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## **From the Cheris to Chennai: Dalit Politics in Tamil Nadu**

Hugo Gorringe

*In 1999 the largest Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, the Liberation Panthers, ended their decade long boycott of elections and contested elections. In the 14 years since they have struggled to establish themselves as political players. During fieldwork in 2012, one of the main concerns of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK - Liberation Panther Party) was to become a 'mainstream' party. Thirumavalavan, the party leader, emphasised that the party tended to be marginalised and sidelined as a 'Dalit' party. He therefore outlined an ambitious attempt to change the constituency and make up of the party so that it was no longer perceived as a Dalit organisation. Institutionalisation, this reminds us, is not a simple step but an ongoing process. Entering elections has compelled the VCK to change in terms of structure, members, rules and tactics. Not all of these changes have been welcomed by cadres, nor have they necessarily benefited the party in obvious ways. Drawing on ethnographic work with party activists and affiliates this paper teases apart the complexities of institutionalisation for Dalit parties in south India.*

### **Introduction**

*Insurgency is always short-lived. Once it subsides and the people leave the streets, most of the organisations which it temporarily threw up and which elites helped to nurture simply fade away. As for the few organisations that survive, it is because they become more useful to those who control the resources on which they depend than to the lower class groups which the organisations claim to represent (Piven and Cloward 1979: xxi).*

In 1999, after a decade of socio-political mobilisation, grassroots activism and widespread consciousness-raising, the largest Dalit party in Tamil Nadu – the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (VCK – Liberation Panther Party) decided to enter the political process and contest elections. The ideological clarity of the new party and the close ties between leaders and led invited optimism amongst a range of commentators. Writing in *Frontline*, noted political analyst Viswanathan (1999) saw the development 'as having the potential to bring about substantial changes not only of electoral politics in the state, but in the nature of political activism in general and the approach of mainstream political parties to organisations that represent Dalits' aspirations'. Similarly, I portrayed them as 'redrawing the political map of Tamil Nadu' (Gorringe 2005: 301).

The rise of Dalit parties in the state seemed to offer another instance of caste-based mobilisation expanding the political mainstream and democratising Indian democracy. Whilst India's democratic system has struggled to accommodate oppositional movements, according to Lakha and Taneja (2009: 316) the recent upsurge of lower caste (Dalit and 'Other Backward Caste') groups is reshaping political institutions. Indeed, these authors describe the political accommodation and electoral successes of such movements as 'a seismic shift in patterns of political participation and structures of power' (ibid. 317). Certainly, autonomous Dalit parties have kept caste discrimination on the agenda, held authorities to account and gained impressive electoral victories. The

Bahujan Samaj Party's (Majority People's Party) formation of several governments at the state-level in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (Pai 2002), led some commentators to identify a 'Dalit revolution' in northern India (Jaffrelot 2003) even before it won an unparalleled Assembly majority in 2007.

Carried away on a tide of radical rhetoric and the emergence of novel actors, it was easy to envision social change. Even at the zenith of movement activism, however, there were indications that the transition to political participation would be neither smooth nor rapid for the representatives of the lowest castes and classes. Internal opposition to the VCK's political ambitions was abundant and vociferous. As one party stalwart put it:

*If you rear a calf with pigs, then the calf too will eat shit. That is why we reject politics. We can protest and gain from that – we can fight the governments from the outside. If the calf joins the piglets then the two become one and you cannot distinguish between them – both fall into the gutter (Subramani Interview, April 1999).*

Captured here are both the radical activists' perception of politics as tainted, and recognition of the influence that the prevalent political culture can have on emergent organisations. Optimistic accounts of the Dalit parties arguably downplayed these deep-seated institutional impediments to change. Returning to Tamil Nadu a decade on from the entry into politics this paper draws on ethnographic data to offer an analysis of the VCK's ongoing process of institutionalisation<sup>1</sup>. The paper charts the VCKs gradual inclusion into and participation within political institutions before analysing the impact that this has had on how they organise and what they are able to demand in the political sphere. We conclude by questioning whether institutionalisation has shorn the panthers of their radicalism or whether they retain the capacity for autonomous action. We begin, however, with an overview of the theoretical work on institutionalisation and social movements that places this case within a wider context.

### **Institutionalising Contentious Politics**

Institutionalisation here refers to the process by which movements move from extra-institutional action to more formal engagement with and action within formal politics and the institutions of interest mediation. A range of social movement theorists regard institutionalisation as an almost inevitable stage within a 'protest cycle', but there is disagreement as to whether it represents the 'success' of a movement and the socio-political recognition of its concerns and influence, or whether it signals a movement's demise as a radical group due to an increasing preoccupation with bureaucratic processes, resource mobilisation and self-preservation (Hensby, Sibthorpe & Driver 2012). Some see integration into political institutions as the end-goal of extra-institutional mobilisation (Gamson 1990; Offe 1990), whilst others see it a form of demobilisation and de-radicalisation (Coy & Hedeem 2005). The two perspectives, of course, may co-exist within any group. As Offe (1990) notes, movements are usually divided into pragmatists and idealists. The former perceive the formation of formal organisations with due-paying members and clear structures of leadership as a means of sustaining activist concerns. By

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<sup>1</sup> Data was collected over 10 months in 2012 during ESRC (Grant RES-062-23-3348) funded fieldwork in and around Madurai District, central Tamil Nadu.

contrast, the idealists - '*fundis*' in Offe's terms - 'refuse to join the institutional learning process' and bemoan the loss of autonomy, spontaneity and specificity that accompanies increasing formalisation (1990: 249-250).

Political theorists such as Meyer and Tarrow (1998) argue that activism can become a vocation for cadre. Given the inevitable ebbs and flows of mobilisation, therefore, such activists seek to professionalize and advocate for their concerns on a more stable footing. Indeed, a range of studies illustrate the benefits of institutionalisation in terms of obtaining vital resources (McCarthy & Zald 1977), influencing policy changes (Kriesi 2004), or creating further opportunities for mobilisation (Pettinichio 2012). Large organisations, however, operate according to a different logic to social movements. They require members, infrastructure, a division of labour and resources. In their study of Social Movement Organisations, therefore, Jordan and Maloney (1997) argue that the quest for bureaucratic stability and efficiency sees the focus on radical action and change give way to recruitment drives and campaigns to raise money.

A corollary process witnesses a decline of mass activism in favour of professional activists who organise events or engage in mediated stunts on behalf of the more passive membership. Whilst Jordan and Maloney focus on 'protest businesses', the focus here is on what we might call 'protest parties'. Such parties, however, experience similar compulsions to businesses: they need to expand beyond the core constituency to have an impact, they need to secure resources to wage electoral campaigns and they need to attract the votes of significant numbers of people to stand any chance of winning (Poguntke 1993). This latter objective may entail the dilution or neglect of key movement demands in favour of broader or more general appeals, or it may result in pragmatic electoral alliances with other parties with all the negotiations, compromises and possible decline in mobilisation entailed (Maguire 1995).

Drawing on their work in Latin America, Petras and Veltmeyer (2006: 91) describe 'electoral politics as a trap' designed to clip the wings of political opponents. They argue that entry into the party system invariably results in de-radicalisation. This finding is echoed in much of the social movement literature in which, as Pettinichio (2012: 501) notes, institutionalisation generally has a 'negative connotation'. Tarrow (1998: 208) argues that movements which adopt 'institutional routines, can become imbued with their logic and values'. Others, however, maintain that institutionalisation need not lead to goal displacement or de-radicalisation and that formal movement organisations can secure gains and concessions from the political system (Staggenborg 1988; Clemens & Minkoff 2004).

As regards process of institutionalisation in Tamil politics, the dominant political parties in the state have established a template for both how political challengers enter political institutions, and what it means to 'do politics' (Gorringe 2011). Successive challengers in the state have entered politics following mobilisation that has legitimised both extra-institutional action and caste based politics. This template is widely recognised. As Thirumavalavan, leader of the VCK, told cadres at a party meeting:

If we look at the political history of Tamil Nadu, most of the parties that emerged in the past twenty years or so perceive politics as a tool to get political power - to get power you need caste support, to get caste support you need caste feelings, if you provoke caste feelings you will get caste support, and if you get caste support you

will get power. This is the perspective of political parties, of most of the political parties that emerged in the past twenty years in Tamil Nadu. They form, first, caste-based organisations, then, convert them into political parties (Speech, April 2012).

Racine (2009) similarly notes how caste dominates political calculations surrounding which candidates to field and which constituencies to address. This is one reason why the proportion of reserved jobs for 'Backward' and 'Scheduled' Castes is so high in the state – exceeding the Supreme Court ceiling of 50% by a considerable margin at 69% (Racine 2009; Ziegfeld 2013). The political mobilisation of lower castes in Tamil Nadu has, to this extent, succeeded. This benchmark, however, means that there is limited scope for emerging parties to lobby for further concessions. There is, as Racine puts it, 'a gap between successful agitations by a caste association and their political dividends' (2009: 470). In part this is because of the absolute dominance of the two Dravidian parties who have not gained less than 67% of seats in the Legislative Assembly in the ten elections since 1971 (Racine 2009: 454).

The emergence of non-Dravidian challengers, as Wyatt (2009) notes, has not displaced the Dravidian duopoly but forced these parties into a range of alliances. Political recognition in Tamil Nadu, therefore, takes the form of an alliance with one or other of the main parties rather than an ability to stand alone. Roberts (2010) argues that the Dalit parties have successfully weaned Dalit votes away from the main parties, but given that they have done so by forging alliances with those parties the gains are marginal (Gorringer 2011). Most critiques – or celebrations – of the party have focused on their performance in politics but, as Jaoul (2007) notes, Dalit politics has an impact in the social as well as political spheres.

Institutionalisation, this suggests, occurs on multiple levels and in various registers. There is a need, therefore, to analyse the broader processes of socio-political institutionalisation in which radical groups are inducted into a particular political culture replete with its own norms, attitudes and ways of doing things. In what follows, therefore, this paper focuses on the wider processes through which the party has been institutionalised into Tamil ways of *doing* politics. Institutionalisation, it is argued, is not a clear cut event. Entering electoral politics, as Aminzade (1995) observes, can co-exist with an informal and decentralised organisational structure and need not (initially at least) lead to formalisation and professionalisation. Electoral contestation, similarly, does not necessarily mark the end of extra-institutional agitation. Institutionalisation, thus, must be understood as a process. It is to this process of change amongst the Panthers that we now turn.

### **Institutionalising Rebellion**

The VCK entered politics for multiple reasons. There were the 'push' factors of repression, marginalisation and alienation from the masses (Gorringer 2005). During its radical mobilisation phase, the Panthers were portrayed as an extremist organisation and faced political repression. Launching a party, therefore, was about establishing their democratic credentials as much as anything else. Alongside this, however, there are also 'pull' factors. Firstly, as Palshikar (2013: 10) notes, any new party also 'thinks it can break the monopoly of the "established" parties and gatecrash into the system'. True to this goal, the VCK first competed as part of a Third Front led by the Tamil Maanila Congress (Tamil State Congress) in a bid to contest Dravidian hegemony. Wyatt (2009: 127) notes, however, that political structures in the state conspire against emergent and poorly resourced parties. Given the first past the post system, the bipolar nature of Tamil

politics means that parties require a significant vote-share to win. The VCK, has not been able to do this independently (Gorringe 2005; Wyatt 2009). Shortly after its initial foray into electoral politics, therefore, the VCK allied with one of the main Dravidian parties and has contested elections in one or other of the main fronts since 2001. Their autonomy has been constrained both by a lack of resources and through the strategies of the dominant. In an echo of Petras and Veltmeyer (2006), Punitha Pandian – editor of the long-running *Dalit Murasu* (Dalit Drum) – saw politics as a trap. He recounted an instance in the late 1990s – at the height of VCK mobilisation - when the Deputy General of Police called Thirumavalavan into a meeting:

It is a conspiracy. If any revolutionary type figure - any element who seems like they might destroy the *varnashrama*, brahminic order – emerges, then they try and inveigle them into politics. That is what the DGP himself said: “Why don’t you start a party Thirumavalavan? ... Come and speak in the Assembly, it will be in the papers. Now no one pays attention. In the house, Karunanidhi will have to respond. Why do you remain outside, speaking like a naxalite? Come to the system.” This did not happen over one or two days, but was a long process of brain-washing. He said: “Why do you come and complain to me that he was arrested or he was beaten? Become an MLA and then give me a call. I’ll come to your house” (Pandian Interview, April 2012).

VCK activists and leaders in Madurai recounted instances in which Thirumavalavan was arrested and intimidated (Fieldnotes 2012). They recalled the cases filed against them and the sea of police at any demonstration, as opposed to the respect they now receive from the police.<sup>2</sup> The carrot and stick approach forecloses the options available to protestors. This contributes to what Pandian sees as a more fundamental form of institutionalisation. The Dalit parties, he argues, have bought into the idea that institutional politics is key:

Since the 1990s Dalits have started their own parties. That was the main set back. Everyone sees 1990 as the time of great uprising. Of course there was an uprising, but no huge change in consciousness. You are realising this now. With the uprising there was a flaw. Post 1990s what the Dalit intellectuals said was that Dalit politics alone would rule India. What they meant by Dalit politics was electoral politics (Pandian Interview, April 2012).

In this regard, the victory of Mayawati in UP, he insists, has further limited the Dalit political imagination to party politics and political power. Dalit parties, in other words, have been institutionalised into particular ways of doing politics that neglect the wider socio-cultural and economic contexts within which discrimination persists. ‘The time worn response to dissent’, Nandy asserts, ‘is to neutralise it by absorbing it into the mainstream’ (1998: 51). This neutralisation, it seems, extends to the political imaginaries of political challengers.

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<sup>2</sup> A politics of principle may have its own reward, but it is a costly and precarious process as the anti-nuclear protestors in Kudankulam found to their cost in 2012 when boys as young as 15 were charged with sedition for their part in a peaceful protest against the commissioning of a nuclear reactor: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/article3898050.ece>

### **Acceptable Allies?**

The compulsions to enter politics, then, are powerful, but what of the VCK's performance as a party? Many critics argued that the VCK should have kept away from established parties. Indeed, the Bahujan Samaj Party's state secretary, Armstrong, insisted that a vote for the VCK was wasted because the Dalits who had been attracted away from the Dravidian parties by the promise of an alternative were shoring up those same parties through alliance politics (Personal Communication, September 2012). Others were even more cynical, arguing that the VCK now acted as the 'SC/ST Wing of the DMK'. Just as Kanshiram – founder of the BSP - portrayed Dalit politicians as *chamchas* (stooges), so these critics argued that the VCK had done little more than get some of their people fielded as candidates. VCK supporters, themselves, were upset by their leader's obsequious behaviour towards allies. I asked Thirumavalavan about this:

H: Do you need to go and stand before politicians with your hands bowed?

T: No. No compulsion at all. It is up to us. We can refuse to go and see them and maintain a party like Nedumaran [a Tamil nationalist politician] – 500 or so strong.

H: But if you want to be a meaningful party?

T: Then we need to observe certain protocols. Go and see Kalaingar Karunanidhi on his birthday and my birthday for instance. We also need to watch our language to some extent, things like that (Personal Exchange, August 2012).

To insist that the VCK should stand independently, however, is to apply different standards to them than to others. The infinitely better resourced and established Communist parties, for instance, similarly feel the need to ally with the regional power-holders. The common view is that the only way of making electoral gains is to ally with the major parties. As Thirumavalavan (2009: 266) wrote: 'Contesting alone was considered, but it would be like clapping with one hand'. Working for the masses, he notes, may mean having to join hands with others even though no party in Tamil Nadu can be seen as a 'true friend of the Dalits' (Ibid: 28).

In electoral terms, as Wyatt (2009: 129) notes, the results of these alliances are 'very modest'. The VCK have won three seats in the Legislative Assembly and one Lok Sabha seat. The most they have won in any election is two seats at state level. Of their representatives, Thirumavalavan - the first VCK candidate to be elected - resigned his MLA seat on a point of principle (Thirumavalavan 2009). Of the two elected in 2006 one defected to another party. Only one of their three MLAs, therefore, has lasted a full term in office – Ravikumar represented Kattumannarkovil constituency from 2006 until his defeat in the 2011 elections. In 2013, therefore, Thirumavalavan, MP for Chidambaram, remains the sole elected representative of the VCK.

Whilst the VCK has now been in alliance with both major parties: 'we have not received full acceptance or recognition from either party. They totally see us as 'just a Dalit party' and it could take some time before that perception changes' (Sannah Interview, September 2012). In an interview for the party magazine *Tamil Mann* (Tamil Land) Thirumavalavan expanded on this:

Whenever non-Dalits start a party they can open branches wherever they like. They can campaign with independence. They can express their opinions without fear or favour. It is a huge struggle for the VCK to simply go to a place and raise a flag there. If we take up general issues than that is a problem too. We took out car rally

from Batlagundu to Cumbam on the Mullaperiyar issue [The dam located in Kerala that is a source of constant disputes], but as soon as we entered Cumbam, dominant castes surrounded our vehicles and threw stones at us. We said that we were protesting on their behalf too, but their view is: ‘Who are you to speak up on this problem’ (Thirumavalavan 2011: 40-43)

Similarly, numerous party members also pointed out how often their leader had called for a Third Front. In 2009, at the height of the crisis in Sri Lanka, for instance, he sought to forge a Tamil Nationalist Front but none would accept his leadership. There are pragmatic reasons to reject a Third Front, but the rejection was couched in caste terms. Institutionalisation here, therefore, is not simply the creation of a party and engagement with elections; it entails a radical change of political culture: educating both the Dalit masses and the other parties about political engagement.

Whilst unfavourable comparisons have been drawn between the Vanniyar based Paatali Makkal Katchi’s (Toiling Peoples’ Party) electoral returns and those of the VCK (eg, Wyatt 2009: 130), such accounts do not tell the whole story. It is true that Paraiyars and Vanniyars have similar populations in the state, but we need to understand their respective performances in context. Firstly, the PMK was most successful *before* the VCK became an established party and eroded their vote-base. Since that point, the PMK’s electoral fortunes have declined. In 2011 the PMK managed to win only 3 of 30 seats it contested despite standing in alliance with the VCK. Caste arithmetic suggested that this was an unassailable combination, but such calculations neglect wider political considerations. Most respondents noted that this was a loss for the DMK alliance as a whole rather than anything. Corruption scandals, accusations of nepotism and power cuts conspired to fuel an anti-incumbency wave. Within that broader framework, however, local contests saw a different logic at play:

Dalit votes fell for non-Dalit candidates, but the votes of the non-Dalits were not cast for Dalit candidates. This is the backdrop and underlying reason for the VCK’s loss in 10 seats (Sannah Interview, September 2012).

I was repeatedly told that caste played a factor in the elections. From this perspective, a purely political analysis of the VCK’s electoral performance is flawed since it neglects the social discrimination that Dalits continue to face, which can mean that non-Dalits refuse to vote for a Dalit party (Gorringer 2005).

This is not to suggest that people automatically or necessarily vote for their caste. Indeed, Sannah noted that both Dalit and Vanniyar votes were divided. Whilst the PMK has been able to mobilise around 50% of the Vanniyar vote, Wyatt suggest that the VCK has not been able to emulate this success with regards to Paraiyar votes (Wyatt 2009: 130). Following Hickey and Du Toit (2007), however, we need to analyse the terms on which groups are included into institutions. The Dalit upsurge did not mobilise a previously excluded category so much as one lacking in political consciousness. This constituency, therefore, was already integrated into the political system albeit on the margins. Dalit parties, furthermore, emerged after those of other caste parties and – partly as a consequence – found key political positions and the status of most-favoured ally already occupied. Thirdly, Dalit parties lack the resources that other political challenges can muster. Fourthly, Dalits entered political institutions but were not able to shed their social identities and faced discrimination as a result: in 1999 cow-dung was smeared on the

posters of Dalit parties, in numerous elections non-Dalits refused to vote for them, and as late as 2012 party flag-poles were uprooted from village squares.

Three key differences between the PMK and VCK stand out: firstly, the VCK has never mobilised Paraiyars on a caste basis – preferring instead to use the language of Dalits or Tamils instead. The PMK, by contrast, has been most successful when mobilising Vanniyars. Sure enough, following its electoral reversals, the PMK reverted to a politics of caste assertion in 2012 in a bid to boost its fortunes. The second point is that Dalit voters have long been integrated into political institutions thanks to the reservations for SC candidates. Dalits not only stand for all parties, therefore, but have long-standing ties and relations to particular parties that are hard to break. Consequently, as one social scientist noted; ‘After the PMK agitation then suddenly there were Vanniyars in both Dravidian parties in great numbers, but the same has not happened in this case’ (Bala, Personal Communication April 2012). Finally, the lack of resources means that the VCK are unable to cherry-pick constituencies or contest from the same number of seats as the PMK. As Thirumavalavan noted: ‘we do not have resources to bankroll candidates and so we are very much at a disadvantage in negotiations’ (Personal Communication, September 2012).

Despite this, Dalit concerns have been institutionalised to some degree. One spill-over (Whittier 2004) from the emergence of Dalit parties has been a focus on caste by Communist Parties. Samuel Raj, a leader of the CPI(M) affiliated Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front conceded that the Dalit parties were instrumental in the forcing the party to rethink its strategy. Their focus was on the economic exploitation of the working class, but the Dalit parties forced them to consider whether Dalits should ‘have to live in social oppression till they get economic liberty’ (Samuel Raj Interview, April 2012). Whilst none of the other parties have so explicitly addressed Dalit demands, they have arguably been more receptive to them. If the police firing that killed 6 Dalits in Paramkudi in 2011 indicated the entrenched casteism of police forces in an area characterised by Backward (but dominant) Caste Thevar clashes with Dalit Pallars, subsequent events suggest that the tide might be turning. In 2012, several attacks on Thevars generated a feeling of insecurity amongst them as reflected by the formation of the *Thevar Inam Paadukarpu Peravai* (Thevar Caste Protection Front) (Dhanraj, personal communication, October 2012). Later that year, the Thevar leader ‘Prabakaran was arrested ... on charges of creating animosity between two groups in Kamuthi and Mudukulathur by making provocative speeches, distributing pamphlets and by posting write ups in his website “marathamizhar.blog.com”, denigrating Dalit leaders’ (The Hindu 2012). Subsequently, in early 2013, the AIADMK government responded to caste violence by Vanniyars against Dalits by clamping down on the PMK and even placing its leader under arrest (The Hindu 2013). Dalit parties and voters, thus, may be starting to shape the institutions they joined in the late 1990s.

### **Rebels in Power?**

If political institutions are shifting in response to Dalit participation, how have Dalit parties and politicians themselves changed? We have seen how the Dalit parties are imperfectly integrated into Tamil politics, but given that new parties seek new gains in politics we should ask what have they achieved through their electoral engagement. The most obvious way in which parties can effect change is through interventions in the elected chambers. It is not, however, straight-forward for a single MP or MLA to gain time and space in Parliament. Respondents mentioned Ravikumar MLA speaking on a

range of issues from housing, to debt, pornography, prohibition, the rights of transgenders and food for prisoners (Tamizh Murasu & TamizhKanni, Personal Communication, March 2012).<sup>3</sup> Others noted Thirumavalavan's fasts and speeches on Tamil issues – relating to the violence in Sri Lanka or the allocation of water for Tamil Nadu. In 2012, however, his most vociferous intervention came on the subject of a cartoon in a NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) textbook that was said to denigrate Dr Ambedkar – first law minister of India and pre-eminent Dalit leader. In Parliament Thirumavalavan launched a tirade at the publishers and a demand for the withdrawal of the cartoon and an apology in a speech that sparked a national debate.

That one intervention, a speaker at a VCK memorial in June argued, justified his 5 year term (Fieldnotes, June 2012). Others, however, castigated Dalit leaders for their focus on issues of identity (Teltumbde 2012), or for their silence:

6 minutes he spoke on that [Ambedkar cartoon]. 6 minutes. After that – again the Eelam [Tamil nation in Sri Lanka] problem and the UN resolution. That is all. After that he never opened his mouth. For that matter no one opened their mouths – we have 110 stooges there [referring to reserved MPs] (Anon Interview, April 2012).

In the eyes of such critics, Dalit politicians merely prop up established parties or enrich themselves. Perhaps, though, the expectations of those who were mobilised by Thirumavalavan's fiery speeches in the 1990s are over-optimistic. As one more tempered interviewee noted, when asked what he expected from the party:

Not much – they are a small outfit with just one MP what do you expect them to do? They need to give us a voice and raise our issues and try and get political power – this is what they are doing (Ambedkar Interview, June 2012)

An otherwise critical union worker said that no other politician had spoken up on behalf of conservancy workers:

Even those who are government employees did not have a set wage – they were paid different amounts at the panchayat level, the regional level and state level and in different institutions. The village workers would have to work for left-overs or face caste wrath. After years of campaigning to highlight their plight, including conferences and protests and a huge rally in Chennai under the auspices of the communist parties, I finally approached Thirumavalavan who listened to the issues and raised them in the media and then Ravikumar raised them in the Legislative Assembly with the result that an order was passed to give the workers a minimum standard wage of Rs 3000 a month (Kondavelai Interview, April 2012).

Whilst this interviewee was sympathetic towards the VCK and offered a rosier picture of this event than others, it should come as no surprise that he approached the VCK, nor that they raised the issue (see Ravikumar 2011). As one Dalit academic, who was a fierce critic of VCK politics, conceded; if I needed to speak to an MLA or MP then the VCK

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<sup>3</sup> In 2011 Ravikumar published a book of his Assembly Speeches to counter the frequent charges that the VCK did not speak up on issues. They include speeches on *panchami* land, Sri Lanka, water-tank workers and employment opportunities – many of which gained no coverage at all.

‘are the only ones I have any sort of access to, so yes I guess I would turn to them’. ‘Political entrepreneurs’, as Wyatt (2009: 87) puts it, ‘function as mediators’ or brokers. Such brokerage often has negative connotations. As activist and writer Raj Gowthaman remarked: ‘Once they enter electoral politics they [movements] become mere vehicles for distributing goods to members’ (Personal Communication, April 2012).<sup>4</sup> Certainly I encountered many Dalits who credited the VCK with obtaining jobs, transfers or land deeds for them, but as the quote from Kondavelai above indicates, mediation may be on behalf of groups as well as individuals. Such mediation, significantly, has come to be expected of all parties. ‘Tamil politics’, as academic and activist Lakhsmanan argues, ‘de-politicises the masses’ through hand-outs and patron-client relations (Personal Communication, March 2012). To gain benefits and concessions of this nature requires the VCK to negotiate or bargain with officials and other parties.

Getting things done, in other words, requires institutionalisation into the informal politics of the state. Early in 2012 I attended a party wedding.

My attention was drawn towards the veshti’s (traditional waistcloths) that the men were wearing. Several sported red, white and blue lines printed down the edges thus identifying them as VCK supporters. Others wore their affiliations literally on their sleeves as well. One attendee sported the black shirt and veshti with black border of the Dravida Kazhagam, others had DMK colours. ... One late comer was ushered in to sit pride of place on the stage behind Thirumavalavan. When he got up to talk, I was told that he was a bigshot in the AIADMK (Fieldnotes, February 2012).

The VCK, thus, had institutional attire and had also forged ties to members of other parties. Whilst reservations mean that there are Dalits in every party, the VCK had gone beyond networks of relations. The Madurai District secretary, for instance, not only invited DMK strong-man and Karunanidhi’s son Azhagiri to her housewarming, she was in turn invited to his son’s wedding. My host at the wedding above explained that:

The VCK have gone beyond the stage of being purely oppositional and become a proper party now with recognition from all the others. They all have to work together to get things done and so they make such visits and shows of respect (Fieldnotes, February 2012).

Dhanapal, a building contractor who has been a member of the VCK for a decade now, spoke of how the movements’ characterisation as extremist used to sideline their concerns. Now, he insisted, they have the authority to make themselves heard:

Now that we are a party, if we want to hold a protest we get a response from officials, our voices are heard, we have the opportunity to interact with alliance partners. We’ve been in the DMK Front and the ADMK Front and so can speak to District Convenors and officials in each district or area. Now the VCK District Convenor and the DMK District Convenor and ADMK convenor have links. So what happens with these connections is that we can deploy them in the interests of

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<sup>4</sup> For an example of how patronage networks operate see: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/watchmen-sweepers-hired-on-political-recommendation-school-department/article5090201.ece>

the people. If someone comes to us, we can contact the district convenor by phone and they say ‘Right, I’ll look into it’ and they facilitate things (Interview, March 2012).

The informal and mediated nature of how things get done in Tamil politics is captured here. Whilst Dhanapal, who had applied for a post in the party, put this in a positive light others were more critical. Raj Gowthaman, however, notes that this is not confined to Dalit parties:

You know what Tamil politics is like – you need connections to get things done. The Dalit parties do not have much clout on their own, which is why they need coalition partners. Now the DMK [the VCK’s coalition partner at the time] is in opposition – they will have to sit quiet for five years. That is what it is like (Personal Communication, April 2012).

At a seminar on Raj Gowthaman’s work the discussion turned to Dalit politics. The frustrations of disillusioned intellectuals as well as their recognition of the wider political culture within which Dalit parties must operate were captured in a humorous exchange:

M: The start [for Dalit Parties] was good, but since joining politics they have stagnated and started to mimic all the other parties. Yesterday there was a shooting [of Dalits] in Paramakudi which the leaders condemned, but today there is an election and so they join an alliance. What do the leaders think of the people? What are they talking?

In response to this rhetorical question one wag shouted out ‘politics’ and the room erupted into laughter (Fieldnotes, April 2012).

Institutionalisation into backroom politics has enabled the VCK to secure land deeds and jobs and ensure that party officials now get respect from police officials. The problems for Dalit critics of the VCK come when the ties forged to other party leaders and groups lead the party into the murkier aspects of politics. As one leading lawyer in Madurai observed:

Now that they are a party they are in contact with other party leaders. Many of the accused [in Prevention of Atrocity cases] will have party connections and so pressure is put on this lot to drop cases or come to some agreement (Vakil Interview, July 2012).

The term used to describe this is the English word ‘compromise’. The alliances and links with other parties, I was repeatedly told, mean that it is harder for the VCK to stand firm against caste discrimination or violence. They are put under pressure by officials, allies and dominant castes to effect a compromise between perpetrator and victim. VCK leaders insist that they would never sell out in such fashion ‘especially not for serious cases’, but concede that some ‘miscreants’ in the party might do so. Given the lack of a salary for party workers the temptation is certainly huge. Others justified informal settlements in relatively minor cases pointing out that such deals secured rapid compensation and saved lengthy and uncertain legal procedures and fees and avoided animosity between groups. As the party propaganda secretary, Gautham Sannah, argued:

In some villages there are minor or petty confrontations and we also have the responsibility to ensure that we engage in dialogue to prevent these small problems from escalating into major caste clashes. You see the Panthers can make a fuss and then leave the village, but the villagers there need to live in peace. We cannot allow the problems caused by a few to adversely affect the entire village. In those situations we have to resolve matters through dialogue there is not other option. In those situations one or two frustrated people might come and accuse us of compromise (Interview, September 2012).

Having repeatedly encountered rural Dalits' distress over long-drawn out and expensive (both in terms of travel and lost earnings) legal proceedings and heard fearful Dalits voice their trepidation about Dalit activists stirring up a hornets' nest before leaving, Sannah's argument is sound. To many, however, the very idea of any settlement is an anathema. VCK cadres in Periyoor Cheri near Madurai printed sports shirts bearing the motto 'no compromise' to celebrate the village temple festival. Activists nurtured on the slogan 'hit back', are appalled by any suggestion of shady deals letting culprits off the hook.

Increasingly, these critics argue, members of the party are using their new-found power to better themselves rather than the community. Social movements everywhere have been seen as vehicles for the advancement of activists (Meyer & Tarrow 1998) and the VCK is said to be no exception. Such tales are hard to verify and very few concrete cases were mentioned. Whilst the VCK is now routinely said to be engaged in *katta panchayats* (kangaroo courts) that resolve issues informally with money changing hands, Thirumavalavan contested such rumours:

I have heard that, but is there any proof? Also, all parties do this why are we the ones who are singled out? This is the result of jealousy and an attempt to break party. Give me details of one instance where we have compromised (Personal Communication, September 2012).

When I mentioned one party member who told me he was elected as Panchayat president having promised to resolve any caste issues *without recourse* to the Prevention of Atrocities Act, Thirumavalavan insisted that party cadre would not countenance this and asserted that 'we can never compromise on atrocities'.

Many of the rumours and misinformation are prompted by jealousy. Whilst other parties are clearly more involved in kangaroo courts and real-estate, the fact that many VCK officials are now relatively well-off, grates with those left behind and with other castes. *Empowering India*, for instance, notes that Ravikumar – General Secretary of the Party and MLA from 2006 to 2011 – registered assets worth Rs 401, 155 in 2006. When he stood again in 2011, this figure had risen to Rs 4, 719, 496.<sup>5</sup> Whilst there is no suggestion of wrongdoing here, and it should be stressed that this is chickenfeed compared to the Karnataka Election Watch (in Manor 2013: 52) finding that 'the average MLA is worth 23.54 crore' in Karnataka, it reinforced people's conviction that politics was a business. 'All these forms of brokerage' as activist and intellectual Paari Chezhan observed, 'are very lucrative' (Personal Communication, February 2012). He pointed to kangaroo

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.empoweringindia.org/new/constituency.aspx?eid=740&cid=159>

courts, land estate deals and other forms of mediation as means to make money. The widespread practice of spending money in elections follows the belief that such investment could be recouped through taking a cut of any contract or deal requiring official approval. VCK candidates for local body elections spoke of spending several hundred thousand (lakh) rupees on their campaigns: on posters, food for volunteers, leaflets and money for voters.

Pavalar Talaiyari (a pen name), writing for the VCK's *Tamil Mann*, recognised that money could not buy elections but that it was widely used:

It is not just money that determines victory or success. Coalition strength, party, strength, individual authority all determine victory. Only in fourth place is money. Despite all this the shameful practice of giving money for votes has been established (2011: 44).

He called for major electoral reform, but pending that, many VCK candidates appear to have adapted to existing practices. The VCK, as one Dalit publisher noted, has become a mirror image of the Dravidian parties (Ezhuthallar, Personal Communication, March 2012). Contesting the worst accusations, a legal advocate insisted that one cannot make vast sums of money from Dalit constituents and suggested that real-estate was a more likely source of income (Jawahar Interview, March 2012). Underpinning the rumours was the fact that the need to amass wealth like the other parties had become important for the VCK and helped fuel attempts to take the party 'into the mainstream'. As the VCK branches out and incorporates ever more non-Dalits it increasingly protests on more general issues, which is a sore point for some:

Now Dalit leaders are protesting about price hikes and so on. That is fine. They can hold a general meeting and condemn Congress, but they should remember that they are a community party. When they hold a 'general meeting' who turns up? Dalits only, so these parties should address their problems first and foremost (Manickam, Interview, June 2012)

Thirumavalavan rightly insisted that the VCK, unlike established parties, protested on both these *and* Dalit issues, but the perception of a party growing away from its core constituents persists at the grassroots.

### **Conclusion: Just another party?**

*When insurgency wells up, apparently uncontrollable, elites respond. And one of their responses is to cultivate those lower-class organisations which begin to emerge in such periods, for they have little to fear from organisations, especially from organisations which come to depend on them for support. Thus, however unwittingly, leaders and organisers of the lower classes act in the end to facilitate the efforts of elites to channel the insurgent masses into normal politics, believing all the while that they are taking the long and arduous but certain path to power (Piven and Cloward 1979: xxii).*

The VCK, as the quote from Piven and Cloward reminds us, are not alone in managing the fraught process of institutionalisation. Like many before them, they have experienced both the benefits and costs of the process. Whilst members have signed up in droves, many core activists have become increasingly disillusioned. Having entered politics the VCK have found that they could not stand independently. For all their emphasis on

maintaining autonomy and respect, therefore, some compromises have been made. One of the main changes to the party has been the decision in 2007 to admit non-Dalits to leadership posts and the related emphasis on Tamil nationalism as a unifying force. This change has given the VCK a toe-hold in villages that they could not think of entering in the past, but that has come at the price of a growing unease amongst supporters. As one academic commentator concluded:

At one stage there were hopes that the VCK would be different – they did create great awareness and introduce some ideas, but that has now come to nothing. They have become another party – another middle man (Perarsareer, Personal Communication, March 2012).

Institutionalisation, however, is not a one-off, once-and-for-all process, but a gradual adaptation to a prevalent political culture. Despite over a decade in politics, the VCK have yet to formalise structures of leadership or membership and remain, in this sense, very much ‘a political movement trying to become a political party’ (Ravikumar, Personal Communication, August 2013). This was perhaps best illustrated when the VCK decided to emulate all other Tamil parties by launching its own TV channel. Lacking resources, the VCK hit on the idea of celebrating Thirumavalavan’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday by collecting gold from members. Rarely can the funding for a channel have been collected so transparently. For all the criticisms of the direction taken by the party and, more specifically, some of its functionaries, supporters responded to the call with enthusiasm and purpose. There was a real sense of ownership pertaining to the party and the prospective channel that belie suggestions of the party’s demise. It is no small matter that Dalits now have people in authority who they can turn to, relate to and interact with. Tamil politics in that sense *has* been democratised by the institutionalisation of the Panthers.

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