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NREGA and the Return of Identity Politics in Western Tamil Nadu, India

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In her piece, Pamela Price raises a number of fascinating questions about the possibility of a major shift in electoral politics in India which deserves further analytical attention and empirical observation. The thesis that electoral politics is being reshaped by development agendas and performance targets rather than being driven by a politics of identity and patron-clientelism is thought-provoking.

Our comment aims to make a contribution to this debate with evidence from Tamil Nadu, which, as Price points out, is recognised as a state that is successful in implementing the NREGA and as a state whose recent DMK-led governments have pursued a populist politics driven by key development and poverty alleviation agendas. A good place, we believe, to think about political behaviour, policy, and identity politics. We start with some ground-level facts about the popular uptake and perception of NREGA (and other pro-poor policies) in Tamil Nadu and then move on to some wider reflections on electoral politics. On the way, we largely share Price's scepticism about a shift away from identity politics and patron-client relationships with the rise of development-focused electoral agendas (Manor 2010, Thachil 2010). We also point to some, perhaps unexpected, outcomes of UPA and state-level economic policies: not merely a potential back-firing

for the Congress-led government but also an electoral politics reinvigorated by the politics of caste and the dynamics of a regional political economy.

The region we refer to here is that of western Tamil Nadu, with Coimbatore as its main centre, where decades of industrial development have gone hand in hand with steady agrarian decline. Building on longer-term familiarity with the region, we carried out one year of field research between August 2008 and July 2009 in the Tiruppur region east of Coimbatore, which is an area now well-known for its thriving garment manufacturing and export industry. We closely observed the 2009 National Assembly elections, and the voices we report on include those of farmers and agricultural workers as well as urban industrialists. Importantly, the main communities referred to here are the dominant Kongu Vellalar Gounders, both rural landowners and urban industrialists, and the Arunthathiyars (locally mainly known as Matharis) who form the main Dalit community in the region.

In the Coimbatore and Tiruppur districts, NREGA was only just beginning to be implemented in the summer of 2008, but by 2009 it was already taken up by a majority of village panchayats, as reflected in district-level data.¹ The ‘success story’ of this state has already been commented on, not only in terms of the extent of its implementation but also in terms of its gender implications, with the women of Tamil Nadu being identified as the

¹ Current data on the ongoing 2010-11 financial year indicate that NREGA works are being carried out in most villages of the Coimbatore and Tiruppur districts, that more than 40 per cent of beneficiaries are SC, and that more than 80 per cent of beneficiaries are women. (http://nregalndc.nic.in/netnrega/homestciti.aspx?state_code=29&state_name=TAMIL%20NADU, accessed 25 February 2011).

main - if not primary - beneficiaries of the scheme (Khera and Nayak 2009). First of all, our research confirms, entirely in line with Price's observations, that NREGA is further enhancing the already considerable tensions between farmers and agricultural labourers in the villages. Tensions arise over availability of labour for casual farm work, over inflation of agricultural wages, and over the shifting balance of power between landowning Gounders and landless Arunthathiyars. This changing balance of power has many causes, including the rising levels of education among Dalits and the many industrial job opportunities now available to them in textiles, garments, construction work, etc. But there is little doubt that tensions have intensified following, firstly, the gradual expansion of the state's public distribution system (PDS) under DMK rule, a system commonly referred to as the 'one rupee rice' policy (even though it covers a much wider range of public food provisioning at highly subsidised rates), and secondly, the implementation of the central NREGA which provides annually 100 days of work per household currently paid at Rs 100 per day (Harriss 2002; Heyer forthcoming).

A second finding of our research is that the implementation of NREGA is deeply enmeshed in local party and village politics, an issue that has not received much attention in the literature on NREGA to date. In one hamlet, for example, Dalits reported in early 2009 that NREGA works had not been started up there because the hamlet consisted mainly of ADMK supporters while the Gounder panchayat president belonged to the leading DMK party. Clearly, the alignment of village/caste politics with higher level party politics has a major impact on the way NREGA is being implemented at the local

level. The NREGA provides local panchayat presidents with yet another budget to control and yet another source for the development of patron-client relationships.

But what do different social groups make of NREGA? Gounder farmers in the region are furious and consider NREGA the insult added to the injury caused by the PDS. They accuse both policies of taking away labour from the fields and increasing its cost at a time when profits from agriculture are rapidly declining. After all, also in this region of India, water and labour remain key inputs for profitable cultivation. Farmers' anger over the current government policies is an articulation of their more general anxieties about losing control over a once docile rural Dalit workforce. This loss of control is most clearly expressed by them when they deplore the fact that they themselves now have to go and knock on Dalits' door to beg them to work on their fields. Evidence from this region thus supports Lakha and Taneja's claim that 'in many parts of rural India, poverty-alleviation schemes such as the NREGS face resistance from landlords whose control over labour is threatened by the availability of employment opportunities outside their authority' (2009: 420).

By contrast, agricultural labourers – a majority of whom are Dalit - have wholeheartedly embraced NREGA as a new source of rural income. For some of them it offers much needed basic social protection and prevents them from going hungry; others, and especially women and older villagers, take it as a great opportunity to earn within the village but away from the control of landowners; and for others again it offers an opportunity to bridge the low seasons in agriculture and thus to secure a more regular

income stream throughout the year. Agricultural workers were explicit about considering this employment guarantee a basic ‘right’ (*urimai*, in Tamil), and some compared it to the agricultural loan waivers that benefited the landowning farmers earlier: if the farmers received loan waivers, it is only right that we can access some basic employment from the state too. Many villagers tend to attribute such policies, including NREGA, to Karunanidhi, the state’s Chief Minister and DMK leader, even though NREGA and related development policies are obviously part of the central UPA programme (of which the DMK is a current ally). Obviously, more research needs to be done on who exactly benefits from NREGA and how, and the ways that local politics shape its implementation and take-up at village and regional level. In many parts of Tamil Nadu, however, it is clear that landless labourers are keen on what the scheme has to offer, and that they realise that this employment guarantee scheme is indeed their ‘right’ by law.

We also need to emphasise that this enhanced tension between labour and capital is not limited to rural areas alone. The urban industrialists of the Tiruppur region, the majority of whom are also Gounder, have been quick to join their rural caste members in condemning the DMK’s pro-poor policies. They critique subsidized food provisioning and guaranteed employment schemes for being not only anti-farmer but also anti-industry and anti-regional development. They claim that these policies are undermining the much needed supply of labour to the urban industry – particularly of migrant labour for whom employment under NREGA might make the difference between staying put and migrating for work. Industrialists also argue that NREGA and ‘one rupee rice’ have reduced the need for workers to turn up 6 days a week. In late 2008, Tiruppur garment

manufacturers and exporters even called for an equivalent urban employment guarantee scheme under which their companies would employ labour under the same conditions and payment! In sum, farmers and industrialists in the region share a now oft-repeated discourse about workers having become disrespectful, uncontrollable and lazy because of the extensive state support and guaranteed employment they now enjoy. They accuse the DMK's and UPA's pro-poor policies of having removed the need for the rural and urban poor to work at all.

What is significant for the purpose of our argument is the way in which this anger and frustration have been channelled and the sorts of party and electoral politics they have put into motion. What we see emerging in this part of Tamil Nadu is an electoral politics that combines populist (and development-focused) politics with a renewed appeal to both caste and regional identity. In February 2009, less than three months before the Parliamentary Elections were to take place, the Kongu Vellalar Gounders of the Kongu region in western Tamil Nadu launched a new political party, the *Kongunadu Munnetra Kazhagam* (KMK, or Party for the Upliftment of the Kongu Region) at a large caste gathering that attracted hundreds of thousands of participants. This new political party was launched by the leaders of the long existing but recently re-activated *Kongu Vellalar Gounder Peravai* (or the Kongu Vellalar Gounder Caste Association). The details of the launching of this caste-based political party are beyond the scope of this comment but some points about the formation of the KMK need emphasising.

Firstly, the party – modelled on the Vanniyar-based PMK (*Pattali Makkal Katchi*) – is first and foremost a caste-based party, appeals to Gounder caste identity, and is primarily concerned with the economic interests of the dominant Gounder community in the region. The launch of a political party by the Backward Class Gounder elite reflects both the community's rising economic and political power in the region and their aversion towards wider (although in this area still very limited) Dalit political mobilisation and economic emancipation. The party's anti-Dalit agenda transpires from its initial promise to fight alleged Dalit abuses of the Protection of Civil Rights Act (PCR Act) in their struggles against Gounders. Secondly, the party emerged from a strong alliance between rural and urban Gounders, both of whom feel increasingly threatened by government policies that they experience as populist, pro-poor, and undermining Gounder attempts to develop the economy of the Kongu region. Thirdly, while clearly the product of a caste-based movement, once established (in February 2009) the party's public rhetoric soon shifted in an attempt to appeal to the people of Kongunadu as a whole and they claimed to represent the interests of all the people of the region. The leaders of the party argue that Kongunadu, while being one of Tamil Nadu's most developed and industrialised regions and while raising more than 50% of the government's revenue, remains largely neglected by the state government. They therefore claim to be concerned with the welfare and the development of all the Kongunadu people. The almost insurmountable paradox of the party became immediately obvious: how to reconcile an exclusive, caste-based and anti-Dalit agenda with an inclusive regional appeal needed to achieve electoral success?

Whatever the claims may be, the 2009 election results were telling. Launched less than 4 months before the Parliamentary Elections, the KMK party contested independently in 12 constituencies, all located in the western part of Tamil Nadu, and as a new party they ran an incredibly well-organised electoral campaign. While the party won no seats, they did win a total of close to 600,000 votes with several candidates gaining around 100,000 votes. Most importantly, in several constituencies (Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Pollachi, and Erode) the KMK candidate ended up in third place, and after the elections it was widely agreed that the KMK had played a major role in taking votes away from the DMK and its allied parties in western Tamil Nadu. It was in these districts that the DMK alliance lost most of their seats and that the ADMK alliance – traditionally more successful among rural Dalits (Harriss 2002) - obtained some of their main electoral victories. In other words, the KMK, while new and in some ways still quite insignificant, did contribute to some of the losses of the DMK-led government and certainly weakened their position in western Tamil Nadu. In this sense the KMK had a real impact on the election results. It is no coincidence that the DMK alliance (and thus the UPA) lost most seats in those areas where its policies (NREGA, ‘one rupee rice’, etc.) were most heavily criticised by the dominant community of Gounder landowners and industrialists.

It remains to be seen whether the KMK’s appeal will translate into longer-term electoral success for the party, or whether its agenda will be appropriated by the existing Dravidian parties, ultimately leading to its demise. In 2009 the party leaders were in any case confident that the 2011 state elections would offer a greater opportunity to win seats, partly because Legislative Assembly constituencies cover smaller territories and partly

because time would allow them to organise a better orchestrated campaign for the state elections.

What this party's recent history and the 2009 electoral politics reveal, is that the pro-poor and development policies of the UPA and its regional allies (the DMK alliance) may well backfire for the alliance in the long term, as suggested by Price. But electoral success is only one side of the coin. The other is the change in electoral politics that such policies have encouraged. The anger and frustration among the dominant Backward Classes about populist and pro-poor development policies have engendered a new electoral politics that plays on the combined identities of caste and region, and that is informed by the uneven economic and political development of Backward Class and Schedules Caste communities. A powerful region and caste based politics could well reinforce the socio-economic influence of already powerful communities and consolidate their grip over weaker Dalit groups who in this region still struggle to come up *despite* the real shifts in government policy towards a politics of development. Such a conclusion fits with Yadav and Palshikar's more general thesis that the emergence of states and regions as 'the central platform of politics might actually weaken the capacity of democratic politics to withstand the pressures of organised economic interests; and may open the doors wider for consolidation of the oligarchic control of dominant social groups, reducing the real political choices available to the citizen' (2008: 22).

Harriss has rightly emphasised that despite steady investment over the last two decades in progressive welfare measures in Tamil Nadu, 'the DMK have failed to carry on an

ideological offensive in civil society against casteism' (2002: 112; see also Pandian 1994). Reflecting on the 2001 election alliances, Harriss concluded that the political success of the two Dravidian parties (DMK and ADMK) had 'by now run its course' and that 'they were no longer able to mobilise widespread support across Tamil society' (ibid.: 113). This conclusion resonates with the 2009 electoral results of the Kongu region. Yet, unlike what Harriss predicted at the time, the disillusionment of the upper and middle classes (or the rising Backward Classes) with the rhetoric of Tamil cultural nationalism and its political torchbearers has *not* resulted in a move towards the 'blandishments of Hindu nationalism' as promoted by the then ruling BJP (ibid.: 113). Rather, disillusionment and frustration seem to have produced an electoral politics in which caste and region play once again a central role *alongside* an agenda of development and welfare. While benefiting many of India's rural poor, the 'successful' implementation NREGA also appears to be contributing – largely inadvertently – to a rise in social tensions and to new shifts in electoral and party politics.

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