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**Title:** “A Voice for the Last and Least”: Thirumavalavan and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi in the Lok Sabha.

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**Key Words:** Federal Politics; Minor Parties; Coalition Politics; Tamil Nadu; Eelam

NB: For special section on small parties.

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## **“A Voice for the Last and Least”: Thirumavalavan and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi in the Lok Sabha.**

### **Abstract**

*Between 2009 and 2014, Thirumavalavan, the leader of the largest Dalit party in Tamil Nadu, served as an MP in Delhi. This paper draws on research with the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK or Liberation Panther Party) to raise a number of key questions about representation and democracy in a multi-level federal system. Although they are a minor party, their experience of national politics offers insights into the workings of party systems in India. The paper considers the extent to which they are constrained by alliance partners and political rules-of-the-game. It then considers the question of representation, and asks what the VCK managed to achieve in Thirumavalavan’s constituency of Chidambaram and the extent to which they could raise issues at the national level both through formal and disruptive means. Finally, the paper reflects on the advantages and disadvantages for a small party of having a foothold in the Centre and draws out the lessons of the VCK’s experience for our understanding of Indian politics.*

### **Keywords**

Federal Politics; Minor Parties; Coalition Politics; Tamil Nadu; Eelam

### **Introduction**

The *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (VCK or Liberation Panther Party) is one of innumerable small parties in India. The Panthers are Dalit-led and see Ambedkar as an inspiration, but this has not prevented them from adopting a regional focus, seen in the demand for a *Tamil* nation free of caste. This (sub)nationalist focus has caused controversy as VCK leader Thirumavalavan has been a vocal advocate of the fight for Tamil Eelam and consorted with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) despite their proscription as a terrorist outfit in India. Indeed, when I met him at his MP’s residence in Delhi during fieldwork in 2012 this broader Tamil focus was immediately apparent:

On the desk were a pile of letters, some files, and printed placards outs bearing the message ‘Manohan (sic) Singhji don’t let Rajabakshe (sic) come to India’ – and variants of that message. Thirumavalavan had been shouting down the Government in Parliament about training being offered to Lankan soldiers. Thirumavalavan came in and greeted me. He was due to head out straight away to see the new home minister Shinde - as it was his birthday - and offer him a bouquet of flowers. A DMK politician was due to take Thiruma along. Another politician had urged him to attend the Indian Parliamentary Group (IPG) dinner hosted by Meira Kumar. He was not in the group and had not received an invitation but the other politician was saying ‘come anyway’. ... In the event, the DMK politician was held up in traffic and never came, and Thiruma spent the evening chatting to me (Fieldnotes, August 2012).

Though the VCK are a minor party with marginal electoral returns, the election of a party MP to the Lok Sabha in 2009 amplified their importance. Encapsulated in my notes from the time are the concerns that I wish to address in this paper: firstly we see how becoming an MP opened up opportunities for networking and alliances with state and national leaders. Secondly, the placards speak to the over-riding focus of VCK politics during his tenure as an MP: the war in Sri Lanka and the treatment of Tamils during the conflict and to Thirumavalavan’s use of disruptive tactics to get his point across. Finally, the fact that the

various invitations came to nought speak to the continuing marginalisation of the VCK from the centres of power.

Were we to measure the success of the VCK in electoral terms alone, looking at seats won and vote-share (2 Members of the Legislative Assembly and 1 Member of Parliament to date), we would regard them as a marginal organisation with minimal influence.<sup>1</sup> Such analysis, however, would be overly narrow. While such indicators are clearly important for a political party, political recognition and impact extends beyond electoral results. Analysis of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi*, thus, needs to probe their interaction with, and possible effect on, other parties and changing social relations more generally. One of the aims of Dalit political engagement, after all, is to democratise Indian democracy (Gorringer 2017; Waghmore 2013). Herzog (1987: 317) argues that small or 'minor' parties are often considered to be unimportant, but 'they play an active and significant role in the negotiations on the sociopolitical boundaries and rules of the game of a given political system'. Drawing on her research, Suri (2013) calls for more research on small parties in India both because they are interesting in their own right, but also because they shine a light on wider political processes and structures. Elsewhere (Gorringer 2017), I have elucidated the impact of the VCK on Tamil politics and society. This paper extends my analysis beyond the confines of the state to ask three inter-related questions: what were the attractions of national politics for the VCK? What did they gain (if anything) from Thirumavalavan's time as an MP? And what is the legacy of his term as an MP? We begin, though, by contextualising these discussions by reference to recent literature on State-Centre relations in India.

### **Centre-State Relations and Party Politics in India and Tamil Nadu**

As Wyatt notes in his introduction to this special issue, small parties often represent particular groups or interests and are capable of winning seats in the State Assembly and gaining a foothold in the Lok Sabha, but are not in a position to form a government even at the local level. Small parties in India, gained salience in the 1990s with the transformation of the Indian party system and the move away from single-party dominance (Suri 2013). Arora and Lama Rewal (2009) argue that the 1990s and 2000s witnessed a federalisation of the party system that has seen an increase in the number of single-state parties. Such parties as Palshikar (2004) notes, are not new, but they have acquired an all-India role in the coalition era. Yadav and Palshikar (2008) suggest that state-politics is increasingly autonomous from national politics and may be able 'to determine the agenda of national politics or enjoy the upper-hand in their bargains with national parties'. Kailash (2009: 54) concurs that it is often 'coalition partners rather than coalition makers who call the shots when it comes to government formation and portfolio allocation'. Indeed, he shows how even parties with only one or two seats secured crucial portfolios and departments in the 1998 Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance Government (ibid. 55). Likewise the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance in 2004 signed up (on paper at least) to a power sharing agreement in which a party would be allocated one ministerial berth for every three representatives (Kailash 2007: 312). As a result, Singh and Saxena (2011: 188) observe, central Government cabinets in coalition agreements may comprise multiple actors who are proposed and controlled by participating (State-level) parties. Sridharan (2003: 146) details how state parties increasingly sought to 'carve out a parliamentary position at the center' as well as retaining state power. This, he argues, marks a shift in the balance of power from the centre to the states. The trend towards coalition politics was, of course, somewhat reversed at a national level in 2014 when the BJP, though part of the National Democratic Alliance coalition, won sufficient seats on its own to gain a majority. The narrow vote margins and the

failure of any polity wide parties to make significant inroads in states like Tamil Nadu, however, suggests that coalitions will continue to be important in future.

Coalition rule has led to the rise of nested games played at multiple levels. State parties, Sridharan (2003: 141) points out, may seek to ‘trade assembly and parliamentary seats with the coalition’s dominant national party partner’. This was the rule until recently in Tamil Nadu. Two regional parties, the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Dravidian Progressive Federation – DMK) and its offshoot the All India Anna DMK (AIADMK), have dominated Tamil politics since 1967 and only since 1998 has Tamil politics moved ‘from a two and a half party system to bi-polar multipartism’ (Wyatt, 2009, p. 1). This duopoly partly explains why opposition parties in the state have been unable to make the inroads that challengers such as the Bahujan Samaj Party have made in Uttar Pradesh. Although they dominate state politics, the Dravidian parties have routinely offered the Congress and BJP more seats in Lok Sabha elections than their local support justified, in exchange for the support of these parties as junior allies in state elections and for influence (including cabinet posts) at the centre (Kailash 2011). These games are always ‘nested’ in that calculations at state (the desire to retain or gain power), national (the aspiration for cabinet berths or resources) and regional level (disputes over river-water sharing for instance) may affect coalitions in multiple ways.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Wyatt (2015) suggests that the DMK rejected Congress in the run up to the 2014 national elections, despite being in a weak position, because it had an eye on the 2016 state elections and the Congress were perceived to be a toxic partner in Tamil politics.

Kailash (2011) demonstrates how such games occur in the distribution of portfolios and ministerships too. State parties may seek to secure Ministerships that they can use to the advantage of their state, or they may prioritise their own status, prestige and resources. Decisions reflect their ‘varied territorial interests’ and depend whether they are in power or opposition at the State level (Kailash and Arora 2016: 63). Wyatt (2002: 737) notes how one of the AIADMK’s hopes in extending support to the BJP in 1998, was that it would topple the DMK Government in Tamil Nadu. When it became clear that this would not occur, the AIADMK withdrew support. The DMK promptly seized the chance to ally with the BJP, hoping to shore up its State government. McMillan (2014: 191) likewise notes how those in opposition in the state may prioritise local issues over national ones. He observes that the Telegu Desam Party offered outside support to the BJP in 1998, so that it could shape coalition politics but distance itself publicly from any unpopular policies.

It is important to appreciate that the VCK is considerably smaller than some of the other parties discussed here. Following Kailash, the VCK are ‘bit players’ who ‘even in the best scenario is a coalitionable party at the state level’ (2011: 252). Problems for analysis arise here given the federalised nature of party systems in India. Wyatt (2009), thus, notes how the DMK/AIADMK have refused to form coalitions at the state level, compelling smaller players to try and compensate for this with gains at the national level. They have been seen as worthy *alliance* partners, but not included in governing coalitions (a point made strongly in the VCK’s 2016 election campaign). According to Sartori (2005: 108 emphasis in original) a ‘minor party may be *discounted as irrelevant* whenever it remains over time superfluous’; exhibiting neither coalition nor ‘blackmail’ potential. Sartori describes blackmail potential as the ability to veto legislation or policy. Herzog (1987), however, challenges Sartori’s evaluation of party relevance noting how smaller parties may influence the political agenda by raising new issues and threatening to wean voters away from established parties. The VCK’s influence in this regard rests on their ability to represent (or claim to) Dalit or Eelam Tamil interests and to publicise and politicise issues. Significantly, the large national parties

have little purchase in Tamil Nadu and need local alliances to succeed (Chhibber and Murali 2006). This affords minor parties the chance of entering national alliances as part of a Dravidian package or as a counter-weight to them.

With few if any representatives, the party relies on extra-institutional protest to raise key demands. In this sense, the VCK remain a protest or ‘movement party’. Such parties, as Kitschelt (2006: 281) argues, follow a dual approach: ‘legislators of such parties may debate bills in parliamentary committees, but the next day, they participate in disruptive demonstrations’. Indeed, such organisations may use the profile afforded to them by elected representatives to gain publicity by disrupting parliament. Spary (2013: 393) insists that such ‘legislative protest should not be dismissed as frivolous behaviour, or narrowly as self-interested representatives “playing to the gallery”’. Indeed, she notes that the absence of conflict may render parliamentary institutions unrepresentative in the eyes of disgruntled citizens (2013: 398). Such disruptions may seek to alter the agenda, but also to ‘effectively signal to their constituents that they are representing their concerns’ (Spary 2013: 402). This latter function is served because ‘disruptions almost guarantee national and regional media coverage’ (Spary 2010: 348). At best such interventions may articulate alternatives and prompt debate, but at least they flag up the salience of particular issues. Given Wyatt’s (2009: 128) observation that ‘there is an important performative aspect to [VCK] politics’, our analysis of the party in Delhi must be attuned to both formal and informal aspects of their engagement.

### **Research Methods and Context**

At the time of writing in 2017, the VCK have no parliamentary representatives at state or national levels, but VCK leader Thirumavalavan served as an MP in Delhi between 2009 and 2014 when the party were in alliance with the DMK and Congress. I spent over 10 months engaged in fieldwork on Dalit politics and institutionalisation in 2012, and visited Delhi to interview Thirumavalavan.<sup>3</sup> The VCK’s engagement with national politics was not a key theme of the research, but it was central to their politics at this point. Party billboards and murals frequently placed the Lok Sabha in the backdrop, activists travelled to Delhi to see their leader, party speeches included reports of parliamentary interventions and all references to Thirumavalavan were suffixed with ‘M.P.’, testifying to the pride they felt in his elevation. The VCK, with one member, neither gained formal political recognition (this requires 2 MPs; Gorringer 2017: 130-131), nor a portfolio in government. Whilst the party seemingly had little relevancy, Herzog (1987: 317) insists that such organisations ‘play an active and significant role in the negotiation on the socio-political boundaries and rules of the game’. It is to an analysis of the interplay between this minor party and national politics that we now turn.

### **Gaining Political Recognition**

Given the VCK’s marginal position, and the bi-polar nature of Tamil politics, the first step to gaining national representation was to forge an alliance with a larger state party. Things nearly floundered at this early stage. The year preceding the polls witnessed the height of the Sri Lankan conflict against the LTTE, and the death and suffering of Tamil civilians. In 2009, Thirumavalavan went on a ‘fast unto death’ to condemn the violence and urge the Indian government to intervene. This action gained him much credit in the state. According to one Tamil-nationalist VCK-member:

[Thirumavalavan’s] reputation reached its peak when he sat for hunger strike in Maraimalainagar and announced that he was ready to die for LTTE, fighting for separate Tamil Eelam. Not only Dalits, even Backward Caste people who were LTTE

sympathisers, supported him at that time. Thousands of youth idolised him on par with Prabhakaran (Vivacayi, Interview, August 2012).

Rather than supporting their junior ally, however, the DMK clamped down on the protests around the fast. They enforced a ban on the use of '*Eelam*' in VCK posters – literally pasting over the term where it appeared, and sanctioned the arrest of party cadres when they took to the streets.<sup>4</sup> Thirumavalavan (2009: 263) analysed the VCK's electoral situation like this:

Last January 12 [2009], PMK leader Ramadoss and Veeramani and Thirumavalavan [in the third-person] went to meet the DMK leader to call on him to raise his voice [withdraw his MPs from the Congress coalition]. When that meeting did not satisfy us, I launched a fast-unto-death. Though we were in alliance, the DMK fiercely arrested cadres: 360 people were arrested in Villupuram, Cuddalore, Nagapattinam, Ariyallur, Perambalur, Tiruchy, Vellore, Thiruvanamalai, Madurai and many other districts. Over 200 were stuck in prison on non-bailable charges. 26 of those arrested were charged under the Goondas and NSA act and languished in prison for one year.

This, obviously, problematized the alliance with the DMK, and the VCK called on Tamil nationalist groups like the PMK and Vaiko's MDMK to unite. When that nationalist front failed to materialise, Thirumavalavan considered going it alone against the anti-LTTE Congress. The relevance of the VCK may be called into question here. The VCK are such small players that any 'blackmail potential' they might have had rested on their ability to persuade other parties to act with them. Indeed, one VCK sympathiser, questioned if the DMK:

were blackmailing *him* [Thirumavalavan] at one point. Funding is an issue, but can it explain this? Thirumavalavan says too many cadres were held under NSA, Goondas, but this happened *in alliance*. What has the alliance done for them in terms of power? ... what good did it do them? (Kavinar, Informal Interview, September 2012).

Such was the feeling among supporters when, for want of a better option, the VCK remained in the DMK fold. The party faced accusations, and were attacked for opportunism and betrayal. The official line was that the party had tried all other options and were unwilling to contest alone since that would mean giving up on victory, contesting from only one seat (since they lack the resources to fight multiple contests) and risking violence. As VCK sympathiser – the author Meena Kandasamy (2009) put it in an open letter:

Even if he takes up the challenge, can Thirumavalavan guarantee the safety of his cadres and VCK members? What happened on the two previous occasions when he contested independently in Chidambaram. 25,000 huts were burnt. 400 Dalit settlements were prevented from coming to the polling booth, several young men died or lost their limbs. Who will stand by the VCK when casteist violence runs riot?

Although bitterly disappointed by the decision, Vivacayi – cited above – accepted the decision and saw the logic in the move:

Either Vaiko or Ramadoss didn't take this attempt. He (Thirumavalavan) took this attempt and it didn't succeed. So what is the next step – to fight alone? You know, erm, if you do that, they [mainstream political parties] will easily side-line the party based on

weaker sections. If we want to boost the confidence of the marginalised section then we have to get MLA's and MP's from the community (Interview, August 2012).

If this explains why the VCK took this unpopular move, it is worth asking why they were accepted into the alliance. As, Kandasamy (2009) argued: 'The DMK did not send him out despite the protestations of the Congress. Even the Congress had to climb down from its earlier stance'. This point highlights Kailash's (2011) argument about the complexities faced by polity-wide parties. When the central Congress leadership was compelled to accept the VCK as part of the DMK package, the state-level Congress were outraged. Muruganandham (2009) reported that 'Karunanidhi's assertion that VCK would be part of the UPA in Tamil Nadu has infuriated the Congress Functionaries. Senior Congress figures from Vellore demanded Thirumavalavan's arrest under NSA for remarks against the sovereignty of the country', recalling that he vowed to root Congress out of Tamil Nadu and glorified the killing of Rajiv. The *Indian Express* wrote of a Congress worker in Chennai who had signed a memorandum with her blood demanding the suspension of the VCK from the UPA.<sup>5</sup> Merely getting into the alliance, thus, was a victory in terms of political recognition for the VCK, a nod by the DMK towards strength of feeling on the Sri Lankan conflict, and a reminder of the weak position of Congress in Tamil Nadu.

### **A place on the world stage**

Kailash notes how secret negotiations underpin coalitions. 'In federal states, he argues, payoffs are not restricted to one level and could involve side payments at other levels. Evidences of such agreements' he says, 'are generally visible only when breached' (2007: 308). In keeping with this, the terms of the agreements between the DMK, Congress and VCK were unclear. During the campaign, when they shared a stage, it appeared that one condition was uncritical support. A disgusted VCK member, insisted that: 'no Tamil Nationalist would accept his eulogy of Sonia Gandhi. ... He shouldn't have said 'long live Sonia Gandhi'' (TamizhMurasu Interview, September 2012). The agreement clearly they did not include a blanket gagging clause, though, since Thirumavalavan was vociferous in criticising both allies at various points. Despite deep differences, however, he did not withdraw support to the UPA or resign as an MP – an act which may have pressured the DMK to justify its continued support for Congress.

For its part, the VCK gained campaign finances and support which enabled Thirumavalavan to secure election to the centre. One of the key attractions of standing in Lok Sabha elections, we have seen, was the lack of opportunities at state level. Given that the VCK contested as part of the DMK alliance, however, and was vehemently opposed by Tamil Congress workers, the chances of a Ministership or portfolio were remote. Furthermore, becoming an MP took the central figure of the VCK away from the state for extended periods leaving the party rudderless at times (though he often missed parliament). What, then, did the party stand to gain? One of the most powerful pull factors has been flagged up already: a central concern of the VCK at this point was the conflict in Sri Lanka, which relates to national rather than state policy. In becoming an MP, Thirumavalavan could raise these issues in Parliament and secure greater coverage for the issues and his party.

In his maiden speech, Thirumavalavan (2015; Lok Sabha 2009a) urged the Indian Government to bring out a white paper on the genocide of Sri Lankan Tamils, change its 'anti-Tamil attitude', and sought to know the role of the Union Government on Sri Lankan issues and what support was extended to the Sri Lankan government. He said: 'Our party and our allied parties are very much concerned about Sri Lankan issues. I am sorry to say the



Government of India betrayed the Tamil community in Sri Lanka'. His stance on these issues led to him being included as part of a delegation of Tamil MPs who visited refugee camps in Sri Lanka. This only occurred due to the alliance, as he told TamilNet (2009):

In the third week of September, a group of M.Ps from the ruling parties called on the Prime Minister and placed this demand to visit the camps in Sri Lanka, so these arrangements were carried out. This was not an authorized selection of a Parliamentary Delegation by the Government of India. I feel that the absence of the opposition parties from this delegation is certainly a drawback.

Thirumavalavan's interview with TamilNet depicted him as a leading supporter of Eelam, helping the VCK grow beyond their characterisation as a 'Dalit party'. Partly on the back of his increased profile, Thirumavalavan was invited to address audiences worldwide including in Dubai, UK, Canada, Singapore and Malaysia. His status as an MP also lent weight to his demands about water sharing arrangements between Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu which are resolved at the Centre. Finally, he was able to raise concerns about untouchability and reservations that again relate to central government legislation. If there is a logic to protesting at the seat of power, this is amplified by the increased coverage he received as an MP. Care was taken to report back to supporters at home: News of his parliamentary interventions and trips were covered in the party magazine, featured in his speeches in Tamil Nadu, and were later published as a volume called '*Kadai Mannithan Kural* (The voice of the last and least)'. Numerous respondents insisted that he had 'raised his voice' for them. Munniamma from Kodankipatti was typical. She responded spiritedly when asked what the party had achieved: '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' (Fieldnotes, June 2012).

### **Material Benefits**

Whilst symbolic gains and agenda change are vital for small parties, participation in national politics has other attractions. Being an MP provides – in Wyatt's (2009: 89) words – 'the satisfaction gained from office holding and the opportunities for financial gain from office holding'. The latter is an essential ingredient for parties and candidates', which 'are forced to mobilize huge resources to meet election-related expenditure' (Suri 2013: 245). An imbalance in resources can reinforce smaller parties' dependence on established players. Minor parties in an alliance may have their electoral campaign bankrolled by the dominant partner. Reflecting on the options open to the VCK, state leader ArtralArasu highlighted this:

A: At least if we have some money, let's say 50 crores, then we can demand some seats from our alliance partners. We can boldly ask 20 seats and say that we would bear our electoral expenses on our own.

Q: Now, are they giving you money?

A: Yes, they do. They think giving more seats means they have to spend more money. You asked about seats – why didn't we demand more seats. ... They feel giving more seats to us is a burden because on top of everything they have to spend more money. If we raise funds from people like this, not from ordinary people, from party functionaries, from industrialists, then we would become self-sufficient (Interview, July 2012).

As Gowda and Sridharan (2012: 235) note: 'Given the magnitude of resources that political parties need to raise for campaigns, they can be expected to prefer candidates who can raise resources for the party and finance their own campaigns'. Sure enough, Thirumavalavan told

a gathering of party workers applying for posts that resources were one criteria: ‘we also need people with means to help finance campaigns and so on’ (Speech 28 April 2012). There was widespread discontent in the party that people with means gained rapid promotion, but candidates chosen for their contribution often lacked the means to compete. In the 2016 state elections, for example, one candidate – Aloor Shanavas - sought to crowd-fund his campaign (Ganesan 2016). The party still relies on others for funds, however, and one of the two VCK candidates standing for election in 2009 was a DMK sympathiser who was foisted onto the VCK by their ally (Gorringer 2017: 133). Gaining an MP was, therefore, welcomed as an opportunity to place the party on a more stable financial footing.<sup>6</sup>

At the very least, the post brings a salary and dedicated MP funds to spend in the constituency. Chandra (2004) refers to India as a ‘patronage democracy’ in which elected representatives ‘enjoy significant discretion in the implementation of laws allocating jobs and services at the disposal of the state’ (Suri 2013: 243; Wyatt 2013). MP resources may be used to build a reputation in the constituency, buttress the party or enrich the incumbent. Thirumavalavan did spend the vast majority of his MP Local Area Development Scheme funds (amounting to 19 Crore during his time in office)<sup>7</sup>, but by his own admission in a media interview he failed to deliver on most key campaign pledges (Puthiya Thalamurai 2014). In line with this self-assessment, the Tamil magazine *Junior Vikatan* reported that Thirumavalavan seldom visited and did not have an office there, failed to heed constituents’ demands, and did not deliver any big schemes (Prabhu 2013). They cited a poll showing that 55% of voters felt that he had not fulfilled his campaign pledges. A senior leader in the VCK admitted that not enough had been done in the constituency:

The 2014 parliamentary election is approaching now. The leader is busy with parliament and other work. So naturally people like us should concentrate on his constituency. But, there is no such system in place in the party to encourage that (Thalaivar, Interview, August 2012).

Conflicting with this Sannah, the propaganda secretary, argued that:

in Chidambaram MP constituency the VCK has a huge team to decide what work needs to be done and what needs to happen. That group finds out what places have what issues and draws up a list noting where roads need to be laid, where tanks need to be built, where social centres and libraries are required, where schools are needed, they note all these issues in a list and then allocate funds accordingly (Interview, September 2012).

Thirumavalavan likewise rebutted the criticisms voiced in *Junior Vikatan* and listed his achievements and projects in Chidambaram. Critically, he highlighted the resources available to an MP in noting that he received 60 lakhs from corporate finance (Prabhu 2013) on top of his parliamentary fund. This fund was increased during Thirumavalavan’s tenure from ‘Rs.2 crores to Rs.5 crores per annum per Member of Parliament from 2011-12 onwards’ and ... ‘the MP can suggest works in one or more districts within the State from which he is elected’ (Government of India 2011: 103). Given the way Tamil politics works (Wyatt 2013; Gorringer 2017) this will have enabled the party to gain some followers and recoup some money from commissions paid by contractors to smooth things along. As Wyatt (2013: 37) notes, however, ‘junior allies cannot hope to compete with the resources available to office holding parties’, and small parties are also dependent on the popularity of their dominant partners. Indeed, in interviews, Thirumavalavan highlights how several big schemes – a women’s

college and a major subway to help construction workers – were hampered by a lack of assistance from state or central government in matching funds or securing the necessary land (Puthiya Thalamurai 2014; Thinna Thanthi 2014). Whilst he emphasises that he distributed more funds to villages than previous incumbents, there is little suggestion that his tenure was especially beneficial to Dalits except insofar as his position in an alliance afforded them greater access to patronage (Gorringe 2017).

One arena in which being a small outfit is beneficial was highlighted during my trip to Delhi. Thirumavalavan was due to address the *Tamil Sangam* (Union) and when I asked why they had invited him he said that people approached him because they would get a speedy response: he did not need to go and ask a party leader if such an engagement was acceptable or not (Personal Communication, August 2012). As party leader, however, he was expected to travel widely and – in the absence of established secondary leaders and party infrastructure - this led to disgruntled constituents. Some of Thirumavalavan's travels arose from his parliamentary duties. He formed part of delegations sent to Estonia and Sri Lanka, and was a member of Standing Committees on Commerce and Petroleum & Natural Gas as well as the Consultative Committee for the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment.<sup>8</sup> Such committees allow MPs to have a say and increase their allowances. VCK General Secretary Ravikumar observed that Thirumavalavan used his role in the Commerce Committee to 'resolve many issues of SC/ST employees including promotion, and wage settlement in the industry' (Personal Communication, January 2016). There may well have been other benefits – the Commerce Committee at this time discussed the performance of the cement industry in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala – which will have increased Thirumavalavan's standing and attractiveness as a contact. Thirumavalavan's tenure as an MP, however, was not defined by such routine parliamentary activities.

### **Performing on the National Stage**

It is notable that many of the Lok Sabha debates where Thirumavalavan is mentioned contain his name next to the statement 'is on the floor of the house' or 'walked out'.<sup>9</sup> Thirumavalavan was also a frequent visitor to the Gandhi statue, habitual site of parliamentary protests, where he was pictured holding placards with demands and slogans. Discussions of political bargaining in the middle game fail to capture these more affective, emotive and symbolic aspects of political engagement (cf. Spary 2010). Indeed, one speaker at the annual memorial of the Melavalavu massacre in 2012 (a key point in the VCK calendar)<sup>10</sup>, felt that Thirumavalavan had already justified his election in disrupting Parliament to protest about the inclusion of a cartoon of Ambedkar in school textbooks: 'This is the Dalit leader who brought Parliament to a halt for the dishonour inflicted on Ambedkar [greeted with huge cheers]. This one act is enough to justify his five year term! (Speech at Melavalavu, June 2012).<sup>11</sup> Thirumavalavan's desk-thumping, impassioned performance was played repeatedly on TV screens in Tamil Nadu, and was welcomed by my Dalit respondents as contesting caste norms and defending their icon.

Whilst most of Thirumavalavan's public protests concerned the Sri Lankan war – an issue flagged up in the *Junior Vikatan* report - he was keen to show his core Dalit support that he was representing their concerns. Apart from the cartoon, one issue highlighted at party events in 2012, was his repeated raising of manual scavenging in Indian railways. In one of his Parliamentary interventions Thirumavalavan insisted that: 'Even in the 21st Century in our country, the scavengers of Railways are cleaning the nightsoils of human beings manually. Really, it is a great insult to the nation' (Lok Sabha 2009b). This stance was

related to supporters in speeches in Tamil Nadu to emphasise his continuing commitment to Dalits. At a wedding speech in Muduvarpatti, for example, he explained his role:

Mind you, being in Parliament is like being in school sometimes – I have to sit quiet and do nothing. I do not even understand the language. Still, it is my duty to go there and represent the people who put faith in me. The downtrodden sent me to Delhi and so I am duty bound to raise my voice for them. When the railway budget was discussed I was the only person to raise the issue of an abiding national shame. Ours is the only country in the world where people still clear faeces with their hands. Unlike in any other country here the waste from the toilets goes straight onto the track. ... I raised this issue forcefully for consideration and, when I got no satisfactory response, I was the only MP to walk out in protest (Speech, May 2012).

Parliamentary disruption, as Spary (2013: 402) argues, may be used ‘to more effectively signal to their constituents that they are representing their concerns’. Thirumavalavan here is seeking to reconnect to the Tamil masses. He notes the difficulty of operating in a strange – almost foreign environment – and emphasises the problematic and unacceptable nature of the status quo. The expectations and outcomes of small, protest parties, this reminds us, cannot be measured alongside those of dominant players. VCK post-holder Selva Arasu spelled out what they hoped to achieve from having an M.P:

S: In a democratic country you can go to Parliament and raise the issues of the downtrodden. We can do that. Though we can’t do much, though we are not a big party and do not get opportunities we have the chance to raise issues. We can go to the centre of political power and raise issues or protest and prevent them from functioning. We can do this. Since there is only a lone representative, however, we do not get many chances to speak. We do not get too much respect. Still the leader does his best. Even in the recent Sri Lankan issue. Thirumavalavan advanced the demand for the government to back the US resolution by holding up placards with this message and staging protests by the Gandhi statue as a lone member ...

A: And because he is an MP this gets coverage?

S: Yes. This is an avenue through which to raise people’s issues (Interview, April 2012).

In an echo of Herzog’s (1987) defence of small parties, VCK leader Unchai Arasan similarly pointed to the wider value of Thirumavalavan’s time in office: ‘Beyond electoral victory, see, we have to think how much change and uprising has occurred in our society, people like us think like that ... what is important is that it has created awareness among people’ (Interview, August 2012). Such interventions gained the VCK few political friends in Delhi and no material resources, but may have helped persuade supporters that the VCK was still worth supporting. Indeed, though the VCK lost both seats in 2014, they secured a large share of the vote in both Chidambaram and Tiruvallur where they stood. Despite this, as of 2014 the party has no parliamentary representatives. This reminds us that resources and kudos to be gained from engaging in national politics, may come at a price in terms of principles and support.

### **Tainting: The Risks of National Alliances**

Whilst, as we have seen, there was dissatisfaction amongst the constituents of Chidambaram (Prabhu 2013) and a sense in the party that that the VCK had not done enough to shore up support in the constituency (Thalaivar interview above), most internal analyses of electoral performances emphasised the importance of alliances for small parties. As Artralarasu put it:

‘We lose elections because of people's dissatisfaction with the party who leads the alliance’ (Interview, July 2012). Though the VCK have reached out to a broader vote-base with their emphasis on Tamil nationalism, their core support-base continues to be made up of Dalit voters. In no constituency are their supporters in sufficient numbers to win alone and so they are, to large extent, dependent on their allies. One thing such alliances with a small Dalit-led party highlight are the persistence of caste identities and attitudes as seen in the reluctance of alliance partners to wholeheartedly endorse or vote for the VCK (Gorringer 2017). Even if they are not fully accepted and incorporated, however, smaller parties’ accommodation in larger coalitions can, as McMillan (2014: 192) notes, lead to ‘tainting’. Sure enough, the VCK were accused of ‘suitcase’ (corrupt and unprincipled) politics and of selling out on both Dalit and Tamil issues. In a group discussion with VCK activists in Pudukkottai district they bitterly commented that: ‘The VCK has abandoned the Dalit issue for the Sri Lankan cause, and has also abandoned that: There are neither one thing nor the other. They have sold out on both (*Ambalapadutheetanga*)’ (Fieldnotes, July 2012). A critical non-political Dalit activist captured a common theme in arguing that:

If you ask what is happening now, Dalit parties whether it be the VCK or Puthiya Tamizhgam are washing their hands of the Dalit issue and reaching out for the Tamil cause. Purely for the vote-bank. The reason they are where they are is the Dalit cause, *but* they are hollering about the problems in Eelam (Arvalar, Interview March 2012).

Thirumavalavan (2009: 26) rightly points out that ‘there is no [recognised] party in Tamil Nadu that can be pointed to as a true friend of the Dalits. In this situation can we avoid all these parties?’ There is an appreciation of this amongst cadre and so the issue of tainting arose mainly around Tamil nationalism. TamilNet (2012) reported how:

Thirumavalavan, meeting UPA leader Mrs Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday expressed his ‘appreciation’ about New Delhi’s stand on ‘Sri Lankan Tamils’ at the UNHRC resolution, and requested her to implement it and pressurise the Sri Lankan government to find a permanent political solution. The moment Thirumavalavan uses the phrase ‘Sri Lankan Tamils’ and thrust an identity despised by Eezham (Eelam) Tamils on to them, he perverts righteous political solution, commented Tamil political circles in the island. Rather than urging recognition of rights of the nation, the VCK leader pleading Sonia Gandhi, whose party presided over the genocide of Eezham Tamils, to implement UNHRC resolutions paving way for structural genocide, makes him no different from the Congress and CPI-M, they further said.

In her passionate defence of the VCK decision, Kandasamy (2009) argued that: ‘I am sure Thiruma’s pro-Tiger stand will be intact irrespective of his alliance with the DMK-Congress. What he has done is not opportunism. This is the only option that was available to him’. In his MP residence in Delhi, Thirumavalavan conceded that not leaving the ‘DMK during the Mullivaikal massacre – that was the biggest blunder; leaving now would make me the biggest of opportunists. Leaving then seemed tricky because we would have been isolated’ (Personal Communication, August 2012). Even if this is accepted other criticised his actions in office, including the decision to shake hands with Sri Lankan President Rajapakse during a deputation to the country. The significance of this event was captured in a VCK event to launch a new website, where all the speakers felt compelled to address the issue and justify Thirumavalavan’s actions (Gorringer 2017: 317). They insisted that the criticism was unfair and that the VCK were being compelled to carry the can for the failure of others to stand firm. The cartoonist Bala captured this sentiment admirably and showed that it was more

widely shared in a sketch showing Thirumavalavan trailing behind Karunanidhi and being forced to bear the weight of ‘Karuna’s Eelam betrayals’.<sup>12</sup>

The federal calculations of this small party clearly back-fired upon them in this regard. AzhaguMurugan from a village near Allangannallur, for example, insisted that he had left the VCK when they backed Congress and joined *Naam Tamizhar Katchi* (We Tamils Party). He, like many experienced the decision to ally with Congress as a betrayal (Fieldnotes, June 2012). ‘The association with unpopular policies’, as McMillan (2014: 192) argues, ‘can harm future electoral performance’. Concerns over, what he calls, ‘tainting’ by association also affects alliance calculations and decisions, and having been shabbily treated in the 2014 elections, the VCK adopted a different approach for the state polls in 2016. They forged a new front, called the People’s Welfare Front (PWF), composed of smaller, non-Dravidian parties in a bid to reclaim some integrity by campaigning against casteism, communalism and corruption. Crucially, recognising that they attract opprobrium for their choices but gain little power by way of compensation, Thirumavalavan spelled out the central plank of the campaign: “‘We have contested with both the DMK in 2014 and the AIADMK in the past,” the VCK chief says. “But this time, we want to present a new proposal to the people of Tamil Nadu. All of the problems of our current political system - corruption especially - can only be solved with a coalition form of government”” (Iyer 2016). The PWF highlighted both the reasons that national elections were so attractive to the VCK - in that they gain no power at the state level, and the difficulties for small parties in contesting against dominant organisations - in that they failed to win a single seat. In light of this, alliance politics is likely to be back on the cards in future elections.

### **Small Parties in Federal Politics**

This study of a neglected feature of federal politics – the place of small parties in the system – echoes Herzog’s (1987) conclusion that minor parties are important indicators of the rules and parameters of a political system. Although the VCK are a minor party, largely confined to pockets of influence in one state, the election of their leader as an M.P demonstrated that they can still harbour national ambitions. It is clear that federal institutions offer options for small parties to gain resources and increase their profile, especially in a context where state politics are not open or participatory and coalitions are ruled out (cf. Wyatt 2015). The VCK’s engagement with national politics also offers insights into the workings of federal politics. It became apparent, that polity-wide parties constrain their state units and that the two levels of National parties are not always in step (cf. Kailash 2011). Tamil Nadu State Congress members were appalled by the inclusion of the VCK – who were accommodated so as not to alienate the DMK. As the Congress has little purchase in the state, local leaders are often over-ruled in attempts to forge electoral alliances. Small parties, thus, may offer national parties a toe-hold in states dominated by regional groups.<sup>13</sup> Insofar as the VCK had any ‘blackmail potential’ it lay here, in that its exclusion by the DMK may have further diluted the DMK’s already weak claims to stand up for Eelam Tamils and Dalits and increased the discomfort occasioned by the alliance with the Congress Party.

Herzog’s scepticism about Sartori’s notion of ‘relevance’ is echoed here. Clearly the VCK remain a minor political party in terms of electoral performance, but they have succeeded in placing key issues on the political agenda. Whilst much of the emphasis during Thirumavalavan’s tenure was on ‘Tamil’ issues, the party was instrumental in getting the Special Component Plan funds – set aside for Scheduled Castes – allocated properly, in raising the issue of land reform and in highlighting caste atrocities and alcohol abuse (Gorringe 2017). In this sense, Herzog (1987: 327) rightly argues that small parties illuminate

the boundaries and limits of a political culture and constitute ‘channels for expressions of grievance and protest’. This highlights the fact that, for all the focus on agreements and resources, there are significant affective and status gains for MPs: they have a higher profile and standing for a start, and may use disruptive tactics to signal commitment to a cause or highlight neglected issues (cf. Spary 2013). To gain access to the Lok Sabha, however, minor parties like the VCK usually depend on alliances with more dominant partners and this comes with a risk of tainting in a context where small parties do not get full access to power. It is for this reason that the VCK raised the demand for coalition rather than alliance-based fronts. As Thirumavalavan insisted in 2016:

‘The DMK or the AIADMK will not give us more than 10 seats in the alliance. We cannot evolve or empower our people. The only option now is to be part of a coalition government. If you look at the past, we got eight seats, then nine seats and finally 10 seats when we were in alliance with either of the Dravidian parties. In 10 years we have been able to increase by only two seats. It is now time to propose a coalition government and we need to be part of the cabinet. We need power-sharing for marginalised sections’ (Economic Times 2016).

If, following Kailash (2007), we view coalition agreements as a learning process, we are perhaps better placed to understand why the VCK - having been deeply disappointed by the DMK alliance – co-formed the People’s Welfare Front in 2016 attempting to recover their radicalism and retain their supporters, and indicating how minor parties can potentially influence the shape of party systems. That alliance was for the State elections, but in closing it is important to recognise that party positions are influenced by the electoral cycle. As Kailash and Arora (2016: 69) argue, the multi-level nature of India’s federal party structure means that party choices are constantly in flux due to different timelines, deadlines and events, and so ‘(p)arty choices at one level are not necessarily guided by factors at the level at which they implement their choice’. With the VCK’s foray we have seen this dynamic in play: engaging in national politics was fuelled by the lack of opportunities at state level, the desire to raise supra-national issues pertaining to the Sri Lankan conflict, and the pan-Indian possibilities offered by the Dalit label. Conversely the 2016 coalition articulated an anti-communal agenda, pitching themselves against the national BJP which has negligible political standing in the state. In both cases, this most minor of parties highlighted significant exclusions and elisions in political programmes and used the electoral opportunities offered by the multi-level federal structure to challenge ‘dominant institutional scripts’ (Spary 2013: 399). With the dissolution of the PWF in 2017, the path is now clear for further rounds of alliance formation and discussion. In light of the argument presented here, we can await these developments with interest.

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#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Thirumavalavan puts the membership of the party at over 400,000 in 2012, but membership forms had not always been properly completed and cards had not been properly issued. Having entered parliamentary politics in 1999 they have stood candidates (albeit unsuccessfully) in every election since. They have fielded 25

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candidates at most for state elections in 2016 (winning none) and 2 candidates for Lok Sabha Elections (in 2009 and 2014).

<sup>2</sup> This became a campaign issue for the VCK after Thirumavalavan's term as an MP and they launched a State's Autonomy Conference to raise the issues of State-Centre relations. For details see here: <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2017/sep/22/cant-even-fulfil-poll-promises-due-to-centres-squeeze-kerala-cm-pinarayi-vijayan-1660957--1.html> (Accessed 18/05/2018).

<sup>3</sup> This was funded by an ESRC Grant (RES-062-23-3348), for full details see Gorringer (2017). Names of respondents have been anonymised where desired.

<sup>4</sup> See the story here: TamilNet 2009. 'Tamil Nadu government erases the word 'Eezham'', *TamilNet* 17 August 2009 (Accessed 08/03/2016): <http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=30027>

<sup>5</sup> Small news item from *Indian Express* 20 March 2009 retrieved from the Dalit Resource Centre (DRC) archive in Madurai.

<sup>6</sup> As Michael Collins (2014) observes in his detailed ethnographic account of a VCK candidate's campaign: 'While concerted efforts by the [Electoral] Commission have, in fact, dampened a candidate's ability to spend freely, a limited focus on candidates without concurrent efforts to limit party expenditure is rechanneling campaign finance through the coffers of political parties and, in effect, leaving intact the primary source of exorbitant spending'.

<sup>7</sup> See the Ministry of Statistics report here:

<http://www.mplads.gov.in/MPLADS/UploadedFiles/HTML/15ls/lsstat22.htm> (Accessed 18/05/2018).

<sup>8</sup> Details of these committees may be found here (Retrieved 20/07/2017):

[http://164.100.47.194/Loksabha/Committee/CommitteeInformation.aspx?comm\\_code=23&tab=1](http://164.100.47.194/Loksabha/Committee/CommitteeInformation.aspx?comm_code=23&tab=1)

<sup>9</sup> See details here (Retrieved 20/07/2017):

[http://164.100.47.194/Loksabha/Debates/DebMembersearch\\_archive.aspx](http://164.100.47.194/Loksabha/Debates/DebMembersearch_archive.aspx)

<sup>10</sup> The Melavalavu massacre refers to the murder of the village Panchayat President Murugesan and six of his followers in 1997. The VCK was instrumental in bringing the case to public attention (see Gorringer 2005 for more details).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the cartoon controversy see Wankhede (2012).

<sup>12</sup> See the cartoon, from July 2012, here: <http://tamilmakalkural.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/karuna-in-teso-drama-bala-cartoon.html> (Accessed 24/08/2017).

<sup>13</sup> This was highlighted in BJP efforts to gain access to Tamil politics by allying with a range of smaller parties in 2014 (Wyatt 2015), 2016 and after the death of Jayalalithaa (Gorringer and Karthikeyan 2016).

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