

Struggling for Freedom from Caste in Colonial India: The Story of Rettaimalai Srinivasan

Malarvizhi Jayanth¹

Abstract

Rettaimalai Srinivasan (1860–1945), a Dalit leader in colonial India, argued that there were two kinds of freedom struggles being waged in the region—one against the British and the other against caste. His autobiography, published in Tamil in 1938, is likely the first Dalit autobiography, and along with his other papers, pamphlets, and speeches comprises a potent anti-caste archive that is yet to be studied. In these texts, Srinivasan defined untouchability as a complex of social and economic practices and emphasized the role of Dalit leadership in undoing these practices. As his work indicates, the freedom struggle against caste required a re-signification of caste names and untouchability itself and an increased representation of Dalit groups within governance. By seeking to turn the name of the Pariah caste into one that could be used with pride, he continuously grappled with the question of self-representation and an appropriate vocabulary to do so. His definition of untouchability as intimately linked with agrarian labour lies at the heart of his emphasis on the importance of Dalit representatives governing and leading people from these communities towards freedom.

Keywords

Dalit, Dravidian, Representation, Pariah, Colonial India, Dalit autobiography, Self governance

¹King's College, University of Cambridge
Research Fellow in Slavery and Its Impacts
King's College, King's Parade, Cambridge – CB2 1ST
Email: mj596@cam.ac.uk

Introduction

In the anti-caste Dalit view in colonial India, the project of representation required re-signifying caste names and groupings, and—in order to ensure both the undoing of caste disabilities and the full participation of lower-caste groups in the democratic process—making space for leadership from their own communities.¹ The struggle for anti-caste representation was also at loggerheads with nationalist projects, as was most famously exemplified in Mohandas Gandhi's fast against allowing the Depressed Classes (as Dalits were known in colonial India) separate electorates—a provision of electoral reform that had been formulated and presented by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) and Rettaimalai Srinivasan (1860–1945) at the Round Table Conference in London. Srinivasan's writings and speeches at this Conference and elsewhere show that arguments for representative government in British India were formulated as part of anti-caste—and not just nationalist—struggles. While Ambedkar's national contributions have received some attention, the manner in which the many meanings of representation coalesce in the work of Srinivasan is yet to be addressed. Srinivasan attended the Round Table Conference in 1930 to 1931 with Dr. Ambedkar and participated in various struggles to improve Dalit representation both in the southern administrative bloc known as the Madras Presidency and across British India, arguing that Dalit political representation was crucial to righting the offence of untouchability. Through a forthcoming translation of his autobiography, which is the oldest known Dalit autobiography, and a recently-published collection of his writings and other papers related to his work, it is possible to reconstruct how Srinivasan's work in representing his political life, the caste he was from, and the Depressed Classes more generally feeds into his definition of untouchability in relation to agrarian labour—a definition that led to his belief in the importance of leadership drawn from Dalit communities in order to erase caste disabilities. The case for Dalit leadership of their own communities or the project of representative government that Srinivasan advances—I will argue—is marked by these three meanings of representation: (1) representation of the political self in the autobiography, (2) of a specific caste within the Madras Presidency region, and, (3) of the Depressed Classes across British India. This history will show how anti-caste claims were advanced in the struggle for representative government and how categories like 'Pariah' and 'Dravidian' were re-signified through such movements, thereby continuing to shape contemporary political formations.

Representing the Self

Srinivasan summarised his life and work in a short text that appears to be the first Dalit autobiography. Though Dalit literature—with an emphasis on Dalit autobiography—is generally dated to the 1990s, work by Srinivasan and his contemporaries pushes this date further back by several decades.³ Srinivasan's autobiography is currently the

¹See Parthasarathi Muthukaruppan (2014) for an introduction to the use of the term 'Dalit' in political mobilization.

³Parthasarathi Muthukaruppan (2017, p. 65) documents the rise of Tamil Dalit literature in the 1990s, starting with the publication of Bama's autobiographical novel *Karukku* in 1992. The work of Srinivasan's colleagues in anti-caste struggle, including that of Ayothee Thass and M.C. Raja, is discussed later in this article.

earliest known text in the genre. He likely wrote this autobiography at around the same time that Dr. Ambedkar was writing his autobiographical notes titled ‘Waiting for a Visa’, dated to around 1935–1936 (Ambedkar, 1993). While Dr. Ambedkar’s notes would eventually only be published in 1990 (Ambedkar, 1993, p. 661), Srinivasan’s autobiography was published in Tamil in 1938. Reprints followed in 1999 and 2017. This makes the autobiography one of the oldest, if not the first, Dalit autobiographies. Srinivasan presents his autobiography explicitly as a political biography, noting that it was a record of his work for his community. Remarks about his early life and his account of his wife, for instance, feature as little more than asides. He writes in his preface that the autobiography is a record of the social history of his people and of their hard work directed towards uplifting their community. While scholars have attended to the political meaning of late-twentieth-century Dalit autobiographies in conjunction with their literary quality, Srinivasan’s work is relentlessly focused on the political work of its author.⁴ Its brevity and matter-of-fact presentation have more in common with the political pamphlet—a genre Srinivasan wrote in as well—than other genres. For this reason, this article seeks to locate the text within a political context, rather than explore its literary value.

The text lays much emphasis on Srinivasan’s work as a Dalit leader. It begins with a felicitation offered by the Revenue Collector of Chingleput, summarizing the work that Srinivasan has done for his community. It then moves into Srinivasan’s voice, briefly sketches his childhood and early work and discusses his publication of a journal titled “*Paraiyan*” (which may be translated as ‘The Pariah’ in English)⁵ starting in 1893 in a bid to reclaim a name used with disgust and elevate it to respectability. After mentioning his attempts to travel to London and the detour to South Africa that followed, he offers a summary history of caste as an external imposition upon the indigenous Dravidians of southern India. He devotes a paragraph to the petition against conducting the Civil Services exam in India—a petition that is provided in fragmentary form at the end of the autobiography. It is his view that the labour commissioner, intended to support the welfare of the Depressed Classes, was established in response to this petition. He documents the political mobilizations intended to meet and felicitate various British administrators as formative of “Adi Dravida society”.⁶ He sketches the difficulties faced in educating children from this community, despite some desultory government efforts to do so. He moves on to discuss his work in the Legislative Assembly of the Madras Presidency, discussing the laws he brought in to undo the exclusions produced by caste practice, and briefly mentions his contemporary M.C. Raja’s similar work. He writes of his visit to London for the Round Table Conference, discusses the contradictions of joint and reserved constituencies and the problem of temple entry. He declares his antipathy towards religious conversion, arguing that those within the Depressed Classes were not Hindu. He goes on to criticise the leadership of the Indian National Congress and Gandhi, writing that he signed the Poona Pact out of pity for the

⁴Raj Kumar (2010), for instance, sketches the differences between Dalit personal narratives and more nationalist work in the genre.

⁵As noted later in the article, the word ‘Pariah’ in English stands in for all ‘out-caste’ groups, while Srinivasan was using the Tamil word to refer to the specific caste he was from.

⁶The use of the terms ‘Dravidian’ and ‘Original Dravidian’ or ‘Adi Dravida’ are discussed at length later in the article.

latter. A brief aside about his wife follows, just before he concludes this very brief tour of his life history. The autobiography was published with three appendices—the first being the petition against the Civil Service exam (which the author notes was similar to that submitted by the Muslims), the second being a summary of his legislative work opening public spaces to all, and the third a summary of the Poona Pact for subsequent electoral regimes following the Round Table Conference.

As this summary indicates, and as Srinivasan himself declares in the preface, the autobiography was intended to be a political biography, largely concerned with documenting the ways in which he sought to improve the well-being of both his caste and Dalit groups more generally. This is of relevance to his life project of improving the condition of Dalit groups through leadership that is drawn from their ranks. Srinivasan's Tamil autobiography used to stand alone, as a fragmentary text with little other evidence to support its claims. The first lines and sections of an appendix were found to be missing in the 1999 reprint. There were no other available sources with which to reconstruct his anti-caste work and philosophy. This text is now, however, bolstered by a wealth of newly discovered and published material. Gauthama Sanna (2019) has collated several documents related to Srinivasan into a volume that stands tribute to the long history of Dalit resistance and liberation and provides fresh insights into how the freedom struggles against caste and colonialism could undercut each other. A forthcoming translation of his autobiography will further be accompanied by newly-discovered English material, including an open letter addressed to Gandhi,⁷ all authored by Srinivasan. These new sources allow us to reconstruct Srinivasan's anti-caste thought in far greater detail than had been possible before, showing how the many meanings of representation coalesce in Srinivasan's work.

Representing the Caste

Before the widespread use of 'Dalit' as a revolutionary term, Dalit pride was expressed in various ways, some of which might seem exclusionary in contemporary times. Srinivasan, for instance, ran a journal named after the Pariah caste, starting in 1893 (Balasubramaniam, 2017; Srinivasan, 1999). Copies of this publication have not survived. He sought to reclaim the name of his caste, a name used with disgust and disdain (Viswanath, 2014), in this endeavour. While it must be noted that the category of the 'pariah' was used a stand-in for all untouchable castes in some colonial

⁷This open letter, published in English and dated to 1921, was recently discovered in the British Library, London, and is critical of the Non-Cooperation Movement for undercutting the government that was seeking to improve the condition of Dalit groups. It begins by differentiating the freedom struggles against caste and colonialism and offers a summary of the history of caste, based on the Aryan invasion theory. He describes Dalit migration to South Africa as offering a means to improve their lot and complains that this was stymied by Gandhi's agitations. He documents the problems with the notion of equal rights as he summarizes the inequality to which Dalits were subject, how they were not allowed into schools, the minimal redress offered by the limited options for self-government in this community and the difficulty with seeking redress for these issues before elite caste magistrates. He cites his petition against conducting the Civil Services exam in India to buttress his claims. He refutes the stereotypical views of the community held by elite caste groups. He suggests that the only way forward—seeking full participation in the mainstream—is being blocked by Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. The letter is signed with a South African address in Natal and dated 1921.

documentation of the time, Srinivasan was likely using it to refer to people of his caste. He details the reasons for having established this journal in his autobiography in the following (translated) words:

[H]e who says, ‘Me! I!’ of himself and speaks the truth of his caste without fear or embarrassment and celebrates his freedom, he will lead a respectable family life with good property and eternal peace. Therefore, unless a member of the Pariah caste comes forward and says ‘I am a Paraiyan’, he will not be able to celebrate freedom and will remain oppressed and a pauper. Therefore, I published a journal crowned with the name ‘Paraiyan’. It was published in October 1893. It was a small monthly with four pages. It cost 2 annas a copy. People of my caste, the ones called ‘Paraiyar’, endorsed it with great enthusiasm.

The advertisements for the journal and the first print run cost Rs. 10. In two days, some 400 copies were sold inside Chennai city. In three months, the journal became a weekly, and after two years, there was a printing press. The journal spoke in favour of that section of society called Paraiyar, sought the support of the government and discussed the codes of good conduct. Wherever this section of society gathered, there they discussed this journal with great enthusiasm. (Srinivasan, 1999, pp. 20–21)⁸

While copies of this journal have not survived, it is possible to deduce that it was part of a vibrant Dalit print culture of the time. This is indicated scholarship on the journalism of his brother-in-law and contemporary Ayothee Thass (1845–1914), based on reprinted copies of his journal ‘*Tamilan*’, which may be translated as ‘The Tamilian’ (Dickens, 2021; Rajangam, 2019; Jayanth, 2019; Ayyathurai, 2011; Ponnoviyam, 2010; Anbarasan, 2009). This scholarship shows how Thass used creative etymology and critical reading of Tamil literature to argue for Tamil country’s Buddhist past and, relatedly, to argue for reading those of the Pariah caste as being the original Buddhists, who were sidelined by those claiming elite caste identity. Thass’ critique of Brahmin dominance and elite caste nationalist aspirations has also received some attention (Geetha and Rajadurai, 2011, p. 40, pp. 60–66). Besides Thass’ journal, which was the primary staging ground for his arguments, Balasubramaniam’s (2017) groundbreaking research on Dalit journalism in southern colonial India shows the existence of a Dalit print public between 1869 and 1943, formed by multiple journals and reading constituencies through the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries. Thus, we have a small but growing body of work dedicated to recovering Dalit writings and print publics, expanding our knowledge of Dalit political and literary activity in colonial India. Srinivasan’s work can be read as part of this emergent print culture—his writing spanned autobiography, journalism, petitions, and pamphlets to educate the public.

While Thass is studied as a theorist of caste and how it may be undone, Srinivasan’s later work, in particular, is understood as primarily concerned with representation in government.⁹ Through the freshly available archive of sources now available, however, it is possible to go further and document the multiple forms of

⁸Translation mine.

⁹Rajangam (2008), for instance, reads his work after joining the Legislative Assembly as related to the political—marking a shift from Srinivasan’s earlier interest in the history and literature of his people (pp. 61–62).

representation his work encompassed. He reads untouchability as a complex of social, political, and economic injunctions, and caste as an external imposition, going on to argue for leadership from Dalit castes to lead the way out of caste subjugation. He deploys the category of ‘Dravidian’ in an anti-caste manner, reading the subjugation of lower castes—including untouchability and agrarian servitude—as the outcome of an ‘Aryan’ invasion. His critique of elite-caste and nationalist interventions against caste all underscore his belief in Dalit leadership for undoing caste in British India.

Dravidian to Original Dravidian: The Language of Anti-Caste Work

While Srinivasan’s anti-caste representative work is yet to get its due, the work of intermediate castes working toward similar ends is better known.¹⁰ We know, for instance, that the former nationalists who would go on to lead the non-Brahmin movement in the Madras Presidency issued a manifesto in 1916, arguing that Indians were not ready for self-rule, since it could lead to the tyranny of Brahmins (Pandian, 2008, p. 1). This argument that Brahmin dominance would follow from nationalist aspirations—a claim promptly denounced as ‘unpatriotic’ (Geetha and Rajadurai, 2011, p. 1)—has a longer history that remains to be told. In 1893, Srinivasan led a petition against the nationalist demand for conducting the Civil Services exam in India, arguing that it would lead to Brahmin dominance and poor treatment of lower-caste groups (Srinivasan, 1999).¹¹ Since the two landmark studies on the anti-caste movement in Tamil country (Geetha & Rajadurai, 2011; Pandian, 2008) do not mention Srinivasan, our knowledge of Dalit political activity in colonial India remains fragmentary. The genealogies of political movements and the categories they deploy are thereby obscured.

To seek the genealogy of the category of ‘Dravidian’, which Srinivasan substituted for ‘Pariah’ in his later work, we have to attend to the vocabulary Srinivasan uses to denote Dalit groups. Given that Srinivasan was a national leader, his interactions with other national leaders are a source to understand the significance of his vocabulary.

¹⁰The reasons for the erasure of Dalit political history in the anti-caste history of Tamil country have been debated. Some have suggested that this erasure was deliberate. Karthick Ram Manoharan (2020) sketches these discussions before going on to argue that the non-Brahmin leader Periyar (as E.V. Ramasamy Naicker was affectionately known) engaged with the work of Ambedkar and stood by the Dalit cause in his work.

¹¹This document begins by declaring that the petition was from those of the Pariah caste, who formed an estimated 25 percent of the population of Madras Presidency. It is described as similar to the petition from Muslims against conducting the Civil Services exam simultaneously in England and India. It argues that doing so would unfairly benefit the Brahmins, who do not compare favourably with the British when it comes to the administration of justice. Since Brahmins were primarily responsible for the infliction of untouchability on those of the Pariah caste, this would be detrimental. The document notes that the Pariah caste were ‘the highest class among those who do agricultural labour’ and were subject to many cruel forms of exclusion. These practices were not unique to villages and could be found in the big city of Madras as well, the petition notes. It concludes by saying the Pariah caste could become ‘a tower of strength’ for the British if they were allowed to continue accessing education as before—a feat that would be impossible under a Brahmin-dominant administration. Translation mine. (Srinivasan, 1999, pp. 53–60).

He appears to have maintained a cordial—if combative—relationship with Gandhi.¹² In a published interview with Gandhi, he is recorded as saying that “The Depressed Classes Community was not consulted when you chose to call them Harijans. Large sections of the people resent the name Harijan” (Sanna, 2019, p. 287) dated December 22, 1933. While rejecting the term ‘Harijan’ to refer to Dalit people, Srinivasan uses the descriptors *Adi Dravida*, *Pariah*, *Depressed Classes* and *Scheduled Castes*. All these terms can be found in his autobiography. In a pamphlet discussing agitations for temple entry, dated to 1938,¹³ he defines *Adi Dravida* as encompassing the 86 *Scheduled Castes* (Sanna, 2019, p. 301). The term *Adi Dravida* is derived from the ‘*Dravidian*’ which has primarily been associated with the non-Brahmin movement—a social and political movement challenging Brahmin hegemony from the early twentieth century onward. While this movement finds no mention in Srinivasan’s work, traces of the history of its dominant category of *Dravidian* can be found in Srinivasan’s work and in the work of another little-studied Dalit leader of the time, M.C. Rajah (1883–1943). Rajah writes about the *Pariah* caste:

The Caste Hindus have called them for a long time *Pariahs*. Whatever be the derivation of the name, this word uttered by a Caste Hindu tongue, conveys everything that is mean and despicable today and means the opposite of all that is holy and respectable... So they sought for a name which would indicate that they were the first inhabitants of Southern India and had nothing to do with that most inhuman of human institutions, Caste. They wanted a name which would point to their racial and territorial origin. Disliking the name *Eurasian*, the *Eurasian* community took to themselves the name ‘*Anglo-Indian*’. The *Non-Brahmin* caste Hindus, disliking the name *Sudra* took to themselves the name *Dravidian*. When the question of a name for the community was considered some thirty-two years ago, it was decided that they should be called *Adi Dravidas* to distinguish them from “*Sudras*”, who had now taken the name *Dravidians* or *Dravidas*. *Adi* means original, pure and unalloyed as in “*Adi Saivas, Adi Sankarachariar, Adi Lakshmi, Adi Bagavan, Adi Sivan, Adi-Narayan, Adi-Kesavan, Adimulam*”, etc. (Raja, 1925, pp. 30–31)¹⁴

¹²He mentions having Gandhi’s friendship in his autobiography. In his interview with Gandhi cited after this note, he writes in English, “My dear Mahatmaji,- We were old friends in South Africa; we crossed swords at the Round Table Conference in St. James Palace; we joined hands and entered into a compromise at Yerrawada; we became friends again and we are met here together to concert ways and means for ameliorating the condition of the Depressed Classes” (Sanna, 2019, pp. 282-283).

¹³Starting with the declaration that *Adi Dravida* referred to the 86 *Scheduled Castes* (referring to the list drawn up in 1935 of Dalit castes), the Tamil pamphlet sketches a history of caste as produced by an *Aryan* imposition and goes on to argue that the *Adi Dravida* had attained several advancements under British rule. In an attempt to undo these advancements and to absorb them into the Hindu fold, the idea of temple entry is now being propagated, he writes. After sketching the history of temple entry bills in the legislative assembly, he argues that temple entry is unnecessary and may be rendered mandatory if the *Adi Dravida* were not careful. He concludes by praising the king of Travancore for having issued a proclamation opening temples to all castes and says that the *Adi Dravida* must garland and celebrate his statue that was to be installed in Madras shortly. Translated summary mine (Sanna, 2019, pp. 301–307).

¹⁴Titled ‘*The Oppressed Hindus*’, this English book documents the suffering of Dalit groups in the Madras Presidency, noting that the arrival of the British had ameliorated their condition. He argues that these groups were converting in large numbers to Christianity to escape the poor

Rajah, who identifies as President of the Second South Indian Adi Dravida Congress and the Honorary Secretary of the Madras Adi Dravida Maha Jana Sabha,¹⁵ also uses the terms Adi Dravida and Adi Andhra to refer to Dalit groups. In his words, then, Dalit groups started calling themselves Adi Dravida to differentiate themselves from the non-Brahmin caste groups mobilizing under the name Dravidian. By 1925, then, the intermediate non-Brahmin castes were calling themselves Dravidians. Srinivasan, who had his differences with Raja (Sanna, 2019, pp. 160–161), sketched a similar history of caste in his open letter to Gandhi, dated 1920:

Dravidians are ancient inhabitants of South India, immigrated from Indo-Oceania submerged land or some other parts of the World. Their language is Tamil. High literature can be found in that language written by their ancients long before Ceylon was separated from the main land India. There were Lords (Perumans) among them, also Kings and Saints... Taking advantage of changes caused by invaders, Brahamins (*sic*) (Priests they were), and Hindus, who got into the caste bondage, gradually oppressed and crushed the Dravidians down, calling them outcastes and other degrading, defamatory, and insulting epithets, such as chandalas (miserable wretch) Puliya (corrupted person) Paraya (stranger or belonging to another) Panchama (a fifth class) and untouchable; calling even their saints as “untouchable saints.” They would not allow the Dravidians to pass in village public streets, use water in tanks or ponds in the village commonage, enter in temples, touch a Brahamin or caste Hindu or any article belonging to him. They were debarred from trading, for they were untouchables. They were kept under bondage for generations by the usuperous (*sic*) landlords and the usury of money lenders. They were kept under serfdom, so that they could not claim their former rights and privileges. In other words the Dravidians were subjugated by the subtle non-violent, non-co-operation methods of the Brahamins.

Srinivasan reads untouchability as the outcome of invaders crushing the indigenous Dravidian people in his open letter to Gandhi, terming this process the outcome of the ‘non-violent, non-cooperation of Brahmins’, poking sly fun at the nationalist agitations of the time. The system of untouchability served to keep them under the yoke of caste and unable to regain their former glory, in his view. He goes on to argue that Gandhi’s political leadership in South Africa shut off avenues of work and savings for Dravidians—the original inhabitants of the South Indian region. In his autobiography, he notes again the exclusions upon which the system of caste is

treatment at the hands of the caste Hindu. He writes that the past glory of the Adi Dravida people was decimated by the Aryan intrusion and speculates on the etymology of various words used to describe Dalit groups. He argues that several extant customs pointed to the former greatness of these groups. He writes about government departments established for their welfare and concludes by arguing against reading a Madras labour strike as a labour movement.

¹⁵This Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha existed atleast from 1891—a fact indicated by Srinivasan joining the Sabha at this time. See the speech delivered by the Chingleput collector in Srinivasan’s autobiography.

premised and rues that Dalit communities have been absorbed into ‘Aryan caste rules’. In his autobiography, he writes:

When the Aryans settled in our country and created the rules of caste, the Dravidians – who are now called Pariah, Panjamar and Adi Dravida – were subject to much misery because they refused to give in. They lived as a separate society, in a separate space called the *Cheri*. They created their villages with such things as their own temple, pond, priest, village head, panchayat members, washerman, barber, burial ground, burning ghat, and the customs of widow remarriage and divorce. ...Instead of openly celebrating their freedom, they have been absorbed into the Aryan caste rules. Those people have kept them under control. I tried to collect them into a large community, that they may ask for and enjoy their rights (Srinivasan, 1999, pp. 24–25).¹⁶

In his 1938 English pamphlet on temple entry, Srinivasan writes again, “When the Aryan Race invaded India those of the Dravidian Race in South India, who repulsed the introduction of the caste system were oppressed, expelled from the towns and kept out of reach of the caste converts and treated them as untouchables” (Sanna, 2019, p. 310).¹⁷

Srinivasan, Raja, and Thass (Geetha and Rajadurai, pp. 92–105), then, all proffer a similar theory on the origin of caste. In their view, the practice of caste was not indigenous to the region, had been imposed by invading outsiders, and that the resulting processes of excluding the ones who refused to practice caste led to the exclusions on which untouchability was premised. In making these claims, these Dalit leaders were participating in the scholarly consensus of the time. Trautmann (2006) has shown that languages and racial groups were twinned in early nineteenth-century European language study (p. 34). The development of ‘Dravidian proof’ or evidence for the Dravidian family of languages was thereby used to formulate the Aryan invasion theory. This theory held that light-skinned Aryans invaded and mixed with dark-skinned Dravidians to produce some contemporary distinctions including caste (p. 225). This theory was part of a scholarly consensus. Therefore, when Ayothee Thass and Rettaimalai Srinivasan repeated the claim, they were not fabricating history—they were, on the contrary, participating in this consensus and citing then-prevalent scholarship on Indian history, while also giving it an anti-caste interpretation.

These understandings of history shaped the anti-caste civic associations that emerged under Srinivasan’s leadership. He had joined the Adi Dravida Maha Jana Sabha in 1891—showing that using Adi Dravida for Dalit groups was an established practice when he began to use Dravidian in place of Pariah or Panchama. These fluid

¹⁶Translation mine.

¹⁷The English pamphlet makes for interesting comparative reading with the Tamil version of the pamphlet. After summarizing the history of caste using the Aryan invasion theory, he argues that the Depressed Classes were misrepresented to the British administration in the early part of their presence in India, but were now coming into their own due to the ‘impartial British administration’. He argues that temple entry was a ruse for absorbing the Depressed Classes into the Hindu fold and takes a strong stance against it (Sanna, 2019, pp. 310–312).

naming conventions were associated with improved political representation and with political movements led by Dalit leaders. Srinivasan notes in his autobiography:

[T]he ones who were called by many names including Pariah, Panchama and Depressed Classes, were now called Adi Dravida, given the right to participate in the Government's administration and had ministerial posts. People of this caste were appointed as ministers and mayors in Legislative Assemblies, Municipalities, Local Boards, Panchayats and given other administrative posts, high posts in the Civil Service, that they may grow in wealth and education. Besides this, the efforts I put into gathering this caste to make it an important part of society were also an important reason for their progress. The Mahasabha of the people of this community continues to function. The name was changed in the course of time. The Madras Depressed Classes Federation and the Scheduled Castes Party are conducted by respectable members of this community. They have also selected me as the leader for this. (Srinivasan, 1999, p. 31) ¹⁸

Srinivasan repeatedly emphasizes that leadership from within Dalit groups was vital to improving their condition. Here, he says that improved representation within governance would allow Dalits to “grow in wealth and education”. All that was denied by caste could, in other words, be granted by participating in governing. This passage implies that the denial of respectability for low-caste names could feature among these potential reversals. The necessity of such reversal and leadership drawn from Dalit communities can be deduced from his definition of untouchability.

Representing and Re-signifying Untouchability in Relation to Agrarian Labour

Srinivasan's 1928 supplementary memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission,¹⁹ which was intended to propose constitutional reform, offers a definition of untouchability that is distinct from colonial understandings of caste as occupation or societal function. In his words, “Untouchability is a device adopted by high-caste men to live upon low caste people by dislocating them from all social, economic and political privileges. It is a public offence committed under cover of social customs and religious observances” (Sanna, 2019, p. 136). In other words, the religious reasons given for the practice of untouchability were merely a ruse to exploit low caste people and enact the social, political, and economic dominance of upper caste groups.

This definition of untouchability is of a piece with Srinivasan's emphasis on agrarian labour as the primary occupation of Dalit groups. The agrarian servitude

¹⁸Translation mine.

¹⁹The English supplementary memorandum, in Srinivasan's words, was intended to show “the condition of the Depressed Classes before and since the advent of British rule, their political advancement, the effect of the introduction of English education, the Indianization of the services, the local self-governing institutions, the revenue department, untouchability, conversion, Depressed Classes welfare, Dominion status and the granting of full self-government” (Sanna, 2019, pp. 112–113).

that people from Dalit castes have been subject to has received some recent scholarly attention (Jayanth, 2020; Viswanath, 2014; Major, 2012). Mohan (2015) has attended to the emancipatory movements that emerge from among the former agrarian slave communities in the Kerala region. The majority of those among the Depressed Classes were associated with agrarian labour, according to leaders from colonial India. In a joint statement submitted to the Round Table Conference by B.R. Ambedkar and Rettaimalai Srinivasan, likely dated to 1931,²⁰ they write that Dalit groups “...cannot consent to subject themselves to majority rule in their present state of hereditary bondsmen... [E]mancipation from the system of untouchability must be[come] an accomplished fact” (Sanna, 2019, p. 173). They note that the poverty among this group is enforced by prejudice, differentiating them from ‘the ordinary caste labourer’ (p. 184). In the main memorandum submitted to the Simon Commission,²¹ Srinivasan describes the Depressed Classes as mainly agricultural labourers who “...form the backbone of the Revenue administration” (p. 108). Srinivasan writes that “we have always been on the soil and attached to it...[E]very argument religious, social or political is used by them to keep us in a state of serfdom” (p. 109). He argues for ensuring that agrarian labour from the lower castes is paid in “coin” rather than “unwholesome grain” (p. 111). Those branded untouchable, in Srinivasan’s view, propped up the revenue administration, since land revenue derived from agrarian land was the primary source of income for the British administration. Srinivasan, therefore, reads untouchability as a complex of economic, political, and social restrictions and seeks the emancipation of the untouchable agrarian labourer from bondage into wage labour, all while shrewdly appealing to the British administrators to protect a vital source of their income.

In the Round Table Conference statement cited earlier, Ambedkar and Srinivasan go on to describe the social boycott of rebellious people from the Depressed Classes as among the most effective methods for suppressing them. They describe the various ways in which untouchability is inflicted—showing how “orthodox classes have used their economic power as a weapon against those Depressed Classes in their villages, when the latter have dared to exercise their rights” (Sanna, 2019, p. 176). They list the ways in which boycott should be made an offence while making an argument for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes in the first ten years of the reformed electoral system and reserved seats thereafter (Sanna, 2019, p. 181). The quest for electoral representation, therefore, is rooted in their understanding of the Dalit condition in colonial India. Since social boycotts could coerce Dalit groups to act against their interests, they turn to the idea of a separate electorate as a means of producing Dalit representation. While Srinivasan would later differ with Ambedkar on

²⁰The statement lays out the conditions under which the Depressed Classes would consent to “majority rule in a self governing India”: equal citizenship, free enjoyment of equal rights, protection against discrimination, adequate representation in the legislatures, redress against prejudicial actions or neglect of interests, special departmental care, and representation of the Depressed Classes in the central Cabinet (Sanna, 2019, pp. 173–187).

²¹The memorandum notes the various exclusions used to uphold untouchability and requires the following for inclusion in the constitution: representation (of the Depressed Classes) in the legislatures, representation in the government, representation in the services, improved economic position, and improved access to education (Sanna, 2019, pp. 108–112).

the question of the emancipatory potential of conversion to other religions (Srinivasan, 1999, p. 45),²² their joint statement and Srinivasan's other writings all emphasise the significance of Dalit political representation.²³ His definition of untouchability as a complex of economic and social restrictions which has been given a religious veneer is at the heart of his ambivalence to causes such as temple entry and conversion to other religions. Likewise, his understanding of the multiple forms of coercion that Dalit groups could be subject to underlies the need for Dalit political representation and leadership.

Self-rule for the Depressed Classes, its Necessity and National Significance

Srinivasan's critique of the nationalist demand for self-rule was accompanied by demands for better Dalit representation within the existing administration. The demands laid out by the Dravida Mahajana Sangam in 1891, for instance, included punishment for those that ridiculed the Pariah using their caste name, and—pertinent to the point being made on political representation—equal respect for those from the Depressed classes for running panchayats and municipalities (Geetha and Rajadurai, 2011, p. 54). “[T]he removal of untouchability,” Srinivasan notes during the Round Table Conference in 1930, “depends upon the vesting of political power in the Depressed Classes”. He finds that there is no other alternative after his forty years of experience working among them. In a speech delivered to the Conference during the second session in 1931, he notes that “[A]bolition of untouchability by law will not suffice” (Sanna, 2019, p. 214). Since it would require administrative action as well, the Depressed Classes must have power in the Legislative and Executive arms of government (p. 215).

His rejection of Gandhi's leadership and of his vocabulary for describing Dalit groups must be read in the context of his belief in leadership from within Dalit castes for advancing the community. While he believes that the community would be best helped by itself, he adds caveats to the manner in which this action should be taken:

Some among the Depressed Classes say that: “The evil spirit called untouchability has taken full possession of the caste Hindus. They will not be able to exorcise it by themselves. If we take up the stick, we will be able to drive it out of the country in a year. If revolution is born, justice will be born.” Revolution will create terrible miseries and, I would say that it would take a long while to recover from it. Enmity, hatred and arrogance are sinful.

²²Conversion was a national question and one on which he differed from Ambedkar. He attacked Olcott for introducing Buddhism to Dalit groups and told Ambedkar that Dalits were not Hindu and therefore did not need to convert—stances that he documented in his autobiography. He sees nationalist temple entry and anti-untouchability movements as self-interested interventions by the caste Hindus, to prevent the Depressed Classes forming “a big, distinct, strong community”. In the English pamphlet on temple entry, dated to 1938, he writes that the Depressed Classes were “...more keen on bettering their economic condition than on temple entry...[E]ntering Hindu temples will take them to the fringe of the caste system to be called a fifth caste and thus into the Hindu fold.” (Sanna, 2019, p. 311)

²³Viswanath (2018) has argued that Ambedkar moved away from this belief in representation, seeing it as a necessary but not sufficient means for Dalit liberation.

It would be more helpful to learn political intrigue and work toward capturing power. For this, the Adi Dravida community must be strengthened. We see the caste Hindus setting goats against each other, sitting and weeping when a goat is drenched and then springing into a flock and looting it when necessary. We need to move them aside and bring to heel those who cheat society for power and money. The Congress and the caste Hindus conduct governance in the manner of home rule. They continue to struggle to achieve complete home rule. Before they achieve this, the Adi Dravidar must stand in opposition to them and strengthen their caste and bring themselves ashore as rapidly as possible. In my experience, until the caste Hindus realise that doing otherwise would bring loss and difficulty to them, they will not give way to the Depressed Classes. We must engage in social service that supports society (Srinivasan, 1999, pp. 48–49)

Here he explicitly argues against revolutionary movements against caste, further underscoring his belief in the advancements that can be effected by leaders from lower-caste groups in political work. That this is his theory of anti-caste work is a case that can be made based on his autobiography as well.

Conclusion

The definition of untouchability as an economic and political process, accompanied by the use of Dravidian and other terminology in anti-caste manner, is—as instantiated by the open letter to Gandhi—at odds with the nationalist crusades for self-rule and against untouchability. One such nationalist crusade that Srinivasan agitated against was the demand to conduct the Indian Civil Services exam in India. His petition against the exam being held in India, which was addressed to the Commons of Britain and Ireland in Parliament, presented a scathing critique of Brahmins for whom, Srinivasan argues, Western education is only a thin veneer. He shows that caste is not simply a problem of the villages but continues to structure life in the big city of Madras.

That this is no idle anticipation can be readily shown, not only from the condition of affairs in the remote Mofussil, where caste is still paramount and sways with a rod of iron, and the rustic mind exhibits all the immobility of ignorance, but also in the capital city, Madras, where Pariah boys are severely excluded from that typical Hindu institution, Pachaiyappa's College, and where, in that great Brahmin centre, Mylapore, a street exists,—and that street forming one of the boundaries of the residence of the Brahmin Judge of the Madras High Court,—in which may be seen a sign board, declaring the way 'No thoroughfare, Pariahs prohibited' and threatening certain pains and penalties, should they not give good heed. (Srinivasan, 1921–24)

These strictures on the education and movement of Dalit people show that, in Srinivasan's view, that the Brahmins "are utterly unfit to share in the administration" and reiterate that caste was not only a problem of the villages (as one might infer from

his characterization of Dalit groups as agrarian labor) but persisted in the urban centre of the Madras Presidency. This awareness of continuing discrimination, therefore, across urban and rural centres influences his critique of the nationalist aspirations. Srinivasan contrasts the two freedom struggles underway in late colonial India in his open letter to Gandhi: “While it is considered 330,000,000 of Indians are kept under subjection by the British, it should equally be considered that one-fifth (66,000,000) of that population is kept under perpetual oppression by the other four-fifths.” (Srinivasan, 1921–24, p. 1) He goes on to note that British administration gave this one-fifth a chance at freedom. His attitude toward British administration remained marked by an ambivalence. Here he noted that they might help the Depressed Classes attain freedom, in other places he is critical of their lack of interest in this cause.

Srinivasan’s usage of Pariah or Dravidian to refer to those from the ‘Depressed Classes’ show that he is still grappling with the question of how best to reclaim shameful names (M.C. Rajah, in the passage cited earlier, also grapples with this question of nomenclature. Thass famously rejected the Pariah name altogether, preferring to refer to the caste as the original Buddhists). The tension between calling his community Pariah and Dravidian shows that he was actively grappling with the question of self-representation. Srinivasan, in reclaiming the identity of being of Pariah caste or of being a despised dark-skinned Dravidian, is deploying caste identity in an anti-caste manner. He uses a category associated with disgust and exclusion with pride to undo the shame associated with the identity. He further demonstrates that the category of Dravidian was still fluid and available for appropriation in 1921. By 1925, according to M.C. Rajah, the intermediate non-Brahmin castes had begun calling themselves Dravidians—a term that has persisted into the present political formations in the region.²⁴ However, the long Dalit engagement with and use of this category has not been given its due in the scholarship on the histories of the Dravidian movement.²⁵ This grappling with naming is significant to anti-caste mobilisation because it is among the earliest signs of an oppressed group cognizing its condition. On recognising that a name has been rendered shameful and disgusting, Dalit leaders chose a variety of ways to reclaim or reject such naming conventions. In Srinivasan’s rendition of this process, Dravidian and Pariah become anti-caste, changeable nomenclature, and names that were given or adopted within history rather than timeless and immutable.

While Srinivasan is slightly better-known in Tamil country and, through his work with Ambedkar at the Round Table Conference, as a part of anti-caste history, it is important to see his life as a part of national history, as in conversation with the anti-colonial struggle. His relationship with Gandhi, his attitude towards nationalist projects

²⁴Sanal Mohan (2015) documents the struggles of the Dalit leader, Ayyankali, who was fighting the landlessness and illiteracy that was a result of former enslavement, echoing the political struggles of Srinivasan. A charismatic preacher drawn from the ranks of the formerly-enslaved, Yohannan, used ‘Adi Dravida’ to refer to all those who had suffered slavery in Travancore (p. 285).

²⁵Pandian, for instance, notes the Dalit critique of the non-Brahmin movement towards the conclusion of his book and speculates that it may now be time for Dalit groups to inhabit the Dravidian category, ignoring the longer history of the Dalit use of the Dravidian terminology (pp. 239–240).

like conducting the Civil Service exam in India, his work as part of the Round Table Conference, his views on temple entry and his legislation rendering public spaces truly public, all put him firmly in conversation with the struggle for freedom from British rule, while advancing the struggle for freedom from caste. His work shows the diversity of thought and political activity in the anti-caste freedom struggle—this Dalit intellectual heritage is a crucial counterpoint to the theories about ‘uplift’ that infantilize Dalit people. His work further indicates the regional support structures that held up and advanced the work of national leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, showing that they were fighting similar battles at the national and regional levels.

I have shown that Srinivasan defines untouchability in political, economic and social terms, rejecting ritual explanations for the practices associated with the exclusion of low caste groups from full social participation. He deploys the category of Dravidian and Pariah in anti-caste manner as part of his political project to improve Dalit political representation. Srinivasan’s political interventions and writing allow the reader to construct Srinivasan’s theory of caste and the significance of anti-caste political movements. The various projects he undertook as a legislator, pamphleteer, national anti-caste activist, and head of regional caste associations, all contributed towards building a public sphere. Democracy depends on such work.²⁶ The work of Rettaimalai Srinivasan, therefore, must be reclaimed for national and anti-caste history.

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²⁶Balasubramaniam (2015) and Dickens (2021) make cognate arguments regarding the significance of Dalit contributions to the formation of a public sphere.

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