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**POLITICAL MOVEMENTS OF DALITS IN SOUTH
INDIA**

*DALIT MOVEMENT AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF DRAVIDIAN
POLITICS*

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POLITICKÁ HNUTÍ DALITŮ V JIŽNÍ INDII

HNUTÍ DALITŮ A POZITIVNÍ DISKRIMINACE V KONTEXTU DRÁVIDSKÉ POLITIKY

Disertační práce

vedoucí práce - PhDr. Stanislava Vavroušková, CSc.

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„Prohlašuji, že jsem dizertační/disertační práci napsal samostatně s využitím pouze uvedených a řádně citovaných pramenů a literatury a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.“

Vlastimil Blecha v. r. _____

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SUMMARY

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.

Conclusions of this thesis provide arguments against the affirmative action as an adequate method of eliminating social inequalities that are rooted in the caste system. It points out to the fact that an extensive system of affirmative action policies in Tamil Nadu only resulted in an extremely corrupt system of government where caste instead of performance is often a qualification criterion for government jobs and university vacancies. The system of reservations itself has become a spoil in partisan political competition along caste lines. Dalit parties instead of bringing a new impulses and ideas are seen and act just like another caste based party and their very nature and orientation only at lowest castes re-affirms caste paradigm in the Tamil Nadu politics. I argue that the appropriate way to society devoid of caste prejudices consists in strengthening legitimacy of state institutions such as state administration, police and judiciary by anti-corruption policies aimed on increasing public trust in the institution of state, instead of trying to redress previous injustices by implementation of caste-based quotas that often only create new injustices and grievances.

It is believed that conclusions and observations made in this thesis may be useful for academics, NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, policy makers and everybody trying to understand the complex reality of Indian politics and the caste system.

SHRNUTÍ

Zatímco je v posledních letech vzrůstající význam dalitských politických organizací v Indii většinou přijímán pozitivně, jako projev rostoucího sebevědomí Dalitů a výraz směřování indické společnosti k větší sociální spravedlnosti a rovnosti, tato dizertační práce varuje před ničím neopodstatněným optimismem. Zabývám se v ní dopadem politického hnutí Dalitů a politiky pozitivní diskriminace na správu věcí veřejných/spořádané vládnutí (angl. governance) ve venkovských společenstvích v indickém státě Tamilnádu, přičemž tuto reflexi zasazují do kontextu politiky tzv. drávidských stran, které jsou vůdčí politickou silou ve státě od roku 1967.

Hlavní otázky, které se snažím v této práci zodpovědět, jsou: „Jaké faktory/instituce přispívají ke spořádanému vládnutí (angl. good governance) ve společenstvích, která jsou rozdělena na základě kastovního uspořádání, pokud zároveň sledujeme cíl posilování sociálního a politického postavení Dalitů? Jaký je dopad politiky pozitivní diskriminace a dalitských politických stran na místní komunity a potažmo na celou tamilskou společnost?“

Teoretickým východiskem této práce je neo-institucionalismus. Jejím základem je srovnání dvou odlišných zkušeností s politikou pozitivní diskriminace a s dalitským hnutím v případových studiích dvou obcí v indickém státě Tamilnádu. Většinu podkladů pro tuto dizertační práci jsem nasbíral během terénního výzkumu na tamilském venkově trvajícím celkem šest měsíců v letech 2005 a 2007. Kombinoval jsem jak kvantitativní tak kvalitativní metody sociálního výzkumu, zejména dotazníkové šetření na skupině namátkou vybraných respondentů a řízené rozhovory s respondenty, které jsem zvolil na základě jejich relevance k danému tématu. Případové studie obou tamilských vesnic jsou uvedeny v kontextu politických dějin státu Tamilnád a vývoje hnutí Dalitů, sestavených na základě analýzy dostupné literatury, tisku a médií.

Závěry této dizertace poskytují argumenty proti politice pozitivní diskriminace jako prostředku k odstraňování sociálních nerovností, které mají svůj původ kastovním systémem. V práci poukazují na skutečnost, že rozsáhlé programy pozitivní diskriminace v Tamilnádu pouze vyústily v mimořádně zkorumpovaný systém vládnutí, v němž o získání zaměstnání ve státní správě či o studiu na univerzitě rozhoduje více kasta než nadání a výkon. Systém rezervací se sám o sobě stal předmětem soupeření na základě kastovní příslušnosti. Strany Dalitů jsou nahlíženy a fungují v tomto systému jako kterákoliv jiná kastovní strana a jejich povaha a orientace výlučně na nejnižší kasty pouze upevňují kastovní paradigma v politice Tamilnádu. Argumentuji, že cesta ke společnosti bez kastovních rozdílů spočívá v posilování legitimacy klíčových institucí státu, jako jsou státní správa, policie a soudy odstraňováním korupce, které zvýší důvěru veřejnosti v tyto instituce, namísto snahy odčinit minulé nespravedlnosti zavedením kastovních kvót, které často pouze vytvářejí nové nespravedlnosti a křivdy.

Závěry a postřehy z této dizertační práce mohou být užitečné pro akademické pracovníky, neziskové a mezivládní organizace, politiky a pro každého, kdo se snaží pochopit složitou realitu vztahu mezi indickým kastovním systémem a politikou.

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"India lives in her villages." (M.K. Gandhi)

"What is a village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism?" (Dr. B. R. Ambedkar)

1. INTRODUCTION – THEME OF THE STUDY AND THE METHODOLOGY

1.1. STATING THE PROBLEM

My first encounter with Dalit political activism was in September 2002 on my first trip to India when I witnessed a manifestation of Liberation Panthers Party (Tam. *viṭutalai ciruttaikaḷ kaṭci*) in Madurai. At the time I knew nothing about the party and the Dalit movement and their name, symbol of a Panther and the fact that the demonstration was taking place in Madurai, where the largest refugee camp for immigrants from Sri Lanka was located, made me think that this was an organization struggling for the rights of Sri Lankan Tamils living in Tamil Nadu. Although my estimate was wrong, the episode shows that the inspiration of the VCK by the Sri Lankan terrorist organization Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tam. *tamiḷ īlam viṭutalai pulikaḷ*) was apparent even for an uninformed observer.

Later I came across articles about caste discrimination in Tamil Nadu and especially a collection of articles by S. Viswanathan published in the book *Dalits in Dravidian Land* (Viswanathan, *Dalits in Dravidian Land* 2006) and I was shocked and surprised by the scale of violence and discrimination that Dalit people in Tamil Nadu, especially in the rural areas, have to suffer. This shock came despite my previous fieldwork in Tamil Nadu countryside and partial familiarity with a complicated nature of caste relations between Dalits and non-Dalits. The reality as presented in Viswanathan's articles was, however, much more violent than what I actually knew from my own fieldwork experience in the Nagapattinam region countryside.

From the individual violent incidents published in the Tamil press some recurrent motives of the conflict between Dalits and non-Dalits are apparent. There are stories of Dalit settlements attacked and burnt down because their inhabitants outran their non-Dalit neighbours in material welfare thanks to financial remittances from their family members abroad, there are cases of Dalit slums attacked by non-Dalits as a result of Dalit ambition to support their own candidate in elections and stories of Dalits being attacked after setting up a local organization of a Dalit party and hoisting up a flag of the party in their cheri. The usual igniter of a conflict is a Dalit effort to change and improve their destitute economic situation and subordinate social status. Their efforts to achieve change by political empowerment are often met with tough resistance by non-Dalits.

The question I am raising in this thesis is: What are the factors necessary for a peaceful process of political empowerment of Dalits? Putnam et al in their *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993) have introduced the term of "social capital". According to this theory a social capital is central to the working of democratic institutions and economic development. On the example of study of local governance in Italy, the book makes the following basic argument: social capital, or mutual trust among members of the community, facilitates the better performance of democratic institutions. The reason why local government performed better in northern than in southern Italy was because the former had a better stock of social

capital than the south. While southern Italy remained “*strictly autocratic, feudal, fragmented and isolated, the towns in northern central Italy became 'oasis amidst the feudal forests'*” (Putnam 1993, 124)”. From the institutionalism’s point of view, considering good governance as “*context-bound ensemble of rules, institutions and good practices*” (Mitra 2005, 52) “social capital” equals to legitimacy of/trust in the institutions of democracy. The question thus should be further specified as follows: Which institutions and what level of trust are beneficial/required for maintaining orderly rule while carrying out the project of Dalit political empowerment?

There are two major agents of Dalit political empowerment in contemporary Tamil Nadu: government sponsored affirmative action and spontaneous Dalit political mobilization. These two cannot be seen as completely separated because one promotes and it is conditioned by the other. In this thesis I focused at implementation of affirmative action in the form of reserved seats for Dalits in the local bodies of village self-government as a cornerstone of the Tamil Nadu government affirmative action policy towards Dalits. This process was observed along and in the context of the growth of the Dalit political movement, especially its at present most active and significant representative in Tamil Nadu - Liberated Panthers Party (VCK).

Both the implementation of village panchayats reservations and the development of Dalit political movement were observed from the perspective of Tamil Nadu rural areas and the fieldwork for this thesis was carried out in two villages that are very similar in their population characteristics but that recorded very different results with the implementation of village panchayat reservations for Dalits and where the growth of Dalit activism is at very different stages of development. This thesis explores the effect of Dalit activism and affirmative action on village societies in Tamil Nadu. I carried out the questionnaire survey and interviews constituting the factual base of this thesis in two periods, in July-September 2005 and in August-October 2007.

Broader issues that I have attempted to address in this thesis can be summed up in questions: What are the effects and eventual benefits of the Dalit emancipation movement and of the state affirmative action on behalf of Dalits for Dalits themselves and for the democratic governance in Tamil Nadu? Why in some parts of Tamil Nadu democratic governance and empowerment of socially excluded classes may work well while in other parts it is not feasible?

1.2. METHODOLOGY AND EVALUATION OF PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED LITERATURE

“A village” has often been in the core of political discussions in India about the character of Indian statehood and democracy with radically different opinions held by different national leaders. Village as a study material to understand caste system and relations in Indian society has also been a popular object of scholarly interest in cultural anthropology, sociology and political science of India since 1950s and 1960s when authors such as M.N. Srinivasan, G. Berreman, A. Béteille or R. Deliége published their major works. The convenience of a village as an object for research on Indian society rests in the fact that every village represents a unique, closed, easily definable and complete social universe that can be described and researched more handily than other types of communities. A common claim of social scientists, governmental and non-governmental organizations is that the caste system has been more resistant to change by

modern values in India's villages and there is more discrimination against Dalits in rural areas of India than elsewhere.¹ All these factors, namely well-established methodology framework for fieldwork provided by the extensive literature on village studies, the relevance of a village study methodology to the problem of the caste system with particular focus on Dalits as well as the relevance of caste and village democracy discourse in the Indian politics contributed to my decision to base my work on Dalit movement and affirmative action on research in Tamil Nadu villages.

The core of this thesis consists of my own fieldwork in Tamil Nadu with combining quantitative and qualitative methods of social research. The quantitative method used was a questionnaire survey among population of two selected villages. The qualitative methods were interviews with villagers, Dalit activists and other relevant persons as well as participant observation conducted during my stay in the villages. My research is supplemented and confronted with published scholarly books and articles. I also used articles published in newspapers, journals and open internet resources as a source of information on the subject.

As the problematic of Indian caste is a vast field linked with multiple areas of human life and activity including religion, social organization and politics, its research is naturally opportune for a multidisciplinary approach and many different discipline of social sciences give us partial answers to questions related to the caste issues. As it is apparent from the attached bibliography many authors have influenced my own understanding of the caste and Dalit issues and they will be referred to as their works become relevant for the particular topics discussed. Here I would like to introduce only the most inspirational sources that influenced my own understanding of the topic.

The rational choice neo-institutionalism approach of Prof. Surbrata Mitra was the stepping stone in my theoretical reflections on caste politics and its impact on the governance in Tamil Nadu countryside. In this approach governance is seen as a self-generating side product of interactions between social actors who pursue not the governance by itself but their own egoistic material objectives driven by the rational logic of human ingenuity. With every game not only the particular objectives but the rules of the game itself are at stake and can be changed. Understanding of the context of the game is crucial for understanding the logic of the actors and may enable us to predict the outcomes. "*Straddling between order and anarchy, governance is a liminal category whose origin and existence are closely linked to self-interest and embedded values* (Mitra 2005, 42)."

Context of governance is understood and analyzed in two perspectives in my thesis. First, it is the state-wide context of Tamil/Dravidian politics, second it is the context of Tamil village societies with its caste hierarchy and set of practices ruled by tradition. There is an extensive pool of literature available on both subjects with some of them overlapping and covering both of them.

¹ This was also stated by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: "*Despite the formal abolition of "Untouchability" by article 17 of the Indian Constitution, de facto abolition segregation of Dalits persists, in particular in rural areas, in access to places of worship, housing, hospitals, education, water sources, markets and other public places which includes burial grounds and other common property resources in the villages.*" (CERD 2007)

Dravidian politics has attracted a considerable interest of Western political scientists since the movement rose in importance in the then Madras state throughout 1950s and became a considerable challenge to the Indian National Congress' dominance in the state. DMK in the 1950s and early 1960s seemed to be a radical party capable of becoming challenge not only to Congress but also to the unity of India. R. L. Hardgrave, in one of the first books on Dravidian movement for an English reading academic public (Hardgrave 1965), mapped the early phase of the DMK and provided an insightful analysis of the social roots of the movement among urban petty bourgeoisie. Hardgrave intercepted Dravidian movement in its radical phase before its radicalism blunted by power. Dravidian parties (DK and DMK) are portrayed here as representing radical separatist ideology inspired to a considerable extent by European fascism and similar to the fascist parties also in their organization structure built on charismatic authority of leaders.

Chronologically later were published works of Washbrook (Washbrook 1976), Baker (Baker 1976) and Irschick (Irschick, Politics and Social Conflict in South India: the Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–29 1969) (Irschick, Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s 1986) examining earlier, formative phase of the Dravidian politics before the Independence. Both Washbrook and Baker belong to the Cambridge school of historiography studying the history of the British Empire from the imperialist point of view. Their work thus rely mostly on sources originating from the British colonial administration, such as reports of district collectors to the governor of the Madras presidency. The picture of the origins of Dravidian politics seen from this perspective is truly Machiavelian with different political ideologies of both the Indian Nationalist Congress and the Justice party being just a cover for personal interests of the main protagonists. Irschick, thanks to his excellent knowledge of Tamil and Telugu that enabled him to study indigenous sources, provided a different, perhaps more balanced perspective. He observed Dravidian movement not only as a political but also as a cultural and literary movement and pointed to roots of some characteristic features of the movement such as anti-Brahminism and opposition against the caste system as a part of the Tamil cultural tradition.

Barnett-Ross took somewhat similar stand to Dravidian movement in her doctoral thesis when she linked the emergence of the movement to particular cultural, economic, and social bases present in the Tamil inhabited areas (Barnett-Ross 1976). Noting the highly competitive nature of southern society, with its frantic pressures for social mobility, but also the way that competition came to be mediated through categories of caste (and other forms of perceived ethnicity), she offered the concept of "*collective individualism*" as a defining feature of Tamil psyche that eventually gave rise to the success of the Dravidian politics.

Another important section of literature on Dravidian movement deals with the exceptionally strong nexus between the Dravidian politics and the film industry. Although other authors were more comprehensive and descriptive e.g. (Karthigesu 1981) and (R. L. Hardgrave 2008), M.S.S. Pandian's brilliant analysis of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MGR's personality cult through his carefully cultivated image on the silver screen and the contradiction in MGR's stereotypical role as a benefactor of poor and his anti-poor policies (Pandian 1992) is in my opinion one of the most useful books for anyone who is trying to understand how politics is done in Tamil Nadu. Impact of the MGR's governments on Tamilnadu poors was also examined and subjected to well-argued and devastating criticism by Joop (Joop 1992). Populist turn in Dravidian politics after the DMK and the AIADMK became two unchallenged political forces in

Tamil Nadu was very fittingly conceptualized by Narendra Subramanian who introduced two new terms to describe Dravidian parties' strategies to rule as "assertive populism" and "paternalist populism" (Subramanian 1999).

The above enumeration of relevant scholars researching from different angles on Dravidian politics is by no way exhaustive. Politics in Tamil Nadu because of its several particular above mentioned characteristics (anti-Brahminism, anti-Congressism, cultural nationalism, blatant populism and notable link with the film industry) has been a subject of a vibrant discussion among historians and political scientists for the last fifty years. Similarly blooming area of research are communities of Tamil or South Indian villages that have been an area of interest more of cultural anthropologist and sociologists than political scientists so far. As well as "Dravidian studies" the "village studies" is a vast field that cannot be easily covered in few paragraphs.

Among social anthropologists works of Béteille (A. Béteille 1966), Moffat (Moffatt 1979), Deliège (Deliège 1988) and Sekine (Sekine 2002) are valuable contributions to understanding of an intricate world of caste system and untouchability in Tamil Nadu. System of caste from the anthropological point of view is seen as a hierarchy in which subordination and dominance are marked by a set of status symbols and the hierarchy itself is very closely linked to religious beliefs and practices. The major theoretical dispute of the cultural anthropology related to the caste system and untouchability has been whether untouchables share the same set of cultural values and beliefs with upper-caste and even though they may thrive to upgrade their social status as a group, they do it within the system and thus inherently accept it. This view associated with Dumont (Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus – The Caste System and Its Implications* 1980 [first edition 1966]), in which brahmin and untouchables as liminal categories of the same continuum, was defended in the field of Tamil studies by Béteille and Moffat² and opposed by Deliège and more recently by Sekine. Both Deliège and Sekine on the base of their studies of Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu came to the conclusion that Dalits are creators of a culture of their own which is in many aspects an antithesis of the caste Hindu culture in particular by being more egalitarian and less hierarchical.

Remarkable, although not directly linked to Tamil society, is the work of Margueritte Robinson based on her two-years of research in the village called Mallannapalle in Andhrapradesh (Robinson 1988). She examined the power relations and the caste system in the village, but she was little concerned with ritual and religious prescriptions. According to her sheer numbers and physical strength of a caste combined with its economic power play much more important role in defining a local hierarchy among castes than Dumontian religion based criteria of purity and pollution. The question "who can beat who" is the key for constituting the hierarchy among castes. I found Robinson's research in Mallannapalle very inspiring for my own understanding of local caste hierarchy in village societies and for preparing my own fieldwork.

While from the sociologists and cultural anthropologists' point of view untouchability and Dalits in Tamil Nadu are quite well researched topic, Dalit political movements in Tamil Nadu have not yet raised that much scholarly interest. With the present boom in Dalit studies all

² Moffat claims that untouchables live in consensus with the wider Indian culture and "*replicate*" it in their own. As a strongest evidence of this he finds the existence of "untouchability among untouchables." (Moffatt 1979, 153,216).

over India, of course, literature is available to Dalits and their political movement in Tamil Nadu but most of it tend to be apologetic and biased with social activism such as writing of Viswanathan (2006)³, Ravikumar (2009) or Meena Kandasamy.⁴ Hugo Gorringe is at present probably the most serious scholar on Tamil Dalit movement and his monography on the subject (Gorringe, Untouchable Citizens - Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu 2005) is so far despite a number of articles by other authors, the only comprehensive monography about the contemporary Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu. Gorringe's monography is an excellent reference book for anybody interested in the topic and was of an immense use for me for containing factographic data on Dalit movement that are not available in similarly synoptical form anywhere else. My own approach to the theme of Dalit movement differs from Gorringe in the fact that while Gorringe is concerned primarily with the narrative of the genesis of the movement and its effects on Dalit community, my case study is primarily concerned with the impact of the Dalit movement on the society as a whole and the location of the Dalit movement within the political system of Tamil Nadu.

Finally I have to mention Ganapathy Palanithurai's work on village governance and panchayat administration as an invaluable source of information on these subjects. Prof. Palanithurai dedicated many years to collecting information about village panchayats in a number of villages and especially two of his books (Palanithurai, New Panchayati Raj in Tamil Nadu 2003) and (Palanithurai, Communities, Panchayats and Governance at Grassroots 2008) helped me a great deal to gain a general overview about the problems of village democracy in Tamil Nadu, to prepare for my own field research and to confront my findings with his published materials. Palanithurai's approach to village governance is, nevertheless, rather elite centered. He has conducted interviews with hundreds of panchayat presidents, representatives of Block, District panchayats and other civil servants, we however learn little from him about a common man's view. My approach differs from Palanithurai chiefly in this aspect.

1.2.1. FIELDWORK AND DATA COLLECTION

The main part of the fieldwork for this study was carried out in two villages in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The first village is called *Alaveli* (Tam. *ālavēli*) and it is located in the taluk of Sirkali (Tam. *cīrkali*), district of Nagapattinam (Tam. *nākapattīnam*). The second village is *Keeripatti* (Tam. *kīripattī*) and it lies in the Usilampatti (Tam. *ucilampattī*) taluk, district of Madurai. The villages were selected because both of them have substantial population of

³ By describing particularly Viswanathan's writing as biased with social activism, my intention is not in any way to scorn upon this type of writing. Strong points of Viswanathan's journalistic articles is their absorbing style and many first-hand information that he is able to collect. The purpose is, however, to confront readers with unpleasant reality of untouchability practice in Tamil Nadu, to raise sympathy and stimulate active resistance against casteism in society. He is not trying to be value neutral and this literature cannot be considered as a detached analyses of a social scientist.

⁴ Meena Kandasamy is a translator of Dalit literature and author of forewords to two books of Thirumaavalavan's (President of the *Liberation Panthers party*) speeches (Thirumaavalavan, Talisman - Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation 2003) and (Thirumaavalavan, Uproot Hindutva: the fiery voice of liberation panthers 2004).

Scheduled castes (*Paraiyars* in both villages) but the *dominant caste*⁵ of the village population belong to the MBC – Most backward castes (*Vanniyars* and *Thevars* in Alaveli and *Piramalai Kallars* – subcaste of the *Thevars* in Keeripatti). Both villages have their own village panchayat with the number of seats reserved to Scheduled castes according to their percentage in the population of the village and the post of the panchayat president reserved for a member of Scheduled castes on a rotational basis.

As the main objective of the study was to assess the impact of the rise of Dalit political parties (especially *Dalit Panthers of India - VCK*) on the governance at the local level, the very significant difference between both villages was the fact that while Keeripatti is a village with a very strong presence of the Dalit Panthers and one of the symbolical centres of the Dalit struggle for empowerment in Tamil Nadu, there are only few members of the VCK in Alaveli and the notion of Dalit struggle for empowerment is almost unknown to locals. This was the main criterion why these two villages were selected, representing village communities of about the same size both before and after being politicized by Dalit ideology over the distinctive line of caste.

In order to gain a more complex understanding of the problem I have decided to combine methods of both qualitative and quantitative sociological research. The qualitative data were collected by personal observation, case studies, interviewing village and political leaders and members of both SC and MBC communities. The quantitative survey was carried out in both above mentioned villages using the questionnaire with 32 questions regarding respondents' and his/her family's social and economical status, access to information, trust in state and community institutions, political participation and his/her opinion about the relationship between SCs and MBCs.

Only initials of respondents are given in the text since the permission to quote full names was not asked and was not given by the respondents. Exceptions are those respondents who are well known in their community or they are well-known public figures and substituting their names by initials thus would make little sense.

A pilot study was conducted from July to September 2005 and necessary changes were made in into the design of the study in the light of the pilot study. The quantitative survey was conducted from August to October 2007.

1.2.2. SAMPLING

As I wanted my questionnaire survey to represent the distribution of opinions within each particular caste community and at the same time to reflect the percentage distribution and thus the strength of particular opinions within the whole of each village, the method of stratified

⁵ The term *dominant caste* will be used throughout this study as it was first introduced by Dr. Srinivas in his article about Mysore village in 1955; "A caste may be said to be 'dominant' when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can more easily be dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low" (Srinivas, *The Social System of a Mysore Village* 1955, 18).

random sampling was selected. This method allowed me to maintain the requirements of constructing the sample randomly unbiased by one's own preferences as well as to keep the ratio between the two main caste groups reflected in the survey. The approximate number of the population in each village and the ratio between the major caste groups were provided to me at the beginning of the construction of the sample by local panchayat authorities. Nevertheless, the first obstacle I faced was that there were not any reliable lists of neither houses nor population in any of the villages. In order to overcome this obstacle, I sketched a simple map of both villages and counted the number of houses myself. A number was attributed to each house. These lists of houses were taken as a base for two-phased random sampling. The first phase of the random sampling was done simply by writing all numbers of houses of the particular community on pieces of paper, putting them in two boxes, one for Scheduled Caste (SC) and one for Most Backward Caste (MBC) community and drawing them randomly from the box. It was easy to make distinction between houses of particular communities as both communities lived in different parts of the villages. In order to keep the proportionality between SC and MBC respondents the number of houses corresponding to the percentage of a particular community was drawn from the box.

The second phase of the sampling was done after arriving to a randomly selected house. Names of all members of the household above 18 years of age were written on a piece of paper and they were attributed a number each. Numbers were put in the box and subsequently one of the numbers was drawn out of the box by one of the younger members of the household. The "winner" was awarded with a small gift (a pen) on the condition that he/she was willing to answer questions in my questionnaire. If the selected person refused to answer the questions, the ballot was repeated with the names of remaining members of the same household. This resulted in a slight preponderance of male over female respondents in my survey sample as women would usually feel more shy to communicate with a stranger than men. As I have realized during my pilot study that political opinions of women in traditional society of Tamil village reflected to the great extent reflect those of their fathers or husbands and that there were no significant differences in political opinions maintained by members of the same family, I did not consider this being a serious problem that could significantly influence the overall result of the survey.

Table 1 Composition of the survey sample

| The Total Number of Households and the Selected Sample | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Castes | Alaveli | | Keeripatti | | Grand Total | |
| | Total | Selected | Total | Selected | Total | Selected |
| Schedule castes | 164 | 53 | 145 | 49 | 309 | 102 |
| Backward and Most backward castes | 127 | 47 | 380 | 127 | 507 | 174 |
| Total | 291 | 100 | 525 | 176 | 816 | 276 |

Table 2 Gender composition of the survey sample

| Sex Ratio of Respondents in Alaveli and Keeripatti | | | | | | |
|--|---------|-------|------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| Castes | Alaveli | | Keeripatti | | Total per sex and caste | |
| | Men | Women | Men | Women | Men | Women |
| Schedule castes | 29 | 24 | 27 | 22 | 56 | 46 |
| Backward and Most backward castes | 22 | 25 | 67 | 60 | 89 | 85 |
| Total per sex and per village | 51 | 49 | 94 | 82 | | |
| Total men and women | | | | | 145 | 131 |

1.3. TRANSCRIPTION OF NAMES

Transcription of Tamil names in English has always been problematic and it is quite usual to find one Tamil name transcribed in several different ways in English. In this thesis I used Tamil names in their most usual English form; no matter how much this form corresponds or does not correspond to its Tamil original. This is for the matter of convenience of the reader who might wish to search for more information on the internet or in other databases where the correct transcription of a particular name would not be very helpful since the name is most often used in its usual though incorrect form. However all Tamil names are also transcribed in standard Tamil transliteration as recommended by the Tamil Lexicon in brackets when they are used for the first time. Thus for example the name of a Tamil leader is given as Naicker which is a usual English form of his name. The transliteration of his name in Tamil is given as *nāyakkār*.

The Tamil alphabet is transliterated according to the Tamil Lexicon as follows;

vowels: அ a, ஆ (஁ா) ā, இ (஁ி) i, ஈ (஁ீ) ī, உ (஁ு) u, ஊ (஁ூ) ū, எ (஁ெ) e, ஏ (஁ே) ē, ஐ (஁ை) ai, ஒ (஁ொ) o, ஓ (஁ோ) ō, ஔ (஁ௌ) au

consonants: க ka, ங ṅa, ச ca, ஞ ṅa, ட ṭa, ண ṇa, த ta, ந na, ப pa, ம ma, ய ya, ர ra, ல la, வ va, ழ ḷa, ள ḷa, ற ṛa, ன ṇa.

This transliteration is true to the Tamil graphic form of the words but does not always express correctly the real pronunciation of the word. I am not concerned for the pronunciation because usual English equivalents of all words are provided and reader who can speak Tamil will know the correct pronunciation from the transliteration.

In quotation of English written sources I always use the transcription of Tamil names as it is in given in the original although different transcription may be more appropriate or more usual. In case of the name of the state Tamilnadu or Tamil Nadu I use both forms as both of them are correct and permissible in written English. Tamil Nadu has recently become more preferred form as it reflects more precisely the Tamil name consisting of two parts (Tam. *tamiḷ nāṭu* i.e.

Tamil country). In an older context I therefore use Tamilnadu, when writing about recent issues I use Tamil Nadu.

1.4. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS AND SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

At this point I would like to briefly introduce the argument of every chapter of this dissertation.

This introductory chapter defines the topic of the dissertation, the methodology of the field research and formalities such as transcription of names. As it has been explained in more detail in the subchapter 1.1, this thesis explores the impact of the Dalit movement and of the caste based reservations in village panchayats on governance in Tamil Nadu villages. It does so within the theoretical framework of neo-institutionalism and it therefore questions what the effects of an intended action of the institutions concerned (i.e. primarily Dalit political parties and Tamil Nadu government) are within the given context. In the field work for this thesis both quantitative and qualitative methods of social research were applied on two village communities in Tamil Nadu that are compared for a number of factors categorized in three broad groups as economic, socio-religious and political.

“Dravidian movement and the rise of Backward caste parties and caste reservations in Tamil Nadu” is the title of the second chapter of this thesis which provides a rather thorough overview of the Dravidian movement’s development. Dravidian parties have for long dominated Tamil Nadu politics and the idea of social justice as presented by these parties have created a rather unique context in which Tamil Dalits’ emancipatory efforts are taking place. I consider it also important to provide this introduction in Tamil Nadu politics because of numerous references to it on the following pages.

Chapter three introduces the Dalit political movement in Tamil Nadu itself. My aim was not to give a comprehensive description of the Tamil Dalit movement development since its beginnings as this due to the long tradition of the Dalit politics in the state and its considerable fragmentation would be a task far exceeding the range of one chapter of this thesis. I was therefore concerned primarily with the presentation of the present form of the Dalit political movement in Tamil Nadu and its most important political force Liberation Panthers party (VCK). To discuss the VCK’s ideology I find it necessary to briefly introduce those of its main inspirations and predecessors that are less known than Periyar and Ambedkar. Also a short description of other Dalit and caste based parties competing for voters and influence with the VCK is provided in here.

Chapter four is an introduction to the analysis of two different contexts of governance in Alaveli and Keeripatti. First, I briefly discuss the development of understanding of the role of caste in Indian society by social scientists (predominantly sociologists and cultural anthropologists) and the importance of “village studies”⁶ for the scholarly understanding of

⁶The origins of “village studies” can be traced back to the interest of British officials in India in villages as a source of knowledge about the caste system and the Indian society in general. In the 1950s and 1960s a number of social anthropologists and sociologists from the United Kingdom, U.S.A. and India contributed

India specific sociological phenomena of caste system. Based on previous methodological approaches to the study of India villages, I identify three broad areas of factors conditioning governance in India villages. These are economic, socio-religious and political factors. All of these are then discussed in detail in subsequent chapters. Chapter four also provides general description of the two villages selected for the field research.

Economic factor of governance in the Indian village in general and in the two villages under examination is the topic of chapter five. Agriculture is still the main and for many Indian villagers the only economic activity and the power relations of domination and subordination are still to a great extent determined by the distribution of agricultural land. I observe the pattern of the land distribution in both villages and there resulting relations between landowners and agricultural labourers. It is notable that the category landowners and agricultural labourers considerably overlap with categories non-Dalits and Dalits. I describe changes in the land distribution in the villages since the middle of the twentieth century, a relative economic rise or fall of the observed groups. Another important factor observed in addition to the landholding pattern is the (non)availability of economic opportunities outside the agricultural sector as an alternative source of income.

The primary justification for the existence of the caste system in the traditional Hindu society is a religious one; the origin of different caste is explained by a series of myths. Although in reality the hierarchy among different castes is not determined exclusively by religious considerations, religion has an enormous importance in it. Socio-religious factors of governance in the observed village societies are analyzed in chapter six. Here I explain how the inequality between Dalits and non-Dalits is traditionally justified by reference to myths of origin, to what extent this traditional explanation of caste system is still accepted or on base of what it is rejected and how the different status is manifested in religious observances, everyday interactions between the different castes and by the access to sacred and public areas in the village.

I deal with the political system of the observed villages in chapter seven. I analyze not only formal political institutions of governance (political parties, panchayats, government offices, police and judiciary) but also the informal or even illegal ones (caste panchayats, local leaders – “big men”). Trust of the population of the villages in the key institutions of governance was measured using questionnaires and the match between their political preferences and the actual party-wise composition of panchayats was examined. A particular attention is, naturally, paid to changes of the political system in the two villages by the activity of the Liberation Panthers party (VCK) and by the effects of the reservations of seats for Dalits in village panchayats. The experiences of the two villages both with the Dalit movement and the affirmative action are indeed very different and confirm thus the presupposition that effects of the same measures may differ considerably in different contexts. While in the case of Alaveli a change caused by reservations is hardly noticeable, in Keeripatti it is apparent yet hardly positive.

to village studies. Prominent among them were F.G. Bailey, Kathleen Gough, William H. Newell, Marian W. Smith, McKim Marriott, David G. Mandelbaum, G. Morris Carstairs. S.C. Dube and M.N. Srinivas. Most of them reflected on social stratification and the institution of caste. For a seminal article on the subject of village studies I refer a reader to the article *Village Studies, Participant Observation and Social Science Research in India* by M.N. Srinivas (M. Srinivas 1975).

Conclusions drawn from my research are presented in the final chapter eight. The conclusive statements, which I state here, are of two kinds. One set of conclusions concerns lessons learnt from the introduction of panchayat reservations in the two villages regarding the favourable conditions (set of factors determining the context in which the affirmative action takes place) for Dalit emancipation through reservation. The second set of conclusions is more far-fetching. On the base of the observation and research in Tamil Nadu countryside as well as on my reading of available literature to the subject of affirmative action and Dalit parties in Tamil Nadu, I have formulated my assessment of the impact of the two on Tamil society.

Bibliography and appendices are provided at the end of the thesis.

2. DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT AND THE RISE OF BACKWARD CASTE PARTIES AND CASTE RESERVATIONS IN TAMIL NADU

2.1. SPECIFICITY OF THE DALIT POLITICAL MOVEMENT IN TAMIL NADU

Throughout India the term Dalit political parties or Dalit organisations has been coined for those organisations who claim to represent the interests of the lowest castes in the Indian society, in particular they promise to protect Dalit people from oppression and discrimination by higher Hindu castes and act against discrimination based on Hindu religious prejudices towards members of certain communities generally described as the practice of untouchability. On a national level the greatest attention has been paid to *Bahujan Samaj Party* (literally “*People in majority*” party) and her leader Mayawati. BSP is the most successful among Dalit parties being the single largest and at present (2010) ruling party in the India’s most populous state of Uttarpradesh. Mayawati and the BSP is thus sometimes portrayed as the representative and voice of Dalits in India. This understanding although flattering to and preferred by BSP is very simplified and the reality of Dalit politics in India is far more complex.

The word *Dalit* originates from Marathi and thus by its origin has been linked with the social struggle of untouchable castes from Maharashtra especially Mahars. Nevertheless the word Dalit has started to be used as a politically correct term referring to any of the groups that feels to be treated by the majority society as outcast, marginalised or subaltern. Under the common mantle of Dalit movement we may thus find groups from all over India, of different caste and social status and even of different religions as not all Dalits are necessarily Hindus. Despite this diversity Dalit movement is usually described as an ideology emanating from the ideas and teaching of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar known as *Ambedkarism*. Ambedkar has become a universal symbol of struggle for rights of discriminated people all over India revered even by those parties and organisations whose understanding of caste system, reasons for its discriminatory nature and the possible solutions for underprivileged groups to shake off this discrimination is considerably different to Ambedkar views and far more related to other ideological sources. It seems almost obligatory for political leaders of Dalit parties to say time to time a few words of praise about Ambedkar and statues of Ambedkar are important territorial markers of influence and activity of Dalit political parties in territories all over India.

The previous paragraph refers in particular to the case of Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu. While Ambedkar has a strong meaning for Tamil Dalit parties as a symbol of struggle against the caste oppression, their actual ideological sources lie much more within the tradition of local Dravidian political ideology than in the teaching of Ambedkar. In order to stress the differences between the ideologies of Tamil Dalit parties, especially Dalit Panthers of India and Ambedkarism and the close relations between Tamil Dalits’ political discourse and Dravidianism, I will need to discuss the latter two ideologies to some extent in chapters 2.2. *Beginnings of Lower Castes Political Mobilization in the Madras Presidency and the Emergence of Dravidian Movement* and 2.3. *Dravidian Parties from Parties of Protest to Stakeholder of Power*.

While examining the two ideologies, I will also touch upon the subject why Dalit Panthers of India despite ideologically emanating from the fold of Dravidian ideology find it important to distinguish themselves from the Dravidian parties and identify themselves as Dalit not Dravidian despite sharing for the most part the same ideology relating to the founder of the Dravidian movement Ramaswami Naicker, known as Periyar. This issue, however, will be more thoroughly dealt with in the subsequent chapter 3. *Dalit and Other Caste Movements in Tamil Nadu*.

2.2. BEGINNINGS OF LOWER CASTES POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN THE MADRAS PRESIDENCY AND THE EMERGENCE OF DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT

As many authors writing on subject of Indian history noted, Tamil country tends to be isolated from the rest of India by geography as much as by language. This was true for ancient Greeks who called this part of India *Damirica* and understood her as a clearly separated region of the subcontinent, as well as for largest Indian empires that until the British arrival never managed to include and subdue the southernmost tip of the peninsula and if they did (Moghuls during the reign of the emperor Aurangzeb) then only for a very short period of time. Looking at the political geography of the Republic of India today one has to acknowledge that this divide between Tamil Nadu and the rest of the country is still in place.

Since independence the major cleavage in the party system all over India has been between communal (represented by Jana Sangh and later by Bharatiya Janata Party) and secular forces (represented chiefly by Indian National Congress) but Tamil Nadu has developed its own political paradigm centred around two parties called *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* - DMK (*Dravidian progressive union*; Tam. *tirāviṭa muṇṇērra kaḷakam*) and *Ahila Indiya Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* - AIA DMK (*All Indian Dravidian progressive union of Annadurai*; Tam. *akila iṅṭiya aṅṅā ti. mu. ka.*) that have been intermittently ruling the state since 1967. A stranger may even find it very confusing to see any difference between the two parties because of their similar names, same party colours (black and red), party symbols and the same set of "founders and past great leaders" (E.V.R. Naicker and Dr. Annadurai) that both party venerate in public. To add more to the confusion, there is another handful of parties in Tamil Nadu that call themselves Dravidian. The most important among them are; *Dravida Kazhagam* - DK (*Dravidian Union*) - the oldest *Dravidian* party started in 1944, *Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (*Revolutionary Dravidian Progressive Union*; Tam. *marumalarchi ti. mu. ka.*) an offspring of the DMK emerged after its founder Vaiko's expulsion from the DMK in 1993 and last but not least *Murpookku Dravida Kazhagam* (*Progressive Dravidian Union*; Tam. *muṛpōkku ti. ka.*) started by a popular film actor Vijayakanth only in 2007.

The word *Dravidian* in its academic use denotes members of a language family in India where beside the four big Dravidian languages - Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam - belong a dozen of small tribal languages. The word Dravid (Tam. *tirāviṭa*) is of an unclear etymology, nevertheless by most authorities it is believed to be derived from the same Tamil word as Tamil

(Tam. *tamiḷ*)⁷. The term *Dravidian* was adopted after Robert Caldwell's *Comparative grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian family of languages* (1856) was published. This publication established the Dravidian language grouping as one of the major language groups of the world.

Dravidians are by some historians considered the original inhabitants of the South of India, while Aryan population arrived later on (according to other opinions Dravidian and Aryan migration in India took place at around the same time period). The idea of Dravidians as indigenous inhabitants of South India and Aryans as foreign invaders was taken over in the 1920s by the ideologists of the Dravidianism, especially by E.V.R. Naicker later known as Periyar, who claimed that only members of non-Brahmin castes are original inhabitants of the South of India - true Dravidians, while Brahmins, who arrived later, are de facto occupants who managed to impose their system of caste based hierarchically arranged social order upon originally egalitarian Dravidian society. This system called *Hinduism* or *Varnashramadharma* placed Brahmins on top of the social hierarchy and made the original population work on them. We may thus understand Dravidian movement at its outset as a South Indian form the "son of the soil" ideology - antireligious and militant against Brahmins. With later development, mainly as Dravidianism became the official ideology of the ruling parties in Tamil Nadu it lost to a large extent its antireligious and anti-Brahmin zeal and its original militancy.

2.2.1. NON-BRAHMIN MANIFESTO AND THE JUSTICE PARTY

Founding of the *Justice party* by a group of wealthy, upper caste, non Brahmin politicians from Madras in 1916 and issuing of a statement of this group known as *Non-Brahmin Manifesto* marked the beginning of the present political paradigm of Tamil – Dravidian politics. The main motive for founding the party and publishing of the Manifesto was a resentment of newly rich Non-Brahmin land-owning and business castes, of what they perceived as an unfair and undeserved dominance of Brahmins in all spheres of public life and especially in the colonial administration. Justice party blamed Brahmins that through their cliques they occupied all important posts in government services and made it thus virtually impossible for non-Brahmin candidates to enter. There can be no doubt that Brahmins were far more represented in most of the then existing political bodies than was their proportion in the population as a whole. For example in 1920 Brahmins occupied 56 % of senior and 59 % of junior position in the administration of the Madras presidency (Irschick 1986, 274). Whether this was caused more by the existence of Brahmin cliques in the colonial administration or Brahmins' natural predisposition to the "white collar" administrative jobs as some authors (e.g. Srinivasan⁸) argue,

⁷ "It is obvious that the Sanskrit *dr(a/ā)viḍa*, Pali *damila*, *damiḷo* and Prakrit *d(a/ā)viḍa* are all etymologically connected with *tamiḷ* (Zvelebil 1975, 53)."

⁸ "I have already noted that there is a certain amount of continuity between the traditional elite and the new or Westernized elite. Such continuity exists in a double sense: first, some members or sections of the traditional elite transformed themselves into the new elite, and second, there is continuity between the old and new occupations. A simple instance of continuity is provided when a son of a Brahmin pundit enters the professions, or when a chieftain's son achieves a high position in the Indian army, or a Bania's son becomes a leading exporter and importer of goods. It is only natural that during the first phase of Westernization each section of the Indian elite should choose a model of Westernization traditionally closest to it" (Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* 1995 (first published 1966), 71).

is actually of far lesser importance than the effect this perception of “Brahmin dominance” had on forming the Tamil political scene. In any case, this Brahmin preponderance in the government service served as an impetus for the growing resentment and for the political mobilization of Non-Brahmin castes.

Under the constitution where only several thousand wealthy Indians had right to vote⁹, Justice party was not primarily focused on capturing the following of the masses in whose name it was speaking (Non-brahmins) but to influence the policy of the British rulers in their favour. Justice party was asking for introduction of posts reserved for members of non-Brahmin castes in the administrative system of the presidency. British in general seemed to have welcomed the emergence of the new party as they also started to perceive Brahmins as a threat, due to their strong presence in the administration and practically hegemony in the Indian National Congress party. Justice party suited perfectly to the "divide and rule" strategy of the British colonialism, especially since in the *Non-Brahmin Manifesto* it pledged loyalty to the British rule fearing that if India gained independence from colonialism, British administration would be substituted by the "Brahmins' oligarchy" (Veeramani 1998, 16).

The idea of communal representation was thus accepted by British who supported the Justice party governments of the Madras presidency between the years 1919 and 1934 in introducing a series of legislative and administrative actions that made caste an essential consideration for applicants for the government jobs and that, in effect, substantially undermined the dominant position of Brahmins in Tamil society. An important act in this regard was the Government Order No. 1129 issued in December 1925. It set the rules for staff recruitment on communal basis in all government offices except of the Indian Civil Service. According to this regulation for every twelve vacancies five Non-brahmins, two Brahmins, two Muslims, two Anglo-Indians and one member of Depressed Class (Untouchables) should have been recruited (P. Kolenda 2000, 180). Only if there was no qualified applicant from the stipulated castes available, a Brahmin candidate could have been accepted for the post.

As a renowned expert on the Tamil Nadu caste system and politics André Béteille put it: "Perhaps the most important consequence of the Non-Brahmin Movement was the introduction of a "communal" or caste idiom into South Indian politics. (A. Béteille 1991, 90)" It was here where large group identities of the society divided in Brahmin, non-Brahmin and Backward castes (meaning "untouchables" in the period) emerged in Tamil politics for the first time.

2.2.2. DRAVIDA KAZHAGAM AND THE EMERGENCE OF DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT

After the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as a national leader of all Indians and due to the growing popularity of the Indian National Congress during Gandhi's *satyagraha* campaign for Indian independence, the Justice party was ousted from the provincial government of the

⁹ *Indian councils Act*, enacted in 1909, gave right to vote to these councils to Indian citizens based on the amount of income tax they paid which meant that only 0.2 % of the population of India could vote in these councils. This was increased by *Montagu-Chelmsford* reform in 1919 to 3 % and by *Government Act of India* in 1935 to 14.1 %. Right to vote for all Indian citizens above 21 years of age was introduced only by *Constitution of India* in 1950.

Madras presidency by Indian National Congress in 1937 and in the passage of time became absolutely insignificant. Its public image was badly damaged by the pledge of loyalty to British and since it has always represented interests of rich Non-Brahmin castes it was also disadvantaged by the enlargement of electorate after the enactment of the India's Councils Act in 1935 that gave the right to vote to 14 % of India's population compared to only 3% under the previous Montagu-Chelmsford reform.

At the time when Justice party was at the lowest ebb of its popularity and influence, E.V. Ramaswami Naicker (Tam. *īrōṭu vēṅkaṭa irāmacāmi nāyakkar*; September 17, 1879 – December 24, 1973) was elected in the position of the party president. His strategy how to save the party and make it more attractive for people consisted of two basic postulates; 1) radicalization of the criticism of Brahmins and Hindu religion and 2) calling for creation of a new independent country in the south of India built on a federative principle and including all speakers of all four main Dravidian languages, i.e. Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada if British were to leave India.

While Justice party was for the bigger part worried only about Brahmin preponderance in the government services and other positions of power, a preoccupation not directly touching most part of the population, E.V.R. Naicker (*Periyar*, Tam. *periyār* or "great man" as he came to be called by his followers) started to attack religion in general and Hinduism in particular as a root of social evils in India, especially casteism and the practice of untouchability. Unlike Gandhi Naicker did not want to reform Hinduism that he saw as a deceitful from the beginning to the end, he wanted to abolish Hinduism and religion as such. His rejection of religion is expressed in his motto which used to be cited as a kind of mantra at the meetings of his followers: "*There is no God, there is no God, there is no God at all. The inventor of a God is a fool, the propagator of God is a scoundrel, the worshipper of a God is a barbarian.*" Hinduism was for Periyar a tool of Brahmins that enabled them to control and to exploit the majority population.

Naicker was constantly disparaging Brahminical norms, abused Hindu deities, epics and scriptures and derided acts of godmen who claimed being inspired by God. The practice of denigrating and ridiculing religion included garlanding idols with slippers instead of flowers, beginning ceremonies at inauspicious hours, going around town or village in procession with an idol while beating the idol with slippers, displaying posters depicting deities engaged in sexual orgies, cutting off the sacred thread worn by Brahmins and even beating up and dishonouring Brahmins and visiting religious mendicants. One of his most notable acts was reinterpreting the Hindu epics *Ramayana* in a way that transposes the characters of Rama and Ravana as hero and villain. He claims that king of demons Ravana was "*a great learned man, a great saint, a master of scriptures, a merciful protector of his subjects and relatives, a brave man, a very strong man, a chivalrous soldier, a very pious man, a beloved son of god and a recipient of many boons*" (Naicker, *The Ramayana (A True Reading)* 1998, 5th edition, 35). Ravana possessing all these qualities was according to Periyar a great king of Dravidians who succumbed to Rama only to a huge numerical superiority of the monkey army. The *Ramayana* epics is according to Periyar a story based on real events of Aryan conquest of a Dravidian kingdom of Lanka but narrated from the perspective of Aryan propaganda. However Brahmins did not subdue Dravidians mainly by force but by deceit, i.e. by penetrating to the courts of Dravidian kings as their ministries and using their influence to spread their religion and system of moral values known as *Varnashramadharmā*.

According to Periyar before arrival of Brahmins and their religious system Dravidian society was largely atheist: *“From Himalayas to Cape Comorin, all pilgrim centres, be of Vishnu and Siva are of Brahminical influence. Where is a god or a temple exclusively for Tamils? This is simply of the fact that there had been no god, no temple, no holy place and no holy tank for the Tamils of ancient days. What are existing to be for the sake of the Tamils have been fabricated and institutionalized by Brahmins for the sake of their livelihood. They have done so, to maintain their religious hegemony and to keep us in perpetual subordination, besides fooling all of us”* (Naicker, *Is There a God?* 1996, 45). Evidence that old Tamils did not worship any gods finds Naicker in the fact that there are no names for gods that would be of a Tamil origin, except of Murugan and Arumugan which are Tamil names for Subramanya. Even that could be explained as Naicker believed that old Tamils did not worship any god but the quality of “beauty” (Tam. *muruku*).

New party ideology and its radicalism were to be reflected in new party colours and symbols inspired most probably by Japanese and European fascist parties¹⁰. Although there was some inspiration of Periyar and his Dravidian movement by fascism, this remained constrained mostly to the level of symbols, much less ideology and almost at all did not influence the practice. Some scholars see the similarity between fascist, especially Nazis’ ideology and the Periyar’s Dravidian ideology in the definition of an outsider and a hidden enemy (the Brahmins in the one case and the Jews in the other). Occasional calls of Periyar for expulsion of Brahmins combined with his admiration of Hitler and Mussolini made the parallel between fascism and Dravidianism even closer. Periyar himself supported the parallel and claimed the affinity to fascist movement. *“Not only did these claims draw further attention to anti-Brahminism, they helped Periyar distinguish himself from British liberalism even while tactically supported the colonial state* (Subramanian 1999, 120).”

Nevertheless, unlike Hitler’s anti-Semitism, Periyar’s portrayal of Brahmins as enemies did not have their physical elimination as a goal. Incidents of DK violence against Brahmins were rare and Periyar even maintained friendly relationships with some Brahmins, for example with the leading politician of the Indian National Congress in Madras Presidency Rajaji¹¹. The anti-Brahmin propaganda of DK was focused at protesting against the perceived Brahmin dominance over Tamil society not at provoking massive attacks against Brahmins. Instead of committing violence against Brahmins, DK supporters’ violent acts targeted symbols of Hindu religion and Brahmanism. It was a politics of heresy challenging the social and religious norms accepted by the majority of population. Shocking public manifestations of DK refusal of religion such as beating Hindu idols with shoes brought the public attention to DK and made Periyar the most popular non-Brahmin leader of the pre-colonial period.

At the same time these politics of heresy alienated many groups who shared the movement aims and who might have been otherwise attracted to the movement. The movement attacked symbols that much of the society held as sacred. Therefore despite the wide popularity that features of its militant form of protest acquired, the Dravida Kazhagam membership and its organizational base remained very limited. In terms of financial support DK depended as well as its predecessor the Justice party on the wealthy individuals who founded the movement. These

¹⁰ The new colors were red and black and the new party symbol was a red sun on a black field.

¹¹ Chakravarti Rajagopalachari (Tam. *cakravarti rājakōpālacāmi*; December 10, 1878 – December 25, 1972 – last Governor-General in India (1948-1950) and Chief minister of Madras (1952-1954).

were first of all large landlords (*zamindars*) such as Rajas of Bobbili, Panagal, Berhampur, Pithapuram, Chinnakimdi, Peddakimdi and Vekatagiri in Andhra, the Rajas of Ramnad and Sivaganga in Tamil Nadu and rich merchants and moneylenders, among them the most notable personality Sir Annamalai Chettiar and P. T. Thiagaraya Chettiar (Ramamurthi 1987, 11). Under the conditions of only limited franchise in the colonial India (0.2% of adult population after 1909, 3% after 1919 and 15% after 1935), Justice party was not motivated to build large party organization as the support of the few influential individuals and the patronage by British was more important in order to gain seats in the provincial and local councils than the support of masses.

Periyar saw Shudra castes or backward castes as the natural vanguard of the non-Brahmins. According to him they were the former rulers of the Tamil country before arrival of Brahmins and the spread of Brahminism. Shudras, many of whom enjoyed considerable power, were also the worst affected by the British acceptance of the system of Varnashramadharma into Indian legal system. *“Varna distinctions received scant attention from the courts during the early years of British rule but became a major factor in the administration of Hindu law after the courts undertook to administer it without intermediaries and directly from the texts. As a result of the centralizing, narrowing and nativizing traditions of the British legal system as it was established in India after the 1860s, varna distinctions were given status and sanction by the law codes. These varna distinctions helped to enhance the dichotomy between Brahmans and the rest of society. Both the modern importance of the varna divisions and the Brahman/non-Brahman dichotomy were the product of British administration (Irschick 1986, 27).”*

Scheduled castes or untouchables who were ousted to the marginal position in the Tamil society even before the onset of the British rule, did not suffer any such a comparable loss as Shudras. Since Scheduled castes were oppressed by the same system of Varnashramadharma as Shudras, Periyar urged his followers to treat them as tactical allies and criticized discrimination of Scheduled castes committed by non-Brahmans. According to Periyar Shudras should treat Scheduled castes as their equals and he argued that the Shudra had been manipulated by Brahman into a sense of higher status as a means to ensure his acceptance of the caste system. However, it was Shudra who stood in the centre of Periyar’s notion of Dravidian nation, not an untouchable. Periyar expressed this openly in his booklet in Tamil *ariviṅ ellai* (Eng. *“Limits of knowledge”*) in 1949: *“Dravidian or Tamil, is neither Brahmin nor Muslim or adi-Dravida. Dravidian is a Shudra (Naicker, ariviṅ ellai 1949, 25).”*¹² If we fully realize that Periyar’s struggle against the practice of untouchability was only a by-product of the movement that was primarily concerned with emancipation of Shudras and strived to disentangle Tamil society from all-pervasive influence of Brahmins and their social norms, then it is rather surprising to find Periyar’s ideology as one of the most important intellectual inspirations and foundations of the most powerful Dalit party in Tamil Nadu today - *Liberation Panthers Party*. It will be argued to a greater extent in the Chapter 3 that although Dalit Panthers in Tamil Nadu revere B.R. Ambedkar and there is also no shortage of local great historical personalities who were fighting for Dalit rights, Dalit Panthers accept Periyar’s interpretation of Dravidian history as an explanation for their miserable status in the Tamil society, considering themselves as “true Dravidians” rather

¹²In Tamil: *“tirāviṭāṇē, allatu tamilāṇē, atāvatu pārpāṇallāta, muslim allāta, ati-tirāviṭaṇallāta. tirāviṭāṇē! sūtirāṇē!”*

than descendents of subdued Buddhist population. This may be at least partially explained by the success and profound impact that Periyar's Dravidian ideology had in the Tamil society.

Anti-Brahmanism was not an isolated and original invention of Naicker and Tamil "middle class." Looking for the origin of the conception that Brahmins cunningly subjugated the indigenous population of India by imposing their system of law and religious order placing them at the top of the social hierarchy we would probably find it in Maharashtra in the works of social reformer and writer *Jotiba Govindrao Phule* (April 11, 1827 — November 28, 1890). Already in 1885¹³ Phule published in Marathi his seminal work *Gulamgiri* (translated in English as "*Slavery: In The Civilized British Government Under The Clock Of Brahmanism*") in which he described the domination of India by Brahmins as follows; "*The extreme fertility of the soil of India, its rich production, the proverbial wealth of the people, and the other innumerable gifts which this favourable land enjoys, and which have more recently tempted the cupidity of the Western Nations, attracted the Aryans... The original inhabitants with whom these earth-born gods, the Brahmans, fought, were not inappropriately termed Rakshasas that is the protectors of the land. The incredible and foolish legends regarding their form and shape are no doubt mere chimeras, the fact being that these people were of superior stature and hardy make... The cruelties which the European settlers practiced on the American Indians on their first settlement in the new world had certainly their parallel in India in the advent of the Aryans and their subjugation of the aborigines.... This, in short, is the history of Brahman domination in India.*"¹⁴ Albeit the ideology of anti-Brahmanism in Maharashtra is limited only to rather insignificant extremist organisations such as *Sambhaji Brigade*¹⁵, in present Maharashtra Phule is considered to be a founding figure not only by anti-caste but also by farmers', women's and rural-based environmental movements (Omvedt 2006 (revised edition), 21).

Phule and his teaching remains powerful symbol and instrument of protest of socially marginalized against the dominant castes and classes in Maharashtra. Periyar and his ideology, on the other hand, gradually developed to a state symbol and state ideology in Tamil Nadu. Though Dravida Kazhagam has never reached to "reins of power," it laid the foundation of the Dravidian nationalism, the ideology that later carried on by other parties than DK gained control and has practically engrossed the political arena of Tamil Nadu until these days. In the process it lost much of its militancy and dropped whatever was inconvenient and would hamper prospects of Dravidian parties to grasp power in the state such as its original separatism, anti-Brahmanism and atheism. Still, all Dravidian parties would profess to Periyar's legacy, declare Dravidian/Tamil uniqueness and pride, use the same party colours (black and red) and symbols. *Mutatis mutandis* – the explanation of the success of Dravidian nationalism lies in this marvellous mix of adaptability and conservatism.

¹³ This year was incidentally the year of convening the first Indian national Congress in Bombay. There were 54 Hindus out of 73 delegates and practically all of them were Brahmins (Strnad, et al. 2003, 775)

¹⁴ Jotiba Phule, *Samagra Wanghmay* (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1990), pp. 118-20. Quoted and translated by (Omvedt 2006 (revised edition), 17)

¹⁵ Radical organization named after legendary king Shivaji's son Sambhaji. Its members and followers belong mostly to Maratha (largest Dalit caste in Maharashtra) youths and consider themselves as ideological descendants of Maratha Empire.

2.3. DRAVIDIAN PARTIES FROM PARTIES OF PROTEST TO STAKEHOLDER OF POWER

Beside discouraging potential supporters by desecrating and ridiculing sacred symbols of the Hindu religion, there was yet another reason why Dravida Kazhagam despite Periyar's ideas being well-known not only in the Madras state but all over southern India never fared well in elections and never gained enough supporters to make it significant player in the politics of the state. It was a sound organizational base and a clear hierarchy of power below its leader's level which was sorely missing in the DK. Periyar treated the party as his personal patrimony, decided autocratically on any issue and his way of dealing with the party's internal matters resembled more to a prophet than a leader of a regular democratic party. Different opinions were being suppressed and those who did not absolutely agree with Naicker were ousted from the party. This model of party organization with all decision-making power centralised in one person; not allowing space for discussion or intra-party plurality of views could be functional only as long as the intraparty opposition was limited to few individuals who were not difficult to silence.

2.3.1. RISE OF THE DRAVIDA MUNNETRA KAZHAGAM

A strong group of intra-party opposition, however, developed among the young members of the party and centred around *C. N. Annadurai* (Tam. *kañcīpuram naṭarājan aṅṅāṭurai*: September 15, 1909 – February 3, 1969), a young editor of the DK newspaper *viṭutalai* (Eng. "*Freedom*"). Since Annadurai enjoyed a considerable influence among young party members, there was no other solution for Periyar but to accept the existence of the Annadurai youth wing among the file and rank of the DK. While accepting the leadership of Periyar, this group developed an independent perspective which paid greater attention to language, territory and the state. Beside of criticizing the low status of non-Brahmins, they were also critical to a wide range of social issues such as the destruction of crafts and growing land concentration and they did not blame only Brahmins for these but also the British. They saw the rise of Brahmins influence and Brahminical norms over a Tamil society as a consequence of the British Raj. In a book *āriya māyai* (Eng. "*Ariyan Mystification*") Annadurai expressed his conviction that "*it is only after British rule began to take root in this country that the speakers of Sanskritic languages (Aryans) were able to become government officials, lawyers and judges; and introduce their scriptures. It is only after this that the contents of scripture themselves became law.*"¹⁶

Entirely negative assessment of the impact of the British Raj on the situation of non-Brahmins led Annadurai to oppose Periyar's directive to mourn arrival of India's independence. As Annadurai believed that Dravidians were oppressed both by Brahmins and British and he expected that an independent, democratic and federal India would provide a more favorable

¹⁶ In Tamil: "*piriṭiṣ āṭci innāṭṭil vērūṅra ārampitta pīrakutāṅ, camskiruta molīyālarkaḷ (āriyarkaḷ), nirvākikaḷākavum, vaḷakkariṅarkaḷākavum, nītipatikaḷākavum, varamuṭintatu; avarkaḷāl, taṅkaḷ smirutiyaip pukutta muṭintatu. Ataṅ piṅtāṅ smirutiyaḷ kaṅṭatē caṭṭamāyirru* (Annadurai 1943, 59)."

terrain for his struggle for the independent Dravidian country. Annadurai also did not share Periyar's vision of Dravidians being primarily Shudras. Instead of racial notion of Dravidian identity based on the Shudra category, Annadurai proposed a cultural one based on a distinctive cultural tradition of the South of India as opposed to the North and at the first place on the Tamil language as a bearer of this non-Sanskritic cultural tradition. The norms that Annadurai appealed to were thus loose enough to mobilize large groups of people with considerably varied practices and gave DMK supporters a huge scope to appropriate the norms in ways attuned to their concerns.

Although DMK did not officially give up the claim for a separate state until 1963 and in 1956 at the party conference in Trichy included "*the right of every state to leave the Indian federation*" among the main program principles of the party, in reality the DMK's secessionist demand was never resolute and seemed to have served more as a tactical instrument with party leaders aiming to settle for considerable state autonomy instead. While some activists desired secession fervently, the party's primary appeal never lay in its secession demand (Barnett-Ross 1976, 1976).

The perspective of possible cultural assimilation of Tamils in the united and independent India preoccupied the DMK and the protection of Tamil culture and language came to occupy the central place in the DMK ideology. DMK suspected the Indian National Congress believing that an assimilation of Tamils in a pan-Indian Hindi culture was its secret goal and the Dravidianists fears of being assimilated undernoted almost hysterical reaction to every Congress/Union government initiative aimed at empowering of the status of Hindi language as an official language of the Indian Union and an eventual switch to Hindi instead of English as the only official language of the Union in 1965, a move presupposed by the Indian constitution. Switch to Hindi as the only official language of the Union and the efforts to introduce compulsory instruction of Hindi in Tamil Nadu schools became objects of fierce anti-Hindi agitation to the large extent organized and supported by the DMK. Although there were protests against the instruction of Hindi in the Madras presidency organized mainly by the Justice party and the Dravida Kazhagam already since the 1920s, the issue did not have such a big importance until it became a part of the DMK agenda. First, because Periyar himself gave only limited role to the Tamil language in his appeals (his family spoke Kannada at home), second, the language issue became more relevant only after the arrival of independence with the Union government efforts to substitute English which came to be seen as a relic of British colonialism with Hindi in all spheres of the state administration.

The anti-Hindi protests became a powerful symbol able to rally people from different castes and classes of the Tamil society behind the DMK and the party member base and popular support was growing hand in hand with the agitations in years 1950, 1952, 1959, 1960 and 1963. The protests culminated in 1965 since on the 26th of January 1956 (Republic Day) when Hindi was due to replace English as the only language of administration in India. Students were the most active part among the protesting people, two of the students – Arangan and Chinnathamby set themselves publicly on fire and died. This sacrifice provoked a fiery reaction all over Tamil Nadu. The protest did not consist only of non-violent means of protest such as hoisting black flags in many homes and public places and obstructing public transport but involved also public burning of the Indian Constitution and Hindi books. In some places mob vented its anger by attacking government offices, destroying and burning government buses and

trains. The reaction of the state Congress government led by Chief Minister M. Bhaktavatsalan was very strict and severe. He refused any negotiations with the leaders of the students and ordered the police to take “any necessary action” to dissolve the demonstrations. The police reacted by opening fire on protesters in many locations and killed altogether 66 activists (Subramanian 1999, 195). Despite the police brutality the riots lasted until May 1965 and ended only after the Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri assured people of Tamil Nadu that “*the Hindi will not become the only official language of India as long as all states do not wish so* (Barnett-Ross 1976, 132).”

The insensitive dealing with the anti-Hindi protests, Congress unpopular position on the issue of the introduction of Hindi combined with failures in food production and distribution, which hit the state in years 1964 and 1967, were the major causes of the loss of public support for Congress in Tamil Nadu in this period and led to the electoral defeat of Congress in the 1967 elections. The same reasons effectively used in the party propaganda brought DMK to its first victory in the state assembly elections. Beside the strategy of portraying itself as a vanguard against the Tamil nation assimilation by Hindi majority in India, DMK gave some populist promises about the price of rice¹⁷. Turning the party interest to issues such as cost of rice and erosion of living standards due to inflation brought party new voters from among the lower income classes of society, Scheduled Castes and women during the 1960s.

Equally important as the new issues that the party addressed was a new way of communication with voters via cinema. Although there had already been attempts to use the film for political propaganda in the British India, the impact of the movies remained limited. This was mainly because during the pre-independence period the “rural population was not fully exposed to the impact of films as cinema halls were largely confined to township” (Karthigesu 1981, 25). After independence this was, however, quickly changing due to the rapid electrification of rural areas under Congress rule.

Annadurai or Anna¹⁸ as he was called by party supporters was among first Indian politicians who could fully appreciate the power of the new media that unlike newspapers or party pamphlets was able to reach and address large illiterate masses of Indian poor. Movies were used for the direct political propaganda, many of the film scripts were written directly by C.N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi (June 3, 1924, since 1969 President of the DMK) or someone else from among DMK team of screenplay writers (A.K. Velan, A.V. P. Asaithambi, Murasoli Maran). “*We can cite Nalla Thambi (1949), Velaikkari (1949), Manthiri Kumari (1950), Marmayogi (1951), Sarvathikari (1951), Parasakti (1951), Sorga Vasal (1954), Nodi Mannan (1958) and Thai Magalukku Kattiya Thali (1959) as examples of overtly propagandist films inspired by the Dravidar Kazhagam and the DMK. These films, in keeping with the early ideology of the DMK, propagated atheism, Tamil nationalism (which was often couched in anti-North and anti-Hindi rhetoric) and anti-Brahmanism. The narratives of these films were peopled with womanizing temple money-lenders and villainous Brahmins*” (M. S. Pandian 1992, 34). The side effect of using movies as a

¹⁷ During 1967 election campaign DMK promised that the price of rice will be one rupee for three measurements (approximately 4.8 kg). Until this is achieved new ministers of the DMK government will work for free (Parthasarathy 1998, 448-9).

¹⁸ Tam. *aṇṇā* – literary meaning is “older brother” but also serves in Tamil to respectfully address an older or a socially superior person.

tool of political propaganda was that the personal popularity of actors associated with DMK slowly prevailed over the popularity of ideas that the party was defending.

2.3.2. ALL INDIA ANNA DRAVIDA MUNNETRA KAZHAGAM

Marudur Gopalamenon Ramachandran (Tam. *marutūr kōpālemeṇṇ rāmacaṅtiraṅ*: January 17, 1917 – December 24, 1984) known as MGR joined the DMK in 1953 and soon became its most popular public figure and symbol capable of attracting masses of people to party rallies. During his lifetime MGR acted in 138 films and in his most productive period in the 1960s he would act as a main character in six to seven films per year. In all his films MGR would very carefully built his thoroughly positive image, never accepting any negative or controversial role and not hesitating to change the script, dialogues or text of the songs in order to suit this carefully constructed image. “A characteristic MGR role was that of a working man attempting to combat everyday oppression. Thus he had acted as a peasant, fisherman, rickshaw-puller, carter, gardener, taxi driver, quarry worker, circus artiste, shoe-shine boy, cowherd, etc.” (M. S. Pandian 1992, 39). In his dress, speech, eating habits MGR becomes associated with masses of Tamil subaltern people and faces the same kind of difficulties and discrimination as they do in their daily lives while the villains in MGR films are also highly stereotypical; greedy landholders and village rich men, money-lenders, industrialists, upper-caste people full of caste prejudice. Needless to say that MGR always overcomes all odds, punishes wrong-doers, protects weaks (i.e. low castes and women) and in the end conquers the heart (eventually marries with) an upper-caste heroine, transgressing the traditional caste norms that strictly forbid relations between low caste men and upper caste women. M S S Pandian in his brilliant analysis of MGR political and film career deduces that there are three signs of superiority/subordination that recurrently appear in MGR films. “They are (a) the authority to dispense justice and exercise violence, (b) access to literacy/education and (c) access to women” (M. S. Pandian 1992, 43). Generally speaking these are the attributes that constitute the difference between dominant castes and subordinated castes in Tamil society. Dominant upper castes have access to all of these while dominated low castes and in particular Scheduled castes do not.¹⁹

MGR films became extremely popular among the poor, low caste, exploited masses of Tamil people who were often not capable to differentiate between MGR – the film character and MGR – real person and politician. Distribution of cheap panegyric autobiographies of MGR among people accompanied by painstakingly orchestrated public appearance of MGR further contributed to blurring of the difference between the film hero and the real man. Soon MGR’s presence became essential to attract crowds to DMK public gatherings, finance in the party’s

¹⁹ Upper castes authority to dispense justice is usually exercised by their monopoly over traditional institution such as village panchayat and it is also owed to close relationships with often corrupted representatives of the state – police and magistrate officials. Difficult access to education of low castes people is caused both by poverty of their families that compel children to work instead of attending school and by discrimination that children from Dalit families face at school by upper castes classmates and even teachers. As for the access to women – upper-caste landlords ranks at the first place in statistics about sexual exploitation and abuse of Dalit women (Irudayam, Mangubhai and Lee 2006, 7). At the same time love relationship not to say marriage between a low-caste man and an upper-caste woman (in Skt. *Pratiloma* – against the hair) is strictly forbidden and harshly punished by families of the spouses.

treasure and votes for the party candidates in elections. Annadurai is once supposed to have said, "*When we show his face, we get 40,000 votes; when he speaks a few words, we get 4 lakhs*" (Hardgrave 2008, 71). MGR's fans, associated in fan clubs (tam. *rasikar manram*) numbering between four and five thousand all around Tamil Nadu, provided to their idol an independent basis of support and power. Although the clubs officially did not involve in politics, "*most of them operated as close adjuncts of the DMK and have been deeply involved in electoral campaigns*" (Hardgrave 2008, 72).

Due to his charismatic command over a large portion of DMK voters MGR occupied a privileged position in the party's hierarchy, despite being officially only an ordinary party member. This was fully demonstrated after demise of Annadurai's in 1969 when a new President of the party was to be elected. Among several possible contestants the most likely candidates for the new President of the party were V. R. Nedunchezhiyan (July 11, 1920 – January 12, 2000) and M. Karunanidhi (Tam. *mutuvēl karuṇāṇiti*: born June 3, 1924). Nedunchezhiyan was one of the five founding members of the party (unlike Karunanidhi) and he was also known to be preferred by the deceased Annadurai also Annadurai had not formally appointed his successor. Karunanidhi, on the other hand, was only a number three in the party hierarchy at the time of Annadurai's death following not only Nedunchezhiyan but also K. Anbazhagan. Nevertheless, Karunanidhi was a master of playing behind the scenes for which purpose he would use his position as a party Treasurer that he was holding since early 1960s. MGR's decision to publicly express his support to Karunanidhi finally tilted that the majority of representatives of the General decided in Karunanidhi's favour and made Nedunchezhiyan and Anbazhagan to withdraw from the contest leaving Karunanidhi in charge of the government and the party. MGR's popularity was also a crucial component to the DMK so far biggest electoral victory in 1971 (Thandavan 1987, 104).

Despite MGR's significant contribution to the victory in the 1971 elections, he was not given any important position in the DMK cabinet and his nomination as a party treasurer was purely formal since in reality party finance was controlled by Karunanidhi. Karunanidhi was definitely less popular among party voters than MGR and he probably felt threatened by the MGR popularity even if MGR never publicly challenged him. Karunanidhi in an effort to strengthen his control over the party and to diminish MGR's influence among party supporters tried to impose his son Mu. Ka. Muthu as a new hero of DMK films impersonating characters so far associated with MGR. There were complaints from among members of MGR fanclubs that DMK cadres exerted pressure on them to leave MGR fanclub and join Muthu fanclub. MGR decided to retaliate by criticizing discrepancies in the party accounts and demanding to be given control over party finances in his capacity as the party treasurer. He also spoke against the growing corruption in the party ranks. DMK executive committee consisting mostly from Karunanidhi loyalists responded to this challenge by expelling MGR from the party (Subramanian 1999, 244).

Although MGR expulsion from the party caused some uproar among his supporters within the party, it did not result in a massive split in the DMK, only less than 10% of DMK quit the party because of MGR. Far greater effect for the party popular base was the loss of DMK support so far provided by MGR fanclubs. The fanclubs until then only loose associations without any clear internal structure, hierarchy and rules were transformed into local organisations of a new Tamil mass-party – Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) claiming

thus the legacy of the deceased leader Annadurai. In 1975 the party was renamed to All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in an effort to avoid a possible ban of the party after rumours that regional parties will be abolished by the Indira Gandhi government during the Emergency period (26 June 1975 – 21 March 1977).

ADMK certainly confirms the main postulate for the genetic model of political parties as defined by Angelo Panebianco: *"A party organizational characteristics depend more upon its history, i.e. on how the organization originated and how it consolidated, than upon any other factor"* (Panebianco 1988, 50). MGR fans, who provided the organizational base for the new party, belonged mostly to the lowest social strata of the Tamil society, to the urban and rural poor and many of them were Dalits. Their association in fan clubs was not motivated by any ideological considerations but by the sheer affection to their idol, they did not have any program beside expressing support to MGR in whatever he may wanted to achieve. When their idol told them to form a political party, they did so. Three basic characteristics of the party resulting from its humble, plebeian origins as MGR's fanclubs have been; 1] its charismatic leadership, 2] lack of consistent ideology and 3] membership of and appeal on subaltern masses.

ADMK was MGR's personal creation and his popularity was its main asset. He was the unquestionable leader of the party that was absolutely dependent on his ability to attract votes. Leaders of ADMK local branches were main organizers of MGR fanclubs who were fanatically dedicated to their leader. At the same time all of them were easily dispensable and could be at any moment substituted in their positions by other party members. Unlike Congress of DMK whose local branch leaders were often important community leaders (caste leaders, union leaders etc.) in their particular areas, ADMK branch leaders did not command any independent support from their areas. They were local leaders only in as much as they acted in the name of MGR and in that sense there was hardly any second rank leadership within the ADMK. Obvious advantage of this kind of centralist one man leadership was a remarkable stability of the party. While MPs' defectionism and party splintering have become main problem of India's politics since 1960s, ADMK did not suffer any of these. *"As the leader's charisma motivated mass support, all attempts to split the party failed during MGR's lifetime, contrary to DK's and the DMK's experiences. The ADMK underwent minor splits in 1976 and 1984. Finding themselves in the wilderness, the dissenters returned to the party after a few years in both cases"* (Subramanian 1999, 272). Because of MGR's paternalist leadership of the party where his opinion was a sufficient and only valid instrument for settling any issue, ADMK did not even have a written constitution and the lack of written rules and regulations became to be felt only after MGR's demise in December 1988. *"In the power struggles after his death, some of the contenders claimed that the party lacked written rules and regulations, but had only been guided by MGR's actions and decisions"* (Widlund 1993, 235-236). The power struggle for leadership of the party divided ADMK in two factions, one of them led by MGR's wife Janaki and the other by his mistress Jayalalithaa Jayaram.

Although MGR movies pointed at social injustices and problems of Tamil society, they were unlike early DMK movies not at all revolutionary. The problems addressed by his films were real problems of Tamil subaltern people, the universal solution to these problems was, nevertheless, purely fantastic and imaginary based on the intervention of MGR - the superhero. In this sense most MGR films are apolitical as they do not call for any kind of social change by mass movement or political action. They do not advocate for any kind of program which they

replace by inspiring complete trust and almost religious dedication to the leader. In the perception of the audience of MGR movies and his fans the difference between MGR on the screen and MGR the politician is non-existent. Popular biographies of MGR played an essential role in disseminating his personality cult and blurring the difference between the real man and the film hero. In order to construct the popular image of MGR as an ordinary man, who raised to his position of authority by virtue of his outstanding physical and moral power, they also never failed to emphasize his humble origins and add stories documenting the poverty he went through during his childhood. A telling example of MGR's self presentation as a champion of the poor is a poster released during the 1980 election that carried a photo of MGR embracing a skinny old woman. The message below the poster read: "*I am not a scholar who has mastered Economics. But I have suffered hunger and poverty in my life. I have climbed thousands of steps and sought employment and was tired of the statement 'no job'. I know the suffering of my mother who could not give us a ball of rice when we returned from school. Till my last breath, I will work [for the people] that no mother in Tamilnadu suffer the way my mother did. – MGR – Born poor – Brought up by the poor – Lives for the poor – The child of our home*" (M. S. Pandian 1992, 100).

AIADMK party was presented as a party by the poor for the poor. It did not promise any social changes, let alone radical social changes to its prospective voters, its campaigns and its public image were focused on showing MGR as a selfless giver both as a private person and a politician. He took a great care to give some money to people affected by natural disasters and would regularly organise distribution of aid among poor. He took even greater care though to ensure that there was always media present on these occasions that would further diffuse the message about his munificency. After becoming a Chief minister of Tamilnadu MGR introduced various welfare schemes that he skilfully used to his advantage and that were projected as an extension of MGR's personal charity. The most famous of these schemes was *Chief Minister's Nutritious Meal Programme* introduced in 1982 which covered one-sixth of the population of Tamilnadu. There was a steep increase in number of households entitled to buy rice and other groceries from government shops for subsidized price. While between 1965-1970 government spent on direct subsidies 283 million Rs, between 1980-1985 it was 3.875 billion Rs (Joop 1992, 73).

Paradoxically, MGR's government with all its welfare schemes for poor people did not improve economic conditions of Tamil poor at all. In fact, these lavish schemes cost the Tamil rich elite very little as MGR did not attempt to increase their taxation and instead were paid partly by the poor themselves through increase of indirect sales taxes (especially heavy taxation on alcohol²⁰) and partly by the Central Indian government and development agencies (Washbrook 1989, 255). Corruption during MGR's rule flourished in an unprecedented scale and became almost an "institutionalized" feature of the state administration. Legislators and party functionaries were allowed to influence appointments, transfers and promotions and the distribution of local contracts and agricultural loans which in turn contributed to relative economic decline in the state when compared to other Indian states. "*When MGR became Chief*

²⁰ "*In 1980-85, the AIADMK government, going back on its election promise, relaxed the prohibition on liquor consumption. This led to a sharp increase in the excise revenue. In 1980-85, it accounted for a substantial 13.9 per cent of the total revenue of the state. The fact that out 80 per cent of the excise revenue came from country spirits like arrack and toddy, which are widely consumed by the urban and rural poor, shows that it was they who paid the bulk of the excise revenue, which almost doubled from Rs. 110 crores in 1981-82 to Rs. 201 crores in 1984-85* (M. S. Pandian 1992, 21)."

Minister, Tamil Nadu was third in India's industrial production. In 1988, it had fallen to the 13th place" (Joop 1992, 72). While industrialization and green revolution were bringing some benefit also in Tamil Nadu, these stayed firmly with the rich. The decrease in percentage of people living below poverty line between the beginning and the end of MGR's rule was far from being significant (from 56.8% to 51.3% in rural and from 45.1 to 39.2 in urban areas) and it is owed more to a general economic growth in India than to Tamil government economic policies. The numbers of absolute poor (earning only 75% of poverty line income) remained steady at around 20 million (Joop 1992, 71).

Effect of MGR's rule on Dalits was similar to its fights against poverty. The government tried to pose as a protector of low castes and to cooperate with Dalit (Scheduled castes) associations and political parties. The welfare policies of the government were drafted in order to incorporate poorer Dalits who constitute the majority of their castes. They were given priority in recruitment for implementation of the lunch scheme and as beneficiaries of housing schemes, cooperative loans, and other welfare policies. The share of the welfare policies allocated to Schedule Castes was given a wide publicity by the government. However, *"the ADMK regime neither prevented attacks against SCs, launched by some BC groups and Hindu revivalists during its rule, nor responded to SC concerns in the aftermath of these attacks. As these conflicts were local in scope, the ADMK regime's inaction in these contexts did not undermine the perception among many SCs around Tamil Nadu that this regime was their benefactor"* (Subramanian 1999, 306). Perhaps more harmful for Dalit empowerment in Tamil Nadu than the lack of care to investigate attacks against Dalits were MGR's welfare policies of distribution of food and other subsidies (such as electricity for free) whose beneficiaries were not only but for a considerable part Dalits. This policy made over half of the state's population directly or indirectly dependent on state charity (Joop 1992, 75). In the end these populist distributive schemes did not contribute to any structural change of the situation of Dalits in Tamil society but instead encouraged among them passive mentality of dependancy and reliance on state.

When MGR died in November 1987, it was a traumatic event for the whole state. Normal life came to a standstill as people were too overwhelmed with grief. Some people expressed this grief in extreme way by mutilating their bodies, committing suicides, setting on fire buses, cars and other property. An anarchy reigned for a while. Internal fight for power in the ADMK started before MGR was buried and his funeral became part of this fight which prize was MGR's political legacy. It only highlighted the fact that the ADMK was MGR's one-man party, that it was poorly organized, lacking both a dedicated cadre and an ideology. The members of the ruling party who had been entirely dependent on MGR's popularity had thrived on considerable spoils related to being part of the ruling party. *"And as nobody wanted to lose these spoils there developed an unseemly struggle for power, and the ADMK party experienced split after split (Joop 1992, 79)."*

2.3.3. EMERGENCE OF BIPOLAR PARTY SYSTEM IN TAMIL NADU

MGR's popularity and charisma was the main and perhaps the only currency that the AIADMK could offer to its voters. Since there was no second rank leadership within the party, the political patrimony of MGR was claimed by his nearest persons – his wife Janaki and his

mistress Jayalalithaa Jayaram. The result of the power struggle between the two ladies was splitting the party in two. For a while it seemed that Janaki will be the winner of the competition after she succeeded to win over to her side majority of the AIADMK MPs and nominate a new government. Nevertheless, the number of AIADMK MP's loyal to Janaki after the split in the party did not make for the majority in the state assembly and Janaki as a newcomer to the world of politics was not able to compensate for the lost MPs by forging alternative alliances. She was perhaps thinking that as MGR's widow she could ride on a wave of sympathy created by the MGR's demise but this strategy did not work in the state assembly. After 24 days of existence of the new government it failed in the confidence motion in the state assembly. After the Janaki's government failure to gain the support of the assembly governor declared state of emergency in the state and imposed president's rule on Tamil Nadu on January 30, 1988. The president's rule lasted until January 21, 1989 (Rajayyan 1994, 85-90).

Imposition of the president rule was substantiated by the necessity to bridge over the political impasse when no party was able to build a government that could pass the motion of confidence in the state assembly, to calm down the situation in the state and prepare it for fresh election. There was no doubt an apparent need for extraordinary solution to the political crisis and declaring president's rule to substitute the rule of the state government by the direct rule by the Indian government is an extraordinary means intended by the Indian constitution for such situation of political crisis in an Indian state. It is, however, also true that the pace of the central government to prepare and hold the elections in Tamilnadu was very slow and combined with massive schemes of direct support implemented during the president's rule there are strong indices to wonder whether the central government's decision to impose the president's rule was really motivated only by its concern for the stability in the state or rather more by its concern for the future political fortune of the Indian National Congress in Tamil Nadu. Congress saw MGR's demise as an opportunity to regain popular support and political standing in Tamilnadu. To demonstrate to Tamil population good effects of the Congress rule governor not only maintained the generous welfare schemes such "*Chief Minister Free Lunch Scheme*" but even extended these schemes and involved new groups of population in it. During the one year of president rule in Tamilnadu, central government built 52,000 houses for slum-dwellers, 235 new school buildings and introduced a new microcredit scheme for poor families (Joop 1992, 80-81).

Congress also invested massive amounts of money in the election campaign in 1989²¹. Despite all the efforts, Congress did not succeed in gaining back its lost positions in the Tamil politics and the elections reconfirmed the paradigm shift in Tamil politics toward supremacy of the Dravidian parties. It was Karunanidhi's DMK who profited from the AIADMK split. In January 1989 general elections in the Tamilnadu state assembly the DMK won 151 seats (33.4% of votes), the Jayalalithaa faction of the AIADMK 27 seats (21.7% of votes) and the Congress 26 (20.2% of votes). Janaki's faction of the AIADMK won only 1 seat (9.1% of votes) (Press Information Bureau 1989, 5).

Beside solidifying Dravidian sway over the Tamilnadu politics, the election also opened a way for the reunification of the AIADMK. Jayalalithaa, unlike Janaki, was already and experienced politician when the split between the two factions occurred. She had held the post

²¹ „in some areas the Congress distributed Rs 15 per vote, as against Rs 5 by the DMK and Rs 2 by the Jayalalithaa faction [ADMK]. Only the Janaki faction (and another small party) appeared to be short of funds (Kumarasamy 1989)“

of the party propaganda secretary since 1982 and is believed to have played a major role in the AIADMK election victory during the period of MGR's prolonged hospitalization with kidney failure in the USA in 1984. The 1989 election results clearly demonstrated that she was the one with more mass appeal as well as more capable in forging pre-election alliances. In the eyes of general public she was by acting the main heroine part in many of MGR movies more related to MGR than Janaki who in spite of being MGR's legal wife was largely unknown in public. After the election debacle of her party Janaki retired from politics and part of her followers returned to Jayalalithaa's ADMK.

Since 1989 elections till today only two parties the DMK and the AIADMK have been able to win the majority necessary for forming the state government and the leaders of the two parties Muduvel Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa Jayaram have intermittently held the post of the Chief Minister. This has been in general a result of two factors. First, Dravidian movement succeeded to eliminate Indian National Congress by projecting it as anti-Tamil, elitist and serving to the interest of Brahmins while none of the remaining pan-Indian ideologies (communism, Hindutva) have for one or other reason ever rooted enough in Tamilnadu politics in order to become a viable alternative to Dravidian ideology. Second, the majoritarian electoral system with small one mandate electoral districts, i.e. first-past-the-post system encourages the the party system with only two relevant parties that have the capability to reach the majority of votes. Voting small parties is not rational in this electoral system. The system, however, also encourages pre-election alliances which give the small parties considerable potential to influence big parties' policy.

In 1991 anticipated state and national elections followed after Karunanidhi's government was dissolved by the central government for tolerating LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) training camps in Tamilnadu in January and the central government itself had to resign in March. During the election campaign in Tamilnadu Rajeev Gandhi was assassinated by an LTTE suicide terrorist. The wave of criticism against the DMK for its previous support to the LTTE helped Jayalalithaa to win the 1991 election in an unprecedented sweep capturing 224 seats of the 232 contested while the DMK won only one.

Elections in 1996 brought the alliance of the AIADMK with the Indian National Congress, while the DMK was supported by TMC (Tam. *tamiḷ māṇila kaṭci* – a party splintered from the Congress) and PTK (Tam. *paṭṭāli makkaḷ kaṭci* – Eng. 'Toiling People Party'). The main issue of the 1996 elections was the allegations of corruption against Jayalalithaa that DMK skillfully used in their campaign. The DMK, TMC, PTK coalition won 211 of 233 contested seats, while AIADMK only four and Congress one. In November 1996 first of a series of charge-sheet has been filed against Jayalalithaa in a multiple corruption cases including illegally obtaining property belonging to a state-operated agency called TANSI. She was briefly arrested in December 1996 and released after few weeks in prison in January 2007. In October 2000 she was sentenced to three years of rigorous imprisonment and appealed to the verdict.

In 2001 voters' support shifted back to Jayalalithaa. Coalition of parties led AIADMK won 48% of votes with a tight lead before DMK coalition that received 47%. In terms of seats it meant that AIADMK coalition gained majority of 125 MPs over 105 opposition MPs led by Karunanidhi. Jayalalithaa assuming the post of the Chief Minister was initially pronounced unconstitutional by the Indian Supreme Court due to the pending corruption charges against her. Because of this the

AIADMK government was initially formally led by O. Panneerselvem (closely supervised by Jayalalithaa). After Jayalalithaa achieved having some of the charges against her dropped by the Madras High Court, she had herself elected to the State assembly in mid-term poll from the Andipatti constituency and assumed officially the post of the Chief Minister in March 2002. She managed to remain in power until the regular end of the term of her government. In the meantime M. Karunanidhi was arrested along with several other DMK party members on corruption charges linked to an alleged bribery during the construction of flyovers in Chennai. Karunanidhi's dramatic arrest was carried out at midnight on June 30, 2001 with the assistance of pro-DMK Sun TV and aroused a lot of attention and sympathy with the veteran leader of the party. Karunanidhi remained in judicial custody until July 10, 2001.

In 2006 DMK returned to power with a majority of 44.75% of votes against 39.91% polled by the AIADMK. In terms of parliamentary seats, however, this resulted in a overwhelming majority of 163 seats for the DMK led government as against only 69 seats for AIADMK. All corruption cases against Karunanidhi were closed but DMK government this time refrained from instigating new charges against Jayalalithaa who in return for a short time after her election debacle preferred to withdraw from participating at sessions of the Tamil Nadu State Assembly.

Tamil Nadu politics has apparently in the past twenty years followed a straightforward bipolar pattern with the two big parties rotating in power and their respective leaders M. Karunanidhi and J. Jayalalithaa alternately sitting in the chair of the Chief Minister or in jail. Behind this predictable pattern of Tamil Nadu politics, there is, however, a buoyant cauldron of many small parties emerging, merging and changing alliances. Charismatic appeal of the leaders of the two big Dravidian parties makes only for a part of the eventual success of their parties in elections. Building alliance and getting support of small parties, that are very often organised on a caste basis, is even more important than building one's own personality cult.

2.4 RESERVATIONS AS A BASIC TOOL OF DRAVIDIAN POPULISM

Beside emphasis on local Dravidian culture and the schemes of distribution of goods for subsidized prices or for free there is one more element characteristic for both major Dravidian parties and the Dravidian movement as such that has shaped to a large extent the nature of modern Tamil society and the character of the electoral competition in Tamil Nadu. This specific feature are the reservations of jobs in government administration and at universities for low castes both so called Backward castes and Scheduled castes. Officially part of the governments' effort for empowerment of marginalized groups of the society, reservations became a basic tool of populist mobilization of large sections of the Tamil society by appealing on their caste and promising advantage in access to scarce resources of education and government job in exchange for support in elections.

The purpose of this chapter is to sum up the history of reservation in Tamil Nadu and demonstrate how the system of government reservations was gradually expanded by political parties in power while encouraging the perception of reservations in the society as a currency in a clientelist social contract based on trade between large castes and power seeking politicians. In

this contract organized castes can win access to more job and educational opportunities in exchange for their votes. The paradoxical outcome of this understanding of positive discrimination policies of the state is that the concept of caste instead of being dissolved by social and economic upgrade of low castes is further fixed, strengthened and modernised as it serves as a basic tool of interest accumulation and replaces other cleavages²² in the society that usually form the political party system. Moreover the trading-off reservations for votes or more generally politicization of social schemes also influence the public perception of any new project for uplifting the lowest sections of society even if the project itself was driven by genuine intentions.

As already mentioned it was the Justice party who first came up with the request to reserve certain amount of jobs in the administration of Madras presidency for representatives of non-Brahmin castes. Thus the tradition of reservation policy in Tamil Nadu goes as far back as to 1924 when thanks to the Justice party reserved seats for non-Brahmin candidates were established for jobs in administrative services subordinated to Indian Civil Service in Madras presidency. Share of the reserved jobs in government services and castes entitled to reservation in the four possible categories ST (Scheduled Tribes), SC (Scheduled Castes), BC (Backward Castes) and MBC (Most Backward Castes) has been growing gradually ever since, especially during the rule of DMK and ADMK. In 1989, there were altogether 211 castes entitled to reservations that represented 73 percent of the population of Tamil Nadu. In the same year total share of reserved posts was 69 percent, from this 20 % for MBC, 30 % for BC, 18 % SC and 1 % ST. In no other Indian state reached reservation such dimensions. For the comparison suffice it to say here that the amount of reserved jobs as recommended by Mandal commission, that aroused so much passion in the early 1990s, should not exceed 50 %.

Washbrook argues that the logic of reservation policy in Tamil Nadu follows the clientelist pattern of medieval Tamil society. Instead of the king the government is the distributor of privileges. The privileges instead of rights over land and functions in religious rituals are access to government jobs and higher education through reservation quotas. Groups of clients are clearly defined by their membership in a particular caste (Washbrook 1989, 198).

Narendra Subramanian elaborates on Washbrook's thesis of clientelist nature of politics in Tamil Nadu and calls the manner of rule of the Dravidian parties the "*populist clientelism*". According to him "*the clients with whom mass parties transact are best regarded as groups rather than as individuals because parties direct patronage to key support groups and usually attempt to monitor continuity in support at a group, not an individual level*" (Subramanian 1999, 65). He identifies two different strategies employed by Dravidian parties: "*assertive populism*" and "*paternalist populism*".

Assertive populism urges excluded groups towards militant action to enter imperfectly inclusive public spheres. It creates entitlements to education, jobs, loans, subsidized producer goods (Subramanian 1999, 74). Assertive populist party engages in negotiations with caste and other social group organizations over distribution of such benefits in return for support in elections.

²² By usual cleavages I intend those described by Seymour and Stein in their classical book on comparison of political systems as: Centre-Periphery, State-Church, Owner-Worker and Land-Industry (Seymour and Stein 1967)

Paternalist populism encourages supporters to assume an attitude of reverence and gratitude towards the leader, party and state, depicted in the manner of a traditional patron, rather than to engage in independent militant initiatives... it appeals mostly to the lower strata and women, who are often unable to assert their demands independently. Its welfare policies focus on addressing basic needs of these groups (Subramanian 1999, 75).

Both DMK and ADMK combined both forms of populism, however while DMK focused more on assertive, ADMK practiced more paternalist form of populism. While MG Ramachandran tried for a short period in 1979 to define groups toward which state support should have been directed in other terms than caste (income less than 9000 Rs a year), this was very soon abandoned due to the massive protests of caste organisations and at the prospect of ADMK's declining popularity. To calm down the masses in the streets MGR's government indeed increased BC reservations quotas from 30 % to 50 % in 1980 (Subramanian 1999, 290). Even during the rule of MGR who could rely on his carefully cultivated personality cult and was therefore much less constrained by the electoral arithmetic of putting together support of influential caste associations, the caste remained the basic category for implementing the state redistributive policy.

Despite Subramanian's critical approach towards populist modes of electoral mobilization in general he evaluates impact of DMK and ADMK on Tamil Nadu policy quite positively in a counterpoint to the increase of the ideology of Hindutva in other parts of India. He says: "*DMK redirected mass Dravidianism from a politics of heresy to a politics of community... The populist turn was effected in such a way that ethnic notions highlighted the norms of middling status groups as central to the political community without promoting intolerance and ethnic violence*" (Subramanian 1999, 312). His study suggests that "*attempts to nurture culturally rooted, yet tolerant, visions of community, and to urge more exclusionary visions in tolerant directions are more likely to promote social pluralism than the approaches advocated by most pan-Indian secularists and followed, albeit inconsistently, by the Indian state*" (Subramanian 1999, 326).

Mitra's conclusion about the impact of Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu is somewhat more critical than Subramanian's when he understands the impact of Dravidian parties positive in the sense of firmly establishing state identity and negative in terms of governance performance. He writes that "*in the final analysis, compared to Punjab, where the issue of regional identity remains contested, the Tamil identity of Tamil Nadu has become incontrovertibly established. But the institutional arrangements that bridge regional identity with governance in everyday life are not in place. The result is a deep sense of insecurity and anxiety that marks both the wielders of power and their opponents*" (Mitra 2005, 124).

Gorringe gives quite negative assessment of the impact of Dravidian parties' rule on Tamil society. This is given mostly by his major concern of the impact of the Dravidian rule on social cohesion and incorporation of marginal groups in Tamilnadu: "*I argue that Dravidian parties have failed to create an open, democratic and plural society, and that the proliferation of Dalit and other parties is, in part, an attempt to extend the scope of Tamil politics. The egalitarian emphasis of Dravidian rhetoric has not translated into social practice and the incorporation of Dalits into a system of state patronage does not equate to an extension of democratic*

participation“ (Gorringe, *Untouchable Citizens - Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu* 2005, 80).

In my opinion, it must be admitted that both major Tamil parties DMK and AIADMK have very similar ideology and neither of them represents any distinctive class or broader group of society. The base of the electoral politics in Tamil Nadu consists of negotiating between political parties and various caste based organizations over support in elections and the effort of all political parties to please important castes with promises of some kinds of benefits for their members. This is perhaps the main reason for the electorate volatility in Tamil Nadu. The “identity of collective individualism” described by Barnett-Ross (Barnett-Ross 1976, 252-3) has been the main obstacle to the development of a modern citizen identity based on different values than the caste. The policy of reservations in government jobs and educational institutions has been used as the instrument for corrupting members of the majority non-Brahmin classes of Tamil society and they have helped to foster caste identities and caste interest groups. While populist clientelism of both major Dravidian parties may have the positive effect of rendering harmless the nationalistic and separatist content of the original Dravidian ideology as represented by Periyar, it has also significantly contributed to fostering caste identities and intensifying inter-caste competition instead of eradicating caste system as all of the Dravidian parties promised. The magnitude of violence generated by the caste problems in Tamil Nadu have often resulted from the fierce competition over scarce job opportunities in government sector or over quotas at educational institutions and it is comparable to violence generated by ethnic and religious issues in other states in India. Understanding the mechanism how anti-caste political discourse and affirmative action policy founded on caste criteria helps to consolidate caste identities and place them in the centre of the political arena is essential to stop wondering why after years of the ideological influence of Dravidian parties and their extensive policies of all kinds of benefits including job and educational reservations for lower castes Tamil Nadu belongs among five states with the highest number of violent crimes against Dalits²³. The violence is there not despite the affirmative action policies but at least partially because of them.

“Untouchables” were excluded from the competition with other castes due to their ritual pollution in medieval Tamil Nadu, nowadays, however, they are involved in the government reservation policy as well as the major “Shudra” castes and become part of the competition among all non-Brahmin castes for privileges granted by the state. The reservations for SC/ST, however, lose their original sense of neutralizing SC/ST’s handicap caused by the denial of opportunity for development in the past. In “generous” government reservation schemes SC/ST have become just one of the many groups of clients of the two alternately ruling political parties. Under such circumstances benefits of reservations are more than questionable.

²³ Among others the high rate of crime against Dalits is criticized in the National Human Rights Commission report (Saxena 2004, 35-37).

3. DALIT AND OTHER CASTE MOVEMENTS IN TAMIL NADU

To provide a thorough overview of a Dalit / untouchable emancipation movement among Tamils is a task suited to a more voluminous monograph and it is impossible to cover the topic in one chapter. Although the word Dalit is of a relatively recent origin and political parties claiming to be “Dalit parties” emerged in Tamil Nadu only after 1980s, the category of caste and thereof resulting inequalities and injustices, of which untouchability is the most appalling one, have always attracted attention of many publicly active men in the Tamil speaking area. Dalit activists often consider Buddhism and Jainism as the first anti-caste movements. Several more philosophical and religious systems put caste and untouchability in question stemming from the indigenous tradition such as Bhakti with the Saint Nandanar challenging the upper caste monopoly of God or foreign origin such as Islam, Christianity, liberalism and Marxism. After the emergence of modern political parties in Tamil countries most of them would criticize the caste system and the practice of untouchability from different ideological perspectives and most of them would be called casteists and hypocrites by their adversaries. For sure the caste system and untouchability have always been so ubiquitous and persistent as at the same time it has been constantly challenged in the Tamil public sphere.

My aspiration here is more modest than to provide an exhausting analysis of anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements in the Tamil country. Considering the Liberation Panthers Party as the main representative of the Dalit political movement in Tamil Nadu at present-day, my aim in this chapter is to give an overview of the main political and ideological sources that have inspired the emergence of the party and contributed significantly to its discourse today.

3.1. SOURCES OF THE PRESENT DALIT POLITICAL MOVEMENT IN TAMIL NADU

The main ideological sources of the Liberation Panthers Party and of the present Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu in general can be divided into three broad groups: 1) legacy of earlier Tamil Dalit social reformers 2) legacy of B.R. Ambedkar and Dalit Panthers' movement in Maharashtra 3) legacy of Periyarism. Since earlier Dalit social reformers, whose ideas echo in speeches of VCK leaders today, are to a large extent unknown in the English written literature, I deem it necessary to dedicate some space to introduce them. On the other hand Ambedkar and Periyar are sufficiently well-known and my interest will be rather to present their interpretation in contemporary Dalit discourse than to analyse in details their ideas. In chronological order the three most influential predecessor of the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu were Pundit Iyothee Thass (Tam. *ayōtti tācar*: 1845-1914), Rettamalai Srinivasan (Tam. *irattamalai cīṇivācaṇ* : 1860 – 1945) and M. C. Rajah (Tam. *mayilai ciṇṇa tampi piḷḷai rājā*: 1883-1943).

Iyothee Thass' given name was Kathavarayan (Tam. *katavaraiyaṇ*) and he was born in a Paraiyar family in the Coimbatore district. His grandfather was a butler to Lord Arlington and the whole family profited considerably from the favour of the grandfather's employer. Iyothee Thass had an opportunity to study and became a renowned scholar in Tamil literature, philosophy, Siddha medicine and gained also a very good knowledge of English, Sanskrit and

Pali. He started to get politically engaged on behalf of untouchable and tribal people since his twenties. His first achievement was to organise tribal people in Nilgiri mountains in a protest movement in late 1870s. During the first Census in 1891 Iyothee Thass urged untouchables not to get register as Hindus but as “casteless Dravidians”. His opposition against Hinduism resulted in his conversion to Buddhism and ordination by a Buddhist monk in Ceylon. In this effort he was supported by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) the first president of the Theosophical Society. The two men jointly founded Sakya Buddhist Society in Madras – an association which main purpose was to propagate Buddhism especially among low caste people and revive Buddhism in India. Iyothee Thass also launched several magazines and newspapers dedicated to fighting caste system such as *Dravida Pandian* (Tam. *tirāviṭa pāṇṭiyan*) and *One Paise Thamizhan* (Tam. *oṟu paicā tamīlan*). Later Iyothee Thass views have become increasingly oriented against Brahmins and he is considered as one of the founders of *antibrahmanism* in Tamil political discourse. This may have well been influence by his work being boycotted by the then largely Brahmin cultural Tamil elite. Iyothee Thass work fell in oblivion and was rediscovered only recently as a result of new interest of Dalits in their history.

Iyothee Thass firmly believed that Tamil untouchables were originally Buddhists. In this claim lies the importance of Iyothee Thass for Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu. Conversion to Buddhism can be interpreted as a return to their Tamil Dalits roots and not only as an imitation of an example set by Ambedkar or a mere escape from the oppression of the Hinduism. Leader of VCK Thirumavalavan wrote in an article about Ayothee Thass that “*Whenever Ayothidasar wrote about Buddhism he always referred to it as Tamil Buddhism because Buddhism in our State has a deep history behind it*” (Thirumavalavan 2010). The fact that Iyothee Thass name has been long ignored is according to Dalit organizations an evidence of the cultural marginalization of Dalits in Tamil Nadu.

Rettamalai Srinivasan also belonged to the Paraiyar caste and was a brother-in-law of Iyothee Thass. He completed his formal education in Brahmin dominated Coimbatore School of Arts without letting anybody know the truth about his caste origin. Being afraid that his classmates might come to know about his caste, Srinivasan became a solitary child with a passion for reading. In his autobiography he recalls his childhood as follows: “*The rules of caste were maintained with great strictness. Afraid that the children should find out about my caste, family and the place I live in, if I became friendly with them, I would sit somewhere outside the school, reading, until after the first bell was rung. When classes were dismissed, I would walk as fast as I can home, so that the students wouldn’t be able to keep up with me. Thinking repeatedly about the cruelty of not being allowed to join other children in play, I would grow sad and think about how to overcome this obstacle*” (Srinivasan 2011). Srinivasan became first an accountant. He established and led *Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha* later renamed as *Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha*. He became, however, best known later as a journalist and an editor of the newspaper *Paraiyan* founded by himself in 1893. His work brought him both condemnation and recognition during his lifetime. Because of his participation in the freedom movement an arrest warrant was issued against him in 1896 and a case was filed against his newspaper. In the end the case was closed with Srinivasan having to pay Rs. 100.- as a fine for his writing.

In 1904 he moved to South Africa where he worked as a translator in the courts of Natal. Srinivasan was working at the same court where Gandhi practiced as an advocate and became his close associate. After returning back to India in 1921 Srinivasan joined the Justice Party and

became one of its prominent members. In 1923 he was nominated by the British government to the Legislative Assembly, a position that he held until his death. During his tenure as a MLA he pushed through several important laws. These included the establishment of separate schools for children of the Depressed Classes and the 1925 Government Order that espoused the right of the Depressed Classes to enter into public spaces and buildings and to use public roads and wells. His efforts for improvement of untouchables lives was recognized by the colonial government that awarded him with several awards: Rao Sahib title (1926), Rao Bahadur title (1930) and Diwan Bahadur title (1936). Together with B. R. Ambedkar Srinivasan represented Dalits at the Round Table Conference in London in 1930 and joined the board of the Servants of Untouchables Society established by Mahatma Gandhi. Together with Ambedkar Srinivasan parted with Gandhi's opinions soon and left the Society to establish with Ambedkar's support the *Madras Province Scheduled Castes' Federation* (Anbuselvam 2005).

On the fiftieth anniversary of Rettamalai Srinivasan demise Dalit Panthers of India erected a memorial over his alleged tomb in Otteri, Chennai and called it "*The Field of Rights*" (Tam. *urimai kalam*). As well as Iyothee Thass Rettamalai Srinivasam unites in his personality fight for Dalit rights with indigenous origin of this fight. Talking about the expense related to constriction of the memorial Thirumavalavan said: "*But the various leaders here who make a living out of Ambedkar's name did not bother about this. It was Rettamalai Srinivasan who fought for the rights that Dalits can walk on public roads, that they can draw water from common well. Today, if it is possible to hold a public meeting – then our great leader Rettamalai Srinivasan, even before Revolutionary Ambedkar, got us this right*" (Thirumaavalavan, Uproot Hindutva: the fiery voice of liberation panthers 2004, 43-44). Srinivasan's memorial in Otteri has become one of the major sites of "VCK pilgrimage" and public gatherings.

M. C. Rajah (Tam. *mayilai ciṅṅa tampi piḷḷai rājā*) as well as the two previous Dalit leaders was a member of the Pariyar caste. In his generation M. C. Rajah was perhaps the most prominent figure among the fore-fathers of Dalit movement, but at the same time the most problematic one due his volatile stand on Communal Award in 1932 which was the critical issue of Dalit politics in the period.

M. C. Rajah completed his formal education at Christian College in Madras. He pursued his career in educational sphere first as a teacher and later as a member of several educational committees. Since 1916 he was a Secretary of the State of *Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha* and since 1920 until 1926 a member of the Madras Legislative Council. Between 1927 and 1937 he was a member of Indian Legislative Assembly. On the issue of separate electorate for Depressed classes (known as *Communal Award*) he was at the beginning together with Dr. Ambedkar supporter of the proposal, later however was persuaded to give up the demand of separate electorate in favour of joint electorate with reserved seats. He was instrumental in persuading Ambedkar to accept this solution which Ambedkar finally did with respect to Gandhi's resolution to fast to death if the Communal Award was to be accepted. Soon after *Communal Award* was declined and reserved seats in joint electorate accepted under so called Poona Act, M. C. Rajah started to regret his previous support to this arrangement. He even declared that "*our entering the joint electorate with the Caste Hindus under the leadership of the Congress, far from helping us, has enabled the Congress led by Caste Hindus to destroy our independence and to use us to cut our own throats*" (Kshirsagar 1994). VCK pays a due respect to M. C. Rajah and for example in 2009 his collected works were published under the patronage of the party. M. C.

Rajah is, however, not an object of the same reverence as Rettamalai Srinivasan or Iyothee Thass.

Dr. **Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar** (1891-1956) is undoubtedly the most important figure of the Dalit emancipation movement all around India. It would be futile to try to provide here account of his life and achievements as it would be an exercise which is both too comprehensive for the space available and unnecessary as it has been well documented many times elsewhere. His importance for Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu is three-fold 1) as a visible symbol of the movement 2) as its ideological inspiration 3) and as a symbol of solidarity with the broader pan-Indian Dalit movement.

Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu in claims a public space for itself and its members most often in the name of its great leader. Gorringer calls this “*symbolic or cultural approach*” of a political assertion of citizenship involving “*the construction of Ambedkar statues, the naming of residential areas as ‘Ambedkar Nagar’, the raising of movement flags, the celebration of Ambedkar’s birthday, the publication of Dalit magazines and the production of Dalit art festivals*” (Gorringer, *Untouchable Citizens - Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu* 2005, 197). Ambedkar’s name and his image serve as a distinctive brand of the Dalit movement. Placing of Ambedkar’s image, statue or name clearly indicates a territory or a sphere of influence of Dalit parties. Ambedkar as a symbol thus assumed a similar function for the Dalit movement as Periyar for Dravidian movement and MGR for AIA DMK. Although there are few statues of Rettamalai Srinivasan and M. C. Rajah, these local Dalit leaders and their physical appearance are too little known to be used as a landmark. Ambedkar’s face and name, on the other hand, had entered into Indian and Tamil consciousness as a symbol of Dalit struggle in a similar way as Alberto Koda’s photograph of Che Guevara became a worldwide accepted symbol for revolution. Erection of an Ambedkar statue has clearly declaratory meaning of Dalit self-assertion and it is likely to become an object of vandalism in areas where relations between Dalits and non-Dalits are tense. It is unfortunately not rare to see Dr. Ambedkar’s statue to be placed in a protective cage which is always an eloquent indication of the local relations between Dalits and the majority.

Dr. Ambedkar’s life and work is undoubtedly an object of a great respect and even veneration by all Dalit parties including VCK. References to and quotes of Ambedkar’s thoughts form almost compulsory part of any public speech made by members of the VCK. “*If the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal go in a vehicle or a bus, they will only shout the slogan, ‘Veeravanakkam, Veeravanakkam, Puratchialar Ambedkarukku Veeravanakkam’ (Salute, salute! Salute the Revolutionary Ambedkar)*” (Thirumaavalavan, *Uproot Hindutva: the fiery voice of liberation panthers* 2004, 43). Ambedkar’s ideas are not disputed, revised or criticized and the party seemingly follows firmly on the path indicated by the great leader. In spite of this apparent devotion to Ambedkar’s legacy, one of the most frequent charges against the Tamil Dalit movement in recent years has been that it has increasingly retreated from Ambedkarian universalism into a parochial Tamil-centric linguistic cultural nationalism. Indeed there is enough substance for these claims and differences to be found between the ideology of Ambedkar and VCK ideology.

The most striking are differences between Ambedkar’s and VCK’s opinion on religion and the origin of Dalits. Gail Omwedt sums up Ambedkar’s theory of social evolution in India as

follows; "(1) Brahmanism (the Vedic period, basically tribal in nature and characterized by varna among the Vedic Aryans, though this was not based on birth); (2) the 'revolutionary' period of Buddhism, marked by the rise of the Magadha and Mauryan states and bringing about a great advance in the status of women and Shudras whose position had become degraded in the last stages of the Vedic period; and (3) the 'counter-revolutionary' period of Hinduism marked by the Manusmṛti, the transformation of varna into caste and the complete downgrading of Shudras and women" (Omvedt 2006 (revised edition), 50). According to Ambedkar the practice of untouchability emerged as a result of the conflict between Hinduism carrying the principles of inequality, hierarchy and oppression and Buddhism as more advanced, rational, tolerant and egalitarian philosophy. Today India's untouchables are descendents of the Buddhist population of the Magadha and Mauryan period and the conversion to Buddhism, that Ambedkar propagated especially by the end of his life, was thus for untouchables a return to their own roots. All Dalits should therefore embrace Buddhism as a supremely pacific and rational religion of their own heritage.

When in 2002 Jayalalithaa led AIA DMK government passed the *Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Bill*, which was designed to restrict conversions among Dalits, Thirumaavalavan defended the right to convert to any religion and actively fought for this right in campaign for the repeal of the Bill. This was, however, only an issue of supporting the right principle. "*Religious conversion is a fundamental right for the Dalits, the sons of the soil, to attempt to change their cultural identity in opposition to Hindutva atrocities and casteist rampage. Religious conversion is the last weapon in the hands of the Dalit people, the cheri people, the proletariat*" (Thirumaavalavan, *Uproot Hindutva: the fiery voice of liberation panthers* 2004, 155). Thirumaavalavan's defense of Dalits' rights to convert does not amount to propagating conversions nor does he share Ambedkar's belief that Dalits' are descendents of Buddhists subjugated by Hindus.

According to Thirumaavalavan "*the immigrant Buddhists and Jains came here and began to dominate in trade, the Tamilians who were agrarians competed with them. The war between the traders and the agrarians finally became the Hindutva (or Saivite-Vaisnavite) war against Buddhism and Jainism*" (ibid., 156). In his version of Tamil Dalits' early history Dalits were descendents of pre-Buddhist population. Neither were they Buddhists nor did they worship deities of the agamic form of Hinduism such as Siva and Vishnu. "*Tamilians worshipped those who lived with them and died, by making them into gods and goddesses. That is how worship has started. That is how Aiyannar worship originated*" (ibid., 157). Such a theory is strikingly similar to Periyar's conception about Tamil pre-Aryan religion. It has to be, however, admitted that Thirumaavalavan's views on the issue of Dalits' origin and their religion is not crystal clear. In 2002 Thirumaavalavan said: "*From the time the Hindu rule was established in this land Buddhism and Jainism have not been allowed to raise their heads. Their annihilation and destruction was plotted and to make it permanent the practice of untouchability was conveniently created and followed continuously from generation to generation*" (Thirumaavalavan, *Talisman - Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation* 2003, 160-161). This sounds as if Thirumaavalavan was accepting the theory about the Buddhist and Jainist origin of Dalits and about untouchability as a method invented by Hindus to keep ex-Buddhists subjugated. Nevertheless, VCK has never propagated conversions and Thirumaavalavan has never encouraged its followers to become Buddhists. "*Viduthalai Chiruthaigal members are the religion-less, caste-less sons of the soil! They are the*

people of the cheri!" (Thirumaavalavan, Uproot Hindutva: the fiery voice of liberation panthers 2004, 155). Such a claim again reminds us very much Periyar's rationalism.

It is evident that despite Ambedkar being the symbol of the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, the movement itself is rooted more in the domestic political discourse than in Ambedkar's political philosophy. Exactly because of the rather domestic sources of the VCK ideology, Ambedkar as a symbol is very important for the party in order to provide it a link to the all India Dalit movement. In spite of different ideological premises, the basic goals of VCK and parties such as *Bahujan Samaj Party* or *Republican Party of India* are the same – empowerment of Dalits and the destruction of the caste system. This together with Ambedkar as an icon makes VCK a natural ally of other Dalit parties at the all India level and a natural opponent of Hindutva. Although VCK is primarily concerned with the rights of Tamil Dalits, its connection with the Ambedkar philosophy brings it within a far larger and more potent umbrella of Indian Dalit movements than it would be possible if VCK categorically insisted on the indigenous character of their issues.

As we can see in Thirumaavalavan's criticism of anti-conversion bill, his understanding of the Tamil past is very similar to that of Periyar. Both Periyar and Thirumaavalavan consider the same set of gods as indigenous, original deities of early Dravidians and both of them in the end reject religion and propagate atheism. The similarity is neither accidental nor Thirumaavalavan insolently uses the idea without acknowledging its author. The inspiration of VCK by Periyar is explicit and admitted. *"We shall not forget Periyar. It is my duty to say one fact. If it can be said that there is one community in this land which has the feeling of gratitude without any considerations of benefit, it must never be forgotten that this is the Dalit community. How many children in the cheris bear the name of Periyar? Do you know how many cheri homes have the portrait of Periyar in them?"* (Thirumaavalavan, Uproot Hindutva: the fiery voice of liberation panthers 2004, 169).

With regard to the fact that established Dravidian parties are objects of the fiercest criticism by Thirumaavalavan and VCK, it is certainly odd that the very founder of the ideology of Dravidianism is the biggest inspiration for VCK's ideology. Yet, Thirumaavalavan's criticism of Dravidian parties is not based on rejection of the Dravidian ideology but on the plea that DMK and AIA DMK actually betrayed the original ideas of Dravidianism by having become populist and casteist. Gail Omwedt fittingly summed up Thirumaavalavan's interpretation of Periyar's ideology in the foreword to the first publication of Thirumaavalavan's speeches translated in English: *"Periyar was progressive, he [Thirumaavalavan] argues, in his anti-Brahminism, his rationalism, his opposition to the caste system. Thirumaavalavan thus identifies the aspirations of Dalits with Dravidian/Tamil culture, seeing Dalits as the major force to carry forward a radical Tamil identity, rather than seeking to negate it. The major degeneration from the ideals of the earlier movement came, Thirumaavalavan argues, after independence with an initial compromise made by the DMK under Karunanidhi's leadership, a compromise that only paved the ground for the complete reversal under the self-proclaimed Brahmin woman Jayalalitha. With her, Dravidianism has turned into its opposite, with only the name AIADMK remaining a hollow mockery"* (Thirumaavalavan, Talisman - Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation 2003, xx).

Thirumaavalavan in fact claims to be the truest follower of Periyar. The VCK's reading of Tamil history and ideas that VCK propagates are Periyar's ideas with only one difference i.e. that

Shudras were replaced by Dalits as the “truest Dravidians.” Adoption of Periyarism as an ideology by a Dalit leader may be bewildering also on the ground that there is a considerable controversy about Periyar's own position on Dalits as it has been already mentioned in the chapter 2.2.2. Although Periyar did protest against discrimination of untouchables, he did not consider them to be a part of “the core” of the Dravidian nation. Then what makes Periyarism so attractive that it is worth of being adopted by a Dalit party? I believe that it is the unprecedented success and deep impact that Dravidianism has had on Tamil Nadu society. After more than hundred years of tireless and uncessant propagandist activity of Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu which was further intensified during more than fifty years since the two big Dravidian parties have been in power in the state, other than Dravidian nationalist interpretations of Tamil culture and history have become marginalized to that extent that they are very unlikely to be found attractive by masses of people. The depth in which Dravidianism is entrenched in the Tamil society is best documented by the astounding number of small political parties founded by all kind of new “leaders” who use the word “Dravida” in the name of the party, combination of black and red as their party colours and a portrait of Periyar on their banners. Even Dalits will feel proud to be Tamil and Dravidians in the first place before venting out their grievances of being treated as untouchables. Thirumaavalavan's clever mix of Tamil nationalism with claims for Dalit empowerment seem to have been until now a well working combination capable to attract attention and votes. In brief we can say that Periyar is as important for the Tamil Dalit movement ideology as Ambedkar is important for its heraldry.

3.2. VCK AND DALIT MOVEMENT IN TAMIL NADU

Dalit movement in India has probably been most often associated with *Dalit Panthers*. Dalit Panthers’ movement was first started by a writer and activist *Namdeo Laxman Dhasal* in Maharashtra in 1972. It was inspired by Black Panther Party, a revolutionary movement among black Americans and became a venture for the disillusionment of young groups of Dalits with the existing SC parties and leaders through its militant literature and art. The militancy of the party slowly waned away and the organization later split in into several groups to re-unite again in 2009 under the name *Republican Party of India (United)*. The movement of Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra inspired similar movements all around India.

In 1982, in Madurai, a Paraiyar leader *M. Malaichami* (Tam. *ma. malaiccāmi*) together with a group of dissatisfied Dalit leaders formed an organization called *Bharatiya Dalit Panther Movement* which was soon after renamed as *Dalit Panther Movement* (Tam. *talit ciruttai iyakkam*) – DPI. DPI was renamed again in 1999 as *Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi* (Tam. *viṭutalai ciruttaikaḷ kaṭṭi*) – VCK that is *Liberation Panthers’ Party* as an inspiration and expression of sympathy to the Sri Lankan Tamil terrorist organization *LTTE – Liberated Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (Tam. *tamiḷ iḷam viṭutalai pulikaḷ*). At present the official name of the party is VCK although DPI is still widely used. The personality of the party's first leader Malaichami was quickly forgotten after his death when he was succeeded by *Tholkappian Thirumaavalavan* (Tam. *tolkāppiyaṅ tirumāvaḷavaṅ*; born 1962) who gave the party its present organization and program. It was only under this charismatic leader, who is sometimes epitomized as "Che Guevara of cheris", that the

movement gained a momentum and gradually grew into the present position of the strongest Dalit party in Tamil Nadu.

Viduthalai Chiruthaigal started their activity with proclaimed aims of annihilation of caste, retrieval of Tamil identity, right to land, retrieval or reclaiming of political rights and boycott of electoral politics. The movement was intended to be a radical alternative to existing Dalit groups. Its leaders expressed frustration with the work of those who preceded it and promised to organize Dalits for a radical action. Gorringer aptly described VCK as *"issue based party"* in a sense that they *"articulate a coherent set of principles and demands, but incident sensitive, in that they react to the aggression of others more often than campaigning on issues"* (Gorringer, Untouchable Citizens - Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu 2005, 55). Thirumaavalavan was visiting villages in the Madurai region and began to learn about the problems faced by Dalits. Later the party started to highlight particular incidents of violence against Dalits or of deprivation of their rights and followed up on them so that they could not be dismissed by the police whom VCK has often accused of being caste biased and unresponsive to crimes where Dalits were victims and perpetrators belonged to upper caste communities. Panthers also reacted on acts of violence committed against Dalits in the region by staging of public protests. As Anbuselvam writes: *"With the slogans, "Refuse to be subdued, Break the fencing, Disengage, Hit back" and with war cries, the movement began to enter the nooks and corners of Cheries"* (Anbuselvam 2005, 13). A manifestation could be staged in front of government offices, a ruling political party's office or even in front of the house of a perpetrator of a crime against Dalits. There is also a disorganized, spontaneous form of protest by VCK cadres against the authority of the state. This includes causing of public unrest, damaging the property of the state, especially government buses. After the murder of the treasurer of the VCK Mr. Mudakanthan Pandi in Madurai in 2001 VCK followers staged a range of violent protests during which several state-owned buses were burnt and in one case a conductor of a bus robbed before he managed to flee (The New Indian Express 2001).

Beside serious violence against Dalits such as murder, rape, looting and arson VCK cadres would not hesitate to act on smaller cases that state authorities would almost certainly not pay attention to. A VCK cadre *Ariyalahan* (Tam. *ariyalakan*) from Mayiladuthurai described to me how in a nearby village a VCK protest was organised in front of the house of a Vanniyar man who beat a Paraiyar working in his field because of disagreement over the payment for the Paraiyar. The Vanniyar landlord allegedly refused to pay the full amount agreed for the work with the objection that the work was not performed in a sufficient quality. After the worker insisted on getting the full amount, he was beaten by the landlord and several of his acquaintances so that he could not work for several days. *"After his wife came to ask us for help, a group of thirty of us went in front of the house of the landlord. First I asked him to pay to the family of the injured the difference in wage for the work and also a compensation for the days of work he had lost because of being beaten. When he refused, we started shouting slogans and blaming him. We were there a day and a night sitting and shouting. After that he agreed to pay the compensation"* (Ariyalahan 2007). VCK would be also organizing occupation of Dalit land encroached upon by upper castes. Due to the direct character of their actions and frequent skirmishes between VCK and police, the movement soon got their violent and unruly reputation.

Among Dalits, the party soon acquired a considerable popularity, its cadres being seen as people who act instead of just talking. The danger of its "counter caste-violence" strategy,

however, came to be evident soon and exposed the boundaries and limits of such a strategy. The counter-violence strategy has restricted the movement to a narrow agenda and has forced it back upon its own caste or community. Despite the determination of the party to resist being branded as a caste movement, VCK appeals mostly to Paraiyars. Attempts to bring with the movement other Tamil Dalit castes have been to some extent successful with *Chakkiliyans* (Tam. *cakkiliyan*) but it met with little success among the second largest Dalit community of *Pallars* (Tam. *pallar*) who see *Puthiya Tamizhagam* (Tam. *putiya tamilakam* – “New Tamil land”) as their caste party. VCK has zero potential to appeal to numerically large Tamil low caste communities of Thevars and Vanniyars that do not belong among Scheduled castes but among Most Backward castes. Thevars and Vanniyars usually live close to Paraiyar communities and are therefore the main perpetrators of the caste violence unlike real high-caste such as Brahmins, Mudaliyars or Chettiyars who constituting urban-upper-class hardly ever come in direct contact with Paraiyars. VCK is extremely unpopular among Thevars and Vanniyars because of what is perceived as unfair and partisan favouring of Paraiyars and violent character of the party. Within Tamil Nadu VCK is therefore mostly limited to areas inhabited by Paraiyars, geographically covering the area from the northernmost parts of the state until a little below Madurai with the higher concentration in the eastern part of the state. Madurai is the centre from which the party has grown even if today VCK's headquarter is in Chennai.

Since its beginning the party has grown in a rather “organic” manner with a great importance of personal links between its members. Local organizations of the party in towns and villages started spontaneously under a patronage of senior VCK members by raising up a flagpole or a board with the colours of the party (light blue, red and white), with the emblem of the VCK (a Panther) and a portrait of Dr. Ambedkar usually accompanied by an image of the leader. Every local branch would have a secretary responsible for keeping up with the issues in his area and setting up meetings. Above local level, there are several district secretaries and also a number of *assistant general secretaries* in every area. There are two general secretaries of the movement. Thirumaavalavan as a leader of the party has an official title of its “convener”. The precise relations of power between senior positions in the party are quite unclear as the pre-eminent focus is on the leader. The usual communication within the party has a top-down character from Thirumaavalavan to leaders of various localities and the internal organization and decision-making processes of the party is rather “charismatic” than democratic. None of the senior ranks among the party leadership enjoys at least remotely similar respect as Thirumaavalavan does which effectively makes VCK a “one-man party”. A lack of intra-party democracy and focus on charismatic leaders is characteristic feature not only of Dalit parties but of all Dravidian parties and looking at the party fragmentation of Tamil politics one has to agree with Gorringe that “*the focus on big leaders, which reflects the dominant form of Tamil politics, itself leads to division and status competition*” (Gorringe and Karthikeyan, *Dalit Unity is Undermined* - Interview with Hugo Gorringe, Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh 2010).

VCK's leader Thirumaavalavan had studied chemistry, law and criminology at the Madras University and at the time of meeting Malaichami and joining the party in 1988 was working at a Forensic department in Madurai. He gained some experience in politics before joining the DPI when he was a student at the Madras University and was helping to organise a movement in support of Sri Lankan Tamils. He has always been a staunch supporter of the LTTE fight for the

independent state in the north of Sri Lanka and has seen the Sri Lankan Tamils struggle as an inspiration for the fight of Tamil Dalits. Besides being the leader of the party, Thirumaavalavan is also VCK's main and only ideologist. The political ideas that VCK carries on are contained in his speeches and conveyed to the membership at public rallies of the party members. So far he has published six collections of speeches; two of them were translated in English by a Tamil Dalit writer Meena Kandasamy. Thirumaavalavan is an entrancing, acerbic orator in Tamil. In accordance with the tradition of Tamil political leaders Thirumaavalavan has also made an appearance in film. So far he has acted in two films. He shortly appeared in a romantic film *Love Lady* (Tam. *aṅpu toḷi*) as a leader of a Tamil militant organization in Sri Lanka and later played a main character of a law college professor in a film named *Mutiny* (Tam. *kalakam*). Thirumaavalavan is not married (just like J. Jayalithaa or former India's president Abdul Kalam) which in the context of Tamil/Indian society adds further credit to him as a person that has sacrificed his personal life to be able to work better for the benefit of people.

Thirumaavalavan's political views/ideology of the VCK was already to some extent brought in while discussing the ideological influences of past leaders on VCK. It can be best described as an eclectic variation on Tamil nationalism. In its logic the annihilation of the caste system is possible only by establishing a truly Dravidian rule. Questions of national liberation and caste liberation are closely interconnected. Present Dravidian parties have considerably deviated from the original teaching of Periyar which showed the way toward establishing a harmonic, casteless society. Thirumaavalavan stresses the importance of emancipation not only for Dalits but also for other vulnerable parts of Tamil society such as tribal population and women. A true democracy in India cannot be achieved without a true equality of its citizens. The main enemy of democracy and equality in India today is according to Thirumaavalavan the political ideology of Hindu nationalism/Hindutva.

VCK's perspective on parliamentary democracy has been developing over the passage of time and is not entirely free of contradictions. Since its beginning until 1999 VCK boycotted both parliamentary and local elections. To distinguish their boycott from the apathy of others they would spoil ballot papers and write messages on it such as "*none of you is honest so none of you will have our votes*". Their rejection of democracy reflected their disillusionment with the system where elites across all political parties were manipulating voters and where legal forms of protest were not effective and would not bring any change. In 1999 Gorringer interviewed Subramani, a VCK activist from Cuddalore who summed up the prevalent VCK's position at that time: "*If you rear a calf with pigs, then the calf too will eat shit. That is why we reject politics. We can protest and gain from that – we can fight the governments from the outside. If the calf joins the piglets then the two become one and you cannot distinguish between them – both fall into the gutter. No matter who it is, this will happen – be it Thirumaavalavan or anybody else. Ambedkar said: 'if he entered politics he would not see his own people' – apart from seeking to advance themselves they will do nothing for their community. It is due to this that Annan has yet to enter politics. Even if he does, not all those who are members of the DPI organization will go with him*" (Subramani, 27 April 1999 In: (Gorringer, Untouchable Citizens - Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu 2005, 277).

The decision to enter electoral politics was not an easy one and many of the older members of the DPI disapproved with the move. It was a denial of previously built identity of a protest movement that is "above" the corrupted system. Thirumaavalavan would visit personally

all local organizations in 1999 and explain to members VCK's entering in the ballot politics by the need *"to prevent our direct enemies from harvesting our votes"* (Ariyalahan 2007). Even if some VCK cadres left the party in reaction to this move, the party has grown considerably since 1999 and new members and local organization have more than compensated for the eventual exit of dissatisfied members. In 1999 general elections and 2001 state elections VCK did not gain any seats but in 2006 Panthers won two seats in the Tamil Nadu Legislative assembly after having entered into an electoral coalition with the AIA DMK which Thirumaavalavan had previously heavily criticized as a main representative of the Hindutva forces in Tamil Nadu.

Since VCK entering the election politics their rhetoric regarding parliamentary democracy shifted from the complete denial of legitimacy of parliamentary democracy in its present form to stressing the fair representation of minorities and backward sections of the society in parliament and other elected bodies as an indicator of the quality of democracy. *"When democracy and power are prevented from reaching the subaltern masses, the Parliamentary democracy is only a bogus democracy"* (Thirumaavalavan, Talisman - Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation 2003, 27). In this context, one of the issues that were carefully followed by the party was the implementation of the reservation for Scheduled Castes and Tribes in Tamil Nadu panchayats elections. Since its introduction by the new *Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act* (1994) the filling of reserved seats by Scheduled castes has been a problem in many village panchayats. Caste Hindus in many villages were not ready to hand over their power to SC and they would instead try to circumvent the law by nominating loyal SC candidates while in fact maintaining the control in their hands. In some places panchayat elections were boycotted by villagers altogether because of the SC reservations. VCK was very active in highlighting these cases, supporting Dalit candidates in such villages and organizing campaigns in their support.

Two factors, however, still leave one with serious doubts about VCK's sincere commitment to democratic values. First is the already mentioned lack of internal discussion within the party and lack of democratic mechanisms within the party. Even after the party entered the election fray, it remained with the same internal structure where most decisions are taken directly by the leader. A second disturbing factor is its unconditional and unwavering support to the LTTE. As Roberts observed *"support for the LTTE's cause (if not their methods) is virtually universal in Tamil Nadu, although the leaders of the mainstream Dravidian parties tend to avoid the issue because to openly sympathize with the Tamil Tigers would risk alienating the Dravidian parties' allies in central government, especially Congress"* (Roberts 2010). Despite the sympathy for the LTTE's/Sri Lankan Tamil cause, leaders of big Dravidian parties do not express sympathy for the LTTE which is considered a terrorist organization by the Indian government and even occasionally expressed their criticism over LTTE's violation of humanitarian principles by conscripting child soldiers and using civilians as human shields in the final stage of the war in March to May 2009. Thirumaavalavan's support to the LTTE is on the other hand blatantly open and indiscriminate. He glorifies and idealizes the movement and its leader Pirabhakaran without any reflection of the dictatorial and violent character of the regime that LTTE imposed on people of Tamil inhabited areas in Sri Lanka resulting in the death of many thousands of people. When Thirumaavalavan referred to his compatriots about his journey to LTTE ruled area of Sri Lanka in November 2002 he praised the sacrifice of LTTE fighters: *"We come to know that till now, 17,648 Tigers have attained martyrdom [were killed or committed suicide in action]. All these Tigers have been buried with complete details, and every year from 20th to 27th November is*

declared as Heroes Day and homage is paid. The Sinhalese army has lost three times more than the Tigers. But the Sinhalese Government does not pay such homage to the military soldiers. Instead of calling the body of the Tigers who have attained martyrdom as a 'corpse'; they are calling it as a 'vith udal' (lit. the body which is a seed)" (Thirumaavalavan, Talisman - Extreme Emotions of Dalit Liberation 2003, 149).

Cult of martyrs is another thing that VCK copied from the LTTE. Victims of violence unleashed by upper castes on Dalits who dared to oppose their dominance are important symbols for the movement and become objects of homage and veneration. Party raises memorials at places of tragic death of Dalits and organize public rallies at the places on anniversary of the incidents. Two most important memorials for the movement where annual rallies are held are located in Melavalavu, Melur district²⁴ and in Venmani, Thanjavur district²⁵. Beside anniversaries of massacres, anniversaries of past leaders of Dalit movement are good opportunity for organising public rallies. The two most important of these anniversaries is April 14th - Ambedkar's birthday and January 6th - anniversary of Ambedkar's passing away.

Public rallies have tremendous importance for the vitality of the movement. The attendance at these events is generally very high with thousands of participants joining the rally. Huge numbers of participants create a sense of empowerment among those who are present. Sensation of empowerment as a member of the movement in turn fosters solidarity with the movement. In places such as Melavalavu, where the violent crime of the local caste Hindu majority on Dalit minority is still in a relatively fresh memory, the rallies serve also as a demonstration of Dalit power and expression of solidarity with people affected by the hostility of upper castes. Of course, public rallies by itself do not solve anything and may even increase the tension in the affected area. It can be assumed that non-Dalits will perceive these rallies as threatening and the interest of politicians and media as disturbing. During my trip to the Melavalavu village, nobody from the non-Dalit community was willing to talk to me about the issues related to the caste tension in the village. This by itself is rather revealing about the non-Dalit reception of the attention of outsiders, be it politicians, journalists or academics. Local Dalits, on the other hand, were more communicative and rather appreciated the fact that VCK rallies took place in their village. K. S., a young Paraiyar from Melavalavu told me: *"We still have a lot of problem with Kallars and there is a lot of fear among our people. At least once a year [during the VCK rally] Kallars need to fear of us and treat us with respect"* (K. S., 25 years; unemployed; Paraiyar man; Melavalavu 2007).

²⁴ A description of the Melavalavu massacre is given in chapter 7. *Local Politics and Dalit Parties*.

²⁵ An incident which is known as "Venmani carnage" took place in the village of Kila Venmani (Tam. *kīla veṇmaṇi*) in southern Tanjore district. It was a tragic culmination of a dispute between Dalit (Paraiyar) agricultural workers and an association of local landlords over the increase of wages requested by Dalits. The president of the landlords association, *Gopalakrishna Naidu*, enrolled criminals/goondas against the workers. In December 1968, Muthusamy, one of the leaders of the farmers' protest was kidnapped by Naidu's people and locked in a house in the village. People from the cheri, who came to know about the kidnapping, arrived to rescue the Muthusamy. In a skirmish between Naidu's gang and Dalits one of Naidu's people was killed. In retaliation Naidu with his gang set the cheri in fire. Some of the people fleeing from the cheri took shelter in a hut. Naidu's gang locked the hut which Naidu personally set in fire, preventing them to escape. All forty-four people inside the hut were burnt to death. Investigation of the crime was sluggish and in the end all of the accused including the main suspect Mr. Naidu were released by the Madras High Court.

3.3. OTHER DALIT AND CASTE PARTIES IN TAMIL NADU

VCK is at present the strongest Dalit political party in Tamil Nadu and it is the only significant Dalit party in areas populated by Paraiyars where I carried out my fieldwork. This is the reason why the focus of this thesis is among all Dalit parties on VCK only. However, Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu has since its beginning been splintered among dozens of other small Dalit parties usually linked only to one particular caste with a support limited to only a certain area of the state. Beside Dalit parties there are also caste parties that neither belong to the Dalit movement nor they come out of the Dravidian ideology. They represent Tamil Nadu Backward or Most Backward castes and as well as Dalit parties oppose the hegemony of the big Dravidian parties – DMK and AIA DMK. Their relationship with VCK and Dalit parties is both of cooperation and competition. In order to provide a more complex background about the important players in Tamil Nadu politics and in particular about the areas where my field research was conducted, it is necessary to at least briefly introduce the smaller actors on Tamil Nadu political stage.

Puthiya Tamizhagam - PT (Tam. *putiya tamiḷakam – New Tamil Society/Land*) is the second largest Dalit party in Tamil Nadu. The PT emerged from a fusion of Pallar caste association *Devendra Kula Vellalar Federation* (Tam. *tēvēntira kulam vellālar kaḷakam*) and several smaller parties. Devendra Kula Vellalar is a new name adopted by the Pallar caste. Through adoption of a new name the Pallars were seeking to relieve themselves from the caste stigma. Although both VCK and PT claim to be parties for all Dalits that fight for the abolition of castes in society, PT is usually perceived as a party of Pallars, while VCK is perceived as a Paraiyars' party. Ideology of the PT is very similar to that of VCK indeed. It also adopts ideas of Ambedkar and Periyar along with self-professed readiness for radical action in favour of Dalits. The strongholds of the party are areas with large population of Pallars, especially districts around Coimbatore, Ramnathapuram, Tirunelveli and Madurai. The party became most notable in Tamil Nadu by organizing a protest of workers from Manjolai tea estates requesting higher salaries in Tirunelveli in July 1999. The clash between protesting workers and the police resulted in the death of seventeen people who mostly died by drowning in the Thamiraparani river where they were pushed by the police (Viswanathan, *The Tirunelveli Massacre* 1999). The leader of the party is *Dr. Karuppusamy Krishnasamy* (born 1952). At present he is a member of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly where he was elected from Ottapidaram constituency, Tirunelveli district, in 2011 elections. First time he was elected in 1996 from the same constituency.

Tamizhagam Arundhadiar Youth Front - TAYF (Tam. *tamiḷakam aruntātiyar ilaiṅar iyakkam*) is one of the largest of several parties that have been trying to organize the *Arunthathiyar* or *Sakkiliar* caste (Tam. *aruntātiyar* or *cakkiliyar*). TAYF is based in Madurai. Sakkiliars are the third most numerous Dalit caste in Tamil Nadu and they are considered to be subordinated to Paraiyars and Pallars in the caste hierarchy. Because of the oppression by other higher Scheduled Castes, Sakkiliars are not particularly attracted neither to VCK nor to PT. Various efforts to unite all Sakkiliars under the fold of one Sakkiliar party have not been successful so far either. “*Since Arunthathiyars are the poorest among the other two Dalit groups, it is not the identity crisis, but the poverty among Arunthathiyars and the practical problems associated with mobilizing the poor stood in the way of giving rise to a strong leadership*” (Rengasamy 2003, 3).

Tiyagi Immanuel Peravai – TIP (Tam. *tiyāki imanuvēl pērāvai* – *Association of the Martyr Immanuel*) is a local political party confined primarily to Ramnathapuram district named after a Dalit political leader who was murdered in 1957. *Immanuel Sekaran* (1924-1957) was a Pallar political activist from a village called Paramakudi in Ramanathapuram. He participated in the *Quit India Movement* and later served in the Indian Army. After having returned to his native village he became a leader of the Youths Congress there. He worked for uplifting of Dalits and together with Dr. Ambedkar organized the *Annihilation of Caste Conference* in Madurai. During 1957 general elections campaign relationships between Dalits and Thevar community in the Ramnathapuram district worsened considerably as both groups rallied in support of two different candidates from Indian National Congress and All India Forward Bloc. On September 10, 1957 Ramnathapuram District Collector made arrangements of talks between Dalit and non-Dalit leaders but during the talks Immanuel Sekaran (Indian National Congress) offended the respected leader of the Thevar community *U. Muthuramalinga Thevar* (All India Forward Bloc). The next day, Immanuel was murdered on the way to his home and Muthuramalinga Thevar was accused of having arranged his murder. The accusation could not be proved and M. Thevar was acquitted after two years spent in jail. The murder caused violent riots between Dalits and non-Dalits in the area known as “*Ramnath riots*” resulting in the deaths of dozens of people. Although TIP’s range of influence is fairly local, the personality of Immanuel is important as a symbol of resistance against the Thevar dominance in the area.

All India Forward Block - FB is a leftist nationalist party in India founded by Subhas Chandra Bose in 1939 as a faction of the Indian National Congress. Although FB is an all-India party, it has gone through a history of splintering and re-unification and its support is restricted to few localities. In Tamil Nadu, the party has been traditionally supported by members of Mukkulathor (Tam. *mukkulattōr*) castes also called also as Thevar (Tam. *tēvar*) and its stronghold is in the regions of Madurai and Ramnathapuram. In these areas the party has been traditionally supported by the *All India Thevar Peravai* (Tam. *akila intiya tēvar pērāvai* – *All India Thevar Assembly*), a caste association of Mukkulathors. The popularity of FB among Tamil Nadu Thevars is due to the legacy of *Ukkirapandi Muthuramalinga Thevar* (Tam. *ukkirapaṇṭi muturāmaliṅka tēvar*: 1908-1963) who was born in the village of Pasumpon in the Ramnathapuram district and belonged to Maravars, one of the three main Mukkulathor castes. U.M. Thevar was a close associate of Subhas Chandra Bose and after Bose’s death in the airplane accident U.M. Thevar was elected as a chairman of the party. Before India gained independence U.M. Thevar acquired fame and popularity among Thevars in the campaign for the repeal of the *Criminal Tribes Act* (1911) that notified considerable sections of Mukkulathors as *criminal tribes* with dire consequences in limitation of civil rights afflicting population of entire villages. U.M. Thevar was elected three times to the parliament being backed by the comfortable majority of Thevars in his area. FB under U.M. Thevar opposed both Congress and Dravidian parties and its ideology was a mix of socialism and nationalism with a strong appeal to local Thevar culture. Today FB in southern districts of Tamil Nadu is a main opponent of Dalit parties and clashes between supporters of FB and VCK, PT are common. U.M. Thevar has a strong symbolic meaning for the Thevar community in Tamil Nadu and his statues are erected in many areas in the south as a symbol of Thevars’ dominance in these areas.

Paatali Makkal Katchi (Tam. *pāṭṭāli makkaḷ kaṭci* – *The Toiling People’s Party*) is a caste party with the support among the Vanniyar caste. It was founded by its present president Dr. S. Ramdoss by transformation from the Vanniyar caste association *Vanniyar Sangam* (Tam.

vaṇṇiyar caṅkam – Vanniyar Union) in 1980. Majority of Vanniyar “vote bank”²⁶ is located in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu in the area also known as “Vanniyar belt”. They have a formidable numerical strength which makes PMK a welcome ally of both big Dravidian parties. By a skilful policy of shifting alliances and the electoral support to both DMK and AIA DMK PMK has managed to secure considerable benefits for the Vanniyar population, including the classification of Vanniyars as Most Backward Caste in Tamil Nadu, while they are only Backward Caste in the rest of India. Vanniyars as a MBC are also entitled to sizeable reservations in government services and institutions of higher education.

²⁶ *Vote bank* is a term widely used in Indian sociology and political science. It serves to describe a loyal bloc of voters from a single community, who consistently back a certain candidate or political formation in democratic elections. Such behaviour is often the result of an expectation of real or imagined benefits from the political formations, often at the cost of other communities. The term was for the first time use by noted Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas (Srinivas, *The Social System of a Mysore Village* 1955, 1-35).

4. CASTE POLITICS AND DALITS – LOCAL CONTEXT

Caste considerations permeate Tamil society at every level be it recruitment to educational institutions or government services, political parties' coalition building as well as daily social contacts of ordinary people. "[Caste] is a central part of the language of social intercourse, whatever purpose that intercourse happens to be serving" (Washbrook 1989, 205). Paradoxical outcome of years of rule by the Dravidian parties, proclaiming their commitment to the destruction of the caste system, seems to be enhancement of the importance of caste in different guises. It is generally agreed that the rural society in Tamil Nadu is particularly caste ridden and many sociological and anthropological research has been done about mechanism of caste relationships in Indian villages. Studies of Bêteille (A. Bêteille 1966), Moffat (Moffatt 1979), Deliège (Deliège 1988) and many other anthropologists started their structural analysis of the system of caste by examining the intricate network of inter-caste and inter-personal relationships in small village communities.

Results of such studies based on detailed analysis of a particular, clearly defined and small communities are often surprising and challenge the classical *Dumontian* notion of a caste system as an institutionalized hierarchy based on purity-pollution concept, as "*attribution of a rank to each element in relation to the whole*" (Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus – The Caste System and Its Implications* 1980 [first edition 1966]). Dumont's theory of caste system stresses the general acceptance of the system by all castes and presents it as a kind of social contract that for ages have provided for rather effective division of work by the mutual interdependence and submission of individuals to the collectivity. "*The caste isolates itself by submission to the whole, like an arm which does not wish to marry its cells to those of the stomach*" (Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus – The Caste System and Its Implications* 1980 [first edition 1966], 41).

Because of emphasizing the functional and consensual nature of the caste system Dumont has often been criticized for adopting Brahmins' point of view on caste²⁷ and ignoring empirical facts as exceptions to the rule in order to be able to maintain the theoretical concept of caste hierarchy intact. Dumont in his work provided, in my opinion, a very useful abstraction and generalization of the caste system, a highly coherent view of Indian society, that raised a great deal of discussion and was further precised and elaborated by others. Its main merit that made it to one of the classical literature for all students of Indian society, lies in the fact that it allowed us to understand and think about the caste system as a social institution *sui generis* ruled by its internal logic for an objective purpose, not just as an infinite set of particular and occasional circumstances. Having said that I also have to convey that Dumont's critics are correct when they affirm that the reality of caste is far more complex than a general acceptance of the hierarchy and shared view of one's own position in the hierarchy with others. Anthropological researches in Indian villages confirm that what we actually find in terms of distribution of power and status is often something totally different to what we would expect if we study Hindu scripts or Dumont's texts. Hierarchy is often challenged and ritual status is not always linked to the actual power. Village studies also reveal that it is not always true "*that those*

²⁷ "*His artificial, stiff, stereotypic and idealized view of caste conforms rather closely to the high caste ideal of what the caste system of Hindu India ought to be, according to those who value it positively: it conforms well to the theory of caste purveyed by learned Brahmanical tracts* (Berreman 1971, 23)."

who are most oppressed materially are at the same time seen as supremely impure” (Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus – The Caste System and Its Implications* 1980 [first edition 1966], 137).

Many have taken for granted, logical and obvious that Dalits suffer from multiple form of discrimination, i.e. that their ritually low status results in their economic and sometimes even sexual exploitation by upper castes. This assumption was supported by powerful narratives of Dalit lives by cultural anthropologists such as Freeman (Freeman 1979), Racines (Racine and Racine 1997), autobiographies of Dalit writers such as Bama (Bama 2000 [published in Tamil 1992]) and Sivakami (Sivakami 2006) as well as various NGO reports and statistics published by the Indian government institutions. However, Marguerite Robinson in her brilliant study about mechanism of power in the Mallannapalle village in the Medak district of the state Andhrapradesh explored a traditional relationship existing between the local dominant landholding caste – Reddiyars - and the village untouchables - Malas and Madigas - who served as Reddiyars’ strongmen. Both parties benefitted from this alliance much to the disadvantage of the village middle castes. While Reddiars’ were able to impose their will in the village by force, the untouchables gained through favours from their employers bribes from the villagers who wanted access to the elites, skills developed by managing employer’s labour, collecting his loans and by settling village disputes (Robinson 1988, 263). In Mallannapalle Dalits did not suffer from multiple discrimination. In fact they succeeded to turn their low status and bad reputation as rowdies²⁸ to their advantage and were economically better off than most of the middle castes in the village. In Mallanapalle untouchables were not allowed to enter the village temple or to drink cow’s milk but at the same time most of them worked only on their own land and their leaders were often asked to sit at panchayats when important issues were decided (Robinson 1988, 87-89).

Moffat during his field research in the village of Endavur, Chingleput district in Tamil Nadu made a similar experience with the social and economic position of local Dalits (Paraiyars) who succeeded to acquire land thanks to their alliance with high-caste Reddiyars. “[Dalits] compare their present landownership with their well-remembered landless past, with the economic level of Untouchables in immediately surrounding villages, and with the material position of most of the higher... caste families of Endavur, excluding the two Reddiyars. In terms of the first two standards of comparison, the Untouchables feel they are doing quite well; in terms of the third, they feel roughly coequal” (Moffatt 1979, 73). Robinson’s and Moffat’s accounts are only two of many demonstrations of divergence between the status and hierarchical position assigned to some castes by the Brahmanical norms and their actual status and power in a particular village society.

There are of course frequent instances of villages where Dalits do not own any land or independent source of income and are entirely dependent on work provided by local dominant caste Hindus. This was for example the case of Valghira Manickam, the village in Ramnad district, Tamil Nadu where Deliège (Deliège 1988) did his field research. Only a tiny minority of them owned some land and some rented land from upper caste Kallars. None of the Paraiyars in the village, however, was able to make his living only by cultivating the small fields. Majority of their income was constituted by working for upper castes (Udaiyars and Kallars in this case) as

²⁸ Among caste Hindus Dalits often have bad reputation for aggressive and violent behavior. Since any physical contact with an untouchable is for a caste Hindu ritually polluting, being beaten by untouchables is not only painful but is also seen as extremely impure and humiliating.

brick makers or agricultural labourers. The dependency of Valghira Manickam Paraiyars on dominant upper castes renders them much more vulnerable *vis-à-vis* the upper castes. They need to bear with all kind of discriminatory behaviour from Kallars in their ordinary lives starting with being addressed with derogatory language, being denied (having only formal) representation in the village panchayat and even being physically attacked for any possible reason. *“Il est encore «normal» qu’un Kallar batte un intouchable et même si ce dernier est physiquement plus fort, il ne réagira pas car cela lui vaudrait de sérieux ennuis. A la moindre occasion, les Kallars se rassemblent en effet pour venger un des leurs alors que jamais les Paraiyars n’oseraient se grouper pour affronter les Kallars. Il arrive fréquemment qu’un Kallar lève la main sur un Paraiyar mais la réciproque est très rare. Un Kallar ne parle pas à un intouchable mais lui donne des ordres à distance”* (Deliège 1988, 152).²⁹

Above mentioned anthropological studies put together clearly demonstrate that castes of roughly equal ritual status according to the Brahmanical norms, may be in radically different status and power position *vis-à-vis* other castes in different village communities. Caste hierarchy according to the Brahmanical standards is by no way the only determinant in the power structure within local communities. Realizing this will make our understanding of caste more complex. While in general we can accept as valid Brahmanical standards dividing castes to high and low according to belonging to a particular varna (or not belonging to any varna at all), following practices of high castes (*Sanskritization*) and rules for interdining and intermarriage, we also need to remember that the actual status of a particular caste in a particular village does not always follow the Brahmanical standards. In reality purity-pollution concept is only one of several variables in competition for status and power among various castes in Indian villages. Or, the ritual status does not always necessarily correspond to the actual social status of a particular caste within a given community. For defining the social status a particular caste in a given village the question who can beat who is of at least equal importance as who can eat with whom and who can marry who. In words of J. Harriss: *“In some contexts, caste demarcates lines of dominance and resistance; in others, lines of hierarchy and dependence; in yet others, lines of emulation and aspiration; and in yet others still, lines of competition for relative privilege and status between groups who, although acknowledging differences, see themselves as having equal claims to rights”* (Harriss 1982, 74).

There are several factors defining the relative status of a particular caste in a given village and most ethnographers for describing the power structure of a given village usually pay attention to a set of similar factors although they attribute different weight or importance to each of them. All these factors combined provide for what could be called in words of rational choice theory the “context of local governance” that enters as an important variable in any political decision to be taken by the inhabitants of a village. Since *“actors do not exist in a vacuum; the social, moral and political contexts that frame their inner world are crucially influential in their perceptions. Context matters. The regional context in India defines the domain of the actor’s strategic perception and reasoning. Knowledge of the context primes the observer with*

²⁹ Translation from the French: [It is still «normal» that a Kallar beats an untouchable and even if the latter is physically stronger, he will not react to that because that would constitute a serious offense. At the slightest opportunity, Kallars would gather in order to revenge one of their caste fellows, while Paraiyars would rarely dare to join together to confront the Kallars. Often a Kallar raises his hand on a Paraiyar but the reverse is very rare. A Kallar would never speak to an untouchable; he would give him orders from a distance.]

clues with which to penetrate the dense and intimate worlds of caste, kin, community, faction and party, all of which are structured on regional lines” (Mitra 2005, 46).

In terms of state administration, the concept of local context of governance and the existing regional differences in predisposition of certain areas to the collapse of law and order and their tendency to resort to violence gained recognition in the *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989*. The Act authorizes governments of the Indian states to identify “*atrociti prone areas*”, i.e. “*the areas where it has reason to believe that atrocity may take place or there is an apprehension of reoccurrence of an offence under the Act*” (India, The SC and the ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Rules, 1995. 1995).³⁰

Since one of the main purposes of my work is to measure the impact of Dalit parties activity and their ideology on governance in Tamil Nadu villages, it is essential first to understand the particular context in which this “political game” takes place. As there is no widely accepted system for describing the context of local governance or caste hierarchy and power structure, my method is a combination of factors used by previous authors with an effort to systematize them in three broad categories. These are 1] *Economic factors* 2] *Ritual and Social factors* 3] *Political factors*. The division is approximative and artificial as all of the factors are actually linked very closely to others, its purpose is to enable comparison of two different local contexts of the villages of Alaveli and Keeripatti. In the following sub-chapters all the three factors will be discussed and the situation in the studied villages will be set in the context of India and Tamil Nadu. Before starting to elaborate on comparison along the three factors, both villages where the fieldwork was executed will be briefly introduced.

4.1. ALAVELI – LOCATION AND GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE VILLAGE

Alaveli (Tam. *ālavēli*) village is located in the fertile agricultural area of the Sembanar Koil (Tam. *cembanār kōyil*) taluk, Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu. It lies in a distance of around 2 km from the road connecting towns Sirkali (Tam. *cīrkālī*) and Mayiladuthurai (Tam. *mayilāṭuturai*). Sirkali is around 15 km and Mayiladuthurai around 8 km far from Alaveli. There is no bus stop in the village itself; the nearest bus stop is in the 3 km distant village of Thirunanriyur (Tam. *tiruṇaṇriyūr*) with buses running about every 15 minutes. The journey from Alaveli to Thirunanriyur can be easily covered by about 45 minutes walk or 10 minutes by bicycle which by far the most frequent option for local villagers. The village is therefore by no way isolated from urban centres as bus fare is rather affordable³¹ even for the poorest classes of the population and it is common among villagers to commute to the nearby towns for work, shopping, medical visits or leisure (usually visits of the cinema).

Alaveli panchayat consists of three parts Alaveli, Ilayankudi (Tam. *ilaiyaṅkuṭi*) and Adaikkalapuram (Tam. *aṭaikkalāpuram*) which altogether cover an area of about 500 ha. There

³⁰ The state has special powers to take “precautionary and preventive measures” in these areas including canceling arms licenses, seizing arms, providing arms licenses to persons belonging to SC and ST and deploy special forces. At present there are 28 atrocity prone areas in Tamil Nadu (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment 2009).

³¹ The fare from Thirunanriyur to Mayiladuthurai was Rs 8 in 2007.

are 291 houses in the Alaveli panchayat, out of which 41 are in Ilaiyankudi, 39 in Adaikalapuram and 211 in the Alaveli village itself. Alaveli is the largest part with about two thirds of residents living in it. Village Dalits live in two settlements, first is located at the eastern outskirts of Alaveli, second behind the paddy field to the north-east direction from Ilaiyankudi. According to the panchayat office the population of the village was 1197 people including children at the time of the fieldwork. There were 837 adults eligible to cast their vote in the panchayat elections in 2006. The population of the village is composed almost entirely of Backward and Scheduled Castes with only one forward or high caste family of *Udaiyars* or *Agamudaya Mudaliars* (Tam. *utaiyar*; *akamutaiya mutaliyar*). BC and SC castes form roughly half of the village population respectively. There are no Brahmins in the village. The part of the village called Ilaiyankudi used to be a Brahmin quarter or *agraharam*. Brahmins sold the property to local Backward castes and moved in Chennai in 1960s. The Brahmin past of Ilaiyankudi is still apparent from the more elaborate architecture of houses in this part of the village and a small Vinayakkar temple. Backward caste who counted for little less than half of the population of the village belonged mostly to Vanniyar or Padaiyachi caste, with minority of Thevar families. All Scheduled castes in the village were Paraiyars.

The village is located also only 10 km far from the famous centre of the palm leaves astrology in Tamil Nadu well-known also for its ancient temple – Vaitheeswarankoyil. Circa 20 km from Alaveli there is today only a village but 2000 years ago it used to be a prosperous trade centre of the Chola empire called Poompuhar (Puhar in ancient scripts), the site of the oldest Tamil epic poem *Silapadigaram* (Tam. *cilapaṭikāram*; Eng. *Song about the anklet*). The part of Tamil Nadu where Alaveli is located is also known as *Cholamandalam* i.e. the land of *Cholas*³² with its centre in the ancient town of Thanjavur. This area has been known as the centre of the ancient Tamil civilization as it is demonstrated to our days by the unparalleled density of ancient temples per square kilometre in this area. It has become the centre of the Tamil civilization since centuries ago mainly because of the fertility of the soil and the sufficient supply of water that are vital for the cultivation of paddy. Paddy cultivation provided material base for construction of opulent temples and their maintenance. Therefore, almost all of land in this area used to be in the possession of either temples or Brahmin families who had once been granted this land by Chola kings.

Paddy cultivation has remained the main agricultural activity in the area until these days. Nagapattinam district is located in so called “*Cauvery delta agricultural zone*” which is known as the rice-bowl of Tamil Nadu. Average temperature is 32.5°C in summer and 25.8°C in winter and the district receives rainfall both from Southwest and Northeast monsoon, Southwest monsoon brings rains from June to September and Northeast from October to December. Northeast monsoon contributes to 60% of annual rainfall. Monthly average rainfall between 1991-96 was 109 mm, i.e. 1300 mm per year (NGO Coordination and Resource Centre Nagapattinam 2006, 12). Although important for agriculture, Northeast monsoon once in 3-4 years creates problems in the area by bringing cyclonic storms that result in flooding of the villages, damaging crops and fields. In November 2004 Nagapattinam district was the worst affected district in India by the tsunami that hit South and South-eastern Asia. Tsunami caused flooding of over 8000 hectares of

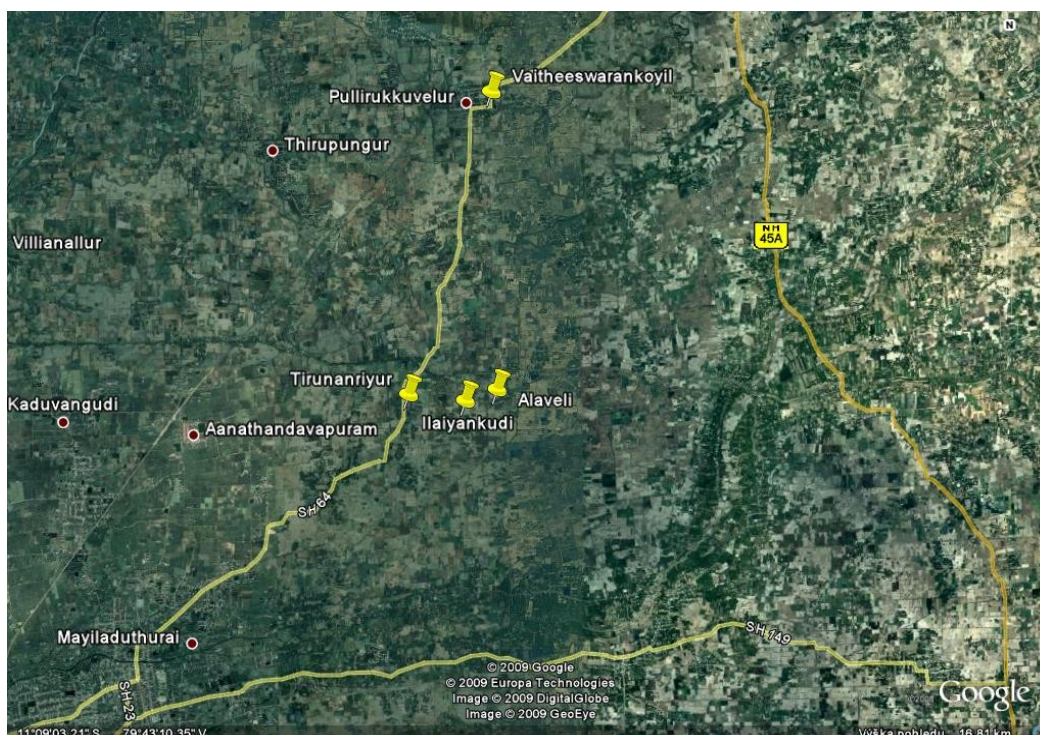
³² *Cholas* together with *Cheras* and *Pandavas* were one of the three main ruling dynasties in the ancient Tamil country.

agricultural land in the district and death of 158 people mostly fishermen. Village of Alaveli and the surrounding fields were not affected and the flood stopped about 5 km from the village.

Beside rainfall, there are two important water sources for fields in Alaveli village. River Kollidam, one of its branches flowing on the northern side of the village is the main source of water for fields adjacent to the river. Second most important source of water are pump sets. The use of pump sets has been steadily growing in Tamil Nadu since the introduction of the new high-yielding varieties of rice and the massive use of fertilizers in the 1970s. Nagapattinam district has large stock of underground water that once seemed to be unlimited. Nevertheless, with the massive use of underground water for irrigation of paddy fields the threat of its negative effects on the quality of the soil in the future, especially salination and soil erosion, is becoming more and more threatening problem. In Alaveli salination is so far not as acute problem as in nearby Mayiladuthurai area. Despite the huge onset of pump sets in the village degradation and salination of the soil has not started yet. Nonetheless richer and more progressive farmers in the village have already started to realize the possible damaging consequences of the excessive use of fertilizers and underground waters drawing and have tried to put the principles of organic farming in practice by cultivating mixed crops in a non-extensive pattern without fertilizers. In 2006 minority of farmers were interested in organic farming, mostly those with larger land holdings.

Above mentioned favourable conditions for the paddy cultivation allow Alaveli farmers to harvest paddy three times a year. Beside paddy other major crops cultivated by the villagers are red and black gram, sugarcane, cotton, coconut and Palmyra trees and various kinds of fruit and vegetable.

Map 1- Alaveli physical location



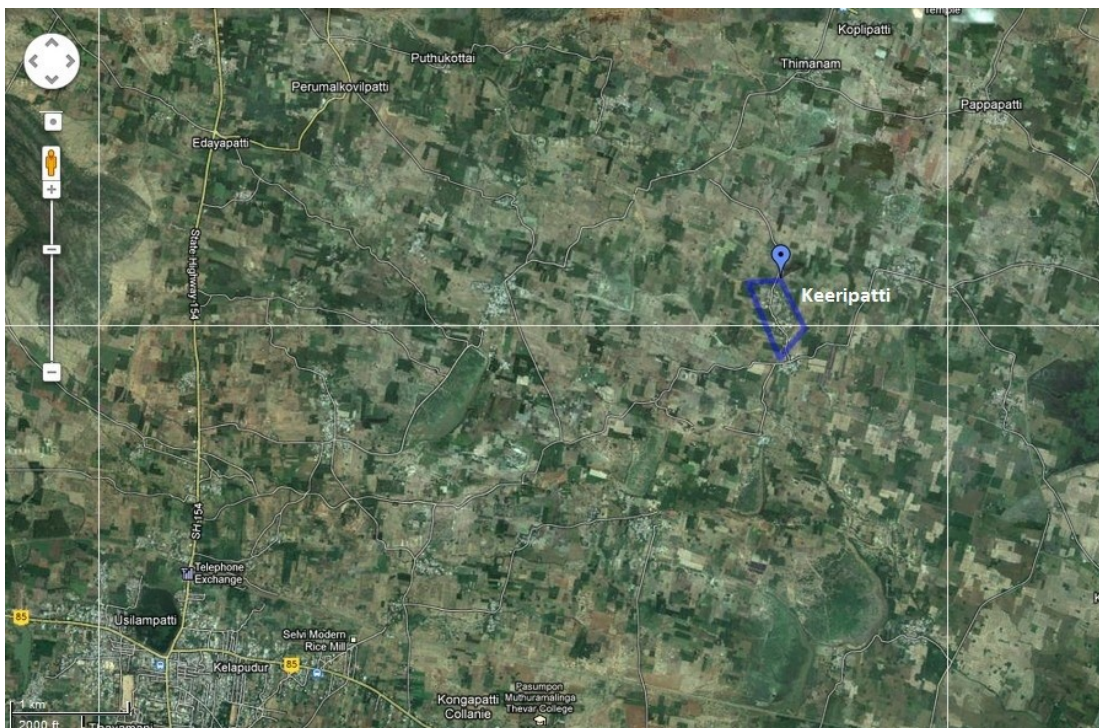
Although agriculture is the main occupation for majority of the villagers, several villagers found work opportunities in nearby towns of Mayiladuthurai, Vaitheeswarankoil and even Chennai. Several young men have worked and saved money in abroad, in countries of Persian Gulf or Malaysia.

There is an elementary and middle school in the village (until grade 8th) for higher education students have to commute to nearby towns. Other facilities in the village include public lighting in the central part of the village. There is one ration shop and two teashops in the village. Panchayat office is located in Alaveli part of the village. There is no police station in Alaveli, the nearest police station is in the nearby town Vaitheeswarankoil.

4.2. KEERIPATTI LOCATION AND GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE VILLAGE

Keeripatti (Tam. *kīripattī*) is a village in Usilampatti taluk, Madurai district, Tamil Nadu. Usilampatti, the capital town of the taluk, is located approximately 34 km from Madurai and Keeripatti is in the distance of 3.5 km from Usilampatti. Madurai, the cultural capital of Tamil Nadu acts as a nucleus and a prominent city for the entire region. Nevertheless, the journey from Usilampatti to Madurai by bus usually takes between one and half and two hours. There is also a bus connection between Keeripatti and Usilampatti two times a day.

Map 2 - Keeripatti physical location



The area stretching between towns Madurai and Usilampatti is known as *Kallar Nadu* (Land of Kallars). From the 6th until the first half of the 14th century Madurai was ruled by the dynasty of Pandyas. After the city was conquered by famous Muslim general Malik Kafur in

1311, the rule over it and the adjacent areas went from hand to hand. The instability of the central government may be one of the reasons why a system of quasi independent small territories called *nadu*-s (Tam. *nāṭu* - land or country) headed by local chieftains called Ambalakarans (Tam. *ampalakkāraṅ*) emerged in this part of Tamil Nadu. Although this traditional feudal system has been to some extent practiced in most areas inhabited by castes belonging to Mukkulathors (Kallar, Maravar and Agamudayar), *Piramalai Kallars*, who are the dominant cast in the *Kallar Nadu*, are considered the most conservative among them. "*Portions of the Madura and Tanjore districts are divided into areas known as nadus, a name which, as observed by Mr. Nelson, is specially applicable to Kallan tracts*" (Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. I (A-Br) 1909, 72).

Kallars, landed agricultural caste today, trace their origins to petty kings, rulers and warriors who fought in the armies of Pandya and Vijayanagar kings and resisted incessant waves of foreign invaders to the South of India. There are many popular Tamil folk stories about valiant Kallar warriors heroically dying in the fight against Muslim and British troops. Kallars' traditional duty in Tamil Nadu villages was *kāval* (Tam. patrol, watch), i.e. they were traditional police or watchmen of the Tamil villages. By British administrators they were however seen as criminals and early ethnographers of South India (e.g. Dubois 1928 (first edition 1817)) provide vivid accounts of their criminal behaviour. Piramalai Kallars were in particular notorious for highway robbery, dacoity, house-breaking and cattle stealing (Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. I (A-Br) 1909, 66). Whether it was for their criminal behaviour or for their early resistance against the British rule, in 1918, they were included among the so called *criminal tribes* by the *Criminal Tribes Act* (CTA - enacted in 1871 in northern British India, in 1911 in the Madras presidency). The dire consequence of their classification as a criminal tribe was that all Piramalai Kallar men were fingerprinted and prohibited from leaving their villages for any reason without written permission. Moreover, they were obliged to be present (sleep) at local police station every night between 11 p.m. and 4 a.m. Although this Draconian measures were accompanied with serious efforts on the side of the colonial government to improve the living and social conditions of Piramalai Kallars by introducing compulsory schooling for Kallar children, providing grants of land, establishing rural cooperatives and training centres and granting occupational loans and other forms of rural credit, the humiliating treatment by the CTA created the sense of grievance and deepened the distrust and resistance to the ruling British authorities. There were numerous uprising and riots in the Kallar Nadu and Kallars were very actively involved in the Independence movement.

The loyalty of Periyar and other early representatives of the Dravidian movement to British crown resulted in Kallar Nadu remaining aloof of the Dravidian politics and siding with Congress first. Later, the major political party of the area became All India Forward Bloc (AIFB) a splinter party from the Indian National Congress founded by Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945). Although AIFB has only marginal influence in Tamil Nadu as a whole, Usilampatti constituency became its stronghold with Forward Bloc backed candidates elected from this constituency in 10 out of 13 State legislative elections since it constituency was created in 1957. The political development of over the centuries contributed to developing of a strong regional identity in the region, closely linked with the Piramalai Kallar caste. Opposition to the central authority of the state, who since the fall of Vijayanagar Empire has been ruled by foreign, unsympathetic rulers, relying on self-justice and traditional authority of ambalakarans, commitment to traditional martial caste values of bravery, self-sacrifice and violent solutions to problems are the historical legacies of Kallar Nadu.

Keeripatti has a rather compact form, with its houses centred along the road from Usilampatti to Pappapatti. The only subdivision of the village is between the quarter inhabited by Backward Castes, i.e. the central village (Tam. *ūr*) and Dalits' quarter - cheri (Tam. *cēri*). Dalit hamlet lies to the east of the village separated by the field. Official population of Keeripatti including children is about 1600, the official registered voters during the 2006 panchayat elections were 1393. Dalits form between 20 and 25 % of the village population; all of them belong to Paraiyar caste. The largest group among Backward castes in the village are Piramalai Kallars. Beside Kallars there are also four families that belong to Acāri i.e. artisans caste and three families of washermen (Tam. *vaṇṇaṇ*). Kallars are the dominant caste in the village and owners of the whole of the land.

Keeripatti covers an area of approximately 1500 ha, about one third of that is uncultivable dry wasteland. Most of the village fields are *puñcai* – non irrigated land suitable only for less water demanding crops. Keeripatti as well as the whole of Usilampatti taluk lies in the dry agricultural zone. Although the soils of the area are mainly alluvial and red soil, useful for the cultivation of paddy and cotton, water is the issue that limits the cultivation of these crops in Keeripatti. The climate is hot and dry with the average temperature for Usilampatti taluk between 37° C in summer and 20° C in winter and the annual rainfall of 770 mm per year below the state average 930 mm per year. Moreover all rainfall is discharged during the Southwest monsoon from June to September while for the rest of the year rainfalls are erratic if at all (Fichtner Consulting Engineers (India) Private Ltd. 2008, 6). Crops like groundnuts and gingelly that do not require much irrigation are therefore the main crops in this region. The only source of water for agriculture beside rain are bored wells, rice cultivation in the village is limited to few relatively affluent families who can afford to purchase pump sets.

Despite not very favourable conditions agriculture is still the main and for most people in the village the only income generating activity. When there is not enough work in the fields, Paraiyar men from the village try to find work as bricklayers or brick makers. Although the village is very close to the provincial town of Usilampatti, the town itself does not offer many job opportunities since there is almost no industry. There are two tea shops in the village and one ration shop. There is an elementary and middle school (until grade 8) in the village.

Significant source of income for at least some Kallar families in the village seems to be illicit drug business. According to my interviews Keeripatti is the processing and export centre for the ganja (marihuana) that is produced in the hilly regions of Varusa Nadu, Mayiladum Parai and Kadamalai Gundu. Marihuana is harvested in these places and transported to Keeripatti where it is dried and further distributed all over India. This is apparently done by traffickers from Andhrapradesh who come to the village to purchase readymade drug. The role of the village in the drug chain seems to be purely processing the raw plants and production of drug. There is no marihuana cultivation around the village. It is, of course, very difficult to assess the share of illicit marihuana trade in the economy of the village as there are no reliable data available and obviously it is rather impossible to collect this kind of quantitative data with a questionnaire. In any case, drug trade is firmly under the control of Keeripatti Kallars while Dalits/Paraiyars are probably completely excluded from this lucrative business. During my private interviews with Keeripatti Paraiyars, involvement of Kallars in the drug trade was often mentioned (A. P. 2007) (M. I. 2007) but at the same time nobody was able to describe precisely who exactly the people linked to the ganja trade were implying that all Kallars were involved in one way or the other. On the other hand all my Kallar respondents would deny that their village was in any way involved in the drug business and did not discuss this problematic at all while

they were absolutely at ease to discuss other rather sensitive questions related to caste and their problematic relations with local Dalits. Local police when interviewed (R. U. 2007) admitted that the abuse of marihuana is a problem among the village population but denied there were any drug trafficking activities in which the village people was involved.

Panchayat office is located in the centre, i.e. in the Kallar part, of the village. There is a police post with four police officers located next to the panchayat office and one police officer patrols 24 hours a day in front of the elected panchayat president's house in the Paraiyars' colony. President of the panchayat is from the Paraiyar caste and the issue of the panchayat president is one of the major problems in the village as it will be explained further.

5. ECONOMIC FACTORS

5.1. LAND HOLDING AND AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

In the traditional village economy based predominantly on agriculture, the ownership of land is usually the main determinant of the economic positions and power relations between different social groups in the village. Land is the prime asset in rural areas and it is instrumental in determining both living standard of the occupants and their social status. Land distribution and relations between landowner – tenant and landowner – labourer is therefore one of the main considerations for most researchers in social sciences on Indian village.

Dalit activists, ideologues and politicians often quote landlessness of Dalits and the subsequent economic dependence on other castes as one of the reasons for their subjugation to and exploitation by caste Hindus. Land redistribution is a frequent claim of Dalit political activists. Chakrabarty and Ghosh using National Statistic Survey data on ownership holdings of land, showed that in most Indian states the proportion of land owned by Scheduled Caste households was much lower than their share in total population (Chakrabarty and Ghosh 2000). In 1991 Tamil Nadu Dalits accounted for 19.18 per cent of the state's population but their share of land area operated was only 7.1 per cent (Athreya and Chandra 2000). The census of 1991 also revealed the fact that of the total Dalits of Tamil Nadu 71.7% were agricultural labourers and 17 % were cultivators, whereas among the non- Dalits 33 % were cultivators (India, Director of Census Operations 1991, 56). There are many reasons for this relative deprivation of Dalits and it would be far too comprehensive to elaborate on all of them. In general it can be said that the causes for inadequate landholding of Dalits were religious, historical³³ as well as motivational.³⁴ For more thorough discussion of the causes of Dalits' landlessness readers are advised to refer to (Thorat 2009, 54-56).

Tamil agrarian economy has always been based upon small-scale production units and an extremely wide distribution of rights in land. During the British period two third of the revenue system in Madras presidency was based on *ryotwari* principles which taxed peasant (*ryot* - anglicized Hindi word *rā'iyat* - peasant) households directly and individually. In southern areas ryotwari co-existed with a system known as *poliam*. "*The Poliams comprised a few villages. The revenue of entire villages would accrue to poligar for feudatory or kaval service rendered to*

³³ Untouchable castes were supposed to work on land for others but were prohibited from owning land themselves. These prohibitions are to be found in Hindu religious texts, e.g. according to Srinivasaraghavacharya „if a Shudra commits homicide or theft, appropriates land, or commits similar crimes, his property should be confiscated and he himself should suffer capital punishment” (Srinivasaraghavacharya, quoted in (Shrirama 2007 (revised, first published 1999), 67). This quotation would suggest that the prohibition would originally apply not only to untouchables but all who did not belong to the first three upper varnas (in Skt. *dvijāti* - “twice born”). In practice the extent of applying this rule varied in different areas, however, in parts of India (e.g. Punjab) prohibition for untouchables to acquire and own land was cancelled only after the arrival of Independence (Thorat 2009, 158).

³⁴ Judith Heyer during her fieldwork among Chakkiliyan caste in Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu in 1982 and 1996 asked respondents why more people of the slightly better off did not buy land instead of livestock when they had any money to spare. The stereotypical answer was that “*Chakkiliyans don't think of themselves as landowners*” (Heyer 2001). This was, however, not the case of Paraiyars in Alaveli who either owned land or had an ambition to own some land and Keeripatti ones who could not acquire land due to the Kallar boycott but were not happy with the situation and wanted to own some..

the sovereign as a tribute. These payments were made in lieu of assistance rendered or required of the poligars by way of men, money or materials during wars" (Venkataramani 1973, 8). In northern areas of Madras presidency zamindari system of landholders entitled to collect revenue for the government and to keep 10 % of the collections had been established by Muslim rulers and subsequently taken over by the British. "*Apart from the zamindaris and poliams, there were also the inamdari lands growing in extent, free assignment to certain persons, known as Inam, either for services during war or in any other service to the sovereign. The holders of these lands could cultivate them without the payment of rent or revenue*" (Venkataramani 1973, 9).

The structure of the peasant economy was highly inegalitarian and during the colonial period tended to become even more so with the uneven development of the economy. Although the distribution of agricultural land was highly unequal, the inequality did not manifest itself in the form of the loss of land rights and expansion of proletarian labour even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when the population grew rapidly. The population pressure was accommodated rather by intensifying the division of land rights (Baker 1984, 65). This led to the fission of landholding into very small production on one hand, on the other hand large landholders were barely touched by this process which further increased the inequality of land holding.

British administration in general did not have an ambition to change or reform the land ownership pattern in Indian society and except few exceptions it satisfied itself with accepting and providing a legal basis for the existing status quo. One of the exceptions was related to untouchables and aimed at improving their living standards by giving them land that had been lying fallow until then. In 1855 a professional field survey of the presidency for the purposes of the taxation assessment pointed out that there had been no extension of cultivation in the previous 34 years and that only less than half the registered arable land was under the plough (Subrahmanian 1999, 258). In 1892 the British in double effort to improve the living conditions of Dalits and to increase the size of cultivated land in Madras presidency passed a government ordinance by which they assigned available forest and wastelands to Dalits. The so called panchami³⁵ land (or *Denotified Class Land* as it was called by the British) could not be sold, given in mortgaged or leased for the first 10 years and after this period it could be only transferred to another Dalit. Any transaction that would transgress these conditions was to be deemed legally untenable. Despite the legal provision that should have prevented the alienation of the land from Dalits, uneducated Dalits often failed to realise the significance of the panchami land and in many instances the land was only nominally transferred to a Dalit owner, while in fact it was kept by or transferred to upper-caste landowners. While in parts of Madras presidency the British panchami land legislation had a positive effect of creating since the end of 19th century among Dalits a pattern of landownership, in many cases the panchami land was appropriated by non-Dalits.

After India gained independence land reforms became an important topic in Tamil Nadu as well as in the rest of India. Although the reform of land ownership was one of the priorities of Nehru led central government, the implementation was left on state governments and therefore the laws enacted and the timing of the reforms varied across the state. In Madras state these reforms started in 1949 by passing of the *Estate Abolition Act*. This act abolished zamindari and

³⁵ Panchami was the term for the "fifth" varna, i.e. untouchables.

imandari system of collection of agricultural rent and enacted the ryotwari as the only legal basis for taxation on land with the intention to eliminate the intermediaries and to decrease the tax burden of peasants. *Tamil Nadu Cultivating Tenants Protection Act* (1955) and *Madras Cultivating Tenants Act* (1956) envisaged protection of agricultural tenants against eviction from their land and fixing the amount of fair land rent. In 1969 Madras government passed the *Madras Agricultural Lands Record of Tenants Act* by which it sought to establish list of agricultural tenants with a view to regulating the working of other Acts. *Minimum Wages Act* (1959) fixed for the first time minimal wage for the agricultural labour. Beside removing intermediaries and fixing the tenancy rules the government also sought to reduce the inequality in the distribution of landholdings by establishing the ceiling on ownership of agricultural land. The *Ceiling on Land Holding Act* (1961) fixed 30 acres (12,1 Ha) as the maximum amount of wet land (equalled to 120 acres of dry land) owned by a family consisting of no more than five members. In 1972 this ceiling was lowered to 15 acres per family with no more than five members. The land above these ceilings (surplus land) was supposed to be confiscated by the Authorized Officers and subsequently leased or awarded to eligible applicants. Agricultural ceiling acts, however, contained a whole range of exceptions that would usually make it possible for the owners to avoid confiscation³⁶. Moreover, lengthy process of discussions about the law before its final approval enabled the landowners who would have not been able to claim any of the exceptions to transfer the surplus land on their relatives or tenants by false, so called benami transactions and virtually to keep their own control over the land.

The effects of the legislation intended to bring more social justice in the organization of agricultural sector were rather dubious. On one hand it changed little in the actual unequal distribution of land with the ratio of land declared as surplus and distributed to beneficiaries against the total operated area being only 0.9 per cent (Thangaraj, *Land Reforms in India* (Vol.9.) - *Tamil Nadu: An Unfinished Task* 2003, 141) and in some cases the new legislation even worsened the situation of landless farmers, tenants and agricultural labour. The problem would lie not as much in the text of the law as in its application. Large landholders would use all the provisions of the laws to the full possible extent while landless farmers, tenants and agricultural labourers were either not aware of the potential benefits of the new legislation or not in the position to claim its implementation. Thus for example the registration of tenants that should have assured them of their tenancy rights in early 1970s led often to eviction of tenants by landowners who wanted to prevent tenants from registering because of their apprehension that the tenants were to be conferred ownership rights on the land (Thangaraj, *Land Reforms in India* (Vol.9.) - *Tamil Nadu: An Unfinished Task* 2003, 243).

On the other hand in some areas the land reform laws and the introduction of land ownership ceilings encouraged and speeded up the natural capitalist process of traditional landed elite, especially of Brahmin castes, moving to other investment opportunities and selling off the land that ceased to be seen as the only secure source of income. Many of the wealthier rural families sold out their land and "*their urban commercial interests were subsequently developed to take a new more 'modern' control of agricultural profits through joint-stock banks, crop purchasing companies and distributive agencies for chemicals, fertilizers and other*

³⁶ Excepted from the land ceilings was land owned by commercial undertakings, land used for growing fuel trees, orchards, areca-nut gardens, land donated to the village, land awarded for gallantry to defence personnel etc. (Thangaraj, *Agricultural Land Transfers in Tamil Nadu* 1988, 28).

increasingly necessary farming inputs. But the withdrawal from landownership by the other elite families released considerable quantities of land for further sub-division and distribution among the residual small peasantry” (Washbrook 1989, 217). When discussing the results of the land reform in Tamil Nadu, this aspect should not be omitted. The direct redistribution of land was only one and perhaps not even the most efficient result of the land reform legislation. The legislation together with other market incentives set in motion processes leading to further fragmentation of land holding in Tamil Nadu.

Albeit the principal objective of the land reform in Tamil Nadu was to rectify the unequalities in the land ownership pattern and the resulting class and social disparities in the Tamil countryside not specifically mentioning or aiming at the situation of Dalits, it would be natural that the Dalits were the main beneficiaries of the reform as they were the major victim of the disparities. Data of the distribution of land surplus to beneficiaries according to caste groups is available for the period up to 1995. According to these “*out of the 131,801 beneficiaries, 58,625 (44 per cent) persons belonging to Scheduled castes and 61,518 (39 per cent) acres of ceiling surplus land was distributed to them*” (Thangaraj, Land Reforms in India (Vol.9.) - Tamil Nadu: An Unfinished Task 2003, 141). Considering the above mentioned limited quantity of surplus land available for the redistribution (0.9 per cent of agricultural land) we have but to agree with Thangaraj that “the above data unmistakably suggests that the Land Ceiling Act could not alter agrarian structure (ibid)” and could not significantly improve the social status of Dalits.

As it has already been mentioned above economical dependence of Dalits on higher castes resulting from the lack of land holding is often identified by Dalit activists as one of the main problems that Dalits have to face. Great deal of activities of Dalit organizations is therefore focused on efforts to undo this perceived deprivation by political action. In the fore stand claims of restoration of the panchami land that had been illegally alienated from the Dalits in the past back to the original Dalit owners. The movement for restoration of panchami land grew in importance and turned from the set of local disputes into a statewide movement after the famous land struggle in the village of Karanai, in the Chengleput district in 1994. This struggle started as a dispute over less than 5 acres of panchami land between a Dalit from Karanai and a north Indian money lender, grew in strength due to the involvement of a local NGO and resulted in local Dalits claiming back 633 acres of panchami land granted to them by colonial government in 1933. Over 1000 activists erected a statue of Ambedkar on the contested plot. After the forcible removal of the statue from the plot by the police, 5000 Dalits encircled the office of the sub collector in Chengleput. Police decided to disperse the crowd by applying tear gas and firing rubber bullets. Two leading activists John Thomas and Ezhilmalai were killed in the firing (Tamil Nadu Women's Forum 2009, 341). With their death the restoration of the panchami land movement gained two martyrs which highlighted the importance of the issue. Since mid 1990s the issue of panchami land became a regularly discussed public issue particularly in periods before parliamentary elections.

While the promises of restoration of the panchami land have been included in programs both of DMK and AIADMK governments, the implementation of these promises has been rather haphazard, resulting in a few theatrical displays of government engagement in panchami land restitution disputes and an appointment of a committee to deal with the charges of encroachment on panchami land by Karunanidhi government in 2010. The whole issue has a tremendous political potential for attracting the votes of Dalits, but the actual solution is more in

hands of the Tamil Nadu judiciary power than in the executive power. Tamil Nadu High Court passed a significant judgement affirming the case-by-case approach of the Tamil Nadu courts to the Dalit claims of panchami land repossession when it rejected a claim of Dalit brothers from a village of Perungudi, Kancheepuram district whose mother had sold the 3.34 acres of panchami land to her non-Dalit neighbour in 1981. According to the High Court decision "*Dalits who had chosen to sell 'panchami' land, granted in favour of them or their family members, in contravention of the rules and regulations would automatically get disqualified from seeking repossession of the properties*" (The Hindu 2011, 2). This verdict de facto rejected automatic right of Dalits on panchami land and takes in account circumstances under which the land had been alienated thus in fact leaving the final decision on each particular case on lower courts. Given the sluggish pace of trials in Tamil Nadu, the restoration of larger extent of panchami land to Dalits seems unlikely in the foreseeable future.

5.2. ALAVELI ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

Agriculture is the backbone of the economic activity of the Alaveli population. My randomly selected sample of respondents will give us the idea about the importance of agriculture for the village economy. Out of 100 respondents 78 indicated "agriculture" as their main source of income. Only six respondents indicated main income generating activity other than agriculture. Twelve stated as their occupation "housewife", three "student" and one "unemployed". Since "housewife", "student" and "unemployed" are not income generating activities, it means that they depend on the income of another family member (husband, parents) who perform some income generating activity and we can call them "dependents". With the relative frequency of "agriculture" as income generating activity being 0.78 and "other than agriculture" only 0.06, we may infer that more than 12 out of 16 dependents depend on income of their family members from agriculture (16×0.78) while only one "dependent" would according to the laws of probability depend on income of his/her family members "other than agriculture". According to my sample more than 90 % of adults in the village would depend on agriculture as their or their family main income.

Land distribution and labour relations in the agrarian economy of Alaveli village changed considerably in the past fifty years. Although Alaveli forms one administrative unit now, in the past it was not like that. The three parts of the today Alaveli panchayat, i.e. Alaveli, Ilaiyankudi and Adaikalapuram, existed as three separate villages with quite different population. Alaveli and Adaikalapuram used to be villages with the majority population belonging to Vanniar and Thevar caste, while Ilaiyankudi was a Brahmin village - agraharam. Altogether ten Brahmin families who used to live in Ilaiyankudi were owners of whole of the agricultural land around Ilaiyankudi and considerable share of the land attached to neighbouring villages of Adaikalapuram and Alaveli. According to oral tradition in the village Brahmins owned the land "since the time immemorial" as it was granted to them by Chola kings for their temple services as a gift - *inam*.

The fields around agraharam were usually cultivated directly by the Brahmin families who employed Paraiyars to work on the land. Paraiyars from the cheri nearest to the agraharam

were bonded labourers or attached labourers (in Tamil *paṇṇaiyāḷ*) of Brahmins. They would work for the same family for generations and beside working in the fields they would execute all kinds of odd jobs for Brahmin family they belonged to. They were paid once a year in cash and kind, sometimes were provided with loans from their employers and received small gifts on opportunities such as weddings and temple festivals (A. U., 78 years; landowner; Vanniyar man; Ilayankudi 2007). Contrary to the common perception of a bonded labour as an exploratory system, bonded labour also provided some benefits to Paraiyars. The labourers were assured of their yearly income and could ask their patron for assistance in case of an unexpected event such as illness or injury. Old people from the cheri who could remember times when them and their families worked as bonded labourers in interviews appreciated the security this kind of work relation provided them (T. K. 2007). Paraiyars from cheri not attached to Ilayankudi also worked from the large part for Brahmins. These were, however, not bonded labourers but worked on a fixed daily wage. They were paid in cash or kind on daily basis and their work was more seasonal.

Majority population of Adaikalapuram and Alaveli villages are Vanniars and Thevars and this was the case in the past as well. Also for these two castes agriculture was their main source of income, nevertheless, their position in the village economy was more diversified if compared to Paraiyars. Unlike Paraiyars Vanniars and Thevars were entitled to own land but the size of their landed property was considerably smaller than those of Brahmins. Instead many Thevar and Vanniar families rented land from Brahmin inamdars from Ilayankudi. Beside small land owners and tenants there was also a sizeable share of landless people whose economic position did not differ much from that of Paraiyars except of the fact that they would hardly ever become bonded labourers and instead worked as daily labourers both for Brahmin *inamdars* and for their richer Vanniar and Thevar neighbours.

In 1950s and 1960s land ownership pattern and economic relations among villagers in Alaveli, Adaikalapuram and Ilayankudi changed considerably in its way mirroring the rise of non-Brahmin castes in the state politics. Uncertainty about the future of large land holdings arising from the prolonged discussions about the land reform accompanied with opening of new economic opportunities in the towns led the Ilayankudi Brahmins to gradual sale of their land assets and moving in towns in search of new opportunities. Former tenants from Alaveli and Adaikalapuram villages were more than interested in buying the land, yet they lacked the necessary financial resources to take over the Brahmin farms on the whole and even if they had enough finance, it would have not been wise to buy large amounts of land in the period when the precise size of land holding ceilings was to be announced yet. Former large Brahmin land holdings ranging in size between 30 and 50 acres³⁷ were therefore divided and acquired by Alaveli and Ilayankudi Vanniars and Thevars in smaller portions. Along with the Brahmin sale of their estates the class of agricultural tenants completely ceased to exist in this village. The new farms were small enough to be comfortably operated by the new land owners. With the downfall of agricultural tenancy as an institution the main economic difference between the farmers has become the size of their holdings.

³⁷ Sizes of the landholdings are approximate according to the estimates by present farmers who bought their property from former Brahmin landlords. (A. U., 78 years; landowner; Vanniyar man; Ilayankudi 2007) and (U. T. 2007)

As per 2007 the land holding operated area of the two largest farmers in Ilaiyankudi was only 10 acres. There were six farms of the size between 5 and 10 acres and 9 farms between 5 and 2 acres. Two acres of wet land can be considered in this region as the minimal operational size of the landholding able to cover the needs of a family purely from agricultural production. Families owning less than 2 acres of wet land need to generate additional income to be able to cover their basic needs and are to be considered as marginal farmers.

Unlike Vanniars and Thevars Alaveli Paraiyars did not acquire any land at all in 1950s and 1960s. They also did not benefit from the early British panchami land legislation because in the fertile agricultural area of Nagapattinam district there was simply no waste land available for distribution among Dalits (or denotified classes as they were described by British authorities). After the Brahmin departure from Alaveli Paraiyars continued to work for the new landowners – Vanniars and Thevars. The main difference between working for Brahmins and working for Vanniars and Thevars was the end of the tradition of bonded labour. All Paraiyars working for the new land owners would work as a daily labour for the fixed daily wage. Unlike Brahmins Vanniars and Thevars would work on their fields themselves and were not dependent on Paraiyars for agricultural labour in the same way as Brahmins were. Even after some Vanniar and Thevar families acquired land there was still growing number of landless Vanniars and Thevars who could be employed by landlords for the seasonal manual work in the fields instead of Paraiyars. Because of family or friendship linkage landowners would prefer to employ members of their caste rather than Paraiyars. The wage for agricultural labourer is the same whether his is from the Paraiyar or Vanniar/Thevar caste – 80.- Rs/day for a man and only 40.- Rs/day for a woman. Paraiyar who stated agricultural labour as their main source of income would typically work in the fields for 15 days a month.

Mechanization and the increased use of machinery has further limited the demand for Paraiyars as agricultural labourers. There are still activities where human labour, the delicacy and precision of human hand are preferred to machines such as planting and weeding, others such as harvesting are increasingly being carried out by machines despite the fact that the manual labour is still very cheap in Tamil Nadu. U. B. (32 year, Vanniar) explained to me why he would hire combine harvester for his 5 acres of paddy fields instead of hiring Paraiyars labourers: *“I paid 4000,- Rs for the machine to harvest the rice. If I hire labour, I will have to pay 80,- Rs a day each. I will also have to provide them tea and tiffan. In six persons they will have the work done in five days. Then the spikes has to be trashed out, that is one more day. All the time I will have to oversee them because otherwise they will steal. I would not sleep because I would have to go and control the fields. It would have been a little bit cheaper to hire labour instead of the combine harvester, but much more hassle. The machine did the work in half a day and now I have the clean grain.... Of course they [Ilaiyankudi Paraiyars] are not happy and they say they will not come for planting and weeding. But they will, otherwise we will work ourselves or bring labour from other village”* (B. U. 2007).

All the above mentioned factors contributed to the decline of Alaveli Paraiyars position as toilers of the land and brought more economic insecurity in their existence. Although the agricultural labour is still the main income generating activity for most of them, now they have to try to supplement the income from agriculture with other resources and to seek work outside the village both in agriculture and other sectors. Alaveli village is no longer self-contained society and even if the agriculture is still the main occupation for most villagers the former

traditional links of mutual dependence between land owners and labourers were substituted with purely market driven mechanisms within a much broader framework than the village.

Half of the respondents who stated agricultural labour as their main income generating activity are also engaged in other economic activities providing them with some extra income. An important supplement to the cultivation is cattle breeding. Cattle is reared both by land owners and landless villagers. The animals reared in Alaveli include cows, water buffalos and goats. Beside the nutritional values of milk products economic aspect of cattle breeding for landless villagers including 11 Paraiyar families is quite significant. Excess milk is purchased by the milk society in the village. With purchase price of milk about Rs 1.5 per litre and the average yield between 10-15 litres per day, one cow generates daily income between Rs 15 and 25. Water buffalos are used as draft animals and are indispensable for certain agricultural operation in the wet fields such as plowing. Usual price for one day renting of a buffalo plow with two animals and a worker operating it is Rs 500.- making plowing with buffalos one of the most lucrative jobs in the village. There are two owners of buffalos in Alaveli providing their services to villagers in Alaveli and adjacent villages.

There are several opportunities both within and outside the village for generating some income out of the agriculture. The list of occupations exercised by the people in Alaveli village would include running of a small shop/ a tea stall, purchase of milk in the milk society, working as a three-wheeler driver, bricklayer, electrician, tailor, worker at well drilling and making wreath for the religious purposes. While some of these occupations, e.g. three-wheeler driving and well drilling provide stable income sufficient to cover current family expenses, others such as running a tea stall in Ilaiyankudi provide a supplementary income to the income from agricultural activities which may be quite important for the home economy of a family but is no alternative to the agriculture which is the base of the family income. There is no significant difference between the types of non-agricultural jobs performed by Paraiyars and Vanniars/Thevars except of occupations linked to the food and drink where Paraiyars are not involved because of their ritual low status and the religious restrictions on accepting food and drink from Dalit castes and the work as washermen which is done exclusively by Dalits.

As well as for the whole of India, government service is considered as the most stable and prestigious career venue. To secure government employment is a lengthy and tedious process and allegedly conditioned by heavily bribing the officials responsible for the appointment. There are two government employees in Alaveli both from Vanniar community. D.S. (51 years) is a clerk in the taluk office in Sembanar Koyil with a monthly salary of Rs 8000.- and K.P (29 years) a vendor in the government owned wine and liquor shop along the State Highway 64 past nearby village Thirunanriyur with a monthly salary of Rs 5000.-.

The most notable of the new opportunities in Alaveli than can make a substantial difference in the economic situation of a family is work abroad, in case of Alaveli villagers exclusively in Gulf countries. At least 21 villagers (it is not excluded that there were more than those known to me at the time of the research) from Alaveli have worked abroad for a period of time between 2 and 5 years, out of them 10 were from the Paraiyar community. All people from Alaveli who had the experience of working abroad were young men in the age between 23 and 39 years, all of them worked as unskilled labourers mostly in construction sites, factories or restaurants. In some cases the remittances sent from abroad by sons or fathers are effectively

the only significant income for the family beside sporadic agricultural labour work, more often though young men would leave for work in Gulf for several years with the aim to save money and invest them in the economical advancement of their family after the return back. The money earned in Gulf countries are used to buy a plot of land, a pair of oxen or a tractor, quite often also to cover wedding expenses of a member of the family. In 2007 there were only two families of Paraiyars in Alaveli who owned somewhat bigger plots of land (1.5 acre each). Both families acknowledge that they were able to purchase the land thanks to the remittances of their family members from abroad.

The observation of the present economic structure of the Alaveli village when compared to the not so distant past makes us realize that the transformation that the economical relations of this local society went through in the past 60 years were beyond the mere replacement of one class of landowners by another. In fact, this transformation was more profound. Although the Alaveli village economy is still based mainly on agriculture today as well as in the past centuries, this new agricultural economy is no more characteristic by the mutual dependence between landowners and labourers in the village. The relationship between the two are no longer ruled by customs but by the market mechanisms that are not limited only to the village but they have become part of the larger economy of the area. Backward castes upgraded their economic status by becoming landowners but have not taken over the means of production of former Brahmin landlords. The new economy provides less security for local Paraiyars who, in competition with labour force from outside the village and increased use of mechanisation, have become dispensable. At the same time the economic differences between Backward castes and Dalits have been slowly waning due to new opportunities out of the traditional rice-growing economy such as work abroad which is open to everybody including Dalits.

5.3. KEERIPATTI ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

Out of the selected sample of 177 respondents in Keeripatti village, 146 stated "agriculture" as their main occupation/source of income. Adding the relevant percentage of those counted as dependent (category of "student", "unemployed") the percentage of population depending on agriculture in Keeripatti is as high as 86%. About 14% (23 respondents who stated non-agricultural occupation plus the relevant percentage of dependent) depend on non-agricultural occupation as their main source of income.

Unlike Alaveli, Keeripatti did not witness any similar dramatic transfers of land property in the past sixty years. Piramalai Kallars have been the owners of the whole land in the village "since the time immemorial" and continue to hold the whole of the land until today. There are five families with large agricultural holdings in size between 15 and 25 acres of land and sixteen families owning between 15 and 5 acres that could be called medium size farmers. In the randomly selected sample of respondents belonging to Kallar caste 69 % stated agriculture on own land as their primary source of income while only 23% of Kallars stated agricultural labour as their main source of income. With the total number of Kallar households being around 380 and the houses of large and medium size farmers being only 21 (i.e. 5.5%), the number of villagers belonging to small farmers among Kallar families is about 240 ($360 \times 0.69 - 21$) i.e.

about 67 % of the Kallar households and 46% of the population of the entire village. About 75% of the cultivable land in the village is cultivated by small Kallar farmers and 25% by small and medium Kallar farmers.

Out of 123 Kallar respondents in my sample 104 i.e. 85% quoted agriculture as their or their family main source of income. Kallars are beside agriculture involved in business activities (6.5%) and there is a relatively high number of salaried government officials among them (5.7%). As it had been mentioned in the general description of the village some Keeripatti Kallars seem to be involved in black economy – illicit drug trade. For obvious reasons it was not possible to estimate the share of the black economy by using our questionnaire. From the interviews with Paraiyar informants it seems that drug business is mostly associated with several powerful families of large land holders although other Kallars may benefit from this trade as well. While bearing in mind that drug business is for some families an important source of income, it was not possible to include this factor in the quantitative description of the village economy. Since the social status and wealth is still traditionally linked with the land ownership and drug business seems to be runned by the richest family with the largest agricultural ownership, it is believed that even if omitting the factor of income from illegal activities, the proportional description of power and employer-employee relations will still be fairly accurate.

Although there were no radical transfers of landed property between different groups in the village similar to Alaveli sell out of Brahmin land in the past six decades since independence, the general trend of land ownership pattern in Keeripatti has been splintering of the property in smaller plots belonging to greater number of families. In early 1950s there were at least ten families with agricultural holdings above 15 acres and more than twenty medium size landowners with the acreage between 5 and 15 acres (P. K., 79 years; landowner, Piramalai Kallar man; Keeripatti village 2007). This trend has been in general a result of growing population of the village and the need to accommodate more Kallar families within the same total acreage of the land and it was also spearheaded by the lack of other work opportunities. At the same time many large landholders splitted their property as a preventive measure against the expected Tamil Nadu legislation on land ceilings.

None of the Dalits/Paraiyars from the Keeripatti village owns any land for cultivation and since ever they have depended on Kallars for employment. For majority of Paraiyars large and medium size landowners have always been the main employers and the main form of work contract between the land working Paraiyars and their employers was attached labour in the past, village Paraiyars were *paṇṇaiyā!* to Kallars. Although I could not receive any exact data about the share of attached labour on Keeripatti Paraiyars employment in the period of 1940s and 1950s, from the interviews both with Paraiyar and Kallar respondents results that being an attached labourer to one of the large land holding Kallar families in the village was rather a general condition among Paraiyar population at that period. Nowadays, the percentage of attached labourers among the Paraiyar population is quite small. In our sample of 49 Dalit respondents from the Keeripatti village 37 (more than 75%) stated agricultural labour as their main source of income. Out of these only two were attached labourers. 35 out of 37 Dalit villagers who stated agriculture as their main source of income (i.e. 95% of Dalit agricultural labourers in Keeripatti) were daily labourers (Tam. *kūli vēlai*).

Attached labourers would work for the whole year. In periods between major agricultural operations in the fields, they would be engaged in various works around Kallar household. They could be asked to stay at fields overnight to look after livestock or equipment. Their work was full-time and continuous throughout the year. While a life of paṇṇaiyāl who was attached to a Kallar landowner in Keeripatti have never been easy, it, unlike labour for daily wage, provided a degree of stability to Paraiyars. Employees received their lump sum wage once a year which was usually half of their annual wage. At the time of cashing out of the part of the yearly wage most Paraiyar household would purchase necessities of higher value, such as new vessels, clothes or livestock. Second half of the yearly wage was usually never cashed out and covered the repayment of debts that Paraiyars would make with their Kallar employers over the year to maintain their families. Paraiyars would also ask for loans from their Kallar employers for larger expenses such as wedding or building a house and in case of medical emergencies. The loans were provided at much more convenient conditions than from usurious money lenders and none of the contracting parties expected the loans to be repaid in cash but by work on landowners estates. This arrangement was convenient for Kallars as well as it assured them of stable labour.

Abandoning of the system of attached labour in Keeripatti was not a result of opposition to that system by local Paraiyars but rather a result of the lack of need for permanent employees on gradually shrinking farms. Increasing number of small and medium Kallar farmers could not afford permanent labourers and instead would call for Paraiyars available to work for a daily wage only at times when a considerable amount of labour was needed for such operations such as planting or harvesting. The advantage of daily labour for employees was quick money at the end of every day of work in the fields and no obligations to employer in providing additional small work or services that the worker was not paid for (e.g. guarding fields at night). At the same time Paraiyars could no longer expect any assistance from Kallars beyond being paid their daily wage. Agricultural labour is in high demand only in the peak period such as harvesting. In this period wages are also higher than for the rest of the year. In 2007 a daily wage of a male labourer in the peak season was Rs. 70./-day for a man and Rs. 30./-day Rs for a woman, in the low season only about Rs. 50/- and Rs. 25,- respectively.

Another negative effect of Kallar property fragmentation has been less work for local Dalits in general. Kallar families belonging to categories of small and marginal farmers would not hire agricultural labourers since they are able to work their land themselves. Since both the number of Kallar farmers belonging to these categories and the percentage of land belonging to small and marginal farmers in the village increased, agricultural work for local Paraiyars became more scarce. Many of the Paraiyars agricultural labourers are in reality “unemployed” for the bigger part of the year. A Dalit informant from Keeripatti, who stated agricultural labour as his main source of income, described his situation as follows: *“For three months I work on Kallar fields six days a week, for another three months I work every second week and for another six months there is no work in fields for me at all. I have to take whatever little job is available to feed my family”* (K. B., 38 years; agricultural worker; Paraiyar man; Keeripatti Dalit Colony 2007). K.B. is a father of three children in the age from 3 to 12 years and although his wife also works (like majority of Paraiyar women) he is responsible for bigger part of their family income. K. B. is a typical representative of a Paraiyar agricultural labourer in Keeripatti in normal times with the sufficient harvest and good relations with upper caste employers. Dalits in Keeripatti are used to living in the struggle to secure bare livelihood of their families. Only the tiny minority of

bounded labourers in the village have somewhat more secure source of income which does not mean that they are also not extremely poor.

The poverty and inability to accumulate any savings among Keeripatti Paraiyars as compared to Alaveli Paraiyars can be well demonstrated by the consumable durables that people from both communities can afford to purchase. In my selected sample 69% of respondents in Alaveli stated that there is a radio in their house as compared to only 22.5% in Keeripatti. There were no refrigerators or motorbikes among Keeripatti Dalits while in Alaveli 9.5% of respondents stated that there was a refrigerator in their household and 15% of respondents owned a motorbike. Quite interestingly only 22.6% of respondents from Alaveli stated that there was a TV in their household, compared to 84% of respondents in Keeripatti. TVs were, nevertheless, donated to local Dalits by the DMK government before the state elections in 2006 after the village had gained its ill fame as a symbol of caste discrimination and the Chief Minister Karunanidhi visited the village. Every Dalit family in Keeripatti was to receive a TV set and 2 acres of land (The Hindu 2006). The political situation in Keeripatti is thoroughly dealt with in Chapter 7.2. *Local Politics in Keeripatti*. At this moment it is important that the TVs were donated and not purchased by the Dalit villagers themselves. The fact that Keeripatti Dalits cannot purchase themselves almost any consumable durables affirms that from their surplus they are able to save very little and their income is spent to cover their basic needs such as food and shelter.

Beside agricultural sector not being able provide a full time employment to majority of Keeripatti Dalits, opportunities to find a non-agricultural occupation for manual labour in the village or its neighbourhood are also very limited. The economy of Keeripatti is as much dependent on agriculture as it has always been and agricultural land has remained till today main source of livelihood and legal income in the village. Ownership of agricultural land remains a major factor for defining social hierarchy in the village and control over land means also control over people who work on it and who have very little alternative to that work. Keeripatti Paraiyars are not only too poor to be able to buy land in the village, there is also no land that upper caste would be willing to sell to them. Although Chief Minister Karunanidhi proudly announced granting of two acres of land to Keeripatti Dalits in 2006, no land for distribution was allocated till 2011 when this chapter was written.

The most significant source of non-agricultural income for Keeripatti Dalits is masonry. In the selected sample of respondents three persons, that would correspond to about 6% of the population of the village, stated masonry as their main source of income. Skilled masons would usually earn about Rs. 100. – 120.- /day. Masonry is a physically very demanding work and masons are expected to work long hours, in average about ten hours per day (usual working hours being six to eleven and three to eight). A working week for bricklayers lasts normally six days. The work involves travelling to building sites and often it is necessary to stay out of home for the entire week as daily commuting would be both too costly and time consuming. Keeripatti masons would usually work in the area of the whole of Madurai district, occasionally also in more distant places such as Chennai. In case of staying at the building site overnight no accommodation other than a reserved plot of land to sleep, a dry toilet and a water tap is usually provided by the employer. Mason labourers are expected to take care of themselves. Physical demandingness, necessity to travel and stay out overnight combined with the harsh living conditions at building sites make the mason's job suitable mostly only to young men. Masonry

also requires some skill that has to be learned from relatives or friends so it is not a career option open to everybody. Unlike agricultural labour mason's job is a more stable source of income as masons were in a high demand in Tamil Nadu at the time of my research and this demand seems to be rather lasting one. Even though masonry offers a hard life to men who chose it as their occupation, it also provides financial stability to their families. A view expressed by my informant T.B. represents the opinion of most Dalit masons from the area on their job: *"I learned the mason work from my older brother. It is good we know the mason work. It is a hard work. But good masons are few, we have always lot of work and we earn well. I am out of home for most of the week. I do not like that. I have three children and I want to be more with my family. But if I stay at home and work on fields I will not earn enough to feed my family"* (B. T. 2007).

Beside masonry there is no significant work sector that could provide employment for Keeripatti Paraiyars. One village woman runs a tea shop in the Dalit Colony that was started chiefly as a place where local Dalits can drink tea and get together without being exposed to harrasment by Kallars and humiliating treatment by Kallar shop owners in the village. The financial benefit of the owner of the shop is minimal as well as goods available in the shop (tea, and two kinds of cigarettes), her family largely depends on her husband's earnings. Other jobs mentioned by Keeripatti Dalits during interview were rather occasional and also did not provide people involved in the jobs any long-term or significant income. Among these jobs there were low salaried position at local administration, work for local based NGOs and playing drum (Tam. *pārai*) or flute (Tam. *kuḷal*) at funerals.

Unlike in Alaveli none of the informants have ever worked abroad nor had a family member abroad who would send remmitances back home. During my interviews with young Paraiyar men (K. U. 2007) (A. P. 2007) they often expressed their wish to work abroad but at the same time they would add that this is unlikely to happen for two reasons. First they did not have sufficient financial resources to be able to cover the initial expenses (flight ticket, visa, fee to a broker who would help them to arrange the formalities and to find a job), second they had no relations or any other contacts abroad that could help them at the beginning of their career. The idea of working in abroad thus seems to Keeripatti Paraiyar only as a very distant and hardly conceivable option. Nearby Usilampatti town is rather an agricultural hub than an industrial town and as such does not provide much working opportunities for unskilled manual labour. Keeripatti Dalits do not see beside masonry and brick making any alternatives to work as agricultural labourers.

In one way Keeripatti economy have maintained the traditional structure that the village economy have had since long. It depends on agriculture where Paraiyars provide manual labour and Kallars means of production and management. Monopoly over the means of production, especially land ownership, reinforces Kallars' power over Paraiyars. Any attempt of Paraiyars to acquire land is thus understood not only as an effort to improve their material status but also as an aspiration to defy the authority and power of Kallars and as such meets with a strong opposition by Kallars. The decline of once powerful large landowners did not paradoxically benefit Paraiyars since they did not acquire any of the land but the land was distributed among family members of the former large landowners. Classes of middle and small landowners thus increased with the only result for Paraiyar being less work opportunities. Middle and small landowners try to avoid hiring Paraiyar labours for many tasks that they are able to do themselves. Working opportunities as agricultural labour have become scarcer with little

alternatives that could compensate for this loss. This situation when Paraiyars have to worry about their mere subsistence naturally creates tension between Paraiyar and Kallar community. With surplus of available agricultural labour Paraiyars have also lost one of the few pressure instruments on their employers by which they once could negotiate their wages and working conditions – threat of work stoppage or actual strike. As the situation in neighbouring villages is similar to Keeripatti, Paraiyars are easy to be replaced by labour from neighbouring villages and strikes are therefore not an effective tool. With actual disappearance of the system of bonded labour, agricultural labourers not only gained more freedom in choosing their employers but landowners also lost any responsibility for the fate of their workers. Position of Paraiyars *vis-à-vis* Kallar landowners have generally weakened.

6. RITUAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS

Foremost importance of ritual and religion in establishing and maintaining power relations in India drew the attention of anthropologists since their first encounters with Indian society. Postmodern critics of early “Orientalists” writing on India claim that this first European understanding of Indian society was based on indiscriminate acceptance of Brahmanical laws and values. Ritual and social factors of subordination were interconnected in this discourse and one helped to vindicate the other. Abbé Dubois, who was perhaps the first anthropologist of India, thus explains the emergence of Paraiyars subordination as follows: “*The origin of this degraded class can be traced to a very early period, as it is mentioned in the most ancient Puranas. The Pariahs were most probably composed, in the first instance, of all the disreputable individuals of different classes of society, who, on account of various offences, had forfeited their right to associate with respectable men. They formed a class apart, and having nothing to fear and less to lose, they gave themselves up, without restraint, to their natural tendencies towards vice and excess, in which they continue to live at the present day*” (Dubois 1928 (first edition 1817), 52). The low status of Paraiyars and other untouchable castes was attributed to their “impurity” which in turn was a result of their low practices - meat/beef eating, drinking alcohol and working with “impure” substances linked to death and end products of human metabolism.

The existence of myths of origin explaining the social status of various castes in the Indian social hierarchy and its significance for rationalization of social inequalities was noticed by “Oriental” scholars before the term “myth of origin” or “creation myth” entered in global discourse by Mircea Eliade. Thus Thurston recorded the myth of origin of Paraiyar caste: “*They have a very exalted account of their lineage, saying that they are descended from the Brahman priest Sala Sambavan, who was employed in a Siva temple to worship the god with offerings of beef, but who incurred the anger of the god by one day concealing a portion of the meat, to give it to his pregnant wife, and was therefore turned into a Paraiyan. The god appointed his brother to do duty instead of him, and the Paraiyans say that Brahman priests are their cousins*” (Thurston, Caste and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. VI. (P-S) 1909, 84).

A long accepted vision of the Indian society has been that of a self-reproducing system based on reciprocal obligations, exchange of status and interests where moral and political arenas converge and anchor the social dominance of a high status, relatively wealthy and powerful core social elite. This vision stems from the writing of Max Weber on Indian society as based on Hindu moral and village communities (Weber 1960). “*Seen beyond the magic and myth that give a veneer of legitimacy to this political and social structure, the order-generating local community conforms to a universal ideal type*” (Mitra 2005, 85).

The idea of social dominance of Indian elite classes as being based on high-status resulting from manipulation of monopoly over interpretation of religious symbols and values was further elaborated and reinforced by Louis Dumont (Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus – The Caste System and Its Implications 1980 [first edition 1966]). Uppermost and lowest layers of society in his explanation are crucial for understanding of Indian society. Brahmins and Untouchables represent for him two basic building elements of the *jajmani* system with their respective position in the system being sanctioned by the authority or religious practices and myths. Despite the criticism that Dumont’s work aroused for leaning too much on Brahmanic

notions of “purity” and for being identified to closely with the Brahman point of view, significance of religious and ritual categories for sustaining social domination of upper castes have not been put in doubt. From the left, Antonio Gramsci (Hoare and Smith 1971) and Francine Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (Frankel and Rao 1994 (first 1990)) describe the empirical basis of order respectively as “hegemony” and multiple “modes of domination”.

With the increased number of anthropological studies based on a fieldwork research in Indian villages in 1950s and 1960s, the attention shifted from general modes of dominance to detailed analyses of particular communities (Gough, Deliége, Robinson etc.). This gave rise to prolonged academic discussion on whether despite of the dominance of Brahmanic moral values in Hindu society subaltern classes of people had their own morality and set of cultural symbols, norms and values distinct from and often built in opposition to Brahmanic symbols, norms and values. There have been basically three groups of opinions on that matter, with the first two opposing each other and the third one being a kind of synthesis between the first two.

The first group depicts Dalits’ culture and consciousness as radically diverse from high Brahmanic culture. The view presenting Dalit culture and consciousness as separate and different from the Sanskritic tradition has been held among others by Gough (E. K. Gough 1960), Berreman (Berreman 1971) and Mencher (Mencher 1978). Low castes from this perspective are seen as unbound by restrictive norms of Brahmanic tradition with more natural approach to life. *“The low castes place much less emphasis than do Brahmins on otherworldliness and on the fate of the soul after death. Engaged in the practical business of earning a living through manual labour, the low castes care more for health and prosperity in this life”* (E. K. Gough 1960, 13). According to these theories, Dalits do not share higher castes’ respect for ideas of purity and see their own subordination to higher castes in more empirical terms of power and wealth. Berreman in his critique of Dumontian model claims that when he presented his version of the model to rural untouchables in Himalayas *“they laughed and one of them said ‘you have been talking with Brahmins’”* (Berreman 1971, 18). Proponents of “outcaste” models refuse the “Dumontian” consensual idea of all castes in the Indian society, accepting the same set of Hindu norms built along purity-pollution concept and defining thus position of every particular caste in the caste hierarchy. Untouchables are for them materialists, sceptical about caste notions and depreciative to the Brahmanical culture.

The second group of opinions is represented by works of Kolenda (P. D. Kolenda 1981), Cohn (Cohn 1955) in later period also by Gough (K. Gough 1981) and more recently by Khare (Khare 1984). We can call these theories as *“theories of diversity.”* Unlike previous “outcaste” theories they do not see Dalits only as a group that is rejected by the high Sanskritic culture and in turn rejects it as well but as authors and bearers of their own, original and alternative social and cultural systems. These systems exist in parallel and as an antithesis of the Brahmanical tradition. They see these systems as more egalitarian and less restrictive when compared to “high” Brahmanical culture. This self-sustained Dalit culture provides different narratives explaining how Dalit people fell in their low status and in contempt of higher castes, while originally their status would have been in par or even higher than those of higher castes. In these myths of origins their fall in caste hierarchy would have been attributed to good-nature of Dalits, wickedness of higher caste or just bad luck but in any case not to a fault of Dalits themselves. In a

myth of origin of *Chamar caste*,³⁸ quoted by Cohn, a forefather of Chamars was originally a Brahmin. One day he came upon a cow stuck in the mud. He pulled the tail of the animal in an effort to liberate it from the mud, however, the cow died. And since he was in contact with a dead cow – a polluting contact – his older brothers outcasted him and he became the first Chamar (Cohn 1955, 113). The fall of Dalits in these narratives is thus no longer a result of any offence but of bad luck and bad will of others.

Diversity theories emphasize different narratives caste to caste and their function as determinants of cultural differences between the castes. All narratives are considered as equally relative without the intention to determine the objectivity of these differences as vindication of a system of oppression. In this view there is nothing like the general high Brahmin or Sanskrit culture covering and linking the small local traditions as all cultures are peculiar and offering their own only relatively valid justifications for existing social reality. This view has been criticised for being too relativistic and ignoring vast similarities between cultural systems of different caste. A “*synthetic approach*” emerged from this critic.

Synthetic approach returns back to Dumont’s structural approach of hierarchy as an all-encompassing principle of the Hindu society but complements it with elements of diversity. It acknowledges the general validity of “*a pervasive and continuous social hierarchy marked by relative purity and impurity*”. But at the same time admit “*the possibility that Untouchables might define their own internal social organization as consistently in these terms as do the higher castes, and that they might be as pervasively ‘rank conscious’ as the higher castes*” (Moffatt 1979, 29). This approach was started by Moffat’s thorough analysis of an untouchable community in the Tamil village of Endavur in Tamil Nadu and was followed and further modified and developed in present anthropological discourse most notably by Deliège (Deliège 1988) and Sekine (Sekine 2002). It operates with the idea of replication of the prevailing social order within the narrower boundaries of the caste community. Moffat pointed out to the fact that while Harijans of Endavur condemn the caste system and their low hierarchical status among other castes, they also replicate or imitate the caste system in hierarchical ranking of various patrilineal lineages among themselves, even to the extent of practicing of untouchability towards some lineages who provide similar services to other untouchable lineages that untouchables provide to higher castes. By imitating the system they implicitly accept its validity. “*It is at this internal level that we obtain the most convincing evidence on Harijan definitions and evaluations of their own identity, by answering the question, who acts as Harijan to the Harijans?*” (Moffatt 1979, 153).

Sekine complements this view by stressing the “*the creative aspect of pollution*”. This means that Dalits do not accept their low status in terms of being “impure” and are not always seen by other castes as such. In this view we have to discriminate between “impurity” (in Tamil *acutam*) and “pollution” (in Tamil *tittu*). While “impurity” is something which from the Hindu point of view has to be rejected, “pollution” marks critical period of human life such as birth, puberty or death and it is thus necessary and important for the maintenance of the life cycle. “*Observation of actual life in the village provides a glimpse into the fact that the Harijans*

³⁸ Chamar - in Hindi *cāmār* derived from Sanskrit *carmakara* - a Dalit caste settled in north India, Pakistan and Nepal. Traditional occupation linked with this caste is that of tanners but many Chamars have been engaged in agriculture. With the total number of Chamars being estimated above 50 million, they belong to largest Dalit castes.

(Untouchables), who are considered to be polluted, are not necessarily regarded as unequivocally negative, or objects of repressed 'impurity' (Sekine 2002, xxii). The importance of participation of Paraiyars at certain religious services and temple festivals point out to this shared understanding. In this view it is also possible for Dalits and they do accept their "pollution" as a result of their jobs or ritual practices but reject being "impure". What seems to be the replication and acceptance of the high caste order does not therefore have the same ideological load.

Dumont in his generalization of caste system maintains that "*the caste is ranked by effecting of series of dichotomies*" (Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus – The Caste System and Its Implications 1980 [first edition 1966], 57)", e.g. vegetarian x non vegetarian, and despite the differences in theoretical abstractions and models drawn from the field research, cultural anthropologists agree on this. They also take in consideration broadly similar range of dichotomies on the base of which a hierarchical status to a particular caste is attributed within a given village community. The fundamental dichotomies concern rules related to food, marriage and occupation. Other important dichotomies related to religious rites are concerned with deities worshipped and participation of a particular caste at temple ceremonies and festivals. Apart from these ritual or religious dichotomies, caste hierarchy reflects strongly in rules governing access to public community facilities and services (schools, services of washermen, public wells, shops, teashops etc.) that do not have any or at least primarily do not have religious function but the access to them may be regulated according to purity/impurity, pollution rules. Therefore these criteria are also among important indicators of the status within the local caste hierarchy and attention is being paid to these indicators when in description of local caste hierarchy. Profane and religious spheres are usually so closely related in the daily life of rural village communities that any effort to divide one from the other would be artificial and incomplete. Therefore for my comparison of status of Dalits in Alaveli and Keeripatti villages religious/ritual criteria are mixed with those of access to public facilities and services that could be rather called social/community criteria.

In case of comparison of the caste systems in Alaveli and Keeripatti communities the important question is, however, not what the local caste ranking is, since this is due to the limited number of castes living in both communities rather obvious but how wide the distance between the particular grades of the local caste hierarchy, i.e. between Kallars and Paraiyars and Vanniyars/Thevars and Paraiyars, is. My aim in following subchapters is to provide a general analysis of the caste hierarchy in Alaveli and Keeripatti villages and rules governing social interaction of major communities in both villages in order to enable their comparison and highlight similarities and/or differences in social and ritual status of the Dalit community *vis-à-vis* the dominant caste.

The description will develop according to the following pattern: a) mythical explanation of the social order (myths of origins), metaphysical acceptance/rejection of inequality as a natural order b) physical distribution of settlements related to caste, b) religious practices, gods worshipped and modes of veneration c) rules concerning marriage, d) social and ritual practices governing the daily interaction of different castes including distribution of work, rules governing the acceptance of food and access to public facilities and services of other castes. First a description of Alaveli setting is provided; subsequently the situation in Keeripatti will be described and simultaneously compared with Alaveli. The description and comparison is based

primarily on field research and interviews in both villages and complemented with secondary sources such as newspaper articles and available literature.

6.1. RITUAL AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN ALAVELI

Caste composition of Alaveli village is uncomplicated with only four different castes living in the village (Udaiyars, Vanniyars, Thevars and Paraiyars) and only three of them in significant numbers (Vanniyars, Thevars and Paraiyars).

Paraiyar caste is the largest community in Alaveli village comprising about 55% of the population. Paraiyars are officially recognized as a Scheduled caste and they belong among the most populous Dalit castes in Tamil Nadu and they are probably even the single most populous one (followed by Pallars). Since most Paraiyars prefer to call themselves *Adi-Dravidas* for Census and other official purposes, which term can apply also to any other Scheduled caste, the exact numbers of Paraiyars is not available. It is estimated that the huge majority of 5,402,755 citizens of Tamil Nadu who called themselves *Adi-Dravidas* in 2001 (Census of India 2001, 1) are in fact Paraiyars. Together with 1,860,519 citizens (Census of India 2001, 1) who opted for the designation Paraiyar in the Census, the total number of Paraiyar caste members in Tamil Nadu is estimated between 5 and 5.5 million or between 8-9% of the total population of the state. Paraiyar caste is mainly concentrated in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu and the high concentration of Paraiyar population is typical to the highly agricultural regions of Tanjavur, Chidambaram and Nagapattinam, since Paraiyar caste once used to be the single largest resource of cheap labour for large landholdings belonging to temples and Brahmins in these areas.

Although Paraiyars are by no way the lowest of Dalit castes in Tamil Nadu, there are no representatives of castes that would be ranked below Paraiyars in the Alaveli. The low status of Paraiyars is most noticeably expressed by the physical separation and the considerable distance of their settlements from the rest of the village which is called in Tamil *ūr*. Paraiyars settlements are called either *cēri* or colony both by Paraiyars and other villagers. Other villagers would also refer to Paraiyar settlement as *kuppam* which term would not be used by Paraiyars. According to Fabricius the meaning the word is “*a small village of fisherman and other low people*” (Fabricius 1972 (4th ed.), 263). By Alaveli Paraiyars this term was, however, unlike neutral expressions *cēri* or *colony* understood as degrading, perhaps because of its resemblance to the word *kuppai* “*a heap, a collection, 2. a hillock, 3. sweepings, rubbish, refuse, 4. dung.*” (Fabricius 1972 (4th ed.), 263).” Although the resemblance of the two words may be just accidental, it is matter of fact that Alaveli Paraiyars, unlike the rest of the village, never referred to their settlement as *kuppam* and indeed resented the use of this word. During my field research I was advised by several Paraiyar informants not to use the word *kuppam* because “*it is not a good word*” although nobody was willing or able to explain why.

The expression *kuppam* was, however, very descriptive regarding other castes’ attitude towards Paraiyar settlements. Neither Vanniyars nor Thevars would ever visit Paraiyar settlement and if a non-Dalit wanted to talk to a particular person from *cheri*, he would ask other Paraiyar, most likely a child, to go and summon the person concerned. Entering Dalit settlement

is considered inappropriate by non-Dalits but it does not seem to be sanctioned by a strong religious taboo. In my interviews with non-Dalit informants non-entering Dalit settlement was not substantiated by the fear of ritual pollution or by the reference to the untouchability of Paraiyars. The typical reply on question why non-Dalits do not enter Dalit part of the village would be: *"We do not go there because there is no need for us to go there"* (A. U., 65 years; housewife; Vanniyar woman; Alaveli village 2007). Several non-Dalit informants reacted to the question why they would not enter the *cheri* with a facial expression of disgust and touching of their nose in the gesture meaning a bad smell. Since Alaveli Paraiyars are not involved in any particular activity that would be source of a bad smell (such as leatherwork) and during my many visits in the *cheri* I did not notice any particular bad smell, this reaction is to be understood as a pure prejudice which is not based on reality. In exceptional circumstances members on non-Dalit castes would not mind entering the *cheri* without any apparent consequences on their own ritual status. One such occasion was a visit of two of my friends U.B. (32, man) and his brother U.K. (27, man) from Vanniyar community in Dalit colony in late afternoon on August 7, when I was conducting interviews with members of Dalit community in the *cheri*. The declared reason for the visit was to call me for dinner which I was about to have in their house, the obvious, unsaid but clearly demonstrative purpose of their visit was to prove to me their open-mindedness and non-existence of any taboo preventing non-Dalit communities from entering the *cheri*. From my observation and interviews I conclude that Alaveli non-Dalits see entering Dalit part of the village as both repellent and unnecessary, however, if any need arises, not particularly polluting or harming their own ritual status.

Paraiyars, on their part, are not restricted in accessing any part of the village including temples. Their social exclusion in terms of space is thus limited to the restriction of their settlement to *cheri*. Alaveli Dalits do not complain about the fact of living separately from the rest of the village as in the context of the village life it seems natural to live together as a community. What Paraiyars perceive as discrimination is an apparent lack of interest of higher castes in the living conditions in the *cheri* substantiated for example by claims that, while a new tar road has been constructed in the main village, *cheri* gets regularly flooded because of the insufficient drainage between the *cheri* and the adjacent fields (K. S., 35 years; agricultural worker; Paraiyar man; Alaveli Dalit colony 2007) and by complaints about regular electric power black-outs in the *cheri* (*ibid.*). The allegation of unfair distribution of public goods may partly be substantiated, in part; however, they are probably just a result of feelings of relative deprivation and inferiority as in case of complaints about electric power cuts. Power cuts in reality effect whole village to the same extent, not only Dalit settlements.

Myths explaining Paraiyars' untouchability as a consequence of the original pollution of their ancestors by contact with a dead cow or by eating beef are not unknown to Alaveli Paraiyars. They are, however, neither voluntarily shared with strangers nor considered to be an acceptable explanation of their low status. Alaveli Paraiyars regard these stories with suspicion as *"false tales narrated by higher castes to defame us"* (S. B. 2007). Position at the bottom of the local caste system hierarchy is accepted by Alaveli Paraiyars as a matter of fact, however, the mythological explanations of this fact has been rejected in favour of more "scientific" explanations of the emergence of the caste system provided by the Dravidian and Communist parties active in the area. In this explanation Paraiyars are descendants from the first indigenous inhabitants of South India who were of Dravidian origin. As such they are called Adi-Dravidas (from Skt. *ādi* - *m.* beginning, commencement (Monier Williams 1899, 136)) i.e. "first-

Dravidians". Adi-Dravidas according to this modern mythology resisted firmly the imposition of new gods and social order brought to South India by Aryan Brahmins and, as a result, they were allocated the lowest position in the newly emerged caste/varna hierarchy. Alaveli Paraiyars strongly prefer this explanation highlighting their glorious past and resistance to foreign invaders to the traditional mythology linking the emergence of their caste with beef-eating and handling corpses. Moreover, the *adi-Dravidian* mythology unlike Hindu myths can be and is shared both by Christian and Hindu Paraiyars in Alaveli and can serve as a linking element between Hindu and Christian Dalits.

In my survey 79.2% of Alaveli Paraiyars disagreed with the statement that "*low caste is a result of bad deeds committed in previous lives*". Only 3.8% of them agreed with the statement, while 17% neither agreed nor disagreed. Having refused the mythological origin of the first Paraiyar based on the primordial pollution as a "fairy-tale" and accepted the "historical" explanation of untouchability, Alaveli Paraiyars are firmly convinced about the accidentality of being born in a low caste and strongly disagree with Brahmanical concept explaining the fact of being born in a low caste as a result of sins committed in previous lives. Majority of Alaveli Paraiyars, i.e. 52.8%, disagreed with the statement that "*caste differences among people are necessary and useful*". 22.6% of respondents agreed with the statement and the same number neither agreed nor disagreed. The apparent Paraiyars denial of legitimacy to the caste system contrasts with answers to the statement saying that "*low caste has to obey high caste*". Majority of 60.4% of Alaveli Paraiyars agreed with the statement, while only 17% disagreed and 22.6% were not able to decide whether to agree or disagree. It can be concluded that society without caste differences represents for Paraiyars a desirable project for the future; however, they do not resist the power and the authority of higher castes in their day-to-day life and accept the dominance of higher caste as a matter of fact. Their attitude was succinctly expressed in an interview with one of my elderly Paraiyar informants: "*All politicians talk about abolishing the caste at every public meeting. DMK, ADMK, Congress, Communists, all of them say that there are no differences between upper and lower castes. Will they give us rice if they talk like that? Before we worked on Brahmin fields so we obeyed Brahmins, now we work for Vanniyars. We obey them because we work on their fields and they give us food* (A. I. 2007)".

Alaveli Paraiyars belong to two religions. Approximately two thirds are Hindus and one third are Christians. All Christians belong to the Church of South India, the successor of Church of England. The nearest church where Alaveli Christians can attend Sunday services is in Sembanar Koil. Their knowledge of Christian beliefs is very limited; Jesus is hardly referred to and is certainly no matter of great devotion. The prominent is the cult of Virgin Mary whose picture can be found and worshipped in every house of Alaveli Christians. Despite Alaveli Christians' affiliation with the *Church of South India* the Catholic basilica of *Our Lady of Good Health* in Velankanni (tam. *vēlāṅkaṇṇi*) is an important focus of worship for them. Velankanni is a small town located about 12 km from the district capital Nagapattinam and approximately 70 km far from Alaveli. Every year between the end of August and the September 8th - the birthday of Mary - all Christians from Alaveli participate to a pilgrimage to the Virgin Mary in Velankanni. Our Lady of Good Health, in Tamil *Arokkia Matha* (Tam. *ārōkkiya mātā*), is according to legends a powerful healer and therefore worshipped not only by Christians but also by Paraiyar Hindus in Alaveli. She, along with *Mariamman* (Tam. *māriyamman*) called also *Punchiyamma* (Tam. *puñciyamman*), is considered one of the two main protective deities of the cheri. In fact, the boundaries between the two goddesses are rather blurred and some Paraiyars claim not only

that Mariyamman and Punchiyamman are one and the same goddess but identify her with Arokkia Mata or Virgin Mary as well.

Although Mariamman is respected by all castes in the village and is one of the protector deities of the village (*kirāma teyvam*), she is the main caste deity (Tam. *cāti teyvam*) of Alaveli Hindu Paraiyars. The temple of Mariamman is located at the village borders behind the eastern settlement of Paraiyars. The temple is in fact not more than a sharp-edged granite idol with the yellow painted tip representing the deity located in the shade of the large Neem tree (lat. *Azadirachta indica*). Mariamman is worshipped throughout the year mostly by women from Paraiyar community in a similar manner as other Hindu gods, i.e. being offered flowers and coconuts as sacrifices. In the first month of the Tamil calendar - *Chittirai* (Tam. *cittirai*) lasting from mid-April to mid-May a bloody sacrifice to the Mariamman takes place. The ceremony is officiated by a Paraiyar from the village and a goat that had been purchased on the expense of the whole village is sacrificed to the deity. All villagers may be present to the ceremony; however, following the ceremony the meat of the goat is prepared and distributed only among Paraiyars. Marriamman or Punchiamman is said to protect the boundaries of the village and help people to resist all kinds of fever diseases. She is also a provider of fertility and is worshipped by women who ask for her intervention to become pregnant and to ensure a smooth delivery of their child. Although Alaveli Paraiyars do worship Mariamman in the first place, they are by no way banned from participating on rites in other temples in or around the village. An exception applies for *Aiyanar* (Tam. *aiyaṅar*) temple in the Adaikalapuram part of Alaveli which is considered a temple of the caste deity of Vanniyars as well as Thevars due to the presence of Thevars' caste deity *Karuppa swami* (Tam. *karuppa cuvāmi*) as one of the idols in the temple.

Vanniyars (Tam. *vaṅṅiyār*) are numerically the second largest community in Alaveli comprising for approximately 40% of the population of the village. Vanniyars are probably the most numerous caste group in Tamil Nadu and according to various estimates they make for between 10% (Rudolph 1967, 49) and 12% (Radhakrishnan 1999, 171) of the population of the state, i.e. about 6.5 million people. The figures are necessarily tentative since the last Census based on caste providing exact data was executed in 1931. Vanniyars live predominantly in the northern part of Tamil Nadu, in the area called sometimes "Vanniyar belt" consisting of about 15 northern districts including Nagapattinam. In this area they comprise for about 25% of the population and represent the dominant caste.

Although nowadays Vanniyars are officially classified as one of the Most Backward Castes (MBC), they derive the origin of their caste from warriors and chieftains who had been in the service of Pallava kings. In the 19th century their caste associations exerted a serious effort to achieve recognition by the British Census authorities as belonging to the Kshatriya varna. This claim was, however, never accepted since the traditional occupation of the majority of Vanniyars is agriculture; they are widely recognized by other castes as belonging to the Shudra varna. Their caste name Vanniyar is, according to their tradition, derived either from the Sanskrit word *vahni* – fire (Monier Williams 1899, 933) since they claim to belong to the "fire race" – "*agnikula*" or "*vahnikula*". According to Thurston "*Agni, the god of fire, is connected with regal office, as kings hold in their hands the fire-wheel of Agneya-chakra, and the Vanniyas urge in support of their name the regal descent they claim*" (Thurston, Caste and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. VI. (P-S) 1909, 3). Vanniyars are also called Palli reputedly referring to their links with the Pallava kings and Padaiyachi (Tam. *paṭaiyāṭci*) a compound noun consisting of Tamil words *paṭai* – "2. an

army” (Fabricius 1972 (4th ed.), 651) and *āṭci* – “n. authority to govern or possess, reign, possession, heritage 2. an old ancestral custom, usage, rule” (Fabricius 1972 (4th ed.), 63) and meaning thus “a chief over the army” or “a general of the army”. According to Thurston “the name further occurs as a sub-division of Ambalakāran and Valaiyan” (Thurston, Caste and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. VII. (T-Z) 1909, 321).

Vanniyars’ myths of origin invariably stress the warrior or Kshatriya descent of their caste. Several versions of their myth of origin have been documented and collected in the literature related to this caste. The version narrated among Vanniyars in Alaveli is the following: The first ancestor of the caste - *Vīra Vanniyar* - was created by lord Shiva upon request and penance performed by a saint Sambu in order to fight against the Asura called *Vātāpi*. *Vīra Vanniyar* was married to a younger sister of lord Murugan’s wife and conceived four sons named *Rūdra Vanniyar*, *Brahma Vanniyar*, *Krishna Vanniyar* and *Sambuha Vanniyar* who were later married to daughters of the saint *Kandha*. In a glorious battle the sons with the help of the goddess *Durga* managed to defeat Asura *Vātāpi*’s army and to kill him. They also killed everybody in Asura’s town except of four Asura women who came out in a human form and who were taken with Vanniyars as captives. Meanwhile Vanniyars’ wives, having been mistaken by wrong evidence, came to believe that their husbands had perished in the battle and they committed suicide by jumping into fire pots. Having lost their wives Vanniyar brothers married Asura women and started to rule regions allocated to them by lord Shiva.

Whatever the historical reality about Vanniyars being generals in Pallava army may be, the self-perception of Vanniyars is that of an “ancient warrior race”. Their myth of origin not only provides symbolical validation of their Kshatriya origin but it also gives an explanation why Vanniyars are not accepted as belonging among Kshatriyas by other castes. Although the four Vanniyar brothers were Kshatriyas born from the union between *Vīra Vanniyar* – the Kshatriya and his demigod wife, their wives were Asuras. Although Asuras are primarily mythological figures, opponents of gods (*Devas*), Asuras are also one of the abusive terms denoting Dalits. The myth can thus also be read as to describe the rise of Vanniyar caste from the inter-caste marriage between Kshatriya men and low caste (perhaps even untouchable) women, placing thus the offspring of such a marriage in a hierarchical rank between the two castes – as Shudras.

In the past Alaveli Vanniyars occupied two out of three parts of the main village (*Tam. ūr*) Alaveli and *Adaikalapuram* while *Ilaiyankudi* was reserved for Brahmins as a so called *agraharam*. After Brahmins left and local Vanniyars and Thevars bought their farms, they subsequently moved in Brahmin houses in *Ilaiyankudi*, since they were constructed from better quality material (brick walls and tiled roofs) than their old houses in other parts of the village. Thus the separation of Dalit and non-Dalit settlements remained the only habitation division in the village, since all non-Brahmin, non-Dalit castes – Vanniyars, Thevars and a few Udaiyars lived in the same part of the village even before.

There are no Christians among non-Dalit inhabitants of Alaveli; consequently all Vanniyars and Thevars are Hindus. Both Vanniyars and Thevars share the same temples, worship the same deities and jointly organize the same pujas in the village. The only difference in terms of worship between the two communities is that while Vanniyars have temples of all their important caste deities within the village and the main temples for their caste are in a range of about 40 km from Alaveli, the main deity of Thevars – *Karuppa swami* does not have his

temple in the village, his idol being only a part of Aiyanar Koil, and Alaveli Thevars travel every year to Alagar Koil temple in Madurai for the Karuppa swami's festival. This fact demonstrates the subordinated status of Thevars *vis-à-vis* Vanniyars in the village.

There are two main deities important for Alaveli Vanniyars that are considered as village deities (Tam. *kirāma teyvam*); Mariamman and Aiyanar. In general, Mariamman is considered as one of the caste deities of Vanniyars due to its involvement in the myth of origin as a deity that helped Vīra Vanniyar to conquer the Asura Vātāpi's army. However, maybe due to the worship of Mariamman by Paraiyars and the fact that Mariamman is considered as a "*tuṭiyāna teyvam*" – (deity accepting blood), Alaveli Vanniyars who have been seeking to improve their caste status by following some of the Brahmanical norms, consider Aiyanar who is a "*cuttamuka teyvam*" – „a deity rejecting blood sacrifice“ - as their caste deity (Tam. *cāti teyvam*).

The Aiyanar temple is located in Adaikalapuram at the southern limit of the village. The temple is in an open ground among several trees with the central idol of Aiyanar represented by a terracotta equestrian statue of the god with the symbols of the god - a trident and a lance - on its side. Around the central idol there are several more idols representing deities associated with Aiyanar amongst them the most important being Karuppu swami and Mariamman. Although the tradition would require a member of the potter caste (Tam. *kuyavar* or *velar*) to be a priest in the Aiyanar temple, in Alaveli Velars are not available and the function of a priest in the Aiyanar temple is performed by a member of the Vanniyar community. In other respects, the worship follows the standard pattern of the Aiyanar worship with offerings being presented in the usual form of flowers, vegetarian food, incense and most importantly rough terracotta figures of horses manufactured by the priest. The ritual in Alaveli does not include blood sacrifices not even for Karuppu swami who is Aiyanar's companion and who usually requires blood sacrifice. In Alaveli Aiyanar's festival is held once a year in the Tamil month of *Masi* (February-March) and it is organized jointly by the Vanniyar and Thevar community. The Aiyanar's idol is walked in the procession around the village during the festival. Paraiyar community does not participate in the organization of the festival but they are allowed to take part in the procession and to worship Aiyanar in the temple at the occasion of the festival. Paraiyars normally do not enter Aiyanar temple throughout the year as it is seen as Vanniyars' temple. Entering the Aiyanar temple by Paraiyars is not explicitly banned but it is not usual and non-entering is not contested by Paraiyars. According to A.I. the general attitude of Paraiyar toward the fact that Aiyanar temple is considered as restricted only for Vanniyars and Thevars is one of acceptance and reluctance "*We go and worship Aiyanar at the time of the festival. He protects the boundaries of the village, that is all. He is not our caste deity and we do not expect favours from him, so why should we go and worship in their temple?*" (A. I. 2007).

While both Mariamman and Aiyanar temples are situated at the limits of the village Pillaiyar or Vinayakar temple is located within the village in the centre of Ilaiyankudi. Unlike other village temples Pillaiyar temple is a genuine building made of bricks with tiled roof and the statue of god Vinayakkar inside. It was constructed by former Brahmin residents of Ilaiyankudi in 1931 and its maintenance is apparently financed by a family of Brahmins from Chennai who also occasionally (once in two or three years) bring a Brahmin and organize a big puja in the temple. There is a person from Vanniyar community living near the temple who is in charge of taking daily care of the temple cleaning it and bringing offerings to the god. Villagers bring small offerings, mostly flowers, to the temple at the time of major Tamil Hindu festivals such as

Deepavali and Pongal but there is no special festival for the Pillaiyar held in the village. Members of both Vanniyar-Thevar and Paraiyar community would come and bring their offerings to Pillaiyar. Alaveli people's attitude to the deity can be best described as respectful but without much expectation and the same kind of attachment as in the case of popular and lower deities such as Mariamman and Aiyanar. Despite Pillaiyar's popularity in Tamil Nadu, he is generally seen as linked with the high Brahmin tradition of Hinduism and as a too distant deity for ordinary people to be influenced by their offerings and worship.

Thevar (Tam. *tēvar*) are the third largest community in Alaveli, although numerically not particularly important with the population comprising for about 5-10% of the village. Thevar is an honorific title of the Mukkulathor (Tam. *mukkulatōr*) "people of three clans," these include Agamudayar (Tam. *akamuṭaiyār*), Maravar (Tam. *maṛavar*) and Kallar (Tam. *kallār*) communities. These castes regard themselves as descendants of indigenous royal families of South India, so called poligars (Tam. *palaiyakkārar*). In Tamil Nadu they are very important community because they count for a substantial portion of the population, especially in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu and because they are very well organized and politically active. There is no reliable number regarding the population of Thevars since the last caste based Census was executed in 1931 when there was nearly 1 million Mukkulathors in the Madras presidency (Gorringer, Untouchable Citizens - Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu 2005, 60). Internet pages popularizing Thevar caste claim the total population of Mukkulathors in Tamil Nadu as being 13 million (Kallar The Caste who makes the History of Tamilnadu 2010) or 11,950,000 (Kottairaj 2009). In spite of the fact that it is not clear how the authors of these web pages arrived to these numbers and it is probable that they tended to exaggerate, we can assume that Mukkulathors make for not much less than 15% of the Tamil Nadu population. According to Tamil Nadu government's classification Mukkulathors belong among Backward Classes (Agamudayar, Maravar, several Kallar subcastes), Most Backward Classes (Ambalakarar) or Denotified Communities (under British notified as "Criminal Castes and Tribes") (Ambalakarar in several areas, Piramalai Kallars).

Alaveli Thevars belong to Kallar caste but indicate themselves consistently honorifically as Thevars, therefore they are titled Thevars in this thesis as well. Kallar caste is more thoroughly introduced in the following chapter 6.2. since it forms the majority population in Keeripatti, therefore here I will introduce only specificities of Alaveli Thevars. Although there are several indigenous Kallar subcastes in the Nagapattinam district, Alaveli Thevars do not belong among them. Alaveli Thevars ancestors moved in Alaveli from the Melur district near Madurai at the beginning of the 20th century. They settled there in search of work at Brahmin estates. Although nobody from the first generation of settlers is alive now, the family links with the communities from the original villages are still maintained.

The main caste deity for Alaveli Thevars is Karuppu swami (Tam. *karuppu cuvāmi*). As it had been said, Karuppu swami does not have his separate temple in the village and he is worshipped along with Aiyanar. In the Aiyanar temple in Alaveli Karuppu swami is represented in the form of a black stone with a turban and dhoti (Tam. *kaylī*) and his symbol which is a weapon and agricultural instrument in one - aruval (Tam. *arivāl*). Karuppu swami is worshipped simultaneously with Aiyanar and although he is a deity enjoying meat and alcohol, in Alaveli he is worshipped in a vegetarian manner. Every year in the Tamil month of *Chittirai* (Tam. *cittirai*), i.e. April-May, Alaveli Thevars travel to Azhagar Kovil (Tam. *aḷakar kōvil*) near Melur to

participate at the festival of the god *Azhagar* (Tam. *aḷakar*) whose guarding deity (Tam. *kāval teyvam*) is Karuppu swami. At this opportunity they also participate at sacrifices to Karuppu swami organized in the villages of their origin. This is also an important opportunity for maintaining contacts with the community of their origin.

Thevars do not inhabit any separate part of the village and they are mixed with the Vanniyar population in the main *ūr* and they are also involved in religious activities and festivals of the Vanniyar community. The relations between the communities of Vanniyars and Thevars are very friendly, since they are roughly of the same ritual status belonging among the Shudra castes and the small number of Thevars in the village could not challenge Vanniyar dominance. Members of both Vanniyar and Thevar caste interact with each other without any restriction imposed by caste. Visiting each others' houses is common, the most usual opportunity for the visit is watching of a favourite TV programme, since not all households have their own TV. Villagers without their own TV would often come and watch in their neighbours' house no matter of neighbours' caste or kinship status. These visits during the daytime are extremely informal, often the person coming for the visit would simply enter the house, sit down on the floor and watch without paying any attention to his/her hosts. People who come watching TV are often children or elderly people, since they are not so busy with work during the day as adults.

According to my survey the acceptance of inequalities resulting from the caste system and the Brahmanical explanation of these inequalities as based on karma law is somewhat larger among the non-Dalits inhabitants of Alaveli, i.e. Vanniyars, Thevars and Udaiyrs, than among Alaveli Dalits. More non-Dalits accepted the idea that *"being born in a low caste is a result of bad deeds committed in previous lives"*. Although 51% disagreed with the statement (compared to 79.2% of Alaveli Paraiyars), 36.2% agreed with the statement (among Paraiyars only 3.8%), while 12.8% could not decide whether they agree or disagree. Majority of 76.6% of non-Dalit Alaveli villagers also believe that *"low caste must obey high caste"* (60.4% Dalits), while only 10.6% disagree (17% Dalits). Caste inequality is natural and useful social arrangement for 57.4% non-Dalits (only 22.6% of Dalits agreed). The difference between perception of caste system between Dalit and non-Dalit villagers in Alaveli is apparent from the Table 3.

Table 3 Caste system acceptance in Alaveli

| Alaveli village> Caste system acceptance questions (figures in %) | | <i>"Being born in a low caste is a result of bad deeds committed in the previous life."</i> | <i>"Low castes must obey high castes for the welfare of society."</i> | <i>"If all people were equal, nobody would do hard and difficult work. Therefore caste differences among people are necessary and useful."</i> |
|---|-----------|---|---|--|
| Agree | non-Dalit | 36.2 | 76.6 | 57.4 |
| | Dalit | 3.8 | 60.4 | 22.6 |
| Disagree | non-Dalit | 51.0 | 10.6 | 27.7 |
| | Dalit | 79.2 | 17.0 | 52.8 |
| Do not know | non-Dalit | 12.8 | 12.8 | 14.9 |
| | Dalit | 17 | 22.6 | 22.6 |

With respect to marriage all castes in Alaveli share the same basic values and ideas about what kind of marriage is suitable and acceptable. This means that the all castes in the village prefer to marry within the same caste and the most preferred potential grooms/brides are cross-cousins, i.e. children of father's sister's children or mother's brother's children (Tam. *muṛai peṇ* and *muṛai paiyaṇ*). On contrary marriage with father's brother's children and mother's sister's children (Tam. *paṅkāḷi*) is considered incestuous and is strictly forbidden. Arranged marriages are generally accepted as suitable and most likely to result in satisfied family life. There are, however, considerable differences between the Vanniyar/Thevar and the Paraiyar caste with regard how much the theory about appropriate marriage is followed.

Among Alaveli Vanniyar community arranged marriages are a rule for the first marriage and the cross-cousins' marriages are strongly preferred unless there are other circumstances that do not speak for the cross-cousins' marriage (e.g. too big age difference between the spouses or horoscopes that do not match). All marriages among Vanniyar caste are arranged. Girls are almost completely segregated from boys after attaining of puberty by being constantly accompanied by other family members whenever they go out of the house. This to a large extent limits the possibility of starting "an improper relationship." The family supervision of women is to some degree relaxed after the wedding as since then it is considered as husband's duty. Remarriage of widows is allowed and since the second marriage is not attributed the same importance as the first marriage, it is permissible to marry out of the caste provided the caste concerned is close to Vanniyar caste status. In practice it means that marriages between Vanniyars and Thevars and Vanniyars and Udayars are tolerated in case of re-marriage. In case of first marriage, marriages out of caste do not happen in Alaveli. What was said about Vanniyars apply to Thevars as well. The particularity of Alaveli Thevars is that they often seek a suitable groom/bride among kinsfolk in Melur region where Alaveli Thevars come from. Re-marriage of widows is allowed and intercaste marriage is tolerated, although not encouraged. Both in case of Vanniyars and Thevars marriage ceremonies is officiated by a Brahmin.

Paraiyar community is one which is the least tied by the Dravidian marriage customs. Although Paraiyars acknowledge the desirability of a cross-cousin marriage, in practice this custom is hardly ever followed, the only actual requirement for the match is that it be within the Paraiyar caste and not within the closest family. There is more consideration for the wishes of the spouses and there are married Paraiyar couples in Alaveli who married a partner of their choice although the actual match and its conditions were negotiated by their parents. Young Paraiyars have more opportunity to contact their prospective partners since the segregation of sexes is not and cannot be so strict as in the case of higher castes. Young people of both sexes work together in fields and thus they have plentiful opportunities to contact each other and start a relationship. Religion of a potential match is of little importance, in Alaveli there are at least three mixed couples with one of the spouses a Christian and the other a Hindu. Paraiyars wedding ceremonies are officiated by priests belonging to *Valluvar* caste (Tam. *valluvar*) from near Vaitheeswarankoil who are considered to belong among "untouchable" castes themselves.

Alaveli Paraiyars do not intermarry with other castes. There are no other Dalit castes in Alaveli and its surroundings and marriages with upper caste Thevars and Vanniyars are considered taboo. It is the fear of possibly consequences that such a marriage would have on the relations with upper caste villagers that make the match with upper caste member unacceptable for Alaveli Dalits' community. In recent Tamil Nadu history there were several cases of

extremely violent reaction of caste Hindu communities including Vanniyars on marriages with Dalits.³⁹ *“If my son marries a Vanniyar girl what benefit will we get? Will they ask us to come and eat with them in their houses? No. They will treat my son as a dog and banish the girl. They would not kill them here but it would only bring shame on us. I will never allow this kind of marriage”* (C. P. 2007).

The idea of mixed marriage with Paraiyars is unacceptable even for younger generation and people who otherwise express rather tolerant and enlightened opinions. T.R. a young English educated son of a Vanniyar farmer, who became my good friend during the fieldwork, expressed his opinion on the matter in these words: *“If somebody of our caste married a Paraiyar, it is not only shame for his family but it will be our shame as well. People from other villages would not give us their daughters for marriage. Our parents have worked hard and our caste has done a lot of progress in this village. We do not want to be ruined because of an unsuitable marriage. If some Vanniyar married a Paraiyar, he would not be allowed to stay in this village”* (R. T. 2007).

Accidentally, I came to realize how serious social stigma a suspicion of close or intimate relations with members of Paraiyar caste for Vanniyars was, while testing one of the first versions of my research questionnaire. In the question *“How are relationships among people of different castes in your village?”*⁴⁰ Tamil word *uṛavu* was used to translate the English word “relationship”. Especially women respondents seemed to be puzzled with this question and a frequent reaction was to deny any relationships with lower castes which obviously was not the case. A typical reply was: *“There are no relations at all. They live in their cheri. They work on our fields, that’s it”*. After few similar (and rather angry) reactions I realized that the word *uṛavu*⁴¹ was a problematic one because of its secondary meaning “sexual relation”. In order to avoid the ambiguous interpretation of the question I replaced it by a more explicit and unambiguous formulation in a final version of the questionnaire: *“Do lower caste and upper caste people live in harmony in the place where you live?”*⁴² The original use of an ambiguous translation, however, provided an opportunity to understand that anything that may bring about a suspicion of possible intimate relationships between Vanniyars and Paraiyars represents a very serious challenge to the community that has to be avoided and suppressed.

Commensality is not an issue among non-Dalit castes in Alaveli. All castes who reside in the main village *ūr* do share food with each other including the boiled rice (Tam. *cōru*) which, according to Hindu usage, is the kind of food where the restrictions on commensality are greatest (Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus – The Caste System and Its Implications 1980 [first edition 1966], 142). The typical opportunity where the food is shared among different castes are weddings where not only relatives and friends but also neighbors are invited. On the other hand none of the non-Dalit castes accepts food from Paraiyars, including the festival of Puchiamman where the goat sacrificed is subsequently eaten and shared among Paraiyars only although other castes participate at the festival. Paraiyars do accept food from all other castes.

³⁹ In one of the most notorious case a young couple from Puthukooraipeetai, Cuddalore district, S. Murugesan (25 years, Paraiyar) and D. Kannagi (22, Vanniyar) was tortured and murdered by being forced to drink a poison. The perpetrators were the girl’s brothers and her father who committed the crime in order to avenge the damaged “honour” of the family (Viswanathan 2003).

⁴⁰ *“Uṅkaḷ ūrilē vittiyācamāṇa cāti makkaḷukkuyiṭaiyil uravukaḷ eppaṭi irukkum?”*

⁴¹ *uṛavu* – 1. relationship 3. relations between departments, states or countries 4. bilateral relations 5. relationship, bondage, attachment 6. sexual intercourse (Annamalai 2008 (second edition), 222-223)

⁴² *“Nīnkaḷ vālum cūnilaiyil kīlcātikkārarkaḷ mēlcātikkārarkaḷuṭaṇ orrumaiyāka vāḷkirarkaḷā?”*

In Alaveli there are no public facilities that would be an object of controversy over their use between Dalits and non-Dalit population. Wells and water taps are used according to their respective location, those in cheri by Dalits and those in the main village by non-Dalits. The only ration shop is located in the main village and it is used by both communities. All children from Alaveli, both Dalits and non-Dalits, attend the same school in the neighboring village of Thirunanriyur. Probably the best indicators of relations among various castes and of the practice of untouchability and caste status in Indian villages are Indian tea-shops. In some villages Dalits are not allowed to use the same cups as caste Hindus, in other villages they are not even allowed to enter the tea stalls. In Alaveli village there are two tea-stalls, one in central Alaveli and the other in Ilaiyankudi. Ilaiyankudi tea-stall is run by a Thevar owner, the owner of Alaveli tea-stall belongs to the Vanniyar caste. In neither of the two places there is the system of two-cups in place and both of them serve Dalit customers. Behaviour of Dalit and non-Dalit customers in the shops is different though. It is more for caste Hindus that the tea-shop serves as a place meeting point where, besides consuming tea or soft drinks, they can also have a chat with neighbours. Dalits consume tea in the shop less often than caste Hindu and prefer to buy tea in cans and drink it in the fields. If they drink tea at the shop while caste Hindus are present, Dalits display signs of submission. They do not sit down at the bench or steps leading to the shop next to caste Hindus and either remain standing or squat on the floor.

The most noticeable sign of status inequality in the daily interaction between Dalit and non-Dalit people in Alaveli is the form of address used in usual communication. Caste Hindus in the village do not address each other by their names only, since this would be considered impolite. As it is usual in Tamil and generally Indian languages terms indicating family relations are used even for unrelated people as a term of respect, e.g. *appā* ("father) for an old respectable man, *ammā* ("mother") for an older women, *akkā* ("older sister") and *aṇṇā* ("older brother") for a women/a man resp. older than oneself but not too old. Family term is used either by itself or after the given name. Contrary to that Paraiyars are called by non-Dalits by their given names only (e.g. Subbah, Velu). Usual honorific ending *-ṅka!* (or *ṅka* colloquially) which is otherwise used rather commonly is generally not used when a caste Hindus addresses a Paraiyar. Thus if an Alaveli Vanniyar calls his Thevar friend Kumar to come, he will address him as "*(kumār) aṇṇā iṅkē vāṅka!*" (Literally: "*(Kumar) Older brother here come-respectful suffix!*"). Saying the same to a Paraiyar Velu, he will formulate the sentence as "*vēlu iṅkē vā!*" (Literally: "*Velu here come!*"). On the other hand Alaveli non-Dalits avoid exaggerating their superiority and do not use a derogatory caste name "*paṛaiyā*" to address Paraiyars and the disrespectful ending *-ṭa* (e.g. "*paṛaiyā iṅkē vāṭa* - literally "*Paraiyar here come (get here)!*"). Paraiyars in their turn avoid directly addressing higher castes and if they have to, then they will use a respectful term (*aṇṇā*, *ammā*) and honorific ending *-ṅka*. Term of address clearly sets the hierarchical social relationship between the speaker and the listener.

From the ritual and social hierarchy point of view, we can conclude that, although there are four castes in the Alaveli village, the only significant division is between the Dalits and non-Dalits. The customary divide between them is clear-cut, defined by the boundaries of cheri, separate facilities used, different modes of religious worship and it is manifested in daily interaction in villagers' speech and behaviour. This divide is to large extent unopposed and the limits between the two communities are consensually maintained by both Dalit and non-Dalit community. Dalits neither struggle to have more access to caste Hindus' temples nor request an access to caste Hindu wells and water taps. Facilities that are common for the village, such as

teashops and the ration shop, are used by both communities. Notion of undesirability of intercaste marriages between Paraiyars and caste Hindus is shared by both communities for different reasons. Paraiyars in Alaveli are at the bottom of the local social and ritual hierarchy and they have to bear the signs of their degradation in daily interactions with Vanniyars and Thevars. On the other hand this discrimination is not escalated to an unbearable extent and local Paraiyars do not actively oppose it. According to my survey relations between Dalits and caste Hindus are considered very good or good by 83% of Alaveli non-Dalits and 77% of Dalits.

6.2. RITUAL AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN KEERIPATTI AND ITS COMPARISON WITH ALAVELI

As well as in Alaveli, Keeripatti caste system is simple consisting of four castes; *Piramalai Kallars*, *Paraiyars*, *Vannans* and *Acaris*. Since the two latter groups (Vannans and Acaris) are numerically rather insignificant (less than 2% of the population), they will be mentioned only in relation with the two other more numerous groups.

Paraiyars form about 25% of the population of Keeripatti, i.e. about 340 persons. The whole of the Dalit population of the village live in the same cheri located on the eastern side of the village and divided from the main village by a paddy field. Most Paraiyar families live in prefabricated one room concrete houses built as a part of Tamil Nadu government effort to improve the conditions of Dalits in the infamous village. Since they are the only available Dalit caste in the village, they are at the bottom of village hierarchy and the only inhabitants of the cheri. They are considered lower than the washermen Vannan caste who although being relatively low at the caste ladder are considered a Shudra caste and live at the outskirts of the main village – *ūr* and not in the cheri.

The movement of Paraiyars around village is limited to the minimum necessary to secure their basic needs. The practice of untouchability mixes with the tension aroused by the political activity of some Keeripatti Paraiyars and resulting resistance by the Kallar majority. Keeripatti Paraiyars are not allowed to enter village temples and they are not served at the two teashops in the village. Local Kallar shopkeepers boycott Dalit families who they believe are involved in Dalit politics in the village. Keeripatti Paraiyar women allege that they do not feel secure in the main village due to harassment and abuse that they suffer from Kallar men. Majority of Dalit women (54.5%) do not feel safe in the village. *"I never let my daughters alone in the main village. When we walk there, Kallar men often shout some abuse at us. I am worried what they do if my daughter is alone. If we are untouchable for them, why do not they leave us alone? We have to go there for work so what can we do?"* (M.A. 2007). Contrary to Keeripatti Dalit women experience only 5% of non-Dalit women in Keeripatti stated that they do not feel safe in the survey. As a result of hostile environment in the main village, Paraiyars tend to spend as little time as possible there although they are not banned from entering the village. They are, however, banned from entering the main temple of Kallars in the central village – Shree Vangaru Thevar swami temple (Tam. *ṣrī vaṅkāru tēvar cuvāmi kōvil*). Piramalai Kallars on their side never enter Paraiyar cheri. In a situation when a Keeripatti Piramalai Kallar needs to meet a Paraiyar, Kallar will have the Paraiyar invariably summoned in the main village.

Despite the high activity of political parties such as Dalit Panthers and several NGOs in the Keeripatti cheri, the opinion of Paraiyar villagers on whether their present low status is a result of bad conduct in previous lives and thus the acceptance of Brahmanical ideology among them is quite surprisingly relatively large. It is accepted by 47% of Paraiyar population of the village, while the same number does not agree. When asked about origins of the whole Paraiyar caste and why it is considered by other castes untouchable, the following story was narrated to me by an elderly Paraiyar in Keeripatti: *“Paraiyars are in fact older brothers of Brahmins. One day both brothers went together to a village to perform a puja on behalf of the people of that village. Before they entered the village, they found a dead cow on the road. Out of respect for the animal, older brother said to a younger to bury the dead animal. But the younger brother was weak and unfit for the physical work, therefore older brother started to dig the hole himself. When the brothers were not coming for a long time, people from the village came to look for them. They saw the older brother digging the hole for the cow and asked who will then perform the puja. The older brother said, ‘eṇṇ tampi pārppāṇṇ’ [in Tamil: ‘My younger brother will see to this/will take care of this’], which villagers and the god understood as ‘eṇṇ tampi pāppāṇṇ’ [in Tamil: ‘My brother is a Brahmin’]. Thus by this mistake the younger brother became a high caste Brahmin in charge of performing pujas and older brother became a Paraiyar who has to do all difficult work”* (S. V. 2007).

Younger generation of Alaveli Paraiyars, however, looks at myths with contempt. *“There is no use in listening to these stories. They were invented to justify why we are untouchables. Our leaders Ambedkar, Periyar and Thirumaavalavan showed us that Brahmins and other upper castes fabricated such stories to keep us obedient. Before Brahmin came and spread the Hinduism, there were no caste differences. Because Dalits confronted Brahmins, they were called untouchables”* (M. S. 2007). While there is a divide between the older and younger generation of Dalits about the ontological causes of Paraiyar low status, there is a general agreement that the present caste divide is unfair, unnecessary and that belonging to a particular caste should not constitute a right for prominent position in society. Majority of 73.5% of Keeripatti Paraiyar respondents in my survey did not agree with the opinion that *“low caste has to obey high caste”*. Majority of Keeripatti Paraiyars, i.e. 71.4%, disagreed with the statement that *“caste differences among people are necessary and useful”*. If we compare these figures with Alaveli Paraiyars⁴³, it is apparent that Keeripatti Paraiyars are not reconciled with the existing social order in the same way as Alaveli Paraiyars are. The discontent with the present social order is bigger among younger generation. Among Keeripatti Paraiyars in the survey in the age below 35 years 93.3% disagreed with the obedience of lower castes to higher castes and 90% of respondents in this category do not see caste differences as necessary and useful (All values are provided in Table 4).

Unlike in Alaveli in Keeripatti all Paraiyar families are Hindus. The main deity in Keeripatti Paraiyar colony is *Ellaiyamman* (Tam. *ellaiyammanṇ*) who is the guardian deity of the boundary of the colony. Ellaiyamman is a goddess with a beautiful body of the princess Renuka and a head of an old Paraiyar woman. According to the legend *Renuka* (Tam. *rēṇṇuka*) was given as a wife to a rishi *Chamatrakini* (Tam. *camarrakini*) and was supposed to help him in his meditation. One day she saw a reflection of the prince Arjuna in the water of the river, admired

⁴³ Majority of 60.4% agreed with statement *“low caste has to obey high caste”* and only 52.8% disagreed with the statement that *“caste differences are necessary and useful”*.

his beauty and lost her chastity. After Chamatrakini learned about this, he ordered their fourth son *Parashuraman* (Tam. *paraṣurāmaṅ*) to kill Renuka and to cut off her head. Parashuraman accomplished the order given by his father and killed his mother together with an old Paraiyar woman in whose house in the cheri Renuka was trying to hide. Parashuraman was rewarded by Chamatrakini who promised to fulfil any wish he might have. Since Parashuraman wished to bring his mother back to life, Chamatrakini gave him a holy ash and paste and told him to put Renuka's head back to her body and apply the substances. Instead Renuka's heady Parashuraman mistakenly joints old Paraiyar woman's head to Renuka's body. Since Chamatrakini refused to take his wife back, she then went to live in cheri to help and protect people with her powers as a goddess Ellaiyamman (popular ethymology of the word is *ellaiṅ ammā* – i.e. “mother of all). She helps and protects people from all evil. She has a troop of devils under her control. She protects the colony in all four directions.⁴⁴

The interesting aspect of Keeripatti Paraiyars' myth of origin is that Renuka and the old Paraiyar woman are represented as victims who miraculously survive the vengeful power of a male brute force and then become the foundation of the Paraiyar divine power. This myth reinforces the fact that formidable divine power is generated through being an outcaste and stresses the independent and strong position of women in Paraiyar community. Ellaiyamman temple consists of an idol of the goddess in the form of a black stone dressed in a saffron dress. Apart from being protective deity of the cheri, it is particularly beneficial as a protector against casting of an evil eye. Her festival is celebrated once a year in the Tamil month of *Kartikkai* (Tam. *kārtikkai* – mid-November to mid-December) when her idol is carried round the cheri in procession.

The majority population of Keeripatti belongs to the caste of Piramalai Kallar (*piramalai kallar*). Piramalai Kallar is a subcaste of Kallar inhabiting the areas lying west of Madurai, in the area which is traditionally known as *Kallar nadu* (Tam. *kaḷḷar nāṭu*, i.e. *land of Kallars*). Their population is estimated at around 200,000, however, they represent the majority population in villages of the of Kallar nadu area (Z. Headley 2007, 4). As a part of Kallar caste that in turn is one of the *Mukkulathor* castes (Tam. *mukkulatōr*) Piramalai Kallars belong to one of the most numerous and politically most active social groups in Tamil Nadu. Official figures of the Mukkulathors' population in Tamil Nadu are not available due to the removal of caste as a category for the census enumeration after 1931. Since there are no reliable data regarding the present size of Mukkulathors' population, we are left with the numbers provided by Mukkulathor caste associations and political parties. These put the number of Mukkulathors in Tamil Nadu at around 13 millions (Kallar The Caste who makes the History of Tamilnadu 2010), i.e. 18% of the state. Piramalai Kallars combine in their self-perception both strong feeling of uniqueness and pride of the particular, glorious history of their sub-caste with the wider allegiance to the strong and well-politically organized supra-caste group of Mukkulathors.

The main deity and protector deity of Keeripatti Kallars is called *Vangaru Thevar* (Tam. *vaṅkāru tēvar*). He is the forefather of Piramalai Kallars, their caste deity and his temple is located in the centre of the Keeripatti village. The myth about Vangaru Thevar was narrated to me as follows:

⁴⁴ This story is a shortened version that was narrated to me by V.S., an old Paraiyar agricultural labourer and astrologer in his house in Keeripatti on October 12, 2007.

"Ten Thevar brothers went to the town of Kannivadi to worship lord Shiva whom they had seen in their dream. After they arrived to the town, they found lodging in a house of a barber. The barber, however, was a demon (Tam. rākṣaca) whose intention was to kill the ten Thevar brothers. Since he could not face the Thevars in a direct fight, he wanted to kill them by trickery luring them in his house disguised as a barber. He offered them lots of food and toddy to make them sleep deeply. All brothers ate and drank alcohol and fell asleep except the youngest brother who only pretended that he was drinking toddy but did not drink anything. After the brothers fell in a deep sleep, the barber took a long knife (Tam. arivāḷ) and was about to cut off heads of the Thevar brothers. When the youngest brother saw this, he jumped up on his feet and attacked the demon. In the following fight, youngest brother defeated the demon and cut off his head with the demon's own knife. After waking up, older brothers praised their youngest sibling and continued their journey to Kannivadi. Ten Thevars are ancestors of all Thevar castes, and Vangaru Thevar – the youngest brother - is the ancestor of Piramalai Kallars".⁴⁵

This Piramalai Kallars' myth of origin in its symbolic mythological language provides an explanation to at least three basic constituents of Piramalai Kallars' identity. First, the hierarchical position of Piramalai Kallar caste among other Mukkulattor (Thevar) castes is low and Piramalai Kallars accept their superiority in the real life as well as in the myths. The myth, narrated to me in Keeripatti, is only one of several versions of the myth of origin narrated among Kallar caste, however all of them share the same theme of relatedness of all Mukkulathors and of Kallar being the "younger brothers" (Tam. *tampī*) and thus subordinated to remaining Mukkulathor castes. This aspect of Kallars' myths of origin was well documented by French anthropologist Zoé E. Headly (Z. E. Headley 2011). In real life the Piramalai Kallars' acceptance of other Mukkulathors manifests itself most markedly by submission to the authority of Ambalakarars (Tam. *ampalakkārar*) who often preside over the proceedings of traditional village panchayats (Tam. *ūr* or *kaṭṭu pañcāyattu*) and resolve disputes among members of Piramalai Kallar castes. It is common that Piramalai Kallars call members of upper Thevar sub-castes by honorific family names such as "older brother" (Tam. *aṇṇā*) or "uncle" (Tam. *māmā*).

A second attribute is the traditional prohibition on drinking of alcohol in the Piramalai Kallar community. Their sobriety has been noted already by early ethnographers such as Thurston: "Hard things have been said about Kallars, but points to their credit are the chastity of their women, the cleanliness they observe, and their marked sobriety. A toddy shop in a Kallar village is seldom a financial success" (Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. III. (K) 1909, 69). Although today the actual avoidance of alcohol is, unfortunately, more a matter of past than present, drinking alcohol seems to be less socially acceptable and done in a more secretive way than among Thevars and Vanniyars in Alaveli, let alone Paraiyar community where drinking alcohol is considered rather normal.

The third characteristic of Piramalai Kallars supported by their myth is the self-perception as a warrior race, despite their low caste status and agriculture as a major occupation. The long knife of South Indian peasants (Tam. *arivāḷ*), which Vangaru Thevar used for cutting off the head of the demon, is an important and powerful symbol of the Kallar warrior tradition. It is an agricultural instrument but it can and it has often been turned in a weapon in

⁴⁵ I translated and shortened this version of the Piramalai Kallars' myth from the narration of V.K. (K. V. 2007)

wars among local chieftains or clashes with other castes. After British abolition of Palayakari system in 1801 (i.e. the rule by local chieftains) and proscription of carrying arms of offence by civilian population of the Madras presidency, the long knife – arival - became the only permissible weapon which possession Kallars could justify by its primary utilization in agriculture.

Vangaru Thevar Swami's temple is located in the centre of the village near the platform for local people to get together called *savadi* (Tam. *cāvaṭi*) with a large neem tree (Lat. *Azadirachta indica*). Temple itself is a red and white painted building built with bricks with the statue of the Vangaru Thevar Swami with his family and lions on each side on the attic above the entrance to the main sanctuary (Tam. *teyva illam*). Only Piramalai Kallars are allowed to enter inside the sanctuary which door is for the most part of the year locked. Temple festival takes place in the Tamil month of *Chittirai* (Tam. *cittirai*). The president of the Keeripatti village panchayat traditionally inaugurates the festival and opens the sanctuary. Further according to the tradition first honors of the temple are bestowed on the panchayat president. This became one of the reasons for the virulent opposition by Piramalai Kallars against the post of the panchayat president to be reserved for a Dalit. When after protracted boycott of elections by Piramalai Kallars' a Dalit panchayat president was finally elected and took his office in 2006, the annual festival of the Venkaru Thevar stopped being celebrated.

Another important deity worshipped by Keeripatti Piramalai Kallars is *Ochchandamman* (Tam. *occāṇṭamman*) which is one of the lineage deities (Tam. *kula teyvam*) of Piramalai Kallars. The temple of this deity is not located inside the Keeripatti village but in the neighbouring Pappapatti village. Pappapatti village idol is said to be made of sacred earth of Karumathur (Tam. *karumatūr*) Ochchandamman. Karumathur is a village about 20 km far from Keeripatti which is regarded as headquarters of the traditional Piramalai Kallar administrative and judicial system of *eight Nadus* (more details about the system in chapter 4.2.). Ochchandamman temple is located to the north-western side of the Pappapatti village and it is a regular temple built of bricks with one gopuram. Ochchandamman is considered to be an avatar of the goddess Parvati. Although she is a Piramalai Kallar lineage deity and the priest in the temple is also from this case, other castes including Paraiyars are not prevented from her worship and are allowed even to participate on a yearly temple festival. Ochchandamman protects from infectious diseases and is worshipped as a protector of chastity, purity and a social order (Tam. *naṭamurai*). In case of transgression against the rules of the community, villagers believe that a person may be punished by Ochchandamman. Believe that Ochchandamman will punish those members of Scheduled castes who will dare to contest in the local elections played a significant role in discouraging candidates from the contest (Panchayat elections are dealt with in chapter 7.2.).

Keeripatti non-Dalit (i.e. Piramalai Kallar) community opinion on Brahmanical notions of caste inequality is an interesting combination of acceptance and rejection of these. While 79.7% of Piramalai Kallar respondents in my survey rejected the idea that a birth in a low caste is conditioned by bad karma, which is significantly more than among Alaveli non-Dalits (51.0 %) and even more than among Keeripatti Dalits (61.2%), they strongly support both the idea that lower castes owe the obedience to upper castes (78.9%) and that caste differences in society are necessary and useful (85.9%). Most likely interpretation of this is that Piramalai Kallars realize their low position in a caste hierarchy *vis-à-vis* other Mukkulathor castes and see themselves as

their “*thambi*” (Eng. “younger brothers”). This is however because other Mukkulahothors are “older” not that they are better. In fact the myth of Vangaru Thevar portrays the Kallar as the most careful, sober, vigilant and brave among the brothers. From this perspective their low caste status is not linked to bad karma or pollution. Although they accept the authority of upper caste Ambalakkarrars, they do not see themselves as inferior or polluted. When being asked the question about connection between bad karma and birth in a low caste, several times Piramalai Kallars respondents replied or added to their reply a Tamil proverb which says: “*Kallar may become a Maravar who may become an Agamudayar who may become a Vellalar*”.⁴⁶

Table 4 Caste system acceptance in Keeripatti and its comparison with Alaveli

| Keeripatti village> Caste system acceptance questions in % (for easier comparison values for Alaveli village are given in brackets) | | <i>“Being born in a low caste is a result of bad deeds committed in the previous life.”</i> | <i>“Low castes must obey high castes for the welfare of society.”</i> | <i>“If all people were equal, nobody would do hard and difficult work. Therefore caste differences among people are necessary and useful.”</i> |
|--|-----------|---|---|--|
| Agree | non-Dalit | 18.8 (36.2) | 78.9 (76.6) | 85.9 (57.4) |
| | Dalit | 32.6 (3.8) | 26.5 (60.4) | 28.6 (22.6) |
| Disagree | non-Dalit | 79.7.(51) | 21.0 (10.6) | 11.7 (27.7) |
| | Dalit | 61.2 (79.2) | 73.4 (17) | 71.4 (52.8) |
| Do not know | non-Dalit | 1.5 (12.8) | 0 (12.8) | 2.3 (14.9) |
| | Dalit | 6.1 (17) | 0 (22.6) | 0 (22.6) |

Acceptance of authority caste who they see as higher is demonstrated by Piramalai Kallar by the composition of traditional caste panchayats that are always presided by an Ambalakkarrar. Since no Ambalakkarrars live in the Keeripatti village and beside peculiar opportunities of caste panchayat proceeding Keeripatti Kallars have little interaction with Ambalakkarrars, they do not find it difficult to submit themselves to rather formal and procedural authority of Ambalakkarrars. At the Keeripatti Piramalai Kallars have the status of upper caste in relation to Paraiyars.

My survey suggests that there is a large difference in perception of an ideal social order between Paraiyars and Piramalai Kallars. While absolute majority of Piramalai Kallars approves the existence of the hierarchically ordered society by accepting its principles such as inequality (85.9) and obedience of lower caste to upper castes (78.9%), Paraiyars who find themselves at the very bottom of the caste ladder in Keeripatti do strongly reject these principles (73.4 and 71.4 resp.). At the same time opinions on caste hierarchy issues are considerably more articulate in Keeripatti than in Alaveli. “Do not know” answers make for only 0-2.3% of the total respondents of all categories in Keeripatti, while in Alaveli it is 12.8 - 22.6%. This means that

⁴⁶ In Tamil: “*kaḷḷar, māraḅar, akamuṭaiyār mella mella vantu veḷḷāḷār.*”

people in Keeripatti have “ready-made” opinion on issues regarding problems of caste hierarchy its acceptance and justification, i.e. these issues are more relevant to people in Keeripatti than in Alaveli. Naturally, the situation where two groups in a community have sharply divergent opinions values along which the community should be organized and at the same time feel strongly about their opinions is considerably conflict-prone.

Today Piramalai Kallars form an endogamous group and by large follow customs and norms characteristic of the Dravidian marriage. These include maternal cross-cousin marriages being considered as the most suitable while other kin relations marriages are prohibited. Inter-caste marriages are prohibited which applies primarily to marriages with Paraiyars and other Dalit castes. Compared with the past the marriage rules observed by Piramalai Kallars today are much stricter. In 1949 Louis Dumont had observed that Piramalai Kallars men and women divorced and remarried rather freely when compared with other castes; *“We can almost say that the pattern of several successive marriages is the rule”* (Dumont, Hierarchy and marriage alliance in South Indian kinship 1957, 58). Also Thurston describes the ease with which a divorce is obtained among Piramalai Kallars: *“A husband dissatisfied with his wife can send her away if he be willing at the same time to give her half of his property, and a wife can leave her husband at will upon forfeiture of forty-two Kali fanams”* (Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, Vol. III. (K) 1909, 78).

A situation has changed to a large extent with increased activity of Kallar caste association and their effort to achieve recognition of Kallar caste on par with other Mukkulathors. Today a Kallar man seeking a divorce from his wife needs to search for the approval of the caste panchayat in the village. In case of divorce the panchayat first tries to accomplish reconciliation between the husband and wife and in case when the reconciliation cannot be reached sets conditions for the divorce. The authority of caste panchayat is universally accepted among Piramalai Kallars. In my survey 88% of Piramalai Kallars stated that the caste panchayat would be the institution most likely to help them to find a fair resolution of a dispute. A typical reasoning why a person believes more to a caste panchayat than other institutions given by a Piramalai Kallar woman was: *“There are our caste people in the caste panchayat. They do not want money and bribes like police. They do not want that people talk badly about us and our good name is damaged”* (A. K., 58 years; housewife; Piramalai Kallar woman; Keeripatti village 2007).

Caste panchayat serves as an unofficial mediation and judicial body in matters related to honour or good name of the village, especially concerning marriages and sexual offences. As data from reports of NGOs (Evidence 2009) collecting data on caste atrocities, sexual offences often remain unreported to the state authorities as caste panchayats deal with them. A disclosed relationship or even a marriage between a Kallar and a Paraiyar partner is seen as one of the most serious offences and punishments can be hard and exemplary. Caste panchayat in Keeripatti have not dealt with a case of marriage out of caste or of an illegitimate relationship between a Kallar and a Paraiyar the recent past. The present distance between Keeripatti Paraiyars and Kallars make it hardly possible for Keeripatti people to start any romantic affair with a member of different caste as any interaction is loaded with tension. Nevertheless, verdicts of caste panchayats and subsequent punishments in other places are well known to the villagers

by the word of mouth and also through Tamil media and serves as deterrent examples.⁴⁷ The idea of having an intimate relationship with a member of the other caste seems unacceptable to Piramalai Kallars while for Paraiyars it is an ominous idea: *"If I found out that my son had an affair with a Kallar woman, I would kill him first. Such relationships only bring disaster on everybody"* (V. S. 2007).

There is much less interaction between non-Dalit and Dalit population in Keeripatti than in Alaveli and it is by large limited only to work. There seem to be no informal or friendly interactions. The relations between the two community are negatively affected by the tension resulting from the local politics and it is difficult to establish whether the actual practice of untouchability and discrimination against Paraiyars in Keeripatti is a reason for Keeripatti Paraiyars' political engagement or if the extreme forms of untouchability practice is a reaction of Piramalai Kallars' against the growing political consciousness among Keeripatti Paraiyars perceived by Kallars as *"their increasing boldness"* (K. V. 2007). While the village politics will be thoroughly dealt with in the following chapter, here it is necessary to cover the forms and practices of untouchability and social boycott in Keeripatti.

As it has been already mentioned Keeripatti Paraiyars do not enter the main village unless they have a good reason. *"When I was a child, Paraiyars had to walk barefooted in the Kallars' village. They do not ask us to remove our sandals anymore, but still we do not feel confident walking there. We go fast and do not look here and there"* (V. B. 2007). If a Dalit hanged around unnecessarily or even "dared" to sit on the platform used for gathering of people (Tam. *cāvaṭi*), it would be considered an offence and bring either immediate punishment or consequences to the family of the person concerned. Those Paraiyars who belong to families of persons involved in a political conflict with the Kallar majority are not served in Keeripatti Kallars' shops and all Paraiyars never come to Keeripatti teashops, as they would have to sit on the floor and drink from a coconut shell instead of a cup.

School is unfortunately often a place where Dalit children are confronted with caste prejudices and came to realize the way in which Dalits have been treated by upper castes. Unlike several other villages in Piramalai Kallar area, there is no open ban on Dalit children attending the school in Keeripatti. However, Dalit children often complain about the treatment by the teachers who belong to Kallar caste and bullying by Kallar classmates. *"If I go to school, I have to sit in the back and I do not hear what the teacher says"* (L. S. 2007). As a result the majority of children from the cheri do not go to Keeripatti school or go only sporadically. There is a study group for children organized by a P. S. (31 years, Paraiyar, unemployed university graduate) who is a university graduate and an active member of the political party Dalit Panthers. The tuition takes place in the open ground in the evenings and in fact substitutes the regular school attendance.

⁴⁷ In 2007 *"a young Dalit man from Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu, a Sivaji, was murdered for having married a girl from a Kallar caste, allegedly by his wife's family after being sentenced by the caste panchayat of the girl's village. His wife Lakshmi, who was seven months pregnant at the time, was forced to watch as her older brother and others from her village tried to choke her husband and then dragged him away. His body was later discovered nearby, hacked to death. With her baby boy in tow, Lakshmi has since been running from pillar to post, seeking justice"* (The Prajnya Trust 2009, 8). This case was widely discussed and several times mentioned in conversations with Keeripatti villagers during my field research.

Access to water is another issue in Keeripatti Paraiyar-Kallar relationships. The water from the bore-well in the cheri is not sufficient and of a poor quality especially during the dry season. There is an additional supply of water to the cheri via public water pipeline which is a branch of the pipeline in the main village. Keeripatti Paraiyars complain that water is regularly stopped by Kallars during Paraiyar temple festival and other important festivities. *“When we go to caste Hindus' area to fetch water they stop us from drawing. If we try to question them they abuse us by our caste name and to avoid this we want a tank for ourselves”* (M.A. 2007).

The Kallar obstruction of water supply brings us to a significant feature of Keeripatti Kallar-Paraiyar relationships. In this incident two different motives for this behaviour are at stake; 1) a discrimination as a result of untouchability prejudices and 2) a hostile behaviour as a punishment or a display force as a result of a political conflict between the two communities. The issue of suspended water supply is at the edge of the two. While caste Hindu Kallars may explain (not excuse) the denial of access to Paraiyars to the water resources in the main village by their concern over the "ritual purity" of the water in their taps and wells, there is no similar caste prejudice that would explain blocking of water supply in the Paraiyar cheri during the temple festival. Since there was no religious or ritual reason for cutting Dalits off the water supply during the festival, the explanation has to be looked for in the context of mutual coexistence and the history of relationship between the two communities. There are more examples of discrimination against Dalits in Keeripatti that have features of mere bullying without being supported by a religious/ritual rationale.

There is no caste law preventing Dalits from receiving their food rations, which they are entitled to, from government shop in the main village and yet many of them complain that some of the commodities they never receive although entries are marked in their ration cards. They claim that caste Hindu connive with officials and take away the Dalit share of the sugar stock for their teashops (M. S. 2007). Recently, Keeripatti Dalits have been demanding a separate ration shop to be opened in the cheri (Karthikeyan 2010), however, they do not meet the government criterion of at least 150 families to be living in a place where a ration shop is to be opened.

For the matter of completeness of the enumeration of the forms of social boycott Keeripatti Dalits are confronted with, an issue of denial of employment has to be brought up again in this place. The economic pressure that families of Dalits, who had been denied employment in Kallar fields, have to face is a powerful instrument of social control in the hands of Kallars.

It is apparent that only part of the discrimination, that Keeripatti Paraiyars face, is directly linked with their "pollution" status, while the other part is a result of a broader context of mutual Kallar-Paraiyar relations. As a part of my survey respondents were asked direct questions to evaluate inter-caste relations in their respective villages. Data on inter-caste relations perception that were obtained in the survey are provided in Table 5.

Table 5 Comparison of relations perception between Dalits and non-Dalits in Alaveli and Keeripatti

| Q: Relations between Harijans/Dalits and other Hindus in the village are. | | Very good | Good | Neither good nor bad | Bad | Very bad |
|---|-----------|-----------|------|----------------------|------|----------|
| Alaveli | non-Dalit | 25.5 | 59.6 | 14.9 | 0 | 0 |
| | Dalit | 28.3 | 49.0 | 22.6 | 0 | 0 |
| Keeripatti | non-Dalit | 64.1 | 17.2 | 6.25 | 1.0 | 2.3 |
| | Dalit | 12.2 | 22.4 | 6.1 | 28.6 | 30.6 |

As the results put in the table show, the perception of mutual relations among Alaveli Dalits and Alaveli non-Dalits is very similar and equilibrated. Nobody of the Alaveli respondents described the relationship as bad or very bad, 85.1% of Alaveli non-Dalits were of the opinion that relations with Dalits were good or very good and 77.3% of Alaveli Dalits were of the same opinion. In Keeripatti also the majority of 81.3% of non-Dalits described non-Dalit – Dalit relations as good or very good, however only 34.8% of Keeripatti Dalits were of the same opinion. On the contrary, relations were bad or very bad for 59.2% of Keeripatti Dalits, while only 3.3% of non-Dalits believed that relations between the two caste groups were bad or very bad.

Disregarding the normative judgment whether the inter-caste relations are in fact bad or good, what we can conclude from these data is that while in Alaveli there exist a common consensus about the quality of relations between the two communities where majority of residents believe that the inter-caste relation are good or very good. In Keeripatti, on the other hand, the village is deeply divided between the two communities in evaluation of the present state. While majority of Piramalai Kallars see the present quality of relations as good or very good, majority of Paraiyars do not agree with this perception and see the relations as bad or very bad. The basic disagreement is over the issue whether there is a real problem in Dalit – non-Dalit relations in the village. Whereas the majority of Dalits believes there is a problem, the majority of Piramalai Kallars rejects this perception and consequently disapprove with involvement of outside agencies, be it the state, political parties, NGOs or media, in the village affairs as an illegitimate infringement.

7. LOCAL POLITICS AND DALIT PARTIES

The range of political issues that have emerged on the horizon when trying to provide an overview of economic, religious and social setting of village communities makes one to realize that indeed "*everything is politics*" (Thomas Mann). By now it is obvious that my previous division of components of local governance in 1) economic 2) ritual, social and community and 3) historical and political factors is only a very imprecise and artificial attempt to particularize a complex reality in order to be able to describe it more handily. Economic relations as well as temple festivals form an integral part of the village politics. To focus the attention at political factors of governance in this chapter therefore does not mean that above mentioned factors are not considered political but only that this chapter deals with those political aspects of village governance that have the management of public goods or exercise of power as their declared goal.

The objective is a description and analysis of formal political structures in the village such as local agents of the state, their interaction with higher levels of administration, role of political parties and the role of those informal political structures and agents who seek through informal mechanisms to influence formal structure to act in their interest. This means first of all local leaders and customary institutions such as caste panchayats. Special attention in this account is focused at the interaction of caste and political parties, especially the link between Paraiyar community and Dalit Panthers. In the discussion about village politics it is also not possible to omit the role of the police and the judiciary as they, in an ideal case, should be the two institutions that supervise over the legality of means deployed in the political competition.

Final part of this chapter will deal with perception of citizens of the two selected villages on effectiveness of the political institutions and their trust in these institutions. The statement that "*the costs of maintenance of an existing order are inversely related to the perceived legitimacy of the existing system*" (North 1981, 53) is valid not only in purely economic sense in economies of states, but it also becomes manifest at the micro-level. Local institutions need legitimacy as much as governments of states to be able to function. To the extent that legitimacy measures the lack of arbitrariness of the institutions of government *vis-à-vis* citizens, it is closely associated with the trust in institutions.

The centre of the village politics in today's India, and the main focus of my analysis of political factors of governance at the local level, is the village panchayat which is supposed to be the basic democratic institution and a representative of the village self-governance. Panchayats in India have long history of ascendancy and decline. They were part of the medieval village society organization and during the British effort for centralization they were slowly disappearing. Later panchayats became important for the Gandhi's concept of *swaraj* (Hindi: *sva-rāj* - self-rule) as basic components of the rule of Indians over their own country. However, Dalit leader Ambedkar, who presided over the team of lawyers drafting Indian constitution, criticized panchayats as representing backward forces in the Indian society. For him village was, but "*a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism*". That the panchayats did not find even a mention in the first draft of independent India's Constitution was probably the result of Dr Ambedkar's strong opposition against it (Meenakshisundaram 2005, 419).

After prolonged discussions panchayats became one of the few Gandhi's ideas incorporated in the constitution of India, established by the article 40. Since then this article has been amended many times and several commissions have been appointed to give recommendation for implementation of village democracy in practice. Generally we can say that since India became independent panchayats never really functioned as the basic units of local self-governance. The foremost reason for this was their too heavy dependence on state bureaucratic administration. Wade in his study *Village republics* describes functioning of Panchayats in Andhra Pradesh as follows; "In Andhra Pradesh the village Panchayats are moribund virtually everywhere (for example, no elections were held between 1970 and 1981). They do receive a small grant of income to be spent on village development purposes; but in practice this is spent largely at the discretion of the Panchayat president (sarpanch)" (Wade 1987, 31). The result is that Panchayats have often been seen not as organs of local self-governance but rather as a convenient source of money and power privatized by potent local elites.

In 1993 Indian government amended Indian Constitution with the *73rd amendment* setting new rules for village panchayats with the intention to broaden democracy at the ground level and to strengthen the local governance. The amendment also introduced the reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in village panchayats. Article 243D provides that seats are to be reserved for (a) Scheduled Castes, and (b) Scheduled Tribes. Scheduled castes and tribes are allocated reserved seats in the village panchayats in line with their share of the population in the constituency, and one-third of these seats should be reserved for women. In areas with a large percentage of SC population constituencies should be selected in which the post of panchayat president would be reserved for SC.

The new amendment of the Indian constitution had to be implemented by India's state government into their legislation that were to provide a legislative framework for the three-tier local government structure. In Tamil Nadu the idea was not met with a particular enthusiasm and the new *Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act* was lukewarmly passed in the parliament in 1994 without much debate in the form that followed the guidelines of the central government but with as much vagueness about the precise competence of the village panchayats as possible. The structure of three-tier local governance in Tamil Nadu is different for urban and rural bodies, for rural areas it is formed by *Village panchayats* (Tam. *ūrāṭci*) as a basic units of administration, *Block panchayats* (*ūrāṭci onriyam*) consisting of several village panchayats and a *District panchayats* one for every district (Tm. *māvaṭṭa ūraṭci onriyam*). Developmental administration is a complete responsibility of local bodies. This includes maintenance of clean environment and public facilities such as water supply, roads and buildings, storm water drains, street lighting, solid waste management and sanitation. The original idea of Gandhi was that every village would be "a complete republic independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants" (Gandhi 1942) and the panchayats would first of all focus on particular issues of a particular village and they would neither become a tool for political mass mobilization nor would they be involved in national politics. However, in Tamil Nadu even village panchayats soon became politicized and came to be another arena of competition for Tamil political parties.

The interference of party politics with village panchayats was augmented by subsequent amendments to the Act. The *Amendment 37 (1997) to the Tamilnadu Panchayat Act* gave voting power to the members of Legislative Assembly and Parliament in their respective local bodies. The *Amendment 40 (1999)* set that chairpersons of panchayat unions and district panchayats can

be removed through a no-confidence motion by their members. These have led to conflicts and controversies between the major parties, and in the process the powers of the panchayats have suffered. Beside partisanism and politization of panchayat elections, every year cases of manipulated panchayat elections are reported in which local powerful elite organise auctions of panchayat seats even before the elections take place. The seats will go to the highest bids and voters in the village are obliged to vote accordingly under various kinds of threats.⁴⁸

Most serious controversies, nonetheless, were linked to the introduction of reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in local panchayats. Local elites and caste Hindus have employed various techniques to keep SC off the position of power in local politics. This could be done either by boycotting elections or by finding a “pliable” candidate for reserved seats who would resign immediately after being elected. Threats of violence and social boycott of Dalit families, whose members take up the challenge to run for the panchayat office, have become a major tool for the casteist forces to intimidate Dalits and discourage them from getting genuinely involved in village administration. It is not rare that the threats of violence result in violent actions.

A small village Melavalavu (Tam. *mēlavaḷavu*) in Melur district, about 30 km from Madurai became a scene of a horrendous massacre of the Dalit panchayat president and his five colleagues by local caste Hindus on the 30th July 1997. While the panchayat president and his company were returning by bus from the meeting with a District collector in Madurai, the bus was stopped before entering the village by a mob of around 20 Kallars from the village. When all the passengers fled the bus and ran away, the gang attacked with sickles (Tam. *arivāḷ!*) the panchayat president and everybody perceived as being associated with him. Murugesan, the panchayat president, Mohan, panchayat vice-president and five others died on the spot. Murugesan’s head was cut off and dumped in a well out of the village. The massacre was a culmination of a fervent opposition by members of local Kallar caste against the designation of Melavalavu as a reserved constituency in 1996 and their rejection to accept a Dalit as a president of their village panchayat. In the process with the perpetrators of the murders, seventeen of them were sentenced for life in 2001 (Alagarsamy And Ors. vs State 2001).

Even though from the legal point of view the case of Melavalavu murders was concluded by judge dismissing the convicts’ appeal to the India’s Supreme court in New Delhi in October 2009, the event started to live its own life in Tamil politics and public imagination. Melavalavu is not only an example of the most horrible form of caste motivated violence, but it has also become a powerful symbol of resistance for Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu. From the Dalit Panthers of India (VCK) initiative a monument was erected in memory of the victims in the village and every year on the anniversary of the event VCK organize huge meetings in the village. During the process with the murderers and due to the VCK organized annual meetings Melavalavu appeared in the centre of attention of Tamil Nad politicians, human rights groups and media. A new police station with a permanent presence of armed police officers was opened in the village and a new meeting hall for village panchayat is located in the building of the police station. A new Dalit panchayat president was elected in 2001, this time a woman. According to local Dalits the president was a puppet handpicked by the Kallar leaders (Menon, The Temple of

⁴⁸ Two examples of media reports on village panchayats seats auctioning: (The Times of India 2008), (Menon, Democracy for sale in TN, highest bidders get Panchayat posts 2006).

Great Divide 2006). The tension between the Dalits and caste Hindus in the village was apparent even during my short visit of the village. The first object that attracts a visitor's attention after getting off the bus is a memorial of Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar with a roaring lion installed by the Thevar Peravai (Tam. *tēvar pērāvai*), a caste association of Thevars. Most local Kallars are related to the convicted murderers and avoided meeting me and talking about the situation in the village, on the other hand Dalits saw my visit as an opportunity to share their concerns. According to my informants the situation in the village was far from being good. They still do not dare to go to go to the Kallar part of the village, which is also the reason why Dalit children do not go to school. *"Every year VCK organize a huge manifestation here. It is good that we show the Kallars how many we are and they can see our power. But they [VCK] cannot be here all the time and we still fear of Kallars"* (P. K., 27 years; unemployed; Paraiyar man; Melavalavu Dalit colony 2006). Also the coalition between the AIADMK and VCK was resented by Melavalavu Dalits because of AIADMK's previous alliance with the Forward Bloc, this party came to be seen as inclined in favour of Thevars.

Melavalavu is perhaps an extreme example of a village internal problems of which became an important issue of the state's politics, nevertheless the link between the local politics at the village level and state politics through the involvement of political parties seems to be generally rather tight in Tamil Nadu. This chapter is not only to provide an account and comparison of politics at local level of the two villages but also to focus on the links between the local and the national with the special reference to Dalit parties, particularly VCK.

As it has been stated in chapter 3.2. Dalit Panthers originated in urban suburbs of big cities in Tamil Nadu where the Dalit population was more politicized than in the village. Albeit the concept of the caste and the discrimination against Dalits based on that concept is stronger in villages than in urban areas, village Dalits are far less active in demanding their rights and in organizing themselves to protest. Villagers often lack their urban counterparts' assumption, and assertion, of equality. This was fittingly expressed by a Gorringe's respondent Mr. Inba, Dalit activist and pastor, explaining about his experience with village Dalits' perception of a 'two-cup' system in tea shops; *"They don't see it as a big deal, they just wash the glass. At least that way you know that it is clean. For such cooperation, we should not forget, they get tea on account, the local landlords provide them with work and they are able to use the common resources of the village"* (Gorringe, Untouchable Citizens - Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu 2005, 114). Villages are therefore the main focus of both Dalit NGO activists' and Dalit politicians' educational and agitational activity.

VCK do, however, offer not only education and politization but also physical protection of Dalits in some cases. First, they are able to organize and stage mass rallies and protests in areas where caste atrocities were committed against Dalits, which serve as well as a demonstration of power. Second, their regional leaders provide individual assistance for victims of caste oppression or caste violence. In my interview with the Madurai district secretary of Dalit Panthers of India Mr. Ellalan, he stressed the protective aspect of VCK political activity as VCK's main mission. As the concerned part of the interview is particularly instructive about the way the regional VCK leaders operate in Tamil Nadu villages, I provide its full record here:

V.B: *"What do Dalit Panthers of India stand for? What do you want to achieve?"*

Ellalan: *"We are here to protect our people. You cannot imagine the hardships and the humiliation Dalit people are subjected to every day in the villages of this area. They are not allowed to enter upper caste temples; they are not even allowed to walk in the upper caste streets. Dalits children are scared to go to public schools because of the bad treatment they suffer from teachers. In some places Dalits are even served tea in separate cups to show them that they are low and dirty. And yet, we Dalits, are the real sons of this soil, we are the first Dravidian oppressed in our own country by Hindus. But our people have lived in this subjugation for too long and they got used to much to bear with all this without being able to raise their voice. And if they do, they are beaten and killed by upper caste Hindus. This is where our party comes in. By organizing ourselves we are able to fight the oppression. Dalits live worse than slaves in villages in this area. But where Dalit Panthers are present, upper castes no longer dare to harass us as before. Because they know that if they do, Dalit Panthers will take care of the victims and will take all necessary actions."*

V.B: *"What kind of actions do you mean?"*

Ellalan: *"See, I will give you an example of a case that people brought to me today. The people sitting next door are relatives of a lady from a village few kilometres from Madurai who was murdered by an upper caste man from the same village yesterday. The lady and the man had been having an affair for a long time, he was married and she was his mistress. After the wife of the man died, his mistress wanted to come public with their relationship and asked him to marry her. He refused repeatedly but she insisted. In the end he killed her and dumped her body into the well. He was afraid that his reputation might have become compromised in his community if their relationship had gone public. After having pulled the poor woman's body out of the well, her relatives went to the local police but the police refused to register the case and declared the event as an accident without doing any investigation whatsoever. This often happens when our Dalit people want to lodge a case against caste Hindus. So they came here because they know that only Dalit Panthers will help them."*

V.B: *"So what are you going to do in this case?"*

Ellalan: *"First of all, we will accompany the family members to the police station and we will insist on filling in the FIR (First Incident Report). Then the police have to start investigate. Of course, they will try hard to hide the evidence but our people will also do their own investigation. There is no justice for Dalit people in this country, police, village panchayat officials, courts, everybody is trying to silence the victims and hide the truth in cases such as this."*

V.B: *"If VCK gets involved in cases like this, is it then more probable to convict the perpetrator, bring them to the court and get them sentenced for their crimes?"*

Ellalan: *"Courts in India are extremely slow and most poor people cannot afford to pay the fees for lawyers. We are trying to help with our advice and support but we cannot pay the bills for lawyers as well. Anyway, the court is not the only solution. What we will try to do in this case is to make the culprit admit his guilt and pay a financial compensation to the family. The poor lady left two children behind" (Ellalan 2007).*

Although Ellalan did not further specify the method of persuasion of the culprit and did not directly admit threat or use of violence in the process in the interview, the impression from his co-partisans who were present to our interview and who accompany Ellalan to all meetings

can be quite intimidating. “Friends” travelling around district together with the leader in his jeep are physically strong men with quite a fierce expression. It is relatively easy to fathom that a one-shot intervention of this kind of a leader may have some effect, the questionable issue is the long-term impact of VCK intervention on village polity. In this chapter an attempt will have been made to assess the long-term impact of Dalit parties on village communities in the two selected villages in the context of other important actors of local governance, i.e. other political parties, police and traditional institutions.

7.1. LOCAL POLITICS IN ALAVELI

Alaveli Panchayat is one of the 57 panchayats in the Sembanarkoil Block of panchayats which comes under the Nagapattinam District Panchayat administration. Out of the 1197 inhabitants of Alaveli Panchayat area in 2006 there were 927 adults entitled to vote in elections. Village panchayats council consists of a panchayat president and other five ward members. Out of six seats three are reserved for Scheduled caste according to their share in the population of the village which is approximately one half. First elections to the Alaveli panchayats according to the new legislation were conducted in 1996. Between 1996 and 2006 Alaveli Panchayat was a general one with the post of panchayat president open to contest by members of all castes in the village. Between 1996 and 2001 Mr. A. Selvaraj (52, agricultural landlord, Vanniyar) from the DMK party was appointed to the function. At the time of my research Mr. A. Selvaraj was holding the position of panchayat vice-president. Between 2001 and 2006 the post of panchayat president was held by Mr. Kajaruban Palanisamy (52, agricultural landlord, Vanniyar) belonging to the ADMK party who was still one of the panchayats ward members after 2006 elections. Since 2006 post of the Alaveli Panchayat president has been reserved for the member of the Scheduled Castes for the period of ten years. Majority of 80.1% among the non-Dalit population of the village consider the reservation of seats in the panchayats for Dalits fair and only 10.6% of non-Dalits in Alaveli disagree with reservations.

The announcement of Alaveli as a reserved constituency did not come as a surprise to people in Alaveli and due to the large share of the Scheduled Caste population in the village it has been expected. *“DMK members in Alaveli are both SC and BC people. We are not concerned about caste. Both SC and BC live in the same village and all of us want to see the development of the village. The task of the Panchayat is to organize the work for the benefit of all and to deal with the block and district offices in order to receive funds for this work. This is the same whether the Panchayat president is an SC or BC. SC people were members of the panchayats in this village before they got the seats by law”* (Selvaraj 2007).

The village politics in Alaveli is dominated by the two political parties DMK and ADMK, which dominate the politics at the national level as well. Both parties draw their members both from Dalit and non-Dalit community and they can therefore easily field a candidate for reserved as well as unreserved seats. Two other national parties operating in Alaveli are CPI (M) and INC but their strength is much limited compared to DMK and ADMK. They also have members in both Dalit and non-Dalit communities. Caste based parties are represented by PMK and VCK. While VCK organizational base and following is weak and the party is not an important player at the village level, PMK has a large support among the local Vanniyar community. Since PMK advocates primarily for the interest of the Vanniyar community and members of the party are

exclusively Vanniyars this party would be the most likely critic of the reservations for Scheduled castes. Nevertheless, it is not the case and the positive attitude of PMK seems to be based on its long-term coalition with DMK. PMK secretary of the Alaveli branch Mr. P. Raja explained the PMK's positive attitude to reservations as follows: *"We have a good support of the Vanniyar community, because our party supports rights of Vanniyar farmers. We cannot stand in any elections on our own but DMK knows that they can gain many votes by allying with us. We are in coalition with the DMK at all levels and the cooperation is good for both parties. In Alaveli PMK has always one seat on the DMK nomination list. Therefore the reservation for Dalits is not a problem for us. We would not get more than one seat and the remaining reserved seats will be filled by DMK Dalit candidates"* (Raja 2007).

Table 6 shows the composition of the Alaveli village Panchayat after August 2006 elections with the caste and party specification of each member of the panchayat.

Table 6 Composition of the Alaveli village panchayat after the 2006 elections

| Name / function | Sex | Party | Caste |
|------------------------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| A. Kumar / President | man | DMK | BC |
| A. Selvaraj / Vice-president | man | DMK | SC |
| M.A./ ward member | woman | DMK | SC |
| U. P./ ward member | woman | ADMK | SC |
| K. S./ ward member | man | ADMK | BC |
| P. R. / ward member | man | PMK | BC |

The percentage of seats gained by each party in Alaveli in 2006 Panchayat elections is shown in the Table 7.

Table 7 Party-wise results of Panchayat elections in Alaveli October 2006

| Abbreviation of the political party | DMK | ADMK | CPI (M) | INC | PMK | VCK |
|---|------------|-------------|----------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Percentage of seats in the panchayat | 50.0 | 33.3 | 16.7 | 0 | 16.7 | 0 |

It is noteworthy that not only the Alaveli village politics has been centring around the same two poles/parties - DMK and ADMK - as the state politics but the party with the majority in the Panchayat has been changed with the same periodicity as parties in power in the State government. The Panchayat was controlled by the DMK between 1996 and 2001, by AIADMK between 2001 and 2006 and again has been taken over by the DMK since 2006. The government of Tamil Nadu was led by Muduvel Karunanidhi (DMK) between May 1996 and May 2001, by Jayalalithaa Jayaram between May 2001 and May 2006 and again by Karunanidhi since 2006. Since Panchayat elections take place in August/September after the State Assembly elections

that take place in April/May, it is conceivable and even probable that the result of State Assembly elections strongly influence the results of Panchayat elections in favour of incumbent party in the state government. In view of the present Panchayat president Mr. A. Kumar, which was also by the ex-Panchayat president Mr. A. Selvaraj, "it is good if the Panchayat president belongs to the same political party as 'upper' officials in the Block and District level. He can receive a bit more funds for the village. The difference will be around 10%" (Kumar 2007). Whatever the motivation for the electoral behaviour of Alaveli villagers may be, the conformity of their choices for their village Panchayat with the incumbent government is economically convenient for the village.

Table 8 shows political party preferences among Alaveli population as expressed in my survey of a randomly selected sample in August/September 2007 - one year after the elections. Since no other surveys before and during the elections are available, this survey was not intended and is not capable to map a development of party preferences in Alaveli, however, due to the sufficiently expansive volume of the randomly selected sample of respondents, it can be taken as a fairly reliable measurement of distribution of voters' party preferences in Alaveli.

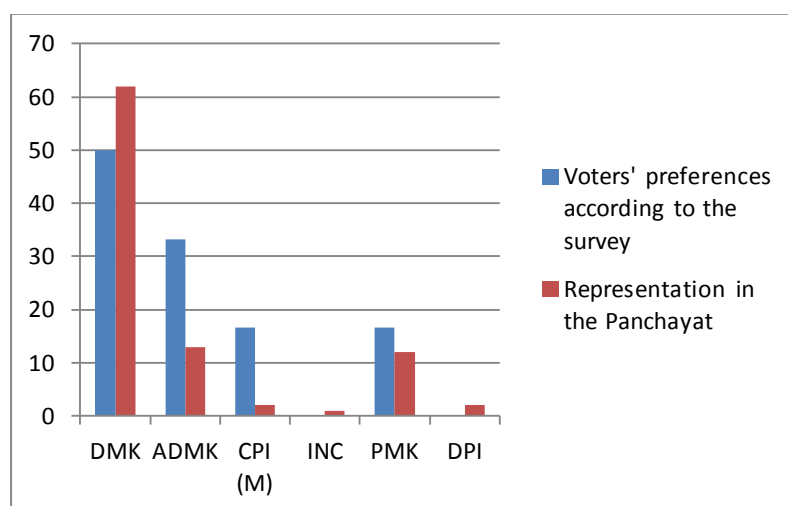
Table 8 Percentage results of party preferences among survey sample in Alaveli 2007

| Political parties Community | DMK | ADMK | CPI (M) | INC | PMK | VCK | No or other preferences |
|--|------------|-------------|----------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------------------------|
| Non-Dalits | 42.6 | 23.4 | 4.3 | 0 | 25.5 | 0 | 4.2 |
| Dalits | 81.1 | 3.8 | 0 | 1.9 | 0 | 5.7 | 7.5 |
| Total village | 62.0 | 13.0 | 2.0 | 1.0 | 12.0 | 2.0 | 8 |

Correlation between the voters' support to respective political parties (Table 7) and the proportion of respective political parties on the total population (Table 8) calculated according to Pearson's formula⁴⁹ is 0.864905. This signifies high positive correlation of both values and therefore high representativity of villagers' political preferences in the Panchayat composition. The comparison of villagers' political party preferences and the actual composition of the village Panchayat is illustrated in Graph 1.

⁴⁹ Pearson's formula $r = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (X_i - \bar{X})(Y_i - \bar{Y})}{(n-1)S_x S_y}$ where X are values for percentage of a membership to a political party from the total population of the village and Y values for voters support to a political party according to the results of the sample survey.

Graph 1 Voters' support to political parties compared to political parties representation in Alaveli Panchayat



The voters' preferences as expressed in the survey sample can be considered stable and based on long-term political orientation of respondents as they positively correlate with the political partisanship pattern in the village measured as a proportion of members of political parties to the rest of the village population. The correlation in this case is expressed with the coefficient 0.915645 or 0.997978 depending on whether the respondents who are not members of any political party (Table 9: No membership = 36.0 %) are included and correlated to respondents with no or different political preferences (Table 8: No or other preferences = 8.0). Since these two categories are not fully compatible (i.e. it cannot be assumed that people who are not members of any political party do not prefer any political party), the actual correlation is closer to 0.997978, which is the value when these two categories are completely omitted. The fact that only 36 % of the respondents in the survey are not members of any political party indicates a generally high level of political consciousness among the Alaveli village population.

Table 9 Proportion of members of political parties on the total population among the survey sample in Alaveli (August 2007)

| Political parties | DMK | ADMK | CPI (M) | INC | PMK | VCK | No membership |
|----------------------|------|------|---------|-----|------|-----|---------------|
| Community | | | | | | | |
| Non-Dalits | 29.7 | 12,8 | 2.1 | 0 | 12.8 | 0 | 42.6 |
| Dalits | 64.1 | 3.8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1.9 | 30.2 |
| Total village | 48.0 | 8.0 | 1.0 | 0 | 6.0 | 1.0 | 36.0 |

Also the voters turn over during all kinds of elections is very high according to the information provided by the members of the Panchayat. In the survey 95% of respondents replied that they regularly go to vote in elections. In 2006 village panchayat elections 837 out of 927 eligible voters casted the ballot which equals to 90.3% participation. As a result of the high electoral participation combined with the representativity of the Panchayat the level of trust in

the Panchayat is considerably high. According to 52.0% of the population the village panchayat is not corrupt at all and 29% believe that it is only little corrupt. Minimum differences in the level of trust in the transparency of the Panchayat between the Alaveli Dalit and non-Dalit community are visualized in Graph 2.

Graph 2 Level of Corruption in the Alaveli Panchayat

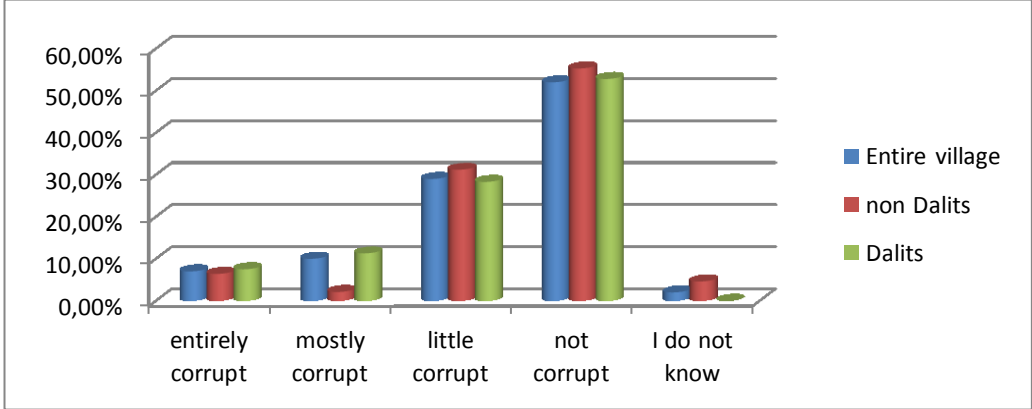


Table 9 and table 8 display differences between Dalit and non-Dalit political preferences in Alaveli. Obviously VCK and PMK are supported only by the particular caste whose interests they claim to defend. Very notable in this comparison is strong support by Dalits to the DMK (81.1% sympathizers and 64.1 % member of the party) while non-Dalits, whose majority also supported the DMK (42.6% sympathizers and 29.7% members), were more divided in their party affiliation and considerable part of them also supported the opposition AIA DMK (23.4 sympathizers and 12.8% members). This may seem surprising in the view of the fact that Dalits were traditional vote bank for MGR. The cause of the DMK’s popularity lies more than in any state level factor in the personality of the Panchayat president *Mr. Asok Kumar* who is a leader of the Alaveli Dalit community and vice-secretary of the DMK branch in the village and who is a highly respected person in the Dalit community. Many consider him as a model for others in the community. In words of a Paraiyar lady from Ilaiyankudi: *“Kumar tambi never drinks liquor and he takes care of his family well. You will not hear anything bad about him. If all men were like him, our community would prosper”* (S. B. 2007).

At the time of the research Mr. A. Kumar was 38 years old, married and had two children. He has been member of the DMK since 1993, vice-secretary of the DMK in Alaveli since 2001 and Panchayat president since 2006. He is a farmer, owning 4 acres and renting another 4 acres of land for rice cultivation. This makes him a middle-size farmer independent on others for his income. Mr. A. Kumar was elected with a convincing majority of 437 votes which was almost double than the second independent candidate who polled 265 votes. Mr. Asok Kumar is not only respected in his community but also enjoys respect of non-Dalits. One of my Vanniyar informants described him as *“a good man and a good farmer who as a President seeks the benefit of the whole village”* (A. K., 43 year; landowner - farmer; Vanniyar man; Alaveli village 2007). Similar views were expressed by many other Vanniyaars during my research in the village.

I interviewed Mr. Kumar three times during my stay in Alaveli. His viewpoint of the role of the village Panchayat and him as a President seem to be very pragmatic. *“We have to improve water supply and roads in the village. We also want to receive government funds for housing*

projects so that everybody lives in a decent house of bricks. A village panchayat has no proper financial resources. If we want money for roads, we have to ask it from the state. Panchayat president has to deal with block and district officials to plan for the development and to secure the funds". Mr. Kumar evaluates his cooperation with non-Dalits in the Panchayat as good, especially with the Vice-President. "Mr. Selvaraj was the Panchayat president before. He knows well how to deal with government offices and he helps me a lot." However he refuses that he would be a puppet of non-Dalits. "Only I represent our village at the Block Council. Half of the Panchayat are SCs and half belong to the BC. Caste is not important in the Panchayat. We all want development for the village and we will not get anywhere if everybody wants benefits only for his caste. We need to work together. There is no discrimination against SCs in the village panchayat". When asked if there is discrimination against Dalits in the village, Mr. Kumar replied: "In Alaveli we do not have any separate cups for Dalits in the tea shop or similar things. But there are still prejudices. We do not live together and we do not eat together. There are villages where all castes live next to each other. They receive a lot of support from the government. We need to educate people and work together with other castes not against them. The VCK do not do any good for Dalits in Alaveli or anywhere else. They only come where there is a problem and make things worse. There are only few boys who sympathize with VCK in this village. They want something good but they are mistaken" (Kumar 2007).

VCK members in Alaveli respect the Panchayat president but consider his attitude to non-Dalits conciliatory: "Dalits suffered a lot in the past. Therefore our community is more underdeveloped than others. State has to rectify this and we need to get more opportunities. We have to ask for advantages because we are disadvantaged. Dalits cannot be patient any longer, we have to hit back when our dignity is not respected" (P. K., 25 years; unemployed; Paraiyar man; Alaveli Dalit colony 2007). VCK's branch in the Alaveli village is relatively new and small started only in 2005. It actually consists of a group of five active members/friends, all of them young Paraiyars in the age between 20 and 25 years. K.P. is the founder and the secretary of the local branch. *Vearaiyan* (Tam. *vīraiyaṅ*) is his self-selected party nickname. All five members of the VCK in Alaveli call each other with their "party" nicknames. Mr. Veeraiyan graduated as a B.A. in Tamil literature at the Kamaraj University in Madurai in 2004. At the time of the interview he was unemployed helping with the agricultural works to his family. He ran for the office as a village Panchayat ward member but was not elected with 27 votes polled.

Veeraiyan came to know about VCK during his studies in Madurai. He started to attend public rallies organized by the VCK and eventually joined the party in 2003. After returning to Alaveli he founded the local branch of the party. "The situation of Dalits in this village is not so bad compared to villages in southern districts like Madurai, Usilampatti or Theni. However, Vanniyars do not treat us as their equals. Dalits here have got used to this and do not object. We need to educate them to find their respect. Other parties like DMK and Jayalalithaa only lie when they say they want to abolish caste. They are themselves casteists. We have to fight until the caste differences are completely abolished" (P. K., 25 years; unemployed; Paraiyar man; Alaveli Dalit colony 2007).

When asked about the activities of the party at the village level Veeraiyan explained that "first we have to educate people and teach them to see that the party like DMK and AIA DMK worship Periyar but their actions are against Periyar's ideology. They need to learn to recognize these lies. We need to unite Dalits behind the VCK. We need stronger organization and more members. Our immediate task is to build stronger organization in Alaveli. We also organize trips for our members' to VCK public demonstrations. This is where they learn more about the party. We

are ready to support our members and other Dalits” (P. K., 25 years; unemployed; Paraiyar man; Alaveli Dalit colony 2007). At the time of my research Dalit Panthers were still rather unknown party in the Alaveli village. 47.2% of Dalit respondents said that they have never heard about such party, 33.9% knew VCK and did not have a favourable opinion about them and only 18.9% knew VCK and had a favourable opinion about the party. Among non-Dalits 53% knew the VCK and 76% of non-Dalits who knew VCK had a negative opinion about the party. The most often expressed criticism by non-Dalits was to the tune that “VCK are violent rowdies who only want to make trouble to catch attention” (B. U. 2007).

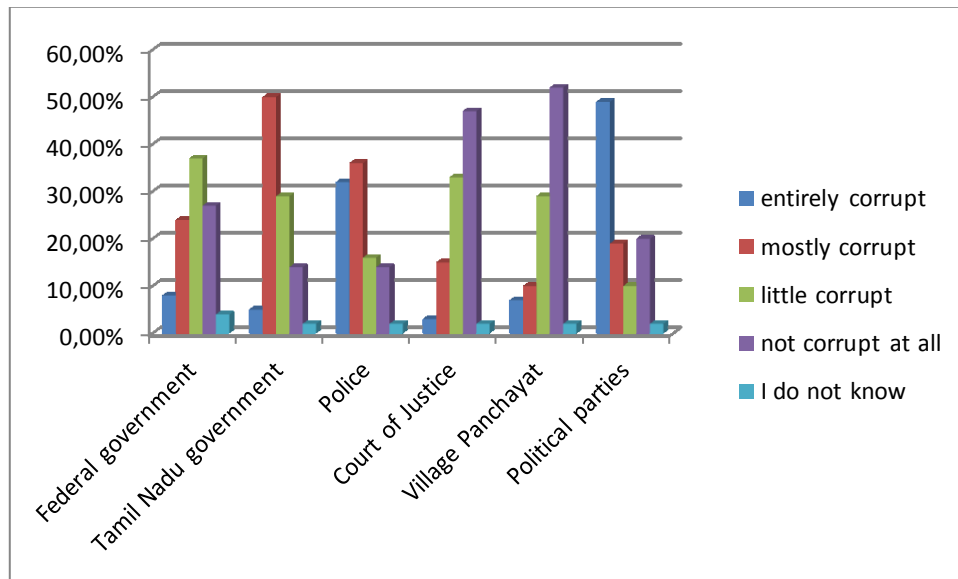
Table 10 Perception of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi among Dalits and non-Dalits in Alaveli

| Your general feeling about VCK is. | Positive (%) | Negative (%) | I do not know (%) |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Dalits | 34.0 | 18.9 | 47.2 |
| Non-Dalits | 12.8 | 40.4 | 46.8 |

Alaveli non-Dalits seemed to be fairly unaware about the fact that VCK party has its branch in the village and linked the party more to news or affairs in the state not in the village. Dalits who knew about the party’s existence mostly also noted its presence in the village. The appeal of the VCK in Alaveli was in 2007 limited to its five members and a few more youngsters, who would sympathize with radical image of the party but were not involved in the activities of the party themselves, especially would not travel and participate at party rallies. Mr. Veeraiyan is acknowledged as a leader only among this narrow group of supporters. However, the authority of Mr. A. Kumar among Dalits was almost universal and he would be as a person respected even by Dalits who would not vote for the DMK in elections.

If we compare the perception of corruption of various agencies of governance in Alaveli as provided in Graph 3, then the village panchayat is perceived as the least corrupted together with the judiciary system. On the other hand, political parties and police are seen as most corrupted agencies of governance. Perceptions of police as the most corrupted institution in the state is in accordance with larger surveys such as Transparency International *India Corruption Study 2005* in which 68% of respondents in Tamil Nadu saw police as a corrupted institution (Transparency International 2006, 157).

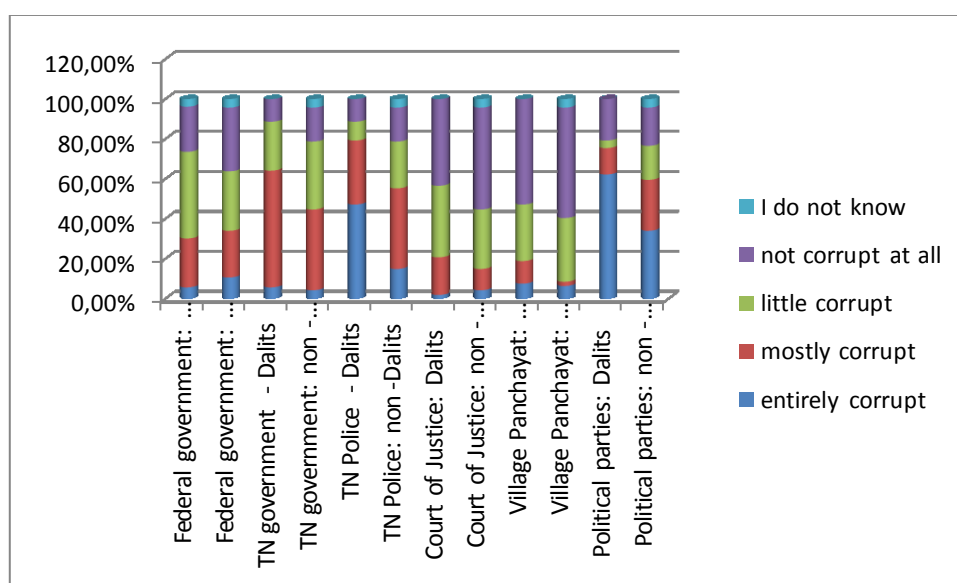
Graph 3 Perception of corruption of various agencies of governance in Alaveli



As an example to document the corruption of police respondents often quoted traffic controls. According to them their single purpose was to collect bribes under whatever pretext. It has to be said that to my knowledge at least four owners of motorbikes in Alaveli who used their motorbikes on a daily basis, had no driving licence and they solved the problem of an eventual traffic control simply by paying a bribe to the police officer in charge. From their point of view bribing the traffic control was much less uncomfortable than to pass a driving test. In general, encounters between Alaveli villagers and police are not frequent, since the nearest police station is in the ten kilometres distant town of Vaitheeswarankoil and the rule in the village is to try to solve eventual disputes between the villagers without the intervention of the police as far as possible. Police is not trusted because as one of the Paraiyar villagers said *“they will agree with whoever pays them more money”* (A. I. 2007). The tendency is to resolve the majority of disputes in a conciliatory manner with the assistance of elders of the community or the village panchayat.

There is however no unofficial judicial body or a *“katta panchayats”* in the village that would decide in matters related to *“good manners”* and that could pass judgments of excommunication from the village. Old people remember that in old days misconduct and offences against good morals were being resolved by the panchayats composed of Brahmin landlords at the presence of elders of all castes. After the exit of Brahmin landlords to town nobody after them assumed the role of the guardian of morality and every caste deals with their own issues internally. Village panchayats is often approached for advice or opinion in minor disputes and its decision may or may not be respected. It, however, does not have any power to sanctify those who do not comply with its advice or decision.

Graph 4 Comparison of perception of corruption of several state institutions by Dalits and non-Dalits in Alaveli village



Perception of corruption of various agencies of governance and there resulting trust in institution is similar among Dalits and non-Dalits as illustrated in Graph 4. In general we can say that perception of institutions as corrupt is slightly more prevailing among Dalits than among non-Dalits. Both groups however show similar tendencies and consider the same agencies more corrupt (police, political parties) than others (judiciary, village panchayats).

7.2. LOCAL POLITICS IN KEERIPATTI

In 2006 Keeripatti panchayat had 1,393 votes and it was divided into three wards. It is one of the eighteen panchayats in the Usilampatti Panchayat Union that comes under Usilampatti Taluk with 54 villages. G. Palanithurai writes that *“Usilampatti Taluk in Madurai district is known for female infanticide and sabotage of reservation in Panchayats. The three village panchayats of Pappapatti, Keeripatti and Nattarmangalam are not able to function since 1996 because of the problem of reservation of the office of the Panchayat president for SC”* (Palanithurai, Communities, Panchayats and Governance at Grassroots 2008, 115). Since out of the eighteen panchayats in the Usilampatti Panchayat Union Keeripatti panchayat has the largest proportion of Scheduled Castes [the other two mentioned villages Pappapatti and Nattarmangalam lie in a neighbouring Chellampatti Panchayat Union], it was designated as a reserved panchayat in 1996 for the period of ten years. Still, Scheduled caste form about 20% of the village population (109 families Dalit and 570 non-Dalit) which together with the custom of Panchayat president being in charge of inaugurating Kallar temple festival (as described in chapter 4.4.2) are the two major causes why the designation of the Panchayat as a reserved one has been perceived as unjust by the dominant Piramalai Kallar community. According to my survey only 10.2% agree with the extent of reservation for Dalits in their panchayat while 86.7% oppose it.

After announcing the decision about Keeripatti Panchayat reservation to the village authorities in 1996, Piramalai Kallar contested the decision about the reservation in courts but have not achieved any for them favourable result, despite the fact that the sum spent for court related costs was about 300,000 rupees in 2007 (K. V. 2007). In the meantime Kallars decided to prevent Paraiyars from contesting the panchayat president seat by the threat of violence and social boycott against individuals who would dare to contest for the position of a Panchayat president. Moreover a rumour was spread in the village that such people would be struck by a disease or some kind of disaster by the Kallar goddess Ochchandamman. As a result of threats between 1996 and 2001 nine elections were announced in the Keeripatti Panchayat but ultimately none of them was held because no Dalit candidate came forward. After 2002 Piramalai Kallars changed the tactic and started to nominate their own puppet Dalit candidates who contested in elections, won with the vast majority of votes and resigned immediately after the election was over.

In 2002 Dalit Panthers of India forced a ballot in Keeripatti after they nominated P. Poonkodi as their candidate for the position. He polled only 3 votes whereas his opponent K. Kannan, nominated by the Piramalai Kallars, won the election with 341 votes and signed his letter of resignation five minutes after the results of the ballots were announced. Despite having lost the election P. Poonkodi had to leave the village after and to live in Chennai because of fear of his personal security. He was nominated again by VCK in April 2005. This time P. Poonkodi polled 29 votes while Mr. Azhagumalai the candidate nominated by Piramalai Kallars gained 487 votes. Mr. Azhagumalai handed over his resignation to the Block Development Officer a day after the election accompanied by representatives of Piramalai Kallars and two advocates. While handing over his resignation Mr. Azhagumalai (Tam. *Aḷakumalai*) explained that his decision was "*in accordance with the wish and in the interest of the village people who voted for him*" and expressed his view that "*stringent action should be taken against those who were indulging in this (reservation) act that disturbs social harmony. The post of Keeripatti panchayat should be de-reserved before the conduct of next election*" (Sundar 2005, 5). Fourteen families perceived to be close to the unsuccessful candidates faced a social boycott, particularly they were denied employment by Kallar landlords and were not served in Keeripatti shops. Mr. Azhagumalai later during his interview with journalists admitted having received from Piramalai Kallars 25 kg of rice and Rs. 1,000.- as a reward for his resignation (Jeevan 2007).

Amendment No 142 of the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Rules proclaimed a principle of rotation in selection of reserved wards and panchayats, i.e. that reservations "*shall be allotted by rotation [at the expiry of every ten years] and reallocated to other Wards or Territorial Wards or Panchayats where the percentage of population of women or Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes or Backward Classes as the case may be*" (TN Government, G.O. No. 142 1995)... According to this principle the period for which Keeripatti was a reserved Panchayat should have elapsed before the Panchayat elections in 2006. However, due to the Piramalai Kallar obstruction the ten years of the reservation would have passed without an SC Panchayat president ever having taken the charge of the function. Following the elections in 2005 Dalit Panthers of India (VCK), Communist Party of India (Marxist) along with two NGOs - People's Watch (PW) and National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) started a campaign to commit the Tamil Nadu government not to de-reserve the concerned panchayats. The climax of this campaign was a public hearing of villagers from the concerned villagers including P. Poonkodi and the family of Mr. Narasingham, who had been found mysteriously dead after having filed his nomination for the Pappapatti panchayat in

2002, in front of a committee composed of former judges of the Madras High Court and members of academic institutions. Among recommendations of the commission the most immediate one was that "so long as the Dalits did not enjoy the fixed period of ten years, the panchayats should not be de-reserved" (The Hindu 2005).

On August 26, 2006 DMK government of M. Karunanidhi followed the recommendations of VCK and NGOs and by a *Government Order No. 105* decided that "the Offices of the Presidents of Pappapatti, Keeripatti and Nattarmangalam villages, panchayats in Madurai district and Kottakatchiyendal village panchayat in Virudhunagar district reserved for the Scheduled Castes shall continue to be reserved as such until the Government directs otherwise" (TN Government, G.O. No. 105; 2006). The authoritarian phrasing of the Government Order angered Piramalai Kallar community who contested the G.O. at the High Court by a public litigation petition as unconstitutional. Even though Madras High Court accepted the plea and started the litigation process, at the same time it refused to grant an interim injunction restraining authorities from notifying the elections for the panchayat. New elections for an SC Panchayat president in all four concerned villages thus could be announced on October 2006.

Beside government sending a strong signal to Piramalai Kallars about the panchayat not being de-reserved until a Dalit Panchayat president serves his/her due term, government authorities also strived to persuade Keeripatti Kallars to give up their adamant attitude both by negotiation and financial incentives to the village. District Collector of Madurai Mr. Udayachandiran visited Keeripatti on the 9th of July 2006 in order to discuss with villagers about their needs. During the meeting financial assistance was promised by the district administration in the amount of Rs. 2,500,000.- for developmental activities. Moreover Block Development Officer Mr. Rajasekar approached Mr. Muthupandi, brother of the late MP P.K. Mukkiah Thevar, and *Mr. Annakodi Thevar*, ex-chairman of the village panchayat, in order to negotiate a deal with Piramalai Kallars in order to allow the election of a Scheduled Caste Panchayat president for all four concerned villages (Palanithurai, *Third general election to local government in Tamil Nadu: expectations and shocking realities 2008*, 87). Mr. Annakodi Thevar is related by kinship links with several young Piramalai Kallar members of Communist party of India (Marxist). These youth started a persuasion campaign among Piramalai Kallars in Keeripatti in order to gain acceptance for a Schedule Caste Panchayat president. The issue was discussed at a village meeting organised by the CPI (M) youths where they confronted the village elders opinions; "We told them that we wanted to elect a Panchayat president this time. All India knows our village because of this problem. It is not fair that we have to elect a Dalit, there are only 10% in this village but we cannot do anything. No development in the village can be done if the Panchayat is not working" (M.P. 2007). The village meeting, however, did not arrive to a conclusion and village elders warned the youths against electing an SC Panchayat president.

Altogether three Dalit candidates filed nomination for the Panchayat president post but nominations of two candidates were rejected on scrutiny of the election commission composed of Block of Panchayat officials leaving thus the only candidate for the SC Panchayat president post. The official reason given for rejection of the two other candidates, who had the support of Piramalai Kallars, were "defective entries in the nomination form" (Palanithurai, *Third general election to local government in Tamil Nadu: expectations and shocking realities 2008*, 92). Finally, the only candidate *Mr. P. Balusamy* (Tam. *bālucāmi*) was supported by the state authorities (District Collector and Block Development Officer) and by the Piramalai Kallars CPI (M) youth. No political leader, including the leader of VCK Thirumaavalavan, was allowed to

enter the Keeripatti and three other panchayats during the electioneering period. The result was an unanimous election of P. Balusamy (CPI-M) as a Panchayat president.

The total number of votes casted for the Panchayat president was 397 out of the total of 1,393 that is only 28.5% of entitled voter, while the vast majority of the population of the village (71.5%) did not go to the election. Among other five elected members of the village Panchayat three members belong to the Backward caste (Piramalai Kallars) and two members to Scheduled Caste (Paraiyars). There are two women in the Panchayat, one BC and one SC. In terms of party affiliation of the ward members, there are two members of DMK, two members of CPI (M), one member of the Indian National Congress (INC) and one without any party affiliation nominated by the local branch of AIA DMK. List of ward members elected in Keeripatti in October 2006 elections is provided in Table 11.

Table 11 Composition of the Keeripatti Panchayat after October 2006 elections

| Name / function | Sex | Party | Caste |
|-------------------------------|-------|---|-------|
| P.Balusamy/ President | Man | CPI (M) | SC |
| P. Palanisamy/ Vice-president | Man | DMK | BC |
| A.P./ ward member | Woman | DMK | BC |
| M. P./ ward member | Woman | Not member of any party (nominated by AIA DMK) | SC |
| S. T./ ward member | Man | INC | SC |
| U. K./ ward member | Man | CPI (M) | BC |

Political parties are thus represented in the Panchayat in the ratio CPI (M) and DMK two members - 33.4% each and the two parties, INC and independents 1 member each - 16.7%. Table 12 shows political party preferences among Keeripatti population as expressed in my survey of a randomly selected sample in October 2007. Proportion of party members to the total population according to the same survey sample is given in Table 13.

Table 12 Political party preferences among survey sample in Keeripatti (October 2007)

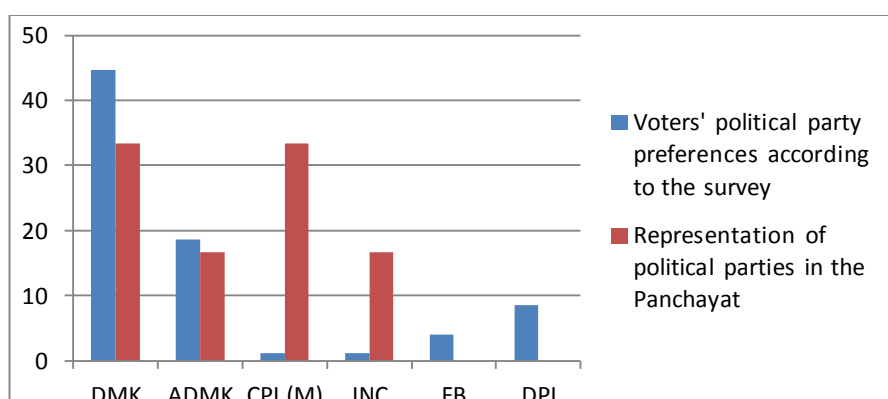
| Political parties Community | DMK | ADMK | CPI (M) | INC | FB | VCK | No or other preferences |
|--------------------------------|------|------|---------|-----|-----|------|-------------------------|
| Non-Dalits | 51.6 | 24.2 | 0 | 0 | 5.5 | 0 | 18.7 |
| Dalits | 26.5 | 4.0 | 4.1 | 4.1 | 0 | 30.6 | 30.7 |
| Total village | 44.6 | 18.6 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 4.0 | 8.5 | 22.1 |

Table 13 Proportion of members of political parties on the total population among the survey sample in Keeripatti (October 2007)

| Political parties \ Community | DMK | ADMK | CPI (M) | INC | FB | VCK | No membership |
|-------------------------------|------|------|---------|-----|-----|------|---------------|
| Non-Dalits | 37.5 | 13.3 | 0 | 0 | 3.1 | 0 | 46.1 |
| Dalits | 12.3 | 4.1 | 4.1 | 2.0 | 0 | 12.3 | 65.2 |
| Total village | 30.5 | 10.7 | 1.1 | 0.6 | 2.3 | 3.4 | 51.4 |

The correlation between the voters' support to respective political parties and the proportion of respective political parties on the total population computed according to Pearson's formula is 0,999997. This suggests very strong dependence between the relative strength of a political party in terms of its members and electoral behaviour of people in Keeripatti, in other words the number of sympathizers of any particular political party in the village is proportional to the number of its members. This finding supports the assumption that political choices of Keeripatti villagers are relatively stable.

Graph 5 - Comparison of voters' party preferences with party representation in the village panchayat in Keeripatti



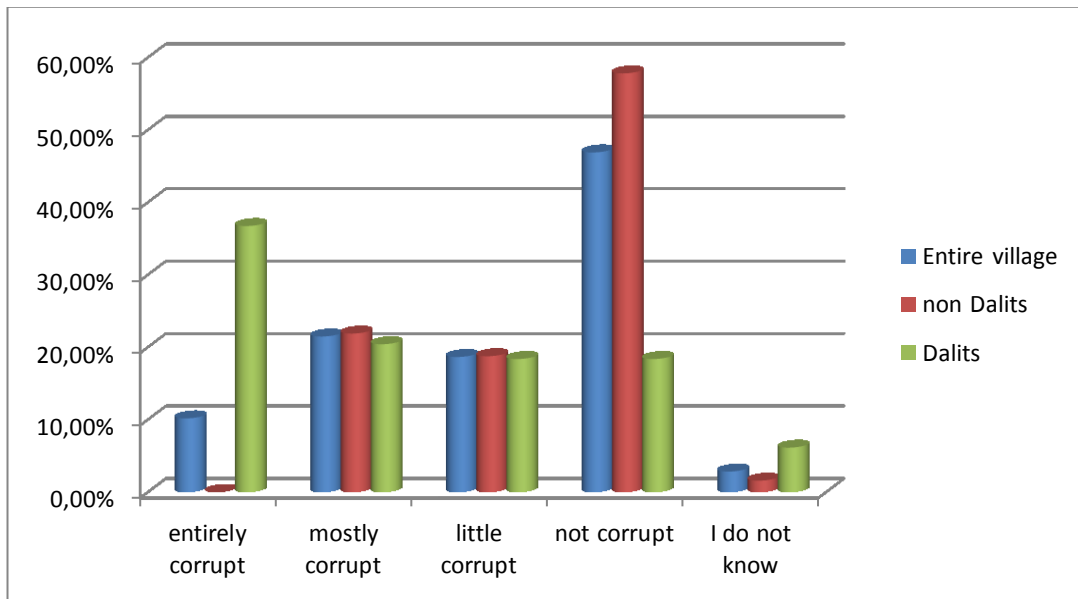
On the contrary the statistical correlation between the party-wise composition of the village Panchayat and the population preferences of political parties is very low between 0.3336 and 0.441450 suggesting that there is a very weak relationship between the party composition of the Panchayat and political choices of Keeripatti villagers. The divergence between the voters' political party preferences and the political parties' representation is shown in the Graph 5. Most obvious is the negative correlation between the strong representation of the CPI (M), that have a Panchayat president and one of the ward members, and the CPI (M) party's weak presence and support among the village population. Similarly INC has one Panchayat ward member but only 1.1% of voters supports the party. VCK is on the opposite side of the spectrum as the party with the largest support among Dalits and in total with 12.3% of the village population's support according to the survey data, yet this party has no representative in the Panchayat at all.

⁵⁰ The correlation is higher 0.4414 if we consider the independent Panchayat ward member M. P. nominated by the AIA DMK as a de facto representative of this party.

Above mentioned facts confirm the claim of several of my Dalit informants that the present Panchayat is a result of an agreement between the leaders of Piramalai Kallars and the representatives of the state, by which Kallars allowed the elections to happen in exchange for the government funding of the development projects in the village under the condition that Dalits associated with the Dalit Panthers will not be represented in the Panchayat. It could be expected that “bypassing” of large sections of the voters’ in the elections would have a negative impact on Panchayat’s legitimacy or trust of voters’ in Panchayat transparency. Graph 6 based on the data collected from the survey sample supports this expectation. Only 18.4% of Dalits trust that the Panchayat is not corrupt while 36.7% believe it is completely corrupt and 20.4% that it is mostly corrupt. Tight majority of non-Dalits – 57.8% believe that the Panchayat is not corrupt, while 21.9% think it is mostly corrupt and 18.8% it is a little corrupt. The total difference in trust in the Panchayat between Alaveli and Keeripatti may not seem important (52% of the total population in Alaveli believe that the Panchayat is not corrupt and 46.9% believe the same in Keeripatti), significant is the strikingly different perception of trust in the Panchayat between Keeripatti Dalits and non-Dalits, while in Alaveli both groups have approximately same perception of the Panchayat credibility. It can be expressed by correlation of values for trust in the Panchayat among Dalits and non-Dalits which in case of Alaveli is highly positive $Corr = 0,972395$, indicating striking similarity or dependence of the two variables and in case of Keeripatti it is slightly negative $Corr = -0,13509$ suggesting thus radically different perception of Panchayat credibility among Dalits from that of non-Dalits.

The differences in how the Panchayat is perceived by the Dalits and non-Dalits is most striking in their perception of the Panchayat president. Those Kallars who consider the village Panchayat mostly corrupted, entirely corrupted or little corrupted invariably consider the President to be the only or most corrupted element of the Panchayat. Although I cannot support this assertion by any statistical number from the survey since I considered the question on corruption of the Panchayat president to be too personal and likely to raise negative reaction to include it in the survey, the very frequent comment by Kallars along with their answer about the corruption in the Panchayat was that *“Panchayat is not corrupt but the Panchayat president is”*. On the other hand a typical Dalit reaction to the question was: *“Although the President is a Dalit, he cannot do anything because of the Kallars in the Panchayat”*. Panchayat president himself gives credit to this understanding of the situation. In a public statement for the newspaper *The Outlook India* in April 2007 he said: *“The vice-president and clerk oppose everything I suggest. When I complained to the BDO, he asked me not to create problems. I’m just a puppet”* (Anand 2007).

Graph 6 Perception of Corruption of village Panchayat in Keeripatti



Due to the previous experience with Dalit panchayat presidents in Keeripatti being elected to be subsequently forced to resign or to be banned from the village Mr. Balusamy was given a police protection from the beginning. He is accompanied 24-hours a day by a District Armed Reserved Police officer with a 9-mm rifle. His family, wife and two daughters live at relatives in another village. The opposition of the larger part of the Keeripatti Kallars to the fact that Mr. Balusamy did not resign from his position immediately after election resulted in a boycott against him and his larger family who will in any case not be employed at Kallar fields. Before being elected as a Panchayat President Mr. Balusamy worked as an agricultural labourer. He does not have any official incomes beside his remuneration for the post of a Panchayat President which is only Rs 350.- a month. In the past Mr. Balusamy had links with the VCK, later he joined Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) – a youth offshoot of CPI (M). Mr. Balusamy became a member of the CPI (M) shortly before the Panchayat elections in 2006.

During my meeting with Mr. Balusamy in September 2007 he complained about the non-cooperative attitude of the Piramalai Kallar panchayat members and expressed an apprehension about his future fate at the end of his mandate after the police protection is lifted. He also talked about his experience in the function of the panchayat president: *“Some Piramalai Kallar boys from the CPI (M) youth came and asked me if I wanted to contest for the panchayat president. They said they would negotiate with Kallars not to object my nomination and election. They said I would have to stop frequenting VCK and to join the CPI. I did and I was elected a secretary of the CPI (M) in the village. They persuaded some Kallars to vote for me. I also had the support by the BDO and even the District collector. After elections a large part of the Kallars started to push for my resignation. I refused to resign and I was given a police protection because of their threats. I have been in the function for one year now but I could not achieve anything. Village panchayat meets once a month but usually without Kallar members, only us Dalits. We let them know what we discuss and decide in writing but they never follow our opinion. All projects are implemented through the panchayat clerk who is a Kallar and I have no power to influence them. Kallars decide all matter at their caste panchayat and then the clerk will do what they tell him. When I went to the BDO to complain about the clerk, he told me not to make troubles. He should convene special*

meetings of Dalit panchayat presidents but he does not do that. My mandate will be over in 2011 and I do not know what I will do after that. I think I will have to move out of the village” (Balusamy 2007).

Mr. Balusamy claims that he is still maintaining friendly links with the VCK. “VCK did not oppose my nomination. Among Dalits in Keeripatti most people support VCK but Kallars hate VCK and would not allow a panchayat president to be a member of that party. It was important for the VCK that there was a Dalit panchayat president in Keeripatti therefore they agreed not to field their own candidate. People who were nominated by the VCK in the past were not elected and had to leave the village after the elections” (Balusamy 2007).

The observation of Mr. Balusamy about the leading position of VCK among Dalits in Keeripatti has been confirmed by the data from the questionnaire. With 12.3% of respondents being the members of the party, VCK is together with DMK the party with largest membership among Keeripatti Dalits. 30.6% of Dalit respondents indicated VCK as their preferred political party and 81.6% of Dalit respondents had generally positive feeling about VCK. My survey among Keeripatti non-Dalits also confirms that for them VCK is absolutely unacceptable. None of the non-Dalit respondents expressed a positive feeling about VCK, while 78.1% had negative feelings about the party and 21.9% either did not know the party or did not have any opinion about it. During my interviews of non-Dalits in Keeripatti they often expressed their conviction that VCK along with some NGOs are responsible for creating an atmosphere of hostility between the Dalits and non-Dalits: “Before politicians from VCK started to instigate Scheduled Castes against us, we had good relations. We need each other. We have land and we need them to work on it. They need to work for us to eat. It has always been this way. It is good that their leaders were not allowed to come here before last elections. Even if there are problems, we can settle our problems ourselves” (P. K., 79 years; landowner, Piramalai Kallar man; Keeripatti village 2007).

Table 14 Perception of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi among Dalits and non-Dalits in Keeripatti

| Your general feeling about VCK is. | Positive (%) | Negative (%) | I do not know (%) |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Dalits | 81.6 | 2.0 | 16.3 |
| Non-Dalits | 0.0 | 78.1 | 21.9 |

K.S. is the head or secretary of the VCK in Keeripatti. He rejects to be labelled as a leader of VCK in the village as he insists that the organization at the village level functions on a principle of equality of all its members and decisions are taken on a consensus basis after being discussed at a meeting. “My responsibility is to convene meetings of the party and maintain contact with the district secretary and other leaders of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal. We do not have a leader at the village level. I joined VCK in 1998 and started to be active as a secretary of the VCK after Poonkodiyan [VCK candidate in 2002 panchayat elections] had to leave the village” (S. K. 2007). Even if officially there is no leader of the VCK in the village and K.S. refuses to be one, he is perceived and respected as a leader by other members of Dalit Panthers in the cheri. K.S. has studied up to the Standard XII and left school when he was 18 years old. He could not pursue further education because of financial and family problems, however he keeps educating himself

by reading books about history and politics. K.S. works as a labour in agriculture in Keeripatti and neighbouring villages and occasionally as a mason. In October 2007 he has been recently married. Like others in the village he came to know about VCK after the problem with the election to the village panchayat started and the name of Keeripatti started to attract attention of the public. *"Nobody would dare to challenge Kallars in this village in the old days. In 1996 after Keeripatti became a reserved panchayat, Kallars announced that if any Dalit files a nomination, he would be banned from the village with his family. No nomination was filed from 1998 until 2001 and no elections took place. Viduthalai Chiruthaigal were going round the villages in this area and were trying to persuade people to contest and use their right guaranteed by the law. No other party was supporting us at that time in order not to antagonize Kallars whose vote is more important for them than ours because they are more. Only after VCK built their branches here and persuaded a few people to file nominations as VCK candidates, things started to change. It provoked elections at least and exposed Kallars when they forced their puppet candidates to resign immediately after elections. It was only because of the VCK campaign that people came to know about Keeripatti. After the whole state came to know about our situation, even the District Collector had to act. If we have a Dalit panchayat president today, it is mainly an achievement of the VCK, not CPI, DMK or other party. We are happy that Balusamy is a panchayat president, although Kallars in the panchayat will not let him do much. It is another step in our struggle"* (S. K. 2007).

Several other Dalits from Keeripatti described the impact of the VCK's activity in the village in similar terms as the secretary of VCK. They were both members and non members of the party. *"Before VCK started to be active in this village, nobody was interested in the situation of the people in this cheri. Only because of the VCK's resistance against the Kallars' rule here journalists started to be interested in the life of this village. After our problems appeared in national newspapers, the government cannot ignore us any more"* (M. S. 2007). Statements of both Dalits and non-Dalits in the village confirm from two different perspectives the same reality. Involvement of the VCK in the political affairs of the village destroyed the apparent unity of all villagers and a general consensus based on which all public decisions had been taken, was replaced by a democratic competition. Before the VCK entered the scene, the political parties present in the village did not threaten the core value system underpinning the unity of the village, that is the acceptance of the existing caste hierarchy and one's own position within the system. VCK does not pose threat to the traditional system of the village in Keeripatti by revolutionary ideas that it propagates as much by the social strata that it attempts to address. Annihilation of caste, empowerment of weaker sections of society and alleviation of social inequalities belong not only in Tamil Nadu but all over India to the political mainstream and they have been incorporated in programs of most political parties. The threatening aspect of Dalit movement for the majority society is when Dalits try to achieve these objectives for themselves by themselves. As one of the VCK sympathizer in Keeripatti said: *"When we happened to learn about the VCK, we were very happy to know there is a party of Dalits, led by a Dalit leader. All parties make a lot of promises to Dalits before elections. But because they are controlled by Brahmins, Reddiars, Kallar and so on, their aim is not the improvement of Dalits' situation. Dalits who are in these parties will not help other Dalits. Only Dalits will help other Dalits"* (A. P. 2007).

For many reasons that had been already discussed (presiding over temple festival, nomination by reservation not by general contest) the idea of a Paraiyar becoming a panchayat president is hard to accept for the majority of Kallars. But this project became absolutely unacceptable when supported by a radical movement proclaiming self-liberation of Dalits. On

the contrary, the same project became possible and tolerated, even if not whole-heartedly and by everybody, when it was taken up by one of the parties which at the village level is controlled by Kallars – CPI (M). VCK had been useful for mobilization of Dalits to make them claim their right for the reserved positions, but its orientation exclusively at the Dalit community did not make the party a trustworthy partner in negotiating with Kallars. The implementation of reservation by a “Kallar” political party re-assured Kallar traditional leaders that the control of the village panchayat and the public affairs of the village will not completely slip out of Kallars’ control. The effort of the new president, who had been expected to be a puppet manipulated by Kallars, to act without the interference of the Kallar vice-president and the panchayat clerk led to a friction between the president and the Kallar community. The majority of Kallars turned back to the opinion of senior traditional leaders who had been sceptical to the plan of electing a Dalit nominated by CPI (M) from the beginning.

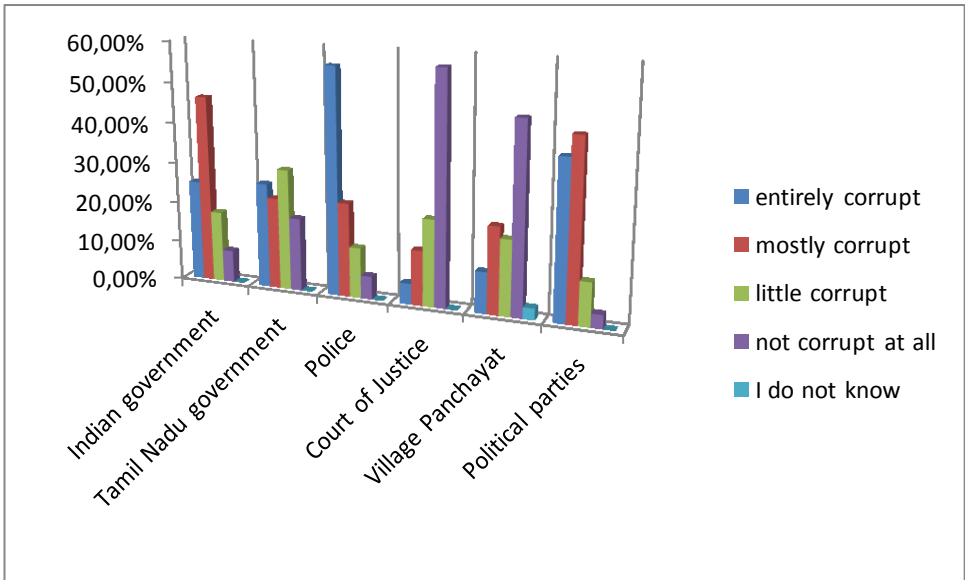
Traditional institutions of village self-governance that preceded the establishment of democratically elected village panchayats still have a powerful influence on local governance and “keeping of good manners” in areas dominated by Kallars. Keeripatti belongs among the traditional *eight nadus* (Tam. *eṭṭu nāṭu – eight lands*) ruled by Kallars. Each nadu is composed of three villages and the traditional system of justice is carried out by assembly of Kallar elders which is known as *katta panchayat* (Tam. *kaṭṭa pañcāyattu*). Keeripatti, along with Nattarmangalam, is under the authority of the Paappapatti katta panchayat. The members of the katta panchayat are not elected but the membership is attributed to certain important families and it is hereditary. Majority of katta panchayat members in Paappapatti are wealthy Kallars but there are also several Chettiyars in the panchayat who reside in Paappapatti. The exact number of members of the katta panchayat is not fixed and it is every time convened on an ad hoc basis. There are no Paraiyars in the Paappapatti katta panchayat. The reason for this is that, according to the tradition, in the past Paraiyars in Paapappatti nadu promised obedience to Kallars in return for the protection of the former. I was not able to talk to member of the Pappapatti katta panchayat during my field-work and all information about katta panchayat available to me were provided only by informants who themselves were not sitting in the katta panchayat.

The decision to ban Paraiyars from filling a nomination for the post of the panchayat president was taken by the katta panchayat in 1996 before the first elections were to be held. The punishment for a person transgressing the verdict of the katta panchayat would be banishment from the village for the person and his/her family. Katta panchayat is not an institution that would normally interfere with the politics. The usual competence of katta panchayats is to resolve disputes related to “good manners”, (Tam. *paḷakkam vaḷakkam*) e.g. transgressions against caste rules mainly concerning marriage and family relations and also to settle financial disputes without the involvement of courts or police. Although influential persons who are members of katta panchayats are often politically active, katta panchayats as such do not get involved in politics and do not pass verdicts in favour or against any political party or candidate. When Paappapatti katta panchayat banned the nomination of Dalits for the reserved posts of panchayat president in Keeripatti and Paapappatti, it was a special case. Because of the traditional role of the panchayat presidents in the temple festival in the concerned villages, a Dalit as a head of the village panchayat would mean offence to Kallars as he would have to start the temple festival and a respect would have to be paid to him by Kallar. As it had been mentioned in chapter 4.2. the ban was also accompanied by the threat of punishment by the village goddess Ochhchamandi. The “interdiction” of the katta panchayat on Dalits that

would fill nominations has never been lifted. However, the support of Mr. Annakodi Thevar to the CPI (M) plan to have a Dalit president elected, split the unity of the katta panchayat. In theory the ban was still in place at the time of my field-work and was one of the arguments for providing Mr. Balusamy with a 24 hours police protection.

Presence of police in the village is another factor having a significant impact on governance in the village. With the Tamil Nadu police to population ratio 1:740⁵¹ it is not usual for a village of the size of Keeripatti to have its own police station. In Keeripatti the police post was set in 1997 as a reaction of the TN government to killing of the panchayat president and his close associates in Melavalavu. The police post in Keeripatti is located next to the panchayat office and there are usually two to four police officers on duty. One of the police officers armed with AK-47 watches over the security of the panchayat president, accompanies him and guards his house in the cheri from the opposite house. As Graph 7 compiled from the data of my survey shows, the trust in police is by far the lowest of all other institution of governance as the police is perceived as being the most corrupted one.

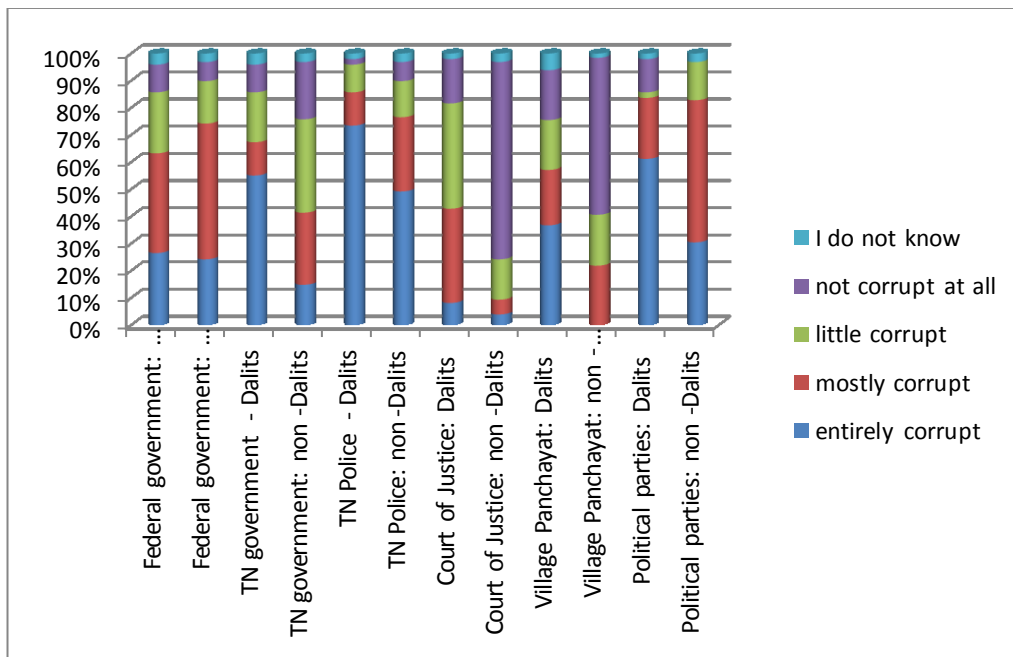
Graph 7 Perception of corruption of various agencies of governance in Keeripatti



Perhaps surprisingly, given the Kallar history of having been subjected to a degrading treatment by the police as a “criminal caste” and given the fact that the police post was set up in Keeripatti chiefly to provide protection to Dalits and the panchayat president, the trust in police is even lower among Dalits than among non-Dalits, as Graph 8 shows. The same graph also shows that Keeripatti Dalits in general have much lower trust in all kinds of institutions than non-Dalits.

⁵¹ This ratio is counted based on Indian government data on TN Police as of 2008 stating 135 police officers per population of 100 000 (National Crime Records Bureau 2009, 168).

Graph 8 Comparison of perception of corruption of several state institutions by Dalits and non-Dalits in Keeripatti village



There has been long and ongoing academic discussion among political scientists what the exact effects of corruptions both on economy and polity are. The automatic perception of corruption as a negative phenomenon has been challenged since 1950s. Instead of seeing corruption as "sand" in the gears of economy, it started to be described as grease that gets the bureaucracy in developing countries moving, and in so doing increases the loyalty of its citizens. Samuel P. Huntington praised corruption since it "provides immediate, specific, and concrete benefits to groups which might otherwise be thoroughly alienated from society. Corruption may thus be functional to the maintenance of a political system in the same way as reform is" (Huntington 1968, 64). Acknowledging the diversity of views I am much inclined to the opposite view that clientelism and related corruption by increasing trust between patron and client decrease trust of public in the political system. As Doig and Theobald concluded: "countries in which petty corruption is pervasive must... endure disablingly low level of trust in public institutions, with all the extremely negative consequences for commitment to collective projects, civic behavior, levels of crime and public order" (Doig and Robin 2000, 6). One more negative effect of corruption should be added which is an antithesis to Huntington, i.e. wide perception of a political system as corrupt leads to further alienation and radicalization of those groups who are mostly left out from the benefits that corruption brings to others. Such groups then desire a radical change of the present corrupt system and support radical movements working to this goal.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Affirmative action and mobilization of Dalits by Dalit political parties are two different means aimed at the same purpose, i.e. empowerment of Dalits and abolition of inequalities between Dalits and non-Dalits resulting from the existence of the caste system. The main question I have been trying to answer in this thesis is: What has been the impact of the affirmative action and of the Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, the state with a unique political climate formed by the Dravidian nationalism? To supply my reflections on this questions with empirical arguments I have selected two villages as a sample on which this impact could be observed and measured.

Qualitative methods of observation and interviews were main research tools used during the fieldwork and they were combined and supplemented with a questionnair research as a tool to gain quantitative data that would allow a comfortable comparison of the two villages and would enable to express certain social phenomena statistically.

The assumption behind the "village studies" is that despite the uniqueness of every village, there are some universal principles of the Indian society, or its cultural patterns, that can be discovered and explained by understanding mechanisms of a particular village community. Without this assumption whether or not openly declared, village studies would have little sense. Why else should any outsider be interested in what Alaveli Vanniyars think about Alaveli Paraiyars if we did not believe that this particular information will help to bring us to some sort of more general conclusion. The obvious danger of this approach is that we may consider as a general principle something which in reality is a very specific phenomenon in one single village. Although this risk cannot be completely eliminated, it can be decreased by collecting data from more than one location and by referring and comparing one's own data with secondary resources such as previously published studies.

Two villages selected for the study, Alaveli in Nagapattinam district and Keeripatti in Usilampatti district are similar in terms of their population and their caste composition. Their experiences with Dalit empowerment and affirmative action, however, have been strikingly different. While the implementation of the reserved seats for Dalits in Alaveli panchayat including the post of the panchayat president did not meet any resistance on the part of non-Dalits, it was not possible to hold panchayat elections at all for ten years in Keeripatti due to the resentment of Kallars against the reservations. In Alaveli, even before the panchayat reservations were introduced, Dalit right to be represented in panchayat on equal terms with non-Dalits has never been put in question. In Keeripatti elections could be finally held in 2006 but even after that the new panchayat president has not been able to perform his functions normally due to the manipulations by the vice-president and the panchayat clerk and the hostile attitude of Kallars towards the new panchayat president. In the tense atmosphere between the two communities Liberation Panthers Party (VCK) has become an important political player and majority of Dalits express support to the VCK in Keeripatti. In Alaveli the party is present but it has little support among Dalits and no leverage in the village affairs.

In search for variables that have led to the two different outcomes of "Dalit empowerment policies" in Keeripatti and Alaveli I have identified three large groups of factors

that determine complex relations between the Dalits and the non-Dalits. These are 1) economic factors 2) ritual, social and community factors and 3) their resulting political factors. It has been demonstrated that the three are mutually interconnected and in a positive or negative way reinforce each other.

Both villages have gone through a significant change since 1950 in terms of land tenure and organization of economic activities in the village. In Alaveli all castes benefitted from traditional Brahmin landowners leaving the village and subsequent sell out of their land to their former tenants. Vanniyars benefitted considerably more than Paraiyars but there were also several Paraiyar families that were able to acquire land from Brahmins. The importance of Paraiyars as agricultural labourers diminished with fragmentation of field holdings but this was to large extent compensated by new opportunities such as work out of village either in towns or abroad. In Keeripatti land holdings of Kallars diminished due to the fragmentation of family landholdings by the increase in population of the village. Paraiyars did not acquire any land at all. In fact, Kallars see it as necessary to prevent Dalits from acquiring land in order to maintain them in a subordinated position. Due to the fragmentation of Kallar landholdings and the increase of the population, there is less work for more people and the work opportunities for Paraiyars are scarce. The only significant additional financial resource of Paraiyars is brick making and masonry which is available only for physically strong men willing to live and work for long periods outside the village. All in all Keeripatti Paraiyars are poorer, have less economic opportunities and are more dependent on labour provided by non-Dalits than Alaveli Paraiyars.

In both villages Paraiyars are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The frontier between Dalits and non-Dalits is clearly marked by the separation of their settlements. Yet, there are considerable differences between the two villages in to what extent the untouchability is practiced by the non-Dalits and to what extent both communities are separated socially. Religious rituals are good indicators of the social distance between the two communities. In Alaveli caste deities of Paraiyars, Thevars and Vanniyars are worshipped by all three castes as village deities and all three castes participate to some extent at festivals of all main caste/village deities. In Keeripatti Paraiyars are not even allowed to enter in the temple of the main Kallar caste deity *Vankaru Thevar* and Kallars on the other hand do not worship and do not participate on the festival of the Paraiyar goddess *Ellaiyamman*.

Both in Alaveli and Keeripatti the lower social status of Paraiyars is reflected in the daily interaction of the two main caste groups. In Alaveli the difference is limited to using less respectful (however not disrespectful) terms of address towards Paraiyars in conversation but there are no restrictions on movement of Paraiyars within the main villages. Keeripatti Paraiyars, on the other hand, do not enter tea stalls in the main village either because they would not be served anyway or because they would be subjected to a humiliating treatment such as being served tea in a separate cup or not being allowed to sit on a bench and have to squat on the floor. In Keeripatti Paraiyars do not feel free to move around the main village and enter the main village only for necessary affairs such as a work for Kallars. Paraiyars' presence in the main village for other than work related purposes is perceived by Kallars as undesirable and it is sanctioned by verbal abuse at least. Consequently it was not surprising to find out that while 77.3 % of Alaveli Paraiyars describe relations between the two main caste groups as very good or good, only 34.6% of Keeripatti Paraiyars replied the same. Unlike that, in Alaveli among non-Dalits 85.1 % described the relations as very good or good and 81.3 % of Keeripatti non-Dalits

said the same. This discrepancy between the judgment about mutual relations between Keeripatti Dalits and Keeripatti non-Dalits indicates that while Dalits see the present situation as problematic and desire its change, Keeripatti non-Dalits are happy with the present situation and consider it natural.

All of the above mentioned economic, ritual, social and community factors are reflected in the institutions of governance and political affairs of the two villages. Institutions of governance in this thesis are conceived in a broader sense of the word and include not only official and legal institutions such as village panchayat, political parties and police but also traditional and illegal institution such as caste panchayat and caste courts. It has been demonstrated that the power of traditional institutions is stronger in Keeripatti than in Alaveli. This is primarily caused by the different historical development of the two villages. While traditional system of village administration monopolized by Brahmins collapsed in Alaveli after the departure of Brahmins from the village, in Keeripatti the traditional *kattu panchayat* has been well preserved and the monopoly of Kallar over this institution reflects their economic power and higher ritual status.

The perception of corruption in various governance institutions was used for the purpose of my research as an indicator of trust in the various institutions of governance and there resulting legitimacy of the institutions. My questionnaire survey brought two essential findings; 1) that the level of trust is lower in Keeripatti than in Alaveli in all governance institutions and 2) while the level of trust in governance institutions is similar among Dalit and non-Dalit community in Alaveli, in Keeripatti the level of trust in institutions is significantly lower among Dalit community than among non-Dalit community. These findings also confirm the positive correlation between the level of governance and legitimacy of institutions. The data of the survey were further confirmed and supported by ad-hoc interviews with informants from the concerned communities.

The level of villagers' trust in the legitimacy of the village panchayat was found to be relatively high in Alaveli and very low in Keeripatti. Alaveli panchayat and its president were elected in a free and fair elections free of tension between the Dalit and non-Dalit community and without external interference, while Keeripatti panchayat elections that finally made it possible to convene the village panchayat were held after a prolonged period of election boycott by the Kallar community and under a heavy pressure to have a Dalit panchayat president elected on the side of the Tamil Nadu state administration representatives encouraged by the DMK government. Finally the elections in Keeripatti could take place notably due to the engagement of the Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPI-M) youths supported by the district collector and a Dalit candidate Mr. Balusamy could become a panchayat president. Mr. Balusamy was nominated as a compromise candidate having had terminated his links with the VCK as a member of the CPI-M, a party that has no mass following in the village. As my survey disclosed the actual party-wise composition of the village panchayat in Keeripatti is fundamentally unmatched to party preferences of the villagers and reflects the manipulation of the election process by the district authorities. On the contrary, in Alaveli the composition of the village panchayat reflects real political preferences of the village population.

The outcome of the implementation of the Dalit reserved post of the panchayat president in Keeripatti is a dubious one at least. Even if the election of a Dalit to the position was finally

carried through, the resultant village panchayat has little legitimacy and authority and it is distrusted for different reasons both by Dalit and by non-Dalit community. The panchayat president acknowledges that his position is weak and complains about non-cooperation of the panchayat clerk, his Kallar colleagues in the panchayat and state officials at the block and district level. He describes himself as a puppet. In Alaveli, the outcome of the panchayat president reservation for a member of a Dalit community was significantly better. Mr. A. Kumar, who was elected a panchayat president on a DMK nomination list, is a respected person both among Dalit and non-Dalit community. The panchayat is functioning well and the president is its head not only nominally but performs independently all responsibilities resulting from his position. The trust in the village panchayat as measured by the perception of corruption is relatively high among the Alaveli village population, both Dalits and non-Dalits.

Two radically different experiences of Alaveli and Keeripatti villages with the implementation of the reservations for the post of the panchayat president as an instrument for Dalit empowerment offer two different perspectives on the issue of affirmative action that combined provide more argument against the affirmative action than in support of it.

First, both cases confirm a frequent objection against the affirmative action that it gives opportunities to the "*creamy layer*" of Dalits while it hardly affect and certainly does not remove the causes of the discrimination against Dalits. In Alaveli, the seat of the panchayat president went to Mr. A. Kumar who would have been an important figure in the village politics even if the reservation was not in place. He may not have become a panchayat president but as a leader of the DMK in the village, he would almost certainly be a member of the village panchayat anyway. In Keeripatti it is difficult to talk about Dalit elite, since the economic and social status of all Dalit families is very similar to each other and Mr. Balusamy can be considered a person of a multitude, who qualified for the nomination by his previous activism and his willingness to run for the office on the CPI-M nomination list. In neither of the two cases, however, we can see any increase of respect to Dalits in the eyes of the majority community because of the simple fact that a Dalit has become a panchayat president by a reservation. Alaveli non-Dalits continue to address their Dalit neighbours as their inferiors and the existing barriers between the two communities did not disappear, in Keeripatti the divide between Dalits and non-Dalits was further exacerbated by its politicization in the series of unsuccessful panchayat elections. By looking into the effects of reservations only in two villages, it can, of course, not be excluded that reservations may have a positive effect on Dalits' empowerment and improvement of their social status in other villages. Based on the study of Alaveli and Keeripatti it can, nevertheless, be confidently argued that there is no automatic and direct relationship between the reservations and improvement of social status and empowerment of Dalits. There are simply too many other factors that influence the complex reality so that final effects of reservations may easily turn in its opposite and may bring even more discrimination and hostility against Dalits.

Second, the Keeripatti case illustrates how affirmative action in electoral democracy destroys representativeness of elected institutions and opens the door to corruption in politics. After the imposition of the Dalit president reservation, removal of counter-candidates for formal shortages in their nominations and low voters turn-out at polls due to the boycott of elections by a part of the Kallar voters, the resulting village panchayat composition does not correspond to the distribution of political preferences in the village. Dalits on their part believe that the panchayat is still manipulated by Kallars and the majority of them think that it is a corrupted

institution and Kallars, although they have a bigger trust in the panchayat as whole than Paraiyars, do not believe to its president and consider him a corrupted person. In Alaveli the effect of the Panchayat president reservation was not as malicious as in Keeripatti and the final composition of the village panchayat corresponds to the distribution of political party preferences in the population of the village. This was, however, made possible due to a large similarity in political preferences of both communities. Despite the barriers between the Dalit and non-Dalit community at the level of social interaction and ritual interaction, Alaveli non-Dalits respect Dalits right to be represented in the village panchayat proportionately to their share on the village population. To sum up, I am arguing - and the survey and observation in Keeripatti and Alaveli villages confirm this assertion, that affirmative action at the level of electoral politics is either useless such as in the case of Alaveli or detrimental to communal harmony as in the case of Keeripatti.

Finally, all governments of Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu have misused reservations for Backward a Scheduled castes as an instrument of corruption of selected castes, that are considered as vote banks, in order to buy their electoral support. The caste based reservations in Tamil Nadu are thus inherently fraught with controversy and it is only natural if any reservation for a particular caste is seen in this perspective as a "bribe in kind" and becomes an object of jealousy among communities left aside. In Alaveli, where reservations for Dalits in the village panchayat match the share of Dalits on the local population and the implementation of village panchayat reservations did anyway not significantly alter the balance of power between the political parties and communities, it was accepted well. However, in Keeripatti and other neighbouring villages in the Usilampatti block reservations of seats for Dalits in village panchayats were unequivocally perceived by non-Dalits as an effort of the Dravidian government to poise Dalits against Mukkulathors in the area. As it was discussed in chapter 3.3. this perception is supported by the modern political history of the region where Mukkulathors under the banner of the Forward Block have constantly challenged the state wise rule of big political parties, first Indian National Congress and later Dravidian parties and these large political parties in turn sought in Dalits a counterweight against Mukkulathors' dominance in the region. Naturally any unilateral benefit provided by the government only to Dalits cannot but stir up the latent conflict between the Mukkulathor and Dalit community in the area.

The role and influence of the Liberation Panthers Party (VCK) in local politics in Alaveli and Keeripatti was at length discussed in chapter 7.1. and 7.2. It was demonstrated that VCK's power and influence is entirely different in the two different contexts. In the tense situation in Keeripatti VCK has become a leading political party among Dalits having sympathies and support of the most/majority of the community, while being universally disliked by the non-Dalit community. In Alaveli the party has only little support among young Dalits and for the majority of both of Dalits and non-Dalits in the village it is unknown. Based on the two case studies combined with analysis of VCK's history and ideology as discussed in chapters 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3. the following conclusions about the role of VCK and generally Dalit political parties in Tamil Nadu politics and their contribution to Dalit empowerment are presented.

First, the cases of Alaveli and Keeripatti illustrate that Dalit parties thrive more in societies/communities sharply divided over the caste issue than in those where there is no divide or the existing divide is not acute. The common idea of Dalit parties is that in order to improve the fate of Dalits it is necessary to organise them in a political force. They do not believe

and reject the idea that the improvement may come also through the cooperation with the majority. While in societies where the caste divide is less acute Dalits prefer to work for their upliftment through established political parties, in radicalized societies they do not find it possible to work together with the majority castes in large political parties and support their caste parties. Dalit parties are also more likely to thrive in societies/communities where particular social and economic inequalities blend in a combination of negative characteristics determining an inferior socio-economic position of Dalits *vis-à-vis* non-Dalits than in societies where social and economic inequalities are independent on each other and spread accidentally across whole of the population. While Keeripatti belongs to the first group with its Dalit population being landless, poor, with worse access to education and socially excluded, in Alaveli not all Dalits are landless, not all of them are indigent/impoverished and their social exclusion is less rigid than in Keeripatti.

Second, although Dalit parties may be beneficial to Dalits by politically activating them and making them claim their rights, their overall effect on societies/communities, however, is disruptive in the sense of deepening existing caste divides and fostering caste identities. This is due to the one-way orientation of Dalit parties on assertion of Dalit rights without working with the majority society. In the case of Keeripatti we can see that as much as Dalits are united in their support to the VCK, the non-Dalits unanimously detest the Dalit party. A Dalit panchayat president could eventually be elected only under the condition that he would not be linked to the VCK. Due to the agitational and radical character of the Dalit movement, it is difficult for its representatives to enter in a dialogue and to be accepted as partners in the dialogue with the leaders of majority castes. Dalit parties are thus very efficient in exposing problems related to discrimination of Dalits but they are not capable of finding amenable solutions and making compromises. The radical character of the VCK may change over time with the movement more accepting rules of representative democracy and coalition politics and may undergo a similar development as Dravidian parties. Periyar's DK was also once a radical and violent movement only to give rise to two largest mainstream political parties in Tamil Nadu. If VCK follows the same path, it may lose part of its followers but gain more bargaining power in Tamil Nadu politics. Although Dalit parties do not have the potential to grow into large catch-all parties similar to DMK or AIA DMK due to their deliberate appeal only to the Dalit part of the electorate, they may become an important player in Tamil Nadu politics by effectively controlling their Dalit vote-banks and using this control for power bargaining in a similar way as PMK does with the Vanniyar vote. In any case, the very concept of a Dalit party strengthens the caste-identities and consolidates the caste politics instead of eliminating caste and removing it from the public discourse.

Finally, it was demonstrated that the ideology of the VCK is based predominantly on Periyar's Dravidianism with Ambedkar being more an identity symbol than an intellectual source for the party program and political doctrine. It would be therefore unnecessary to classify the VCK party as a representative of a new ideological current in the Tamil Nadu politics. Dalit parties in Tamil Nadu are in reality firmly embedded in Dravidian ideology and should therefore be considered as Dravidian parties. Their only significant innovation of the traditional Dravidian doctrine is their orientation on Dalits instead of on the more general social group of non-Brahmins.

Abolition of caste and elimination of discrimination of Dalits is a noble goal that many have taken up and nobody has achieved in India so far. This goal cannot be treated as being separate from the issue of building a modern society based on principles of democracy, equality and justice. Persistence of caste system and discrimination against Dalits is not a result of a lack of laws protecting Dalits but it is a lack of their enforcement. It is a problem of weakness of modern institutions that are compromised by the ubiquitous corruption and whose authority, especially in rural areas, is substituted and surpassed by traditional non-democratic and caste biased institutions. My survey both in Alaveli and Keeripatti confirm a very low level of trust in police and judicial system in the population. Continuous emergence of new political parties declaring their fight to the caste system accompanied by various efforts of governments to contain caste system by extending caste based reservations are, rather than a way to solve the problem, its symptoms.

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10. APPENDICES

All photographs in appendices were taken by the author of the thesis unless stated otherwise.

Questionnaire

Date / தேதி:

Place / இடம்:

1) Sex / பால்:

a) man / ஆண்

b) woman / பெண்

2) Age / வயசு:

3) Family status / குடும்ப நிலை

a) married / கல்யாணமாகி

b) single / கல்யாணமாகவில்லை

c) widow / widower வைதவ்வியன் / விதவை

4) What is your job? நீங்கள் என்ன வேலை பார்க்கிறீர்கள்?

5) What is your caste? / உங்கள் ஜாதி என்ன?

a) SC

b) ST

c) MBC

d) BC

e) other caste வேறொரு ஜாதி

Your caste name / ஜாதியின் பெயர்:

6) What is your education? / உங்கள் படிப்பு என்ன?

Number of the school attendance years / பள்ளிக்கூடம் போகும் அண்டுகள்

தொகை:

7) Are you a member of any political party? / நீங்கள் ஒரு அரசியல் கட்சியின் உறுப்பினரா?

a) Yes / ஆம் -

If yes which party? / ஆம் என்றால் என்ன கட்சி?

b) No / இல்லை

8) What political party do you like? / உங்களுக்கு என்ன அரசியல் கட்சி பிடிக்கும்?

a) Name of the party / கட்சியின் பேர்:

b) I do not like any political party in particular / எந்தக் கட்சியும் எனக்குப் பிடிக்காது.

9) Are you a member of any other organization (such as self-help group, caste association etc.)? / நீங்கள் எதோ ஒரு அமைப்பியின், சங்கத்தின் உறுப்பினரா (சுய உதவி கழகம், ஜாதி கழகம் அதைப்போலவே)?

- a) Yes / ஆம்: What is its name / அதன் பேர் என்ன?
- b) No / இல்லை

10) Media audience – ஊடகங்கள்

I) I watch TV. / டீ. வீ பார்க்கிறேன்.

- a) daily / தினமும் b) sometimes / எப்போதாவது c) never / பார்ப்பது இல்லை

II) I read newspapers. / பத்திரிகை படிக்கிறேன்:

- a) daily / தினமும் b) sometimes / எப்போதாவது c) never / படிப்பது இல்லை

III) I listen to the radio. / வானொலி கேட்கிறேன்

- a) daily / தினமும் b) sometimes / எப்போதாவது c) never / கேட்பது இல்லை

IV) I use internet or e/mail / இணையம் அல்லது மின்னஞ்சல் பாவிக்கிறேன்:

- a) daily / தினமும் b) sometimes / எப்போதாவது c) never / பாவிப்பது இல்லை

11) Number of family members living with you in the same household / உங்கள் வீட்டிலே எத்தனைப் பேர் வசிக்கிறார்கள்?

How many of them work or have any other source of income? / அவர்களில் எத்தனைப் பேருக்கு வருமானம் இருக்கும்?

12) What is the main source of income in your family? / உங்கள குடும்பத்தின் முக்கியமான வருமானம் என்ன?

- a) agriculture, own land / விவசாயம், சொந்த நிலம்
- b) agriculture, rented land / விவசாயம், வாடகைக்கு எடுத்த நிலம்
- c) work for other people as an agricultural labour / வேறோரு மக்கள் நிலத்தில் கூலி வேலை செய்கிறேன்.
- d) job in a civil or public service / அரசு வேலை
- e) pension – உபகாரச்சம்பளம்
- f) regular job in a private sector / தனியார் கம்பனியில் ஒழுங்கான வேலை
- g) irregular job in a private sector / தன்னையமான கம்பனியில் ஒழுங்கற்ற வேலை

- h) own business / சொந்த உத்தியோகம் (கம்பனி)
- i) work in abroad / வெளிநாட்டில் ஒரு வேலை
- j) other income / வேறொரு வருமானம் - please specify / என்ன?

13) What kind of house do you live in? / எந்த மாதிரி வீட்டில் நீங்கள் வசிக்கிறீர்கள்?

- a) house made of bricks with tiled roof or concrete house / செங்கல் வீடு அல்லது மாடி வீடு
- b) house made of brick with palm roof / பனைமடல் கூரையுடைய செங்கள் வீடு
- c) thatched house / குடிசை
- d) other / வேறு

14) What of the following accessories do you have in your house? / உங்கள் வீட்டிலே என்ன வசதிகள் கிடைக்கும்?

- a) radio / வானொலி
- b) TV set / தொலைக் காட்சி
- c) refrigerator / குளிர்சாதனப் பெட்டி
- d) computer / கணிப்பொறி
- e) motorbike, two-wheeler / டூ வீலர்
- f) car – கார்

15) Economic situation of your family is... – உங்கள் குடும்ப பொருளாதார நிலமை (வசதிகள்)...

- a) satisfactory / திருப்திகரமாக உள்ளது
- b) rather satisfactory / ஓரளவுக்கு திருப்திகரமாக உள்ளது
- c) rather unsatisfactory / கொஞ்சம் திருப்திகரமாக இல்லை
- d) unsatisfactory / திருப்திகரமாக இல்லை

16) Do you feel safe in your village? / நீங்கள் வாழும் சூழ்நிலையில் பயமில்லாமல் வாழ்கிறீர்களா?

- a) always safe – பயமில்லை
- b) mostly safe ஓரளவுக்கு பயமில்லை
- c) mostly unsafe – பயத்தோடு வாழ்கிறோம்

17) All people have by nature equal rights no matter their sex, age, caste or property. /
மேல் சாதி, கீழ் சாதி, பணக்காரன், ஏழை, ஆண், பெண், யாராக
இருந்தாலும் எல்லோருக்கும் சம உரிமை உண்டு.

- a) I agree. / ஒத்துக்கொள்கிறேன்.
- b) I do not agree. / ஒத்துக்கொள்ளவில்லை.
- c) I do not understand, I do not know./ புரியவில்லை, தெரியாது.

18) I think that my human rights are being respected / என் மனித உரிமைகள்
மதிக்கப் படும் என்று கருதுகிறேன்.

- a) I agree – இந்தக் கொள்கைக்கு சம்மதிக்கிறேன்.
- b) I do not agree – இந்தக் கொள்கைக்குச் சம்மதிக்க மாட்டேன்
- c) புரியாது, சொல்ல முடியாது.

19) If an injustice is committed against you, which of the following would you ask to help
you. / உங்களுக்கு அநியாயம் அழைக்கப்படும்போது நீங்கள்
முதலில் யார் உதவியை நாடுவீர்கள்?

- 1) police / காவல் துறை
- 2) court of justice / நீதிமன்றம்:
- 3) my caste elders / என் ஜாதியின் பெரியவர்கள்
- 4) village panchayat / ஊர் ஊராட்சி
- 5) caste panchayat கட்டப்பஞ்சாயத்து செய்பவர்கள்
- 6) a respected person who I know / சமுதாய பெரியவர்
- 7) a political party / அரசியல் கட்சி
- 8) other / வேறு.....

20) Are you satisfied with the work of police? / காவல்துரையின் சேவை
உங்களுக்கு திருப்தியாக உள்ளதா?

- a) satisfied / திருப்திகரமாக உள்ளது
- b) rather satisfied – ஓரளவுக்கு திருப்திகரமாக உள்ளது
- c) rather unsatisfied / கொஞ்சம் திருப்திகரமாக இல்லை
- d) unsatisfied – திருப்திகரமாக இல்லை

21) Do courts of justice give fair judgements? / நீதிமன்றங்கள் நியாயமாக
தீர்ப்பு வழங்குகின்றனவா?

- a) Yes / ஆம்
- b) No – இல்லை

22) To be born in a low caste is the result of sins committed in the past lives. /
முற்பிறவியில் செத பாவமே கீழ்சாதியில் பிறப்பதற்குக்
காரணம்.

- a) I agree. / ஒத்துக்கொள்கிறேன்.
b) I do not agree. / ஒத்துக்கொள்ளவில்லை.
c) I do not understand, I do not know./ புரியவில்லை, தெரியாது.

23) To create harmonic society lower castes must obey higher castes.
மேல்சாதிக்காரர்களுக்குக் கீழ்சாதிக்காரர்கள் பணிந்துபோவது
சமுதாய ஒற்றுமைக்கு வழிவகுக்கும்.

- a) I agree. / ஒத்துக்கொள்கிறேன்.
b) I do not agree. / ஒத்துக்கொள்ளவில்லை.
c) I do not understand, I do not know./ புரியவில்லை, தெரியாது.

24) If all people were treated equally, nobody would do hard, difficult and dirty work.
Therefore caste differences are necessary. –எல்லா மக்களும் சமமாக
நடத்தப்பட்டால் கடினமான, அசுத்தமான வேலைகளை யாரும்
செய்யமாட்டார்கள். எனவே மக்கள் மத்தியில் சாதி வேறுபடுகள்
அவசியம்.

- a) I agree. / ஒத்துக்கொள்கிறேன். b) I do not agree. / ஒத்துக்கொள்ளவில்லை.
c) I do not understand, I do not know. / புரியவில்லை, தெரியாது.

25) What do you think about following institutions? How much corrupt are they? /
கீழ்க்கண்ட அமைப்புகளில் எந்த அளவுக்கு ஊழல்
காணப்படுகிறது?

I) federal government – மத்திய அரசு அலுவலகங்கள்

- a) 100 % entirely corrupt – முழுவதும் ஊழல் காணப்படுகிறது
b) 50 % mostly corrupt / அதிகமாக ஊழல் காணப்படுகிறது
c) 25 % little corrupt / ஓரளவுக்கு ஊழல் காணப்படுகிறது
d) 0 % not/corrupt at all / ஊழல் என்பதே இல்லை

II) Tamil Nadu government / தமிழ் நாடு அரசு அலுவலகங்கள்:

- a) 100 % b) 50 % c) 25 % d) 0%

III) police / காவல்துறை

- a) 100 % b) 50 % c) 25 % d) 0%

27) How are the relations between lower caste and upper caste in your village? /

**நீங்கள் வாழும் சூழ்நிலையில் கீழ்சாதிக்காரர்கள்
மேல்சாதிக்காரர்கள் ஒற்றுமையாக வழ்கிறார்களா?**

- a) very good / நல்ல ஒற்றுமையுடன் வாழ்கிறார்கள்
- b) rather good / ஓரளவுக்கு ஒற்றுமையுடன் வாழ்கிறார்கள்
- c) neither good nor bad / ஒற்றுமை உம் இல்லை வெற்றுமையும் இல்லை
- d) bad / ஒற்றுமை இல்லை
- e) very bad / பகையுணர்வுடன் வாழ்கிறார்கள்.

28) How are relations between higher caste people and lower caste people in Tamil Nadu? /

**தமிழ்நாட்டில் கீழ்சாதிக்காரர்கள் மேல்சாதிக்காரர்கள்
ஒற்றுமையாக வழ்கிறார்களா?**

- a) very good / நல்ல ஒற்றுமையுடன் வாழ்கிறார்கள்
- b) rather good / ஓரளவுக்கு ஒற்றுமையுடன் வாழ்கிறார்கள்
- c) neither good nor bad / ஒற்றுமையும் இல்லை வெற்றுமையும் இல்லை
- d) bad / ஒற்றுமை இல்லை
- e) very bad / பகையுணர்வுடன் வாழ்கிறார்கள்.

29) Have relations between lower caste and higher caste people improved in the last ten years? /

**கடந்த பத்து ஆண்டுகளில் சாதிகளுக்கிடையே
பழக்கவழக்கங்கள் மேம்பட்டுள்ளதா?**

- a) Yes, they improved / ஆம், மேம்பட்டுள்ளது.
- b) Nothing have changed. / ஒன்றும் மாறவில்லை.
- c) No, they have deteriorated. / இல்லை, சீர்கெட்டுள்ளது.
- d) I do not know, I cannot say. / தெரியவில்லை

30) Have relations between lower caste and higher caste people improved in the last ten years in the place where you live? /

**நீங்கள் வாழும் சூழ்நிலையில் கடந்த
பத்து ஆண்டுகளில் சாதிகளுக்கிடையே பழக்கவழக்கங்கள்
மேம்பட்டுள்ளதா?**

- a) Yes, they improved / ஆம், மேம்பட்டுள்ளது.
- b) Nothing have changed. / ஒன்றும் மாறவில்லை.
- c) No, they have deteriorated. / இல்லை, சீர்கெட்டுள்ளது.
- d) I do not know, I cannot say. / தெரியவில்லை

31) Do you think that reserved seats for SC in village panchayats are... / கிராம ஊராட்சியில் ஏஸ் ஸீ மக்களுக்கு ஒதுக்கீடுகள் உள்ளன. அது நியாயமா அநியாயமா?

- a) just – நியாயம்
- b) unjust – அநியாயம்
- c) I do not care – கவலையில்லை
- d) I do not know. – தெரியாது

32) Have you ever heard about any Dalit party? – நீங்கள் ஒரு தலித் கட்சியைப் பற்றி கேள்விப்பட்டீர்களா?

- a) No I have not. / இல்லை, கேள்விப்படவில்லை.
- b) Yes, I have, but I do not like them. / ஆம், கேள்விப்பட்டேன். எனக்குப் பிடிக்காது.
- c) Yes, I have and I like– ஆம், கேள்விப்பட்டேன். எனக்கு கட்சி பிடிக்கும்.
- d) Yes, I am a member of such a party (please, write its name). ஆம், கேள்விப்பட்டேன். நான் ஒரு தலித் கட்சியின் உறுப்பினர். (அதன் பேர் எழுதுங்கள்).

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 1: Members of Liberation Panthers party in Melavalavu in the memorial hall erected in the memory of the panchayat president Murugesan and five of his colleagues murdered by upper-caste Kallars on 30th July 1997.



Photo 2: Place where Dalit panchayat president Murugesan and his colleagues were murdered near Melavalavu.

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 3: Thirumaavalavan - leader of the Liberation Panthers party (VCK) – photo downloaded from www.thiruma.com



Photo 4: Poster of Thirumaavalavan and his name written on the wall of a waiting room of the bus stop near Dalit settlement before entering the Melavalavu village.

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 5: The portrait of Mokkiah Thevar with a lion - a symbol of the Thevar Peravai (caste association of Mukkulathor castes) at the main bus stand in the centre of Melavalavu transmits a clear message to all incomers who the dominant community in this village is.



Photo 6: Police station and the village panchayat are located in the same building in Melavalavu to prevent any further problems...

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 7: In 1997 a police post was established in Keeripatti as well. Police officers use the office of the village panchayat.



Photo 8 Temple of Sri Vangaru Thevar, a legendary forefather of Piramalai Kallars, in Keeripatti. Paraiyars are not allowed to enter this temple. Festival of Sri Vangaru Thevar is by tradition inaugurated by the head of the panchayat in the temple. This tradition was one of the reasons why Kallars from Keeripatti assiduously rejected the reservation of the post of the panchayat president for a Dalit candidate.

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 9: Piramalai Kallar men sitting on the platform called "savadi" (Tam. *cāvaṭi*) in front of the Sri Vangaru Thevar temple. Savadi is a place to meet neighbours and informally discuss all kinds of things. Paraiyars are not allowed to sit here.



Photo 10: Keeripatti Paraiyars sitting in their own savadi in the cheri. The building is tiled with granite and equipped with a TV, a photograph of the Chief minister M. Karunanidhi and a big inscription reminding that it had been built as a gift of the DMK to Keeripatti Dalits.

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 11: Fieldwork among Keeripatti Kallars



Photo 12: Seeing smokers of marihuana in the Keeripatti village in public is not uncommon.

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 13: Paraiyar agricultural labourers in Alaveli harvesting sugar cane.



Photo 14: Typical houses in the Dalit settlement in Alaveli.

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 15: A tea shop in Alaveli. Both upper caste Vanniyars and Thevars and Dalits are served in this shop and sit next to each other on the steps to the shop.



Photo 16: A sign inside a tea shop in Keeripatti requesting guests "not to talk about politics inside."

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 17: Statues of political leaders in protective cages are indicators of caste tension in the area. This is the B.R. Ambedkar's statue in Tirunelveli.



Photo 18: Despite anti-poor policies and police terror during his rule, former AIA DMK leader and Tamilnadu Chief Minister M.G.Ramachandran (MGR) is still a hero for many common people. The tattoo on this picture belongs to a rickshaw driver from Mahabalipuram.

Annex II: Photographs



Photo 19: A traditional Paraiyar band playing during a funeral in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The big drum is *pārai* that gave name to the Paraiyar caste.



Photo 20: A group of villagers waiting in front of the ration shop in Alaveli to buy basic commodities for state subsidized prices.