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**‘Brâhmins of the Pariahs¹’:
Peripheries in Quest of Identity**
*The Valluvar of Tamil Nadu and the
Construction of Dalit Identity in South India*

ALEXIS AVDEEFF



“Ēn paraiyā! Enkiratai vit, vulluva paraiyā enkiratu mēl.”²

“Why [say] Paraiyan ? When [one can say] Valluvan Paraiyan instead.³

This scornfully and obvious ironical old Tamil proverb highlights the ambiguity surrounding the questions of status and identity of the Valluvar *cāti*⁴ in Tamil society. It suggests that, whatever the title or the status they claim, the Valluvar belong to the Paraiyar community. But beyond this rhetorical device, there is truth in that popular Tamil expression: Even in the nineteenth century, there existed a difference between the Valluvar and Paraiyar communities, and questions related to identity were already present. Since the beginning of the rise of *dalit*⁵ assertion, the question of the identity of untouchable sub-communities has passed from the daily village life and the local sphere to become a central matter of concern in the contemporary Indian political arena.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the special place that the Valluvar community occupies within Tamil society and their current process of identity construction. Considered popularly as ‘Brahmin of the Paraiyar’, the Valluvar have relationships with caste people in their role of traditional rural astrologers and physicians, and they enjoy a particular status among untouchable communities due to their *tozhil* (traditional occupation). First of all, I will analyse the etic and emic discourses on the Valluvar community through the work of scholars and through local discourses,

in order to draw the contours of this particular identity. Then, drawing on data collected during three years of fieldwork in rural Tamil Nadu, I intend to show how the special position of the Valluvar within Tamil society is related to the notion of knowledge. Finally, I will focus on Valluvar self-assertion and analyse their identity construction process.

Contours of a South Indian Untouchable Identity: Discourses on the Valluvar Community

Even if no exhaustive study has been made of this endogamous South Indian community, there are nevertheless some references to the Valluvar in literature since the middle of the eighteenth century. Thus, I have been able to compare these ethno-historical sources with the present situation, and with regard to the emic discourses of the social actors encountered during my fieldwork.

One of the first references to the Valluvar community (excepting epigraphy)⁶ can be found in *A Description of the Character, Manners and Customs of the People of India* by Abbe J. A. Dubois,⁷ published at the end of the nineteenth century. In one chapter, in which he describes superstitions and people known for their magic skills, Dubois presents, with contempt, the Brahmin and even some Paraiyar whom he calls 'Valluvar' (Dubois 1879: 251). He describes them as soothsayers, omen decipherers and palmistry specialists. Further, in footnotes relating to the Paraiyar, he describes the Valluvar as one of the 13 classes composing the Paraiyar population and the most respected one. According to the author, this high rank among the Paraiyar is due to the figure of Tiruvalluvar, whom tradition has assigned to them (ibid.: 330). He adds that they are priests of the Paraiyar, and often physicians who 'enjoy such a reputation that Sūdras often resort to them and allow them to feel their pulse,⁸ but always through a thin silken covering' (ibid.: 330). Further, he states that they conduct Paraiyar marriage rites and, in his opinion, this is perhaps why they are called with derision '*Brāhmins of the Pariahs*' (ibid.: 333). Even if he does not clearly call them astrologers, he describes them as decipherers of *pañcāṅkam* (almanac) predictions, identifying auspicious or inauspicious times for every life enterprise, and adds that although they use the almanac, they are not allowed to edit it, which only Brahmins can do. At the beginning of the twentieth century, more than any other observer, Edgar Thurston gave many details about

the Valluvar community, and his compilations remain a reference for any anthropological work on South India. In his chapter on the Paraiyar, he presents the Valluvar as the people who have sacerdotal rank within the Paraiyar community (1909: vol. VI, 107). He insists on their fame: 'Their position and authority depend largely on their own astuteness. Sometimes they are respected even by Brahmans for their powers as exorcists' (*ibid.*). They serve in the marriage ceremonies of the Paraiyar, and work as astrologers for the untouchable populations, finding auspicious days to hold a marriage ceremony or for agricultural activities. He also mentions that they are buried in their own place, apart from the Paraiyar (Thurston 1909: vol. VI, 108). Then, in the chapter devoted to them, Thurston turns to the possible origins of the community, quoting a legend telling the story of a 'morganatic union' between a Brahmin and a Paraiyar woman.

According to one account, the Valluvans are the descendants of an alliance between a Brāhman sage and a Paraiyan woman, whose children complained to their father of their lowly position. He blessed them, and told them that they would become very clever astrologers, and, in consequence, much respected. (Thurston 1909: vol. VII, 304)

In a way, we can say that from that angle, the Valluvar appear to be 'fallen Brahmins'. He states that they might have been the priests of the Pallava Kings before the arrival of the Brahmin (Thurston 1909: vol. VII, 303). He presents different sections of different ranks within the community, and notes that although there are both Śaiva and Vaisnava in the community, they do not intermarry (*ibid.*: vol. VII, 304). All males of the community above 12 years old wear the sacred thread (*ibid.*). He quotes the Madras Census Report of 1891: 'Both men and women are employed as astrologers and doctors, and are often consulted by all classes of people' (Thurston 1909: vol. VII, 305). Then, he discusses extensively the cycle of life rituals (*ibid.*: vol. VII, 307) and describes the burial in sitting posture of the Śaiva Valluvar (*ibid.*: vol. VII, 308) as a special marker of this Valluvar section. He finally notes that they abstain from eating beef and adds that 'Though they mix freely with the Paraiyans, they will not eat with them, and never live in the Paraiyan quarter', without specifying where they live within the village entity (*ibid.*: vol. VII, 310).

The other important reference to the Valluvar community is M. Moffatt's monograph on social structure among the untouchables of a southern Indian village in the 1980s. Like Thurston, he presents the Valluvar as 'the highest-ranking Untouchable caste in Endavur'⁹ (1979: 102). In Moffatt's 'replication and consensus' theory on the social structure of the untouchables' world, the Valluvar play an important role as they illustrate the replication¹⁰ among the untouchables of the Brahminical function among the *ūr* castes.¹¹ Describing the relations with the other communities, Moffatt stresses that:

The Valluvar Pandarams of Endavur do not just relate downward to the Untouchables; however, they also serve upward as astrologers to the non-Brahmin *ūr* castes. They are thus divided almost evenly between Untouchables and non-Untouchables by their *tozhil*, but the balance of these ties is toward the Untouchables. (Moffatt 1979: 102)

Although the *purohit*¹² functions of the Valluvar are only related to the untouchable world, as astrologers (and physicians), they are related to the caste people of the *ūr*. He also offers a crucial detail about the spatial disposition of the Valluvar within the *ūr* and the *cēri*: 'The position of the Valluvar Pandaram street clearly expresses their medial position between the *ūr* castes and the rest of the Untouchables' (Moffatt 1979: 103).

Drawing on my observations in different villages, I must relativise Moffatt's statement as well as Thurston's about the spatial settlement of the Valluvar within the village entity. Indeed, although the Valluvar Street is a common feature of many village layouts, standing as the interface, rather than a boundary, between the *ūr* and the *cēri*, such a distinct quarter does not exist everywhere, and sometimes the Valluvar live in a corner of the *cēri* with other untouchables. About the fame of the community, nowadays too, the *cāti* name 'Valluvar' is given much respect by all the strata of the village society. Furthermore, since the Valluvar have acquired such a reputation in the practice of *cōciyam* (astrology), in rural areas the name 'Valluvar' is, in many cases, a synonym for *cōciyan* (astrologer) and to a lesser extent for traditional physicians. If a village or a hamlet does not have a Valluvar family, village people always know where to find one nearby. Their forecasting and practice of astrology is recognised even by the Brahmin, who do not hesitate to see a Valluvar astrologer instead of one of their own.

From an internal point of view, the Valluvar present themselves as the authentic old priests, astrologers and physicians of Tamil Nadu. According to them, when the Brahmin came to South India, they despoiled them (Valluvar) of their traditional knowledge and reduced them (Valluvar) to an inferior status. This assertion may seem paradoxical, with regard to the legendary claim to be 'fallen Brahmin'. Indeed, on one side, they establish and defend their particular status relying upon their 'fallen Brahmin-ness' and, on the other, they claim to be a high community despoiled and downtrodden by the Brahmin, a common topic in the South Indian Dravidian context. From this brief browse through the literature and the current discourses, it appears clearly that the Valluvar enjoy a special position among the Tamil untouchables, a medial position just like Moffatt demonstrates, as they share symbols and functions with Brahmin and are entirely part of the untouchables' world, nevertheless having constant relations with higher caste people of the *ūr*.

Knowledge as the Key to a Particular Position in Tamil Society

Literacy

It should be clear by now that, among the untouchable communities, the Valluvar occupy a special position. Revealed both by emic and etic discourses, this position reflects a social reality. Indeed, if we look at the literacy rate in Tamil, according to the data gained in the Census of India in Madras Presidency for the years 1911,¹³ 1921,¹⁴ and 1931,¹⁵ it appears that throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the literacy rate of the Valluvar was significantly high compared to other untouchable and even non-Brahmin communities. During my fieldwork in the villages, I noticed that many of my older informants, 60–85 years of age, were literate in written Tamil, some even in English; in short, they had a good education. This situation contrasted with that of the same generation in the other communities which I encountered in the *cēri*. So it seemed that among the *cēri* communities, the Valluvar were more literate than the other untouchables. Perhaps this was due to their *tozhil*. In order to test these observations, I consulted the censuses of India of the pre-Independence period, from 1911–31; due to the Second World War, no Census was held in 1941. I used

the data available in the three censuses, taking into account the fact that the communities appeared under different names from one census to another, such as Palli for Vanniyar and Kammalar for Visvabrahman, and converted these figures in percentages. I selected three major Scheduled Castes, including Valluvar, and a Scheduled Tribe. I also chose the Brahmin community and four important non-Brahmin communities to produce a cross-section of Tamil society. These percentages allowed me to highlight the fact that between 1911 and 1931, the literacy rate of the Valluvar population was between 14 per cent and 17 per cent, whereas the literacy of other untouchable communities was considerably lower. For example, the literacy rate of the Pallar population was between 2 per cent and 3 per cent; that of the Paraiyar population was between 1.5 per cent and 2 per cent. Obviously, the literacy rate of the Valluvar population was strongly lower than that of the Brahmin population (which was between 42 per cent and 62 per cent), but was higher than that of the other non-Brahmin communities (such as the Idayar/Konar, the Maravar, the Vanniyar) and slightly equal to that of the Kammalar (Visvabrahman). These percentages corroborate the observations made during my fieldwork, showing that even before the big education campaigns of independent India and quota policy with regard to the Scheduled Castes, the Valluvar's literacy rate was quite high, even compared to non-untouchables. This factor throws light on the discourses and on the singular position of the Valluvar community in Tamil society.

Practice of Astrology

The high literacy rate is directly linked to the traditional occupation of the community. Indeed, more than the practice of popular medicine, astrology requires many skills linked to the use of writing. First of all, in the transmission of astrological knowledge, literacy is crucial to the training process, even if the oral tradition plays a significant role. Moreover, learning and practising astrology presupposes a wide range of abilities linked to writing. In a consultation for making a birth chart, for example, the astrologer has to go through different steps, each one requiring a particular skill. It begins with the calculations: from the personal data provided by the 'patient' (time and place of birth), the astrologer must calculate the planetary positions, according to his *pañcāṅkam*. Then he has to draw and fill in a birth chart, *jātakam*, which will be the basis of

further work and predictions related to this patient. Depending on the kind of consultation, the astrologer must adjust his calculations, comparing his results regularly with the *pañcāṅkam* in order to interpret them and to forecast. From this example, it appears clearly that the Valluvar astrologer must have a mastery of basic mathematical calculations as well as a good command of written language, since he has to read the *pañcāṅkam* to write the birth chart of his 'patient'. Reading and writing Tamil is, in fact, an indispensable precondition for acquiring, practising and transmitting astrological and, to a lesser extent, medical knowledge; depending upon the kind of medical practice, literacy may be less important than for the practice of astrology.

Skills and Symbolic Position

Astrological and medical knowledge and their practical application are related to aptitudes and particular competences that are generally recognised as belonging to the Valluvar community. As astrologers, they are seen as the *time keepers* of the day-to-day life of the village, since they can read and interpret the *pañcāṅkam*. This mastery of time is one of the most important skills that villagers recognise in the Valluvar, since knowing the auspicious time is a central concern of the organisation of daily life, for example, finding the auspicious time for a marriage, for agricultural activities, etc. Another skill central to the practice of astrology is calculation. As the Valluvar practitioners themselves admit, they are not clairvoyant; they just know how to calculate according to the astrological treatises, and then they 'see the horoscope' (in Tamil: *jātakam pākka*). Because of that skill (calculation or *kanitam* in Tamil), they are often called *kaniyān*. Closely related to the practice of astrology is the practice of *vāstu*,¹⁶ an architectural knowledge that requires the mastery of space, knowledge of the right directions and orientations, according to the cosmic forces, in order to erect a building. Last, the practice of medicine, *maruttuvam*,¹⁷ presupposes the knowledge of the *Materia Medica*: plants, leaves, herbals, roots, etc. as well as other organic substances and metals. It presupposes too, and this is perhaps the central point, mastering the manufacturing process of remedies, which cannot be described here, ranging from the simple use of the fresh juice of a leaf to the most complex and perilous mixtures difficult to realise. We may also add here the knowledge of sorcery (*mantiram*) and the making

of talismans and amulets (*entiram*), although the practitioners I met are reluctant to speak about those practices. Independently of skills related to a specific practice, Valluvar practitioners are renowned for their skill seen as almost innate, or at least intrinsic to this particular community. They are seen as the best astrologers in Tamil Nadu — Valluvar is often used as a synonym of astrologer — and the best traditional physicians of rural areas, for their supposed accuracy in diagnosis and forecasting. As powerful soothsayers their speech, their words, are seen as pure and always true, like the words of their legendary ancestor Tiruvalluvar. Some of the older Valluvar astrologers I encountered give their forecasts in a singing or poetical manner. About this particular skill relating to speech, a Tamil proverb says: '*Mānikka kallē kallu/ Valluvarutaiya collē collu*, meaning: 'the speech of a Valluvar is as pure (brilliant) as a jewel'. The power of speech can to some extent be linked, in the case of diagnosis and forecasting, with the practice of *mantiram*, which requires the mastery of words to be efficient. Indeed, if people admire and revere the speech skills attributed to the Valluvar, they also fear them for their ability to curse or throw spells. Admired, sometimes feared, for their knowledge and their practice of 'sacred sciences', the Valluvar are at the centre of daily village life, both in the *ūr* and in the *cēri*. Through their knowledge and their skill, they occupy a special status in society, between two worlds: that of the untouchables and of the caste people. Due to this particular position in Tamil society, the contours of the community identity are blurred and, consequently, the way they assert and construct their identity is slightly different from that of other untouchable communities.

Self-assertion and Construction of Valluvar Identity

Sangam and Relations with the Regional Centres

The question of Valluvar identity is deeply embedded in the whole *dalit* quest for self-dignity and eradication of untouchability in India. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Ghanshyam Shah, this contemporary *dalit* struggle and movement for identity and equality is not a unified one (Shah 2007: 195). The reality is more complex, and the awakening of *dalit* self-consciousness comes with various movements related to specific ideologies or particular untouchable communities (due to the variety of socio-cultural

contexts in the Indian subcontinent and the region-wise classification of the Scheduled Castes). The many movements pursue a common aim in many different ways. Even within a region like Tamil Nadu, the process of untouchable identity construction differs from one community to another.¹⁸ Concerning the Valluvar community, the beginning of their self-assertion movement goes back to the first half of the twentieth century, during the pre-Independence period. The associative structure that they created to represent their social interests on the regional political scene was founded in 1935 and was named The Madras Valluvar Mahajana Sangam (Mohan 1993: 50). Through its provincial conferences, the Sangam pointed out issues concerning representation in local bodies, public services and the educational field, sending the claims of the Valluvar community to the relevant authorities. Two decades later, in 1955, the name of the Sangam was changed to South India Valluvar Mahajana Sangam, Madras (ibid.: 51). Today, there is still an active association defending the interests of the Valluvar community: The International Valluvar Community Welfare, Chennai (*Ulaka Valluvar Kulap Pōvai, Cennai*), based in Chennai, which organises meetings of the Valluvar community and edits a pluri-annual gazette for the community *Valluvam pēcukiratu*. Among the struggles led, in 1962 the association obtained from the government the recognition of Nayanar¹⁹ people as full members of the Valluvar community, and, in consequence, the right for them to benefit from Scheduled Castes' Reservation Policy, which was not permitted for them before (see Figure 10.1). More recently, the association obtained the recognition of Valluvar people as Scheduled Caste from the state authorities of Andhra Pradesh, where they were classified as Forward Communities (FC), allowing them to benefit from the Reservation Policy inherent to the Scheduled Castes classification.

As an associative entity, the Valluvar Sangam concentrates its action on the political scene, to publicly assert the Valluvar identity and to support the community interests. Nonetheless, parallel with this process of political assertion, another identity construction process can be observed at work within a significant part of the community. Regarding the data collected both at the Sangam and in villages of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, it appears that an identity formation process is at work on a global community-scale. This identity transformation process observed within the

HOME DEPARTMENT
Letter No. 202933 IWIII/61.62

From
Sri Rasak Hassain,
Deputy Secretary to Government.

To
The Secretary,
The South India Valluvar Mahajana Sangam,
10, Ammaiappa Mudali Street,
Old Washarmanpet, Madras – 21.

Sir,
Fort. St. George, Dt. 31st December 1962.

Sub.: Harijan Welfare – Communities – Valluvar in the list of Scheduled Caste
– Nayanar – Brasketing of.

Ref.: Your representation dated 8-12-62

With reference to your representations cited, I am directed to state that if Nayanar is the title of Valluvan Community and that if fees are demanded by the institutions persons for entering the caste “Nayanar” instead of “Valluvan” the persons concerned have to produce the necessary certificate from the prescribed officer of the Revenue Department to the effect that they belong to Valluvan Community in order to claim full fee concessions.

The Government does not consider it necessary to the list of Scheduled Caste in the regards.

Yours faithfully,
Sd. C.N. Singaravelu 2.1.65
for Deputy Secretary to Government.

Figure 10.1: An official letter published in the Valluvar gazette ‘Valluvam pēcukiratu’, June 2005, p. 14.

Valluvar community goes through a series of three major and distinct phases.

Differentiation and Reunification

This self-assertion process begins with the delimitation of Valluvar identity.²⁰ As we saw earlier, the special status of the Valluvar community within the untouchables and its relations with higher-caste people make this delimitation less clear than for other untouchable communities, like the Paraiyar. Indeed, even if they are aware of the *dalit* condition as a whole, differentiation from other *dalit* communities is the first step of the process and particularly from the Paraiyar, with whom they are very close. The Valluvar are, as noticed by Moffatt, generally quite emphatic about their distinctness from the other untouchables (1979: 107) and from the Paraiyar in particular. Although they admit to being very close to them, the Valluvar normally do not intermarry with the Paraiyar or other untouchable communities. They also explain, though admitting that nowadays there is a standardisation of life cycle rituals within the whole rural society, that they have kept some of their own rituals and especially those concerning death, which for the Valluvar is a strong identity marker with regard to the other communities. When we came to the question of community rituals, they were very talkative about the way the Śaiva Valluvar²¹ bury their dead: in a sitting position and in a particular part of the cemetery, *collai kātu*, apart from the others. For the Valluvar, burying the deceased in a sitting position is directly linked with the Hindu god Shiva and marks their higher sacerdotal rank among all other untouchables, who bury their dead in a supine position. Despite the fact that they strongly assert their differences with the other untouchables, the Valluvar know that they do not pertain to the caste people. Indeed, even if they share symbols and attributions with higher castes, they are aware of their low status and of the impurity related to their sacerdotal functions among the other untouchable communities. But this process of differentiation is closely linked to the construction of internal cohesion. Differences between different *kōttiram*²² (Nayanar or Alvar) and other subsections (Tādar, Pandaram) are ironed out to reinforce the feeling of community. Intermarriage within Valluvar community subsections is reinforced. In the cities and among educated Valluvar, the old restrictions between different *kōttiram*

and sections have vanished. For example, the Valluvar who converted to Christianity, most of who live in Tirunelveli district, are now taken into account by the community. As an active member of the Sangam told me:

In some places near Papanasam, some of the Valluvar converted themselves to Christianity. And there is an adjustment among the community when it comes to the marriages. If the girls of that family, who have converted themselves to Christians, come to the Valluvan family who are still Hindus, she changes herself as a Hindu and vice versa.

Nevertheless, although the Valluvar try to unite their community under a same identity by smoothing over the differences previously made about the subsections, notably with more flexibility regarding intermarriage, they remain very strict regarding other communities by maintaining endogamy within their own community. As underlined by the Valluvar man previously quoted:

The Pandarams themselves, there are two types of Pandarams, one is the Aandi Pandaram and the other one is Pookkatti Pandaram. Excepting for the title they do not actually belong to the Valluvan community. They cannot enjoy the intermarriage with the Valluvar, Nayanars or the Alvars. These Pandarams belong to the Backward class.

Through this process of differentiation and unification, the Valluvar are able to form a clear boundary of their community, and, thus, on this foundational basis they can firmly assert what they are and start their identity assertion.

Symbolic Emphasis: Drawing on Symbolic Resources of the Community

The core of the identity construction process is the use of the symbolic resources of the community and the way in which the Valluvar are used to sustain an identity assertion. Among all the resources used in this process, the glorification of their role as a sacerdotal caste and as astrologers of kings of ancient kingdoms is perhaps the most visible fact. The claim to be the old authentic specialists of Tamil astrology and medicine, before the supposed arrival of the Aryans and Brahmin — which is yet a controversial theory but a common ideological feature of many Dravidian movements — comes as a logical consequence of such an assertion. Yet this claim

is not really founded on strong criticism and a total rejection of the Brahmin, with whom they share the symbols upon which both build their social differentiation and, in a way, their superiority (scriptural learning, sacred knowledge and sacerdotal functions, and in some cases, a vegetarian diet). The Valluvar and the Brahmin also share a common symbolic feature: They wear the *pūnūl*, the sacred thread. However, whereas it is a strong symbol for Brahmin identity, the Valluvar do not use it as an important marker in their self-assertion process. Indeed, for many of my informants, wearing the *pūnūl* is more than anything a purity marker directly related to sacredness. For this reason, it could not be an ostentatious symbol worn for a profane use. Many Valluvar wear it only when it is required by the context — astrological and medical consultations, ceremonies, festivals, etc. — and are reluctant to wear it in everyday life, if this is not necessary. Finally, the most visible symbol adopted by the Valluvar community is the figure of the Tamil poet Tiruvalluvar. As a key figure in Dravidian literature, culture and identity, questions about Tiruvalluvar identity are the object of passionate debates among scholars and various communities, which claim his ancestry (Blackburn 2000: 452). The question itself highlights the problem of recognition of *dalits* by high-caste people; in fact, the main controversial point of this debate is focused on whether Tiruvalluvar was or not an untouchable. Even if the question about the author of the *Kura* and his origins remains unsolved, the Valluvar regard him as one of them, undoubtedly belonging to their community. It is common to see concrete manifestation of such a claim in villages. Indeed, some families, to mark their belonging to the Valluvar community and to differentiate their house from others, hang a depiction of Tiruvalluvar on the door lintel or on the front of the house. The Valluvar Sangam itself uses his image and his name for its pluri-annual gazette *Valluvam pēcukiratu*, on which he appears standing on the World, holding an *eluttāni* in his right hand and an *ōlai cuvati*²³ in the left. Half a century ago these were still the work tools of Valluvar astrologers and physicians. Thus, Tiruvalluvar clearly appears as the embodiment of community pride.

Breaking with the System

Nowadays, it is hard to find Valluvar ‘Pandaram’ in villages. Many Valluvar are increasingly reluctant towards their *purohit* duties and



Plate 10.1: Symbol of the Valluvar Community pride – Tiruvalluvar standing on the World holding a stylus in his right hand and a palm-leaf bundle in the left, as he appears on the front cover of the Sangam's gazette.

Source: Valluvam pēcukiratu, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Used with permission.

priestly functions among the untouchables. The main reason stated by my informants is the loss of respect for the Valluvar shown by the Paraiyar, as confessed by a Valluvar living in the Paraiyar corner of a Pondicherry village:

The Paraiyar consider the Valluvar as Brahmin and invite us for all their functions like marriages and other ceremonies, where they need a Brahmin to do all the rituals. I used to go their houses, but now I am reducing it because they do not give good respect. In those days, people used to give respect to the Valluvar and invite them, but now there is no respect given to us. [...] We do not participate in the [village] festivals. If they come to us for donation, we give them some money. Apart from that we do not go and participate in the festival.

Others complained about the financial aspect; indeed, to be attached to and looking after a temple is a harsh task, paid little by the village community. In cases in which the temple duties are left to other community people, I observed that some Valluvar families possess their own familial temple adjacent to their house. These private temples belong exclusively to the family and their relatives, but some ceremonies can be organised for other community people, on request and in exchange of payment in kind or in money. Although it seems clear that the Valluvar, on a village scale, try to sever the traditional ties that linked them with the Paraiyar and other untouchable communities, it also appears that they want to develop the other side of their traditional occupation that links them with all the other strata of society. Due to their reputation and their traditional experience as astrologers, nowadays the Valluvar develop the practice of astrology as a profession and, in some cases, into a very profitable business, like in Vaitheeswarankoil,²⁴ where customers come from all over India and even from abroad. Excepting this large southern Indian centre for the commerce of astrology, the majority of Valluvar who maintain their traditional occupation are moving from the village to the urbanised areas to develop their professional activity. The most reputed ones do not hesitate to travel around Tamil Nadu and beyond to give their consultations. Breaking with the local system of services, the Valluvar, nonetheless, continue their traditional practice of astrology, and in many cases they use it as a social uplift among higher strata of the Tamil society and as a place in the modern globalised economic model.

Nevertheless, a part of the Valluvar is not involved by these changes and transformations. Generally these Valluvar are isolated families in remote villages or hamlets, less educated than the average community member; they work in the fields, carrying out agricultural tasks, and do not practise traditional occupations such as astrology or medicine. These forgotten ones live far from social changes and view the Sangam as a political entity, which is not representative of them, but instead far from their daily preoccupations and mainly focused on the more educated urban or peri-urban Valluvar — the ‘elite’ of the community, as pointed out by a 75-year-old Valluvar man living in a remote hamlet of Thanjavur district:

There is a Sangam. But we do not know where it is and what are the main functions of the local Sangam. Being different ... coming from other communities [my interpret and I], you are coming to me to get some information, but our own community people do not invite us for any of the Sangam meetings, and we are not aware of anything happening in the Sangam.

These forgotten people feel rejected by an elite, which — from their point of view — works only for a small fraction of the community people and does not seem to be concerned by their condition, as denounced by the old man from Thanjavur district:

Definitely they [the Valluvar] are better than before in the financial condition and other things. But I would say that they are not united; they are not working together for the social uplift of the community. They are keen in their work, but they only work for the betterment of their family alone and not for the community as a whole.

Thus, the major criticism expressed towards this Valluvar ‘elite’ is the lack of unity in the community struggle, in spite of all the efforts made by the Sangam to unify a heterogeneous and scattered community.

Conclusion

Identity assertion is a very central concern among peripheries, not only for the tribal people but also for the untouchables. The case of the Valluvar community shows another facet of the untouchable world and its struggle for recognition within Indian



Plate 10.2: Valluvar Community's banner as it appears on the front cover of the Sangam's gazette, with a depiction of Tiruvalluvar on a white background.

Source: Valluvam pēcukiratu, Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Used with permission.

society. Despite belonging to the untouchables, the Valluvar community enjoys a special status in Tamil society. Indeed, due to their sacerdotal rank among these populations and to their practice of astrology and medicine, the 'Brahmin of the Paraiyar' — as they are colloquially called — are seen as the purest among the untouchable communities. This special status has consequently given a particular orientation to the way they assert their identity, one different from other untouchable communities. In this struggle for self-assertion it appears that each untouchable subgroup has had to find its own way in the quest for identity, drawing on its own symbolic resources and community history.



Plate 10.3: Threshold of a Valluvar's house with a depiction of Tiruvalluvar on the door lintel.

Source: Photo courtesy of Alexis Avdeeff, Nagappatinam district.

The Valluvar self-assertion identity process goes through a series of three distinct phases: (1) differentiation which goes hand in hand with delimitation and unification; (2) re-symbolisation by using the symbolic resources of the community; and (3) breaking with the system, permitting a new beginning in the society, far from the traditional ties. The core of this process is the root of the identity in the pan-Dravidian figure of Tiruvalluvar, a prestigious symbol for the Valluvar community, and beyond, for Tamil identity in its whole. For an external observer, this process can seem paradoxical, in the sense that, on the one hand, the Valluvar claim a particular identity dissociated from the other untouchable identities, as other untouchable communities also do to reinforce their own assertion. On the other hand, they ask for the total annihilation of untouchability.

As we have seen, if the Valluvar have acquired a certain visibility and rights from the authorities, some of them still remain in the shadow of this transitional process. These forgotten ones, who do not benefit from the social progress gained by the Sangam, feel rejected. This may be the weakness of all these *dalit* movements scattered at the peripheries of Indian society. What we observed is still transitional, and the *dalit* movements may have a lot to earn by unifying themselves under one banner to reinforce their weight in this struggle. This difficult task of coordinating all present forces might be the final struggle for the peripheries on the way to emancipation.

Notes

1. This expression is quoted from J.-A. Dubois *1879, p. 333).
2. Tamil proverb quoted from the compilation of H. Jensen (1897): proverb no. 1585, p. 174.
3. Translated from Tamil by the author.
4. *Cāti* is the Roman transliteration of the Tamil term *jāti*. *Cāti* is generally translated as 'birth group' or 'sub-caste'. It is an endogamous community based on traditional occupation. Each (linguistic) region has its own *jāti*, even though we can distinguish recurrent features from one region to another. For the sake of clarity, the term 'community' will be used in this article instead of the term *cāti*.

5. In this article, the term '*dalit*' will be used to define the ex-untouchables in their self-assertive political dimension, whereas the term 'untouchable' will be used to define a socio-cultural reality which yet remains.
6. Thurston mentions a ninth-century inscription about the Valluvar community (1909: vol. VII, p. 304).
7. According to Sylvia Murr's research, the original text by Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux was written in the middle of the 18th century. Cf. Murr (1987).
8. The pulse is '*In Siddha medicine, as in Ayurveda, Yunani, and traditional Chinese medicines, [...] the sign par excellence for the diagnostician. Others signs, symptoms, and syndromes are ancillary to or corroborative of the signifiacnce of the pulse*' (Daniel 1984: vol. XVIII, p. 115).
9. 'Endavur' is the fictional name chosen by Moffatt for the Tamil village that he studied.
10. We must moderate this concept of replication as formulated by Moffatt (see Deliege 1992: vol. 27(1), pp. 155–73).
11. The Tamil term *ūr* defines a village entity. The term *cēri* (nowadays replaced by the term *colony*) defines a quarter inhabited only by untouchables. The *cēri* or *colony* is generally situated at the periphery of the *ūr*. This is a common layout of South Indian villages.
12. *Purohit* is the name commonly given to the person who has in his charge the priestly functions of a group or of a family.
13. Data collected from Table IX — 'Education by Caste, Tribe or Race', in J. Chartres Molony, 1912, p. 80.
14. Data collected from 'Table IX — Education by Caste, Tribe or Race', in G. T. Boag, 1922, pp. 76–78.
15. Data collected from 'Table XIV — Literacy by Selected Communities', in M. W. M. Yeatts, 1932, pp. 276–77.
16. *Vāstu* is a traditional Hindu system of building and designing sacred places (like temples) and harmonious houses according to directions and cosmic forces.
17. By 'practice of medicine' I mean local medicines: *paccilai-maruntu*, *nātu-mūlikkai* and, to a lesser extent, Siddha medicine (*Citta maruttuvam*).
18. See, for example, the studies on the Nadars (Templeman 1996 and Hardgrave 1969) and the analysis on the Paraiyars' self-assertion (Arun 2007).
19. *Nayanar* is a title of the Valluvar community. According to the Valluvar themselves, this title refers to the 63 Tamil Śaiva Saints tradition, the *Nāyanmār* (singular, *Nāyanār*), see McGlashan 2006). In his study, Moffatt noted the use of the title '*Nayinars*' only for the Valluvar Pandarams, who have in charge the *purohit* duties. During my multi-sited fieldwork, I noticed that the title *Nayanar* was generally used for the Śaiva Valluvar, without distinction of occupation.

20. The delimitation of an identity can involve a process of reappropriation, drawing on various sources, some of which can be quite surprising for the anthropologist. In South Tamil Nadu, I attended a Valluvar girl's puberty ceremony that brought together many Valluvar families. The Valluvar priest for the ceremony, also in charge of the local community association, brought many printed booklets of the chapter 'Valluvar' (taken from Thurston 1909) and asked the audience to carefully read this booklet said to contain the essential features of Valluvar identity and tradition.
21. Thurston mentions them as 'Saivite lingam wearers' (Thurston 1909: vol. VII, p. 308). It is interesting to notice that this funeral practice among Śaiva Valluvar bears some similarities with the funeral practice of *Lingāyat-Vīraśaiva* (see Assayag 1987: vol. 27(103), pp. 93–112).
22. *Kōttiram*, also spelt *gōtra*, means family, lineage. But it is commonly used when speaking about the religious sections within a community or a caste. In the case of Valluvar community, the Śaiva are called Nayanars and the Vaisnava are called Alvars (which name refers to the 12, sometimes ten, Tamil Vaisnava Saints, the *Ālvār*
23. The *eluttāni* is the stylus used to write on the palmyra leaf and the *ōlai cuvati* is the palm-leaf bundle.
24. Vaitheeswarancoil is a town situated in the Nagapattinam district, renowned for its Shiva temple dedicated to Vaidyanatheeswarar, as well as for its many astrologers, in fact *nadi* readers, who practice a particular form of astrology, *Nadi Jothidam*.

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