



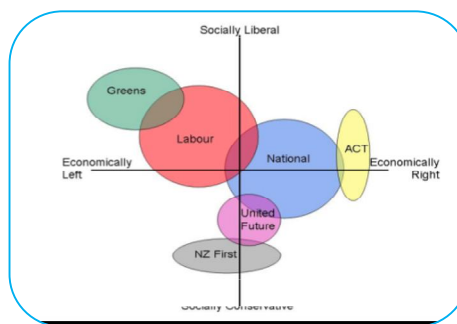
POLITICAL CLEAVAGES ON CASTE LINES IN THE POLITICS OF TWENTIETH CENTURY TAMIL NADU-A HISTORICAL SALIENCE

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ABSTRACT

There are five notable ways in which caste has been used by political entrepreneurs in modern Tamil Nadu to enlist support and introduce a cleavage in the party system that would work to their advantage. The first one was the Brahman-Non-Brahmin cleavage which cultivated the notion that Brahmans were excessively advantaged in the public life of the Madras Presidency. The Justice Party owed its existence to this interpretation of political conflict. A second one was based on intra-Non-Brahman divisions, emerged as the so-called 'forward Non-Brahmans' were alleged to have gained most benefit from the Justice Party. A third possible basis for mobilization was to articulate the ambitions of a single caste group, perhaps by forming a caste-based party. A fourth one was the construction of an organized alliance that recognizes the ambitions of individual caste groups. A fifth one was regarding the solidarity of those who suffer the stigma of untouchability as a way of transcending separate caste identities.



KEYWORDS: Non-Brahmin, Brahmin. Justice Party, Caste, Backward Classes, AIADMK, Thevar, MBC.

INTRODUCTION

The advocates of Non-Brahmanism drew attention to the advantage enjoyed by Brahmans in the fields of higher education and government service.¹ The Non-Brahmin Manifesto, published in December 1916, expressed concern also at the relative absence of Non-Brahmans in the politics and the press in the Madras Presidency.² The Justice Party developed this manifesto into a successful political strategy. The Congress movement responded rather ambivalently to the attempt to develop the Brahman-Non-Brahman divide. At times it denounced the communal tendency of the Justice Party and stated its identification with the entire Indian people. At the same time, Congress seemed to locate itself on the Brahman side of the divide. Between 1923 and 1927 Congress staunchly politicians opposed Justice Party's legislations for temple reform that were seen as an attack on the monopoly of the Brahmans.³ Brahmin politicians, including Kasturi Ranga Iyengar, Rajagopalachari and Satyamurty, were prominent in Congress in the 1920s and 1930s though the movement successfully attracted members from other communities.⁴ The Congress ministry formed after the 1937 provincial elections was criticized by Periar E.V. Ramasamy for its domination of Brahmin members.⁵ Advocates of the Non-Brahman cause introduced a compelling narrative of conflict into the politics of Tamil Nadu and constructed a symbolic separation between a small Brahman elites

and the majority of the population. In the context of universal male suffrage, which, ironically arrived after the downfall of the Justice Party, open advocates of Brahmin political interest were at a huge disadvantage. Indeed, the Congress Party in the mid-1950s radically dispelled the suggestion that it favoured Brahmin interests and the party came to be dominated by senior politicians from more modest backgrounds.⁶ For its part, the Justice Party did not become a strong Non-Brahmin political entity. Non-Brahmanism was a political identity that did not displace local caste identities and the Justice Party was too elitist to be able to popularize the concept of Non-Brahmanism.⁷ Besides, the term "non- Brahmin" covered economically, socially and culturally heterogeneous people that was difficult to unite.⁸ The Justice Party seemed little interested in the large Adi-Dravida minority⁹, causing the prominent leader M.C. Rajah to withdraw his support from the Justice Party.¹⁰ Others from lower caste backgrounds were disaffected too.

In 1930s, a group of 'backward classes' identified themselves and opened up a division in the Non-Brahman camp. Critics of the Justice Party pointed out that the party was dominated by leaders from a small group of relatively privileged 'forward castes' including the landowning Naidus, Reddys and Vellalas.¹¹ In fact, the majority of the population came from less privileged or 'backward' castes that were referred to as 'backward classes'. Advocates of backward 'class' politics observed that Hindus from modest caste backgrounds were overlooked in the allocation of benefits and lacked political representation. A Backward Classes League was formed in 1935 to champion the interests of lower caste Non-Brahmans and protest against the tendency of reserved appointments, intended to limit Brahman dominance, to go to members of the forward Non-Brahman castes.¹² Advocates of the Backward Classes League were critical of Congress and the Justice Party and in the mid-1940s suggested that an alternative political party be formed to ensure that the backward classes were adequately represented. They also argued that a proportion of government jobs be reserved for members of the backward classes in the same way that the Justice Party had argued for the larger Non-Brahman category.¹³

The forward-backward divide did not become the basis of a formal divide in the party system in Tamil Nadu. However, the sense of injustice nurtured by the Backward Classes League has not been overlooked by political parties in Tamil Nadu. After 1947, the Government of India recognized the backward class concept and allowed state governments to provide benefits for the Other Backward Class (OBC) category. Even though the Government of Tamil Nadu has extended generous support for the backward classes, some of its policies have been pronounced unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. More recently a refinement of the backward classes cleavage was invoked because of the materialization of the idea of the 'Most Backward Classes' (MBCs). Again the complaint was lodged that the MBCs, a less privileged subset of castes in the backward class category, were overlooked in the allocation of benefits by the Government of Tamil Nadu. The realization of the exclusion of Forward Non-Brahman castes was not happened from the coverage of the potential for a backward class/caste bloc. Partly it was because it has not found favour among those who speak in terms of Dravidian regional sentiments. It has proved possible to incorporate backward caste aspirations within broader ideological formations. It is also the case that some political advocates from the larger backward Non-Brahman castes dropped the backward class label in favour of promoting the fortunes of their own caste group.

A third cleavage was because of the organization of political parties and organizations to represent an individual caste group. In areas where a particular caste comes close to being a majority of the population it is feasible for a party to identify with one particular caste. In northern Tamil Nadu the demographic domination of the Vanniars created this situation just such a possibility. They have a substantial presence in the erstwhile North Arcot, South Arcot, Salem and Chingleput Districts. In 1937 Vanniar politicians attempted to use the People's Party as an instrument for their community.¹⁴ In the early 1950s, two parties, the Commonweal Party and the Tamilnad Toilers Party, enjoyed much more success. The tradition was revived in the late 1980s with the emergence of the PMK as a party opting to represent a Vanniar community. This style was imitated by a number of smaller parties in the 2001 Assembly elections without advancement. Individual caste parties are able to assert

identity to a limited level. Voters are subscribed to various ideologies and it is not possible that caste groups could vote totally on caste lines. Also, it is relatively possible for ruling parties to gain the support of such parties and large caste groups in Tamil Nadu. The individual caste cleavage is also a feature of the party system in Tamil Nadu. However, in a fragmented party system electoral alliances are giving opportunities for individual caste parties to find a place. A caste group is best represented by leaders from that background who have a strong spontaneous appeal.

Political conflict is also embedded in the inter-caste alliance. An alliance of castes is used to create one side of a dividing line in a party system. It is possible to mobilize support for a party by building support among an alliance of castes. In the 1950s the Congress leader Kamaraj cultivated relationships between his party and several influential caste groups. In the southern districts of Ramnathapuram and Tirunelveli Kamaraj formed an alliance between the Nadar and Pallar caste groups and so confronted the powerful cluster of Thevars.¹⁵ In the northern districts of Madras State, Kamaraj obliged the party to accommodate leaders from the numerically dominant Vanniar caste group in an explicit attempt to incorporate the group into Congress. However, the Madras Congress of the 1950s used a combination of methods to mobilize voters. In the

1990s the AIADMK became the champion of the Thevar caste group but once again the party uses various methods to mobilize votes and the special attention given to one group creates an one-sidedness that makes it unsuitable to talk of a cross-caste alliance.

Dalit solidarity offers a fifth possible way of using caste to create conflict between parties. Those suffering the stigma of untouchability have a strong sense of grievance which has suggested to a number of political advocates that the general principle of social and ritual exclusion can be converted into a clear line of division in a party system. The Scheduled Castes form a significant minority which carefully organized has the potential to be very influential. Several prominent leaders, movements and parties in Tamil Nadu have claimed to act as representatives of the Adi-Dravidas, the Scheduled Castes and more recently the Dalits. M.C. Rajah presented himself as a leader of the Adi-Dravidas and the depressed classes in the 1920s and 1930s. B.R. Ambedkar's Scheduled Castes Federation and its successor the Republican Party of India, were both briefly active in Madras State. The DPI was a very successful social movement that emerged in Tamil Nadu in the 1980s. It is worth noting here that just as Dalit political leaders have attempted to develop an account of political conflict based on caste exclusion larger parties have attempted to reduce the projection of the caste Hindu-Dalit cleavage. In the 1930s Congress emphasized the conflict with the British as the only relevant political division in India while also campaigning against untouchability in Tamil Nadu.¹⁶ The term Adi-Dravida was viewed by Congress leaders as an expression of 'communal feeling' that ran counter to the unified national identity that they wished to project.¹⁷ Rajagopalachari was stirred into action on the question of untouchability following the Poona Pact in 1935. The 'Harijan' campaign carried out by Congress was a political success. Substantive reform to relieve the economic and social pressure on the Adi-Dravidas did not follow but Congress had gained important allies.¹⁸ However, the likelihood of an independent Adi-Dravida political movement was reduced. Other parties have attempted to draw in Dalit voters using various means to recognize the aspirations of Dalit voters while addressing a broader range of issues. The Communists in Thanjavur campaigned against untouchability as well as the working conditions experienced by Adi-Dravida labourers.¹⁹ The AIADMK under the leadership of MGR made concessions that drew Scheduled Caste voters to his party. The caste Hindu-Dalit cleavage is a very good example of the way in which conflicts are politically constructed and managed. The terminology is deeply contested. There prevails no sense of collective identity among disparate caste groups. Yet, the extent of social alienation, the size of the minority affected by the stigma of untouchability and the palpable sense of grievance encourage the political leaders to return to an account of caste conflict that attempts to bring various excluded caste groups together.

To conclude, caste is a very important social marker in Tamil society and that there is no single way of defining caste conflict. Some of the narratives associated with each version of conflict come into sharp conflict with each other. They deny the logic of alternative conceptions of caste politics and seek to submerge other constructions of salient political conflict. Most backward caste assertion sits uneasily

with Non-Brahmanism, for example. Political leaders have also attempted to use caste in combination with other social markers. The Communists brought together the overlapping themes of caste and class in the 1950s. Religious belief and practice are also intertwined with the politics of caste.

END NOTES

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