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Middle Class Activism and Poor People's Politics:
An exploration of civil society in Chennai

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MIDDLE CLASS ACTIVISM AND POOR PEOPLE'S POLITICS: AN EXPLORATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN CHENNAI[1]

By John Harriss

"Politics is a dirty river": civil society activist, a former banker

"Only the poor agitate; the rich operate": civil society activist, a former Indian Administrative Service officer

Introduction

The word 'activist' is used very commonly in conversations with and about middle class people in Chennai. Someone, for example, who runs a well-endowed organisation promoting music, dance and drama, might well describe herself as a 'cultural activist'. Why is it that middle class people feel such a need to use this term? It seems possible that as middle class people have either failed to take on leadership roles in the sphere of political society (the domain of political parties), or have vacated that sphere – as they have done according to the electoral studies which have demonstrated their declining political participation – so they have increasingly found in civil society the domain for their self-assertion. They have responded to their impotence in the political sphere by devoting their energies to activism in civil society, and in doing so de-valorise party political activity in the manner of the former banker, now noted civil society 'activist', who described politics as a 'dirty river'[2]. The purpose of this paper is provide an analysis of middle class activism in the sphere of 'civil society' in Chennai, and to explore its relationships with the politics of poor people[3]. This 'exploration' means both examining the ways in which, or the extent to

[2] I owe my recognition of the possible significance of the uses of the word 'activist' in Chennai, and the arguments of this paragraph, entirely to Venkatesh Chakravarthy.

[3] The term 'middle class' is of course notoriously difficult to define, not only in the context of Indian society. There is an outstanding discussion by Satish Deshpande (2003, chapter six). He suggests, rather than an empirical description, three hypothetical definitions 'to think with': the middle class is the class that articulates the hegemony of the ruling bloc; it is the class that is most dependent on cultural capital; and it is an increasingly differentiated class – its elite fraction specialising in the

which, middle class activism in civil society represents the urban poor and whether or not, or in what ways, poor people are able to engage in activism in civil society

The old idea of civil society has returned to the agenda of the social sciences, and of public policy, in quite a major way over the last fifteen years or so. Indian scholars have made notable contributions to the general literature (especially: Chandhoke 1995, 2003; Chatterjee 2001, 2004; Khilnani and Kaviraj, 2001. For a collection, published in India and with some Indian materials see Elliott, 2003). Meanwhile through organisations such as PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia) in Delhi or PAC (the Public Affairs Centre) in Bangalore Indian activists have also made an extremely important contribution to thinking and to practice internationally on the role of civil society, and its development. For all this significant work, however, there is relatively little solid empirical research on what is actually *there* in what may be described as 'civil society' in India's major cities. There is little systematic research on the structure and character of civil society in India. The task of this paper is to describe and to provide some analysis of, precisely, the structure and character of civil society in the South Indian city of Chennai – which is one of the major metropolitan cities of the country with a population of around six million people. Following this brief introductory discussion of the concept of civil society, and then of the history of Indian civil society, I will describe the city of Chennai, before explaining the methodology used in the field research on which the paper is based. The matter of research methodology is no small affair, for there is no means of determining the universe of civil society so as to be able to devise a rigorous sample of civil society actors, and it is perhaps for this reason that while there are some good studies of particular civil organisations or of social movements (for example, by Kamat 2002 and by Chandhoke 2003) there is no very systematic study yet available of the character of civil society as a whole. After some discussion of the methodology that was used in this study, the paper moves on to map the civil society of Chennai, to

production of ideologies and its mass fraction engaging in 'the exemplary consumption of these ideologies, thus investing them with social legitimacy' (2003, p.141). In this paper I mean to refer to those disposing of significant cultural capital, which usually includes considerable facility in English, and who have some property or relatively well-paid salaried or professional employment. The term 'poor people' is hardly any less difficult to define. I have chosen to refer to the 'urban poor' for the same reasons as Nandini Gooptu in her study of *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth Century India* - so as to 'encompass various urban occupational groups and to highlight the diversity of their employment relations and working conditions' and 'to draw attention to vital aspects of urban experience, other than work that determine the nature of politics' (Gooptu 2001: 3)

explain which social groups are actively involved, in different ways, to describe what they do and how the people involved themselves conceptualise their work and the sphere of 'civil society'. I am concerned, too, with the possible connections between trends in civil society, and those of globalisation. But ultimately I aim to address two broader questions. The first is that of whether there is indeed a 'new politics', based in civil society, that has the potential to dam up or divert that 'dirty river' of regular politics of which the civil society activist whom I have quoted in the first epigraph speaks; and the second and related question has to do with the class character of civil society, on which the second of my epigraphs bears.

A contested concept

'Civil society' is a contested concept. There are different definitions of civil society, and there is politically significant contestation over them. The task of sorting through different conceptions, of explaining their filiations and of teasing out their implications is one that has been taken up latterly by a number of political philosophers, and it is not one that I shall repeat in any detail here. Suffice it to say that the idea of civil society is very generally held to connote a sphere of associational life – usually the space of association, independent of the market, and between the family and kinship groups on the one hand and the state on the other. It also connotes a set of values that may be summed up as those of 'civility', implying tolerance and respect for others as citizens with equal rights and responsibilities. These different aspects of the idea of civil society in Western political thought are brought together well by Partha Chatterjee when he suggests that it refers to 'those characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in Western societies which are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract, deliberative procedures of decision-making, recognised rights and duties of members, and other such principles' (2001, p.172)[4]. It refers, then, also to a public space in which people can come together in ways other than those dictated by the state, the market or by the requirements of kinship, where they can debate and engage with public affairs.

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[4] Note that the fact these 'characteristic institutions' are based on a principle of equality does not mean that the sphere of modern associations is necessarily homogeneous or solidaristic in practice.

Chatterjee's statement sets out clearly the idea of civil society that provides the starting point for my analysis. In view of the extent of contemporary debate over civil society, however, and the fuzziness of the idea, I prefer to couch the analysis in terms of the sphere of 'civil' and of 'social association' in Chennai. By 'civil association' I mean to refer to those organisations that have professional staff, work to benefit others and specialise on a particular set of issues, while by 'social association' I refer to those associations that represent their members or communities and mobilise for their own demands[5].

This essay is concerned, therefore, with the sphere of 'modern associational life' in Chennai and it offers a critical perspective, on the basis of ethnography, of some of the key questions about it that have been debated normatively by political philosophers in their discussions of the idea of civil society. These derive in particular from the two distinct traditions of thought about civil society in western liberal philosophy as these have been distinguished by Charles Taylor. One of these takes off from Locke and the other from Montesquieu and de Tocqueville. The former emphasises the idea of a self-directing society '…which at the extreme becomes a dream of eliminating politics' – a view that is reflected in the ideas of the first of the two activists in Chennai whom I have quoted; while from the second 'comes the conception of civil society engaged with politics, educating citizens, facilitating communication, and making government more effective' (quotations from Carolyn Elliott's discussion of Taylor's work: 2003, p.6) – which is the idea of civil society that has been picked up by, for instance, policy advisers in the World Bank in their arguments about 'good governance' (see, e.g, World Bank 1997). One key question to which this view gives rise is that of what the connections are between the state, and political society, and 'modern associational life': very simply put, is 'a vibrant civil society' a condition for good government, or for an effective democracy, as the World Bank suggests, or is the direction of causality rather the other way round?

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[5] I take this distinction from the work of my Latin Americanist colleagues and their associates, though they choose to refer to 'civil' and 'social organisations'.: see Lavalle, Houtzager and Castello 2005.

India: a 'democracy without associations'?

India was quite recently described in these terms by one political scientist – though on empirically flimsy grounds (Chhibber 1999). The idea is contested by historical research, especially that of Carey Anthony Watt in his book *Serving The Nation: cultures of association, service and citizenship in colonial India* (2005). Referring principally to North India, Watt argues that the period between 1908 and about 1920, seen by many historians as one of quiescence in the nationalist movement, in fact was notable for the development of social service and of a range of charitable and philanthropic activities that – both through the idea of patriotic service and by building connections between people – contributed very significantly to 'making the Indian nation'. He shows that in the early Twentieth Century what he calls 'a vibrant "associational culture"' was being developed in India , meaning by this – following Jose Harris - 'a richly variegated, autonomous and self-governing multiplicity of associations and societies that were cradles of citizenship, mutual assistance and social reform' (2005, p.10). In the growing network of associations linked to the Arya Samaj, the Servants of India Society, the Theosophical Society (actually based in Madras) and the Seva Samiti of Allahabad, Western ideas of social service, charity and philanthropy were negotiated by Indian ideas and by Indian practices of physical culture, health and manliness, giving rise to strong notions of active, patriotic citizenship. He remarks, significantly for the story of associational cultures in Chennai today, that 'with notably few exceptions social service work was undertaken by urban elites of the upper castes, lower-middle and middle classes, and directed towards individuals of lower social status' (2005, p.3), and further that it is 'not surprising that educated, elite middle class and upper caste social service activists imparted brahmanical values to citizenship, because they drew on the familiar and ambient' (2005, p.16). But, equally unsurprisingly, this became problematic when imposed on people from the 'Depressed Classes' in the process of trying to 'uplift' them. The point has remarkable resonance in present day Chennai, as I shall explain.

Many of the social service organisations described by Watt are still active today, but he argues that as the Nehruvian state in the post-Independence period became much more involved than had been the colonial state in the promotion of social welfare 'there seems to have been less "philanthropic space" for older service associations,

and less autonomy in the voluntary sector' (2005, p.205). Perhaps Chhibber's argument that India has 'democracy without associations' carries weight after all. Certainly grave misgivings were expressed in the 1950s by some from the older service organisations, about the extension of the state into areas of activity that had previously been pretty much their preserve. But if this was true of the interventionist Nehruvian state in the1950s and 1960s it may be much less so now, given that the character of the Indian state has undergone some change, not least as a result of the increasing assertion of neo-liberal ideas. Now, in line with 'new pubic management' thinking, considerable emphasis is being placed in India, as elsewhere in the world, on public-private partnership where 'private' may include the voluntary sector.

Chennai: a 'global city'?

Somewhat remarkably, given that it is a colonial port city of relatively recent origin, Chennai has been seen as a major centre of 'the Great Tradition' of Hinduism and of Indian civilisation (see, notably, Singer 1972). It also used to be the case that the city was described as being a great village. But, if this was a fair reflection of the reality of a city in which it was possible quite easily to discern the layout of earlier village settlements, this has changed over the last decade. Though the image of Chennai as a modern 'global city' has not been projected internationally in the way that have those of Bangalore and of Hyderabad, it has seen a great deal of change in its architecture and consumer cultures alongside the development of IT-related industries, and the major investments that have been made by foreign companies such as Ford and Hyundai. Though the city has the reputation of being much less cosmopolitan than Bangalore it can now fairly be described as a 'global city'. The construction of a major highway in the south of the city, intended to facilitate travel to and between the large software parks that are being developed there is an important symbol of global Chennai.

Yet this labelling conceals persisting contrasts within the city. {map} The 'new economy' and the service industries and consumer cultures that are associated with it is located primarily in South Chennai and in areas that have been developed quite recently, like T Nagar and Anna Nagar in the west. The 'new economy' and the

appearances of globalisation are much less in evidence, however, in the older central parts of the city such as Mylapore and Triplicane or Chepauk, or in the old commercial heart of the colonial city in Georgetown (what was originally called 'Blacktown'). Even less are they in evidence in the great swathe of the city lying to the north of Georgetown, including the areas of Washermanpet, Royapuram, Tondiarpet, Vyasarpadi, Perambur and Ayanavaram. These are, historically, the principal working class areas of the city. The city's textile mills were there, though they are now closed. It has long had important railway works – what is said to be the oldest railway station in India is there - and the vast Integrated Coach Factory is in Perambur. It is the area of the docks - and in fact it has been the problem of pollution from the Madras Port that has helped to activate citizens locally in Royapuram, which the port dominates. Chennai, though it is not a very old city, is nonetheless a great city of Hindu temples, and the southern part of the city has seen a great spate of temple renovation and of the construction of new temples, some of them financed by Non-Resident Indians in the United States. This is well described in a recent book by Joanne Waghorne (2004). But North Chennai – or what I shall henceforward refer to as 'North Madras', using the old name to make a point about its distinctiveness and lack of change in the era of 'Chennai'– has very few temples and has not shared in the wave of temple renovation and construction. A recent report in the leading English-language daily, *The Hindu*[6], on the *Avvai Kalai Kazhagam*, in Royapuram, refers similarly to the dearth of cultural facilities in North Madras that the Avvai centre has sought to rectify. The great cultural associations of Chennai, such as the celebrated Music Academy, are almost all either in the old centre of the city in and around Mylapore, or in T Nagar. They are emphatically Brahmin organisations, with support from Chettiars and some others of the 'Forward Castes'. The Avvai Kalai Kazhagam, on the other hand, is a 'Non-Brahmin' Nadar foundation. North Madras remains in many ways a world apart, not least in the perceptions of local people and of those who represent them[7]. In the debate on the Budget of the Chennai Corporation in 2005, for example, it was proposed by some of the Councillors that there should be a separate budget for North Madras.

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[6] *The Hindu*, 25 April 2005
[7] This is confirmed in an article reporting local perceptions, in *The Hindu*, 28 April 2005:

The exploration of associational life in Chennai described in this paper sought deliberately to take account of this major contrast of social geography.

City Governance in Chennai

In view of the significance, in Latin America, of the creation by governments of public spaces in which citizens or their associations are able to engage in debate on matters of public policy (see Avritzer 2002; and Houtzager et al 2004), and of the encouragement of decentralisation in government in India since the passage of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India in 1992, making the establishment of panchayati raj institutions for local self-government mandatory throughout the country, it is important to note how very *limited* has been decentralisation of urban governance in Chennai, and the lack of public spaces like those that have started to be opened up in some Latin American countries (especially Brazil).

The 74th Amendment, or Nagarapalika Act, provides a legal framework for urban self-governance, and the Ministry of Urban Development of the Government of India claims on its web-site[8] that the Act has 'made the urban local bodies into vibrant self-governing institutions'. It is hard to agree with this judgement on the basis of what has happened so far, at least, in Chennai. The Act requires 'the constitution of electoral wards for representatives within each municipality, and mandated the establishment of "Wards Committees" consisting of one or more wards, the composition of which would be the responsibility of state governments' (Heitzman 2004, p.129). Heitzman explains in detail the struggles that took place in Bangalore over the size of wards in the city and the functioning of ward committees, between an increasingly well-organised group of NGOs on the one hand, and government and officials on the other. The former sought to ensure the implementation of the legislation in such a way as to facilitate democratic participation, for example by restricting the size of wards to a population of 50-75,000 people, while the latter generally sought to ensure that such possibilities were closed off. Heitzman notes that 'For most public administrators in

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[8] This was consulted on 25 April 2005.

India, the movement towards decentralisation seemed a grim necessity or a historical trend, rather than a positive good …' (2004, p.153). In Chennai the way in which the legislation has been implemented in fact provides little or no scope for democratic participation, except through voting in quinquennial elections for ward councillors.

The Corporation of Chennai is divided into 155 wards, organised in turn into 'units' and then Zones. There are ten Zones in Chennai, each headed on the side of the administration by a Zonal Officer. On average, therefore, each Zone has a population of 450 – 500 000 people. Yet in Chennai it is the Zonal Committees, constituted by the Councillors for each of the wards in the Zone that are deemed to be the 'ward committees' (according to the Municipal Commissioner). Each of the Zonal Committees has a chair elected from amongst the Councillors. They are described as being 'very active' by the Municipal Commissioner though his expectation of them is that they will prioritise work required in the Zones. There is actually no committee or meeting of citizens, either as individuals or – as in Brazil – through their associations; and senior officials in the Corporation are very sceptical about the practicality of setting up any kind of deliberative bodies and about anything like the system of participatory budgeting, pioneered in Porto Alegre in south Brazil, and now instituted very widely throughout the country. For these officials in Chennai panchayati raj is implemented in the city in the form of the City Council. Its meetings are certainly 'lively', because it is highly politicised and a significant arena for the ongoing struggle between the two principal political parties, the DMK and the ruling AIADMK. In early 2005 it seemed, according to reports in the press, that virtually every meeting ended with one group of Councillors or the other walking out, and there were commonly scenes of violent confrontation on the floor of the chamber. It is a forum for party political conflict rather than for 'urban self-government'.

This assessment, of the lack of space for democratic participation in urban governance in Chennai, is confirmed by some of those who are active in civil associations. One of these, an advocacy NGO, has used the 74th Amendment to take the Government of Tamil Nadu to court for its failure to practice subsidiarity. Another of the advocacy NGOs is specifically concerned with what its director – the second of the activists whom I quoted at the head of this paper – refers to as 'civic engagement'. In his view there is an inverse relationship between urbanisation and civic engagement in Tamil

Nadu, there being more active involvement of people as citizens in rural areas than in towns and cities, because of the increasing significance of panchayati raj institutions in the villages. For all their imperfections and malfunctioning, institutions like gram sabhas (village meetings) do create spaces for the active engagement of people, spaces that are lacking in the city. His organisation aims to encourage participation in panchayats through programmes to increase information and awareness. It is also active in trying to increase participation in local elections in Chennai, pointing out that given the low turnouts in elections to the Chennai Council, it is possible for a candidate to be returned with only a tiny number of votes. In the view of this man, organisational space for civil society activism is closed off by the alternating ruling parties, the DMK and the AIADMK, neither of which wishes to see influential alternative local leaders coming up. Part of the programme of his organisation is to encourage independent candidates to stand in city elections.

This, then, is the formal institutional context of urban government for the activities of civil and social associations in Chennai.

Studying Civil and Social Associations in Chennai

The great difficulty in the study of civil and social associations in Indian cities is that there is no means of defining the universe from which to sample. Though many are officially registered, with the Registrar of Societies, many are not; and the records of the Registrars at any one time are both incomplete and include the names of entities that evidently exist only on paper. There are also lists of associations compiled by different agencies in the voluntary sector, such as that called *Sahaya*, which is a 'Directory of Welfare, Health and Social Service in the City of Chennai', published by the Joint Action Council for Women. The Third Edition, published in December 2004, lists 202 associations. But it is not a complete list even of social service associations in Chennai working with women and children on health and welfare issues. So these lists are useful but they too are quite evidently inadequate as a means of defining a universe from which to sample (though they may be a basis for sampling associations of particular types). It is not surprising, therefore, that empirical studies of civil and social associations in India have generally been case studies.

In these circumstances one way of proceeding is to build up a sample by means of snowballing from an entry point or points. In research in Sao Paulo and Mexico City, and in Delhi, colleagues with whom I have worked have selected local government constituencies with differing characteristics, and then identified entry points by consulting with different local authorities in local government, politics and (in Latin America) the churches. They have then proceeded from these different entry points by asking questions about other associations with which their immediate respondents have some kind of a working relationship or of which they have knowledge, then moving both horizontally, to interview associations in the same geographical entity, and vertically, to higher level organisations such as 'councils', 'forums' or 'coalitions'. In this way samples may be constructed that have a claim to representativeness, if not to statistical accuracy, and confidence in them is enhanced when the networks that are described in them are seen to be completed.

In Chennai I sought to use this method, trying to find entry points in representative Zones in the contrasting areas of South Chennai and North Madras. But it actually proved difficult to set up snowballs that worked, partly because of the character of civil and social associations in the city. There are many residents' welfare associations, for example, that have no connections with other associations either of the same or different types. NGOs are notoriously cagey about themselves, and often reluctant to acknowledge the existence of others. I had great difficulty, for example, finding one small NGO in a remote part of North Madras. Its founder told me that it was just as well that I hadn't enquired as to his whereabouts with another, better known NGO in the same small area because, he said, they would simply have denied the existence of his organisation. Local politicians are not necessarily well informed about associations operating in their constituencies and may not wish to acknowledge them, either, because they want to maintain that they themselves are the avenue whereby people can expect to find a means of tackling their problems. One of the Councillors in North Madras, for instance, a doughty lady with a fine record of engagement with people's problems, was able to guide me to just one local association. In the end I relied heavily on information and introductions in South Chennai supplied by a friend who assisted me with the field research and who is herself a social activist (that word again!); on the suggestions made by the editor of

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one of the free local community newspapers distributed in South Chennai who is very active in community affairs; and on contacts that were given to me in North Madras by a professor of social work, who himself coordinates several organisational networks. The entry points that I used, and the networks of relationships to which they gave rise are shown on the following diagrams *{available on request to the author at the LSE}*, in which the associations are presented first in terms of the distinction between civil and social association, and secondly using a typology that is explained below. The fact that the contacts that I was given allowed me in the end to map out different though partially inter-connecting networks – one firmly located in South Chennai and the other more loosely in North Madras - helps to give me confidence that while there is no sense in which the 62 associations shown in the diagrams constitute a statistical sample of those existing in the city as a whole, they do represent a significant cross-section. The diagrams show certain entry points that did not lead on to other associations, including the RSS – the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh – which is one of the bastions of the Hindu nationalist movement, and very strongly opposed to the left-leaning associations that predominate in the networks that I show. Its contacts were all with other bodies within the Sangh Parivar, the 'family' of Hindu nationalist organisations. A second entry point that set up only one further contact was an important federation of residents' welfare associations in a South Chennai suburb, reflective of the fact that I have noted already, that residents' welfare associations are often isolated. A third entry point was a recently formed local heritage organisation which has, as yet, interacted only with a traders' association in the area in which it is working.

In addition to this network of associations defined by snowball sampling I followed up several leads from articles in local papers about associations of different kinds, and made forays into different slum areas in search of local social associations, looking for associations *of* slum-dwellers (as opposed to those working *for* them). I also gathered information about associations that have recently joined together to form the Confederation of Indian Organisations for Service and Advocacy (CIOSA); and an assistant conducted some additional (32) interviews for me with residents' associations, unions and NGOs in North Madras. I use information from these sources to supplement that from the core investigation of the networks defined by snowballing.

I go on to explain that the networks that my snowball defined are strikingly differentiated in terms of the social backgrounds of those who are involved in them, and that they include very few organisations in which Non-Brahmins are leaders. Of course the possibility arises that the differentiation of associations that I describe is an artifact of my starting points. Yet my enquiries outside of the snowball sample did not suggest that I had missed any very significant set of associations; and the activists themselves confirmed the differentiation that I found.

Types of Associations in Chennai

Table 1: Types of Associations, Dates of Foundation and Social Identity

Association Type		Date of foundation						Social Identity*		
	Total number	Before 1960	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000 & after	Brahmin	Christian	C
Advocacy NGO	7	0	0	0	3	3	1	3	4	
Advocacy & Service	5	0	0	0	2	3	0	3	2	
Service Providers	19	1	1	2	4	7	4	2	12	
Movements	10	1	0	3	4	1	1	4?	1	
Associations	12	0	0	0	3	5	4	4	0	
Networks/ For a	9	0	0	1	0	6	2	2	5	
ALL	62	2	1	6	16	24	12	18	24	

Organisations listed in Sahaya**	202	27 (13%)	7 (3%)	37 (18%)	44 (22%)	68 (34%)	10 (5%)		

Note: * 'social identity' refers to the identity of the founder or founders, or – in the case of the networks and fora – of the organisers

 ** 'Sahaya', as explained in the text, is a Directory of 202 associations involved in 'Welfare, Health and Social Service in the City of Chennai'. Data on date of foundation missing for 5% of the associations listed.

Amongst the sixty-two associations in the network shown in the diagrams, it is hardly appropriate to classify nine of them either as 'civil' or as 'social associations'. They are networks or fora made up by other, mostly though not all, civil organisations. These are: (i) *TNForces*, meaning the Tamil Nadu Forum for Creches and Child Services, which is a network across the state of over one hundred organisations working on children's issues; (ii) the *Tamil Nadu NGO Forum for Street and Working Children*, with a membership of 48 organisations across the state (iii) the *Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement*, which is an informal grouping of two social associations, the *Penn Urimai Iyyakkam* (the Women's Rights Front) and the *Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangh* (a union for construction workers) - with both of which one particular woman activist is closely associated - with a policy research centre on urban poverty set up by a former senior civil servant, coordinated – like *TNForces* - by the professor of social work who was my third key informant; (iv) the *Tamil Nadu Voluntary Health Association*, a network with 550 different organisations and institutions as members, all working in the health sector; (v) the *Citizen Action Network (CAN)*, which links 24 associations, a majority of them outside Chennai, around governance issues, especially corruption and accountability; (vi) FEDCOT, the Federation of Consumer Organisations of Tamil Nadu; (vii) the *Tamil Nadu Peoples Forum for Social Development*, a grouping set up at the time of the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995, and that has subsequently produced a number of reports on social development in Tamil Nadu – though it is now more or less inactive; (viii) the *Confederation of Indian Organisations for Service and Advocacy*, linking just over one hundred mostly smaller philanthropic organisations and trusts, but which is intended by its founder to became the equivalent for the voluntary sector of the

Confederation of Indian Industry; and (ix) a recently created 'citizens platform' that links a number of associations that were concerned about the way in which rehabilitation of the tsunami-affected areas of Tamil Nadu was taking place.

Apart from these nine bodies there are 22 social associations, including eight local associations, four associations of particular social groups, and ten mobilisational movements (amongst which I include the Tamil Nadu chapter of the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties [PUCL] which has the character of a 'movement' rather than that of an organisation); and there are 31 civil associations (including, however, an internationally well known environmental organisation, *Exnora International*, that mobilises large numbers of people in local groups). These civil associations include seven advocacy NGOs (though at least two of them would hotly dispute the description of 'NGO', because of its increasingly negative connotations amongst activists in Chennai); five associations that combine advocacy and service (amongst which I include both *Exnora*, and the Chennai chapter of INTACH, the national organisation that works mainly for the preservation of the built heritage, because it combines both action – in this case actually taking on the restoration of significant old buildings – and campaigning and advocacy against the destruction of built heritage); and 19 non-profit service providers. These latter include both organisations that would usually be described as 'NGOs', and that often carry on some mobilisational work, as well as running services, and on the other hand philanthropic trusts that run facilities such – notably – as care homes for the elderly, orphanages and day-care centres for children with disabilities, that have no kind of mobilisational aspect to them.

It should be noted that the distribution of associations amongst the types I have distinguished is no way statistically representative. Although there are large numbers of non-profit service providers in Chennai, they are certainly outnumbered by local residents' welfare associations, of which only three were included in the network given by snowballing (though I have data on others, from North Madras). There are also significant numbers of trades unions (and again I have information about more than are included amongst the mobilisational movements included in the network); and there are relatively many more identity-based associations (especially caste associations) than the four included here. There are also important cultural associations, devoted to music and the performing arts, like the Music Academy or

the Avvai Kalai Kazhagham. Finally, though the network does embrace the familiar Lions and Rotary Clubs, associations of business and professional people, they appear as funders of some of the smaller service providers, and I did not actually interview any of their office holders.

Fields of Work and Activities

The local associations include *residents' welfare associations* (RWAs) which are concerned with issues such as access to public services – water, electricity and street lighting, with road maintenance and with drainage, solid waste management, or in some cases problems of parking in the street. There are large numbers of these associations in Chennai, many of them being nothing more than management committees in apartment blocks or housing colonies, to which residents are legally required to pay regular charges, and which organise and pay for security, look after lift maintenance and water pumps and perhaps organise celebrations on major public holidays. Those that are more active do engage with the City Corporation over services[9]; they may be involved in enumeration for ration cards and with the revision of the electoral roll; and they may have a role in, for instance, raising awareness amongst parents over the need for polio vaccination for their children. The Commissioner of the Chennai Corporation (the chief executive, who is deputed from the Indian Administrative Service) speaks of active 'public-private partnership' (the language of the new public management is widely used) between the Corporation and RWAs, especially over garbage collection. Such associations are more commonly found in higher income, middle class areas[10], though we encountered two in North Madras that had been started by Dalits in the 1970s and that had initially struggled to secure *pattas* (land titles) for people living in their areas. Some are now linked up with *Exnora International* over solid waste management. They vary considerably in size, and in age. The largest of the twelve I have recorded has 1268 members, the smallest just 34; the oldest was set up in 1964, the newest in 2002. Members pay

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[9] The residents' associations of Chennai seem to bear no relation to similarly labelled associations in Latin American cities which are highly active politically, as was the case in Bolivia at the time of writing of this essay (June 2005).

[10] The character of many is reflected in the comment made by one RWA chairman, about the need for action against 'anti-social elements', referring specifically to rag-pickers who visit his street.

monthly or annual subscriptions, and the associations are run by officers elected at regular general body meetings.

Residents' welfare associations are rarely federated together. One of the advocacy NGOs that focuses on citizenship and electoral reform has sought, so far unsuccessfully, to bring together associations in the Besant Nagar area of South Chennai. But federations do exist. The largest and best known is a federation of now 82 RWAs in the Pallavaram Muncipality – a suburban municipality on the south west side of the city with a predominantly middle class and upper caste character. The federation dates back to 1982. It is led by an Iyengar, now in his 60s, who was brought up in a small town about sixty miles from Chennai, and who worked in the marketing department of a large corporation. He was a CITU union organiser from 1974, and is well known as a communist – though he does not push his communist views in the residents' associations, and in spite of his local reputation he has not succeeded in winning a seat as a councillor, standing as a communist. He lists as the achievements of the Federation: a successful campaign against the raising of property taxes; revision of electoral rolls; success in securing the appointments of new specialists in the local government hospital; improvement of the local burial ground; and on-going action to secure completion of a fly-over bridge across the main road (which has an appallingly bad safety record).

A federation has recently come up in Royapuram, in a once rather genteel part of North Madras where there were quite large numbers of Anglo-Indians, linking eight RWAs – most of them management committees in apartment blocks; the cultural association mentioned above, the *Avvai Kalai Kazhagam*; a Catholic Welfare Movement and three fishermen's associations. It also has individual members and has become very active under the leadership of a local Congressman over local environmental issues, especially the pollution caused by dust blown from heaps of minerals in the Madras Port. It has also been successful in improving the regulation of lorry traffic in and out of the Port, and in establishing a small park, partially under a road flyover. This federation, too, with the notable exception of the fishermen's associations, has a distinctly middle class membership.

Other local associations include two informal citizens' groups in parts of South Chennai. One was initially formed over the restoration of an old temple tank but with the objective, certainly on the part of the person who was most involved in setting it up, of bringing members of the local community together. The second aims for the improvement of the area around another great temple, and to encourage informed cultural tourism in an old part of the city. The language of 'citizen' that is associated with both these groups is indicative of their middle class character, and they mainly involve professional people – though the first, at least, aims to reach out to poorer working class and Scheduled Caste people living in the area. Finally, amongst the local associations are two local *Exnora* groups, active especially in solid waste management. They too involve local business people and middle class employees. It was interesting and probably significant that the leaders of the Royapuram Residents' Welfare Federation should have been quite scathing, in conversation, about the lack of the presence of *Exnora* in areas like their own. The fact that *Exnora* has been successful so far mainly in organising in middle class areas is recognised by its leadership, and they are seeking to extend their activities into poorer parts of the city, but without too much evident effect, so far.

The ***identity-based associations*** in the snowball sample include two Dalit welfare associations in slum areas of North Madras, that have successfully organised local community centres with activities such as coaching classes for school drop-outs and *balwadis* (child-care and pre-school classes); an association of male sex workers and gays, that provides drop-in facilities for those affected by HIV/AIDS; and an association for *aravannis* (a general term for trans-gender persons, commonly but somewhat misleadingly translated as 'eunuchs'), that is also especially concerned with HIV awareness, counselling and support as well as with the civic rights of community members.

Those associations that I have described as ***mobilisational movements*** include the PUCL, which campaigns on civil liberties and human rights – often having to do with incidents involving caste violence, or with monitoring actions by the police - and is a network organisation in the particular sense that it is able to mobilise all sorts of people and organisations. These movements also include the *Tamil Nadu Unorganised Workers Federation*, the *Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangh* and a

union for domestic workers with about 1500 members in North and Central Chennai, all of which work for greater social protection for their members; three women's movements, each of which has local groups and works, in somewhat different ways, for women's rights; and the *Tamil Nadu Science Forum*, described as 'a voluntary organisation started by students and scientists' that now works in villages and schools across the state in science communication, education, health, literacy and women's empowerment (sought through the common means of setting up women's savings groups). All of these eight movements are aligned politically with the left, though only two of them have formal connections with the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Another movement in the sample, on the other hand, is *Seva Bharathi*, the service organisation of the RSS, which mobilises volunteers for social work. It was, for example, active in tsunami relief from within a few hours of the event and in late January had, reportedly, 4500 volunteers working in tsunami affected areas of the state. Seva Bharathi also runs tuition centres in slum areas of Chennai that are very much like those set up by numbers of NGOs and run coaching classes in the evenings for school drop-outs, and tailoring and computer classes. But they also have 'cultural programmes' aimed at inculcating the values of Hindu nationalism. There is finally the *Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers' Federation*, which appears now to be less of a 'federation' than an organisation of a number of Dalits who are in low level positions in government service and who aim to work for housing rights of slum dwellers and for the provision of better sanitation. It bears only a very pale resemblance to the National Slum Dwellers' Foundation (NSDF), as this has been described by Appadurai (2004) in his work on Mumbai, even though the president of the Tamil Nadu association is now also the president of the NSDF.

Amongst the civil associations in the network the largest category is that of the ***Non-profit service providers***, many of which would commonly be described as 'NGOs'. Three of them are small charitable trusts set up by individuals to provide, variously, a short stay centre for people living with HIV who are taking treatment in Tambaram, south of the city; an old people's home, and scholarships for 'deserving students'; and a residential home 'for destitute mentally challenged and spastic children'. The first of these has been set up by a professional social worker; the second by a successful young businessman who 'decided to form [his] trust after he successfully merged his

company to a multinational corporation' (according to his own publicity material); the third was established by a young man who describes himself as a '23 years old social entrepreneur' who has qualifications in the care of mentally challenged children. His organisation has been run on a shoe-string, through sponsorships, though it is now starting to receive funding from Lions clubs and some other organisations, as well as from individuals. Probably the oldest of these kinds of charitable trusts is the Madras Society for the Protection of Children, started in 1908 by Dr Varadappa Naidu, and subsequently presided over initially by Governors of Madras and later by Governors of the state of Tamil Nadu, whilst judges of the High Court have served successively as its Chairmen. The Society now runs an orphanage, a children's home and a school for children with special needs.

These charitable trusts have no kind of mobilisational activity, whereas many of the more regular service providing 'NGOs' do aim to organise their beneficiaries as well. The currently popular way of doing this is through the organisation of women's self-help groups – an idea initiated, according to the report of one of the NGOs, by the Government of Tamil Nadu under the leadership of the present Chief Minister, J.Jayalalitha. Certainly self-help groups have mushroomed across the city and the state of Tamil Nadu in recent years (there are now 190 000 across the state and 4475 in Chennai, according to the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Women's Development), promoted by the government (through the TNCWD), with the active involvement of service-providing NGOs. Self-help groups (SHGs) are groups of 15-20 women who contribute regular savings and who are assisted in obtaining loans for setting up different kinds of productive activities – such as bottling and selling phenyl and other domestic detergents, making fruit juices or pickles or snack foods, doing embroidery, or making decorative ornaments for sale. The NGOs employ coordinators who animate the formation of groups and who help women to open bank accounts and obtain loans from the TNCWD. They may organise training (sometimes one woman from a group teaches others) and TNCWD also teaches 'entrepreneurial skills' (rather basic ideas about profit and loss and simple accounting). It is argued that the fact that the weekly meetings of each SHG are minuted by them, and that the minutes have to be signed by each of the members is an important step for many of these women, to becoming conscious of themselves as independent actors. There is a good deal of controversy about the SHG movement, with there being widespread – and probably

justified - concern about the sustainability of many of the income-generating activities in which women are being encouraged to engage, and – especially on the left – the recognition that involvement in SHGs may divert women from participation in political movements. The SHG movement has been criticised on these grounds by the national leadership of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). Leaders of AIDWA in Chennai, however, now say that they 'appreciate' the SHG movement, recognising that it achieves '25%' of their own purpose, through bringing women into public space as, for example through their opening of their own bank accounts and their participation in minuted weekly meetings. AIDWA has itself now organised around 400 SHGs in the State, including about 25 groups each in North Madras and South Chennai, and is running district level conventions, with NGOs, to consider problems relating to SHGs – including the demand that government should purchase a certain share of SHG output. My own observations of women in and from SHGs in different parts of the city certainly suggested that they are instrumental in increasing women's confidence, and that they may have the effect – in women's own estimations – of making them more independent of their husbands.

Seven of the service providers in the network sample are very active in organising SHGs, in partnership with the TNCWD. Otherwise common activities undertaken by the service providers are: provision of crèches, night schools to enable working children and school drop-outs to take their education further, transit schools intended to get working children, or in one case children with disabilities, back into mainstream education, tailoring classes and computer classes. Combinations of these activities may be described as 'community development' programmes, or in some cases it is only 'organising SHGs' that appears under the rubric of 'community development services in slums'. A glance through the pages of *Sahaya* shows that there are large numbers of organisations that run crèches or balwadis for children, coaching classes or night schools, 'vocational training' (usually tailoring and often the use of computers), supplemented with some health services – health check-ups and health training. There are other more specialised organisations working in the health sector and some specifically with HIV affected people.

The ***advocacy NGOs*** work variously in the fields of human rights, labour rights, women's affairs, consumer affairs and citizenship and governance. Though all are led

by well educated, middle class professionals, and they (with the exception of one association that is rather a one-man band) employ teams of technically qualified staff, they do differ according to whether they are prepared to work in partnership with government or not. They engage in research, produce publications of different kinds to inform citizens, and they conduct public meetings – but they do not, on the whole, engage in mobilisational work.

Amongst the associations that may be best described as *service and advocacy organisations*, apart from *Exnora International* and *INTACH*, both described briefly above, there are two NGOs working with street and working children, and providing services for them, but which are also very active in advocacy work through the Tamil Nadu NGO Forum for Street and Working Children, which includes amongst its objectives the goal of ensuring 'implementation of the Juvenile Justice Act 2000 for care and protection of the urban child'. The fifth organisation in this group is the South Indian Aids Action Programme (SIAAP), set up originally with the objective of 'getting information and resources to people in India to protect themselves from an HIV infection, and treating affected people with respect and care'. SIAAP has some service functions but is now focussed more on its advocacy roles.

The Chronology of the Development of Civil and Social Associations

As the table shows, few of the associations were started before the 1980s, and more than half have been started since 1990. In spite of the fact that we have no means of knowing about the rate at which associations are closed down (or more likely, fade away – as the Tamil Nadu Peoples Forum for Social Development has done), it is probably reasonable enough to conclude, from the accounts that are given by those involved, and from analysis of the ages of associations that are part of CIOSA, or (less clearly so - see Table 1) of those listed in *Sahaya*[11], that there has been an acceleration in the rate of establishment of non-profit service providers (of the kind

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[11] The *Sahaya* list includes quite a large number of old service organisations. It also shows fairly steady growth in numbers of organisations through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, rather than a pronounced 'take off' in the 1990s. The organisations that have been started in the 1990s are, however, the kinds of NGO service providers described in the text.

described above as 'NGO service providers' rather than the charitable trusts) in the 1990s. This has been driven in part by the availability of more funding from foreign donors in this time – and it is said (by PUCL), though I have not been able to corroborate the statement, that Tamil Nadu in general, including Chennai, has attracted relatively more such funding than any other part of the country. 'Now', one observer said, 'Chennai has an NGO on every corner'. Fifteen of the 19 service providers, five of the seven advocacy NGOs, and four out of the five advocacy and service associations receive significant foreign funding; and it is claimed by some activists, who are critical of this trend, that foreign funders dictate the associations' agendas. It does indeed appear to be the case that the particular interests of donors in child rights and children's issues in general, and in HIV/Aids, have exercised a significant influence on NGO activities. But in fact the agendas of almost half of the service providers seem to have been dictated more significantly by the state government, because they supply services to the state, and the Tamil Nadu Women's Development Corporation in particular, for the organisation of women's self-help groups. What we seem to observe, therefore, is not so much the effect of globalisation – though more donor funding has been arriving in the period of economic liberalisation – as the impact of the encouragement that neo-liberal thinking has given to the idea of partnership between state and civil associations. But the fact remains that there is fierce criticism, from amongst some of the associations, both civil and social, of 'NGOs' – and resistance to being described as such – because of what is perceived as the way in which NGO agendas are dictated from outside, and because of their failure really to engage with and to mobilise people.

Whereas there are some old-established service providers (like the Guild of Service, started in 1923), as well as those of more recent origin, advocacy NGOs have evidently developed since Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1975-77. The consumer movement started in the early-mid 1980s, women's organisations, organisations promoting the rights of unorganised sector workers and environmental organisations developed especially in the 1980s, while associations concerned with issues of governance and of citizenship, and with human rights, have taken off especially in the 1990s. It is noticeable that the mobilisational movements mostly have their origins in the period after the Emergency in the 1970s, and in the 1980s. The one movement in the network sample that is shown as having started in the 1990s is the PUCL which,

more accurately, was re-launched in Chennai in 1991. Only the Unorganised Workers' Federation is of recent creation amongst the movements – and it is a development based on the much older construction workers' union, first established in 1979. The numbers in the sample are too small to allow a firm conclusion, but the possibility that the movement activism of the 1970s and 1980s, itself a response to the Emergency and the demarche of the old left parties, has been at least partially supplanted by advocacy NGOs – also generally funded, as was noted earlier, by foreign agencies - is confirmed in the remarks of some of those who have been active over a long time. The PUCL, in contrast, has sought to retain its movement character and it specifically refuses foreign funding.

The 'Stratification' of Civil and Social Organisations

The final three columns of the Table show what has been referred to as the 'social identities' of the various organisations, as these are given by the social backgrounds of those who have been involved in starting them up, or building them. It is very striking that Brahmins on the one hand, and Christians – in fact mainly Catholics – on the other should be so prominent amongst those who have been the key social entrepreneurs. There is in fact a cluster, mainly of civil, advocacy or service associations, located in South Chennai, organised and led in the main by Brahmin professionals, with overlapping sets of trustees, also mostly Brahmins, and including former senior civil servants, prominent lawyers and other professional people, that is very largely distinct from another significant cluster of civil associations, and including service providers as well as advocacy NGOs, and also mobilisational movements, that is located geographically much more in North Madras and organised and led especially by Christians. The former cluster is led entirely by middle class activists, and most of the organisations in the second are also led by middle class activists, albeit from a different, less wealthy, less-propertied fraction of the middle class. The fact that only one of the interviews took place almost entirely in Tamil is an indication of the extent of cultural capital disposed of by these social activists. Several others were conducted in Tamil (as with the *Penn Urimai Iyyakkam* – Women's Rights Movement) but with the knowledge that the original organisers were middle class activists

The distinction between these clusters was brought home to me by a particular experience. My earliest encounters were with associations in what I might label 'the South Chennai Brahmin cluster', and I had heard from several of them of another of the human rights advocacy organisations (I will call it 'Organisation X'), though it was only ever rather casually mentioned and was not represented by any of my informants as being a particularly significant organisation. Nobody gave me a contact number for its director and in the end I looked up his number in the phone book. Whilst I waited for him, sitting in his office, I glanced through a recent copy of *Economic and Political Weekly*, and saw in it a mention of another, apparently active rights advocacy organisation ('Organisation Y') in Chennai. Since I had by this time been pursuing my snowball sample very actively for well over a month I was quite shocked that I had not till then heard mention of 'Organisation Y'. I asked about it, therefore, from the director of 'Organisation X' when I met him, and he explained that he was himself active in 'Organisation Y'. Through him, the next day, I then met the director of 'Organisation Y'. Both men are Catholics and share a common background at Loyola College and in the All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF). 'Organisation Y' is in fact a forum or network of 17 organisations, from across Tamil Nadu, all of them led by Christians. When I explained to the director of Organisation Y that I felt very chastened because it had taken me so long to encounter him and his activities, he burst out laughing. 'Ah!', he said, 'You are now learning to take a caste perspective on civil society in Chennai!'. The Brahmin and the Christian/Catholic clusters of associations are not entirely separated from each other. Organisation X, in particular, does work with some of the Brahmin-led advocacy NGOs. But it is striking that the Brahmin organisations aren't involved in the work of Organisation Y, even though they are concerned with many of the same issues.

The Director of Organisation Y argues as follows. In the 1970s and 1980s, after the Emergency, in the period of what he refers to as that of 'civil society formation', there were three groups or streams of organisers: those from a Gandhian background ; those who were left oriented, often Brahmins; and those like himself, well-educated and of a Christian background. Very quickly, 'civil society' became splintered and sectarian, with Dalit, tribal and women's groups, and others, separating themselves out and then becoming internally very fractured. When he and his co-workers set up Organisation

Y in 1995 they wanted to try to restore a more unified perspective on social problems. They wanted to take a 'bottom-up' perspective and to link national, gender, caste and social questions. But at the same time civil society was, in a sense becoming 'brahminised'. Donor agencies were putting much more money in, and when they sought local staff as project officers and grant administrators they found them disproportionately amongst Brahmins because of the Brahmins' common advantage in terms of educational qualifications and cultural capital. He illustrated the point with reference to his own staff. There is a significant connection, in his view, between globalisation in south India and the reinforcement of Brahmin dominance in civil society organisations. The left, he thinks, is also distinctly Brahmin dominated and it is partly for this reason that those of a left orientation are often unable to relate to Dalit struggles, which they think obscure more fundamental class questions; and there is reluctance amongst Dalits to accept, and sometimes resistance to Brahmin leadership, even when that leadership intends to act on behalf of Dalit interests. Organisations like his own, led by Christians, are not necessarily exempt from the same criticism, but at least Dalit leaders – he claims – have picked up on their work, for example regarding Budget allocations for Dalits.

These are the views of one insider, and though I found them to be shared by others as well, I cannot offer independent verification for them. Still, the network that I identified shows a close set of connections between Organisation Y and mobilisational movements (except of course with the RSS linked movements), including the unions and the women's movements, and with the Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement, as well as with many service and service and advocacy NGOs (which are predominantly Christian). There is what seems to be a significant difference, therefore, between the South Chennai Brahmin cluster of associations and the dominantly Christian cluster that includes organisations that actually work *with* people in poor parts of the city, and the relatively few social associations or movements in which poorer people are active participants – those organisations that may be described as being *of* the poor. The former, Brahmin cluster, does not include such organisations. Some of the associations within the Brahmin cluster are concerned with problems relating to citizenship and to problems of governance that surely affect and are of relevance to poorer people, but they principally address middle class interests. Exnora International provides an important example that makes the point. I

see no reason to doubt that the leadership of Exnora does wish to extend the work of the organisation into slums and poorer parts of the city, and that it takes very seriously its stated mission of 'taking back governance' [to/ by or on the part of]] ordinary citizens. But the organisation has its origins in the idea that for India to become truly developed public cleanliness has to be improved – a classic concern of the middle classes, not only in India, and associated elsewhere, and sometimes in Chennai, with slum clearance campaigns that are intended to modernise and to 'beautify' cities. In Bangalore, it has been argued (Narayanan 2005), there is also a very distinct upper stratum of associations, intimately involved with the Bangalore Agenda Task Force that has had the aim of creating a truly 'global' city – a stratum of associations that use the language of citizenship very deliberately but in their practice very largely ignore the majority of the city's residents who are in effect only 'denizens'. They are associations that readily enter into partnerships with government authorities, in contrast with the organisations actually *of* the urban poor, with which they have little connection, and which relate to government in an oppositional rather than a partnership mode. The upper stratum of associations, which are highly professional, and have been organised by a relatively small group of highly educated professional people, some of them returned NRIs, have also been very much concerned with the problems of the urban environment, but – as Janaki Nair has shown - with 'Roads, rather than public transport; garbage and pollution, rather than public housing; mosquitoes and public toilets rather than public health' (Nair 2005, p.336). Nair continues: 'Other studies that have been undertaken of how different sections of the city prioritise their municipal problems reveal altogether different concerns: they include, importantly, concerns about the availability of water, the existence of job opportunities in poor neighbourhoods, and an overwhelming anxiety to claim citizenship and voting rights by getting onto the voters' lists. The last was seen in many cases as critical to the survival of the poorest groups in the city, as politics is often the only resource in a system which may deny the benefits of policy decisions or legal remedies to the poor' (2005, p.336-7)

Nair in fact concludes her study of Bangalore with the argument that 'the city has become the ground on which broadly two contending forces stake their claim: on the one hand are the newly renovated citizens, who are amply aided by a technocratic vision of change offered by the leaders of the new economy. On the other hand are

those, including citizens-in-the-making such as women, for whom democracy has come to have a different meaning in the urban setting' (Nair 2005, p.347). This account of Bangalore corresponds quite closely with the distinctions that I have observed in Chennai, though I believe that the evidence that I have suggests a more nuanced picture. After all, there are associations in my South Chennai Brahmin Cluster that are concerned with citizenship, voters' rights and the maintenance of the electoral rolls; and even the SHG movement has ambivalent implications. In part it seems, in a sense, to buy women off with very modest resources; but in so far as it does bring them into public spaces and help them to acquire a greater sense of their own agency, then it contributes to their becoming citizens, rather than just denizens of the city.

But there is an important distinction between the South Chennai network of organisations for and of 'citizens' – even if the concept of citizenship, for them, tends to be regarded in terms of the rights of consumers – and the 'North Madras' Christian network, in which there are not only organisations that work with the urban poor, like the service providing NGOs, but also the mobilisational movements – the most notable of them actually being women's organisations. The *Penn Urimai Iyyakkam*, in particular, though started initially by four middle class women – a teacher of physics, two other academics, and a lawyer – is an organisation of poor women. The group whom I met included two women with no education at all, one with education to 9th standard and one with SSLC. The husband of one is a day labourer, and that of another a watchman. The other two were victims of domestic violence and had been deserted by their husbands. They are all members of the Committee of an organisation with about 7000 members in Chennai and 10 000 in the state, that aims to fight for women's rights, campaigns on violence against women, provides legal aid and counselling services, and – most importantly, for those women with whom I spoke – fights to secure housing rights and basic services for women living in slums. It is a constituent member, as noted earlier, of the Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement, and both through this formal connection, and through the central involvement in both associations of the same leading women's rights campaigners, the *Penn Urimai Iyyakka*m is also closely connected with the mobilisation of informal sector workers by the *Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangh* (the construction workers' union, founded in 1979) and now with the more recently formed Unorganised

Workers' Federation. The Federation links unions of domestic workers, construction workers, scavengers, tailors, gem cutters, vendors, agricultural labourers, handloom weavers and, latterly, fish workers, and (reportedly) it joins together about one lakh (100 000) people across Tamil Nadu. Its objectives are to campaign for the rights of unorganised sector workers – including those that have been formally legislated for already by the Government of Tamil Nadu, but not fully implemented - and against globalisation (on the grounds that liberalisation and globalisation harm the livelihoods of poor workers)[12]. The close links of these organisations – the women's rights movement and those for unorganised workers, depending partly on their overlapping leadership - reflect their common position that housing rights and rights to livelihood are intimately connected. The priorities of these movements of the urban poor are clearly different from those of the citizen-consumer advocacy associations of South Chennai, and their modes of action are also very clearly contrasted.

The women's movements in many ways seem to supply the backbone of the mobilisations of the urban poor in Chennai. In addition to the *Penn Urimai Iyyakam*, there are in different slum areas of the city groups organised by Mahila Milan (the women's organisation described by Arjun Appadurai as one of the three constituents of the coalition in Mumbai that he argues has had an important impact in creating a 'culture of aspiration' amongst poor people there: Appadurai 2004) – though it appeared from the information I was given that Mahila Milan has fewer groups now than before, perhaps because of competition from the quasi-governmental SHGs. More significantly, and sometimes allied with *Penn Urimai Iyyakkam*, there is the CPM-linked All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). AIDWA has 460 000 members in the state, and 66 000 in Chennai, including 45 000 in North Madras and 21 000 in South Madras. (By way of comparison it was reported that the CPM has 90 000 members in the state including 11 000 women). Eighty to ninety per cent of the AIDWA membership is described as being of poor and working class women – in North Madras almost entirely of working women, while in South Chennai only about half the membership is of working women. The local leadership in North Madras,

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[12] See reports in *The Hindu* of 15 March 2005 and 5 May 2005, on demonstrations on job security, wage and pension guarantees for unorganised workers. A model bill has been drawn up, and a rally of about 20 000 people from all over the country took place in New Delhi in May 2005, when a petition was presented to the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, 'seeking inclusion of the right to employment, education and health security as fundamental rights'.

certainly amongst those whom I was able to meet, including one Municipal Councillor, is constituted by women from amongst the urban poor. The movement is said by the State Secretary to be both proactive and reactive. AIDWA picks up local issues such as kerosene distribution in North Madras, drinking water problems, electricity connections, and sometimes housing rights. But the Secretary describes as 'major achievements' work on domestic violence and 'getting women out of the victim syndrome', and now on sexual harassment at work. She concedes that AIDWA has hitherto done least in regard to class issues – to the concerns of women as workers. It is partly for this reason that the movement is not highly regarded by some of those women who are involved in the Unorganised Workers' Federation, who describe themselves as independent socialists, and who criticise AIDWA for its failure to take up the livelihood issues of slum dwellers, which means also addressing the problems of housing rights.

The numbers of women who are organised by *Penn Urimai*, AIDWA and Mahila Milan (never mind the large numbers of women's SHGs) seem to far outweigh the numbers of men from amongst the urban poor, living in slum areas, who are involved in such mobilisational movements. All those involved in the Slum Dwellers' Rights Movement spoke of the difficulty of holding together local organisations of poor people, including men, in slum areas. The Tamil Nadu Slum Dwellers' Federation proved to be unable (I believe, rather than unwilling) to provide any introduction to local slum dwellers' organisations. The professor of social work who provided my third entry point was able to identify five or six slums in which there are, to his knowledge more or less active local organisations. According to him, and to other activists, there are particular mobilisations against evictions but they rarely, if ever, hold together for very long either because of their politicisation by competing political parties, or because of the buying off of leaders by landlords. Exactly as Janaki Nair has said of Bangalore, therefore, politics 'is often the only resource in a system which may deny the benefits of policy decisions or legal remedies to the poor' (cited above). Survey research in Bangalore, and in Delhi (see Harriss 2005) shows that the urban poor are often more active in trying to find solutions to public problems than are members of the middle classes, but that their way of tackling such problems is most commonly mediated by political parties. It seems likely that the same is true of

Chennai, in spite of women's activism through their own movements and organisations.

Associations and Party Politics

The foregoing discussion raises the general question of the connections between civil and social associations in Chennai, and political parties. Apart from AIDWA and the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, with their connections with the CPM, and Seva Bharathi, with its connections within the Sangh Parivar, none of the associations in the network sample have any formal connections with political parties, though a small number of the founders or leaders of associations either have or have had important political connections. These include the organisers of the two significant federations of residents' welfare associations that were encountered, and two of the NGOs that had been started by people with strong party connections. The founders or leaders of several of the more important advocacy NGOs, addressing human rights and social development agendas, in the North Madras 'Christian' network, as well as the leaders of the PUCL, and the leaders of the mobilisational movements (apart from AIDWA and the TNSF) have backgrounds in the broad left movement – though none of them, so far as I am aware, is a now member of one of the left parties.

Whereas it may have been the case, as Narendra Subramanian argues in his study of Tamil politics, that: 'The ascent of the Dravidian parties was accompanied by the growth of formal and informal intermediate associations, such as debating fora, literary societies, reading rooms, film fan clubs and what I call talk shops – public spaces (often small shops) where people regularly gather to gossip, discuss social issues, read newspapers and journals, and read them out loud to others' (1999, p 44), the more formal of these associations, at least, seem much less in evidence now than was the case in the past. This impression gains some confirmation in Ingrid Widlund's study (2000) of the organisation of the Dravidian parties in Madurai, but to affirm or reject the hypothesis calls for more detailed ethnography. All that can be said with confidence is that the networks of civil and social associations that I traced are very largely independent of political parties, and that such connections as the associations

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do have are more likely to be with the left parties, or with the DMK, than with the AIADMK. Few of the associations provide active support to any political parties.

Conclusions: Is there a 'new politics' of civil society?

The sphere of civil and social associations in Chennai is very largely dominated by people from the middle classes. Even those associations in which numbers of the urban poor are mobilised, like *Penn Urimai*, have been established by middle class people, though they may now have leaders from amongst the poor. There is nothing at all surprising in this observation. 'Civil society' is the arena for middle class activism and assertion; and to a significant extent the middle classes engage in such activism whilst the urban poor engage in politics. As the activist cited in the second epigraph put it, the rich *operate* whilst the poor *agitate* – though it should be added that they agitate relatively rarely and then in a rather fragmented way.

There is one set of associations, including advocacy NGOs and certain service and advocacy NGOs, as well as large numbers of local and residents' associations, that uses the language of consumer-citizenship and addresses the interests principally of middle class citizens. These associations commonly enter into implicit or explicit partnerships with government (as the Municipal Commissioner claimed). But they can be effective in acting as public 'watch-dogs', monitoring and checking the actions of government. Their engagement in politics, however, is of the 'anti-politics' kind, involving the attempt to find rational solutions – outside 'the dirty river' - to what are defined as key public problems that have to be addressed in the process of modernising society. When they do address the needs of poor people then they are liable, like their predecessors in the colonial period when they sought to 'uplift' the Depressed Classes, to be seen as imposing brahmanical values.

There is then another set of associations, including some other of the advocacy NGOs – those which use the language of human rights rather than of citizenship, as well as service providers, that addresses the needs of the urban poor. These associations work *for* poor people, rather than being of them, and there is a sense in which, partly through the performances in which they engage, they often seem to treat the people

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for whom they work as 'denizens' rather than as citizens - as people 'to be done unto', through 'dispensing drops of charity' (as one association puts it, in its brochure) rather than as people endowed with the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. This was certainly so in the case of an event for women from SHGs that I witnessed on International Women's Day when women from slums were frankly patronised by the well-intentioned upper middle class leaders of an NGO; and it is an attitude that is reflected in the common assumption of the service providers that tailoring classes are the best means of 'empowering' women. Such civil associations also frequently work with government, and draw part of their funding from government sources. Some of them may be very effective in supplying services – in health care for instance – and either meet needs that are not being met by the state, or supply those needs more effectively than does the state. But they too are engaged in a kind of 'anti-politics'.

The mobilisational movements - which involve women in particular - stand out as being organisations *of* the urban poor. Through their participation in the movements women - like those from *Penn Urimai*, or from AIDWA in North Madras - become 'citizens-in-the-making', as Nair suggests is true of Bangalore too. They are engaged in struggles with the state especially over the linked issues of livelihood and of housing rights. They are explicitly political, whether they have formal connections with a political party or not. Certain of the advocacy NGOs, including those brought together by the Tamil Nadu People's Forum for Social Development, provide some support for these movements.

There are resonances in these descriptions of major differences amongst civil and social associations in Chennai, with the distinction that Partha Chatterjee makes between 'civil society' – his definition of which I quoted earlier – and what he calls 'political society'. His point is this: 'Most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously …rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution. They are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state' (2004: 38). People like the urban poor of Chennai relate to the state (as they do to many NGOs, too) as defined 'populations' – such as that of 'slum-dwellers' – which are the targets of policy and to be controlled by the state. The people who are thus defined take action that is quite often technically illegal – such as squatting on public land - to make claims upon the state for the realisation of what

they believe to be their rights to welfare. This is what Chatterjee refers to as 'political society'. There is a good deal of evidence in this paper that lends support to the idea of the existence of such a 'political society' as distinct from 'civil society'. The associations I studied are part of civil society; and poorer parts of the city do not generally have the same kind of associational life at all. There are some associations, however – mobilisational movements like *Penn Urimai,* and a few identity-based associations - that enter into the sphere of political society. There is no absolute divide between the spheres of civil society and of political society. But it is striking that these movements and associations have almost all been established by people from the political left, even if not from the main left parties. In effect those whom I have described as 'denizens' are indeed *not* regarded as 'proper members of civil society by the institutions of the state' (using Chatterjee's words). They are the objects, the targets of policy, and the evidence of the paper shows that the extent to which they are active participants in 'civil society' through associational activity is constrained. As I have put it, there are few associations that are actually *of* the urban poor.

The activist whom I quoted in the first epigraph to this paper believes in the possibility and the fact of a 'new politics' beyond what he describes as 'the dirty river' of politics. The 'new politics' that is thought to be emerging is based in life-spaces and is built up around local associations, replacing the 'old politics' of political parties and the social movements associated with them. The ideologists of the World Bank referred implicitly to such a politics when they wrote in the *World Development Report* of 1997, that 'In most societies … citizens seek representation of their interests beyond the ballot as taxpayers, as users of public services, and *increasingly as clients or members of NGOs and voluntary associations* (my emphasis: JH). Against a backdrop of competing social demands, rising expectations and variable government performance, these expressions of voice and participation are on the rise' (World Bank 1997, p.113). These trends are clearly in evidence in Chennai – but, it seems very clear, they are largely exclusive in regard to the urban poor, except sometimes as clients for services that are provided by some civil associations. The extent to which the vibrant associational activity of Chennai provides for 'voice and participation' on the part of the urban poor is very limited.

This is not to say that civil society actors have not sometimes been very successful in bringing the problems of poor people to attention – and even in bringing about action to address these problems. This is true of some of the organisations that I have described in Chennai, or of a number of the well organised rights-based campaigns in India, like those that are mobilised around the Right to Food and the Right to Employment, the Peoples Health Movement, the Campaign for the Right to Education, and the Campaign for the Right to Information. But they also are not engaged in mass mobilisation, and are not 'social movements' in the accepted sense of this term. And, as Neera Chandhoke asks, '…can all this substitute for the activity we call politics? …do civil society actors actually represent people?'. She worries that what all this activity connotes is 'the collapse of the idea that ordinary men and women are capable of appropriating the political initiative' (2002: 47). The evidence that I have presented from Chennai suggests, I think, that she is right to be worried, not only in regard to 'global civil society' (the subject of her essay) but also in regard to civil society in general. Poorer people, our evidence shows, may be excluded through the 'new politics', and progressively denied the possibility of engaging in politics as self-realisation. The potential and the possibility of politics, Chandhoke argues, involves 'activity that is empowering inasmuch as, when ordinary people engage in political activity they acquire agency, they recover selfhood, and they earn self-confidence' (2002: 46). The passionate commitment of many poorer people in India to the democratic idea, through all the manifest imperfections of the political parties and their leaders, and in spite of the failures of democracy in regard to the solution of their problems of livelihood and well-being, demonstrates their recognition of these potentials. The vision of participation that is suggested in the statement that I quoted from *WDR 1997*, by contrast, reflects a very stunted view of the meaning of 'representation' because it reduces politics to a market place of buyers (people are presented as customers or clients rather than as citizens) and sellers. It is in this sense that the World Bank discourse, and that of some of the other protagonists of new politics, is anti-political. But it is a vision that is consistent, of course, with the classical liberalism that remains in ascendance in the Bank and elsewhere.

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