

An Ethnography of Associational Life: Caste and Politics in India

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In 1956 Susanne Rudolph and I arrived in India for the first of many research years there. We were among the second batch of Ford Foundation Foreign Area Training Fellows. As area scholars we were committed to using ethnographic methods. We used political ethnography to explore India's associational life. Our research led us to understand that caste in the form of caste associations played a vital role in making the introduction of political democracy in India a success. Studying caste in the form of caste associations, we came upon two of India's greatest paradoxes, that caste was anti-caste and that caste strengthened democracy. How could this be? Universal suffrage made it possible for India's more numerous lower castes acting through caste associations to acquire political power and to use political power to dismantle the *varna* status order based on purity and pollution and to gain power, respect and benefits. Five decades on, caste associations have taken on a different hue. From striving for group improvement and social justice vanguard associations have turned to the pursuit group interest and social aggrandizement.

Caste was not, like interest group or class, an established category in the political science canon. And caste was anathema to the modernists of the Nehruvian nationalist generation. Like those who made the French revolution, Nehruvians imagined a nation of equal citizens unencumbered by the institutions of an old regime. For the French this entailed eradicating the institutions of its old regime, the monarchy, the aristocracy and the church; for Nehruvian nationalists India's old regime was epitomized by India's hierarchical and ascriptive caste system based on purity and pollution. Ridding India of its old regime meant eradicating ascribed differences institutionalized in the caste system. Article 17 of India's Constitution declared that "Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of

‘untouchability’ shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.”¹ Absent eradication, denial stepped in. Our early writing about caste was treated as a non-subject, an illegitimate subject or a reactionary subject.

Using political ethnography in search of India’s associational life meant finding out how Indians living in the *mofussil*² and in villages as well as the English educated living in cities thought about self-help and collective action. It also meant being an area scholar as well as a political scientist, entering into the other’s world of thought and feeling, studying the particular to arrive at the general, finding out how context and agency shaped thought and action.

Using political ethnography as a mode of inquiry meant avoiding “the imperialism of categories,”³ the imposition of concepts derived from European and American experience on distant cultures and peoples. Marx, for example imposed the category of peasant on India’s agricultural producers. Peasants in India like peasants in other nations were formed “by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sackful of potatoes.” Peasants do not form a class Marx argued. Their relations are “strictly local.” Since the “identity of their interests begets no unity, no national union, and no political organization”, they “cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”⁴ Like Marx in the nineteenth century, American colleagues such

¹ . Parliament enacted the Untouchability [Offences] Act, 1955, which was amended in and renamed in 1976 the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. According to D. D. Basu, “The word ‘intouchability’ has not, however, been defined either in the Constitution or in the 1955 Act. It has been assumed that the word has a well-known connotation, - primarily referring to any social practice which looks down upon certain depressed classes solely on account of their *birth* [author’s emphasis] and disables them from having any kind of intercourse with people belonging to the so-called higher castes.” Durga Das Basu, *Introduction to the Constitution of India*, Sixteenth Edition, New Delhi, Prentice-Hall of India, 1994. P. 93.

² . “The country stations and districts, as contra-distinguished from ‘the Presidency’”. Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Anglo-Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases*, New Delhi, Munshram Manoharlal, 1994. P. 570.

³ . “The imperialism of categories” is a phrase we first used in the Introduction of *The Modernity of Tradition* [1967]. Susanne Rudolph used “the imperialism of categories” as the title of her American Political Science Association Presidential address. The address was published in *Perspective on Politics* [2005].

⁴ . Karl Marx, *Selected Works*, 2 vols, New York, International Publishers, n. d. pp. 414 – 415.

as Myron Weiner and Pradeep Chhibber, trained in the pluralist tradition of political science and writing about post-independence India, sought India's associational life by writing about a category familiar in the Atlantic world, formal organizations [interest or pressure groups, professional and business associations, trade unions, NGOs, etc.] and found that they were of marginal importance.⁵

We took a different tack. Oriented by area studies and political ethnography, we investigated categories used by local actors, Vanniyars and Nadars in Madras, Jats and Rajputs in Rajasthan. They and other groups like them practiced self-help and collective action in what we came to call caste associations, intentional associations that were partly ascriptive, partly voluntary.

A word about what constitutes the ethnographic eye. It can be by contrasting the contextually grounded perspective of area studies and political ethnography with Robert Bates's scientific perspective. For Bates context not only doesn't matter, it has to be excluded from analysis. Context doesn't inflect independent variables or shape outcomes. For Bates, explanation is said to be independent of time, place, circumstance. Being scientific in this way provides access to objective knowledge, knowledge that is said to be true everywhere and always. An outspoken opponent of area studies, Bates put his "scientific" position most succinctly and forcefully when he called on political scientists to search for "lawful regularities which must not be context bound" and for area scholars to make their "data" available to political scientists for theorizing.⁶

⁵. Myron Weiner, *The politics of scarcity: public pressure and political response in India*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962, where Weiner finds that "pressure groups" in India play a marginal role, and Pradeep Chhibber, *Democracy without associations: transformation of the party system and social cleavages in India*, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 1999, where Chhibber finds that India's associational life ranks last among 52 nations. For a critique of Chhibber's methods and findings see Lloyd I Rudolph, Review of Pradeep K. Chhibber, *Democracy Without Associations*, in *Comparative Political Studies*. Vol 36, No 10, December 2002.

⁶. Robert Bates, "Area Studies and the Discipline: A Useful Controversy." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30 (2), 1997. pp. 166–69 and Robert Bates, "Area Studies and Political Science: Rupture and Possible Synthesis." *Africa Today* 44 (2), 1997. p. 123

Returning to how the ethnographic eye helped us to see what our political science education led us to overlook, we start with what we first saw in our search for associational life, that relatively weakly articulated voluntary associations and formal organizations were confined to the urban-educated who are more or less attuned to the modern political culture. Ethnographic attentiveness led us to notice that caste was pervasive aspect of social life. It became apparent that it provided channels of communication and bases of leadership and organization that enabled those submerged in the traditional society and culture to participate in the recently instituted democratic politics. Appendix One: An Historical Ethnography of a Caste Association. The Story of the Vannuya Kula Kshtriyas, formerly the Pallis, shows why and how caste was able to perform this novel role by developing a new form for self-help and political activity, the caste association (*sabha* or *sangham*).⁷

Caste associations were already visible in the mid-nineteenth century. Over the years prior to independence and more so since independence brought adult enfranchisement, they have proliferated, their number and strength providing a vehicle for the growth of political literacy, participation and representation. After Independence, it became increasingly apparent that caste associations would be a central feature of Indian politics for the foreseeable future.

The political role and characteristics of the caste association resemble in many ways those of the voluntary association or interest-group familiar to European and American politics. On the other hand, the caste association is distinguishable in a number of important respects not only from the voluntary association but also from the *jati*, the local ascriptive and endogamous group out of which it developed.

Membership in caste as *jati* is ascriptive: there is no way to change social identity within the confines of the local social structure and cultural norms.⁸ Caste norms prescribe the ritual, occupational, commensal, marital and social relationships of members, and caste organization and authority enforce these norms within the group and

⁷. See Appendix One: An Historical Ethnography of a Caste Association. The Story of the Vannuya Kula Kshtriyas, formerly the Pallis, pp. 11 -25.

with other caste groups. Caste members are culturally and socially quite homogeneous since they share the same occupation, social status and ritual position.⁹ This social homogeneity results in a sense of exclusiveness and identity which tends to subsume all social roles to that of caste membership. The unit of action and location of caste has been, until recently, the *jati* or sub-caste in the village or group of villages. Traditionally, it has been concerned with settling problems at the village level, both internally and in relation to other castes. At most, its geographic spread took account of the reach of intra-caste (endogamous) marriages which often extended to other villages, but the village unit was crucial. Leaders were hereditary, generally the senior members of a specific lineage. Social integration, the relationship of the *jati* to other *jatis*, was governed by local versions of *dharma*, the sacred and traditional prescriptions of duty which permeate Hindu life. Finally, its organization was latent, embedded in habit and custom, rather than manifest and rationalized.

The emergence of caste associations seems to have been associated with the spread of communications and a market economy under British rule.¹⁰ On the one hand, these forces undermined the hold of the traditional culture and society as it was organized in relatively autonomous local units; on the other hand, they created the conditions under which local sub-castes [*jatis*] could be linked together in geographically extended associations. Caste associations, particularly those of lower castes, frequently undertook to upgrade the position of the caste in the social hierarchy. They pressed for the extension of privileges and rights to the caste either by turning to the state or by emulating the social or ritual behavior of higher castes. Thus, for example, in the South, where the caste culture has been conspicuously dominated by Brahmanical norms, the rising castes have

⁹ . Occupational heterogeneity of castes was well advanced in rural areas before independence and even more so in towns and urban areas. The materials of the older caste ethnographers indicate that the breakdown of social and occupational homogeneity was apparent in the nineteenth century. Both Edgar Thurston, in his *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Madras, 1909, and William Crooke in his *The Tribes and Castes of the North West Provinces and Oudh*, Calcutta, 1896, bear this out.

¹⁰ . See M. N. Srinivas' articles bearing on the issues raised here: 'A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization,' *Far Eastern Quarterly* (XV), August 1956; "Caste in Modern India," *Journal of Asian Studies* (XVI), August 1957.

emulated those norms by, in M.N. Srinivas' phrase, "Sanskritizing" their caste practices; they have encouraged vegetarianism, abstention from liquor, the adoption of Brahman rituals, and the prevention of widow remarriage.¹¹ Caste associations have often assisted and coordinated such emulative activities.¹²

When the caste associations turned to the state for furthering their purposes, their initial claims were aimed at raising caste status in terms of the values and structure of the caste order. But as liberal and democratic ideas penetrated to wider sections of the population the aims of the caste association began to shift accordingly. Instead of demanding temple entry and prestigious caste names and histories in the Census, the associations began to press for places in the new administrative and educational institutions and for political representation. Independence and the realization of political democracy in the form of adult suffrage intensified these new concerns. Caste associations attempted to have their members nominated for elective office, working through existing parties or forming their own; to maximize caste representation and influence in state cabinets and lesser governing bodies; and to use ministerial, legislative and administrative channels to press for action on caste objectives in the welfare, educational and economic realms. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the caste association in the contemporary era, however, is its capacity to mobilize the non-literate mass electorate, thus making possible in some measure the realization of its aspirations and educating large sections of it in the methods and values of political democracy.

¹¹ . "Sanskritization," while also practiced in the North, may offer less compelling emulation patterns there than in the South because of the strength of *Kshatrya* norms in most areas.

¹² . The caste association has not been alone in this type of activity. More parochial village caste groups have also pursued emulation as a vehicle for improving status, sometimes successfully. See for example the process of the Boad Distillers, in F. G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier*, Manchester, 1957. But McKim Marriott has pointed out that any caste group operating in an intimate local setting, where relative status positions are well understood and jealously protected, might have trouble advancing itself by emulation: "A mere brandishing of Brahmanical symbols by a well-known village group can scarcely hope to impress a village audience in its own parochial terms. . . ." See his "Interactional and Attributional Theories of Caste Ranking," *Man in India* (39). April-June, 1959. Conversely, the caste association, operating in the wider, more impersonal setting of a district or a state, may encounter less resistance to its emulative claims because in the wider setting there is no clear standard for assessing its "true" position

The caste association is not an ascriptive collectivity in the sense in which the sub-caste or *jati* was and is. It has taken on features of the voluntary association. Membership in caste associations is not purely ascriptive; birth in the caste is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for affiliation. One must also identify with and in this sense “join” the (*Rajput*) *Kshatrya Mahasabha* or the (*Jat*) *Kisan Sabha* through a variety of conscious acts — ranging from attendance at caste association meetings or voting for candidates supported by caste association leaders, to paying membership dues. The caste association has generally both a potential and an actual membership; when it speaks, it often claims to speak for the potential represented in all the *jatis* encompassed by the term, Vanniyar, Shannan, Jat or Rajput. In recent times, post-Mandal commission, we have seen the term OBC become a caste rallying cry. While the purposes of caste as *jati* are wide-ranging and diffuse, affecting every aspect of members’ life paths, the caste association has come to focus on self-help and politics. The traditional authority and functions of the sub-caste or *jati* are declining, but the caste association’s concern with politics and its rewards serves to sustain caste loyalty and identification.¹³ This loyalty and sense of identification tend to retain the exclusive quality of the *jati*; the caste association seems to have a more complete and intense command of its members’ commitments than is usually the case with voluntary associations where cross cutting interests and identities play a larger role.

Since modern means of transportation and communication have had the effect of broadening caste identity, binding together local sub-castes which had been relatively autonomous into geographically extended associations, caste associations today usually parallel administrative and political units—states, districts, sub-districts and towns—whose offices and powers of legislation or decision-making are the object of the caste associations’ efforts.

Leadership in the caste association passed fairly quickly from the hands of those qualified by heredity—the senior or more able members of the lineage group which

¹³ . For confirmation of these and other points, see also Selig Harrison, “Caste and the Andhra Communists,” *American Political Science Review* (L), June 1956; M. L. P. Patterson, “Caste and Politics in Maharashtra,” *Economic Weekly*, (VIII) 29, July 21, 1956.

traditionally supplied village sub-caste leadership. The “availability” of association leaders was soon conditioned by the ability to articulate and represent the purposes of the caste association, and for this purpose leaders had to be literate in the ways of the new democratic politics. Men whose educational and occupational backgrounds assure these skills have moved into the leadership positions. The new leaders stand in a more “accountable” and responsible relationship to their followers; their position depends to a great extent on their capacity to represent and make good the association’s claims.

Finally, at the organizational level, the caste association moved away from the latent structure of caste as *jati*, towards the manifest structure characteristic of the voluntary association. It developed offices, membership, incipient bureaucratization, publications and a quasi-legislative process expressed through conferences, delegates and resolutions. On the other hand, the caste associations shared sense of culture, character, and status tends to create a solidarity of a much higher order than is usually found among voluntary associations where the multiplicity of social roles and the plurality of interests of its members tend to dilute the intensity of commitment and sense of identification.

The caste association brought political democracy to Indian villages through the familiar and accepted institution of caste. In the process, it changed the meaning of caste. By creating conditions in which a caste’s significance and power depended on its numbers, rather than its ritual and social status, and by encouraging egalitarian aspirations among its members, the caste association exerted a liberating influence.

Liberties in the west have a dual paternity. They arose on the one hand from an assertion of political philosophy which placed the reason and interests of the individual in a central position. On the other hand, they were the end-product of a historical process in which the rights and liberties of a variety of corporate groups and orders in traditional feudal society were gradually extended to ever-widening sections of the population until many rights and liberties became available to all.¹⁴ In India, as formerly in 18th century Europe, one attack on tradition and the old order came from the modern middle classes

¹⁴ . See T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963, for, inter alia, the spread of feudal liberties from the Magna Carta granted to the barons at Runnymede to the civil rights found in modern states such as Britain and US.

who succeeded in writing into the new nation's constitution the values of 18th century liberalism.¹⁵ But the modern middle classes' attack constituted only one aspect, and a formal and impersonal aspect at that, of the challenge to the old order.

The other challenge has come from the caste association; its successful assertions of privilege and rights were in many ways comparable to the extension of corporate feudal liberties which characterized the development of English liberalism. They were perhaps more truly indigenous assertions of liberties than the liberalism of the modern Indian middle classes. Thus, for example, the *Shanans*, traditionally low caste southern tappers of palm (toddy), asserted as early as 1858 that their women had a right to go about with an upper cloth, even though customary rules restricted such apparel to the higher castes. After a series of riots, the Maharaja of Travancore was persuaded to concede the claim: "We hereby proclaim that there is no objection to *Shanan* women either putting on a jacket like the Christian *Shanan* women, or to *Shanan* women of all creeds dressing in coarse cloth, and tying themselves round with it as the *Mukkavattigal* (Fisherwomen) do, or to covering their bosoms in any manner whatever, but not like women of higher castes."¹⁶

The caste associations assertion, which could be multiplied many times with reference to other issues (such as extending the rights of temple entry to lower castes), exemplifies the caste association's liberating role. It also suggests that the corporate assertion of rights challenged the old order at points in which the "liberal" modern middle classes took rather little interest. Indian analyses of these developments have tended to attribute the entire credit for such victories to the state which conceded the right rather than to the group which agitated for it—a point of view which gravely underestimates the role of liberating forces within the old society.

The very considerable extent to which caste associations were performing a liberating function in the decades immediately following independence has been obscured by the fact that the modern Indian middle classes tended to see caste (in any form) as a part of the old order which they hoped to destroy. That a new social and

¹⁵ . They also included the often conflicting values of popular sovereignty and political democracy and the "socialist" goals of economic and social justice.

¹⁶ . Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, op. cit., Vol. VI, p. 365.

political force clad in the institutions of the old order was to an extent collaborating in destroying the old order, that caste in its manifestation of the caste association, was anti-caste, appeared to them incomprehensible.¹⁷ Because the caste association pressed home the interests of its followers, it was also seen as pursuing a form of group selfishness which the Nehruvian political class deplored in the name of social duty and discipline. Fifty years on, fears that caste politics promoted group self selfishness at the cost of the public good were increasingly realized.

When we look back from the millennium to the immediate post-independence decades at the transformations wrought by caste, we see the positive consequence of caste association politics. Lower castes gained a seat at the table and social respect. As we look forward, we see less favorable consequences of caste association politics. The goals of caste politics have shifted from group welfare and social betterment to the self-serving politics of benefits and patronage. This shift has been enabled by a sort of “supply side” economics: as the availability of benefits and patronage has grown so too has the appetite of lower castes for them.

Kanchan Chandra, writing in the millennium, characterizes the Indian polity as a “patronage democracy”, “a democracy,” she says” in which the state monopolizes access to jobs and services, and in which elected officials have discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state.”¹⁸

¹⁷ . An early exception was Shyam Lal, the then Editor of the *Times of India* whose 1969 Op-Ed review of *The Modernity of Tradition* found the liberating function of the caste association being advanced here a major breakthrough in the interpretation of Indian politics.

¹⁸ *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed; Patronage and Ethnic Headcounts in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p.64.

Discretion, not merit governs who gets a job and material benefits. Panandikar and Kshirsagar reported that only 3.2% of Classes III and Class IV jobs in the four government agencies they studied were filled by competitive exams. V.A. Panandikar and S.S. Kshirsagar, *Bureaucracy and Development Administration*, New Delhi, Center for Policy Research, 1978, 170, Table G, in Chandra, *Ethnic*, p. 119. Mulayam Singh Yadav as Chief Minister of U.P. could appoint 720 Yadavs to the 900 teacher positions available.

The expectations of “patronage democracy” have changed the meaning of caste politics. When the Mudaliars asked for reservation for backward castes in Madras higher education, they usually asked for grace points to be given to “backwards” in examinations. A dilution, not an abandonment, of merit. The metrics of merit and ethnic entitlement were both at play. As merit and India’s version of affirmative action have faded, violence and criminality have increased in the allocation of jobs and benefits.

By the 1990s a culture of violence and criminality increasingly came characterized caste association politics. Lucia Michelutti’s history and ethnography of the Yadav caste association in Uttar Pradesh vividly illustrates this transformation.

Some people consider these political styles attractive. On the one hand the appeal of Robin Hood—strongmen politicians are linked to the prospect of getting “goods” and material benefits from the state, on the other [these styles] ... also reflect a desire for acquiring self respect which is legitimised by local forms of heroic authority (hero-gods, martial epics, a martial Krishna) and by related ideas of and practices of masculinity. Strongmen politicians are often described as ‘saviors’ and ‘protectors’ of the poor people, skilled in statecraft and fighters for ‘social justice.’ This positive way of looking at strongmen politicians and politics should be taken seriously. It may help to shed some light on the... criminalization of politics in North India...and how their corruption and criminal records paradoxically coexist with a strong support for participatory democracy and the empowerment of poor people.¹⁹

This shift of political culture is visible in the symbolic clichés used by the old and the new leadership to enact their status and mores: the “social worker” in *khadi kurta pajama* and Gandhi cap, displaying the accoutrements of the non-violent and community serving vocation, versus the *goonda*, a strong man in leather jacket and sunglasses flouting his muscular power.

¹⁹ Lucia Michelutti, *The Vernacularisation of Democracy, Politics Caste and Religion in India*, London, New Delhi: Routledge, 2008, 11-12.

**APPENDIX ONE: AN HISTORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF A CASTE
ASSOCIATION. THE STORY OF THE VANNIYA KULA KSHATRIYAS,
FORMERLY THE PALLIS.²⁰**

An historical ethnography of *Vanniyars*, or *Vanniya Kula Kshatryas* of Tamilnadu, formerly Madras state, illustrates the formation and development of caste associations. The *Vanniyars* are primarily a caste of agricultural laborers, but also include substantial numbers of cultivating owners and petty landlords. They make up slightly less than 10 percent of the population of the erstwhile Madras state, but in the four northern districts of the state (North Arcot, South Arcot, Chingleput and Salem) where they are concentrated, the caste constitutes about a fourth of the population.²¹ As early as 1833, the *Pallis*, as they were then called, had ceased to accept their status as a humble agricultural caste and tried to procure a decree in Pondicherry that they were not a low caste.^{xva} In anticipation of a census-taking in 1871, they petitioned to be classified as *Kshatryas* (high-caste warrior-rulers)—a claim which found support in their traditional caste histories if not in their then low occupational status. Twenty years later the community had established seven schools for its members, and an enterprising *Palli* who had risen to the status of a High Court *vakil* (lawyer) had produced a book on the caste,

²¹ . These figures are necessarily tentative because they are based on the 1931 census, the last Indian census to enumerate caste. At that time, the *Vanniyars* numbered 2,944,014 and almost all of the *Vanniyars* were located in those parts of Madras which remained with the state after Andhra was detached in 1953. Presumably the *Vanniyar* population has increased substantially since then, at a rate not too different from the average population increase. In Chingleput, North Arcot, Salem and South Arcot there were 2,349,920 *Vanniyars* in 1931 in a total population for these districts of 8,810,583. See *Census of India*, Vol. XIV, Madras, Part II, Imperial and Provincial Tables.

^{xva}On this and some of the material which follows, see Thurston, *op. cit.*, Vol. VI, pp. 1-

which he followed with another some years later, supporting the caste claim to be Kshatriyas and connecting *Pallis* by descent with the great Pallava dynasty.²² Oral histories simultaneously were stressing descent from the traditional “fire races,” which *Kshatriyas* both north and south often claim as ancestors. This attempt to press history into the service of social mobility, to counter current ritual and occupational definition of caste status by a historically derived definition, has been a quite frequent practice among rising castes.

By 1901 the *Pallis* had not won any battles but everyone was aware of their efforts. The Madras Census Commissioner noted that “they claim for themselves a position higher than that which Hindu society is inclined to accord them,” and added that they were attempting to achieve this status via “a widespread organization engineered from Madras.”²³ The organization’s sporadic seventy-year activities to make *Pallis* conscious of their dignified and glorious history was bearing fruit. Instead of giving the old name, *Palli*, many were beginning to refer to themselves as *Agnikula Kshatriyas* or *Vannikula Kshatriyas* (i.e. *Kshatriyas* of the fire race). The associations of the caste were spreading and becoming increasingly effective in various districts, enforcing a higher “sanskritized” standard of social conduct:

They have been closely bound together by an organization managed by one of their caste, who was a prominent person in these parts . . . and their *esprit de corps* is now surprisingly strong. They are tending gradually to approach the Brahmanical standard of social conduct, discouraging adult marriage, meat-eating, and widow remarriage. . . . In

²²T. Ayakannu Nayakar, *Vannikula Vilakkam: a Treatise on the Vanniya Caste*, 1891, and *Varuna Darpanam* (Mirror of Castes), 1901.

²³*Census of India*, 1901, Madras, Part I, Report, p. 171.

1904 a document came before one of the courts which showed that, in the year previous, the representatives of the caste in 34 villages in this district had bound themselves in writing, under penalty of excommunication to refrain (except with the consent of all parties) from the practices formerly in existence of marrying two wives, and of allowing a woman to marry again during the lifetime of her first husband.²⁴

When these new caste associations turned to politics at the turn of the century, their main target was the census office, for its listing of caste and caste descriptions became more “real” than reality itself, carrying as it did the authority of official imprint. Mr. J. Chartres Moloney, of the Indian Civil Service, having survived the decennial onslaught of petitions from castes who wanted to be reclassified, remarked in the Census of 1911:

The last few years, and especially the occasion of the present census, have witnessed an extraordinary revival of the caste spirit in certain aspects. For numerous caste *sabhas* have emerged, each keen to assert the dignity of the social group which it represents.^{25 26}

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The rising castes continued to persuade their members to give a new name to the census enumerators, and to persuade the census commissioners to list this new name when the old one bore some odium. They also urged the census officers either to revise the description of traditional caste occupations, where these were thought undignified, or to drop them altogether. The Madras Census dropped caste occupations in 1921 as a result

²⁴W. Francis in *Gazetteer of South Arcot District*. Cited in Thurston, *op. cit.*, Vol. VI, p.

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²⁵. *Census of India, 1911, Madras, Part 1, Report, p. 178*

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of these pressures.²⁹ The effectiveness of the *Pallis* in influencing the official recorders on the one hand and their own members on the other was considerable. By 1931 the *Pallis* had disappeared altogether from the Census, and only the *Vanniya Kula Kshatryas* remained.

The explicit organization of the *Vanniya Kula Kshatryas* in an association called the *Vanniya Kula Kshatrya Sangham* dates back at least thirty years in some districts, although the 1901 census commissioner indicated that some organizational stirrings were visible then, and the efforts of 1833 indicate even earlier (probably sporadic) activity. The *Vanniya Kula Kshatrya Sangham* of North Arcot District held its 34th annual conference in 1953, and the South Arcot *Sangham* held its tenth in 1954.³⁰ For the *Vanniya Kula Kshatrya Sangham*, the district unit was initially more important than the larger, Madras-wide organization which developed somewhat later. In 1952, the *Vanniya Kula Kshatryas* published a volume,³¹ the introduction of which gave expression to the *sabha*'s attempt to build a sense of caste patriotism and solidarity which would make it a more effective force:

The Vanniya Kula Kshatryas who till now were proverbially considered to be backward in education have made long strides in a short space of time and have come almost on a level with other communities . . . the community has not

²⁹ . *Ibid.*, Vol. XIII. This successful agitation reflected the fact that some castes were abandoning the traditional occupations. They presumably felt that from a descriptive point of view this fact deserved recognition. Even where the caste still kept to its traditional tasks, the census description (i.e., "*Shanars* are oil pressers.") carried a normative implication. From the point of view of mobile castes, the census looked like a new agency for sacred classification, an impression hardly alleviated by the fact that Brahmans, the traditional compilers of sacred classifications, tended to dominate the Indian cadres in the bureaucracy. In a society in flux, the problem of maintaining "objective" official social records becomes particularly difficult

³⁰ . *Hindu* (Madras), June 18, 1953; *Mail* (Madras), June 27, 1954.

³¹ . Graduates and Diploma Holders among the Vanniya Kula Kshatrya, Triplicane, Madras, 1952.

realized its deserving status in society. . . A cursory view of the book will show every reader how many a desirable fruit of the community was veiled by the leaves . . . (it) will stimulate the younger generation to greater deeds and will fill the hearts of the older with just pride in the achievements of the community. . . .³²

That the *Sangham* still had some work ahead may be inferred from the fact that it listed 298 names, or about .01 percent of the community, as holders of degrees or diplomas.³³

After the war, when the electorate was expanding but had not yet reached the adult suffrage proportions which came with the 1952 general elections, the *Vanniya Kula Kshatrya Sangham* began to press the Congress Party state ministry with two demands: it wanted the appointments to the civil services (which are based on competitive examinations and merit) to reflect the *Vanniyars'* percentage in the population, and it wanted Congress itself, through party nominations, to assure the election of *Vanniyars* on a population basis to all elected bodies—municipal corporations, district boards, and the state legislature. The request was Jacksonian in its optimism concerning the universal distribution of the capacity to hold office. But it was not altogether unreasonable in view of the constitutional, statutory and administrative provisions both at the central and the state levels, which are designed to give special consideration to scheduled castes (untouchables) and backward classes (usually low castes) in the public services and educational institutions, and the Congress' known disposition to give some special consideration in candidate selection to "depressed" elements in the population. It assumed also that the authority of caste no longer depended on traditional rank but rather on numbers in the context of democratic authority. However, the Congress ministry of

³² . *Ibid.* Introduction.

³³ . A diploma holder is about the equivalent of an American high school graduate, while a graduate is one who has finished college. It is probably safe to assume that most of those listed were diploma holders rather than graduates.

Madras did not respond favorably to the *Vanniyar* demand, nor did the nominating bodies of the Congress party. From that time, the *Vanniyars* decided that they could rely only on themselves, dropped the attempt to work through the Congress or any other party, and began to contest for public office as independents.

Their first major electoral efforts were exerted in district board elections in the districts where their greatest strength lay. In fact, the district boards became one of their main targets, not only because they represented a convenient geographic unit within which caste influence could be maximized, but because the subjects falling under the competence of district boards, especially educational and medical facilities and road building, were of the greatest local and political interest. In 1949, the *Vanniyars* did well in the district elections, capturing, for example, 22 of the 52 seats in the South Arcot District Boards and defeating many Congress Party candidates. They almost succeeded in electing the president of the board.³⁴

In 1951, with the prospect of the 1952 elections before them, the *Vanniyars* convened a major conference of the *Vanniyar Kula Sangham* on a state-wide basis. The conference resolved that the *Vanniyars* should contest the elections “in cooperation with the toiling masses,” and formed a political party called the Tamilnad Toilers Party. The leading spirits in the conference were men with modern and cosmopolitan qualifications rather than hereditary and traditional ones. Two of the most significant were Mr. N. A. Manikkavelu Naicker, a lawyer with experience in earlier state-wide party activities, notably the Swarajya Party, and Mr. S. S. Ramaswami Padayachi, a young man (33 in 1951), a high school graduate, Chairman of the Cuddalore Municipal Council, member of

³⁴ . See interview with S. S. Ramaswami Padayachi, a prominent *Vanniyar* leader, in *Mail*, April 27, 1954

the South Arcot District Board and the man who was narrowly defeated for its presidency in 1949.³⁵ The names of Padayachi and Naicker, especially the former, provided an effective signal for caste solidarity in voting. Padayachi's youth is an interesting commentary on leadership patterns in castes coming to political self consciousness; older members of lower castes generally do not command the necessary skills in communication and education for state organization.

Organizationally, the conference represented a capstone in the expansion of the association, since it mobilized the *Vanniyars* on a state-wide basis. It sought at once to centralize control and to bring about a proliferation of operating sub-units, working toward a more rationalized campaign organization which could mobilize the potential membership. Mr. Padayachi was elected Chairman of the Central Election Committee, established to supervise *Vanniyar* candidate selections throughout the state, and District Election Committees were established for twelve districts.³⁶

Subsequently, the unified state-wide effort represented by the conference broke down when the caste *sabhas* of North and South Arcot districts, which had always rested on local loyalties, failed to agree. The Tamilnad Toilers as a party remained strong in South Arcot and Salem under Mr. Padayachi's guidance, while the North Arcot and Chingleput *Vanniyars* rallied to a second caste party, the Commonweal Party, under Mr. Naicker.

At election time, the caste *sabhas*-cum-pames utilized the older village organization, mobilizing *Vanniyar* village leaders to assure solid caste voting for one or the other party. This mobilization device was effective because it defined the electoral issues in terms

³⁵ . *Mail*, April 13, 1954; *Indian Express* (Madras) April 14, 1954

³⁶ *Mail*, October 13, 1951.

meaningful to an unsophisticated electorate: government services, especially roads and educational and medical services, could surely be more firmly secured for poor *Vanniyars* if men familiar with their plight (i.e., other *Vanniyars*) were elected to office. Watching Nehru speak to uncomprehending thousands, one might assume that there is an unbridgeable gap between the ordinary Indian voter and his government, but observers watching village election meetings, in which local caste headmen engage in running debate with aspiring or incumbent legislators, cannot come to the same conclusion. Common caste background is not essential to these exchanges but the fact that candidate and village headman often share a common caste culture provides a context in which discourse is natural and easy.

The Commonweal Party, representing the older caste *sabha* of North Arcot and Chingleput, which had no program to speak of (much less an ideology), won six seats in the state legislative assembly, while the Tamilnad Toilers, speaking for the younger South Arcot *sabha* and stressing a more leftist socialist platform, captured 19. This gave the *Vanniyars* 25 of the 190 seats in the legislature of post-1953 Madras, or 13 percent (though they numbered only 10 percent of the population).

In the same 1952 General Elections, the Congress Party failed to win a majority in the Madras state legislature, and in its search for enough legislative support to form a cabinet, persuaded the six Commonweal Party members to support a Congress ministry, but it could not persuade them to join the Congress. In return, Mr. Naicker, the Commonweal leader, was given a seat in the Cabinet, an event which delighted many *Vanniyars* but won him public catcalls from the Tamilnad Toilers, who decided to remain

in opposition.³⁷ Shortly thereafter, the Tamilnad Toilers also opened “negotiations” with Congress, presumably to see what offices might be offered in return for support.³⁸ The negotiations came to nothing until 1954 when Mr. C. Rajagopalachari, a Brahman statesman with a long and distinguished history in the nationalist movement, resigned as Chief Minister and was replaced by the shrewd and competent but less cosmopolitan and lower caste Kamraj Nadar. He had made his reputation as chief of the Madras Congress Party over more than a decade, and belonged to a large and prosperous peasant caste.³⁹ The Tamilnad Toilers decided to support Mr. Kamraj’s ministry, and Mr. Padayachi joined the cabinet, consisting of eight persons. Mr. Naicker too remained in the Cabinet, so that the *Vanniyars* could now call two of eight cabinet seats their own. Mr. Padayachi reported to the press that he was happy to see that the Ministry was so much more representative of the backward classes than any previous one. With two ministers in the Cabinet and cordial relations with Congress assured, the Commonweal and the Tamilnad Toiler parties were dissolved, their members joining the Congress.⁴⁰

The procedure followed by the *Vanniyars* is not unusual. In Rajasthan, the (*Rajput*) *Kshatrya Mahasabha* pursued an almost identical tactic in 1952, campaigning successfully for the legislature, extracting not cabinet offices but concessions on land

³⁷ . Indian Express and The Hindu, May 13, 1952.

³⁸ . *Mail*, October 21, 1952.

³⁹ . The *Nadars* were formerly called *Shanans* and were once oil pressers. See Thurston, *op. cit.*, Vol. VI, pp. 363-378. Their caste *sabha* was influential in getting the old, odious name replaced (in 1921). They persuaded the census authorities to drop traditional caste descriptions, since many had moved out of oil-pressing, which had low status repute into agricultural, commercial and financial pursuits. Mr. Nadar’s strength is based on a combination of long service with the nationalist movement and on the faith which lower castes repose in him as “one of them.”

⁴⁰ . *Mail*, July 30, 1956. The parties were in fact dissolved before 1956. At that time, the election commission merely recognized their dissolution officially

reform from Congress, and then joining the party, which needed members to strengthen its very precarious majority. The *Jat* caste *sabhas* in Rajasthan very nearly did the same when many members in 1950 considered converting the Rajasthan branch of the *Krishikar Lok* Party into a *Jat* branch. But the *Jats* with politically literate leaders and a self-conscious and effectively mobilized following, saw the expediency of infiltrating the weak Rajasthan Congress, gave up the idea of a separate party, and contested the elections for the most part under the Congress Party label.

Throughout this period, both before and after the dissolution of the two caste parties, the demands of the *Vanniya Kula Kshatriya Sangham* continued to find active expression. The *Sangham* had three primary objectives. The first was educational services. What was at stake were scholarships which might allow a village student to pay for room at the hostel of a distant secondary institution, fee concessions at institutions which still charged tuition, and reservation of seats for *Vanniyars* in institutions of higher learning. The second objective was places in the civil service; these conferred status as well as a job. The third was winning Congress “tickets” (i.e., nominations) for seats in lower governing boards as well as in the legislature and places in the cabinet. The *Sangham* was also interested in various economic services affecting *Vanniyars*. That they could hope for government help in several respects was clear from the fact that they had been officially classified as a Backward Class, that is, a caste above the Untouchable level but one whose status and condition was nevertheless so weak that it deserved

special consideration under the policy of “progressive discrimination” which has been a central feature of Indian social policy.⁴¹

The way these demands were pursued and the responses of the two ministers to them is apparent from the proceedings of *Sangham* meetings and conferences. Shortly after his appointment in 1954, Mr. Padayachi explained to a *Sangham* conference why he had joined the Kamraj ministry when he had not joined the earlier one of Mr. Rajagopalachari. The *Vanniyars’* demands for educational facilities and representation in the civil services had not been met by the Rajagopalachari ministry, he said, and implied that he expected a more generous attitude from the Kamraj ministry.⁴² At a North Arcot conference in 1955, he could report that the government had been doing its best to give school fee concessions, scholarships and employment preference to the *Vanniya Kula Kshatriyas*.⁴³ At that time, 5 out of every 20 seats in the state civil service were reserved for “qualified candidates of the backward classes,” in addition to the reservations for scheduled castes and tribes. These reservations were established by administrative order in cooperation with the Public Service Commission. (Unfortunately no figures are available on whether enough “qualified” candidates were found to fill these posts— formal reservation and actual seats filled by members of backward classes have by no means always coincided.).⁴⁴ In any case, Mr. Padayachi apparently kept an eye on the situation, and presumably his and Mr. Naicker’s views on how this difficult problem might be handled were always available to the government. The frequency with which

⁴¹ . Progressive discrimination, especially in the services, was already a policy of the old Justice Party governments in pre-Independence Madras.

⁴² . *Indian Express*, April 28, 1954; *Mail*, May 30, 1954

⁴³ . *Mail*, January 5, 1955.

⁴⁴ . See Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* (3 Vols.), Delhi, 1955, especially Vol. 1, p. 131.

both men reported to *Vanniyar* meetings indicates that they considered themselves to some extent special agents of *Vanniyar* interests; drawing a line between this role and their role as cabinet members responsible for the formulation and administration of public policy is of course difficult.

The quality of the *Sangham*'s economic demands is illustrated by another North Arcot conference, addressed by Mr. Naicker in 1953. The resolutions present a striking illustration of the fact that the *Vanniya Kula Kshatrya Sangham* operated as an economic interest group—one might expect similar resolutions from western farm groups in the U.S. They urged better irrigation in North Arcot district; electricity for agricultural areas; better roads; expansion of the Krishna Pennar multi-purpose water project; relief to tenants for rain failure; and (recalling the fact that many *Vanniyars* were tenants and laborers) making tillers owners of the soil.⁴⁵

Negotiations with the Congress concerning the number of nominations which would be given to the *Vanniyars* in local board elections became very lively late in 1954, just before the District Board elections. One result of the negotiations concerning seats in North Arcot was the promise, given by the officers of the state Congress Party, that once the District Board was elected, it would choose a *Vanniyar* chairman. This promise came in response to *Vanniyar* pressure to extend to District Boards the principle of “communal rotation” in the selection of officers, a principle which has long been recognized in the Madras Municipal Corporation Presidency. In this case, the promise caught the state party in a difficult situation: the non-*Vanniyar* Congress Party members of the North Arcot District Board, many of whom belonged to the higher caste of *Reddiars*, saw no

⁴⁵ . Hindu, June 18, 1953.

reason why they should be bound at the district level by negotiations carried on by the state party with the *Vanniyars*. They accordingly decided not to vote for a *Vanniyar*, and elected a *Reddiar* president, in cooperation with non-Congress members of the board. The Madras Congress Party, knowing that they might not be able to count on *Vanniyar* support in the general elections in 1957 if they did not keep faith with the *Vanniyars*, took strict disciplinary action and suspended a number of the recalcitrant *Reddiar* members from the party. According to the newspaper report:

Sri Karayalar (President of the state Congress organization) said that indiscipline in Congress ranks should not be tolerated as it would weaken the organization. . . . In the North Arcot case, Sri Karayalar said, the idea was that the Presidentship this time should go to a member of the *Vanniyar* community as in South Arcot. All along the Reddiars had been presidents there. The *Vanniyar* community had supported the Congress in the Board elections and the understanding all along had been that the Congress nominee for the Presidentship should be a member of the *Vanniyar* community. . . .⁴⁶

Throughout this period, the *Sangham*'s organizational structure was being elaborated and expanded. Local branches sprang up in many places often at the level of smaller administrative units such as *taluks* (districts) and towns. Usually one of the ministers graced the occasion with his presence.⁴⁷ At all these sessions, the ministers and others sought to strengthen the *Sangham*'s solidarity, to increase the sense of unity and of mission. Mr. Padayachi reminded a conference that his ministership was the result of the

⁴⁶ . *Mail*, November 20, 1954.

⁴⁷ . Thus, the first conference of the North Madras Vanniya Kula Kshatrya Sangham, the conference of the Uttiramerur sub-*taluk Sangham*, the tenth annual meeting of the South Arcot *Sangham*, the second annual conference at Perambur, and a conference at Ayyumpet. See *Hindu*, May 23, 1955; *Mail*, June 21, 1954, and January 10, 1956; *Indian Express*, July 23, 1956.

united efforts and sacrifices of the community over a long period, and the caste flag was ceremonially unfurled at the 34th annual conference of the *Sangham* at North Arcot.

The *Vanniya Kula Kshatrya Sangham* plays an important role in Madras, now Tamil Nadu, politics. Village sub-castes persist, but their relative role in the new democratic culture gradually declined. It is the caste associations (*sabhas* or *sanghams*) which have given caste a new vitality, and it is political democracy which has transformed caste and enabled it to play its paradoxical role in India today. Rather than providing the basis for a reaction, caste has absorbed and synthesized some of the new democratic values. Ironically, it is the caste association which links the mass electorate to the new democratic political processes and makes them comprehensible in traditional terms to a population still largely politically illiterate. Caste has been able to play this curious political role as bearer of both India's *ancien régime* and its democratic political revolution by reconstituting itself into the *sabha*, with characteristics of both an ascriptive collectivity and a voluntary association, of caste defined in terms of both *dharma* and democracy.