Chapter 3

SPEAKING SWADESHI, MADRAS 1907

> The name of Surendranath Banerjee first fell on my ear in the year 1902 when I was studying in the Fourth Form. Ananda Charlu, G. Subramania Ayer, Doctor Nair, Vi. Krishnasami Ayer and others would speak now and then about the Congress. Sometimes, my friends and I would go to those meetings; we would enjoy the honey of their speech and debate as to whose English was better as we walked home.
>
> —Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram, *Vāḻkkai Kuṟippukaḷ*

> He spoke in his childhood's Tamil, and when he had finished speaking he went upon his way, while the meeting dispersed, and dying shouts of "Bande Mataram!" mingled with the roaring of the surf.
>
> —Henry W. Nevinson, "On the Beach"

Madurai Mayandi Bharati, freedom fighter, Communist activist, journalist, and lifelong political man, was born in 1917. Sitting on his bed in February 2009, half blind, very old, fully bright, he channeled for us the sounds preceding a public meeting of the late 1920s and 1930s in the temple town of Madurai. There were two men in particular who regularly advertised events in that town—*taṇḍōrā pōḍutal*, it was called (playing a small drum hung from the shoulder)—the brothers Arunachala Rao and Renganatha Rao. Mayandi Bharati sang the words, more or less, emphasizing the nasals and the long vowels, especially the long *ā* (ஆ), as he held and rattled an imaginary *tappaṭṭai* between his hands, the two-sided drum beaten with a curved stick: *takka takka takka takka takka takka*.

Innnnnṟu māāāālaiyil
Toddday eeeevening

immmmmmmmaturai māāānagaram
in this greaaaat Mmmmmmmmadurai town

Kāṅgiras Kamiṭṭi cāāārpil
on behaaalf of the Congress Committee

Innnnṟu māāāālaiyil
Toddday eeeevening

āāāāāṟu maṇikki
at siiiiiiiiiiiiix o'clock

Tilakar maitāāāāānattil
at the Tilakar Maidaaaaan

potuk kūṭṭam naṭaipeṟum.
a public meeting will take place.

Maturai makāāāāā janaṅkaḷ
Madurai's geeeeeentlemen

anaivarum varuka!
all are welcome!

Madurai of that day was a small city, maybe seventy-five thousand people, mostly single-story houses, maybe a few at two stories. Certainly nothing that would rival the massive *gopuram*s (towers) of the Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple, which would have been visible in the distance to pilgrims for at least a day or so before they arrived. No loudspeakers, of course. The brothers' *taṇḍōrā* drumming would have been heard from one end of the city to the other.

The meetings themselves would begin with someone calling out "*vantēēēēē mātaram*!," a phrase introduced during the Swadeshi period.[1] They would then begin singing songs, often those penned by the poet Subramania Bharati (Chapter 4) more than a decade earlier during the Swadeshi movement itself, songs such as "Vantē mātaram" (Mother, I bow to thee), "Enṟu taṇiyum inta sutantira tākam" (When will this thirst for freedom be quenched?), "Accamillai accamillai" (Fear not), or "Pōḻutellam" (All of time [I said this]).

The meetings were small. If two to three hundred people showed up, it was a very big meeting. No stage. The people sat in front of the speaker, some to the side. Some benches were brought from nearby stores, and on either side were Petromax lanterns, sometimes kerosene. The speakers' voices varied according to style, but they tended to speak deliberately and slowly. Mayandi Bharati used the term *gambīram* to describe almost all of them—a term applied to a king or great man, a kind of manly profundity, majesty. Their voices were marked

mostly by their poetic abilities, their training and affinity to literature, or their eschewal of that for the vox populi, the common man.

Meetings lasted only about a half hour or so. They often ended with a procession and more singing. If it were a great man's birthday, such as that of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, participants in the meetings took photographs of him around the city along the Masi streets, those used by the goddess Meenakshi on her *dik vijya* (victory march) or in her wedding procession.

I had come to ask Mayandi Bharati what these meetings would have sounded like, what they looked like, how people without "mic sets" (microphones and speakers) organized themselves, and how many people could hear when they got together. I was looking for the beginnings of these things, what they looked like before they came to dominate political life in the twentieth century. He was able to channel his memories as a bright ten- to twelve-year-old boy who, inspired by these meetings, already knew what his life's work would be. And what was striking to me here is that a paradigm first set out in the Swadeshi movement was fully formed by the late 1920s—and looked very similar to what we see described in 1907 and 1908.

Among the most prominent aspects of the sensorium in twentieth-century Indian cities has been the sound of oratory broadcast from loudspeakers. During the weeks and months leading up to elections, the voice of the politician would ride the winds along with cinema and devotional tunes. It has struck many, in fact, that one of the chief indexes of "public space" in India has been the sound of the loudspeaker—though voice amplification would not be widespread until the 1950s and later. Such a thought is pleasing, that the voice would index a public, for it was the voice that first spoke into being the community of strangers that understood itself to be related in a queer way (Warner 2002).

In the Madras Presidency, orators and poets first articulated this new, queer social imaginary in a way that we understand it today, as a modern social imaginary. At least, the orators and poets were the ones who articulated and ritually instantiated that imaginary in moments of an odd collective effervescence that became known as public meetings.

There were other voices before them, of course: voices chanting the Vedas

(in Sanskrit), voices singing *Tēvāram* or *Tivyapirabantam* (in Tamil), theatrical voices from *Harikathā* drama (in Marathi), the voice singing theatrical news in genres of public singing known as *noṇḍi cintu*. We might also mention the *bhajan*, a simple, folksy, devotional song sung "publicly," not necessarily from a temple but from a home or "public" *mandapam*. Many of Subramania Bharati's nationalist songs were written as *bhajan*s, songs designed for the people. But it seems that the *bhajan* in Tamil Nadu (at least in the form we see it now) was a fairly new thing, about as new as oratory.

As shown in Part I, vernacular homiletic oratory is a relatively newer communicative-cum-ritual form, whose systematic use dates to the Swadeshi movement of the early twentieth century. Such oratory became the defining feature of a new kind of political practice associated with Swadeshi that emerged across British India in 1905 following the partition of Bengal (Sarkar 1970), and the British government had passed the Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act, 1907 by the end of that year. The act was written to counter these political practices, and its passing indexes the newness of these practices. I believe that this was the first time that political actors systematically took to vernacular oratory.[2] In the Madras Presidency, then, vernacular political oratory was a direct response to the events in Bengal and inspired, in particular, by visits to Madras by leaders such as Bipin Chandra Pal in 1907.[3]

Responses to the partition were split among the several factions of the Indian National Congress. The Moderates advocated continued Anglophone meetings as well as memorials petitioning the English government and, via the British press, the people—that is, the people in England. The Extremist or Nationalist approaches advocated a faster path to *swaraj* (literally, self-rule) via the promotion of Swadeshism (that is, national independence), boycott of foreign goods, and universal literacy through the establishment of national (*swadeshi*) education and such things as reading rooms devoted to nationalist literature and training. For the first time in India, this latter—and younger—group of political actors was systematically taking to public spaces and speaking to larger and larger crowds in vernacular languages such as Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, and Tamil.

The ideological differences between the so-called Moderates and the Extremists were articulated through entirely different communicative

forms—staid hall meetings of elites, on the one hand, whose "public" was actually the rulers and common people of England, half a world away. On the other hand, the Extremists gathered in meetings of "the people" numbering in the thousands in the squares, bazaars, and other open spaces of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. And because they knew that there were other people besides those in the cities, a few provincial Congress committees and other groups organized speaking tours of "preachers" to villages and towns of the mofussil, taking the gospel of *swaraj* to the ordinary Indian.

But to say that this was the first time that political actors systematically took to vernacular oratory is not to say that Tamil oratory itself was created at this moment. To be sure, the oratory of this period seems very well worked out—indeed, with people able to deploy already extant oratorical forms that had been developed in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and other vernacular languages as modes of preaching in Christian (churches), and later Saivite, contexts (*Saiva sabaikaḷ*, starting in the 1880s), as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, respectively. These forms were probably also borrowed from court- and mutt-based literary commentary practices among scholars; and they were, no doubt, also deployed by teachers and scholars using oratory to address classrooms and audiences in some colleges (e.g., Sanskrit College in Madras). It seems, too, that vernacular oratory was heard in some political meetings and tours in the 1880s, in particular, G. Subramania Iyer's speaking tours of 1882 (about which, more later in this chapter); the Madras Merchants Association meetings in Egmore of which Iyothee Thass writes; and within caste associations, for instance, by Irattaimalai Srinivasan of the Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha in the 1890s.[4] But if not totally new, the Swadeshi movement saw the first *systematic* use of vernacular political oratory delivered to far-flung "common" or "illiterate" people (*pāmara makkaḷ*) well beyond anything that had gone on before. These were the forerunners of kinds of practices that dominated twentieth-century Tamil Nadu politics (Bate 2009b) and through that came to be a major feature of the urban sensorium in Tamil towns: the spoken voice riding the city winds.

Imagine, for a moment, what Tamil politics would have looked like if it had remained an English-only affair. If it had remained an affair of elites and

not the ever-widening expansion of political participation that marked the twentieth century, would democracy itself be possible? It is certainly possible to have a democracy with the "cosmopolitan" language of rulers. But I do not think it could have been the *deep* democracy that we see in India. While Indian citizens and political observers may criticize the Indian democratic system, it cannot be denied that Indian democracy has drawn greater and greater numbers—and categories—of people into the political system. And could there have been the creation of a (or even the) "Tamil People" without the addressing—the interpellation—of the people themselves?

Crores of people spoke Tamil, but one hundred years ago, there really was not anything called the "Tamil People" outside the imaginations of a tiny group of elites, who were very well aware that they were not reaching the people whom they wanted to reach. The people who spoke Tamil were broken into thousands of named *jāti*s (castes), occupations, hereditary positions, and named geographical areas. But when Swadeshi activists spoke to the Tamil people in Tamil, a new kind of imaginary was born that would only grow stronger and stronger over the next half century.

This is the importance of what happened in the Swadeshi movement, and far more powerfully, in the Home Rule movement and Labor movement a decade later: the necessary interpellation—or the calling into being—of the common person in the Tamil (and Telugu and other) lands, an interpellation that instantiated "the people" as a category of a new modern social imaginary. Indeed, vernacular political oratory provided an *interpellative infrastructure* that enabled brand-new kinds of actors and social entities—in particular, the vernacular politician and the people, both of whom came to recognize themselves as wielding new kinds of political agency. These are not superstructural matters, mere rhetoric, or some kind of epiphenomenon to some other more real material practice. Rather, these new practices represent an infrastructure that allowed an entirely new set of practices to flourish and a new imaginary of social and political order: the Tamil people and the Tamil public sphere.

Speaking Tours

Let me go back to the newness of vernacular political speeches. As noted in the Introduction, G. Subramania Iyer had taken a speaking tour, perhaps

the first of its kind, in July–August 1882 throughout the Tamil-speaking parts of the Madras Presidency (Suntharalingam 1974, 181–82). G. Subramania Iyer was a giant in the Madras Presidency, one of the founders of *The Hindu*, the founding editor of the Tamil daily *Swadesamitran*, and one of a core group of young men to form the Madras Mahajana Sabha and the Indian National Congress itself in the early 1880s (Suntharalingam 1974). He went on his 1882 tour—and another in 1888—to propagate new ideas about the formation of the Congress. With these tours, a series of "Congress Catechisms" (*Kāṅgiras Vinā Viḍai*) were developed to answer questions about self-rule and elite political organizations such as Madras Mahajana Sabha and the Congress. This question-answer catechetical style was written in a clear, simple Tamil for the widest possible audience, borrowed directly from the missionary practice discussed in Chapter 1. As a *Swadesamitran* editorial of 24 December 1887 announced, using the Christian metaphor of "irrigation" or "drawing water (from a well)" (*iṟaittal*), "little books of easily understood catechism had been printed and Congress Committeemen were coming to irrigate every nook and corner of every village and town about the Congress and independence" (Mani 2005, 22).

It is not clear that these were Tamil-only speaking tours. More likely was that most of the speeches were in English, as G. Subramania Iyer was famous as an accomplished English speaker well into the Swadeshi period.[5] R. Suntharalingam writes that "his visit to the mofussil towns excited interest among local leaders who were anxious to know his views on important public questions" (1974, 182), suggesting to me that these were meetings of English-speaking elites, not *pāmara makkaḷ* (common people), to deploy the language of the time.

These tours, numerous articles, and essays by members of the elite indicated that they knew that they were not reaching "the masses," the common man in the towns and villages, and that "public opinion" was composed of a tiny group of men who spoke to each other only in English. Unlike Jürgen Habermas ([1962] 1991), whose early writings on the bourgeois public sphere were class-blind as to just how limited and privileged such a space was, these men were quite well aware that they were speaking only to themselves.

Consider two examples from one year, 1902, that illustrate elite

understandings of their own political and rhetorical impotence. The first example is another childhood memory of someone who would become a major political figure, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram (better known as Thiru. Vi. Ka.):

> The name of Surendranath Banerjee first fell on my ear in the year 1902 when I was studying in the Fourth Form. Ananda Charlu, G. Subramania Ayer, Doctor Nair, Vi. Krishnasami Ayer and others would speak now and then about the Congress. Sometimes, my friends and I would go to those meetings; we would enjoy the honey of their speech and debate as to whose English was better as we walked home. ([1944] 2003, 194)

In 1902, just prior to the Swadeshi movement, critically thinking youngsters such as Thiru. Vi. Ka. (born in 1883) were evaluating political actors based on their English oratory. The idea that there might be Tamil political oration was not even considered.

The second example is Hindu activist K. Sundarama Iyer's discussion on "Religious Education in Indian Schools," published in the *Indian Review* in 1902. His is merely one of many laments during this period regarding the need to begin interpellating the vast majority of people beyond the Anglophone classes. He writes:

> Some highly educated men . . . seek out a hundred opportunities for making a stir in the minds of the few who are akin to them in tastes, pursuits and aims. *The leaders as well as the rank and file of this cultured minority of Indian society create but very little impression on the immense population around them on whose behalf they work and for whom they speak.* As people concern themselves but little with their view or activities in regard to public needs and wishes and as in most cases their views and feelings find expression in a language unknown to the millions, they produce little or no effect on the practical life of society at large, or any section of it. Hence there is little real vitality in the movements set on foot for the formation and expression of public opinion or for the achievement of social progress and unity. (Sundarama Iyer 1902, 174; emphasis added)

This passage is striking: for in 1902 the author could make this claim about elites engaging in political agitation (in this case, Hindu elites demanding

that Hinduism be taught in the schools to counter Christian biases and conversions), yet they could get no purchase on "the people." Events would not cohere as such, and they could only dream of a time when "the people" would join them. Yet by 1920 the entire field had shifted so that the political would be a far more encompassing game: in Tamil (or Telugu); to the masses (who in this passage, note, are not a part of the "public" of "public opinion"). I do not believe that this situation changed until some very brash young men began concerted efforts to speak in the vernaculars during the Swadeshi movement.

Political Meetings in the Madras Presidency

In the Madras Presidency, political meetings seemed to be taking place in three main locations under circumstances very different from each other: (1) the deltas of the Krishna and Godavari Rivers in Kistna (or Krishna), Godavari, and Guntur Districts in modern-day Andhra Pradesh; (2) Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli, in modern-day Tamil Nadu, in association with V. O. Chidambaram Pillai (V. O. C.; 1872–1936), Subramania Siva (1884–1925), and a convergence of Swadeshi capitalism and the Labor movement; and (3) Madras City, in several distinct spaces.

First, the Guntur-Kistna District Association made provisions for a number of young men to go on what appeared to be itinerating tours of small villages and towns throughout the delta regions of the Krishna and Godavari Rivers, some of the richest paddy production areas in the Madras Presidency. Again, the model appeared borrowed from missionary activities, a likeness not lost on authorities who referred to them as "preachers." Among these were three men who would become quite prominent in coming decades, especially once formal vernacular politics was firmly established by 1918: G. Harisarvathama Rao, Bodi Narayana Rao, and A. Narayana Rao. They were, almost to a man, rusticated students from the *vantē mātaram* incidents at Rajamundry College in 1907, where many students were suspended for wearing "Vande Mataram" badges and for crying out "*vantē mātaram*" during the half-yearly examinations. Their activity was so startling to the officials at Fort St. George that the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) sent out at least two special sub-inspectors on spying tours of the deltas to assess the impact of these young men. Their

FIGURE 3. V. O. Chidambaram Pillai (V. O. C.)

reports provide a fascinating quasi-ethnographic account of the villages and towns in the deltas.

Second, for a period of approximately forty days in February and March 1908, two men—V. O. Chidambaram Pillai and a mysterious itinerant preacher and *sanyasi*, Subramania Siva—set the town of Thoothukudi in southern Tamil Nadu alight in oratorical incandescence, ending with their arrest, riots, the burning of the magistrate's office in Tirunelveli, and four dead by police shootings. This was a very strange story, especially when we think how short a time it was and how spectacular the results. Consider that their lectures drew several thousand men, mostly laborers in local mills, to almost daily meetings at the south beach, in crowds that police estimated between one thousand and five thousand people. These lectures resulted in the first systematic labor movement in Tamil Nadu (Sivasubramanian 1986). But what I find truly stunning

about these meetings is that in less than forty days, from almost no movement whatsoever, the two men, via sheer oratorical charisma, managed to move the workers—the *pāmara makkaḷ*—of Thoothukudi into a genuine mass political force that even involved the Madras Presidency's first major work stoppage at the Coral Mills. This movement to tie a freedom struggle to the rights and welfare of working men, women, and children foreshadows the successful production of a stable vernacular political scene in Tamil Nadu in 1917–18 with the labor activism of P. Varadarajulu Naidu and Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram.

Third, in Madras City the meetings took place mostly in three places: the south beach of the Marina, opposite Presidency College in Triplicane; the Esplanade, in a *maidan* just opposite Pachaiyappa's College in Georgetown; and the Moore Market, just behind Central Station.

The Marina Beach meetings, headed by the young nationalist poet and newspaperman C. Subramania Bharati, mostly involved students and *vakil*s (lawyers), the educated classes of Indians to which the British had become accustomed as their most articulate challengers. Crowds of similar, though somewhat more complex, composition gathered in a *maidan* opposite Pachaiyappa's College in Georgetown. It is, of course, no accident that these spaces were opposite colleges and set amid two of the most densely populated—really urban—areas of Madras (most of which was fairly suburban). The Marina meetings established a space on the south beach that would become the most significant site of mass meetings throughout the Madras Presidency, in both the Indian Independence and Dravidian movements.[6]

The Moore Market meetings, however, featured Telugu speeches by an enigmatic young man named Ethiraj Surendranath Arya, who addressed not only students but what police reports described as "coolies and labourers," an entirely different class of political actor to which the British authorities were accustomed. We know that Ethiraj delivered some fifty speeches from April 1907, when the police first noticed him, to July 1908, when he was arrested. It is significant that the police first noticed him speaking in Perambur, an area with a great many cotton mills, factories, and an important railway workshop, where ten years later the Labor movement in Madras would take root and flourish. Unlike the Marina Beach meetings of more forward, or elite (caste) communities, the Moore Market has been largely forgotten as a major political

space. It was demolished after a fire in 1985 and became the site for a commuter rail station terminus next to Central Station.

These meetings across Madras were not those of the Mylapore or Egmore cliques, the established groups of lawyers, government officials, and other professionals who for several generations made up the leadership of the Madras Presidency Congressmen in the well-established Madras Mahajana Sabha. These were a new generation of leaders who came to call themselves, in telling contrast, the Chennai Jana Sangam (Chennai People's Society) (Kesavan 1991, 75–96).

And the meetings were huge—both police and newspaper reports regularly estimate crowds in the thousands (more on these meetings, and their acoustics, discussed later). The British journalist Henry W. Nevinson, for example, writes in a famous passage in *The New Spirit in India* about the "four or five thousand" gathered around a lit stage on the beach (1908, 125), probably describing the February meetings of 1907, perhaps February 27, in which Bharati first sang "Vantē mātaram." Similarly, police estimates of these crowds concur that they ranged as high as eight thousand people for one of the Bipin Chandra Pal meetings and regularly into the low thousands.[7]

There were some other speakers, here and there—notably Krishnaswami Sarma (also known as Krishna Aiyar), a Tamil Swadeshi lecturer paid by the National Fund (a Swadeshi organization). He is the only speaker I can find who was a paid Swadeshi preacher on the model of the delta speakers in Andhra. There was also some systematic preaching going on in the Cauvery delta of Thanjavur District, though very little in Madurai. (There is, however, a wonderful fragment from a CID report that indicates that "a Vellala woman, aged about 40, gave a swadeshi lecture in front of the new mandabam";[8] see Bate [2009b]. This was at least nine years prior to the tentative beginnings of women's participation in formal politics and the first time that the official record indicates that a woman—any woman—gave a lecture in a political meeting.[9] We know nothing else about her, though.[10])

But the movement itself was very short, perhaps about eighteen months to two years. These young men were an upstart presence in the Madras Presidency and—at least from the points of view of both the officers in Fort St. George and

the vernacular newspapers—dominated common discourse and imaginations in 1907 and 1908 until they were all either arrested or fled into exile.

After the riots, V. O. Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Siva, the Thoothukudi speakers, were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment (i.e., hard labor)—at first for life, though later commuted to six years. Subramania Bharati fled into exile in Pondicherry, where he would remain for more than a decade. Many were hauled in front of magistrates and humiliated into signing apologies. To the shock of the Presidency, even G. Subramania Iyer was arrested briefly. By the end of 1908, British prosecution of the Swadeshi speakers was so total that by April 1909, J. T. W. Filson, author of the CID's "History Sheet" on Ethiraj Surendranath Arya, could boast that "since his conviction, public speaking in Madras has ceased, and the Chennai Jana Sangam has ceased to show any outward signs of activity."[11]

In contrast to Bengal, where the movement was far larger, far more broad based, and far more willing to take matters to another level in revolutionary terrorism, the movement in the Madras Presidency came to a standstill very quickly with only less than a dozen prosecutions. Despite its opposition to Moderate and established elite politics, however, Swadeshism across the Madras Presidency was almost exclusively an upper-caste Hindu movement (predominated by Brahmins), with some Christian, and virtually no Muslim, participation. It is not an accident, for instance, that it was most prominently marked in the deltas, in wet-rice agricultural areas with disproportionate Brahmin landownership. The oratory that bloomed in this period would not be heard again at the same volume for nearly a decade, until 1917, during the Home Rule movement, the formation of the Madras Presidency Association, and the linking of the formally "political" concerns of the educated elite to the concerns of ordinary people—mostly in the Labor movement—in the vernacular speeches of P. Varadarajulu Naidu, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram, and the return of Subramania Siva and V. O. Chidambaram Pillai, Harisarvathama Rao, Krishnaswami Sarma, and other luminaries of the Swadeshi movement. But in 1908, it was over, probably because they had not managed to link their politics to the people they thought to mobilize through their oratory. The nation, at this time perhaps, was too abstract.

Uncontrollability of the Vernacular

What provoked the British was something brand-new in the world, something they could not control or, perhaps more important, comprehend. And they knew it. Up until that time, most of those who had engaged in formal politics (*arasiyal enkiṟa kaḷam*) had been members of the educated elite (mostly Brahmin—Iyengar and Iyar), hailing from families boasting generations of service to, and critical engagement with, the British government. "Politics" (*la politique*, in Paul Ricoeur's terms) had been conducted in English from the first glimmers of respectable political engagement in the Madras Native Association in the 1850s to the forerunner of the Congress itself, the Madras Mahajana Sabha in the 1880s.

English oratory, thus, was largely controllable because the social fields in which it was delivered were fairly small and circumscribed. The educated elite who orated did so in hall meetings, largely at Pachaiyappa's Hall or Victoria Public Hall in Madras, or places such as Victoria Edward Hall in Madurai, and the social groups were also limited to the elites themselves. They also had a lot to lose—many of them had government jobs, or at least standing among the ruling British, which would be jeopardized by open antagonism toward the authorities.

More than this, though, for some thirty years, formally since at least 1874 but actually from a little earlier, the authorities could monitor "native public opinion"—even vernacular public opinion—via the agency of the Native Newspaper Reports. Newspapers, once printed, stayed put. They were knowable by and vulnerable to authority. They could be stilled, translated, examined. Texts could be extracted and their authors confronted. Presses could be threatened with forfeiture of monetary security, the withdrawal of license, or even seizure of the press itself should their proprietors exceed the bounds of propriety set up by the British authorities, crossing the line beyond "reasonable" comment and criticism into the realm of sedition. And, of course, the proprietors had not only money to lose but also their ability to engage in the sociopolitical world of the ruling race, a privilege they might jeopardize with too harsh criticism in print.

By contrast, the new oratory was very, very difficult to monitor, and it took some time before colonial authorities were aware of it happening (Bate 2012b). Printed material did not appear to provoke the authorities' concern nearly as

much as speaking did, primarily due to its fleeting nature, its impermanence, its in situ vernacularity. Public speeches, unlike newspapers, were ephemeral and difficult to pin down.[12]

A letter of 25 June 1907 from Sir Harold Stuart, secretary to the Government of India, to his provincial counterparts gives a sense of the newness of these practices, at least from the point of view of the government:

> I am directed to draw your attention to the efforts which are being made to extend political agitation to the masses by means of lectures and speeches and the danger that this method of disseminating seditious sentiments among illiterate villagers will be largely developed in the near future. The Government of India find that there is an initial difficulty in the way of local Governments in dealing with this phase of the agitators campaign due to the fact that, although the itinerant politician not infrequently preaches open sedition, it is often impossible, in the absence of any report made at the time, to prove to the satisfaction of a court of law the exact words used, and he can not, therefore, be prosecuted with a reasonable prospect of success.[13]

As far as I can tell, it was as late as mid-1907 that officers were coming to understand that these new meetings were occurring, and they began to scramble to figure out new modes of surveillance and recording, as well as new standards of evidence, by which prosecutions might be instituted against any violators of law. A great deal of correspondence begins just before Bipin Chandra Pal's famous set of speeches on the south beach in Madras in the first two weeks of May 1907. The first police report of Ethiraj Surendranath Arya's Telugu speeches, for instance, was in Perambur on 14 April 1907;[14] his first Moore Market speech was recorded only on 26 August (but he may have been speaking there earlier prior to notice). We see speeches on Marina Beach reported in newspapers as early as February 1907 (Viswanathan 1998, vol. 2), but very few earlier than that. The exceptions are V. O. Chidambaram Pillai's subscription speeches in Shiyali and Madurai shortly after the formation of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in April 1906, but we are not sure if those were in English or Tamil. V. O. Chidambaram Pillai is noted as "speaking in Tamil"

in meetings on the beach in Madras in March 1907.[15] And no doubt he spoke in Tamil in his subscription drives in Madurai in 1906 when he spoke at the Jhansi Rani *pūṅgā* (park) or the *anti kaḍai poṭṭal*, today's Meenakshi Park, just between the Puthu Mandapam and the Central Market (probably the same place where the Vellala woman spoke).

But the unknowable of these speeches, I believe, was a key reason why the police came down so hard on the speakers. Consider an example from Kistna from 1907. One district sub-inspector of the Special Branch (for intelligence), F. B. M. Cardozo, wrote on 25 June about reports of oratory and the menace of schoolchildren shouting "*vantē mātaram*" in the deltas. Cardozo's frustration is very close to the surface in this letter:

> I am sorry I could not trace those school boys. There is no doubt that some organization exists for every school town or village has the cry vande mataram. I believe that the school masters are all in league: or at all events connive at the teaching of the cry. What can one do in the matter? If only Govt. would issue some definite order in plain language and say that students found stumping the country would be expelled from all Government schools—anything definite like that—we could do something, but at present the boys have evidently been taught that we can do nothing to them; they are as cheeky as they possibly can be.[16]

The frustrated tone moves into paranoia in Cardozo's next fragment: "Some inspectors do not report properly and leave me in the dark as to what is going on around me."[17]

The extreme violence that this movement was met with from the police was based on the epistemological darkness that is clearly at the heart of this note. The uncertainty not only forced the speakers into jail or into exile in Pondicherry. It also spurred new modes of knowing and new kinds of police procedures, such as the strange ethnography in the deltas and police openly taking notes in public meetings. Perhaps the most fateful of these was the development of Tamil (and Telugu) shorthand (see Bate 2012b). The letter from the secretary to the Government of India quoted earlier provoked officials in Fort St. George to call for shorthand reporters, only to find that there was virtually no systematic vernacular shorthand of Indian languages available,

with the exception of two recent attempts by missionaries for the purpose of transcribing vernacular sermons—one using a method devised for French, the other for German. Reports reproduced in both government offices indicate further that there were simply no experts in the field at all in the Madras Presidency for either Tamil or Telugu. Given indigenous textual practices, it had never been necessary to develop.

The notion of how the technical problems of shorthand and Swadeshi politics come together is writ large in a letter by Registrar of Books V. Krishnamachari, who developed and proposed a new system to the government. In August 1907 he writes that while he was preparing his "principles of phonography," as "a loyal son of His Majesty the King Emperor," he realized that shorthand would be necessary to the police:

> In my humble opinion some such system of shorthand is of very great importance in the conditions now obtaining in India. I have purposely not published this system in a book form and before doing so I think it my bounded duty to inform Government of this, so that in case they see fit, they may utilize the art for their purposes. With this object I am keeping the matter strictly confidential.[18]

Shorthand here is tied in with "loyalty," "the conditions now obtaining in India," "bounded duty" to His Majesty, and secrecy. The development of shorthand, like fingerprints and other modern techniques of knowing, was very much a part of the penetration of an epistemological space that went hand in hand with the colonization of the land and people themselves.

In the process, both oratory and shorthand shared a similar idea of how language works: both techniques stripped language down to its denotational function, the relationship between words and concepts, the signifier and signified, and stripped individuals down to their words as threatening or benign, loyal or seditious. Oddly enough, however, officials also appeared to have an intuition of how codes themselves, rather than their denotationality, were critical in their political meaningfulness. Thus, a vernacular newspaper article was not only easier to monitor, but it also presupposed and entailed a very different kind of interaction—and political import—than a vernacular public meeting, whose denotations and politics were far murkier and potentially far more dangerous.[19]

Politics in the Bazaar

But apart from official darkness and uncertainty, from the point of view of Tamil practices, even more profound was the transgression of the "proper" places and social bounds in which politics otherwise operated in Madras. Though the new orators hailed from prominent—or at least educated—families in the mofussil, they were not a part of established Madras society. They transgressed the linguistic-cum-sociocultural boundaries of respectable politics by speaking to lower-class, illiterate, and status-less audiences in open-air meetings and in the vernacular. Neither the orators, their audiences, nor the media were of the requisite status to engage in "politics" (*la politique*).

The meetings were met by contempt by the authorities and Madras Mahajana Sabha alike.[20] Indeed, the low status of activist lecturers in the Swadeshi movement was a frequent target of derision. Often, the activists were students or student-aged: no titles, no honors, no record of engagement with the government or Congress.[21] They were upstarts who, from the perspective of both official India and established Indian society, did not understand how politics was conducted, whom one needed to know, to whom one needed to speak. And the audiences of the meetings that they conducted were composed of very young people: students in the case of Subramania Bharati's meetings on Marina Beach; or "coolies, farmers, and labourers" in the case of meetings in the bazaars of provincial towns such as Madurai or in the villages of the Andhra deltas, which were stumped by young "Swadeshi preachers" paid by the Krishna District Association.

The places they spoke, too, beaches and bazaars, were indexes of their lack of status. In contrast to proper gentlemen of cities and towns, who spoke a highly cultivated English in named halls, the Swadeshi speakers spoke in bazaars to illiterate petty vegetable retailers, "coolies and labourers." In the case of Madurai, they spoke at a place called the *anti kaḍai poṭṭal*. This is what they meant by "in front of the temple," on the east side, just between the Puthu Mandapam and the Central Market (which was, up to 1906, the town's jail). According to a 1948 report in *Maturai Jillā Tiyākikaḷ Malar*, this was the space where V. O. Chidambaram Pillai came to collect subscriptions for the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in 1906.[22]

A hall was a controlled space, socially, where people of a certain class could

gather and discuss, in English, the important matters of the day. A bazaar, by contrast, was the ultimate space of mixing, of discourse and commerce between people who were very, very different from each other (Chakrabarty 1991; Kaviraj 1992). The bazaars and beaches were probably the closest thing to a public space in colonial India, public in the sense of "free and open to all without prejudice" (although some, such as Dalits, were excluded, no doubt). And such places were the first sites of vernacular public oratory, first in Protestant sermons, later in political oratory. And that "publicness" was a part of its vulgarity, another index of the low status of those who would speak there.[23]

As the letter penned by the secretary to the Government of India discussed earlier indicated, what was particularly unprecedented and highly unnerving was how such speeches crossed lines of caste and class and, thus, how new ideas and attitudes toward government previously contained within the upper, educated classes (via newspapers and English-medium public meetings) might possibly move into the general population of farmers, laborers, and "coolies," that is, into the masses. *Vantē mātaram* had also appeared to cross social categories and ages. As an unnamed officer reported,

> The intention to annoy Europeans has permeated into the lower classes everywhere. The other day riding on the beach some two miles south of Adyar river in the early morning half a dozen little naked fisher boys aged five or six shouted Bande Mataram at us as we trotted past them on the sand.[24]

Though motivated by other interests than the preservation of the Raj, our correspondents from Krishna District, Ramaswamy and Krishneyya, perhaps put it most succinctly:

> Not satisfied with the agitation carried on in the town these Politicions [*sic*] of the New School—whose chief end and aim is to set up Swaraj on the grave of British Government—have commenced overtaking the Rural parts with the flood of seditious eloquence with a view to infusing a rebellious spirit into the minds of the illiterate and ignorant rustics, by holding so-called Swadeshi meetings in almost all big villages. . . . It is absolutely unimaginable the effects and consequences that would result to the coun-

> try, if these ignorant ryots numbering several thousands should take into their heads to revolt against authority and assert to establish "Swaraj."[25]

What they termed "the demon of Bande Mataram" and the unknowable of this "flood of seditious eloquence" were linked, and they served as the primary motivation for the police to come down hard on the speakers (see Chapter 5 for more discussion). "Demon" is a fine and telling index of their anxiety—a supernatural being, a spirit that can be glimpsed only from the corner of one's eye and never controlled. Both "*vantē mātaram*" shouted at a passing carriage by a nameless schoolboy from a crowd and the vernacular orator whose words are fleeting, unknowable, and dangerous shared this same demonic spectrality.

The authorities were provoked into new modes of knowing to fill an epistemological gap. Light had to be thrown on the darkness of an impenetrable mob, of crowds of *ryot*s (farmers) hearing the speeches of Swadeshi preachers somewhere in the interior, or even the frustration aroused by a naked little boy.[26]

In these contexts, it was the English language that was the unmarked form of political communicative action. The use of the vernacular, Tamil and Telugu, in open spaces in Madras constituted an entirely new public that would only expand to become the Tamil people themselves. This would be a demos constituted by increasingly inclusive categories of people, men and women, Brahmin and non-Brahmin, non-Brahmin elites and what we call today Other Backward Classes (or OBCs), and most recently, Dalits and others within the most subaltern groups. It is only when people standing in marked categories begin to move into and co-constitute the "public" (women, subaltern classes of one sort or another) that one can see the markedness of the previously unmarked categories of people.[27] And it is in these meetings—though still largely composed of educated people, audiences and speakers alike—that some of the most significant moves toward the interpellation of a generalized public, well beyond elite or even literate classes of people, begin.

Sensorium of "Sedition"

I want to end my discussion where I began, with the feel of these events, the sensorium. There is very little secondary writing on them from either the police (who focused on the denotation of the speeches in order to provide "texts" that could be extracted to prove sedition) or in memoirs by people

who saw them. In fact, there are only a handful of the latter, Thiru. Vi. Ka's ([1944] 2003) *Vāḻkkai Kuṟippukaḷ* being the best known.[28] His descriptions of events are far more fulsome for the politics that begins in 1917–18, however, as he was still a young man during the Swadeshi movement. But he did attend some meetings, in particular, those of Bipin Chandra Pal in 1907. As he put it, "an ocean of water on one side, an ocean of humanity on the other (*nērkaḍal oru pakkam; janakkaḍal innoru pakkam*; 195).

Another exception to this is a vivid description offered by Henry W. Nevinson, a British journalist and traveler who published an account of the Swadeshi movement from Bengal to Madras and Bombay, quoted earlier in the chapter on the size of the meetings (1908, 125–33). Nevinson offers an account of a Swadeshi meeting on the Madras Marina, 23 November 1907, in celebration of the release of Ajit Singh and Lajpat Rai from custody. He mentions that the meeting began in the evening—"the sky was full of the deep and ominous colours of an Indian sunset in the rains" (125)—and ended a few hours later with "the late moon" risen high "in the clouds and stars" (132). Earlier, he writes that

> on the broad, dry sand, between the esplanade and the surf, a vast circle of people was gathered round a little platform and chair. They were seated by hundreds on the sand—between four and five thousand of them altogether—and round the outer edge of the seated circle hundreds more were standing upright, like the rim of a flat plate. (125)

I find this description remarkable, if also somewhat difficult to imagine how a crowd of five thousand people, no matter how they were organized, could hear what was said in as an acoustically challenged space as an open beach. I have seen small circles of fishermen—perhaps as many as fifty—listening to sermons and political orations just to the south of the space where these meetings took place. But a crowd of five thousand is another matter.

In this as in many other speeches described, the cadence was said to be slow and steady. Nevinson describes "a little boy with head half shaven and a long tuft of black hair at the back" standing on the platform, singing "Vantē mātaram" "amid complete silence . . . in his native Tamil": "in this boy's singing the words were fairly distinct, and the repeated cadence gave a certain solemnity" (1908, 127).

Clearly, though speaking—the core ritual act—was what drew people to the beach, there were other elements of the meeting drawn from other ritual and phenomenological realms. In particular, the use of song and procession was central to all of the events described by police and diarists. Nevinson's account included such a description:

> Through the middle of the crowd came a line of white-robed students carrying a yellow banner with a strange device. "Bande Mataram! Bande Mataram! Hail to the Motherland! We bow before our mother!" rose the familiar cry from the thousands seated there. But there was no wild gesticulation, no frantic excess, such as we might imagine in a fanatical East. A Trafalgar Square crowd is more demonstrative and unrestrained. Nor was a single soldier or policeman visible, though the occasion had been publicly announced as a meeting of the Extremists. In the audience I was the only European present. (1908, 126–27)

Of the half-shaven little boy's "Vantē mātaram," Nevinson described the music as "that queer Eastern kind, nasal, quavering, full of turns and twists, such as one may hear from the Adriatic to Burma, and very likely beyond" (127). This made it seem to him to be somehow unfitting for a political anthem:

> It is obviously too tender for a stirring "Marseillaise." There is not enough march and thunder either in words or tune to enflame the soul of trampling hosts. The thunder comes in the cry of "Bande Mataram!" But the tenderness, the devoted love of country, and the adoration of motherhood are all characteristic of the Indian mind. (128–29)

Nevinson then turns to describing "the chairman" (perhaps G. Subramania Iyer?) who rose to speak (in English). Nevinson's description is also singular and rare insofar as he makes another key description of the appearance of the speakers, the stage, and some of the crowd's actions.

> The Chairman rose, and the darkening air glimmered with the petals of flowers thrown in handfuls, as the custom is. Round his neck heavy garlands were hung, pink and white, to match the lesser garlands which surrounded the photographs of the two national heroes on the table. He spoke in English, like all the subsequent speakers till the last. One felt at

> once how great a contribution to Indian unity the English rule makes in the gift of a common language which all educated men can understand, while even in Madras alone four distinct native languages are spoken. He summarized the history of the last year of suspicion, repression, deportation, imprisonment, flogging of boys and students for political causes, and the Seditious Meetings Act. It was all done without passion or exaggeration, and he ended with a simple resolution calling on the Government to repeal the deportation statute as contrary to the rights which England had secured for herself under the *Habeas Corpus*. (130–31)

This resolution was supported by the next four speakers. Nevinson describes again their "quiet reasonableness" and lack of passion in the speeches, the way that the crowd held onto every word,

> and all spoke with the same quiet reasonableness, so different from our conception of the Oriental mind. But for clapping of hands and occasional shouts of "Bande Mataram!" or "Jai!" . . . , the immense crowd remained equally calm. There was no frenzy, no disorder, no excitement, beyond intense interest and desire to leave no word unheard. If a speaker was just a shade too emotional the crowd laughed a little scornfully, just as an English crowd does. . . . The speaking was average straight-forward stuff, free from flowers, and even free from quotations, which are the besetting tendency of many Indian minds. Indeed, I remember only one quotation—just a hint at a parody on Mark Antony's speech, with John Morley and the Liberal Government as the honourable men. (131–32)

"Only Anglo-Indians," Nevinson concludes, "could have called the speeches seditious," for "though this was avowedly a meeting of Extremists, the claim in the speeches was for the simple human rights that other people enjoy—the right to a voice in their own affairs, and in the spending of their own money" (132).

Conclusion: Interpellative Infrastructure and the Return of the Event

Vernacular politics begins in earnest around 1918–19. It was during these years that all the elements of twentieth-century Tamil politics came together for the first time: human rights, women's rights, labor rights, even caste res-

ervations. The only thing missing was Communism per se, which only begins to be articulated outside the idiom of "Bolshevism" by M. Singaravelu in 1923. Major historians (e.g., Washbrook and Baker 1975) have already noted that the explosion of politics in 1919 was based on the formation of elite factions with horizontal roots in the mofussil that were able to respond to a series of events (e.g., Jallianwalla Bagh, the fall of the Khalifat post–World War I, and the Non-cooperation movement of Mohandas Gandhi).

But I argue that it was not merely events and factions. The "events" had to occur within some kind of sociocultural context in which they could cohere as recognizably relevant events to large groups of people who would then mobilize as such (see Sahlins 1991). More pointedly, the events emerged at a moment in which mass politics was possible due to the infrastructure of new communicative forms. There could have been no mass politics without the presence of such interpellative networks, without the interpellative infrastructure of the mass meeting and the "public" oration—that is, a practical basis of action within which certain kinds of agency could affect certain kinds of effects, a practical basis of action in which a very specific set of agents and entities was possible, a practical basis of action in which a speaker could interpellate an audience. Without the interpellative infrastructure of the public address, the forms of politics we see emerging in 1918–19 could not have occurred.

But they would not emerge just as they pleased—the new social political forms would be modern, but they would also be Indic—and increasingly, the more time passed, as twentieth-century politics would become Tamil politics itself, the more Indian those forms became.

Let me conclude this chapter and lead to the next with one last image: in February 1907, Subramania Bharati was described as leading a procession from Triplicane to a vast meeting on the beach following the singing of *bhajan*s at the Parthasarathi Temple.[29] It was said that as he moved through the streets at the head of the crowd, he spontaneously composed new (and now presumably unknown) verses of "Vantē mātaram."[30]