Epilogue

HOME RULE, THE LABOR MOVEMENT, AND LINGUISTIC AND POLITICAL MODERNITY

After it was shut down in 1908, vernacular political oratory would not be heard again until late 1916 and 1917, leading eventually to the great satyagraha of 1919 described at the beginning of this book. Police and judicial attentions under the India Press Act of 1910 moved from a concern with "sedition" from 1911–12 to one with "obscenity" by 1913–14. Starting in 1914, the Fortnightly Reports from the secretary to the Government of Madras showed virtually no interest in "politics" (*la politique*) per se until late 1915, when notice began to be given to the increasing activities of Theosophical Society leader and political activist Annie Besant and her nascent Home Rule movement. As far as the political (*le politique*) is concerned, reports from the beginning of 1916 concentrated on the war effort, prices of basic commodities, and Muslim reaction to British enmity with the Khalifat. In one Fortnightly Report, the chief secretary to the Government of Madras dismissively predicts that Annie Besant's activities will not be supported by the people. Over the course of the year, however, his mocking tone turns to concern and then to genuine alarm as the movement grows by leaps and bounds; Besant is nearly deified in her reception around the Presidency, and subscriptions to her newspaper, *New India*, explode to more than ten thousand, eclipsing even *The Hindu*.

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Her movement began with a transformation of some thirty-four theosophical lodges—in provincial towns and centers throughout the Presidency—from strictly religious and philanthropic organizations into an outright political machine.[1] Mostly coming from the educated classes, several thousand students, *vakil*s (lawyers), and landowners participated in its meetings, which were still conducted in English, as were the great public meetings that Besant held at Gokhale Hall in Madras throughout the movement.

But by December 1916 and early 1917, Besant was calling for a new kind of political action that involved vernacular pamphlets and the "itineration of Home Rule preachers," very much like what had happened some nine to ten years earlier in the Andhra deltas and parts of the Tamil-speaking lands of the Madras Presidency. The Government of Madras in Fort St. George saw the connection immediately: "Hitherto the district reports have for the most part pictured the Home Rule movement as confined to the younger *vaikils* [*sic*] and students in the central towns, but in the report from Guntur district for the past fortnight the Collector lays stress upon the activities of the league in the delta villages of Tenali Taluk."[2] Just a few months later, in March 1917, the Home Rule League's main office issued a notice to the members of the Theosophical Society: "It is proposed by Mrs. Besant that a more vigorous campaign must begin throughout the Tamil districts of the Presidency to form as many branches of the Home Rule League and enlist as many members as possible. To do this, fluent speakers in Tamil are required."[3] Besant's involvement in the Provincial Congress Committees, too, seemed to spur on calls to vernacularize meetings and thereby persuade more and more categories of people into speech and action.[4]

The Madras Presidency Association

This was the crucial moment when the non-Brahmin movement began to formally organize itself in the establishment of the pro-British/anti-Congress Justice Party, on the one hand, and the formation of the pro-Congress Madras Presidency Association, on the other. The Justice Party continued to hold Anglophone hall meetings, while the Madras Presidency Association established itself in its very first meeting by passing a resolution declaring that henceforth all meetings in Tamil-speaking areas would be conducted in Tamil. Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram (Thiru. Vi. Ka.), wrote of that meeting:

> The Trichy-Tanjavur conference was organized on behalf of the Madras Presidency Association and met in Tanjavur on 20, 21 April 1918. Under the Presidency of Indian Patriot editor Diwan Bahadur Karunakara Menon, many resolutions were passed in that conference. One of them involved Tamil. I seconded the motion which stated that, henceforward, the Tamilians' mother tongue must be spoken in public meetings, that foreign tongues are not to be spoken, and that if anyone should speak in a foreign tongue, the general public would reserve the right to rebuke him. . . . Of all the revolutions [*puraṭci*] of my life, this was the first. ([1944] 2003, 202)

In this period, the Andhra movement also started to formally demand separate political accommodation for the furtherance of Telugu-speaking people; at the May 1917 Ganjam District Conference there was a major split between the Oriya and Telugu speakers over representation; and one even begins to read from this period of the return of some of the vernacular lecturers of the Swadeshi movement.[5]

The vernacular had arrived in a big way, and vernacular oratory was back. The authorities were becoming worried and began to compare these times with the Swadeshi movement, taking action accordingly.

The Labor Movement, 1917–20

This time it would be different, however. First, the people engaging in these lectures and organizations were not upstart young men without standing but established politicians and respectable people. The Madras Presidency now had all-India figures of status, such as Besant and her two chief lieutenants in the Home Rule movement, George Arundale and B. P. Wadia. This time they were not going to be so easily dismissed or crushed.

A second difference was that now they not only reached out to the lower classes and appealed to their nationalism and devotion, as during the Swadeshi movement, but they also tied their politics to issues of direct concern to ordinary people, especially to the economics and dignity of the new proletariat toiling in the cotton mills around Madras. The biggest transformation, and probably the key element in the establishment of vernacular oratory, was the formation of the Madras Labour Union, as well as other unions that arose immediately thereafter, in 1918. The Labor movement started, flourished, and became established precisely because of the direction of vernacular oratory to the workers.

It is important to briefly examine what kinds of actions and communicative practices were engaged in prior to the formation of organized labor institutions. Work stoppages, strikes, workers' riots, and other disturbances are as old as industrial forms of production in India. The managing agents of the Buckingham and Carnatic (B&C) Mills in Perambur, Madras, reported a strike just a few months after opening their first textile factory in 1878. They continued to report major strikes at intervals of every two years throughout the 1880s, a figure consistent with reports from other factories surveyed in an 1892 Royal Commission on Labour report (Veeraraghavan 1987, 88–89). Modes of protest frequently took the form of idling, theft, sabotage, and throwing spindles at managers, sometimes with riots involving thousands, violence directed at supervisors, and destruction of factory property or the personal property of their tormentors. Workers' demands were sometimes monetary but often had more to do with assaults to their dignity by their European managers, overwork, the denial of previous privileges, or what were perceived to be unjust dismissals of fellow workers. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted, the kinds of industrial violence that followed often took the form of personalized vengeance precisely because the form of colonial authority practiced in the mills—a kind of *maa-baap* system of parental despotism[6]—was personalized, excessive, and bore the marks of terror (1989, 170–77). The forms of struggle against this system of unreasonable power were met with unreasonable violence, and managerial terror, in turn, met with workers' vengeance (182). These all continued well into the twentieth century.

What was born with the organized labor union, then, was a different mode of communicative practice, even as a paternalistic system continued to operate by other means. The direct oration to the workers constituted a new mode of action that would be fateful indeed. The formation of an organized union was the result of a conscious, deliberate move by a series of different groups to address the workers directly. It began, curiously enough, with the ethical and humanitarian idealism of a Perambur-based merchants' philanthropic and religious organization, the Sri Venkatesa Gunamrithavarshini Sabha (SVGS). Run by two small shopkeepers in the Perambur area—cloth merchant G. Chelvapathi Chettiar and rice merchant G. Ramanjulu Naidu—the SVGS sponsored weekly discourses by religious orators such as Thiru. Vi. Ka., who

was by then well-known for such oration, and N. C. Kannabiran Mudaliar, a Vaishnava preacher of some renown. Just as the Besantite Home Rulers based their organization initially on the infrastructure laid down by the Theosophical Society, it is no coincidence that the fateful move to address workers came from a group organized around oratory, in this case Vaishnava sermons and literary discourses (Chettiar 1961; Souvenir 1963; Murphy 1981).

As providers of goods to the local workforce, Chelvapathi Chettiar and Ramanjulu Naidu were well aware of the plight of the workers, their sub-subsistence wages, inhumane living conditions, and the constant humiliations and degradations they faced as the lowest-status workers in an apartheid-like social situation.[7] Over the course of several months in late 1917 and early 1918, the SVGS moved from sponsoring strictly religious discourses to ones addressing the need for an organized labor union (Veeraraghavan 1987, 119–23). It began on Vijayadasami Day (mid-October) in 1917, when the SVGS organized a small meeting of some thirty workers who were addressed by N. C. Kannabiran Mudaliar on "a few victorious passages from Mahabharata" and the need for a labor union. Thiru. Vi. Ka. participated in meetings of this sort for some months thereafter, and his memoir states that with every speech more workers showed up.[8] After the enthusiastic reception of Kannibiran Mudaliar's proposal for a labor union and the successes of Thiru. Vi. Ka.'s speeches, Chelvapathi and Ramanjulu decided to organize a public meeting of workers.[9]

The first meeting was held at Janga Ramayammal Gardens on Statham's Road, Perambur, on 2 March 1918. By all accounts the meeting was massive: the police estimated that one thousand B&C workers—"most were coolies"—showed up, but Thiru. Vi. Ka. said that "many thousands of workers thronged the meeting, filling the *maidan*, the walls and the trees" ([1944] 2003, 352); Chelvapathi claimed that ten thousand came, but that number seems high. In any case, the meeting was most likely the single largest event of its kind ever in the Madras Presidency, and certainly nothing close to it had ever been organized specifically for workers. The only meetings that might have rivaled it were those that V. O. Chidambaram Pillai and his colleagues had organized for workers in Thoothukudi in 1908 (Chapter 5).

The meeting was chaired by V. E. Sudarsana Mudaliar, an honorary magistrate, and the main speakers included Thiru. Vi. Ka. His speech, and the

reactions to it, serve well to illustrate the crossroads of, and emerging contradictions between, religious philanthropy and political organization. Chelvapathi described it as "a powerful speech in chaste but simple Tamil" (Veeraraghavan 1987, 120–21). Police reported that Thiru. Vi. Ka. "spoke on the need of organizing labor at Madras. In doing so he emphasized the fact that labor plays an important part in the prosperity of a country and how India is becoming poorer day by day by the industrial exploitation of foreign countries. . . . He placed the picture of Mr. Gandhi's life before them and exhorted them . . . to follow his example. They should all be loyal, constitutional and do their work with truth in one hand and fearlessness in the other, thinking that service to man is service to God because man is but a moving temple to God."[10] According to Thiru. Vi. Ka., he spoke about "the history of the labor movement in Western countries, the dignity of economic liberty, and the necessity of a labor union. The workers were brimming with a sense of new possibility" ([1944] 2003, 352).

Clearly, Thiru. Vi. Ka. saw his purpose as addressing the political, economic, social, and even spiritual challenges facing the workers as a whole. However, the chair, Mudaliar, was displeased with his remarks and in his closing speech rebuked Thiru. Vi. Ka. for what he felt was an overly political oration: "The Chair, for his part, had come with the expectation that this was going to be some kind of religious speech. He was a government employee. He began to rebuke my speech. The uproar made by the workers, who had gathered like the sea, reached all the way to the stage. Mr. Chelvapathi Chettiar [in his vote of thanks] cut and felled the Chair's rebuttal decisively. . . . The workers' honor had been protected. And the question of when a new 'Labourers' Union' would be formed circulated widely among the workers" (Kalyanasundaram [1944] 2003, 353; see also Veeraraghavan 1987, 120–21).[11]

Given the success of the first public meeting, Chelvapathi Chettiar and Ramanjulu Naidu took the next step of approaching the highest-profile persons they could find who might be sympathetic to their cause. They spoke with a number of prominent politicians, including Congressmen, about joining them as leaders, but no one was interested in the plight of "lowly, illiterate labourers" (Murphy 1981, 82). Finally, they turned to Annie Besant and her people, and though they went to the Theosophical Society headquarters in Adyar with the hope of luring Besant herself, she was out of the office that day and they

chanced to meet one of her lieutenants, B. P. Wadia.[12] In the end it was he who, despite his own ignorance of the mills, the workers, and the overall condition of labor in India, immediately understood that labor would be a key ally in their larger struggle for home rule in India. "The educated classes in India," he wrote, "have so far failed to realize the great value of the Labour movement as a factor in the general political advancement of the country. Without the masses there can be no true Democracy" (Wadia 1921, xvi).

The first meeting with Wadia was held at the Janga Ramayammal Gardens in Perambur, at 5:00 p.m. on 13 March 1918. Five hundred people attended. Tellingly for our purposes, the police report of this meeting spends a significant amount of time on the codes deployed, the languages spoken, the quality of that language, and the work of translation:

> Mr. B. P. Wadia presided. Mr. T. V. Kalyanasundaram Mudaliyar (editor of *Desabhaktan*) explained to the audience that Mr. Wadia did not know Tamil and so he would speak in English and after his speech Mr. Kalyanasundaram Mudlr. would translate into Tamil so that the whole audience might understand what Mr. Wadia said. Mr. Wadia then addressed the audience in English and laid stress on the fact that they were all sparks of the Divine Being and so they are all equal. . . .
>
> Mr. Kalyanasundaram then translated into Tamil the ideas mentioned by Mr. Wadia . . . and pointed out how influential the labour movement was in England. He also referred to the success achieved by the mill hands at Ahmedabad by the kind intervention of Mr. Gandhi.
>
> Mr. Kurnivala, a Parsee on the staff of "New India" next spoke in broken Tamil and compared the laborers to the feet and hands of a man's body and the mill owners to the head and said that if there are no feet and hands the head would be worth nothing.[13]

Most reports mention translations not at all or, at best, very little, and the attention paid here to translation and the broken Tamil of speakers is no doubt an index of just how strange and significant this kind of meeting was to the policeman observing it. Unlike the Swadeshi speakers of ten years earlier, who were youngsters and upstarts, students and people without status, B. P. Wadia

was a major political personality whose internment (house arrest) the previous year along with Annie Besant had only boosted his fortunes and made him a pan-Indian political hero. For men of that stature to not only take an interest in the welfare of the common man but also actually commit to addressing him in the vernacular (albeit translated by Thiru. Vi. Ka.) was extremely rare if not unprecedented.[14]

From the establishment of the Madras Labour Union on 27 April 1918 onward, Thiru. Vi. Ka., along with Chelvapathi and Ramanjulu, spoke at Perambur and "wherever workers were" (Kalyanasundaram [1944] 2003, 354). The major vernacular politicians of the day, including many who had been active since the Swadeshi movement and many others who would come to dominate politics over the next several decades, all fanned out to help organize new unions.[15] The result was an explosion of labor unions, many within months, most within one year. By April 1920, there were some eleven major unions, and another ten to fifteen organizations of workers organized enough to issue collective bargaining statements and go on strike.[16] Thiru. Vi. Ka. lists the Madras & Southern Maratha Railways Workshop Workers Union, the Tramway Workers Union, the Madras Electric Supply Corporation Workers Union, the Kerosine Workers Union, the Aluminium Workers Union, Domestic Servants in European Homes, Barbers, Conservancy Workers, Rickshaw Drivers, Police, Postmen, the Southern Railway Workshop Union in Nagapattnam, and the Textile Workers Unions in Madurai and Coimbatore (354).[17] All of these organizations and more emerged within two years of the founding of the Madras Labour Union. It was a fundamental transformation in social organization, as if the entire society suddenly phase-shifted from one state to another, providing the basis for a new mode of action on the part of workers as well as new relationships to owners. A necessary condition of that shift was the new interpellative power of the vernacular oration to persuade the people into speech and action, a new infrastructure of communication whose origins have been at the heart of this book.

A final point to note is that while these unions were started at the instigation of elites from "outside" the workforce, over the course of the following year workers themselves began to address meetings, first the skilled laborers such as weavers, carpenters, clerks, and so on, and later some of the ordinary workers (Veeraraghavan 1987). We see numerous reports over the course of 1919

and 1920 of meetings from which the leaders were absent or in which members of the general workforce countered their recommendations.[18] A meeting of the Tramway Workers Union of 1919 was chaired by Thiru. Vi. Ka. and featured speeches by old-time Swadeshi activists such as V. O. Chidambaram Pillai and Subramania Siva. A meeting ten days later, chaired by another Swadeshi speaker, S. Padmanabha Aiyangar, included other current and former politicians of note. But workers at both meetings heard speeches by Mohaiuddin Sahib, a former Tramway employee, and Vasudeva Ayyar, a secondary school teacher. The secretary of the union, Sriramulu Nayudu, reported on responses authorities gave to the grievances the workers presented. But they were no longer responding only to the luminaries of the union, the heroes of the past, or important figures of the nation (B. P. Wadia and his co-Theosophists and Home Ruler George Arundale) or of the Madras Presidency (Thiru. Vi. Ka.), but also to a tramway driver, a schoolteacher, and a clerk.

Finally, George Arundale, a man of all-India stature, chaired a meeting of the Madras Labour Union in February 1920. As was the wont of the responsible elite liberals, Arundale cautioned prudence and patience on the part of the workers and counseled them to wait for negotiations to go through among their leaders and elected representatives. He "repeatedly exhorted [the workers] to refrain from strike. He even threatened to sever his connection with the Union should they be hasty." To this, a worker named Natesan rose on the platform and presented a tableau that is striking when we consider the career of vernacular oratory over just fifteen years: "One Natesan, a weaver, followed Mr. Arundale. He told the men that Mr. Arundale's preaching were no longer of any use to them. . . . The only successful course now therefore left open to them was to strike. Natesan's speech is said to have created a more favorable impression than that of Mr. Arundale's."[19]

The ability to speak, though still highly restricted, was being extended, as all people were being invited to the political through being interpellated, called, via the vernacular press and the vernacular platform and through being invited to interpellate the public itself.[20] By the end of 1919, as Wadia had called for just one year earlier, the masses had finally been "persuaded to speech and action."

Interpellative Infrastructure and the Birth of Modern Tamil Politics

Political men faced the common man of 1916 and 1917 and began to address him directly. Their address called the people into being as a new category of social action, a new estate, and a new agency. By 1919, at least, the common man began to stand up alongside, and sometimes against, his master, and began to speak back with greater force than ever—Natesan the weaver being but one case in point.

When we consider what constitutes political action in general, we invariably must account not only for the ideas and the people engaging those ideas but also the real-time practices and actions of those people that are, invariably, couched within very particular communicative modalities. Writing, printing, and the circulation of printed texts throughout a limited vernacular geography have been the usual foci of analysis in considering the political practices that constitute the large-scale social imaginaries such as the public or the nation (Habermas [1962] 1991; Anderson [1983] 2006; Blackburn 2003; Taylor 2003; Venkatachalapathy 2012). As I have argued, we must also add homiletic oratory, which has generally been forgotten in the genealogies of such imaginaries. Perhaps chief among the reasons is that it is an embodied form of action rather than a new technology such as printing, the telegraph, or the internet, and its embodiment has suggested to people that it is therefore natural and panhuman, that people must have always orated.

As we have seen, this was not the case in South India. In fact, this equally invented form enabled politics on a new level, mass politics of the kind that came to dominate twentieth-century India and the empire of orators of Tamil Nadu in particular (Bate 2009b). Whereas Indic models of textual authority resulted in a kind of identity, or consubstantiality, of text and person, in modern or sermonic oratory the object was to effect some kind of change, to transform the world and the hearers from one state in a linear chain of becoming to the next, just as the Protestant sermonizer attempts to transform the souls of his auditors from a state of being lost to one of salvation. Oratory embodied a new kind of agency with entirely new models of textual authority and social order, from religious discourses to new forms of education and, of course, to political action.

The history of Tamil oratory, then, is also a history of the social and cultural transformation of the practices, statuses, and agencies of the population that enabled new kinds of political and social action. The vernacular oratorical revolution that I outline in this book entailed a new kind of agency on the part of an entirely new genre of political actor, the vernacular politician, who could now turn toward and evoke the participation of people formerly thought to be irrelevant at best and irrational and dangerous at worst. In that interpellation, it was Tamil oratory that enabled the production of a new Tamil people whose agency came to define twentieth-century Tamil politics.

What does it mean for the definition of politics, then, to say that in 1918–19 "the people" emerged as an agentive category in politics? If we say that the people became relevant to politics, then what were the people doing prior to that point? And who was engaging in politics? If a riot broke out between two communities, was that not politics? Or was it something else? When laborers attacked their supervisors and charged out of the factory floor, was that not politics?

I think it was political (*le politique*), but I do not think they were a part of what we call politics (*la politique*), that is, the particular realm of action in which people directly face the state, an activity that is called politics itself. Elites of the time, such as Wadia, clearly understood that inviting the masses "to speech and action" was, in fact, calling them into politics. Politics (*la politique*) was enabled not only by the rupture of historical events and the emergence of factions such as Gandhian satyagraha, nonviolence, or the massive events that shook India at the end of World War I (such as the infamous massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh on 13 April 1919), which are said to have transformed the nationalist movement into a fully fledged mass movement. These events had to occur within some kind of sociocultural context in which they could cohere as events that large groups of people would recognize as relevant to them and then mobilize appropriately (see Sahlins 1991).

More pointedly, as I have emphasized, these 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 "public" oration. Such an infrastructure provided a

practical basis of action within which new kinds of agency and agents, that is, the vernacular politician, produced new kinds of effects. Such an infrastructure provided a practical basis of action in which a speaker could call an audience and the audience would return his gaze and recognize itself as such. Without the interpellative infrastructure of the public address, the forms of politics that emerged in 1918–19, and for the next hundred years, could not have occurred.

But they did not emerge just as they pleased—the new modern, social, political forms were modern, but they were also Indic, and as time passed, the more twentieth-century politics became Tamil politics itself, the more Indian those forms became (Kaviraj 2005a, 2005b).