



PORTRAIT: SHYAM KUMAR PRASAD

● **FOOD CAFE:**
THOL THIRUMAVALAVAN

Reservation a path to social justice, not easing poverty

Over breakfast, the leader of Tamil Nadu's Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) explains Sushila Ravindranath why caste is still a vital force in Tamil Nadu. He adds that society has changed in the last few decades, and will continue to change if communal forces do not gain ground

IT WAS NOT REALLY MEANT to have breakfast with Thol Thirumavalavan, the leader of Tamil Nadu's Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK). I have been wanting to talk to him for months ever since he came out strongly against the recently announced 10% reservation for the economically backward among the upper castes.

Thirumavalavan is the most important Dalit voice to emerge from Tamil Nadu. He has genuine charisma, practises nuanced politics, and has great following amongst the young, especially the aspirational young Dalits. His party, in its 29 years of existence, has evolved into not just fighting for Dalit rights, but

also for many other issues, creating a broader agenda including rejection of caste, state rights and women's empowerment, among others.

He has struggled for years to become part of mainstream politics. The two Dravidian parties have always had their favourite Dalit members, but they have not done enough for the Dalit cause. The Dalits form 18% of the population of Tamil Nadu, which is predominantly an OBC, MBC (most backward class)-dominated state.

I am asked to come and meet him by 8:30 in the morning at his office-cum-residence in a Chennai suburb to avoid the crowds. As it happens, there are peo-

ple who have come much ahead of me, and I have to wait. I am being plied with hot cups of coffee and vadais from local shops. There is a carnival atmosphere and a pre-election air of excitement, although the VCK is contesting only two seats in the elections. It is now part of the DMK-Congress alliance. Thirumavalavan is contesting under his own symbol from Chidambaram, and his colleague Ravikumar under the DMK symbol.

When he calls me in, he insists on offering me breakfast from the popular Sangeetha restaurant. We have mini tiffin (a very Chennai concept) consisting of idli, vadai, pongal, mini dosa and sambar.

The VCK entered electoral politics in 1999 when Thirumavalavan transitioned from an educated Dalit leader, holding on to his job, to a full-time politician. Congress leader GK Moopanar, who then headed the rebel Congress in the state, persuaded Thirumavalavan to join his alliance and contest elections from the Chidambaram constituency. Although he ended up second, he attracted attention by getting 2.25 lakh votes.

Ever since, it has been a roller-coaster ride for the VCK as far as elections are concerned. The party has been part of several alliances. "If we are not part of an alliance, we get isolated. Growing small parties do not have much of an option now," he says. The VCK has been with the AIADMK-BJP alliance during an earlier election. "We have taken the decision that we will never be part of an alliance with the BJP. They are committed to the Sanatana Dharma. The RSS never talks about doing away with caste."

Thirumavalavan has also declared that he will never be part of an alliance that has chosen the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), led by Dr S Ramadoss, as a partner. The PMK is a caste-based party representing the Vanniyars who come under the MBC category. The PMK has alienated itself from other castes. It is considered to be strong in a few northern districts of Tamil Nadu.

There has been traditional rivalry

between the Vanniyars and the Pallars, a Dalit community. The PMK has been accused of instigating honour killings to prevent intercaste marriages involving the Dalits. The PMK, however, accuses the VCK of stirring up violence. "Caste is still a vital force in the state. There are people who humiliate us and we get compromised. Caste and communal forces create law and order situations, and we fight to maintain peace. We have maximum number of cases foisted upon us. We are helping people challenge the accusations. There has been no proof that we have been behind any violence. So much of my time is spent on getting them legal assistance. The PMK believes in politics of hatred. It turns social issues into communal issues," Thirumavalavan adds.

People keep walking in and out of the room. Although he shows no signs of impatience, I know that I have to hurry up. I ask him why he is so totally opposed to reservations based on economic criteria. "Reservation for SCs, STs and backward castes was a way to implement social justice, to set right years of suppression. It was not meant for poverty alleviation. Economic criteria will slowly eliminate social justice. Most opposition parties have welcomed this move. The RJD and the SP in north India, and the DMK and the AIADMK in the South, are the few major parties opposed to this move. There are other ways of eliminating poverty. The Centre can provide them financial assistance, ensure free seats in educational institutions, reduce farm distress."

I ask Thirumavalavan why Tamil Nadu has not seen the emergence of a mainstream Dalit party like the BSP in Uttar Pradesh and a leader like Mayawati in the state being the pioneer of the self-respect movement? "There has been no DMK or AIADMK in Uttar Pradesh. These two mainstream parties were not founded on the basis of caste. They are parties consisting of OBCs, MBCs and others. They have not been dominated by one caste. Contests such as the DMK versus the PMK or the AIADMK versus the DMDK are not possible in Tamil Nadu. Here we can only be an alliance party."

Although after years of efforts Thirumavalavan is now accepted as a mainstream politician, electoral success still eludes him. He has not been able to retain his seat in Chidambaram. Going by the 2016 assembly elections, it appears as though VCK's vote share is coming down. He explains: "The vote share depends on how many seats we get. We have been contesting only two seats in the Lok Sabha elections. We have not stood for elections independently to establish our vote bank. Nor have we contested beyond 10 seats in assembly elections. You can't judge us by these numbers. We have our branches and supporters in all the other constituencies..."

...We get branded as a Dalit party. Caste abolition and putting an end to untouchability have to be part of mainstream politics. We have not been able to do that yet.

The room gets more crowded. Before I leave, I ask Thirumavalavan about the challenges of bringing all the Dalits under one umbrella. They still remain splintered in the state. "We are not a sectarian party. Social improvement will happen with more and more acceptance by intellectuals and opinion makers. This will convert our party into a mass movement."

There is no time to finish breakfast. "In 50 years, society has changed, and it will continue to change if communal forces do not gain ground. Tamil Nadu may not be ready for a Dalit chief minister now, but it will happen," he says as he sees me out.

Caste abolition and putting an end to untouchability have to be part of mainstream politics. We have not been able to do that yet

POST THE SUPREME COURT'S decision in the Puttaswamy vs Union of India case (2017), the right to privacy has clearly been established as a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution. The judicial decision has been applauded by citizens and privacy activists alike, given the rampant data leaks and unauthorised use of users' personal data.

While the law is settled, people feel behind about privacy. A recent research by AudienceNet, a social and consumer research company, noted that for as many as 92% of the urban Indian respondents irrespective of age or gender, privacy is a priority in their use of social media. They depend on relatively safer encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp to communicate on a day-to-day basis and expect encryption across social media platforms, which is viewed as critical to the public as it protects users and their personal data from the prying eyes of unintended recipients.

However, critics argue that fully encrypted platforms are prone to misuse and a tool to spread fake news and political propaganda that may be used during elections to influence electoral outcomes. Thus, we all agree that something needs to be done and social media platforms are increasingly taking steps to mitigate such risks.

The existing privacy framework under

Privacy is a right that encryption secures

Encryption strengthens privacy; data localisation may weaken it

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the IT Act 2000 and Telegraph Act 1885 is seriously inadequate when it comes to providing protection to personal data or remedies in case of data breach. Besides, there are no effective safeguards against excessive state surveillance under existing rules. On the other hand, the draft data protection Bill 2018 emphasises on the need for data localisation to ensure data privacy and to prevent foreign surveillance of Indian citizens.

No doubt, the draft Bill provides far greater protection to privacy than what's available under the IT Act; its grievance redressal mechanism is better and punishment for data breach harsher. Yet it has

several shortcomings. For instance, the scope of non-consensual processing of data is too wide—consent will not be needed for data processing on grounds such as national security, legal proceedings, and research and journalistic purposes, or for any other reasonable purposes specified by the proposed Data Protection Authority. Thus, the exceptions granted to the state by the country's proposed data protection law do not inspire much confidence as it allows unwarranted intrusion into citizens' privacy. The degree of data privacy will actually depend upon the effectiveness of the country's data protection regime and not where the data is



located. As things stand, it'd be wrong to argue that data localisation will ensure better privacy protection. Rather domestic enforcement agencies may pose a greater threat to an individual's privacy than suspected foreign snoopers due to relative ease of applying coercive action within the country's boundaries.

It's safe to argue that India's proposed data protection law, in its current form, is not effective enough to fully safeguard data principals'/individuals' against unchecked state surveillance. Thus, imposing a sweeping data localisation regime on the country without an effective mechanism to protect personal data

may encourage intrusive data gathering by state agencies and will lead to lower rather than higher protection to privacy. Hence, it should be avoided especially when there are several adverse side-effects that are not being fully appreciated by the supporters of localisation.

For instance, localisation may drive up the infrastructure cost of IT companies, tech start-ups and SMEs that currently rely on storing data abroad that costs less. Besides, India's software and IT-enabled services sector is export-driven and deals with data of non-national citizens and corporations. Thus, mandatory data localisation could be perceived as a protectionist trade barrier and may induce retaliation from other countries. That will create complications for the country's IT industry. Moreover, consumers may have to bear the additional cost of storing data locally in the form of higher charges for digital services.

The way forward

Trust remains a major concern for users with even top names in the digital economy space accused of unauthorised sharing of personal data. So, tougher privacy norms (either self-imposed or enforced by government through legislative actions) are needed to improve 'trust factor' and help propel India's digital economy.

Encryption by ensuring safety of the data will improve trust and is part of the

solution. However, social media and messaging platforms must take responsibility to check the misuse of their platforms. In this context, WhatsApp has taken several proactive measures to prevent misuse of its platform and mitigate such risks. It has stopped forwarding of a message to more than five people in one go, in India. It has also started a helpline that a user can rely on to verify any message or news being circulated. These measures will rein in the possibility of spreading fake news and misinformation campaigns, and enhance users' experience while protecting every Indian's right to privacy.

Encryption strengthens privacy, while localisation may weaken it. There is a potential danger that allowing state unrestricted access to users' data through regulatory moves such as data localisation will dilute privacy protection and may lead to unnecessary state's intrusion into citizens' personal lives. Moving towards a surveillance state is not the answer. Besides, it undermines the spirit of the Supreme Court's decision in the Puttaswamy case. Then, there are side-effects of data localisation that can't be ignored. A far better alternative to data localisation would be bilateral and multilateral data sharing agreements that will keep digital economy open and yet expedite criminal investigation without diluting protection to privacy.

So much potential for globalisation

JOHN PEARSON

CEO, DHL Express

Investments by companies in international operations account for less than 10% of total fixed capital formation

AFTER 33 YEARS IN the global logistics industry, I continue to be amazed by how little globalised the world economy still is. Some may find this thesis disingenuous, given the fears often associated with globalisation. But, at a time when populism and nationalism are ever more pervasive, while multilateralism is increasingly under threat, it matters greatly to have one's facts straight.

For example, just about 20% of world economic output is exported. Globally, investments made by companies buying, building, or expanding international operations account for less than 10% of total fixed capital formation. Only 3% of people live outside the countries where they were born. And the total number of parcels shipped internationally equals just 1.3% of all parcels shipped domestically in countries around the world, according to the Universal Postal Union.

In addition, for all the talk about global supply chains, we should be aware that most of these supply chains are actually regional. That pattern is documented in the DHL Global Connectedness Index 2018 (bit.ly/2KlpY14), developed by scientists at NYU Stern and IESE Business Schools. In that sense, it is not so much globalisation per se, but the regionalisation of the world economy that underpins the growth in many parts of the world.

Cross-border trade, whether regional or global in reach, advances economic prosperity. In that regard, the more than 4.5 billion people living in Asia will prove to be an unstoppable economic force.

Progress in successfully tapping into the world economy is increasingly achieved in some unexpected places. As highlighted in the DHL Global Connectedness Index 2018, Cambodia, Malaysia, Mozambique, Singapore and Vietnam are the top countries globally whose actual international flows are larger than predicted by such factors as size, wealth, language or proximity. Notably, four of these five countries are located in Asia, one in Africa. This says a lot about the future dynamics of the global economy.

Even though there are significant tensions affecting the global trading system at this juncture, we should also feel encouraged by the conclusion of major trade agreements. As the recent EU-Japan Free Trade Agreement underscores, such trade deals also provide room for economic growth in what used to be considered the "first world," largely by removing bureaucratic impediments to trade.

I can still remember a world where there was no online trade and when companies' sales representatives had to travel around the globe handing out their catalogues. After they returned home, they then hoped for orders by mail. All of that can now be achieved more or less by the click of a button.

Trade creates genuine participation in the global economy and can help countries to improve the skillsets of their population as well as the quality of their infrastructure. This is especially empowering for the ever more productive middle classes of emerging market countries. The times when overnight access to the flow of goods and services that make up the global economy were the exclusive privilege of the upper-most classes of these countries—are gone.

In this context, it is of particular importance to note that e-commerce is by no means one-directional. Online shops facilitate trade and expand opportunities in all directions. This even applies to small-scale artisan producers in remote corners of the world. They can now connect to customers globally.

In this way, global trade helps draw countries together and allows their citizens to prosper. The global logistics industry is both a beneficiary of and a catalyst for that greater connectedness.

It is also true that, as a result of economic change, jobs are being lost in some sectors, countries and regions. At the same time, new jobs are being created in other industries, countries and regions.

Finally, we must not lose sight of the fact that, since 1990, globalisation has been a critical factor in reducing the number of people living in extreme poverty from 1.9 billion to 736 million. Considering the significant increase in the world's population, this is an even more impressive achievement.

If we want to build on this success story, we should focus even more actively on eliminating remaining barriers to trade and access to information. In this way, we can also enable people living in far-away places to tap into global prosperity.