

The Arrogation of Being Tamil and Other Campaigns Against Caste Discrimination in Jaffna, 1927–1957

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Abstract

For decades, scholars have interpreted twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history through the prism of sovereignty. From calls for communal representation in the early decades of the century, to the attempt to establish Tamil Eelam at its close, the Sri Lankan Tamil effort to chart a self-directed political destiny is often considered a defining feature of the community's twentieth century story. Less discussed is another question that consumed Ceylon Tamil politicians, activists, and the island's reading public between the 1920s and the 1950s: should the so-called "depressed classes," or roughly a quarter of Tamil-speakers in the island's north and east, enjoy the same rights and privileges of their neighbors? Focusing on four campaigns that shaped these debates—equality of Tamil identity, equality in schools, equality in death, and equality in political representation—I argue that a multi-faceted and, at times, internally divided movement against caste discrimination operated over the four decades preceding the well-known Marxist-led temple and cafe entry protests of the late 1960s. Based on the family archives of key activists, police and other colonial records, and both oral and published accounts in Tamil and English, this article considers the larger circumstances that made landmark civil rights accomplishments possible, including the appointment of the island's first Minority Tamil legislator in 1947 and the passing of anti-caste discrimination legislation in 1957. Drawing insights from new work in Critical Caste Studies, the article reveals how a diverse, multi-caste, and multi-national coalition of Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists united to disrupt widespread discrimination decades before the rise of Tamil militancy. In so doing, this article suggests the addition of a second century-defining theme in twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history: caste struggle.

Keywords

Tamil, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, Caste Discrimination, Civil Rights, 20th Century.

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Introduction¹

For decades, twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history has been interpreted through the prism of sovereignty (Wilson, 1994; Manogaran and Pfaffenberger, 1995; Gunasingam, 2008; Cheran, 2009; Wickramasinghe, 2014). From calls for communal representation in the early decades of the century to the attempt to establish Tamil Eelam at its close, Sri Lankan Tamil efforts to chart a self-directed political destiny are often considered the defining feature of the community's twentieth-century story. Less discussed in historical writing, especially in the English language, is another question that consumed Ceylon Tamil politicians, activists, and the island's reading public between the 1920s and the 1950s: should the so-called "depressed classes," roughly a quarter of Tamil-speakers in Ceylon's north and east, enjoy the same rights and privileges of their neighbors?

In this work, I track a decades-long and little-known series of oppressed-caste campaigns that fought for and won long-denied rights, privileges, and public services, including something that today might seem obvious to an outside observer: public recognition as Tamil. Through their creative use of collective action, civil disobedience, political violence, the mobilization of print media, petitions to government, and public meetings, campaigners for oppressed-caste civil rights convinced people across the island that they deserved the same rights and privileges afforded to all citizens in British and, later, independent Ceylon. These rights included electoral representation, protections from education and workplace discrimination, the right to wear clothing of their choice, and equal access to public space, temples, restaurants, water facilities, transportation, and mortuary spaces. While examples of these forms of discrimination continue to this day and are currently the targets of social justice activists in Jaffna, twentieth-century campaigners should be credited with comprehensively challenging the ubiquitous and systematic deployment of these discriminatory activities that operated at the heart of Ceylonese Tamil public life up until the early 1970s. Over

¹Thanks are due to a host of institutions and individuals who made this work possible. Much of the research was conducted under the auspices of postdoctoral fellowships from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Government of Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, kindly supervised by Srilata Raman and Bhavani Raman. The American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies supported the operation of the Lanka Critical Caste Studies Working Group that Ponni Arasu and I co-convened in Jaffna between 2022 and 2023. Thanks are due to Ponni, R. Hibakaran, and V. Rupesh for the many lessons they taught me about allyship during this period and since. Ongoing conversations with D. Samuel, M. Thiruvarangan, and Father Sam Ponniah have all helped uncover the contemporary stakes of this story. Archivists at the National Archives in Colombo and Kandy were particularly helpful, and special thanks are due to Dr. Nadeera Rupesinghe and Mrs. Himali Weerakoon. Thank you also to the numerous readers who helped sharpen the work—some of whom must remain anonymous—including Rachel McDermott, Shamara Wettimuny, Dominic Esler, and Senthujan Senkaiahliyan. Family members connected to the story I discuss below have gone to extraordinary lengths to support this project. To the Paul and Jacob families—especially Daisy Paul and Vimala Amma—I offer my sincere thanks for the trust you have placed in me. Stephan Kanagalingam and Henria Aton have both provided critical support and encouragement for this project from its inception; few have done more to help bring this work into being.

the course of the thirty years of work I describe below, oppressed-caste leaders built the institutional foundations necessary to secure legislation that overturned the two-hundred-and-fifty-year legal basis for dominant-caste privilege.

This article focuses on four campaigns that helped shape the larger debate around caste inequality in twentieth-century Ceylon: equality of Tamil identity, equality in schools, equality in death, and equality in political representation. Here, I argue that a multi-faceted and, at times, internally divided movement against caste discrimination operated over the four decades preceding the well-known Marxist-led temple and café entry protests of the late 1960s. In so doing, this article suggests the addition of a second century-defining theme for twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history: caste struggle.

Though the war between 1983 and 2009 can partly explain why sovereignty has often been considered the defining feature of twentieth century Sri Lankan Tamil history, the clarity of this portrayal depends on the language in which one is working. In English, the search for Tamil self-determination on the island is ubiquitous, whereas references to oppressed-caste activism are few and far between. Up until the past few years, many have relied predominantly upon a single article published in 1990. In two more recent contributions, Selvy Thiruchandran's and Bahirathy Rāsānan's interest in exploring Vellālar supremacy is commendable (Thiruchandran, 2021; Rāsānan, 2015). The article, written by Bryan Pfaffenberger, drew on the 1968 clash at Māviṭṭapuram² to partially explain the formation of Eelam Tamil nationalism, or what he describes as "Defensive Nationalism." In his compelling portrayal, the Eelam Tamil national project grew out of a defensive reaction to Sinhala nationalism. While this may very well be the case, this description has also come to be the definitive interpretation of oppressed-caste activism on the island in English. Here, I offer an alternative that considers oppressed-caste anti-discrimination work as the result of oppressed-caste interests, rather than as an adjunct to nationalism, something to which Tamil oppressed-caste communities have long had an ambivalent relationship.³

In Tamil, the situation is more complicated. First-hand accounts of Jaffna-based social justice and anti-caste discrimination work have been published frequently, if irregularly, throughout the twentieth century. For instance, Cū. E. Cīṇṇappu's *Cuvāmi Nāṇappirakācarīṇ Cuviṣēcat Toṇṭu 1901–1926* [*Fr. Gnanapragasar and His*

²Tamil words have been transliterated using the conventions of the Madras Lexicon. All translations are my own, and have been produced in consultation with S. Kirubalini and Stephan Kanagalingam.

³Oppressed-caste communities in Jaffna have long harbored complex opinions about the Tamil nationalist cause. For decades, they fought to be considered as more than an afterthought by national Tamil leadership. Nearly all Tamil political leaders of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s came from elite backgrounds, and most were Vellālar. S.K. Senthivel, who was a young Marxist activist in the 1960s, has argued for decades that the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress showed no serious interest in the needs of oppressed-caste communities. He writes: "While [the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress] spoke of the unity and rights of the Tamils, non-violent struggle and their rivalry for parliamentary seats, they showed no interest [in] the plight of the downtrodden people living among the Tamils and [the denial] of their rights by the caste system and untouchability" (Senthivel, 2005).

Missionary Labours] and Rāja Śrīkāntaṇ's *Cūraṇ Cuyacaritai* [*The Autobiography of Cūraṇ*] describe educational activism and community building work during the first decades of the twentieth century. The All Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabai's *Camūka Munṇōṭi Em. Ci.* [*Social Pioneer M.C.*] hosts a group of essays by acolytes of one of the most important anti-caste activists of the period, M.C. Subramaniam (1917–1989). Kē. Tāṇiyal's (1927–1986) excellent set of novels, short stories, and essays were the result of self-learned ethnographic methods and community-based descriptions of the past.⁴ Works like these offer critical vantage points into Sri Lankan Tamil history largely ignored by professional historians in any language and challenge the idea that sovereignty is the century's key narrative.

Sitting somewhere between primary and secondary source, *Ilaṅkaiyil Cāṭṭiyamum Atarketirāṇa Pōrāṭṭaṅkaḷum* [*The Struggles Against Casteism in Sri Lanka*], written in 1989 by S.K. Senthivel and N. Raveendran, is the most in-depth description of Jaffna's anti-caste discrimination movement. Its authors are both significant left activists, and their work provides unique access into the logic behind much of the anti-discrimination and civil rights work of the 1960s and '70s. Senthivel and Raveendran also display a tendency to privilege their own party's contributions, for instance in their insistence that the Communist Party of Ceylon-Peking Wing brought a clarity of ideological purpose that united previously disparate causes.⁵ "It cannot be denied," Senthivel has written, "that there have previously been from time to time attempts to combat the caste system and reject untouchability."⁶ Given their enormous contributions, this focus is understandable, though there are consequences for the description of oppressed-caste anti-discrimination activism prior to the 1960s as piecemeal. The labor, bravery, and energies of many hundreds of oppressed-caste activists and allies over four decades of the twentieth century deserves to be identified and better understood.

Theoretically, to paraphrase Gajendran Ayyathurai, I attempt to consider some of the diverse counter-caste practices that Sri Lankan Tamils have mobilized in response to caste-based subordination and exploitation.⁷ In doing so, I seek to contribute to Ayyathurai's larger call for a transformation in the study of South Asia through an investment in Critical Caste Studies, a dedicated scholarly project that systematically rejects academic tendencies to render caste as something natural and documentable, rather than as a social problem and argument made by dominant-castes for political and economic gain.

As others have long noted, the writing of oppressed-caste centered histories presents unique challenges, as does writing about people and places still recovering from decades of war. I have complemented traditional archive-based work in Colombo, Kandy, and Kew with a multi-year search for sources in Jaffna. My interviews for the

⁴For more on Kē. Tāṇiyal's method, see *En Katai*, 1986.

⁵Having been a member of the same political party as Senthivel and Raveendran, it is not surprising that in 1962, Tāṇiyal repeated this same line of argumentation that previous sporadic efforts to overthrow caste oppression in Jaffna had failed due to an inconsistent ideological basis for the campaign. Kē. Tāṇiyal, 1962, pp. 6–7.

⁶Senthivel, "Thoughts and Experiences...", n.p. Emphasis mine.

⁷"It Is Time for a New Subfield: 'Critical Caste Studies,' South Asia @ LSE Blog, 5 July 2021.

larger project of which this article is part began with an unexpected meeting down an unpaved Jaffna road in 2014. They continued through the fourteen months I spent conducting dissertation research in Jaffna in 2016 and 2017, and during annual month-long visits over the subsequent eight years. During this period, relationships with the families of several activists have revealed key sources and breath-taking personal insights. These families could be reasonably described as “activist families,” for the clarion call of their (grand)fathers, (grand)mothers, (great)uncles, and (great)aunts still ring clear as a bell and continue to inspire the dedicated pursuit of justice.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the terms used by oppressed-caste communities to describe themselves have been deliberate and of great political significance. As a result, I am reluctant to use one single foreign and potentially alienating term to describe them. To complicate matters, activists and scholars based outside the island use the term “Dalit” to be comprehensible to and act in solidarity with international audiences.⁸ Prashanth Kuganathan’s use of the term *pañcamar*—meaning, “the fifth people”—is reasonable; however, I have yet to find evidence of the term’s self-referential use by oppressed-caste people on the island in the first half of the twentieth century (Kuganathan, 2014, p. 79). Considering the immense efforts that oppressed-caste Tamils made to claim titles of respect and humanity that I partly document here, I use language cognizant of and deferential to that effort: I alternate between “oppressed-caste communities,” “oppressed-caste Tamils,” and “Minority Tamils,” depending on the period under discussion.

Finally, I must point out three limitations. As you will read, I have not focused attention on the role of the Jaffna Youth Congress because its larger story has already been ably discussed by both Jane Russell and Silan Kadiragamar, though it rightly could be described as an incubator for several of the oppressed-caste led organizations described below. Second, the struggle for civil rights discussed here coincides with widespread discrimination against the island’s Malaiyaka or Upcountry Tamil community, their disenfranchisement, and the stripping of their citizenship. For reasons that need to be better understood, Jaffna-based oppressed-caste activists did not seek to coordinate efforts with the island’s Malaiyaka Tamil community, despite a distinct interest to think island-wide from the early 1940s. Because of this, I do not attempt to incorporate contemporaneous movements among Malaiyaka Tamils. Finally, the roles of women in oppressed-caste activism in Jaffna remain glaringly under-reported. Though all the activist organizations I discuss below were formally led by men, interviews reveal the expansive role that women played as public speakers, educators, and leaders. Dedicated work on this subject is critical if we are to ever truly understand how these communities fought for and claimed a host of rights long denied.

⁸For instance, the Paris-based Front de Développement Pour La Societe Des Dalits Du Sri Lanka explicitly frames itself as a Dalit organization, Kē. Tāṇiyal’s first novel translated into English was subtitled “A Sri Lankan Dalit Novel,” and the important Malaiyaka writer based in Norway, Sarawanan Nadarasa, self-identifies as Dalit. In his work, Sarawanan highlights his own Indian heritage, which may have significance for his use of the word.

In what follows, I consider four distinct, decades-long campaigns for oppressed-caste civil rights that challenged the dense network of discriminatory activities that characterized life in Jaffna in the first half of the twentieth century. I begin with the claim of a Tamil identity.

The Arrogation of Being Tamil

Defining Tamil identity is notoriously complicated. Like a moving target, the idea has changed over time and place, and been subject to contestation, accumulation, and fracture. Today, Sri Lankan Tamils generally rely upon a set of intersecting elements when thinking about who qualifies as “Tamil.” This often includes language, geography, culture, and race. However, it would today be confusing to hear someone’s Tamilness questioned based on caste, regardless of where they were born or live, in Sri Lanka or the diaspora.⁹ Roughly a hundred years ago, however, this was possible. In the Jaffna of the late 1920s, a widespread definition of being Tamil limited membership to dominant-castes, especially the landowning Vellālar, as well as various middle, artisan, or service castes. These land-owning, educated communities claimed to be the sole inheritors of literary, political, and sacred traditions, some of which date back two thousand years to the Sangam period, making them the rightful heirs of the title “Tamil.” Historically denied access to education and thus literacy, Jaffna’s oppressed-castes were often excluded from this definition of Tamil, and thus not heir to what was becoming an increasingly important regional identity and source of pride (Wickramasinghe, 2014, p. 275).

Though this absence of a caste requirement among Sri Lankan Tamils today can be explained as the result of the circulation of early twentieth-century political thought from South India (i.e., through the writings of E.V. Ramaswamy or Periyar) and the multiple waves of migration within the Indian Ocean and further afield, Jaffna-based activism also contributed to this shift. Between 1927 and the mid-1940s, a discrete campaign, led in part by oppressed-caste activists, used organization names, government petitions, and newspapers to publicly claim that oppressed-caste communities were Tamil, thereby seizing or arrogating the term, expanding its meaning, and convincing others of the legitimacy of their claim.

By the turn of the twentieth century, to be Jaffna Tamil was already deeply associated with certain elite and distinctly Vellālar characteristics. Facility in the English language, a dedicated work ethic, frugality, and fiscal acumen were all associated with this identity. “The Jaffna Tamil,” wrote one observer in 1902, “could be seen in every part of Ceylon, India and the Straits and even in more remote parts of the earth where they have gone almost by necessity, and their pluck, perseverance, intelligence, and

⁹This is more complicated for the Malaiyaka Tamils, whose Tamil and Ceylonese/Sri Lankan credentials have been repeatedly questioned and described as illegitimate. For instance, the most recently completed census on the island (2012) officially labels Malaiyaka Tamils as “Indian Tamils.” Considering the often presumed oppressed-caste status of Malaiyaka Tamils, their definition as Indian or otherwise foreign is impossible to separate from a question of caste. Øivind Fuglerud made a similar claim about the ubiquitousness of Tamil identities, regardless of caste, in Jaffna in the late 1990s. See Fuglerud, 1999, p. 20.

elasticity of character have made them conspicuous wherever they have gone; and it is not impossible that a new civilization could flow from Jaffna into her own hoary mother-India” (Nathanael, 1902, p. 34). It is not hard to see how elite Tamil social and political life reinforced the idea that to be Jaffna Tamil was to be Veḷḷāḷar: Tamil political leadership on the island was Veḷḷāḷar, and membership of the leading Tamil political organizations, such as the Ceylon Tamil League, the Tamil Mahajana Sabhai, the All Ceylon Tamil Conference, and the Jaffna Association, were all predominantly Veḷḷāḷar. Elected village and town councils were also almost exclusively Veḷḷāḷar, as was the management of almost all newspapers, schools, temples, and churches.

In February 1927, a group of primarily progressive, dominant-caste Hindus operating under the name the Jaffna Depressed Classes League, Chunakam, began publishing a newspaper called *Tirāviṭaṇ*. Part of the goal of the newspaper was to reform Hindu perspectives on caste and untouchability to stem the tide of oppressed-caste communities becoming Christian. In the preceding decades, Christian—and particularly Catholic—outreach had made noticeable inroads among Jaffna’s marginalized communities. Perhaps the most famous example of this was the work of Cuvāmi Ṇāṇappirakācar (1875–1947), who by 1927 had spent more than twenty-five years building Catholic communities, churches, and schools across the peninsula.¹⁰

The way oppressed-caste communities are described in *Tirāviṭaṇ* helps us see how language circulated in progressive Hindu spaces that explicitly sought to avoid the use of pejorative caste names. Though there was no single, predominant Tamil collective term in use at the time, a set of adjectives were nominalized to refer to oppressed-caste communities. These nominalizations generally relied upon the words *tāḷttappaṭṭa* and *oṭukkappaṭṭa* (both of which can be translated as “depressed,” “oppressed,” or “downtrodden”) and include *tāḷttappaṭṭavarkaḷ* (the downtrodden), *tāḷttappaṭṭa vakuppinaṅkaḷ* (the depressed classes), and *oṭukkappaṭṭavarkaḷ* (the oppressed)¹¹. More infrequently, we also find the use of *taṭṭukkeṭṭavarkaḷ* (those in need), *tiṇṭakkūṭātavarkaḷ/toṭakkūṭātavarkaḷ* (both meaning “untouchables”), and *kīḷ jāti*, meaning low caste.¹² Notably, none of these names are combined with or used to modify the word “Tamil.”

One of the first signs of a coordinated effort to claim a Tamil identity for oppressed-caste people on the island occurred the same year *Tirāviṭaṇ* was founded, in 1927. In July, the eminent dominant-caste Methodist educator Nevins Selvathurai (1863–1938) and a successful building contractor, Joel Paul (1893–1969), partnered with a group of Christian and Hindu leaders to found The Depressed Tamils’ Service League. Their goal was “to investigate the hardships endured by the Tamils of the Depressed Classes

¹⁰For a vivid Marxist critique of these activities, see Ṭāṇiyal, 1986.

¹¹Yāḷppāṇam tāḷttappaṭṭavarkaḷiṇ caṅkam cuṇṇākam” [Jaffna Depressed People’s Association Chunnakam], *Tirāviṭaṇ*, 27 February 1927.

¹²References to oppressed-caste communities in more mainstream newspapers of the period are rare, and generally refer to these communities solely by caste name. The *Intu Cāṭaṇam*, however, did on rare occasions refer to these communities as *tāḷnta cāṭiyiṇar* [low castes] and *tāḷnta vakuppār* [low classes]. See Vaṭamākāṇap paripāḷaṇam, 1930; Tāḷnta vakuppār piratiniti, 1930.

in Jaffna and in other parts of Ceylon and to endeavor to improve their condition, by means of education, social service, and other civilizing influences.”¹³ The use of the term “Tamil” in the organization’s name served several distinct purposes. It located them in a clearly recognizable political order and defined them as the representatives of a certain constituency. We can see that interest revealed clearly in a letter written to the Colonial Secretary two months after the League’s founding to request permission to appear before the Donoughmore¹⁴.

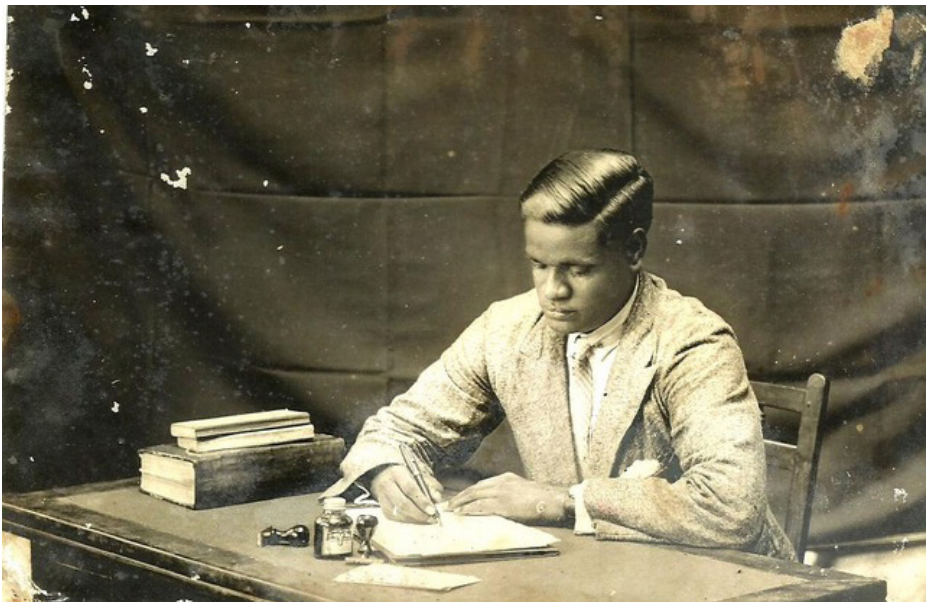


Fig. 1: Joel Paul circa 1930. Family collection. Photo reproduced with permission.

At the time, the Donoughmore Commission was widely expected to recommend a new constitution for the island and to remake the system of representative politics, which it eventually did in dramatic fashion (Russell, 1982). Representatives from multiple organizations advocating for the rights of oppressed-caste Tamils were given the opportunity to speak before the commission, including the Catholic Diocesan Union of Jaffna, the North Ceylon Workman’s Union, and the United Tamils’ League of Colombo. The Depressed Tamils’ Service League delivered evidence before the commission at Jaffna on 14 December 1927. The group highlighted a host of civil rights issues from educational disparities and discrimination in obtaining marriage licenses, to receiving care at pharmacies, accessing public wells, and the difficulty of obtaining equal justice under the law from dominant-caste juries.¹⁵ Four members of

¹³Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League, “Memorial of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League submitted to the Special Commission appointed to consider possible reforms in the Ceylon Constitution,” 7 December 1927. CO 1041/12, The National Archives, Kew, U.K.; hereafter TNA.

¹⁴Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League, “Memorial of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League submitted to the Special Commission appointed to consider possible reforms in the Ceylon Constitution,” 7 December 1927. CO 1041/12, TNA.

¹⁵Evidence of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils’ Service League (Witness No. 58). CO 1041/6, TNA.

the League gave testimony that day: Nevins Selvadurai, the Franco-Anglo Principal of St. Patrick's College, Father Charles S. Mathews (1879–1969), the American Principal of Jaffna College, Reverend John Bicknell (1877–1936), and Joel Paul. Paul's presence is significant, because out of the roughly two hundred people who sat before the commission—including many of the most important political figures on the island—Paul was the only known oppressed-caste person invited to speak.

By May 1930, Jaffna-based oppressed-caste claims to a Tamil identity began to be articulated directly to the reading public. We can see this argumentation in the Depressed Tamils' Service League's monthly newspaper *Jaṇatarma Pōṭiṇi*. The newspaper, which ran between May 1930 and January 1931, was both edited and funded by Paul. He had been educated in an American missionary school in Tellippaḷai and later trained to become a teacher, but this goal was thwarted by principals unwilling to hire someone from a Paṛaiyar, or drummer, background.¹⁶ Instead, Paul followed his father into work as a general contractor. With his keen mathematical mind and considerable work ethic, Paul built a successful construction firm responsible for some of Jaffna's most important twentieth-century buildings, including the now razed Jaffna Town Hall.¹⁷ Paul was also an active member of the Jaffna Youth Congress and remained in contact with Handy Perinbanayagam (1899–1977) until the end of his days.¹⁸

Records from Paul's early activist years are rare, though interviews with family and members of his organizations recall the fiery speeches he gave at public meetings. T. Arasaratnam, for instance, frail and more than 80 years of age when I met him, recalled travelling by train in the 1940s with Paul to attend one of the bigger public meetings in Jaffna town, made possible by the urban center. "For these type of meetings," he shared, "depressed class people from all over the village, they gather there. If they go to a particular village here, people won't come much. Now if you have a meeting in Tellippaḷai, only the people from Tellippaḷai will come. Not from outside. Jaffna means, without any fear they go. Because the town, no? That was the situation at that time."¹⁹

Though the formal leaders of The Depressed Tamils' Service League were men, we know this did not reflect the organization's complex assemblage of leaders and membership, let alone the audiences attracted to its public meetings. Interviews and emails with families connected to the organization provide a stream of references to multiple generations of women leaders who were forceful public speakers and key administrative aids.²⁰ At least three such women leaders are known, including

¹⁶Interview with Daisy Paul, 4 March 2023.

¹⁷"Tiṇṭāmaiyaī akarṇa ayaṛātu uḷaitavar" [The Tireless Worker Who Removed Untouchability], *Tiṇṭakaraṇ*, 17 June 1969; interview with Arasaratnam, 4 May 2022.

¹⁸Email correspondence with Robert Perinbanayagam, 5 October 2022.

¹⁹Interview with Arasaratnam, 4 May 2022.

²⁰Interview with Arasaratnam, 4 May 2022; Interview with a Paul family member who wishes to remain anonymous, 6 September 2025.

world together in a way nothing else could; both religion and caste undermined an essential, linguistic unity. Despite having been raised in a world that considered him an outsider as a result of his birth, Paul rejected the discriminatory foundations of the idea, and claimed for himself and his community participation in a unified, expansive sense of Tamilness.

By July 1930, the campaign to be considered Tamil was showing results. One of the first editorials carried by N. Ponniah in his new monthly newspaper *Īlakēcari* made the argument that “oppressed Tamils are Tamils.” Unfortunately, copies of this first issue are not known to exist in libraries on or off the island, and so the details of his argument will remain unknown for the time being.²⁵

It is difficult to track the speed at which Ceylonese oppressed-caste Tamil-speaking people started to be broadly considered Tamil over the course of the twentieth century; however, there is evidence that the shift was already well underway by the mid 1940s. From at least 1944, widely-read newspaper editorials started referring to so-called “high caste” Tamils. For instance, in an opinion editorial discussing caste and social disability in Jaffna, A. Arulampalam of Nīrāvīyaṭi noted that, “True, high caste Tamils and Hindus may feel wounded at the breach of time-honoured custom...” (Arulampalam, 1944). We also see a shift in this period among politicians seeking to speak on behalf of all Ceylon Tamils and thus claiming Minority Tamils as part of their constituency. Immediately following the Soulbury Commission’s Report, G.G. Ponnambalam outlined the platform of the All-Ceylon Tamil Congress that made clear their intent to represent all Ceylon Tamils, regardless of caste, and that the pursuit of separate electoral representation that would “divide the Tamil people” was a “short-sighted policy and suicidal for the race, though perhaps advantageous to certain individuals.”²⁶ Though Ponnambalam’s argumentation ran contrary to the interests of oppressed-caste activists, the highly publicized moment attracted the attention of a reading public well beyond the progressive circles that read *Jaṇatarma Pōṭiṇi* or *Īlakēcari*. The moment signals a powerful embrace and legitimization of the argument that Joel Paul had fought hard to put before the Jaffna public.²⁷

Next, I turn from the arrogation of a Tamil identity to the demand for education equality.

²⁵We know that this argument was made thanks to a brief note of appreciation Paul published in *Jaṇatarma Pōṭiṇi* in July 1930. “Īlakēcari,” *Jaṇatarma Pōṭiṇi*, July 1930.

²⁶“Tamil Congress and Reforms,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 5 February 1946.

²⁷Despite these efforts, the Tamil identity of oppressed-caste people in Jaffna was still not universal in the 1970s and early 1980s. Pfaffenberger notes that some Veḷḷāḷars denied that oppressed-caste groups were Tamil during his doctoral fieldwork between 1973 and 1975. Pfaffenberger, 1990, p. 83. Evidence also suggests that some oppressed-caste communities in the period did not themselves identify as Tamil. The militant activist-turned public intellectual Sivaram recalled visiting a Jaffna oppressed-caste village in 1983 that shared none of the nationalist fervor of the urban middle class. Even news of the Sinhalese-led, anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 failed to generate a strong reaction among the villagers. Civarām, 2005.

Equality in Education

Education was a second critical venue for Jaffna's oppressed-caste activists in the first half of the twentieth century. At the height of opposition to the movement, petitions were signed, public letters filled newspapers, thousands of dominant-caste parents were prosecuted and fined for keeping their children home from schools practicing equal seating, and more than ten schools were burned to the ground. This section considers efforts in Jaffna to claim and utilize rights to free elementary education and the various ways in which this cause was resisted.

From the mid-nineteenth century, Jaffna was one of the most literate and well-educated parts of the island. By 1929, Christian and Hindu institutions managed almost all the 424 schools and colleges in the Northern Province, most of which relied upon funding assistance from the central government.²⁸ This dense educational infrastructure helped make white-collar labor one of Jaffna's best-known exports. Up until the mid-1920s, this educational system was largely a dominant-caste domain. In 1920, the Ceylon Legislative Council passed an educational ordinance making it illegal to consider caste in admissions to state-assisted schools.²⁹ This law, which came into effect the first day of 1924, drew the attention of oppressed-caste parents, and in the years following, colonial administrators mentioned a new interest in education among Jaffna's "depressed classes."³⁰

By February 1925, one of the island's most prominent politicians, Sir P. Ramanathan, guided a set of resolutions through Jaffna's Hindu Board of Education that moved the board toward alignment with the law. The resolutions proclaimed it "the duty of every Hindu" to help those who "had the misfortune of being born in what is called the lower caste family attain through education the principles enjoyable by what is called high caste persons."³¹ Despite being framed as altruism, the resolutions did little more than encourage members to follow the law. Sir Ramanathan's efforts attempted to reconcile the Department of Education's apparent new willingness to enforce equality measures with concurrent dominant-caste opposition.

One way that managers of some Jaffna schools sought to subvert the legislation's caste equality provisions was by arranging school life according to caste, with separate facilities for eating, drinking, and sitting. Oppressed-caste children were generally seated at the back of classrooms, on the floor, while dominant- or middle-caste children sat at the front on benches or chairs, some with desks. In the 1920s, differential seating was hardly restricted to school rooms, and was ubiquitous in public

²⁸Ceylon, *Administrative Reports for 1929*, pt. I, p. D12.

²⁹Ceylon, *Educational Ordinance of 1920*, pt. III, para 13, p. 633.

³⁰Ceylon, *Administrative Reports for 1927*, p. A12.

³¹Educational discrepancies between communities were publicly justified based on cultural or natural attributes rather than unequal opportunity. For instance, according to an author who used the pen name "Common Sense:" "It is our common experience that the children of the people belonging to the castes which have been regarded for generations as high have in them the germs of certain noble qualities which the children of the low castes lack to a great extent, and have, on the other hand, positively harmful mental tendencies." "Equal Seating in Schools," *The Hindu Organ*, 5 March 1928.

and private spaces.³² It is not rare to hear of it still in operation.³³ It was this last form of discrimination inside schools that campaigners decided was rectifiable, as it most clearly broke the spirit of the equality provisions in the law.

Multiple connected efforts were made to compel government action on unequal seating. From July 1927, the Jaffna Depressed Tamils' Service League had signaled education to be one of three critical targets for social reform, along with poverty and "insanitation."³⁴ By that December, the League's leadership emphasized unequal access and treatment in Jaffna's schools in its written and oral evidence before the Donoughmore Commission.³⁵ We also know an oppressed-caste mother from the Roman Catholic Tamil school in Mayilitti wrote a petition to L. Macrae, the island's Director of Education, in which it was explained that oppressed-caste children were made to squat on the ground for hours.³⁶

In late February 1928, a group of leaders from the Depressed Tamils' Service League paid a visit to Macrae in Colombo and provided further details on the state of educational inequality in Jaffna.³⁷ Macrae reportedly assured the deputation that "the Government had no intention whatever of going back on the resolution to treat all school children alike." Macrae's own evidence before the Donoughmore Commission a month earlier also showcased an unwillingness to abide by discriminatory local custom, so we cannot rule out the prospect that white British administrators were setting policy they interpreted as protecting local minority rights. Though multiple actors are likely responsible, wheels were set in motion and a new directive was issued in 1929 that explicitly prohibited distinctions of caste in assisted schools.³⁸ Were the Department of Education to find that such practices were maintained, the school in question would lose its financial support and be required to transition into a private school supported by student fees.

Despite there being a varied collection of published perspectives on the question of equal seating, public opinion as such is hard to gauge due to obvious questions of representation. Even though it was claimed that "the opinion of most of the thinking

³²As public examples of the general practice were challenged in Jaffna in the first half of the twentieth century, differential seating was explicitly deployed to reiterate caste position and subordination, and as a form of insult. In the early 1940s, Ponṇar and Cellaia were respectively elected to the Chankanai and Paḷai village councils, making them some of the first oppressed-caste people to win elections in Jaffna. According to Kē. Tāṇiyal: "When village council member Ponṇar went to the first village council meeting, he was invited to sit on the ground. When Cellaia went to the meeting, a coconut tree stump was placed as a seat. These moments should be engraved in brass in the history of the democratic system of Tamils." Kē. Tāṇiyal, c. 1979, p. 4.

³³For instance, evidence of the post-war practice of preferential seating is noted by Bremner, 2013, p. 33.

³⁴"The Depressed Classes," *The Times of Ceylon*, 22 July 1927.

³⁵Evidence of the Jaffna Depressed Tamils' Service League (Witness No. 58). CO 1041/6, TNA.

³⁶"Hooligan Scare in Jaffna," *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 April 1930.

³⁷"Caste in the Classroom," *The Times of Ceylon*, 28 February 1928.

³⁸"Report of the Commission to Inquire into and Report upon the Present System of Education in Ceylon" (Sessional Paper XXVII of 1929).

people in these days” is “that depressed classes should be elevated,” debate centered upon whether government enforcement would be effective.³⁹ Challenging custom, it was argued, and imposing caste equality through state action, is most likely to provoke opposition, strengthen caste sentiment, and provoke violence.⁴⁰ It may even “create enmity between the two sides and make Nalavas homeless,” as the jurist H.A.P. Sandarasegara once argued.⁴¹ In response, oppressed-caste activists pointed out that all citizens should have equal rights to public services.⁴²

Meanwhile, others sought to link the demand for equal seating to growing calls for independence. The editor of *The Times of Ceylon*, for instance, registered his skepticism that independence would lead to adequate protections for the rights of minority castes, and questioned whether it would instead lead to the exchange of one form of domination (foreign) for another (casteist).⁴³ In fact, this concern had been a running theme through the Donoughmore Commission’s hearings and the evidence it received. For instance, the renowned Sinhala



Fig. 3: M. Sarlis. “No Swaraj To Lanka Until the Scales are Equal.” Painting on paper. CO 1041/10, TNA

muralist M. Sarlis produced a remarkable image making a similar point.⁴⁴ Drawing on Lankan, British, and classical Western imagery, the painting centers Lanka Mava, or Mother Lanka as Lady Justice, light-skinned, bejeweled, and dressed in a Kandyan sari. Lanka Mava stands before a map of the island and the Union Jack, and holds the scales of justice. The scales, labeled Minor Castes and Powerful Castes, are tipped

³⁹“Equal Seating in Schools,” *The Hindu Organ*, 5 March 1928.

⁴⁰This same argument was made repeatedly by opponents to state protections for the rights of oppressed-caste people, first against education equality, then against rights to public cremation grounds, and eventually, access to temples.

⁴¹“Equal Seating Ferment in Jaffna,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 18 June 1930.

⁴²“Caste in the Classroom,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 28 February 1928.

⁴³“Swaraj for Jaffna,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 April 1930.

⁴⁴For more on M. Sarlis, see Sanathanan, 2017.

in favor of the latter group. She points to the painting's argument spelled out: "No Swaraj To Lanka Until The Scales Are Equal." The image was apparently given to the Donoughmore commissioners as it was bound into one of the commission's correspondence files now held at the National Archives at Kew.

The 1929 directive to school managers to enforce equal seating or lose their funding created a sensation in parts of Jaffna, with some schools losing eighty percent of their students almost overnight.⁴⁵ Though students at certain schools were heading for the gates, some of Jaffna's educational institutions had accepted and integrated oppressed-caste children into their ranks for two decades. For instance, the American Ceylon Mission's Tamil elementary school in Tellippalai accepted its first oppressed-caste students in 1901 and then enforced equal seating from February 1905 (American Ceylon Mission, 1905, p. 41). Other schools, such as those started by Cuvāmi Ṇāṇappirakācar from the 1910s, were opened specifically in oppressed-caste villages and designed for community upliftment. By 1930, St. Patrick's College had long been operating without caste distinction, followed by Jaffna College, Hartley College, and Uduvil Girls' College.⁴⁶ S.R. Jacob's (1903–1974) experience as Jaffna College's first oppressed-caste boarding student in 1917 was recorded in vivid detail by John W. Bicknell, the son of Principal John Bicknell.⁴⁷

Members of the Hindu Board of Education in Jaffna were up in arms and passed resolutions attempting to delay enforcement and shift the financial burden to the Board of Education should school property be damaged as a result of the policy.⁴⁸ Neither tactic worked.⁴⁹ Major problems were initially reported from Elalai and Kopay. In Tuṇṇalai North's Wesleyan Mission Tamil school, Veḷḷālar students abandoned en masse, leaving just two oppressed-caste children.⁵⁰ Between 1929 and 1933, more than 30,000 fines were issued to parents for school absences, many of which were undoubtedly protests against equal seating.⁵¹

Fire was often used as a form of violent protest, by dominant- and oppressed-caste activists alike. Several schools had been burned in Jaffna's villages before the first case of arson reached the courts and was detailed in the press. Most village schools at the time were wooden-framed shelters roughly ten by twenty feet, surrounded by meter-high mud walls, all of which was covered in palm or palmyra leaf thatch. The schools were thus highly flammable and once set aflame, were engulfed in a matter of minutes. On 24 April 1930, the Vacāviḷāṇ Roman Catholic Tamil school was razed by a group

⁴⁵Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1929, pt. I, p. D7-8.

⁴⁶"Hooligan Scare in Jaffna," *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 April 1930.

⁴⁷Bicknell, 1981, pp. 21–22. Having been deeply inspired by M.K. Gandhi's writings, S.R. Jacob spent the majority of his life dressed in *khadi*, that is, simple home-spun cloth. Consequently, from the 1930s, he was known within his activist and union circles as "Jacob Gandhi."

⁴⁸"Hooligan Scare in Jaffna," *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 April 1930; "Equal Seating in Jaffna," *The Times of Ceylon*, 8 May 1930.

⁴⁹"Equal Seating in the North," *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 June 1930.

⁵⁰"Equal Seating in the North," *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 June 1930.

⁵¹Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1929, pt. I, p. D12, Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1931, pt. I, p. D12, Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1933, pt. I, p. D9.

of seven Catholic Veļļāļars, three days after the announcement about enforcement of equal seating was made.⁵² Two and a half weeks later, in Ēļālai, it was oppressed-caste people who set a school ablaze.⁵³ Hours before the fire was lit, Veļļāļars in Ēļālai met and resolved to ban those seeking equal seating from their land and palmyra trees, thus denying the local oppressed community their livelihood. Within weeks, schools in Tunņālai North and Urumpirāy were in cinders.⁵⁴ In all, more than ten schools were burned, and two villages were forced to pay for a local detachment of constables referred to as “punitive police” until the crisis abated.⁵⁵

Governmental reporting declared that by the end of 1931, with the exception of the Jaffna village of Pūtūr:

“active opposition to equal seating has died out, although it cannot be doubted that there are many who silently disapprove. Nevertheless the depressed class people in certain villages are afraid that if they were to send their children to school, the high caste people would harass them in various ways. They feel that it is not possible for them to resist them or prosecute them in courts successfully...”⁵⁶

In the years immediately following, Jaffna Government Agent E.T. Dyson recorded several visits to villages to investigate complaints against members of the government’s village-based administrative apparatus, including village committees, headmen, and police vidanes. “It is regrettable to note,” the same report mentioned, “that some of the Village Committees are encouraging opposition to equal seating by dealing with prosecutions for non-attendance according to their sympathies instead of in accordance with the law.” In March 1932, he drove out to Pūtūr to determine whether a headman and a teacher of an aided school there were working against equal seating. “The charges are not without foundation,” he wrote.⁵⁷ In July of that year, a caste dispute revealed that while Veļļāļars in Ilavalai had accepted equal seating in the Tamil language school, they “resented some Pallar boys being admitted into the English school.”⁵⁸ Later that month, G.A. Dyson fined the headman of Sirupiddy, V. Kathirgamar, Rs. 10 for “encouraging by his attitude opposition to equal seating in schools.”⁵⁹

There are indications that equal seating was not completely settled even by 1934, but colonial reporting from the period points out that “the desire of the depressed classes, particularly in the Northern Province, for education has been maintained...”⁶⁰

⁵²“Caste Revolt in Jaffna,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 1 May 1930.

⁵³“School Burning in Jaffna,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 15 May 1930.

⁵⁴“Equal Seating in the North,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 June 1930; “Opposition to Equal Seating,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 3 July 1930.

⁵⁵“Lawlessness in the Jaffna District,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 12 July 1930.

⁵⁶*Ceylon Administrative Reports for 1931*, pt. I, p. D12.

⁵⁷Jaffna GA Diary, 12 March 1932. 20/127, Kandy branch of the Sri Lanka National Archives, Kandy, Sri Lanka; hereafter SLNAK.

⁵⁸Jaffna GA Diary, 7 July 1932. 20/127, SLNAK.

⁵⁹Jaffna GA Diary, 29 July 1932. 20/127, SLNAK.

⁶⁰*Ceylon, Administrative Reports for 1934*, pt. I, pp. D8, A40.

As admission to and treatment in private schools was not considered to be within the government's jurisdiction, it would not be until the early 1950s that Ramanathan College and Parameshvera College—two of Jaffna's most elite Hindu institutions of higher education—accepted oppressed-caste children. In 1954, the leaders of the North Ceylon Toddy Tappers' Union testified to a government committee on the interconnections between economics and educational access.⁶¹ As J.D. Aseervatham, S.R. Jacob, G. Nalliah, and M.C. Subramaniam explained, "we feel [our children's recent acceptance into Ramanathan and Parameshvera Colleges] has become possible because our children are neatly dressed on account of better economic conditions. The management did not find difficulty as our children were dressed better."

By the early 1950s, Jaffna's oppressed-caste activists, along with brave parents and children, had successfully leveraged ideas of equality under the law to mobilize the island's Board of Education, managers and teachers, village councils and headmen, and even the Hindu Board of Education to enforce educational equality in state-supported schools. The record shows that in some places this project was fiercely resisted and in certain villages it took years for the question of equal seating to be resolved. Despite these challenges, the example of equal seating provides evidence that the Ceylonese colonial state was able to implement policies targeted at ending caste discrimination in public space using public funds, and that oppressed-caste activists played no small role in compelling the state's action.

I now turn to ways in which ritual spaces surrounding death became a venue for the campaign against caste discrimination.

Equality in Death

After the shots rang out, two men lay dead. Both had died instantly within feet of the burning funeral pyres. Though twelve kilometers and more than a decade separated their demises, the deaths of Caravaṇamuttu Rāmaliṅkam and Mutali Ciṇṇatampi were connected by an oppressed-caste campaign to exercise rights to public cremation grounds. This section demonstrates how public space for death rituals became important venues for oppressed-caste rights work. Between 1930 and 1950, ten known cases of the explicit use of cremation to claim rights hitherto denied were documented in contemporary newspapers, colonial reports, and police records. At least four other examples that did not lead to serious injury or police involvement are also known. As they did to secure equal education, oppressed-caste activists mobilized the colonial state to protect their rights. As we will see, the state was an imperfect defender of those rights, especially as independence approached and Jaffna's politics turned distinctly Tamil nationalist.

On 20 May 1931, in a Jaffna village outside Cankānai, seventeen Ceylonese police officers stood shoulder to shoulder, bayonets fixed, while stones rained down upon them. Their uniforms were already ripped and bloody from an earlier clash, while

⁶¹Ceylon, Sessional Paper XVIII. Evidence before the Special Committee to Investigate the Working of the Tree Tax System in Jaffna, 1954, p. 28.

one of their number, Police Constable Ibrahim, lay unconscious and bleeding from a strike to the head.⁶² According to police testimony, a group of several hundred Cāṇṭārs and Kōviyars had used clubs, knives, and rocks in an effort to exclude a local Paḷḷar community from cremating the body of an elderly woman, Tampan Cinnī.⁶³ Police Inspector R. Stewart recorded that, prior to the clash, he had tried to convince both the Cāṇṭār and the Paḷḷar community to resolve the conflict. “I told the Cahndas [sic] that we had to prevent a breach of the peace, and that I would use all necessary force to prevent such a breach.”⁶⁴ Working in tandem with the Maniagar, they tried to convince the Paḷḷars to bury the body, as had been their local practice. Stewart reminded them that the Vellāḷars own the land on which they lived and the palmyra palms they tapped for their livelihood.⁶⁵ The community declined to bury the body, which by Stewart’s estimation had been dead for about two days.⁶⁶ The community then requested police protection, to which Stewart responded by telling them to collect water for the rites from their own area and see to the cremation.⁶⁷

By the time the clash had occurred in May 1931, oppressed-caste communities in various parts of Jaffna had already started to adjust their funeral practices. As part of the investigation surrounding Caravaṇamuttu Rāmaliṅkam’s death, T. Suppiah, a Police Vidhan of Caṅkāṇai East, explained that it is not normally the custom of Paḷḷars to cremate their dead. “But now it is being done in the adjoining village Manepay. I know instances of Pallas being cremated. It takes place in Chulipuram, Chunnakam.”⁶⁸ Cremations by communities previously excluded from the ritual were clearly on the rise, and the practice appears to have been occurring for some time without serious incident. Sinnadiyan Kanapathipillai, a 30-year old Paḷḷar who had been part of the funeral party at Caṅkāṇai, testified that the community had already cremated five or six bodies before the day in question.⁶⁹ That year, the Administrative Report for the Northern Province of 1931 also sought to explain the noticeable growth in what were referred to as “riot cases” as part of larger changes in the social order: “During the

⁶²83/1559, 83/1560F, and 83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶³In his testimony before the inquiry resulting from the incident, Police Vidhan of Changanai East T. Suppiah explained that it was the Vellāḷars, Kōviyars, and Cāṇṭārs who objected to the cremation. Paḷḷar members of the funeral procession Sinnadiyan Kanapthipillai and Nannian Kuddiyan both noted that Cāṇṭārs and Kōviyars were in the crowd attacking the police, though neither was willing to name those they saw. 83/1560, SLNAK.

⁶⁴83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶⁵83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶⁶The decomposition of a body in May—often the hottest month of the year—is rapid, making the timing of mortuary practices all the more important. For several cases such as this, the timing of decomposition placed pressure on all parties involved, creating a deadline tied to intimate questions of respect and public health. In May of 1946, the body of the grandmother of S.N. Rajendram awaited cremation for more than four days as activists and city officials fought over where the cremation could be conducted. At the time, Rajendram was President of the United Youth League and an up-and-coming oppressed-caste leader. “Body Unburied for Four Days,” *Ceylon Daily News*, 4 May 1946.

⁶⁷83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶⁸83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁶⁹83/1560C, SLNAK.

year 26 riot cases were reported, as against 5 and 9 in 1929 and 1930, respectively. An assertive tendency in the depressed classes due to their growing emancipation and a corresponding reaction in higher castes has stimulated friction in certain quarters and led to this increase.”⁷⁰

With his constables lined up on the cremation grounds, the armed Cāṇṭār and Kōviyar contingent before them and the Paḷḷars behind, and Police Constable Ibrahim bleeding from the head due to a stone strike, Inspector Stewart’s instructions were clear: there was no law preventing the Paḷḷars from cremating the body, and he was to prevent any breach of the peace.⁷¹ As soon as the funeral pyre behind the police line was lit, according to police testimony, the anger of the Cāṇṭārs and Kōviyars was renewed. Stones continued to fall as the Cāṇṭārs and Kōviyars approached the police line. In response, PI Stewart emptied his revolver into the air above the advancing crowd, and took a rifle from one of the police constables. According to Stewart, as soon as the crowd reached ten yards from the police, “a man jumped forward from the crowd, with a drawn knife. I fired from the hip and he fell.” Numerous inconsistencies in this description of events were highlighted during the resulting investigation and trial, though PI Stewart was exonerated of any wrongdoing.⁷² In the moment, PI Stewart interpreted his role as the protector of public rights to the cremation ground, a choice that was then supported by the resulting administrative review.

Thirteen years later, in 1944, the political terrain had shifted and along with it, the significance of the movement to open cremation grounds. Adding to longstanding debates over custom and privilege were newly urgent concerns over the interference of outsiders. With the prospect of independence coming into clearer focus, fears of majoritarian rule and the threat of Sinhala politics “interfering” in “local” issues were increasingly voiced. This growing call, an early vocalization of a Tamil nationalist impulse, became an important element in the direction and development of oppressed-caste politics.

On the evening of 26 September 1944, Mutali Ciṇṇatampi was standing with about 25 family members in the Villūṇṇi cremation grounds, keeping watch over the body of Vallippillai, his elderly aunt, as it burned.⁷³ As much of the evening’s ritual had finished, most of the hundred or so family members had left before the shots rang out. Ciṇṇatampi died on the spot, while two kinsmen, Murukar Poṇṇaiyā of Point Pedro and Anthony Valichaur of Kāraiṇūr were also wounded.

The moment was preceded by years of effort by oppressed-caste leaders to convince the Jaffna Urban Council to provide space for oppressed-caste cremations in Jaffna Town. In 1941, a motion was put forth in the council to open Villūṇṇi to all castes, though the matter was tabled without a vote.⁷⁴ Then, three months before Mutali Ciṇṇatampi was shot, Urban Council Member Sam Sabapathy put forward a

⁷⁰Ceylon, *Administrative Reports for 1931*, pt. I, p. D13.

⁷¹83/1560C, SLNAK.

⁷²83/1560C, SLNAK; “Revolver or Gun Shot?” *The Times of Ceylon*, 21 January 1932.

⁷³Acting Inspector-General of Police W.T. Brindley to Minister for Home Affairs A. Mahadeva, 19 May 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁷⁴“Shots Fired at Funeral,” *The Hindu Organ*, 28 September 1944.

motion to create a crematorium for residents of the town who had no other facility.⁷⁵ No apparent action was taken.

The Government Agent of the Northern Province (GA NP), C. Coomaraswamy, spent much of the slowly unfolding crisis balancing between obligations to maintain order, public safety, and equality of access to public services, with the need to respect the concerns, actions, and inactions of local elected officials under whose jurisdiction the cremation grounds fell. Through the Villūnri episode, Chairman of the Jaffna Urban Council C. Ponnambalam struck a conservative line. He frequently argued that custom had taken on the power of law, that existing facilities for oppressed-caste cremation were sufficient, and that the real danger of the moment was the threat to public order. That he took such a firm position belied his complicated relationship to the growing significance of oppressed-caste politics. Some months before the crisis, he had put forward a motion that sought to curb caste discrimination in restaurants and tea shops in the Urban Council.⁷⁶ Though he quickly withdrew the motion, explaining that he was “guided by the views of the majority of citizens,” his actions reveal the growing appeal of catering to a new constituency.⁷⁷

At multiple stages throughout the conflict, GA NP Coomaraswamy repeatedly appealed to members of the council to resolve the situation. He offered suggestions to designate part of Villūnri a general public cremation ground and, when that idea was rejected, to open a new general crematorium within the town limits.⁷⁸ During a conference with the leaders of the Urban Council in October 1944, he emphasized that he spoke to them as one of their own—a Vellāḷar and Caiva Hindu—and that negotiating a conclusion would avoid a future breach of the peace.⁷⁹

Two days after Ciṇṇatampi was shot, his family requested permission to cremate his body at Villūnri. Standing before the GA NP Coomaraswamy and the Superintendent of Police (SP) Osmund de Silva, the family’s Vellāḷar representative V. Sittampalam asked for an immediate response in writing from Chairman C. Ponnambalam.⁸⁰ The request was denied and Ciṇṇatampi’s body was cremated in Kolōmpōturai, outside the Jaffna town limits.

Only a few days later, on 1 October 1944, violence was narrowly averted by police in Arāli North when a Nalavar funeral party cremated the body of a member of their community despite opposition by two nearby communities.⁸¹ In his correspondence with GA NP Coomaraswamy, SP de Silva also made clear that he wanted direction as to what attitude the police should adopt should the Nalavar community request police protection to cremate another body at Villūnri. The question appears to have been settled nine months later, during a meeting between the GA NP and police leadership when it was revealed that the “police have no legal right to prohibit cremation or burial

⁷⁵“Jaffna Seeks Textile Quota,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 June 1944.

⁷⁶“Stormy Meeting of Jaffna UC,” *Ceylon Daily News*, 14 September 1943.

⁷⁷“A Challenge to the Tamil Congress,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 29 September 1944.

⁷⁸“Villundi Tragedy Sequel,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 19 October 1944.

⁷⁹“Not Willing to Share Villundi Crematorium,” *The Observer*, 18 October 1944.

⁸⁰“Intolerance Over Crematorium,” *Ceylon Daily News*, 29 September 1944.

⁸¹Osmund de Silva to C. Coomaraswamy, 3 October 1944. 83/1317, SLNAK.

of Nalavas at Villundi but, if a breach of the peace is anticipated, action could be taken under Section 114 Cr. P.C.”⁸² Section 114 of the Criminal Penal Code is an insurrection clause.

By the first week of May 1945, no progress had been made on the proposed general cremation ground within the Jaffna Urban Council limits. In response, activists arranged for the body of another Nalavar community member to be cremated at Villūnri. Soon after the cremation on 7 May, a telegram was sent to the Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Ranulph Bacon in Colombo by S.R. Jacob, the President of the North Ceylon Minority Tamils Mahasabha to inform him of the cremation and requesting police protection for the collection of ashes.⁸³ This was followed up the following day by another telegram that added “WHY NO REPLY MATTER URGENT.”⁸⁴ Jacob had also written directly to Ceylon’s Governor Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore appealing for protection.⁸⁵

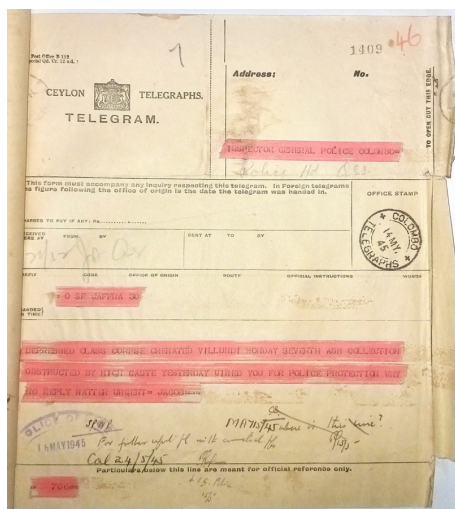
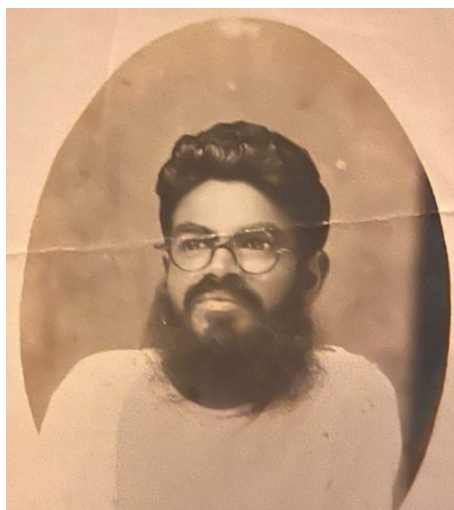


Fig. 4: President of the North Ceylon Minority Tamils Mahasabha S.R. Jacob circa 1930. Family collection. Photograph reproduced with permission. Fig. 5: The telegram Jacob sent to Inspector General of Police Ranulph Bacon to request police protection for the collection of ashes at Villūnri. 83/1317, SLNAK. Photograph credit: Stephan Kanagalingam.

Within a month, A. Nagalingam of the Saiva Virithi Sangam of Kottāṭi had sent the Minister of Home Affairs a petition signed by 27 members of the organization, calling on him to act.⁸⁶ Nagalingam claimed that the police were “the aiders and

⁸²“Notes of Conference held at Kachcheri on 10.6.45.” 83/1317, SLNAK. After further inquiries by the SP NP, the IGP finally weighed in on this question three months later, in September 1945, confirming “the Police have no legal right to prevent the Depressed Classes entering the Villundi crematorium to cremate their dead.” SP NP to IGP, manuscript note, 12 September 1945, with answer of 15 September 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁸³S.R. Jacob to Ranulph Bacon, Telegram, 13 May 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁸⁴S.R. Jacob to Ranulph Bacon, Telegram, 14 May 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁸⁵Acting Inspector-General of Police W.T. Brindley to Minister for Home Affairs A. Mahadeva, 29 May 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

⁸⁶83/1317, SLNAK.

abetters” of the Nalavars in their criminal activity and “doing everything possible...to upset religious custom.”

In response to the petition, Jaffna Chief Inspector of Police T.B. Herath forcefully defended the police’s approach. “I submit that it is a libel on the part of the Petitioners to say that we have taken sides in this matter,” he argued. “It was in this connection that the leader of the depressed classes asked me for Police protection to remove the Ashes from the Crematorium. I told him that I would do nothing of the kind and also informed him that I would not hesitate to place him in custody if he was going to be the means of a serious breach of the peace. Our policy has been and is strictly impartial and within the law. As a result the intelligent and disinterested public here appear to have confidence in the Police at present.”⁸⁷ According to reports, the ashes were never collected.

In 1931, the Jaffna police went to great lengths to enforce the law of equal access, even to the point of showing armed force and opening fire on a group of dominant-caste protesters and their enforcers after having been attacked. By 1944, when an oppressed-caste community sought to exercise their legal rights, the government establishment considered and then declined that same protection. Government officials appear to have accepted the plausibility of the arguments put forth by leaders of the Jaffna Urban Council that custom had obtained the power of law, and the contravention of custom was a threat to public safety.

Finally, we now turn to oppressed-caste efforts to ensure electoral representation.

Equality in Electoral Representation

Between 1927 and 1946, three commissions guided the establishment of Ceylon’s system of national representative government. Though adjustments have been numerous, many of the changes this period put into place remain constituents of Sri Lanka’s system of government. In hundreds of interviews across the island, senior British and Ceylonese administrators spoke with a vast array of individuals who insisted on making their claims to representation heard. In 1927, a commission led by Richard Hely-Hutchinson, the 6th Earl of Donoughmore, recommended universal adult suffrage and paved the way for widespread adult participation in the democratic process. This was followed by a second British-led commission in 1945, in which Herwald Ramsbothom, the first Viscount Soulbury, investigated and then proposed a constitutional system in which electoral representation to the new Parliament would be balanced between both territory and what were called “communities of interest.” Finally, in 1946, the eminent Ceylonese jurist L.M.D. de Silva chaired the island’s first delimitation commission, which used the Soulbury report and its own hearings to draw electoral boundaries for the first parliamentary elections in 1947.

During the work of each of these three commissions, oppressed-caste activists gave testimony, held political meetings, and wrote publicly to protect their electoral

⁸⁷CIP Jaffna T.B. Herath to ASP Jaffna P.R. de S. Seneviratne, 17 August 1945. 83/1317, SLNAK.

rights.⁸⁸ In response, oppressed-caste leaders faced claims denying their community's existence, threats of verbal and physical harm, and the regular denial of reasonable requests for the same rights their fellow citizens enjoyed. Throughout each step of the process, all three commissions listened to oppressed-caste claims of ubiquitous mistreatment and the need for independent representation. Each time, hereditary caste and political interests impressed upon commissioners reasons to limit efforts designed to ensure oppressed-caste representation. The combined effect of this advocacy, explored below, resulted in an electoral system that effectively barred oppressed-caste representation from Parliament for thirty years.⁸⁹

At the time of the Donoughmore Commission's arrival on the island in November 1927, the prospect of universal adult franchise represented a distinct threat to the conservative political order writ large, not just for the Vellālar-controlled Tamil political landscape. At the time, the right to vote was restricted to literate adult men with a monthly income of at least Rs. 50 per month or those who owned property worth Rs. 1500. This resulted in an island-wide electorate totaling 204,997 men, or about 4 per cent of the island's population, in 1924.⁹⁰ Queried as to his perspective on expanding the franchise to all adult men, Ponnambalam Ramanathan responded that a wider franchise would place power in the hands of men who have no time for reading newspapers, engaging in political debates, or other activities that educate people for civic responsibility. "You want to give him political privileges?" Ramanathan implored, "For his own sake I say he will have no time for it."⁹¹ His argument against the expansion of the franchise to women revealed a similarly conservative and patronizing perspective that was clearly at odds with the socialist tendencies of the commissioners. The Commission recommended a broad franchise for most men above the age of twenty-one and women above thirty. The Colonial Office in London responded by reducing the age threshold for women to twenty-one, making the island the first country in Asia with universal franchise.⁹² In its report, the Donoughmore Commissioners noted that, though they were unable to recommend special representation for oppressed-caste communities, they believed the extension of universal franchise, combined with recent efforts to ensure equal educational opportunities, were "the true remedies for their condition." (Ceylon, 1928, p. 72).

Arriving on the island in 1945, the Soulbury Commission was tasked with thinking through constitutional reform that would more directly prepare the island

⁸⁸Oppressed-caste activists were also concurrently fighting for electoral representation at the municipal and village level, where successes were more forthcoming. In the 1948 Jaffna Municipal Council elections, D. James was elected for the Cathedral ward, which had been created specifically because of pressure by various activists. "He Creates Precedent," *The Times of Ceylon*, 7 December 1948.

⁸⁹In 1977, with the support of the Tamil United Liberation Front, T. Rasalingam (b. 1933) was elected from the Uṭuppiṭṭi constituency.

⁹⁰Ceylon, *Report of the Special Commission on the Constitution*. Ceylon Government Press, 1928: 12, 61.

⁹¹CO 1041/4, TNA.

⁹²K.M. de Silva, *A History of Ceylon*, p. 522.

for independence. Part of that remit included making recommendations for new electoral boundaries. Though the actual drawing of boundaries was left to the Minority Tamils Progressive Union, a subsequent body, the Soulbury Commission did make a range of recommendations devised to navigate the political challenge of ensuring minority representation. While taking keen interest in the claims put forth by leaders of the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha, the Soulbury Commissioners publicly recognized the distinct limitations associated with single-seat electoral divisions.⁹³ Scattered or widely dispersed minority communities of interest were generally unable to concentrate enough votes to win any one single-seat election, leaving them without representation. In response to this issue, the Soulbury Commissioners recommended that the Delimitation Commission consider creating larger, multi-member constituencies. In theory, minority communities of interest would then be able to consolidate enough votes for a single candidate. Parts of Colombo and Jaffna were both recommended for such consideration (Ceylon, 1945, p. 73).

Between the release of the Soulbury Commission report in 1945 and the Delimitation Commission report of 1946, an oppressed-caste elected Member of Parliament was a distinct possibility for Jaffna. The hearings before the Delimitation Commission reflect this possibility, both as optimism from the perspective of oppressed-caste activists and concern from the Tamil political establishment. The arguments of oppressed-caste organizations, particularly the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha and the Minority Tamils Progressive Union, centered on the call for multi-member constituencies.⁹⁴

In his multiple testimonies before the Delimitation Commission, the leader of the All-Ceylon Tamil Congress and State Council member for Point Pedro G.G. Ponnambalam offered a master class in lawyerly skill and charismatic charm. While his Oxbridge English and patrician courtesies were common to his generation of Ceylonese politicians, Ponnambalam also had a wickedly sharp sense of humor and was known to use insults to devastating effect. Due to his experience, position, and skill, Ponnambalam's testimony carried enormous weight. Ponnambalam argued that the commission should adopt an expansive interpretation of minority rights to representation. In his enumeration, this definition would field 34 minority seats, 13

⁹³During the Soulbury Commission's visit to Jaffna in February 1945, member Frederick Rees and commission secretary Trafford Smith were invited by members of the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha to tour a recent site of caste violence. In Kanpollai, a village outside Point Pedro, the group visited the site of a home razed two days earlier and spoke with victims. Immediately following this visit, the three leaders of the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha that accompanied commission members were attacked. M.C. Subramaniam, D. James, and V.R. Ganapattipillai were tied together using Subramaniam's shawl, and an attempt was made to light the three on fire. A doctor and three policemen happened to drive past and stopped the assault before anyone received a life-threatening injury. Kē. Tāṇiyal, 1979, pp. 5–6; *Ceylon Daily News*, 16 March 1945.

⁹⁴Representatives to the first Delimitation Commission hearings in Jaffna for the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha were J.D. Aseervatham, M.A.C. Benjamin, D. James, P. Jonah, and G. Nalliah. Representatives for the Minority Tamils Progressive Union were A.B. Rajendra, Ariya Pathirana, and M.C. Subramaniam.

of which would be held by Ceylonese Tamils. Then, to avoid potential threats to the unity of a Ceylonese Tamil voting bloc, Ponnambalam systematically deconstructed the arguments of oppressed-caste activists who sought representation as minorities among Ceylonese Tamils. In previous testimony before the Soulbury Commissioners, Ponnambalam had publicly questioned whether a Minority Tamil community of interest actually existed in the first place by pointing out that the term “depressed classes” was difficult to define.⁹⁵ “In this country,” he went on, “it is a fairly wide term, and a rather nebulous class.” Before the Delimitation Commission, Ponnambalam leveraged ongoing disagreements within the oppressed-caste rights movement itself. This point was made abundantly clear in the testimonies of the two primary Minority Tamil organizations. When asked whom they represent, members of the All-Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha argued that Vaṇṇars (launderers) and Ampaṭṭars (barbers) were not part of the “depressed classes” because they have public rights that Naḷavars, Paḷḷars, and Paṛaiyars do not.⁹⁶ Speaking on behalf of the Minority Tamils Progressive Union, Ariya Pathirana—Jaffna’s leading Sinhala politician and a former member of the Jaffna Urban Council—argued that Vaṇṇars and Ampaṭṭars were certainly part of the “depressed classes,” as they faced the same exclusion from political life as all the other oppressed communities.⁹⁷

The question of the size of the Minority Tamil community was of critical importance, as the larger the community, the more important it was to ensure their representation. Unlike categories such as religion and race, caste has been excluded from modern census taking since its inception in 1871, and so when the question of the size of oppressed-caste communities was raised, authoritative data was unavailable.⁹⁸ Estimates varied from as little as 42,000 to over 200,000 people. When asked about this latter number, Ponnambalam quipped: “All I can say is, some of us might belong to that category.”⁹⁹ Ponnambalam thus undermined and dismissed Minority Tamil claims using caste-inflected humor designed to appeal to a dominant-caste listener. The efforts of oppressed-caste activists and their allies were clearly hampered by the lack of independent data, and this ambiguity provided license to their opponents.

Taking a slightly different tack, the Nationalist Tamils Committee argued that because the social advancement of oppressed-caste communities was proceeding so

⁹⁵“Argument for Balanced Representation,” *The Times of Ceylon*, 16 February 1945, p. 1.

⁹⁶Delimitation Commission, Proceedings of the Public Sessions Held at Jaffna, 5 July 1946: 21. 108.25/9, Sri Lanka National Archives, Colombo, Sri Lanka; hereafter SLNA.

⁹⁷Delimitation Commission, Proceedings of the Public Sessions Held at Jaffna, 5 July 1946: 44. 108.25/9, SLNA.

⁹⁸There is a history of debates among those designing the Ceylonese and Sri Lankan censuses as to whether caste should be included. For instance, in early 1945, a conference of Government Agents discussed the proposal and there was general agreement that it should be an included category, though the recommendation was not accepted by the executive committee of the Ministry of Labour, Industry and Commerce which had the final say. See *Census of Ceylon 1946*, 1, no. 1: 155, pp. 277–228.

⁹⁹Delimitation Commission, Proceedings of the Public Sessions Held at Jaffna, 5 July 1946: 73. 108.25/9, SLNA.

quickly, a permanent electoral response was unnecessary. Instead, A.E. Tamber and Handy Perinbanayagam argued for a transitional representation: "Their disabilities can be obliterated in a short time. Things are moving pretty fast and we would not stand in the way of nomination of a depressed class man to the Parliament."¹⁰⁰ Oppressed-caste activists also seemed to see the writing on the wall, and pivoted to a second option. J.D. Aseervatham, the representative of the All Ceylon Minority Tamil Maha Sabha at the delimitation hearings, closed his remarks by advocating for the nomination of an oppressed-caste leader to the Senate or House of Representatives.¹⁰¹

Upon the Delimitation Commission report's release, the possibility of electing an oppressed-caste member to Parliament faded, as the commission was unwilling to design an electoral space in Jaffna with the distinct aim of facilitating oppressed-caste representation. This choice was principally justified based on a question of quantifiable evidence. "Figures supplied by various deputations were largely, if not entirely, the result of private effort," the Commission wrote, "and we find it impossible to accept them for the purposes of accurate delimitation."¹⁰² Despite this choice, the Delimitation Commission did explain that they sought, to the best of their ability, to leave oppressed-caste communities electorally undivided, "to give these groups a greater voice in the election of representatives than they have hitherto possessed."¹⁰³

Though the Delimitation Commissioners made clear that they had no ability to comply with the multiple requests they received to recommend to Governor Henry Monck-Mason Moore that he nominate an oppressed-caste representative to Parliament, the inclusion of this note in their final report sent a message.¹⁰⁴ Just more than a year later, on 16 October 1947, Governor Moore appointed A.B. Rajendra to the upper chamber of the Senate, making him the first oppressed-caste member of Parliament.¹⁰⁵ Having graduated from St. Patrick's College in Jaffna, he rose through the ranks of the Education Department to eventually become Interpreter Mudaliyar to the Governor. After retirement, he became President of the United Youth League and was a leader of the Progressive Minority Tamils Union.

Aside from the symbolic value of his appointment, A.B. Rajendra was able to rapidly contribute to the oppressed-caste cause from his new position. On 27 January 1948, Senator Rajendra made a motion calling on government to ensure access to public wells and cremation grounds, and to require all public authorities who issue licenses to restaurants and tea shops to include conditions that prohibit discrimination (Ceylon, 1948, pp. 941–942). The motion resulted in the Cabinet issuing a government circular that was discussed in the Jaffna Urban Council in October 1948. Chairman C. Ponnambalam did not attempt to hide his displeasure. After reading the circular out

¹⁰⁰Delimitation Commission, Proceedings of the Public Sessions Held at Jaffna, 6 July 1946: 21. 108.25/9, SLNA.

¹⁰¹See, for instance, "North Wants Nine Seats," *The Times of Ceylon*, 10 July 1946.

¹⁰²Ceylon, Sessional Paper XIII, Report of the First Delimitation Commission, 12.

¹⁰³Ceylon, Sessional Paper XIII, Report of the First Delimitation Commission, 12.

¹⁰⁴Ceylon, Sessional Paper XIII, Report of the First Delimitation Commission, 12.

¹⁰⁵A.B. Rajendra would be followed in Parliament by the nominations of G. Nalliah in 1957, and M.C. Subramaniam in 1970.

loud, he stated that the central government should “not preach without practicing,” and that it was guilty of discrimination of its own, a comment with obvious nationalist implications.¹⁰⁶

Despite the 1948 government circular, caste discrimination and exclusion from public space continued into the 1950s. In 1956, the teacher and Communist activist P. Kandiah (1914–1960) was elected to Parliament for the Point Pedro constituency. Helping begin a long tradition of Communist support for oppressed-caste politics in the North, Kandiah was influential in helping advance the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act. Brought by the Federal Party’s MP for Trincomalee N.R. Rajavarothiam (1908–1963), the act passed with the support of S.W.R.D. Bandaranike on 13 April 1957. The act read like a summary of oppressed-caste anti-discrimination activism of the period. It prohibited more than ten separate forms of discrimination, including the prevention or exclusion of a person on the basis of caste from schools, cremation grounds, public wells, public vehicles, shops, restaurants, or temples normally open to all followers of a religion. Though rarely referenced today, the Act was a watershed moment for the movement. It would take another decade before someone was charged under the law and for that case to wind its way through the courts, but once the dust settled the result was momentous.¹⁰⁷ For the first time, a legislative act had overruled the legal protection of dominant-caste custom and privilege protected in Tēsavalamai, the Dutch-codified legal codes of Jaffna. That is to say, in about thirty years of work, oppressed-caste campaigners managed to secure legislation that ended at least two-hundred and fifty years of legal sanction for dominant-caste supremacy.

Conclusion

We can also see from this story that the decades of activism leading up to the well-known 1968 clash at Māviṭṭapuram was led by a diverse group of oppressed- and dominant-caste leaders, that included Hindus, Christians, Sinhalese, Buddhists, and foreigners. Activists were variously motivated by a Christian sense of human equality, an interest in renovating Hinduism, a sense of Tamil unity that transcended religion, and a socialist drive to overturn social inequality. Combined, all these motivations produced a multi-faceted anti-discrimination agenda. Like any other social body, the movement also navigated its own internal conflicts.

As we have seen, the role of the colonial and then post-colonial state varied throughout this period. Early on, the state was an active defender of public rights to education and cremation ground space, yet by the 1940s government representatives had become hesitant to contradict the protectors of tradition and were willing to accept delay tactics for the preservation of the status quo. As Tamil nationalism became a more direct motivation in both local and national politics, oppressed-caste claims of Tamilness were used against their calls for separate representation.

¹⁰⁶“Set Example,’ State told: Circular on Caste ‘Discrimination,’” *The Times of Ceylon*, 14 October 1948.

¹⁰⁷Balmforth, 2023

That oppressed-caste advocates failed to ensure that the island's new electoral system protected their equal access to political representation is beside the point. They achieved meaningful victories by winning seats in village councils, the Jaffna Municipal Council, and through appointment to Parliament. In so doing, Jaffna's oppressed-caste advocates of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s reshaped Tamil political life on the island, and helped make Jaffna at the dawn of independence arguably more politically equitable than ever before.

There are several potential routes forward for this history, far more than I am able to note here. First, I have just touched on internal divisions that challenged the unity of oppressed-caste activism in the period—including narrow and more expansive definitions of being part of the “oppressed classes”—but this just one of many points of fracture that need to be better understood, as ideologies, methods, religion, and personality clashes all threatened to break-up the movement. Better understanding these challenges helps us see just how remarkable the movement itself was, to have overcome so much. Second, this article has focused on Jaffna due to its centrality to the oppressed-caste rights work in the period, but Jaffna is just one of several important parts of Tamil Sri Lanka. We need to better understand how space has affected the story of caste discrimination, both across the island and across Jaffna. Third, Sinhala politicians, Buddhist monks, and Colombo-based political agendas have played important roles in this history beyond the simplistic “interloper” narrative that Tamil nationalist politicians used to dismiss criticism. For instance, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, and Madihe Pannaseeha Mahathera all channeled resources and political support to oppressed-caste activists and communities in Jaffna, and these remain little understood parts of the story.¹⁰⁸ Fourth, deep consideration of the intellectual origins of oppressed-caste activism is necessary, because it came from some surprising corners. Periyar and Gandhi both played roles, as did a host of Christian and Marxist writings and thinkers, but we also know that American Black intellectual history played a role: we know Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) was being publicly discussed in Jaffna as early as 1916. Finally, multiple Canada-based family members interviewed for this project explicitly requested anonymity due to ongoing experiences with caste discrimination, including social isolation and fear that public association with this history could harm the marriage prospects of the youngest generation. Further research on caste in the diaspora is clearly needed to expand on work being conducted by P. Thanges and most recently, Mark Whitaker in the first part of this Symposium.

A fuller account of the transformations that oppressed-caste activists of this period achieved will point to the ubiquity of caste struggle between the 1920s and 1950s. Due to space limitations, I have focused only on the campaigns surrounding Tamil identity, education, mortuary space, and electoral representation. Future research will demonstrate coordinated oppressed-caste efforts to access clean water, land, and economic independence. Combined with what we know about the movement

¹⁰⁸Also, see Dominic Esler's article in this volume for a critique of the scholarly separation between Tamil and Sinhala caste systems on the island.

to challenge caste discrimination and open temples and tea shops in the 1960s, and new work on the horizon by Bahirathy Rāsānan on the complicated role of caste in the LTTE, a new picture is developing. Caste struggle, in various forms, articulated by different actors, and for a range of ends, has been a constant and central narrative in twentieth-century Sri Lankan Tamil history. Both its remarkable successes and the obstacles it has overcome can serve as powerful lessons for anti-caste activists today.

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