

CASTE AND CIVIC POWER

V.Geetha

Originally - about two years ago - this paper set itself clear-cut objectives. It wanted and tried to address two related concerns that appeared urgent and existential: the re-emergence of caste as a crucial category in popular politics; the changing nature of civic power.

I was bothered at that time by the efflorescence of caste parties and formations. Beset and shocked by dalit militancy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Tamil non brahmin castes appeared to have collapsed into an angry angst. They turned viciously against the dalits and in the process re-defined their own identities and histories, as they sought to petition the State for what they perceived as their rightful share of common economic, social and cultural resources. On one hand, this seemed a regression, a travesty of the founding ideals of the Dravidian movement. On the other hand, the quick and brisk appearance of several new caste parties and the assertion of old ones appeared to proclaim the winning power (and attractions) of two disparate logics - the brahminical logic of varna; the democratic logic of numbers and votes. Trying to unravel these riddles of the present, I turned to the past and attempted to understand the role and function of caste - as a political category that enables an easy and compelling mobilisation and deployment of people and resources.

My paper comprised several parts. I have given these below in the order they appeared in my earlier argument

I

First, I looked at how communities represented themselves to the colonial state. I pointed out that native society was essentially a caste society, but that it did not merely heed a normative varna logic. Recent scholarship on native society in the eighteenth century - Neil Brimnes' work on the right and

left hand castes, Bhavani Raman and Aparna Balachandran's studies of native civic activity in the middle and late eighteenth century - suggest that caste society was neither rigid nor moribund: while its constituent logic did endow brahmins with normative power and authority, its actual workings sketched several other trajectories and performances of power. For one, castes ranged themselves in right and left hand formations to demand symbolic honours, and claim social and ceremonial precedence within a civic space that did not entirely heed brahminical claims to superiority. Instead this civic space responded to and was constituted by communities that demanded visibility and authority for themselves on the basis of their productive worth.

It is interesting that though these claims to honours and entitlements were publicly asserted in a recognizably urban context, they drew strength from caste brethren in the village hinterland as well. It is as if the city, whether market town, temple town or seat of political authority, appeared conducive to contestations and worked against the grain of ascriptive power. Communities perceived themselves in two ways - either on the basis of their importance in the immediate economic environment, or on the basis of their location within broader horizontal formations and sometimes in both ways at the same time.

In the first instance, they insisted on their productive and economic significance, as the pariahs did in eighteenth century Madras. In 1779, the English East India Company decided to lay claim to property it had earlier leased out to individuals in Black Town in order to attract them to those commercial prospects which ostensibly awaited them in a growing European settlement. It also decided to auction off waste land or give it away in compensation to those whose lands it had acquired for a different purpose, such as for enclosing wells. One such piece of land included a small area in the paracheri - or the paraiah settlement - in Black Town and elicited a plea from the "pariyar (an adi dravida) caste residing in the town of Madras". The petitioners pointed out that "at different times and in three different

governments...one Gongapetta Narrain sought means to dispossess your petitioners of part of the said ground which he had bought some years before for a trifling sum, which the Hon'ble company was under the necessity of taking as a convenience...". More recently, "certain lascars and cooleys" claiming orders from the Chief Engineer had sought to demolish the pariahs' homes on behalf of the dastardly Narrain. The petitioners went on to say:

"That your petitioners are but menial servants to the gentlemen and ladies of this settlement as butlers, butlers mates, cooks, cooks mates, roundell boys, coachmen, palanquin boys, housekeepers, grass cutter, dry and wet nurses, water wenches, scavengers, cart drivers, totys, women sweepers and lamp lighters and their pay is very small and insufficient to maintain themselves and family; and further your petitioners are of the meanest cast and in case of troubles from any country powers your petitioners cast will be entirely exposed to the Mercy of the Enemy if your petitioners should be dispossessed of their houses,...as no other cast will entertain them in their houses within the Bound Edge, which is not the case with the said Gongapetta Narrain..."
(Colonel H. D. Love, R.E., *Vestiges of Old Madras 3 vols. and separate Index:* (London: John Murray, 1913.)

In spite of its humble tone, the paraiahs' appeal was accented with a sense of productive worth, for it drew attention to their indispensability as labourers in the city, without whose work, several important urban tasks would come to a standstill. It is clear that rights are being claimed in terms of a scheme of values which endorsed the significance of labour, however mean its nature and attributes. Thus a new and important social relationship was being announced: between work and entitlements.

In the second instance, Komatis and Beri chettis, who belonged to the right and left had caste formations respectively, were locked in intermittent conflicts throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century. Neil Brimmes notes that clear material interests were at stake in these games for symbolic honours, but he cautions against an easy reading of symbolic conflicts in

terms of material interests alone. He himself uses Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic' (or cultural) capital' to refer to these skirmishes over precedence, status and honour - most of which had to do with temple festivals, marriage processions, with ceremonial and ritual activities. The right and left hand castes attracted to their ranks several other groups, deemed 'low' in the hierarchy, many of whom were assigned positions of strategic importance in their respective formations, Thus paraiahs (and other so-called lower castes) , who were part of the right-hand group, were both granted ritual honours as well as deployed as shock troops, so to speak - to attract British attention, and challenge the status claims of the left hand castes. To achieve the former, these paraiah shock troops deserted their settlements, in this case, the environs of Fort St George in early eighteenth century Madras, thus depriving the latter of the services of, among others, boatmen, carpenters and washermen. For the latter purpose, paraiahs threatened, cajoled and in some cases, used force to settle their claims (Neil Brimmes, *Constructing the Colonial Encounter: Right and Left Hand Castes in Early Colonial South India*, Curzon Press, London, 1999

II

I argued then that these instances of trans-caste mobilisation were examples of a social logic that ceased to exist from about the middle years of the nineteenth century. I went on to suggest that a new narrative of caste, power and civilisation was argued out through the second half of the nineteenth century - a narrative that substituted for and in some instances subsumed an older narrative and practice, exemplified most immediately in the fortunes of the right and left hand caste formations. This new narrative emerged out of the thoughts and practices of a class of urban notables that owed its existence to the colonial state.

The nature of civic activity had changed over the decades leading to the period of Crown rule and after. Merchants were not the only privileged urban group that possessed the ear of government. With the spread of education,

the coming of the university, and the emergence of the native press, a new sort of *homo civis* came to dominate urban life: men from the new professions - teachers, publicists, lawyers - and the class of native bureaucrats who, from at least the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, were highly visible in positions of power at Fort St George.

These men, a great majority of whom were brahmins, and an older class of civic notables, the merchants, both came under the spell of new knowledges - of history, linguistics, political science. Infected by the contagion of modernity, they came to define themselves through new modalities - of speech, deportment, dress - and acquired a new sense of the self. They thought as individuals, as sovereign beings, sure of their powers of reason. This, on one hand. On the other hand, they perceived each other as fraternal members of a new collectivity, the commonweal - as the *vox populi*, no less. Interestingly, and significantly, this sovereign individual was more often than not the modern, educated brahmin, whose concerns and ideas came to define and dominate the idea of the commonweal.

The commonweal was informed by new ideals: for one, of rights, and of the good society. Rights were believed to be common and general and the white man had to necessarily share them with the natives. The good society was defined partly in terms of notions of progress, rationality and education and partly in terms of history. This history was deemed lost but knowable, a history of a past golden age of Hindu wisdom and valour which stood to be re-discovered in the present through the efforts of the new knowledges. Thus was born the neo-hindu, fervid in his rhetoric of social reform and devoted to the memory of an ancient civilisation that was sacred and secular, innately progressive and radically open.

Colonial ethnography with its meticulous - though, often, misplaced - collection of facts about communities and their customs, an earlier ideology of Orientalism, which privileged the virtues and nobility of scriptural

Hinduism, and described the ideal Hindu society in terms of a simple and elegant varna logic, together, helped crystallize a novel sociology of communities and castes. This sociology was eagerly consumed by the brahmin intellectuals of Madras - and by upper caste elites elsewhere - who brought to it their own sense of self-importance and pride. This resulted in a social narrative which brilliantly collapsed two interpretative trajectories: the sacral and the sociological.

On one hand, the caste system in the present was explained away as a perversion of an original exalted order that abhorred untouchability and notions of the pure and the impure. On the other hand, varna ideals were explained as both god-given and natural, an inscription of a range of human qualities and abilities within social classes, at the apex of which was positioned the brahminical quality of wisdom, and the brahminical ability to learn and intellectualize. In this varna universe, it was further argued, brahminical attributes naturally deserved to be treated as the measure of worthwhile human virtue. In other words, the measure of human perfection was the brahmin. The ideal brahmin was not merely the future perfect human being, but also the universal human person - one who represented in his prowess and understanding all of humanity, who could voice the concerns and anxieties of the rest of the social world.

Meanwhile, the social logic of varna, perverted and distorted, allowed the brahmin to insist on his superiority - he had regained a sense of his vocation through education and learning - while denying to others the existential moment of self-discovery. After all, how could shudras and panchamas - always already low and despised and therefore incapable of learning - aspire to be perfect? The caste system of the present subjugated them, while ignorance of the past disallowed them to progress to their appointed varna roles. In any case, these roles received their meaning in and through the sacred learning of the brahmins. However one may look at it, the brahmins alone could speak the language of truth and relevance.

This re-charged varna logic acquired a measure of legitimacy through the fiat of the colonial state, which attempted to order its affairs - the governance of men, land, temples, women and children and the garnering of revenue - in and through this logic. The census, changes in educational practices which privileged rote learning and abstract knowledge over the living, experiential knowledges of the labouring castes, and the gradual death of artisanship and specialised labour services, gradually, and in extremely complex ways, changed the relationship of castes and communities to work, worth and fraternity. The great left and right hand caste divisions ceased to define civic activity which was now more or less captive to the newspaper-owning, pen-wielding intellectuals of late colonial Madras.

This does not of course mean that the intricate interrelationship between powerful non-brahmin agricultural, trading and artisan castes and other "lower" castes completely disappeared. Caste networks continued to be salient and the village (or town) "big man" (or men) were important even in the new scheme of things. But castes did not anymore band together into large horizontal formations - instead, in response to the normative logic of varna, they sought a vertical integration within both local and trans-local societies. This was manifest in the founding ideals and objectives of the many caste associations that began to emerge from the last decades of the nineteenth century. These caste associations demanded that they be pushed "up" in the varna order (that is, they claimed vaishya and kshatriya status, with some castes even claiming the right to wear the sacred thread, claimed by brahmins to be their prerogative), pursued social reform with respect to education and the status of women in their communities and petitioned the colonial government to heed their claims.

Interestingly and significantly, these new-found assertions conceded the power vested in the colonial capital of Madras, and sought to address their claims to the press and public pulpit in the city. This is entirely

understandable, for the exercise of power and the courting of authority made sense only when deployed in the capital city. For, with the coming of Crown rule and the establishment of a vast colonial bureaucracy, local towns lost out in importance to Madras - for many intellectuals and aspiring "big" men, the road from the moffusil to the city appeared a natural one.

III

Thirdly, I looked at the genesis of the non-brahmin movement: I viewed it as a great and inventive exercise in forging relationships in horizontal comradeship.

The Justice party, founded in 1916, though packed with urban notables from the richer non-brahmin communities, urged forth a democratic politics. Its leaders called for all non-brahmin communities, including the so-called panchamas, to unite into a political and social formation that could effectively challenge the power wielded by brahmins - in the professions, government offices and in the public-political world of late colonial Madras. This call to unity resonated with civilisational pride on one hand and democratic beliefs on the others. It upheld the claims of an equally hoary past, of a characteristic Dravidian ethos which owed nothing to the arcadia of the Aryans, and espoused a fraternal and democratic coming together of all non-brahmins who were of course equal and possessed the same rights as each other and as the brahmins.

There were "practical" politicians in the Justice party who attempted to argue against the grain of this desired unity, who pointed out that it was unrealistic to realise such a unity, since it demanded that castes intermarry and interdine on a regular basis. However, Justice party publicists, able and well-read young men, convinced of the virtues of republicanism, continued to speak of a unified and principled resistance to brahmin power and ideology. These were the men who carried the message of equality, freedom and fraternity to diverse constituencies, including the so-called panchamas.

In practice, Justice ideology was often at odds with the material interests of its individual leaders, as well as of the mercantile and landowning class to which these latter belonged. This was evident in the famous Buckingham and Carnatic Mills strike that broke out in Madras city in 1921. Adi dravida labourers refused to join the strike. Their leader M.C. Raja argued that prolonged absence from work would spell penury and ruin for many adi

dravida families. Besides, unlike the caste hindus, adi dravidas could not hope to return to a convivial village hinterland that would welcome them and look after their needs until such time the strike ended. The Justice party supported the strike and took the part of caste hindu workers during skirmishes and rioting that broke out during this period, earning the ire of adi dravidas and even of some of its own publicists and intellectuals who felt that the party's ideologies stood in danger of being compromised by its leaders (V.Geetha and S.V.Rajadurai, 1998: 184-209)

Clearly Justice ideology was more persuasive than its practice, though in specific instances, Justicites did act in ways that served the non-brahmin commonweal - for instance, they were instrumental in the passing of the three governmental orders that institutionalised reservation of posts for non-brahmins in government services. They also encouraged and supported government spending on adi dravida education. Justicites also attempted to challenge brahmin sacral power by the passing of the Hindu Religious Endowments Act which enabled the State to regulate the secular aspects of temple life, especially those relating to property, grants and endowments (V.Geetha and S.V.Rajadurai, 1998:168-174; 209-216)

Perhaps the Justice party may be viewed as a modern, secular version of earlier horizontal formations, such as those represented by the right and left hand groups. Unlike their forebears, its leaders and members did not seek to hoard symbolic capital, rather they laid claims to another sort of power - which flows from the modern State. They also did not speak the language of custom and entitlements, and, instead, resorted to a discourse of reform and rights. And, as with the past, in the present too, production and social relations remained in place, while the search for honoured goods/rights created a topos and a time for various groups - including the so-called panchamas - to come together. It is not accidental that in this instance, as in the earlier one, the city remained the defining horizon for political demands and mobilisation.

With the emergence of the Self-respect movement in the late 1920s, non-brahmin concerns acquired a radical edge. The movement did not merely challenge brahmin power, nor did it only seek to populate the services and the professions with non-brahmins. It refuted the varna order, both as normative idea and practice. In doing so, it unpacked the various constituent elements that structure and grant form and coherence to caste relationships - the authority granted to and enjoyed by brahmins, their hoarding of intellectual and spiritual goods, the economic ties that criss-cross caste divisions, religious belief, kinship and marriage which cement caste ties, female sexual powerlessness in a context of a system of endogamous marriages that privilege male promiscuity while forbidding and penalising female desire and, of course, untouchability. This latter the movement considered the very ethos of caste, which informed the division of communities, notions of work, ideologies of labour, and visions of the intellect.

he Self-respect movement made the liberation of the so-called panchamas the objective of their radical social mission. They also considered this liberation a necessary condition for the emancipation of all communities from the stranglehold of varna hierarchies and the brahminical constructs which justify them. Further, they insisted that none of this freedom mattered or could be considered significant, until women were free to study, work, love and make their own lives.

Periyar summed up his life's work thus:

"Though I have endeavored all along to abolish caste, as far as this country is concerned, this had meant I carry out propoganda for the abolition of God, Religion, Shastras and brahmins. For caste will disappear only when these four disappear. Even if one of these were to remain, caste will not be abolished in its entirety... because caste has been constructed out of these four ...only after man had been made a slave and a fool would caste have thus

been imposed on society. One cannot abolish caste without instilling a taste for freedom and knowledge [in the people]. God, religion, the Shastras and Brahmins make for the growth and spread of slavery and folly and strengthen the existence of caste" (Periyar: Ninety-third Birthday Souvenir 17-9-71; Anaimuthu: 1974).

Significantly, several famous and resourceful anti caste radicals were also municipal or urban notables who worked to infuse into old spaces a new semantics of rights, which, in turn, transformed these old spaces into urban topos. WPA Soundarapandian, a self-respecter, was President of the Ramanathapuram District Board and during his tenure threatened to withdraw licenses to bus operators who refused to admit adi dravidas into their vehicles (V.Geetha and S.V.Rajadurai, 1998: 356). As in other instances of caste mobility and unity, with the self-respecters too, the city with its constitutive modern, utopian character appeared a context for new social possibilities.

It must be added that in this case, the self-respecters self-consciously asserted the links between urban life and radical social transformation. As an article in the Self-respect journal, *Pagutharivu*, argued, the city with its factories, its colleges, hospitals and its courts of law intimated a vision of the world, where reason and human ingenuity ruled the day. Also, it was a space ruled by that new God, the machine. Unlike the gods of old the machine did not insist that qualities, skills and attributes were determined by birth. The city decisively cut the links which tied knowledge to birth and privilege and instead linked it up with opportunity and a self-renewing intelligence. Most importantly, for the self-respecters, the city provoked desire and anger with one's lot in life, and offered an entirely different definition of goodness. It enabled the transformation of discontent into purposive action against all those conditions of Unfreedom which plagued the unfortunate in caste society. It fostered the cultivation of self-reliance and self-respect and an

expansive imagination ("The Fallacious Nature of Village Re-construction", *Pagutharivu*, 1936).

I concluded that the Self-respect movement countered the refurbished and modern logic of varna, as it had emerged in the early twentieth century, but it could not effectively transform the material life of caste society. This was one of the reasons why caste persists in quotidian life - ideologically, the varna logic stands delegitimised, but the logic of caste differences and the material power that underwrites them have survived, despite the triumph of ideology. It also seemed to me that assertions of anti-brahmin anger and anti-caste radicalism possessed an urban edge that rendered them dangerous and problematic in rural parts.

I pick up the narrative from there. I wish to demonstrate how the challenges posed by the Self-respect movement were distracted into another agenda, that of Tamil nationalism, and consider the implications of this distraction for the persistence of caste.

My arguments in the following sections are speculative and provisional and need to be honed with the help of careful research.

IV

In the late 1930s, with the onset of the anti-Hindi agitations of 1937-39, self-respect ideologies came to be embedded within a new discursive field and expressed as aspects of a new politics: of Dravidian and later Tamil nationalism. Nationalism was both an affective sentiment, as well as a powerful political imperative that allowed diverse peoples to come together into an imagined community, a sort of cultural and linguistic utopia in which all differences - of caste, class, and, to a marginal extent, gender - ceased to matter. Dalits, less privileged non brahmin castes as well as powerful upper caste non brahmins were captivated by the heady rhetoric of literary passion, cultural pride and righteous anger at being forced into a future free India that

many, including Periyar, understood as being a "brahmin-bania" political entity.

Tamil nationalism possessed great popular appeal, and was rendered even more attractive by those urbane men of the stage and cinema: young men with a talent for narrative and scripting, theatre and performance. These men drifting into the city, with its stages, theatres and an audience hungry for the unknown and the known, brought a dramatic panache to expressions of nationalism. Their imagination - particularly that of C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, both former Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu - endowed politics with a lusty urban lyricism that did not require the lay person to think through complex notions of rights and power, but instead solicited from him an exultant and loyal approval of the nationalist cause. Also, the invocation of a common Tamil past and the assertion of a Tamil brotherhood proved enormously inspiring to a generation that had learnt from the Self-respect movement to defy convention and flout custom.

This generation of young people now wanted to express and embody their new-found freedom - from the past, from orthodoxy - in and through grand imaginative gestures. Tamil nationalism allowed them the space and provided the means through which they could found their new anti-caste utopia, not merely as a society that is free of caste, but one that responds to different and celebratory energies and emotions.

The political triumph of the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) was on this account: it articulated a distinctive political and cultural vision of the new community and it achieved this at an opportune historic hour - of free India's democratic adventure. Post-independent India, with political promises inscribed at the heart of the power it bequeathed to its people - universal franchise - enabled the Tamil nationalist cause to pass into the realm of the popular. Once that happened, DMK ideologies of honour and power, and their mordant urban political constituencies worked to create a democratic

government of ordinary non brahmins. - for once, it appeared as if the logic of varna, as well as the older logic of caste divisions along the lines of productive and symbolic worth had ceased to exist (V.Geetha and S.V.Rajadurai, 1996).

But Tamil nationalism proved deceptive: it allowed for a public and political exercise of unity and brotherhood, but ironically thrived on a celebration and nurturing of familial values: of chastity, female honour, revered motherhood. Thus, the worlds of family and kinship remained untransformed, while the world outside the home resonated with Tamil pride. Caste identities, written into and sanctified by endogamous marriage practices, and feeding off the emotive inner life of communities, both in rural and urban India, continued to remain salient. Though the DMK's economic populism did result in marginal benefits for the non-brahmin (urban) poor, and its policy of reservations did bring non brahmins into government employment, these measures did not significantly address the economics of caste - untouchability, land relations and service labour.

The DMK did affect urban life - it created a civic-political world that was democratic and unruly, energetic and chaotic. But rural Tamil Nadu appears to have been bewildered by its self-conscious celebration of a lost past, its use of a language that bore no inflections of place or community, and by its invocation of a brotherhood that heeded neither the bonds of blood kinship nor those of location. The Tamil nation, looking to the future and drawing from the past, perhaps seemed a mirage, an alienating no man's land - that came alive only in the poetry of the bard and the pen of the novelist. In any case, this is an idea that awaits further investigation.

V

As DMK rhetoric began to wane, and the older self-respect ideas that informed it retreated into an honoured (and unused) past, that party was unable to sustain its credibility with all sections of the non-brahmin public.

Thus, new discourses of rights and entitlements emerged - both from within the non brahmin community of castes and the dalits. Significantly, these distinctive demands that impinged on each other were articulated from the mofussil, the city's hinterland where town and village meet. Beginning from the 1970s, locally dominant non brahmin castes exuded confidence as well as unease. On one hand, they demanded that their share of reserved positions in government and education be increased, while on the other hand, and locally, they asserted their own through an anger directed at a slowly emerging dalit militancy.

For their part, dalits came to assert their rights to dignity and self-respect, to a life free from violation, as a generation of young people, emboldened by education, resisted local instances of untouchability. Also, in some ways, dalits had ceased to be "merely" local - they had migrated to cities in search of an education, their employment in government took them to places outside their homes, and some of them even ventured beyond the seas, to the Middle-Eastern nations and Singapore, in search of work. These experiences and the relatively better standards of living they ensured enable some dalit families at least across different regions to assert their own against the locally dominant communities. (These are inferences that await serious interrogation by the field researcher.)

Political developments, especially the coming to power of the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the exit of the DMK from the political sphere of over a decade, and the gradual fracturing of a non-brahmin consensus led to the rise to prominence of particular castes. The AIADMK, for instance, is known to have quietly patronised the *mukuulathor* in southern Tamil Nadu, a militant Tamil non brahmin community of castes with a martial history.

Perhaps, the late eighties and the nineties may be viewed as an era when the moffusil and the country laid their distinctive claims on a polity that had been

shaped by urban energies and visions. The logic of rural caste politics on one hand (based on local relationships of economic and social power), and the logic of varna that informed all attempts at caste mobilisation on the other, have together created a situation where the radicalism of an earlier decade - nurtured in the city - appears both lost and renounced.

Interestingly, the only political groups that assert such radicalism are groups of dalits - poised for change, dreaming of utopia, yet captive to a life in the fields. And this radicalism is of course inexorably urban: drawing from texts, rather than memory, reconstructing identity, rather than flaunting an ascriptive one, seeking civic power - dalits have been fierce contenders in local panchayat and municipal elections - and flocking to the city in search of work.

VI

Dalit militancy in the city is an interesting development of the last two hundred years. From being shock troops - in the eighteenth century - in a civic army that co-opted them but which kept them in their ranks, so to speak, dalits today are struggling with the question of alliances and political linkages. Political formations continue to abide by the older captive logic, whereas dalits are looking for a more genuine and generous horizontal axis. In this sense, dalits are the rightful inheritors of the Self-respect legacy - with all the promises and dangers such a legacy implies.