
COUNTERING HINDU HEGEMONY: TAMIL SEPARATISM AS COUNTER-MEMORY WORK

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When beginning work on this paper in February 2020, Delhi was on fire following days of Hindutva riots in what has since been described as a pogrom. The Hindu nationalist violence that incited the riots relies on convenient, ideological scripts of Hinduism that reify Sanskrit linguistic and Brahmanical caste hierarchies. Nonetheless, resistance is not lost as Tamil counter-memories on language and caste reinterpret Hindutva histories of India to provide an alternative, oppositional possibility for a progressive future. Tamil Nadu, the southeastern-most state in India, has a legacy of being a stronghold for anti-casteist and pro-Dravidian politics. In this paper, I trace how Tamil Nadu's separatist politics engage with Dravidian counter-memory that challenges conservative Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) narratives of Hindu Nationalism. This paper aims to explore two particular tensions emergent between the BJP and Tamil counter-memory: Sanskritization versus Tamil purism and BJP casteism in opposition to Dravidian anti-caste resistances. Furthermore, these counter-memories transcend elections and demonstrate a material and discursive resistance to fascism. As the Indian state descends further into the clutches of Hindu nationalism and casteist bias, Tamil counter-memory work establishes the utopic possibility in uncovering the unique, transgressive history of Tamil Nadu and Tamil linguistic sovereignty. Moreover, the ubiquity of the Tamil language beyond India provides the opportunity for solidarity among upper-caste Tamils, non-Indian Tamils, and anti-fascist memory activists in India. Much of the power of Hindutva is its affective appeal; indeed, the best way to counter its hegemony is through compelling, information-based memory practices such as the work done through Tamil counter-memory.

Introduction

As one of the two major political parties, the Bhartiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, hereinafter referred to as BJP) has garnered overwhelming support throughout India with it becoming the ruling party in 2014, despite the facing criticism of endorsing Hindutva, or Hindu Nationalism. However, the southeastern Indian state

of Tamil Nadu remains an obstacle to the BJP's nationwide success. Tamil Nadu, the southeastern-most state in India, has a legacy of being a stronghold for anti-casteist and pro-Dravidian politics. This paper traces how Tamil Nadu's separatist politics engage with Dravidian counter-memory in a way that challenges BJP narratives of Hindu Nationalism. Stemming from the field of memory studies, counter-memory constitutes memory narratives that contradict dominant and hegemonic 'official' histories. Counter-memory work can serve to resist and disrupt oppressive social and political systems. This paper surveys the legacy of Hindu Nationalist narratives of language and caste and counters it with the history of Tamil linguistic separatism and political inclusion. This paper explores two particular tensions emergent between popular BJP scripts and Tamil counter-memory: Sanskritization versus Tamil purism; and, BJP casteism in opposition to Dravidian anti-caste resistances, as these tensions complicate the BJP's attempts to establish hegemony through ethnonationalism and casteism. Finally, this paper considers how Tamil memory practices persist and how they can be invoked to resist Hindutva hegemony.

Historical Background

Ingrid Therwath, who investigates Hindu nationalism on online forums, situates "*Hindutva*," which "literally means 'Hinduness', as "the ideology of Hindu nationalists that equates 'Indian identity' with 'Hindu identity' and, according to which, blood attachments prevail over loyalties to a particular location or one's native soil."¹ Hindu nationalism can be understood as a form of ethnonationalism that relies on social hierarchies including casteism, patriarchy, and religious discrimination to produce an idealized version of India that is explicitly Hindu. Therwath also stresses that "Hindu nationalism has a modernist streak which foregrounds science and technology as pillars of Hindu civilization."² As a result, India as imagined within Hindu Nationalism is presented as modern, progressive, secular – while paradoxically remaining rooted in ancient tradition, conservative politics, and, notably, the Hindu caste system. Rangetta Dutta notes how caste in particular has retained its continued social impact.³ While the caste system predates the British colonization of India, it took on a particular political meaning during the colonial period during which Hinduism was articulated as an institution; Dutta notes that British authority "facilitated the development of a homogeneous institutionalized Hinduism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."⁴ By the post-colonial period, the caste system as it had evolved under the British took on new significance in the creation of the Indian nation.

1 Ingrid Therwath, "Cyber-hindutva: Hindu nationalism, the diaspora and the Web" in *Social Science Information* 5, no. 4 (2012): 552.

2 Ibid.

3 Ranjeeta Dutta, "Locating the Self, Community, and the Nation: Writing the History of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India" in *Religion and Modernity in India*, eds. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Aloka Parasher Sen (Oxford Scholarship Online: January 2017): 86.

4 Ibid.

Brahmins, who hold the superior position in the Hindu caste system, were “under stress to establish their modern identity by associating with the colonial state and the new concept of the Indian nation.”⁵ Thus, in the advent of the post-colonial Indian state, caste retained its significance with Brahmins transitioning their social and cultural power from privileged colonial subjects to idealized national citizens. In contemporary India, Brahmins and other *savarna* (upper caste) peoples continue to maintain privileged status, as exemplified by the ubiquity of *savarna* last names within Indian and diasporic institutions.⁶

Moreover, Hindu nationalism is not only reliant on caste-based hierarchies but also the politics of alterity and affective appeals to the dominant class. The BJP rose to prominence in the 1980s as the party for Hindus. In an attempt to win over Hindus in Uttar Pradesh (UP) during the 1989 election, BJP candidate Rajiv Gandhi relied on Hindu nationalist mythologies of Rama and his supposed birthplace of Ayodhya, UP: “It was there, said Hindu nationalists, that the first Mughal emperor, Babur, had centuries earlier razed the temple marking the birth site to erect a large mosque on the spot . . . [t]heir demand was that this temple be rebuilt.”⁷ While Gandhi lost the election, his strategy of playing on anti-Muslim and niche scripts of Hinduism became a strategy of the BJP more broadly. By the late 1990s, the BJP held more prominent positions in Lok Sabha. The infamous 2002 Gujarat riots, which claimed the lives of over one thousand people (about 800 of whom were Muslim), were kindled by reports of Hindu pilgrims to Ayodhya being attacked. Then-Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi was accused of inciting rioters to commit acts of violence against Muslims. We can see through the history of the BJP the history of Hindu Nationalism as well, what Dibyesh Anand has called “a chauvinist and majoritarian nationalism” reliant on “the image of a peaceful Hindu Self vis-à-vis the threatening minority Other.”⁸ Hindu Nationalism’s Hindu majority logic suggests that minorities, particularly Muslims, present a danger to the imagined Hindu citizen. As is the logic of Othering, Anand observes an increased “political anxiety about the presence of minorities in the body politic”⁹ in India since the rise of the BJP. Furthermore, the BJP has rapidly gained support throughout India, becoming the ruling party of the Indian state in 2014. While India is home to diverse religions and languages, the ever-present Hindutva narrative of who *should* call India home: according to Hindu nationalists, only Hindus. It must be noted that since its inception, Hindu Nationalism has relied on simplified scripts of Hinduism; due to this legacy, the idealized “Hindu” citizen is thus presumed to be upper caste and Hindi-speaking. As a result, non-Hindi speaking Hindus and lower-caste Hindus have begun to be presented as

5 Dutta, “Locating the Self,” 86.

6 One such institution, notably, is the Academy, as illustrated by the reference page of this paper.

7 Jaffrelot, 53.

8 Anand Dibyesh, *Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2011): 1.

9 *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Other in addition to non-Hindus.

The History of Tamil Linguistic Separatism

Notably, a division between North Indian BJP support and South Indian dissent seems to fall along the linguistic divide between Sanskrit-derived languages (Hindi) and Dravidian-derived languages (the oldest of which is Tamil). In a 2012 article for *Economic and Political Weekly*, M.S. Pandian comments that despite the Hindu rights' far-reaching influence throughout North India, they still failed to "find any meaningful political space in Tamil Nadu."¹⁰ In keeping with the fact that the BJP idealizes Hindi speakers, it is unsurprising that support for the BJP is widespread among North Indian Hindus, who predominantly speak Hindi and other Sanskrit-derived languages, but wanes in South India, where Dravidian-derived languages like Tamil and Telegu are spoken. Moreover, we can trace the unique history of the Tamil language as the origin point of separatist pride for the over 70 million native Tamil speakers throughout South India, Sri Lanka, and other southeastern Asia nations. Although Dravidian languages emerged independently of an Indo-European language, the prevalence of Hindi as the primary Indian language traces back to the period of the British Raj during which British colonizers favored Sanskrit-based languages due to their links to Greek and Latin as opposed to Dravidian-based language, which constitutes a language family separate from Indo-European languages.¹¹ British linguists of the time, including John Gilchrist, espoused that Hindustani languages (such as Hindi), emerged from Sanskrit and influenced all other languages in the subcontinent.¹² As a result, Hindustani languages were privileged by the British as languages of command. However, during this period, some missionaries took an interest in Dravidian languages, noting the linguistic complexity and history of languages such as Tamil. In uncovering Dravidian linguistic history, these historians espoused that Sanskrit-speaking Brahmins were historically "hostile to Tamil and constantly conspiring to elevate Sanskrit at the expense of Tamil — through a process of 'Aryanization' or 'Sanskritization.'"¹³ Nineteenth-century British missionary Robert Caldwell observed the inordinate influence of Sanskrit words in Tamil despite there being "equivalent Dravidian words which are equally appropriate and, in some instances, more so [yet] such words [had] gradually become obsolete and . . . confined to the poetic dialect."¹⁴ The writings of missionaries such as Caldwell proved to be a catalyst for Tamil linguistic purists, invoking a counter-memory of the effects of Sanskritization that were otherwise

10 Pandian, 61.

11 Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1996): 54.

12 Ibid., 37.

13 K. Kailasapathy, "The Tamil Purist Movement: A Re-Evaluation," in *Social Scientist* 7, no. 10 (1979): 24.

14 Ibid., 25.

erased. Kailasapathy posits that a number of Dravidian movements stemmed from this linguistic counter-history including “the non-Brahmin movement, the self-respect movement, the pure-Tamil movement, the quest for the ancient Tamil, the Tamil (icai) music movement, the anti-Hindi agitation, [and] the movement for an independent Tamil state.”¹⁵ Consequently, Tamil language plays a significant role in Dravidian social movements and Tamil memory.

However, the anti-colonial independence movement leaders *a/so* privileged Sanskrit; R. Thirunavukkarasu notes that “relentless campaigning by many Congress leaders that the true nature of Indian civilization rests upon the timeless Sanskrit tradition beginning from the four Vedas further made Tamil language inferior and the speech community.”¹⁶ Following independence, efforts in 1965 by the Indian national government “to impose Hindi over non-Hindi-speaking states”¹⁷ led in major protests in Tamil Nadu and resulted in the [Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Dravidian Progressive Federation), or] DMK taking control over state politics. Thirunavukkarasu contends that “Tamil language pride [has become] an ideology to which all major political parties [in Tamil Nadu] began to show their uncompromising allegiance,”¹⁸ and the “BJP [is] depicted as well as perceived by the people of Tamil Nadu as a party antagonistic to the spirit of Tamil/Dravidian cultural nationalisms,”¹⁹ which are rooted in linguistic history and religious traditions that emerged separately from those of North Indian-focused Hindu Nationalism. The author cites an interview with a Tamil BJP supporter who makes the apt observation that “[t]he Hindi name of the party should be translated into Tamil and the party’s name must be “Indhiya Makkal Katchi” (meaning Indian People’s Party)”²⁰ should the BJP hope to find success in Tamil Nadu. Thirunavukkarsu observes the tendency for Tamils to view the BJP as “a party of/for Hindi-speaking areas,” further supported by the reality that “none of the BJP’s prominent leaders at the all-India level are from Tamil Nadu.”²¹ These comments expose how deeply entrenched Tamil linguistic purism is in Tamil politics, both relying on a narrative that the Hindi language and the BJP are inherently exclusive to Tamils.

In contemporary India, the BJP espouses a sacred memory of Sanskrit, claiming it is “a storage of India’s glorious past and it is the only vehicle for India’s promising future.”²² From this view, the promotion of Sanskrit and its linguistic derivatives like Hindi is an essential component of Hindu Nationalism. In opposition

15 Kailasapathy, “The Tamil Purist Movement,” 25-6.

16 R. Thirunavukkarasu, “Caste and Cultural Icons: BJP’s Politics of Appropriation in Tamil Nadu,” in *The Algebra of Welfare-Warfare: A Long View of India’s 2014 Election* (eds. Irfan Ahmad and Pralay Kanungo), (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2019): 226.

17 *Ibid.*, 223.

18 *Ibid.*, 225.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, 227.

to Hindu nationalism, the Tamil purist movement set its objective as the “elimination of foreign elements like Sanskrit (and English) words that had found and were finding their way into Tamil”²³ and to replace them with Tamil words. In Section III, we will explore the Tamil Purist movement as counter-memory work challenging Sanskritization and North Indian influence.

Historical Tamil Resistances to Casteism

Another significant point of contention regarding North Indian influence involves casteism and Brahmin supremacy. Clark, et. al., traces the emergence of the contemporary caste system, noting that Hindus were “traditionally divided into four castes... Brahmins, priests; Kshatriya, rulers, administrators, and soldiers; Vaishya, farmers, bankers, and traders; and Shudra, laborers, and servants [and hierarchically ranked subcastes].”²⁴ Moreover, the authors trace how under British colonialism, the traditional system of social roles (*jati*) became codified as a system of social standing (*varna*) through which the lowest social groups became further socially ostracized. These groups, now collectively referred to by terms such as Dalits²⁵, Bahujans, Adivasis, or Scheduled Castes and Tribes, “included the untouchables²⁶, who were believed to confer defilement on higher-caste groups through mere contact, as well as indigenous tribal communities not incorporated into Hindu or Muslim society.”²⁷ However, despite nominal efforts since Independence in 1947 to further incorporate marginalized peoples into society, including the outlawing of untouchability through Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, “caste affiliations determined centuries ago still strongly predict current [economic and] educational outcomes.”²⁸ As a result, an individual’s assigned caste often determines one’s livelihood. Still, as recently as May 2019, BJP politician and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi denounced the influence of caste in Indian society, claiming that only “two castes” remain in India:

23 Kailasapathy, “The Tamil Purist Movement,” 31.

24 Gregory Clark, Neil Cummins, Yu Hao, Daniel Diaz Vidal, Tatsuya Ishii, Zach Landes, Daniel Marcin, et al. “India: Caste, Endogamy, and Mobility,” in *The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014): 144.

25 The Indian National Commission for Scheduled Castes has deemed the term “dalit” is imprecise at best and unconstitutional at worst (see: “Dalit word unconstitutional, says SC Commission” from *India Express*, published 31 Jan 2008: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090922060507/http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/Dalit-word-unconstitution-al-says-SC-Commission/262903/>). The Commission instead favors the term “Scheduled Caste”; however, I have been advised by Dalit scholars and colleagues that the term Dalit is more inclusive of oppressed groups and is preferable to the term SC.

26 I have made the choice to censor this term given the history of violent, hateful use of the word against Dalit peoples.

27 Clark, et. al., “India,” 144.

28 *Ibid.*, 145.

those in poverty and those who help to free individuals from poverty²⁹, effectively erasing the dominant role that casteism plays in creating poverty. Contemporary Dalit activists remain critical of the BJP for reinforcing caste-based hierarchies through the denial of caste-based structures of oppression, the overrepresentation of upper caste individuals in politics, the rewriting of public history (a process known as Saffronization), and the continued exclusion of Muslims and other religious minorities in civic space.³⁰

On the other hand, since the independence era, most popular grassroots campaigns in Tamil Nadu have built off of the existing anti-caste and anti-Brahmin movements, one of the most well-known of which is the Self-Respect Movement. Launched in the 1920s by E.V. Ramaswamy (otherwise known as Periyar), the Self-Respect Movement “argued for social inclusion of Adi-Dravidas, encouraged intercaste marriages, and denounced the practice of untouchability.”³¹ While Periyar was himself from an upper caste family, Dalits, Bahujans, members of Scheduled Tribes, and lower caste individuals were drawn to his message of inclusion. Caste oppressed people make up over 25 percent of the population of Tamil Nadu³²; as noted by Edward Luce, Brahmins constitute only “3 percent of [Tamil Nadu’s] population, compared to between 15 and 20 percent in the northern states.”³³ The momentum of the Self-Respect Movement and other anti-Brahmin movements was only further amplified by the relatively large population of lower caste Tamils compared to Brahmin Tamils. This legacy of inclusion and tolerance has played a significant role in Tamil politics: M.S. Pandian argues that “long-standing propaganda against the caste-based discrimination within Hinduism”³⁴ in Tamil Nadu, “which led to a positive representation of Islam and Muslims.”³⁵ Having been held accountable by this ethos, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the major Tamil political party, has prioritized a more nuanced form of “rationalism and atheism.”³⁶ These political choices have allowed for more critical discussions of religion in Tamil Nadu and “have given rise to a form of Hindu religiosity among the non-Brahmin Hindus in the state

29 Sagar, “Narendra Modi’s “two-caste society” is a facade to hide the BJP’s casteist politics” in *The Caravan* (21 June 2019): <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/narendra-mo-di-two-caste-society-casteist-bjp>.

30 Ibid.

31 Amit Ahuja, *Mobilizing the Marginalized: Ethnic Parties without Ethnic Movements* (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2019): 52.

32 “It’s now Dalits versus non-Dalits in Tamil Nadu” in *The Hindu* (05 July 2015): <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/its-now-dalits-vs-nondalits/article7386959.ece>.

33 Edward Luce, *In Spite of the Gods: The Rise of Modern India* (London: Anchor Books, 2007): 274-5.

34 Ibid., 62.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

that is self-critical and tolerant.”³⁷ Likewise, these political movements have evolved to incorporate Muslims into the anti-Brahmin fold. Pandian points to “a slogan which Tamil Muslims continue to use till today *Islam engal vazhi, iriba Tamil engal mozhi* (Islam is our path, sweet Tamil is our language).”³⁸ The solidarity of caste oppressed peoples and religious minorities in Tamil Nadu has produced a political climate in the state that is inhospitable to BJP aims.

Pandian points to continued yet failing BJP efforts to rally support among Tamil citizens, observing a Tamil solidarity “wherein the [BJP] othering of Muslim against the non-brahmin Hindu is relatively a difficult possibility.”³⁹ In fact, in R. Thirunavukkarasu’s view, “the ideology of caste, Brahmanical values, and Sanskrit supremacy thus effectively became the ‘cultural other’ in contemporary Tamil society.”⁴⁰ The following section explores how the history of Tamil political movements rejecting caste and creating a religiously tolerant society produces a counter-memory that ruptures BJP narratives of Brahmin supremacy and Hindutva.

Conceptualizing Tamil Counter-Memory Practices

Tamil resistances to Hindu nationalism are conceived of through distinct counter-memory practices, including the survival of a Dravidian linguistic history and anti-Brahmanical social legacy. In Maurice Halbwachs’ article “Collective Memory and Historical Memory,” the author expands on types of memory, paying close attention to collective memory and historical memory. Collective memory speaks to an individual’s memory that has been filled in by members of the society while historical memory refers to the historical record maintained by professional historians. While Halbwachs does not see these accounts necessarily at odds with one another, we can observe the tension between memories of the community versus the official record when it comes to Tamil history. We can begin to make sense of collective memories as alternative and resistant histories through Walter Benjamin’s conception of historicity and historical materialism. Benjamin is highly distrustful of the concept of ‘history’; instead, he recommends a historical materialist approach. Benjamin distinguishes that “history” as a concept is not explicitly grounded in the material conditions of individuals, whereas historical materialism is, by definition reliant on understanding events through the material realities of the individuals who experienced them. Benjamin’s claim is well illustrated by the differing approaches to historical memory between the BJP ‘official’ history and Tamil counter-memories. The BJP’s history of India is one that relies on a process of Sanskritization, or the privileging of Hindi, North Indian, and upper caste histories. Inherently, Sanskritization skims over the legacy of colonialism, caste, and linguistic suppression, producing a sanitized script of a monolithic Hindu citizen. Instead, Tamil counter-memories invoke a historical

37 Luce, *In Spite of the Gods*, 62.

38 Pandian, 63.

39 *Ibid.*, 67.

40 Thirunavukkarasu, “Caste,” 229.

materialist approach, uncovering histories of Dravidian language and resistances to caste structure; in doing so, Tamil counter-memory work serves a progressive political purpose of undermining fascist narratives.

Shared Resistance to Tamil Erasure

A facet of Tamil memory is the continual emergence of narratives that speak to the Sanskritization of Tamil identity and history; Sanskritization has taken place through processes such as Saffronization; initiatives that rewrite Indian history through a Hindu Nationalist lens and attempt to erase Dravidian legacies from official history. Collective memory that resists Sanskritization reaches back throughout the history of Tamil Nadu and persists through the present day. The mechanism by which such memories persist can partially be explained through Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory. In her view, prosthetic memories are "memories that circulate publicly, are not organically based . . . [and] become part of one's archive of experience, informing not only one's subjectivity but one's relationship to the present and future tenses."⁴¹ For Tamils, these memories circulate through the ubiquity of the Tamil language itself. Continued efforts to revitalize the Tamil language not only in Tamil Nadu, but also in the Tamil diaspora carry with them the anti-casteist and anti-Sanskrit resistance politics that regularly crop up in South India. Examples of transnational Tamil memory work in the diaspora can be observed on media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, with activists seeking to build solidarity among Tamil people of different national origins (Indian, Sri Lankan, Malaysian) and caste backgrounds. Instagram accounts like @tamilgirlstar, @tamilculture, and @tamilarchive aim to bolster a shared Tamil identity through the proliferation of Tamil-language content on social media and the rejection of fascism (including Hindutva and the Sinhalese occupation of Tamil Eelam). As Landsberg posits in the introduction to *Prosthetic Memory*, prosthetic memories "challenge more traditional forms of memory that are premised on claims of authenticity, "heritage," and ownership"⁴²; indeed, Tamil linguistic heritage is charged with an anti-Brahmanical legacy that undermines Hindutva notions of who counts in the eyes of the state. As a result, Tamil language practices become memory practices, serving an affective link to the past and radical promise for the future.

Tamil Separatism as Memory Activism

Tamil collective memories and counter-histories do more than produce an affective connection to a legacy of resistance; we can also observe how this legacy of resistance is invoked to produce oppositional consciousness. In Yifat Gutman's

41 Alison Landsberg, "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy" in *New German Critique* 71 (1997): 67.

42 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004): 3.

Memory Activism, the author embarks on this project to determine “how memory work can be a part of progressive politics.” Gutman defines “memory activism” as “the strategic commemoration of a contested past outside state channels to influence public debate and policy,”⁴³ noting that “[m]emory activists use memory practices and cultural repertoires as means for political ends, often (but not always) in the service of reconciliation and democratic politics.”⁴⁴ In her text, she outlines a few different initiatives within memory activism, including links to truth and reconciliation efforts and social movements. In her view, memory activism relies on the reconciliation of past events and “brings in different temporal relations as the foundation of its model for political change: first the past, then the present and future.”⁴⁵ Gutman observes how studies of social movements particularly lack “a historical dimension” and fail “to acknowledge the significance of the past for social and political intervention,”⁴⁶ which is where memory activism plays a role. Tamil resistances to Hindu Nationalism rely on not only an opposition linguistic history but also a rejection of caste-based and religious discrimination. As a result, Tamil’s political activism centered on inclusion and a rejection of Hindu Nationalism primarily operates in the realm of memory activism, as it is rooted in democratic political participation and alternative history to Hindutva claims on history. Speaking to Halbwach’s concept of collective memory, Gutman observes that collective memory is often perversely invoked by those in power to legitimize their positions⁴⁷, such as is done by Hindutva politicians presenting the idealized Hindu citizen as under attack throughout history. Nonetheless, Gutman reminds us that “collective memory can also serve as a ‘weapon of the weak’ . . . and a tool for social and political change.”⁴⁸ We can observe collective memory being used to counter power and leverage inequities through Tamil political activism.

Gutman focuses her text on memory work surrounding *Al-Nakba* (Arabic for ‘the catastrophe’), the 1948 displacement of Palestinians; she suggests that “[a]s a counter-hegemonic force in society, Nakba memory activism in Israel assisted a marginalized group of citizens to intervene, albeit obliquely, on the level of culture, in state practices and public discourse.”⁴⁹ Central to the argument of Gutman’s text is that memory activism serves to catalyze knowledge-based political change through the preservation of cultural memory. While the text is focused on the dynamics of Palestinian memory work in Israel, we can learn from her conception of memory activism when considering Tamil counter-memory work and its efforts to undermine Hindu nationalist discourses, including Sanskritization and casteism.

43 Yifat Gutman, *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel-Palestine* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017): 2.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 15.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 16.

48 Ibid., quoting Scott 1985.

49 Ibid.

Throughout her text, Gutman explores how Palestinians develop a national identity through practices similar to those used by Zionists. She highlights Baladna, a Palestinian youth organization, who facilitate tours and testimonies similar to those facilitated by Israeli groups; however, the outcome between the two groups is very different. Gutman explains how “[t]he tour and testimony Baladna facilitates for Palestinian youth in Israel illuminate how, for those on the marginalized side of the conflict, the use of hegemonic cultural practices (tours and testimonies) carries different meanings, goals, and stakes than Jewish Israeli memory activism.”⁵⁰ In Gutman’s view, “all Palestinian memory activism in Israel [constitutes] . . . a cultural liberation effort that is part of a general claim for cultural autonomy.”⁵¹ Such memory practices thus seek to define the contours of Palestinian national culture, history, and identity to show how it has been suppressed by the dominant Israeli system. Similarly, the continued prevalence of Tamil language in Tamil Nadu and the diaspora comes to define a distinct Tamil identity separate from that of Hindutva. As observed previously, the privileging of Hindi and Sanskrit-derived languages by the BJP constructs a dialectic in which Tamil-ness is socially positioned in opposition to Hindutva. While Hindu nationalists push for an all-Hindi language schooling and propagandized history through Saffronization initiatives, Tamil Nadu has pushed back through continued public-school initiatives to maintain Tamil as the state language. Moreover, the history of the Tamil language heavily overlaps the history of anti-casteism in India. To learn Tamil is to learn of the Sanskritization of the continent, including the Brahmanical system of caste and oppression. For many Tamils, to continue to speak Tamil is to reject Sanskritization.

Challenges for Tamil Counter-Memory

Nevertheless, knowledge of Tamil history and proliferation of Tamil memory is not without challenges. Gutman surveys Zionist efforts to rewrite the erasure of Al-Nakba instead with a mythologized tradition of reconciliation, what Gutman terms “reconciliation without truth.”⁵² She contends that missing from the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 was the “addressing [of] 1948 and the right of return for Palestinian refugees.”⁵³ The author observes that despite Palestinian efforts to spread information about the “contested past,” for the most part “[m]ore knowledge did not lead to more power for the silenced group of Palestinian citizens.”⁵⁴ Along the same vein, despite the prevalence of Tamil counter-memories, Hindutva persists and appears to be growing more influential throughout India. Gutman emphasizes that truth and reconciliation efforts are not always made more equitable with the spread of more information; instead, it is essential for those with the power to acknowledge existing

50 Gutman, *Memory Activism*, 64.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 129.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 140.

systems of power and publicly recognize those who were disadvantaged by past and present actions.⁵⁵ While Tamil political activism generally leans into this work, political activism in the rest of India does not, as illustrated horrifically by the February 2020 Hindutva riots in Delhi that have since been described as a “pogrom.”⁵⁶ In India and in the diaspora, informed citizens – Tamil or not – holding the BJP-led government accountable for their actions is essential for alleviating systemic inequalities and producing. The memory work of Tamils and other marginalized populations plays a critical role in catalyzing oppositional consciousness, but Landsberg and Gutman’s studies demonstrate the key role of privileged individuals being moved by such memories and speaking truth to power. It remains integral to the success of counter-memory work that those who aim to resist the BJP also understand that Brahmanical supremacy, Sanskritization, and religious intolerance predates and will likely succeed the party. The praxis of memory activism is to change material realities; this process is ongoing and fundamentally relies on privileged individuals reconciling convenient scripts propagated by Hindu nationalists with resistant histories like Tamil counter-memories.

Conclusion: Towards a Progressive Politics

The BJP heavily relies on Hindutva narratives that call for an ethnostate established for an idealized Hindu citizen; while these insidious narratives have gained traction in the contemporary moment, the privileging of the Sanskrit language and Brahmanical supremacy have deep roots that predate the founding of modern Indian nation. Still, we find resistance to these totalizing narratives in Tamil counter-memory. The legacy of Tamil counter-memory begins first and foremost with the uniqueness of the Tamil language, the oldest spoken Dravidian-derived language. Unlike Hindi and other Hindustani languages, Tamil is entirely separate from Sanskrit and the Indo-European language family, despite Sanskritization and Saffronization attempts throughout history to erase its distinctiveness. The Tamil language serves as a starting point for Tamil separatism, which rapidly slides into other forms of resistant histories including anti-casteism and religious tolerance. While caste has persisted in the Indian subcontinent for the last 4000, caste oppressed peoples and minorities face new forms of violence under the BJP’s tacit advocacy of Hindu Nationalism. With that being said, concerted efforts in Tamil Nadu to deconstruct the caste system and alleviate systemic inequality have been codified in Tamil politics; as a result, the BJP has been unable to establish dominance in Tamil Nadu.

We can conceive of Tamil resistances through frameworks presented in memory studies. Halbwachs’ notion of collective memory helps us articulate the

55 Gutman, *Memory Activism*, 141.

56 Mira Kandar, “What Happened in Delhi Was a Pogrom” in *The Atlantic* (28 Feb 2020): https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/what-happened-delhi-was-pogrom/607198/?fbclid=IwAR148Kh4BrUN_TES8oXxuB24LU6DqFVcoZD8tUuAeiGul7b_Vlp-6s6lVf28.

memory work that Tamil community members do to maintain an alternative history of their people; furthermore, that collective memory can be seen as historically materialist, as it relies on an understanding of the material reality of the people involved. Tamil memory practices are deeply entrenched in language, which can be understood through Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory. Additionally, Tamil counter-memory work generates oppositional consciousness along the lines of Gutman's notion of memory activism. Still, the challenge of memory activism is the essential need for privileged individuals — both within Tamil Nadu and beyond — to acknowledge Tamil counter-memory and the material realities of linguistic suppression and caste oppression that it exposes. While the task of challenging Hindutva hegemony and the BJP's affective appeals is daunting, Tamil counter-memory work and activism is compelling because it directly contradicts dominant, totalizing narratives and provides undeniable nuance to an oversimplified history. With India facing the threat of descending further into fascism, Tamil counter-memory pushes us towards progressive politics.