

## Caste Away: Perspectives on Caste-Equality Struggles in Tamil Nadu

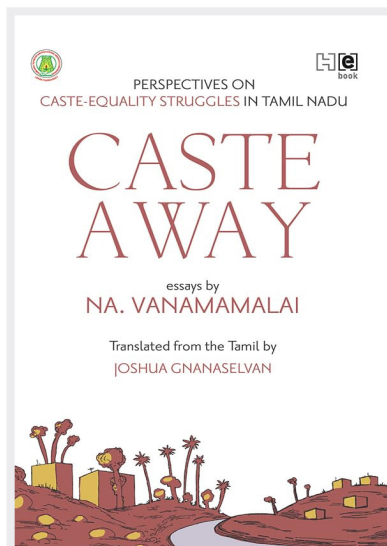
Essays by: Na.Vanamamalai

Translated by: Joshua Gnanaselvan

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An article published in *The Hindu* on June 20, 2024, came with the title “Caste Away”. It shed light on the gruesome “murderous assault on two Scheduled Caste (SC) siblings by their dominant community schoolmates in Nanguneri” (“Caste Away”, 2024, para. 1). The grave incident cannot be dismissed as a juvenile tussle or a one-off incident. The attack speaks volumes about the historical ostracisation of the lowered-castes<sup>1</sup> who were socially marginalised and violently subjugated on the basis of their caste identities. A plot that thickens for hundreds of years in the socio-political history of the Dravidian state, Tamil Nadu.

Amid these ongoing contexts of caste-violence and struggle for equality, Joshua Gnanaselvan’s book titled *Caste Away: Perspectives on Caste Equality Struggles in Tamil Nadu* was timely published in 2024. As a teacher-cum-translator, Joshua Gnanaselvan applies his expertise and ambition in the field of Dalit and postcolonial studies in this book translation. The book is a translation of collected essays produced

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<sup>1</sup>The article uses the term “lowered castes” instead of “lower castes” to signify the political undertones hidden in the semantics of our daily language, following the suggestion of S. Harikrishnan (2022).

by social activist Prof. Na. Vanamamalai (henceforth Na. Va), originally published in Tamil in 1980 under the title *Tamiḷ Nāṭṭil Cāti Camattuvap Pōrāṭṭak Karuttukkaḷ*.

Na. Vanamamalai was born in 1917 in Nanguneri, the same caste space where events like the discussed criminal assault against two students of lower-caste background continue to take place even in 2024. Prof. Na. Va established himself as an active member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and among literary circles. He went on to establish the Nellai Literary Society in 1947. The author's critical thoughts on social equality are informed by his diverse interests in art, literature, culture, history, philosophy, anthropology and folklore. The source text, which was posthumously published by Makkal Veliyeedu (People's Publishing Company), informed the Tamil literary and research landscape of the writer's scholarly contribution. As contemporary writer Perumal Murugan rightly mentions, "caste is a universal issue" (Times News Network) and a translation of important works like Na. Va's has the potential to offer a remedy or even redeem the social fabric of a divided Indian society at large. As a popular figure among scholars of Tamil Studies, Na. Va's ideas on equality and social upliftment deserve a wider audience. Joshua Gnanaselvan's attempt to translate Na. Va's thought is prompt and much-needed in this regard.

In *Caste Away*, Gnanaselvan takes a hermeneutic approach for his translation that critically blends subjectivity, cultural understanding, and creative interpretation to bring out the source-text's archaic, cultural and linguistic layers into English. The translated text is a part of the initiative of the Tamil Nadu Textbook and Educational Services Corporation (TNTB & ESC) launched in 2021-22. This initiative, aptly named "*Thisaithorum Dravidam*" (meaning: Dravidam in all Directions), identifies nationalized social texts from Tamil and translates them into English, Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu. The translation is supported by Hachette India. The translation uplifts Na. Va's contribution and his critique of caste politics in South India as historically different from those in the North.

Structurally, the book begins with the translator's preface and acknowledgements. The translation retains the original format of the 1980 compilation by keeping the editorial notes of the first and second editions intact. The readers are gradually introduced to the translations of the two core essays by Na. Va titled "Perspectives on Caste and Equality Struggles in Tamil Nadu" and "Tamil Kings and Caste Divisions". The book ends with an extended glossary in the "Notes" section, which explains niche Tamil signifiers related to caste, and concludes with a valuable bibliography section. The text contextualises the history of caste-equality movements of Tamil Nadu in perspective, from the reign of the Chola era to the modern era and underscores the hypocrisies that carried along with the movement. Na. Va highlights how anti-caste movements were carried out by several dominant communities in Tamil Nadu solely

due to their antagonism towards Brahmanical superiority. These political movements were driven out of their agenda for social power rather than an ethical call for social equality per se.

## Textual Politics of Caste

The notion of caste derives its strength from the sacrosanct texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and Dharmashastras like *Manusmriti*. Countering this, the beginning of the twentieth century saw a rise in Tamil print culture that spoke volumes on caste equality. In his text, Na. Va denotes how the oppressed in Tamil Nadu subverted the Vedic prescriptions of the *varna* system by rewriting and manipulating the interpretations of these canonical texts. The conceptualization of the two-knowledge theory, which classifies the larger corpus of texts into ‘Arya Vedam’ and ‘Dravida Vedam’ further supports this line of argument. It fits the logic, as the Sanskrit word ‘*veda*’ literally signifies knowledge. While Arya Vedam included the aforementioned traditional and religious texts of North India, Dravida Vedam incorporated age-old texts from the *Cankam* era (approx. 200 BCE to 500 CE) like *Thirukkural* and *Shaiva Thirumuraigal* from Tamil literature.

To begin his literary criticism, Na. Va quotes from the book *Varuna Sinthamani* (1901) that marks this epistemological dichotomy. The book claims that “the Vedas contain neither support for the exaltation of the Anthanar (Brahmins) nor the debasement of the Shudras. The Vedas do not hinder all the varnas (castes) from intermingling, interdining and social-give-and-take amongst each other” (qtd. in Gnanaselvan 2024, p. 4). Denying Brahmanical superiority, *Varuna Sinthamani* hypocritically privileges the Vellalar community instead, who were followers of the Shaivite tradition, as opposed to Brahmins who followed principles of the Arya Vedas. Here, Na. Va cleverly highlights the textual politics given that the text was widely sponsored by wealthy folks from the Vellalar community.

Similarly, texts like *Paravar Puraanam* and *Kilaivalappa Maalai* received patronage from the Bharathavar and the Karkathar caste, respectively, to promote the presence (read: dominance) of their own community in Tamil society. These texts included fabricated narratives vis-à-vis made-up Puranic stories that supported their genealogical claim to divine ancestral ties and the royal lineages of the Tamil Kingdoms. More texts like *Kshatriyakula Vilakkam* (The Kshatriya Clan: An In-depth Overview) and *Nadar Kings and Nayaka Kings*, published by the Nadar community, not only asserted caste superiority but also appropriated themselves as *sandror* (learned).

Broadly, Na. Va argues that these textual fabrications had a twofold political agenda: i. to reject the superiority of Brahmins in the *varna* system, and ii. to establish themselves as dominant Vaishyas and those who laboured for them as inferior Shudras.

The author finds this perspective heavily problematic, critiquing this as self-defeating the goal of the caste-equality struggle in itself.

### **Left-Hand (*Idangai*) and Right-Hand (*Valangai*) Factions**

Going back in time in the section on “Tamil Kings and Caste Divisions”, Na. Va offers the broad canvas of the caste politics agenda in Tamil Nadu to historically situate these textual manipulations of history.

Historically, the caste communities in Tamil Nadu under the reign of the Chola Kingdom were categorized as *valangaiyar* (right-hand faction) and *idangaiyar* (left-hand faction). These groups carry the bodily metaphor of ‘hands’ to the sovereign head of the body politic—alluding to the Hobbesian and Manu’s political philosophy. The nomenclature signifies how they literally served as ‘hands’ that amassed wealth through land revenue and trade to the monarchs during Chola rule from the period of Raja Raja I. While land-owning castes like Vellalar headed the *valangaiyar* association, wealthy merchants like Chettis led the *idangaiyar* caste groups. The Vellalar caste had strong social and financial capital, and hence their faction was called the right-hand, and the groups that supported Chettis were called left-hand, as they were relatively weaker. Despite their power imbalance, the influential leaders of *valangaiyar* and *idangaiyar* shared a common trait in exploiting the labour of those peasant and artisan groups working under them, respectively.

More often, these differences and hierarchies were capitalized by the Chola rulers by levying tax burdens and curtailment of land rights. Na. Va brings evidence of how several riots broke out historically between the right-hand and left-hand groups against unjust differences in tax imposition, like in Rajamahendra Chaturvedi Mangalam, for which the temple inscriptions (Rajukumar 1974) speak volumes to date. What becomes a common factor here, as Na. Va puts, is that the collateral damage in these caste disputes, demonstrated under the façade of a struggle for caste-equality, is always borne by the lowered castes who remain marginalized vis-à-vis cast(e) away. Dominant *savarna* groups used caste-equality and feudal rights agitations as a leeway to gain power and exercise authority over the lowered communities.

### **Advocacy of Justice Against Caste Atrocities**

Na. Va’s contribution critically traverses the literary and historical politics of caste and also reads juridical controversies of the modern era. The author recalls the landmark judgement of the Chittoor District Adalat court in 1814 in a case between Marakasagayam Aasariyar (*idangaiyar*) vs Panchagam Gundaiyan (*valangaiyar*). The ruling came in favour of the *idangaiyar*, which condemned Brahmins to not prevent the Vishwa Brahma clan from solemnizing weddings quoting Vedic tradition. The

verdict came with an additional fine of Rs. 550 in 1818 for the damage incurred on the wedding event of the *idangaiyar* community by the upper castes. The court case comes as a reminder of how the weaker sections of society had to struggle for several basic rights, starting from the right to perform religious rites to even the right to die with dignity in the aftermath of caste homicides.

## Conclusion

Addressing the sensitive topic, Joshua Gnanaselvan's translation carefully reports on the original text, which makes generous references to Old Tamil lexicon owing to the historical data it (re)produces. The efforts undertaken by the translator contribute to the larger subaltern studies collective in bringing Na. Va's advocacy towards labour consciousness to the forefront. The book and its translation offers to rewrite caste history from below, i.e. geographies of the South that often suffer the risk of homogenization and essentialism in the discourse of critical caste studies in India. The text has 'labour consciousness' at its heart, owing to giving back the weightage it lost in the epistemological underpinnings of Brahminism. Particularly, the sincere efforts to transliterate, translate and explain the proverbial adage from *Thirukkural* are commendable, among other additional details taken with care. A matter of suggestion recommends caution with a few typographic errors, and the lack of diacritics in a rich Tamil translation could be affixed in newer editions.

Overall, the book should be of interest to scholars of caste in national and international contexts. It is not just a compendium of historical discussions but a rich resource to understand caste subalternity and resistance blending historical, religious, juridical and anthropological perspectives. Socially relevant, the text advocates against the caste pride that poisons the young minds of Tamil Nadu at present. Notwithstanding the perpetual caste violence following the Nanguneri incident (mentioned in the introduction), the one-man committee headed by Justice K Chandru recommended guidelines to appoint a Social Justice Monitoring Committee comprising academicians and activists to monitor social exclusion and bring inclusive forms of education ("Caste Away", 2024, para. 2). For many years now, every school textbook mandated by Tamil Nadu Uniform System of School Education (*Samacheer Kalvi*, meaning "Equitable Education") opens its cover page with three key aphorisms:

"Untouchability is a sin;  
Untouchability is a crime;  
Untouchability is inhuman".

A more critical discourse generated by texts like *Caste Away* can instill meaning into these stand-alone paper aphorisms, paving the way for quality education to all children that is rational, inclusive and empathetic.

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