



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Caste and politics in Tamil Nadu

**Citation for published version:**

Gorringe, H 2012, 'Caste and politics in Tamil Nadu' *Seminar: The Monthly Symposium*, no. 633.  
<[http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633\\_hugo\\_gorringe.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_hugo_gorringe.htm)>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Seminar: The Monthly Symposium

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Gorringe, H. (2012). Caste and politics in Tamil Nadu. Seminar: The Monthly Symposium (633)

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## Caste and politics in Tamil Nadu

HUGO GORRINGE

TAMIL NADU has a Janus-faced attitude towards caste. Occasionally, as Hindi-belt states have been rocked by disturbances over caste-based reservations, it has appeared as if caste considerations are less politicized in the South. Regional and linguistic nationalism, the long history of caste-based affirmative action and the legacy of anti-caste campaigns arguably account for this. Simultaneously, however, caste remains central to Tamil politics. From this perspective, the dominance of Backward Classes and the paucity of upper castes best explains the acceptance of Other Backward Caste reservations.

Over the past 150 years there have been contrasting trends towards cross-caste ethnic mobilization and caste-based assertion. Recently, Vasanthi – former editor of *India Today*'s Tamil edition – argued: 'Every section of society now clings to its caste label with pride. With a caste-based political party being born every day, each group is in the need of political protection and asserting its identity'.<sup>1</sup> That this should occur in the home of Dravidianism is puzzling, and this paper will examine the interplay between caste and politics in the state.

Caste and kinship in South India only really extended beyond the boundaries of the village and the control of village headmen in the 19th century. Indeed, British administrators found that strong vertical ties of obligation and patronage precluded solidaristic group action and compelled them to work with caste patrons. Positions of economic power and status were maintained through patron-client ties and coercion rather than community feeling. Thus, where patrons stood to gain, they could dictate social and political alliances for followers which were ritually polluting or economically counter-productive.<sup>2</sup>

**C**aste relations, this reminds us, were structured by power and built into the agricultural production process, which assigned different castes specific roles. When colonial rule laid the basis for a centralized, commercial economy, it weakened the economic logic of caste and assimilated the traditional compartments into a larger territory. The pre-eminence of the caste headman withered as employment opportunities and education expanded aspirations and networks. Communities bound by marriage, kinship and locality were replaced by state-wide caste associations united by political affiliation as much as blood ties. This transition from a hierarchy of interdependent social categories to a universe of 'essentially identical' competing blocs is what Dumont<sup>3</sup> terms 'substantialization'. It involves, Barnett argues, shifting the basis of caste from codes of behaviour that governed everyday interactions to 'blood purity' or descent.<sup>4</sup>

Elements of competition and mobility long existed within the caste system, but the processes of social change described above increased scope for mobility and emphasized the mutability of caste. Well before the introduction of democratic governance, therefore, social processes facilitated the mobilization of communities as political actors. Similarly, commercialization meant not just the increasing use of money in the economy, but the monetization of social relationships. New opportunities for employment and the importance of an English education led to a physical transition of elites to the centre of government administration.

Motivated by these possibilities, families widened their marriage circles to encompass those with a similar outlook and education from within their expanded caste category.<sup>5</sup> This socio-economic transformation opened up new choices and created new political configurations. Railways, the press and the weakening of patron-client ties further encouraged group action. The introduction of a limited franchise in the second and third decades of the 20th century opened up new channels to power and influence that were adopted and used creatively by the new citizens.

Less privileged castes similarly sought to escape from relations of dependency. One challenge to caste hierarchy that indicated the shifting constellations of caste power came from the Nadars. Previously considered degraded, Nadars met with economic success in the 19th century and adopted the practices of the higher castes.<sup>6</sup> In donning the sacred thread, transgressing multiple other caste regulations and confronting higher-castes with violence, the Nadars demonstrated the possibility of social mobility and signalled that hierarchy was susceptible to social mobilization. The accelerated growth of urban areas more generally reflects this desire for change.

**T**he Nadar challenge did not occur in a social vacuum, but exploited emerging possibilities for education, employment, and legal and political contestation. They drew on new forms of knowledge created by the British to reconceive how they saw and presented themselves to others. Confronted by complex systems of social relations and stratification, and increasingly prominent as a controller of people and resources, the British state required knowledge about society and means to discipline new political subjects and citizens. The attempt to impose such order, however, fostered increased interaction with the people and this exchange profoundly affected the nature of the classificatory enterprise.

**F**irst, by asserting that each caste conformed to certain characteristics, and that everyone belonged to a caste, administrators avoided, and arguably precluded, the painstaking problem of differentiating between individuals. This, though, also ‘crystallized’ the caste system.’<sup>7</sup> In mapping society, colonial powers unwittingly assumed the royal prerogative of determining the hierarchical position of castes within their jurisdiction. Petitions demanding a change in caste rank, thus, were now submitted to British officials, and the potential to renegotiate one’s caste position animated caste competition and consciousness. The Nadars, for instance, initially lobbied to be recognised as Kshatriya or warrior castes. In the 1930s, however, following the introduction of quotas based on communal categories by the Madras government, they petitioned to be counted as Backward Classes (castes).<sup>8</sup>

Whilst Nadars initially mobilized on caste lines, both they and others tapped into British unease over the preponderance of Brahmins in office, and appealed to widespread resentment of Brahmin domination and arrogance.<sup>9</sup> The combination of these factors facilitated the emergence of a politically active and important ‘non-Brahmin movement’ which included both socially dominant castes and the untouchables who had mobilized as ‘adi’ or original Dravidians. The non-Brahmin movement rejected Sanskritization (the emulation of higher castes) as a path to mobility and created a rhetorical divide between the over-privileged Brahmin minority and the majority of the population, but they could not paper over the divisions that the category sought to dispel.

**T**he main objective of the elite-led movement appears to have been the prestige and patronage that was conferred by assuming government office. Despite campaigns for temple reforms by the Justice Party – the political manifestation of non-Brahminism – the more deprived members of the category felt neglected. In the 1930s, therefore, the non-Brahmin movement split into Forward and Backward Classes. The Backward Classes League, formed in 1935, noted that privileged and dominant castes monopolized leadership positions and rewards and demanded a more equitable distribution of resources. Non-

Brahminism, which united disparate castes against Brahmin dominance, thus foundered upon internal caste inequalities.

Simultaneously, another attempt at broader-based mobilization was underway. E.V. Ramasami Naicker left the Congress Party in 1925, when it rejected his demand for non-Brahmin reservations, and assumed leadership of the Justice Party as well as forming the Self-Respect Movement. Naicker, more commonly known as Periyar (Great One), echoed the Reverend Caldwell who argued that Sanskrit had been introduced in the South by the 'Aryan' Brahmins. Periyar and other lower-caste leaders thus claimed to be the oppressed Dravidian inhabitants of India.<sup>10</sup> The self-respect movement encouraged members to dispense with the services of Brahmin priests and to abandon Brahminical markers like the sacred thread. Inspired by Marxism and the Soviet Union, Periyar articulated a socially radical programme that advocated caste, class and gender equality.

**H**is project for a more equal and representative society of Tamils, however, employed the language of Dravidianism and he founded the Dravida Kazhagam (DK – Dravidian Federation) in 1944. Both the Justice Party and the DK voiced secessionist demands and the anti-caste elements of the Dravidian and non-Brahmin movements have largely been superseded by this emphasis on regional and, following the linguistic reorganization of states in 1950s, linguistic nationalism. Two legacies of the non-Brahmin movement, however, still shape Tamil politics and its relationship to caste.

The first is the institutionalization of communal or caste-based politics and the belief that social and ritual hierarchies could be challenged and renegotiated through political mobilization. The second legacy, which stems from the assertion of Backward Caste members and Periyar's anti-caste egalitarianism, was the early institution of affirmative action programmes for Backward Castes and Classes. Since 1947, when state governments gained the discretion to implement reservations for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Tamil authorities have provided generous benefits to this category.<sup>11</sup> Communal categories were thus established as effective and new organizational forms were directed towards securing economic benefits, jobs, or special concessions.

**T**he principal political parties in the state all grew out of the non-Brahmin movement, particularly the organizations launched by Periyar. The most enduring of these organizations are the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) and its two offshoots, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK - Dravidian Progressive Federation) and All India Anna DMK (AIADMK). It is these offspring that have dominated Tamil governments since 1967. Dravidian mobilization placed caste and 'race' divides at the centre of Tamil politics, portraying Independence as the replacement of one elite (British) by another (upper-caste, 'Aryans'). The strength of this Dravidian rhetoric is reflected in the changing composition of Congress candidates. In 1954, when the Nadar Kamaraj replaced a Brahmin as chief minister, only 5% of members of the Legislative Assembly were Brahmins, as opposed to 17% in 1937.<sup>12</sup>

Despite this nod towards Dravidian concerns, Congress saw their vote-share steadily eroded by the DMK. This regional nationalist party, which played on language nationalism (rather than insisting upon it) and espoused populist/socialist policies that were mediated to the electorate through cinema and an effective party organization, took power in 1967. In 1972, the film-star M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) formed the AIADMK, in response to DMK 'corruption'. It wrested power from the DMK in 1977 due to MGR's popularity and populism (as typified by the free school meal). Since then, the two parties have alternated in power. Both claim to represent *all* Tamils and emphasize regional concerns and social justice

issues in a populist vein, but numerous studies suggest that Dravidian parties have used Tamilness to avoid enacting politically sensitive election pledges on land-reform, dowry and caste. Pandian argues that Tamil voters have fallen into ‘the image trap’, accepting Dravidian claims and not recognizing that ‘progressive’ reforms resemble ‘charity from above’ and/or disproportionately tax the poor.<sup>13</sup>

**P**ost-independence, caste concerns animated Tamil politics, and pro-Congress Dalits clashed violently with the All India Forward Bloc led by BC leader Muthuramalingam Thevar in September 1957. Caste riots spread through central districts of the state following the murder of Dalit leader Immanuel Sekharan who campaigned against caste dominance. Within a decade, however, mobilization against the imposition of Hindi as a national language, the artful use of cinema and populist programmes resulted in a seeming diminution of caste conflict as Dravidian parties attracted cross-caste support. It took time for this apparent consensus to be shattered since the regional-cultural emphasis successfully masked the narrow (predominantly BC) Dravidian core.

During the 1980s, consciousness raising groups highlighted the implicit casteism of the Dravidian parties, but it was only when such mobilization turned violent that it was reflected in institutional politics. In the late 1980s, the sizable BC Vanniyar population demonstrated forcefully to demand recognition as a *Most Backward Caste* (MBC) and proportional access to reservations. The culmination of this campaign of extra-legal mobilization was the political assimilation of the Paatali Makkal Katchi (The Toiler’s Party – a Backward Caste group) into the mainstream and the validation of extra-institutional agitation. As one respondent noted:

Now there is the PMK – a Vanniyar party. In the beginning there was no violence that they did not engage in. They blocked roads, chopped down trees ... So what it seems like is that one can only become a political party by taking part in violence first, now that is the route we must follow.<sup>14</sup>

**T**he PMK and Dalit parties which seemed to introduce caste concerns into Tamil politics, thus, arguably arise from the cosy relationship between dominant BCs and the two Dravidian parties. Honours have been heaped on Muthuramalingam Thevar, for instance, whilst lower caste politicians are perceived to lack recognition and respect. The continuing under-representation of Dalit politicians in cabinets and ministry portfolios questions Dravidian pluralism. Caste politics in this period, furthermore, has been synonymous with outbreaks of caste violence. Lower caste (especially Dalit) assertion has challenged the social status of higher castes and incurred disproportionate, forceful retaliation (or ‘extravagant revenge’) against any caste transgression or resistance.<sup>15</sup> Dalit assertion has also led to conflict with state authorities (in 2011, police fired on demonstrators in Paramakudi killing seven Dalits) emphasising that access to political institutions is not straightforward. An unintended consequence of MBC and Dalit activism, therefore, is that social fault lines have assumed a collective, caste character and rendered violence a recognized, albeit censured, feature of the political repertoire.

**S**uch mobilization has challenged the capacity of Dravidian parties to represent all castes. In the two decades up till the 2011 elections, therefore, the AI/DMK had to stitch together coalitions to secure political power. This has had the dual effect of prompting caste specific demands, such as earmarking 3%

of Scheduled Caste reservations for Arunthathiar – the lowest of the main SC castes in the state - and the creation of more caste parties. 2009, for instance, witnessed the formation of the Kongu Nadu Munnetra Kazhagam (Kongu Land Progressive Federation) which predominantly represents the interests of the dominant BC Gounders. The KNMK emerged following Arunthathiar assertion in western districts which challenges both the status of Gounders, but also their supply of pliant agricultural labour. The KNMK offers an example of defensive mobilization and ‘reverse-casteism’ in which Dalits are accused of preferential treatment, so it is not surprising that 2010 saw violent clashes between the groups.<sup>16</sup>

The caste competition and status that have animated the KNMK and others are particularly salient at the *panchayat* level, where local patrons directly encounter the elevation of lower-caste individuals and feel threatened by Dalit assertion and the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act. As a consequence, panchayats reserved for SC candidates have witnessed violence, threats and cancelled elections. Furthermore, many elected Dalits have found it impossible to carry out their work due to upper-caste interference. Dalit panchayat presidents have been murdered; made to sit on the floor; denied access to offices or pressured into rubber-stamping the decisions of others. Even where caste discrimination has diminished and relations between castes are less marked by hierarchy, status concerns matter and find political expression.

It is clear that caste remains an important political resource, but it would be mistaken to view caste identities as ascribed. Rather, they are complex constructs that draw upon yet differ from earlier categories. Institutional incentives, the fact that state-provisions are distributed to caste categories, offer one important reason for the number of caste-based parties.<sup>17</sup> Jaffrelot accepts this but also points towards the structure of political institutions and the struggle for political accommodation.<sup>18</sup> Such accounts, however, cannot explain the differing contours of caste mobilisation across India. In emphasising instrumental concerns, they downplay the ideological, social and emotional aspects of caste politics.

Dalit parties offer the clearest example of ideological mobilization with their emphasis on social justice and equality. Dalit political participation has often increased vulnerability rather than material advancement; so the institutional incentive argument has limited purchase, though the demand for sub-reservations demonstrates that it is not without value. Multiple factors increase the importance of caste within politics, including political entrepreneurs.<sup>19</sup> It was the emergence of Dalit middle-class leaders that amplified Dalit assertion. Equally, changes in political economy have seen the dominance of upper-castes challenged by lower-castes who are no longer prepared to tolerate indignities or forego the promise of education for their children.

Occupational mobility, access to state benefits and consciousness-raising by movements has altered caste dynamics, increased competition between groups and enhanced the political salience of caste identities to the extent that Communist parties which previously focused on seemingly caste-less ‘workers’ have begun to tackle caste discrimination. Furthermore, as the socio-economic gap between castes narrows, status considerations are sharpened with lower-castes decrying humiliation and BCs defending their social standing and claiming reverse discrimination. The land of non-Brahminism, thus, witnessed the registration of the ‘Non-Dalit General People’s Welfare Association’ in March 2012.

Despite this, Dravidian parties still secure cross-caste support and Tamil nationalism continues to unite competing caste parties. Caste concerns, thus, must be repeatedly politicised. Additionally, the

political recognition accorded to caste categories can mean that various (non-caste) social conflicts are framed in caste terms. Caste relations *are* changing in Tamil Nadu but declining dependency has fostered a spirit of questioning and competition which help explain the multiplication of caste-parties in the home of Dravidianism. Although the AIADMK swept to power in the 2011 State elections, therefore, we may safely conclude that caste considerations and parties will animate Tamil politics for the foreseeable future.

\* I am extremely grateful to Nandan Maniratnam for perceptive comments on an earlier draft, to Andrew Wyatt and M. Vijayabhaskar for permission to cite an unpublished paper, and to the ESRC (Grant RES-062-23-3348) which funded work in 2012.

1. Vasanthi, *Cut-Outs, Caste and Cine Stars: The World of Tamil Politics*. Penguin, New Delhi, 2006, p. 190.
2. D. Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics*. CUP, Cambridge, 1976.
3. L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*. 2nd edition; Trans. L. Dumont, B. Gulati and M. Sainsbury. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980 (1966), p. 222.
4. S. Barnett, 'Identity Choice and Caste Ideology in Contemporary South India', in K. David (ed.), *The New Wind*. Mouton Publishers. The Hague, 1977, pp. 393-415.
5. L. Rudolph and S. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1967.
6. R. Hardgrave, *Essays in the Political Sociology of South India*. USHA, New Delhi, 1979.
7. N. Dirks, 'The Invention of Caste: Civil Society in Colonial India', *Social Analysis* 25, 1989, pp. 45-52.
8. R. Hardgrave, op cit., 1979.
9. E. Irschick, *Tamil Revivalism in The 1930's*. Cre-A, Madras, 1986.
10. M. Ross-Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976.
11. A. Wyatt, *Party System Change in South India*. Routledge, Abingdon, 2010.
12. C. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*. Hurst, London, 2003, p. 177.
13. M.S.S. Pandian, *The Image Trap*. Sage, New Delhi, 1992.
14. H. Gorringer, *Untouchable Citizens*. Sage, New Delhi, 2005, p. 108.
15. O. Mendelsohn and M. Vicziany, *The Untouchables*. CUP, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 51-53.
16. M. Vijayabhaskar and A. Wyatt (2011), 'Politics and Caste: The Case of the Kongu Nadu Munnetra Kazhagam (KNMK) in Western Tamil Nadu, South India'. Unpublished mimeograph; cited with permission.
17. K. Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.
18. C. Jaffrelot, op cit., 2003.
19. A. Wyatt, op cit., 2010