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Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 40–56 | ISSN 2050-487X | [journals.ed.ac.uk/southasianist](http://journals.ed.ac.uk/southasianist)

# From untouchable to Dalit and beyond: New directions in South Indian Dalit politics

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In 1999, following a decade long boycott of the political process the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi - the largest Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu - contested elections for the first time. This paper will examine the process of institutionalisation that has occurred since that point. One of the main changes to have occurred is that the party has sought to reach out beyond the Dalit category in order to secure more votes. Increasingly, thus, Dalit parties in Tamil Nadu are taking up the issue of Tamil nationalism in a bid to reach out to other castes on an ethno-linguistic basis. The paper will chart the pros and cons of such an approach before thinking about possible future directions.

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## Introduction

Eleanor Zelliot's (1996) classic work charts how protests against caste discrimination have shifted over time from the early Bhakti saints who articulated critiques of inequality in devotional songs, through Untouchable mobilisation to Dalit protest. The adoption of the name 'Dalit' was radical in multiple ways, not least in that it was a self-chosen term rather than an imposed one and sought to invert the stigma of untouchability. In early usage, furthermore, Dalit sought to go beyond caste and include all the downtrodden (Joshi 1987). Over time, however, the epithet has come to be synonymous with ex-Untouchables and has lost its critical edge. Its residual radicalism relates to the fact that it still holds out the possibilities of cross-Dalit caste mobilisation and, unlike the constitutional category of Scheduled Caste, it incorporates those ex-Untouchables who have converted out of Hinduism yet still suffer the social effects of untouchability (Viswanath 2012). Continued caste discrimination, inequality and violence mean that Dalit struggles are ongoing but, as Ciotti (2010) notes, Dalit groups are increasingly seeking alternative ways of describing themselves.

Ray and Katzenstein (2005: 25) argue that Indian social movements have always followed a dual logic; simultaneously targeting equality and identity. Dalit movements, thus, have campaigned *both* to be recognised as equal citizens *and* for an end to caste discrimination.

Whilst there are different emphases and foci over time, the fight for social justice and equality remains constant. The struggle for socio-political recognition, however, has assumed different characteristics according to the varied contexts and subjects in question. At different times and in different contexts the identity-based strategies of Indian Dalits have emphasised religion (see piece by Funahashi in this volume), occupation (as in campaigns against manual scavenging), caste (see Jodkha & Kumar 2007), human rights (Bob 2007), and poverty (Govinda 2009).

Dalit activists would contend that their campaign for equality continues unabated no matter which epithet they choose to mobilise around. Here it is argued that identity-based strategies are never simply a case of packaging the same demands in different rhetoric; *how* one articulates demands has an impact, though not always the one that it is intended to have. Rather than superficial labels, names are chosen within particular socio-political circumstances. Thus, whilst struggles were confined to the social sphere the emphasis on caste inequality sufficed. As Dalits entered electoral politics, however, they increasingly had to reach out to other groups in society. Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation, thus, morphed into the Republican Party. DS4 (*Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti* – Dalit and Exploited Group's Struggle Committee) metamorphosed into the Bahujan Samaj Party (Majority People's Party)

which in turn pursued a *sarvajana* (All People) strategy to gain political power.

This paper is concerned with the political strategies of the *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (Liberation Panther Party, VCK) – the largest Dalit party in Tamil Nadu. It emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the *Dalit Panther Iyyakkam* (Movement). At that time it was seen as a radical movement that threatened to hit back against caste oppressors. In a decade long electoral boycott, it was scathing of existing political parties and tore away the veneer of social justice to reveal the implicit casteism of political institutions. Its leader, Thirumavalavan, was hailed as a *Cheri* (Dalit settlement) Tornado, a second Ambedkar and a liberator of the oppressed. Intermediate castes feared and reviled the organisation for infusing hitherto dependent and submissive Dalits with pride and knowledge about caste and social change. When the VCK first contested the elections in 1999, therefore, they faced intense hostility; posters were defaced with cow-dung, candidates and voters were threatened, and large-scale violence marred the polling in Thirumavalavan's constituency (Gorringe 2005).

Ten years on, the party remains a marginal player. Following the first election, which it contested as part of a Third, alternative, Front, it has failed to repeat that venture and been forced to ally itself with both of the main parties in the state. Dalits cannot win alone in any constituency and so the party has had to reach

out to allies and voters from other castes and parties. In this paper we chart the political compulsions that render such strategies imperative, explore the ways in which the VCK has sought to grow beyond the Dalit category, and assess the impact of these attempts. First, however, we will outline the literature on institutionalisation and offer a sketch of Tamil politics before turning to the data.

### **Institutionalisation & Dravidian politics**

Whilst scholars like Tarrow (1998) and Jenkins & Klandermans (1995) regard political participation as the aim of protest groups, however, many such groups perceive politics as corrupt and/or reformist. The process of 'institutionalisation' – whereby movements 'develop internal organisation, become more moderate, adopt a more institutional repertoire of action and integrate into the system of interest representation' (Della Porta & Diani 1999: 148) – is therefore contentious. Coy & Hedeon (2005: 417) highlight the benefits that can accrue from institutionalisation including material gains, access to influential allies, and wider legitimacy. Institutionalisation, however, also has costs; movements may become 'bureaucratized and technique centred' with a dilution of movement critiques and tactics (Coy & Hedeon 2005: 407). It can also, as Piven & Cloward (1971) show, result in demobilisation or co-optation. As Mosse (2007: 27) puts it: 'Empowerment depends upon political

representation, but such political capacity is gained only at the cost of conceding power to a political system'. Understanding how movements move from radical actors to political contestants, therefore, is vitally important in understanding processes of democratisation and combating social exclusion (Tilly 1998).

Whilst India's democratic system has struggled to accommodate oppositional movements, according to Lakha and Taneja (2009: 316) the recent upsurge of lower caste (Dalit and 'Other Backward Caste') groups is reshaping political institutions. Indeed, these authors describe the political accommodation and electoral successes of such movements as signifying 'a seismic shift in patterns of political participation and structures of power' (ibid. 317). Certainly, autonomous Dalit parties have kept caste discrimination on the agenda, held authorities to account and gained impressive electoral victories. The BSP's formation of several governments at the state-level in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (Pai 2002), led some commentators to identify a 'Dalit revolution' in northern India (Jaffrelot 2003) even before it won an unparalleled absolute Assembly majority in 2008.

The BSP has undoubtedly effected significant social and political alterations in Uttar Pradesh and its success signifies an expansion of the public sphere as well as demonstrating the ability of Dalits to wield political power (Pai 2002; Ciotti 2009).

Representation and electoral success in and of themselves, however, do not necessarily reflect the interests of the disadvantaged (see for example, Jeffery et al, 2001; Mosse 2007). As Fraser notes, such 'politics of identity' can entail the 'displacement of redistribution and the reification of group identities' (2003: 32). Dalit parties can entrench caste identities by emphasising the background of parliamentary candidates rather than their policies, and once parties are in positions of power, those who mobilised to demand recognition anticipate beneficial outcomes (Chandra 2004). The inability of Dalit parties to determine public policy jars with the increased expectations of followers, resulting in the argument that Dalit politics has 'reached an impasse' (Shah 2004:131).

In other words, Dalit movements across India are confronting the problems of 'institutionalisation' and this has arguably engendered a split between hard-line and reformist activists (Offe 1990). Pai's (2002) work on the BSP distinguishes between empowerment from 'above' and 'below' and contends that the Party primarily pursues the former, viewing empowerment in purely political terms. This emphasis on political power has led the BSP to ally with parties opposed to Dalit assertion, thus weakening their attempts to eradicate caste inequalities. Dalit parties in Maharashtra, which was at the forefront of post-colonial Dalit mobilisation,

have suffered a similar fate (Omvedt 2003), indicating an enduring tension between radical grass-roots movements seeking to transform social relations and political parties seeking electoral success.

Tamil Nadu provides an interesting case study since it is one of the more developed states in India and has a long history of non-Brahmin politics and legislation. Although Tamil Governments have been rhetorically committed to eradicating caste for nearly 50 years, Dalits continue to lag behind in social development indices. The uneven distribution of land-holdings means that 58.5% of Tamil Dalits work as agricultural labourers and a further 10.2% are cultivators of marginal landholdings. SC literacy rates (63.2%) languish behind those of the general population (76.2%) and Dalit women are further marginalised with literacy rates of 57% (TN Government Statistical Handbook 2010). Backward Castes have wielded political power in the state since 1962 and portray themselves as countering Brahmin dominance. Whilst this has led some (notably Subramaniam 1999) to regard Tamil Nadu as a bastion of social pluralism, Dalit movements arose in large part because they faced continuing discrimination and were excluded from the body politic.

Autonomous Dalit mobilisation generated a forceful (often violent) casteist backlash which led Dalit movements to advocate violent means (Gorringe 2006). Only in the past 15 years,

therefore, have Dalit parties entered political institutions, and no Dalit party can emulate the BSP's electoral success since the political context here is very different (Omvedt 2003). Indeed, only since 1998 has Tamil politics moved 'from a two and a half party system to bi-polar multipartism' (Wyatt 2009: 1). Tamil Dalit parties have been to the fore in advancing this change by seeking to strip Dalit voters away from established parties (Roberts 2010: 18).

The VCK were not the first Dalit party to enter Tamil politics but they have been the most successful, gaining 3 victories in the smaller constituencies of the State Assembly and one in national elections. It is difficult to gauge support for the party – which has always contested in alliance with others – but they have held rallies of over 100,000 people in the state capital and Wyatt (2009: 120-1) suggests it could swing the vote in movement strongholds. Their political standing was recognised in the State elections of 2006 when they contested from 9 seats and in 2011 when they were allotted 10. Over the past few years the VCK have cemented their alliance with the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Dravidian Progressive Federation – DMK), one of the two main political parties in the state having previously allied with the *All India Anna DMK* – which is the other pillar of Tamil politics.

### **'The Compulsions of Electoral Politics'**

*“The Karunanidhi who used to sport a Black shawl, today wears a saffron one. The Karunanidhi who used to sing the praises of Periyar is today singing the praises of Vajpayee ... He has made a big mistake in history, he has slipped up. This is an unforgivable fault” (Thirumavalavan Speech on the DMK alliance with the BJP: 13/07/99).*

Before the VCK became a political party, Thirumavalavan poured scorn on both established parties in equal measure. Both were seen as corrupt, casteist and communal in outlook. Issues that were portrayed as ‘unforgivable’ in the movement phase, however, have been quietly forgotten now. The VCK has allied alternately with both Dravidian parties and has become so close to the DMK in the past 5 years that one popular weekly magazine – *Junior Vikatan* – asked whether he was in *alliance* with the DMK or actually *in* the party. As with any process of institutionalisation (Offe 1990) there has been a split between the pragmatic and idealist wings of the party with the latter becoming increasingly disillusioned by the political acrobatics of their organisation. The tendency of political movements to lose their radicalism and get embroiled in ‘politics as normal’ once they have been institutionalised is often explained away by reference to ‘the compulsions of politics’. What these

compulsions are, and how they work, however, are often unspecified.

The implication is that political institutions work in similar manner around the world such that the simple phrase is explanation enough for political choices. In truth, however, it ranks alongside the over-used concept of ‘political will’ in its vagueness and lack of analytical value (cf. Melo, Ng’ethe & Manor 2011). To understand why Dalit parties act as they do, therefore, we need an account of the circumstances within which they operate and the pressures and opportunities that arise as a consequence. This will help illustrate the specificities of the Tamil case that may be obscured by the catch all notion of ‘compulsions’.

The most important pieces of the jig-saw are the make-up of the political system in TN and the constituency that the VCK can reach out to. One of the most common questions is why the Dalit parties in TN have not been able to emulate the success of the BSP in Uttar Pradesh. The answer, I would contend, lies in the different political circumstances and caste make-ups of the two states. The first issue is that Tamil politics is dominated by the two Dravidian parties that have ruled the state continuously since 1967. National parties like the Congress, BJP and Communists have little presence in the state and are unable to contest and win independently. Whilst there have been signs that the dominance of the Dravidian



parties is weakening (Wyatt 2009), hitherto this has only meant that they have shifted from single party rule to being the largest party within a coalition.

Given the stranglehold of the DMK and ADMK on state politics, Dalit parties faced the choice of allying with their erstwhile foes or remaining a pressure group on the fringes of institutional politics. Time and again VCK attempts to forge a Third Front have been frustrated because potential allies have opted to join one or other of the main Fronts. The Tamil State Congress with which the VCK first contested the polls, thus, jettisoned the Third Front the moment it received a better offer. In subsequent elections calls for a secular and non-Dravidian front and a Tamil nationalist front have similarly fallen on deaf ears.

Underpinning many of these calculations is the question of resources. Election campaigns cost money: for posters, hoardings, flags, manifestoes and flyers. Even if there is a high degree of voluntarism – as there was in the 1999 election – volunteers need to be fed, accommodated and transported from place to place. Campaign meetings are expected to have sound-systems, stages and seating for the audience. If you want to persuade people to vote for you, you also need the big leaders to tour the constituency. All of this costs money and time and again I met people who expected some return for their investment. The commonest ‘returns’ in Tamil politics are access to

contracts, and state patronage. Those who sign off on contracts routinely expect to receive commissions from companies or individuals bidding for the work. More routinely, established politicians use their influence to distribute government jobs and resources and intervene on behalf of constituents to secure job transfers, loans or amenities (running water for instance).

When in alliance with the Dravidian parties, the VCK’s electoral expenses are bank-rolled by their coalition partners. Not only does this allow for a larger-scale and wider reaching campaign, it also offers opportunities: cadres can be paid for their work; candidates can siphon off some of the expenses; and the money can be targeted in specific places and locations. Not only this, outside of election times the VCK can work with and through their allies to secure patronage and political influence. As VCK Propaganda Secretary Gowthama Sannah put it:

**Sannah:** Both the DMK and ADMK have been in government for 50 years and grown accustomed to government. Extracting resources from them and taking them to the people was a serious undertaking and we did not fully succeed in doing so. This is for the future. We need to learn how to do this, we too are still learning aren’t we? We have created an understanding of the processes to some extent though, we have understood how to best use the ruling party.



**Hugo:** In many places you have also got work for people.

**Sannah:** We have, that has happened. In many places it has happened. We can't talk in terms of thousands of opportunities, but certainly in hundreds (Interview, September 2012).

The upshot is that parties choosing not to ally with the Dravidian duo have to contest elections with their own resources and in a scenario where votes tend to be split two ways making victory for third parties incredibly difficult. Unless and until the emergence of strong parties that can split the Dravidian vote, autonomous candidates will offer little more than a protest vote. The question then is; why not exercise that option? Many VCK activists insisted that they would rather preserve their autonomy and integrity than be beholden to larger allies. The question here is whether the VCK is a movement with the trappings of a party or a fully-fledged party. Given that one of the reasons given for joining politics was to consolidate Dalit votes what prevents them from standing alone?

### **Dalit vote bank?**

The second issue that propels Dalit parties into the arms of Dravidian coalitions is the lack of a consolidated Dalit vote bank. Dalit, we are reminded, is a caste category that incorporates a diversity of different castes. In Tamil Nadu

there is no dominant Scheduled Caste in terms of numbers. The three main Dalit castes are the Pallars, Paraiyars and Arunthathiyars. These three are concentrated in particular areas, have distinct socio-cultural characteristics, and have been mobilised by different political organisations. Whilst the VCK has never confined itself to one caste and has always reached out to all the oppressed it remains, to all intents and purposes, a Paraiyar party. Pallars, calling themselves Devendra Kula Vellallars, have mobilised separately. The 'Pallar Party' is Dr Krishnasamy's *Puthiya Tamilagam* (New Tamil Nadu). Arunthathiyars have yet to produce a political party, though the *Adi-Tamilar Peravai* (Original Tamilian Front) looks set to stand in future polls.

This three-way division effectively splinters the Dalit vote, but the issue is yet more complicated. Each of these sub-categories is, in turn, divided on multiple lines including right and left-hand factions; Amma and Atha (different ways of saying 'mother') sections; and different occupational clusters before we even get onto people's differences over politics. Given the long history of anti-Hindi Tamil nationalism, many Dalits continue to owe their political allegiance to one or other of the Dravidian parties. This has been cemented by ties of patronage and clientelism. Others continue to regard politics as corrupt and compromised and claim affiliation to one of the myriad extra-institutional social movements that

work on Dalit issues. Dalit parties, as a consequence, have their work cut out to attract voters.

Whilst Roberts (2010: 18) argues that Dalit parties have been successful in stripping Dalit voters away from established parties, therefore, they have usually contested in alliance with one of the major parties. K. Armstrong, State leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party pointed to this as a key issue underlying Dalit disillusionment:

These people have come away from the Dravidian parties. They come from households that voted for DMK or ADMK and they rejected that to vote for the Dalit parties, but now what is happening? The Dalit parties are delivering their votes back to those same Dravidian parties through their coalitions! (Interview August 2012).

The BSP has made it a point of principle to contest independently in Tamil Nadu, but the party has failed to win a single seat as a consequence and hardly registers on the political scale. *Puthiya Tamilagam* and the VCK, by contrast have secured political recognition on the premise that they can mobilise Dalit votes for their coalition partner. Contrary to simplistic accounts of ‘ethnic head-counts’, however, there is no guarantee that caste members will vote for ‘their party’. Indeed, insofar as caste is privileged, people may vote for the opposition if caste calculations arise. This is what seems to have happened in 2011 in the Sholavandan

constituency in central Tamil Nadu. VCK cadres here openly canvassed for the opposition ADMK candidate because he was a Paraiyar whereas the candidate in their coalition was a Pallar.

They pointed to a neighbouring reserved constituency where every party fielded Pallar candidates following the success of one MLA from that caste. The fear was that a similar situation could arise here too. Whilst this would seem to give credence to the notion of a caste vote-bank, the issue was not that straightforward. For a start, the coalition candidate represented the *Paatali Makkal Katchi*. Although the PMK and VCK have been working together since 2003, there is a historical enmity between the two parties and the unity between them does not extend beyond the leadership. ‘Had the VCK stood here and fielded a Pallar candidate’, I asked, ‘what would you have done then?’ The VCK group I was talking to laughed: ‘You are really putting us on the spot now, aren’t you! Had the VCK stood here, then that is a different story. Definitely we would have worked for the party’.

Secondly, Karrupiah, the ADMK candidate was a local man, who was related to many of the VCK cadres and known by all. There was a sense that he might respond to local issues and demands, though as of 2012 he had yet to do so. Encapsulated here, however, are the issues facing Dalit political organisations. Many voters are tied to established parties through bonds of

pat seats or to retain access to the resources and flows of patronage that help tie voters to a party, Dalit organisations are compelled to ally with one or other of the main parties. The alternative is to attempt to emulate the BSP in Uttar Pradesh and grow beyond the Dalit/caste tag. This is precisely what the VCK is endeavouring to do at present.

### **Entering the Mainstream?**

In a bid to escape their dependence upon the two main parties and gain sufficient support to contest elections on their own or in alliance with a Third Front, the VCK has tried to broaden the base of its support. The mantra of the party at present is the need to ‘enter the mainstream’. Whilst the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra initially sought to effect an alliance of the poor and downtrodden; class-based politics has had limited success in Tamil Nadu. Indeed, having long insisted on the primacy of class, even the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has turned its attention to caste discrimination since the emergence of Dalit politics. The tacit recognition of the failure of class politics means that there are few avenues available to parties of the marginalised. ‘Secular’ or ‘anti-communal’ politics has been a hall-mark of the VCK which has strong links to Christian and Muslim organisations. Such an alliance, however, lacks numerical strength.

In any case, communalism is less of an issue in Tamil Nadu than it is elsewhere. The politics

of linguistic nationalism shattered the myth of Hindu India in a Tamil context. ‘Secular’ politics, thus, has limited mileage in the state. Indeed, the one platform on which the party could conceivably reach out to people is that of Tamil nationalism. Not only is there still a strong attachment to Tamil as a language, people and country; the conflict in Sri Lanka reached its height in the 2000s and there was a wave of public outrage about and sympathy for the suffering of Tamils on the island. The shift to Tamil nationalism had credibility, moreover, since the VCK had spoken of a caste-free Tamil nation from the outset and Thirumavalavan cut his political teeth in student organisations campaigning for Eelam and is one of the few political leaders from India to have met Prabhakaran.

The rhetoric of Tamil nationalism, however, could not mask the fact that this was primarily a Dalit party. The VCK, therefore, took two momentous steps: the first was to join hands with its bitter enemy – the PMK – in a Tamil Protection Front. The second was to amend the rules stating that only a Dalit could hold office in the party. This attempt to enter the mainstream however was a risky strategy and it is as yet unclear how it will play out. On the one hand, the party risks being not Dalit enough for the Dalits. On the other, it is not Tamil enough for the Tamils.

*Not Dalit enough ...*

The move to bring in non-Dalit leaders has been particularly contentious. When posts were re-allocated in 2012 there was a decision to have four main leaders per District: one would be Dalit, one non-Dalit, one from a minority group and one woman. As Sannah – VCK propaganda secretary put it: ‘you get people saying: “I’ve been in the party for 20 years, why am I not recognised”’. There are widespread rumblings of discontent that suggest that non-Dalit leaders are only joining the party to make money and do not buy into party principles or carry forward the work of the movement. Such leaders find it difficult to get the cadre to work for them and can find what work they try and do hamstrung as a consequence. A number of VCK veterans have left the party to look for work, join other parties or found their own organisations in part because they feel that they have been overlooked.

More insidious than the party cadres feeling slighted, there is a perception that cosying up to non-Dalits will result in compromises on caste issues. Time and again I was told that it would mean that perpetrators got let off: ‘He will contact one of his caste leaders, who will phone our leaders and say: ‘Look, can we reach some agreement on this?’ Money will change hands and the case will be settled’. Many respondents insisted that this was happening. Though few could substantiate their allegations, the rumours persisted and circulated amongst party members. I gained some sense of the reality of

these accusations when I interviewed a party man who had succeeded in becoming Panchayat President from a *general* (not reserved) constituency. When I asked how he did it he mentioned common issues, money and the promise to resolve any disputes without recourse to the prevention of atrocities act (Interview July 2012). There was a suggestion that caste abuses could resurface if such soft-touch treatment led to the non-Dalits becoming emboldened.

#### *Not Tamil enough ...*

In-fighting and rumours occur in any party, though, so the question is whether the gains from the Tamil strategy are significant enough to off-set the disadvantages. Party leaders speak of a reduction in caste violence and the ability to campaign in the *oor* (main village) as well as Dalit settlements. There are credible suggestions of funds from the Tamil diaspora, and Thirumavalavan has certainly been abroad to speak on the Sri Lankan Tamil issue. None of these are insignificant, but it is unclear whether the reduction in caste violence is a result of amity or compromise meetings to hush cases up. In any case the social harmony is fragile – as seen dramatically in November 2012, with the burning of over 250 huts in north-western Tamil Nadu. Against this, it is clear that the attempt to mainstream the party has not seen huge numbers of non-Dalits flooding to the party.

Thousands were signed up in membership drives, but the one-off contribution of Rs 10 hardly constitutes a sea-change. Those leaders that have joined the VCK have done so as individuals rather than in groups and voting figures in 2011 when the PMK and VCK contested together for the first time, suggest that there is no meaningful transfer of votes. For all the focus on the Sri Lankan issue in protests, party publications and speeches no party responded to Thirumavalavan's call for a Tamil nationalist front in 2009. The sense within the party was that other outfits were unwilling to rally under Dalit leadership. The adoption of Tamil nationalism, furthermore, means that the party may be criticised on this score as well. If the party is not Dalit enough for the Dalits, the decision to ally with Congress (implacably opposed to Eelam) and failure to resign at the height of the massacres in Sri Lanka mean that the party is portrayed as opportunistic and inadequately committed to the Tamil cause.

In part the alliance with the Congress in the centre reflects the quandary that the VCK finds itself in. It needs powerful allies to maintain some resource flows to the grassroots. Dalit voters, thus, revel in Thirumavalavan's performances in parliament, especially in his speeches on manual scavenging and the Ambedkar cartoon. The Tamil nationalists, however, see his continued support of the Congress administration as a betrayal of the cause. At times over the year it felt like the

party was neither one thing nor the other. The party has repeatedly echoed Ambedkar in saying that securing political power is the way to tackle caste, but given the issues faced by the party what is the future of the Liberation Panthers?

### **Whither Dalit liberation?**

When asked what the VCK was doing towards its goal of annihilating caste, Thirumavalavan responded: 'The first step is to seize political power. That is why we have entered politics and engaged in campaigns to raise awareness and break down barriers' (Personal Communication, August 2012). Taking their cue from Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram, the VCK repeatedly emphasise the importance of political power. The notion that the VCK could emulate the success of the BSP in Uttar Pradesh anytime soon, however, is fanciful. Were the Dalit vote consolidated, then Dalit parties could claim to represent nearly 20% of the population but, as we have seen, this is far from being the case. The VCK and *Puthiya Tamilgam*, as a consequence, have less leverage with which to force concessions or policies from their coalition partners. Caste violence in northern Tamil Nadu in November and December 2012 suggests that the Tamil identity route to social harmony is flawed and will, at best, take time to be realised.

So are Dalit parties merely a footnote to Tamil politics? Can Dalit leaders merely speak truth to power on their own platforms and then

hold their tongues in the corridors of power?

This is certainly the view of many observers and activists. In December 2012 when

Thirumavalavan voted with the United Progressive Alliance to increase Foreign Direct Investment in retail trade, one social analyst commented: 'Thiruma voted in favour of FDI owing allegiance to coalition dharma, he is more of a DMK representative than his own man' (Personal Communication December 2012). If this is the political fate of the VCK, then whither Dalit liberation in the state? For all the disillusionment and despair in some quarters it is important to recall that activists may have higher expectations and standards than others and it is also important to look beyond the narrowly political impacts of a social movement.

For all the critiques of Dalit *politics* there is universal agreement that the mobilisation of the VCK and others has radically transformed caste dynamics in the state. The calls to 'hit back'; the education of people about their rights and Ambedkar; the calls for people to reject subservient labour; direct challenges to forms of untouchability; and increased awareness about government provisions have changed the outlook and aspirations of Dalits in the state. Some of the most vociferous critics of the movement today owe their conscientisation to it and are carrying on the work of the movement in multiple forms ranging from offering tuition to youngsters, through helping to fund students

and protesting about atrocities. Even if we accept that *some* party activists are engaged as middle-men in brokering compromise deals that hush up caste abuses in exchange for money, at the grassroots level there is a greater sense of confidence about approaching the police. The conviction rate for the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocity Act is abysmally low, but Dalits have lost their fear of police stations and registering cases.

Others have focused on education, government schemes for land or livestock or migration in search of caste neutral employment, and the results are readily apparent in rural areas. Dalits may still lag behind caste-Hindus in most socio-economic indicators, but they are catching up in many and have surpassed BCs in some pockets.<sup>1</sup> Much of the violence in northern districts in late 2012 stems from status competition as much – if not more – than 'traditional' caste antipathies. The VCK has been to the fore in protests against the violence and they have been joined by Communist and other parties. Stepping back from the frustration of Dalit activists and their tales of corruption, co-option and compromise perhaps the single largest political contribution of Dalit parties is seen here. For the first time non-Dalit political parties are taking Dalit concerns and anti-Dalit atrocities seriously and condemning them publicly. It will take time for

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.livemint.com/Politics/Z9XXD3n7cgVwmSQanGc9uN/Census-rewriting-SC-ST-narrative.html>

Dalit parties to be able to re-write the political agenda, but this change of heart amongst others is itself a form of political recognition. 🙏



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