

Elusive Democracy

Today, India is widely celebrated as the world's largest democracy. However, not all groups experience India's political institutions the same way. This book draws on extensive interviews with longtime Dalit (ex-“untouchable”) activists and original archives of party documents to explore the democratic transformation of one of India's most prominent Dalit-led parties—the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK; Liberation Panthers Party). Through a historical and ethnographic account of the VCK's transition from boycotts to ballots, this book provides a novel perspective on India's democratic trajectory, as well as its limits. Whereas VCK leaders initially viewed elections as an instrument to spur development and contest power asymmetries, they would come to recognize that democratic institutions can equally function as a means of containment and control. The research shows how democratic politics opened new space for Dalit political advancement while simultaneously imposing unique constraints on these leaders that would reconfigure the very nature of their politics.

Michael A. Collins is an independent scholar whose research examines modern Indian politics, democracy, and theories of political representation. He holds a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen.

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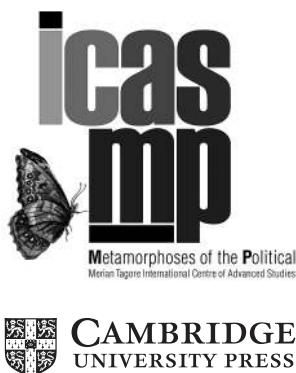
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Elusive Democracy

Dalit Politics, Elections, and the Dilemmas of Representation

Michael A. Collins



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978-1-009-56725-1 — Elusive Democracy
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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009567251

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First published 2025

Cover image: A painted wall mural of VCK president Thol. Thirumavalavan pledging to protect democracy, Chennai, 2019; photograph courtesy of Michael A. Collins.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-009-56725-1 Hardback

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Acknowledgments

This book has benefited from robust support across many years, including mentorship from Martha Selby (University of Texas), Lisa Mitchell (University of Pennsylvania), Kannan M. (French Institute of Pondicherry), and Rupa Viswanath (Centre for Modern Indian Studies [CeMIS], University of Göttingen). Without their invaluable feedback, intellectual rigor, and constant encouragement, this project would not have been possible. Further, I could not have asked for a more generous interlocuter than Hugo Gorringer, whose own work introduced me to the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) and whose guidance over the years enriched this project beyond measure. In Göttingen, I was surrounded by phenomenal colleagues whose personal research, support, and friendship sustained and nurtured this project, including Nate Roberts, Karin Klenke and the entire CeMIS staff, Srirupa Roy, Lalit Vachani, Martin Freyberg, Roberto Goya, and Tiago De Oliveira. This book benefited from incisive feedback from Daud Ali, Gajendran Ayyadurai, Lisa Björkman, Karthikeyan Damodaran, Robert Hardgrave, Devesh Kapur, Afsar Mohammad, Anastasia Piliavsky, Ram Rawat, C. Jerome Samraj, Juned Shaikh, Nilanjan Sircar, Ramya Sreenivasan, Sharika Thiranagama, Milan Vaishnav, a cohort of excellent graduate students, and my ever thoughtful, always inquisitive students in Göttingen.

Over the years, this research was supported by funding from the Plan II Honors Program at the University of Texas, the Department of South Asia Studies and the Center for the Advanced Study of India at the University of Pennsylvania, CeMIS at the University of Göttingen, and external grants from the American Institute for Indian Studies, the John W. Kluge Center at the United States's Library of Congress, and the Fulbright–Hays Program. The project has benefited from engaged audiences at the University of Pennsylvania, CeMIS, Brown University, the University of Cambridge, King's College London, the French Institute of Pondicherry, and the annual South Asian Studies Conference in Madison, Wisconsin, United States. Additionally, Boopathy S., Julia Bliss, Kaustubh Jagtap, Damion DeShield, and Mwai Sande offered invaluable research assistance.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-56725-1 — Elusive Democracy
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I am forever indebted to my family for their boundless patience of my itinerant lifestyle as I pursued what likely seemed an unending project. And, most importantly, this book was made possible by the generosity, hospitality, and thoughtful reflections provided by hundreds of Dalit activists, intellectuals, and politicians throughout Tamil Nadu, whose perspectives continually challenged my assumptions and ultimately transformed my outlook. This book is dedicated to you. *Jai Bhim!*