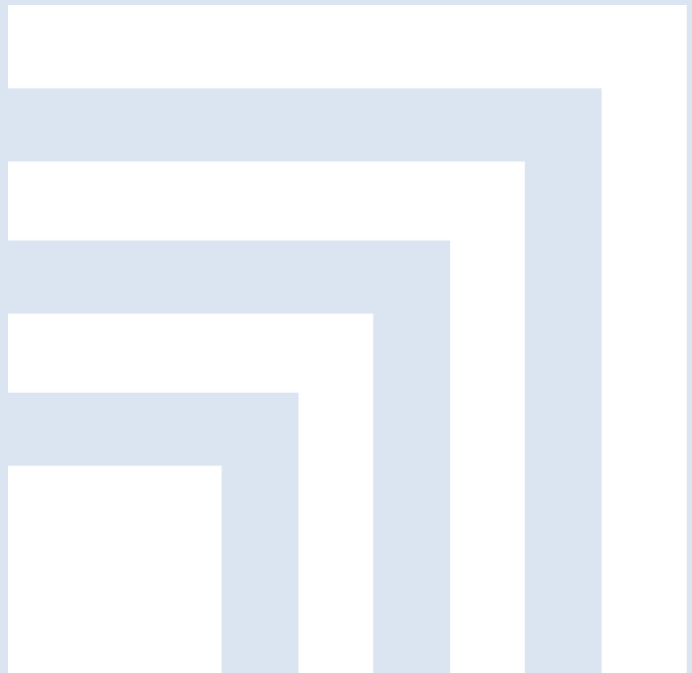




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Privilege in Dispute: Economic and Political Change and Caste Relations in Tamil Nadu Early in the 21st Century

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Abstract:

This paper examines recent developments in caste relations in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, in the context of economic and political change in India's most highly urbanised major state. Though Tamil Nadu has a reputation for being socially progressive, and has a history of rule by political parties that emerged from a movement that was forcefully secular and supposedly 'anti-caste', it also has a long history of the exclusion of Dalits. Recent events show considerable tension and contestation over caste privilege, with defensive reactions by dominant castes to the increasing assertiveness of Dalits.

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John Harriss is a social anthropologist and a professor at the School for International Studies at Simon Fraser University, which he directed in 2006–2013. He has published extensively on the politics and the political economy of South Asia, and of India in particular. Harriss was Editor of the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d'études du développement* in 2010–2014. Before 2006 he headed the Development Studies Institute (DESTIN) at the London School of Economics.

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Privilege in Dispute: Economic and Political Change and Caste Relations in Tamil Nadu Early in the 21st Century¹

In January 2015 the Tamil writer, Perumal Murugan, was subjected to so much abuse both by his fellow citizens and by officials in the town of Tiruchengode in which he lived, as to have led him to announce his ‘death’ as a writer and his intention of renouncing his craft. The case attracted international attention. Murugan’s crime? That he had ‘insulted’ Hinduism (according to a local functionary of the RSS), and dishonoured women of the Kongu Vellalar Gounder caste, the community that has been historically dominant in the region of the town. This because of a novel that he had written, published four years earlier, without comment from anyone in the locality. The attack on Perumal Murugan was orchestrated by caste organisations that remained in the shadows. Their hostility towards him reflected, another Tamil writer, V. Geetha, observed in a commentary, the discontent and frustration of ‘disgruntled peasants and aspirational small town men, employed in an amorphous service sector’, which found an outlet ‘in a politics of identity that is vacuous but in an immediate sense compensatory’ The caste organizations, she argued, ‘provide a sense of “home” and illusive belonging in a political economy that is competitive, divisive and extractive’ (2015: 18).

The attack on Perumal Murugan is just one rather specific instance of the intensity of caste feeling in the state of Tamil Nadu. In this case it was evidently intensified by the involvement of the RSS – a reminder that Tamil Nadu is not at all immune to the politics of Hindutva.² This seems remarkable in several ways. For one, the politics of the state have been dictated for half a century now by political parties that have their origins in the Dravidian movement, which was built up around an ideology articulated by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, known as ‘Periyar’ (meaning: ‘Great Man’), that was explicitly and forcefully secular,

¹ I am very grateful to Christopher Fuller, Hugo Goringe, Nate Roberts and Rupa Viswanath for their very helpful comments on drafts of this paper, and to Judith Heyer, Grace Carswell and Geert De Neve for sharing their work with me.

² See Harriss (2002) for commentary on Hindutva politics in Tamil Nadu around the turn of the century. There are clear indications of the strengthening of Hindu nationalist sentiments in the state in the context of Narendra Modi’s premiership after the general election of 2014.

rationalist, anti-religion – EVR was especially critical of Hinduism – and anti-caste. Then, Tamil Nadu has achieved a notable reputation in recent years as a progressive state that combines both high levels of human development and of economic growth. What accounts therefore, for the proliferation of caste-based political parties in the state over the past twenty years or so – seven such parties were formed, for instance, in the 12 months before the state assembly elections of 2001 – and for the significance of the sort of casteism reflected in the actions against Perumal Murugan? How have caste relations been affected by the economic and political changes that have taken place in Tamil society? These are questions that are taken up in this essay. Further, I will comment from the experience of Tamil Nadu on recent arguments concerning the decline of hierarchy and the importance instead of ‘difference’ in caste and social relations.

Caste and Class in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu has been the site both of a remarkable corpus of village-based studies of caste, class, religion and politics,³ and of historical studies.⁴ These show up marked differences in local caste structures. In contrast with the neighbouring states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, in each of which two *jati* groups (or in the Andhra case, three), enjoy dominance (in the sense in which this term has been used by anthropologists⁵) in large areas, dominance is much more fragmented in Tamil Nadu. As Washbrook put it ‘No single caste was preponderant over an area equivalent to more than one British district, and usually it was much less’ (1989: 223). Even in the western districts of the state where the Kongu Vellalar Gounders have historically exercised dominance over a large area, there were also villages in which Kammavar Naidus (of Telugu origin) were dominant. Similarly, in the north of the state, though Mudaliars and Telugu-speaking Naidus and Reddiars are powerful in different tracts, Vanniyars are more numerous and

³ A list of some of the more outstanding of these would include work by Beck (1972), Beteille (1965), Gough (1981, 1989), Harriss (1982), Mencher (1978), Sivertsen (1963). There are also the so-called ‘Slater village studies’, referring to studies conducted in five Tamil villages on several occasions since the first surveys were made by students of the professor of economics in the University of Madras, Gilbert Slater, in 1916-17. See Harriss et al. (2010, 2012)

⁴ See especially Baker (1984) and Ludden (1985). Washbrook (1989) provides an interesting discussion of their analyses.

⁵ The idea of the ‘dominant caste’ was first expounded by Srinivas (1959).

though considered to be low-ranking, are sometimes locally the dominant caste. In the south those from the caste cluster that is now usually designated as Thevar are commonly dominant, though there are parts where their hegemony is challenged by historically ‘untouchable’ (Dalit, or Scheduled Caste, as they are now known) Pallars.

There are regional patterns, and it has become conventional to distinguish especially between the river valleys and the ‘plains’ between them, sometimes expressed in terms of the distinction between the ‘wet’ and the ‘dry’ because of the more extensive irrigation of the former regions, and the greater dependence on rainfed agriculture in the latter. The society of the valleys, the areas of high Tamil culture, based on intensive paddy cultivation, is presided over by farming communities, generically Vellalars, with – historically – a significant Brahmin presence, a range of service castes, including those such as Acharis (carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths), oil pressers and potters, as well as barbers and washermen, and a large agricultural labour force made up predominantly by ‘untouchables’⁶. The plains, for long forested and exploited mainly for grazing, were brought under more extensive cultivation ‘partly by the immigration and settlement of Telugu warrior chiefs and clans’ (Baker 1984: 40) in the Vijayanagara era. This was the case of the village of Iruvelpattu, for example, and of others in the area of Villupuram, where Telugu-speaking Reddiars have long been dominant (Harriss et al 2010: 48). Organized around peasant clans, who combined farming with warfare, plains society included fewer Brahmins and relatively fewer untouchables. ‘Outside agriculture, there was a diverse set of economic opportunities, involving artisanal, pastoralist and merchant groups’ (Washbrook 1989: 223).

Data based on the Census of 1891, presented by Baker (1984: 55), show that Brahmins made up only a very small proportion of the population of the Tamil districts⁷ – three per cent overall, though going up to six per cent in the Kaveri river valley and its delta (the former Thanjavur district) – the core of the society of the valleys. Fuller and Narasimhan, more recently, have noted that in 1931 the Brahmin population in the Tamil Districts was only 2.5 per cent of

⁶ A classic source is: Burton Stein (1968) ‘Brahman and Peasant in Early South Indian History’, *Adyar Library Bulletin*, 31-32: 229-69.

⁷ And, contrary to Dravidianist stereotypes, the majority of agricultural lands were owned by non-Brahmins.

the total (78 per cent of them being Tamil Brahmins and 11 per cent Telugu Brahmins, the largest minority; Fuller and Narasimhan 2014: 231). This marks an important difference from large parts of North India, where Brahmins often constitute a larger share of the population. Washbrook went so far as to argue that not only was ‘Tamil Nadu’s “caste system” ... very different from that of Northern and Brahmanic tradition’ but that it perhaps came ‘to be considered a “caste system” at all more because of the activities of nineteenth century orientalist scholars [and bureaucrats] than because of anything else’ (1989: 221). The Tamil country generally lacked *jatis* that claimed either Kshatriya or Vaishya status (though some have done so in the more recent past), so that all non-Brahmin castes, other than the outcastes, were classified as Shudras. Scholars, such as Beteille, have long considered that ‘The population of Tamil Nadu can be broadly divided into three groups, the Brahmins, the Non-Brahmins, and the Harijans (or Adi-Dravidas)’ (Beteille 1991: 85) – or as he says elsewhere ‘Brahmins, Shudras and Panchamas’⁸ (1991: 87). Earlier, in the 19th century, these distinctions appeared in Caldwell’s classic *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*, where, in an appendix, the author felt compelled to address the question of whether Paraiyars and other outcastes were really Dravidian. Caldwell remarks that the usual linguistic practice amongst speakers of Dravidian languages (not just Tamil) was to use the ‘national name’ in a way that reflected a three-fold distinction: ‘a Tamilan ... is neither a Brahmin, nor a member of any of the inferior castes, but a Dravidian sudra’ (Caldwell 1875: 549).⁹

The tripartite schema does clearly show up the broad difference between the caste structures of the Tamil country and those of other parts of India. The division of Tamil society is seen perhaps most prominently in the valleys, of the Kaveri in (the old, undivided) Thanjavur District, and in that of the Tamirapani in the south. Here there were, and to an extent still are, distinct settlements occupied by each of the three groups, but all within the boundaries of a single ‘village’. Caste people lived in the *ur*, though the Brahmins usually occupied a separate and often a detached street. The Dalits occupied the *ceri* [‘cheri’], a physically distinct settlement not considered to be part of the *ur*. At the very least there were well distinguished quarters or

⁸ A term widely used for Dalits in the colonial period.

⁹ Thanks to Rupa Viswanath for this reference.

streets occupied exclusively by the three groups. Elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, where Brahmins are few in number, there are no *agraharams* (the distinct settlements or streets of Brahmins), but it is usually the case that the Dalits are confined to their own hamlets, effectively segregated ghettos (the ‘cheris’, sometimes referred to as ‘colonies’¹⁰).

Big changes have come about in Tamil society as a result of urbanization, colonial ‘modernisation’ and industrialization. It was in the context of 19th century urbanization that very important changes took place in the character of caste. Ideas of caste ‘substance’ based on common features of culture facilitated the development of more extended networks that were of advantage to upwardly mobile groups. Whereas marriages had been regulated by rules of kinship, some caste communities took deliberate decisions that permitted the formation of much more distant alliances than would have been possible before (Barnett 1975). Tamil Nadu is now the most highly urbanized of India’s major states (48.4 per cent of the population was urban in 2011 – by 2015 almost certainly over 50 per cent), and it is generally considered to be the best-connected too, with metalled roads reaching into many villages and frequent bus services. This, recently, has greatly facilitated movements of labour out of agriculture through commuting and short and long term migration. One recent estimate is that there are as many as 7.2 million ‘commuting workers’ in contemporary Tamil Nadu.¹¹ Perhaps most important, formerly dominant landholding caste groups have tended to move out of agriculture and of the villages. This is most strikingly the case of the erstwhile Brahmin landlords of Thanjavur and the Tamirapani river valley (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014; Harriss et al. 2012), but it is happening with others as well – for example with Reddiar landlords in the region of Villupuram District (Harriss et al. 2010) and in the case of Mudaliars in villages in northern Tamil Nadu (Arrivukkarasi and Nagaraj 2009). Village studies from different parts of the state show, indeed, the near disappearance of the so-called Forward Castes from the villages (Harriss and Jeyaranjan 2015), and historically lower ranking *jatis*, like the Vanniyars around Villupuram, or Yadhavs further north, have been taking over lands that were formerly owned by Reddiars and

¹⁰ This term seems to have come into use in the context of ‘Harijan’ welfare programmes only from the 1960s – though it was certainly in common use locally by the early 1970s (Rupa Viswanath, in a personal communication).

¹¹ This estimate is given by S. Anandhi and M. Vijayabaskar, ‘Where buying a motorcycle can spark a riot’, *The Hindu* January 7, 2013.

Agamudaiyan Mudaliars. These studies also show that rural caste structures have often been simplified, as it is commonly the case that many of the artisanal and specialist service castes have moved out of the villages. There is, for example, no longer the demand that there was for the services of blacksmiths and carpenters in the manufacturing of ploughs and carts. Clay pots have been replaced in daily use – though not in some rituals – by plastic and aluminium vessels. Hereditary potters have moved into other occupations. Blacksmiths and carpenters ply their trades rather in the towns. Meanwhile, agricultural labour, the village studies show, has become more than ever the occupation of Dalits¹² – Paraiyars in the north of the state, Pallars (who claim Kshatriya status as Devendra Kullatars) in the south, and Aruntathiars (also known as Matharis or Chakkiliyars) in the west. Though the relationships amongst different caste groups described by anthropologists as the ‘jajmani system’ were still observed in Tamil Nadu in the 1970s there is little evidence of them having persisted into the 21st century.¹³

Caste structures and relations in Tamil Nadu have, therefore, been highly localized. Washbrook describes relations both of caste and of class in Tamil society as having been marked historically by ‘diffuseness and fragmentation’ (1989: 225). He describes the latter – class relations – as being characterized by ‘almost infinite petit bourgeoisification’ (1989: 220). He refers here to the continuing processes of fragmentation of agricultural land holdings and of the reproduction of small production units – the development of Tamil agriculture under capitalism has not led to the consolidation of landholdings by capitalist farmers¹⁴ – and, as he says, ‘as in the countryside so in the towns (where) much “labour” possessed small property’. There has been, in the towns, a ‘proliferation of a petit bourgeoisie based in pedlar commerce, quasi-artisanal and small workshop production and educated professional employment’ (1989: 220-21). This describes fairly well, in broad outline, the economic organization of the towns. This has

¹² Or, it may be, that agricultural labour has become once again the occupation of Dalits. In the 19th century most agricultural work was done by Dalits under conditions of slavery (see Viswanath 2014). It seems possible that members of other caste groups only began to engage in agricultural labour later in the 19th and in the 20th centuries.

¹³ For a critical treatment of the idea of ‘the jajmani system’ see Fuller 1989. A description of relationships between castes corresponding with what has been called the jajmani system from the early 1970s is found in Harriss 1982, chapter 6. For commentary on the effective disappearance of these relationships see Harriss et al. 2010, 2012. See also Guha 2013, chapter 3.

¹⁴ On these processes and the trends in landholding and the organization of agriculture see Harriss 1982, Chapter 8; and Harriss and Jeyaranjan 2015.

been analysed in great detail with regard to the market town of Arni in northern Tamil Nadu by Barbara Harriss-White, who draws on observations made over three decades and shows the still intimate connections between caste and class differences in this ‘petit bourgeoisified’ economy.

‘In Arni’s fast expanding urban economy’, Harriss-White shows, ‘caste *still* supplies a broadly hierarchical social order’ (2003: 197, emphasis in the original). She reports that ‘Control of business by members of Forward Castes [here Jains, Marwaris, Veera Saiva Chettiars and others, who make up about 12 per cent of the population of the town] is stable in absolute terms’ (2003: 182). Those officially defined as ‘Backward Castes’ – in Arni the most numerous of them are Agamudaiyan Mudaliars, historically also the dominant agricultural caste in the region – make up about a third of the population and have been becoming more significant as business-owners. Members of the ‘Most Backward Castes’ – by far the most numerous of them being Vanniyars – who make up another third or so of the population, and the Scheduled Castes (15 per cent of the population), together make up around 80 per cent of the casual labour force. A range of ‘low-tech, physically dirty and (still, for some) ritually polluting work’, which is nonetheless essential for the running of the town and the functioning of the economy is pretty much the ‘preserve’ of the SCs (2003: 182). They are, on the other hand, still denied access to some other jobs. A battle to enable them to enter silk-weaving – a major industry of the town – was going on, for example, even towards the turn of the century. In short, castes, Harriss-White argues, show little sign of erosion, though the institution of caste is being reworked into a form of corporatist regulation of the capitalist economy. Caste membership affords trust and provides social networks on which a great deal of the economic activity of the town depends. Quite contrary to the expectations of many scholars who have thought that economic liberalization and modernization would dissolve economic relations based on caste, Harriss-White finds that caste-based relationships have become more important, revealing ‘a deeply segmented social structure in which caste is ultimately connected with all the other organisations of civil society that comprehensively regulate economic and social life’ (2003: 178). There is, therefore, an economic basis for the reproduction of caste differences, and they are still organized hierarchically – even if this hierarchy reflects a long history of economic differentiation rather than the structural opposition of purity and pollution.

Caste competition for middle class and formal sector jobs persists, as well, in Chennai and other larger cities. There is strong evidence that the kind of cultural capital commanded by Tamil Brahmins and by some others from amongst the 'Forward Castes' of the state, can give them a significant advantage in gaining access to the most sought-after jobs, such as those in the IT sector. Fuller and Narasimhan have studied the relative success of the Brahmins, describing them as a 'middle class caste' that is especially well represented amongst those employed in the best jobs. As they say 'In the long run the caste's traditional "vocational ethic" of learning and education has clearly been a flexible asset in enabling and encouraging Brahmins, who once belonged to a landed elite, to diversify into a range of occupations in a modern economy' (2014: 228). Such occupations include ownership of a majority of Tamil Nadu's biggest businesses (Harriss 2003), and seem amply to compensate for the relative exclusion of Brahmins from public sector employment that resulted from political non-Brahminism.

Caste distinctions influence even civil society and the world of NGOs. In Chennai there is a sharp distinction between Brahmin-dominated networks of civil society associations in the southern part of the city, and a mainly Christian-led network in the north: 'Those in the North Chennai network talk explicitly of the 'caste-base' of civil society activism in the city, and there remains a good deal of resentment towards what is seen as Brahminical paternalism ...' (Harriss 2011: 100). Caste relations have changed considerably, no doubt, but there are significant ways in which caste hierarchy persists.

The Politics of Identity in the Non-Brahmin and Dravidian Movements

As M. S. S. Pandian writes in his study *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin*, these identities, which have come to 'possess a normal presence in the region', 'were mutually constituted in the Tamil region during the colonial period' and make sense 'only within a framework of mutual opposition and antagonism' (2007: 4, 6). The idea of a common Non-Brahmin identity, and subsequently ideas of 'Dravidianness' or 'Tamilness', have their origins in the economic and social changes of the later 19th century, and in the urbanization of Tamil society. In this context Brahmins retained their high status and were culturally separated from the 'forward' non-Brahmins who had enjoyed considerable privilege and prestige in local rural society, but were

now reduced to a common Shudra status, perceived as being inferior to that of the Brahmins. These were the circumstances of the formation – with some encouragement from the British, intent on countering the anti-colonial movement for Home Rule (Irschick 1969) – of what became known as the Non-Brahmin Movement, opposed to Brahmin dominance in the bureaucracy and the professions.¹⁵ This, by a process of association, developed into a political movement first around the idea of the Dravidian (Brahmins being held not to be ‘Dravidian’), and then the idea of the ‘Tamilian’ (as Bishop Caldwell had explained). Marguerite Barnett argues in her classic account of the history of Dravidian politics that the increasing political, social and cultural isolation of the Brahmins:

...became significant (that is, necessitated action) as increasing urbanization and mobility challenged forward non-Brahmin status, rendered the symbol ‘Suddra’ (*sic*) exceptionally meaningful, and led to the development of a sense of relative deprivation. Politically, Home Rule was identified with Brahmin rule. The first Justice Party [the South Indian Liberal Federation, founded in 1916, the party of non-Brahminism] demands were, therefore, political and administrative, attempting to counteract Brahmin dominance in these areas. However, Justice party ideology and demands did not long remain so limited. Elite Suddras focused their ire on Brahmins and, utilising the research on Dravidians by European scholars, began elaborating a counter-cultural tradition. (Barnett 1976: 26)

Non-Brahmins are ‘Dravidians’, Brahmins are not.

A more developed ideology countering the Brahminical Hindu tradition then came to be elaborated with the formation of the Self-Respect Association in 1925, under the leadership of Periyar, who had broken with Congress over the separation of Brahmins and Non-Brahmins in a school set up by the party. According to Geetha and Rajadurai, the establishment of the Self-Respect Association was a deliberate counter to Gandhi. The two authors explain that:

The Self-Respecters’ desire to found a community of rational, fraternal, freedom-loving citizens ... was propelled forward by their conviction in the principle of what they termed *samadharmā* ... (which) ... assumed equality amongst men and between men and women but, more important ... required that this equality be realized in and through an affirmation of each individual’s self-respect (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: 384)

Consistent with this overarching principle was the centrality accorded by Periyar to the abolition of caste. Two years before his death, on his 93rd birthday, he observed “I have

¹⁵ But see Washbrook’s critical discussion of the claims of the Non-Brahmin elites (1989: 212).

endeavoured all along to abolish caste ... (which) ... has meant that I carry out propaganda for the abolition of God, Religion, the Shastras and Brahmins. For caste will disappear only when these four disappear ... One cannot abolish caste without instilling a taste for freedom and knowledge [in the people]' (cited by Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: 350). But though Periyar himself was a consistent critic of untouchability, though his journal *Kudi Arasu* carried reports of events and actions that concerned Adi-Dravidas, and though the Self-Respecters, for instance, protested against the Poona Pact, scholars still maintain that Periyar tended to identify the 'Dravidian' with the Shudra. And according to Barnett again, 'social support for the Self-Respect Movement is difficult to gauge'. But she goes on to say that 'The early movements were certainly supported largely by forward caste Hindus', and that only 'As the movement developed into the 1940s (did) larger and larger numbers of backward castes become involved' (1976: 50-51).

It is important to remember the very clear demarcation in Tamil society between those now generally called Dalit, and others. Rupa Viswanath tells us that in the 19th century the caste names of the Dalits (whether Paraiyar, Pallar or Chakkiliyar – all of whom came to be known to the British as 'Pariahs') were used by Indians interchangeably with words meaning 'slave', and that the conditions of their lives and labour, especially in the most fertile rice-growing regions, were indeed commonly described by foreign visitors as slavery (2014: 3). And not only was 'the social hiatus between Pariah labourers and all others ... rigorously policed (and) inscribed into the geography of the village itself' (in the way described earlier) but it was marked out even in language, for 'in the nineteenth century, the term ... "Tamilian" referred exclusively to caste Tamils. One could be a Tamil or a Pariah – but not both' (Viswanath 2014: 31). The term 'paraiya' was also widely understood as an insult. And according to Washbrook's interpretation of the rich historical literature on medieval and early modern Tamil society, it was a society characterized by intense competition for privilege or honours – from which, however, Dalits were always excluded. As he says 'Untouchability has always supplied the ultimate defining line of both "unprivilege" and identity in historical Tamil society' (1989: 239). This is an idea to which we will return.

It was only after the formation, under Periyar's leadership, of the Dravida Kazhagam in 1944, following the coming together (in 1938) of the Self-Respect League and the old Justice Party, that larger numbers of backward castes began to be drawn in. This process was taken further following the creation of the political party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), led by C. N. Annadurai, in 1949. The split between Annadurai and Periyar came about largely – it seems – because the former had come to think that the way forward was through electoral politics, in which case it was important to build support amongst the numerous backward castes of Madras, whereas Periyar continued to eschew electoral politics. Barnett concludes her discussion of this period as follows:

Mass mobilization of the backward castes during the 1940s transformed the character of the Madras Presidency political arena and determined the essential constraints on radical politics. *The orientation of the backward castes was toward maintaining their position in the face of competition from Untouchables and other backward groups.* This status was not threatened by the wealthy landlord and the proud and orthodox Brahmin, but by the previously subservient Untouchable (1976: 83, emphasis added)

Brahmins and elite or 'forward' non-Brahmins had begun increasingly to support the Congress in the 1930s, and – Barnett argues – the social and economic dependence upon them of so many of the Dalit agricultural workers of the state meant that in rural areas their vote, too, went to Congress. For the DMK, 'That left the backward castes as the best potential base of support' (1976: 99). Yet this meant the dilution of the radical agenda of social reform that the DMK had taken over from the DK and the longer tradition of the Self-Respect Movement: 'Backward castes in Madras accepted social reform as a relevant social goal, but social reform did not have the radical connotations of Dravidian ideology, that is atheism or anti-Hinduism. Social reform, as it came to be defined in the 1950s, meant uplift of the scheduled and backward castes' (1976: 99). And given that the scheduled castes had by now become eligible for positive discrimination – thanks to measures first introduced by the British and then extended by the post-independence Indian state, the backward castes of Madras felt themselves to be relatively neglected (even though reservations as quotas for different groups had first been introduced after the Justice Party was elected to office in 1920).

(T)he DMK began to talk more about this 'neglected' segment, 'neither the very bottom nor the very top of society'. It was this 'common man' that Annadurai claimed to

represent. The appeal to the common man was directed toward the rising urban middle class, the educated unemployed youth, and the middling (film-going) farmer in the backward castes ... the political arena in Madras state was inhospitable to radical social reform as the basis for a mass political organization seeking election victories (Barnett 1976: 100)

The resonance with the 19th century distinction between the ‘Tamilian’ and the ‘Pariah’ is unmistakable. The DMK proceeded to build and to maintain a strong base mainly amongst the ‘common man’ who was neither ‘the very top nor the very bottom of society’. The party still spoke of ‘social reform’, but the term came to mean ‘the uplift of the backward classes’. ‘The movement’s early emphasis on untouchability, the destruction of caste and on women’s emancipation’, say Geetha and Rajadurai, ‘was abandoned gradually, and even cast out of the collective memory’ (2002: 121).¹⁶ At the same time, ‘Amidst an electorate which is predominantly composed of believers’, recognizing that ‘atheism may not be workable plank’, the DMK aligned itself ‘with the pre-existing Tamil common sense’ and courted certain forms of religiosity (Pandian 2012: 64). In recent years the leaders of the two major Dravidian parties have competed between each other over who has done most for temples and temple priests (Harriss 2002).

The DMK won office in 1967, drawing primarily on the support of the backward classes, and maintained itself in office through the pursuit of what Narendra Subramanian (1999) refers to as ‘assertive populism’, under which excluded groups are urged to assert themselves against the discrimination they have faced and to secure entitlements – to education, to jobs, loans, subsidized consumer goods and sometimes small pieces of property. Later, after the formation of the Anna DMK, following the breakaway by M. G. Ramachandran (‘MGR’) and his followers in 1972, the politics of Tamil Nadu came to be dominated rather by what Subramanian calls ‘paternalist populism’, under which a benevolent leader – a type of whom MGR was the

¹⁶ As Nate Roberts has pointed out to me (personal communication 29 April 2015), it is, to say the least, questionable as to whether the Dravidian movement was ever truly ‘radical’. It eschewed communist leaders, and Dravidianists, including Periyar, never looked closely at the political-economic basis of caste. To have done so would have undermined their own leaders, and funders, who came from landed and merchant backgrounds. There is a sense in which the Brahmin/Non-Brahmin distinction functions as an ideological dodge, diverting attention away from class contradictions, and away from the combined social and class antagonism between Dalits and all the others.

archetype – or party promises to provide for ‘the people’ through subsidised wage goods and protection from repressive elites.

The pursuit of these populist politics and policies, according to their (initially, at least) somewhat different modes, by the two Dravidian parties, has proven enormously successful electorally – and has given rise to some real achievements in regard to social development.¹⁷ The Tamil scholar and political commentator M. S. S. Pandian argued, too, that ‘The [Dravidian] movement’s most singular achievement, which even its worst critics cannot fail to acknowledge, is to have infused the much-needed sense of self-respect among the non-Brahmins’ (1994: 221). But the two parties long ago left behind the social reforming objectives of the Dravidian movement. In the 1990s scholars such as Pandian and Anandhi S. spoke of the ‘ideological retrogression’ of the two parties and of the failure of the DMK in particular to carry out any sort of an offensive against casteism (discussed in Harriss 2002). The broad ‘Non-Brahmin’ identity was broken apart, Pandian argued, because different non-Brahmin caste groups experienced very different trajectories of development. Chettiars,¹⁸ Gounders, Kallars, Nadars and Naidus came to make up an important fraction of the social and political elite of the state, while others such, notably, as the numerous Vanniyars, and the Dalits failed to keep pace. ‘It became difficult’, he says, ‘to hold together the pre-existing ‘consensual’ bloc’. He notes that ‘The materially most advanced sections of the non-Brahmins such as the Chettiar elite, who during their economic ascendancy endorsed and funded the movement, found it no longer to be of any great relevance’. And if the economic success of some caste groups led them to drift away from the movement, some others did much the same, but for opposite reasons. ‘The Adi-Dravidas, Vanniyars and others found the movement to be woefully falling short of their expectations, the proof of which, for them, was their own continuing underdeveloped status’. Beyond this ‘the growing power and the caste arrogance of the backward caste elites at the local level ... often translated itself into anti-Adi Dravida violence’ (quotes from Pandian 1994: 221).

¹⁷ Rina Agarwala’s analysis (2013) of the competition between the two parties, in order to win the votes of informal sector workers, provides a very good explanation of how competitive populism can deliver social benefits.

¹⁸ This is the remarkable caste cluster in which, historically, caste institutions formed the framework for extensive and powerful banking operations, as Rudner (1998) has explained in an important study.

The disaffection of Dalits was eventually reflected in the establishment of Dalit political parties. The first of these was the Puthiya Tamilagam (PT), born in 1996 of the Devendra Kula Vellala Federation which calls for Pallars in the south of the state to be recognized as Devendra Kula Vellalars, and provided with special benefits; and then, formed in 1999, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), which mobilises mainly Paraiyars in northern Tamil Nadu, and also emerged from a social movement, the Dalit Panthers. The divisions amongst the Dalits are further reflected in the existence of several political organisations amongst the Aruntathiars – referred to in the Governor’s Address in Tamil Nadu in 2008 as ‘the untouchables among the untouchables’. These organisations did however come together in pressing the demand for special reservations for their community, which was finally recognized in the passage of the Tamil Nadu Aruntathiyar Special Reservation Act in 2009 – though it continues to be contested by non-Aruntathiar Scheduled Castes in the state (Pandian 2013b¹⁹).

Somewhat earlier, in the 1980s, a successful agitation by Vanniyars in the northern districts for a separate 20 per cent quota led to the formation in 1989 of the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), a Vanniyar party led by S. Ramadoss. There has long been conflict across northern Tamil Nadu between Paraiyars and Vanniyars, which erupted into an especially notable instance of violence in Villupuram, in 1978 (and see Harriss et al. 2010 on the history of the relations of Vanniyars and Paraiyars in a village outside Villupuram). Ramadoss briefly interrupted ‘orchestrated violence against the Dalits’, in 2003, when for electoral reasons he formed an alliance with the VCK (built around the idea of a Tamil Protection Movement). But when this failed to work he turned the PMK back to the strategy of trying to bring together intermediate castes against Dalits (Pandian 2013a). Meanwhile, in the western part of the state there is conflict between Kongu Vellalar Gounders and Aruntathiars; and in the south between Pallars and Thevars (a caste cluster which brings together the distinct clans of Kallars, Maravars of Agamudiyars: see Manikumar 1997). The incidence of discrimination against Dalits shows no signs of diminishing, and both the major Dravidian parties, when in government, have turned a blind eye to violence – including that of the police – when it has suited them.

¹⁹ Pandian notes in this article that ‘the category dalit, instead of unifying oppressed communities, has become the nomenclature for the Paraiyars in the state’ according to some members of other Dalit castes (2013b: 20).

Pandian remarks that ‘the old historic block of non-brahmins or Tamils, which subsumed and muted various sectional interests, has developed irreparable fissures’ (2006: 2182). And Andre Beteille was prescient when he remarked, almost 40 years earlier, that ‘Perhaps the most important consequence of the Non-Brahmin Movement was the introduction of a ‘communal’ or caste idiom into South Indian politics’ (1991 [1969]: 90). Rationalist, avowedly secular, and ostensibly committed against caste and religion though it was, the Self-Respect Movement took on mobilization around the Non-Brahmin identity, and the subsequent politics of the Dravidian movement came to play upon the distinction between backward castes and Dalits. Communities were defined by their symbolic privileges and traditional social disadvantages vis-à-vis Brahmins, and mobilisation on class lines was occluded. In recording the history of agrarian conflict in Tirunelveli, for instance, K. A. Manikumar notes with regret that ‘the political parties failed to politicize the Dalits and organize them on class lines as happened in Kerala’ (1997: 2243).²⁰ Now, in the context of the economic and social changes of the present, the particular relations between different OBCs and the Dalits, in different parts of the state, have given rise to caste-based movements and to the birth of a significant number of caste-based parties. And though these have not been at all successful electorally (Pandian 2013a), ‘caste feeling’ runs high, all the same.

Privilege/Honour under Threat

The story of caste relations in Tamil Nadu over the last twenty five years or so of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st is reflected in the title of an article by S. Anandhi and M. Vijayabaskar from 2013: ‘Where buying a motorcycle can spark a riot’²¹. Their article was occasioned by an ugly event in the Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu, when 300 or so Dalit houses and a lot of their property were destroyed by rampaging Vanniyars, angered by the marriage of a Vanniyar woman to a Dalit youth, and the subsequent suicide of the girl’s father. But, say the authors, the underlying reason was ‘the simmering discontent against the upward

²⁰ In Kerala the left movement had its roots in caste-based social reform movements, but succeeded in transcending them. The Kerala case is discussed in Harriss and Törnquist (2015). It should be noted that Tamil communists did succeed in mobilising Dalits, in Thanjavur especially, in the 1950s and 1960s (Bouton 1985).

²¹ See note 11.

mobility of Dalits'. They continue: 'The growing intolerance of the intermediate castes towards this economic mobility of the Dalits is not confined to Dharmapuri district alone. In the last two decades, eleven districts in the State have witnessed similar destruction of Dalit property as part of caste violence'. During the attacks in Dharmapuri, according to a report on the events, the Vanniyar assailants kept chanting that they were punishing the Dalits for 'the "offence" of "untouchables" acquiring wealth and cattle, having a tiled roof, educating their children, and acquiring gold ornaments' (Senthilir 2012: 13). The 'offence' of having a tiled roof echoes events of the 19th century, when Dalits were prohibited from constructing tiled (=flame resistant) homes – arson being amongst the techniques of caste domination (Roberts 2010, note 35). Not only houses, however, but according to government figures, at least 50 'two-wheelers' were destroyed. Anandhi and Vijayabaskar point to the particular significance of this. There is of course an intimate link between caste honour and control over women's sexuality, and consequently great fear on the part of men from the dominant castes of Dalits luring away 'their women'. The motorbike is a symbol of masculinity, and dominant caste men who are fearful of the erosion of their masculine power reassert it symbolically through the destruction of the Dalits' bikes.

The context of this 'simmering discontent' amongst caste groups such as the Vanniyars, the Thevars and the Kongu Vellalar Gounders is that of the declining importance of agriculture in Tamil Nadu (it accounts for only about eight per cent of state domestic product, and has been largely stagnant since the hey-day of the green revolution in the 1970s and 1980s), and its impact on socio-economic relations in the villages. These changes are negotiated, Anandhi and Vijayabaskar argue, 'through altered caste and gender relations posing challenges to the intermediates castes' pre-existing power'. The move of Dalits from agricultural labour into manufacturing and service occupations in the country towns – even though it is more constrained than that of labourers from higher castes, as Harriss-White shows in the study of Arni, cited earlier, and as is shown in village studies (Harriss and Jeyaranjan 2015) – has reduced the ability of the intermediate castes to control Dalit youth. The effects of tightening labour markets are supplemented by the impact of state sponsored welfare interventions which have become much more extensive over the last decade, with the introduction of MGNREGA and in Tamil Nadu the

availability of free rice through the Public Distribution System. De Neve and Carswell report from studies in western Tamil Nadu that these developments have heightened tensions between landowners and labourers, while Gounder industrialists believe that they have reduced labour supply in their factories and workshops. So, these authors say, ‘The anger and frustration among the dominant Backward Classes about populist and pro-poor development policies have engendered a new electoral politics that plays on the combined identities of caste and region’ (2011: 209). Here they refer to the formation of a new political party in the western region of Kongu Nadu which has an anti-Dalit agenda even whilst making regional claims.

These points are amplified by Vijayabaskar and Wyatt (2013) in their study of recent developments in this region of the state, dominated by Kongu Vellalar Gounders. The party that De Neve and Carswell refer to, the Kongu Nadu Munnetra Kazhagam (KNMK), established in 2009 to contest the Lok Sabha election of that year, has its origins in the Kongu Vellalar Goundergeral Peravai, a caste welfare association that was itself formed in 1988. The party is led by Gounders and stands for Gounder interests, while claiming to articulate concerns that affect the region as a whole, notably of power supply and infrastructure development, with the aim – so far largely unrealized – of attracting other voters. The Gounders have a particularly strong self-image of themselves as set apart from others. They are the ‘lords of the soil’ – reckoned to make up about 30 per cent of the population of the western region of Kongu Nadu, and to have owned as much as 80 per cent of the land of the old Coimbatore District. They value self-employment as bringing ‘independence’. They have a culture of ‘toil’, of hard work, and credit much of their recent success in textile manufacturing to their willingness themselves to engage in physical work alongside their employees (Chari 2004). They have not, until the last two decades or so, had all that much interest in education. But this is a culture that has come under stress as a result of economic changes. One important expression of this that appeared in the early years of this century is the increasing difficulty that even prosperous Gounder farmers have experienced in finding brides for their sons, if they are not well-educated and with prospects outside agriculture. Some have resorted to taking brides from outside the community, often from Kerala.²²

²² Personal communications from Sharada Srinivasan (University of Guelph).

The Gounder community is economically differentiated, and some are labourers, like very many of the Dalits of their villages. Most propertied Gounders continue to value their relationship with the land and with agriculture – in spite of the problems of the agricultural economy of a dry belt, dependent upon groundwater irrigation – but some have become successful businessmen, as owners of power looms in villages and towns, while others are owners of small and medium businesses in the hosiery manufacturing centre of Tiruppur. A few of these wealthier men have invested time and resources into KNMK, looking mainly for stronger representation of their community in the politics of the state. Most important of all, however, the party builds Gounder resistance against the mobilisations of the lower castes – notably against the several organisations representing Aruntathiars – and seeks to reassert Gounder caste privilege and control over labour. Vijayabaskar and Wyatt say that ‘Many in Tamil Nadu [including some of their respondents] take seriously the social reform agenda of the Dravidian movement which called into question caste privileges’ (2013: 109). But the idea of community representation, in defence of those privileges, while contested by some, remains a powerful one.

The tightening of labour markets and enhanced welfare provisioning by the state have led to increasing challenges to Gounder privilege and domination. A particular aspect of these tensions is the use by Dalits of national legislation directed against caste crimes, the 1989 Prevention of Atrocities Act. An important example is that when Gounder employers try to recover advances that they have paid, or claim to have paid to Dalit workers, the workers may ‘lodge a complaint that they have been abused using derogatory caste names’. These actions have built up Gounder anger against the Dalits who are seen to have gained ‘unfair protection’, and ‘The KNMK has become involved so that whenever a complaint has been lodged or a Dalit attempts to lodge a complaint, KNMK cadres try to prevent the booking of Gounders under (the) Act (often successfully)’ (Vijayabaskar and Wyatt 2013: 109). On the other hand Carswell and De Neve have argued that ‘though the litigation route further antagonizes caste relations ... the Act has provided Dalits with an invaluable tool to seek justice, democratize public space, and challenge the power of the dominant caste in the region’ (2015, Abstract).

The KNMK does also campaign for the inclusion of the Kongu Vellalar Gounder community in the list of ‘Most Backward Classes’, so as to be able to claim the special benefits for those so classified. Vijayabaskar and Wyatt argue, however, that the mobilization of the party – contrary to some understandings – is not primarily about reservations but rather is a ‘response to conflict within society and to economic issues that challenge the status of the Gounders’ (2013: 110). The argument is a convincing one.

There is an irony about the tensions between Gounders and Aruntathiars in western Tamil Nadu because, as the Governor of the State said some years ago, they are the ‘untouchables of the untouchables’. Recent village studies provide a lot of evidence on the extent of labour market segmentation on caste lines, and the disabilities especially of Dalits. As Isabelle Guerin and her co-authors, in a study of villages in Villupuram and Cuddalore districts say, ‘old hierarchies persist in the midst of the changes that India has undergone over the past decades’ – though as Grace Carswell concludes ‘It is not simply that Dalits are excluded from urban jobs. Rather, some Dalits, from some villages, have less access to urban jobs than others ... labour market segmentation works differently in localities just a few miles apart’ (2013: 335). Carswell found that, in the two villages she studied outside Tiruppur, the Aruntathiars (here known as Matharis) were still much more heavily dependent upon agricultural wage work than the Adi-Dravidas, who have done very much better in securing wage work outside agriculture. The point is also emphasized in her research from the same area of western Tamil Nadu by Judith Heyer (2010, 2014).

In the village in northern Tamil Nadu studied by Anandhi (2013), it is Telugu-speaking Naidus whose dominance is contested. Here – exceptionally – the Paraiyars are now treated as equal to the middle castes in the village, with whom they compare well in terms of their living standards. Their mobility beyond the village, taking up non-agricultural jobs, and their access to state-provided welfare, has given them the resources to resist their marginalization in the village, and they refuse caste-based employment or domestic and menial work. The Aruntathiars in the same village, meanwhile, lacking comparable access to education and employment, are still heavily dependent upon the Naidu landowners. They continue to participate in ritual practices in which some of their girls and women are dedicated to the goddess Mathamma that have the

effect of sustaining the caste hierarchy of the village, and pretty certainly condemn them to being exploited sexually by higher caste men. There are now contestations between Naidus, Aruntathiar men, and NGOs that are trying to stop the ritual practices, involving control over Aruntathiar women.

Conclusion

Washbrook's argument, to which I referred earlier, that the society of the Tamil country in the medieval and early modern eras was characterized by intense competition for privilege or honours seems insightful. As is the further point that 'Untouchability has always supplied the ultimate defining line of both "unprivilege" and identity in historical Tamil society' (1989: 239). There is truth, no doubt, in the assertions of scholars such as James Manor (2010) that hierarchy and dominance have generally declined in rural society in India, but – as I have shown in this essay – tension and contestation over caste privilege remain extremely significant, certainly in Tamil society. Rupa Viswanath's careful historical analysis of 'the Pariah problem' in the 19th and early 20th centuries clearly shows how very sharp the break was between Dalits and the rest of the society, a break marked, as she points out, in language. Linguistically, 'Tamilians' were not Pariahs/Dalits, and Dalits/Pariahs could not be Tamilians. In the middle of the last century, the Self Respect Movement and then the Dravidian Movement, inspired by the social radicalism of Periyar, opposed caste privilege. But once Annadurai had created a political party, the DMK, with the objective of securing power in the state, the compulsions of politics meant that, as Nate Roberts has put it well, 'from the 1960s onwards, the Dravidian parties unabashedly courted the powerful and populous BC castes, who were at once Dalits' most immediate oppressors and the foundation of the Dravidian parties' social and political dominance over rural Tamil Nadu' (2010, para 12). Social reform came to be identified with the 'uplift' of the backward castes, who were represented as not having benefited to the same extent as had the Scheduled Castes from affirmative action on the part of the state.²³ The social radicalism of the Dravidian Movement –

²³ Though, as Christopher Fuller has pointed out to me, it is ironic that by this time the backward castes had largely displaced the Brahmins in government and public sector jobs and education – as had been the original aim of the Non-Brahmin Movement.

such as it was, given its neglect of political economy – was gradually lost. And, as Pandian argued, over time the encompassing ‘Non-Brahmin’ identity developed ‘irreparable fissures’, given the increasing differentiation amongst the non-Brahmin caste clusters. Then, as Senthilir argues in his observation on the caste violence in Dharmapuri of 2012:

Job opportunities available in the cities and the assertion of dalits to take up non-traditional jobs have disrupted established caste relations, taking away privileges that caste Hindus enjoyed over centuries. On the other hand, women equipped with education and employment resist patriarchal caste values and now independently exercise their choice in selecting their life partners. This has infuriated caste Hindus who are becoming increasingly intolerant of the upward economic mobility of dalits and empowerment of women (2012: 13)

It is often the case that those who in reality are relatively unprivileged, and whose material circumstances are precarious, are most tenacious in the defence of their status and of what privilege they have. As Karthikeyan, Rajangam and Gorringer have argued, ‘most anti-dalit violence in the state is perpetrated by the intermediate castes and occurs to demonstrate that they are higher status than their victims’ (2012: 33). They also point out that ‘A paradoxical outcome of dalit mobilization has been the way in which the dominant castes have recently embraced victimisation and portrayed themselves as at the receiving end of reverse casteism’²⁴ (2012: 32). Some dominant castes have formed themselves into defensive fronts under such banners as the Thevar Protection Front or the Non-Dalit Common People’s Association – in spite of the abundant evidence of the lack of power and influence of the Dalit parties or of ordinary Dalits, while at the same time, as these authors say, ‘Caste majoritarianism is writ large in the prominence accorded to members of the [dominant] castes in all government posts from police through panchayat leaders to ministerial berths’ (2012: 30). Another reflection of the defensiveness of dominant castes is in the actions of Kongu Vellalar Gounders – encouraged by the RSS – against the writer, Perumal Murugan.

So it is that, as the *Economic and Political Weekly* editorialized in 2012 ‘The oppression, social humiliation and exploitation of the dalit and tribal communities in Tamil Nadu contradict

²⁴ Nate Roberts points out (personal communication) that in his Srinivas Memorial Lecture in 2000, the late Gerald Berreman discussed anti-affirmative action rhetoric in the United States as one in which whites have adopted a victim role

the accepted image of the state as having made impressive social and economic advances over the years' (2012: 9). In the face of this continuing subjection the Dalit parties are constrained by the fact that even in alliance – and, of course, perhaps the most crucial problem they confront is that of the divisions amongst themselves – they lack the numbers to stand much chance of winning office. They have sought, therefore, to bring in the votes of people from other communities, latterly by diluting their anti-caste radicalism and the adoption of an assertive 'Tamil' national identity. In the process they have tended to lose the confidence of their core constituents.

Social relations are never static, and it is clear that there has been a great deal of change in caste relations in Tamil Society, even over the last forty years or so, during which they have been observed by the present writer. But for all such important changes as the movements out of the villages by members of the Forward Castes, and those from the historically dominant landed castes, and – on the other hand – the increased assertiveness of Dalits, there remains intense contestation over caste privilege. Caste identities, too, are important repositories of cultural and social capital, and these play out in such a way in the towns and cities of the state as to reproduce hierarchy.

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