

While growing strength of Dalit political organizations in India in the last years has been usually welcomed as a manifestation of rising self-confidence of Dalits and an expression of new orientation of the Indian society towards more social justice and equality, this thesis advocates for some restraint from an unwarranted optimism. It focuses on the impact of Dalit political movements and affirmative action on governance in Tamil Nadu rural societies and it sets the Dalit movement and the affirmative action on behalf of Dalits in the context of Dravidian political parties that have been the leading force in the Tamil Nadu since 1967.

The main questions I am addressing in this thesis are: "Which factors/institutions are conducive to good governance/orderly rule in communities divided by caste while carrying out the project of social and political empowerment of Dalits?" "What is the impact of affirmative action and Dalit political parties on local communities and by extension on Tamil Nadu society?"

The thesis uses neo-institutionalist theoretical framework and it is predominantly based on comparison of two different experiences of two Tamil Nadu villages with the Dalit movement and the affirmative action. I have collected most of the empirical data for the thesis during my two periods of fieldwork in Tamil Nadu countryside, in a time span of altogether six months in 2005 and 2007. I have combined methods of both quantitative and qualitative social research by using questionnaire survey on randomly selected sample of respondents as well as guided interviews with intentionally selected relevant respondents. Data from the two village case studies are set in the context of political history of Tamil Nadu and the development of Dalit movement based on analysis of available literature, newspapers and other media.