Modern Asian Studies (2025), 1–30
doi:10.1017/S0026749X25101285

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The power to disempower: The government of caste and the career of Dr Sathiavani Muthu in Tamil Nadu, *circa* 1960–1979

Rupa Viswanath

Center for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany
Email: rviswan@gwdg.de

(Received 15 July 2024; revised 30 June 2025; accepted 30 June 2025)

Abstract

Why has political representation by Scheduled Castes in post-colonial India failed to improve the lives of the vast majority of this population? One common answer rests on the assumption that caste inequality is upheld by dominant social groups who effectively resist progressive state policy. Others point to the institution of joint electorates: though constituencies are reserved for Scheduled Caste legislators, Scheduled Caste voters form a minority within them; the representatives thus elected are chosen primarily by others, and precisely because they will not challenge the status quo, it is said. But neither of these explanations, I argue, can adequately account for the minimal effects of Scheduled Caste representation, because both imagine states as confronting a distinct realm—'society'—with pregiven interest groups that are then represented in legislatures. Instead, an examination of how state actions themselves govern, produce, and reproduce caste groups and intercaste relations is required. The argument is illustrated through episodes from the career of Dr Sathiavani Muthu, who sought to address injustices suffered by Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu from the late 1950s through to the 1980s. Muthu's skill, diligence, and commitment make her an ideal representative, and Tamil Nadu as a state ought to provide a best-case scenario for the success of such an actor, given the scholarly consensus regarding its good governance and the pervasion of its society with a progressive ideology. An analysis of why her efforts nevertheless produced little fruit reveals pervasive deficiencies in current models of political representation.

Keywords: Caste; political representation; minorities; democracy; Dalits

Introduction: Scheduled Caste representation in post-colonial Tamil Nadu

The contention that minority representation is a form of political inclusion that is indispensable, at least as a starting point, for any substantive sharing of power with dominant groups is among the most important legitimating claims of modern

representative government.[1] When India became newly independent, it built on the institutional and ideological legacies of colonial forms of group representation, and fierce contestation between reformers and conservatives ensued over the forms and extent of quotas, especially those for Scheduled Castes (SCs). The heat of contestation obscures the fact that both sides shared the same premise: that minority representation was a concession of power. Conservatives wished to jealously monopolize it in the name of a unified 'nation', while advocates of minority rights believed that minority representation would lead to the upliftment of minority populations in ways that would ultimately be to the benefit of all. But despite significant inclusion of Scheduled Castes in the institutions of political representation and bureaucratic office, the majority of Scheduled Caste people in India today experience an extreme degree of relative inequality. They remain disproportionately undereducated, underemployed, exploited, and impoverished, and are all too often targets of mass violence.[2]

Observers have put forth two kinds of explanation. The first rests on a specific analysis of the power of the state relative to a distinct form of power understood to be held by 'society'. However well-meaning central or state government policies and efforts are, these can be thwarted by entrenched social attitudes, interests, and practices that the Indian state simply does not have the autonomy, or perhaps capacity, to overcome.[3] This is the concept of the so-called 'soft state'. As Ronald Herring has noted in an overview of theories of the Indian developmental state, this widespread view is best exemplified by Gunnar Myrdal, for whom the Indian state simply could not enforce land reforms or eradicate untouchability due to the power of social forces. Similar conceptions include the ideas of a 'weak state' as well as Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph's influential compromise position, the 'weak-strong' state, which sought to explain why basic services could not be provided even as insurgencies were crushed with relative efficiency.[4]

[1]Following Bernard Manin, I use the more precise term 'representative government' rather than the laudatory 'democracy', common to both colloquial and much scholarly usage, when referring to the modern system of government by elected representatives. Whether such a system is, in fact, democratic, and what that would even mean in a state whose population is permanently divided into ascriptively defined majority and minority subpopulations whose interests are institutionally pitted against one another is one of the larger conceptual questions that motivates my research. It has, furthermore, been powerfully argued that electoral representation is itself, apart from the issue of majorities and minorities, an inherently 'aristocratic' and thus anti-democratic form of government: both political philosopher C. B. Macpherson and Manin himself make this argument in different ways. I do not purport to definitively answer either question in this article, but nor do I wish to foreclose them by following standard usage that I regard as misleading. See B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and C. B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[2]See, for instance, Human Rights Watch, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's Untouchables* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999); S. K. Thorat and Katherine Newman, *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ashwini Deshpande, *The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[3]'State capacity' and 'state autonomy' are of course distinct concepts; my argument concerns only what they share—the notion that the state is simply unable to fulfil stated policy goals.

[4]R. Herring, 'Embedded Particularism: India's Failed Developmental State', in *The Developmental State*, (ed.) Meredith Woo-Cummings (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 306–334; discussion referred

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The second explanation for the failure of minority representation to uplift and protect Scheduled Castes points to the personal inadequacy of their elected representatives—their alleged venality and self-interest—an inadequacy that is most often ascribed, by anti-caste scholars and activists, to the flawed political framework through which they are elected—the system of joint electorates. Coercively extracted from B. R. Ambedkar by M. K. Gandhi's suicide threat ('fast unto death') and enshrined in the Poona Pact, this system ensured that Scheduled Caste representatives would be elected by territorial constituencies in which Scheduled Castes themselves were almost invariably a minority. Representatives who owe their position to dominant caste majorities are rarely committed to the minority community, it is said, and their failure to vigorously advocate for Scheduled Caste interests within the legislative framework is why this subpopulation has not reaped the anticipated rewards of Indian democracy. These are the 'chamchas' (toadies) famously indicted by the founder of post-colonial India's most successful Dalit-led political party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, Kanshi Ram.[5] More recently, Niraja Jayal has expressed a sophisticated argument that also focuses representative failure on representatives themselves, indicting not the Poona Pact but the overwhelming prioritization of identity over substance in contemporary Indian politics, and arguing that better representatives (that is, less self-interested, less committed to identitarian symbolism, and more vigorous and single-minded in their pursuit of socially progressive policy initiatives) could bring about the substantive equality for Scheduled Castes that is so far lacking.[6]

The first explanation focuses on society, construed as a pre-existing and stubborn counter power the Indian state can never fully master. The second depends on a specific understanding of representatives and legislative practice—one that shares with the first a picture of society as a collection of pre-existing interest groups—and sees the representative system as the means by which society's diverse interests can be politically accommodated via the legislative process. My own analysis of minority representation differs from both. I do not find that what scholars call 'the state' is best understood as existing in opposition to a 'society' complete with pregiven interests in relation to which its effective powers are limited. On the contrary, by focusing my account on the actual institutions of government—its consistent and rule-governed pattern of operation—rather than the normative model of government as presented in civics textbooks, I show how it continually reproduces the allegedly recalcitrant caste-based interest groups against which the state is said to be 'weak', and how it maintains them as permanently unequal.[7] By organizing my argument around the career of one

to on pp. 313–316. See also S. Rudolph and L. Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[5]Kanshi Ram, *The Chamcha Age (An Era of the Stooge)* (New Delhi: Kanshi Ram, 1982); the epigraph tellingly reads, 'Published on 24th September, 1982 on occasion of 50th anniversary of the Poona Pact'.

[6]Niraja Jayal, 'The Limits of Representative Democracy', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2009, pp. 326–337.

[7]The term 'institution' has been used in a wide variety of ways, including by social scientists. My use of the term follows the most recent developments in the analysis of the concept by scholars working in the philosophy of social science and institutional theory. In contrast to older uses—which defined institutions imprecisely as an amalgam of not only rules, but also the panoply of beliefs, values, bodily dispositions, and so on that justify and support them—more recent usage defines institutions as systems of rules *backed by some form of enforcement*. Institutions are thus distinct from mere conventions, which

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

especially diligent Dalit representative, moreover, I begin to sketch an argument that 'democratic' representation—however noble the representative—does not operate to amalgamate and transcend social differences to produce a common good that gives each interest its due, as the pluralist theory that underpins common normative views on democracy would have it. On the contrary, I attempt to explain why the representatives of Scheduled Castes do not—because they cannot—effectively challenge the real institutions of government that render their constituents separate and unequal. This is because the system of representative government is embedded within and dependent on a government that institutionally reproduces subpopulations as unequal, as I will show.

My research is set in the state of Tamil Nadu, an ideal test case for the argument that robust social movement-based politics and effective government will overcome inherited inequalities and benefit minorities. Almost without exception, scholarship has lauded the state's regnant ideology, Dravidianism—a 'Non-Brahminist' ideology advocating pride in Tamil culture, an end to caste differences, and freedom from northern domination and Brahmin hegemony.[8] Equally, it has hailed the performance of the political parties founded on that ideology, which first took power in 1967—especially

are also rule-governed, but in which conformity is not externally enforced and may be entirely optional. See Francisco Guala, *Understanding Institutions: The Science and Philosophy of Living Together* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). The signal advantage of the contemporary understanding over older usage is that it allows for the fact that not all those who are subject to an institution will necessarily share the same subjective understanding of or affective relationship to it. Thus, it is not necessary for a user of *money* (a classic example of an institution) to possess an accurate understanding of where money comes from or how it actually works, nor do they need to share any particular set of values or beliefs about it, in order to participate in a monetary economy. They need only to know and follow the usage rules that money qua institution imposes upon them. An advantage of the stripped-down modern definition of institutions is that by clearly distinguishing between an institution itself and the ideological apparatus that justifies it, it allows for more precise study of the relationship *between* ideology and practice, and thus to better study the complexities of power and resistance. Of special relevance to this article is that dominant ideologies typically operate by denying the existence of institutional realities—regular patterns of rule-governed action that are enforced—that are at odds with the official account of how government works (what I term the 'civics textbook' view) or which are politically inconvenient for its ruling class to acknowledge. Whether an institution exists or not is thus an empirical question, and a central claim of this article is that the actually existing government of Tamil Nadu includes institutional regularities that are not acknowledged and that contradict the ideological self-representation of its political class. By considering both legally enshrined institutions and those that are just as real but not openly and formally mandated under the same heading, I am not denying the relevance of the distinction between these two categories for some purposes, for example, for programmes of political reform that seek to challenge the legitimacy of unjust institutions that lack legal mandate. The purpose of this article, however, is to accurately describe government as it in fact operates.

[8]The most important exception is David Washbrook, 'Caste, Class and Dominance in Modern Tamilnadu', in *State Power and Dominance in Modern India*, (eds) F. Frankel and M. Rao (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989). A book-length study that also does not conform to the pattern is Marguerite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), now almost 50 years old; Barnett clearly recognized the early Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (DMK) ideological and actual exclusion of Dalits, though she does not address violence or economic domination. In addition, anti-caste intellectuals in Tamil Nadu have consistently criticized Dravidianist claims to inclusion: two particularly important writings are T. P. Kamalanathan, *Mr. K. Veeramani, MA, BL, is Refuted and the Historical Facts about the Scheduled Caste's Struggle For Emancipation in South India* (Tirupattur, North Arcot, Tamil Nadu: Ambedkar's Movement for Self-Respect, 1985); and more recently, Stalin Rajangam,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), but also its later offshoot, the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK).

We are told, for instance, that Tamil Nadu is unusually lacking in violence because 'Dravidian parties embraced populism in ways that not only contained the intolerant potential of ethnicity, but also promoted social pluralism.'[9] Harking back to the 'Self-Respect Movement' led by E. V. Ramasamy in the 1920s and 1930s, historians and political scientists have insisted that this movement decisively transformed Tamil society, producing 'broad subaltern alliances' and a new 'subaltern public' composed of 'lower castes, women and the labouring poor'.[10] The new Tamil citizen, the 'non-Brahmin', 'was identifiable ... by his or her interest in and commitment to a politics that valued equality, mutuality and self-respect'.[11] Building on this legacy, the Dravidian parties in power instituted a populism that has had a 'tremendous impact' with 'positive implications for the socially and economically disadvantaged sections'[12]; indeed, Tamil Nadu's economy is a 'model' of 'inclusive growth' built on 'mobilisation against caste-based inequalities' that other states would do well to follow.[13] Tamil Nadu is an unmitigated 'success', a former high-ranking bureaucrat avers, 'based on charismatic leadership with a social justice and welfare agenda'.[14] In addition to all these state-specific studies, in interstate comparisons, Tamil Nadu is widely held up as exemplary. Christophe Jaffrelot, for instance, has praised Tamil Nadu's 'plebeians' for 'dislodg[ing] elite groups from power' by instituting Other Backward Class (OBC) reservations in government early on, and thus playing a 'pioneering role' and becoming a precursor to the 'silent revolution' in the Hindi-belt in the 1990s.[15]

C. Lakshmanan, J. Balasubramaniam, A. Jeganathan and Anbuselvam, *Saathi Indru (Caste Today)* (Chennai: Neelam Publications, 2022 [2013]).

[9]Narendra Subramaniam, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 318. Subramaniam acknowledges that 'Dravidianist dominance did not inhibit caste clashes as effectively as it curtailed violence along religious lines' (p. 212). But unaware of the extent of these 'clashes' or the details of the state's responses to them, he maintains his overall assessment of the state as harmonious, and adds that such violence is anomalous, 'restricted to local pockets' (p. 212). For an important critique of Subramaniam's analysis of populism, see John Harriss, 'Populism, Tamil Style. Is it Really a Success?', DESTIN Working Paper Series No. 01-15, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2001.

[10]M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006), pp. 220, 223.

[11]V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Ayothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1998), p. xiii.

[12]A. Kalaiyarasan, 'Politics of Dravidian Populism: Understanding Developmental Outcomes in Tamil Nadu', in *Rethinking Social Justice*, (eds) S. Anandhi, Karthick Ram Manoharan, M. Vijayabaskar and A. Kalaiyarasan (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2020), pp. 232–233.

[13]A. Kalaiyarasan and M. Vijayabaskar, *The Dravidian Model: Interpreting the Political Economy of Tamil Nadu* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), abstract on unnumbered page preceding main text. For critiques of specific arguments in this text, see the review by Judith Heyer, 'Inclusivity and Growth under the "Dravidian Model": Controversial Omissions and Claims', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 57, no. 8, 19 February 2022.

[14]S. Narayan, *The Dravidian Years: Politics and Welfare in Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2018), p. 239.

[15]Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Introduction', in *The Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*, (eds) Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (New Delhi: Routledge, 2009), pp. 8, 15–16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The late 1990s and early 2000s, the time of my first extended research periods in Tamil Nadu, were witness to a series of brutal incidents of anti-Dalit violence.[16] The sharp divergence between existing scholarship and unfolding current events sparked my interest in the current research. Why was violence occurring so regularly and so spectacularly in a state that the vast majority of scholars have consistently characterized as governed by a uniquely anti-caste, inclusive, and peace-promoting government? Why, furthermore, was relative inequality between Dalits and others so resistant to the good governance others had hailed? I was fortunate to engage with a range of Dalit intellectuals and activists—from both urban and rural backgrounds, young and old—whose acute observations convinced me that existing accounts of post-colonial Tamil Nadu had to analytically integrate violence and exclusion in any adequate history of the state's politics and government.[17] My own preliminary archival research revealed, furthermore, that violence against Dalits was not, as many influential commentators were then saying, a recent backlash against upward mobility among Dalits—typically spun as an unfortunate side effect of the state's alleged success in promoting equality[18]—but had occurred regularly throughout the post-colonial period.

I begin to sketch an answer to these questions by tracking how one uncommonly committed Scheduled Caste representative, Dr Sathiavani Muthu (Figure 1), sought to intervene in three different instances. In the first, a case of violence against Dalits, I demonstrate that the resource-distribution apparatus of the Government of Tamil Nadu organizes the relationship between the *ūr*, the caste settlement or 'village proper', and the *cēri*, the Dalit ghetto or 'colony', as a zero-sum game by means of the institutions of the panchayat and electoral representation. I situate these post-colonial administrative divisions in the context of prior historical patterns of state-supported labour control,[19] and I consider how the political inequalities and economic dependencies they create incentivize Dalit victims to relinquish their rights. In the second example, I describe how one of Tamil Nadu's most widely celebrated 'pro-people' policies—its early adoption of a large quantum of reservation of government jobs for Other Backward Classes—has been implemented as another zero-sum game in which resources (in this case, government jobs) due to Scheduled Castes are diverted to majority OBC populations, as Muthu would come to discover. The final example examines telling features of the diverse set of policies that comprised the state's Harijan Welfare programme: we follow Muthu's attempts to intervene in the design, implementation, and budgeting of Harijan Welfare, which reveal consistent rules of state

[16]See S. Viswanathan, *Dalits in Dravidian Land: Frontline Reports on Anti-Dalit Violence in Tamil Nadu, 1995–2004* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2007).

[17]See my Acknowledgements, below.

[18]See M. S. S. Pandian, 'Dalit Assertion in Tamil Nadu: An Exploratory Note', *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, vol. 12, no. 3–4, July–December 2000, pp. 501–517. He asserts that Backward Caste perpetrators of violence against Dalits in the 1990s were responding to conditions specific to 'contemporary Tamil Nadu' in which they 'do not any longer exercise ideological hegemony over the Dalits' (p. 501). But his argument is contradicted by archival evidence of a continuity of violence well before the 1990s, as is his assumption that Dalits were ever under the ideological sway of the castes comprising the Backward Classes and not merely dominated by them.

[19]I documented these in Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion and the Social in Modern India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. Dr Sathiavani Muthu, *circa* 1965. *Source: Aṉṉai Sattiyavāṇi Muttu 47vatu Piṟanta Nāḷ Viḻā Malar* (Chennai: n.p., 1970).

operation that directly contradict the stated aims of this agency most directly charged with a measure of (albeit limited) economic redistribution. Muthu's efforts to intervene within the legitimate powers of her office and in keeping with the official and ideologically hegemonic account of representation—by which representatives seek to pursue constituency interests within the neutral arena of the state—ran up repeatedly against what I show to be realities of governance that severely and decisively constrain Scheduled Caste representatives' effective power.

These realities find no place in accounts of Tamil Nadu politics and government. And yet they are absolutely typical. What I present below is just a small number of the episodes I have uncovered, in which Muthu herself plays a role. These are themselves a miniscule fraction of those I have traced over three decades, which together reveal how the state and its system of political representation constituted and continuously reproduced relations of caste domination and subordination that are conventionally dismissed as feudal 'remnants'—as the work of a recalcitrant 'society' against which state power can only do so much. How could it be that existing literature on the state has completely overlooked this? Is this a flaw of theory or method or both? I address this question in my conclusion.

Sathiavani Muthu and the representative regime

As a Scheduled Caste representative, Dr Sathiavani Muthu's career provides a 'best case scenario' and thus the strongest test for my alternative account of what limits

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 2. Dr Sathiavani Muthu with C. N. Annadurai, founding leader of the DMK, popularly known as Anna, *circa* 1963. *Source:Aṉṉai Sattiyavāṇi Muttu 47vatu Piṟanta Nāḷ Viḻā Malar* (Chennai: n.p., 1970).

Scheduled Caste representatives' exercise of political power. From the late 1950s through to the early 1980s, she was both a tireless advocate of Scheduled Caste rights and an experienced politician with powerful allies, as opposed to a marginal outsider. She was squarely at the centre of political mobilization in the state from an early age, leading protests against Congress conservatism[20] and winning a Lok Sabha election as an Independent even before the DMK, the first Dravidian party of which she was a core founding member, came to power.[21] Once the DMK won the state in 1967, she held ministries including Harijan Welfare, Information, Agriculture, and Women and Children's Welfare, and also served in the Rajya Sabha as a Member of Parliament for over a decade. She was a beloved mentee of the DMK's first leader, the revered C. N. Annadurai (Figure 2).

Most significant for our purposes, she vocally sought to ensure rights for Dalits both as a member of the opposition and of the ruling party. The state's archival records confirm her support was not mere lip service, providing proof of dogged effort once she was made Harijan Welfare minister. She was, in short, the very best representative Dalits can reasonably hope for: she cannot be dismissed as a tool of majority interests, a mere 'chamcha'. In what respects could this extraordinarily committed and well-placed Dalit political representative refashion the lives of ordinary Dalits? And if she could not, why?

[20]The protest was led by her and directed at then Congress Chief Minister C. Rajagopalachari's proposed scheme to apprentice children to their parents, a move that would preserve inherited caste-based occupational status. See R. Kannan, *The DMK Years: Ascent, Descent, Survival* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2024), p. 57.

[21]These details are included in her riveting memoir which she published in both Tamil and English: Dr Sathiavani Muthu, M.P., *My Agitations* (Madras: Sezhian Pathippagam, 1982); also published as *Enathu Porattam* (Madras: Sezhian Pathippagam, 1982).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Violence, representation, and the 'local state' as alibi

In this first example, I follow the demand of a group of Scheduled Caste citizens to have enforced constitutionally mandated rights to the protection of one's person, as it travelled from constituent to Sathiavani Muthu as political representative, and was then acted upon by various bureaus of state. For post-colonial Tamil Nadu between the later 1950s and early 1980s, the archival record is replete with entreaties from ordinary Dalit villagers asking Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), or the Minister of Harijan Welfare, or the chief minister, or even the prime minister, for protection from or justice for anti-Dalit violence. Likewise, Dalit MLAs brought incidents of violence to the state's Legislative Assembly regularly during this period, demanding answers regarding action taken during the Assembly's 'question hour'. The government's responses to these urgent claims of Dalit citizens, brought to their attention by Dalit representatives, can serve as an index of how much political power these representatives wielded.

In 1972, Dalit villagers in a 'colony'[22] near Cuddalore in South Arcot district—'Harijans', as they referred to themselves—sent a telegram to Sathiavani Muthu, describing a conflict with members of the locally dominant caste that they wanted her to resolve. The telegram was sent on their collective behalf by one A. Kannan, secretary of the MGR Mandram (MGR Association) of the Dalit colony and is preserved in the original in the government file.[23] In his telegram, Kannan referred to a violent encounter that left 'ten injured [and] two admitted [to] hospital'. He alleged that the 'Collector refused interview [and that the local] MLA and Councillor ... [were] supporting Padayatchis'. Padayatchi is an alternative name for a caste grouping more commonly called Vanniyar, a group that is dominant in the district in demographic and political economic terms, and whose political fortunes were also on the rise in this period, as indicated by the allegation that both the local MLA (a member of the ruling DMK) and a councillor had taken their side. The Padayatchis were, moreover, according to Kannan, 'threaten[ing] to [set] fire[s]', most likely to Dalit homes.[24] Kannan ended with the words: 'Pray immediate action'.

[22]The term 'colony' is an English-language euphemism for the Tamil term '*cēri*', the separate residential section of the village in which Dalits are segregated and which lacks the resources of the village proper. The term '*cēri*' came to be considered offensive and was ordered to be replaced by 'colony' in official correspondence by the Congress regime in 1957: GO (Labour, Industries and Cooperation) 442 Ms., 6 February 1957, The National Archives (hereafter TNA).

[23]GO (Social Welfare) 800 Ms., 23 August 1972, TNA. MGR, or M. G. Ramachandran, was a film star and prominent member of the DMK at this time; from the late 1960s onwards fan associations served in villages as a principal site of cadre formation for the DMK, and pro-Dravidian themed films, often featuring MGR, were one of the most significant ideological instruments of the Dravidianist parties. See M. S. S. Pandian, *The Image Trap* (New Delhi: Sage, 1992); and the excellent study by anthropologist Sara Dickey on MGR fan clubs in the Madurai region, although she focuses on a later period: Sara Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[24]Every single incident of mass violence against Dalits in the state in the period of my study involved large-scale destruction of Dalit homes and gardens through arson. Between 1950 and 1980, the three instances of anti-Dalit violence that claimed the largest number of lives included mass destruction through fire: in 1957–1958, the incidents in and around Mudukulattur in Ramnad District involved the burning and looting of a number of Dalit colonies. The most grisly incident was the burning alive of 44 Dalits in Kilvenmani, Thanjavur, in 1968. In Villupuram in South Arcot, both arson and murder were used to effectively destroy Dalit access to the potential profits of an important centre of trade. Driven out from

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This is the sort of appeal that Sathiavani Muthu received on a regular basis, and also a principal means through which Dalit citizens communicated with her in the expectation that as their representative she would intervene. Once received, she would send these letters to the director of Harijan Welfare, who would then contact the district welfare officers and other district and taluk level officials to make inquiries and register cases under the Untouchability Offences Act.[25]

The Collector, the same official, presumably, who was accused by the Dalits of refusing to meet with them, provided an account of the events in response to direction from Sathiavani Muthu's Ministry. The district welfare officer had been sent to investigate and reported that children from the Dalit colony had strayed into the caste village, the *ur*, and were playing on 'Vanniyar Street'. A number of Vanniyar villagers took this as an affront to their spatial exclusivity, and beat the children before allowing them to go back to the colony. The victims' parents confronted the Vanniyar villagers to demand an explanation. But this was taken as a further provocation, and the parents were physically attacked by the Vanniyars. In Tamil Nadu at the time, this was a typical instance of caste folk defining and policing spatial and social boundaries to preserve local patterns of domination.[26]

The Collector's letter then explained how the issue was handled:

> Subsequently the Police intervened in the matter and made a compromise between the Harijans and the Vanniyas in that locality. Thiru A. Kannan in his statement dated 12-5-72 has stated that there is no enmity between the Harijans and Vanniyas now and that no action need be taken on the telegram given by him on 10-4-72 to the Government.

To his own report the Collector appended Kannan's new statement, which contains more details of what took place. The Collector's report had not revealed, for instance, that after the parents had been beaten, another group of Dalits from the colony had been attacked by Vanniyars while on their way to a local shop. It was this event that led to the hospitalizations Kannan's telegram had reported.

The new letter by Kannan, signed by him in the presence of the district welfare officer, concludes, 'Afterwards the police intervened. They conducted an investigation, the panchayat discussed things, and a conciliation (*rācināma*) was effected between

the centre of the market town where they once had leverage as load bearers, not a single business in the centre of Villupuram is owned by Dalits today, as Vasuki Bhaskar's brilliant research on the lasting aftermath of the incident demonstrates: Vasuki Bhaskar, 'Ullur Porulatarattin Dalitkalin Itam: Viluppuram Nagarattai Munvaittu Oru Milayvu' (Dalit Participation in Local Economies: A Reconsideration Based on the Case of Villupuram), *Neelam Magazine*, December 2020.

[25]The Untouchability Offences Act was passed in 1955 and preceded today's Prevention of Atrocities Act passed in 1989, but largely targeted the same classes of crimes.

[26]That a single incident of children straying into the caste street was countered with collective punishment not once but twice, as well as a threat to burn down the colony, as Kannan noted in his telegram, might appear to be evidence of an extreme and 'irrational' expression of a flawed ideology, namely, 'casteism'. But as my research on many such cases reveals, there is a far greater likelihood that long-standing conflict shaped intercaste relations in this instance; more detailed investigations of other cases invariably reveal smouldering, years' long tensions over material resources or wage relations—a situation that, as we will see below, state practices directly constitute.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the two sides. There is no more enmity between us. Nothing further needs to be done with respect to the incident I had written about in my petition and telegram.'[27] We do not know how exactly the two sides were conciliated. What we do know is that Dalits in the colony, including children, were victims of attacks so violent that two were hospitalized, and that the perpetrators of those attacks were not charged with any crimes. For Kannan to insist 'nothing further needs to be done' was to give up any claims to redress for the unlawful violence that he and other Dalits had suffered and that all parties, including government officials and elected representatives, knew had occurred and did not contest. The 'compromise' is more accurately described as Dalits being persuaded to relinquish entirely their basic right to physical safety.

Sathiavani Muthu recognized the coercive nature of these forms of 'compromise'. She asked that a directive be issued to police personnel. 'While a compromise is a good thing,' she observed, 'we should not enforce a compromise, especially where (1) violence is involved (2) where women are molested or (3) where untouchability has been practised.' She asked that a memorandum to this effect be sent to the Inspector General of Police and from him to all his subordinates: 'The Government desire to impress upon the Police Officials and others concerned,' the memorandum stated, 'that the only effective way of discouraging the practice of untouchability would be for the police to take action under the [Untouchability Offences] Act against the persons guilty of the offence regardless of their status, position, etc.'

While Kannan and his compatriots were forced to make peace with aggressors, Sathiavani Muthu attempted to change the course of government practice to ensure this could not happen again. The pointed instructions to the police were also a bold statement of what usually went unsaid: in instructing police to 'take action' even if perpetrators were persons of influential 'status [or] position', she was putting on the official record the fact that police usually did not do so. Police routinely contravened the letter of the law, especially in cases of violence between Dalits and caste folk—a fact Dalit elected officials regularly brought to the notice of the government, but about which no concrete steps had been taken until Muthu took office.[28] Muthu, at this point in her career, held out the hope that greater oversight from her Ministry, and diligent instructions to her subordinates, would alter governance to bring greater justice and the basic right to physical safety to Dalits in Tamil Nadu's rural colonies—in line with the good intentions she assumed to emanate from the seat of power in Madras, and reflecting the common wisdom I described above, according to which 'local power', distinct from and antagonistic to the imperatives of ruling regimes based in Madras, could, in principle, be reined in.

She pursued this goal with consistent diligence. Thus Muthu asked that a separate registry be maintained by the Harijan Welfare Department specifically recording all the petitions about violations of rights she personally received from Dalit constituents, and detailing how they had been dealt with, with updates to be sent to her every

[27]GO (Social Welfare) 800 Ms., 23 August 1972, TNA. Translation mine.

[28]For instance, the legendary Scheduled Caste leader K. B. S. Mani excoriated police inaction in the assembly on 3 April 1970, p. 250, during his remarks on the budget request for 1970–1971; c.f. 11 November 1975, pp. 297–299, for a debate between S. Vadivel, Vai. Balasundaram, and Mu. Karunanidhi on the same issue.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

quarter.[29] She sought her subordinates' cooperation, in other words, in ensuring she acted as an accountable representative. She further attempted to alter the routines of how power was exercised in the localities by instituting mobile anti-untouchability squads (*rontu patai*) in six districts that appeared to be especially rife with violations of the law. These squads, put in place in 1972, were intended to be on hand to register complaints and deliver justice because earlier mechanisms had failed on both scores.[30] She held frequent meetings, which included significant numbers of other Dalit elected officials from a range of political parties, where Harijan Welfare policy and problems of implementation were debated at length.[31] This was not only an uncommon level of perseverance and non-partisanship in the fulfilment of her role, but evidence of a deep commitment to the normative values of representative government. As she wrote in her memoir, 'I am the political representative of the oppressed ... We elected politicians outline our platforms, making promises to people to get their votes, and that's what gets us into office. Shouldn't we ... act on these promises?'[32] She backed these words with deeds throughout her career.

But violence against Dalits continued to occur with regularity, and although it is difficult to obtain precise numbers, seems only to have increased over the course of the 1970s. In the same district in the short period of three months at the beginning of the very next year—1973—for instance, no less than 40 cases of harassment of Scheduled Caste persons were filed, involving 75 perpetrators, and this despite the existence of the mobile police squads and other monitoring mechanisms Muthu had set up.[33] The well-established patterns of state operations, by which, for instance, 'compromises' were brokered, continued unabated.[34]

As I observed above, both the notion that representation by the right kind of Scheduled Caste elected official will produce positive change, and the view that local power resists the good intentions of ruling parties with its autonomous forms of counter power, are based on a normative model that artificially abstracts representative and party politics from the routine operations of statecraft, ignoring how they in fact systematically intersect. A closer reading of this case and others demonstrates the weakness of those explanations—explanations that also, incidentally, serve the important political purpose of providing an alibi for ruling regimes' failure to protect Dalit citizens even from the basic right to bodily integrity.

Recall that Kannan's original telegram contained a reference to two local elected officials who took the side of caste folk—the MLA and a councillor. No one in the government even acknowledged this allegation—it is passed over in silence in the thick

[29]GO (Social Welfare) 601 Ms., 3 July 1972, TNA. Handwritten note.

[30]Mobile police squads were set up at the end of the administrative year 1971–1972 in the districts of Tiruchirapalli, Coimbatore, Madurai, South Arcot, Thanjavur, and Tirunelveli 'with a view to prevent physical violence and atrocities against the members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in rural areas, to detect the infringement of the Untouchability Offences Act, 1955 and to bring to book the offenders ...': Harijan Welfare Department Administration Report, 1971–72, filed in GO (Social Welfare) 729 Ms., 25 September 1974, TNA.

[31]For instance, GO (Social Welfare) 412 Ms., 11 May 1970, TNA.

[32]Muthu, *Enathu Porattam (My Struggles)*, pp. 51–52. Translation mine.

[33]GO (Social Welfare) 601 Ms., 3 July 1972, TNA, 'Quarterly return for the Period Ending 31.3.1973: Harassment and ill-treatment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes'.

[34]And indeed still obtain as a rule, as revealed by research in Human Rights Watch, *Broken People*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

stack of papers concerning the case. And yet, from other cases, we know that the involvement of political actors here was not exceptional. Political parties and their local cadres frequently took sides against Dalits in instances of caste violence in the countryside.[35] This bias was not confined to any particular party and the preferential treatment of caste folk was not pursued in a clandestine fashion. Far from a secret handshake, many political parties in this period in Tamil Nadu appeared to *want it publicly known* whose side they were on. The government response to one case of violence against Dalits in 1980 in Sathanur, South Arcot, for example, was so egregiously unjust that a federal agency, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, had to intervene, castigating the state for failing to provide better protection for its Dalit citizens.[36] Yet in that very case, local elected officials and cadres from the across the political spectrum—the DMK, the ADMK, Congress, and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—not only supported caste folk in a violent campaign against the colony, but signed a petition to the government asking them to make sure Dalits were properly punished (!), pointedly affixing their party affiliations to their names.

What does this reveal about the limits of Sathiavani Muthu's political power? First, it demonstrates that impoverished constituencies can themselves prevent representation from achieving its normative goals; representatives can fail to act, but just as importantly, constituents can be disincentivized to make demands that they do, as happened here: the colony dwellers in Cuddalore were dependent for their livelihoods on those in the *ūr*, and were willing to forgo their fundamental rights to maintain those livelihoods.[37] A representative like Muthu could not even attempt to secure justice if the aggrieved parties gave up their demand for it.[38]

But in addition, even members of her own party were unwilling to support her in her efforts, dependent as they were for their political survival on the demographic

[35]The exception is the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) in a few regions where Dalits comprised a significant proportion of cadres, such as in East Thanjavur until the mid-1970s: see Marshall Bouton, *Agrarian Radicalism in South India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). But in a sense, this exception is no exception at all precisely because they supported the largest demographic on which they politically depended. That in this case they may have done so out of genuine ideological commitment to agrarian labour does not counter the basic point that demography is as central to explanation as ideology.

[36]This was not the only time the central watchdog agency had to intervene on behalf of Dalits in Tamil Nadu, and on more than one occasion the Commission considered the local Tamil Nadu police's reports on anti-Dalit violence literally incredible, and questioned its commitment to welfare schemes: see, for instance, GO (Labour, Cooperation and Industries) 1664 Ms., 22 January 1954, TNA; GO (Home) 3163 Ms., 4 September 1965, TNA; GO (Public) 1405 Ms., 20 July 1981, TNA.

[37]They were thus presented with a stark choice between rights and survival, a possibility B. R. Ambedkar warned of in his most radical policy prescription for Scheduled Caste representation. B. R. Ambedkar, 'States and Minorities: What are Their Rights and How to Secure Them in the Constitution of Free India', in *BAWS* (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 409–410. I discuss this warning and its implications in a lecture delivered at the University of Edinburgh and later at the University of Hyderabad, available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sU4Q-VjJyYY, [accessed 9 September 2025].

[38]Based on long-term ethnographic research on Tamil Nadu's most important Dalit political party, Michael Collins demonstrates how the party is continually undermined due to the way the political playing field itself depends ultimately on the relative resource strength of each constituency. See Michael A. Collins, *Elusive Democracy: Dalit Parties, Elections, and the Dilemmas of Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

majorities who were also the perpetrators of these crimes. In the case near Cuddalore, Vanniyars were a critical subset of voters. Since at least 1952, when Vanniyar political organizations were won over by Congress Chief Minister K. Kamaraj, cementing his victory, Vanniyars have exercised considerable political power in elections in the state; they have been treated solicitously by both Dravidian parties, the DMK, and its offshoot the ADMK (founded in 1972), that have alternately held state power since 1967.[39] For those seeking political office, then, demonstrating support for dominant castes and attempting to shield them from punishment for crimes against the Dalit minority was an essential piece of building and maintaining the support of these constituencies—a form of political campaigning.[40] Both the majoritarian principle and the fact that representative government favours resource-rich constituencies are institutional backstops of OBC dominance over Dalits: elected representatives and cadres of all parties publicly advertise their support for the exercise of OBC power over Dalit life and labour to ensure dominant caste votes.[41] OBC domination of Dalit citizens reinforced by these 'democratic' institutions is particularly entrenched in the state of Tamil Nadu, because strengthening OBC constituencies through governmental succour has been an essential feature of its politics from the early 1960s onwards. Yet these strategies have been judged by political scientists as laudable forms of 'assertive' or even 'left' populism.[42] The 'caste vote bank' is usually analytically isolated in regard to its role in politics and specifically elections, but it has been a central means of ensuring unequal labour relations and access to state-controlled resources in Tamil Nadu. We should remember, furthermore, that these caste associations did not emerge from

[39]Robert L. Hardgrave, 'The DMK and the Politics of Tamil Nationalism', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 4, Winter 1964–1965, pp. 396–411.

[40]Dominant castes could make their political support contingent on politicians demonstrating that they were not in favour of Dalits, openly expressing resentment, for instance, about funds spent on Harijan Welfare: one ADMK leader complained, after an incident of mass violence against Dalits in North Arcot district in the late 1970s, that the state practice of providing monetary compensation to Dalit victims was causing conflict in the local party: GO (Public—Law and Order) 1254 Ms., 25 June 1979, TNA. And in the public forum of the Legislative Assembly, Congress Party MLA K. Vinayakam remarked, while discussing Backward Classes welfare and how it ought to be improved, that when he sought votes among them in his constituency, they bitterly told him to go ask the Harijans instead, since they were the ones receiving state patronage in the form of houses and wells. Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Debates (henceforth TNLAD), 13 March 1969, p. 600.

[41]On the effects of the majoritarian principle on ethnic or 'racial' minority constituencies, see Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Majority: On Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); on the intrinsically resource-favouring and aristocratic character of representative government, see Manin, *Principles of Representative Government*, and Macpherson, *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*.

[42]The idea that this could appear to some as a form of *left* populism (for instance, Rajan Krishnan, Ravindran Sriramachandran and M. S. Subagunarajan, *Rule of the Commoner: DMK and Formations of the Political in Tamil Nadu, 1949-1967* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022], and Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar, *The Dravidian Model*) is especially puzzling, given that the real wages of agrarian labour fell in Tamil Nadu between 1950 and 1975: see C. T. Kurien, *Dynamics of Rural Stratification: Study of Tamil Nadu, 1950–1975* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1981). Further on this point, see my review of Krishnan, Sriramachandran and Subagunarajan in R. Viswanath, 'A Revolution Achieved? The Latest Study of the Dravidian Movement Follows Its Leaders', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 58, no. 13, 1 April 2023, pp. 37–42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a society untouched by state practice but in direct response to institutions of statecraft first established in the colonial period, as David Washbrook powerfully identified a half century ago.[43] State action was essential to the production of the Vanniyar caste as a 'vote bank', and the post-colonial state systematically reproduces this group, and organizes its relationship with other categories of persons like Dalits, through the institutions of mass election. These majoritarian practices obtain across the political system and despite apparent ideological differences between parties.

Second, a close analysis of government archives reveals the significant role of not only political practices, but also post-colonial institutions of local governance in reproducing intergroup domination, a role that goes well beyond allowing 'local prejudice' to go unchecked. The labour relations that obtained in the early 1970s in Tamil villages entailed the employment of Dalits by caste landlords as sharecroppers or landless labour, and, in addition, where certain crucial aspects of the subordination of labour were directly incentivized by the state. For instance, village panchayats, dominated by the most powerful residents of the *ūr*, controlled allocations for infrastructure and essential resources like water that were disbursed by the state and meant to be shared according to state-defined percentages between the village proper and the 'colony'; some funds were even earmarked specifically for the colony. But no mechanisms or personnel were in place to ensure that these funds reached the colony, which, most often, they did not.[44] The spatial segregation of *ūr* and *cēri* that continued to be maintained in post-colonial Tamil Nadu, furthermore, ensured that employers of Dalit labour were empowered by the government to decide where to sink a well, or build a road, or locate a public distribution centre, clinic, or school. Employers were put in a position where they were able to directly control the well-being of their employees by using state resources meant to be fairly distributed through the panchayat according to official policy, but which never were, with the regularity of a rule. Government action was a significant force in the reproduction of unequal dependence, forcing some groups to comply with others to secure their own basic survival.

The administrative structure of rural governance subordinates each Dalit settlement to a dominant caste village to which all resources are directed. There is nothing obvious or automatic about this. An equally valid devolutionary scheme could have, for example, classified each *cēri* as its own separate village and channelled resources to it directly.[45] Instead, the Tamil Nadu government *constitutes* unequal intergroup

[43]David Washbrook, 'The Development of Caste Organisation in South India,1880 to 1925', in C. J. Baker and David Washbrook, *South India: Political Institutions and Political Change, 1880–1940* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1977); see also Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–1929* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

[44]The risks of using panchayats to disburse Harijan Welfare funds to the colony were recognized by officials as early as 1957: GO (Industries, Labour and Cooperation) 2724 Ms., 17 August 1957; the same concerns were raised periodically by Harijan Welfare Department members: see, for instance, GO (Social Welfare), 805 Ms., 22 August 1970—but never, to my knowledge, were these occasional misgivings acted upon.

[45]In 2004 the brilliant political activist and former bureaucrat P. Sivakami wrote a pamphlet searingly indicting the enforced subjugation of *cēri* by *ūr*, calling for the end to the village panchayat and the administrative separation of *ūr* and *cēri*. No one in political office has taken her up on this challenge, which would indeed fundamentally undermine the existing distribution of power. See *Apna Panchayat, Allatu Thalaiyaruttal (A Separate Panchayat, Or, Breaking the Chains)* (Chennai: Puthiya Kodangi Patippakam, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relations; it does not resist or counter the power of allegedly autonomous and independently arising 'dominant castes' in the countryside, but specifically produces and empowers them, in some cases building on earlier states' institutionalization of group dominance, a process Sumit Guha has persuasively demonstrated.[46] In our case in Cuddalore, the Dalit victims of crimes perpetrated by those on whom not only their livelihoods but also access to basic resources depended, signed away their rights in the presence of officials—a conciliation, *nota bene*, conceived by the village panchayat, the very body in charge of unequal distribution. With no leverage to demand justice, victims risked losing further resources should they attempt to hold out for it. The alleged failures of minority representatives to ensure justice for their constituents depend as much on how state-defined categories of persons are constituted and empowered by government policy as they do on the actions of a representative.

'Powerful locals' and their enduring 'feudal' casteist mentalities are actively and materially reproduced; their existence is also ideologically ratified because it is politically useful to ruling regimes as an alibi. Unequal state-led distribution through village panchayats, and the majoritarian and resource-favouring character of electoral representation, work in concert to direct both means and powerful incentives for the exercise of domination in the countryside, concretely reinforcing the group dynamics that erupt in violence. The law-and-order branches of the state then intervene to ensure 'reconciliations', working in concert with the electoral and local governance institutions to constitute dominant groups.

When poor Dalits sought Sathiavani Muthu's support, she most often could not provide what her constituency was asking of her, not because she failed to act—her commitment is not in doubt—but because what her constituents required went against the interests of constituencies actively empowered both economically and politically to move against those Muthu represented. Her own ability to act as a political representative on behalf of the Scheduled Castes—even to simply ensure the implementation of existing legal remedies to protect them from bodily harm—was severely limited by the network of political actors invested in winning elections and the powerful constituencies that control labour in post-colonial India, not only through wages, but also through state resources. In the state of Tamil Nadu, power over Dalits in the locality is exercised not in spite of the best intentions of those in power, but because of the support they receive from state officials and party headquarters in Chennai, whose networks and institutions extend into the state's villages.

State resources and 'opportunity hoarding': The problem of unfilled vacancies

Among the scarcest and most coveted of resources in post-colonial India has been the government job. No state went to the lengths Tamil Nadu did to ensure that a significant proportion of these jobs went to members of the Other Backward Classes soon after independence. Reservation for Backward Classes was introduced in Tamil Nadu even before the end of colonial rule; it was revoked by the courts as unconstitutional in 1950, but reinstated by the K. Kamaraj-led Congress government in 1951, and reservation was set at 25 per cent for Backward Classes and 16 per cent for Scheduled

[46]Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power, Past and Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Castes and Tribes. It was increased in 1971 under Mu. Karunanidhi's chief ministership during the first DMK regime to 31 per cent for Backward Classes and 18 per cent for Scheduled Castes and Tribes.[47] This fact is routinely admired as evidence of Tamil Nadu's commitment to ending political domination by elites and bringing forth a more democratic government of 'plebeians'.[48]

But such judgements ignore a very long-standing problem that surely undercuts the demoticizing argument: the failure of the state of Tamil Nadu since its inception and across both Congress and Dravidianist regimes to fill vacancies in government positions reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This failure was first officially recognized as a problem across the country by the central government in 1958, when the central Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes suggested states set up commissions to investigate and propose solutions. Tamil Nadu chose not to appoint a commission, instead assigning an Indian Civil Service officer, P. P. Vaidyanathan, to spend a few months looking into the matter. Vaidyanathan issued a report with recommendations in 1962.[49] But by 1969, when Sathiavani Muthu came to office, no action had yet been taken.

In the early 1970s Sathiavani Muthu attempted to address this fact. As Harijan Welfare minister, she sought to prepare a report that would empirically ascertain the scale of the problem, analyse the reasons for its failure, and recommend policy solutions. As she argued in her memoir, Article 335 of the Indian Constitution should be understood as giving the Harijan Welfare Ministry the authority to check if the 18 per cent quotas were being filled in government offices.[50] So she sent what should have been an uncontroversial request, asking the secretaries of all government departments for their employment and recruitment records. As she later observed, 'It is a routine of governance that when a Minister makes an order it is approved straightaway by the Chief Minister' and then forwarded directly to the relevant departments.[51] But Muthu's order was instead sent to the chief secretary, who before forwarding it to the relevant departments, appended a note that pointedly 'raised the question of whether the Harijan Welfare Ministry has the authority to ask if the 18% reservation has been filled'. The chief secretary, in other words, invited department secretaries to flout her order. Predictably, all the secretaries refused her call for information, with the exception of two who were themselves SCs. Sathiavani Muthu had the legal and bureaucratic authority to demand such reports, but her authority was openly flouted in this instance without fear of consequences.

Muthu, however, thought that she had an ace up her sleeve, in her direct connection to the chief minister. She expected that he would easily understand the necessity of her actions, and the validity of her interest in ensuring full compliance with the legally mandated reservation policy. But Karunanidhi refused to force the department

[47]GO (Social Welfare) 695 Ms., 7 June 1971,TNA.

[48]Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Introduction', in *The Rise of the Plebeians*, (eds) Jaffrelot and Kumar, pp. 8, 15–16.

[49]GO (Social Welfare) 695 Ms., 7 June 1971,TNA.

[50]At the time of Sathiavani Muthu's writing, the Article read: 'The claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration, consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State.'

[51]Muthu, *Enathu Porattam (My Struggles)*, p. 51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

secretaries to turn over any information to her, and he did this without speaking to her about it first. She confronted him with these words:

> You took the side of the officials, [the department secretaries] without even approaching me directly. But I am the political representative of the oppressed. I am the one who has promised them welfare, and reassured them that their needs would be met. Are the officials the ones who give these assurances? Are they the ones who have these responsibilities? We elected politicians outline our platforms, making promises to people to get their votes, and that's what gets us into office. Shouldn't we be able to act on these promises?

She sought to invoke basic normative ideals of political representation in modern democracy—accountability and responsiveness to the demands of a constituency—perhaps imagining these could not be openly disregarded by the chief minister. But apparently, they were: 'I tried to reason with him in these ways, but in the end all I got was defeat. The officials won.'[52]

This is because there was another zero-sum game in operation. When positions reserved for Scheduled Castes were not filled, as was routinely the case, such positions were carried over and remained reserved for two additional years of recruitment.[53] If they were still not filled, these positions were then allowed to be filled by members of the Backward Classes, and then by anyone not belonging to a reserved category, that is, the so-called general category. Keeping positions reserved for SCs vacant, in other words, worked directly to the advantage of others. David Mosse has aptly described the behaviour of castes in modern labour markets as engaged in forms of 'opportunity hoarding', drawing on the late sociologist Charles Tilly's powerful account of how 'durable inequality' persists in societies composed of ascriptively defined social categories.[54] Ruling regimes in Tamil Nadu hoarded government positions for the most powerful constituencies. They did so by perfecting the art of using loopholes in the distribution of government positions for which the most deprived paid the price—and from which favoured political constituencies reaped rich rewards.

A further incident that took place behind closed doors in 1972 confirms that hoarding positions for political favourites was not merely an unforeseen side effect of failing to find qualified Dalit candidates. At that time, the Government of India had fixed a limit—50 per cent—on the proportion of vacancies in public service positions that could be reserved.[55] Anything more was deemed a violation of the constitutional principle prohibiting discrimination against citizens based on categories of birth, religion, ethnicity, and so on. In most states nothing close to 50 per cent was ever reached. With

[52]Ibid., pp. 51–52. Translation mine.

[53]GO (Public Services A) 1975 Ms., 22 October 1969, TNA.

[54]David Mosse, 'The Modernity of Caste and the Market Economy', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 54, no. 4, July 2020, pp. 1225–1279, discussion cited on pp. 1252–1253.

[55]Under the chief ministership of M. G. Ramachandran, Tamil Nadu would later ignore the law and exceed this limit in 1980 by 18 per cent (reaching 68 per cent); subsequently various attempts were made to get legal recognition *ex post facto*. A bill was finally passed in Tamil Nadu in 1993 under Chief Minister J. Jeyalalitha, and it received the President of India's assent; it was brought under the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution so that it can no longer be subject to legal challenges.

the newly instituted quotas for SCs and BCs at 18 per cent and 31 per cent respectively, however, a total of 49 per cent would be reached each year. This meant that carrying over unfilled positions would almost certainly exceed 50 per cent and given the 'legal implications'—the violation of the Constitution—this would entail, officials in the departments of Social Welfare and Law thought it best that 'carrying forward the lapsed vacancies in favour of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes ... be cancelled'.[56]

Sathiavani Muthu made a proposal to counter the effects of the loss of these carried-over positions, hoping to minimize the number of positions that would fall out of SC hands permanently by not being filled: '[I]n all fairness the vacancies that have been reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in any particular year should be filled up by relaxing the rules, qualifications and standards for direct recruitment or promoting Scheduled Caste candidates from lower levels.'[57] An agenda prepared for the next Cabinet meeting included this proposal. No minutes are recorded of this meeting; we know only that Muthu's proposal was rejected. And in so doing, the ruling regime, like those who had ruled before, continued to ensure that reservation for SCs and STs was a mere performance of resource redistribution, a programme whose actual design guaranteed just the opposite year after year: opportunity hoarding for the politically and economically dominant.

Economic redistribution: Harijan Welfare, the protection of property, and routine misspending

Under the broader ideologies of poverty reduction and the elimination of backwardness that shaped the early post-colonial state, schemes under the rubric of 'Harijan' (or later, 'Adi-Dravida') welfare were supposed to provide the necessary support to promote economic and social improvement.[58] Harijan Welfare schemes ran the gamut from provision for education (such as schools in the colonies, quotas in higher education, Harijan student hostels, and tutoring schemes for hopeful entrants into the public services), health programmes, and 'economic uplift' schemes (including, at various times in the first three post-colonial decades, funds for small businesses, licences

[56]GO 245 (Social Welfare), 'Memorandum for the Council of Ministers', paragraphs 5 and 8, 31 January 1973, TNA.

[57]GO (Social Welfare), 'Memorandum for the Council of Ministers', paragraph 6, 31 January 1973. See also Muthu's personal recollection of this affair in Muthu, *My Agitations*, p. 46.

[58]See the department's publicity brochure published after the first year that Harijan Welfare was instituted as its own separate ministry in Tamil Nadu, in GO (Social Welfare) 412 Ms., 11 May 1970, TNA. Included too were a range of quaintly paternalistic schemes such as prizes for 'neat and clean' colonies and the building of small community centres where cleanliness was to be taught. There were also sporadic attempts to educate the public against caste 'prejudice' and end practices of untouchability, in keeping with the ideological claim that caste difference was primarily caused by deluded thinking and arcane superstition. Some schemes directed at Dalits were overseen by other departments, such as cooperative farming programmes. A thorough analysis of what is no doubt the largest state-led programme of development in history that is specifically directed at ascriptively identified minorities—the effects it had on labour regimes, and on social and political relations within those minorities and between those minorities and other state-defined categories of persons—is beyond the scope of this article but central to the larger research on which it draws.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to run ration shops, provision of house-sites, milch cows for cooperative dairy farming, and loans or small grants for agricultural tools). Both financially and politically, most attention was given to the schemes targeting developmental goals like electricity, drinking water wells and pumps, and the building of roads and thoroughfares in and through the colonies—the basic elements of modernization that were also being vigorously pursued in the caste villages in states like Tamil Nadu, in accordance with the centre's five-year plans.

Improvement—as opposed to equality—is the operative word.[59] Even in design, these schemes fell far short of what would be required to bring about the degree of independence that could, for instance, have allowed the victims of violence near Cuddalore, described above, to remain firm in their demand for justice. The Harijan Welfare Department did not even ideologically emphasize the provision of agricultural land to the landless, the single scheme that might have somewhat mitigated the dependency of agrarian labour.[60] There was a yawning gap, moreover, between even the modest goals of uplift described in government publicity materials and the actual funds and personnel allocated to the task of Harijan Welfare.[61] But as with the earlier examples, my interest here is in revealing, first, systematic discrepancies in government practice, demonstrating how schemes apparently designed and legitimated for one purpose might in fact be routinely deployed to fulfil another, and second, what happened when those tasked with representing the interests of Scheduled Castes attempted to alter normal operations to bring them in line with official policy. We will follow some of Sathiavani Muthu's actions to implement one exemplary scheme—the provision of Dalits with house sites they would own—and then consider how, at the seat of state power in Madras, the central government's funds for Harijan Welfare were distributed.

A scheme that had the potential to alter relations of dependency in favour of Dalits to at least some extent was the provision of house site ownership. In much of India where Dalit settlements are separate from those of caste people, landlords for whom Dalits laboured also owned the land in the 'colony'. While forms of unfreedom and bondage varied across the country, the ownership of house sites by employers was a powerful and widely used technique of labour discipline because labourers rarely had the capital or other means to resettle themselves and their families elsewhere. Landlords could thus threaten dissenting labourers with both eviction and loss of employment at once, a devastating price to pay.[62] Even some officials in the colonial

[59]Because developmental resources were granted overwhelmingly to the *ūr* at the expense of the *cēri*, the economic—and therefore power—imbalance between the two worsened even as the lives of *cēri* dwellers could be said to have 'improved' when considered in isolation.

[60]There were also, of course, a number of policies in these decades quite openly directed at bringing about agricultural growth by favouring the already economically powerful. The most well-known examples are the schemes pursued across the country under the rubric of the Green Revolution, amply demonstrated by Francine Frankel, *India's Green Revolution: Economic Gains and Political Costs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); and Tomasson Januzzi, *India's Persistent Dilemma: The Political Economy of Agrarian Reform* (New York: Routledge, 1994), to cite just two examples. While the Green Revolution undoubtedly tipped the scales further in favour of 'he who hath', my concern here is the analysis of measures defined and legitimated as attempts to overcome caste-based inequality.

[61]GO (Social Welfare) 805 Ms., 22 August, 1970, TNA.

[62]For an extended discussion of colonial house site policy and its political effects, as well as the violence state intervention elicited, see Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, pp. 95–99, 168–189. It was a problem that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

state viewed the practice of landlord ownership of these sites as tantamount to 'slavery', despite their overall support for caste-based agrarian unfreedom; by the 1910s it was decided that the provision of house site ownership to Dalits in the colonies was ultimately necessary for the modernization and growth of agriculture. The developmentalist post-colonial state added to these economic imperatives the national goal of eradicating traces of feudal inequality. In independent India, then, the provision of house sites was a central ideological plank in Harijan Welfare at the central level, and, in Tamil Nadu, was an issue Scheduled Caste MLAs and others frequently raised in the Legislative Assembly across the first three regimes that held power.[63]

But house site provision through the Harijan Welfare apparatus was undercut by at least three pervasive problems that were rediscovered every decade or so but never resolved. First was its almost comically flawed design. For instance, in the early 1960s house sites were granted to Dalits, the vast majority of whom lacked the capital to actually build on the sites—hardly a surprise, but a fact that was not taken into account by the government until thousands of sites had been found to be lying vacant for many years. Second was a massive problem of scale. Housing was needed for a population of between 7.5 to 10 million Dalits in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By even a conservative estimate at least a million sites were required. But by 1975, the most that had ever been granted in a single year was 15,000.[64] When it was decided that same year that houses too needed to be provided, the inability to reach agreement on a design halted provision entirely for some two whole years. Third, and most significant for our purposes here, is that house site provision provoked landowner opposition.

The state was sued hundreds of times for its attempts to use the Land Acquisition Act (despite carefully choosing sites that were neither cultivated nor occupied), suits that typically took years to resolve.[65] When debating the Harijan Welfare budget in the Legislative Assembly in 1970, the Scheduled Caste MLA E. Ko. Balakrishnan challenged Sathiavani Muthu, asking, 'the honourable minister says landlords oppose the granting of specific sites. But why aren't you responding by invoking the Emergency Acquisition Act and seizing the land, rather than simply letting it go because landowners oppose it?'[66] Muthu responded, 'Harijans are afraid of what they will have to suffer if they occupy a site against a landowner's wishes. We therefore simply cannot ignore their opposition and have to take it into account.'

Muthu's response that the government had to take 'opposition … into account' effectively meant allowing landlords to freely exercise threats and maintain Dalit subordination in direct contravention of government policy. As a minister of the ruling party, Muthu could not publicly criticize party policy.[67] But as my own research reveals, Muthu herself did not accept that policy, and shortly after this exchange she attempted

continued to contribute to violence throughout the post-colonial period as late as at least the early 1980s, as a case in the village of Sathanur in South Arcot demonstrates: GO (Public) 1405 Ms., 20 July 1981, TNA.

[63]For instance, TNLAD, 13 March 1969, pp. 565–566, 576–577, 586–587; TNLAD, 26 March 1969, pp. 494–495; TNLAD, 3 April 1970, pp. 172–173; TNLAD, 8 April 1970, pp. 504–505; TNLAD, 25 August 1972, p. 416; TNLAD, 24 January 1974, pp. 28–31; TNLAD, 4 March 1975, pp. 479–481.

[64]TNLAD, 4 March 1975.

[65]Some 700 suits were pending when Muthu assumed the ministership in 1969.

[66]TNLAD, Vol. 30 (March 26–April 1) 1970, p. 172.

[67]A section of my in-progress book project examines a dynamic by which SC representatives are compelled by political exigencies to work *against* the interests of poor Dalits; the present article concerns only the institutional barriers they face when trying to advocate *for* said interests.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to use her position to intervene more discreetly by pursuing with officials in the Board of Revenue the possibility of simply acquiring these lands by eminent domain. Of course, all modern governments can, and indeed routinely do, appropriate property in this manner for public purposes, and in Tamil Nadu, as elsewhere, competitive rates of compensation are paid. But Muthu's suggestion was rebuffed by the Board, which flatly lied to her, insisting her request was 'expropriatory' and thus even 'unconstitutional'![68] Poor design, insignificant scale, and the selective deployment of property rights once again implicated the state—as we have seen in the examples of anti-Dalit violence and government employment—in safeguarding the institutional basis of a dominant group's power, while subverting the legitimate actions of an elected minority representative and a minister seeking to mitigate it.

But are these lawsuits not actually an instance of 'society' resisting the benevolent designs of the state? Yes, individual property owners refused to comply with the Harijan Welfare Ministry's state directives. To leave our analysis at that, however, would be to ignore two important facts. First, as Sathiavani Muthu's interactions with the Board of Revenue and my broader research overall show, these cases were filed against a state that firmly upheld dominant groups' right to property against only some, but not all, claims to it. When the private property regime was in conflict with Harijan Welfare policy, officials representing state institutions insisted property rights were sacrosanct; for the purposes of construction of infrastructure or industry, however, those sacred rights evaporated. The cases filed by landowners, in other words, given the prevailing regularities of government operation, were ones the state was already committed to losing and therefore hardly evidence of concerted opposition between the two.

The second and more fundamental point is that to accept at face value the construction of these cases as 'property owners versus the state' is to participate in the naturalization of the existing property regime, ignoring the state institutions, including the legal construct of property and the many apparatuses, from courts to police, that constitute it. A core conceit by which liberal governments dissemble their own role in constituting and maintaining the inequalities of the 'society' they claim neutrally to administer is that the realms of 'the economic' and 'the political' are distinct and autonomous.[69] Thus when a successor state chooses to ratify an ancien régime's system of property rights, as India for the most part chose to do, it is not often presented accurately as a choice, but rather as 'preserving' what liberal ideology portrays as natural order, or, *obscurum per obscurius*, as safeguarding time immemorial 'custom'.[70] It is often forgotten that Ambedkar had proposed the complete abolition of India's rural property regime, replacing private ownership with state administered

[68]GO (Social Welfare) 412 Ms., 11 May 1970, TNA.

[69]Ha-Joon Chang, 'Breaking the Mould: An Institutionalist Political Economy Alternative to the Neoliberal Theory of the Market and the State', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 26, 2002, pp. 539–559.

[70]A peculiarity of the Indian intellectual context is that 'custom' has frequently been misrepresented as a weapon of subaltern resistance to colonial rule and to capitalism. What Andrew Sartori has shown, however, is that the discourse of customary rights in India was predominantly a tool by which the proprietary classes resisted government efforts to no longer recognize their inherited privileges, and far from being contrary to liberal property, their notion of 'custom' was derivative of it: Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). John Locke provides the locus classicus of the liberal claim that property exists in the state of nature, and that states may 'regulate

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

agrarian collectives, and that his proposal was not rejected on the grounds that the state had no right to do so.[71] In reality, property exists only to the extent that states recognize it; the right to property is a creature of the state and is always conditional and limited.[72]

Let us return now to Harijan Welfare, and conclude our discussion of Sathiavani muthu's experiences as a representative by examining an even more basic problem that implicates not just the house site scheme but the entire Ministry: the institutionalized redirection by the state of Tamil Nadu of federal funds supplied for Harijan Welfare for other purposes. Misdirection at the level of the village panchayat was readily admitted to be widespread by Sathiavani Muthu when she was Harijan Welfare minister, verified by her own field visits to villages and known to Ministry officials, as we saw in our discussion of violence. More damning, however, is Muthu's discovery of the way funds were misdirected at the level of state government itself.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, the term 'Backward Classes' was most commonly used to refer to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes alone, but in some government-published documents the term was used more expansively to include any group perceived to be in some way disadvantaged, including the entire native population of India apart from the most advanced forward caste communities, and even at times to refer to non-Brahmins to the *exclusion* of the Scheduled Castes.[73] What is important here is that central government funds transferred to the state of Tamil Nadu expressly for the purpose of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe welfare continued for many years to be referred to in official documents using the outdated and potentially confusing nomenclature 'Backward Classes'. In her memoir, Sathiavani Muthu recounts discovering that Mu. Karunanidhi, as chief minister, had knowingly directed these funds to be spent not as intended on Scheduled Castes and Tribes alone, but also on political constituencies the Tamil Nadu government had designated 'Other Backward Classes'.[74] A fund meant for schemes directed at Scheduled Castes and Tribes (22–23

and preserve', but do not constitute it: C.B. Macpherson (ed.), *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980).

[71]Ambedkar, *States and Minorities*, p. 397. As Niraja Jayal describes them, the debates centred on whether social and economic rights could be legally enforced in the same way as political rights, ultimately leading to a conceptual separation between the two, and the relegation of the former to the category of 'Directive Principles', in Niraja Jayal, *Citizenship and its Discontents: An Indian History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 144ff.

[72]Geoffrey Hodgson, 'Property, Possession, and Contract', in *Conceptualizing Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 101–128.

[73]See Marc Galanter, *Competing Inequalities: Law and the Backward Classes* (Oxford: New Delhi, 1984), pp. 154–159, especially the table on p. 155 showing the different possible referents of the term.

[74]The 'Other Backward Classes' category is determined at the state level, and there are no clear social scientific or historical criteria for establishing eligibility. The major OBC communities in Tamil Nadu are almost all what M. N. Srinivas defined as dominant castes, but fundamentally, an 'Other Backward Class' is literally whatever the state government says it is. The decision to award membership is a wholly political one, normally the result of concerted lobbying by leaders of the beneficiary community or by political party leaders on the basis of electoral considerations, that is, in order create a constituency, weighed against the objections of other constituencies whose support might be lost in the process. I intend to cover this process in detail in the book of which the current article is an offshoot. Cf. Nicolas Martin, 'Dominant Caste', in *The Oxford Handbook of Caste*, (eds) Surinder Jodhka and Jules Naudet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

per cent of the population) was instead used to reroute state resources to others more populous and electorally powerful (some 52 per cent of the population were eligible for these funds) at the direct expense of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Once again, we find a governmentally organized zero-sum game. But is this truly an institution, that is, a regular pattern of rule-based procedures, albeit one that departs from publicly proclaimed norms? Or should it be considered rather as a temporary corruption of the 'true' institutions of government by an opportunistic politician?

Shocked by her discovery, Muthu raised the matter with Karunanidhi, who insisted that his interpretation of the budget's intended recipients was in fact the correct one! Not long afterwards, however, the central government asked for an account of funds spent and its response proved Muthu right: it 'strictly pointed out that amounts allowed by the Centre should be spent only for the welfare of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes'.[75] Events like this, in which Muthu attempted unsuccessfully to challenge government practices detrimental to Scheduled Castes, fuelled the growing animosity between her and Karunanidhi, culminating in her expulsion from the party in 1974. Although her memoir frequently focuses on her growing disillusionment with the DMK in general and Karunanidhi in particular, she recounts a memorable conversation with a member of the Finance Department on the same topic of central government-supplied 'Backward Classes' funds that makes it clear that the diversion of funds intended for Scheduled Castes and Tribes to OBCs was *not* in fact a corruption of 'true' government procedure by Karunanidhi or even the DMK, but a regular (if unacknowledged) institution of government in the state of Tamil Nadu that spanned regimes: 'Later the Finance Secretary met me. He told me that the State was using the funds allocated for the welfare of the "Backward Classes" for other purposes also. He further explained that it was the practice from the days of Kamaraj [Congress Party politician and Tamil Nadu's chief minister from 1954–1963]. He expressed his inability to suddenly change it now.'[76] Redirection was thus not a perversion of state power by the DMK under Karunanidhi, but had been standard for decades, regardless of the party in power. Sathiavani Muthu immediately expressed her outrage, 'But this *has* to stop. This can't be taking place in a government formed by Anna,' she began, invoking her mentor's reputation for integrity. Invested, as we have seen before, in the normative ideals of representative democracy, she asked, 'How can this continue even when *I* am occupying the position of minister for Harijan welfare?'[77] The text does not provide her interlocutor's answer, and changes topic in the next paragraph. No action, however, was taken, and in any case Sathiavani Muthu was soon expelled from the party and thus from her ministerial berth. The practice of diverting central government funds intended for SCs to politically powerful OBC constituents was not, in other words, a mere mistake or an aberration. It was a genuine institution of government in the state of Tamil Nadu—a rule-governed practice that even the finance secretary would not contemplate challenging, even through there was clear evidence it violated central government policy.

[75]Muthu, *Enathu Porattam* (*My Struggles*), p. 44.
[76]Muthu, *My Agitations*, pp. 43–44.
[77]Muthu, *Enathu Porattam* (*My Struggles*), p. 46. Translation mine.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Despite being among the most politically successful Scheduled Caste representatives of her age, and perhaps of all time in Tamil Nadu, Sathiavani Muthu was consistently prevented from effectively representing the interests of this constituency.[78] This cannot be ascribed to individual failings, or to 'social forces' resistant to state-led progress. Scheduled Castes are rendered vulnerable to violence by state administration, and not simply subject to it by irrational casteist hordes. They are pitted against dominant castes because of the way state resources are distributed in the form of a zero-sum game. By being rendered powerless and dependent, they are pressured not to seek justice when made victims, while politicians and state officers who benefit from this relation are incentivized to press Scheduled Caste victims to concede their rights. The officially sanctioned quantum of reserved government jobs is never distributed to them. And finally, the minimal forms of officially mandated schemes of social improvement enshrined in 'Harijan Welfare', are, with rule-like regularity, never put securely in place. And it is important to note that even if fully implemented, their very design would still maintain the inequality between *ūr* and *cēri* and thus entail an unequal state-sponsored competition, in a situation of scarcity, between groups of spatially segregated persons identified by caste. Yet when facts of this subordination occasionally erupt into public view, as they did in the early 2000s and many times since, they are lamented—but then dismissed as residual or anomalous. Their systematicity and their causes have escaped, or been considered unworthy of, scholarly attention.

Conclusion: Theory and method in the study of minority political representation

As I explained at the outset, my research was initially motivated by the sharp divergence between academic writing on Tamil Nadu and pervasive realities of inequality, exclusion, and violence. Such facts as the massive discrepancy in state support between

[78] An alternate hypothesis was proposed by an anonymous reviewer, who queried whether Sathiavani Muthu's lack of success could be attributed to her gender and caste identity, or more generally to 'Brahminical patriarchy'. Beginning with the latter, the concept of Brahminical patriarchy refers properly either to an *institutional* reality—to the set of institutions that accord special prerogatives to Brahmin males within a patriarchal family, and to the endogamous kinship rules followed by Brahmins—or to an *ideological* one, that of the Sanskritic religious corpus that justifies Brahmin male privilege within the family, society, and religious institutions on the basis of sacral purity. During the period I describe the government of Tamil Nadu was certainly patriarchal in the colloquial sense of being male-dominated, but it was not Brahminical in either its institutional structure or ideologically. The reigning Dravidianist ideology of the state of Tamil Nadu was specifically opposed to Brahminism, and the governmental institutions Muthu attempted to challenge accorded special privileges not to Brahmins but to OBCs. The only way I could envision 'Brahminical patriarchy' playing a role is via a rather more expansive usage of the term, according to which any and all instances of caste domination are labelled 'Brahminical patriarchy' on the assumption that they must ultimately have been caused by the religious ideology of Brahminical Hinduism—even if the exact causal mechanism is unknown, and even when social actors themselves profess to reject Brahminism and offer completely distinct reasons for their actions. It is difficult to see how such a hypothesis could ever be falsified, which is why my own research has focused instead on the empirically observable institutions on which caste domination rests, the interests they serve, and on the concrete historical processes that give rise to them. As for whether Muthu's own individual caste and gender identity could explain her lack of success, it is important to note she was a highly effective politician and administrator; she was only ineffective when she sought to challenge institutions that subordinated Dalits. Male legislators, both Dalit and non-Dalit, who sought to alter these same institutions, were likewise unsuccessful.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

SCs and dominant OBC castes do not even appear as a puzzle to be addressed in these accounts, nor is the regular occurrence of violence recognized as an intrinsic component of the state's political system. How is it that such prominent features of Tamil government and politics have been overlooked for so long? It appears to me that the answer to this question comes down to methodology and sources.

The existing scholarship on the government of Tamil Nadu and Tamil politics in the post-independence period is based almost entirely on interviews with bureaucrats, journalists, politicians, and party cadres; on discourse produced for public consumption such as newspapers; and on party propaganda such as party publications, and the speeches, writings, and film scripts of Dravidian leaders, etc.[79] These sources share the very conceptual premises my research contests: that social interests exist independently of government action, and, accordingly, the pluralist conceit that representative institutions channel these independently existing interests into government through the legislative process. Such accounts are well suited to producing a model of the government and political history of the state as it appears to those who inhabit its administrative and political system. This is what anthropologists call an 'emic' theory, one that provides the normative categories through which social actors explain their actions to themselves and others, but it is not sufficient in itself. To mistake participants' representations for a complete account of social reality is a well-known fallacy, which is why anthropologists do not just interview native informants, but live among them to collect extensive observational data on what they do, especially when it conflicts with or otherwise falls outside their self-representation. Systematic analysis of these data is what allows ethnographers to go beyond normative models derived from emic categories and to identify systematic regularities of action whose implications participants themselves may not see, and which may even contradict their normative account or ideology.[80]

Unlike interviews, party propaganda, and the recollections of politicians and bureaucrats, research based on the administrative state archive—the accumulated messages passed back and forth between different state actors, the detailed chronological record of orders given and of information received, the embodied 'mind' and memory bank of the state itself—has the potential to reveal what government in fact does, often in contrast to what political and bureaucratic agents say about it. Thus my previous research on the administration of Dalits in colonial Madras presidency was able to demonstrate the institutions of government that contradicted official policy, that effectively underwrote—even while denying the existence of—the slave-like status of Dalits in relation to landowning castes, and that positioned the revenue-collecting state and village elites as political allies and co-exploiters of Dalit labour.[81] Nor was the reality of the British state's institutional preservation of de facto slavery long after it had been officially abolished readily accessible even to

[79]This is the case for all the accounts cited in the introduction in footnotes 8–13, as well as Kannan, *The DMK Years*; and Arun V. Swamy, 'The Nation, the People and the Poor: Sandwich Tactics in Party Competition and Policy Formation, India, 1931–1996', PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1996.

[80]Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 [1972]).

[81]See Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, esp. pp. 13–15. See also Uday Chandra, Joel Lee, Brian Pennington, Lucinda Ramberg, Zoe Sherinian and Rupa Viswanath, 'Roundtable on Rupa Viswanath's *The Pariah Problem*', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–64.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experienced government officers, and only became apparent to me through the systematic analysis of case files and other sources on the countryside spanning multiple departments over many decades.[82] More generally, prevailing patterns of operation that contradict official narratives are beyond the grasp of individual functionaries within any complex and highly compartmentalized organization like a state bureaucracy, unless such individuals concertedly conduct research on them, which requires both significant resources of time and a level of access to documentary records spanning multiple departments and decades, which are rarely available to contemporaries, though sometimes accessible to historians.[83]

[82]While my present and prior research are similar in method, my analysis differs in its underlying theoretical conception and insofar as the state I am analysing is itself differently constituted. Where my analysis of the administration of Madras presidency relied on the notion of state penetration—a *caste-state nexus*, as I then called it—my current research on Tamil Nadu state government is concerned with the active constitution of subpopulations through new institutions of power and modes of operation: the developmental state and representative government under conditions of mass elections.

[83]I do not claim it is in principle *impossible* for bureaucrats or well-positioned political actors to form a picture of the real institutions of government that find no place in normative accounts. Attentive readers will note that I cite a highly astute Tamil-language pamphlet, which analyses the institutional zero-sum game created by the administrative subordination of the *cēri* to the *ūr* in a manner that confirms my own discoveries, and that this pamphlet was written by a government bureaucrat, P. Sivakami, Indian Administrative Service. Readers will also note that in this article I have supplemented my analysis of the state archive with recollections from the memoir of a politician. It is no coincidence, moreover, that both these women, Sivakami and Muthu, belong to the Scheduled Castes. My claim is thus not that a government's unequal treatment of groups is entirely *invisible* to politicians and bureaucrats, but that they are not normally positioned to gain a synoptic view that would allow them to identify patterns across multiple departments and across decades, that is, to concretely distinguish between those acts of prejudice that amount to no more than opportunistic perversions of government institutions and those which are so rule-bound, consistent, and resistant to challenge that they can only be described as true institutions in their own right. For government personnel to reliably draw such distinctions would require that they be granted respite from their normal duties and given access to a large archive of files in order to engage in the sort of analysis of government records that I myself have conducted, the scope of which I describe in the main text of this article; see Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, for a useful discussion of the epistemological gap between the social actor's practical involvement in his or her lifeworld, and the theoretical apprehension of that world by a researcher in terms of the systematic access to data collected over extended periods of time, and without the demands of sustained direct involvement in the world they study. In addition to lacking a systematic overview, state personnel are conditioned by their training and by the exigencies of political life to regard departures from the civics textbook-view of government in the manner of individual acts of corruption, that is, as situation-specific perversions of government's true form. The limitation of interview-based research—in contrast to archive-based research or participant-observation—is that unless an interviewer knows the right questions to ask, informants will rarely, if ever, spontaneously bring discrepancies between the emic view and actual practice to a researcher's attention, and unless they have a compelling personal interest (for example, because they belong to a disadvantaged minority) and furthermore possess a personality that impels them to a habit of systematic note-taking over the course of their careers, they will not normally be able to supply the researcher with enough reliable data to support the kind of analysis I offer here. On the constitutive blind spots of interview-based research and the distinction between interviews alone and interviews supplemented by participant observation, see Howard S. Becker, 'Interviewing Medical Students', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 62, no. 2, September 1956, pp. 199–201; and Howard S. Becker and Blanche Geer, 'Participant Observation and Interviewing: A Comparison', *Human Organization*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1957, pp. 28–32. Research based on the published propaganda of political parties and on newspaper reports shares many of the structural limitations of interview-based research, and more besides. Where the world view of bureaucrats and politicians

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Two large collections are the primary evidentiary basis for my present analysis. The first comprises Tamil Nadu government records ranging across the different regimes—Congress, the DMK, and the ADMK—that ruled the state from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s. Based on a complete survey of all extant indexes for the departments of Social Welfare, Public, Home, Labour and Employment, and Industries, Labour and Cooperation over these decades, I identified all potentially significant files pertaining to state action directed at Scheduled Castes, comprising three policy areas: state responses to anti-Dalit violence, the provision of 'Harijan' or 'Adi-Dravida' welfare, and the regulation and disciplining of agrarian labour. From an initial selection of over 400, I narrowed my analytical focus to 258 non-redundant files (of between six and over 200 pages in length each) that provided significantly detailed accounts of policy formulation and implementation, including whether and how implementation was delayed or obstructed, and whether measures were taken as a result. I also collected material that is not in files, including, most importantly, all relevant Fortnightly Confidential Reports from 1954 to 1980, which provide brief overviews of law-and-order issues and political activity in the state—a pithy snapshot, therefore, of recurrent violence. The distinction between *files* and *reports* is that the former contain back-and-forth correspondence between state officers and additional information that allows a researcher to trace chronologically what different actors knew and when they knew it, and also to trace the internal power relations, the mistakes, and the corrections though which bureaucrats are themselves socialized and taught the implicit rules of the game.

The second large corpus of evidence I use is another that political scientists and historians of the post-colonial Tamil state have hitherto overlooked. The Legislative Assembly Debates over the period I am studying (1952–1983), comprise tens of thousands of pages containing a near-verbatim record of speech on the assembly floor.[84] Legislative council members frequently reported on the implementation and unforeseen effects of government action in their constituencies; careful study of these records has revealed a rich and untapped source for an account of village- and taluk-level statecraft that has allowed me to identify additional patterns of state activity across decades. Furthermore, because descriptions of local conditions included in the period had to be verified before being put into the legislative record, and because many MLAs from diverse party affiliations made similar kinds of observations over the course of different ruling regimes, this corpus represents a reliable archive of local governance distinct from that of the bureaucratic files I reviewed. Working through the full run of these volumes, I created a scanned database of some 4,000 pages of text on the governance of Dalits, including appendices containing the state's own evidence of implementation or actions taken in the form of government orders, commission reports, and budgets. The collection of legislative records I assembled includes all, or

is shaped by dominant political and state ideologies, party publications are themselves carefully crafted instruments of political propaganda. True adversarial journalism based on in-depth investigation of governments is an invaluable resource for anyone seeking to understand our world, but run-of-the-mill news rarely rises to this level and is more typically a purveyor of state narratives; see Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

[84]The proceedings are in Tamil and English during the 1950s and entirely in Tamil from the early 1960s onwards.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nearly all, debates on Harijan Welfare budgets and discussions of anti-Dalit violence or harassment, all important debates on agrarian labour, and the vast majority of interventions made by MLAs—many but not all of whom were themselves Dalit—over a 30-year period on issues affecting the Dalit population, whether by asking questions or in extended responses to the speeches given periodically by governors and chief ministers.[85]

These sources have allowed me to identify pervasive patterns in which government constitutes and systematically channels resources to one population at the direct expense of the other, and acts to support and reinforce that population's dominance.[86] This operational pattern is not mandated by any formal directive of the legislature, nor is it the result of any particular policy or constitutional directive. On the contrary, it contravenes at least one directive principle and also directly violates the more general constitutional norm of equality among, and state neutrality towards, its citizens. Viewed from the normative perspective of the civics textbook, which reduces institutional reality to those institutions that are formally encoded and publicly acknowledged, what I have found would be regarded as a deviation, a corruption of the 'true' form of government.[87] It would be described, no doubt, as the work of interested individuals favouring their own communities or private interests—blame would be directed, in other words, at society. But as I have shown, the constituencies and divisions of 'society' owe their continued existence to administrative boundaries, classification schemes, property regimes, etc., that are themselves institutional creatures of the state that pit Scheduled Castes and the dominant OBCs against one another in a zero-sum game.[88] And the patterns of operation this article has

[85]'Or nearly all', because although it was my intention to identify and collect all legislative records on these topics, working my way through several tens of thousands of pages of text was arduous, and it is possible that I overlooked some minor debates or discussions.

[86]Apart from the abovementioned sources, I have, over the last two decades, collected oral historical accounts from older Dalit activists and survivors of violence, memoirs in Tamil and English, newspapers in Tamil and English, and Dalit periodicals from private collections. Another extremely important corpus that has allowed me to develop a working knowledge of rural society in Tamil Nadu during my time period has been a remarkable series of very high-quality studies by a generation of anthropologists and development studies scholars who conducted fieldwork between the 1950s and 1980s, and which, when read from our vantage point today, provide microhistorical snapshots of the effects of government policy on local agrarian economies and labour regimes. Most significant for my research have been: Andre Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1965]); Göran Djurfeldt and Staffan Lindberg, *Behind Poverty: The Social Formation in a Tamil Village*. Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph series no. 22 (London: Curzon Press, 1976); Kathleen Gough, *Rural Society in Southeast India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Kathleen Gough, *Rural Change in Southeast India, 1950s to 1980* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); John Harriss, *Capitalism and Peasant Farming: Agrarian Structure and Ideology in Northern Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); Kurien, *Dynamics of Rural Stratification*; Joan Mencher, *Agriculture and Social Structure in Tamil Nadu: Past Origins, Present Transformations and Future Prospects* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1978); David Mosse, 'Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: A Study of Social Organization in Rural Ramnad', DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1986; and Dagfinn Sivertsen, *When Caste Barriers Fall: A Study of Social and Economic Change in a South Indian Village* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1963).

[87]See supra, footnote 7 on the meaning of 'institution'.

[88]The difference between the SC and OBC category is that, where inclusion in the second is wholly a political decision, the former is based on relatively clear social scientific and historical criteria. This is not to deny some areas of ambiguity in the assignation of SC status, but it is not the case, as Simon Charsley

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285 Published online by Cambridge University Press

identified are not deviations, as I have continually stressed, but regular institutions of government.

The cases I have analysed in this article were chosen, furthermore, for the additional light they shed on the institution of representative government as it pertains to a resource-poor minority, that of the Scheduled Castes. Many more incidents from Sathiavani Muthu's career could have been cited to make the same arguments, and Muthu is just one among the many Scheduled Caste representatives whose stymied efforts I have traced. Where the study of formal politics (the institutions of representative government) is normally treated separately from that of administration, I have sought to re-embed Scheduled Caste political representation in the context of the government institutions that render this constituency vulnerable to everyday violence and that continually disempower it by channelling vital economic resources, jobs, and other opportunities to dominant groups. I have suggested that explanation of a Scheduled Caste representative's successes or failures in terms of individual actions and personalities, the structure of electoral constituencies, or by reference to obstinate forms of traditional casteism are wide of the mark. As I asserted in the introduction to this article, and as I have now demonstrated, the system of representative government is embedded within and dependent on a government that institutionally reproduces subpopulations as unequal.

Acknowledgements. Extended conversations with the following individuals provoked the questions that both this article, and the larger research project from which it draws, seek to answer: T. P. Kamalanathan (RIP); A. Padmanabhan, IAS (RIP); X-Ray Manikkam (RIP); Erimalai Rathinam; D. Ravikumar, MP; P. Dayanandan; P. Sivakami, IAS; C. Lakshmanan; Stalin Rajangam; Karthikeyan Damodaran; Tamilmurasu; Nicholas Chinnappan; Christodas Gandhi, IAS; Brindavan Moses; and in recent years, Tamilmuthalvan, Aravindan Kannaiyan, Vasuki Bhaskar, and A. B. Rajasekaran. Karthikeyan Damodaran and Hugo Gorringe made it possible for me to present an early version of this article as an Ambedkar Lecture at the University of Edinburgh in 2018, and their feedback was much appreciated. For reading and perceptively commenting on a more recent version of this article, I am grateful to Sheetal Chhabria, Michael Collins, John Harriss, Nicolas Martin, Nate Roberts, Srirupa Roy, and Ashwin Subramaniam.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

has attempted to argue, that the Scheduled Castes category was entirely arbitrary and based only on the mistaken criterion of ritual untouchability promulgated by M. K. Gandhi; see S. Charsley, "'Untouchable": What is in a Name?', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1996, pp. 1–23.

Cite this article: Viswanath, Rupa. 2025. 'The power to disempower: The government of caste and the career of Dr Sathiavani Muthu in Tamil Nadu, *circa* 1960–1979'. *Modern Asian Studies*, pp. 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101285