing the degree of inter-party bonhomie forged through nearly seven years of collaboration in the Tamil Protection Movement.

In 2011, the ruling DMK government, besieged by accusations of corruption stemming from its allotment of 2G spectrum licenses and popular frustration due to price hikes in food staples and basic commodities, faced tall odds heading into the contest. The AIADMK coalition enlisted the support of communist parties (CPI(M), CPI) and Vijayakanth's DMDK, which had demonstrated a 10.1% statewide vote share in the prior election, facing off against a DMK coalition comprised of the Congress (INC), PMK, and VCK. For the first time, the alleged sociability between the VCK and PMK was put to an electoral litmus test. The DMK coalition suffered a poll debacle, winning 31 of 234. While the VCK drew a blank across all ten of its

assembly segments, the PMK bagged a paltry 3 of 30 contests and Congress won a dismal 5 out of 63 seats. The AIADMK coalition walked away with a clear majority in the assembly with its coalition prevailing in 203 of 234 seats.[81]

The DMK's poll debacle turned heads not merely as a popular verdict against DMK and Congress rule, but also due to the sheer magnitude of their defeat. Although the DMK, PMK, and VCK independently enjoy substantial electoral support across the state's northern districts, their candidates fared poorly. While pundits attributed the electoral results to the 2G spectrum scam alongside recent price hikes among basic food items and essential commodities, electoral data suggests that poor vote-transfer among allies compounded the coalition's woes. Although Thirumaavalavan and Ramadoss spearheaded joint action espousing Tamil nationalism, their bonhomie failed to transcend the stage and percolate the grassroots, where party cadre declined to cast their ballots for caste-rivals-turned-coalition-partners. Whereas VCK candidates lost by margins greater than 25% in four constituencies, their average margin of defeat was 21.87%.[82] VCK General Secretary Sinthanai Selvan recorded the party's only single-digit margin, trailing in his bid by 9.08%.[83] The results corroborated prior logic that the VCK and PMK are best pit against each other, calling into question the viability of a common platform.

In 2014, the VCK remained with the DMK to face the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election. As detailed at length in Chapter Five, the 2014 parliamentary election featured an unprecedented five-way contest. The AIADMK coalition's prudent decision to stand independently paid handsome dividends and nearly ran the table, winning 38 of 40 seats across Tamil Nadu and the union territory of Pondicherry. In contrast to the AIADMK's good fortune, the DMK coalition, which boasted an alliance of caste and religious minorities, drew a blank.[84] The VCK contested two seats, losing both: VCK General Secretary D. Ravikumar lost in Thiruvallur (SC) and VCK Chairman Thol. Thirumaavalavan suffered a hefty defeat in his re-election bid in Chidambaram (SC). The PMK, which had aligned with the VCK in the previous assembly election, contested from the BJP coalition, winning a single seat, Dharmapuri, where recent anti-Dalit violence had polarized the electorate. Following the 2014 *Lok Sabha*

Election, the VCK found itself without representatives in the state legislature and national parliament.[85]

Amidst more than fifteen years of electoral politics, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers have tasted marginal success on the campaign trail. Despite demonstrating substantial sway among Dalit-Paraiyar voters in northern districts, the party has been dogged by its popular reputation as an exclusively Dalit organization, a title that political pundits and Dravidian leaders widely interpret as an electoral liability, fearing that the presence of a "Dalit outfit" may jeopardize its support among critical backwards caste communities. Moreover, as the party has struggled to acclimate to the rising cost of election campaigns, VCK leaders profess a reliance on Dravidian coalitions to access the financial resources and organizational support required of a competitive campaign. Hence, political coalitions in Tamil Nadu do not merely consist of the aggregation of vote-banks, but involve tense negotiations over seat allocations, campaign finance, and electoral infrastructure. As Tamil Nadu is widely reputed to host some of the country's most expensive campaigns, this places smaller parties such as the VCK at a disadvantage when negotiating the terms of coalition politics with prospective allies. Whereas the concluding chapter provides a firsthand account of an election campaign that explores these issues in ethnographic detail, the remainder of this chapter calls our attention to how VCK leaders recount their experience of electoral politics and explores how this exposure informs their understanding of democracy.

'Now we only fight in front of the mic'

On a small family farm nestled a short distance from the national highway passing through Villupuram, one of Tamil Nadu's bustling transit junctions, Sinthanai Selvan leans forward in a wicker chair on his house veranda. A thatched canopy overhead, assembled with a motley assortment of bulrush, coconut fronds, and political banners from years past, mitigates an oppressive afternoon sun as livestock roam the grounds, occasionally entering the veranda to interrupt our conversation. The house functions as a family home as well as a political office, bearing witness to a constant stream of

party workers and community members filtering in and out; making requests, seeking assistance, and, depending on the season, delivering wedding invitations. As an afternoon shower begins to saturate the grounds, an intermittent stream of water trickles through the roughshod roof, sending us scuttling inside to resume our conversation. As we resituate ourselves atop a small mat strewn across the concrete floor, Selvan, an early organizer and current General Secretary of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, savors a sip of tea and recollects his thoughts before our conversation turns to his movement's tenure in electoral democracy. Casting the movement's electoral politics in stark relief to its earlier social radicalism, Selvan opines, "Today, it seems as if we only fight in front of the mic."[86]

Over the following hour, Selvan shares his perspectives on how the pressure generated by electoral participation has clashed with the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* prior disposition for robust Dalit advocacy. Reflecting upon his fifteen-year tenure in electoral democracy, Selvan voices concern that electoral calculations have tempered his movement's ability as well as its incentive to advocate Dalit causes and respond decisively to instances of caste violence. VCK organizers acknowledge that they must strike a delicate balance that addresses Dalit concerns without 'alienating' upper caste votes or jeopardizing coalition prospects. Selvan describes this in terms of a tradeoff between electoral viability, which, he argues, compels his organization to join Dravidian coalitions and appeal for electoral support from the backwards castes, and what he terms principled politics, which he discusses through allusions to his movement's earlier social activism in the 1990s. Whereas popular media frequently harps on endemic corruption (*uuzhal*) in electoral politics, Sinthanai Selvan professes that electoral calculations press his movement to "compromise," using the English term, which he discusses in terms of moral corruption, that is a dilution of its earlier principles. "The present political context forces compromise," he underscores, adding, "the electoral field is a compromised field."[87]

Prior to contesting elections, Selvan recalls that VCK organizers exhorted their supporters with impassioned slogans, chanting: *"adagga maru, attumiru, timiri ezhu, tiruppi adi!"*, or, "refuse to submit, transgress all barriers, rise up, and hit back!" "In

those days," he recollects, "we vehemently opposed the casteist forces," noting that this opposition occurred regardless of the official posts or professional titles that these individuals may have held.[88] He elaborates:

> Before entering electoral politics, we would proclaim, 'Where is Panneerselvam? We demand to speak to the MLA!' Even though he may be a powerful minister, we would pressure him, 'You must not act against the interests of Dalits. If you continue to do so, we will not allow you to walk peacefully in the streets of Tamil Nadu!' In this manner, we won the people's support behind our movement.[89]

But, Selvan claims that electoral calculations overwhelmed this early program and tempered his movement's politics. When facing elections, he concedes, "we were required to collaborate with the very individuals against whom we were previously opposed because we now had to take in account their official positions and political affiliations. We were suddenly pressed to work *with* them; to work *for* them."[90] Alluding to the VCK's inaugural campaign amid the 1999 *Lok Sabha* Election, Selvan recalls, "Suddenly, the local union president, the town secretary, the very individuals who we earlier regarded as caste fanatics, became our allies. Now I am expected to approach them and express my greetings, 'Hello, sir.' I should pay my respects and perform *kaaltodu*," gesturing as if touching someone's feet.[91] "The electoral field," he reiterates once again, "is a compromised field."[92]

In addition to what he describes as "demeaning performances," Selvan relates how these compromises assumed alternative forms. When Selvan recalls his experiences as an assembly candidate, he recounts instances when coalition partners implicitly advised or explicitly pressed him to rescind legal cases that he had filed under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989):

> When a VCK affiliate becomes the coalition candidate he will need to compromise his stance. If he has lodged cases under the SC/ST Act, he will need to compromise these cases to enter upper caste settlements for electioneering purposes. Otherwise, the upper castes would say, 'You are the man who lodged the complaints against us and pressured the police to take action. It was only at your insistence that the police filed cases against our people. With these cases underway, they will not vote for you.'[93]

Selvan stresses that electoral calculations require key compromises to secure critical backwards caste votes, which has undermined prior attempts to safeguard Dalit security through recourse to law and litigation.[94] "This electoral system compels us to compromise," he claims, asserting, "We could not win a single seat without compromising."[95]

Selvan's candid reflection illuminates what many of my respondents regard as the principle quandary that minority parties confront in electoral politics. For instance, Mu. Arivudainambi, an organizer in Cuddalore District, reiterates many of Selvan's concerns. "As a political party," he postulates, "we are unable to address casteism as vigorously as we once did due to alliance and vote-sharing considerations."[96] As Arivudainambi elaborates, he claims that his sentiment does not justify any alleged dilution of VCK politics, but rather is intended to call into question *why* its once robust social advocacy has ostensibly waned following its integration into electoral democracy. From my reading, his account points to structural constraints imposed by electoral calculations as principal impediments to robust Dalit advocacy. His response warrants further consideration:

> Today, I see the error in our decision to enter electoral politics. As a social movement, we fought tirelessly for our people's rights. But, I sense that this intensity has decreased nowadays. Today, we compromise with others; we conduct diplomatic politics because we require votes from the backwards castes to win elections. Due to this, we are unable to fight as vigorously as before. I envision electoral politics as a critical shortcoming for the common SC/ST people because only the petite bourgeoisie among them benefit; that is, those who are already somewhat economically developed stand to benefit most from the emergence of a political party. Now, as party affiliates, they can secure promotions, transfers, and other benefits in government, but the common people do not benefit.[97]

Arivudainambi argues that electoral competition contains social radicalism, which featured as a recurring theme in my conversations with *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers. When discussing the movement's electoral phase, my interlocutors refer to a double bind that they describe in terms of a trade-off, often deploying the English

term "compromise," between electoral viability and what they perceive as principled politics.

In our conversations, VCK organizers such as Selvan and Arivudainambi acknowledge the irony of their present impasse. As social activists who once proclaimed *"therthal paadai, tirudar paadai!"*, meaning "the electoral path is the thief's path," and cut their teeth on exposing what they deemed rampant anti-Dalit bias across the political establishment and state bureaucracy, today they align with the Dravidian parties and leaders they had initially set out to oppose. Recounting this earlier, pre-electoral phase of VCK politics, VCK Spokesperson Vanni Arasu emphasizes, "When we spearheaded an electoral boycott and refused to cast our votes, lakhs of people stopped to looked at us… the principle of electoral democracy was shaken. We declared to the politicians, *"ungalil evanum yookkiyan̲ illai, engal̲ oot̲t̲u ungalukku illai,"* meaning, "As none of you are persons of integrity, you will not receive our votes!"[98] But, upon entering the electoral arena, erstwhile adversaries become allies because, according to many *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, Dravidian parties presented the best opportunity for electoral success by pledging access to inter-caste vote banks, extensive party infrastructure, vote-canvassing expertise, and the financial means necessary to spearhead competitive election campaigns.

In an article on VCK electoral politics, Hugo Gorringe observes an upwelling of criticism among VCK cadre who are unable to palate the movement's obsequious behavior to Dravidian parties upon entering the electoral field.[99] I encountered similar perspectives during fieldwork. Take for example, the comments of an early VCK organizer who stated resolutely, "What I once feared has now become reality. Today, we sit with our oppressors, our exploiters, those who sell illicit liquor, and we are told, 'Here, work with this gentleman.' How can I accept this?"[100] Castigating the VCK's present electoral strategy, he conjures a poignant idiom drawn from Dalit life-experience to convey his criticism:

> We once declared, *'adanga maru,'* proclaiming that we would refuse to yield, but upon entering electoral politics we felt compelled to join a coalition. Then, regardless of the coalition, the question naturally arises, 'How many seats will

they allocate?' In earlier days, our people begged for bread, but now we are begging for seats! What purpose is there in having struggled for so many years? We never imagined that we would yield, but this is submission, electoral politics is a form of submission."[101]

Juxtaposing the electoral platform with the movement's early social activism, he adds, "Even in the 1990s, we knew that if we entered elections our model of pressure politics would forfeit votes from other caste communities."[102] Or, as phrased by another organizer, the VCK's earlier reputation for Dalit advocacy not only limits its popular support in the electoral arena, but its entry into electoral politics has benefited the Dravidian parties by consolidating Dalit support, which it now brokers in exchange for lucrative coalition pacts at the time of elections. "What benefits have we gained?" inquires the former *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* leader 'Tada' Periyasami. Following a short pause, he responds, "I'm not sure anymore. We consolidated our people, but the cumulative effect is that their votes are now available for purchase by the DMK."[103]

On Democracy and Majority

When *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers recall their experience of electoral democracy, they roundly criticize the myriad compromises folded within electoral participation. Yet, throughout our conversations, they nonetheless continue to discuss democracy, often on a theoretical basis, as a harbinger of equality, rights, and pluralism. Why do figures who profess palpable disdain for the current electoral system continue to hold democracy with such regard? Initially, VCK organizers were bemused when I inquired about their democratic transition. As I soon realized, they were at first baffled by my conflation of democracy with electoral politics, an awkward construction of *therthal jananayagam,* literally "electoral democracy," which they found jarring on the tongue and limited to lexicon of media pundits. Instead they preferred to use *jananayagam* in reference to its political principles and *therthal arasiyal* when referring to political competition. Distinguishing between the two elements, they informed me that while they may have entered electoral politics, they had not yet experienced democracy and, in fact, theirs was a struggle to realize *unmaiyana jananayagam*, a

genuine democracy. In what follows, I juxtapose divergent perspectives of democracy, first attending to conversations with Dalit Ezhilmalai, the founding General Secretary of the *Pattali Makkal Katchi* (PMK), an ex-Member of Parliament (MP), and the ex-Union Minister of State, Health and Family Welfare. Next, I reflect upon a discussion with M. Abdul-Rahman, a former MP and state executive of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in Tamil Nadu. Upon presenting different impressions of democracy, I then consider these perspectives alongside those offered by VCK leaders.

On May 4, 2014, Ezhil Caroline, Chairperson of the VCK Lawyers' Wing, facilitated an interview with her father, Dalit Ezhilmalai, a prominent Dalit politician and former union minister who served as the founding PMK General Secretary. In the 1998 *Lok Sabha* Election, one year prior to the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* electoral turn, Ezhilmalai contested from within the AIADMK-BJP coalition and emerged victorious in Chidambaram. The BJP-led Vajpayjee government appointed him to the post of Union Minister of State, Health and Family Welfare. When internal feuds fractured his early bonhomie with PMK Chairman Dr. S. Ramadoss, the latter appointed E. Ponnusamy, also a Dalit, to replace him in the party ranks and, eventually, in the union cabinet.[104] After his departure from the PMK, Ezhilmalai joined the AIADMK and soon thereafter won his second parliamentary berth in the 2001 Tiruchirappali (Trichi) By-election.[105] When we discussed his political career, Ezhilmalai, a retired army veteran, spoke candidly about his experience in the PMK and why its early experiment in social engineering, an attempt to consolidate Dalits and Vanniyars in a single party, proved to be a futile exercise.

Recounting the social and political climate surrounding the formation of the PMK in 1989, Ezhilmalai recalls, "At that time, the animosity, the rivalry between [Dalit-]Paraiyars and Vanniyars was like a battle between serpent and mongoose, but it was a fight between unequals and the Dalits were squarely on the receiving end."[106] After the 1989 *Vanniyar Sangam* road *roko* razed thousands of Dalit huts, Ezhilmalai remembers thinking, "If this situation were to persist, it would be detrimental to both groups."[107] He recounts that his entry into electoral politics stemmed from a conviction that "constitutionalism and legislation alone could not uplift our people. We require the

mutual support of other communities."[108] Acknowledging that his appointment as PMK General Secretary was, at least in part, a political overture intended to woo Dalits with an eye toward electoral calculations, he professes indifference, stating, "If the backwards castes and the Dalits band together, they could form a great strength and share political power."[109] Despite seething tensions between the two caste communities, he accepted Ramadoss' invitation to serve as the founding PMK General Secretary.

Although the PMK emerged through a consolidation of the Vanniyar vote bank, Ezhilmalai estimates that, by the late 1990s, it had reached an impasse and began appealing to Dalits with an aim to augment its vote share and secure an outright majority, nothing that, if consolidated, these groups would form an electoral majority in constituencies across the northern districts. Discussing his decision to join hands with Ramadoss, Ezhilmalai states frankly, "From the very beginning, the PMK was an experiment: could 'touchable' Hindus and the 'untouchable' Dalits band together to make their move? We tried for the collective benefit of both communities, but we soon realized that oil and water cannot be mixed so easily."[110] "It was all stage-managed," he confesses, "After bringing both sides together for a conference, the caste Hindus would return to their *uur* (settlement) and the Dalits to their *cheri* (colony). Everything remained the same. It had all been staged."[111] When he describes the motivation for his politics, Ezhilmalai recalls, "My intention was to give Dalits a hope that we can prevent violence," alleging that, in those days, Dalits in the state's northern districts were besieged at once by state-sponsored violence as well as caste atrocities.[112] "At that time, the government was very hostile to our community," he recalls, "but, between caste and the state, you cannot fight both; you must befriend one. We befriended the caste group," adding tersely, "That's all. It didn't work."[113]

When Ezhilmalai discusses early attempts to woo Dalit voters into the PMK, he proffers an evocative description of electoral democracy. Without mincing words, he contends, "In India, politics means caste politics. The dynamics of caste is this: see how far you can run the table against the other castes; you see how far you can travel on your own numerical strength."[114] Ezhilmalai stresses that this core dynamic of caste

politics, that is, the aggregation communities in a relentless pursuit of electoral majority, serves as a defining attribute of Indian democracy:

> Democracy means votes. A vote implies a number. The largest number produces the winning party. How does one garner the maximum quantity of votes? You must maximize your community's support and then enlist more members among the general population. Is that not true? So, your voters cannot only be from your community; you must secure support from other communities. That's how it is. This is how you can gain more votes.[115]

Although Ezhilmalai bluntly conveys his perspective on the *realpolitik* of caste calculations, he concedes its limitations. Deploying a shared motif with Sinthanai Selvan, Ezhilmalai claims, "If you want to gain more votes, you have to compromise; you must forfeit some of your spirit, you should avoid some of your rhetoric, you must compromise some of your main issues. Naturally, this is happening; the vibrancy goes and then you are gone," referring to what he envisions as the limited future prospects for caste-based parties.[116] After a punctuated silence, he adds, "It's temporary like a summer rain; they will come, stay for some time, and then they will have gone."[117] Almost as if an afterthought, he adds, "The system is fine, but the man is wild."[118]

During our conversation, Ezhilmalai routinely conflates democracy with electoral politics. In his perspective, democracy did not provide a new set of ideas or political principles as much as a platform that integrated rival communities into a competitive, electoral process and, as an effect, intensified caste competition within state institutions. Ezhilmalai offers a viewpoint that recognizes the centrality of values and principles to initial stages of political mobilization, yet he acknowledges that these ideals often factor among the earliest casualties of electoral politics. Values inherent to the democratic process are notably absent from our conversation, instead, he describes how democracy sets the parameters for caste competition and provides a new avenue of political mobility for all caste groups regardless of their traditional status; their success is not contingent on heredity, but the size of their community, their prowess in leveraging political support, and their aptitude to effectively manage their affairs *vis-à-vis* other parties. Ezhilmalai suggests that electoral democracy has not disrupted, but rather restructured the nature of caste; that is, while caste may not have conformed to

the high ideals of liberal theory, it has proven a malleable substance in adapting to its institutions.

When I discussed the topic with M. Abdul-Rahman, a former Member of Parliament (MP) and state organizer of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), he similarly professed that electoral politics centers on a what he refers to as a "calculative rationality," yet he expressed concern that this impetus for electoral politics all too often conflicts with core values ascribed to democracy. Acknowledging the unresolved tension between electoral politics and democratic principles, Abdul-Rahman discusses the fine line that minority elected representatives such as himself must tread in the electoral arena, always keeping a wary eye on the next election:

> Today, democracy is a principle that is universally celebrated, but within a democratic society there are all kinds of adverse habits and mannerisms, both virtue and vice co-exist. If I, as a member of the ruling party, take serious action against any particular individual, the community that he belongs to may turn against me and I may lose crucial votes in pockets densely populated by that community in the next election. This is the calculative rationality that guides electoral politics.[119]

Recognizing that democratic values and electoral politics make odd bedfellows, Abdul-Rahman reticently concedes that electoral calculations take precedence as politics always occurs with an eye towards the next election. For example, he notes that political leaders routinely intervene in local affairs in order to prevent authorities from taking action against the individuals hailing from electorally influential castes. "Politicians in the ruling party will regularly come forward to stop authorities from acting against the fellow; if such activities were to rake up trouble, it would affect their election strategy. So, they will instruct the authorities, 'Don't do it!'."[120]

Considered together, the accounts provided by Ezhilmalai and Abdul-Rahman corroborate academic scholarship on modern Indian politics that accentuates the "plasticity" of caste in its encounter with democratic institutions.[121] Caste has both transformed and been transformed through its interaction with democracy, giving rise to what scholars have referred to as the "horizontalization" of caste, that is, a permutation of caste from a vertical system premised on hierarchy into horizontal

solidarities that have adapted to the quantitative demands of electoral politics.[122] While

conceding the centrality of caste to political competition, VCK organizers project

electoral politics as the antithesis of a "genuine democracy." As opposed to interpreting

democracy in terms of electoral procedures and core institutions, VCK leaders describe

what they envision as its underlying principles, arguing that the ideals ascribed to

democracy cannot so easily be pared from its political practices. In effect, they

articulate a perspective that frames electoral politics as antithetical to the project of

democracy. Attempting to recover democracy as a set of core principles that exist

independently of electoral procedures and state institutions, VCK leaders evoke

democracy at political rallies in a manner that harnesses its powerful social imaginary

and draws upon its potent political vocabulary to energize their political program.

Recalling Democracy

In conversation, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers profess that caste is integral to

electoral politics in contemporary India, but they remain apprehensive to equate

electoral politics with democracy. In fact, most of my interlocutors insist that the two

cannot be combined. Take for instance M. Yallalan's declaration at the opening of this

chapter that the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* entered electoral politics "to show that there

was no democracy," a sentiment that formulates an antagonistic relation, pitting both

caste and electoral politics against democracy. In a separate conversation, VCK

Headquarters Secretary Gopinath, more commonly known by his moniker 'Che

Guevara' conveyed a similar perspective, stating, "The electoral system is not

democratic. We selected the electoral path because we lacked viable alternatives. Still,

our key objective is to achieve genuine democracy."[123] Echoing these perspectives,

Viduthalai Chiruthaigal organizers most often distinguished electoral politics, which they

equate with the relentless pursuit of electoral majority through vote-bank politics, from

democracy, which, for them, represents something altogether different, inseparable

from its core principles of equality, rights, and pluralism. In what follows, I draw upon

conversations with party leaders and recent political oratory to consider how these

individuals envision a democratic society and why they perceive electoral politics to be its antithesis.

Although allusions to an Ambedkarite theory of democracy factor as a recurring element of VCK oratory, the frequency of these references has increased over recent years. For instance, during a May 2015 seminar organized by the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF), a wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), VCK General Secretary D. Ravikumar discussed what he perceived an unresolved tension between electoral politics and democracy. Ravikumar called our attention to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's premonition that India should not replicate the blueprint of western democracies, cautioning that such a model would foster communal, or sectarian, majoritarianism. Ravikumar stated:

> Prior to joining the Constituent Assembly, Dr. Ambedkar shared his perspective on how the Indian Constitution should be designed. Among the insights that he shared, one idea is especially salient for India's parliamentary democracy. Ambedkar declared, 'In India, we should not establish a parliamentary democratic system mirroring those in western countries. Such a system is not suitable for us in the way that it vests authority in the hands of the majority. The majority community in western countries is a political majority – that is, it is established by individual preferences that are subject to change. Therefore, in those countries, the majority possesses an open quality. In contrast, the majority in India is not a political majority, but a communal majority. It is determined by birth; it does not change; it retains its closed quality.' Ambedkar explained, 'If we were to follow the blueprint of western nations here in India, it would vest power in the hands of a communal majority, resulting in dictatorship, in despotism. Therefore, the challenge before us lies in how we keep the majority in check.'[124]

Ravikumar proceeded to argue that "communal majority" is, at once, an organizing principal of electoral politics as well as a primary obstacle to democracy. In his view, democracy must serve as a corrective force to electoral politics, tasked with checking the omnipresent potential for "a government of majority to transform into majoritarian rule."[125]

Two weeks later, on June 9, 2015, VCK leaders convened a symposium prior to the coming Tamil Nadu Assembly Election that proposed a fresh approach to coalitions politics. Attracting leaders from a range of smaller political parties including

the Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), *Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (MDMK), *Tamil Maanila Congress* (TMC), and *Manithaneya Makkal Katchi* (MMK), or the Humanist People's Party, an offshoot of the *Tamil Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam* (TMMK), or Tamil Muslim Progress Federation, the seminar critiqued the current approach to alliances and expounded a platform of shared governance intended to augment the stature of minority parties within state politics.[126] Noting that electoral coalitions are formed solely on the basis of vote-sharing, VCK organizers beckoned smaller parties to consolidate themselves and pool their collective strength to press their hand and pressure their Dravidian counterparts into a more equitable distribution of political power. Henceforward, they would demand guarantees for *kuṭṭarasu*, or collective governance, as a prerequisite for alliance negotiations. In his speech, VCK Chairman Thol. Thirumaavalavan argued that the present approach to coalitions was misguided, charging that these efforts had sustained Dravidian rule without integrating allied parties in administration. Instead, he proposed that minority parties collectively leverage their vote-banks and stake a claim for post-poll governance as a precondition for electoral support.[127]

In his address, Thirumaavalavan offers a two-fold critique of electoral politics. On the one hand, as discussed earlier, he charged that electoral politics buttresses the traditional authority of the majority, which he alleged served to reinforce the customary dominance of backwards caste groups already entrenched in state power. Further, Thirumaavalavan questioned whether electoral democracy had, in fact, afforded greater opportunity for minority representatives to air grievances and generate ameliorative solutions for their community. To this end, he alluded to early arguments posed by *Tamil Maanila Congress* (TMC) leaders when they wooed him to join their electoral coalition ahead of the 1999 *Lok Sabha* Election. At that time, Peter Alphonse, who was in attendance at the seminar, referred to the political career of Jagjivan Ram, arguing that Dalit leaders must integrate within the government in order to deliver concrete benefits to their constituents.[128] With more than fifteen years having passed since these conversations took place on Marina Beach,

Thirumaavalavan disputed the degree to which Dalits have integrated into the political system, distinguishing electoral victory from political empowerment:

> In contemporary politics, in the present electoral system, marginalized communities remain unable to grasp political authority. There is no chance. Individuals may rise within the present system. Jagjivan Ram rose to the level of deputy minister. But, still, *cheris* (Dalit colonies) upon *cheris* continued to persist in the same state. In the political field, Thirumaavalavan, a Dalit hailing from an oppressed community, rose to the level of deputy minister. But, still, the *cheris* are set ablaze… Whether Dalit, Muslim, woman, or working class, an individual may secure a post in a political party and, through that, attain an official position; they may come into power. But, the society from which they hail continues to exist in a state of repression. It may be feasible in the current electoral system for such individuals to attain an official position, but it is not possible for their society to grasp political power.[129]

Noting that a "ceiling" had been imposed by the electoral system, Thirumaavalavan proceeded to distinguish mere *presence* in government from *influence* in governance, that is, from a capacity to shape policy agendas and impact political outcomes. Citing Ambedkar, Thirumaavalavan argued that "minority empowerment," deploying the English phrase, requires that minority representatives must enter government not only as elected officials, but also as authorities with sufficient latitude to make their presence felt.[130]

Though the idiom of "*panmaivatta jananayagam*", or pluralist democracy, Thirumaavalavan points to an unresolved tension between what he terms the parliamentary electoral system and core democratic principles. "Democracy does not exist in the mere casting of a vote," he emphasizes, "it requires the distribution of political authority among all the people."[131] "The present electoral system is opposed to democracy," he states, because it successively installed *oru katci aatci*, or single party rule, in state governance, which, he alleges, is tantamount to "autocracy" and "despotism"—noting that political power had strictly changed hands between two party heads over the past five decades.[132] Instead, Thirumaavalavan argues, "democracy is founded on pluralism," which he interprets not only as a social precept, but also an organizing principle for governance.[133] Presenting it as the *jananayaga kadamai*, or the democratic duty, of marginalized groups to break up the concentration

of state power, he argues, "The oppressed people must be transformed into a political force; that alone will sustain democracy; that alone will safeguard democracy… This is the struggle that lies before us."[134] Denoting an evolution of movement politics, he emphasizes that his party was no longer merely demanding the delivery of rights, but seeking to grasp authority and, therein, the capacity to deliver rights and wield influence in governance. Harkening back to his party's inaugural parliamentary bid, he recalls, "In the 1999 General Election, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* raised the slogan, *"kadaisi manidanukkum jananayagam; eliya makkalukkum adihaaram,"* which translates, "Extend democracy to the very last person and authority even to the poorest people." "This is not a mere political demand," he stresses, "It's theory."[135]

To illustrate this point, Thirumaavalavan invokes an evocative metaphor of Dalit life-experience: temple entry struggles. "When we demand that our people enter a temple," he says, "we do not view this only as rights-based struggle. It is also a demand for a share of authority—authority to administer the temple; authority to conduct festivals inside the temple; authority to worship gods inside of the temple." Hence, temple entry is framed not strictly as a matter of rights, but as a component of a broader struggle to access points of authority and acquire a stake in state power. This example taps into a powerful idiom of Dalit experience and provides a suitable metaphor for political action—a struggle for authority that connects the temple board to the statehouse. Signaling an evolution of minority politics, Thirumaavalavan argues that the VCK is no longer only demanding rights, but staking a claim for an equitable share of political authority; that is, the capacity to administer rights, shape policy directives, and influence governance. He conveys this demand through a familiar idiom, beckoning Dalits to regard political authority as a material asset, or *sottu*, comparable to wealth and property. "We must view political authority as an asset," he presses the audience, "Our people identify a house and a plot of land as an asset; we recognize that jewelry, livestock, and wealth are assets; Now, we must also regard political authority as an asset. It's time to claim our share."[136]

Conclusion

In an early address on *Voice of America*, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar pondered, "Is there democracy in India or is there no democracy in India?"[137] When formulating a response, he proposed that an answer in the affirmative is possible only if we were to equate democracy with a "Republic" or "Parliamentary Government." Ambedkar countered the quotidian view in which "democracy is understood to be a political instrument and where this political instrument exists, there is democracy." Instead, he opined, "The roots of democracy lie not in the form of Government, Parliamentary or otherwise. A democracy is more than a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living. The roots of Democracy are to be searched in the social relationship, in the terms of associated life between the people who form a society."[138] The chief mandate of a democratic state, in his view, was to cultivate the conditions necessary to foster the realization of such a society. Upholding democracy as an alternative to a society structured around caste inequality, Ambedkar surmised that democracy had not yet taken root in post-Independence India, a viewpoint that endures in contemporary Dalit politics.

When movement organizers discuss their complicated tenure in electoral democracy, they concede that exigencies of electoral politics may have sapped their earlier radicalism and come at the expense of their movement's prior disposition for robust Dalit advocacy. Whereas these individuals had once approached elections as a political platform to represent their concerns, the optimism characteristic of these early projections has visibly waned in recent years. While democracy continues to evoke appealing principles, electoral politics has proven of limited use in fulfilling the political aspirations of these leaders, who reminisce fondly on their pre-electoral politics and now question the utility of the electoral platform in representing their concerns. At the end of the 1990s, many VCK organizers envisioned electoral democracy as a battlefield that demarcated a new locus of political struggle, but, in the years that followed, they reassessed this early appraisal. In fact, their palpable anxiety of electoral politics today appears as if to have been presaged in an early slogan, *"atikaaram aayutankalaal mattumalla, alakaana poykalaalum tannai nilai niruttikoliratu,"* meaning, "Power establishes itself not only by weapons of war, but also through beautiful lies."[139]

Although democracy projects a commanding idea that energizes their political program, party organizers have grown increasingly skeptical of its allure.

In my interviews and translation of party speeches, VCK organizers distinguish democracy from electoral politics, routinely pitting one against the other. Whereas they interpret electoral politics in terms of a majoritarian institution that operates with a quantitative logic, they argue that democracy is premised upon fundamental values that cannot operate independently from society. Party organizers articulate a view that casts democratic politics not strictly in terms of electoral procedures or formal institutions, but as a set of governing principles, namely rights, pluralism, and equality, with a popular mandate to vest real, and not merely nominal, authority in minority representatives. In our private conversations as well as their public oratory, my interlocutors conveyed their interpretation of democracy through a familiar idiom that taps into popular sentiments and ratchets up the expectations of their Dalit supporters. In speeches, they project democracy as an evolving struggle, selectively drawing on its political imaginary and potent social vocabulary to mobilize their community and ignite popular aspirations. Although VCK politicians may have tasted only marginal electoral success, their politics has undoubtedly heightened Dalit expectations, which are unlikely to subside in the future.[140]

Whereas this chapter has explored how VCK organizers recall their firsthand experience of electoral politics and why they perceive its present form as antithetical to "genuine democracy," the following chapter provides an ethnographic account of electoral competition, drawing upon fieldwork from the campaign trail where I tailed VCK General Secretary D. Ravikumar amidst his parliamentary bid during the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election. As such, it provides an ethnographic vantage point from which to consider how the VCK experiences coalition politics and navigates the contested terrain of an election campaign. In particular, Chapter Five considers how caste, to which direct electoral appeals are banned by the Election Commission of India (ECI) as stated in the *Model Code of Conduct for Elections*, surfaces during the election campaign to inform vote-canvassing strategies, shape political rhetoric, and structure a division of campaign labor. In effect, I present instances where direct electoral participation

appears to silence the voices often presumed to be 'surging' within India's expanding democratic arena and investigate what this may bring to bear on our study of minority representation in modern democracies.

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[1] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, "*munnurai*" ("Preface") in Ravikumar (ed.), *tamiḻnāṭṭil kūṭṭaṇi āṭci*. Velacheri: karical padippakam, 2015. Translation: Coalition Government in Tamil Nadu.

[2] M. Yallalan, interview by author, January 9, 2008.

[3] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[4] Dario Castiglione and Mark E. Warren (2006), "Rethinking Democratic Representation: Eight Theoretical Issues." Conference on Rethinking Democratic Representation, Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, University of British Columbia, May 18-19, 2006: p3. Paper accessed at http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu

[5] Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper, 1950: 269. Quoted in David Plotke, "Representation is Democracy," in *Constellations*, Vol. 4, No. 1: 20.

[6] Robert A Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.

[7] Giovani Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited (Part One: The Contemporary Debate)*. Chatham: Chatham House, 1987. Quoted in Michael Saward, "Authorisation and Authenticity: Representation and the Unelected," in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 17, No. 1: 1-22.

[8] For instance, consider indices on political freedom and democracy such as the *Freedom in the World* reports compiled by Freedom House and the "Democracy Index" generated by *The Economist*.

[9] Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000 (2012), p218. Quoted in Jonathan Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p143.

[10] More generally, M. David Forrest has underscored the distinctive capacity of political ethnography to disrupt naturalized ideas as well as the commonly accepted terms of political debate. See: M. David Forrest (2017), "Engaging and Disrupting Power: The Public Value of Political Ethnography," in *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50, issue 1: 109 – 113.

[11] Frederic C. Shaffer, *Democracy in Translation: understanding politics in an unfamiliar culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.

[12] Matthew Gutmann, *The Romance of Democracy: Compliant Defiance in Contemporary Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p11.

[13] Julia Paley (2002), "Toward an Anthropology of Democracy," in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 31, p470.

[14] Julia Paley, *Democracy: Anthropological Approaches*. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2008, p5

[15] Paley (2002) 471

[16] Jorge Nef and Bernd Reiter, *The Democratic Challenge: Rethinking Democracy and Democratization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Rajni Kothari, *Rethinking Democracy*. Orient Longman: Hyderabad, 2005.

[17] David Nugent, "Democracy Otherwise: Struggles over Popular Rule in the Northern Peruvian Andes," in Julia Paley (ed.), *Democracy: Anthropological Approaches*. Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2008.

[18] David Nugent (2002), "Alternative Democracies: The Evolution of the Public Sphere in 20th Century Peru," in *PoLaR*, Vol. 25, No. 1, p151.

[19] Dilip Gaonkar (2007), "On Culture of Democracy," in *Public Culture*, Vol. 19, No. 1, p16.

[20] James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. For an earlier iteration of "disjunctive democracy," see James Holston and Teresa P. R. Caldeira, "Democracy, law, and violence: disjunctions of Brazilian Citizenship," in Felipe Aguero and Jeffrey Stark (eds.), *Fault Lines of Democracy in Post-Transition Latin America*. Miami: North-South Center Press, 1998.

[21] Holston (2008) 311, 14, 310

[22] Holston(2008) 31

[23] Jeffrey Witsoe (2011), "Rethinking Postcolonial Democracy: An Examination of the Politics of Lower-Caste Empowerment in North India," in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 113, No. 4, p620.

[24] Jeffrey Witsoe, *Democracy Against Development: Lower-Caste Politics and Political Modernity in Postcolonial India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, p12, 10.

[25] Ibid. 189

[26] Ibid. 14

[27] Sudipta Kaviraj, "Democracy and Social Inequality," in Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava, and Balveer Arora (eds.), *Transformation India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. OUP: Delhi, 2000: 90. Emphasis in original.

[28] Ibid. 107

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid. 110

[31] Anastasia Piliavsky (2015), "India's Human Democracy," in *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 31, Iss. 4: 25.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, interview by author, November 4, 2013; Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014; Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014; Kani Amudhan, interview by author, January 9, 2014; Selva Arasu, interview by author, January 9, 2014.

[34] I suggest that electoral politics was not entirely of their choosing because many leading VCK figures contend that the liberal use of national security legislation (e.g., NSA) and similar pre-emptive detention laws (e.g., Terrorism and Disruptive Activities (TADA) Act and the Goondas Act) against their district organizers and local cadre had crippled the movement's capacity to operate by the late-1990s.

[35] For an alternative account of VCK electoral politics, see Andrew Wyatt, *Party System Change in South India: Political Entrepreneurs, Patterns and Processes*. New York: Routledge, 2010: 116-123.

[36] Election Commission of India. *Statistical Report on General Election, 1999 to the Thirteenth Lok Sabha*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid. A. Raja (DMK) secured 330,675 votes, or 48.58% of votes polled, as compared to P. Rajarethinam's (AIADMK) 262,624 votes, or 38.59% vote-share. The fourth and fifth place candidates behind Periyasami secured a negligible 0.20% and 0.11% of the vote-share, respectively.

[39] While both the PMK and VCK were strongest in Tamil Nadu's northern districts, the PMK was considered better organized and financed, which generally made the PMK the first option in coalition arithmetic. But, the VCK's debut performance positioned the party as a noteworthy alternative to the PMK.

[40] R. Ilangovan, "Dalit consolidation and polarisation," in *The Hindu* (Chennai), April 21, 2001, p5.

[41] M.R. Venkatesh, "Karunanidhi does a balancing act," in *The Hindu*, April 21, 2001, p4.

[42] T.S. Subramanian, "Tough Battle," in *Frontline*, Vol. 18, Iss. 9, April 28 – May 11, 2001. In addition to allocating seats to coalition partners, the DMK contributes its organizational infrastructural and financial resources in support of allied parties' campaigns. For more on this, see Chapter 5.

[43] In Chapter 3, I provide an account of this criticism provided by TMC General Secretary Peter Alphonse. Alphonse did not espouse these perspectives himself, but elaborated upon such criticism to convey the challenge that Moopanar faced in aligning with Dalit parties. Peter Alphonse, interview by author, November 6, 2013.

[44] Staff Reporter, "DMK ignored ideals of Periyar, Anna," in *The Hindu* (Chennai), April 18, 2001, p5; T. Ramakrishnan, "Karunanidhi inciting caste outfits, says Ramadoss," in *The Hindu* (Chennai), April 19, 2001, p4.

[45] The DMK's decision to align with the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* as well as *Pudhiya Tamizhagam* appeared to validate this preliminary assessment.

[46] Per figures from the 2011 Census, Scheduled Castes constitute 20.01% of the Tamil Nadu population (this figure excludes Scheduled Tribes). Also, see: John Harriss (2002), "Whatever Happened to Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu? A Reading of Current Events and Recent Literature on Tamil Politics," in *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 40, Iss. 3: 106-7.

[47] Suresh Nambath, "Pro-AIADMK shift visible among Thevar youth," in *The Hindu*, April 23, 2001, p4; Radha Venkatesan, "Dalit consolidation, a gain for DMK," in *The Hindu*, May 7, 2001, p4; Suresh Nambath, "Vote transfer a worry for rival fronts," in *The Hindu*, May 8, 2001, p1.

[48] R. Ilangovan, "Dalit consolidation and polarisation," in *The Hindu* (Chennai), April 21, 2001, p5.

[49] Radha Venkatesan, "Dalit consolidation, a gain for DMK," in *The Hindu*, May 7, 2001, p4; Suresh Nambath, "Vote transfer a worry for rival fronts," in *The Hindu*, May 8, 2001, p1.

[50] *Statistical Report on General Election, 2001 to the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India.

[51] Among the remaining seven candidates, six registered a second-place finish and one recorded a third-place finish, losing her deposit. See: *Statistical Report on General Election, 2001 to the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India. "Mangalore" is sometimes written in ECI documents as "Mangalur."

[52] Ibid.

[53] Our Tamil Nadu Bureau, "Jayalalitha's alliance arithmetic worked," in *The Hindu*, May 14, 2001, p1; P.V.V. Murthi, "PMK supporters bypass Vanniyar candidates in Vellore district," in *The Hindu*, May 16, 2001, p5.

[54] R. Ilangovan, "Dalit card cost DMK OBC vote bank," in *The Hindu*, May 15, 2001, p1.

[55] Our Tamil Nadu Bureau, "Jayalalitha's alliance arithmetic worked," in *The Hindu*, May 14, 2001, p1; R. Ilangovan, "Dalit card cost DMK OBC vote bank," in *The Hindu*, May 15, 2001, p4.

[56] Some analysts attribute the AIADMK's decline in part to its silence in response to the December 6, 1992, demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by rightwing Hindu nationalists.

[57] Special Correspondent, "DMK wins Mangalore seat too," in *The Hindu*, May 14, 2004, p1; S. Viswanathan (2004), "Isolated in Tamil Nadu," in *Frontline*, Volume 21, Issue 10, May 08-21; Special Correspondent, "DPI to contest Mangalore Assembly seat," in *The Hindu*, March 4, 2004.

[58] Allegedly, the AIADMK offered monetary support in exchange for VCK support, but refused to allocate seats.

[59] Special Correspondent, "We have no truck with NDA: Tirumavalavan," in *The Hindu*, April 14, 2004, p4. The *Janata Dal (United)* was formed on October 30, 2003, when the *Lokshakti Party* and *Samata Party* merged with the Sharad Yadav faction of the *Janata Dal*. In 2003, its presence was concentrated in the northern Indian states of Bihar and Jharkhand.

[60] R.K. Radhakrishnan, "Big challenge to Tirumavalavan," in *The Hindu*, April 28, 2004, p4.

[61] *Statistical Report on General Elections, 2004 to the 14ᵗʰ Lok Sabha*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India.

[62] Ibid.

[63] This performance is particularly noteworthy because the VCK's allies did not have a meaningful presence in constituencies that its candidates contested. The party ran a modest campaign across large parliamentary constituencies without the external support of Dravidian parties but still managed to secure an average of 9.5% of the vote share in seats that the party contested. Excluding the results in Chidambaram, the party secured an average of 6% vote share in the remaining seven seats. This figure can be regarded as a proxy for the VCK's vote share in these constituencies as its coalition partners had virtually no presence in these districts.

[64] Roger Jeffery and Hugo Gorringe, "Institutionalising Marginal Actors in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu: Insights from Dalit Electoral Data," in Hugo Gorringe, Roger Jeffery, and Suryakant Waghmore (eds.), From the *Margins to the Mainstream: Institutionalising Minorities in South Asia*. New Delhi: Sage, 2016: p114. The authors make an important point, noting: "One effect of reservations for SCs, of course, is that the Dalits are present in each party. The fact that autonomous Dalit parties did not really emerge in the state till the late 1990s, means that Tamil Dalits have historic ties and attachments to the Dravidian parties that can be hard to shake off (Carswell and De Neve 2014)." This runs in contrast to the Vanniyar politics, which has an established history of autonomous political parties prior to the advent of the *Vanniyar Sangam* and PMK.

[65] V. Jayanth, "DMK front sweeps polls," in *The Hindu*, May 14, 2004, p1.

[66] While VCK supporters point to Thirumaavalavan's Tamil *Eelam* politics as a student organizer at Madras Law College, the joint action under the banner of the Tamil Protection Movement was widely

perceived as a political attempt to patch tensions between the two largest caste communities in northern Tamil Nadu, Paraiyars and Vanniyars, with an eye toward elections.

[67] Thirumaavalavan and Ramadoss launched the Tamil Protection Movement along with N. Sethuraman of the *All India Moovendar Munnani Kazhagam* (AIMMK), a small party in Tamil Nadu's southern districts with a modest following among the Thevar caste.

[68] For an account of how VCK organizers critique normative interpretations of the 'common good', see Chapter 5.

[69] Wyatt 122.

[70] Special Correspondent, "DMK's alliance arithmetic faulty: Thirumavalavan," in *The Hindu*, April 7, 2006, p6. The VCK also contested two seats within the Union Territory of Pondicherry.

[71] V. Jayanth, "Dravidian parties on an even keel," in *The Hindu*, April 29, 2006, p1.

[72] V. Jayanth, "Bitter campaign comes to an end, archrivals wind up hectic tours," in *The Hindu*, May 7, 2006, p1.

[73] The DMK coalition secured 44.73% of the statewide vote as compared to the AIADMK coalition's 40.06%. Despite being the closest election in recent decades, the DMK coalition bagged 163 seats as compared to the DMK coalition's 69. The newly formed DMDK and an independent candidate won a single seat apiece. Staff Reporter, "Winning margin in Tamil Nadu was 4.67% points," in *The Hindu*, May 14, 2006, p1.

[74] D. Ravikumar won in Kattumannarkoil (SC) and K. Selvam won in Mangalore (SC). See: Suresh Nambath, "Karunanidhi to be Chief Minister for fifth time," in *The Hindu*, May 12, 2006, p1.

[75] As local body elections follow state assembly elections, it is common practice for alliance partners to coordinate amongst themselves prior to elections in local bodies. These negotiations typically occur along with seat sharing agreements for the state assembly election. Thirumaavalavan made the allegation cited above in: Special Correspondent, "VCK, PMK contesting together for the first time," in *The Hindu*, March 27, 2011. A similar ordeal occurred in Cuddalore District local body elections following the 2011 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election. Although the VCK and PMK joined the DMK coalition, the PMK voted in support of the AIADMK in select local body to undermine VCK candidates. B. Thamizhaiselvan, interview by author, December 22, 2013.

[76] The DMK was particularly vulnerable to criticism on the Sri Lankan issue as it was allied with the ruling Congress-led UPA coalition, which remained hesitant to meddle in the regional affairs during an election year.

[77] T. Ramakrishnan and R. Srikanth, "DMK front secured 42.54 per cent votes," in *The Hindu*, May 20, 2009, p10.

[78] B. Kolappan, "DMDK votes exceed victory margin in many seats," in *The Hindu*, May 17, 2009, p6.

[79] T. Ramakrishnan, "DMK front wins 28 seats," in *The Hindu*, May 17, 2009, p1.

[80] *Statistical Report on General Elections, 2009 to the 15th Lok Sabha*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India.

[81] *Statistical report on General Election, 2011 to the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India.

[82] VCK candidates suffered margins of defeat greater than 25% in Shozhinganallur, Uthaganarai (SC), Ulundurpettai, and Kallakurichi (SC).

[83] Ibid.

[84] The DMK coalition enlisted the support of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (VCK), *Pudhiya Tamizhagam* (PT), *Manithaneya Makkal Katchi* (MMK), and Indian Union Muslim League (IUML). The latter two parties have a predominantly Muslim support base in different pockets of Tamil Nadu.

[85] When conducting my fieldwork (2013-2014), Thirumaavalavan served as the presiding Member of Parliament (MP) from Chidambaram.

[86] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, August 2, 2013.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Discussing the successful election campaign of VCK candidate for panchayat president, Hugo Gorringe notes that the candidate pledged not to lodge cases under the SC/ST PoA Act (1989) in order to bolster his electoral prospects. Hugo Gorringe, "Legislating for Liberation? Dalit Electoral Politics and Social Change in Tamil Nadu," in Clarinda Still (ed.), *Dalits in Neoliberal India: Mobility or Marginalisation?* Delhi: Routledge, 2014, p148.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Mu. Arivudainambi, interview by author, October 20, 2013.

[97] Mu. Arivudainambi, interview by author, October 20, 2013.

[98] Vanni Arasu, interview by author, February 1, 2014.

[99] Hugo Gorringe, "Legislating for Liberation? Dalit Electoral Politics and Social Change in Tamil Nadu," in Clarinda Still (ed.), *Dalits in Neoliberal India: Mobility or Marginalization?* New Delhi: Routledge, 2014: 148. Also, see: Hugo Gorringe, "Party Political Panthers: Hegemonic Tamil Politics and the Dalit Challenge," in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal (SAMAJ)* [Online], Free-Standing Articles, Online since December 30, 2011.

[100] F. Jose, interview by author, February 18, 2014.

[101] F. Jose, interview by author, February 18, 2014.

[102] F. Jose, interview by author, February 18, 2014.

[103] Tada Periyasami, interview by author, February 24, 2014.

[104] In 2013, E. Ponnusamy quit the PMK, allegedly in protest to its position against the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) and opposition to inter-caste marriages. From 1999, E. Ponnusamy was pitted against Thirumaavalavan in Chidambaram during consecutive *Lok Sabha* elections. See: Special Correspondent, "Dalit leader walks out of PMK, quits politics," in *The Hindu*, January 12, 2013.

[105] Special Correspondent, "Dalit Ezhilmalai wins Tiruchi LS seat," in *The Hindu*, May 14, 2001.

[106] Dalit Ezhilmalai, interview by author, May 4, 2014.

[107] Ibid. For a detailed account of the 1987 Vanniyar Sangam *road roko*, see "Vanniyar Consolidation" in Chapter 3.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Dalit Ezhilmalai, interview by author, May 4, 2014.

[111] Dalit Ezhilmalai, interview by author, May 4, 2014.

[112] Dalit Ezhilmalai, interview by author, May 4, 2014.

[113] Dalit Ezhilmalai, interview by author, May 4, 2014.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Dalit Ezhilmalai, interview by author, May 4, 2014.

[116] Dalit Ezhilmalai, interview by author, May 4, 2014.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Ibid.

[119] M. Abdul-Rahman, interview by author, September 6, 2013.

[120] Ibid.

[121] See: Sudipta Kaviraj, "Democracy and Social Inequality," in Francine Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava, and Balveer Arora (eds.), *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. OUP: Delhi, 2000.

[122] A.M. Shah (1982), "Division and Hierarchy: an Overview of Caste in Gujarat," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 16:1; D.L. Sheth, "Caste and Class: Social Reality and Political Representations," in Ghanshyam shah (ed.), *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*. London: Anthem Press, 2004, p158.

[123] Che Guevara, interview by author, May 1, 2014. As Guevara spoke further, I was struck by his understanding of democracy as a concept rendered material through everyday practice. When I inquired to whom the VCK referred when they discussed the need to mobilize other "democratic forces," he replied, "Whoever accepts minority rights, whoever struggles for their realization, they are democratic forces. This only is true democracy. Those who stand idly to the side are not democratic."

[124] D. Ravikumar, *"'mattiyilē kūṭṭātci! mānilattil kūṭṭaṇi ātci!' eṉḏra viḍutalai ciruttaigaḷiṉ muḻakkattai mārkciṣṭ kamyūṉiṣṭ kaṭci valimoḻiyavēṇṭum."* (The CPI(M) should second the VCK's motion stating "Federalism at

Centre! Coalition at State!") speech delivered at the Second State Conference of the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front at Virudhunagar, May 16-18, 2015.

[125] D. Ravikumar, personal correspondence, May 25, 2015.

[126] National political parties including BJP and INC, as well as the regional DMK, AIADMK, and PMK were explicitly not welcome to participate in the seminar or subsequent joint-efforts undertaken under the banner of the People's Welfare Front (PWF). This is not to say that the aforementioned parties would have participated if invited, but rather to denote organizations against which the People's Welfare Front has positioned itself.

[127] The vote shares of both major Dravidian parties, the DMK and AIADMK, tend to hover close to one-third apiece. From the 1980s until the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election, Dravidian parties had been required to forge broad coalition to bolster their electoral performance. In 2014, the AIADMK contested elections independently and nearly swept the field, winning 37 of 39 parliamentary seats.

[128] For a detailed account of Alphonse's remarks, refer to the section titled "The Electoral Turn" in Chapter 3. Though, it is worth noting that scholars have questioned the degree to which Jagjivan Ram utilized his position to advance the cause of his community. Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany note, "Once he became a Minister he seems not to have made Untouchability a central preoccupation in either speech or action," suggesting that integration within government many checked his capacity to advocate Dalit concerns or, alternatively, it could be read to imply he choose to do so though less visible channels. See: Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, poverty and the state in modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: p208.

[129] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, *"kōrikkai alla, kōṭpāḍu!"* (It is not a demand, it is theory!), address delivered at the Coalition Government in Tamil Nadu symposium convened in Chennai on June 9, 2015. Reprinted and published as Thol, Thirumaavalavan, *"kōrikkai alla, kōṭpāḍu!"* in Ravikumar (ed.), *Coalition Government in Tamil Nadu*. Chennai: Karisal Publishing House, 2015.

[130] This argument resembles Ambedkar's stance that the mere presence of Dalit representatives in elected bodies would do little to improve the lot of their community. In his testimony before the Southborough Commission, Ambedkar wryly stated, "A Legislative Council is not an old curiosity shop. It will be a council with powers to make or mar the fortunes of society. How can one or two untouchables carry a legislative measure to improve their condition or prevent a legislative measure worsening their state?" Furthermore, this debate mirrors critiques offered by African-American scholars on FPFP electoral systems and substantive minority representation. Consider Lani Guinier's contention that "Minority empowerment requires minority legislative influence, not just minority legislative presence." See: Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Majority*. New York: The Free Press, 1994: p55.

[131] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, *"kōrikkai alla, kōṭpāḍu!"* ('It is not a demand, but theory!')

[132] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, *"munnurai"* ('Preface')

[133] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, *"munnurai"* ('Preface')

[134] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, *"munnurai"* ('Preface')

[135] Thol. Thirumaavalavan, *"kōrikkai alla, kōṭpāḍu!"* (It is not a demand, but theory!), address delivered at the Coalition Government in Tamil Nadu symposium convened in Chennai on June 9, 2015.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Dr. B. R. Ambedkar address on Voice of America, May 20, 1956. Reprinted as B. R. Ambedkar, "Prospects of Democracy in India," in *Dr. Bahasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol 17.3: 519.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by author, October 13, 2013.

[140] I appreciate Devesh Kapur for his metaphor of a ratchet wrench when discussing political mobilization. Like a ratcheting socket wrench, which enables continuous motion in one direction and prevents any regression, effective political mobilization can purvey specific understandings of rights and citizenship to ratchet up expectations that, even if unfilled, are unlikely to subside in the near future.

CHAPTER FIVE

Expressing Reservation:

Representation, Reservations, and an Election Campaign

Introduction

Amidst the 2014 General Election, VCK parliamentary candidate D. Ravikumar stands atop an open-air jeep barreling down rickety rural roads linking disparate villages across Tiruvallur District of northern Tamil Nadu. Today, an impressive entourage flanks his campaign vehicle, including roughly twenty-five SUVs followed by a sea of motorcycles with, of course, monitors from the Election Commission of India (ECI) nipping at their heels. This particular afternoon, the caravan loses its way and a wrong turn ushers the convoy into the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh. The mistake becomes evident when a polite bystander informs the candidate's driver that he is, in fact, no longer in Tamil Nadu. The candidate's mic is cut mid-speech once DMK party leaders have been informed of the predicament. The navigator is cursed as engines roar to life and the caravan lurches back towards Tamil Nadu. A mounting anxiety is palpable due to the sheer number of villages left to visit before ECI monitors, frequently lurking nearby, bring the day's activities to a screeching halt at 10:00pm; sharp. But, if a village is omitted, there is a prevalent concern that local leaders waiting with firecrackers and shawls may interpret their absence as a political affront and reappraise their allegiance to the candidate.

Engulfed in a two-week blitz across Tiruvallur District, the motley caravan of rugged jeeps, SUVs, motorcycles, and auto-rickshaws (vehicles vary by the day depending on local terrain) traverses half a legislative assembly constituency per diem. As parliamentary districts typically consist of six legislative assembly constituencies, this entails twelve grueling days of dawn-till-dusk electioneering during which the candidate greets voters across the district. Electioneering begins by 8 or 9am and concludes promptly at 10pm; that is, when election monitors are visible. A festive atmosphere welcomes their entrance in remote villages and congested urban areas alike: crackers burst to announce the entourage's imminent arrival, the caravan halts

anywhere from thirty seconds to fifteen minutes depending upon the size and electoral significance of the area, during which the candidate and DMK leaders accept and bestow a reciprocal economy of shawls with local organizers and address the crowd. Then, just as Ravikumar clasps his hands in the 'vanakkam' gesture to entreat the local community for their support, he abruptly sets off for the next destination. Impromptu delays impede our progress along the way; the candidate faints in the scorching midday heat; the PA system's battery dies and cannot be resuscitated despite a party engineer's most animated antics; a residence catches fire due to an ornery cracker as party workers scatter to fetch water and extinguish the blaze.

When D. Ravikumar, a *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* General Secretary, invited me to accompany him on the campaign trail, I readily obliged. I was engulfed amidst the final stages of dissertation fieldwork and keen to observe what is often regarded as the quintessential democratic exercise: the election campaign. In India, campaigns are multifaceted endeavors that often run the gamut from the mundane to the extra-legal, encompassing door-to-door canvassing and direct cash distribution to voters. In this chapter, I provide an ethnography of electoral participation to shed light on challenges confronting minority representation in electoral democracy, examining how the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* experiences an election campaign as small player in a powerful coalition. In particular, the chapter examines how caste, to which direct electoral appeals are banned under *The Model Code of Conduct* governing elections, manifests on the campaign trail to inform vote-canvassing strategies, shape political rhetoric, and structure a marked division of campaign labor. The parliamentary campaign entailed a continuous bracketing of persons and interests that re-inscribes the boundaries of political community, a public enactment of *who* can speak and on *what* issues. While democratic politics is frequently expressed through a discourse of popular sovereignty and the idiom of a common good, a view from the campaign trail enables us to envision how election campaigns may compound existing forms of inequality and provides a window into how electoral participation sometimes works to silence the very voices presumed to be 'surging' in India's expanding democratic arena.

India's Silenced Revolution?

In the late twentieth century, lower caste voters redrew the contours of democratic politics in modern India. Following the initial submission (1980) and partial implementation (1990) of the Mandal Commission Report, the 1990s experienced what Yogendra Yadav heralded as "a new phase of democratic politics."[1] He observed:

> Although overall turnout figures have not increased dramatically, the social composition of those who vote and take part in political activities has undergone a major change. There is a participatory upsurge among the socially underprivileged, whether seen in terms of caste hierarchy, economic class, gender distinction or the rural-urban divide.[2]

Corroborating Yadav's account, Zoya Hasan similarly detected "a dramatic upsurge in political participation," which she discerned particularly "among the socially underprivileged in the caste and class hierarchy."[3] Next, Christophe Jaffrelot examined how these trends altered the social composition of state assemblies and the national parliament. Borrowing an expression from ex-Prime Minister V. P. Singh, Jaffrelot trumpeted a "silent revolution," referring to a mostly peaceful transition of political authority whereby "plebeians" began to dislodge an entrenched, upper caste elite from elected office.[4] When taken together, these scholars captured a seminal moment in the history of Indian democracy, tracing a fundamental transformation in the social composition of elected representatives, which they conveyed through an ostensibly optimistic lexicon, an admixture of "silent revolution," "democratic upsurge," and "democratic revolution."

In recent years, renewed debate has scrutinized the merits of descriptive representation, or when representatives 'mirror' key attributes of those represented, prompting some scholars to reconsider the often sanguine tenor characteristic of earlier work on the subject. In particular, these scholars interrogated the limitations of descriptive representation, often citing as evidence instances where institutions promoting descriptive representation such as electoral reservations had failed to ameliorate chronic deprivation among its presumed beneficiaries. Recently, Niraja Jayal bemoaned what she calls a "fetishization of representation," contending that

institutions of descriptive representation, which she terms 'mirror' or 'microcosmic' representation', have hitherto failed to address enduring inequalities facing India's most disadvantaged communities.[5] Referring specifically to the Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes, Jayal writes:

> Institutional quotas appear to have failed to substantively address the disadvantages that mark the condition of the vast majority belonging to disadvantaged social groups. The persistence of poor human development indicators for disadvantaged groups is clear testimony to the fact that greater opportunities for expressing grievances have not led to material improvement.[6]

In sum, Jayal contends that the ostensible 'democratization' of elected bodies including state assemblies and the national parliament has failed to generate substantive gains for India's most downtrodden communities, who continue to lag behind in key development indices.

Curiously, Jayal's account stops well short of querying why current institutions designed to promote minority representation appear inept to ameliorate chronic material inequalities among India's most downtrodden communities. Moreover, she offers little by way of evidence to support her claim that electoral reservations have actually afforded "greater opportunities for expressing grievances."[7] Further, does this necessarily signal an inherent failure of institutions of compensatory representation or merely point to shortcomings in the existing framework? In a recent essay, Rupa Viswanath, *pace* Jayal, observes that critiques of political reservations often pivot on a similar line of argumentation, noting that despite the presence of such institutions, their presumed beneficiaries continue to lag behind in most development indicators.[8] This, some critics suggest, signals the failure of descriptive representation or, as Jayal argues, of electoral reservations.[9] In response, Viswanath proposes that we interrogate why Dalit representatives sometimes fail to deliver substantive benefits to their community and encourages us to examine the constraints under which they operate. Her position is supported by others who have studied the political careers of Dalit elected politicians.[10]

Prior to deliberating the effectiveness of institutions providing for minority representation, I suggest that we investigate the processes whereby these representatives are selected.[11] While studies have scrutinized the democratic formation of caste organizations and their subsequent politics, often highlighting the ability (or lack thereof) of such parties to gain preferential access to state resources, less attention has considered the campaign itself, that is, the primary hurdle separating democratic integration from political empowerment.[12] Moreover, whereas academic scholarship has surveyed the changing landscape of democratic politics in detail, less attention has been paid to this "silent revolution" *vis-à-vis* a parallel, disquieting growth in gross electoral expenditure. At a time when social minorities exercise their franchise at an unprecedented rate, campaign spending has risen sharply from one election cycle to the next. Estimates provided by the Centre for Media Studies (CMS) project that aggregate spending in parliamentary elections more than doubled from 2004 to 2009, rising from ₹4,500 to ₹10,000 crore, before tripling to a staggering ₹30,000 crore, or nearly US $5 billion, in 2014.[13] And, as M.V. Rajeev Gowda and E. Sridharan observe, political parties appear to have responded to rising campaign expenditure with a penchant for fielding wealthy "crorepati" candidates able to self-finance their campaigns and pad party coffers.[14] Although expenditure does not outright determine electoral outcomes, politicians recognize the impact of what is known colloquially as "money power," affirming that viable candidates must cross a spending threshold.

This chapter contributes an ethnographic account of electoral participation to our study of minority representation, examining how VCK candidates experience an election campaign in a reserved constituency. Reserved constituencies, which produce the overwhelming majority of Dalit representatives in India, are a remarkably constrictive affair for the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*. First, the chapter investigates how Dalit politicians, who most often lack independent access to critical sources of election finance, mobilize sufficient resources to fund a competitive campaign. And, second, it considers how these fiscal constraints affect the democratic participation of Dalit parties in India today. To explore this topic with ethnographic detail, I draw upon conversations with party organizers and vignettes from the campaign trail to consider

electoral processes by which Dalit representatives are selected, investigating the impact of "money power" on electoral procedures before examining how election campaigns navigate the question of caste. As we shall see, while financial constraints incentivize parties like the VCK to join coalitions spearheaded by more their established counterparts, these arrangements do not strictly entail a *quid pro quo* exchange of vote-banks for financial resources and vote-canvassing support, but entail complex negotiations that may affect candidate selection and set the terms of democratic participation.

Chapter Outline

The following chapter examines tensions between coalition politics, election campaigns, and political representation in modern India, placing ethnography from the 2014 General Election in conversation with personal interviews taken with *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, both on the campaign trail and over the past eight years (2009-2016). Foremost, the chapter draws upon ethnographic fieldwork on the campaign trail of the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election where I tailed D. Ravikumar throughout his parliamentary bid. In supplement to the ethnography, I incorporate a wide breadth of primary and secondary materials that were circulated during the campaign, including election handbills, political pamphlets, media reports, and materials provided directly to party representatives by the Election Commission of India (ECI). The chapter examines how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* candidates experience an election campaign in a reserved parliamentary constituency, illustrating how party organizers navigate the uneven physical, fiscal, and social terrain of electoral competition. An account of an election campaign in reserved constituency, that is, a contest in which only Dalits may contest, uncovers how caste, to which direct electoral appeals are banned under the *Model Code of Conduct for Elections*, surfaces on the campaign trail to structure vote-canvassing strategies, political rhetoric, and a division of campaign labor.

The chapter opens with an overview of coalition politics and election finance in Tamil Nadu, assessing why smaller parties such as the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* have most often relied on the financial and organizational support of erstwhile political

rivals. While existing scholarship has extensively mined psephological data to explore the dynamics of caste in electoral politics, little more than anecdotal evidence has been offered to convey how these new political actors respond to the costs of electoral competition and what this brings to bear on minority representation in Tamil Nadu, a state reputed to host to some of the country's most expensive election campaigns. Fiscal constraints not only affect the nature of political practice, rendering smaller parties reliant on more established counterparts, but also set the terms of electoral participation. In exchange for leveraging their support behind allied partners, the coalition leader finances and administers the campaigns of allied parties, extending critical vote-canvassing expertise and marshalling its extensive infrastructure in support of their candidates. This opening section provides a general overview of campaign finance in Tamil Nadu and outlines financial aspects of coalition politics before turning to ethnographic fieldwork from the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election. Due to the sensitive nature of these conversations, I have protected the confidentiality of my sources.

Next, the chapter presents three vignettes drawn from the campaign trail in order to explore how party organizers and candidates navigate the conflicts occasioned by electoral competition. First, I present an account of coalition formation, examining an instance when seat sharing talks went awry and tensions spilled beyond the bargaining table into public streets. Second, I attend to the visual spectacle of an urban procession, assessing how the VCK is publicly represented during the rally. In doing so, I bring into focus how the VCK is often physically *present* without necessarily being visually *represented* amidst electioneering practices and examine how a conflict in interests affects cooperation between coalition partners. Third, I shift our attention to vote-canvassing strategies to shed light on how caste informs political rhetoric and structures a marked division of campaign labor. These vignettes illustrate how electioneering strategies consist of a constant bracketing of persons and interests, a public enactment of *who* can speak and on *what* issues that, in effect, reifies the boundaries of the political community. In providing a viewpoint drawn from the campaign trail, I consider why election campaigns features among the most stifling

moments for *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers, sometimes even rendering them, as Ravikumar quips, "mute spectators" of their own campaigns.[15]

In conclusion, the chapter conveys how *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* leaders envision the system of electoral reservations, conveying their perspectives as to why the current approach stipulates compromises that ultimately undercut the capacity of elected Dalit representatives to advocate for their community's concerns. Alluding to the thoughts of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on democratic politics and minority representation, VCK organizers reflect on why Dalit representatives often appear inept to generate ameliorative solutions for their community. They discuss constraints under which Dalit representatives are currently selected and offer an alternative view of "true representation," which they denote by syntax, emphasizing that robust minority representation cannot be ensured through the mere selection of representatives *from* minority communities, but must provide an institutional framework that enables them to function as representatives *of* minority communities. The chapter provides an ethnographic study of electoral participation, investigating how VCK candidates experience an election campaign in a reserved constituency and what this perspective reveals about the challenge of providing for robust minority political representation in modern democracy.

Navigating Fiscal Constraints

Just prior to the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election, I met with Gowthama Sannah, VCK Propaganda Secretary, in his shared office at Madras High Court. Casually perched on a rolling chair seated across a cluttered desk, his silhouette is set against a towering bookshelf featuring an archive of legal volumes intermixed with the conspicuous blue tomes of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's writings and speeches.[16] "Our democracy is very expensive," he says as he leans forward across a wooden desk cluttered with legal cases.[17] Sannah continues, "For a developing party like ours, money is a critical factor when fighting elections and a shortage of funds compels us to align with more established parties," referring to the Dravidian parties. "We have worked hard to consolidate our people," he claims, "but we lack sufficient resources to contest

elections on our own and this deficit poses a key dilemma." In response to these financial limitations, Sannah discloses, "We have come to depend upon Dravidian parties. They have been in power and possess ample resources, enjoy wider financial networks, and draw upon a much broader economic base." Ruing this dependency, Sannah stresses that Dravidian parties provide necessary campaign resources, monetary and otherwise, that bolster the prospects of VCK candidates. "We hold clear principles," he asserts, "but, frankly speaking, principles do not necessarily sell in such an expensive system." "Electoral victory is critical for running a party," he continues, "Once you enter electoral politics, you must win elections. If you fail to do so, you cannot survive."

Election campaigns in Tamil Nadu are extravagant affairs reputed to be among the costliest in the country, but assessments of gross electoral expenditure are inherently imprecise as money flows into campaigns in staggered phases and from multiple sources. Electioneering commences well in advance of the notification period, that is when the Election Commission of India (ECI) fixes polling dates and begins to monitor candidate expenditure. Prior to notification, Dravidian parties ink lucrative contracts with public relations firms and media consultants to gear up for the polls.[18] For example, DMK Treasurer M. K. Stalin launched his *"Namakku Naame"* (We for Ourselves) *yatra*, a well-choreographed journey that traversed all 234 assembly constituencies and addressed crores of voters, nearly a full year ahead of the 2016 state assembly elections. In local villages, Dravidian parties and their prospective candidates sponsor religious festivals and community fairs, organizing sporting matches alongside artistic and literary competitions, dispersing cash awards and prizes to participants.[19] As the campaign machinery begins to hum, political organizers distribute party attire such as banyans, saris, towels, dhotis, and mufflers among cadre, form booth-level planning committees, and cross-check voter lists to identify core and swing voters, a move said to facilitate cash distribution just prior to polling.

While the floodgates open well ahead of polling, spending intensifies once the ECI fixes polling dates and candidates file nomination papers. In Tamil Nadu, Dravidian parties ply voters with cash, gifts, and alcohol during the campaign and woo

public support with 'freebie'-filled manifestos financed by tax revenue. In recent years, promises ranged from consumer electronics, including mobile telephones and personal computers, to kitchenware, livestock, bicycles, and gold coins.[20] Moreover, the day-to-day expenses incurred by a campaign require significant investment. Candidates traverse their constituencies in sprawling motorcades and host mega-rallies that may attract tens of thousands of supporters, a majority of whom are paid to attend. Whereas VCK candidates estimate that a budget campaign requires a minimum expenditure of ₹50,000 per diem to meet basic expenses and keep cadre on the ground, they project that Dravidian parties often spend upwards of ₹1 crore per week. In fact, a VCK General Secretary contends that it is not uncommon for major parties and their candidates to collectively spend ₹5 crore in an assembly segment and ₹25 - ₹30 crore per parliamentary constituency to cover campaign costs ranging from food and wages (*batta*) for party cadre, rally expenses, vehicle hire, petrol, salaries for booth agents, and what is sometimes referred to as "influence money," cash payments doled out to entrepreneurs in rival parties, neighborhood and caste associations, and religious institutions.[21]

Then, there is the question of cash distribution, which is often glossed in media accounts as "bribing" or "vote-buying."[22] Although the practice dates back to the early post-Independence period, the salience of cash in state elections surged from the early 2000s.[23] First, during a 2003 by-election, AIADMK party allegedly flooded rural pockets in Santhakulam assembly segment with cash and gifts.[24] Then, in a survey of the 2006 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election, the Center for Media Studies (CMS) estimated that cash distribution had reached nearly 40 percent of the electorate, although political insiders informed me that, in 2006, Dravidian parties concentrated cash distribution among known party supporters in an effort to retain existing vote-banks and in select swing constituencies where they hoped to tilt the scales in their favor.[25] But this all changed in 2009 when DMK operatives upped the ante during a state assembly by-election in Thirumangalam, where they reportedly covered the entire constituency with cash, distributing newspapers stuffed with ₹5,000 per vote in what has since been dubbed the "Thirumangalam Formula."[26] Although this sum could

not be replicated at a statewide level, the DMK's inaugural attempt at blanket cash distribution signaled a new normal in Tamil Nadu politics. In recent years, Dravidian parties have fine-tuned their cadre-based cash distribution networks, which are said to reach a substantial majority of registered voters.[27]

Although media pundits and politicians alike readily concede that election campaigns are a costly affair, the sheer depth of their extravagance remains an open question. Not only does money flow into campaigns in staggered phases and from multiple levels in the party structure, but expenditure varies according to what my respondents refer to as "candidate capacity" and, moreover, depends on the strategic value and competitiveness of a constituency. Following the 2016 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election, one political commentator averred that Dravidian parties must have collectively dispersed a bare minimum of ₹1,000 crore in cash payouts directly to voters, whereas another pundit notched this figure between ₹6,000 and ₹9,000 crore.[28] Of course, both figures pertain solely to cash distribution and exclude costs incurred by campaign activity. When I raised the matter with a prominent VCK official, he stated confidently that Dravidian parties may spend upwards of ₹10 crore apiece in assembly segments and as much as ₹50-60 crore in parliamentary contests, all-inclusive figures that corroborate those reported by media outlets.[29] Commenting on how Dravidian parties muster profuse resources, he relates, "Dravidian parties collect an election fund prior to elections. They first gather donations among their own party members that generate crores worth of rupees and then amass far greater wealth upon soliciting contributions from corporates, media conglomerates, and industry."[30] Moreover, both parties rely upon "crorepati" candidates who finance the bulk of their own expenses.

Lacking political leaders of comparable means as well as independent access to key sources of election finance, the VCK has relied foremost on electoral coalitions with Dravidian parties to bankroll its campaigns. In exchange for the support of allied parties such as VCK, Dravidian financiers shoulder the lion's share of campaign expenditure, covering costs related to coalition propaganda, print and digital advertising, vehicle and equipment hire, political rallies, food, transportation, daily

batta (informal wages) for party cadre, and additional day-to-day expenses incurred by campaign activity. Further, the Dravidian patron administers the campaigns of allied candidates, extending extensive party infrastructure and vote canvassing expertise. Although Dravidian parties may earmark crores of rupees to finance the campaigns of allied partners, this cash circulates through its own party infrastructure, requiring allied partners to remunerate their cadre and finance party-specific expenses. In effect, Dravidian benefactors commission their party apparatus to finance and administer allied campaigns, extending critical expertise in vote canvassing, marshalling their party infrastructure, and supplying cadre for electioneering work. Many of these expenses are remunerated in a closed feedback loop through lucrative contracts awarded to businesses associated with the party.[31]

In our conversations, former VCK candidates commented on coalition finance with marked candor, acknowledging the importance of financial support yet cognizant of the compromises entailed. For example, a former assembly candidate recounted his failed 2011 bid, recalling:

> In 2001, the DMK supplied ₹1 crore to support our [assembly] campaigns. In 2006, the AIADMK supported us during assembly elections and then, in 2011, we contested alongside DMK. In 2011, the DMK allocated ₹2 crore to finance my [assembly] campaign, but this sum was managed strictly by DMK office bearers under the category of my election expense. Every day, they may disburse some ₹5,000 directly to me for canvassing activities, fuel, posters, and related expenses, but they alone administer my election fund. On a daily basis, they may circulate ₹10 lakh among their party cadre for vehicles, fuel, food, propaganda, *batta* (daily wages), and other expenses.

Despite the coalition-leading party allocating a handsome sum to finance their campaigns, VCK candidates nonetheless shoulder a share of the burden. They remunerate VCK cadre, purchase party-specific propaganda (i.e., handbills, flags, posters, etc.), and cover miscellaneous expenses incurred by day-to-day activities that are not channeled through the leading party. Casting a wry grin, the candidate shrugs off the irony that despite strong financial backing he nonetheless accrued personal

debts. He quips, "Even though ₹2 crore had been allocated to finance my campaign, I had to sell my personal vehicle to raise funds to cover my expenses!"

Rather than an isolated case, this personal anecdote corroborates accounts shared by other party candidates. For instance, when another former candidate recalls that AIADMK allocated a generous sum to finance his 2006 assembly bid, he confirms that its office bearers alone strictly managed the money, dispersing funds through a combination of personal and party networks, with the district secretary serving as the primary conduit. He recounts, "In 2006, AIADMK spent the money through its own party structure; AIADMK office bearers handled all the expenditure. Although their party provided substantial support to alliance partners such as myself, AIADMK leaders managed the money themselves and, as alliance partners, we also bore many of our own expenses." To supplement the financial assistance of the AIADMK, the candidate mobilized an additional ₹17 lakh through a combination of party funds, personal sources, and external contributions, yet he recalls having been saddled with considerable post-poll debt. Pointing to the irony of campaign finance regulations, he grins when he confirms that even his personal spending, which amounted to a fraction of his AIADMK financier, exceeded the ceiling fixed by the Election Commission of India (ECI). Unfamiliar with the precise limit at that time, he fumbles for the figure, "The expenditure limit may have been around ₹8 lakh. Actually, it was probably ₹5 or ₹6 lakh; I don't recall."[32]

Despite financial support from allied parties, VCK organizers admit that monetary concerns factor among the "important criteria" taken into account when selecting party candidates, even stating a preference for "economically developed candidates." "Can this person spend for their campaign?" one organizer asks rhetorically, before adding, "If so, he will have an edge in a tight race." "When we select candidates," another party leader adds, "we ideally seek individuals with their own financial means; those who own a car and can spend on their own without expecting party money." Yet, what some party leaders describe as a pragmatic accommodation of "money power" has generated resentment among the party's rank and file who, following decades of committed activism, today feel shunted by party

organizers when their candidacy applications are bypassed in favor of wealthier aspirants. Longtime cadre contend that the party's *nouveau riche* joined only after Thirumaavalavan dissolved the party structure in 2007 and conducted a fresh membership drive designed to court non-Dalits and religious minorities in an effort to broaden its social base, eschew the 'Dalit' label, and lend credence to its self-designation as a common party of "democratic forces."[33] But, friction between grassroots activists from lower class backgrounds and the recent tier of middle and upper-middle class office bearers has grown more pronounced in recent years.[34]

The financial hurtle of electoral competition provides a perennial challenge for Tamil Nadu's largest Dalit party, which has typically relied on election coalitions to finance its campaigns. As we have seen, Dravidian coalitions provide allied parties with the financial, organizational, and technical support necessary to administer competitive election campaigns. Moreover, these electoral arrangements enable them to 'piggyback' in other areas of expenditure including print and televised media, statewide political marketing, and digital canvassing efforts. However, although monetary concerns incentivize electoral coalitions, these arrangements do not strictly entail a *quid pro quo* exchange of vote banks for financial support and campaign assistance because, as principal financiers, Dravidian parties set the terms of electoral participation. Commenting on the predicament faced by small parties, a leading figure in the Tamil Nadu Congress stressed, "Any small party that enters this electoral system, whether a caste-oriented or regional outfit, must find their way through the Dravidian parties simply to win a few seats in parliament or the state assembly."[35] The next section provides ethnographic insight into how smaller parties such as the VCK navigate tensions that arise through electoral competition.

2014 *Lok Sabha* Election

Across four weeks, I accompanied VCK General Secretary D. Ravikumar throughout his parliamentary bid in Tiruvallur District of northern Tamil Nadu. The following vignettes afford ethnographic insight into electoral competition, examining how VCK candidates experience an election campaign from within a major coalition and

attending to tensions that surface amidst electioneering procedures. In the following section, I examine instances where direct electoral participation sometimes appears to silence the voices often presumed to be 'surging' in India's ever-expanding democratic arena, exploring political negotiations and inter-party occasioned by electoral competition. The section opens with an account of coalition formation, describing an instance where seat sharing talks went awry and tensions spilled beyond the bargaining table into the vernacular press and public streets. Next, the paper unpacks two vignettes from the campaign trail, opening with an account of a mass urban procession followed by a description of day-to-day vote canvassing procedures. Drawing on ethnography from the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election, these vignettes afford ethnographic insight into how Dalit candidates representing autonomous political parties experience an election campaign in a reserved constituency and navigate the disputes that arise through coalition politics.

Assembling the Cast

On March 6, 2014, the VCK inked a seat sharing deal with the DMK for the forthcoming parliamentary contest.[36] In the previous 2009 *Lok Sabha* Election, the DMK allotted two seats to the VCK, Chidambaram and Villupuram constituencies, of which the party won the first handily by nearly one-lakh votes while suffering a narrow defeat in the latter, coming up short by less than half of a percentage point.[37] In 2014, VCK organizers sought to increase their yield, requesting five parliamentary constituencies: four seats across its stronghold in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu along with Dharmapuri in the western districts where recent anti-Dalit violence had effectively polarized the electorate and consolidated the Dalit vote-bank.[38] While the VCK did not realistically expect to reap all five seats, it anticipated brokering a deal for three or, at the very least, retaining its previous allotment of two 'winnable' seats. Instead, the DMK extended a solitary seat, Chidambaram, where VCK Chairman Thirumaavalavan served as the presiding Member of Parliament (MP).[39] After protracted albeit futile negotiations, VCK organizers begrudgingly accepted the DMK's offer.[40] Why had they settled for less?

Days earlier, the AIADMK expelled the beleaguered communist parties, CPI and CPI(M), from its electoral coalition.[41] In what many speculated to be an ill-advised bout of hubris but was later recognized as political genius, the AIADMK released an unprecedented declaration that it would contest the elections across Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry independently without brokering seat-sharing arrangements with allied partners.[42] Wary that the DMK might embrace the exiled Communists as prodigal sons, thereby prompting its own exodus from the coalition, the VCK reluctantly accepted the DMK's proposal.[43] This, VCK organizers acknowledged, was less than ideal, but they emphasized that a growing party such as theirs relies upon financial support as well as campaign assistance from an affluent, established party in order to conduct competitive campaigns.[44] Unsatisfied with the DMK's offer yet lacking viable alternatives, the VCK signed the seat sharing deal, accepting the solitary seat.

Much to the chagrin of DMK party leaders, this pronouncement incensed a sizeable portion of VCK cadre who interpreted the paltry offer as an affront to the party's rising popularity, with some individuals even going so far as to dub the affair an instance of "political untouchability." In pockets across the state's northern districts, VCK activists, likely at the behest of district leaders who harbored electoral ambitions, ripped DMK flags from flagpoles and effaced metal placards affixed to their pedestals.[45] At crowded intersections in Villupuram and Tindivanam, VCK supporters staged road *rokos* (blockages) and set ablaze effigies of DMK Chairman M. Karunanidhi as well as his son M. K. Stalin, DMK Treasurer and presumed heir-in-waiting.[46] Ushering the protest into print media, a media savvy VCK organizer facilitated an interview between party chairman Thirumaavalavan and *Dinamalar*, a popular Tamil daily, arranging for the article to run adjacent to a bolded caption proclaiming, "We are ready to contest alone." The DMK, whose Democratic Progressive Alliance touted strong support from minorities, particularly Dalits and Muslims, mollified the situation by allotting a second seat, Tiruvallur District situated just north of Chennai and bordering Andhra Pradesh.[47]

The DMK surrendered Tiruvallur, in part, because party leadership forecast dim prospects in the constituency. Despite losing the previous *Lok Sabha* election in the

constituency by a slim margin, recent intra-party squabbles had fractured the DMK's district administration into warring camps with little chance for pre-poll reconciliation.[48] Short on alternatives, the VCK, which altogether lacked a grassroots presence in Tiruvallur, accepted the seat on condition that the DMK finance both campaigns.[49] With the coalition assembled, the VCK understood that it faced an uphill battle in Tiruvallur, where it hoped to stitch together a collage of Ambedkarite organizations strewn across the district, all the while relying on DMK office bearers to mobilize their cadre and influence behind the VCK candidate. Mindful that an unprecedented five-front electoral contest would soon engulf Tamil Nadu, VCK leaders exuded cautious optimism on their prospects of winning both seats and, thereby, securing recognition from the Election Commission of India (ECI), but remained cognizant that their party could just as easily draw a blank, as it eventually did.

In private conversations, VCK organizers acknowledge that their party relies upon financial support to face elections, pointing to the previous *Lok Sabha* contest as emblematic of how fiscal constraints impact election time decision-making. After reviewing internal nominations for the party's second seat in 2009, VCK leaders expressed concern that current office bearers did not possess the financial clout necessary to finance a parliamentary campaign in Villupuram. Upon soliciting external nominations, the party initially fielded S. P. Velayudham, a party outsider and real estate mogul who pledged to spend generously, but VCK leadership rescinded his candidacy following media reports that detailed an ongoing inquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) into an alleged land scam to the tune of ₹171-crore.[50] Pressed for time, the VCK fielded K. Swamidurai, a retired Madras High Court justice and known DMK sympathizer, on the final day of nominations.[51] Describing the eleventh-hour nomination, party insiders profess that they selected the retired justice, a party outsider, at the behest of DMK leaders in exchange for, according to multiple sources, "more generous campaign support." One VCK leader, who stated his displeasure for the nomination without reservation, nonetheless underscored the

pragmatic need to field a wealthy candidate, recalling, "At the time, we felt that we could only win with money on our side."

Viewed against this backdrop, the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election signaled improvement for some cadre as both candidates, Thirumaavalavan and Ravikumar, are respected, core party leaders rather than outside nominees. Still, the consequences of financial constraints on the party's electoral participation provided a recurring motif in our conversations. Former party candidates acknowledge that their party, a relative newcomer in India's expanding democratic arena, relies heavily on financial support from established parties to finance its campaigns. Estimating a baseline expenditure, they project that, when supported by an affluent coalition partner, party candidates should nonetheless spend between ₹50 lakh and ₹1 crore to finance a parliamentary campaign. Despite underscoring the prominent role of what they refer to in English as "money power," they nevertheless recognize that their challenges exceed economic constraints. While the financial imperative of a competitive election campaign plays an important role, the VCK's challenges exceed well beyond economic means and are rendered visible through tensions that surface during campaign execution, to which I will now turn.

Negotiating Allies
On the morning of April 13, 2014, I accompany Ravikumar to the local office of S. M. Nasar, the burly, loquacious chairman of Avadi municipality. His smile radiates from beneath wire-rimmed spectacles when he boasts that this municipality, *his* municipality, is the largest in Asia, an apparent hyperbole. He hails from political pedigree, an established lineage of DMK office bearers, and, on the side, controls an expanding share of Tiruvallur's garment exporting business, fulfilling contracts and dispatching brand-name merchandise including Armani and Billabong across the globe. Recently, Nasar diversified his business portfolio to include brick kilns, thereby joining an already sizeable list of DMK organizers with a firm foothold in the district's burgeoning construction industry. Considering Tiruvallur's strategic location in northern Tamil Nadu encompassing the industrialized outskirts of north Chennai

replete with defense manufacturing, industrial production, and special economic zones (SEZs), construction provides a constant stream of revenue, aside from when it stalls during election campaigns.[52]

Today, Nasar will parade his prestige through the crowded streets of urban Avadi, publicly conveying his support for Ravikumar's candidacy while also displaying the sheer depth of his political clout, and, not to mention, keenly reminding those within earshot of *his* service to the constituency. Nasar orchestrated a massive urban procession that clogged the municipality's dense arterial roads. Cars, motorcycles, auto-rickshaws, bicycles, and even a few horse-drawn carriages eked a path through the town center at a snail's pace, waving colorful party flags and donning masks of DMK Chairman *"Kalaignar"* (the 'Artist') Karunanidhi as well as his son and assumed heir-in-waiting *"Thalabathi"* (the 'General') Stalin. The procession brought the city to a standstill for several hours as police cleared the pre-approved route and media personnel scurried across overpasses and rooftops to capture the best viewing angle, struggling to cram the entire spectacle within a solitary camera frame.

Ravikumar acknowledges that his campaign provides a prime opportunity for DMK office-bearers to demonstrate their influence and, moreover, 'grease' their cadre-base. But, he also admits that the Avadi rally achieved little by way of bolstering the public standing of his party as it was DMK imagery that captured the limelight: red and black flags fluttering in the breeze, cadre of both parties donning paper masks in the likeness of DMK leaders, and loudspeakers broadcasting DMK party songs. As the day-to-day execution of his campaign is financed and managed by the leading coalition partner, the candidates of smaller parties, Ravikumar quips, often feature as little more than "mute spectators" of their own campaigns. Many VCK cadre were unreserved in their criticism of the day's procession, charging that the VCK was *present* yet not *represented* during the event, galled that DMK iconography subsumed their party's visual presence. But, while these cadre bemoan that such spectacles merely augment the stature of the leading coalition party, they admit that mega-rallies generate unparalleled public visibility and media exposure that enables them to reach a mass audience and publicize their election symbol to the electorate.[53] During our

evening commute, Ravikumar confirms that such rallies, despite being "a public nuisance," generate the needed political visibility to bolster his candidacy. Still, the flustered candidate estimates that more than a thousand motorcycles draped with DMK party flags accompanied the procession, ratcheting up the rally's ostentatious display of DMK politics as well as the cost assessed to his campaign expenditure report.[54]

Although the Avadi rally augmented the visibility of Ravikumar's candidacy, it generated financial tensions that surfaced as the campaign progressed. Many DMK leaders, Nasar included, utilize campaign rallies to bolster their personal stature, shoring up support among their constituency and maintaining their vote bank. Although the candidates of small parties rely on the Dravidian-style electioneering to ensure media exposure and project electoral viability to the electorate, such political spectacles accrue on the candidate's expenditure report, which the Election Commission fixed at ₹70 lakh for the 2014 *Lok Sabha* Election.[55] Although candidates routinely flout the *Model Code of Conduct* governing electoral proceedings and evade prescribed spending limits, recent ECI monitoring procedures including video surveillance limit a candidate's ability to grossly under-declare the cost of public canvassing activities captured on film.[56] The pinch of financial monitoring became evident toward the end of the campaign when Ravikumar, caught between personal egos and campaign finance regulations, implored local DMK leaders to send back their fleets of SUVs wary that their presence might attract ECI video teams and press his assessed expenditure beyond the prescribed limit, prompting fear of disqualification.

In the aftermath of the Avadi rally, Ravikumar learned that the ECI had assessed ₹2.5 lakh to his expenditure report. With only ten days remaining in the campaign, and his expenditure blossoming, this posed a serious cause for concern. To further complicate matters, Avadi was in the final stages of preparation for a mega-rally, slated to draw the attendance of DMK state executives including its Chairman Mu. Karunanidhi, and projected to exceed ₹10 lakh in assessed gross expenditure. This poses a serious dilemma for the candidate as the office-bearers of the DMK, the principal financier of his campaign, display a clear tendency to organize ostentatious

displays of political spectacle, a politics of presence that projects their own authority, but which accrue on his expenditure report.[57] Tensions intensified as the campaign progressed and, at times, the candidate implored local leaders to send home their 'fleets', wary that ECI monitors, always lurking in near proximity, would record their presence and tip his assessed expenditure over the prescribed limit. Although, campaigns are often projected to spend upwards of ten times the sanctioned limit, the presence of video monitors heightened the already formidable challenge confronting campaign accountants tasked with maintaining 'clean books'.[58] At the same time, the self-interest of leading coalition figures to parade their prestige often overtakes the candidate's control of campaign execution.

While some DMK office-bearers utilize the campaign period to service their vote banks and gauge the public pulse, treating it as a mid-term progress report ahead of assembly and local body elections, not all party leaders are keen to bolster what they call a "non-party candidate." Whereas DMK executives finalize seat-sharing agreements with allied parties intent to bolster their electoral prospects by tapping additional vote-banks, district-level party organizers, those effectively tasked with administering the campaigns of allied candidates, may not share these incentives. Instead, local DMK leaders often regard allied candidates and cadre with suspicion, mindful to maintain their local support and wary to cede ground to a newcomer and potential future rival. Upon arriving in Tiruvallur, Ravikumar's first order of business is to solicit support from district DMK leaders including current and former MLAs and MPs. Aware that many of these individuals had vied for the seat he would contest, Ravikumar exercises a delicate finesse in these interactions, acting with deference toward DMK leaders and pledging to collaborate should he be elected. But, VCK campaign organizers sense their reluctance to deliver votes and express concern that local DMK organizers may pocket funds allocated by the party executive. Should the VCK win the seat, its victory would only augment the party's leverage in future negotiations to retain Tiruvallur. Expressing skepticism over the commitment of local allies to his campaign, Ravikumar muses, "Why would they even want to create another power-center in the district? It's not in their interest."

'You canvass your votes, we'll canvass ours…'

Ponnivalavan stands a hair above 5 feet tall, his modest stature belied by a bellowing voice that reverberates throughout the vehicle he deftly maneuvers across rickety rural roads. Initially jovial, Ponni grows increasingly riled as the campaign progresses. Although he is Ravikumar's personal assistant, our car is routinely pressed to the tail end of the entourage. He curses the cavalier demeanor of DMK bigwigs whose freshly minted Toyota SUVs blaze past the candidate's aged Mahindra Scorpio and chides their ability to wax poetically on Ravikumar's merits as the "DMK coalition candidate" while keeping a miserly finger on the purse strings. Despite his occasional rancor during our daily commute across the constituency, Ponni nevertheless acknowledges the critical importance of his party's alliance with the DMK. In particular, Ponni emphasizes that the DMK not only offers financial support and lends critical infrastructure but, moreover, mediates the contested physical and discursive terrain of caste in an electoral campaign.

Throughout rural Tamil Nadu, Dalits most often reside in a separate colony, or *cheri*, spatially segregated from the upper caste settlement, or *uur*; a caste geography that compartmentalizes the electorate and structures vote canvassing efforts. Ponnivalavan's observation materializes as we pass through a rural Vanniyar village, Tamil Nadu's single largest backwards caste community that is widely perceived to be at loggerheads with Dalits. As we proceed through a settlement marked with Vanniyar-caste iconography such as caste movement flags and freshly painted wall murals, I ask Ponni, "Would you canvass votes in this area without the DMK's presence?" He emits an uncomfortable chuckle, "No, no, we rely on the DMK to enter these areas. Without them, it would be difficult to canvass votes in OBC communities across the countryside and, in particular," he concedes, "among Vanniyar settlements."[59] For instance, in a later conversation, the Ravikumar acknowledged that the *Vanniyar Sangam* and PMK cadre can physically bar the VCK's entry into Vanniyar settlements, which the VCK can reciprocate to PMK candidates in Dalit colonies, but neither party can bar entry to the Dravidian parties and allied candidates.[60] On

multiple occasions, vehicles and motorcycles bearing VCK flags and banners stall at the entrance of these settlements, awaiting the candidate to proceed through the village accompanied by DMK leaders before rejoining the entourage as it departs for the next destination.[61] When I inquired about this practice with the candidate, he acknowledged that caste provides a basis for vote canvassing techniques in rural segments and confirmed, "the DMK doesn't care about caste, only winning," intimating that DMK organizers perceive VCK cadre as an electoral liability outside of Dalit colonies.[62]

In private conversations, DMK organizers conveyed a nagging concern that the VCK's reputation as a Dalit party may forfeit coalition votes, especially among OBC communities. As Dalit voters never form a political majority, OBC votes are critical for their electoral prospects, even in a reserved constituency where only Dalit candidates may contest. In their calculations, DMK organizers regard the VCK more as a liability than an asset in attracting Tiruvallur's non-Dalit electorate, and, in light of this, they carefully stage-managed the VCK's physical presence on the campaign trail, a concerted effort rendered visible through a marked division in spatial and rhetorical aspects of vote canvassing. In varying registers, DMK organizers advised VCK party workers, 'you canvass your votes, we'll canvass ours,' referring to a clear bifurcation of electioneering efforts. Twice daily, in morning and evening sessions, party workers flocked to communities across the district to engage in door-to-door canvassing. Knocking on doors and calling into open entryways, they distributed party flyers, interfaced with the electorate, and requested the community's support. Often, VCK cadre entered Dalit colonies harkening the merits of Ravikumar and their VCK party, whereas DMK party workers canvassed votes in the adjacent *uur*, or upper caste settlement, soliciting votes for the "DMK coalition candidate."

Vote canvassing relies heavily on local experts to navigate caste geography. As our aged Mahindra Scorpio maneuvers rickety rural roads, it develops a revolving door through which local DMK leaders file in and out. These individuals possess close familiarity with local geography, dictating which roads to navigate and specifying those to be avoided. More importantly, these guides possess intimate knowledge of the

caste and religious composition of local communities. A key piece of information is ascertained prior to our arrival in each settlement, "What is the main community residing in this area? This block? This colony?" The guides advise, 'Here is a Muslim enclave. Now we are approaching a Dalit colony. Next is the caste settlement.' These notes are scrawled on a loose sheet of paper and delivered by hand to the open-air jeep where the candidate, flanked by DMK organizers, greets local party leaders and community members assembled in a public space. While caste provides a basis for a division of canvassing efforts, it also shapes the rhetorical content of stump speeches. Political speeches are tailored to the audience, presenting targeted welfare schemes and identity concerns to Dalits, accentuating an anti-hindutva politics to religious minorities, and outlining an economic development program for those referred to collectively as "non-Dalits."

As we proceed through the village, the master of ceremony (MC) tailors the candidate's introduction accordingly. The MC waxes poetically on the merits and accomplishments of Ravikumar, but his affiliation differs according to local demographics. As we pass through an upper-caste settlement, the MC rattles off: "Ravikumar, our DMK candidate selected by our most esteemed *Kalaignar* ('Artist')! Ravikumar is *Thalabathi* ('General') Stalin's candidate! Ravikumar is *Kavignar* ('Poet') Kanimozhi's candidate! He is our DMK candidate! Ravikumar, candidate who will attain victory!" All the while, the MC elides mention of Ravikumar's political party, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi*, as well as the party's popular chairman, Thol. Thirumaavalavan. Upon entering a Dalit colony, the MC flips the script: "Ravikumar is the candidate of *Ezhuccitamizhar* ('Surging Tamilian') Thol. Thirumaavalavan! He is *Puratciyaaḷar* ('Revolutionary') Ambedkar's candidate! *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* candidate, Ravikumar! Our victorious candidate, Ravikumar!" In effect, the candidate's affiliation with the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* is carefully tailored to local caste and religious demographics. While the VCK brand reverberates across the *cheri*, it is muffled beyond the confines of Dalit colonies.

When we discuss vote canvassing techniques, the candidate confirms, "Despite being in a DMK coalition, VCK cadre will not canvass votes in many areas," noting

that DMK organizers "assume full control of the campaign and take charge of canvassing procedures outside of the *cheri* (Dalit colony)."[63] Similarly, Nilavanathu Nilavan, VCK Campaign Manager in Tiruvallur, stated that in many areas, and particularly rural pockets, Dalits focus on canvassing colony votes while DMK cadre concentrate their activities in non-Dalit settlements. Saying that this division is less pronounced in cities and large towns, he avers, "Depending on the local context, the VCK may or may not accompany the DMK to canvass non-Dalit votes in those areas."[64] In a separate conversation, VCK Headquarters Secretary Balasingam claims that party cadre will occasionally canvass votes in non-Dalit settlements, but only when accompanied by the DMK, inferring that VCK cadre most often limit their canvassing efforts to Dalit colonies. After a pause, he adds, "Otherwise problems may arise," intimating that their presence may aggravate communal tensions that jeopardize the party's prospects.[65]

In the *Model Code of Conduct* governing electoral procedures, the Election Commission of India stipulates: "There should be no appeal to caste or communal feelings for securing votes."[66] While explicit reference is generally avoided, caste maintains a near ubiquitous presence on the campaign trail. Stated candidly in private conversations, DMK organizers professed their view the VCK factors more as a liability than asset in constituencies where its candidates contest and, moreover, expressed general concern that the VCK's popular reputation as a Dalit outfit would forfeit coalition votes from OBC communities. In response, the DMK strategically mediated the VCK's physical and visual presence throughout the campaign, adhering to warily scripted division of vote canvassing labor and established blueprint for political rhetoric. While the VCK brand was ardently broadcast in Dalit colonies, it was conspicuous by its absence beyond these settlements. Ironically, a prime opportunity for the VCK to represent Dalit concerns under the gaze of incessant media scrutiny and public attention, instead, factors among the organization's most constrictive moments, DMK organizers advising in different registers, 'you canvass your votes, we'll canvass ours.'

Through its enactment, the campaign conceived of and discursively produced the electorate in terms of three distinct groups: caste minorities (*i.e.,* Dalits), religious minorities (*i.e.,* Muslims, Christians), and a broader caste society referred to by DMK organizers simply as "non-Dalits" or "the caste people." This tripartite partition of 'the people' provided the basis for a spatial and rhetorical division of vote canvassing practices that bracketed the bodies and interests of social minorities and reified the notion of a caste society as a coherent entity, producing 'a people' who are perceived as standard-bearers of general concerns. When I interviewed VCK organizers over the course of the campaign, my interlocutors referred to an apparent incongruity between the quantitative logic of electoral politics and the principle of strong minority representation as conceived by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. This distinction was embedded in syntax; they observed that the present system of electoral reservations provided for the selection of representatives *from* Dalit communities yet questioned whether these elected officials could serve as representatives *of* Dalit communities. While reservations, in principle, promote the political representation of Dalits, my interlocutors argue that the present method through which Dalit representatives are selected serves as an impediment to its realization. To examine this issue in ethnographic detail, I turn to how these VCK organizers conceptualize the present system of electoral reservations, conveying their impressions, experiences, and critiques.

Expressing Reservation

Wooden sticks strike taut leather, warmed only moments earlier over an open fire, emitting tight rhythmic beats that shatter the stillness of a sultry spring evening. A frontline of drummers furiously pound their *parai*, or traditional drum, as they guide our procession through the main street of a bustling Dalit colony in rural Gummidipoondi.[67] Our motley caravan swells as local residents, whose excitement is palpable, pour into the narrow lane to accompany us as we progress gradually through the colony. To their rear, an open-air jeep carrying the candidate tails the crowd followed by a caravan of SUVs and motorcycles waving colorful party flags that flutter

in the breeze. The *parai* is not struck lightly, but beaten aggressively to generate in unison tight metrical beats that crescendo steadily until suddenly peaking and then falling silent, returning stillness once again to the evening air. From behind the florescent glow of halogen lights affixed to the jeep's crossbar, Ravikumar stands adjacent to the master of ceremony, who broadcasts over the loudspeaker in a deafening roar, "*Ezhuccithamizhar* (the Surging Tamilian) Thol. Thirumaavalavan's candidate, *Puratciyaalar* (Revolutionary) Ambedkar's candidate, our very own *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* candidate, Ravikumar!"[68] Following a momentary pause, Ravikumar lifts the microphone to an uproarious cheer from the crowd.

Addressing the audience, Ravikumar first discusses his accomplishments as an ex-Member of the state legislative assembly (2006-2011) elected from Kattumannarkoil, Cuddalore District, and details a housing scheme he implemented for Dalit families that replaced thatched and mud huts with concrete houses.[69] Ravikumar pledges, if elected, to deliver the same benefit to Dalits in Tiruvallur District. Then, following a brief pause, he implores the audience to acknowledge the weight of the present election on Dalit communities across Tamil Nadu. He emphasizes, "A vote for the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* is not simply a vote for yourself and your personal interests. A vote for the VCK is also a vote for Dalit communities across Tamil Nadu." Presenting his candidacy as that of a surrogate representative for all Dalits and the VCK as a party built upon the preservation of Dalit rights and the community's development, he underscores the necessity of sending Dalit representatives to parliament who are not beholden to separate interests.[70] Ravikumar accredits the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* status as an autonomous political party for its ability to meaningfully address Dalit issues.

During our evening commute back to the residence-cum-election-office, Ravikumar elaborates upon his earlier statement and pinpoints a tension that inheres between Dalit representation and electoral reservations. Although electoral reservations were conceived on the basis of community to ensure that political minorities are represented within the general body politic, elections are conducted on the basis of territory, through spatially delimited joint electorates where Dalits are

insufficiently preponderant to elect a representative of their choice.[71] This, Ravikumar points out, creates a scenario such that Dalit representatives are elected not by Dalits, the presumed beneficiaries of electoral reservations, but by a popular majority that often prefers a candidate who will, to quote another VCK organizer, "take a soft-corner on Dalit issues."[72] Ravikumar emphasizes this distinction, questioning whether such elected officials are representatives *of* Dalit communities, *from* Dalit communities, or both. In effect, he asserts that, although reserved constituencies may ensure the selection of a Dalit candidate, Dalits never comprise an electoral majority and, therefore, lack the numerical strength to elect a candidate of their choice.[73] Elaborating his critique, Ravikumar guides our conversation to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's conceptualization of electoral reservations and minority representation.

Amidst a broader discussion of political franchise before the Southborough Committee in 1919, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar proffered a prescient critique of traditional joint electorates in which representatives are selected through territorially delimited constituencies. Presenting a distinction between a "government *for* the people" and a "government *by* the people," Ambedkar underscored the importance of composite representation for India's depressed classes, who are today referred to legally as Scheduled Castes or, in common parlance, as Dalits. Ambedkar stressed, "…it is not enough to be electors only. It is necessary to be law-makers."[74] In premonition that communal affiliation would structure voting preference, he anticipated that the concerns of electoral minorities would fail to garner sufficient political imperative in a system of territorially delimited joint electorates. In response, he averred, "Territorial constituencies fail to create popular Government because they fail to secure personal representation to members of minor groups."[75] While minority communities, if politically consolidated, may possess sufficient voting strength to influence electoral outcomes, such communities lack the ability to select their own representatives.

This observation, in turn, triggered a contentious political debate between Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Mohandas Gandhi regarding the electoral system best suited to provide for the political representation of minority communities. The dispute pivoted on whether Dalit representation was best served through reserved constituencies or

separate electorates. Gandhi lobbied for reserved constituencies in which, while only Dalit representatives may contest elections, their representatives are elected by popular suffrage in joint electorates. In staunch opposition to Gandhi's proposal, Ambedkar argued that joint electorates would effectively limit the role of Dalit communities to that of "electors" and reduce their so-called representatives to "bondsmen" who, in being elected by popular majority, would be most beholden to dominant political parties and the non-Dalit majority.[76] From Ambedkar's perspective, Gandhi's model would, at best, afford "nominal" representation for Dalit communities.[77]

In contrast, Ambedkar advocated for a system of separate electorates such that Dalits received a dual-voting right, casting ballots alongside the general population in joint electorates *sans* reservations as well as in separate electorates where they alone cast ballots to elect at-large Dalit representatives. A key distinction between the Ambedkarite and Gandhian models lies not only in the design of the electoral system, or in *how* a Dalit representative is selected, but on the basis of their selection, namely *who* elects Dalit representatives and, in implication, *to whom* they will be beholden. While reserved constituencies would stipulate that Dalit representatives be elected by popular suffrage in joint electorates, separate electorates provided for Dalits to both engage in the general body politic and ensured that the community elected representatives of their choice.[78] From Ambedkar's perspective, the purpose of a reservation policy was to "enable a minority to select candidates to the Legislature who will be *real and not nominal representatives* of the minority," stressing that Dalit representatives must be elected by their own community members in order to afford the necessary autonomy for these individuals act as "freemen."[79]

Before the Southborough Committee, Ambedkar argued that the allocation of a mere handful of legislative seats would not suffice for India's Dalits because "a legislative Council is not an old curiosity shop," but rather holds "the powers to make or mar the fortunes of society…"[80] In effect, Ambedkar stated forcefully that political representation did not provide an end in itself and, rather, underscored that "the effective use of political power" afforded a means through which to promote social and

economic development.[81] Ambedkar underscored, "The Depressed Classes must be given sufficient political power to influence legislative and executive action for the purpose of securing their welfare."[82] Further, he stressed that the "chief significance of suffrage or a political right consists in a chance for active and direct participation in the regulation of the terms upon which associated life shall be sustained."[83] Hence, for Ambedkar, meaningful political representation requires not only the presence of minorities within bodies of government, but moreover their capacity to wield sufficient influence and shape policy outcomes.

Ambedkar asserted that only separate electorates could ensure that these conditions be satisfied. In premonition that caste affiliation would structure voting preference, Ambedkar forewarned that joint electorates would create a scenario such that Dalit representatives could be co-opted by party politics and beholden to the interests of the political majority, which would, in effect, severely undermine their envisioned role as Dalit representatives. Ambedkar wrote:

> A joint electorate for a small minority and a vast majority is bound to result in a disaster to the minority. A candidate put up by the minority cannot be successful even if the whole of the minority were solidly behind him. The fact that a seat is reserved for a minority merely gives a security that the minority candidate will be declared elected. But it cannot guarantee that the minority candidate declared elected will be a person of its choice if the election is to be by a joint electorate. Even if a seat is reserved for a minority, a majority can always pick up a person belonging to the minority and put him up as a candidate for the reserved seat as against a candidate put up by the minority and get him elected by helping its nominee with the superfluous voting strength which is at its command. The result is that the representative of the minority elected to the reserved seat instead of being a champion of the minority is really the slave of the majority.[84]

This premonition, while proposed by Ambedkar more than fifty years earlier, bears a striking resemblance to the electoral impasse that *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers describe today. Taken collectively, their personal accounts of the party's electoral experience lend further credence to Ambedkar's premonition and, moreover, continue to animate his early critiques of the present system of electoral reservations.

"I'm telling you," Sinthanai Selvan says, "a reserved constituency is a humbug. In a reserved constituency, the candidate may be Scheduled Caste, but this sends the wrong impression that the Scheduled Castes have their own representative. These candidates are not representative of the SC community because they were not elected by our community."[85] Selvan, a VCK General Secretary, retrieves a book of Ambedkar's writing from the cupboard, emphasizing that only Ambedkar's model of separate electorates and dual-voting rights could ensure that Dalit communities receive "true representation" in state assemblies and the halls of parliament, whereas the present system of reserved constituencies within joint electorates prevent Dalits from electing their own representatives.[86] Selvan concedes, "Although the government has allocated reserved constituencies in which only SC candidates may contest, a popular majority will elect the candidate. Who is the majority? The majority is always caste Hindus."[87] So, he asks, "How can we refer to them as representatives of Dalits?"[88] As another party leaders stated, "In reserved constituencies, non-Dalit voters prefer to elect Dalit candidates that they perceive as their proxies—the weaker the candidate, the better his electoral prospects."[89]

Selvan reverts our attention to the blue tome of Ambedkar's writings and speeches by his side and then proclaims, "In the present electoral system, Dalits cannot be elected as *true* Dalit representatives."[90] Proceeding further, he contends, "Under the current system, there are no Dalit representatives in Parliament and the State Assembly. Although a Dalit may be elected, we cannot call him as a Dalit representative because he is not elected by the Dalit people."[91] Pointing to his experience as a VCK candidate for the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly (2006, 2011), he emphasizes, "The caste Hindus will only select a representative who will adjust with them. They want a candidate who will take a soft corner and accept their views, or who is willing to work under the agenda that they set. Only such a candidate will be elected in the present system."[92] While narrating his experience, Selvan refers to instances when, prior to the election, he was pressed to drop pending cases against upper castes that were filed previously under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 as a prerequisite to coalition partners

consenting to canvass non-Dalit votes on his behalf.[93] Over the course of our conversation, he continually returns a core acknowledgement, "Electoral politics compels compromise," which, as he underscores, undercuts the ability of Dalit elected representatives to meaningfully address Dalit concerns.[94]

When I juxtapose this early conversation with a more recent discussion, which occurred nearly five years apart, Selvan's position on electoral alliances altered markedly upon further experience. In 2009, he accentuated the necessity of "capturing power" to justify electoral alliances with Dravidian parties, referring to such arrangements as a pragmatic solution that bolstered the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* probability of dispatching its members to the state legislature and national parliament. Selvan emphasized that electoral alliances did not imply ideological congruence with allied parties, but merely served as a strategic platform to strengthen electoral performance. At the time, Selvan suggested:

> Through the electoral process we can consolidate the Dalit people and, in doing so, we can influence the results. To gain political power we must forge alliances with Dravidian parties… Aligning with the DMK does not mean that I subscribe to their ideology or their objectives; an electoral alliance strictly implies an arrangement for power sharing. That's all. We have taken this stance.[95]

Further, Selvan emphasized the practical necessity of electoral alliances to finance and facilitate the campaign, but underscored that such alliances do not imply ideological congruence between allied parties. Rather, he emphasized that these temporary arrangements are strictly forged on the basis of "power sharing."[96]

When we revisited this topic nearly five years later, Selvan's critique of the current system of political reservations had remained consistent, namely that it does not produce strong Dalit representatives, but he had revised his position on the present strategy of electoral alliances. He acknowledged that many party members feel that "in order to grasp political power you should band together with a dominant party; you must share with them and only then you can attain some degree of authority."[97] But, he proceeds to admit, "This method is not yielding success. Last election we lost all ten

seats! We were defeated in ten seats!"[98] Today, he acknowledges, "When we share power, we cannot take the same stand that we previously took against [caste] atrocities or state terrorism."[99] He stalls and, after a temporary pause, continues, "Power sharing entails a constant compromise. We once spoke of capturing power, but our present scenario cannot even be called power sharing, rather, it's begging."[100]

Conclusion

Ethnography from the campaign trail affords a unique vantage point to question what work electoral democracy does for the wide range of new actors populating India's rapidly expanding political sphere. As elaborated earlier, Christophe Jaffrelot captured fundamental shifts in the social demographics of elected representatives, which he interpreted to signal a democratization of India's once closed political arena. But, more recently, skeptics including Niraja Jayal have alleged that this 'descriptive' democratization of state assemblies and the halls of parliament has failed to generate improved developmental outcomes. Moreover, Yogendra Yadav corroborated Jayal's contention when he claimed that a "deepening of 'descriptive representation' co-exists… with a thinning of 'substantive representation'."[101] But, these scholars based their arguments on measures of developmental outcomes without investigating why descriptive representation may appear inept to yield more equitable patterns of development. Scholars have responded to this contention with historically sensitive, ethnographically informed analyses that foreground the political experience of Dalit representatives in order to investigate the constraints under which they function, *when* and *if* elected. Further, as Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany observe, elected Dalit representatives are often discouraged from "taking too active a political interest in issues of greatest relevant to their own people."[102] This chapter has provided an ethnographic lens into electoral competition to further nuance our understanding of the procedures through which Dalit representatives are selected and, thereby, to investigate the fraught relationship between electoral democracy and robust minority representation.

Democratic politics, elections, and political representation, a triad that assumes center stage in scholarship on modern India, are often clubbed together as if a natural triumvirate. I suggest that we interrogate the relationship of these three pillars of political theory without assuming a natural congruence. Taken collectively, the democratic trajectory of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* signals that integration into electoral democracy need not imply assimilation within the political community. In fact, in the direct experience of VCK party candidates, electoral campaigns entail a constant bracketing of persons and interests, a public enactment of *who* can speak on *what* issues. When the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* honed its politics on issues surrounding land rights, caste violence, social justice, and economic development as a social movement in the 1990s, it developed a reputation as forceful representatives of Dalit causes and as a political alternative to existing political parties. But, following the movement's transition into electoral politics, this reputation has routinely factored as a primary obstacle to electoral success, even in reserved constituencies where candidates are widely presumed to be representatives of Dalits.

In this chapter, I have investigated how VCK candidates experience an election campaign in a reserved constituency as a smaller player within an influential political coalition. By way of contrast, Mukulika Banerjee recently lent an ethnographic perspective to the study of elections in which she "focuses on ordinary Indians' *experience* of elections, and on what elections *mean* to them."[103] She writes, "For these voters, Election Day creates a time out of time, a carnival space, where the everyday reality of inequality and injustice is suspended, and popular sovereignty asserted for a day."[104] From the perspective of VCK activists and candidates, Election Day and, more broadly, election campaigns may project the façade of "a carnival space," but are highly scripted events that mask rather than suspend everyday realities and, thereby, actually serve to undermine their struggle to secure equal recognition within democratic politics. Further, canvassing strategies themselves are sometimes premised upon the presence and reproduction of not only inequality, but also exclusion. My ethnography corroborates Michael Saward's observation that "elections can, in some circumstances, act to restrict the nature and range of representative perspectives and

voices, and that these restrictions can be democratically troubling."[105] Or, framed differently, it offers ethnographic insight into Ravikumar's quip that Dalit candidates often feature as "mute spectators" of their campaigns, illustrating how elections may work to constrain rather than promote robust minority representation.

Six months before VCK General Secretary D. Ravikumar descended beneath the halogen glow and media buzz of the election campaign, he reflected upon the challenges of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* democratic transition and, when he did so, deployed the same motif as Banerjee, albeit in a remarkably different way.[106] Cautioning against the fanfare that sometimes celebrates the Dalit occupation of the political sphere as if it signaled a triumph in and of itself, Ravikumar instead describes such forays into the public domain as carnivals that generate "a temporary effect" among the people.[107] Citing Mikhail Bakhtin's work on "the carnivalesque," Ravikumar describes the democratic challenge confronting *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics as a struggle to harness and concretize these temporary effects and, in doing so, to convert the carnival into a rebellion.[108] He recollects, "Earlier, we worked like that," reminiscing about how the movement consolidated Dalits *en masse* across the 1990s as a stout political force.[109] But, Ravikumar fears that the compulsions of electoral politics have sapped the movement's earlier radicalism, causing him to question whether the rebellion has devolved back into a carnival. "It has all become a carnival, a festival; it's a political spectacle," he says, "and I am not able to see the same effect."[110] Reflecting upon the party's shortcomings in the electoral arena, Ravikumar surmises, "A Dalit party must have a vision beyond elections. We have to return to our basics."[111] Then, he adds, "I want to re-commit myself to Dalit politics; maybe it's time to quit elections."[112]

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[1] Yogendra Yadav, "Reconfiguration in Indian Politics: State Assembly Elections 1993-1995," in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *State and Politics in India*. OUP: Delhi, 1997, p180.
[2] Ibid. Also see: Yogendra Yadav, "Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge: trends of bahujan participation in electoral politics in the 1990s," in Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava and Balveer Arora (eds), *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*. OUP: Delhi, 2002, 120.
[3] Zoya Hasan, *Democracy and the Crisis of Inequality*. Delhi: Primus Books, 2014: 444.

[4] Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (eds.), *Rise of the Plebeians?: The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*. Routledge: London, 2009. For alternative interpretations of this 'communalization' of politics, see: D.L. Sheth, "Caste and Class: Social Reality and Political Representations," in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.), *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*. London: Anthem Press, 2004; Dipankar Gupta, "The certitudes of caste: When identity trumps hierarchy," in Gupta ed. *Caste in Question: Identity or hierarchy?* Contributions to Indian Sociology Occasional Studies, Sage Publications, 2004, ix-xxi.

[5] Niraja Gopal Jayal, "The Limits of Representative Democracy," in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXII, No. 3, December 2009, pp326-337.

[6] Jayal 334

[7] Ibid.

[8] Rupa Viswanath, "Being Seen and Being Heard: The Depressed Classes, Political Representation and the Extrapolitical in Colonial Madras," presented as the Workshop "Extrapolitics: Indian Democracy and the Political Outside." University of Goettingen, 5 December 2012.

[9] Jayal's critique echoes Pitkin's early writing on representation, which distinguished between "substantive representation," which stipulated that a representative "act for" those represented whereas descriptive representation merely entailed "standing for" those represented. See: Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967: 60-91, 112-143

[10] For example, see Chapters 7 & 8 in Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, poverty and the state in modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: pp203-257; Alistair McMillan, *Standing at the Margins: Representation and Electoral Reservations in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.

[11] The literature of election campaigns is limited, with notable recent contributions form Mukulika Bannerjee and an edited volume brought forward by A. M. Shah. See: Mukulika Banerjee, *Why India Votes?* New Delhi: Routledge, 2014; A. M. Shah (ed.), *The Grassroots of Democracy: Field Studies of Indian Elections*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007.

[12] See: Jeffrey Witsoe, *Democracy Against Development: Lower Caste Politics and Political Modernity in Postcolonial India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013; Jeffrey Witsoe (2011), "Postcolonial Democracy: An examination of the Politics of Lower-Caste Empowerment in North India," in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 113, No. 4, pp. 619-631; Craig Jeffrey, Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery (2008), "Dalit Revolution? New Politicians in Uttar Pradesh, India," in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 67, No. 4, pp. 1365-1396; Barbara Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Craig Jeffrey (2002), "Caste, Class, and Clientelism: A Political Economy of Everyday Corruption in Rural North India," in *Economic Geography*, Col. 78, No. 1, pp. 21-41; Craig Jeffrey and Jens Lerche (2000), "Stating the Difference: State, Discourse and Class Reproduction in Uttar Pradesh, India," in *Development and Change*, Vol. 31, pp. 857-878.

[13] Anita Sharan, "Campaign 2009 is cool and costly," in *Hindustan Times* on April 8, 2009.

[14] M.V. Rajeev Gowda and E. Sridharan. 2012. "Reforming India's Party Financing and Election Expenditure Laws," in *Election Law Journal*, 11:2 (2012): 235. Moreover, their study demonstrates a correlation between candidate expenditure and vote-share, indicating that those who spend more tend to reap electoral returns on their investment. See Gowda and Sridharan (2012) 234.

[15] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013.

[16] Gowthama Sannah, interview by the author, February 18, 2014.

[17] J. Gowthama Sannah, interview by author, February 18, 2014. Sannah served as VCK Propaganda Secretary at the time of interview but has subsequently been appointed VCK Deputy General Secretary.

[18] Sandhya Ravishankar, "Old wine, new bottle: The medium may have changed but the message remains the same in Tamil Nadu," *Scroll.in*, May 11, 2016.

[19] R.K. Radhakrishnan, "We pay, you vote," *Frontline*, July 6, 2016.

[20] Sreenivasan Jain, "Almost Every Jayalalithaa Freebie, Including a Goat, Under one Tree," *NDTV*, April 20, 2016.

[21] V. Prem Shanker, "Tamil Nadu polls: How money is used as instrument to woo voters," *Economic Times*, May 16, 2016.

[22] For an excellent critique of the popular discourse on "vote-buying," see: Lisa Björkman, ""You can't buy a vote": Meanings of money in a Mumbai election." *American Ethnologist* 41, issue 4 (2014): 617-634.

[23] In a 1962 speech at Kancheepuram, DMK founder C. N. Annadurai appealed that party supporters not allow cash payments from Congress to sway their voting preferences. Sam from The Hindu Centre brought this video to my attention.

[24] V. Prem Shanker, "Tamil Nadu polls: how money is used as an instrument to woo voters," *Economic Times*, May 16, 2016; Ilangovan Rajasekaran, "The 'M' factor," *Frontline*, May 11, 2016.

[25] CMS-India Corruption Study, *Lure of money in lieu of votes in Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections – The trend: 2007-2014* (New Delhi: CMS Research House, 2014).

[26] Sarah Hiddleston, "Cash for votes a way of political life in South India," *The Hindu*, March 16, 2011; A.S. Nazir Ahamed, "Cash-for-vote: Genesis of the 'Thirumangalam formula'," *The Hindu*, May 14, 2016.

[27] R.K. Radhakrishnan, "We pay, you vote," *Frontline*, July 6, 2016.

[28] Both figures pertain strictly to cash distribution and exclude costs incurred by campaign activity. See: Sreenivasan Jain, "Headline you won't read post-poll…" in Business Standard, May 23, 2016; "'Cash-for-vote may result in distribution of Rs 6,000 – 9,000 cr in TN'," *Times of India*, March 31, 2016.

[29] V. Prem Shanker, "Tamil Nadu polls: How money is used as instrument to woo voters," *Economic Times*, May 16, 2016. Although such a sum may appear outlandish, CNN Money cited cites one source that suggested upwards of $2 billion in "black money" may have been spent to influence the 2012 assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh. Nick Thompson, "International campaign finance: How do countries compare?" *CNN Money*, March 5, 2012. Also, just prior to the 2016 assembly polls across India, as much as $9 billion dollars entered the Indian economy, leading some to suspect that the upsurge in cash was related to the forthcoming assembly polls. See: Charles Riley, "Is vote-buying behind India's $9 billion dollar cash spike?" *CNN Money*, April 11, 2016.

[30] In fact, such capital drives and party donations are well established. For example, *The Hindu* reported that three DMK Districts Secretaries representing Tiruvannamalai, Kancheepuram, and Tiruvallur together contributed more than ₹20 crore to the general party fund over a five-year period beginning 2010-2011. In total, the party declared ₹158.52 crore in contributions and income, with far greater sums likely undeclared. See: B. Kolappan, "DMK ahead in receiving donations, ex-Ministers top contributions," *The Hindu*, March 25, 2016.

[31] Whereas many election contracts do not run through party-affiliated businesses, for instance the turn toward digital advertising has recruited PR and IT firms into electoral proceedings, parties are nonetheless working to develop their own IT teams. The AIADMK reported amassing a team of nearly 82,000 "IT warriors" focused on digital canvassing during the 2016 Tamil Nadu State Assembly Election. See: Staff Reporter, "Poll Diary—May 15, 2016," *The Hindu*, May 15, 2016.

[32] The ECI fixed a ₹10 lakh ceiling for candidate expenditure in the 2006 Tamil Nadu Assembly Election.

[33] In September 2007, VCK leadership passed the Velachery Resolution, which dissolved the party structure and solicited fresh applications from previous office bearers as well as new party members. The membership drive was designed, in part, to attract influential non-Dalits to join the party by offering plum posts. This, of course, riled many longitudinal VCK cadre. See: Hugo Gorringe, "Interview with Gowthama Sannah, Propaganda Secretary of the VCK," *The South Asianist*, 2:1 (2013): 76-77.

[34] Hugo Gorringe (2013), "From untouchable to Dalit and beyond: New directions in south Indian Dalit politics," in *The South Asianist*, 2:1 (2013): 51.

[35] S. Peter Alphonse, interview by author, November 6, 2013.

[36] IANS, "DMK inks seat sharing agreement with Dalit party VCK," *Economic Times*, March 6, 2014.

[37] Thirumaavalavan won his bid by 99,083 votes whereas Swamidurai lost by 2,797 votes. Election Commission of India (ECI), "Election Results – Full Statistical Reports," http://eci.nic.in. Accessed December 10, 2014. VCK organizers in Villupuram attribute Swamidurai's narrow defeat to the District Secretary of their DMK ally, who they argue worked behind the scenes to ensure that the VCK did not win a seat in "his" district. In response, the VCK cadre in Villupuram pledged to work diligently "to ensure his defeat" in the Villupuram assembly segment in the 2011 MLA election, prompting him to contest from Tirukkoyilur in the 2016. Thalaiyaari, interview by author, August 14, 2016.

[38] See: R. Ilangovan, "Caste Fury," *Frontline*, Vol. 29, Iss. 4, December 1-14, 2012.

[39] IANS, "DMK allots Chidambaram constituency to VCK," *Business Standard*, March 6, 2014.

[40] VCK General Secretary D. Ravikumar describes these negotiations as overtly friendly, yet tense discussions. Describing friendly banter back and forth, he states that Dravidian parties will always feign surprise that VCK leaders are not satisfied with their initial offering. Describing these negotiations as "a friendly exchange," he also acknowledges that party cadre can be used as leverage beyond the bargaining table; but, he contends that the protests in 2014 may have backfired and adversely affected the VCK's ability to draw DMK support on Election Day. D. Ravikumar, interview by author, July 29, 2016.

[41] S. Bridget Leena, "AIADMK parts ways with Left parties in Tamil Nadu," *Mint*, March 6, 2014.

[42] Syed Muthahar Saqaf, "AIADMK going it alone for the first time," *The Hindu*, March 10, 2014.

[43] VCK insiders familiar with the 2014 seat sharing negotiations contend that the DMK mislead them, stating that it could only offer one seat to the VCK in order free up additional seats to bring the Communist parties into the alliance. According to party insiders, the DMK appears to have reneged on this promise and, upon finalizing the single-seat allotment to the VCK, made no more than an overture to the Communist parties.

[44] Gopinath 'Che Guevara', interview by author, May 1, 2014; Balasingam, interview by author, April 19, 2014; D. Ravikumar, personal communication, April 18, 2014; Gowtham Sannah, interview by author, February 18, 2014.

[45] Express News Service, "DMK offers one more seat as a VCK protest snowballs," *Indian Express*, March 9, 2014.

[46] K. Ezhilarasan and Karal Marx L, "VCK Fumes Over LS Raw Deal, Burns MK Effigy," *Indian Express*, March 8, 2014.

[47] B. Kolappan, "DMK mollifies VCK with one more seat," *The Hindu*, March 9, 2014.

[48] Some of these leaders were closely associated with DMK Chairman Karunanidhi's son M. K. Azhagiri who was expelled from the DMK a few months earlier.

[49] A VCK party insider recalled that DMK offered the Tiruvallur seat on condition that no further negotiations would take place. The DMK agreed to finance both campaigns and DMK Chairman Mu. Karunanidhi personally requested that the VCK field its general secretary, D. Ravikumar, as the second candidate. Ravikumar has long acted as a conduit between DMK and VCK. Tiruvallur did not even factor among the initial list of five constituencies that VCK presented to DMK during seat sharing talks.

[50] Express News Service, "VCK Candidate in land cheating case," *Indian Express*, April 10, 2009; Special Correspondent, "Anticipatory bail for VCK functionary," *The Hindu*, May 1, 2009, p8.

[51] Special Correspondent, "VCK changes its Villupuram candidate," *The Hindu*, April 15, 2009; Special correspondent, "Former judge files nomination from Villupuram," *The Hindu*, April 25, 2009, p9; Special Correspondent, "Total of 1298 nominations received for 39 seats," *The Hindu*, April 25, 2009, p14.

[52] For a detailed discussion of the relationship of election finance to construction, see Devesh Kapur and Milan Vaishnav (2013), "Quid Pro Quo: Builders, Politicians, and Election Finance in India" (Working Paper No. 276). Retrieved from Center for Global Development: www.cgdev.org. Published 2011 (Updated 3/29/2013).

[53] Small parties rely upon broad media exposure to broadcast their election symbols to the general electorate. As the VCK is a "registered" with yet "unrecognized" by the Election Commission of India, its symbol may change from one election cycle to next. In 2009 and 2014, the party lost court bids to be awarded the "star" symbol, which is popularly associated with the VCK party flag because the symbol had been allocated to the Mizo National Front in Mizoram. A full week into the campaign, the ECI allocated the "ring" symbol to the VCK. Election symbols assist voters, especially those who are illiterate, in identifying their candidate on the ballot.

[54] In many regards, this vignette corroborates Lisa Björkman's description of politics as street theatre. See: Lisa Björkman, "The Ostentatious Crowd: Public protest as mass-political street theatre in Mumbai." *Critique of Anthropology* 35, no. 2 (2015): 142 – 165.

[55] For more information on political finance and election campaigns, see Michael Collins, "Cash, Candidates, and Campaigns," in Center for the Advanced Study of India's (CASI) *India in Transition* online blog: https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/michaelcollins.

[56] Acknowledging that candidates flout regulatory attempts with ease, the ECI recently implemented new video-monitoring procedures to surveil and assess individual expenditure. Prior to the campaign period, the ECI distributes a rate-card that details district-specific rates of assessment for a broad

spectrum of expenses ranging from individual plastic chairs (₹9) and cloth party flags (₹70) to per diem valuations for PA-system (₹2500-7500) and vehicle (₹800-5500) hire, prescribed rates that vary depending upon the number of speakers and type of vehicle. See: Election Commission of India (ECI), "Proceedings of the District Election Officer and District Collector, Tiruvallur District, Tiruvallur." Dated March 27, 2014.

[57] It should be noted that the DMK channels campaign expenditure through its party office-bearers. A limited subset of funds is given to the VCK party to manage its own expenses.

[58] A.T. (op-ed), "Campaign Finance in India: Black Money Power," in *The Economist*, May 4, 2014. www.theeconomist.com. Also: Devesh Kapur and Milan Vaishnav (2013), "Quid Pro Quo: Builders, Politicians, and Election Finance in India" (Working Paper No. 276). Retrieved from Center for Global Development: www.cgdev.org. Published 2011 (Updated 3/29/2013).

[59] V. Ponnivalavan, interview by author, April 3, 2014.

[60] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, July 29, 2016. This tension became immediately clear in 2016, when VCK candidates contested outside of a Dravidian coalition. Their candidates were physically barred entry into many backwards caste villages across the northern districts, particularly in rural areas.

[61] Some VCK workers interpret improvement over the past fifteen years of electoral participation, noting that in the party's inaugural election, the 1999 General Election, candidates Thol. Thirumaavalavan and D. Periyasamy were physically barred from entering non-Dalit settlements across Chidambaram and Perambalur Districts.

[62] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, April 18, 2014.

[63] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, April 18, 2014.

[64] Nilavanathu Nilavan, interview by author, April 21, 2014.

[65] Further, Balasingam suggests that these tensions were much more pronounced in the VCK's campaign in Chidambaram District, where the Vanniyar-oriented *Pattali Makkal Katchi* (PMK) has a stronger presence. Balasingam, interview by the author, April 19, 2014.

[66] Election Commission of India, Model Code of Conduct for the Guidance of Political Parties and Candidates. www.eci.nic.in (Accessed August 11, 2015).

[67] The parai is a traditional drum made of animal hide affixed with tamarind paste to a circular wooden base. Before performing, drummers warm the parai's hide over a hearth or fire, which tautens the leather and ensures crisp beats. The parai is often associated with Tamil Nadu's largest Dalit community, the paraiyars," or those who play the parai, has traditionally been understood to indicate a community that was required to provide drumming 'services' during funerary functions as a part of their caste obligations.

[68] VCK party rhetoric refers to Thol. Thirumaavalavan as *Ezhuchithamizhar*, which may be translated as 'the surging Tamilian' or 'the Tamilian who is rising up'. Ambedkar is often referred to as "*Puratchiyaalar* Ambedkar," or 'Revolutionary Ambedkar'.

[69] Ashwarya VP, "Slum-free Vellore town could be a reality soon," in *The New Indian Express*, July 17, 2012. www.newindianexpress.com; Special Correspondent, "Kalaignar Housing Scheme inaugurated," in The Hindu, September 3, 2010. www.thehindu.com; See, "*Kalaignar Veedu Vazhangum Thittam*," commonly translated as Kalaignar's Housing Scheme, at the Government of Tamil Nadu Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Development website: www.tnrd.gov.in/schemes.

[70] Similarly, Aloor Shanavas, a VCK Deputy General Secretary and party candidate in the 2016 state assembly election, projects VCK candidates as surrogate representatives tasked with representing the interests of Dalits as well as religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians.

[71] Lani Guinier has offered a thorough synopsis of challenges confronting minority representation in single-member districts. See: Lani Guinier, "Groups, Representation, and Race Conscious Districting: A Case of the Emperor's Clothes," in *The Tyranny of the Majority*. New York: The Free Press, 1994: 119-156.

[72] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by the author, January 12, 2009.

[73] This, in the past, has compelled the VCK to joined electoral coalitions in anticipation that allied parties will deliver sufficient non-Dalit votes. Today, there is a tentative acknowledgement among part organizers that these votes, more often than not, are not transferred efficiently.

[74] Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "Evidence before the Southborough Committee on franchise. Examined on 27th January 1919" in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979 (2014), p251. Italics not in original.

[75] "Evidence before the Southborough Committee on franchise" 252

[76] Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "Gandhi and his Fast," in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 5, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979 (2014), p351.

[77] Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve It," in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979 (2014), p274.

[78] Separate electorates were not intended to provide a permanent solution, but rather temporary institution for ten years until reassessment. See Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "Gandhi and his Fast," in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 5, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979 (2014).

[79] "Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve it" 274; italics not in the original. For a discussion of "freemen" versus "bondsmen," see Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "Gandhi and his Fast."

[80] Ibid

[81] Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "Held at Bay," in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 5, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979 (2014), p271.

[82] Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "Under the Providence of Mr. Gandhi," in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 5, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979 (2014), p309.

[83] "Evidence Before the Southborough Committee," 265.

[84] "Gandhi and his Fast" 347

[85] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by the author, January 13, 2009. Selvan contested legislative assembly elections from Mugaiyur, Villupuram District (2006) and Thittakudi, Cuddalore District (2011). In both contests, Selvan finished in second place, losing by 19,506 and 12,642 votes, respectively. For complete data, see the website of the Election Commission of India: www.eci.nic.in. M. Arivudainambi expressed a similar sentiment, stating: "The elction system is utterly flawed. Although they may declare a constituency as a reserved constituency, our Dalit people are unable to elect their own real representatives. Only a candidate who favors the upper castes can win the election." M. Arivudainambi, interview by author, October 20 ,2013.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid. Che Guevara makes a similar argument following the 2014 General Election. He emphasizes, "Earlier, we were always voting for someone else. We understood that even the candidates fronted by dominant parties in reserved constituencies were not our representatives." Che Guevara, interview by author, May 1, 2014.

[89] Thalaiyaari, interview by author, August 14, 2016.

[90] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by the author, January 13, 2009

[91] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by the author, January 13, 2009.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Similarly, Hugo Gorringe records a 2011 instance where a Dalit candidate for panchayat president pledged to resolve caste disputes without resorting to the SC/ST POA Act (1989) as a key plank of his electoral platform. With this key concession, Gorringe notes that he emerged victorious from a 2011 panchayat election and highlights the degree of compromise required for Dalits to remain electorally 'competitive'. See Hugo Gorringe, "Legislating for Liberation? Dalit Electoral Politics and Social Change in Tamil Nadu," in Clarinda Still (ed.), *Dalits in Neoliberal India: Mobility or Marginalisation?* New Delhi: Routledge, 2014: 148.

[94] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by the author, January 13, 2009.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by the author, August 2, 2013.

[98] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by the author, August 2, 2013.

[99] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by the author, August 2, 2013.

[100] Sinthanai Selvan, interview by the author, August 2, 2013.

[101] Yogendra Yadav, "Representation," in Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India*. OUP: Delhi, 2011, p347.

[102] Mendelsohn and Vicziany (1998) 256

[103] Mukulika Banerjee, *Why India Votes?* Delhi: Routledge, 2014, p19; emphasis in original. Also see: Mukulika Banerjee, "Sacred Elections," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 17, pp. 1556 – 1562.

[104] *Why India Votes?* 3

[105] Michael Saward (2009), "Authorisation and Authenticity: Representation and the Unelected," in *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 17, No. 1: p2.

[106] While Banerjee deploys an analytic of the "carnivalesque" in a very similar manner to Mikhail Bakhtin, she neither cites nor refers directly from his work.

[107] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013.

[108] See: Mikhail Bakhtin, Helene Iswolsky (trans.), *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

[109] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013.

[110] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013.

[111] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013.

[112] D. Ravikumar, interview by author, September 13, 2013.

<div align="center">

CONCLUSION

Whither *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* Politics?

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This dissertation has presented an empirical study of political representation drawn from an ethnography of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics in Tamil Nadu, India. As a diachronic account of political formation, the project has examined a layering of strategies deployed by *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* organizers to represent Dalit concerns over the course of nearly three decades. Established in 1982 under the leadership of A. Malaichamy, the early movement, comprised of a small collective of Dalit lawyers, government employees, and student activists, embraced legal advocacy as an instrument to represent Dalit concerns. These individuals submitted formal legal petitions through official government channels that advocated for the realization of what they considered to be their fundamental rights including demands for equitable access to social and economic development. When these petitions failed to garner a satisfactory response from state authorities, the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* turned to the public sphere as a complementary forum to air grievances and make political claims. Espousing contentious street politics as a technique to force state authorities to reckon with or, at the least, to acknowledge their demands, movement activists engineered tactical obstructions of critical transportation infrastructure, a corporeal politics that blockaded major roads and railway lines with the deliberate intent to attract media coverage to amplify their voice and visibility, and, thereby, to broadcast their political demands. Confronted, at once, by the selective use of preventative detention laws and the transformation of backwards caste associations into political parties, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* leaders tentatively waded into electoral democracy in 1999, seeking to convert their upwelling of popular support into a viable vote-bank that would augment their leverage with state authorities.

The transition of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* into electoral democracy need not be interpreted as a radical aberration from its earlier platform as much as a natural extension of party politics that recognized electoral democracy as the formative site of political struggle. By the late-1990s, VCK leaders envisioned the state less as a

recipient of petition (i.e., Chapter 1) or as the object of protest (i.e., Chapter 2), but as an ensemble of institutions that demarcated the new locus of political struggle (i.e., Chapter 3). In effect, democratic politics was reimagined as the frontlines of a 'battlefield', echoing the evocative motto of the Black Panthers of America, which defined politics as a "war without bloodshed."[1] While the opening three chapters chronicled the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* transition from boycotts to ballots, the latter two chapters provided an ethnographic lens into how VCK movement organizers experience democratic institutions and navigate electoral competition. The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, which had earlier pledged "to turn the history of Tamil Nadu on its head," found itself mired in an intricate web of political negotiations that its leaders describe in terms of a steep trade-off between robust Dalit advocacy and electoral viability. VCK leaders initially justified the ostensible dilution of their earlier platform under the pretense of "capturing power," but today these figures profess that electoral politics sapped their early radicalism and undercut their capacity for robust advocacy. Instead of affording greater latitude to express grievances and represent Dalit concerns, party organizers today argue that electoral democracy instead contained their early program.

Analysis of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* tenure in electoral democracy fills a lacunae in the literature on caste politics and democracy in modern India, which all too often presents electoral democracy as a *telos*, the natural end-point for caste mobilization. As a counterpoint, this study examines democratic integration in retrospect, through ethnography of political leadership that conveys how these figures understand their transition today, now with the benefit of more than fifteen years of hindsight. A study of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics illustrates that democratic integration does not inherently bolster the representation of minority interests, but, from the perspective of movement organizers, it mired their party within a web of compromises in response to electoral calculations that compromised its early platform and undercut its capacity for robust Dalit advocacy. The study cautions against a general theory of democratization, one that implicitly (or explicitly) correlates democratic integration with political representation, but queries what *work* democracy does for historically marginalized groups. A close study of the VCK demonstrates that

democratic politics does not erase, but may compound existing forms of inequality as its experience is necessarily mediated by pre-existing disparities premised upon caste, class, gender, and religion. From this perspective, there is no master narrative to capture the implications of democratic integration; only manifold different vantage points from which to approach its study. The political trajectory of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* presents one example through which to study these processes and consider the afterlife of democratic integration.

How can an ethnography of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics inform our general theory of representation? A close analysis of the VCK presses us to reconsider our approach to political representation, stretching it beyond its traditional moorings in elections in order to examine and evaluate its manifold forms. This project perceives representation not only in terms of voice, but the capacity to effect an audience and, thereby, to be heard. Of course, this is not without a lengthy historical precedent, as Paul Woodruff notes, Athenian democracy not only afforded its citizens the "right to speak their minds," but moreover, "they had the right to be heard by the governing body."[2] Representation, when understood not in terms of a natural fact or concrete relation between two already constituted entities, but as an event, that is, as a dynamic process that assumes variable forms, provides an alternative vantage point from which to consider how marginalized communities advance political demands and make claims on state authorities. An ethnographic study of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics reveals that, although electoral politics may provide improved access to state institutions, it does not in itself enhance the opportunity for movement organizers to articulate their grievances and represent their concerns; rather, it may constrain their voices. When VCK activists reminisce about their political trajectory, they argue that mass agitational politics provided the most efficacious means to effect an audience. This perspective echoes Timothy Mitchell's argument that techniques of disruption are sometimes integral to substantive democratic practice, claiming that such acts provide marginalized groups with "an effective way of forcing the powerful to listen to [their] demands."[3] Although the VCK gained the opportunity to speak before the state

legislature and national parliament, this has not necessary bolstered its capacity to represent Dalit interests.

Finally, a close study of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics challenges common assumptions in academic scholarship as well as the popular representation of Dalit movements in modern India. Accounts of Dalit politics are often framed in terms of a dichotomy, interpreting its objectives as premised either on a struggle for dignity and equal recognition or, alternatively, as a politics for material access and economic redistribution. A recent study of Uttar Pradesh accentuated this tension, arguing that Dalit parties "have overwhelmingly pursued an agenda of recognition, calling for equal respect, rather than one of redistribution."[4] On the contrary, Dalit politics most often straddles both sides of this equation, advancing collective demands for recognition *and* redistribution. Although studies that focus on struggles for dignity afford a lens into an integral component of Dalit mobilization, they often constrict their analysis to identity politics without sufficient attention to demands for social and economic justice, not to mention the challenges of achieving redistribution. A study of *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics drawn from a longitudinal ethnography as well as its own documentary evidence demonstrates that economic development and social justice served as enduring planks of its political program. Dating back to its origins in Madurai, *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* politics advanced demands for equitable access to social and economic development, basic provisions for physical security, and the administration of law. To constrict Dalit politics to a struggle for recognition without accounting for its radical social and economic agenda merely breathes new life into an old stereotype.

Before concluding, the structure of this dissertation imposes several limitations that warrant mention. Firstly, the study provides an empirical study of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* that draws principality on the perspectives and experiences of party leadership and long-term organizers; the study does not claim to capture the myriad perspectives of local communities, supporters, or voters, which have been studied in detail by other scholars.[5] My research has instead focused on political leadership to contribute a viewpoint that is notably absent in the current literature. Additionally, the project is constrained by the availability of source materials. Whereas the early

chapters of the dissertation draw heavily on primary materials and rare vernacular publications, the availability of these sources was often limited to fragmentary personal archives compiled by early activists. While I have worked to triangulate available materials to construct a narrative, most early documents did not weather the sweltering climate, falling prey to an admixture of insects, humidity, and monsoon rains. The study does not offer a set of bullet-point solutions or recommendations to afford greater latitude to minority representatives, but rather provides an account of how Dalit activists in Tamil Nadu recall their experience of electoral democracy. I have sought to nuance to our understanding of how democracy is experienced, understood, and, at times, contested by marginalized social groups, accounting for its powerful social imaginary and potent political vocabulary while still remaining attentive to its limitations as a platform for marginalized groups such as India's Dalits to represent their concerns.

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[1] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2013 (2016).

[2] Paul Woodruff, *First Democracy: The challenge of an ancient idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005: 67.

[3] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. New York: Verso, 2011, p21. Also, see: Timothy Mitchell (2009), "Carbon Democracy" in *Economy and Society*, 38:3, pp.399-432.

[4] Radha Sarkar and Amar Sarkar (2016), "Dalit Politics in India: Recognition without Redistribution." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 51, No. 20, p14.

[5] Hugo Gorringe's collective work has brilliantly captured the political dynamics of VCK politics, affording close attention to the perspectives of local organizers and a broad range of political leadership. Drawn from recent fieldwork, Grace Carswell and Geert De Neve have provided an incisive study of Dalit electoral participation in western Tamil Nadu. Also, recent years have witnessed the growth of Dalit studies as an independent field of scholarship for which Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana's edited volume captures the development of the field. In addition to Hugo Gorringe's collective body of work, see: Grace Carswell and Geert De Neve, "Why Indians Vote: Reflections on Rights, Citizenship, and Democracy from a Tamil Nadu Village." *Antipode* 46, no. 4 (2014): 1032-1053; Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana (eds.), *Dalit Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

APPENDIX

A *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* flyer distributed prior to the movement's airplane *roko* agitation on July 22, 1994. The title reads: "Airplane *roko* war: We do not want 69%! Extend it even further!..."
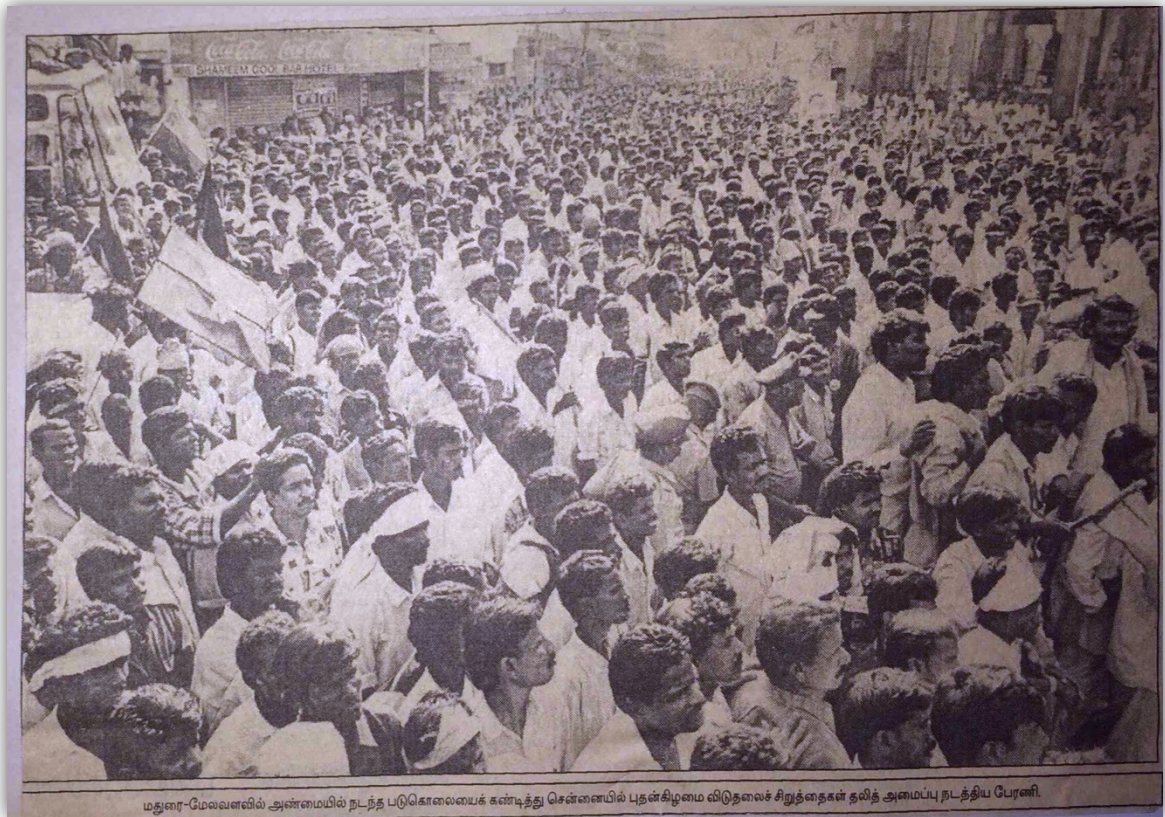
Viduthalai Chiruthaigal wall poster circulated following the movement's airport roko agitation on July 22, 1994. The Poster Reads, "A DPI airplane *roko* in Madurai over the reservations issue; R. Thirumaavalavan and 5000 *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* arrested."

A *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* wall poster distributed in Dalit colonies publicizing the "*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* mass condemnation military parade in Chennai [related to the] Melavalavu assassination."

A *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* wall poster, which publicized the movement's upcoming protest march in Chennai, reads, "*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* mass condemnation military parade [related to the] Melavalavu assassination."

மதுரை-மேலவளவில் அண்மையில் நடந்த படுகொலையைக் கண்டித்து சென்னையில் புதன்கிழமை விடுதலைச் சிறுத்தைகள் தலித் அமைப்பு நடத்திய பேரணி.

A photograph published in *Dinamani* on July 24, 1997, depicted thousands of Dalits participating in a protest march in Chennai condemning the violence in Melavalavu. The caption reads, "The protest march conducted by the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal*, a Dalit organization, in Chennai on Wednesday to condemn the murder that occurred in the Madurai-Melavalavu area."

விடுதலைச் சிறுத்தைகள் ஊர்வலத்தையொட்டி, மதுரை கோரிப்பாளையத்தில் திங்கள்கிழமை பாதுகாப்புப் பணியில் ஈடுபட்ட போலீஸார்.
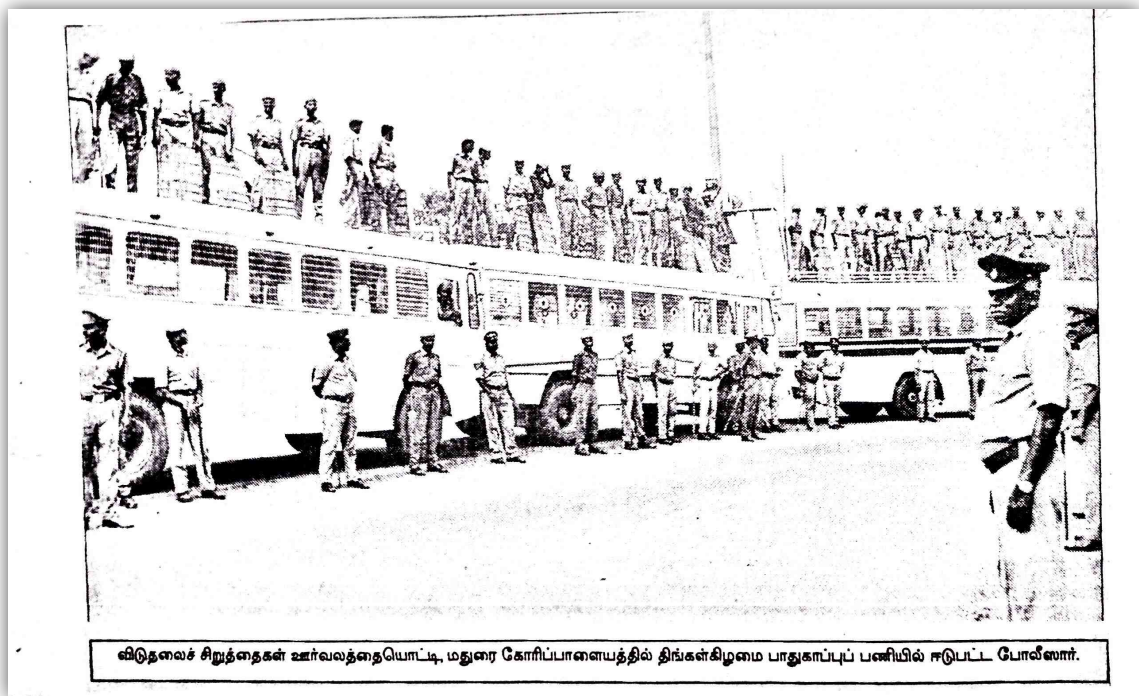
A photograph from *Dinamani* displaying a portion of the police battalion monitoring the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* protest march in Madurai on November 24, 1997, demanding stringent government action in response to violence in Melavalavu. The caption reads, "Police engaging in a protection force on Monday in Madurai's Goripalaiyam area for the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal's* walking procession." Today, the photograph provides a source of amusement for movement activists who jest, albeit with a shade of truth, that its sometimes seemed in the 1990s as if more police attended *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal* rallies than movement supporters.

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