

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constructing a caste in the past: Revisionist histories and competitive authority in South India

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Abstract

This article examines the recent political history of the Devendrakula Vellalars (henceforth, Devendras). Officially recognized by the state and union governments in 2020 and 2021, this novel consolidated caste formation includes a broad range of formerly endogamous ‘Untouchable’ communities spread throughout Tamil Nadu but most highly concentrated in its southern half. I argue that the communities constituting the Devendras have been socio-economically diverse for at least the past century and thus do not necessarily share the same political priorities. They have, nonetheless, attempted to unite in opposition to the politically powerful Thevars (Other Backward Class or OBC) who are themselves a consolidated caste formation that grew out of colonial domination. The Devendras’s economic diversity has, however, troubled their oppositional political consolidation, compelling the production of revisionist mythico-histories that appeal to widely held desires for authority and honour. Disavowing the Dalit past and recasting the Devendras as the descendants of heroes, such mythico-histories produce a collective identity characterized by the ideals of righteous self-sacrifice, valour, and agrarian civility. Devendras’s identarian claims are, however, reliant on the acceptance of internal and external audiences, some of which violently oppose their assertions. They nevertheless seek recognition, and in so doing empower themselves by gathering strength in numbers.

Keywords: Caste; politics; Dalit

Introduction

Tamil Nadu’s chief minister, Edappadi K. Palaniswami, announced his recognition of the Devendrakula Vellalar caste (henceforth, Devendras) at the state level and his plan to recommend corresponding recognition to the union government on 4 December 2020 at a political rally in the southeastern city of Sivagangai (Srikrishna 2020; Velmurugan 2020; *Indian Express Tamil*

2020a).¹ His recommendation was heeded, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced his acceptance of the change in February 2021, less than two months before Tamil Nadu's assembly elections in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (henceforth, BJP), Modi's right-wing Hindu nationalist party, has historically fared poorly (Prasanna 2021). On 19 March 2021, just 18 days before the election, the Lok Sabha passed the Constitution Scheduled Castes Order Amendment Bill 2021, which legally enshrined the existence of the Devendras (*The Hindu* 2021a).

The newly recognized caste is constituted by the consolidation of seven localized Dalit castes (called Scheduled Castes in government parlance; henceforth, SC), including the Pallar, Kudumbar, Pannadi, Kaaladi, Kadayar, Vathiriyar (sometimes spelled Pathiriyar), and Devendrakilathar, who are socio-economically and demographically diverse (Senthilir 2019; *The New Indian Express* 2020a). Of the seven castes, Pallars are by far the most populous, constituting about 19–20 per cent of the total SC population in Tamil Nadu, while the other six castes together constitute significantly less than 6.5 per cent of the total SC population (Census of India 2001).²

Palaniswami's act of official recognition was in immediate response to a one-man commission that investigated communities now classified as Devendras after the political party claiming to represent them, the Puthiya Tamilagam (New Tamil Country; henceforth, PT), led a day-long hunger strike that stretched across the state. Following their leader, Dr Krishnasamy, protesters demanded consolidation and renaming (*The Hindu* 2020a). The chief minister's gesture cannot, however, be attributed to recent advocacy and activism alone. The PT's mobilization builds on the efforts of activists who have been petitioning the government for official recognition of the Devendras since 1971 and for their removal from the SC list since 1994 (Ragupathi 2007, 125; 170).

The latter half of the demand, which was not met by Palaniswami, remains a point of contention among Devendras and illustrates the tension that troubles their caste-based mobilization. Inclusion on the SC list affords significant material benefits under India's reservation (affirmative action) system, such as increased chances for acceptance into elite educational institutions and highly coveted government posts. However, in an ironic twist that conflates governmental systems of reparation with traditional markers of status and

¹ I have chosen the spelling of Devendrakula Vellalar that is most common in English-language journalism. For all Tamil words, I follow the most common transliterations if a word regularly appears in English in public discourse. I use diacritical marks if a term is not commonly transliterated into English.

² Reliable and consistent quantitative data about specific castes is hard to obtain. The numbers I have provided align with those offered by the Office of the Registrar General of India's Tamil Nadu 'Data Highlights' report from the 2001 Census of India. According to the report, out of 76 Scheduled Castes, five—Adi Dravida, Pallan, Paraiyan, Chakkiliyan, and Arunthathiyar—constitute 93.5 per cent of the Scheduled Caste population of the state. The percentage of the population of the Devendra seven, besides Pallars, is most likely significantly less than 6.5 per cent (Census of India 2001). Nonetheless, in absolute terms, the numbers are substantial, as Tamil Nadu's population hovers between 75 and 80 million.

rank, many Devendras reject the SC label. According to Dr Krishnasamy, 'Remaining in the SC list is a stain. It is akin to being in the River Cooum (a once-pristine river which has turned into the drainage of Chennai) ... Only after the British included them in the SC list, these communities have been subjected to caste oppression and discrimination' (Rajan 2019).³

Although rejecting the SC label (and the benefits it offers) is not unanimous among the two to three million individuals who now fall within the Devendra caste, the rejection of antecedent caste titles, especially Pallar, is widespread. As Ragupathi (2007, 59–66) demonstrates in his highly informative doctoral thesis, early twentieth-century caste organizations aimed at social reform and 'upliftment' claimed Indrakulathan or Devendrakulathan ('person of the family of Indra [the king of the Hindu gods]') as their titles. From the 1970s onwards, such organizations that added Vellalar to their name, making themselves the 'Vellalars of Indra's lineage' (Ragupathi 2007, 125). The Vellalars are a relatively high, agrarian, landowning caste who some Pallar populations used to serve. Upending that history, Devendras-in-the-making passed a resolution at a 1971 state-wide conference in Trichy requesting that the government add the Vellalar suffix to their caste title in order to recognize their traditional agricultural occupation (Ragupathi 2007, 125). They thus claimed to embody the agrarian civility of the Vellalars and the Hindu valour of Indra, the king of the gods.

Today numerous caste organizations, political parties, literary groups, scholarly organizations, and other institutions bear the Devendrakula Vellalar title. Nonetheless, audiences that have the power to legitimate the Devendras's mythico-historical narratives have refused to recognize them as they wish to be seen. Even within the new Devendra caste, a contingent of self-styled scholars prefers to be called Mallar rather than Devendra, which has Sanskritic roots (Asirvatham 1977, 1991; Mallar 2013).⁴ More contentiously, the Vathiriyar, who were added to the Devendra list by the aforementioned government order, have been petitioning and demonstrating against their inclusion in the Devendra caste since 2018, claiming a unique history and culture (Dinamani 2020; Dinakaran 2021; *New Indian Express* 2020b; *The Hindu* 2018).

While the Vathiriyars, a very small minority, seem to have been patently ignored, the refusal of dominant castes to recognize the Devendras is more troubling to their process of identity making. The recent protests against the government's recognition of Devendras by Vellalar caste associations, with the support of other dominant castes in Chennai, such as Chettiars and

³ The need to continue to benefit from favourable reservations among his (potential) supporters is not lost on Krishnasamy who at times has called for the creation of a separate category called 'Extreme Backward Class', which would remove the 'stain' of the SC label, but continue to afford Devendras reservation-based benefits. In a similar move, a less-established Devendra leader, K. Senthilmallar, staged a protest in Madurai in November of 2019 calling for the renaming and the removal of Devendras from the SC list in favour of their inclusion on the list of Most Backward Classes (*Times of India* 2019).

⁴ While Mallar does not have an obvious meaning, it dissociates the communities to which it applies from the Pallar past.

Mudaliyars, demonstrates the urgency and power of such challenges (*The Hindu* 2021b). In more quotidian contexts, dominant caste Thevars and Udaiyars, among whom I conducted fieldwork in southern Tamil Nadu, continue to call Devendras ‘Pallars’, ‘Dalits’, and ‘Harijans’, even as Devendras persist in their pursuit of authority, honour, and respect by rejecting older monikers that marked their putative inferiority (Gross 2017, 116–118).

The argument: Mythico-history, authority, and recognition

In this article, I draw on multi-sited ethnographic and archival research conducted between 2012 and 2014 in Tamil Nadu to examine narrative and embodied processes of collective self-making among the Devendras.⁵ I argue that such processes have been central to the project of Devendra consolidation. I also highlight the economic diversity among the Devendras, which produces divergent political priorities and precipitates the rise of internal tensions between the various communities that are now consolidated into a single caste, according to the state- and national-level governments. Such tensions make the development of revisionist histories particularly important for the Devendras and for other castes against whom they compete because they have the capacity to draw groups and individuals together and to obscure economic differences that would otherwise belie caste unity.⁶

Despite its reference to a different context (Hutu refugees in Tanzania), I employ Liisa Malkki’s concept of mythico-history as a heuristic framework for examining Devendra collective self-making (Malkki 1995). Mythico-history, Malkki (1995, 54–55) argues, is an oppositional ‘recasting and reinterpretation’ of the past in moral terms that makes heroes of its creators and disparages their opponents. For the individuals whose stories unfold in the pages below, mythico-histories generate dignity and rebuff enduring structural and spontaneous violence perpetrated by state actors and locally dominant castes (Gupta 2012; Luce 2007). However, the details of Devendra mythico-history are not universally accepted within the recently consolidated caste; instead, Devendra mythico-history is ‘very much a world in the making’ (Malkki 1995, 103).

Within their not-quite established world, most Devendras, nonetheless, share an interest in endowing their caste, and by extension themselves, with

⁵ My primary field site was the small industrial city of Paramakudi, but I also worked in the large cities of Madurai and Chennai, as well as in various villages in the southern reaches of Tamil Nadu. Prior to 2012, I conducted six months of preliminary ethnographic research in and around Madurai, split between the summers of 2007 and 2010.

⁶ Self-aggrandizing revisions of history among upwardly mobile but officially ‘low’ castes (SC, OBC, and MBC [Most Backward Class]) have been identified by Robert Delègue (1997, 123–136; 166–167), and the production of more honourable origin stories than those that are commonly accepted is a strategy undertaken by a range of Dalit groups. For example, Dalit activist Iyothee Thass claimed that the Paraiyars of the Tamil country were originally Buddhists and owned the land, which was later stolen from them by Aryan invaders (Bergunder 2004, 67–68). Scholarly accounts of such narratives do not, however, share my focus on embodied practices, political assertions, and inter-caste status competitions.

authority (*atikāram*), respect (*mariyātai*), and honour (*mānam*), complicating the understanding of twenty-first century experiences of caste developed by David Mosse (2012) in his ground-breaking, long-term study of caste, politics, and Christianity. Mosse identifies a shift from a focus on honour, rank, and respect in discussions and practices of caste during his fieldwork in the 1980s to a focus on rights articulated through claims to equal access to opportunities upon his return in 2009 (Mosse 2012, 227–228). Describing the new incarnation of caste ‘as a portable form of belonging and connectedness structuring opportunity’, Mosse also identifies inter-caste opposition, which he calls ‘competitive associationalism’, in the rise of caste associations competitively advocating for rights and entitlements (Mosse 2012, 243–245). While competitive associationalism is evident in Devendra mobilization, desires for honour and respect also emerge powerfully and, importantly, such desires are articulated in opposition to other castes that make similar claims projected onto the past.

Aligning with the Devendrakula Vellalar caste title, Devendras’s aspirational mythico-histories invoke martial kingship and the classical Tamil virtue of agrarian civility (Mosse 2012, 175–176; cf. Pandian 2009), drawing, in part, on the semiotic resources of Dravidian politics. In so doing, they compete with other castes who make similar claims. The appeal and power of such claims is grounded in their tacit implications, namely that those making them are the rightful, originary rulers and ‘sons of the soil’ of the Tamil country, preceding the nation-state and superseding the assertions of other castes and communities. There is thus a kind of a priori authority, or *atikāram*, undergirding mythico-historical narratives. Defined as ‘power, authority’ and ‘rule, dominion, sovereignty’ (*Tamil Lexicon 1924–1936*, 73), the capacious Tamil term *atikāram* gives us a sense of the various degrees of empowerment, from authority to sovereignty, that Devendras and competing castes seek through mythico-histories.

Regardless of its magnitude, *atikāram* is troubled by its need for recognition. Like sovereignty, which Danilyn Rutherford (2012, 3–4) describes as a utopic ideal that is, by definition, impossible to reach because of its reliance on external acceptance, *atikāram* requires the recognition of interpellated audiences who themselves exercise authority by shaping the actions of would-be authorities (or even would-be sovereigns). Stuck in this state of Hegelian co-dependence, Devendra claims to authority require that Devendras convince both themselves and members of the broader public of their *atikāram*. Internal consensus building as a means of collective identity building is, however, challenged by tensions between Devendras with different priorities, and external recognition is even harder to garner. Nonetheless, Devendras seek recognition, which is, in their case, politically empowering.⁷

Devendras’s pursuit of recognition by those outside their fold is accomplished, in part, by the recognition they achieve internally, as it brings them together, building their bargaining power by virtue of their size. A telling

⁷ My understanding of recognition, as it is sought by Devendras, runs counter to accounts of multicultural recognition fuelled by colonial fantasies of difference that constitute political exclusion and eviscerate the sovereignty of indigenous communities in North America and Australia (Simpson 2014; Povinelli 2002). For Devendras, recognition is inextricably linked to political power.

example of their bargaining power in action unfolds in a recent incident on which *The Hindu* reported. In mid-October of 2020 (less than two months before Palaniswami's announcement), Kannapiraan, the president of a local Devendra caste association, visited the Tirunelveli Collectorate to submit a petition demanding the name change and the removal of the Devendras from the SC list. It read: 'This is our demand which alone will wipe out the social humiliation we are now facing for decades. If this demand is not met, the Devendrakula Vellalar voters, who can decide the victory of the candidates of political parties in 20 districts, will exhibit their anger against the ruling AIADMK in the forthcoming Assembly polls' (*The Hindu* 2020b).

Asserting their strength as a unified caste with the power to affect election outcomes, Kannapiraan also endows the Devendras with the audacity that would enable them to make such a threat. He thus aligns their contemporary mobilization with their mythico-historical past. Rather than Dalits (literally, 'crushed') in need of the government's protection and resources, many Devendras imagine themselves as righteous heroes, who are congenitally courageous and unsusceptible to victimization.

Such attempts to marry the present to the imagined past are, however, challenged by entangled state and dominant caste forces that have the power to underwrite or negate Devendra claims. On the one hand, Devendras must repudiate the power of such forces over them, but, on the other hand, they must appeal to such forces without which their claims to authority remain illegitimate. Devendras implicitly address external audiences in their attempts to make themselves and their world by evoking an extra-institutional dimension of political power—that of the past.

In what follows, I will elucidate the strategic negotiations and oppositional tensions of Devendra identity building. I will first examine the history of Devendras found in the colonial record and trace the development of their mobilization in more recent decades. In so doing, I will highlight Devendras's mimetic, oppositional, and co-constitutive relationship with Thevars, who are also engaged in collective identity building and political mobilization. In the latter half of the article, I will examine the nature of Devendra claims to authority and the leaders that have arisen to make them, homing in on the internal tensions that vex Devendra political strategies and ideologies. I will also elucidate the production of caste identity and political subjectivity in everyday narrative acts of remembering a caste hero. Finally, I will shed light on an important annual ritual event that generates Devendra collective identity, drawing the caste into its consolidated form.

Devendra–Thevar conflicts: historical diversity and revisionist unity

The disavowal of Dalit status by many Devendras, while not unique to them, is facilitated by historical realities that lend themselves to the plausible deniability of antecedent 'Untouchability'. Unlike other Dalit castes whose names refer directly to hereditary occupations that Brahmanical sensibilities deem polluting, such as Paraiyars (drummers) in Tamil Nadu and Chamars (leather workers) in northern states (Deliège 1997, 123–125), the 'Untouchability' of the

seven castes that constitute the Devendras is not clearly illustrated by their names or historical occupations. According to colonial administrators-cum-ethnologists of the Madras presidency, such as Edgar Thurston (1855–1935), the name Pallar was derived from the word *pallam* (meaning low-lying ground) which was either allotted according to their residence or a reference to their place of work, as wet paddy cultivation, in which most Pallar women were engaged, is carried out on low ground (Thurston 1906, 442; cf. Government of the Raj 1890, 37). The close association of Pallars with agriculture, rather than ‘polluting’ forms of labour, supports their present-day denials of Dalit identity. However, as Rupa Viswanath (2014) argues, in the nineteenth century, most Pallars were relegated to Untouchability and slavery.

By the turn of the twentieth century, substantial socio-economic differences between and within castes called Pallar, Kudumbar, Kaaladi, Kadayar, and Devendra suggest a more complicated picture. Drawing on the Manual of the Madura District of 1868, Edgar Thurston and his collaborator K. Rangachari claimed that the condition of Pallar agricultural labour was akin to slavery and described the Pallars as a ‘most abject and despised race ...avoided by all respectable men’ (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, Vol. 5, 473).

Thurston and Rangachari went on, however, to describe a range of occupations that such castes undertook and to elucidate their access to resources. Drawing on the 1891 census report, they claimed that Pallars in the northwest of the Tamil country were employed in a number of positions, including cultivator, gardener, ‘coolie’ (day labourer), blacksmith, railway porter, tax-collector, office ‘peon’, and magistrate (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, Vol. 5, 474). They also described intricate details of Pallars’ elaborate wedding and death rituals involving gifts of money and the exchange of feasts, clothing, and jewellery, suggesting that not all Pallars were destitute agricultural labourers at the time of their study (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, Vol. 5, 480–484).

Colonial accounts of the Kudumbar, Kaaladi, and Kadayar and their relationship to the Pallars provide further evidence of economic diversity within the not-quite-incipient Devendras. At times, Thurston and Rangachari subsumed the Kudumbar, Kaaladi, and Kadayar within the Pallar fold, describing them as sub-castes and titles, but, at other times, they also appeared as independent castes with unique hereditary occupations. They worked, respectively, as headmen of Pallar hamlets, lime shell gatherers and burners (of human bodies?), and agricultural serfs with important duties in lifecycle rituals (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, Vol. 4, 106; Vol. 3, 6 and 52; Vol. 5, 477–480).

Internal diversity is also evident in early identity claims. Thurston and Rangachari listed Devendra as ‘a name assumed by some Pallans, who claim to be descended from the king of the gods’ (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, Vol. 2, 166). They also included Devendra as a Pallar sub-division and recounted this mythological origin story: ‘The sweat of Devendra, the king of gods, is said to have fallen on a plant growing in water from which arose a child, who is said to have been the original ancestor of the Pallans’ (Thurston and Rangachari 1909, Vol. 5, 476). The fact that the Devendra title and corresponding myth were taken up by *some* Pallars is further evidence of internal variation within what is now becoming a single caste.

Thurston, Rangachari, and a whole army of administrators collecting ethnological data had profound effects on the castes they set out to locate because they encouraged individuals to define themselves according to stable and singular caste identities (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). They also allowed such individuals to question and create new categories in the service of their interests. Caste, M. S. S. Pandian explains, took on a new speakability as colonizer and colonized participated in the processes of producing categories, which constituted a shift of caste from the ontic to the epistemic realm and enabled collective negotiations with colonial administrative institutions (Pandian 2007, 10–12). Such epistemological openings expanded even further for the Devendras and many other communities that have experienced the shift to urban lives and livelihoods, departing from rural contexts in which traditional services, like those offered by the Kadayar, were institutionalized.

Negotiations and (re)definitions of caste identity in reaction to colonial policy are evident in the mobilization of the caste formation now known as the Thevars, which is constituted by several ‘caste Hindu’ communities that fall under the Government of Tamil Nadu’s Other Backwards Class (OBC) designation.⁸ While ‘Thevar’ is not officially recognized as a single caste by the government, self-proclaimed Thevars’ political influence and their attempts to continue enforcing assiduous forms of Untouchability well into the twentieth century make them the Devendras’s greatest opposition. The landowning communities that call themselves Thevars have a long history of oppressing Pallars (the most populous of the present-day Devendras). That history became particularly pronounced when British power waned and the nation lurched towards independence.

While I avoid focusing on Devendra victimization, rejecting the tendency to highlight suffering that Sherry Ortner (2016) calls ‘dark anthropology’ and aligning my account with the self-image of most of my interlocutors, Thevars’ violent assertion continues to be an important catalyst of Devendra mobilization. The Devendra movement is not, however, an example of Sanskritization (Srinivas 1962), understood here as self-fashioning according to the ideals of Brahmanical Hinduism, nor a derivative discourse that exists only in reaction to Thevar assertion. Instead, the mutually constitutive opposition between Thevars and Devendras sometimes starts with the latter’s

⁸ The largest and most powerful caste-based designation is what the Government of Tamil Nadu calls the Other Backwards Classes (OBCs), which together constitutes about 50 per cent of the state’s total population. It is not surprising, then, that we find Tamil Nadu’s two major parties, the All India Annadurai Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (henceforth, AIADMK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progress Party; henceforth, DMK), which have alternated in their control of the state government continuously since 1967, conspicuously courting OBC communities by offering them favourable reservation policies and criminal justice clemency (Collins 2018, 147; Selway et al. 2011; Subramanian 2002; Ravishankar 2016). It is also worth noting here that the Pattali Makkal Katchi (Working People’s Party), which is dominated by Vanniyars (OBC), has sought to challenge the OBC bloc by demanding the establishment of a separate 10.5 per cent reservation for Vanniyars within the MBC subcategory that is itself meant to prioritize particularly disadvantaged castes classified as OBC. While the Government of Tamil Nadu implemented the special quota in July 2021, it is being challenged in the Madras High Court as of September 2021.

formation of caste associations (Mosse 2012, 260) and political assertions, which support their resistance to the former's domination.

From the 1920s through to the 1940s, the initial political consciousness of disparate castes, which would later consolidate into the Devendras, arose, but activism remained disjointed. In Ramanathapuram District in the mid-1920s, local leaders advocated for 'reform' and 'upliftment', imploring their caste fellows to seek education for their children, and to end 'backwards' habits like child marriage, alcohol consumption, and eating crabs and snails (Ragupathi 2007, 60–62). They echoed the self-conscious religious and cultural reform movements that were influenced by the colonial gaze in many parts of British India (cf. Chatterjee 1986, 67–91; Hansen 1999, 71–74; Soneji 2012; Heimsath 2015). However, in the same district in 1932 and 1934, Pallars advocated for themselves more radically.⁹ Violent conflict erupted between Thevars and Pallars in Ramanathapuram District when the latter refused to accept prohibitions, such as those on the clothing they could wear, their access to education, and their freedom to pursue work outside the bounds of the landlords' tracts (Ragupathi 2007, 92–93). In 1934, a riot broke out in the same area when Thevars refused to accept Pallars' modes of temple worship (Ragupathi 2007, 94). Meanwhile, in Thanjavur in 1936, a Devendra conference called for a much more conservative approach, passing a resolution 'exhorting their people not to oppose landlords, ... [and to] follow traditional values and obey the orders of the landlord' (Ragupathi 2007, 73).

Devendras's changes in religious affiliation further elucidate their diverse political strategies and their historical formation in opposition to Thevars. Christian conversion from the 1890s onwards held out the promise of upward mobility in the southern reaches of the Tamil country, which was sometimes delivered through missionary education leading to employment (cf. Hardgrave 1969; Mosse 2012).¹⁰ Christianity did not, however, diminish practices of Untouchability, a fact that led some Christian and some Hindu Pallars to convert to Islam in the 1940s. In what are now Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram Districts, more than 2,000 Pallar families converted to Islam between 1945 and 1947, eliciting a violent response from right-wing Hindu nationalist organizations, including the Rashtria Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu Maha Sabha, and the Arya Samaj (Ragupathi 2007, 77–78; Manikumar 2017, 59). After failing to reconvert the Pallars to Hinduism through propaganda campaigns, members of such organizations enlisted Thevars to help them violently attack the newly Muslim families (Ragupathi 2007, 78).

Alongside their violent assertion, which continues today, Thevars began claiming political power by assimilating separate but affiliated castes into

⁹ More radical political advocacy was also evident among Pallars who, in 1939, joined Paraiyars in agricultural labour unions organized by the Communist Party of India to demand better wages and working conditions (Ragupathi 2007, 82–83). Around the same time, some Devendras participated in the Quit India Movement, courting arrest and police violence, and advocating on behalf of the Congress Party, while others were adamantly pro-British (Ragupathi 2007, 83–85).

¹⁰ Nonetheless, changes in livelihoods and increased access to material resources did not constitute an eradication of caste identities. As Mosse (2012, 191) argues, 'being Christian offered a means to negotiate or modify, but never to substitute for, caste identity'.

the unified Thevar caste, which is now well known in popular parlance. At the broadest level, the Thevar caste formation, which also calls itself the Mukkulathor (roughly, ‘three united clans’) is constituted by the Maravars, Kallars, and Agamudaiyars who appear as different castes in colonial records and in the nomenclature of contemporary governance.

Historically, the Maravars were a clan of hereditary chieftains, some of whom ruled a kingdom of 2,000 square miles in what is now the southeastern-most region of Tamil Nadu (Price 2013, 20–21). Called the Sethupathis (guardians of the bridge), Maravar chieftains presented themselves as fierce warriors, but simultaneously paid tribute to and supplied troops for the Nayakkar kings who ruled from Madurai from the mid-sixteenth through to the mid-eighteenth centuries (Bes 2001, 556; Price 2013, 20–21). Maravars beyond the Sethupathi fold and Kallars (literally, ‘thieves’) played martial roles through the indigenous mode of policing—the *kāval* (protection) system—which allowed them to earn income and ‘power, social status, and prestige’ (Ravichandran 2008, 1–3). The Agamudaiyars (householder or landholder) lacked royal lineages and have comparatively less violent histories, but their affiliation with Maravars through marital arrangements afforded them the benefits of high status (Government of the Raj 1890, 30).¹¹

The British Permanent Settlement, the dismantling of the *kāval* system, and the criminalization of wide swathes of the Kallar and Maravar populations under the Raj (Price 2013, 19–25; Pandian 2009) diminished the power of all three communities and created conditions ripe for their unification against the British. Taking advantage of such conditions, Muthuramalingam Thevar (1908–1963), a wealthy landlord, self-fashioned Hindu renunciant, and Indian nationalist, began raising his voice on behalf of ‘the Thevars’, rhetorically consolidating the Maravars, Kallars, and Agamudaiyars.¹² He appealed to their frustration at their profound socio-economic losses under the weight of colonial rule and spoke out strongly against criminalization, staging demonstrations, which eventually led to the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1949 (Price 1996, 192). Early in his political career, Muthuramalingam was vehemently opposed to colonial rule and joined the Indian National Congress, which he then left to join the Forward Bloc, a leftist, nationalist party formed by a schism in the Congress (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2002, 3–4).

Muthuramalingam’s ability to unite the three castes depended, in part, on the revisionist histories he promulgated. He recast colonial criminalization as a remnant of the Thevars’ kingly, martial past that evidenced their valour and honour in the present (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017, 3).¹³ In his public life, he adopted the symbolic strategies of royalty, such as public beneficence

¹¹ As Dirks (1987) notes, the Tondaiman Kallars maintained a system of privileged landholding that favoured all three of the present-day Mukkulathors, which evidences the primacy of the political (as opposed to the religious) in Tamil social structure in the eighteenth century.

¹² I refer to Muthuramalingam Thevar as Muthuramalingam to avoid potential confusion between caste name/title and personal name.

¹³ Muthuramalingam’s formulation of Thevar identity can be understood, in part, as an articulation of the Dravidian aesthetic that arose from the non-Brahmin Movement and its less militant successor, the Dravidian Movement around this time (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017, 3; Bate 2009).

(Price 1996, 193) and declared that ‘the Maravars were the rulers of the country and they alone were entitled to rule the country’ (Manikumar 2017, 65). In addition to Tamil kingship, nascent articulations of Hindutva, which continue to influence Thevars, were reflected in Muthuramalingam’s self-stylization.¹⁴

Muthuramalingam’s performative production of unified Thevar caste pride was intertwined with his political mobilization. In the context of the 1957 state assembly by-election in which he ran on the Forward Bloc ticket,¹⁵ Muthuramalingam forcefully denigrated the Congress Party and those who supported it, namely Pallars and Nadars (Government of Madras 1957b).¹⁶ His rhetoric translated into what the government called ‘communal ill-feeling’ (Government of Madras 1957a). Government agents monitoring Muthuramalingam recalled that his ‘inflammatory speeches incited his community men to harass the Nadars and Harijans [Devendras and probably also Paraiyars]’ (Government of Madras 1957a). Government records also refer to an increased influx of petitions from ‘Harijans’ claiming that Thevars had been harassing them and interfering with crop production (Government of Madras 1957a).

Around this time, the incipient Devendra Movement was led by Perumal Peter, a Lutheran convert who called for caste solidarity and, above all else, the upliftment of Pallars through education, and by Immanuel Sekaran (1924–1957), a youth Congress leader and participant in the Quit India Movement who briefly served in the Indian National Army (Iyer 2016; Ragupathi 2007, 101–103). The latter adopted a more radical approach, directly addressing Thevar domination. He taught Pallar youths self-defence and openly rejected Thevar attempts to wield authority through the performative, ritual receipt of first respects at temple festivals (Ragupathi 2007, 103). He paid homage to Ambedkar and insisted on the importance of institutional political power (Ragupathi 2007, 104).

Immanuel’s radical, rights-oriented Dalit activism still echoes in the Devendra Movement that has developed in opposition to Thevar assertion. Starting with the Mudukulathor Riots (also called the Ramnad Riots), which broke out during the aforementioned 1957 by-election, recurrent attacks by

¹⁴ Under the mentorship of S. Srinivasa Iyengar, a Brahman Indian nationalist, Muthuramalingam learned Sanskrit and acquainted himself with Brahmanical Hindu philosophy. He styled himself as a Hindu ascetic, remaining single and explicitly rejecting the ‘pleasure and pomp’ of his father’s behaviours (Bhai 1995, 80).

¹⁵ As a candidate running on the Forward Bloc ticket during the first and second general elections, Muthuramalingam was successful. In both 1952 and 1957, he ran as the Forward Bloc candidate for the Aruppukottai constituency in the Lok Sabha election and for the Mudukulathur constituency in the assembly election. In 1952, he won both seats and chose to vacate his position in the Lok Sabha. In 1957, he chose to keep his Lok Sabha seat and vacate his seat in the assembly, triggering a by-election.

¹⁶ In the early nineteenth century, dominant-caste Hindus relegated Nadars to an extremely low status on account of their occupations as toddy-tappers. However, the Nadars’ savvy responses to social and economic change over the past century and a half, especially the educational opportunities offered by colonial missionaries, have allowed them to become one of the most economically successful caste groups in South India (Hardgrave 1969).

Thevars, sometimes with the complicity of state forces, have increased Devendra political consciousness.

Returning to the by-election in 1957, the Collector of Ramanathapuram convened a peace committee on 10 September to ease rising intercaste tensions that coincided with Muthuramalingam's campaigning. Both he and Immanuel participated, and in so doing, clashed in a now famous incident upon which the government reported:

During this conference, an altercation took place between Sri Muthuramalinga Thevar and Sri Emmanuel, a Harijan leader, which would indicate the attitude adopted by Sri Muthuramalinga Thevar and his followers to the Harijans of that area... The incident is that Sri Muthuramalinga Thevar is reported to have asked Sri Emmanuel, Secretary of the Harijan Welfare Association, Mudukulathur, at the conference whether he could pose himself as a leader of the same stature as himself and whether his assurances on behalf of his community were worth having. Sri Emmanuel seems to have retorted that though he was not of the same stature as Sri Thevar yet[,] he could represent his community and speak on its behalf (Government of Madras 1957a).

The following morning, while waiting to transfer buses in Paramakudi, Immanuel was assaulted and killed by a group of men wielding sickles and sticks (Government of Madras 1957a; Government of Madras 1959). Muthuramalingam and 11 others were accused in the case.¹⁷

Violence broke out a few days after Immanuel's murder. While an analysis of the documented cases of violence during the riots is beyond the scope of this article, their brutality and scale make this one of the deadliest conflicts in modern Tamil history (Government of Madras 1957a). Government records attribute the riots' outbreak in Arunkulam, a village about 20 kilometres outside of Paramakudi, to Devendras's opposition to the public performance of a song praising Muthuramalingam (Government of Madras 1957a). In this case, as in the caste-based identarian claims I analyse below, the aesthetic occupation of public space with assertions of caste pride sparks competitive animosity.

I want to point out here the interplay of symbolic and physical opposition between Devendras and Thevars. Thevar assertions of honour and respect sparked the Mudukulathor Riots in the first place and appear even earlier in Immanuel's rejection of Thevars' receipt of first respects at temple festivals, as mentioned above. Rather than rights alone, we find the ongoing opposition between Thevars and Devendras articulated in competitions over symbolic resources through which they both lay claim to markers of caste distinction (cf. Mosse 2012, 164–166). More recently, Muthuramalingam's construction of Thevars' shared royal past has evolved into claims of descent from the

¹⁷ Muthuramalingam was charged with abetment or instigation of a murder and was later acquitted. Of the remaining 11, all were acquitted save three whose sentences were reduced from the death penalty to life sentences after an appeal (Government of Madras 1959).

militant Dalit Panthers *Iyakkam* (henceforth, DPI)²¹ at the moment of its establishment in 1982, when it was a revolutionary collective (that is, not a political party) aiming to eradicate Untouchability and caste ideology writ large (Waghmore 2012; Lerche 2008).²² In the early 1990s, Krishnasamy split from the DPI, which had become an active political party, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (henceforth, VCK). He attributes this fracture, somewhat cryptically, to the refusal of Paraiyars to cooperate and, more plainly, to the hereditary occupational differences between Devendras and Paraiyars (Vaasanthi 2006, 204).²³ After the split, Krishnasamy won in a Legislative Assembly election in 1996 and established the predominantly Devendra PT political party in 1997, which gained popularity in the context of another Thevar–Devendra conflict (Vaasanthi 2006, 201).²⁴ Krishnasamy was elected to the Legislative Assembly again in 2011, but, unlike the VCK, he has not been electorally successful more recently.²⁵

Krishnasamy's decline may be attributed, in part, to his wariness of caste fellows who fail to align with what can best be described as his class status. In 2012, a few weeks after violent clashes between Devendras and Thevars led to false accusations and arrests in Ramanathapuram district, I managed to get an appointment with Dr Krishnasamy in Coimbatore, a prosperous town in the northwest of Tamil Nadu and his native city. I arrived at the hospital he and his wife founded and was greeted by a receptionist and a not-too-long wait. When I was ushered into his office, Krishnasamy looked up from his desk, which was piled with neatly stacked papers, and, in English, invited me to sit down. I asked Krishnasamy a few broad questions about the events unfolding in the state's southeast, such as 'What do you think about the situation (*sunilai*) in the Paramakudi area?' Mostly in English, Krishnasamy's reply revealed the complicated internal dynamics that trouble the formation of the Devendras as a single caste. He began evenly,

²¹ The DPI was a branch of the national level Bharatiya Dalit Panthers. Founded by Namdeo Dhasal and J. V. Pawar in Mumbai in 1972, the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers were inspired by the American Black Panther Party from which they derived their name. They reached their heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, initiating a renaissance in Marathi literature and practising radical, militant politics outside the framework of both parliamentary and Marxist–Leninist models. Importantly, the Dalit Panthers popularized the term 'Dalit' as a name for formerly Untouchable communities (Rao 2009, 192–194).

²² Although Krishnasamy claims to have co-founded the DPI (Vaasanthi 2006, 202), scholars usually attribute its establishment to Pallar attorney A. Malaichamy (Collins 2017, 239; Wyatt 2010, 117).

²³ The numerous, contingent, and complicated factors that precipitated the Devendras's split from the VCK are beyond the scope of this article and in need of further research.

²⁴ The popularity of Krishnasamy and his party surged in 1997 alongside the violent clashes between Devendras and Thevars that followed the state government's announcement that they would name a branch of the government bus system the Veeran Sundaralingam Transportation Corporation, recognizing Sundaralingam Kudumbanar, an eighteenth-century Pallar fighter who died opposing the British.

²⁵ The VCK's leader, Thirumavalavan, successfully contested state assembly and general elections, serving as a member of the Tamil Nadu legislative assembly for five years (2001–2006) and a member of the Lok Sabha for six years and counting (2009–2014; 2019–).

Down there, there are some rowdy elements. They will get into fights with the young fellows of other castes. One side will say, 'we're the big ones' [*periyavanike*], and then the other side will say, 'we're the big ones.' They fight senselessly, and then there are some problems with the police. It is a very rough area, and it is also poor so there is not much employment. The men stand around on the road and at tea stalls, so some fights arise ... There is not much that I can do about such things. There is nothing that I can do by going there ... I am an MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) and work with the government to improve the economic situation.

Krishnasamy then shifted to a discussion of the PT. He told me about the establishment of the party and about their petitions to officially change the Pallars' caste name to Devendrakula Vellalar, which have finally yielded results. The authority Krishnasamy claimed was rooted in his institutionalized status emerging from his official government position and his role as a well-to-do medical doctor. His stance was not an affront to 'the establishment', but was rather aligned with the well-worn moderate approach of effecting change from within.

Krishnasamy's mobilization is troubled by his competition with J.P.'s Tamizhaga Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (Tamil People's Progress Party; henceforth TMMK), which was established in the late 1990s but was mostly dormant during J. P.'s imprisonment between 2002 and 2010.²⁶ Mutual animosity colours the relations between the two leaders, who describe each other as 'waste' (that is, ineffective and useless). Such intracaste antagonism, compounded by both parties' adaptive electoral alliances with the hegemonic DMK, AIADMK, and even the BJP, leaves many Devendras sceptical of the possibility that their lives can be improved through the institutions of electoral democracy. Rather than putting their faith in party politics, disenchanted Devendra populations evoke the past to energize claims to authority in the present. A significant contingent of Devendras claim *atikāram* through revisionist histories. Such claims are, I contend, essential to their empowerment vis-à-vis the government and other castes, as it affords them the substantial power in numbers yielded by consolidation.

Despite the diversity of the Devendras, they consistently situate themselves within a collective past characterized by righteous heroism and exemplified by the life of the aforementioned caste leader Immanuel Sekaran. He was by far the most common point of reference when I inquired about the Devendras' history and identity, and in my observations of everyday interactions in homes, community centres, and public spaces. More broadly, the story of Immanuel circulated through conversations, songs, social media posts, YouTube videos, popular artistic representations (on and offline), quotidian conversations, self-published tracts, and ritual performances.

The version of Immanuel's story recounted to me by Ponnammal, a Devendra retired principal residing in Paramakudi, is typical. Sitting on the

²⁶ J. P. was accused of murder. He was acquitted in 2010.

cool granite floor of her neatly swept house during one hot and bright morning in 2013, Ponnammal presented Immanuel's story with the narrative amplitude described by Walter Benjamin (1968 [1965], 89). The art of storytelling, Benjamin (1968 [1965], 89) explains, does not involve the dissemination of information (raw data), but instead relays an experience that is shared in the moment of telling. This tale was not explained didactically or reflected upon with extra-narrative comments by Ponnammal or other interlocutors. It was relived in the tone and tenor of the voices and movements that recounted it.

Ponnammal loudly and slowly explained what she sees as a very clear-cut chain of events. 'There was Immanuel, right, and he and Thevar [Muthuramalingam] were at a meeting in Mudukulathor [sic].' 'The Congress meeting, right?' I asked misguidedly.²⁷ Ponnammal continued evenly:

Yes, and they were both in the Congress. You see, Thevar came in and Immanuel did not stand up. He sat, like this, with his legs crossed, and his foot pointing towards Thevar. Like this! ... And Thevar said something wrong and Immanuel extended his hand like this, like this. No one else would say anything except for Immanuel. But then they [the Thevars] got mad at his audacity (*tairiyam*), at his heroism (*viram*).

Ponnammal narrated the story with her body, sitting 'like this' with her legs loosely crossed, extending her hand and her index finger (as if scolding) with the zeal that she attributed to Immanuel. She mimetically embodied Immanuel's rejection of Thevar supremacy and his own 'Untouchable' subjectivity, actively participating in his courageous subversion.

Muthuramalingam's status as an older, wealthy landlord and successful politician set the normative imperative for the younger and lower-caste Immanuel to stand when the former entered the space of a gathering. In addition to his failure to rise, Immanuel's crossed legs, we are to assume, would have offended Thevar. While sitting with one's legs crossed is not an act of assertion in and of itself, socially, it can signify the cross-legged individual's superiority over co-present others whose feet remain more humbly affixed to the floor. Even more offensive to Thevar sensibilities is the idea that Immanuel pointed his foot and finger at their leader. Pointing your foot at someone is an act of aggressive disrespect and insult in South Asia and pointing one's index finger at another is again a sign of superiority, akin to a mother or boss wagging their finger in scolding.

When remembered and relived, such subversive corporeal acts are hyper-potent signs of resistance to generational Thevar domination and mythico-historical narratives that create and consolidate collective identity.

²⁷ The meeting was not in Mudukulathor, but in the town of Ramanathapuram. The mistakes I made demonstrate my initial confusion over the events that led to Immanuel's murder. The mistakes made by Ponnammal might indicate some of the same, but they also indicate how little the details of party politics matter to Ponnammal and many of her caste fellows who focus on a performative act of rebellion against caste domination when they remember Immanuel.

Ponnammal and her caste fellows' narratives unite individuals through their performative experiences of liberatory defiance, despite their widely varying socio-economic circumstances. Ponnammal, for example, is well off relative to her neighbours and to her rural relatives and caste fellows. She receives a pension from the government and benefits from the financial comfort of her daughter who is married to a government-employed engineer. Nonetheless, her affectively powerful recounting of the story of Immanuel narrates her belonging as a Devendra (cf. Simpson 2014, 15 and 209).

The heavily moralized tale of Immanuel, which is repeated often at formal and informal gatherings throughout the state, produces the Devendras as a collectively defined subject by building a mythico-historical consensus on the past. As Malkki explains, mythico-history is a process of world making that consolidates collective identity by educating, explaining, prescribing, and proscribing; it helps the communities it constitutes confront the past and the pragmatics of everyday life (Malkki 1995, 54). For Devendras, confrontations of the past manifest in strategic citations that disavow degradation and Untouchability and stake a claim to righteous and honourable heroism.

Needing all the help they can get in this discursive struggle, Ponnammal and others draw on the powerful aesthetico-political ethos of Dravidianism, the multivalent twentieth century 'Southern' movement that began as a rebellion against Brahman, North Indian, and orthodox Hindu power, but which evolved into a less socially radical articulation of retrotopic Tamil pride (Damodaran and Gorringe 2017, 3; Bate 2009; Ramaswamy 1997; Subramanian 1999; Pandian 2007). Broadly popularized by the celluloid images, print-mediated discourses (Cody 2015), and performative practices (Bate 2009) of two Dravidian parties, which have been electorally challenged only by each other since 1967, Dravidianism defines what it is to 'do' politics in Tamil Nadu (Gorringe 2011). In so doing, it equates political authority, *atikāram*, with behavioural and ideological ideals exemplified by its leaders, namely, *vīram* (heroism), *mānam* (honour), and *māriyatai* (respect).²⁸ In the Dravidian ethos that endures today, *vīram* appears as the sine qua non of the trifecta, as it is required to achieve and protect honour and respect (Price 2013, 160–1).

While such ideals were articulated in pre-colonial political practice in the Tamil country, they gained widespread appeal as central themes of Dravidian propaganda between the 1940s and 1960s (Price 1996, 143–178).²⁹ Widely popular Dravidian leaders, drawn from the burgeoning Tamil film industry, including Marudhur Gopalan Ramachandran (1917–1987) and

²⁸ I am not suggesting that Dravidian political rhetoric monopolizes such themes. As Pamela Price (2013, 172–173) points out, honour plays a major role in 'organising identities in movements of ethno-nationalisms' in a wide array of contexts.

²⁹ Dravidian leaders constructed the antiquity and glory of 'Tamil civilization' by invoking themes and tropes that coloured the texts of ancient and medieval Tamil literature. Rediscovered by Śaiva scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, works of Cankam literature (circa first century BCE to third century CE) and Śaiva devotionalism (especially the twelfth-century *Periyapurāṇam*) presented the figure of the *vīraṇ* ('warrior-hero,' noun form of *vīram*) whose self-sacrificial valour oftentimes resulted in martyrdom (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005; Monius 2004, 150).

Muthuvel Karunanidhi (1924–2018), presented themselves on screen and in person as embodiments of the glorious Tamil past (Bate 2009), as well as righteous revolutionary heroes who would stop at nothing to protect the Tamil people (Prasad 2014; Pandian 2007; Dickey 1993). Around the same time, true stories of young men self-immolating in protest against the attempted imposition of Hindi in schools and government institutions circulated (Ramaswamy 1997). Tamils of various ages and statures joined together in the spirit of *vīram* that had been generated by Dravidianism.

Nonetheless, Dravidianism ultimately failed to create a unified non-Brahman Tamil coalition, as Dalits were excluded from its centre and responded with the development of their own political movements (Pandian 2007, 196). It is thus not surprising that many Devendras avoid aligning with the dominant Dravidian parties and instead appropriate and deploy Dravidian behavioural ideologies as their own. Over the course of my fieldwork, I found that *vīram* (heroism), *mānam* (honour), and *māriyatai* (respect) featured prominently in discussions of effective Devendra leadership and mobilization, and in narratives about the longer history of the community.

Ponnammal closed her account with a direct reference to the ultimate act of heroism—martyrdom (*tiyākam*). She asserted Immanuel's *vīram* even in his defeat and death. Drawing a line across her neck, above which she bore an exaggerated grimace, Ponnammal told me that 'they killed him, those goondas [ruffians], right over there ... at the bus stop. He was a great martyr for our community' (*samuthāyam*). When Ponnammal and other Devendras tell the story of Immanuel, they endow his ultimate sacrifice with honour and righteousness, appropriating the power of heroes remembered in Tamil political and cultural history in order to repudiate narratives that highlight their historical oppression as Dalits.

While my Devendra interlocutors consistently referred to Immanuel, emphasizing his transgressive, corporeal rejection of Thevar domination and his subsequent martyrdom, they minimized the outbreak of violence that followed. As mentioned above, the Mudukulathor Riots erupted in the wake of Immanuel's murder. Despite the fact that some of my interlocutors lived through them, I usually had to refer directly to the riots (*kalavaram*) in order to hear anything about them. Devendras, in their refusal to focus on their victimization during the riots, construct the collective memory of heroism upon which their consolidated caste relies and align themselves, as individuals, with the primordial *vīram* they attribute to Immanuel.

What I aim to point out here is the way in which Devendra mythico-history functions as world making. Despite the destruction of Devendra lives and property that is clear in government records and which continues in the twenty-first century, Devendra mythico-histories rhetorically refuse the victimization that powerfully shapes Dalit political mobilization in many parts of the subcontinent. We must not understand Devendra narratives as 'singular ... but, rather, as [part of] the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (Butler 1993, 2). They present (and thus phantasmically constitute) themselves as righteous rulers and fierce heroes, carrying glimpses of the (imagined) past into the present.

Ritual remembrance: Constructing caste in the past

While Devendras's assertions are circulated in a wide range of contexts, one particular annual event, commonly known as the *Tiyāki Immaṇuvēl Tēvētiraṅ Niṅaiṅu Viḷā* (Memorial Festival of the Martyr Immanuvel Devendran), plays a crucial role in their collective identity-making. Celebrated annually on 11 September in Paramakudi, the event has grown steadily and significantly since the late 1980s and now attracts thousands of Devendras, as well as various political leaders and party cadres from across the state (and sometimes country).

Although I focus on the *Niṅaiṅu Viḷā* in what follows, it is not the only annual event celebrated by the Devendras. There are thematically comparable and similarly structured events that have increased in popularity in recent decades, including memorial events celebrating Veeran (literally, 'hero') Sundaralingam, a late eighteenth-century Pallar fighter loyal to the Nayaks who died resisting the British East India Company (Pandian 2000), and the modern-day Devendra leader Pasupathi Pandian, who was murdered by political rivals in 2012 and is now widely considered a martyr. Even the annual celebration of the *Sataya Viḷā*, the birth anniversary of the tenth-century king Rajaraja Chola, has become a space for Devendra assertion. Since at least 2011, Devendra and Thevar (and Vanniyar) activists have deployed ritual assertions of their royal lineage at the *Sataya Viḷā*, but they have, luckily, avoided each other, descending on Thanjavur on different days during the three-day celebration.

While status claims are conspicuously articulated at Devendra memorial events, the history of the *Niṅaiṅu Viḷā* demonstrates that status aspirations were not always at the heart of Devendra mobilization. My interlocutors and the journalist Muthukaruppan Parthasarathi agree that Immanuvel was first ritually memorialized in 1958, but the event began attracting state-wide attention with the help of radical Dalit political leader P. Chandrabose in the late 1980s (Parthasarathi 2011; Geetha 2011). During a long interview in his sparse home in Paramakudi, Chandrabose claimed, 'the reason for this function [*Niṅaiṅu Viḷā*] is really me!' While the leadership of the state SC/ST Employees Association in organizing the event means that its development cannot be attributed to Chandrabose alone, the underlying goals of Dalit solidarity and the destruction of caste that he propounds ensure that he and the Employees Association are ideologically in sync.³⁰ Chandrabose's vision for the event is reflected in the organization he established in 1988,³¹ the *Tiyagi Immanuvel Peravai* (Martyr Immanuvel Union), which rests on an atheist, materialist, and universalist Dalit human rights platform, and its public statements and monthly magazine, *Mārram* (Change), tend to focus attention on violence against Dalits from a range of communities. Running counter to revisionist histories of heroism, Chandrabose recently told the *Hindustan Times*

³⁰ An anonymous reviewer of this article for *Modern Asian Studies* informed me of the early leadership of the state SC/ST Employees Association in organizing the event.

³¹ Not coincidentally, the black granite memorial gravestone (the *samadhi*) that still stands in Paramakudi was built in 1988.

reporter Aditya Iyer (2016) about caste oppression and assiduous practices of Untouchability in the Paramakudi area.

Crucial for my argument that diverse strategies vex Devendra consolidation is the appearance of Immanuel as an early icon of Dalit unity aimed at destroying caste writ large. Chandrabose told Iyer that Immanuel fought for 'equality for all' and showed Dalits throughout the state the way to unify and mobilize (Iyer 2016). Iyer also quotes Dalit intellectual and historian Stalin Rajangam, explaining that Immanuel 'reemerged as a powerful symbol for the Dalits in this state ... in the late 80s and early 90s ... [in order] to unite the Dalits in the state under one banner'.

Chandrabose himself remains steadfast in his commitment to Dalit unity and his complementary rejection of status aspiration. During the aforementioned interview, his wife walked by and he pointed out that she does not wear jewellery, which is, in the Tamil context, a ubiquitous marker of prestige and status. 'We desire the equality of all,' he remarked, handing me the August/September 2013 issue of *Mārram*. I noticed on the back cover an advertisement for the upcoming Niṇaiṇi Viḷā, which was described in telling language as 'Cāti Māvīrarkaḷ Oḷippu Nāḷ!' ('Great Heroes' Destruction of Caste Day') (see Figure 1).

The advertisement also featured a sketch of Immanuel's bust below which the following text was printed: 'Hail to the great hero Immanuel Sekaran who fought for the destruction of caste'.³²

While many Devendras have moved away from Chandrabose's socially radical platform, the endurance of multiple conceptions of Devendra identity is evident in the semiotic repertoire of the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā's recent iterations. In the days leading up to the event, didactic visual and auditory signs telling the story of Devendra valour and honour become increasingly dense, so that on the day of the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā, Devendra presence overwhelms the space of Paramakudi.

In part constituting Devendra semiotic saturation, throngs of participants arrive on foot, on motorbikes, and, more rarely, in cars, usually carrying banners bearing the names of their caste organizations, villages, or political parties (see Figures 2 and 3).

They form a parade, making their way down the town's main thoroughfare towards Immanuel's ten-foot-long black granite gravestone, which is referred to as his samadhi.³³ Journalists and an attentive crowd watch as groups approach the samadhi, garlanding it with heavy strands of flowers and performing *aṅjali*—a sign of reverence and worship undertaken by raising one's hands and joining them together in prayer position at the chest or above the head. Announcers from Paramakudi's largest caste organization, which

³² 'Cāti oḷippu pōrāḷi māvīraṅ Immāṇuvēḷ Sekaranārukku vīraṇakkam'.

³³ Samadhi (from Sanskrit *samādhih*) refers to a state of meditative absorption achieved through ritual practice and devotion in Hinduism (and the religions it begat). Usually attained by saints and highly accomplished devotees, samadhi marks the end of earthly life. It also refers to the place where the act of samadhi occurred, which is often marked by a statue or stone. Immanuel is likened to a Hindu saint in the nomenclature referring to his gravesite. A grave is otherwise called *kallaṅṅai*.

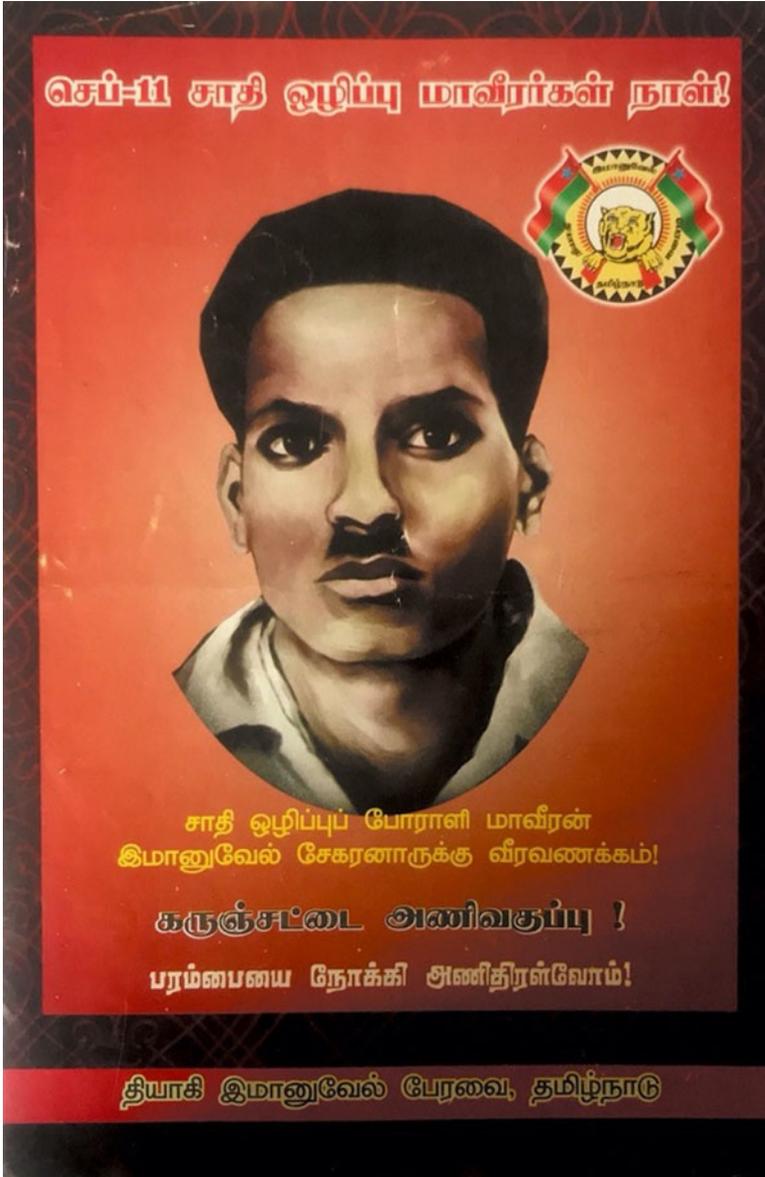


Figure 1. *Mārram* magazine August/September 2013, back cover. Source: The author, 2021.

plans the Niṇaivu Viḷā, narrate these acts of ritual reverence, so that all groups receive recognition, followed by applause and cheers.

While respects are paid at the samadhi, the party continues along Paramakudi's main road (see [Figures 2 and 3](#)). The visceral tone of the festivities is assertive, even aggressive, as songs that recount the glories of caste history blare through heavily amplified speakers and groups of men dance



Figures 2 and 3. Participants at the Paramakudi Niṇaivu Viḷā in 2012. *Source:* The author, 2012.



feverishly to the rhythms of the big drums beaten by their compatriots. Explosions of firecrackers intermittently add to the percussion, and the visual horizon is filled with loud flexboards and cut-outs featuring Devendra heroes (and aspiring heroes) of the past and present (see [Figures 4 and 5](#)).³⁴ Some of the signs are sponsored by political parties, but most of them are financed by

³⁴ ‘Flexboards’ are large (8 foot x 8 foot at the least) digitally printed posters mounted on wooden or metal frames and ‘cut-outs’ are enormous anthropomorphic flexboards of human figures that can stretch the length of three stories (Jacob 2008; Vaasanthi 2006).



Figure 4. Flexboard of Immanuvel at the Paramakudi Niñaiyu Vilā in 2012. Source: Author 2012.

caste-based organizations in various locales, which announce their sponsorship in the largest and most colourful fonts.

In addition to heralding the reach of Devendra identity across the state, the superabundant marking of public space with Devendra signifiers asserts the caste's greatness through what Bernard Bate calls 'sensory saturation' and Diane Mines describes as 'density' (Bate 2009, 80; Mines 2005, 163). In her analysis of Tamil temple festivals, Mines (2005, 163) locates density in material



Figure 5. Flexboard of Immanuel in various forms at the Paramakudi Niñaiyu Vilā in 2012. Source: Author 2012.

excess manifest in enormous offerings of food and other valuables that together are converted by worshippers into a scale of value: ‘The scale may be understood as relative “bigness” (*perumai*), and village residents display it and openly compare it hierarchically’. In the context of Mines’ (2005) study, a high value of *perumai* bespeaks the power of the god to effect change in the world, as well as the prestige of the village. In the world of (at least officially) secular politics, the employment of density as an iconic signifier of *perumai* follows the same logic. Public political meetings of Dravidian parties, Bate (2009, 78) explains, are characterized by excessive numbers of repetitive signs lined up one after the other, which saturate the viewer’s visual field. Aural signs, like blaring loudspeakers, are also part of the sensory saturation that Bate (2009, 78) recalls overwhelming his body. Together, the degrees of visual and aural saturation are ‘directly proportional to a particular organisation’s or individual’s “greatness” (*perumai*), “name” or “renown” (*peyar*) ... “weight” (*kanam*), etc’ (Bate 2009, 78).

Such assertions of status underwrite Devendra claims to *atikāram* by articulating their ability to make them, and iconically and materially signifying their achievement of control (even if temporary) over public space. The Niñaiyu Vilā thus simulates the actualization of *atikāram*, understood here as authority and (nested) sovereignty (cf Simpson 2014).³⁵

³⁵ Here the critical role of physical space is reminiscent of early modern European theories of political power, which posited a particular area over which one rules as the sine qua non of sovereignty (Machiavelli 2005 [1532], Rousseau 1994 [1755], Locke 2003 [1690]). However, Devendras do

Complementing articulations of Devendra authority through sensory saturation, the content of individual flexboards and cut-outs at the Niṇaiṇu Viḷā iconographically asserts the community's righteous heroism. Immanuel, of course, appears with the most frequency. He is often depicted in his military uniform, although his time in the Indian National Army was short lived.

In such depictions, he appears standing up straight or marching towards the viewer in a military uniform fitted with the pins and medals of a well-decorated soldier. He demonstrates the pride and dignity of a man who has been honoured at the national level and who thus transcends the historical oppression to which his community has been subjected. As Chandrabose claims, Immanuel 'came back [from the army] wearing his new boots and sporting his new ideas of equality for all' (Iyer 2016).

Even more frequently, Immanuel is depicted in another guise that highlights his *vīram* as he challenges Thevar authority. He appears sitting with his legs crossed, clad in a pure white, Oxford-style shirt, white *vēṣṭi*, and leather sandals, which are typically worn by Tamil men in formal contexts and which have become something like a uniform for (male) Dravidian politicians.³⁶ Immanuel extends his hand and points his index finger out towards the viewer, referring to the story of his conflict with Muthuramalingam during which he refused to see the Thevar leader as worthy of respect superior to his own. Some larger flexboards feature Immanuel in both forms, emphasizing his dual heroism as regimented soldier and spirited fighter.

The mythico-historical spirit of Immanuel is taken up by Devendra leaders who citationally embody his heroism in their promotional signs. For example, at the 2012 Niṇaiṇu Viḷā, three enormous, identical flexboard archways featuring the aspiring Devendra leader Suba Annamalai marked the beginning, middle, and end of the thoroughfare on which the parade took place (see Figure 6).

Because he does not have a significant support base compared to someone like J. P. or Krishnasamy, Annamalai attempted to make his newly established party known through eye-catching archways that associated him with Immanuel through proximity, mimetic postures, and sartorial choices.³⁷ A waving Annamalai appeared above a waving Immanuel, a sitting Annamalai above a sitting Immanuel, and a standing Annamalai above a standing Immanuel. The archways' bright red-and-green background referenced the hues' widespread adoption as Devendra caste colours, which,

not occupy the space of Southeastern Tamil Nadu to enclose and capitalize from it (as early modern thinkers would have it).

³⁶ A long, unstitched cloth, which is white with a gold border in its most formal iterations, the *vēṣṭi* is wound around the waist and reaches below the ankles like a sarong.

³⁷ Although he was represented only once, within in a graphic gold frame above his name, as in a portrait, the late local-level Devendra leader Pasupathi Pandian accompanied Annamalai and Immanuel. Pasupathi led Devendras in the Thootukudi district area, sometimes in collaboration with J. P. and sometimes in opposition to him from the 1990s through to the 2010s and was murdered in his home by political rivals in 2012. As Pasupathi is now revered as a martyr, Annamalai's inclusion of him strengthens his own appropriation of *vīram*.



Figure 6. Archway featuring Suba Annamalai at the Paramakudi Niṇaivu Viḷā in 2012. *Source:* Author 2012.

I have been told many times, represent the red blood spilled in wars and the green of rice paddy (as per Devendras's claims to be heroic warriors and a cultivating, land-owning caste).³⁸

The archway also featured text describing the event through the eyes of Annamalai and his followers. Augmenting popular understandings of the function as a day of reverence and remembrance, the archway referred to the event as the 'Mallar's Political Rising Day', thus explicitly recognizing the political potential of Devendra collective identity generated by the event. Below the announcement, in smaller white font, was a reference to the murders of the previous year (which I will soon explain): 'Please join us in honouring the *vīram* of the seven martyrs who gave their lives on the Martyr's Memorial Day'. *Vīram* and its maximal articulation as martyrdom prominently marked Devendra identity making in Paramakudi.

At the Niṇaivu Viḷā, Devendras construct collective identity through acts of remembering and celebrating mythico-history that bring soon-to-be Devendras physically and ideologically together. In addition to producing Durkheimian collective effervescence in moments of dancing and chanting, the Niṇaivu Viḷā plays a pedagogical role, 'reminding' Devendras of their proud past. Its success is rooted, in part, in the mediated diffusion of the tone and narrative content of the event through videos and images posted on social media, souvenirs (like mini Immanuel prints, statues, and t-shirts), and stories shared by word of mouth, which allow Devendras to claim heroism and righteousness as their defining and thus unifying features.

³⁸ Bright red and green are deployed by Devendras on their flags, t-shirts, websites, publications, decorative images, etc.

Recognition and refusal: the vulnerability of Devendra authority

Devendras's claims are not, however easily accepted by wider (non-Devendra) audiences, especially Thevars whose resistance to Devendra power is articulated in violent attacks and, more subtly, in their own competing mythico-historical claims. The righteousness and honour, which Devendras assert through the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā, stand in explicit opposition to the claims that Thevars make during their celebration of Muthuramalingam's birth (and death) anniversary—Thevar Jayanthi (or Thevar Guru Puja).³⁹ Observed annually on 30 October in Muthuramalingam's native village of Pasumpon (Ramanathapuram District) and at one of the busiest intersections in the large city of Madurai (77 km northwest of Paramakudi),⁴⁰ the event attracts thousands of Thevars. They propitiate Muthuramalingam as a divine ancestor and Indian freedom fighter whose leadership strengthened their own community and the nation writ large.

As Thevars do not generally accept allegations that Muthuramalingam was responsible for Immanuel's death, a reality that would conflict with his saintly status, both memorial events become spaces for competitive proclamations of righteousness. Even the fact that Devendras can honour their own caste hero in opposition to Muthuramalingam is itself an affront to Thevars' insistence on their superior status. What is more, the temporal and physical proximity of the memorial events precipitates an annual resurrection of the two castes' mutual animosity, making September and October particularly dangerous months in southern Tamil Nadu.

Despite contestation and conflict, the recognition that Thevar Jayanthi receives relative to the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā demonstrates that Thevar domination endures. Thevar Jayanthi rose to state-wide prominence about ten years before the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā, is celebrated on a much larger scale, and receives much more state support in the form of amenities like fresh water and emergency healthcare facilities. More importantly, leaders of Tamil Nadu's dominant political parties, the DMK and AIADMK, continue a long tradition of participation and legitimation that has policy implications beyond Thevar Jayanthi.⁴¹ For example, by way of a 1985 government order, the AIADMK carved out a new district from Ramanathapuram District that it called Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar District (Kumar 1991). A 1991 census handbook describes the district as 'traditional Marava country' and assures readers that it is 'appropriate and apt to name a district in honour of this great son

³⁹ The Niṇaiṇi Viḷā is sometimes referred to as Immanuel Guru Puja, but Immanuel's status as a Christian convert who then reconverted to Hinduism and his daughters' ongoing adherence to Christianity complicate matters. Evident in the language of most of my interlocutors, an exclusively Hindu framing of the Niṇaiṇi Viḷā is problematic.

⁴⁰ In recent years, Thevar Jayanthi has also been observed in the state's capital, Chennai, at the Muthuramalingam statue that was installed by the government of former chief minister Jayalithaa in 1996.

⁴¹ Notwithstanding other less instrumental contributing factors, the highly publicized participation of the DMK and AIADMK constitute attempts to win the votes of the large (consolidated) Thevar population.

of India, Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar' (Kumar 1991, 10 and 12). While the burgeoning controversy over the new district, indexed by the handbook's defensiveness, resulted in its official erasure, Dravidian party recognition of Thevar honour continues.

In 2019, Chief Minister Palaniswami expressed the AIADMK's support by reminding reporters that the party declared Thevar Jayanthi an official function in 1979 and that former Chief Minister Jayalithaa installed a bronze statue of Muthuramalingam in Chennai in 1996 and adorned the bust of Muthuramalingam in Pasumpon with a gold shield in 2014 (Scott 2019).⁴² Similarly, DMK president M. K. Stalin described Muthuramalingam as a freedom fighter and noted that 'The DMK takes pride in paying homage to the great leader' (Scott 2019). As major political leaders garland the grave of Muthuramalingam during the widely televised official government function, there remains no doubt that the state recognizes Thevar dominance and bends to their will. Devendras, by contrast, fight for recognition of their righteous heroism, balancing defiance with respectful compliance.

Instead of receiving the recognition they seek, Devendras are sometimes repudiated with brutal violence.⁴³ One such moment was the 2011 Paramakudi police shooting. The details of the events that unfolded on 11 September 2011 are contested, as government sources and many media outlets maintain that police were defending themselves, while civil and human rights organizations, NGOs, and scholars claim that the police killed without much provocation (Parthasarathi 2011, 15; Geetha 2011).⁴⁴ All parties have nonetheless agreed on the fact that police shot into a crowd of Devendra protesters, immediately killing five men.⁴⁵ Two more succumbed to their injuries in the local hospital.

In the days leading up to the shooting, Thevar–Devendra antagonism surged in the area. In and around Paramakudi Thevar groups allegedly tore down flexboards featuring Immanuvel. On 9 September, a 16-year-old boy by the name of Palanikumar, was murdered in Pallapacheri (a village about 50 kilometres from Paramakudi) by Thevars who falsely claimed that he had written 'Muthuramalingam Thevar was a eunuch' on a wall in the village. On 10 September, J. P. was arrested and detained in Pallapacheri where he had stopped on his way to the Niṇaivu Viḷā. In response, his supporters protested

⁴² According to the accounts of numerous journalists, the shield weighs 13 kilograms, making it worth about US\$ 500,000 (Mayilvaganan 2014). It is also worth noting here the widely known fact that Jayalithaa's long-time companion, V. K. Sasikala, is Thevar.

⁴³ Notably, the police in southern Tamil Nadu have become notorious for their discrimination against Devendra and other Dalit communities, which has increased in recent decades as such communities have become more assertive (Viswanathan 2009, 152–162 and 87–94).

⁴⁴ Numerous pieces of video footage posted to YouTube indicate that the sandals and sticks some protesters threw at police officers were not exactly life threatening.

⁴⁵ According to human rights activist Karthik Navayan (2011), one among the dead was a 65-year-old man who was killed not by bullets, but by severe lathi blows inflicted on him by the police. This suggests that the murders were not contingent outcomes of the police shooting into a riotous crowd by necessity, but instead were acts of violence intentionally directed at a visible and assertive Dalit population.

at Paramakudi's main junction outside the police station that was guarded by about 2,000 police officers, some of whom opened fire on the protesters (Parthasarathi 2011, 15).

Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha immediately responded to the murders in the Legislative Assembly. She claimed that the Paramakudi episode was the 'culmination of a chain of events' triggered by defamatory graffiti against Muthuramalinga Thevar. She did not denounce the police or refer to the long history of violence against Dalits in the area (Geetha 2011).

Such flagrant indifference fails to quash Devendras's desire for political recognition. Many of them are cynical of dominant parties, but they also desire and require state recognition, which has the potential to legitimate their mythico-historical narratives. At the 2012 Niṅaiṅ Viḷā, this tension was evident. AIADMK representatives were invited and participated, even as victims of the previous year's shootings were commemorated as heroic martyrs.

Small groups of cadres and (mostly local) leaders of major parties, inter alia the DMK, the North Indian Lok Janshakti Party (Folk People's Power Party), and the BJP also accepted invitations.⁴⁶ They paraded down the packed main road of Paramakudi with their banners and contributed to what became an enormous pile of garlands on the samadhi, bringing *perumai*—greatness—to the event. More importantly, the participation of powerful parties suggested, at least momentarily, the broad-based recognition of Devendra claims to authority.⁴⁷

Devendra authority cannot, however, be achieved without a struggle, as Dr Krishnasamy knows. During the 2012 Niṅaiṅ Viḷā, he arrived just after nightfall and was pushed up to the samadhi by his cadres, who had formed a protective barrier around him. He was handed a microphone, which he wielded to remind the crowd of the previous year's deep disappointments. Not only did the AIADMK fail to make 11 September a government recognized function (like Thevar Jayanthi), but they also failed to protect the Devendras from violence. In Krishnasamy's words, 'after two years, they still have not done it. And last year, Devendra men were killed by the police. A [memorial] pillar should be erected for the martyrs.' The crowd whistled and cheered in enthusiastic agreement, and Krishnasamy slipped away into the idling vehicle that was waiting for him. He had directly addressed Devendra desire for recognition by referring not only to the need to establish a government function, but also to construct a monument for the Devendra martyrs whose deaths had demonstrated the fragility of Devendra *atikāram*.

Arriving after Krishnasamy's departure, J. P. generated anxious anticipation that charged the crowd (see Figure 7).

⁴⁶ As an anonymous reviewer of this article helpfully pointed out, the participation of Ram Vilas Paswan, the leader of the Lok Janshakti Party, reflects pan-Indic Dalit aspirations that shaped the Niṅaiṅ Viḷā in earlier decades. He is president of the National Dalit Forum in which J. P. was also a representative.

⁴⁷ While the DMK's former leader, Karunanidhi, did not visit Paramakudi to honour Immanuel, the party's current leader and Karunanidhi's son, M. K. Stalin, participated in 2019 about six weeks before he made the same gesture for Muthuramalingam, as I mentioned above.



Figure 7. Crowd waits for J. P. at the Paramakudi Niṇaiṇu Viḷā in 2012. Source: Author 2012.

After about an hour-and-a-half of waiting, the sound of approaching drumbeats and chants indicated J. P.'s arrival. As the words of the advancing entourage grew louder, the crowd in front of the samadhi joined in: 'John Pandian—vāḷkkai Immanuvel Sekaran—vāḷkkai ... Immanuvel Sekaranukku vīra vaṇakkam, vīra vaṇakkam, John Pandianukku vīra vaṇakkam ...', 'Long live John Pandian, long live Immanuvel Sekaran, hail to the hero Immanuvel Sekaran, hail to the hero, hail to the hero John Pandian'.

A man of considerable height, J. P. was visible above the crowd, his face illuminated by the spotlights directed at the samadhi. His wife, Priscilla Pandian, bedecked in a shimmering silk sari and heavy gold jewellery for the occasion, accompanied him (see [Figure 8](#)).

The crowd erupted when J. P. approached the samadhi. A chorus of piercing whistles accompanied chants of 'John Pandian—vaḷkka! John Pandian—vaḷkka!', 'Long live John Pandian! Long live John Pandian!' Staring out into the crowd, J. P. performed *añjali* by raising his hands above his head and pressing his palms together (see [Figure 9](#)). He held this position of worship and salutation for several seconds, and the crowd's excitement soared.

J. P. had honoured participants as if they too had made the ultimate sacrifice that they attribute to Immanuvel and to the seven men who had lost their lives the year prior.

J. P. then approached the banner featuring the pictures and names of the seven victims of the previous year's state violence. Across the top of the banner, bold font read *vīra vaṇakkam* (hail to the hero) (see [Figure 10](#)).



Figure 8. J. P. and Priscilla Pandian at the Paramakudi Niṇaiṇu Viḷā in 2012. Source: Author 2012.

J. P. performed *añjali* before the fallen heroes and laid down garlands at the base of the banner as the crowd reached its deafening zenith, which continued as he swiftly departed.

The Niṇaiṇu Viḷā was over and quiet returned as participants slowly headed towards their homes. There was no closing speech, no formal goodbye, but instead a gentle fade-out that allowed the power of the event to endure. Participants were left with images of collective history characterized by *vīram*, honour, and authority, and, more importantly, their common cause with other Devendrakula Vellalars. While Devendras do not necessarily agree on the strategies or goals of their political battles, the fact that they are embattled brings them together.

Conclusion: Contestation, democracy, and collectivity

I have argued above that assertions of Devendra authority grounded in mythico-histories are complicated by their need for recognition by the array of communities now falling within the consolidated Devendrakula Vellalar caste and by those outside the Devendra fold. The former are oftentimes attracted to appealing histories that disavow their victimization, while some among the latter (that is, Thevars) are threatened by Devendra mythico-histories that belie their own. Others outside the Devendra fold, especially political actors, assert the supremacy of *their* authority by violently repudiating



Figure 9. J. P. performs *anjali* at the Paramakudi Niṇaivu Viḷā in 2012. Source: Author 2012.

Devendra claims but also sometimes court Devendras in order to gain their support in the form of votes.

The process of collective identity making the Devendras undertake thus serves to give them political power. The larger and more united they are, the more parties and their machinations of governance must attend to them. It is not surprising then that mythico-historical claims are increasingly common among other castes in Tamil Nadu. Arunthathiyars (SC) rally behind the late eighteenth-century anti-British fighter Ondiveeran, and Thevars have added three mid to late eighteenth-century anti-British chieftains—Puli Thevar and the Maruthu Pandiyar brothers—to the repertoire of caste heroes they honour.⁴⁸ Beyond Tamil Nadu, the North Indian Yadavs (OBC), who have become a substantial political force in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, adopt similar

⁴⁸ While a discussion of what are now sometimes called Arunthathiyar ‘subcastes’ is beyond the scope of this article, the historical applicability of the Arunthathiyar title to all of them is unclear. The novelty of their political consciousness as a united collective identity is evidenced by the Government of India’s most recent Scheduled Caste list, which includes all seven subcastes as different castes (Government of India 2017).



Figure 10. Victims of the previous year's police shooting at the Paramakudi Niṇaiṇu Viḷā in 2012. Source: Author 2012.

strategies. Yadav caste organizations with national ambitions, Lucia Michelutti (2004) demonstrates, have succeeded in their erasure of older caste divisions and facilitated a broad-based consolidation, in part through the construction and dissemination of self-aggrandizing historical narratives. Many Yadavs now claim to be descendants of the god Krishna and thus primordially predisposed to 'martial' qualities and, at the same time, congenitally committed to 'social justice'. As Michelutti's (2004, 46) interlocutors put it, Yadavs are 'born to be politicians' in democratic India.

The Devendras are thus one among many examples of caste-based mobilization that can help us understand political life in contemporary India, one of the most heavily politicized countries in the world, as evidenced by consistently high rates of voter turnout (Spencer 2014, xvii–xix in Banerjee 2014)⁴⁹ and by the dizzying proliferation of political parties that intersect with and sometimes produce caste and religious identities. As Thomas Blom Hansen recalls, there is a 'certain irrepressible quality ... [of] political life in India' characterized by 'incessant recoding ... and reevaluation of virtually every identity' (Hansen 1999, 58–59). Entanglements of personal and political identities are not, however, perversions of contemporary democracy or holdovers from earlier times. To again quote Hansen, democracy lives not just in formal

⁴⁹ According to Jonathan Spencer (2014, xvii–xix in Banerjee 2014), as of 2014, India's voter turnout was more than 60 per cent in ten out of last 15 elections.

institutions of governance, but in the ‘questioning and subversion of social hierarchies and certitudes that over time produce an altogether different society’ (Hansen 1999, 18).⁵⁰

The Devendras’s attempts to effect sociopolitical change that I have examined in this article demonstrate that those engaged in the questioning and subversion to which Hansen refers face an onerous task without end. They must construct a collective self with the power to overcome differences internal to their aspirational collectivity, which are increasing with economic diversification and urbanization. At the same time, they contend with both the competing claims of other groups and the authority of the state to grant them the status of official recognition. The Devendras’s claims to rights structuring opportunities that Mosse (2012) identifies in contemporary caste-based political mobilization thus include the rights to honour and respectability, values that he locates in an earlier historical moment of caste practices and ideologies. Ultimately, the symbolic and material dimensions of authority undergirding political power are both inextricably linked and irreducible to each other for the Devendras and other communities developing in a world characterized by rapid and profound transformation and perpetual contestation.

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⁵⁰ In this section of his book, Hansen (1999, 18) draws heavily on the work of the nineteenth-century political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, specifically his research on democracy in the United States.

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