CHAPTER - V

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The early attempts by Vanniars to mobilize themselves into a cohesive unit were made in 1870. In those days the mobilization, as is the case with many caste groups, was centered round the issues of deprivation and lack. In the case of the Vanniars, the issue was one of conflicting perceptions. While the wider society regarded the Vanniars as occupying the lower rung of the society and even considered them polluting untouchables. Undeserving of equal status in any sphere of life whatsoever, the self-perception of Vanniars varied from this. The aspiring members among the Vanniar community regarded themselves as eligible for higher status.

Interestingly, in the Indian context, caste groups have always sought to establish themselves high in social status through a reconstruction of history. They resort to unearthing mythological tales, ancient poems and other historical evidences to support their claim for higher status. This process is further compounded by their urge to move up in the social hierarchy through what M.N.Srinivas calls sanskritisation.

This is unique to the Indian situation. In the social structural arrangement of Indian society, particularly in caste groups, the attempt is not for recapturing of lost social status in substantial terms. There is no attempt to attain a higher social status through reclaiming of material resources as it happens in many Western contexts. Although Max Weber, regarding class and caste as status groups, argues that in the case of class
the difference between a higher class and a lower class is symbolic rather than substantial, more often than not. Western societies have ethnic movements that seek to resolve their conflicts through material means and addition of economic muscle.

In the Indian context the difference between one Varna or jati is often symbolic rather than substantial. And the process of resolving the difference also happens in the symbolic realm, anticipating an economic revival. This symbolic resolution is called sanskritisation by sociologists. Interestingly the process of sanskritisation does not result in actual upward movement of the caste in question. Instead it ends up as a pure self-perceived mobility, often unaccepted and ignored and unrecognized by other castes occupying a higher status than the caste attempting to move upwards. This, however, becomes a continuous process for upwardly mobile castes, their aim to reconstruct the self-perception of its members to believe in their higher status now lost in the debris of history. This is the cultural basis of caste politics.

In a similar spirit the Vanniar caste members also organized their early mobilization strategies around the issues of deprived social status. There were many struggles waged, efforts made and processes initiated to locate the Vanniars’ origin in the golden past and construct a Vanniar identity in the image of a ruler king whose children the present Vanniars are.
The first attempt by the Vanniars or any other caste to mobilize the masses horizontally takes place in the form of seeking recognition for its twice-born status by other caste members. But more importantly this twice-born status should become part of the self-recognition and self-perception of its members. However the claim for twice-born status has to be legitimized by placing the Fact in official records. So an all out attempt is often made by the caste groups to achieve recognition from the state apparatus. Since the pre-British state introduced for the first-time a rational-judicial administrative machinery in India, the recognition by the state of any cultural fact proved to be highly consequential for society. Therefore many caste groups, high or low in social status, often sought recognition of the state for any of its traditional status. The same is true of the Vanniars.

Recognizing the need to convince the British administrators on the one hand and the self-deprecating Vanniar masses on the other, the learned among the Vanniars made individual and collective attempts to establish their dignified and high origin, by writing books on their early status as kings and rulers. In fact these books often depicted the present status of Vanniars as a fallen state. In their case the desire to be accorded recognition for higher status from which they have fallen now arises mainly from the belief of the members that they enjoyed prosperity and high status during the golden ages of the past. Every member of the caste cherishes this sense of shared prosperous history wherever there is any challenge to such a belief.
For any caste in India, the exact origin is often traced to mythological accounts and every caste stakes its claim to Kshatriya status effectively through a mythological story, which is corroborated by quoting the poems of the early poets/who might have written them in a different context. Often written in the form of caste biographies, masquerading as ethnographies, these stories substantiate their claim by citing poetic evidences and folk tales. They are often glorifying in spirit. Yet they attempt to fit themselves into the criteria set by the British for acceptance.

These biographies were often presented as substantiating sources for the claims made in the petitions sent to the British time and again. In 1890 a petition was sent to the British Government to regard the Vanniars as Kshatriyas and enumerate them in the 1871 census as Kshatriyas. In the preface to the book the author writes, "This book has been prepared to meet a felt need. In anticipation of 1871 the Vanniars praying that they may be classified as Kshatriyas in the census returns submitted a petition to the Government. But Government in their order thereon stated that to suit all purposes an alphaphetical order of the several castes would be published.

This however was not done nor was the order carried out in the succeeding census 1881. As it was feared that the prayer of the Vanniars would be ignored on third time, unless a proper representation was made and positive proofs adduced in support the compilation of this pamphlet was undertaken for submission to Government as appendix to the memorial lately submitted."
Guided by the spirit to prove that the Vanniars are descendants of the Kshatriya race, this book arrays fascinating accounts of the bravery of the Vanniars, the munificence of Vanniar kings, and the triumphs of Vanniar kings over other renewed rulers like the Pallavas. Apart from the book, there are accounts urging the Kshatriya status of the Vanniars by tracing their roots to puranic and mythological images and figures. There has also been an exercise in etymology. The origin of words like Vanni in Vanniar and Palli, the erstwhile name by which the Vanniars were referred to before being called Vanniars. This seems to be the regular pattern of lobbying for a higher status.

This book, along with other similar biographies, refers to a myth that is part of the Vanniar consciousness. According to this myth the Vanniars are said to have originated from the Agni Gundam (sacred fire) raised by Muni Satnbu for the purpose of creating a brave, skilled soldier. In response to his demand was born a soldier who was called Vanni, the modified form of Agni. The often resorted to method for establishing the Kshatriya status is tracing the genealogy of the caste members to popular kings and rulers'. And in this respect here are clear strands of history, which trace the genealogy. It is widely shared among the present Vanniar caste members that their former caste name Palli is a corrupt form of Pallava. In fact there have been many attempts by other members of the caste to look for isophonic words to corroborate their claim to Kshatriyahood.

Interestingly these sporadic attempts by the enlightened sections of the Vanniars to claim Kshatriya status coincided with the ground reality
wherein the majority members of the Vanniar community lived in abject poverty as most of them were agricultural labourers.

The sankritisation attempts were carried on even more intensively. Apart from reconstructing the genealogy of the Vanniaras against the backdrop of a royal past, there were organized attempts to achieve consistency of the present Vanniar life style with the glorious mythological past. As has been identified by M.N.Srinivas, there were other tendencies that pointed towards the operationalisation of sanskritisation process. Sanskritising the names of Vanniar members, particularly among the learned, using the services of Brahmins, changing the dressing habits for men and women, worshipping sanskritized gods etc. were also resorted to by the Vanniaras in their drive to achieve Kshatriyahood.

Most of these earlier attempts were isolated events and concerns of very few learned Vanniar members. Their petitioning the British for recognizing their Kshatriyahood coincided with the welfare activities initiated by some privileged members of the Vanniar community. In other words the sanskritisation process often got reinforced and received fillip from an accompanying modernization process. Education in its modern version, introduced by British, was often viewed as a launching pad for achieving status consistency. The successful stating of claim for Kshatriyahood simultaneously paralleled entering into modern education. In fact it is those who received modern education, lawyers, doctors and graduates, who vehemently argued for Kshatriya status. They did not see any inconsistency between the claim for Kshatriya status and acquisition of modern education.
On the contrary they saw them as mutually reinforcing forces. This was expressed in the form of many educated Vanniars entering into welfare oriented work for Vanniar youths. Rudolph and Rudolph mention the opening of many schools by an upwardly rising lawyer so that Vanniar children could study there.

But the first organized effort to take up the Vanniars’ cause was made when the British Government refused to accept the petition by the Vanniars to be treated as Kshatriyas in the up-coming 1871 census. Reacting to this refusal to classify the Pallis as Kshatriyas, a five-member committee was constituted with Sivabhatha Naicker, Virasamy Naicker, Chengavarayar Naicker, Venlecatchala Naicker and Andiappa Naicker. This committee submitted a petition to Lord Gower, the Chairman of the Census Committee to classify the Pallis as Kshatriyas. But Lord Gower asked the committee members to produce substantial evidence in support of their claim. In response to this Kunna Muniasamy Naicker wrote a book Jathikal Sangaraham (confederation of castes) by gathering evidences from various documents, inscriptions and other sources to support the Kshatriya claim and gave it to Lord Gower.

Apart from submission of the books, the need for an organization to fight for Vanniar rights was realized and the first Vannia Kular Kshatriya Sangam was started in Kadalur by Gurusamy Rayar. The founder travelled to many villages and preached to the Vanniars that they were the descendants of kings. He also wrote a book Sangagani and Sanga Thoni.
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Having failed to get their community members listed as Kshatriyas in the 1871 census, the newly formed Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Sangam activated itself to resume its fight for inclusion of the Vanniars as Kshatriyas in the next census of 1881. Thus the Sangam embarked on a full-fledged mobilization process. It adopted many tactics for rallying the population towards the Sangam. Some of the tactics that it adopted were quite characteristic of what other caste Sangams did, like that of the Nadars.

The Sangam formed in Kadalur spread its tentacles far and wide. In imitation of Gurusamy, some Vanniars started the Chennaipuri Vanniar Sangam in Madras. This allied itself with Kadalur Vannia Kula Kshatriya Sangam to form a Mahana. Sangam (Provisional Sangam). The Sangam members took upon themselves the task of lobbying for including the Vanniars as Kshatriyas in the 1881 census, by substantiating their claims through historical evidences. Various Sangam leaders set about writing ethnographic texts to support their claim. In line with this Annasamy Naicker of Conjeewaram, wrote a book *Vanniar Vilakkam*. Anticipating the 1881 census the members of the Sangam submitted a petition to the Colonial Council to classify them as Kshatriyas. But this time their plea was rejected and in the 1881 census also the Vanniars were named Pallis. This necessitated more rigorous and expanded Sangam activities and the Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Maha Sangam was started with Challappa Naicker as its president in 1888, and was registered in 1890. Its relentless effort to establish kshatriya status resulted further in Ayyakannu Naicker's work *Vanni Kula Vilakkam*. This effort bore little fruit except that the Government
and census officers accepted it only in principle. Their community did not get enumerated as Vanniars in the Varna category of Kshatriya. This continued till the 1932 census. But the fact that their claim for Kshatriya status was accepted in principle gave the Vanniar members a great deal of psychological advantage and a sense of hope and it was hailed as a great achievement. Anyhow the Sangam continued its community welfare activities in full swing. The Sangam built many educational institutions, rest houses and trusts.

Sociologists in India often argue that caste Sangams of all kinds seek to organize their members fully, unlike the contractual organizations which enter into relationship with their members only with reference to particular aspects of their personality. But caste organizations or Sangams make a direct relationship with the entire personality structure and self. There is an all out attempt to organize the total self of the members to facilitate their full loyalty to the movement. This, as T.K.Ommen argues, is initiated on the issue of depreciation. Once the sense of depreciation is instilled into the minds of the members, their participation is ensured. It is at this point of participation that the attempts at total organization of the self takes place.

Therefore the caste Sangam aspires to take part in the total life cycle of its members. It does it by building schools, and other institutions that intersect the life paths of the individual members. This applies to Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Sangam too. But the Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Sangam's activities took a sharp turn and had another cause to actively organize its masses during 1934 when the Government of Madras, in their notification
No. 6487649 dt4-l 1-34 (Fort Saint George Gazette part I page 2128 dated 4-12-34) declared a part of the class of Padayachis residing in the District of South Arcot consisted of those who have been convicted of non-bailable offences or who have been ordered under section 118 of the code of criminal procedure 1892 to give security for maintaining good behaviour and who are addicted to the systematic commission of such offences. This provoked the Vanniars sharply.

The Sangam undertook many activities that ensured that the members were brought around certain issues that had relevance for the entire Vanniar community. In fact the Sangam used various tactics that were derived from the people’s life itself. Mention can be made of the Handful of Grain (pidiyarisi) campaign launched by the Sangam. It was a mobilization drive aiming at raising funds for Sangam activities. Through this method all the Vanniar members were requested to give a handful of grain as donation. The grain thus amassed was sold to raise funds for Sangam activities.

Another important activity that the Sangam members undertook with regular intensity was the writing of ethnographic documents that often turned out to be glorificatory treatises on the Vanniars. Apart from books, the community members also started many journals and periodicals. In this respect may be cited the magazine started by A.Subbramanya Naicker named Vanniayakula Mithran. Kshatriyan (1932), and Kshatriya Sigamani (1923) were published from Salem Vanniyakula Suryodhoyam (1924) was published from Pondichery and Tamil Mannan (1932) was published from
Thiruvannamalai. Ardhanarees Varma was another Vanniar who wrote proficiently on the Vanniar’s royal origin. *Vannia Vamsa Prakasam, Mazhavar Varalam, Tamil Mannar Charitham, Sambuvarayar Vallarasu, Arasar Kula Asara Sindhu, Kshatriyan, pathtu Upadesangal, payatchi Pattu, Vanniar (or) Tamilnadu Kshatriyar, Palliyar Pathuvam, Vannia Kula Vardhamenam, Jathi Sangrahachram*, etc were books written by ArdhaNarees Varma.

The acceptance of the Vanniar in the category of Kshatriyas by the British Government, although only in principle, in a way exhausted the cause for the Sangam. After 1934 the Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Sangam was seeking more legitimacy and space for its welfare activities.

The introduction of dyarchy by the British Government by which the native Indians could rule themselves at the lower levels of administration, particularly at the district level, heralded the arrival of electoral politics, even though universal franchise was not in force then. The Congress party contested for in these district administrative councils and won the major share of the seats. In the Madras Province, however, the Congress faced a major opposition from the Justice Party and independents. The Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Sangam entered into a political deal with the Congress Party under a few conditions, which included pressing for reservation in Indian civil services for the Vanniar in proportion to their percentage to the total population and asking the Congress Party itself to stand as a model for this by giving share in party positions to Vanniar along the same lines.
But the Congress Ministry of Madras did not respond favourably to the Vanniar demands. Nor did the nominating bodies of the Congress Party respond to it by changing its structure. From that time the Vanniars decided that they could rely only on themselves. They dropped the attempt to work through the Congress or any other party and began to contest for public office as independents, backed by the Sangam.

The full-throated entry of the Sangam into electoral politics did not happen for a long time. But a combination of various factors like declining of numerical strength of the Congress party and the Justice Party made the Sangam members contemplate starting their own political party. The Vanniars occupying the northern districts of Tamilnadu were always a force to reckon with due to their numerical strength. This was further reinforced by their homogeneity. In these areas the Vanniars voted solidly for the Sangam backed candidates. In the 1949 South Arcot District Board Elections, Vanniar backed candidates won 22 out of 52 seats and went about nearly electing the president for the district. Having realised their numerical strength they could even dictate terms to political parties existing then. As mentioned above their demands were guided by the welfare spirit and made along the progressive discrimination policy followed in the United States of America.

Deciding to translate their numerical strength into a vote bank for negotiations, the Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Sangam entered into electoral politics. But a more important reason was the Congress party’s stubborn refusal to yield to the Sangam's demands. In an effort to consolidate their
vote bank/ the Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Sangam organized a state-level conference to mobilize the support of all the Vanniars across the state. In this conference it was decided that the Vanniars needed a political party of their own which could fight for the cause of all working and toiling masses. Though broadbased it meant a lot only to the Vanniars. Therefore the Tamilnadu Toilers Party was launched just before the assembly elections of 1952. The Tamilnadu Toilers Party elected Ramasamy Padayachi as its chairman and began its campaign for the assembly elections. Inclined more towards socialist and leftist lines, this party, however, did not go down well with the North Arcot Vanniars who had their undying loyalty to Manikavel Naicker, whose charisma had strong influence among the Vanniar youth in North Arcot. Under the leadership of Manickavel Naicker, another political party was launched named the Commonwealth Party. Though different in name they did not work at cross-purposes. They worked in tandem to defeat candidates belonging to other parties. In the 1952 assembly elections the combined strength of these parties was twenty-five of which nineteen seats were won by the Toilers Party and six by the Commonwealth Party. The Vanniar combined strength turned magical with the Congress faring not so well. It fell short of a majority and needed the support of Vanniar parties.

Sensing a great opportunity to turn a few of their MLAs into ministers, the Vanniar parties negotiated with the Congress Party leader, C.Rajagopalachari. The Commonwealth Party showed more enthusiasm to join the ministry in return for the support given to the Congress Ministry. This resulted in Manickavel Naicker becoming a minister with cabinet rank.
This was a great achievement to a humble caste. The Toilers Party headed by Ramasamy Padayachi, chose to remain an outside supporter of this ministry, and did not vie for ministership. However when Kamarajar assumed office in place of Rajagopalachari, Ramasamy Paydayachi pressed for more favour to the Vanniars from Kamarajar. Not only the favourable response but also the pro-poor policies of Kamarajar convinced Ramasamy Padayachi to join Kamaraj’s cabinet. With Manickavel Naicker continuing his position as cabinet minister from the Rajaji ministry and with Ramasamy Padayachi joining Kamarajar’s Congress Ministry, the Vanniars could boast of two cabinet ministers from their caste. This gave a tremendous amount of psychological advantage to the Vanniar community.

The conviction on the part of Padayachi and Naicker that the Kamarajar Ministry was taking care of the Vanniars needs properly finally led to their deciding to dissolve their parties, for they thought that what their political parties aspired to do for the Vanniars was already being done by the congress Party. The dissolution of the Vanniar political parties meant a great fall in the political career of this community as there was now no goal-oriented political force. Nor was there any need for a political force, since there was no specific political goal to be immediately achieved.

The birth of the political parties was rooted in the then felt need to correct certain administrative lapses. In the District Boards, during the days when the Vanniars occupied office, they were primarily aiming at offering welfare activities only. When these were taken up by the Congress Ministry they decided to disband their political parties.
The period that followed the dissolution of the political outfits of the Vanniars was characterized by demands placed before the Congress Ministry that ruled for ten years under Kamarajar for welfare-oriented favours. This was also the period during which Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Sangam was also engaged in low-key activities and went into hibernation that amounted to its near disappearance.

Despite the apparent disappearance of the two political parties from the political horizon of Tamilnadu, there were many undercurrents whose visibility was very subtle but significant. It was not that everything was acceptable to all the Vanniar community members. For example there were certain sections of the dissolved political parties who opposed the dissolution of the political parties. These sections formed the Toilers Party under the leadership of Govindasamy. It supported the emerging Dravidian parties. It saw more promise in the Dravidian political outfits and supported the Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (DMK). It ultimately came to function with DMK, which gave a ministership to a Vanniar when it came to power later.

Many insiders in the Congress Party did not accept the concessions given to the Vanniar community as they perceived the Vanniars’ continued demand for welfare measures as political arm-twisting. In protest against the undue importance being given to the Vanniars, when the Congress Party gave tickets to Vanniars in preference to old-time congressmen during the 1957 elections, some of the Congress members joined together and formed a Congress Reform Committee. Led by K.S.Venkatakrishna Reddiar, and joined by other higher caste land-owning leaders from his own caste, apart
from members of the Naidu, Vellala and Mudaliar castes, the Congress Reform Committee argued for proper allocation of tickets. In their efforts they were also joined by some of the dissident Vanniars who were refused tickets by the Congress Party. Having failed to force the Congress Party to retract, they finally formed a party called Indian National Democratic Congress. This party, notwithstanding its upper caste leadership, achieved modest electoral support but gradually faded away by 1962. A few members of this party finally returned to their parental fold, namely the Congress Party and some of them joined the DMK or the Swatantra Party.

But what was significant throughout was the feat that no political party could ignore the presence of the Vanniars, as they were not characterized by divided loyalties. Even though there were a few murmurings and dissenting voices, by and large, the Vanniar community functioned as an undivided whole and it always ensured that their strength lay in their unity.

Here mention must be made of the campaign that the Vanniar leaders very soon after launched, declaring “Vanniar votes are not for non-Vanniars” (Vanniar Ottu Anniyarku Illai). The Vanniar leaders repeatedly reiterated that the Vanniars should always ensure that ultimately they benefited only Vanniars and not non-Vanniars. This was reaffirmed despite differing party loyalties. The Vanniar leaders during those days when their political parties were defunct preferred to ride piggy back on other prominent political parties with whom they had entered into alliance. This was evident from what happened in the 1962 general elections. There were three influential
Vanniar leaders who lost all in different political parties. Ramasamy Padayachi had started to move more towards the Swatatantra Party after it was formed in 1960. He even became its head in South Arcot District. Srinivasa Padayachi was with the Congress, and Govindasamy was with the DMK. In South Arcot District all these parties were in the hands of Vanniar leaders. In this election out of the fifteen non-reserved seats, thirteen were captioned by Vanniars although they came from different political parties. Eight seats went to Vanniars fighting under the Congress banner and five to Vanniar candidates fighting on DMK tickets.

This is a clear indication of the fact that the mobilization of the Vanniar vote bank was so strong that even when divisions surfaced among them, the Vanniars always ensured that only Vanniars benefited. This trend continued even when the political mobilization was at a low ebb. However political mobilization activities had a strong base in the case of the Vanniars.

The arrival of the Dravidan political party that was born out of the Justice Party also coincided with the low-key political mobilization of the Vanniars. In 1967 Vanniar community's capacity to operate as a political force collapsed completely. This was preceded by the revival of some political activity by the Vanniars in the name of Vanniar Peravai in 1962. This was started to highlight the plight of the Vanniars. It was around this time that the Vanniars also felt more inclined towards the DMK, as the Congress Party was not yielding to the demands of the Vanniars. The DMK gave some promises to the Vanniars. It assured the Vanniars that it would give any
position that the Vanniars wanted. This proved very attractive to the Vanniar youths and many of them supported the DMK to the hilt. But the DMK coming to power did not mean much to the Vanniars as the promised concessions were not delivered.

This persuaded some of the prominent Vanniars to revive their political activities. Padayachi revived the Tamilnadu Toilers Party in anticipation of the elections, but could not enter the united front organized by the DMK, as the DMK argued that it already had the support of the Vanniars who, it contended, were adequately represented. When DMK finally won the assembly elections in 1967, Govindasamy, Velaventhan and Annamalai, who were made cabinet ministers, represented the Vanniar community.

During the period after 1952 when the Vanniars were united as one single group even though they had two parties, the solidarity among the Vanniars was weakening due to various reasons. So many political formations were planned and dissolved. The causes were:

1. None had the eagerness to strengthen the central caste sangam.

2. The caste Sangam conducted no special conference or processions.

3. Padayachi and Naicker thought that they could uplift their caste with the help of the political processes initiated by them. They tried to lead their followers on wrong reasons.
4. The reservation and other demands never got importance in the policy of the caste sangams at all. The Vanniars were satisfied with their ministerial posts. They thought that the ministerial posts lifted their social status. Therefore they did not bother about their immediate pressing needs.

5. The very important fact is that the Vanniars had been nominated by other political parties in order to contest in Vanniars belts. Finally the Vanniars contested on behalf of other different political parties instead of strengthening their own political parties.

   The Vanniars fail to evolve not only a centralized political authority but also no alterative to the Sangam activities. The twin-failure on the part of the Vanniars weakened the solidarity among the Vanniars. The continuation of welfare activities initiated by the Vannia Kula Kshatriya Sangam was maintained by other alternative forms. One such entity that maintained it was the Samuga Narpani Mandram Social Service Society (SSS). Though it was started as a secular non-partition organization the Vanniars primarily patronized it. This society not only played a significant role in carrying on the activities undertaken by the earlier Vanniar Kshatriya Kula Sangam but also became the training ground for many young leaders.

   The SSS was started in November 1961 with the avowed goal of bringing about social coherence and cultural development of its members. The aims and objectives of the SSS were declared to be the following.

   1. It shall render voluntary service to the needy.
2. It shall not have any political affiliation.

3. It shall help the members in matters of education, and cultural and social development and guide them in entrepreneurship, employment, and self-development etc.

The SSS played a key role in the education of Vanniar boys and youth. Electing M.P. Manivannan as its general secretary, it rendered great service to many Vanniar youth. The activities it undertook focused primarily on educational services like helping students by offering scholarships and conducting coaching classes for competitive examination so that they could be helped to take up Government job.

The Vanniars protested against the 1934 Criminal Tribe order. After the Vannia Kula Kshatriya Sangam was registered in 1890, many Vanniar caste sangams were formed in the Vannia belts, viz., South Arcot, North Arcot, Salem, Dharmapuri and Chengalpattu. They worked more at the rural level. The North Arcot Vannia Kula Kshatriya Sangam and the South Arcot Vannia Kula Kshatriya Sangam were the two most important Sangams.

The South Arcot Vannia Kula Kshatriya Sangam mobilized the rural people by explaining their economic problems. This Sangam helped to get 22 seats out of 52 seats in the 1949 South Arcot District Board Elections. Its main goal was to arrive at a clear-cut idea about the economic problems. The Tamilnadu Toilers Party headed by Ramasamy Padayachi was started with the help of the South Arcot Vannia Kula Kshatriya Sangam. Likewise North Arcot Vannia Kula Kshatriya sangam started the Commonwealth
Party. It functioned under Manickavel Naicker’s leadership in North Arcot and Chengalpattu Districts. The important thing at that time was that two mobilized caste groups were transformed into two political parties.

During the election campaign, the caste-sabhas-cum-parties utilized the established village social organisations, mobilizing Vanniar village leaders to gain support for their parties. Rudolph and Rudolph observe that this means of mobilization was effective despite widespread illiteracy and the absence of mass media because it was able to define and translate electoral issues at the grassroots in meaningful terms: government services for production and welfare, particularly roads, credit, education and health could surely be better and more firmly secured for poor Vanniars if men familiar with their plight, that is Vanniars or their friends, were elected to office. National leaders speak before vast and apparently uncomprehending throngs that there is an unbridgeable gap between the ordinary Indian voter and his government. Others watching village election meetings in which caste headmen engage in running debates are likely to come to quite different conclusions. Behind these meetings and private negotiations there lies more discourse than distance, more dialogue than domination. They are part of a chain of communication, access and influence that links the purposes of village and caste and locality to the political system of state and nominations. Common caste background is not essential to such exchanges, but the fact that a candidate and the local leaders share a common caste culture and interest or are linked by those who do provide a context in which discourse and dialogue are natural and easy does help. The TNT
Party and the Commonwealth Party got 19 and 6 seats respectively in the 1952 assembly elections. The Congress Party could not get a majority in that election. Hence it sought the Vanniar as allies and offered ministerial posts to two leaders. Ramasamy Padayachi and Manickavel Naicker dissolved their parties and merged in the Congress Party. The Congress Party indirectly used the Vanniar masses as its vote bank. The Vanniar were satisfied with their ministerial posts, because, at that time, ministerial posts for the low caste people seemed to be a great achievement. They thought that having high number of seats as MLAs and ministers was the ultimate success. In the 1950s the caste leaders could mobilize the Vanniar masses in a few districts. The Mobilization was not effective after 1957. There were so many reasons. The main reason was that all the Vanniar leaders had connections with some other political party. Secondly there were so many Vanniar Sangams spread out in all villages and every sangam supported different political parties. Finally the Vanniar caste solidarity was weakened because the reservation demand was not emphasized.

In the 1980s the Vanniar Sangam was very careful in defining its principles which it spread throughout Tamilnadu. Oral history and class character were the two factors by which the Vanniar Sangam mobilized the people. There is no major difference in goals between the Vanniar Kula Kshatriya Sangam in the beginning and the present Vanniar Sangam. The Vanniar Sangam also submitted petitions, conducted conferences and meetings like those Sangams. But it used some new strategies, organizing
agitations and mobilizing the people through protests are some such means. All their success can be attributed to the symbol—agnikundam (Firepot), yellow towels, yellow sarees used by Vanniar Sangam. Their writings, speeches and activities were all directed towards reminding the community of its rich ancient past and its present economic condition. Further it was favourable circumstances that helped the Vanniar Sangam to mobilise the masses. The Vanniar scholars and their books had already prepared sufficient intellectual background for the movement. Further its caste-based parties like the TNT and the Commonwealth mobilized the people to get two ministerial posts. In the Vanniar Sangam some personalities like Ramdoss, A.K.Natarajan, Theeran, V.S.Ramamurthi, Elangovan and Gopal are important. These personalities are responsible for mobilizing the people for Sangam activities. Among these Ramdoss and Theeran are talented writers, orators and propagandists. From the initial period up to the present day Ramdoss is very popular among the youth through his inflammatory speeches and writings. Among his contributions kanal, started in 1984, evoked a good response from his caste people. It generated good support, resulting in total mobilization.

Ramdoss explained the Vanniar caste status (kula perumai), their socio-economic condition and the oppression of dominant castes through the journal. He projected the uniqueness of the Vanniar community in Tamilnadu. Through his continuous writings he collected all Vanniars together and trained them to be involved in agitations. The Vanniar Sangam published a book in 1986 in which the organisation has been sub-divided
into many parts with a centralised head office at Madras for the entire Tamilnadu. Ramdoss contacted and talked to the caste members through letters published under the title of *Anbu Sonthangal* (beloved relatives) in *Kanal* run by him. Then the popularity and influence of Ramdoss increased a great deal and he was addressed, not as Ramdoss, but as Inamaana Kavalar (Protector of the dignity of the community). People gave a special name-Ina Murasu (Community trumpet) to Dheeran. The Vanniar Sangam offered help to its members. For example, financial assistance is given during marriage for poor Vanniars; donations for small-scale industries and for group industries are also given. Some reform marriages\(^5\) were celebrated with Vanniar leaders presiding (the thali would be given away by the Vanniar leaders and the spouses’ and the leaders’ names would be published in *Kanal*.

The Vanniars celebrate separate caste festivals. The first full moon day of the first Tamil month (Chitra Bowranami) has always been celebrated every year as their chief festival in the presence of their leader Ramdoss. In their caste meetings, in order to achieve their demands, they critically analyse all matters that are to be taken up. A.K.Natarajan published a book entitled *Samuthaya Sinthanaikal* (Social thoughts), which gained popularity among the Vanniars. In this book he clearly describes the socio-economic political status of the Vanniars. Further he mentions the Vanniars’ present persistent problems and highlights the future plans of the Sangam. It cites 20 reasons to form a separate political party for the Vanniars. It was published in *Kanal* also. Pattali Katchi (not Pattali Makkal Katchi) had been
started under the Vanniar Sangam's leadership in 1986. However, unlike the Vanniar Sangam, this party contributed nothing to mobilize the people.

The Vanniar Sangam's first conference was held at Erode. Other conferences were periodically held at Thittakkudi, Mettore, Chengalpattu, Madras, Mylam, Salem, Pondicherry, ManalMedu, Mayiladuthurai, Ambasamuthiram, Thiruvidimarudur, Wanthavasi and Dharmapuri. The Mettore, Madras, Pondicherry, Salem and Mayiladuthurai conferences were the more important among them because they had historical significance. Though the Vanniar conferences have been conducted since 1950s the conferences were conducted throughout Tamilnadu only after Ramdoss assumed leadership. The Vanniars contributed enormously to the 1985 conference at Madras. Reservation was the main demand in this conference. The women participants wore yellow coloured sarees, and men draped yellow coloured towels over their shoulders. A large number of flags were hoisted with the caste symbol on them. This conference assembled the whole mass of the Vanniars. All Tamilnadu newspapers appreciated this conference. A final decision was taken in this conference that if their demands were rejected, they would protest through agitations.

The government did not consider their demands. So many agitations broke out under the leadership of Ramdoss throughout Tamilnadu. Train blockades, bus blockades, Neyveli mine agitation and the sugar factory agitation were important agitations. In those agitations conducted throughout Tamilnadu, 20,000 Vanniars were arrested, 18 persons were killed. It virtually indicated the Vanniar Sangam's strength in mobilization in
Tamilnadu. By conducting agitations they strengthened their power and achieved their demands. Reservation was an important demand: 20% reservation was their enduring demand. The Vanniar Sangam played a major role in getting the 20% reservation for the Most Backward Classes (MBC) from the Tamilnadu government. The Vanniar Sangam helped to get the MBC quota, even for Christian Vanniars. As a result of the Vanniar Sangam's proposal to the Tamilnadu Government named a district Padayachi after the pioneer Vanniar leader Ramasamy Padayachi.

After 1987, the Vanniar Sangam conducted processions and meetings along with other castes. A caste sammelam was organised at Madras with an assemblage of 14 castes. Ramdoss, the leader of the sammelam, mentioned in his speech that Vanniars would help the depressed castes struggling for their basic rights. He further mentioned that his party was ready to negotiate its reservation demand for the development of the depressed castes. Vanniars, on behalf of the Vanniar Sangam, organised some meetings with other castes in order to integrate all the depressed castes together. The Vanniar-Devendra Kula Vellalar Conference at Madurai, the Vanniar-Adi-Dravida Unity Conference at Vellore and at Arur, the Vanniar-Vannar Elutchi Conference at Tirutani and Vanniar-Islamiar Religious Tolerance Conference at Mayiladuthurai were conducted in order to extend the mobilization to the Adi-Dravidars and the minorities.

In these conferences, the other castes’ demands were also emphasised by the Vanniar Sangam. For instance, the Vanniar Sangam supported the Adi-Dravidars’ demands for the Ramanathapuram Imanuel Devendrar
District, Sundaralinga Kudumban Transport Corporation and Mozhignaeru Deva Neiyapavanar name for the Tanjore Tamil University. Hence the depressed castes associated themselves with the Vanniar Sangam. A Scheduled Castes-Backward Castes Conference was conducted at Madurai by Ramdoss. Adi-Dravidars, Mukulathors, Yadavar and Barbers participated in this conference.

While Ramdoss mobilized his people he preferred other caste leaders joining the PMK. The All India-Devendrakula Vellalar Sangam’s founder John Pandian allied himself with the PMK Youth federation leadership. Irumporai Gunasekaran, Vadivel Ragavan, Murugavelrajan lent support in the Southern Districts like Madurai. Generally 50% party posts are reserved for both Adi-Dravidars and the Aboriginals in the PMK. Usually each and every PMK leader has his own caste support. The PMK’s concern with party consolidation activities consisted of two steps: one carrying over the Vanniar loyalty to the political party and the second broadening its programme to include people other than of their caste.

The need to broaden the party so as to include other castes arises from practical necessities. The Vanniars constitute 20% of the population in Tamilnadu, which is not large enough to form a government of their own. Hence, the need to widen its base under a programme appealing to all becomes obvious. This effort also facilitates the supply of other caste votes, especially those of Scheduled Castes. Actually speaking one's allegiance to the Sangam need not coincide with the allegiance to a single political party. The Sangam believed that a party of its own would make its members;
loyalty conterminus with party loyalty. The endeavor to broaden the party activities occurred at three levels 1. Class level. 2. Linguistic nationalistic level and 3. Ideological level.
NOTES


3. Ibid.


7. Ibid.

