Assertion for resources and dignity:
Dalit civil society activism in Tamil Nadu

Sundara Babu Nagappan

1 KEY FINDINGS:

Various report and studies over the years have observed that some of the major causes for the continuing atrocities and offences against the Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalised social groups are related to the issues of exclusion. This is seen in the context of entitlement to land and property, access to water resources, poor wage payments, indebtedness, bonded or forced labour as well as around issues of human dignity, including the compulsion to perform certain humiliating tasks that are or were traditionally enforced on the Dalits. Under this back-drop, this study has been separated into two parts, consisting of detailed ethnographic account of two different aspects of Dalit mobilisations in two different locations by two different Dalit communities.

The first part considers the land-rights movement in north Tamil Nadu, where Paraiyar/Adi-Dravida groups are asserting their claims to a share in common natural resources. This case study examines the role played by the Dalit Mannurimai Kootamaippu (DMK) network in and around Villupuram district. The Tamil name Dalit Mannurimai Kootamaippu means Dalit Land-Rights Federation (DLRF) and the English acronym is used in this study instead of the Tamil one in order to avoid confusion with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam political party in Tamil Nadu. The network brings together 16 organisations working on land related issues.

The second part deals with the movements for dignity and violations of fundamental human rights of the Arunthathiyars of west Tamil Nadu. It looks at the role played by the Arunthathiyar Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK, Arunthathiyar Peoples’ Progressive Forum) network in and around Tiruppur district in the context of Dalit civil society activism in contemporary Tamil Nadu. The AMMK works in three districts of western Tamil Nadu.

2 CASE STUDY 1:
DALIT MANNURIMAI KOOTAMAIPPU / DALIT LAND RIGHTS FEDERATION

Re-distribution of control over land and other natural resources can contribute greatly to the empowerment of the marginalised communities, particularly among the historically disadvantaged social groups like the Dalits. It can help reduce of acute poverty and improve food security, human dignity and social inclusion. In last few decades, the government has abandoned ‘welfarism’ for the Dalits in the context of land re-distribution. Instead it has been on the drive to acquire more and more land for its ‘national’ economic growth, in partnership with private corporations, and this has included land that was being used by the Dalit and Adivasi communities. Many protests have taken place across the country against such enforced acquisitions of land for projects like the Special Economic Zones (SEZs). These have already began to force both the central and state (federal) governments to talk about an adequate compensation and meaningful rehabilitation policy that explicitly recognises the rights of these marginalised sections of society. With this background, this study explored the
role particularly played by the Dalit Mannurimai Kootamaippu (DMK) or Dalit Land Rights Federation (DLRF) in the struggle in Northern districts of Tamil Nadu to recover Dalit lands and the dispossessed lands of the landless.

The DLRF network was formed in 2001 to coordinate the land struggles in the region and comprises organisations of varying strengths, including committed leftwing cadres and evolving local community based organisations. The ‘nodal organisation’ within the network is Integrated Rural Development Society (IRDS), a NGO based in Villupuram District started by Chinnappan Nicholas in 1981. Since the establishment of the network several aspects of the land reclamation struggle have been systematised in the region. The DLRF has been focusing on the following key issues:

1) Reclamation of lands of Dalits, specifically Panchami lands, temple lands, land made surplus due to the Land Ceiling Act and land made available under the Bhoodan movement
2) Ensuring Dalits their due share in the local common property resources
3) Enforcement of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, on matters than can help to ensure the former two objectives.

However, over the years they have expanded their activities to also include:

4) Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)
5) campaigns against the demarcation and forced acquisition of land for Special Economic Zones (SEZs)
6) implementation of the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe Sub-plan also known as the Special Component Plan (SCP)
7) using the Right to Information Act (RTI).

The DLRF network works on land rights and associated schemes and needs at both on a central (national) level with federations like the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, as well as state (federal) level agenda with federations like Tamil Nadu Land Rights Federation. It draws its support base from the organisations and grassroots leadership within its network. Village Action Committees (VACs) have been established in the areas of intervention in order to reach the target population and provide training for local cadres and functionaries. Half of the members of VACs are women. The DLRF network also has a system of periodic peer review and a core team within the network functions to document its work, to convene meetings and to implement additional supplementary and sponsored programmes.

### 2.1 Reclamation of lands in Villupuram

The issue of Dalit land rights, and particularly the reclamation of land, became the focus for IRDS in the early 1990s when it was recognised as a strongly emotional and symbolic concern for local mobilisations. For Nicholas the issue of Panchami lands in Tamil Nadu, which make up more than 250 thousand acres, was the classic proof of how life-line assets like lands had been taken away from Dalits, thereby crippling and condemning them to vicious cycles of poverty and misery. Reclaiming the right to Panchami land, Bhoodan land and the temple land would drastically improve the socio-economic conditions of the Dalits, he asserts.

The approach of IRDS was to clearly identify the ‘Panchami lands’ in every village through systematic study of land records and other documents while at the same time informing or ‘sensitising’ Dalit villagers about the issues involved. This was done through several rounds of group meetings, theatre programmes and similar activities, with the support of VACs. In the
areas where the DLRF is active those officials and lawyers who were in favour of the Dalit cause were identified and their services used. The 2005 RTI Act improved the access to information for the land rights movements.

As a result now, for the first time in their history, Dalits in this area have succeeded in gaining access to the ‘A’ Register of the revenue department. Moreover, they now have the necessary understanding of the legal jargon and technical terms in order to make use of the Register – people know what ‘Condition Patta’ means, what ‘DC land’ means, what ‘Citta’ meant, what ‘Monday petitioning’ means.

Durai Melchior, another member of the network, said with a pride:

“As a result of various exposures and training, now many of our people can even study land maps better than revenue officials”

Nicholas and his team felt that the occupation of Dalit lands by other caste-Hindus was an atrocity against them. They believed that careful use of the SC/ST Atrocities Act can be a deterrent factor for the encroachers, while preventing polarisation of society on caste lines. They also see this as a method to block attempts to reduce the issue to being a ‘law & order’ problem for the police officials.

The IRDS’s actions and reactions are self-consciously public. In fact it derives protection from its wider visibility. Periodic public notices and posters advertise the history of their struggle. The names and phone numbers of activists and lawyers involved from all over the region are boldly displayed at prominent places, all projecting power, scale and influence associated with the Ambedkarite organisations.

Action Aid India started a strategic partnership with IRDS in 2000 on the land rights movement. This was also envisioned as an integrated way to also promote women’s livelihoods, to ensure their empowerment through ensuring title deeds under their name, and to re-politicise women’s leadership. This was in resistance to the trend where their skills were actually being enlisted to de-politicise development process through ‘self-help groups’, ‘microcredit initiatives’ and the like, which avoided confronting the structural inequalities within which such initiatives had to operate.

2.2 Special Economic Zone in Thiruvalur district

The DLRF was also aware of the need to find ways of engaging with the effects that economic liberalisation was having in rural areas. This brought the network into contact with the struggle against an SEZ at Thervoy Kandigai.

The area under dispute is 1127 acres of grazing lands classified as ‘Mekkal Poromboku’ land. This land has been managed by the Thervoy villagers for several decades. There are seven irrigation tanks on the land, and it acts as a water catchment area not only for the Thervoy village, but also for the neighboring 24 villages within the Gumudipoondi Taluk of Thiruvalur District. However, in 2007, the Government took over the land, bypassing several procedures to establish a SIPCOT (State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu Limited) industrial complex. The villagers met all the relevant officials as well as politicians and expressed their dissent, but no concrete measures happened to shelve the project. In 2008, members of the DLRF, the National Alliance of People’s Movements, the Anti-SEZ struggle group, the Unorganized Workers Federation, Pennurumai Iyyakkam and the Association for the Rural Poor joined the villagers to support their resistance. However, in

1 Here Ambedkar Peravai is the platform that widely disseminates their actions.
the first week of January 2009 SIPCOT put up a board in the area allocating lands for a Michelin tyre factory, a glass manufacturing company and a brewery. They also cleared the forests in the area including demolishing some of the irrigation tanks and check dams. Since then, there have been several clashes and tensions between SIPCOT officials and the people of Thervoy over the land. Attempts are also still being made for legal recourse.

2.3 Contrasting struggles

Despite the DLRF’s involvement in both sites, Villupuram and Thiruavallur, there are remarkable differences between the two struggles. For example, in G. Ariyur village in Villupuram the struggle is an assertive one of reclaiming land assigned to Dalits by the erstwhile British colonial regime. Yet it is at the same time low-profile, negotiated primarily at the local level. Though organised in the name of Dalits, the caste dimension of the conflict is actually downplayed. Dalits are only a minority (about 30%) in G. Ariyur village although they receive solidarity from Dalits in surrounding villages. This struggle has been supported from the beginning by IRDS and the DLRF and has developed the strong added demand that land deeds be given in particular to Dalit women. Moreover, the struggle could count on a gradual acceptance by the government of the movement’s demands since they first began to put their case, in 1996.

In Thervoy village in Thiruavallur, on the other hand, a vast majority of the village’s inhabitants (nearly 90%) are Dalits. However due to previous inter-village conflicts over resources, particularly water, they cannot count on solidarity from neighbouring villages, even Dalit dominated ones like Kannankotai village. Within the village itself, however, the struggle has united both Dalit and non-Dalit villagers in defending the village common grazing lands, which are not registered in any individual’s name but rather managed as a common property resource. In Thervoy, unlike in Villupuram, the DLRF only entered the scene in 2010 after the struggle of the villagers had already gained public attention through media. Though the DLRF came in because the majority of those affected would be Dalits, the network recognises that it is in the village’s interest to emphasise the struggle as being about the village sovereignty (Gram Sabha) and democratic control of natural resources rather than Dalit rights. This is in contrast to the efforts of Dalit political parties like the VCK and BSP to promote the latter framing. Another significant difference here in Thiruavallur district with Villupuram site is that, in the case of Thervoy, the government has been hostile to the villagers’ demands, rather than accommodating. On the other hand, the struggle has also received more public attention, including from national solidarity networks such as the National Alliance of People’s Movements and international solidarity from French civil society groups.

3 CASE STUDY 2: ARUNTHATHIYAR MOBILISATION FOR DIGNITY

A very different scenario of Dalit activism exists in the Tiruppur district in the western region of Tamil Nadu. Firstly, here Arunthathiyyar predominate among Dalits, rather than Paraiyars/Adi-Dravidars as in Villupuram. Arunthathiyars are one of the communities that was long ignored and neglected within the discourses of Dalit studies. Both the state and civil society groups have contributed to exclusions among Dalit caste groups by this neglect. However, the political organisations of Arunthathiyars have had a long history. Though, most of the organisational efforts have been sporadic, restricted to specific regions of Tamil Nadu, there have been quite a number of articulate rebel and symbolic leaders down the line. Arunthathiyar movements have now added the figures of Ondi Veeran, a legendary military
commander, and the traditional folk deity Madurai Veeran to their icons. The latter is also worshipped by non-Arunthathiyar as well as non-Dalit castes. Despite the political organisation, the high dependency of Arunthathiyars in the western Tamilnadu on the landowning Gounders for their sustenance can be gauged by the way in which they have been integrated in the local Annamar Samy festival. This ritual is a primary mode by which the inferior status of Arunthathiyars is reinforced and internalised. The persistence of economic and ritual dominance–dependence relations of Arunthathiyar with excessively powerful Gounders or Naidus has contributed to a later and weaker political organisation among these Dalits here, who still experience several extreme forms of caste subordination. The space for public action is still highly restricted and the potential for measures such as reserved constituencies or protections such as the PoA Act to alter Dalit social condition is quite limited.

Another significant feature to grasp is the relative isolation and distinction of those involved in sanitation work and ‘manual scavenging’ even within the Arunthathiyar caste. It is reported by at least a few interlocutors that those belonging to the family of sanitation workers can find matrimonial alliance only in the families of other sanitation workers. There appears to be an imperceptible dividing line between Arunthathiyars employed in agriculture or other industries and those employed in sanitation work and manual scavenging, though the nature of division may vary from one region to another. The sanitation workers are undoubtedly the most exploited of the entire spectrum of workers in Tamil Nadu. Their situation exposes the caste unconscious of the Indian polity as a whole.

A third difference is that historically Christian missions have had a weaker presence in the region and a very small proportion of Arunthathiyar are converts to Christianity. In fact the Arunthathiyars see Christianity more as synonymous with Pallars and Paraiyars. Exclusive Arunthathiyar political organisations not only came into existance after the emergence of powerful Pallar-Paraiyar caste constituencies in the 1990s, but were also shaped partly through opposition to these other Dalit caste groups. They were oriented, among other things, towards lobbying for a proportional share of educational, job, and political reservations – something which was partially achieved in 2009.

Arunthathiyars face a peculiar challenge in their political aspiration. On the one hand they need to insist on their distinction from the other, comparatively autonomous, Dalit castes like Pallars and Paraiyars so that they can demand and implement their quota of reservations. On the other hand they need to find a way to forge an alliance with other Dalit castes to press for the implementation of measures for improvement of Dalit standard of living like the Special Component Plan, credit facilities at nationalised banks or land entitlements.

Second, exclusive Arunthathiyar social mobilisation has been slower and delayed compared to that of Pallars or Paraiyars, which also depended considerably on NGOs, missionaries and donor support. In consequence, there remains considerable overlap between Arunthathiyar NGOs, movements and political parties, sometimes all being headed by the same individuals. Moreover, in Tiruppur rather than a plethora of NGOs and movements in the region, effectively there is one, Vizhudugal, which has various spin-offs. Not only is Arunthathiyar NGO activism highly localised, but Arunthathiyar communities themselves have restricted marriage circles, limited mobility and a territorial organisation of the caste that is still active, and often do not speak Tamil as their mother tongue.

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2 Atleast this was the perception from almost all Arunthathiyar NGO leaders.
Vizhudugal is guided by its founder leader Maran Thangavel³, a man who was formed politically through being a leftwing trade union leader in the region’s major textile industry. The organisation was initiated as an Arunthathiya platform in 1993 with the initial support of Oxfam-NESA. Vizhudugal is an umbrella for a network of village level Arunthathiya associations which federate into a movement, the Arunthathiya Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam.

3.1 Arunthathiya Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam / Arunthathiya Peoples’ Progressive Forum

The NGO networks were generally being perceived by activists like Thangavel as essential bridge between social movements, centres of power and ordinary people. increasingly the politics of networking can also be seen as an interface between social movements particularly in the context of vertical mobilisation and linkages. However sustainable social and economic development depends on creating effective local organisations, with horizontal linkages across sectors and vertical linkages that enable grassroots groups to have influence on wider policy-making.

This was evident in the case of AMMK movement as well. The AMMK is the organisation which was earlier called Arunthathiya Munnetra Kazhagam (AMK). The word Makkal, meaning ‘people’, was added to AMK in 2009 to make it more secular and inclusive. In future after reaching a sufficiently empowered stage, Thangavel has said, he hopes it can be changed again into just Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (MMK), dropping the word Arunthathiya just like Vanniyar Sangam that had changed to Patali Makkal Katchi (PMK).

Pamphlets and posters of AMMK have sometimes photos of Ambedkar and Thangavel or Ambedkar and Periyar or sometimes only Ambedkar. In contrast Arunthathiya groups in the south of Tamil Nadu avoid pictures of Ambedkar because they see him as a Paraiyar icon. However ethnic and linguistic dynamics in west Tamil Nadu affect the way the AMMK wishes to project itself. The Gounder-dominated local politics are more chauvinistic on language lines, making it advisable for the Arunthathiya groups to resort to Tamil icons like Periyar, Ondi Veeran, Madurai Veeran and to make reference to Adi-Thamizhar. Their dependent status makes this more important for Arunthathiyars than the other Dalit castes like Paraiyar, whose groups have promoted themselves by using Dr. Ambedkar as an icon, sometimes even exclusively. On the other hand, the Arunthathiyars in the region also get patronised by the other powerful caste group, the Telugu speaking Naidus in the name of linguistic affinity and ethnicity.

‘Vizhuthugal’ Thangavel himself is evidently a point of reference as a political leader of this movement in this region. His style is that of a politician and a man of influence, and his prestige has specifically been enhanced by a visit to the UNHCHR, Geneva in 2008, where spoke on the plight of Arunthathiyar in Tamilnadu. This opportunity for Thangavel was sponsored by the French NGO CCFD. In all public meetings of Vizhudugal and AMMK, it has been repeatedly mentioned by several speakers that Thangavel was the Arunthathiya representative in the UN. Thangavel considers that this branding of his image has also altered the behaviour of local police and other agencies with regards to him and Vizhudugal members.

Between the years 1999 and 2003, Vizhudugal was very active on the land rights issue. The Vizhudugal coordinators and organisers had identified Panchami lands and Bhoodan lands

³ Maran Thangavel is also referred in several places as Vizhudugal Thangavel
⁴ CCFD is an association comprising 28 movements and services of the Catholic Church in France
and filed petitions with the Government on several occasions. According to Thangavel, when the encroachers were from smaller caste groups such as Valayars they were able to recover back some lands, however when they were Gounders or Naidus, it has not been possible, due to the strong political clout of the later.

When Vizhudugal first got involved in the land issue, they faced greater obstacles compared to the well-established processes of Dalit NGOs in Villupuram. Public protests were necessary even to get basic information on land from the administration. When they could not get details from the administration officials, they pasted posters all over the town areas protesting and asking the government to take action against the official by naming him/her on the poster. As a result, these officials immediately released all the information to Vizhudugal. Vizhudugal systematically processed the information that they received and submitted petitions with the government. In Tiruppur Taluka around 1700 acres were identified by Vizhudugal that were still under the control of people from the dominant castes. Vizhudugal could not mobilise enough funds and other resources to take the matter with High Court or Supreme Court.

The movement also addresses atrocity cases and the intensely humiliating practice of ‘manual scavenging’. Along with its affiliated NGOs, it confronts the exploitation, trauma and barriers that Arunthathiyar children face at schools and colleges or even as child labourers or bonded labourers working in several hazardous industries. The atrocities continue to happen at the grassroots level despite the legal sanctions. On issues like the manual scavenging, the Vizhudugal/AMMK also collaborated with several all India level NGOs including SKA (Safai Karmachari Andolan), the Navsarjan and the Garima Abhiyan.

Assertions for Arunthathiyar dignity and honour in public spheres are the counterpart to caste humiliation. In this connection, inaugurating village-level associations, the ceremonial placing of name-boards accompanied by pamphlets, fireworks, cultural performances and broadcast speeches and slogans aggrandising the leader Thangavel are important symbolic strategies attempting to create new political spaces. The international links represented by supporting European donor agencies have been equally important for more than just financial reasons. The Arunthathiyar political organisation has produced a large number of different and splinter fronts in the western region, as well as in the southern districts such as Virudhunagar, Tirunelveli and Madurai, where Arunthathiyar NGOs and movements had separate origins, mostly stemming from, or supported by, the social programmes of the Jesuit Madurai Province. Arunthathiyar leaders themselves still acknowledge this support as providing the ideological base, education and training for their movement in a way that other Dalit movements do not. In recent years, the church and development agencies themselves have become explicit in prioritising support for Arunthathiyar organisations.

Though the discourse of rights has become central to Dalit activism, the social movements and NGOs became more and more caught in the broad sweep of Dalit political parties. For several complex reasons the Dalit NGO networks weakened or divided. Meanwhile several of the external agencies, particularly the foreign donors and churches, reframed their Dalit support programmes as specific Arunthathiyar programmes, endorsing a narrative of Arunthathiyar as the most oppressed and subordinated among Dalits. The ‘Dalits among Dalits’ was also a popular slogan at the 2004 World Social Forum. The Arunthathiyar were not sufficiently politically and socially included, had been denied benefits of earlier NGO programmes and suffered the most disadvantaged profile in terms of income, assets and social humiliation. Donor agencies then focused on Arunthathiyar struggles with the stigma and indignity of leatherwork and ‘manual scavenging’ including removing human excreta from dry latrines, which had been marginal to earlier Dalit NGO work and campaigns. One particular cluster of development initiatives also focuses Arunthathiyar children working in...
the match and firework industries. However by focusing on the minority and subordinated among Dalit castes, NGOs and donors also face reprimands for fostering division and fragmentation. They are also accused of reinstating preferred forms of patronage in relation to weaker clients, in preference to having to give space for Dalit leadership of their own institutions. This is an accusation particularly leveled against the church groups, and now even on the Communist Parties. While some argue that the affirmation of separate identities among Dalit castes can be supportive of collective assertion of common concerns, others insist that narrowing constituencies on the basis of relative social disadvantage can also be ultimately politically self-defeating.