Introduction

On August 15, 1997, India celebrated its golden jubilee of Independence. In the capital city of New Delhi, organizers prepared lavish ceremonies to commemorate the occasion, beginning with a midnight program broadcast from the Central Hall of Parliament that reenacted prominent scenes from the freedom struggle and featured A-list vocals from Lata Mangeshkar and Bhimsen Joshi alongside audio recordings of founding figures such as M. K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose.[1] In the afternoon, tens of thousands of spectators thronging the city's broad avenues near the historic Red Fort were treated to a flyover by the Indian Air Force that showcased its newly acquired Russian Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jets streaking across the sky with tri-colored contrails matching the Indian national flag streaming in their wake. Shortly thereafter, Prime Minister I. K. Gujral addressed the nation. His speech paid tribute to India's diverse mosaic of languages and cultures, extolled its commitment to secular values, and pledged to uphold its democratic traditions. As dusk fell, fireworks lit up the night sky as patriotic hymns hummed from loudspeakers late into the evening.

In the southernmost state of Tamil Nadu, Dalit activists sought to capture national attention with a radically different program. In the preceding weeks, Thol. Thirumavalavan, the firebrand leader of the state's largest Dalit movement, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal (Liberation Panthers)—also known as the Dalit Panther Iyakkam (DPI; Dalit Panther Movement)—dispatched postcards to his deputies that praised their "successful uprising" in Chennai the previous week.[2] On July 23rd, the DPI had conducted a massive procession that brought traffic in the state capital to a standstill. But as he reminded them, that protest was only the first step in a multi-pronged response to the recent atrocity in Melavalavu, where a dominant caste gang had murdered the first Dalit president of the village council and his five associates on June 29.[3] After a string of protests demanding state intervention in Melavalavu failed to elicit a response, DPI leaders decided to up the ante. Thirumavalavan advised his district secretaries: "For this next phase, it is

essential that you assemble at least thirty district organizers and convene a planning committee to prepare for the upcoming August 15th protests."[4] When most of the country celebrated Independence, the DPI planned to spearhead mass rallies censuring the government's silence on Melavalavu and demanding the realization of equal democratic citizenship for India's Dalits.[5]

To prepare for the rallies, DPI activists peppered Dalit colonies with pamphlets that enumerated recent incidents of caste violence and apprised their residents of democratic rights. They commissioned local artists to paint murals in Dalit settlements and design posters that their cadre plastered on city walls, train cars, and public buses promoting the golden jubilee protest. To rally grassroots support, organizers traversed the state convening meetings in Dalit colonies. At these local gatherings, they highlighted the persistence of untouchability practices and underscored the irony of celebrating Independence, asking those in attendance: "How can our people be declared free when we are forced to reside in segregated colonies and even prohibited from wearing *chappals* [sandals]?"[6] As a longtime activist asserted, "We organized the rally to draw attention to the fact that our community continued to suffer from bonded servitude and casteism."[7] In a series of published interviews, Thirumavalavan honed a blistering critique that juxtaposed the popular fervor surrounding the golden jubilee with the everyday "oppression meted out against Dalits."[8] He emphasized:

> A free society is one without domination, exploitation, and repression. The only society that should celebrate Independence is one that can determine its own political and economic livelihood. Do Dalit people enjoy this right? Till today, Dalits have not been liberated from the prison of the *cēri* [a segregated Dalit colony]. Here, there is no rule of law. Instead, it is caste that reigns... In the present context, it is a travesty to celebrate the golden jubilee and call it 'Independence'... Dalits, who continue to live without basic freedoms, regard such celebrations as shameful acts.[9]

The proposed protest not only attracted media coverage but also elicited strident criticism from authorities, some of whom vowed to arrest DPI activists under national security laws should they proceed with their plans.[10] On August 15th, fireworks and flyovers illuminated the Delhi sky while *lathi* (wooden baton) wielding police constables descended on participating Dalit colonies in Tamil Nadu to quash DPI protests, resulting in hundreds of arrests.[11]

The golden jubilee protest occurred at a seminal moment for the nation, as well as a critical juncture for the Liberation Panthers. Two years later, in 1999, the movement jettisoned its policy of election boycotts to enter democratic politics.

When they discussed their transition from boycotts to ballots, party leaders routinely cited the golden jubilee protest as a reference point as they chronicled this tumultuous period. In 2008—and in the first of hundreds of interviews I conducted with DPI leaders across more than a decade—I spoke to M. Yallalan, a district secretary who monitors rural affairs in Madurai District, at a popular park near the bustling Arappalayam bus stand. We situated ourselves on a grassy field circumambulated by residents taking a brisk evening stroll. Over the next hour, Yallalan chronicled the genesis of the Liberation Panthers, starting with its origins as a civil rights movement. He described landmark protests and rattled off a lengthy list of police detentions as he guided our conversation to the movement's electoral turn in 1999. For him, the golden jubilee was not only a seminal moment but a potent metaphor that cast the ideal of equal democratic citizenship in stark contrast to the lived experience of India's Dalits.

Yallalan recalled how schoolteachers distributed sweets and miniature Indian flags to their students while state bureaucrats and politicians draped floral garlands around busts of Gandhi in meticulously scripted media spectacles.[12] "While the rest of India celebrated its freedom," he recounted, "many of its citizens were still prohibited from wearing *chappals* in the streets and continued to suffer from the stigma of untouchability. We highlighted that these basic freedoms had not yet reached our people in the *cēri*."[13] To canvass their support, Yallalan detailed how DPI activists traveled from one Dalit colony to the next, exhorting their residents to consider what it means to celebrate freedom in the wake of the Melavalavu atrocity, where the state government had failed to safeguard their physical security and uphold their basic rights. When our conversation reached a natural pause, I inquired why the movement, which had long boycotted elections and panned the parliamentary system as an extension of caste power, changed course soon after the golden jubilee to enter democratic politics. Yallalan responded forcefully: "We entered elections because we needed to show that there was no democracy."[14]

*

When I began studying the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK; Liberation Panthers Party) in 2007, many assumptions followed me into the field. In accordance with contemporary scholarship on Indian politics, I interpreted the party's entry into electoral politics as part of the broader "democratic revolution" said to have gripped India since the late twentieth century. Further, I viewed the VCK's transition from boycotts to ballots as representative of this national trend and absorbed the upbeat prognosis of prominent academics, who interpreted the formation of lower caste parties and their incorporation in elections as indicative

of a growing democratization of India's elite dominated political arena. At the time, the greater visibility of Dalit parties appeared to be a natural outcome of successful grassroots organizing whereby a new generation of tenacious activists-turned-politicians had gatecrashed the democratic arena and, through elections, acquired a seat at the metaphorical bargaining table. Their arrival in the halls of Parliament struck me as a resounding, even if incomplete, story of success. But, my continued interactions with Dalit party leaders over the ensuing years revealed a different, significantly more complex account. Without a doubt, the story of the VCK is a tale of determined activists hurtled from humble beginnings into the limelight of state and eventually national politics. But, as longtime activists emphasized in our conversations, their foray into elections was not the endpoint of a grassroots struggle for a more democratic society. Instead, it marked the beginning of a new phase of activity whose implications would profoundly shape their future trajectory.

Yallalan's comments grate against the popular and generally optimistic representations of democracy in India today. The contours of this narrative, which Debasish Chaudhury and John Keane have described as the "India Story," are broadly familiar.[15] After gaining Independence in 1947, India befuddled its early critics. At the time, political scientists were generally pessimistic about the prospects for democracy in the newfound nation. Successful democratization was presumed to require an already-existing, robust middle class, a vibrant civil society, and high rate of literacy, all of which were absent in India at the time of Independence. Moreover, scholars anticipated that the country's stark societal cleavages, which divided its citizenry along caste, religious, and linguistic lines, would derail its democratic transition. For them, the outlook for democracy in India was dim, at best. But, India defied their wildest expectations. Freed from the shackles of colonialism, the newfound nation introduced universal suffrage, administered elections at an unprecedented scale, ratified a secular, liberal constitution, and laid the foundation for durable democratic institutions.[16] The "India Story" chronicles how the country's politics ebbed and flowed—weathering conflagrations on its borders and a suspension of democracy at home—yet ultimately adheres to a linear teleology. It recounts the seemingly inevitable progress of the world's largest democracy.

Since the late 1990s, scholarship on Indian politics has largely reinforced this buoyant narrative. At the turn of the millennium, a triumphalist tenor resonated through academic scholarship. When media pundits heralded a "democratic revolution," many scholars were in agreement, pointing to a clear uptick in political participation among historically underrepresented groups.[17]

New parties led by traditionally marginalized castes emerged as the complement to this broadening demographic profile of democratic politics.[18] Documenting how these developments transformed the social composition of the national Parliament and individual state legislatures, Christophe Jaffrelot declared a "silent revolution" whereby "plebeians" harnessed the power of the ballot to gradually dislodge an entrenched elite from elected office.[19] Penned on the heels of this great churning in Indian politics, early works overstated the ameliorative effects of democratic incorporation for marginalized groups while underestimating the systemic hurtles that elections would present to these new politicians. This is particularly true for Dalits, who generally lack the independent wealth, political pedigree, and social capital available to India's traditional political class.

Dalit-led parties have generally struggled in elections and even the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)[20], often upheld as a paradigm of successful Dalit assertion, has struggled to replicate its earlier success in recent years.[21] Dalit-led parties typically pursue a path that is contingent on their state's party system.[22] In multipolar systems—that is, where elections feature multiple competitive fronts in most constituencies—the vote-share required to win an election can be significantly lower, which has historically opened opportunities for parties such as the BSP to contest independently. In contrast, Tamil Nadu features a bipolar party system that, since the 1970s, has pit two rival coalitions helmed by the state's Dravidian parties, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK: Dravidian Progress Federation) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), against each other. Here, smaller upstart parties like the VCK face greater pressure to align with a powerful coalition partner to be electorally viable, and to counteract myriad other challenges they face in elections, such as their comparatively limited access to campaign resources, signal material disadvantages, and caste stigma. This reinforces their reliance on dominant parties, which can undercut their political autonomy and impede their growth.

Whereas many studies have documented transitions into democracy and the changing demographics of political representation in India, considerably less attention has chronicled the longer genealogies that precede these transitions and evaluated their complex afterlives. Contrary to the commonplace assumption that minority rights are best secured through elections, the political fortunes of Dalits—India's largest minority that may account for up to a quarter of the population and some 300 million people—does not fit the comfortable narrative of expanding democratization in India today.[23] Historically bonded laborers, Dalits form an estimated 23.7 percent of the Tamil Nadu population where they are concentrated in the countryside and work foremost as landless agrarian laborers.[24]

Though Dalits have seen modest progress in their socio-economic status, they continue to lag behind in virtually all development indicators despite constitutional safeguards and decades of affirmative action programs introduced to promote their uplift.[25] Seventy-five years after independence, nearly one-third of Dalits live in multidimensional poverty and many continue to experience routinized forms of violence and discrimination.[26] While some scholars and media commentators are quick to cast the growth of Dalit politics as emblematic of the "India Story" or evidence of greater social inclusion and political equity, an ethnographic study of Dalit party leaders captures their differentiated experience of democratic politics, as well as unanticipated and sometimes deleterious consequences of entering democratic politics for minority representation.

This book offers a longitudinal study of democratic incorporation through the firsthand experiences and personal perspectives of Dalit activists who steered their movement from boycotts to ballots at the turn of the millennium. Today, the VCK is the largest Dalit-led party in Tamil Nadu and among the most visible in India. Synthesizing fieldwork spanning fifteen years, hundreds of interviews with founding party figures, and the personal archives of grassroots activists, the following chapters elucidate the rigid but generally unseen limits of democratic inclusion for groups lacking the inherited social and economic capital of India's conventional elite. Chronicling their transformation from a radical civil rights movement into party politics, the research shows that the VCK's entry into elections was neither predictable nor was it entirely of their own choosing and on their own terms. Instead, it resulted from a collision of contingent factors shaped as much by repressive state measures and the political consolidation of antagonistic castes as it was by the VCK's own political shortcomings and its leaders' democratic aspirations. For them, democratic incorporation presented a paradox. While elections opened new avenues for Dalit political advancement, they also imposed unique constraints on VCK leaders that would reconfigure their politics and frustrate their ability to champion Dalit interests.

The Political Context

Before the VCK joined electoral politics in 1999, its leading figures panned the parliamentary system as an instrument of caste power. As activists, they projected themselves as an uncompromising force for Dalits, vowing to "hit back" (*tiruppi adi*) against caste oppression while expounding a scathing critique of Tamil Nadu's Dravidian parties, which they depicted as corrupt, anti-Dalit, and beholden to the interests of elite and electorally influential strata of backwards castes. Characterizing elections as the path of thieves, movement activists spearheaded electoral boycotts

and political awareness campaigns that sought to consolidate Dalits as a cohesive political bloc. In fiery speeches, VCK activists charged both Dravidian parties with depriving Dalits of their basic rights and, moreover, regarding their community as an on-demand vote bank that could be activated with election season "freebies" and otherwise fobbed off with piecemeal concessions and welfare subsidies. From the 1980s, these figures consistently emphasized that their principal objective was not to extract additional sops from the state but, rather, to achieve equal citizenship and equitable development, underscoring that state largesse was not a substitute for democratic rights. But, in 1999, their relationship to Dravidian parties would radically transform after joining democratic politics, when they entered an electoral field whose contours and grammar had been shaped by Dravidian politics over the course of a century.

The seeds of the Dravidian movement were sown in the provincial countryside of the late-nineteenth-century Madras Presidency where, as David Washbrook observes, a "tiny élite of rich peasants" consolidated their grip over the rural economy and its agrarian labor force.[27] In time, these village magnates migrated to growing market towns where they formed new political and economic associations and expanded their economic portfolios beyond commercial agriculture to encompass credit, trade, and banking.[28] In 1916, wealthy landowners endowed 100,000 rupees to the South Indian People's Association, an early tributary of the Dravidian movement known as the Justice Party, to support the publication of its *Non-Brahmin Manifesto*.[29] The manifesto criticized the monopoly of high caste Brahmins in public life, higher education, and employment in the colonial administration, and petitioned authorities to allocate more resources and opportunities to non-Brahmins, an imagined community purporting to encompass 97 percent of the Madras population.[30] Borrowing a term from philology, this emergent class of elites would later refer to themselves as "Dravidians," an ethnolinguistic concept that, as Karthigesu Sivathamby argues, provided "cultural glue" for a nascent politics that, although spoken in the name of all "non-Brahmins," prioritized the interests of an elite new faction.[31]

In the 1940s, Dravidian politics took a popular turn under E. V. Ramasamy (EVR), a fiery iconoclast better known as Periyar (the Great One).[32] EVR's virulent non-Brahmin politics, which from 1944 occurred under the banner of the Dravida Kazhagam (DK; Dravidian Federation), blamed societal ills on the disproportionate influence of Brahmins in the Madras Presidency. For EVR, the Brahmin provided a malleable trope characterized by religion (Hinduism), language (Sanskrit/Hindi), and apocryphal claims of racial difference (Aryan) against which the Dravidian was counterposed.[33] EVR tapped into public

sentiments through incendiary rhetoric that railed against Hinduism, Hindi, and caste as foreign imports thrust upon Tamil society by conniving Brahmins, and spearheaded massive protests against compulsory Hindi education and caste-based entry restrictions at prominent Hindu temples.[34] Framing Madras politics as a civilizational clash between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins, EVR reified non-Brahmins as a cogent bloc while carefully glossing over its myriad internal caste fissures. Although EVR certainly sought to supplant Brahmans and promote the interests of backward castes,[35] Dalit scholars have long questioned his commitment to eradicate untouchability.[36]

In 1949, C. N. Annadurai, a DK activist and acclaimed scriptwriter, flanked by iconic personalities in Tamil cinema, led a breakaway faction of DK members and launched the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK; Dravidian Progressive Federation).[37] Keen to test their fortunes in the new era of democratic politics, the DMK harnessed the power of Tamil cinema and galvanized support through ethnolinguistic nationalism, which found a receptive audience in the early post-independence period.[38] In 1956, the States Reorganization Act redrew state boundaries to establish more linguistically homogenous states in south India. This, by implication, ensured a mostly Tamil-speaking electorate in present-day Tamil Nadu.[39] Tamil nationalism soon turned the political tide in favor of the DMK. Although anti-Hindi agitations had gripped the region since the 1930s, the DMK led mass strikes in 1965 against the federal government's alleged plan to install Hindi as the sole national language.[40] Speaking in a classical idiom that evoked Tamil antiquity, DMK leaders rallied the public through an ardent defense of an apotheosized "Mother Tamil."[41] As an opposition party, DMK rhetoric hewed closely to Tamil nationalism as a foil to distinguish itself from the pan-Indian Congress Party, but this would gradually change after the DMK captured the reins of state governance in 1967.[42] Once in power, and particularly after the emergence of a rival Dravidian party, the DMK's emphasis on a pan-Tamil, non-Brahmin community would gradually be displaced by direct appeals to specific caste constituencies.

Despite the DMK's thumping victory in 1967, its reign as an unrivaled force in Tamil Nadu politics was short-lived.[43] In 1972, DMK leadership expelled M. G. Ramachandran—an era-defining movie star known as MGR—from the DMK.[44] That year, MGR created the Anna DMK (ADMK; later All India Anna DMK [AIADMK]), casting himself as the heir to Annadurai's legacy while converting his fanclubs across the state into party infrastructure.[45] Since the 1970s, the DMK and the AIADMK have entrenched themselves as the dominant, rival forces in Tamil politics and alternated rule in the state. Both parties dealt adroitly with

successive national governments, leveraging their clout in Parliament to secure influential ministerial berths and procure resources that sustain state patronage networks,[46] while also using caste as a tool of statecraft to shore up support among numerically preponderant, and therefore electorally influential, caste groups. The Dravidian parties acclimated to the exigencies of electoral politics by pandering to intermediate castes—often at direct expense to Dalits—through political alliances and the programmatic allocation of state resources, including reservations (affirmative action benefits).[47] The formation of caste parties in the following decades was not antithetical to Dravidianism's professed anti-caste agenda but, rather, a predicable outcome of how both Dravidian parties prioritized the interests of influential intermediate castes.[48]

From the 1980s, Dravidian parties faced an insurgent challenge from 'below' in Tamil Nadu's northern districts, the primary locus of this study. In 1980, the release of the Mandal Commission report, which recommended extending reservations to Backward Classes (BCs), ignited a wave of quota politics nationally, including in Tamil Nadu.[49] In 1980, S. Ramadoss consolidated 27 Vanniyar caste associations—a locally dominant caste concentrated in the state's northern districts presumed to be the largest in Tamil Nadu—and founded the Vanniyar Sangam (Vanniyar Association) to exclusively lobby for Vanniyar interests and, in particular, a separate quota for the community.[50] After demonstrating the depth of his grassroots support through a weeklong protest that crippled transportation throughout the region and led to widespread violence against Dalits, Ramadoss launched the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK; Working People's Party) ahead of the 1989 general election, which siphoned votes from the Dravidian parties—particularly DMK—and played a decisive role in tight races.[51] Initially, the DMK sought to retain Vanniyar support without engaging PMK leadership, releasing election manifestos replete with benefits earmarked for Vanniyars. When these efforts proved futile, the DMK altered course and integrated the PMK within its governing coalition, as described in Chapter 4, signaling its receptiveness to caste parties with a demonstrated ability to deliver, or deny, votes.

Then, from 1990, national celebrations honoring B. R. Ambedkar's birth centenary generated an upsurge in Dalit organizing throughout India. In Tamil Nadu, Thirumavalavan featured prominently among a new generation of grassroot activists as he rallied his community through truculent rhetoric and a bold public disposition. Pledging "to turn the history of Tamil politics on its head," he charged both Dravidian parties with prioritizing the welfare of dominant castes and shunting aside Dalit concerns.[52] As the decade wore on, VCK leaders confronted a heavy-handed police force that used anti-terrorism laws to stymie their grassroot

activities and imprison leading activists, generally in preemptive detentions without trial. At the same time, opposition politicians opened backchannels with Dalit leaders, keen to tap into their expanding support base by drawing them into elections. Faced with increasingly repressive state measures and the consolidation of antagonistic castes, VCK leaders entered electoral politics in 1999, keen to preserve their movement and leverage its expanding support base to impact government policy. While elections certainly afforded VCK leaders a recognized public platform to pursue Dalit interests, they also vested dominant parties with a range of new tools to contain their development while also benefitting from their grassroots support.

By the 2000s, the Dravidian parties had come to rely on broad electoral coalitions to maintain their competitive edge and compensate for the erosion of their political base.[53] The DMK and the AIADMK allocated campaign resources and political seats to caste parties in exchange for their support, effectively contracting them to mobilize votes for the alliance while backing their candidates in a handful of contests. The DMK and the AIADMK leveraged their party infrastructure, political networks, media assets, and economic resources when negotiating these alliances, granting them considerable latitude to structure the terms of coalition politics. Although some literature has celebrated Dravidianism for its alleged production of equality,[54] these accounts are contested,[55] and, as Rupa Viswanath observes, "the terms of Dalit 'inclusion' are starkly instrumental and rooted in electoral demography."[56] Initially, VCK leaders justified their participation in Dravidian coalitions as a necessary step to "capture power," and as evidence of their development into a prominent political force, while reassuring their supporters that such alliances were purely pragmatic, and not ideological.[57] But many longtime Dalit activists struggled to accept Dravidian coalitions, frustrated that the product of decades of concerted grassroots organizing was now marshalled during elections to support the very parties and politicians they had initially set out to oppose.

Across twenty-five years of electoral participation (1999–2024), VCK leaders have won five seats in the national Parliament and seven in the Tamil Nadu State Assembly—which is no small feat—yet each of these victories occurred as part of a Dravidian coalition. When the VCK faced elections without a Dravidian ally (1999, 2004, 2016), it failed to notch a single win. For VCK leaders, elections present a perennial predicament, in which their signal material disadvantages and social stigma as Dalits not only hamper their electoral performance but also reinforce their structural dependence on dominant parties determined to check their growth and contain their development. This presses VCK leaders to