

Allapuram Election Report, Tamil Nadu

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Introduction

Introducing the village

The Allapuram polling booth (SI number xxx; polling station number xxx) is located in Allapuram hamlet, Allapuram Panchayat, Pongalur Union, situated about 15km from the town of Tiruppur. The polling booth covered four hamlets: Allapuram, Perumaalpalayam, Thottampalayam and Pallipalayam.

There are 251 households living in Allapuram, Perumaalpalayam and Thottampalayam, and another 105 in Pallipalayam. The land owning Gounders (BC) make up the dominant caste (28%) – in terms of number, economic wealth and political voice - while there are about equal numbers of Adi Dravida Christians² (23%) and Matharis (SC, also known as Arunthathiyars) 22%.³ In addition there are BC castes (15%) such as Nadars and Mudaliyars, and MBC castes (8%) such as barbers. 23% of the residents of the three hamlets are Christians and the remainder are Hindu. A wealth ranking exercise conducted with a group of key informants grouped all households into one of four, locally-defined, wealth groups: rich (9%), medium (26%), poor (48%) and very poor (17%).⁴

Until 20 or 30 years ago Allapuram would have been a largely agricultural village, with most inhabitants being either landowning farmers (Gounders) or agricultural labourers (Adi Dravida and Mathari), and some others engaged in service occupations such as barbers, dhobis and potters. However, the proximity of Tiruppur, a booming garment textile town, has led to dramatic changes in the village economy. Most households in the area (across caste and class) now have members who are involved in some way in the

² Being Christians, Adi Dravidas are officially categorised as BC. However, many of them still have Hindu and thus SC on their community certificate. In the village, they are socially perceived by others as SC, and like the Matharis, they used to be primarily involved in coolie work.

³ The survey of 251 households was undertaken as part of on-going research on the region. It covered the hamlets of Allapuram, Perumaalpalayam, Thottampalayam – but not Pallipalayam.

⁴ Local definitions of wealth groups: Rich ‘*panakarar*’ were those with good amounts of land (10-20 acres) or immobile assets, a Tiruppur business or a Grade A government job. Middle households ‘*nadutharam*’ were those with a grade B government job, 1-2 acres of land (often bought by themselves), a house of their own and going for company work. The poor ‘*ealay*’ were those doing coolie agricultural work, which was unpredictable. If they are sick they can’t work, and they don’t have a good house. Many are heavily in debt, but at least the poor may have a son or daughter giving them food. The very poor ‘*unaccount*’ are those who have nothing, no-one to look after them, they are too old or physically unfit to work, while some are also lazy.

Tiruppur industry. While men from Gounder households are most likely to have started up a business of their own or to work as a manager or supervisor in a garment company, men and women from other castes commute daily to work as tailors, ironing masters, cutting masters, checkers and helpers. It is important to note, however, that several men belonging to Christian and SC households have also done quite well in the urban industry, and have been able to access the better rewarded jobs such as tailors and cutting masters, with several of them acting as labour contractors.

While Gounder women are unlikely to engage in paid work outside the village, some Christian and Mathari women, on the other hand, do commute to Tiruppur to work in the garment industry, but on the whole in smaller numbers than men. The majority of these women remain employed in agriculture. In addition, some women (from non-SC castes) are involved in home work (mainly checking and trimming) for the industry. The high demand for labour in town has led to pervasive changes in the social relations of the village. Matharis no longer need to rely exclusively on low-paid, seasonal agricultural work, and as a result their dependence on Gounders has undergone substantial change.

Agricultural relations have undergone transformations too. Major crops grown in the area include maize, chollam, coconut, onion, tomatoes and other vegetables. Agriculture here is irrigated by wells, borewells and the PAP canal. While falling water tables and only periodic canal water (it is received for five months once every two years) meant that the 'water problem' was the main issue for agriculturalists for many years, today the 'labour problem' dominates. Nowadays, labour in Allapuram has several alternative employment opportunities and it has become much harder for landowners to get labourers – and especially younger men and women – to toil on the land. Gounder landowners have responded by offering higher wages, switching from daily wage rates to contract rates for certain agricultural tasks, employing labourers from outside the area (on a contract basis) and by switching crop types. In particular there has been an increase in coconut cultivation, which is a crop with low labour demands, not in the least thanks to the widespread use of drip irrigation.

Party politics in the village and the region

For this parliamentary election, following the delimitation exercise, Allapuram falls within the Coimbatore Parliamentary Constituency. Before the delimitation exercise it was part of the Pollachi Parliamentary Constituency (which was a reserved SC seat), and the sitting MP was Dr Krishnan (MDMK). The delimitation exercise has also led to changes at the Legislative Assembly level. Allapuram currently falls within Pongalur Legislative Assembly, and the current MLA is Mr A.S. Mani (DMK). However, while Allapuram still belongs to Pongalur Union, it will no longer be part of Pongalur Legislative Assembly for the next MLA elections, but will fall within Palladam Legislative Assembly. Moreover, following the formation of the new Tiruppur District in January 2009, Allapuram has shifted from Coimbatore District to Tiruppur District. Given the physical closeness of Tiruppur city (15km) versus Coimbatore city (45 km), and the fact that most people from the village commute to Tiruppur for work, villagers have a much closer affinity with Tiruppur than any other city around. Many villagers initially even assumed they were part of the Tiruppur Parliamentary Constituency – and it was certainly the case that many people were more exposed to campaigning in Tiruppur town, than in the village or in Coimbatore city.

The continued domination of the two major political parties (ADMK and DMK) in Tamil politics was evident at the village level, where the majority of voters adhere to either one or other of these parties. In this rural region of Tiruppur, people hold the strongest opinions and have most passionate feelings about either the ADMK or the DMK, with other parties being much less discussed or considered (with the exception perhaps of Congress, and the newly established KMP).

Nevertheless, two points are worth noting. First, rather than individual party manifestoes, it was the composition of the alliances, the seat sharing arrangements and the shifting of parties in and out of existing coalitions that dominated much election talk and campaigning. For example, people talked extensively about the shift of the PMK and communist parties from the DMK-Congress alliance to the ADMK alliance, or about the possible post-election shifts in alliances. The key parties, their candidates, the alliances and the symbol under which they stood are outlined in Table 1. Because of the proximity

to Tiruppur, and the confusion in many people's minds as to which constituency they were in, details are included for both the Coimbatore and Tiruppur constituencies.

Second, the launch of a new political party less than three months before the election triggered a number of new policy debates and led to new speculations, among both voters and activists, about shifting vote banks in the region. This new party is the *Kongunadu Munnetra Peeravai* (KMP), a regional party, covering the entire Kongu Nadu, which grew out of the caste-based *Kongu Vellalar Gounder Peeravai* (Kongu Vellalar Gounder Association). The KMP was formally launched on 15th February 2009 at a large public meeting organised by the Kongu Association, which allegedly attracted more than 700,000 people. The party thus emerged out of a caste association, much in the way the PMK emerged from the Vanniyar Sangam. Even though KMP activists tried to convince the public that the party was established for the 'upliftment' of the area as a whole and for people of all communities, the party was widely seen as a Gounder party and as working for the particular interests of the Gounder community (see below). Pre-election, many people felt that this new party had little chance of doing well, because it seemed highly unlikely that many Gounders would be prepared to abandon their current party loyalties or that any non-Gounders would vote for a KMP candidate. However, activists of different parties expressed concern that the KMP would further split the vote, as the DMDK vote had done in the previous assembly election, and the party renewed the policy debate, as discussed below. In the end, a good deal of scepticism about this party was misplaced. KMP candidates stood in 11 constituencies and even though none of them gained a seat, several candidates got around 1 lakh votes, split the vote in their constituency, and so influence the overall outcome of the elections in the region.

Table 1 – Summary of major parties in Coimbatore and Tiruppur constituencies (grouped into alliances)

| Party | National leader | Coimbatore candidate | Tiruppur candidate | Symbol | Flag / Comments |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|--|
| Congress | Sonia, Rahul Gandhi Thangabalu (TN) | <i>R. Prabu</i> | <i>Karvendhan</i> | Palm of hand | |
| DMK | Karunanithi | Not contesting | Not contesting | Sun rise | |
| VCK | Thirumavalavan | Not contesting | Not contesting | | SC party; flag blue and red with white stars |
| Indian Muslim League | | Not contesting | Not contesting | None of own | |
| ADMK | Jayalalithaa | Not contesting | <i>Sivasami</i> | 2-leaf | |
| CPM | Prakashkarat Varadharajan (TN) | <i>PR Nataraj</i> | Not contesting | Sickle & hammer | |
| CPI | AB Baradan Pandian & T Raja TN) | Not contesting | Not contesting | Sickle & grain | |
| PMK | Ramadass | Not contesting | Not contesting | Mango | Vanniyars |
| India National League | ? | Not contesting | Not contesting | ? | Black flag with white star |
| MDMK | Vai Gopalsamy (Vaiko) | Not contesting | Not contesting | Spinning top | |
| BJP | Advani | <i>GKS Selvakumar</i> | Not contesting | Lotus | |
| KMP | Best Ramasamy | <i>E.R. Eshwaran</i> | <i>Balasubramanian</i> | Gas cylinder | Gounders |
| DMDK | Vijaykant | <i>R Pandian</i> | <i>DineshKumar</i> | Drum | Flag with torch |
| Bahujan Samaj Party | Mayawati | <i>K Ramasubramanian</i> | | | National SC party |
| Independent | | <i>Annadurai</i> | | | Was in Hindu Makkal Katchi |

Returning to our polling booth, the hamlets covered by the Allapuram polling booth are located at the heart of a region with a historically strong ADMK presence. Until Mr A.S. Mani (DMK) won the 2006 Legislative Assembly elections, the Pongalur MLA had ADMK for more than 30 years. Even today, the ADMK enjoys widespread popularity among villagers of all castes, and has the continued support of a considerable number of both Gounders and Matharis. It is no exaggeration to say that Allapuram is an ADMK village and that most villagers would be utterly surprised if any other party obtained a majority vote.

But Allapuram village is just one in the panchayat of Allapuram, and the current Panchayat President is Mrs B. Preetha (DMK). It is widely felt that she only acts in name as this is a reserved seat for women, and her husband, Mr Eshwarapandian, acts as *de facto* president and is always introduced and referred to as ‘the President’. The Panchayat Office and the residence of the current panchayat president are about 2 km from the village itself on the main road. As the hamlet of Allapuram is strongly ADMK and the current panchayat president is DMK, the villagers of Allapuram feel rather ignored and disadvantaged. Disappointment with current panchayat administration often surfaces when people mention the promised free TV that they have still not received, and some do not hesitate to point a finger at the current panchayat president in this regard. The previous president, Mr Kulandaisamy, is a resident of Allapuram hamlet itself, an ADMK activist and a Mathari who gained the position under the SC reserved seats. He is still widely respected in the village and remains a key political player within the ADMK. The two presidents before him were both Gounders: Mr Murugan, an ADMK man, and Mr Balagovindan, a Congress supporter.

Methods and problems faced

Allapuram was selected as it was a village in which we were already conducting research. This research looks into socio-economic transformations in the Tiruppur region, and this village was selected for at least two reasons: its relatively vibrant agricultural economy and its strong links with the Tiruppur garment industry. We conducted this election

research alongside our broader ethnography of the changing social, economic and political relations of the village. As part of our project we had already collected information on past and current village politics and undertaken a household questionnaire on all 251 households living in Allapuram hamlet and 2 other neighbouring hamlets, Perumaalpalayam and Thottampalayam. In addition to these three hamlets the Allapuram polling booth also covered one additional hamlet, Pallipalayam, which is not covered by our survey, but which is broadly similar to the three hamlets in terms of caste and social makeup.⁵ The findings discussed here relate mainly to the three hamlets of our study.

Despite numerous visits to the CEO we were unable to gain access to the polling booth. We did manage to get a letter of permission to enter the polling booth 3 days before the day of voting, but this was not considered to be sufficient by the Presiding Officer of the booth on the day of the election. It was clear that all officials did everything they could to prevent us gaining access, coming up with excuse after excuse as to why this was not possible. For the same reason, we were prevented to attend a training meeting for election officers that took place 10 days before the elections.

Due to previous commitments the main researchers (Grace Carswell and Geert De Neve) could not be in the field from 3 days before the elections, but had trained up two assistants in their place. They collected data pertaining to the last days before the election, election day itself and results day. After the results, we returned to the village for further interviewing and to complete the NES questionnaires.

⁵ Although it has rather higher proportion of Mathari's than the other 3 hamlets.

1. Why do people vote?

Why the people of Allapuram vote is a vexed question and any answer to it has to address voters' considerations at different levels. What we attempt to summarise here are some of the main issues that were brought up by a range of informants, not necessarily in order of importance, and to illustrate them with the concepts, ideas and language used by the villagers themselves.

Benefits, policies and local issues

At one level, it became transparent that practical benefits – either benefits received or anticipated – are an important driving force for people to vote. Past and anticipated benefits also help to explain why people vote for a particular party. One widowed woman voter, who said she has never missed a vote but does not always vote for the same party, said that she decides who to vote for by looking at who will 'help people'. More particularly, she would look at who is likely to increase the old age pension, provide water facilities or ensure that prices go down. Whoever she felt would provide such things is who she will vote for.⁶

Periyasamy, a man from the Christian area, who commutes daily to Tiruppur where he works as an ironing master, is very pragmatic in his approach: 'there is no change, but we still vote. I always voted ... I look at the candidate and at what they are likely to do, and I'll change from DMK to ADMK to other parties. Last time, they gave us a government loan to build this extension [to our house], that was under the ADMK, so I voted for them. Now the DMK has given us roads and street lights. Whoever is giving something at the time of election, that's whom I will vote for.' And it is not only the poor who follow this line of reasoning. A wealthy Gounder made the same calculations: he favours Congress in central elections as they have wavered many agricultural loans, and he supports Karunanidhi [DMK] at the state level because he has given free current for farmers.⁷

⁶ Christian widow, 29/4/09. All names have been omitted or anonymised.

⁷ Interview with Gounder farmer, Allapuram, 26/4/09

Not only past but also anticipated benefits shape people's voting behaviour. Anthony and his uncle Ponnarasu, both Christians employed in Tiruppur, complained about the unwillingness of any party to provide a decent bus stop in their village and about a road that was poorly constructed near their house. They explained to us: 'If one party wants to do something, the other parties will obstruct them. In other places where there is a *thottam* (farm) they build a bus stop, but for us they are not providing one. But I will still vote, because we expect that perhaps a next government will lay a good road or provide that bus stop. People are always expecting something, so they vote!'

A group of Congress leaders in Tiruppur explained this by comparison: 'In other countries people have their basic needs fulfilled, so they lost interest in politics, but here people still have lots of needs, so people keep voting to get a government in place that will do something for them.' While it was clear to these Congress men why many Indians vote, they found it much harder to describe a typical Congress voter in Tamil Nadu: 'They are silent voters, we don't know ourselves who they are. Usually, they are anti-terrorist and secular. They are people who seek a stable government. Congress families always remain Congress.'

Mr Kulandaisamy, former panchayat president and member of the Mathari community, clarifies that for some this willingness to vote is less a matter of choice than of necessity: 'There is no other way for us. Adi Dravidas have Thirumavalavan and the Pallars have John Pandian to look after them and even to use violence on their behalf, but we Arunthathiyars [Matharis] have nobody to stand up for us and we have no money to organise. We are not even able to use violence to attract people's attention. So, we have to vote. If you put your vote, change will come'. Kulandaisamy presents voting as the only way for Matharis to be heard or attract attention in the absence of any other form of organisation or influence. Indeed, in the absence of any form of political power.

While perceived benefits, whether past, present or future, help to explain why people vote, they also go some way explaining why some have become sceptical about voting. Disillusionment with broken promises or persistent negligence by subsequent

governments turn some people against voting altogether. One man told us he was not going to vote. He said: ‘I don’t mind about the television [promised to them in previous elections, but not yet received], but they don’t even give us good drinking water. In the whole of Allapuram panchayat, all the other hamlets have drinking water except this one. Even the foothills people [a Mathari colony] get drinking water once a week, but we don’t.... All political parties promise it in all elections - the MLA and the president, etc. But they never keep the promise. ... I’m not worried about the TV... but water is the issue.’⁸

Water, however, is only one of the local issues that people are concerned about, and local concerns are closely shaped by local politics. An older woman told us: ‘Karunanidhi promised us a TV, and hasn’t given it. ... The whole area around here has not got a TV, no drinking water, no bus stop. All the neighbouring villages have – it is because of local politics – some conflicts between people of two different parties within the village’.⁹ But such local issues certainly affect how people vote. Poornima said that failure to repair a nearby street light (under which her SHG would normally meet in the evenings) and the lack of drinking water for her hamlet, were the main issues for her.¹⁰ In an interview with men and women from the Christian area, all the men mentioned national issues, such as minority protection, non-corrupt government, and so on, while the women all mentioned local issues as being most important. They themselves were aware of this difference, with one of them saying ‘women will never think outside the house!’¹¹

Local issues may even bring about radical shifts in people’s voting behaviour. Gayathri, a woman who had a history of voting ADMK had been helped by a local ADMK politician to be allocated land for a house in the village. However, while her sister was going through the same process her sister had somehow fallen into a dispute with the current ADMK ward member. Because of this dispute Gayathri had avoided going to the ward member when she needed his signature for a new water pipe to her own house, and had

⁸ Interview with the small group of men, plus Perriyamma, Allapuram; 15/4/09

⁹ Old lady, after visit by DMDK candidate, 26/4/09

¹⁰ Interview with Poornima, 29/4/09

¹¹ Interview with Christian family, 8/5/09.

instead gone directly to the Panchayat President (DMK). When the ADMK ward member had found out about this, he had been very angry and had come to her house late one night, drunk, and shouted outside the house. She was furious about this, as she was working late that night in Tiruppur and her young daughter and son were alone in the house. She has since said she would never vote for ADMK again.

Past policies are certainly not irrelevant in steering voting behaviour, and people routinely refer to a range of government policies and how they benefited from them or not. Most often we were told about the '1Rs rice', the free TV, the free gas stove and old age pensions. Government employees, for example, praise the DMK for regular salary increases and many other benefits extended to them by Karunanidhi, while others remain grateful to Amma (ADMK) for having provided cheap house loans or house pattas (documents). While some approve of 1Rs rice, others criticise it for either being inedible or for making workers lazy. Some are grateful for a free TV while others complain that it is tax money that could be better spent on much needed infrastructure and basic amenities. Assessments of policies obviously vary, but policies themselves are central to how people judge past government performance and gauge likely future impacts of different parties coming to power. Some believe that voting can bring about real change, others keep asking themselves: does it really make any difference whether I vote or not?

Loyalties and histories

Policies and benefits, however, only tell part of the story, and perhaps not even the most important part. Many voters have strong family traditions of supporting a particular party, and would not dream of swapping allegiances even though they may not always be pleased with their party's policies or candidates. Party loyalty is particularly strong among activists, but also runs through ordinary families, many of whom have voted for the same party for generations. Mohan, a leading ADMK activist in the village, has been an ADMK councillor for the last 5 years and before that his mother was a councillor for the same party. They have been ADMK supporters for a long time, and Mohan has developed a close bond with the ADMK. His support has become unconditional: 'Whatever Amma says, we will do. The way Amma goes, is our way!' In this respect,

some households think of themselves as a single unit for the purpose of voting, as appears from Rangasamy's reflections. Rangasamy, a Gounder landowner and toddy grower, considers that he has two votes: his own and that of his unmarried son, who works as a supervisor in Tiruppur. He says he plans to vote for the newly established KMP (for obvious reasons related to toddy selling policies – See Box 1) and his son will vote for the ADMK. He considers his son's vote as something that he too has control over: 'I will vote for KMP, but if I only had one vote, I would vote ADMK'¹².

While sons and daughters may follow the voting of their parents, and wives that of their husbands, there are definitely limits to family loyalty, and we came across many women who admitted voting differently from their husbands. Poornima, a woman of barber caste who now runs a cable business and a chicken stall together with her husband, confided to us that she voted Congress even though all her extended family members around vote ADMK. 'I am not telling anyone, but I have always voted Congress, my father voted Congress and I have always liked the party.' Similarly, Karpagam, a young first time voter had decided that she would vote for Vijayakanth (DMDK) and was even trying to convince her parents to vote for him too.

Secrecy, or not revealing who one votes for, is particularly adhered to by women who feel passionate about their personal right to vote and to make their own choice.

Ayyasamy, a now 65 year old retired quarry worker, says he has voted for the same party since he was 21, yet was unwilling to reveal who that is. His wife, a 55 year old school cook, admits not always voting for the same party: 'I vote for whatever party I feel should come to power. But we won't tell each other whom we have voted for, because if I do he might start questioning me!' Asked whether she had already decided who she would vote for, she said she hadn't yet and her decision would depend on who would seem most likely to reduce the price of goods. They do talk politics at home but never outside for fear that arguments may arise, and they never try to influence their now grown-up children who to vote for.

¹² Interview with Rangasamy, farmer [5/5/09 Notebook 14]

Some people's loyalties are based on a historical identification with a party or a party leader, often a founding father. This identification often extends beyond the individual or the household and can apply to entire communities. This is the case of the Matharis in the village, who have a longstanding community-wide loyalty towards the ADMK. One woman from the foothills [Mathari colony], a loyal ADMK supporter, said she had always voted for ADMK. While she might sometimes think about voting for someone else, she admits: 'when I get to the booth and see the two-leaf, I will always vote for it!' She expressed worry that some people wouldn't know to vote for the sickle [CPM symbol] in this election, as the ADMK alliance candidate in Coimbatore Constituency is a CPM candidate. Asked why she has always been such a loyal supporter of ADMK, she said that 'right from the beginning we are used to this party, we have always supported it.' She then explained that the term 'Amma' [used to refer to Jayalalithaa] is something that they know from when they are born with their own amma [mother], and so they have a very close relationship with that term.¹³ Another woman who said that she just votes for whoever helps her, also felt that there was no real decision to take: 'we always vote for one party, so there is no decision to take. It comes generation after generation; all our forefathers voted for that party. The person who gave us this land, built this house, gave us free electricity – they are all of this party.'¹⁴

Other Matharis similarly state that 'our people have always voted for two-leaf (*irettalai*) [ADMK symbol]', and they closely associate the two-leaf symbol with MGR, the founding, now dead, leader of the ADMK. MGR is spoken of with great reverence, and pictures of him appear on all ADMK posters and leaflets. It is not unusual for voters to talk about him in the present tense and to mention their love for MGR as the main reason why they vote for ADMK today. A Mathari mother and agricultural labourer explained her love for MGR with a great deal of emotion:

'Here, our children could not sit in the same chair as them [Gounder children] and they could not sit inside [the school building]. Now all that is possible thanks to him. We used to have to stand up when they [Gounders] passed our house and show them respect. [At this point she stands up and makes a deep bow to show how one had to be respectful and she demonstrates how one had to tie one's saree

¹³ Interview with lady in foothills, day of CPM candidate's tour of Allapuram, 29/4/09

¹⁴ Woman in foothills, 27/4/09

in front to show deference – while doing this she laughed at how things used to be done and how everything has changed now!] Because of him we haven't got that fear anymore (*anda atcham illae*). He said all our children should go to school, and he started free school meals and introduced eggs for the children ... What MGR did, Amma is now following too ... Whether I die tomorrow or live another 50 years, I won't change the party I vote for!

MGR remains alive and well in the minds of Allapuram's Mathari voters today: a young Mathari woman told us that 'as far as politics is concerned no one is as good as MGR.'¹⁵ They give plenty of examples of how Amma continues his legacy and how she keeps prices of food and gold down, how she supplies water and street lamps, and even how she provides rain: 'Whenever Karunanidhi comes we don't get proper rains, but when we have Jayalalithaa we have good rains!' But what drives people to vote for the ADMK today goes far beyond the everyday care Amma takes of them. The party and its leaders are perceived to have given them a sense of dignity and self-respect, to promote equality and 'upliftment', and to have been instrumental in the transformation of social relations in the village and beyond. It is their very identity – as low caste and poor people – and its transformation over time that the Matharis talk about when reflecting on 'their party' and their overwhelming desire to vote.

In a similar way, the Adi Dravida Christians in the village closely identify with the DMK – almost entirely associated with Karunanidhi - and most of them are self-declared DMK voters. They consider the DMK a party that takes care of them in several ways. Many of them have government jobs, or as Ayyadurai, a strong DMK supporter, put it 'in each family there is a government employee and the DMK is known for giving good support to government staff, so that's why many vote DMK in our area'. But also here loyalty to the party is based on more fundamental issues too. As Christians and a minority group, they feel that voting ADMK would be too risky given the party's earlier alliance with the BJP. Security is without a doubt an issue for them. Priya, a Christian woman employed in a Tiruppur company, explains 'I am a Christian and I will see to my safety. I will choose a party under whose rule there have been no communal clashes.'¹⁶ Her parents joined in saying: 'When Advani was in rule we had communal problems and when

¹⁵ Diary of Mathari girl.

¹⁶ Interview with Priya and family, Christian area, 8/5/09.

Jayalalithaa was chief minister in Tamilnadu there were problems. ... So we don't want them [Advani and Jayalalithaa] to come to power. Because of that most Christians will vote DMK. Although it is not a problem here in the village or in Tamil Nadu, there was the case in Orissa... when a sister and a priest were burned - and so most Christians will vote DMK. We feel that minorities are secure under DMK.¹⁷ Minority identity and security are two related factors that many Christians will carefully consider when voting and that have led many of them consistently to vote DMK over the last elections.

Rights and duties, respect and recognition

When asked 'why do you vote?' or 'why do people vote?', people often reply that they vote 'because it is our right (urimai)' or 'because it is our duty (kadamai)' as citizens of India. Voting is often simultaneously perceived as a right, given by the state to its citizens, and as a duty, a task people feel they have to fulfil as citizens. While people are often unable to further articulate what exactly they mean with right (urimai) and duty (kadamai), these terms nevertheless carry a very strong and precise meaning for those who use them. A few examples may illustrate this.

Take the case of Anthony and his mother, Sangeetha. Anthony (25) is a Christian Adi Dravidar who lives in what is widely known as the 'Christian area' in the centre of the village. Anthony works as a cutting master in the Tiruppur garment industry where he earns up to Rs500 for a 12-hour shift, while his brother works as a skilled tailor in the same industry. Both are unmarried and live with their widowed mother who works as a casual agricultural labourer in a nearby farm. Their tiled house consists of three spacious rooms, an immaculate kitchen and has been recently extended. While Sangeetha talks about the hardships they faced in the past – until 2 years ago they lived in a mere hut and they didn't have the means to educate their sons – they now readily admit that their lives have substantially improved thanks to 'Tiruppur jobs'. Turning to the topic of elections, I ask whether she will vote, and Sangeetha replies:

I can't be without voting; we both have not missed any vote ... we always think: whoever might come next, will they do something good for us? Parties are changing all the time, but there is no change for us. The roads, for example, they

¹⁷ Priya's parents, Christian area, 8/5/09

have been approved 2 years ago, but only now have they put the road. It is at the local level that things are not being properly done and implemented. We will look at the person and if they don't do well, we will change our vote; we will not always vote for the same party.

Anthony adds: I will look at the policy of a party. Here ADMK is very strong, and only the last time the DMK won here. ...

Sangeetha continues: We will ask: what will they do for the people? Many people got free loans, but we had to pledge our patta (or land document) and get a loan, which we are still repaying now. I didn't get a free loan, so I am fed up with all the parties.

So why do you vote then?

Sangeetha: There is no meaning to life in this world if I do not vote, it is meaningless not to vote!

What do you mean with this?

Anthony explains: If we don't vote, we are giving up our right, it is our right (*urimai*)!

In talking about voting Sangeetha and Anthony move back and forth between two levels. At one level, they dwell on the practical benefits that may ensue from selecting a good government, while at another level, they refer to something much more fundamental, something 'they cannot be without'. This something is a basic right which they strongly feel should not be given up under any circumstance and, more importantly, which they feel provides 'meaning to life in this world' or, one can assume, to life as a citizen in contemporary democratic India.

Karpagam, a first time voter studying at a nearby teacher training college, asks me in reply to the voting question: 'It's our right, so why should we give it up? The only right of Tamil people is the vote, so why should we give it up?' On another occasion she said: I'm very happy [to be voting]. This is the first time I've been given this responsibility. This is my right and no-one can interfere with that.¹⁸ While certainly not everyone is passionate about politics, almost everyone is passionate about voting itself, and considers it wrong 'to waste a vote'. Even though not everyone who said they would vote ended up doing so on the day of elections, most people had strong intentions to vote and felt that it

¹⁸ Karpagam, 14/4/09

was a most valuable right (*urimai*) that everyone should make use of to the best of their abilities.

Other informants expressed this in comparable ways. Rajan, a tailor in Allapuram, told us ‘I have never wasted (in English) a vote, that is the only right (*urimai*) we have, the only thing we can handle on our own. No one can interfere with that.’¹⁹ One Mathari woman, who had told us that all politicians make promises which they fail to keep, said that despite this she would always vote. When questioned why she would vote, if she felt it made no difference, she replied ‘The thing is written on our forehead’²⁰. With this she meant that it is simply something they have to do, it is their fate. Priya, introduced above, was asked what she would do if she didn’t get leave to vote on the day. She exclaimed: ‘I will just go [to vote]! I have to vote! It is our right (*urimai*) to vote.’ What do you mean by right? ‘The government gives us no other benefits, it only respects us in that regard, this is the only place where they respect us!’²¹

Interestingly, the right to vote is somehow perceived as the ‘only’ absolute right people have and the only right that cannot be taken away from them – unlike other social and economic rights which are considered much more ill-defined and elusive. It is valued because it is a unique, personal right, *and* because it is one of the ways in which the state gives recognition and respect to people, irrespective of caste or class. The right to vote is indeed seen by many as one of the ways in which the state recognises the very existence of people, or as one Mathari woman puts it: ‘It [voting] is the only evidence that I am here’.²² One could even argue that it is the very act of voting that turns people into citizens, into recognized and legitimate members of a nation. If one does not vote, one does not exist (in a political sense at least, as citizen). For Periyasamy, a Christian employed as an ironing master in Tiruppur, voting and being an Indian citizen is indeed one and the same thing: ‘As Indian citizen (*Indian kudimagan*) I have to vote; I have to select a representative for parliament.’ Here, right becomes duty.

¹⁹ Rajan, interview in new stitching unit, , Allapuram, 10/4/09

²⁰ Interview with woman in foothills, 27/4/09 [notebook 14]

²¹ Interview with Priya and family, Christian area, 8/5/09.

²² Woman in foothills, 27/4/09

Mr Murthy, a Gounder and Coimbatore District Treasurer for the DMDK, answers the question ‘why do people vote?’ as follows: ‘*Adu taan jananyakam!* (That is what democracy is!) *Adu taan makkalactchi!* (That is what people’s rule is!) *Adu kadamai illaea?* (That is our duty, isn’t it?)’. In throwing the question back at us, Murthy uses the word duty (*kadamai*) rather than right (*urimai*). Others too refer to the duty of voting. Chandrashekar, Tiruppur sub-editor of the Dina Thandi, puts it this way: ‘People vote because it is a duty (*kadamai*); someone has to be voted to power. People cannot deny the elections.’ Others in the village express it in even more explicit terms: ‘It is our democratic duty to vote.’²³

To some extent right and duty are used interchangeably, evoking similar meanings. Some speak of a right to vote, others of a duty. However, for those who use either of these terms, clear distinctions of meaning are being made, and this was most clearly expressed by a group of women first time voters enrolled in a teacher training college. In search of first time voters, we approached a class of 50 women students at a local college and asked them about the upcoming elections and why they would vote. They talked about *urimai* and *kadamai* and were very explicit about the difference between them: ‘The right to vote is an individual right, it’s a right given to us by the state. But it is our duty to use it, it is our duty to select a good leader.’ While *urimai* is understood as a formal right conveyed by the state onto its citizens, the way in which that right is made use of is perceived as a matter of personal duty or *kadamai*. Either way voting is a must, and the young women we talked to further expanded on their love for their country and the importance of selecting good leaders given that the country is in their hands only.

But several informants took this even further; for them voting isn’t only a matter of being recognised by the state as a person and citizen, it is also an act that gives some sense of meaning to their life, even though no one further specified what this meaning exactly consists of. Consider the following statements by a cross section of Allapuram’s population in the days before the election.

²³ Interview with Christian family, 8/5/09.

The brother of Vijay, a staunch DMK activist from the Christian area, has this to say about voting: ‘It is our only right in our country. We are nothing if we are not voting, we are not worth anything if we do not vote.’²⁴ And his father added: ‘Only dead people will not vote. If you don’t vote, it means you are not living.’²⁵ A caste woman in the main village similarly replied: ‘It is our right to vote; if you are not voting then you are not living. Only those who have died will be removed from the list. There is no meaning to living if you are not voting.’²⁶ Even Gurusamy, a Gounder farmer with no particular party loyalties or interest in politics, and who claims to decide only in the last minute who to vote for, has this to say: ‘There is no respect for us if we don’t vote. There is no meaning in life if you don’t put a vote. If I don’t vote, it’s like I am dead. It isn’t that we vote for a good person or a bad person, but it is our duty to put a vote. They earn lakhs and crores and we don’t benefit but still we vote.’²⁷ Clearly, as Priya concludes, there are strong emotions involved in voting too: ‘I am happy I have voted – it gives me some pride. But the government hasn’t done anything for me. Even if they do nothing for us we will still vote! We will hope that this time they’ll do something, so we’ll give them a chance!’²⁸

Who votes and who doesn’t?

It has recently been suggested that the rate of participation in voting in India is high, and rising. Figures released by the government immediately after polling would certainly support this (see, for example, ‘62% vote in Phase V as curtain comes down on polls’, *The Hindu*, 14 May 2009). However, it has to be questioned whether these figures of voter turnout are calculated on the basis of percentage of those *on the voters list* who voted, or percentage of *eligible voters* who voted. In other words, if there are a significant number of people who do not appear on voters lists anywhere (and we certainly came across examples in just one small village) then the turnout figures are likely to be overestimated.

²⁴ Interview with Vijay’s brother and father, Christian area, 12/5/09

²⁵ Interview with Vijay’s brother and father, Christian area, 12/5/09

²⁶ Interview with woman in main village, 11/05/09

²⁷ Gurusamy, Tomato farmer, Allapuram, 15/4/09

²⁸ Interview with Priya and family, Christian area, 8/5/09.

The main reason that people don't appear on voters lists is that they are young people who have never registered. These are not only those who have just turned 18, but even up to their early twenties.²⁹ We also came across a number of first-time voters who were eligible to vote, but who did not appear on the voters list. A group of young Mathari women said they hadn't registered to vote. Some were unclear as to the procedure to get on the voters list, believing that someone else would do this for them.³⁰ This seems to be a particular issue amongst the poorer and less well-educated, and those apathetic about politics are likely to be over-represented. While the failure to register is sometimes due to the voter's own lack of action, in other cases it is due to administrative delays or failures. Indeed, we often heard voters complaining that they had applied for their voter card a long time back but had still not received it.³¹

Apart from not voting because they do not appear on the voters list, there are other reasons that people – who appear on the list - don't vote. In Allapuram, 78% of those on the voter's list cast their vote on 13th May. So, what happened to the other 22%? One important reason why people don't vote is that they are on a voters list, but not where they are currently resident: this particularly affects women who often move on marriage, and labour migrants. This area of Tamil Nadu has high rates of labour migration and many may not transfer their vote because they are not clear how long they will stay in the area, while others mean to transfer their vote but never get around to it. Others report that transferring your voters card is not straightforward and that problems routinely occur with the transfer of their vote to the list of their new place of residence. Thus, in this area, perhaps one of the major reasons for not voting is due to difficulties in returning to the 'native place'. For many the cost, in terms of bus fares and time off work, makes returning to vote prohibitively expensive.

Others are simply apathetic, and our research found a certain amount of apathy among the young and the very old. We found, however, little evidence of apathy among better off

²⁹ We also came across one example of a woman who discovered she has been removed from the list for no apparent reason, having voted for many years.

³⁰ Group of young women in foothills, aged 19, 20 and 21. 27/4/09

³¹ Interview with Karpagam, GDN notes.

landowners. Even wealthy Gounder men and women were on the whole interested in the elections and many of them were actively involved in camp. The highest degree of apathy seemed to be amongst younger SC voters, and apathy and lack of interest seems, in large part, to explain the failure of the group of young Mathari women mentioned above, to register to vote. A group of young Christian men, who had their voter cards, were simply uninterested in politics, saying their main interest in life was cricket. Having said this, they did say that they would vote on the day, and were considering voting DMDK ‘as the other parties hadn’t done anything for them.’³²

Some older voters were also apathetic. One old Mudaliyar woman – who has two politically active sons - told us that she knew nothing about politics and that each time she voted she simply ‘put it randomly.’ Although she didn’t mind who she voted for, she always used to go to vote, partly because of family pressure. ‘As everyone used to insist and want me to vote, I would just go.’ But this time she wasn’t going to bother voting. She said it was too difficult as she can no longer walk. But this didn’t bother her at all, because, she concluded, ‘whoever wins, they don’t do anything for me anyway’.³³ Thus, some have become so disheartened with past governments and their policies that they see no point in voting, convinced that it is not going to make any difference anyway.

Finally, there were voters who were under the impression that they would be able to vote with, for example, a ration card, but ended up being turned down on the day of election. Before polling day there was a widespread belief (not just amongst ordinary voters, but also amongst polling booth agents and officials³⁴) that the ration card was an acceptable form of ID for those without a voters card (see the case of Gayathri in Section 4 below).

³² Group of young men from Christian area after visit by DMDK candidate, 26/4/09

³³ Interview with a Mudaliar woman and her mother-in-law behind foothills, 4/5/09.

³⁴ Interview with Vijay, Christian area, 10/4/09; Selvi (teacher and booth official), GDN notes

2. What is the language of voting and the vocabulary of politics and participation?

English-Tamil in everyday conversation

The language of politics in Tamil Nadu, and particularly the language used by activists and ordinary voters, is made up of a series of terms and concepts that frequently combine Tamil and English. While English terms such as ‘police’, ‘government’, ‘party’, ‘candidate’, etc are widely known and understood - even among less educated people in the village of Allapuram -, most terms have a Tamil equivalent that is usually more popular and more widely used. Let us consider in turn some terms that we only encountered in English, terms that were variably used in English and Tamil, and terms that were almost only used in Tamil.

‘Police’, ‘canvass’, ‘machine’ (electronic voting machine), and ‘aspirant’ are some election related words for which we only heard the English term used, both in conversations and interviews. These terms were used by both educated and illiterate informants. The number of such English-only terms, however, is quite limited. A second set of terms consists of those for which either an English or a Tamil version is used, and for which the choice of language is likely to depend on the level of literacy/education of the speaker, the person one is talking to, and the context of conversation. Typical examples of such terms are: ‘vote’ or ‘vakku’; ‘election’ or ‘theerthal’; ‘election commission’ or ‘theerthal commission’; ‘politics’ or ‘arasiyal’; ‘alliance’ or ‘kuttani’; ‘party’ or ‘katchi’; ‘two-leaf’ or ‘irettalai’ (to refer to the two-leaf symbol of the AIADMK); ‘campaign’ or ‘pracharam’; ‘candidate’ or ‘veetpaalar’; etc. Often the English and Tamil are used interchangeably. While a wide range of people, even those with less education, know the English words for these concepts and are aware of their meaning, in everyday conversations the Tamil word is used much more frequently. Moreover, when combined with other words, such as ‘vakku chavadi’ or ‘election booth’, ‘kuttani dharmam’ or ‘alliance loyalty/duty’, and ‘uzhal illaame katchi’ or ‘corruption-free party’, it is always the Tamil that is used in conversations.

Finally, there are a number of popularly used terms relating to politics for which almost always the vernacular is used, even though the speaker may have knowledge of its English equivalent or at least have heard it. Here are some typical examples. When villagers are talking about voting as a ‘right’, they always mention ‘urimai’, a Tamil word that also means ‘hereditary rights’, used, for example, in the context of certain castes having specific ‘rights’ in temple festivals or of an uncle having the ‘right’ to marry his sister’s daughter. It is the same ‘urimai’ that is used to refer to the democratic right to vote in contemporary India. Another word frequently used in conversations about democracy and voting is ‘kadamai’ (duty), again always mentioned in Tamil. We never heard ‘democracy’ in the village, but always ‘jananayakam’, also referred to by one informant as ‘makkal atchi’ (people’s rule). Similarly, we did not come across the English ‘citizen’, but only the Tamil ‘kudimagan’. This word’s double meaning - both ‘citizen’ and ‘drunkard’ are ‘kudimagan’ – leads to much humorous and teasing comments.

So, while English has certainly influenced the everyday language of politics in Tamil Nadu, in our rural research site at least Tamil remains the main language in which people ‘talk politics’ and an extensive vernacular political vocabulary is widely used and understood by villagers of all social rank.

Fraud, corruption and broken promises

But how do people talk about politicians and politics more generally? It is almost impossible to have a conversation about politics in Tamil Nadu without some mention being made of fraudulent voting practices and corruption. While people in our village were adamant that money has never been given for votes, and would not for this election either, there is a widely held belief that bribery happens in other places – particularly Madurai. We were told by many different informants (from all parties) that the January 2009 state by-election in Tirumangalam (Madurai) where Alagiri (son of Karunanidhi) was DMK party organiser was fraudulent: ‘This [bribery for votes] started in Tirumangalam election – [people were given food and] under the banana leaf there were 2 coupons [which you can fill in and get something, that will be paid by Alagiri] and

2000/-’³⁵ Details of the amounts paid varied, with figures of up to 7000/- being quoted. Additionally we were told that as there are many voters from that area living in Tiruppur buses were sent to collect people to take them to vote in Madurai. As well as their bus fare being covered each voter was paid to vote DMK.³⁶ Stories were also told of ADMK voters fleeing Madurai as family members (who were DMK activists) had received information that all ADMK supporters were going to be beaten up – which proved to be true.³⁷

While some told us that bribing for votes was only possible in local elections and by-elections, but was impossible in national elections as it would be simply too costly,³⁸ there is evidence that such fraudulent practices did occur in this election. We came across cases of migrant workers in Tiruppur returning home to Madurai *because* they were expecting to be paid 1000/- or 2000/- by the DMK. Thulasi, a tailor from Madurai, went home to vote and ended up getting 500/- for his vote – and he did vote for DMK. In Allapuram, however, Mohan reassured us that bribing voters just wouldn’t make sense. Partly because an MP candidate simply could not afford paying people over a large constituency, and partly because they would lose real voters. Mohan explains: ‘Now we’ve got genuine voters, but if I start giving money, they will always expect money and it will become difficult to manage. So, we wouldn’t want to create such a situation.’ As they are anyway a majority party in the area, there is indeed no rational in bribing voters.

Yet, paying for votes is not the only way that people believe corruption occurs. Many other aspects of the election were seen by voters to be in some way corrupt. For example, we were told of cases in previous state and national elections of one politician paying an opposition politician to *not* campaign, of candidates paying their party leader to be allocated a seat,³⁹ of DMK giving DMDK leader Vijayakanth 300 crores to split Jayalalithaa’s supporters,⁴⁰ and so on. During the results day the recount in Sivagangai

³⁵ Interview with DMK activist, Allapuram, 10/4/09

³⁶ Interview with Congress activist, Allapuram 6/5/09

³⁷ Interview with DMK activist, 10/4/09

³⁸ Interview with Congress activist, Allapuram 6/5/09

³⁹ e.g. we were told that the CPM candidate paid 6 crores to Jayalalitha to get this seat, villager, 29/4/09

⁴⁰ 29/4/09 Mohan

was widely believed to have been fraudulent. As the results were being scrolled on the television news they showed that Chidambaram was lagging behind as each round of counting was completed – right up to the final round. Once it became clear that he had lost, the television announced that there was a recount, and after this Chidambaram was announced as winner. All those watching the results felt strongly that he must have cheated, although none could explain how. One stated he was ‘using his power’ to ensure that he won – and it is of interest that ADMK, DMK *and* Congress supporters all saw his victory as fraudulent.

Politicians are seen as corrupt: ‘they take half of our tax for their personal use’ and, in the case of DMK, as highly nepotistic.⁴¹ We were frequently told about how different politicians had earned lakhs or crores from corruption – the cases of Balu (Roads minister) and Raja (Spectrum case) being often mentioned. Interestingly, though, some informants almost excused politicians for being corrupt, saying that you couldn’t only blame politicians for corruption – they were taught to be corrupt by government officials.⁴² Others said that ‘all humans have the same tendency.’⁴³

Mr Muthalagan and his father, both avid Congress supporters, talked with much deference about Nehru, Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, praising their focus on ‘the development of the country and the welfare of the people’ rather than ‘their own personal interests’⁴⁴. But when asked about today’s politicians, they commented: ‘Nowadays we can’t believe in politicians. They seem to be innocent before they get to their post. Then they get to their post, and they become like a politician! All politicians are thieves and robbers (*yella arasiyal vathigal thirudhargal*)’⁴⁵.

Mr Murthy, the DMDK District Treasurer, does not hold politicians in high esteem either. He asserts that ‘those who are genuine cannot face the election. Everywhere corruption is on the rise.’ People almost take it for granted that politicians are corrupt. In a discussion

⁴¹ Interview with Thanaraj, 11/5/09.

⁴² Interview with Muthalagan, Allapuram 6/5/09

⁴³ Interview with Christian family, 8/5/09.

⁴⁴ Interview with Muthalagan and his father, Allapuram, 1/4/09

⁴⁵ Interview with Muthalagan and his father, Allapuram 6/5/09

with Mohan, the ADMK ward member, and Kulandaisamy, an ADMK activist and ex-panchayat president, the topic arose of everyone in politics being corrupt. So we asked them why they themselves engage in politics. Kulandaisamy used a Tamil saying to explain his activism: ‘a thorn can only be removed with a thorn. In the same way, even though politics is bad, we too have to enter it if we want to do something good for the people. We hope to change something for the people’.

Young female voters, while being proud of being able to vote, clearly did not think much of their politicians. They were clear about what politicians *ought* to do: ‘work truthfully for development and for the nation’, ‘do good for the people and not misuse their power’, ‘fulfil the needs of the people’, ‘work for the good of the nation’ and ‘serve the people and not take bribes’. But at the same time they described politicians in the following terms: ‘politics is a drainage (*sakkadai*)’; ‘politicians are not fulfilling their promises’, ‘politicians are big cheats (*mosadi*), ‘politics is a place to earn money; none are good here - none are like Annadurai or Kamaraj [politicians from a past era]’, ‘politicians are selfish’, and ‘politicians are big corrupt rats’.⁴⁶ One woman even said they are ‘stained white dhotis!’

Perhaps more important for people’s everyday lives is not simply that politicians are perceived to be corrupt but that they fail to keep their promises. It is clear that while the people of Allapuram are on the whole keen voters, they no longer believe the promises of politicians. Rather, their verdict is often condemning. Countless unmet promises by politicians to give drinking water, build roads or offer educational loans make voters highly sceptical of their leaders. After one candidate had toured the village, Poornima commented ‘like this they come and tell everything, but they’ll do nothing for our area.’⁴⁷ Another man exclaimed: ‘Everything they say is humbug [English]! Don’t believe them, they’ll never commit to their sayings... they are all cheating!’⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Interview with group of about 50 young female students at Teacher Training College, GDN

⁴⁷ Interview with Poornima, 29/4/09

⁴⁸ Interview with Poornima’s family, 29/4/09

We asked an older widowed woman whether she trusts her party's candidate. She replied: 'what is there to trust? When they win and they do something good for us, then we will believe them. Now they are just talking nicely to get our votes, but once I vote they won't come back to help me.' Indeed, voters are well aware that the many promises are just a part of getting elected, and that few - if any - of them will ever materialise.

The Election Commission

In contrast to the way politicians are seen as corrupt and some election practices as fraudulent, the Election Commission is held in high regard. It is seen as being very strict, and to have implemented stricter rules this election than ever before. Restrictions on the use of cars in the campaign, and advertising posters are seen as a good thing by most people we talked to. One Congress supporter felt that the Commission was highly respected and only with a respected Commission 'can we contest elections in a democracy'.⁴⁹ The stricter rules were generally approved of, as a Gounder in Subbegoundampalayam stated: 'Otherwise there are too many banners and cut-outs and they annoy people. Announcements on TV are sufficient. There is no need to spend unnecessarily!' Another person noted: 'They have 100% power, but should have even more! It must have its own power *'adigaram'*'.⁵⁰

Others again complained that the EC rules were not always properly enforced and that while only three cars were allowed in a campaign rally, often many more cars would turn up. But rather than critique the EC itself, such statements merely reaffirm people's respect for the EC and their recognition of its authority. In similar vein, newspapers were quick to report any offences against EC rules (such as posters that were too large or that had been put up without prior permission), to name the parties involved, and to mention the number of court cases that had been put against each offender.

On the whole, however, in the towns and cities, political banners and posters were dutifully removed from public spaces, as ordered by the EC, and only at the time of

⁴⁹ Interview with Muthalagan and father, Congress supporters, 4/5/09 or 6/5 – see NOTEBOOK 14

⁵⁰ Interview with Muthalagan and father, Congress supporters, 4/5/09 or 6/5 – see NOTEBOOK 14

public meetings or of visits by party leaders, were posters and flags being erected. Yet even then they were usually limited in number and removed soon after the gathering was over. In the villages paintings appeared on the walls of houses and workshops, usually mentioning the name of the candidate, the alliance parties and the symbol of the alliance. Because of the strict regulation of the use of posters and flex boards, painters were in high demand and doing particularly well. The producers of printed flex boards on the other hand complained that there was hardly any election printing work for them.

3. What makes a typical election campaign in India?

Alliances and seat sharing

Tamil Nadu voted in the 5th and final phase of the election, and the election campaign seemed to start very slowly and very late. While other states were about to go to the poll, here in Tamil Nadu, it was not until the end of March (6 weeks before the election) that it became clear which parties were going to form which alliance. Only once alliances were announced could the all important discussions around seat sharing (between the parties within each alliance) begin, then - once these were finalised - the candidates could be announced, and finally campaigning could begin.

Negotiations around alliances and seat-sharing proved to be protracted, and were played out in the media. In the event ADMK, CPM, CPI and PMK were in alliance, while DMK was in alliance with Congress (see Table 1 for further details of smaller parties' alliances). For activists in Allapuram the results of the seat sharing negotiations were a major disappointment: here CPM put forward a candidate on behalf of the ADMK-led alliance, and Congress put forward a candidate on behalf of the DMK-led alliance. So – in a village where we had never met a CPM supporter, and come across only very few Congress supporters – the seat sharing arrangements were a huge let-down for people on all sides of the political spectrum. ADMK and DMK activists were deflated that 'their' party would not be standing.⁵¹ One DMK activist said 'It doesn't matter who wins now!' while an ADMK activist (himself an aspirant for the Coimbatore constituency) was reported to be considering leaving politics altogether as he felt so disillusioned.⁵² It was striking that the day after the seat sharing arrangements were announced, ADMK activists travelled to Tiruppur (outside their constituency) to meet and congratulate the ADMK candidate there. In contrast they had very little contact with their alliance candidate in Coimbatore.

⁵¹ Kulandaisamy, 8/4/09; See also GDN's notes from 28/4/09 (Mohan and Kulandaisamy, ADMK) and Vijay (DMK) 2/5/09

⁵² Interview with Vijay and his father, [GC notes]

Although activists on both sides said they would campaign for their alliance, they all agreed that this would be with less enthusiasm. While they said they would work as hard for the alliance as they would have if their own party had been allocated the seat, they explained this in terms of ‘rules’ and ‘duty’. They would ‘obey the party leader, and work [for the alliance] because that is the rule’⁵³ Another noted that he would work hard for the alliance to win: ‘Jayalalitha has strictly announced that they must not be careless [‘assault’] with the alliance parties. If votes go down because they are careless and they are not working hard for the alliance, the person responsible will lose their post.’⁵⁴ The local sub-editor of the *Dina Thanthi* was convinced that the alliance parties would all support each other’s candidate, and explained: ‘If ADMK doesn’t work properly for CPM in Coimbatore, the CPM activists won’t work properly here. That is *kuttani dharmam*, or alliance moral duty!’

But what is clear is that the party whose candidate stood in a particular constituency took responsibility for planning the campaign. Four weeks before the election the local DMK activist had not even met with the local Congress man to discuss the campaign.⁵⁵ Three weeks later, when we interviewed him again, we asked him why still not much campaigning was going on. At this point, he sounded quite disheartened and admitted: ‘If we had a DMK candidate, it would have been much better; there would already be banners and flags up everywhere. But now Congress took all the money. Now I feel very disappointed with the Congress members and the candidate. Because I have a position within the DMK I have to work, but ordinary members are very upset.’⁵⁶ While Vijay had hoped to be appointed as one of the booth agents for Allapuram, he had now lost all hope and said that almost certainly a Congress member would be appointed: ‘They pay Rs5000 for that, and in MP elections even more, but even that I won’t get this time.’⁵⁷ At different points we were told that the Congress candidate, was going to visit the village, but as we got closer to election day it became obvious to the activists that he

⁵³ Kulandaisamy, 8/4/09

⁵⁴ PeriyasamyGounder (Mohan’s father) Allapuram, 8/4/09

⁵⁵ Interview with Vijay in Christian area of Allapuram, 10/4/09

⁵⁶ Interview with Vijay, 2/5/09

⁵⁷ Interview with Vijay, 2/5/09

was never going to turn up. This added to the sense of neglect felt not only by the DMK supporters but also by those of the Congress party.

Vijay's feelings were echoed by Mohan, an ADMK activist, who similarly had to campaign for a candidate of a different party (in his case, the CPM). He first said that they were closely collaborating and used the following image: 'In a banyan tree, there are big and small branches and they all grow in different directions. Like that, we have people who feel differently and who have different opinions, but in the end we all collaborate.'⁵⁸ However, towards the end of the interview, when we asked him how he felt about campaigning for an alliance candidate, he admitted: 'If my own [party] candidate was standing, you wouldn't be able to talk to me right now. I would have organised everything in a major way, but now it doesn't feel as if the election is about to come. Even though I am responsible here, I am hardly working now, I am just sitting around without doing anything.'⁵⁹ A few days later he mobilised 50 or so people from the village to go and see Jayalalithaa in Coimbatore, but we did not see a lot of activity within the village itself.

For voters the discussions about seat sharing and alliances are often remote and confusing. (See Box 3 for a discussion about alliances and the transfer of votes). About three weeks before the election, when alliances, candidates and seat-sharing arrangements had all been announced, some voters were still unclear as to who was in which alliance. They knew they wanted to vote for '2-leaf' ADMK, but didn't know who they were in alliance with.⁶⁰ Here it became clear how important the symbols used by the parties were. The '2-leaf' symbol is strongly associated with MGR, and some activists raised concerns in the run up to the election about the fact that there would be no '2-leaf symbol' on the ballot paper.⁶¹ As a result an important aspect of the campaign was to get across to voters that they should vote for the sickle and hammer. Wall paintings appeared in and around the village showing the sickle and hammer symbol, referring to it as '*Amma cinnam*' or

⁵⁸ Interview with Mohan and Kulandaisamy, ADMK activists, 28/4/09

⁵⁹ Interview with Mohan and Kulandaisamy, ADMK activists, 28/4/09

⁶⁰ A group of men outside Poornima's house.

⁶¹ Man at Mohan's father's shop, 27/4/09

‘Amma’s symbol’ [ADMK]. On some walls, the sickle and hammer symbol was painted in the red, white and black colours of the ADMK, while in other paintings the symbol had all party names of the alliance written around it. Furthermore, the night before polling day ‘voter slips’ with the alliance symbol on them were distributed by all the political parties to remind their supporters which symbol to vote for (see below).

Box 1: A new party: the Kongunadu Munnetra Peeravai (KMP)

The *Kongunadu Munnetra Peeravai* or Kongunadu Upliftment Party was launched at a large meeting of the Kongu Vellalar Gounders on 15th February 2009, less than three months before the election. It emerged out of the *Kongu Vellallar Gounder Peeravai*, a caste association of Vellalar Gounders that had been seriously revamped over the last two years.

The main reason for the revival of this caste association and the subsequent decision to start up a political party is a widespread sense among the Gounders of the area that despite their large contribution to the state’s wealth, their community has not received any government support and their requests have been systematically ignored by the established political parties. ‘Our community delivers more than 50% of the state’s wealth, but we get no recognition whatsoever from the government!’ The Kongu Vellalars are indeed the dominant community of landowners and agriculturalists in the villages of Western Tamilnadu, and the leading industrialists in the main industrial clusters from Coimbatore in the West to Salem in the East and Karur further South.

A group of caste leaders from Coimbatore, Erode and Tiruppur decided that a separate party (set up largely in the image of the PMK) would be the best way forward to address the community’s current problems, and ‘to gain freedom from the established parties’. These problems include a number of issues around which they organised their election campaign. The main one is the alleged misuse of the PCR Act (Protection of Civil Rights Act, especially the Prevention of Atrocities against SC/ST Act) by lower castes, primarily Matharis (Arunthathiyars), against Gounders. The use of this Act has been widespread across the powerloom belt of the Kongu Nadu, and many Gounder factory owners have had cases filed against them.

The second point taken up in the campaign is that of toddy-tapping, which is a major issue for the many Gounder agriculturalists who have converted their fields into coconut groves over the last decade. The prohibition of tapping and selling toddy takes away a significant potential source of income for them, and has thus been very unpopular among farmers. This issue was later during the campaign also taken up by other parties, including the ADMK.

A third campaigning issue sought to address some of the main problems faced by the numerous Gounder industrialists involved in a range of manufacturing and business

trades. For them, particularly in the Tiruppur and Erode areas, pollution management and infrastructure development remain pressing issues for which they feel the state has failed to provide adequate support.

While the party leaders and activists themselves argued that they were not just a caste-based party and that they were addressing issues affecting everyone in the ‘Kongunadu’ (including Mudaliyars, Chettiyars and Naidus), they were widely perceived to be a Gounder party for which only Gounders would vote. KMP activists were nevertheless convinced that they would win a few seats and that many Gounders would switch allegiances. Other party supporters, however, said that they didn’t stand a chance and that all they would do is split the vote of the main parties.

In the event, the KMP stood in 11 districts but did not win any seats. However, in a number of constituencies they won a substantial number of votes (around 1 lakh) and did contribute significantly to the split of the vote. Several people were of the opinion that the KMP would mainly take votes away from the DMK, and interestingly across the entire West of Tamilnadu, where all seats were won by ADMK alliance candidates (apart from the Nilgiris). One explanation given by informants in the village is that this is a rich area where labourers earn well and are little impressed with IRs rice or free TVs, and where industrialists need solid policies that promote infrastructure and industrial development. DMK’s popular policies may not have cut the cake, and KMP might well have attracted a good number of protest votes.

Campaigning

The protracted negotiations over alliances and seat-sharing meant that campaigning did not begin for the major parties until about three weeks before polling day. Perhaps not surprisingly, those parties that were not part of an alliance (notably DMDK and KMP) had the earliest and one of the better organised campaigns. These were the parties whose symbols were painted on walls first, and – in the case of the DMDK - whose candidate was the first to visit the area.

Campaigning happens at different levels. Firstly, there are the large rallies attended by the party leaders. At these gatherings, the party leader arrives, addresses the crowd, makes a short speech and introduces the candidate - who usually does not speak, but merely greets the people and looks respectfully at the leader throughout the function. They are typically held in larger towns and cities (Palladam, Pongalur, Coimbatore and Tiruppur), last maximum 1 or 2 hours, are attended by large numbers (crowds of between 3,000 – 10,000) of mainly men, but sometimes women, as was the case during the visit of

Jayalalithaa in Tiruppur. Many of these rallies are organised in the evenings (see DMDK and KMP meetings) where they are attended almost entirely by men. The leaders speeches address both general (state-wide or national issues) as well as more local concerns. At the rally held just outside Tiruppur, Jayalalithaa referred to Karunanidhi's fast (in support of Sri Lankan Tamils) as a 'a drama' and made fun of Karunanidhi's 'family politics'. Her speech covered local issues as well, such as the concerns of the garment export industry, the treatment of effluents from the dyeing industry, and the issue of tapping and selling toddy in the villages. Other general issues she mentioned included reducing the high prices of food and providing free laptops for all students.⁶²

Box 2: A visit by Captain

On 15th-18th April, Vijayakanth, well-known film star and leader of the DMDK, toured the Coimbatore and Tiruppur districts. On the 16th, we went to Palladam where Vijayakanth was expected to arrive by 6.30pm. A number of boards with larger than life pictures of Vijayakanth had been put up on all four corners of the junction, alongside pictures of the local DMDK candidate, Mr Pandian. The crowds quickly grew bigger and bigger and by 8pm all sides of the junction were packed with people, mainly young men and only a handful of women. Most were men from the local area, dressed in everyday trousers and lungis, some stopped off on the way back from work, while others had come especially for the occasion. As time passed the crowd grew more and more excited and started cheering and shouting 'Captain, Captain', the name of one of Vijayakanth's most famous film characters. Just after 8pm, his vehicle pulled up and the crowd – now at least 3-4,000 people - gathered around it. He appeared through the open top roof, sided by the local candidate, and addressed the crowd in informal Tamil. Talking for about 15 minutes, he spoke about the water, educational loans and power supply that the other parties had promised but never delivered, and asked: 'I trust you, do you trust me? If you vote for me I'll do you favours. Do trust me and give me a chance!' After that he disappeared in the van, drove off to his next gathering and the crowds quickly dispersed.

Local activists are responsible for supplying large crowds at these events, and they organise food and transport for them. At least one party (DMDK) is reported to have offered factory workers in Tiruppur Rs 100 to attend a rally. The Allapuram ADMK activists had, frustratingly for them, to take people to Coimbatore when Jayalalithaa

⁶² Jayalalitha rally 9km outside Tiruppur, 27/4/09

visited (as Allapuram falls within that constituency), rather than Tiruppur which being much closer would have been considerably easier for them.⁶³

At another level, there are tours of the area by the local candidates. These typically involve the candidate driving in a small convoy (the numbers of cars are restricted under Election Commission rules) of supporters. They arrive in a place, are greeted with fire crackers and a small puja is performed. The candidate, accompanied by a local person, speaks from the open roof of a vehicle addressing smaller crowds for 5-10 minutes. They may then greet a few local activists, thanking them for their support, and continue on their way. In Allapuram both CPM and DMDK candidates visited the village. However, to the frustration of DMK supporters, the Congress candidate did not.

Observing these visits by the candidates in the village, we cannot say there was huge enthusiasm by anyone but the most loyal activists. Some people did not stop what they were doing, while others came out of their compounds briefly but did not actively engage. Candidates were observed with little more than idle curiosity. On at least one occasion an individual known to be an active supporter of another party was involved in ‘welcoming’ the candidate (lighting the firecrackers). In that case he made light of it, saying someone had asked him, and he had done it to be polite.⁶⁴

What was said by the candidate on these tours was carefully amended for each stop. For example, the CPM candidate spoke about caste in an area where there had recently been an issue about access to a temple, in the next village he spoke about agriculture and irrigation as this was a place with many landowners. In an SC hamlet he spoke all about Amma, and also made a point of thanking local (SC) men who had helped with the campaign, referring to them as ‘leaders.’⁶⁵ He also made detailed reference to the issue of corruption amongst DMK and Congress politicians and the nepotism of the DMK government⁶⁶ The DMDK candidate on his visit to the village spoke more generally

⁶³ Interview with Mohan, 4/5/09

⁶⁴ Visit of DMDK candidate to village 26/4/09

⁶⁵ Tour of area by CPM candidate, 29/4/09

⁶⁶ Tour of area by CPM candidate, 29/4/09.

about the failures of the two major parties: they have ‘done nothing useful for society ... They have cheated people for 40 years – because they believe that they’ll somehow come alternately. If people want change, and want respect, and want their needs fulfilled, they should vote for the drum.’⁶⁷

At a third level, there are meetings held in towns, usually in the evenings, at which typically the candidate, one or two neighbouring candidates or sitting MPs, and other local politicians, such as the mayor, speak. These are attended almost exclusively by men, and the candidate speaks largely about what the current government has done or, if it is an opposition meeting, failed to do. At a DMK-Congress meet in Tiruppur on 21st April, the local DMK mayor spoke as well as the candidate of the neighbouring constituency. They praised what the DMK government had done at the state level and what the Congress had achieved at the national level. On another occasion, the Tiruppur candidate of the KMP tried to reach out towards a specific group of Gounders, the urban industrialists, by organising a meeting where he set out his policy plans to improve industrial development and address pollution management, a recurrent headache for many textile and garment manufacturers. To this aim, the candidate had had a study carried out by a group of pollution control experts, the results of which were presented and discussed at the meeting.

Finally, there is door to door campaigning, which largely takes place in the evenings. In the week or so before polling day, activists visit houses of known supporters, giving out flags and banners to be displayed.⁶⁸ In the past, activists had also campaigned in neighbouring villages, but because of recent restrictions by the EC on the use of cars, they now only campaigned in their own village.⁶⁹ As discussed below, in Allapuram, all parties took this seriously and were knocking on people’s doors and handing out voters slips till late at night on the eve of polling day. Asked what they talk about when they go from door to door, one activist explained that they emphasise what their party has done in the past and then ask people to vote for them. Unlike the party leaders, local activists

⁶⁷ Visit of DMDK candidate to village 26/4/09.

⁶⁸ Interview with Mudaliar women behind foothills, 4/5/09.

⁶⁹ Interview with Muthalagan and father, Congress supporters, 4/5/09

cannot make any specific promises or policy announcements, and are thus limited in what they can tell the people.

For voters, the visits by door-to-door campaigners are expected, and they play their part by talking to the campaigners. Sometimes they ask questions or grumble about broken promises, but generally they just tell the activists that they'll vote for them, although they often have no intention of doing so. Gayathri explains that the activists 'all come to our house asking for our vote and we'll just say to all of them "yes, we'll vote for you" and let them go. As we are already on bad terms with some of them in the village, we don't want to make things worse...' The final part of the door-to-door campaigning is the distribution of 'voters slips' to voters the night before the election (see below).

Another aspect of campaigning is the use of wall paintings. Professional sign writers are employed in the weeks before the election and, together with a local activist, travel around the region painting advertisements on walls, which mainly consist of the candidate's name, the alliance parties' names and the alliance symbol. New regulations by the EC mean that posters are not longer allowed in the towns, but paintings in the villages are still allowed on privately owned houses and walls. Because of the concern that many ADMK supporters would not recognise the alliance party symbol (CPM's sickle and hammer), this aspect of the campaign was very important for the ADMK-led alliance, and we thus found many sickle and hammers, painted in ADMK colours with '*Amma cinnam*' written around it.⁷⁰ [PHOTO] In line with EC rules the VAO removed all flags, banners, and wall paintings within a 100m radius of the polling booth a few days before the election (see below).⁷¹

Finally, this election saw the use of mobile phone messages to voters. One in particular caught the attention of many people. It was first seen on 10th April,⁷² but it quickly spread

⁷⁰ Painters of CPM signs, on road from Allapuram, 15/4/09

⁷¹ Loudspeakers are also taken around the villages, urging people to vote for a particular party, but also here the number had been restricted by the EC. See DMDK loudspeaker, 4/5/09

⁷² Shown by KMP activist, KMP Office on Dharapuram Road, 10/4/09

and many people received this message multiple times. The message detailed CM Karunanidhi's assets and properties owned since he first came into power:

'TN C.M Dr Karunandid Family Property: 4th millionaire in ASIA in 2001. Now 2nd. 1) 1951 – a house; 2) 1992 – 80cr 3) 2006 17,000cr, 60,000cr in black 4) SUN Net19 channels 5) Aircel 6) Poongi Textile 7) Sheshayee papermills 8) Dinakaran450cr 9) Vigadan 100cr 10) Tamil murasu 280cr 11) kungumam 150cr 12) Mursoli 90cr 13) Many cinema theatres all over TN 14) 30% of shares in TATA group etc. In 2009 he'll be 1st in Asia. Thanks to TN voters! PLZ FRWD 2 ALL

Another message, particularly discussed by the KMP activists, provided details of black money of rich Indians stacked away in Swiss banks, we received it on 18th April. It read as follows:

Black money in Swiss banks – Swiss Banking Association Report, 2006, details bank deposits in the territory of Switzerland by nationals of the following countries: Top five: India - \$1456 billion; Russia - \$470 billion; UK - \$390 billion; Ukraine - \$100 billion; China – \$96 billion.

These messages were discussed with us by Tiruppur KMP activists and taken as evidence of how the current government had enriched itself and allowed their cronies to stack away money in foreign banks, thus escaping tax duties in India.

Box 3: Alliances and the transfer of votes

The proliferation of political parties, the alliances that result from this and the seat-sharing arrangements that these alliances enter are a central part of Tamil politics today. For the voter they mean that 'their party' may not have a candidate in their constituency, and for the party they mean that the 'transfer of votes' is essential to ensure the success of the alliance.

One Congress activist – a rich Gounder farmer - noted that while the transfer of votes to alliances works 'perfectly' for those 'active and experienced in politics', those who are not active, or who are new voters, will 'look at the candidate', and thus may not be relied on to transfer their vote.⁷³ Having said that, when we asked the informant how he felt if his party changes who it is in alliance with, he said it does make a 'real difference. If there is a party that I don't like and they are in alliance with my party, then I would not vote for them. If the party nominated will do nothing for me, then I won't vote for that candidate.' So it is clear that he –active in politics and well informed – could not be relied upon to transfer his vote to the alliance party.

⁷³ Interview with Sakthivel, Allapuram, 26/4/09

Some do remain loyal. One example of this comes from Priya who is a strong Congress supporter, and comes from a family of Congress activists. Her vote was in a neighbouring constituency, where DMK had been allocated the seat, and thus if she transferred her vote correctly she should vote DMK. But before the election she said she wouldn't vote for the DMK candidate: 'I am a citizen of India, and I have to look to the welfare of the whole country! Karunanidhi is a stupid man – they beat people up – in Madurai Alagiri arranged it [fixed the election]– and he (Karunanidhi) appoints all his family members, and that isn't good.'⁷⁴ In the weeks before the election she said that she hadn't decided she would vote for; but afterwards she told us she had been teasing us. Despite everything she said about DMK she never had any intention of voting for any other party: she voted for DMK as that was her alliance party.

Others say they are more likely to switch if they don't like the alliance party. The transfer of votes might well become less likely if there is a seemingly attractive new party. One Gounder informant in Tiruppur, for example, explained that he has always been a keen supporter of 'Amma', but that he is very much against the communist parties. He said that if the ADMK-led alliance had allocated a CMP or CPI candidate to stand in Tiruppur, he would definitely not have voted for them and would have voted KMP instead. Like that, he claimed, KMP will get lots of votes.

⁷⁴ Discussion with Priya, 22/4/09

4. What is the Culture of the Polling station?

Preparing for the day

In Allapuram, voting took place in the village primary school buildings, which are located in the centre of the village, adjacent to the temple and fenced off by a rectangular compound wall. Entering the gate from the main road, one first crosses an open space, normally used as a playground or open class room where children are taught under the tree. Straight ahead is the old tiled school building which is divided into two class rooms, with on the left a smaller room used as a kitchen where noon meals are prepared. The open space between the old building and the kitchen leads to the new school building at the rear, which contains two new class rooms as well as the headmaster's office. Next to this new building there is plenty of open space, where the children play and where formal functions take place.

As the school year had finished a few days before election day, the headmaster had handed over the keys of the gate and the building to the VAO. When the teacher, Selvi, had to go back to the school to collect some paperwork, she found that the lock of the gate had already been changed and that she had no longer access to the school. Clearly, the school was now under the control of the VAO and its function had changed from school to polling booth. On the day before the elections, Mr Samuvel, the village *thandal* or VAO's assistant, entered the campus together with a cleaning lady to prepare the building for the elections. They cleaned the rooms of the old school building and set up the required number of chairs and tables for the officers.

Several days before, all party flags and wall paintings had already been removed, and all walls within a radius of 100 metres around the polling booth had been whitewashed. This also included the removal of some Congress flags as well as a KMP party board that had been erected on a nearby corner a few months before. A 100-metre line had been drawn on the road to indicate the area within which one would not be allowed to talk politics or display party symbols on the day of election, as well as a 200-metre line further down the road, to indicate the wider area within which full law and order had to be maintained. We

were told that there should be no shouting or screaming within that area and that if anyone were to create problems within this zone, they would be removed by the police. However, as we will see below, the day passed peacefully and no disturbances or clashes took place.

On the day before election day, an electrician came to check the power supply to the school. He had to check whether fuses and fuse boxes were fully functioning and to ensure that there was a reliable supply of electricity to the booth. We were told that a UPS would be provided to avoid disruption to the voting process in case of a power cut. However, we were assured that on polling day there would be no electricity cuts.

Despite having been given a formal letter by the Erode District Collector (the DEO for the village), our research assistant did not get access to the polling booth. She approached the presiding officer to introduce herself on the afternoon of the 12th of May and to ask for his permission to enter the booth on polling day. While he first hesitated and asked her to come back the following day, discussions with the VAO and one of the polling officers made him increasingly nervous about giving permission. In the end, he refused on the basis that she did not have a proper photo ID or clear form of identification on the letter, which only contained her name. The presiding officer explained: ‘Being a presiding officer I myself have a photo ID, and without a photo ID I can’t even let the polling officers inside the booth. ... Suppose the zonal officers come and they ask me ‘who is this Mr Samuvel [VAO’s assistant]?’ , then he too must provide a valid photo ID.’ He also refused an interview on the 12th on the grounds that the letter only mentioned the 13th of May, polling day.

The presiding officer – who would not even give us his name – was particularly concerned about ‘maintaining secrecy’ and doing everything by the book. He explained: ‘I can’t give any interview to you. We have to maintain the secrecy of the election issues. Even though the polling officer is a colleague who works with me, I will not even give my election rules book to him. So I can’t tell you people what is happening around here ... Basically, we tend to keep things very secret, and can’t reveal anything to you’.

Asked what is in the election book, he replied: 'It contains rules and tips for the presiding officer, advising how he should deal with different sorts of problems, what kinds of decisions he can take and what he cannot do.' And while explaining this, he was trying to find the page and rule that states that he can not let us in without adequate ID. In the end he finished off by saying 'please don't come tomorrow and embarrass me.'

This 'going by the book' is very much a reflection of booth officials' fear of higher election officials and observers who can drop by at any time and inspect the procedures in the booth. It is also a reflection, we believe, of a strong adherence to the Election Commission's rules and of a widespread acceptance of the Commission's authority and legitimacy. We were similarly turned down by the officers at an election officers' training session a week earlier on the basis that we didn't have adequate written permission. The officer told us that we had to get a written permission from the DEO, as 'election observers could turn up any time and enquire about whoever is present.'

On the evening before polling day, party activists of the ADMK and DMK continued door-to-door campaigning till late at night, and this despite a heavy thunderstorm with torrential rain in the late afternoon. They went to the houses of all their party supporters to hand out voters slips. The voter slip is a small piece of paper on which the party's (or rather the alliance's) symbol and the candidate's name are printed on the left hand side and the voter's name, role number and other details on the right hand side. While voters do not need such a slip to enter the polling booth and vote, in Allapuram they are widely distributed by the parties, allegedly to speed up the voting process within the booth – with a slip the voter can be swiftly identified, ticked off the list and allowed to vote. However, the distribution of voter slips also plays another role. They are part of the parties' last minute canvassing work in the village and send out a final reminder to their supporters that they should go and vote the next morning. For illiterate voters or those who are poorly informed about the alliances, they provide an important reminder of the symbol that they should vote for (and which might not be the symbol of their own party). In Allapuram, most people vote ADMK and DMK but for both parties it was an alliance partner who fielded a candidate (CPM and Congress respectively).

Despite the heavy rainfall, Mr Shanmugan, a booth agent for DMK, went from house to house to distribute voter slips for the DMK till 2am in the morning. Asked on election day whether he didn't feel tired he said: 'we are only doing this once in 5 years and we have to do this because people expect us at their doorstep irrespective of time.' Did you cover all four hamlets? 'Yes, we went everywhere, even to the farms.... I haven't even taken a bath yet as I had to be back here by 6 in the morning! ... I will go to sleep after the booth closes and only wake up on results day!' The ADMK activists, on the other hand, stopped campaigning by 10pm and did not manage to hand out voter slips to all their supporters in the evening itself.

While we were not allowed inside the booth when the machines arrived, Mr Shanmugan, told us afterwards how the machines were set up. Once the machines arrived in the evening, all booth agents tested the machine by casting their vote and they then checked the total number of votes, which was correct. For all those who had cast their vote, it counted as their official vote. Only one official test was carried out, after which the machine was sealed only to be reopened on polling day morning.

13th May 2009: Election day

At 6.30 in the morning little was happening in the village apart from the usual activities of women sweeping in front of their house and collecting water. There was no one to be seen around the polling booth, although inside the polling officers and booth agents were already busy setting up the EVM for the day. Outside, just beyond the 100-metre zone, two DMK-Congress activists dressed in white dhotis set up a desk and some chairs under the tree next to the small Ganesh temple. They said their work would start from 7am onwards. They sat down behind the desk with the voters list in front of them and explained to us that those voters who already received their voter slip or know their role number will go straight to the polling booth but those who don't know their number will come to the desk to get their voter slip. We were told that if voters haven't got their voters ID, they would still be able to vote with a driving licence or another photo ID.

By 7am a policeman was standing just inside the gates of the school and 3 posters had been put up within the school grounds. Two posters were pasted on the veranda of the old school building, one above the other. The top one shows the design of the EVM and the one underneath explains in Tamil how to cast a vote. The third poster was pasted on an opposite wall detailing the use of the EVM in English. In addition, one poster was put up on the compound wall to the left of the gate and this one gave some information about the presence of observers, the importance of free and fair elections, and the availability of form 17(A), which voters can fill out in case they do not want to vote. Around the same time a second desk was set up under the temple tree, just behind the DMK-Congress desk. This was the ADMK desk, manned by ADMK activists, to which ADMK voters would come to collect their voter slips in case they didn't know their role number. The KMP set up a few chairs under a tree at the other side of the school, partly because there was no place under the temple tree and partly because they wanted to access voters coming from Thottampalayam and the farms, where they knew they had more supporters.

By 7.30am there were two men in white dhotis sat at the DMK-Congress desk and about eight men around the ADMK desk. Other party workers – all men - were squatting on the floor around and in between the desks. Many of them were SC party workers dressed in their everyday clothes and none of them in dhotis. Slowly voters start to turn up, first a lady on her own and then another lady on her own, followed by two ladies walking together. Some people walk directly to the school to vote, while others first approach one of the desks to collect their voter slips or ask for any other clarification or just for a chat with people they know.

A little later, Gayathri turns up at the DMK-Congress desk to tell that she has not been allowed to vote at the booth. She comes up to us and seems annoyed by this. We comment on the nice sari she is wearing, but she said it's nothing special, she wore it yesterday too. We asked her what happened and she said her name is on the voters list, but she doesn't have a voter ID card. She says she has her ration card with her but they told her at the booth that this is not acceptable, unless one is the head of household, which she is not. The men at the desk can't help her either and say that it is the right of the

presiding officer to refuse certain IDs⁷⁵. Later in the morning Gayathri returned to the desk, this time with her post office account book, but also this was not accepted. She was unable to cast her vote. She was visibly annoyed about this, and told us later that she found it hard because she wanted to vote for the party she likes but had not been able to do so.

Karpagam, her daughter, had also been unable to vote. Karpagam is a keen first-time voter who had a few days earlier expressed her excitement about voting for the first time and had talked at length about her admiration for Vijaykanth and her support for the DMKD. She found out at one of the desks that her name was not on the voters list and that she would thus not be allowed to vote. She said it doesn't bother her and she'll try to vote next time around. However, none of her age mates had been able to vote due to a lack of voter ID cards. She said she had applied for a card but this had not yet been issued, and as she found out today, her name had not yet been added to the voters list either. Like Gayathri and Karpagam, many voters (and even booth officers we talked to before the elections) were under the impression that they would be able to use their ration card as a form of ID - as they allegedly were able to do in the past – only to find out that it was unacceptable this time around. This in turn led to comments about the Election Commission having become more strict, even though there was also talk about ration cards having been accepted in a nearby village and about it being the presiding officer's right to take such decisions.

By 9am about 10-12 people sit around the ADMK desk, with a regular flow of voters approaching the desk. The DMK desk, on the other hand, seems rather quiet with hardly anyone so far coming forward to collect their voter slips, but then most of the DMK slips had been handed out the evening before. The ADMK desk, with lots of men around in white dhotis and lots of motorbikes parked around, looks rather intimidating to walk over to, and some women are somewhat hesitant to approach them. By 10am it gets busier with more people moving between the desks and the polling booth. But at no point was

⁷⁵ Later we found out that it was the booth agents who had agreed not to accept the ration card as an ID, unless it was presented by the head of household him/herself.

there a real queue outside the polling booth. Some men and women come alone, others in small groups, activists go back and forth on their bike to drive older voters to the booth and children are playing around. But there is nothing like the atmosphere of a festival.

By 1pm activists tell us that about half the votes have been cast. Around the same time A.S. Mani, the sitting Pongalur MLA (DMK), arrives along with two other party leaders in three large four wheel drives. They had a large group of men accompanying them and they all gathered around the DMK-Congress desk to give them their support. Suddenly the air was filled with tension. For the first time during the day, the atmosphere around the desks changed and the ADMK table with its many activists and supporters suddenly looked small by comparison. The ADMK people were watching the DMK gathering intently. Mr Mani stayed for only about 10 minutes or so and left. After his visit the DMK group somehow no longer seemed small or the ADMK group overwhelming, and the atmosphere soon relaxed again.

By 2-2.30pm, several supporters around the desks had left for lunch, but a steady stream of people kept coming to cast their votes. Later in the afternoon a group of 5 women come to vote; they are all from the Christian area and all related to each other; all appeared dressed up in nice sarees and with flowers in their hair. The son of one of them is one of the main DMK activists in the village. They said they always come together to vote, just like they go together to festivals and functions. Their polling booth used to be further away, in the nearby hamlet of Pallipalayam, and they used to walk there together as a group. Since then they have continued this and always wait for each other to leave. They've all been regular voters.

And we asked them again on polling day itself: why do you vote? 'It is a sign that I belong to this nation; if I don't vote then I don't have an identity. ... It is our right, it is our duty.' What do you mean by duty? 'It is our duty to elect our leaders. I feel empowered to choose them.' Trying to explain more clearly another lady adds: 'If there is something in my house, then we say it's mine, well it's the same with the country ...' Asked whether in the queue they talked to each other about whom they would vote for,

they said no: 'It would create competitiveness ... we don't want to create a bitter relationship with people from other parties. We just make jokes!' This sense that party rivalries should not interfere with or upset local relations and friendships was also echoed by the men, even by those who are actively involved in rival parties. Mr Shanmugan, a Gounder activist and booth agent for the DMK, emphasized; 'Look, people of all parties are standing together, activists of the DMK next to those of the KMP. Political relationships are different from personal relationships. We don't have that bias in us. We differ in political opinions, but not otherwise'. He was very particular about the fact that different political allegiances should not affect personal relationships. We were even told that the ADMK activists went to the DMK activists' houses to ask them for their vote and the other way around!

As seen in the photos, around each party desk we also find people of different castes, from the wealthier Gounders to the middle ranking Nadars and Barber to Adi Dravida Christians and SC Matharis. They sit and stand next to each other and work together for the common goal of canvassing votes and winning the elections. This is a rather rare occasion to see men of all these communities gathered and cooperating, and contrasts rather sharply with everyday accounts of caste relations in the village.

We asked the group of Christian ladies what the atmosphere was like in the polling booth, and they said it was very quiet. They talked in low voices while queuing in the playground and said it was very quiet inside the booth. There was no pressure to vote quickly and they were allowed time to vote in a relaxed manner. A man who had just cast his vote similarly reported that it was very quiet in the booth and that while last time there had been some problems, there were none now. This tallies with what other informants had to say about the day: everything passed peacefully and without any incidents.

By 4.45 the Congress men had already packed up their table and left with the voters list; they didn't expect anyone to turn up anymore. Similarly at the ADMK table the number of supporters began to dwindle too, and by 5pm the gates of the school were closed and polling was over. There had been no problems with the EVMs throughout the day. They

were sealed by 5.30pm and taken away by a security van at 10pm. This brought polling in Allapuram to an end.

Results

Despite great efforts, it has not been possible to get the official results for this polling booth. Party activists claimed to have seen a print-out, and have copied down the figures, but then never had a copy of their own. Here are the results as confirmed by a number of party activists.

| Alliance party | Number of votes |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| CPM (ADMK alliance) | 270 |
| Congress (DMK alliance) | 170 |
| KMP | 129 |
| DMDK | 47 |
| BJP | 15 |
| BSP | 3 |
| Independent candidates | About 20 |

These results suggest that the total votes cast was 654. The ticked voters list (see Appendix 1) gives a total of 665 votes cast. We are unable to explain this difference. The turn-out rate was very high, at 78%, well above the Phase V average of 62%.

5. What is the role of the media in elections?

The main elements of the media considered here are televisions and newspapers (English and Tamil). Most households in the village own a television and there is widespread access to television news. The different TV channels are closely identified with particular parties, being owned by politicians. Thus SunTV, SunNews and Kalaiganar TV are Karunanidhi's channels, JayaTV is Jayalalithaa's and MakkalTV is the PMK channel. The most popular channels seem to be SunTV, SunNews and JayaTV. But the widespread availability of television news does not necessarily translate into people watching large amounts of election news. Many voters – especially women - do not watch TV news at all. Two women (both commuters, one married and one unmarried), who we had asked to fill out election diaries about what they saw or read about the election said they were unable to do so, as they simply did not have the time to either read newspapers or watch television. It is certainly the case that the long hours worked by both male and female commuters in Tiruppur (8.30am till 8.30pm) mean they have little spare time.

Few newspapers circulate in the village. There is one teashop where the owner always has a paper, and male customers will read it – but they are relatively few in number. Some male commuters say that they read newspapers during breaks from work at teashops in Tiruppur, but again this seems to be of marginal importance. The main Tamil papers are Dinamalar (the most popular and most associated with ADMK and BJP) and Dina Thandhi (more independent) and Dina Karan (DMK). It was found that the major issues that they covered were broadly the same as those covered in the English press (The Hindu). The Tamil papers concentrated more on local Tamil Nadu issues, paying much less attention to national issues.

It can be said that the newspapers that were read daily reflected – to some extent at least – the concerns of the voters. In March the newspapers were very focussed on the discussions about alliances. In the month of April this developed in detailed reporting about the seat-sharing negotiations, as well as some discussion about manifesto promises,

although this remained limited. By mid April candidates were being announced, and their assets were reported in great detail in both the English speaking and the Tamil press. The administrative preparations for polling were also reported on: preparations of polling booths, the campaign to demonstrate EVMs, police preparation for elections, and a case against ER Eswaran for violation of Model Code of Conduct (set by EC) for using vehicles without proper permit from Returning Officer.

As the campaigns for DMK and ADMK were launched, so the press reported on visits by different party leaders. Such reports typically contain information about where the leaders went, how many people attended, and which main issues they covered in their speeches. The Hindu carried a few articles on the newly established KMP, the candidates it put forward and its main manifesto points. The filing of nominations by candidates in Coimbatore was recorded – often accompanied by photographs. Towards the end of April the Sri Lanka issue began to fill the media pages. This is the one area where there was a notable gap between the importance given to this issue in the media and the importance given by the villagers. Sri Lanka was seen as a serious matter by all, but it was not considered a major *election* issue for the voters in the village (See Box 4).

Box 4: Tamil Nadu and the Sri Lanka issue

In the last week of April, as the civil war in Sri Lanka began to reach its bloody conclusion, there was very widespread coverage in the media of Sri Lanka. The leaders of the major political parties seemed to be trying to ‘out-do’ each, in terms of showing their sympathy for Sri Lanka Tamils. On the 23rd April a state-wide bandh was called by DMK’s Karunanidhi in support of Sri Lankan Tamils. There was widespread confusion about how closely it would be followed with the Hindu reporting that as this was a statement by a political party, it should not be observed, and buses etc should run as normal. But in fact it was closely observed, and there were no buses on that day, and most shops remained closed. According to the Hindu, Jayalalithaa said that the strike was only announced to disrupt her campaign – she was due to campaign in Madurai (where Karunanidhi’s son Azhagiri is standing) that day.

A few days later, on the 27th April, Karunanidhi took this one step further, beginning a fast until a ceasefire was announced in Sri Lanka. It was televised live on TV – he lay, surrounded by air coolers, on a bed, with a wife at each end. It began at 6:30am and was called off at about 1pm, when a ceasefire was announced. Many people say he knew that the ceasefire was going to be announced, and thus hardly fasted at all. Indeed ordinary

voters were sceptical about the way Sri Lanka was being used as an issue in the elections by the leaders. One SC man noted that this issue had been there for the past 40 years, but only now are they [party leaders] raising it. He also felt insulted that such a man should fast: we fast only because we don't have enough to eat – why should he fast?!⁷⁶

We asked voters how important what was happening in Sri Lanka was in deciding how to vote, and they were pretty unanimous that it was not important. (This is not to say they didn't feel it is an important humanitarian issue or that they didn't have an opinion on it, but just that politicians' current debate on the issue would not affect how they voted.) One informant, when asked whether he thought voters were thinking about Sri Lanka, said: 'There is no link between the Sri Lanka issue and the election. People will see to their needs and vote. People like those in trade unions will think about Sri Lanka, but people in the villages and ordinary people will never think about that.' In explaining why the party leaders were talking about it so much, he (a Congress-DMK supporter) argued that the opposition couldn't find any criticisms of the ruling party –so they find this Sri Lanka issue in an attempt to get votes. But he was adamant that this strategy wouldn't work, as 'it makes no difference to ordinary people.'⁷⁷ Interviews with ordinary voters confirm this,⁷⁸ and it is worthy of note that Sri Lanka and the LTTE was never raised – unprompted - by any ordinary voter in Allapuram.

⁷⁶ Interview with man in foothills tea shop, 27/4/09

⁷⁷ Interview with Sakthivel, Allapuram, 26/4/09

⁷⁸ For example interview with man in foothills tea shop, 27/4/09

Conclusions

The findings of this research are too many to sum up in a couple of paragraphs, but on the whole we personally felt that this ethnographic research has yielded a rich body of data on the elections that cannot be captured by media reports or national surveys. In particular we felt that the data collected through the ethnographic research method yielded fruitful insights into people's thinking about elections, politics and politicians; their rationale to vote or not to vote; and the politics of caste and inequality at a local level. It allowed us to see how men and women relate differently to politics, to leaders and to the media, and how the identities of castes as well as individuals are shaped through politics and political histories, as much as they are through everyday lives.

It also provided us with insights into both the practical concerns that shape people's everyday lives and voting behaviour (such as inflation, water, and house loans) as well as the more fundamental ideas they hold about rights, duties, identity and democracy. The election provides us with a unique site to study people's relationship vis-à-vis the state, how they conceive of their citizenship, and what it means to belong to the Indian nation. A closer look at elections allows us to better understand what people feel they can expect from the state, what their government should deliver to its citizens, and the sorts of things they do not approve of (corruption, broken promises, etc).

As such, ideas, discourses and practices of voting reveal a number of values - such as fairness, honesty, dignity, equality of opportunity, and not in the least democracy itself - that people in India adhere to. Moreover these values are themselves reproduced and reconfirmed through people's engagement with politics and more particularly through the act of voting itself.

While the EC is held in high esteem and an impressive election machinery allows more than 700 million people to vote in relative peace and safety, there are equally times and spaces available where rules can be bent and where local power muscles can be flexed, as

was the case with the alleged bribes paid, recounting contested, and the IDs accepted or refused at the polling booth.

Whereas elections provide a prime site to study all the above and much more, in Allapuram enthusiasm for the elections themselves was rather muted – and indeed anything but festival like. This may be explained in part by the shifting politics of alliance building and seat sharing that are transforming the political landscape in Tamil, and in part because this was a national rather than a more local election.