

Rethinking Caste and Class: “Labour”, the “Depressed Classes”, and the Politics of Distinctions, Madras 1918–1924*

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ABSTRACT: This article follows the administrative usage of the term “labour” and its political effects in the period from roughly 1918–1924 in Madras Presidency, India. In this short period, I will argue, fundamental tensions in the ability of the concept to refer coherently to its object came violently to the surface. The prevailing tension in both governmental discourse and in the sphere of political representation concerned the extent to which either caste status or economic class were to be understood as the primary determinant of the meaning of labour. At the nub of this conflict lay the contested status of the descendants of hereditarily unfree labourers who supplied the bulk of the Presidency’s labour requirements and were referred to in this period as *Adi-Dravidas*. Should they be construed as ritually disadvantaged caste subjects who also happened to labour, or as paradigmatic labourers who were also subjected to caste discrimination? *Adi-Dravidas* provoked both the anxiety of the elite political classes who wished to incorporate them into larger nationalist projects, as well as the reformist zeal of the colonial state, throwing the category “labour” into crisis. By navigating the use to which “labour” was put by caste elites, state officials, and *Adi-Dravidas* themselves, I will reflect on the coherence of caste and class as analytic concepts for political and social struggles of the kind I am describing.

INTRODUCTION

Over a period of roughly seven years, from 1918 to 1924, the administrative and political meanings of the term “labour” became a matter of great anxiety among native elites in colonial Madras, who recognized in it

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their potential political undoing. The question that arose in these years, in both governmental discourse and in the sphere of political representation, concerned the extent to which the significance of labour could be abstracted from the logic of caste domination. At the nub of this conflict lay the contested status of the sub-population known today as Dalits and referred to in this period variously as Panchamas, Adi-Dravidas, depressed classes, untouchables, and occasionally still as Pariahs (the most common term through the late nineteenth century).

Descendants of hereditarily unfree agrarian labourers, Panchamas had formally been freed in 1843, but often remained in conditions of de facto enslavement over half a century later, and throughout the pre-Independence period this almost entirely landless population supplied the bulk of agrestic labour in Madras Presidency.¹ Should they be construed as ritually disadvantaged caste subjects who happened also to labour, or as paradigmatic labourers who were also subjected to the social and cultural logic of caste discrimination? And why should this matter? In this short period, how to classify Panchamas provoked a series of arguments by the elite political classes who wished to incorporate them into larger sub-nationalist projects. This was in turn instigated by a nascent and short-lived reformism on the part of the colonial state with respect to its most degraded subjects.² The result of the meeting of these two incorporative projects was a political redefinition of “labour”, and the simultaneous destruction of the limited welfare measures that had been put into place for the depressed classes.

I begin by analysing new state discourses of Adi-Dravida improvement and how these came increasingly to rely on the idiom of labour, culminating in the institution of colonial India’s first provincial Labour Department. I examine as well Adi-Dravidas’ own conceptions of who “labour” referred to, as is evident, for example, in their responses to the Labour Department’s welfare schemes, and in their own writings from this period. I then chart the emergence of a crisis in the meaning of labour in the late 1910s as a result of strikes in some of Madras’s most important mills. The existing social and political division between Dalits and caste people was deepened, and subsequent efforts by the colonial state to benefit Dalits substantively would be crippled by sub-nationalist political machinations.

1. The caste character of agrarian labour was especially pronounced in the wet rice-growing regions, which in economic terms and with respect to population density (if not necessarily in land area) were the most important parts of the Presidency. The morphology of Madras’ caste-based labour regime, and its systematic downplaying and misrecognition by the ruling native elite-colonial state nexus, is described in detail in Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem* (New York, 2014).

2. The history of how the wretched condition of Pariahs (as Dalits were known in the 1880s and 1890s) was forced upon the reluctant attention of the colonial state, and how the state’s faltering efforts at reform brought the state briefly, and partially, into conflict with landed interests and native elites more generally, is detailed in *The Pariah Problem*.

By focusing on the use to which the term "labour" was put by caste elites, state officials, and Adi-Dravidas themselves in the period I have specified, the present paper departs from the main currents of the debate in Indian labour historiography on the relation between caste and class. My primary aim here is not to determine how "caste" and "class" can be made fruitful analytic concepts for the colonial Indian context. Having eschewed earlier conceptions of caste as a premodern vestige that indexed the incomplete modernization of Indian labourers, Indian labour historiography, like its counterparts elsewhere in the world since the late 1980s, has increasingly recognized the importance of what were earlier construed as "cultural" elements (in the Indian case, primarily caste, religion, and regional-linguistic identity) in the composition and ideologies of workers' movements and in the historical trajectories followed by them.³ The most sophisticated work in this vein historicizes both caste and class, tracking transformations in caste consciousness alongside changes in the conditions of work in an attempt to map the social field as a whole.⁴

While this turn to the historical specificity of cultures of labour is critical for our understanding of workers' social worlds, it is distinct from my purpose here. Laying aside the question of how and to what degree caste and class contributed to workers' consciousness and forms of organization in the period I am analysing, I instead track the *use* of these concepts in spheres of political and administrative contest that were largely beyond the reach of Dalit labourers,⁵ and which shaped the playing field upon which they would thenceforth be forced to operate. Having stepped temporarily aside from prevailing concerns in Indian labour history, I return in the conclusion to the important question of the analytic significance of caste and class and the relation between them.

BECOMING "LABOUR": PANCHAMAS AND WELFARE IN THE LATE 1910s

Who were to be counted as the backbone of India's labour force in the early decades of the twentieth century? The government of Madras first

3. On trends in Indian labour historiography, see for instance, Chitra Joshi, "Histories of Indian Labour: Predicaments and Possibilities", *History Compass*, 6 (2008), pp. 439–454, and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, "Aspects of the Historiography of Labour in India", in *idem*, *History, Culture and the Indian City: Essays by Rajnarayan Chandavarkar* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 236–250.

4. Exemplary works in this vein that specifically discuss Dalit labourers include Nandini Goopu, "Caste, Deprivation and Politics: The Untouchables in UP Towns in the Early Twentieth Century", in Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour* (London, 1993), pp. 277–298; Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories* (London, 2003), esp. pp. 237–276; and Janaki Nair, *Miners and Millhands: Work, Culture and Politics in Princely India* (New Delhi, 1998) pp. 87–126.

5. Although Dalits had able representatives on the Legislative Council, they were vastly outnumbered, as we will see.

broached this question in 1918, when an extensive report on “Panchamas”, those at the bottom of India’s caste hierarchy who were primarily landless agrestic servants, was published in Madras. The report, widely known as Gray’s report after the Collector J. Gray who directed the enquiry, was the first in colonial India to take Dalits as its subject. It evaluated the piecemeal measures of “uplift” directed at Dalits, which had been instigated by agrarian conflict in the countryside as well as missionary publicity, and deemed them ultimately ineffectual.

With the publication of the report the provincial Revenue Department was determined to rationalize Panchama welfare, in the first instance by directly involving state agents in the manning of welfare schemes. Hitherto, it was missionary agents who had provided the capital and oversight for schemes such as, inter alia, the resettlement of Panchamas on agricultural wasteland.⁶ This background is significant because the missionaries’ manner of conceiving of and acting upon Dalits was largely taken over wholesale by the state. Mission agents, *pace* views prevailing in the historiography of mission activity in colonial India, did not seek to alter what they viewed as the fundamental structure of agrarian society. They wished instead to *rationalize* caste, which they saw as a perversion of what could otherwise be an efficient and socially necessary division of labour. Shorn of its Hindu excrescences, caste could be purified, and agrestic servitude would simply become agricultural labour. What required transformation, moreover, according to missionaries, was primarily the attitudes and habits of Pariahs themselves. As one influential Wesleyan missionary and ardent advocate of the Pariah cause put this: “Chief among the Pariah’s enemies is himself.”⁷ Self-directed moral improvement was therefore the need of the hour, and in this colonial state officials readily concurred.

In understanding how Gray’s report brought about a new administrative usage of labour, it is instructive to consider what gave rise to it: as we shall see, conceptual ambiguity plagued it from the start. The report was ordered in response to a politically inconvenient account of the condition of Panchamas in Chingleput District written by the Wesleyan missionary Adam Andrew.⁸

6. Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion and the Social in Modern India* (New York, 2014), chs. 2 and 3.

7. “A Letter from the Rev. A.C. Clayton”, printed pamphlet dated 15 October 1895; WMMA (SOAS).

8. Andrew’s report focused on Chingleput District, where his station was located and where he worked for several decades between the 1880s and the 1910s. Andrew’s administrative importance, and therefore the continuity between state and missionary projects for which I argue in *The Pariah Problem*, is attested by the inclusion of Andrew’s report in a document with far-reaching consequences for state welfarism, Government Order Revenue Department [henceforth GOR] 875 (Confidential), 19 April 1916, Tamil Nadu State Archives [henceforth TNA].

Investigations leading up to it, begun in 1916, focused on agricultural wages in general, and only secondarily on Panchamas in three districts where the conditions of agrarian labour were reputed to be most severe, since Panchamas comprised the bulk of agrarian labourers.⁹

Why was the report not straightforwardly carried out as a study of Panchamas in the first instance, but instead cast as a *general* enquiry into agricultural wages? In this case, Indian members of government refused to support an enquiry into the condition of Panchamas, on the grounds that even to inquire into such matters would stir up trouble. As one P.S. Sivasamy Ayyar put it,

[...] the appointment of a commission [of enquiry] is, I am afraid, only too likely to cause great friction between the classes by creating undue expectations in the minds of one class and undue apprehension in the minds of the other [...]. [A] low standard of living and [...] insanitary conditions of life are not confined to the Pariah [i.e. Panchama] labourer.¹⁰

As I have argued elsewhere, defensive responses of this kind were ubiquitous, and must be located in a coherent structure of sentiments among Indian elites whereby caste difference was above all a source of embarrassment.¹¹ Dalit difference, a persistent reminder of the tenuousness of both nationalists’ and loyalist sub-national elites’ claims to represent a unified people, was either downplayed (by representing it as a difference merely of degree but not of kind, and one that would naturally dissolve in the course of time), or suppressed altogether, as in this instance, when the condition of “Panchamas themselves” was anxiously proclaimed unworthy of specific investigation. Indian members of government did agree, however, to support an investigation into the “agricultural poor”.¹² Their position foreshadows how contentious the counting of Panchamas as labourers would soon become in Madras, as sub-nationalist politics – and thence the political need to deny Panchama difference – gained ground.

Yet while categories of persons such as “the poor”, “the houseless poor”, “labourers”, and “Panchamas”, were treated as notionally distinct within government, they remained difficult to disambiguate in practice, because they were largely co-extensional.¹³ For this reason, whichever of

9. GOR 2941, 12 August 1918, TNA.

10. Notes to GOR 875 Confidential, 19 April 1916, TNA, p. 20.

11. Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, ch. 7. For more contemporary examples of this same sentiment, see Nicholas Dirks’s depiction of what he calls the “embarrassment of caste” among nationalist Indian sociologists and other high caste academics in *idem*, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), pp. 290–296.

12. See, for instance, Notes to GOR 875 (Confidential), 19 April 1916, TNA, p. 20, as well as Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, ch. 7.

13. In analytic language philosophy a term’s extensional meaning refers to the set of empirical objects to which it refers, as opposed to how it is conceptualized. Thus, terms that may have

these names were applied to them, these persons were administratively indistinguishable, and were one and all subject to the same governmental schemes. While the empirical coincidence of these categories was openly admitted, at least at first, their being treated as *conceptually* distinct in bureaucratic parlance would determine whether or not native politicians would be willing to support specific programmes, as well as how far that support would extend. And thus terms that meant the same thing at a practical level were, for political reasons, subject to a sort of conceptual apartheid that placed their systematic relations beyond the pale of acceptable debate.

The conclusion of extensive discussion of Gray's report was that the measures for the uplift of Panchamas adopted hitherto had not sufficed to secure a significant improvement in their conditions. A coordinating officer who could give his entire attention to the matter was deemed necessary and thus a post of Special Officer to act as protector of the depressed classes was instituted. George Paddison was its first holder. The Madras Revenue Department also sought to align this position with the increased concern with industrial development, prompted by the Report of the Indian Industrial Commission published in 1918.¹⁴ In that connection, the Secretary of State for India had observed that "[b]y her adherence to the International Labour Convention India will now become subject in respect of labour conditions to international criticism". This persuaded revenue officials in Madras that "It is not sufficient to confine the duties of the Special Officer to what are commonly known as the depressed classes, but that it is necessary to include within the scope of his duties all the depressed and backward classes, *in other words, labour in general.*"¹⁵ That is to say, the depressed classes were, in this view, a specific, if paradigmatic, instance of a general category, labour.

What must be emphasized here is that the founding of the Labour Department in Madras, the first of its kind in colonial India, *preceded* India's joining the International Labour Organization when it was founded in 1919, and was initially instigated by a programme directed specifically at Dalits.¹⁶ Only as the Madras government's concerns with

distinct conceptual significance, such as featherless biped and human being, may be empirically co-extensional insofar as humans are the only featherless bipeds. The fact that Panchamas were, until the late colonial period, empirically speaking almost always landless labourers, and, outside relatively elite labour contexts like factories, labourers who did not own the means of production were almost always Panchamas, the two terms "labourer" and "Panchama" were largely co-extensional in Madras. They could therefore be used interchangeably in practice.

14. *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission* (Calcutta, 1918).

15. GOR 271, 2 February 1920, TNA, p. 2 [emphasis mine].

16. For a succinct overview of the relation between India and the ILO, see Gerry Rodgers, "India, the ILO and the Quest for Social Justice since 1919", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 March 2011, XLVI, No. 10, pp. 45–52.

labour, and particularly industrial labour, grew in the years succeeding the institution of the International Labour Organization, of which India was a founding member, did Madras’s Labour Department come to conform to a more traditional conception of labour – and that too as a result of political as much as policy considerations, as we shall see.

By 1920, permission had been secured to constitute a fully-fledged establishment whereby the Special Officer would become the Commissioner of Labour, and have under him eight Assistant Commissioners and a host of lower-level employees. The primary duty was described as the improvement of the depressed classes. Just as “depressed classes” could sometimes be used interchangeably with labour, and elsewhere be considered to refer to only one class of labourers, the category “depressed classes” too encompassed several others within in. It could refer only to Panchamas, and in most public discourse this was its reference,¹⁷ but in technical documents such as these it was also used more generally to refer to a threefold grouping of Panchamas, criminal tribes, and aboriginal and hill tribes; as with labour, Panchamas were the most numerous members of the group.¹⁸

The protection and elevation of the depressed classes, then, included the amelioration of the conditions of Panchamas and hill tribes, and the supervision of criminal tribes settlements, as well as the following subjects of governance, all considered by administrators to be, in various respects, “cognate” with work for the depressed classes: (1) the portions of the Factories Act that concerned factory labour; (2) the supervision of the wage census, (3) the emigration of labourers, (4) the workings of the Planter’s Labour Act and the Workman’s Breach of Contract Act; and (5) all general labour questions, “including those of the organisation of labour, of the recognition or registration of labour unions, of cooperative housing, and of the co-ordination of un-official assistance directed towards the improvement of the health and the condition of labour in general”.¹⁹ The document granting expenditure for the new establishment concludes, “As labour questions play such an important part in the work of the Special Officer, the Governor in Council proposes to designate him, in future, by the title of Commissioner of Labour.”²⁰

17. Thus, men like B.R. Ambedkar and M.C. Rajah were universally described as “depressed classes leaders”, without any ambiguity over the fact that what this meant is that they were leaders of the first category. Similarly, one could refer to conflicts between depressed classes and Kallars (a dominant group often used by landowners to discipline Dalit labourers, and not infrequently landowners themselves), despite the fact that Kallars were a so-called criminal tribe and therefore themselves also members of the depressed classes in the more technical sense.

18. Cf. Board’s Proceedings (Settlement) 60, 18 March 1918, TNA.

19. GOR 2254, 14 September 1920, TNA, p. 13, §12.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 13, §13.

His duties were no doubt “multifarious,” but as noted, they were regarded as “cognate” with work on depressed classes concerns and in summing up the tasks of the Assistant Commissioners of Labour, which I will describe more fully below, the order concluded that their “primary duties” were “generally of promoting the interests of the depressed classes in any [...] way that suggests itself”.²¹ “Labour” was the genus to which various kinds of depressed and backward classes, including so-called hill tribes and aboriginals, criminal tribes, and factory workers, all belonged as species. And in this genus, the depressed classes properly speaking – the Panchamas – were undoubtedly the paradigmatic species; this was a classic case of what Louis Dumont dubbed “conceptual encompassment”, the relation that obtains when a term for one member of a set is used also to name the set of which it is a part (as in the use of “man” both in opposition to women and children, and as encompassing all human beings).²²

CLASS: THE RATIONAL COMPONENT OF CASTE

If Dalits were conceptually enfolded within the category labour, the Labour Department’s programmes were designed to make this subsumption concrete – in short, to produce the ideal example of the very category, “labour”, for which the department had been founded – by working on the subjectivity and habits of Dalit agricultural servants. It is in this significant respect that the new state programmes were most in continuity with those of missionaries of a previous generation: the activities of the office of Labour Commissioner may be read as intending to produce a class identified by and unified because of their shared role as labourers, shorn of heathenish caste characteristics.

The Special Officers (later named Assistant Commissioners of Labour) directed the transformation of Dalits along three distinct planes – political, moral, and economic. These three aimed, however, at a unified end: economic regeneration would require moral improvement, which in turn would produce political subjects capable of self-representation, an official desideratum of the state under the rubric of the devolution of governmental responsibility that was taking place at the time. Thus, discussion appended to Gray’s report included the opinion that:

[...] in view of the rapid steps that are being taken to give India self-government, it is a matter of urgent necessity and mere political justice that along with the political reforms social reforms should be pushed more vigorously than before, so that the depressed classes may be enabled to make their voice heard in politics [...].²³

21. *Ibid.*, p. 14, §15.

22. See Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago, IL, 1980), pp. 239ff.

23. GOR 749 (Confidential), 29 March 1919, TNA, p. 28, §9.

How might this end be achieved? The most ambitious and interventionist of the early projects of the Labour Commissioner was the provision of house sites to depressed class labourers in those districts in which landlords, known in South India as *mirasidars*, owned the sites on which their labourers dwelt – and thereby maintained labour subordination with threats of eviction. The ownership of labourers’ homesteads by their masters was a very longstanding problem in Madras Presidency, having been identified as a “species of slavery that casts a slur upon th[e] administration” as long ago as 1889,²⁴ but one that had failed to arouse any remedial action until the changed social and political context of the late 1910s. The district in which this practice was particularly rampant was Tanjore, and it was therefore there that the state focused its initial efforts.

Officials undertook a number of economic-moral interventions that were meant to enable agricultural labourers to take up ownership of their house sites. Cooperative credit societies were considered especially effective in allowing Panchamas to develop habits of saving. These habits in turn would produce, or so it was hoped, not only an economic but also an affective investment in the soil, and thus make absconding rarer. As a Tanjore District Munsiff put this rather poetically, “To provide house sites of their own to Panchamas is [...] [to] make those that are now [the] poor and disinherited of this land feel the magic of property and the possession of some stake in the country.”²⁵ Once granted ownership, that is to say, the “magic” that is property (the phrase comes from the eighteenth-century economist, Arthur Young²⁶) would, far from inducing labourers to leave in search of better wages – as *mirasidars* objected that it would – in fact persuade them to stay. Because they would now be *invested*, in both the affective and economic senses of the term, in their homesteads. “There is a greater danger”, the Munsiff continued, “of a Panchama having no stake in the village running away [...] than one who owns a site there and has some inducement to remain.”²⁷ Just as wages had to be invested in cooperative societies and not squandered on drink, so too in the realm of the sentiments, Panchamas themselves must be made to invest in their own rational subordination to a regime of property.

To induce the internalization of habits of thrift, officials devised quite novel measures, including the circulation of heroic tales of those who had

24. This was the opinion of Collector of Chingleput C.M. Mullaly in Board’s Proceedings (Revenue) 617, 6 September 1889, TNA.

25. §12 of District Munsiff’s Judgment, GOR 1740 Mis., 25 July 1919, TNA.

26. Arthur Young (1741–1820) most famously wrote on agriculture and economics, and he and Jeremy Bentham were mutual admirers. The phrase “the magic of property turn sand into gold” appears in his 1793 pamphlet, *The Example of France: A Warning to England*. Cf. G. Mingay (ed.), *Arthur Young and His Times* (London, 1975).

27. GOR 1740 Mis., 25 July 1919, TNA, p. 9, §13.

succeeded in raising themselves up by diligent economizing. These moral exemplars included women such as Arasayi. Every effort was taken to make hers a household name among the region's Panchamas and her road to self-sufficiency was narrated as follows to audiences in *ceris* (the ghettos in which Panchamas lived in segregation in villages throughout the Presidency) by the Assistant Commissioners of Labour and their subordinate staff:

Arasayi [...] is a resident of Vathalangudi village [...]. She has taken particular care to implant in her sons while young the value of temperance and truthfulness with the result that her four sons Veerapan, Kandan, Raman and Marimuthu have the reputation of not having tasted a drop of alcohol in all their lives in spite of the fact that [Arasayi's husband] has always been a drunkard [...]. The early career of Arasayi who is now 70 years old is rather remarkable. Arasayi understood only too well the value of money [...]. The small wages earned by her four sons who were doing Pannai [tied farmhand] work under mirasidars were carefully put together and the members of the family were living on starvation rations for some years. Arasayi in addition to doing pannai work along with her husband found time to rear annually about 20 pairs of turkeys. The sale proceeds in the first year amounted to about Rs. 150 [...] which Arasayi buried underground not knowing what to do with the money. She did the same for three years when she found a trustworthy man to take the money as a loan [...] until after ten years it amounted to about Rs. 2000 for which Arasayi purchased 4 acres of wet land. This was about 15 years ago. At the present moment Arasayi [...] owns about 12 acres of wet land in Vathalangudi worth about Rs. 8000 [...]. Her name is proverbial for truthfulness and economy in the neighbourhood. Arasayi is a truly wonderful Panchama woman whose footsteps the Panchamas will do well to follow.²⁸

The story illustrates the radical transformative potential of thrift and temperance. Arasayi's willingness to undergo hardship in the present – by such things as imposing restrictions on the family diet – for the sake of an improved status in the future highlights the value of individual investment as against profligacy, and its basis in self-control. It was well-known at the time that women's and children's wages for agricultural work were far lower than men's, making her ability to save based entirely on those wages all the more remarkable.²⁹ A Madras missionary I cited earlier had cautioned his readers in a pamphlet on Pariah uplift not to forget that "Chief among the Pariah's enemies is himself."³⁰ Here in Arasayi's story was a restatement,

28. Board's Proceedings, Revenue [henceforth BPR] 347 (Mis.), 3 November 1919, TNA, p. 11.

29. A thorough exploration of women's labour and remunerative hierarchies in rural Tamil Nadu is beyond the scope of this essay. One of the most penetrating accounts of the consequences of gendered ideologies of work and respectability on women's organization and labour militancy in colonial India is Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge, 1999), especially pp. 177–212.

30. This is what Wesleyan Adam C. Clayton, see above, n. 6.

now in positive terms, of essentially the same individualizing judgment: the Pariah, when properly self-directed, could also be his or her own best friend.

But Arasayi’s story goes further. In enlisting the mother of the household in a central role, Arasayi’s success story promotes a bourgeois vision of the family that also shares in native stereotypes about Dalit men’s and women’s respective roles in the process of their own improvement. Arasayi’s tale enjoins patient self-sacrifice on Dalit women, and presents improvement as within their reach with the right kind of self-exertion and will, the unspoken logical correlate being a woman’s high degree of culpability for a family’s failure to thrive. At the same time, it is a dramatic set piece that casts in the role of villain, not the landlord, the employer, or the dominant caste enforcer, but Dalit men. Where Dalit writings at the time, as we will see below, found the source of their oppression in the unjust practices of their caste employers, the state propagated a narrative that drew at once on familiar Victorian tropes of the profligacy of the poor, as well as very local representations of Dalit men as unusually given to drink and excessive spending.³¹ It is interesting that postcolonial development schemes run by both the state and NGOs in India today also routinely seek to enlist women as the vector of governmental intervention, by interpellating them as economically responsible victims within the households of the poor, while painting poor men as irresponsible, workshy, and hopelessly alcoholic, thereby displacing what might become caste or class antagonism by resituating it *within* the targeted family.

We cannot know exactly how Dalit men and women interpreted these stories. But state officials recorded, with not a little surprise, that object lessons such as these were apparently not lost on the Panchamas who heard them. The Special Officer in charge of granting house sites in Tanjore, D. Arulanandam Pillai, reported on his activities in Adambar village, where, following the acquisition of sites,

All the Panchamas of this cheri have completely given up the use of alcohol and have also of their own accord organised and started a school which is in good working order [...]. The abstention of these Panchamas from drink was the result of the attendance of the nattamaikaran (headman) of the Paracheri and three of his friends on the occasion of my organising the co-operative society at Tirukkandiswaram (6 miles from Adambar) and they resolved at once to give up drinking [...].³²

31. Protestant missionary pamphlet literature in Tamil that circulated at this time often carried similar stories about women’s virtue, but, to my knowledge, refrained from according women a leadership role in accumulating household capital, as the story of Arasayi does here. Cf. *Canthayiyin Carittiram* (Madras, s.a.).

32. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

The Panchamas of Tirukkandiswaram too had given up drinking, and relatives of some of the Panchamas of Adambar had apparently been persuaded as well. Whether or not as the result of Arasayi's stirring moral example, when confronted with a viable option to alter the status quo, Panchamas in rural Madras leapt at the chance.

But as I have indicated, the government's design was not simply to change habits, but to alter the internal landscape of Panchama subjects. Panchamas themselves were to grasp fully the rationale driving the schemes they were being enjoined to take up, namely that they were paradigmatic representatives of labour. Panchamas were thus invited in numerous ways to recognize the dictum that the single source of social standing was wealth, and not the ascriptive characteristics associated with caste. Most striking in this regard are the series of slogans, following a pithy assonant form familiar to Tamils from folk and moral maxims, which were to be pasted on to the mud pots, or *uṇṭi kalayaṅkal*, in which *cēri* [Panchama ghetto] cooperative societies were meant to store their monies.

Some follow a form that is familiar to historians of Protestant missions almost anywhere in the colonial world, advocating the moral and economic transformation of persons in a project that mission activity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shared with many imperial powers. Consider the following slogans (whose alliterative and metrical qualities are lost in the English translation): *Kuṭittāl kuṭittāṇam keṭum* ["Drink destroys the household"]; *Orukkālum cōmpal ākātu* ["Never be lazy"]; *Vāṅkina kaṭaṇaik kētku muṇ koṭuttuviṭu* ["Return loans even before they are due"].³³ Where these *uṇṭi kalayam* maxims became specific and indeed definitive of a new project for the formation of labourers from the raw material of caste subordinates, however, was in adages of the following type, in which caste was explicitly *translated* into class terms: *kācu iruntāṭāṇ mariyātai kiṭaikkum* ["Respect will come only with money"]. The reduction of status to wealth was reaffirmed again in the distich *mirācutārkaḷukku mariyātai tavarātai* ["Show unfailing respect to *mirasidars*"], followed by *kācu iruntāl mirācutārkaḷum matippārkaḷ* ["If you have money, the *mirasidars* will respect you in turn"]. You must respect them without hindrance, but if you practice thrift, eschew laziness and drink and thereby accumulate money, that respect will be returned to you.

I have argued elsewhere that to be a *mirasidar* was also to be high caste, and likewise that labourers were at one and the same time Panchamas. Caste and class, which had not been either conceptually or materially abstracted from one another in rural Madras, were now

33. Government Order, Law (General) Department [henceforth GOL(G)] 1846, 7 November 1921, TNA.

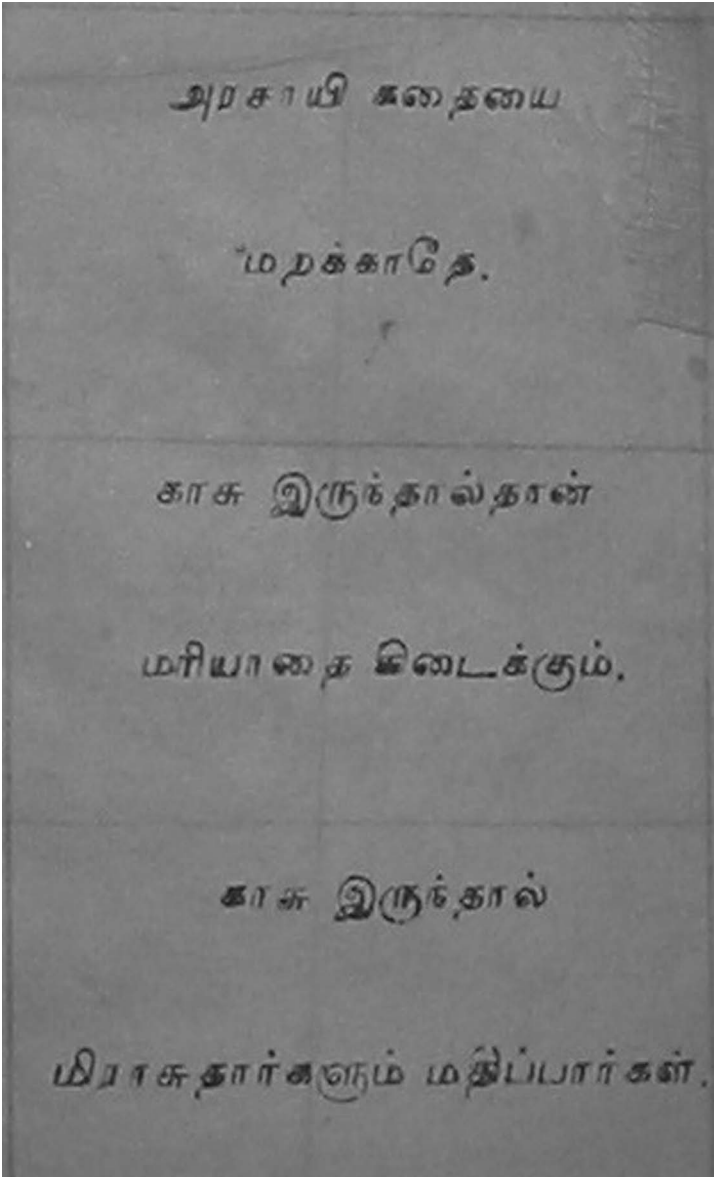


Figure 1. A sheet of maxims to be cut up and pasted on Adi-Dravida savings boxes in village cooperative societies. The first here reads: *Arasāyi kataiyai māyakkate* [“Don’t forget the story of Arasayi”]. The second reads: *kācu iruntāltān mariyātai kiṭaiykkum* [“Respect comes only with money”], and the final maxim reads: *kācu iruntāl mirācutārkaḷum matippārkaḷ* [“If you have money, (even) the *mirasidars* will respect you in turn”].

Courtesy of Tamil Nadu State Archives.

being disarticulated.³⁴ Maxims like those described above were but one component of a more general translational project, in which the terms of caste subordination were being painstakingly rewritten in the language of bourgeois class values, which, needless to say, also served to reinforce normative concepts of gender and the family. It was Arasayi after all, whose self-sacrifice and economizing ensured her family's success. This shining vision was the carrot. The unspoken reverse – the “stick” as it were – was the derogation of Dalit men and, simultaneously, the threat that lassitude on the part of a household's women would bring about its collective ruin.

THE OBDURATE UNREASON OF CASTE: WAR IN VILLAGE LABOUR RELATIONS

Yet there were cracks in the veneer of these ideal class subjects in the making. Neither the newly-minted labourers nor their “employers” appeared able to forfeit entirely their commitments to a labour regime which operated in contravention of economic rationality. It is no surprise that *mirasidars* would resist state-led changes to a labour regime in which they exercised such formidable authority; what is interesting for our purposes is the *language* in which they did so. They denied that the “Pariah *qua* Pariah”³⁵ was the victim of unique suffering, and therefore styled their own provision of house sites for Panchama labourers as being entirely of a piece with housing provided for labourers by management in modern factories. There was nothing, *mirasidars* would claim, that made *mirasi* labour management distinct from all forms of modern labour control, and there was thus no justification for state intervention. To cite just one illustration of the numerous arguments proffered in this vein over the course of several years in the Legislative Council, in petitions to government, and by litigators in suits brought against the Revenue Department, a petition signed by leading landlords of Tanjore explained:

Just as the planter, the mill or factory owner collects the labourers required for his operations [and] settles them in the plantation, in the factory or mill premises so that he may be sure [...] of labour at all times [...] so has the mirasidar [...] settled his farm labourer in the cheri [...]. The manaikats [house sites] in the cheris are to the mirasidar what the coolie-lines are to the planter and to the owner of a mill or factory.³⁶

34. Rupa Viswanath, “Spiritual Slavery, Material Malaise: ‘Untouchables’ and Religious Neutrality in Colonial South India”, *Historical Research*, 83: 219, February 2010, pp. 124–145.

35. This phrase comes from a statement made by government in 1892, in response to a report made by Collector of Chingleput, J.H.A. Tremenheere, which stated that Pariahs experienced unfair treatment in courts; GOR 1010–1010A, 30 September 1892, p. 70, §11 (d).

36. GOR 3559, 10 November 1917, Appendix: “Further Notes to Discussion on Matters of General and Public Interest”, p. 3.

Insisting on the likeness of traditional village organization and rationalized labour, the petitioners explained that Panchama labourers lived in housing owned by their employers in a manner identical to many industrial workers; *mirasidars*’ ownership of house sites was therefore only “a rational organization of labour”, akin to factory labour, even when its ancient origins might obscure that fact. Landlords, in short, sought to erase rhetorically the distinction between Panchama labour and labour *tout court*. That is to say, *mirasidari* opposition to the house site scheme shared with the scheme’s official justification the fundamental premise that Pariahs and labourers were indeed one and the same. The signal difference was that *mirasidars* took this premise to be entirely descriptive of *existing* agrarian conditions, while the state schemes saw “labour” as currently best embodied in the Panchama, but as nevertheless an ideal that was as yet unachieved, and for which the eradication of certain feudal characteristics of Indian labour was essential.

Panchamas themselves, meanwhile – and to the surprise of officials who had for decades repeatedly alleged the resignation or, more positively, the “contentment” of India’s agrestic servants – took to these schemes with enthusiasm, as we have noted. As a Tanjore District Munsiff Krishna Ayyar had put it, “Even a spirit of healthy discontent is a matter of education and requires time to develop”, and officials were unanimously of the view that they would have to work hard to drum up any interest in the programmes.³⁷ Given these prevalent assumptions, the response of Panchamas from villages across Tanjore astonished officials, and a flood of petitions for house sites quickly overwhelmed the officers put on special duty to receive them.³⁸ Moreover, because officials had been ordered to make assignments *only* to Panchamas who requested them of their own accord (i.e. not forcefully to persuade them to adopt the programme, thereby flagrantly upsetting landlords), many of these requests have been recorded in great detail and reveal Panchamas’ enthusiastic embrace of state programmes – though not quite for the reasons the state itself had envisioned. Rather, Panchamas appear to have participated in state projects in order to gain ground in what we may describe, in the words of the most well-known spokesperson for civil rights in India, B.R. Ambedkar, as “the perpetual war [that went] on every day in every village between the Hindus and the Untouchables”.³⁹

37. GOR 1740 Mis., 25 July 1919, §34.

38. There is considerable evidence to suggest this was not a recent development in Panchama evaluations of relations with their caste masters – Collector of Chingleput C.M. Mullaly found himself besieged with applications when he offered house sites to *cēri* dwellers in the late 1880s; BPR 617, 6 September 1889, TNA.

39. B.R. Ambedkar, “States and Minorities – Memorandum Submitted to the Constituent Assembly on the Safeguards for the Scheduled Castes”, 15 March 1947, *Babasaheb Ambedkar*

Let us take a typical case of house-site acquisition to illustrate how this perpetual war was carried on. In 1917, the Panchamas of Thenperambur village in Tanjore asked for new house sites because, they said, the river Vettar was in danger of flooding the existing *cēri*.⁴⁰ The complaint was judged to be real, and no government-owned lands were found to be available for the acquisition, meaning that land would have to be bought from a local landowner in a suitable location. A piece of land was chosen, and the Panchamas agreed to pay a rather large part of the full price up front, and the remainder in instalments, as well as to perform the necessary labour to raise the elevation of the land – since it too, like their old homestead, was slightly low-lying. The Pallars (a specific caste of Panchamas predominant in south-eastern Madras) were very “keen about owning their own house sites”, we are later told, because “the Kallar⁴¹ mirasidars appear to treat them rather harshly”.⁴² While the danger of flooding was real enough, it was in fact their landlords’ treatment that impelled them to make an official request.

The land that the government had selected was owned jointly by forty *mirasidars*, three of whom failed to respond to the government’s notice of acquisition. The remaining thirty-seven, without exception, refused to part with the land for government compensation, but agreed to give it *free of cost* on condition that their *āḷs* (servants) be made to perform the required field labour – they explained that they “would otherwise lose all hold on [their panchamas]”.⁴³ But the Panchamas in Thenperambur remained insistent, explaining that they were willing to pay what for them were large sums of money as down-payments on house sites – *even* when

Speeches and Writings, I (Bombay, 1979), pp. 391–450, cited in Sukhdeo Thorat and Narendra Kumar (eds), *B.R. Ambedkar: Perspectives on Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policies* (New Delhi [etc.], 2008), p. 329. In an earlier period missionary archives attest to these relations, but style them as evidence of “religious persecution”. I elaborate on this in *The Pariab Problem*, ch. 2. Foucault has also famously used war as a metaphor to characterize relations of power of this kind. Although Foucault came to question the applicability of the metaphor to a general theory of power, it is particularly apt at evoking the feints, tactics, and uncertainty that mark the relation between the Panchama and her master in this period in Madras. See “*Society Must be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (New York, 2003), especially Lectures 1, 2 and 3. For an astute political theoretic analysis of Foucault’s use of this metaphor, see Pasquale Pasquino, “Political Theory of War and Peace: Foucault and the History of Modern Political Theory”, *Economy and Society*, 22 (1993), pp. 77–88. Gyan Pandey has recently produced a sobering account of forms of conflict in contemporary India, allied to those I am discussing here: *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Palo Alto, CA, 2006).

40. BPR 1256 Mis., 10 September 1918, TNA.

41. Kallars are a dominant caste in some parts of Tamil Nadu, with members across the state ranging from sharecroppers to kings. Today Kallars are classified amongst the “backward classes” (BCs) for administrative purposes.

42. BPR 1256 Mis., 10 September 1918, TNA.

43. *Ibid.*

threatened with the loss of employment in a situation in which, as officials regularly confirmed, alternative employment was difficult to come by. Though counter-intuitive from the perspective which assumes that the bonded labourer clings to her bondage above all else for the security it provides, cases like this continued to arise.⁴⁴ As the officer charged with implementing the house-site scheme explained in his interim report, the Panchamas of Tanjore were in fact “more anxious to secure the ownership of their house sites than to be retained in the employ of their mirasidars”.⁴⁵

As the government sought to teach them to live according to the principles of economic rationality, Tanjore Panchamas participated in state schemes only to alter their position in an ongoing struggle against caste landlords. In order to secure their own house sites from government, they routinely acted at net financial loss to themselves, and in the face of threats to their employment. As government sought to produce conscientious labourers, Panchamas appeared to officials to be “quite cheerful” about risking loss of employment in order to become owners of their house sites.⁴⁶ Nor were risks financial alone. In a number of cases, petty obstructionism – caste peoples’ refusing to sell land if it might go to Panchamas, for example – gave way to armed violence.⁴⁷

While Panchamas in villages exploited these new possibilities, albeit not purely in the service of the principles of economic rationality that government sought to instil in them, a small but significant cohort of Panchama activists and writers were developing their own distinctive

44. The thesis that bondage provides labourers with protection under conditions of famine and scarcity has been aptly challenged by Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India* (Delhi, 1992 [1965]), p. xxiii; see also Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, Introduction and ch. 1.

45. Special Deputy Collector D. Arulanandam Pillai’s Progress Report, BPR 347 Mis., 11 March 1919, p. 18, §10. With respect to techniques of labour control, it was not only ownership of sites that was critical, but their location: a report on Kistna demonstrated that even without control over the house site itself, ownership of an adjacent site provided employers with the means to harass labourers: “[The landowner enjoys] an indirect hold [...] over the Mala [a Telugu Dalit caste] labourers by reason of possessing a piece of vacant land in close proximity to the Malapalli [cēri]. [It is] an instrument [for] impounding their cattle or killing their fowls on the slightest pretext, whenever they assume an attitude of independence. He thus becomes privileged to command their manual labour at less than the market rates; GOR 1230, 27 April 1917, citing a report from Achary dated 26 August 1916. In Thenperambur, the village of which we have been speaking, we are told that there were a few Panchamas who owned their sites in the old cēri, but that in order to live elsewhere they were “willing to relinquish their house sites without any compensation in favour of Government in addition to the moiety of the cost of acquisition [of new sites] which they have agreed to pay”; BPR 1256 Mis., 10 September 1918. This was likely due to the location of the old cēri, and attests further to Panchamas’ willingness to assume loss and risk to alter labour relations.

46. Special Deputy Collector D. Arulanandam Pillai’s Progress Report, BPR 347 Mis., 11 March 1919, TNA, p. 18, §10.

47. Some instances of violence are recorded in BPR 347 Mis., 11 March 1919, TNA.

understanding of “the economic” and its relationship to Panchama servitude. Thus, as *mirasidars* sent petition after petition to government, so too did a group calling itself the South Indian Oppressed Classes’ Union (SIOCU). The few issues of its magazine, *Valikāttuvōṇ* [*The Leader*], that have survived reveal the politically active Panchama’s intense interest in the situation in Tanjore.⁴⁸ Let us begin by considering the magazine’s position on the question of the relation between the Panchama’s labour and his caste, for the position *Valikkāttuvōṇ* would take on the house-site issue can be more accurately pinpointed by considering several key passages in which caste is analysed both in terms of social relations, and in terms of wealth [*aicuvvariyaṃ*]. The former is evident in an explanation by the editor, S.A.S. Tangamuttu, of how the SIOCU acquired its name.

It may be remarked that this Union has been curiously named as “The Oppressed Classes Union.” The names suggested by the Originators, viz., “The South India Panchama Union” and “The South India Depressed Classes Mission” were not welcome to the members as they said that *they were not depressed but oppressed by other people* even in trifling matters such as the wearing of shoes and holding of umbrellas [...]. The landlords [...] oppress them in exacting more work than is conscientiously fixed for coolies in factories and mills [...]. Hence the name [...] is given to suit the desire of the majority of the Depressed Classes [...].⁴⁹

Tangamuttu identified two pivotal aspects of the *mirasidars*’ position, which elided their own role in socially reproducing the Panchama as Panchama. First, he impugned the apparently value-neutral language by which Panchamas were dubbed “depressed”. Such language allowed the Panchamas’ poverty to be depicted as a natural fact, guaranteed by the *universal* existence of such a class. One petition by *mirasidars*, for instance, explained that, “There must be a certain class of people with whom the better sort do not freely associate and the position in the Tanjore district is in no way worse.”⁵⁰ In contrast, Tangamuttu described the Panchamas’ condition as one not of depression but *oppression*, in which the tactics of *mirasidars* effected a decidedly *man-made* degradation. In the same vein, Tangamuttu denied any similarity, of the kind that *mirasidars* were so keen to promote, between the factory- or millworker and the *paṇṇaiyāl*, resolutely particularizing the regime that *mirasidars*

48. We also know that following a mass meeting of the *mirasidars* of Tanjore to protest against the Government Order, the SIOCU organized their own meeting to counter the *mirasidars*’ claims. The speeches made at the meeting have not survived, and all that remains is a brief but bracing commentary on the issue in the pages of *Valikāttuvōṇ*; “Notes Connected with Resolution on Matters of General Public Interest”, GOR 3201 Mis., 10 September 1918, TNA, p. 7, §7 (iii).

49. *Valikāttuvōṇ*, January 1918, pp. 2–3 [emphasis mine].

50. GOR 3559, 10 November 1917, Appendix: “Further Notes to GO 3559”, p. 3.

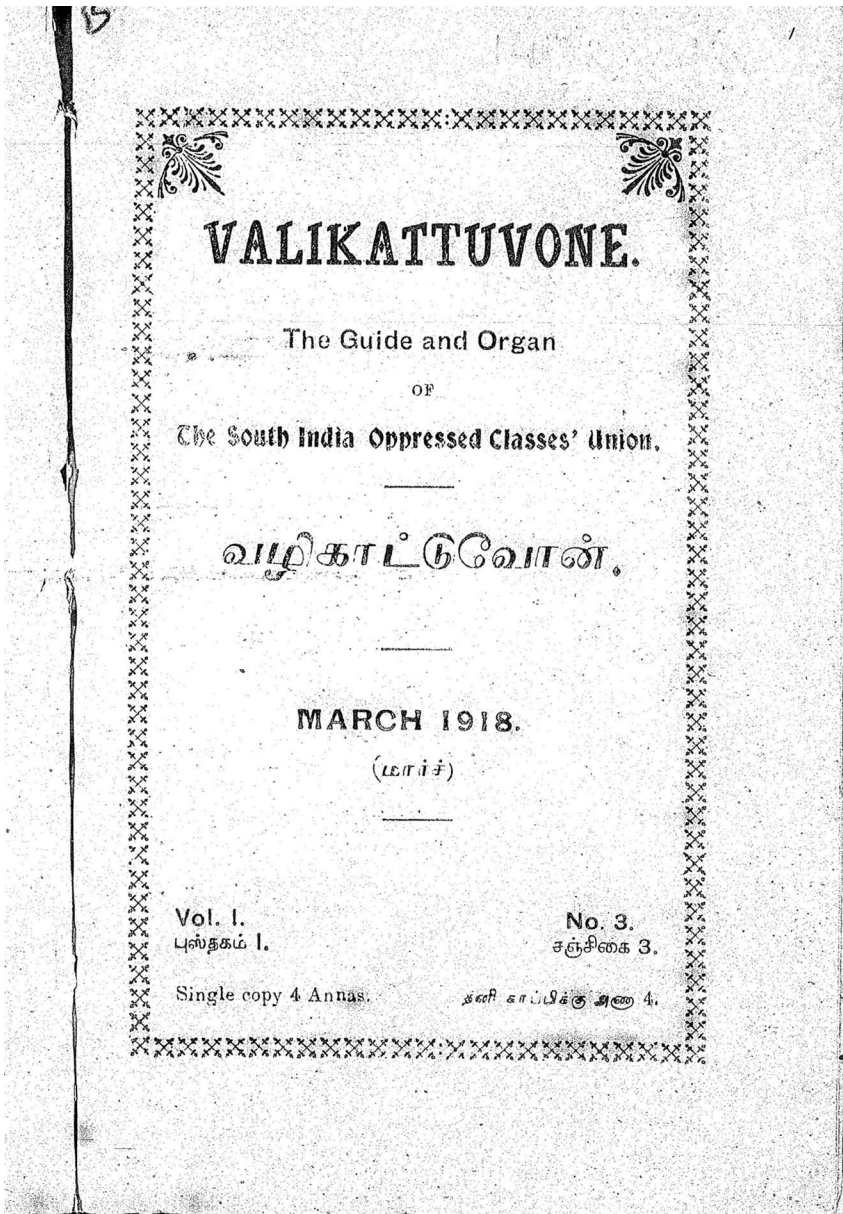


Figure 2. Front cover of *Valikkattuōn*.

portrayed as universal. And by means of revealing the particularity of Tanjore's rural labour relations, Tangamuttu highlights as well their *relational* nature: oppressed classes can exist only by virtue of those who

so oppress them. Classes, in this usage, are as much social and political as economic relations.

In another decisive passage P.S. Samuel, a co-founder of the SIOCU, explained the centrality of wealth, *aicuvāriyam*, to the conception of oppressed caste improvement [*oṭukkapaṭukiṛa cātikaḷin virutti*] that the SIOCU sought to propagate amongst its members. A hortatory piece on the importance of careful money management began with the following observation:

When we examine any [high] caste in the world, we may observe that wealth alone is the principal reason for its existence and superiority. Money makes all sorts of endeavours possible [...] [and] indeed, as everyone knows, there is no respect in this world for those without it [...]. It is a fact [...] that a poor man is thought to be evil and disreputable.⁵¹

It was for *this* reason that oppressed caste leaders enjoined members to exercise stringent control over their earnings and expenditure. They thus embraced the state's concerns for thrift and property, but re-situated them in the framework of their everyday experience of caste antagonism. Wealth, for Samuel, was thus the immediate need of the oppressed castes, and its lack was the proximate cause of their condition of oppression.

While *mirasidars* acknowledged Panchamas' poverty, they were at pains to deny any ontological relationship between economic (or class) status and caste and, indeed, never tired of repeating a refrain that is echoed by high-caste apologists even today: that *many* people were poor, not just Panchamas. Against this prevalent high-caste argument Samuel maintained that "wealth alone [was the] *principal reason* for [...] [a caste's] superiority". In Samuel's analysis, this was the cause, and not the result, of the practices of social ostracism and accusations of moral turpitude that beset Panchamas. Samuel underscored that the Panchama's poverty was linked to the disdain with which he was treated, for "a poor man is thought to be evil and disreputable". Indeed, Tamil aphorisms like *illātavaṅ pollātavaṅ* ["Have-nots are wicked"],⁵² attest to the cultural resonance Samuel's observations would have carried for readers. This is not unlike official maxims of the sort, "Respect comes only with money". Yet Samuel's observation emphasized the *agonistic and relational* field in which the accumulation of wealth took place.⁵³

51. P. Samuel, "South Indian Oppressed Castes, their Income and their Expenses", [Teṅintiya Oṭukkapaṭukiṛa Jātikaḷum, Avarkaḷuṭaiya varavu-celavukaḷum] *Valikaṭṭuvōṇ*, February 1918, p. 48.

52. *Illātavaṅ pollātavaṅ*, cited in Herman Jensen, *A Classified Collection of Tamil Proverbs* (New York, 1997[1897]), p. 122.

53. These views would appear to be not atypical among Dalit castes during the later colonial period I am describing, as well as subsequently. For the former, most influential are the sociological writings of B.R. Ambedkar; a recent volume collects many of the documents

I have described, then, how a more or less seamless categorial equation of *Panchamas* with *labourers* had taken place in Madras governance, among landed elites, and in circles of Panchama activism. There were significant variations among these groups to be sure, for instance with regard to the question of culpability for the Panchamas’ poverty. And there was disagreement as to how, exactly, this fact should be acted upon – landlords in the countryside, and their representatives in the provincial Legislative Council, would sometimes violently oppose the schemes of the Labour Department insofar as they interfered in existing labour regimes. Yet no-one questioned the synonymy of caste and class with respect to the Panchama. It would certainly not have made sense to anyone to imagine that, categorially speaking, labourers and Panchamas were in any respect in tension.

“BLACKLEGS”: THE DIREMPTION OF CASTE FROM LABOUR

In the course of the next couple of years, however, the conceptual world of Madras administration and politics would be irrevocably altered by instances of labour militancy that emerged in two British-owned sister mills, the Buckingham and Carnatic, located in the industrializing areas of northern Madras, and surrounded by a concentrated mass of labourers residing in close but caste-segregated quarters. By a series of strikes and lockouts in the years between 1918 and 1921 – referred to in public talk as the “mill troubles” – caste difference was thrust into the public eye and into political struggles over labour organization. It is in this light that we may assess how the very existence of the Labour Department, and thereby, the local meaning of labour itself, came under attack. I want to provide only a brief schematic of these well-known events, before turning to what has gone unrecognized, namely the changed context of the debate over whether “labour” was a suitable target of government administration.

The troubles at the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills began over questions of discipline and working conditions during the years of World War I, exacerbated by the massive inflation in food prices unmet by any rise in wages. What had been sporadic outbreaks of insubordination from the days of the mills’ inception in 1876 grew into frequent riots and strikes, leading millworkers in 1918 to seek the help of outside organizers. Two social workers, Chelvapathy Chetti and Ramanajulu Naidu, founded the Madras Labour Union, and in turn approached and secured the support of a prominent Madras nationalist and lawyer associated with Annie Besant,

pertinent to his theorization of caste: Thorat and Kumar, *B.R. Ambedkar*. More recent ethnographies also suggest the prevalence of these views: cf. Gerald Berreman, *Caste and Other Inequities: Essays on Inequality* (Meerut, 1979).

B.P. Wadia. The Union was among the first in India, and certainly one of the largest and longest-lived, functioning for decades with virtually no competition in Madras.⁵⁴ During various stages of conciliation with management, Wadia was able to bring national attention, and at one stage, the presence of Gandhi himself to serve as arbiter, in a protracted and bitter series of strikes and lockouts that lasted well over two years, until 1921.⁵⁵

The definitive crushing of the millworkers' movement by the managers is, in its barest outlines, a familiar story, in which dissension within the union occasioned by political rivalries among union leaders, economic hardships caused by prolonged loss of wages, and the strategically timed use of strikebreakers allowed the negotiation of new terms and an end to conflict without recompensing millhands or even very substantially altering the conditions against which they had fought. But in its specifics, the meaning of these events is not at all a settled matter. For the strikebreakers – or, in the contemporary term, “blacklegs” – used in the final strike were not brought from outside as they had been in the past. They were Adi-Dravidas (as Panchamas had come to be called at this time in Madras) who were themselves for the first year and a half loyal participants in the strikes.⁵⁶ And it was the violent retaliation against these Adi-Dravida “blacklegs” by fellow millhands, and the general lawlessness that followed, which produced serious political rifts in Madras. These rifts were in turn reflected in a new determination of the meaning of “labour”.

Before the final strike was even called, on the evening of Sunday, 19 June 1921, Adi-Dravida millhands met with Madras Union Leaders to say that if the Union chose to strike again, they could not participate. The reason they offered was simple: the last strike, which had occurred a few months earlier and lasted for over three months, had been nearly impossible for them to survive, requiring them to pawn what little they possessed in order simply to feed themselves and their families. Caste Hindus and Muslim workers, it was widely acknowledged, could find work in people's homes, or return to their nearby villages to wait out the

54. This account of the founding of the Madras Labour Union is taken from *Royal Commission of Labour 1931: Evidence from Madras*; see also Eamon Murphy, “Class and Community: The Madras Labour Union, 1918–21”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 14 (1977), pp. 291–321, and A.R. Venkatachalapathy and V. Sivasubramanian, *Pinni Ālai Vēlai Niruttam 1921 [The Binny Mills Strike, 1921]* (Chennai, 1990). The latter is the only full-length study of this watershed event. While appreciating its empirical and analytic richness, I note in passing my disagreement with the authors' view that the state's actions can be read as evidence of a policy of divide and rule. For an alternative argument, see the following section, and n. 75 below.

55. Gandhi's speech of 16 September 1921 is reproduced in *Swadharma*, 18 September 1921, p. 341.

56. The Adi-Dravidas describe their evolution from loyal unionists to disillusioned strikebreakers in a memorial to government; GOL(G) 1844, 2 August 1922, TNA.

dispute, neither of which option was available to Adi-Dravidas.⁵⁷ As Subho Basu has observed, ties to the village, rather than being necessarily in tension with processes of urbanization, in fact allowed newly arrived urban workers to better survive the rigours of city working conditions, not least by providing succour during strikes that thereby increased their collective bargaining power.⁵⁸

Yet these findings apply, of course, only to those emigrants whose position in the village could indeed secure them support. Urban Adi-Dravidas had no such recourse to maintenance. As Eamon Murphy has put this, they were in this sense more thoroughly proletarianized than their caste Hindu and Muslim co-workers. Given that this is so, it is surely wrong to surmise, as Murphy does, that we can analyse the fractures in union membership by considering caste and class as two mutually exclusive factors corresponding to economic and so-called ascriptive difference. What distinguished Adi-Dravida workers was not only their “caste status”, if by that we mean their position in a ritual hierarchy. It was precisely also their inability to draw on economic resources other than their wages. Murphy’s depiction of the relatively greater difficulties Adi-Dravidas had in holding out during a strike acknowledges as much, but he nevertheless remains wedded to a conceptual language in which caste and class are opposed, thereby undermining his own astute observations.⁵⁹

The next day the strike was announced, and about 150 Adi-Dravida workers remained at work; in a week’s time that number had swelled to 700 or 800.⁶⁰ On 29 June, minor skirmishes around the entrance to the mills gave way to the first of several major fires: about 100 Adi-Dravida huts were burned down in the nearby *cēri* [Adi-Dravida settlement] of Puliyantope; Adi-Dravidas’ huts, already segregated by caste and therefore easily identified, were ransacked and torched over a period of four days, and hundreds were made homeless. Many were also attacked, and fearing for their lives, most Adi-Dravidas fled the neighbourhood, eventually ending up in refugee camps located further north; in 1924, some three years later, most of the Adi-Dravidas who had been driven away were still living in camps.⁶¹ No-one was charged with the crimes,

57. Madras Legislative Council Proceedings [henceforth MLCP], 12 October 1921, TNA. pp. 1005–1033.

58. Subho Basu, “The Paradox of Peasant Worker: Reconceptualizing Workers’ Politics in Bengal, 1890–1939”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 42 (2008), p. 52.

59. Murphy, “Class and Community,” p. 319.

60. William B. Ayling, T.M. Narasimhacharlu, and R. Venkataratnam Nayudu, “Report on the Madras Disturbances Inquiry Committee”, GOL(G) 1957, 21 November 1921, TNA, p. 7.

61. GOL(G) 1912, 27 June 1924, TNA. This file includes a memorial from Adi-Dravida refugees at the camp in Vyasarpadi who describe miserable living conditions persisting over three and a half years later.

though it was widely accepted that strikers had perpetrated them. Adi-Dravidas too, it appears, initiated a few counter-attacks, armed with stones and crudely fashioned swords. So grave was the general lawlessness that prevailed in many quarters in Madras that the Adi-Dravida leader and member of the Legislative Council, Rao Bahadur M.C. Rajah, widely seen as having instigated Adi-Dravida workers to return to work, was forced to go into hiding for fear of angry rioters.⁶²

The Labour Department, given its duties to attend to the welfare of factory labourers, intervened in the events at a number of levels, and the political crisis that emerged turned not only on whether the department was acting in the interests of management, a charge we might expect, but on whether it was sufficiently directing its attention to labour *in general*, as opposed to Adi-Dravidas only. And here the two questions were in one sense inextricable, since Adi-Dravidas were also strikebreakers. For instance, the Commissioner of Labour at this time, T.E. Moir, was widely observed riding on police-protected buses and lorries with Adi-Dravida millhands as they made their way to work, publicly, it would seem, declaring an affinity with both Adi-Dravidas and management. Second, with respect to the victims of rioting, it was believed that Adi-Dravidas received disproportionate care and relief.⁶³ It could not be denied that Adi-Dravidas constituted the majority of victims of the fires and the assaults, but it was nevertheless also the case that others had lost property and been victims of physical violence at the hands of the police, and, thereby, it was alleged, government, via the Department of Labour, had made plain where its preferences lay. In fact, a large Adi-Dravida relief camp was indeed constructed to house the dispossessed in Vyasarpadi, but it appears that the few caste Hindus and the large number of Muslims

62. MLCP 12 October 1921, TNA, p. 1011.

63. Dewan Bahadur R. Venkataratnam Nayudu, one of the authors of an official inquiry into the disturbances, included the following in his addendum to the report, at GOL(G) 1957, 21 November 1921, p. 11: "418 huts were destroyed by the several fires: of these 269 belonged to the Adi-Dravidas and 149 to others – 67 of the latter belonging to Chucklers [another Dalit caste in Madras]. Living under similar conditions, they were all undoubtedly of a similar condition in life. But how glaringly unequal the relief afforded to these two sections of equal sufferers! Over and above contributions made by philanthropic persons, a sum of twenty thousand rupees of Government money was spent on feeding and sheltering the Adi-Dravida occupants of the 269 huts; whereas the other 169 huts received attention to the extent of Rs. 100! What way this one-sided measure will interpret itself to the average mind [...] need not be dilated upon." This dissenting minute was then circulated in the popular press; *Swadharma*, 23 October 1921, p. 414. The "Chucklers", it would appear, neither worked in the mill nor participated in the strike either way, but were simply the victims of fires because they happened to live in the vicinity of the strikebreakers. Their mention here is critical however, for it shows another series of conceptual encompassments: Adi-Dravida sometimes simply meant depressed classes, but could also be used specifically to refer only to members of the Paraiyar caste, as was being done here.

whose homes had been destroyed (nevertheless a small fraction of the total affected) had taken shelter with family and friends.⁶⁴ As during the strikes, they had drawn upon social and economic support systems unavailable to Adi-Dravidas.

As the violence continued, police reserves were called in from neighbouring regions, so overwhelming was the fury and size of the crowds. Finally the army had to be summoned to provide backup; fires nevertheless continued to rage in *cēris* in north Madras for four days. In several instances rioters attacked police, and one British constable was killed, while a few rioters were injured in bayonet charges. On many of these occasions, Labour Commissioner T.E. Moir arrived on the scene to consult with high-ranking police officials, and given the fact that police were primarily engaged in street battles against caste Hindus and Muslims, the perception that the Labour Department was biased appeared more and more credible.

Moreover, past events were reinterpreted by prominent political caste Hindus to lend support to this view. Thus, in December of 1920, six months prior to the final strike which ultimately broke the Madras Labour Union, Adi-Dravidas had been brought in as strikebreakers, though they were not themselves millworkers or former Union members. On 9 December 1920, police, besieged while protecting lorries of Adi-Dravidas being transported to the mills, had turned their rifles on the crowd of striking millhands, killing two and injuring many others. This provoked major uproar in the nationalist press, prompting comparisons to the killings of unarmed protesters in Punjab at Jallianwala Bagh, an event that then as now was considered the apogee of colonial state brutality. Like Jallianwala Bagh, though in a more local domain, the killing of striking millhands was thus quickly incorporated into nationalist narrative – a narrative within which, however, the issue of caste difference remained significantly absent.⁶⁵ Yet when relations between Adi-Dravida union members and others had decisively turned in mid-1921, the fact that the shooting had resulted only in caste Hindu injuries was invoked to prove Adi-Dravidas had never been loyal strikers, and correlatively, that government was biased in their favour: now Commissioner of Labour T.E. Moir was made the Madras equivalent of Punjab’s mastermind, Michael O’Dwyer: “Mr. Moir [...] has in him the making of great Sir

64. *Ibid.*, Labour Commissioner’s Office reply. The Office also pointed out that “Muhammadans” were able to return to work, for instance at the local slaughterhouses, immediately after the rioting, whereas Adi-Dravidas had been intimated from doing so. In the same reply, it is noted that L.C. Guruswami, an Arundhatiyar (Chuckler) MLC, had found that members of his caste had fled the city or been taken in by friends and relatives in other *pālaiyams* [Arundhatiyar ghettos].

65. Murphy, “Class and Community”, p. 310, n. 53.

Michael. If only he is given a free hand, he could make Perambore Barracks a Madras Jallianwala Bagh.”⁶⁶

Indeed a small but significant minority opinion held that Adi-Dravidas may themselves have torched their own huts, confident that government, given the sympathies of the Labour Department, would provide them with superior dwellings.⁶⁷ Most people dismissed this hypothesis out of hand, but it illustrates the widespread and deep-seated suspicion entertained by caste people with respect to the Labour Department’s apparently preferential position on Adi-Dravidas. No-one at the time (other than British officials, and Adi-Dravida leaders like M.C. Rajah and L.C. Guruswami) believed the department to be entirely above suspicion. Indian officials otherwise sympathetic to government registered their disquiet:

[...] every circumstance that was alleged against the police as tending to show their partiality to the Adi-Dravidas or prejudice against the strikers was scrutinized [...] and I am convinced that there was not the slightest trace of any such thing [...]. However [...] it would have been better if even appearances of partiality or prejudice had been avoided.⁶⁸

And in contrast to these conciliatory expressions of dissatisfaction, criticism of the government’s actions, and the Commissioner of Labour’s office in particular, was expressed with unbridled rancour in the popular press, in the Legislative Council, and on public platforms.⁶⁹

THE UNDOING OF “LABOUR” IN THE POLITICAL ARENA, OR, GOVERNANCE AS WAR BY OTHER MEANS

The mill troubles would set in motion a chain of events in which political elites in Madras would entirely transform the status and functioning of the Labour Department. In 1922, a heated debate took place in the Legislative Council over the Labour Department’s rightful remit in the context of a discussion of the budget to be allotted to the Labour Department for the following year. It is worth quoting at length from the member, Ramalinga Chettiar, who first proposed a reduction in the expenditure of the department:

The Government at first appointed a Commissioner to look after the interests of the depressed classes. Unfortunately they added later on to him the duty of

66. *Swadharna*, 10 July 1921, p. 123.

67. Ayling *et al.*, “Report on the Madras Disturbances”, p. 7; cf. *Swadharna*, 10 July 1921, p. 123; MLCP 12 October 1921, TNA, 1007.

68. “Note by Mister T.M. Narasimhacharlu”, GOL(G) 1957, 21 November 1921, TNA, p. 8.

69. MLCP 12 October 1921, TNA, pp. 1005–1033; *Swadharna*, issues ranging from 5 June 1921 to 2 April 1922. The latter contains many transcripts of speeches made by prominent Justice Party members, as well as Madras Union men, throughout the city.

looking after labour and labour problems. By that means and by the unfortunate occurrences which took place last year a considerable amount of bad blood has been roused [...]. I may assure the House that [...] if I have brought this motion it is not because of any of those occurrences or of any of those feelings [...] [But w]e are not in affluent circumstances and we cannot afford to allot for the amelioration of these classes all that will be necessary[...].⁷⁰

The speaker here denied what had hitherto been the assumption of governance all along, namely that to tend to the welfare of labour was to tend to the welfare of the depressed classes; the depressed classes and others together comprised, in the words of the document that sanctioned the founding of the Labour Department, "labour in general". The mill troubles thoroughly transformed this conceptual universe. Here, for the first time, Chettiar introduced the idea that someone enlisted to tend to both labour, and the depressed classes were very likely to find themselves in a contradictory position – as though, in other words, the two were not only distinct, but actually opposed.

Chettiar's motion did not go entirely unchallenged. One passionate opponent of the motion, M.D. Devadas, expressed his position in a manner that captures what had been the prevailing climate well, explicitly avowing the worthiness of the depressed classes not only for state welfare, but for welfare *under the aegis of a Department of Labour*, remarking, "I do not wish to use the term depressed classes, because they are really our labouring classes. They are the real labour of this country."⁷¹ Yet rebuttals like these were isolated, and some even seemed to concede Chettiar's basic premise. Thus one A.T. Palmer, in response to the call for separate establishments to govern labour and the depressed classes, remarked that with respect to

[...] the question [...] of the separation of the Labour Department from its other branch of work [i.e. the protection of the depressed classes] [...] is a very knotty problem, but from the common-sense point of view *as labour is recruited mostly from the depressed classes*, I do not see why there should be a separation of these two branches at the present time.⁷²

Palmer's weak rebuttal, along with Devadas's, were in any case soon to be minority positions. Chettiar's view, which took for granted the *difference* between labourers and Adi-Dravidas, would more and more come to seem obvious. Thus in 1922, two prominent representatives of what was called the Justice Party, O. Tanikachala Chettiar and Shanmuga Pillai, both highly influential businessmen, went so far as to propose the summary abolition of the department.

70. MLCP 1922, TNA, VII, p. 3503.

71. MLCP 29 March 1921, TNA, p. 1337.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 3531 [emphasis mine].

Before considering how their proposal fared, it is essential to understand what Justice stood for politically, and what its relationship to Adi-Dravidas was. The Justice Party is most commonly understood as the vanguard of the political and social movements to oust Brahmin supremacy in Madras (movements dubbed “non-Brahminism” or “Dravidianism”), and in general as the force that first brought movements against caste discrimination to Madras.⁷³ While the movement is therefore widely hailed as progressive, or at least as having significant progressive elements within it, it is important to recognize that its early proponents, in the form of the Justice Party, were elite non-Brahmins ranging from powerful rural landed magnates to the scions of Madras’ leading business houses. Indeed, the “Non-Brahmin Manifesto” with which Justice launched itself in 1916, urges the state to honour Justicites’ demands for increased representation in government services relative to Brahmins not on the basis of their being an oppressed class, but on the grounds that their “large material stakes, traditional and inherited interests in the soil and the social prestige that goes with it” – in short, their power in rural society, a designation that excluded Adi-Dravidas virtually by definition – should be more properly reflected in state administration.⁷⁴

As far as Adi-Dravidas were concerned, both Brahmins and non-Brahmins were simply caste people, and in the countryside as much as in politics both represented a force unified against landless labourers like themselves. The fact that political elites – both nationalists like Ramalinga Chettiar and loyalist Justicites – could call for a reduction in state-sponsored programmes for Adi-Dravida improvement could only confirm this view. In sum, although Adi-Dravidas might be potential political allies under the newly-minted umbrella category “non-Brahmins”, for Justicites they were more plainly a serious threat. Adi-Dravidas had yet to be convinced of the political wisdom of a platform built on putative non-Brahmin unity, and their members were in direct conflict with the base of Justice support in the countryside.

I should briefly address whether the political situation I have described above can be understood as an example of “divide and rule”. This is the standard framework by which the relations between Dalits and non-Dalit political leaders in colonial India have been understood. Yet it fails to account for the complexities of the native political sphere in Madras

73. There is a vast and highly contentious literature on political non-Brahminism in Madras. An excellent sceptical account of its early history may be found in Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahmin Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916–29* (Berkeley, CA, 1969); a positive assessment is contained in V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Kolkata, 1999).

74. “The Non-Brahmin Manifesto”; *The Hindu*, 20 December 1916, reproduced as Appendix 1 in Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict*.

Presidency, and cannot explain the state’s short-lived solicitude towards Dalits in Madras Presidency, either in the form of founding the Labour Department or in the specific instance of intervention in the mill strikes. In brief, the colonial state’s paramount concern of checking the nationalist politics of Congress entailed, in Madras, avoiding actions that would upset or politically weaken the powerful non-Brahmin loyalists associated with the Justice Party. Efforts to uplift or politically empower Dalits were a direct threat to the state’s most important allies against nationalism. What efforts the state made on behalf of Dalits it undertook not in service of its divide-and-rule policy, but despite it.⁷⁵

It was in this political context that Justices Tanikachala Chettiar and Shanmuga Pillai brought forth their proposal for the abolition of the Labour Department. It was circulated among all council members, prompting opposition from Adi-Dravida organizations throughout the Presidency who were likely alerted by the five Adi-Dravida nominated members of the Council.⁷⁶ What did “labour” mean to these organizations, and how did they conceive of its relationship to Adi-Dravidas themselves? A number of the petitions are in virtually identical language and make no explicit mention of the caste Hindu claims that labour and Adi-Dravidas were somehow opposed. But that silence itself implies a fundamental belief that they referred to the same categories of person. By their accusation that the Justice Party men mooted the proposal for the abolition of the Labour Department were plotting against the interests of depressed classes, they revealed that they saw no difficulty with the Labour Department overseeing depressed classes protection. The issue of whether depressed classes’ protection and questions of labour might run

75. I have argued this point more fully in *The Pariah Problem*, ch. 8. One illustrative indication of the state’s difficulties is given in a letter written by the Collector of Chingleput, H.A.B. Vernon, who wrote of the problems he faced in implementing Labour Department schemes in 1922: “At present the landowners of the district, the majority of whom are nonbrahmans are loyal to the backbone and ready to support Government in every possible way. The seeds of non-co-operation [a nationalist campaign] have not stuck any root in this district. This class is the class which will be principally affected by the rise of the Adidravidas to an independent position and it is this class which at present is hostile to the movement. Rightly or wrongly they regard [state ameliorative schemes] as inimical to them and I anticipate that their attitude towards Government may be seriously prejudiced if the present methods are continued”; Letter from Collector H.A.B. Vernon, in GOL(G) 462 Mis., 9 February 1923, TNA, §13.

76. These petitions and resolutions, incidentally, provide evidence of the strength and breadth of the autonomous Adi-Dravida political activity in this period that is often very difficult to document, primarily because these organizations were eclipsed by the Dravidianist hegemony that has existed almost without interruption in the Tamil political sphere since the later 1920s. See Nathaniel Roberts and Rupa Viswanath, “Dravidian”, in *Keywords in South Asian Studies* (London, forthcoming). The five Adi-Dravida members of the Legislative Council in 1922 were M.C. Rajah, the most politically powerful at this time, M.C. Madurai Pillai, L.C. Guruswami, R. Kesavalu Pillai, and G. Vandanam.

athwart one another was simply not acknowledged. One particularly eloquent petition in this vein, received from an organization headed by Adi-Dravida activist and politician Rettamalai Srinivasan, alludes as well to the serious social-political stakes of the debate on the Labour Department:

The Dravidas (misnamed Panchamas) of Madras [...] express their emphatic protest against the resolution to be brought [...] for the abolition of the Labour Commissioner [...]. Let us [...] consider whether the Government is justified in spending [a] certain sum of money for the benefit of a particular section of the population from the General Revenue [...]. A mirasidar avails himself [...] of everything and anything from the Revenue expenditure, depriving his labourer [...] who contributed to the land revenue by putting in his labour [...]. [The] Depressed classes who form about one-fifth of the population of the Province of Madras, contribute approximately four eighths of the General Revenue. We are not here to-day to consider the general labour problem in Boroughs and Towns, though we [depressed classes] may have a good part to play [in it]. We are now concerned [...] [with] the agricultural labourers [...] in the rural Districts [...]. It was found necessary [...] [to establish] the office of the Labour Commissioner and protector of the Depressed classes to attend to their wants [...]. The department is still in its infancy, and to try to [abolish it] is to retard the progress of millions of agricultural labourers who are the assets and bulwarks of this country.⁷⁷

Srinivasan's argument rested on foregrounding the disproportionately large economic contribution of the depressed classes, and specifically their contribution *as labourers*, and in the most lucrative sector, agriculture. In this way, Srinivasan reminds us that when the Labour Department was first formed, the depressed classes were conceived as paradigmatic agricultural labourers. Their role in urban labour, and indeed the relationship of urban labourers to those in the countryside, which proved to be of such importance in determining the outcome of the strikes, does not figure in this account. Instead, Srinivasan stresses the importance of the agrarian economy and Adi-Dravidas' role in ensuring its functioning.

But in addition to the view that labour and Adi-Dravidas could not and should not be administratively or even conceptually distinguished, was Srinivasan's parenthetical remark, in which he refers to the

77. Printed petition entitled "Resolution of the Dravida Mahajana Sabha, Madras: Protesting Against the Abolition of the Labour Commissioner and Protector of the Depressed Classes", GOL(G) 2693 Mis., 3 November 1922. Rettamalai Srinivasan was also the son-in-law of Ayothee Thass Pandithar, an important early Dalit leader in Madras Presidency; cf. G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement Among the Tamils under Colonialism* (Delhi, 1998); and G. Ayyathurai, "Foundations of Anti-Caste Consciousness: Pandit Iyothee Thass, Tamil Buddhism, and the Marginalized in South India", Columbia University, Ph.D. dissertation, 2011.

depressed as "Dravidas (misnamed Panchamas)". Contained in these three words is a political history that even today is virtually unknown. The word Dravida, or Dravidian, is most often associated in the popular imagination and certainly in historical accounts of the period, with movements for political Non-Brahminism.⁷⁸ Srinivasan claimed this term, however, solely for those that others preferred to call Panchamas, or indeed Adi-Dravidas, "original Dravidians". Srinivasan thereby asserted that the difference of the depressed classes from all others was more salient than any difference between non-Brahmins and Brahmins. At a time when the term Dravida connoted the unified non-Brahmin masses as righteous autochthons ranged against Aryan invaders, Srinivasan limited its meaning to the depressed classes alone. In short this was a political repudiation of non-Brahminism, and more precisely, against its claim that there was any natural unity or shared interests among all non-Brahmin castes.

Srinivasan's position may also be seen as a continuation of the scepticism towards non-Brahminism expressed by Adi-Dravidas since non-Brahminism's inception. At several moments in the years preceding the mill strikes, the potential conflicts of interest that might plague political movements for a unified non-Brahminism had occasionally come to the surface, as, for instance, when the Adi-Dravida leader Anchas is reputed to have rebuffed the invitation to join Justice proffered by Dr. T.M. Nair, a well-known Justiceite social reformer.⁷⁹ The inherent fragility of non-Brahmins' claims to represent Adi-Dravida interests became increasingly visible during public contests over the meaning of "labour".

The entirely novel conception of labour as something distinct from the depressed classes, and therefore of the Labour Department as a fundamentally flawed undertaking, continued to be disseminated widely by prominent Justiceites and others,⁸⁰ and given their positions in government, it did not

78. Cf. M.S.S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Delhi, 2007); V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (New Delhi, 1998), Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict*.

79. *Ibid.*

80. For reasons of space, this discussion of the relevant aspects of the politics of the time leaves out the role of the Congress Party, because during the period when Justice dominated the council Congress had chosen not to participate in the elections; hence their relative absence in administrative debate in this context. On this point see, for instance, David Arnold, *The Congress in Tamilnad, 1919–1937* (New Delhi, 1977). Congress did, however, have a close relationship with the Madras Labour Union, and M.C. Rajah, the Adi-Dravida leader, blamed Congress for politicizing the movement by roping it to the wider movement for Non-Cooperation: see MLCP, VII, 1922. Adi-Dravidas sometimes explained their reasons for defecting from the Union as a refusal to participate in its anti-British Congressite politics; GOL(G) 1912 Mis., 27 June 1924. My purpose here is not to give an exhaustive account of the strike, but to chart changing uses of "labour" in

remain only a conception. For reasons primarily concerning priorities in the council, the proposal for the abolition of the Labour Department was never directly debated, but the sentiments underpinning it were expressed instead in discussions over the budget to be allocated to the Labour Commissioner's office. In the 1922 budget debate, the Council voted to abolish several of the positions beneath the Commissioner of Labour, in a move that Adi-Dravida representatives saw as vengeance for the state's institution of welfare schemes and for its role in assisting Adi-Dravida millworkers. Over the course of the next couple of years, the budget of the Labour Department continued to be drastically cut.⁸¹ Most importantly, the positions of the eight Assistant Commissioners were entirely removed, meaning that Revenue Divisional Officers (RDOs), already by all accounts vastly overburdened, would report directly to the Commissioner. RDOs in turn would be reliant on local Indian officials to do the work: these officials were, as was widely acknowledged at the time, and as has been amply documented by historians, themselves intimately involved in the forms of everyday warfare between caste Hindus and Adi-Dravidas that I adumbrated above.⁸² The functioning of the department had therefore been irremediably hamstrung, and this is evident in the department's annual reports in succeeding years, which showed how little it was accomplishing.⁸³

The undoing of the Labour Department was cemented by the institution of dyarchy in colonial India, according to which certain governmental responses would be devolved on to Indians themselves. Departments of government were to be newly divided among reserved and transferred branches, the former to be under government control, and the latter delegated to locally elected Indians.⁸⁴ The government of India had provided guidelines to the

administrative and political discourses, in which the strike was a precipitating event in an ongoing political antagonism.

81. GOL(G) 462 Mis., 9 February 1923, TNA.

82. GOL(G) 680 Mis., 23 June 1921 and GOL(G) 2693 Mis., 3 November 1922 document the opinions of Indian and British officials on the lack of commitment and even overt opposition of local revenue officers to work for the depressed classes. Accounts of how the state functioned at the village level that are germane to my argument here include: R.E. Frykenberg, "Village Strength in South India," in *idem* (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (New Delhi, 1979), pp. 227–247, and *idem*, "The Silent Settlement in South India, 1793–1853: An Analysis of the Role of Inams in the Rise of the Indian Imperial System", in *idem* (ed.), *Land Tenure and Peasant in South India* (New Delhi, 1977); David Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870–1920* (Bombay, 1977); Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, ch. 1.

83. GOL(G) 462 Mis., 9 February 1923, TNA.

84. The political peculiarities of dyarchy are not germane to this paper; their considerable complexity, moreover, has been addressed only cursorily in recent historiography, with a few exceptions such as James Chiriyankandath, "Democracy' Under the Raj: Elections and Separate Representation in British India", in Niraja Jayal (ed.), *Democracy in India* (New Delhi, 2001). Several near-contemporary sources may be consulted for the structural rudiments of diarchy:

provinces on how to divide up administrative work. While loud and bitter complaints were made at the time regarding the retention of critical financial control in the reserved branch, the silent transfer of the Labour Department to the Justice cabinet (which came to power in the 1920 elections) has never excited comment. The decision to make labour a transferred subject occurred not in the relative open of the Legislative Council, but behind closed doors, and primarily at the behest of Sir A.P. Patro, a prominent Justiceite, former judge, and large-scale landowner (*zamindar*).

British officials hesitant to give up the Labour Department finally decided there was nothing in the new constitution upon which they could argue this, since the Department of Labour in Madras was one of its kind, and therefore no specific provisions had been made for its retention in the reserved branch of government by the government of India.⁸⁵ Justiceites knew that a critical fault line lay between their own political interests and that of Adi-Dravidas, for Adi-Dravida politicians broke with Justice publicly after the mill troubles. When Justiceite O. Tanikacala Chettiar alleged government bias towards Adi-Dravidas, a position that M.C. Rajah – the leading representative of Adi-Dravidas at the time – felt was only provoking violence against them, Rajah exclaimed:

The position of my community is simply this. We believe at present the view of Mr. Tanikacala Chettiar that the Government are siding with the Adi-Dravidas is not shared by the members of the wide non-Brahmin party in this country. If however they are, we have no option but to cut ourselves aloof from that party.⁸⁶

This was, in short, a situation of serious political animosity between Justice and the Adi-Dravidas, itself the result of ongoing social and political-economic antagonisms between the two groups’ supporters. Yet by 1923, Justice would come to enjoy sole authority over the now skeletal remains of the Labour Department, the outfit that oversaw the provision of welfare to its most recalcitrant political enemies.

CONCLUSION: CASTE, CLASS AND POLITICS IN COLONIAL MADRAS

Two projects took shape in the later 1910s that in different ways attempted to recategorize Adi-Dravidas. The first was a state initiative to train and persuade Adi-Dravidas to become ideal labourers and labourers alone; subsumed under the broader rubric of labour, they were nevertheless to be its paradigmatic and most numerous members. The second, a political project on

A. Appadorai, *Dyarchy in Practice* (London, 1937) and K.M. Pannikar, *The Working of Dyarchy in India, 1919–1928* (Bombay, 1928).

85. BPR 0893 Mis., 30 May 1922, TNA.

86. MLCP 12 October 1921, TNA, p. 1013.



Figure 3. M.C. Rajah, one of the most influential Adi-Dravida leaders in Madras between the 1910s and 1920s, and first Adi-Dravida Member of the Legislative Council.

Photograph: Anonymous.

the part of elite non-Brahmins, denied the reality of the political-economic and social antagonisms between Adi-Dravidas and themselves in order to portray themselves as the legitimate representatives of the a newly conceived “Tamil people”. Both of these projects turned on the question of when and

whether Dalits were primarily caste or class subjects. These two projects clashed, but the conflict, politically inconvenient for both caste elites and the state itself, was diffused when control over the Labour Department fell into the hands of Justice politicians, and the sensitive question of whether administration could treat Dalits as “labour” was placed forever beyond debate.

As I briefly described at the outset, the historiography of Indian labour has grappled with caste in the following way. Originally viewed as a pre-modern vestige that could not be incorporated in any story of class struggle, caste came to be understood as central to the experiences of many Indian workers. In recent accounts, transformations in “caste consciousness” and forms of caste-based mobilization are recognized as intimately linked to changes in labour regimes. This is a welcome development. But in focusing on consciousness, discussions of caste’s role in organizing labour tend to reproduce the questionable assumption that caste is itself ultimately a matter of culture – that is, as something subsisting in representations, religious sentiments and values, ritual proscriptions, and so on.⁸⁷ Thus, even as the highly reified understanding of culture that appeared in works such as Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Rethinking Working Class History* has been roundly criticized by labour historians for treating culture as a transhistorical essence,⁸⁸ what I have implied in this essay and argued in detail elsewhere⁸⁹ is that the culturalization of the caste remains a problem even when culture is understood as historically constituted.

Because caste is not reducible to culture. It is also a matter of social organization, political-economic relations, endogamous kinship arrangements, and the property regimes and rules of inheritance these imply. It entails exclusion from resources (symbolic and otherwise) not merely accidentally, but in its very essence. And in the case of Dalits, especially in Madras Presidency in the period I am describing, it also entailed being born into a category of people who were virtually to a number, servile labourers. This fact poses a fundamental problem for formulations that seek to understand a *relation* between caste and class, because in the specific case of Dalits – in some parts of India and in some historical periods – these are not

87. The prevailing emphasis on consciousness to the exclusion of other potential problematics in Indian labour historiography has been critically discussed in Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “Aspects of the Historiography of Labour in India”.

88. For an insightful account of the changing conceptions of culture in Indian labour historiography, see Joshi, “Histories of Indian Labour”.

89. Rupa Viswanath, “Spiritual Slavery, Material Malaise: ‘Untouchables’ and Religious Neutrality in Colonial South India”, *Historical Research*, 83:219 (February 2010), pp. 124–145; *idem*, “The Emergence of Authenticity Talk and the Giving of Accounts: Conversion as Movement of the Soul in South India, ca. 1900”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55 (2013), pp. 120–141; and *idem*, *The Pariah Problem*. See also Nathaniel Roberts, “Caste, Anthropology of”, in William S. Darity (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 2008, 2nd edn), pp. 461–463.

two intrinsically distinct matters that can be “correlated” *a posteriori*. They are ontologically inseparable. What needs to be historicized is not their relationship (because relationship implies difference) but precisely how they came to be conceptually separated in the first place. In the case I have described here this separation was simultaneously the political defeat of Madras’s most exploited workers, the outcome of social and political struggles that produced in Madras’s governance the naturalized intelligibility of “labour” as an unmarked category.

TRANSLATED ABSTRACTS
FRENCH – GERMAN – SPANISH

Rupa Viswanath. *Une nouvelle réflexion sur les castes et les classes: “Main d’œuvre”, les “classes déprimées”, et la politique des distinctions, Madras 1918–1924.*

Cet article suit l’utilisation administrative du terme de ‘main d’œuvre’ et ses effets politiques dans la période allant d’environ 1918 à 1924 dans la présidence de Madras en Inde. Pendant cette brève période, comme je le démontrerai, des tensions fondamentales dans la capacité de ce concept à établir une distinction cohérente surgirent violemment. La tension prédominante, tant dans le discours gouvernemental que dans la sphère de la représentation politique, concernait la mesure dans laquelle soit le statut de caste, soit la classe économique, devaient être compris comme le principal déterminant de la signification du terme de “main d’œuvre”. Au cœur de ce conflit résidait le statut contesté des descendants des travailleurs héréditairement non libres qui fournissaient la plus grande partie de la main d’œuvre exigée par la présidence et étaient désignés comme intouchables: devaient-ils être considérés comme les sujets d’une caste rituellement désavantagés qui travaillaient accessoirement ou bien comme des travailleurs paradigmatiques qui étaient également soumis à une discrimination de caste? Les intouchables provoquèrent tant l’anxiété des classes politiques de l’élite, qui souhaitaient les intégrer dans de plus amples projets nationalistes, que le zèle réformiste de l’état colonial, mettant la catégorie de la “main-d’œuvre” en crise. En étudiant l’utilisation faite du terme de “main d’œuvre” par les élites de caste, les agents de l’état et les intouchables eux-mêmes, j’examinerai la cohérence de caste et la cohérence de classe en tant que concepts analytiques pour les luttes politiques et sociales du type que je décris.

Traduction: *Christine Krätke-Plard*

Rupa Viswanath. *Eine Rekonzeptualisierung von Kaste und Klasse: “Arbeit”, die “niedereren klassen”, und die Politik der Unterscheidungen in Madras, 1918–1924.*

Der Beitrag verfolgt die behördliche Verwendung des Begriffs “Arbeit” (“labour”) und ihre politischen Auswirkungen in der Präsidentschaft Madras, Indien zwischen etwa 1918 und etwa 1924. Innerhalb dieses kurzen Zeitraums sind, so wird im Beitrag argumentiert, grundlegende Spannungen hinsichtlich der Fähigkeit des Begriffs zutrage getreten, einen kohärenten Gegenstandsbezug aufzuweisen. Die

wichtigste dieser Spannungen, sowohl im Regierungsdiskurs als auch in der Sphäre der politischen Repräsentation, betraf die Frage, ob der Kastenstatus oder die wirtschaftliche Klassenlage als Hauptdeterminante der Bedeutung von “Arbeit” zu begreifen sei. Mittelpunkt dieser Auseinandersetzung war der umstrittene Stellenwert jener qua Geburt unfreien Arbeiter, die in der Präsidentschaft Madras den Großteil des Arbeitskräftebedarfs deckten und in diesem Zeitraum als “Adi-Dravidas” bezeichnet wurden. Waren sie als rituell benachteiligte Kastensubjekte zu begreifen, die zusätzlich auch arbeiteten, oder waren sie paradigmatische Arbeiter, die außerdem der Kastendiskriminierung unterlagen? Die Adi-Dravidas riefen nicht nur das Unbehagen jener die Elite stellenden politischen Klassen hervor, die sie in umfassendere nationalistische Projekte zu integrieren suchten, sondern auch den reformistischen Eifer des Kolonialstaats, was zu einer Krise der Kategorie “Arbeit” führte. Der Artikel vollzieht den Gebrauch nach, den Kasteneliten, Staatsfunktionäre und die Adi-Dravidas selbst vom Begriff “Arbeit” machten; auf dieser Grundlage werden Überlegungen angestellt, die die Kohärenz der analytischen Begriffe “Kaste” und “Klasse” mit Bezug auf politische und soziale Kämpfe der beschriebenen Art betreffen.

Übersetzung: *Max Henninger*

Rupa Viswanath. *Repensando la casta y la clase: “Trabajo”, las “clases desfavorecidas”, y la política de las distinciones, Madras 1918–1924.*

Este artículo se adentra en el uso administrativo del término “trabajo” y sus efectos políticos en el periodo que aproximadamente va entre 1918–1924 en la Presidencia de Madras, India. En este corto espacio consideraré cómo las tensiones fundamentales que se plantean en la capacidad del concepto para poder hacer uso del mismo de manera coherente salen a la superficie de forma abrupta. La tensión predominante tanto en el discurso gubernamental como en la esfera de la representación política referida a la cuestión del lugar que ocupaba cada estatus de casta o clase económica debe ser entendida como un determinante principal del significado del trabajo. En el meollo de este conflicto reside la condición puesta en entredicho de los descendientes de los trabajadores hereditariamente no-libres encargados del suministro de la mayor parte de las necesidades de trabajo de la Presidencia y que eran designados a lo largo de ese periodo como los Adi-Dravidas: ¿deberían ser interpretados como individuos pertenecientes a una casta ritualmente desfavorecida que trasladaba tal condición al mundo del trabajo, o como trabajadores paradigmáticos que al mismo tiempo quedaban sujetos a la discriminación del sistema de castas? Los Adi-Dravidas provocaron tanto la preocupación de la elite de las clases políticas que aspiraban a incorporar a estos sectores en los proyectos nacionalistas más amplios como la preocupación en el fervor de los reformistas del estado colonial, poniendo la categoría “trabajo” en crisis. Abriéndome paso a través del uso que las castas elitistas, los funcionarios y los propios Adi-Dravidas han atribuido al término “trabajo” reflexionaré sobre la coherencia de las castas y de las clases como conceptos analíticos para analizar las luchas políticas y sociales del tipo que hemos descrito anteriormente.

Traducción: *Vicent Sanz Rozalén*