Searching for Solidarity in Shrinking Civic Space

The Dalit Human Rights Centre's strategic *cultural turn* in the wake of growing polarization and violence under the Hindu-Nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party*

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'All my life, I have been associated with the Dalit movement. Building up a Dalit people's movement is very, very important. To give the Dalits protection, and courage. To guide them on how to regain their dignity, how to regain their rights. It is through the movement, that we regain our rights. And constantly, this movement, this people's movement, will remind me of my history.'

- Fr. Yesumarian[1]

'

[1] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020.

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Introduction

The Dalits, or 'downtrodden', comprise the bottom rung of India's caste hierarchy. Rooted in Hinduism, the caste system is a millennia old system of social stratification based on inherited status. A traditional practice within the caste system is 'Untouchability', whereby Dalits are considered permanently and ritually polluted in a way that all physical contact with them must be avoided (Waughray, 2010: 328). When India gained independence from the British Empire and became a democratic republic in 1947, citizenship rights were extended to hitherto marginalized groups, among which the Dalits. With the Indian Constitution, the practice of Untouchability became a punishable offense. The 'Untouchables' were reclassified as 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs), referring to a schedule of communities entitled to positive discrimination in order to lift them out of their marginalized position (Gorringe, 2010: 105). Since then, numerous laws strengthening protections and expanding reservations have been provided under pressure from growing numbers of educated Dalits and Dalit activists. This includes reservations in educational institutions, government jobs, and state and national legislatures (Bob, 2007: 172). Nonetheless, though all these measures have helped a small percentage of Dalits gain education, respectable jobs and political power, Dalits in contemporary India still experience widespread stigmatisation, discrimination and violence on grounds of their ascribed hereditary status (Bob, 2007: 173).

Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state of India, differs historically from India's Northern states in terms of caste and social justice. As early as the 1920s, the state saw rise to an anti-upper caste ('anti-Brahmanist') movement, which mobilized around a regional, 'Dravidian' identity rather than on the basis of caste. The Dravidian movement encouraged members to reject upper caste hegemony and advocated a radical social program of caste equality (Gorringe, 2012: 4). Though the movement and later Dravidian political parties did establish the most extensive affirmative action programs for SCs in the country, they soon became monopolized by regionally dominant castes. In this way, the parties ultimately reinforced caste inequalities while maintaining a socially 'progressive' image (Pandian, 1992). As such, while the South has historically distinguished itself from the North due to the absence of Brahmanical hegemony, the extent to which Dalits continue to be marginalized does not differ substantially between Tamil Nadu and the rest of India.

Around the 1980s, Dalits started to respond to sustained marginalization on a national scale and in diverse ways. As affirmative action programs developed, more Dalits became politically aware and dissatisfied with their continued marginalization. In several states, Dalit political

parties have sought power, and especially in the last few decades, grassroots Dalit activism has grown steadily (Bob, 2007: 172). Among numerous activist groups and social movement organizations in Tamil Nadu is the *Dalit Human Rights Centre* (DHRC), which was founded in 1990 by the prominent Dalit activist Fr. Yesumarian. The organization was initially founded as a coordination point for several social movements that engaged in reclaiming illegally occupied Dalit lands. It was also during this time that the Dutch International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) *Mensen met een Missie* began its cooperation with the DHRC. As an international cooperation and solidarity organization, MM is committed to strengthening the capacities of local activist networks in various places around the world. It provides people with the means to tackle deeply rooted problems in society such as ethno-religious conflict, systemic marginalization and gender-based violence (Mensen met een Missie, 2019). The DHRC and MM have a long history of cooperation, especially in the field of Dalit and Adivasi[2] empowerment.

Since the 1990s, the DHRC has focused mainly on empowering Dalit communities on the basis of the ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar – one of the founders of the Constitution of India and a Dalit himself – which can be summarized as 'educate, agitate, organize'. The DHRC has traditionally engaged in awareness-raising campaigns on the constitutional rights and socio-economic entitlements of Dalits and social education on leadership, especially for youths and women. Furthermore, the organization has engaged in protest activities and has traditionally followed a judicial approach based on litigation and advocacy in order to agitate against violence and discrimination against Dalits.[3]

Even though India has historically been the home of many different ethnicities, cultures and religions – among which Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism – the country's political and cultural elite has traditionally been Hindu. Especially since 2014, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi's right-wing populist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) won a landslide victory, the position of Dalits and other minorities in India has deteriorated significantly (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The BJP's political agenda is strongly inspired by *Hindutva*, a political ideology based on the primacy of (higher caste) Hindu culture and values, which is undermining the already precarious position of Dalits (Kim, 2017: 357). The BJP's aim of creating a Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu nation) on the basis of 'one nation, one language, one religion' has most recently manifested itself in the BJP's revocation of Article 370 in the Muslim-

[2] India's indigenous community.
[3] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 08/09/2020.

majority Kashmir region, its central ordinance to make Sanskrit a compulsory language in education, and the construction of a Hindu temple on grounds that have been historically contested between Hindus and Muslims. Furthermore, since the ascendance of the BJP, India has seen a significant increase in repression of minority activists. This has been accompanied with an upsurge in communal and caste-based violence throughout the country, particularly against Muslims, Dalits, and India's indigenous communities (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The process described above is not unique and is often referred to within the international civil society community as 'shrinking civic space'. In short, shrinking civic space can be defined as the decreasing practical room for action and manoeuvre for citizens and CSOs (Buyse, 2019: 969). Evidentially, the shrinking of space for minority citizens and civil society actors in India has had repercussions for Dalit activists. Not only do they need to find ways to make the best of the space that is still available, they also need to meaningfully adapt to the changing socio-political environment in order to sustain their relevance and to remain effective (Deo & Hilhorst, 2019). It is thus not surprising that the DHRC, through their partnership with MM, adapted their strategy during this time. It is this strategic redirection that this thesis is about.

Apart from reports by (international) CSOs, little substantial research has been done about the different ways in which Dalits activists have strategically adapted to the new socio-political situation in India, nor has there been a substantial academic debate on minority activism within democracies with shrinking civic space more generally. Yet insight into this matter is of academic and societal significance. The last decade has seen a steady increase in established democracies turning towards repressive methods and nationalist rhetoric as a political strategy. In order to better understand the (often covert) dynamics through which governments are able to oppress minorities within seemingly democratic states, more research needs to be conducted on this subject. Furthermore, the findings in this thesis can provide civil society actors in positions similar to Dalit activists with answers on how to adapt to and hopefully push back against these increasingly grim circumstances. Thirdly, given the close partnership between the DHRC and MM, an investigation into the DHRC's process of strategic change inevitably leads to questions about the role of Western cooperation organizations in countering shrinking civic space, their agenda, and the ways in which they negotiate strategic decisions with 'local' actors. An understanding of this organizational dynamic is important, especially in the context of increased hostility towards activists (and hence, their international partners) within newly emerging illiberal democracies.

The proposed research thus aims to fill the gaps identified in the literature on Dalit activists, as well as on activists in shrinking civic space in general, by focusing on the role of both external and inter-organizational dynamics in the DHRC's strategic considerations. I thereby aim to contribute to the theoretical debate on social movements by focusing on strategic change, as well as on the way in which activists' perceptions, experiences and emotions inform their strategic decisions. Additionally, the specific case of the DHRC is theoretically significant as it provides the opportunity to examine the claims and tactics of a social movement organization that does not focus exclusively on the state or the polity. In this thesis, an answer will be formulated to the following research puzzle statement:

How have the members of the Dalit Human Rights Centre*, through their partnership with the Dutch INGO* Mensen met een Missie*, made strategic choices during their period of strategic reflection between 2018-2020, in the wake of shrinking civic space in India, which has been exacerbated since the ascendance of the right-wing Hindu-nationalist* Bharatiya Janata Party *in 2014?*

In order to answer the research question, the thesis will be divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, the most relevant voices within the theoretical debate on contentious collective action will be reviewed and the current status of theoretical knowledge on the subject will be outlined. Subsequently, I will explain my choice for the analytical framework that will be used as the basis for this thesis. Lastly, I will elaborate on the proposed theoretical contributions this thesis aims to make to this framework.

After the theoretical framework has been outlined, the second chapter will revolve around the current developments with regard to shrinking civic space in Tamil Nadu. The question that will be answered in this chapter is as follows: What constraints have the DHRC and similar Dalit rights organizations in Tamil Nadu faced in the wake of shrinking civic space in Tamil Nadu since 2014? In order to understand the most recent changes in the socio-political environment in Tamil Nadu, as well as the activists' grievances and their limited capacities for change, it is first necessary to examine the more structural social position of Dalits and the lived reality of this situation. After that, the concept of shrinking civic space will be unpacked, followed by an examination of the ways in which Dalit activists have experienced concrete constraints and challenges as a result of shrinking civic space.

Building on the results from chapter 2, the next chapter will go deeper into the strategic choices that the DHRC has made in the wake of the socio-political changes in Tamil Nadu. The

chapter will provide an answer to the following two interrelated questions: How and why has the DHRC changed its claims during their period of strategic reflection between 2018 and 2020 in the wake of shrinking civic space in Tamil Nadu? And what was the role of MM in this strategic redirection? The chapter will first elaborate on the DHRC's original formulation of their claims, followed by an analysis of how and to what extent these claims have been strategically altered. Moreover, in order to fully grasp the DHRC's reasoning behind their recent strategic choices, it is important to understand their perception on different forms of authority and the ways in which these forms can be challenged in order to achieve 'social change'. Lastly, the chapter will dive deeper into the period of strategic reflection. I aim to examine how the changes in the organization's claims are not only related to their external environment, but also to dynamics within the movement community. Crucial here is the role of MM in the DHRC's process of strategic redirection.

The last chapter will focus on the consecutive changes in the DHRC's tactics or forms of collective action, thereby answering the following questions: How has the DHRC changed its tactics in the wake of shrinking civic space and following the re-articulation of the organization's claims between 2018 and 2020? What was the role of MM in developing these tactics? This chapter will delve deeper into the form of the tactics itself and the ways in which these tactics are intended by the members of the DHRC to press their newly articulated claims. Lastly, similar to the previous one, this chapter will provide insight into the role of MM in the DHRC's process of tactical redirection.

In the concluding chapter, a summary of the findings will be presented. I will provide a comprehensive answer to the central research question, while also reflecting on the findings of this thesis on a more general and conceptual level. The chapter closes with some suggestions for further research.

Methodology

In this section, I will first elaborate shortly on the epistemological and ontological vantage points of the research project. After that, I will discuss the methodology of this thesis in terms of the different phases of the research and the data collection techniques that have been employed, as well as the connection between the chosen research methods and the ontological and epistemological stances. I will then shortly discuss the ethics and the limitations of this research. The methods described in this chapter have been used to provide an answer to the following sub-questions:

1. What constraints have the DHRC and similar Dalit rights organizations in Tamil Nadu faced in the wake of shrinking civic space in Tamil Nadu since 2014?
2. How and why has the DHRC changed its claims during their period of strategic reflection between 2018 and 2020 in the wake of shrinking civic space in Tamil Nadu? What was the role of MM in this strategic redirection?
3. How has the DHRC changed its tactics in the wake of shrinking civic space and following the re-articulation of the organization's claims between 2018 and 2020? What was the role of MM in developing these tactics?

This thesis, its puzzle statement, sub-questions and underlying analytical framework, are all clearly focused on '*how decisions* are *made,* by what individuals or small groups, and via what processes' (Jasper, 2017: 297). This thesis thus aims to uncover, above all, 'agency, choices, dilemmas and contingency' (Jasper & Volpi, 2017: 23). Furthermore, the framework also underlines the importance of interaction. It accounts for the fact that multiple players involved in the work of social movements – ranging from different actors internal to a movement to external state- and non-state actors – redefine and shape each other's goals and strategies (Jasper, 2019: 3). Hence, this thesis departs from a post-structuralist, action-oriented ontology, while simultaneously acknowledging the important ways in which relations and interactions shape and create meaning (Mason, 2017: 5-8). Furthermore, contrary to how action (or strategy) is generally studied, namely through more explanatory models based on rational choice, this thesis adheres to an interpretative epistemological stance. This means that I aim to uncover how decisions and choices are made by looking at how actors interpret and experience the world

through their context-specific belief- and value systems (Mason, 2017: 8). In line with an interpretivist epistemology, the research strategy of the proposal is of a qualitative nature.

During the first phase of the research, it was aimed to provide a documentation of the ways in which DHRC has chosen to channel contention, before examining their actual strategic decisions. Hence, this period can be seen as preliminary work in order to be able to answer sub-questions 2 and 3. In order to do so, a comprehensive oversight of the DHRC's most important events and performances throughout six years was constructed. Given that this part of the research is not so much about probing subtle mental representations and more on documenting events and performances, data was generated through content analysis. Content analysis looks at 'publicly expressed meanings' by analysing documents, written texts and spoken words and practices (Benford, 1997: 419; Jasper, 2010b: 97). This data collection technique is, above all, useful in painting a broad, overall picture and in tracking change and development (Bowen, 2009: 27). Documents that were used were procedural documents and program proposals on the activities of DHRC that are held by both DHRC and MM, online resources, and various news reports on the activities of the DHRC.

The second phase of the research was meant to revolve around exploring and describing the experiences of the members of the DHRC with democratic decline and shrinking civic space and their interactions with state and non-state actors between 2014 and 2020. Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020, followed by a global lockdown, it was not possible to conduct interviews in person, nor was it realistic to conduct field research on location. Luckily, it was possible to conduct online interviews with Yesumarian, the director of the DHRC, and Mr. Ambrose Christy, the local coordinator of MM's partners in India, who has been working closely with the DHRC for many years (hereafter considered as 'member of DHRC'). In order to triangulate the interviews with Yesumarian and Christy, I conducted additional online interviews with (Tamil) Dalit activists and human rights defenders whom I considered to be similar to the DHRC in terms of ideology and methodology. Hence, the findings presented within the second chapter of this thesis, which revolves around the first sub-question, are based on the experiences of a broader group of interviewees beyond the members of the DHRC. However, throughout the chapter, I have made sure to take the experiences of the members of the DHRC as the central vantage point and to use the additional interviews as complementary to their experiences. An oversight of the conducted interviews can be found in the appendix of this thesis.

In line with Jasper's opposition towards a structuralist conception of 'the state' or the 'external environment' of a social movement, I focused on tracing concrete interactions

between Dalit activists and (non-)state actors and the way in which they 'jostled with one another across different boundaries' (Jasper, 2010b: 974). In doing so, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured (online) interviews, since these are most adequate in uncovering understandings, interpretations, experiences and interactions (Mason, 2017: 111). In this way, this research method is aligned with both the ontological and epistemological vantage point of this thesis, as it is used to gain an understanding about the ways in which people make sense of the world through inquiring about their personal experiences. Central to the interviews were the activists' experiences with concrete confrontations and events that can be linked to the characteristics of shrinking civic space, as interviews are most effective when talking through 'specific experiences' and 'events and situations which have taken place in [people's] lives' rather than by simply asking abstract and general questions (Ibid, 112). As a means of further triangulation, the interviews have been complemented by a document analysis of secondary sources, consisting of both academic and non-academic sources (e.g. reports by local monitoring NGOs, (local) news sources, reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, etc.).

During the third phase of the 'field' research, which revolved around sub-questions 2 and 3, I aimed to explore how the members of the DHRC strategically responded to the perceived constraints in terms of claims and tactics and related dilemmas during their period of strategic reflection between 2018 and 2020. During this phase, I conducted the previously mentioned two in-depth interviews with Christy and Yesumarian together and two with Yesumarian alone. The interviews also revolved around discussing several standardized dilemmas, which are provided by Jasper. Given the fact that these dilemmas are 'inductively derived (..) from empirical research' (Jasper, 2004: 13), I made sure that the dilemmas chosen from Jasper's standardized list were relevant in the context of the experiences of the DHRC. During the interviews, the members of the DHRC were asked whether they perceived these as dilemmas and why they reacted to them the way they did.

During the last phase, I categorized and coded the accumulated data into theoretical concepts and themes and I indicated whether and what kind of data was still missing in order to adequately answer all the sub-questions. Something which I assumed beforehand and which was also much discussed during the interviews with Christy and Yesumarian was the crucial role of MM in the DHRC's process of strategic redirection. As such, I decided to conduct an additional interview with Kees Schilder, who was MM's Program Director for India until 2019, during the last phase of the research. I also had informal conversations with Ton Groeneweg, the current Program Director, through e-mail. Through these conversations, it was aimed to

further tease out the role of MM in the rearticulation of DHRC's strategy and to bring to light the perspective and agenda of MM alongside the DHRC.

With regard to the ethical dimension of the research, I have made sure that I had obtained the informed consent of my interviewees by notifying them about the goals of the research project and the general content of the interview beforehand. I also made sure to ask for permission to cite them in my thesis and to publish their views in the form of a Master's thesis. However, as Murphy & Dingwall (2001: 342) rightly state, ethics in ethnographic work extends beyond consent forms and often depends more on the moral sense of the researcher and their ability to make moral judgements. As such, during the interviews, I emphasized that the interviewees could always object to answering certain questions or decide that some answers should be deemed 'off the record'. Throughout the writing process, I have tried, in good conscience, to stay as close to the original material as possible by keeping in mind the context in which certain remarks or statements were made. Given the sensitivity of the information and the government's increasing hostility towards minority activists, I initially had doubts about addressing the role of state and semi-state actors in oppressing marginalized communities. However, after I had informed my participants about these topics, all expressed eagerness to share their experiences as a way of increasing (international) awareness for the Dalit issue. Keeping in mind that my informants are activists who are familiar with raising politically and socially sensitive issues, I felt safe to conclude that their choice to share their experiences and to be vocal about human rights issues despite possible negative effects was a conscious decision and that the possibility of these negative effects was well-considered. Hence, I decided that publishing my informants' views and experiences is justified as long as the primary function of this research is to bring awareness to, as well as enhance public knowledge on repressive methods of democracies and the ways in which civil society organizations can adapt to these methods.

Lastly, as for the limitations of this research, the worldwide COVID-19 lockdown created a situation in which important dimensions of field research – making personal observations and being a participant – were no longer possible. In order to adequately compensate for these limitations, it was all the more crucial to provide triangulation, which I explained earlier in this chapter. Considering the possible limitations due to the language barrier, I made sure to keep questions as concrete and as close-to-the-ground as possible, which could be answered by the participants in their own words. Furthermore, I tried to minimize the potential effects of my position as an 'outsider' by making sure I was well-read and well-informed before conducting the interviews as a way of showing my serious dedication to the subject. Nonetheless, my

relationship to a Western donor organization, coupled with the increasing anti-Western sentiment within India’s governmental arenas, could still have been a reason for some informants to withhold certain (sensitive) information.

Chapter 1 | Theoretical framework

Being a student of conflict – or a student in any academic field, really – means standing on the shoulders of giants. In our quest of making sense of our complex and sometimes confusing empirical observations, these ‘giants’ offer us the analytical and conceptual frameworks to make sense of it all. In reference to Lund (2014), analytical frames aide and even force us to answer some important questions: What is my empirical phenomenon actually a case of, in a more general and abstract sense? What exactly do these abstract concepts help me to understand better about my empirical observation? And, *vice versa*: what can my specific empirical case add to the related theoretical discussion?

Before I am able to answer these questions, it is first necessary to evaluate and ultimately decide which analytical concepts and frames make *most sense* in relation to my concerned empirical phenomenon (Ibid.). This first chapter is meant to do exactly that; to review the existing theories related to my empirical case and to determine which analytical concepts and frames ultimately help me to make sense of my case the most. This not only involves weighing different theoretical perspectives, but also showing how these theories – including the chosen analytical framework – have evolved from and built on its theoretical predecessors. Hence, throughout the chapter, I will outline several relevant theoretical perspectives, followed by the most important points of critique and my own reflections on the applicability of the different theoretical angles. Subsequently, I will explain my choice for the chosen analytical framework, after which I will go further into the most important concepts within the framework, which will be used as the building blocks for this thesis. Lastly, I will argue how my research will further add to the existing theoretical debate.

Political process theory and contentious politics

It can be said that, on a more conceptual level, inquiring about the strategic choices made by Dalit activists in India means asking questions about the ways in which activists make collective attempts to challenge their position of structural and political marginalization (Demmers, 2017: 92). Questions similar to these have often been studied from the perspective of social movement theory, which emerged in the 1960s as a reaction to the significant growth in movement activity. During this time, scholars started to move beyond the dominant belief that major forms of collective action were simply ‘irrational’ towards a conception of social movements as intentional and strategic entities (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009: 17). From the 1960s

onwards, two broad paradigms of social movement theory can be discerned, both of which grapple with the phenomenon of collective action in a distinct way. While the approach known as resource mobilization focuses mainly on individual motivation and strategy, thereby clearly building on rational-choice theory, other scholars concerned themselves more with examining the structural foundations of collective action (Demmers, 2017: 92).

One of the most notable approaches within the structuralist tradition is political process theory (PPT). Since its emergence almost half a century ago, PPT has heavily dominated the field of social movement research by 'powerfully shaping its conceptual landscape, theoretical discourse, and research agenda' (Jasper, 1999: 28). Influenced by Marxism, PPT is a macro-sociological theory that was developed to explain in particular the emergence and organization of labor and civil rights movements (Jasper, 2010b: 966). In doing so, the founding fathers of this approach – Charles Tilly, Sydney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam – focused primarily on the conditions and mechanisms that produce, encourage, and sustain contentious collective action (Tarrow, 2011: 22). Central to this approach is the underlying conviction that 'social movements […] are shaped by the broader set of political constraints and opportunities unique to the national context in which they are embedded' (McAdam et al., 1996: 3), thereby revealing the strong structuralist undertones of the approach.

Given the important role of the socio-political environment in shaping the strategies of the members of the DHRC, PPT might seem fitting because it involves changes in opportunities of a regime as important contextual factors. However, in this chapter, I argue that the political process model, along with the structuralist paradigm on which it is built, is inadequate in examining and understanding my empirical case. As will be shown, the narrow focus of PPT scholars on class-inspired movements aimed at 'political' change is problematic for the study of social movements. Furthermore, it insufficiently addresses the agency and lived reality of the Dalit activists in relation to their political environment. Not surprisingly, an important contemporary critique on PPT and other structuralist models is that social movement theory should be concerned with how individuals and groups perceive and interpret certain external conditions rather than with these conditions themselves, thereby prioritizing the cognitive, ideational and affective roots of contention (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009: 18-19). Nonetheless, it is important to examine its major conceptual building blocks, since it forms a clear conceptual starting point from which later critiques are built, including the analytic framework that is chosen for this research.

First of all, the political process model centers around explaining the mechanisms and processes underlying what Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 7) call 'contentious politics', which can be

defined as 'interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as target, initiators of claims, or third parties'. When broken down into its constituent concepts, contentious politics consists of three features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics (Ibid, 8). *Contention* involves making claims that bear on someone else's interests or well-being. *Collective action* means coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs. These collective efforts of claims-making become *political* when actors interact with agents of governments, either dealing with them directly or engaging in activities bearing on governmental rights, regulations and interests (Ibid.) As such, contentious politics always puts at risk, however slightly, the advantaged position of those who are currently in governmental power (Ibid.).

It is important to clarify here that not all contentious politics takes place in the form of social movements. Rather, contentious politics places social movements in the context of a wider variety of struggles, which include civil wars, insurgencies, and other broader forms of contention (Tarrow, 2014: 5). According to Tilly (1999: 260), social movements engage in 'sustained challenges to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders.' Movement campaigns thereby focus on changing or abolishing particular laws or policies and usually disassemble when those are implemented or overturned (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: 15). My point here is that, even though Tilly and Tarrow (Ibid, 9) acknowledge that much of contentious collective action takes place outside the realm of politics, their definition of social movements covers only those collective efforts that fall within the realm of contentious politics. In other words, their definition of social movements focuses exclusively on policy change through contentious interaction with the state. As I will argue later in this chapter, this narrow conceptualization of social movements is problematic when it comes to analysing the strategic decisions of Dalit activists. However, in order to elucidate this claim, it is first necessary to further elaborate on the most important building blocks of the political process model, its ultimate goal, and the questions that it helps to answer.

PPT is a political-structural approach to social movements and contentious politics, which aims to provide an explanation for the emergence of a particular movement by focusing on changes in the institutional structure or informal power relations of a given national political system (McAdam et al, 1996: 3). Important within the political process approach to social movements is the idea that general features of a regime affect the opportunities and threats impinging on makers of claims, and that changes in those features produce changes in the character of contention (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: 51). This idea is called *political opportunity*

structure. Opportunities in this sense are 'options for collective action, with chances and risks attached to them, which depend on factors outside the mobilizing group' (Koopmans, 2004: 65). In this way, social movements are both influenced by and a response to institutional politics (McAdam et al., 2009: 266). Political opportunity structure includes six properties of a regime.[4] According to PTT's founding fathers, these political opportunities are *objective* factors, though they later acknowledged that opportunities may or may not be *perceived* by challengers (Ibid, 264). The opportunities of opening or closing political space can range from stable structures that are deeply embedded in political institutions, to more volatile properties, such as events, policies, or even political actors (Gamson & Meyer, 1996: 277). Especially the latter are at the heart of the political process model, since these properties are most subjected to change, thereby creating clear 'windows of opportunity' for activists (Ibid, 277-8).

Closely related to political opportunity structures are the consecutive forms of contention that political actors use in order to make collective claims, which Tilly and Tarrow (2015: 236) call *contentious performances.* As has been shown, the availability and forms of these performances are dependent on the presence (or absence) of political opportunities within a given national political context. Hence, the actual forms of collective action through which activists can press their claims are constrained and limited to relatively stable sets of potential ways of acting, better known as *repertoires of contention* (Ibid, 49; Tilly, 2003). Though scholars have later critiqued this overly structuralist conception of tactical repertoires, the concept itself has provided the crucial insights that activists never operate in a vacuum and that there is always some form of interaction between activists and the (political) context in which they are situated, ultimately resulting in a limited range of tactical options that activists can choose from.

Lastly, in order to fully understand how PPT has shaped the study of social movements and social movement strategy, it is also important to look at the methodology that is used in order to analyse movements. Given PPT's approach to contentious repertoires as structurally produced through political arrangements of state power, work on tactics in this vein has predominantly analysed development and changes in repertoires at the macro level and over longer periods of time (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 4). Hence, most research on social movements from a political process perspective is based on large n data sets, drawn from questionnaires

[4] : 1) the multiplicity of independent centres of power within it; 2) its openness to new actors; 3) the instability of current political alignments; 4) the availability of influential allies or supporters for challengers; 5) the extent to which the regime represses or facilitates collective claim making; and 6) decisive changes in items 1 to 5 (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: 59).

and surveys (Ibid, 4). As will become clear in the remainder of this chapter, PPT's macro-level methodological approach to analysing social movements, coupled with its emphasis on structures at the expense of agency, severely limits our understanding of strategy and the way in which activists make strategic choices.

The new social movements

In the previous section, I have distinguished between three features of the political process approach that are crucial to understanding later debates on social movements. These three aspects consist of a definition of social movements as exclusively focused on policy change or political power, the centrality of the state in social movement activity, and the conviction that activists' repertoires of contention are, above all, 'structurally produced' (Tilly, 1993: 267-8). I argue that these features are problematic to the study of social movement strategy and my empirical case in several ways. It is to the first two features of PPT and the theoretical debate it has sparked that I now turn.

Political process theorists were less interested in why people felt frustrated enough to engage in protest, and instead turned almost exclusively to the question of how social movement actors secured the resources to combat their exclusion from political systems. In doing so, collective actor's interests were 'implied by their very formulation; they lay in gaining access to institutional structures of political bargaining' (Polletta & Jasper, 2001: 286). This presumption was challenged by several scholars, the most notable of them being Alain Touraine (1981), Jurgen Habermas (1987) and Alberto Melucci (1996), who argued that the 1960s saw a rise of new social movements (NSM) that were impossible to fit within the PPT's narrow conceptualization of social movements. The new movements that these scholars referred to mobilized around issues such as peace, local autonomy, human rights and feminism, which they saw as fundamentally different from the class-based, political mobilization of the 'old' social movements (Laraña et al., 1994). As such, NSM scholars advocated for a different approach to studying social movements that first and foremost privileged questions of activists' motivations, instead of presupposing them (Crossley, 2002). In the case of the DHRC, it is crucial to question their motivations and interests rather than assuming them, since their position as human rights defenders rather than protestors looking to overthrow current political systems sets them on an 'awkward' position in relation to the political process model.

Within the NSM approach, a few core themes on the motivations of movements can be identified. Firstly, scholars share the idea that NSMs are not necessarily interested in seeking redistribution of political power, but instead seek ways to change dominant normative and

cultural codes by gaining recognition for new identities (Polletta & Jasper, 2001: 286). Hence, NSM scholars emphasize the cultural sphere as a major arena for collective action and advocate a more value-oriented approach to social movement goals, as opposed to conflicts over material resources (Buechler, 1995: 442). Furthermore, the NSM approach stresses the importance of processes that promote autonomy and self-determination instead of strategies for maximizing influence and power (Habermas 1984). The new movements thus brought with them a new perspective on the nature of the goals of social movements. These revolve, first and foremost, around issues such as quality of life, participation, identity formation and social integration (Buechler, 1995: 445-6; Habermas, 1987: 392).

NSM scholars not only sparked a renewed interest in motivations or 'grievances' of movement actors, but in doing so, also advocated a fundamentally different view on the nature of domination in society and on the relationship between forms of domination and social movement challenges (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008: 81). Within the political process model, it is assumed that the activities and struggles of social movements take place in a single unified space, referred to as 'the polity'. By locating power solely within political institutions, PPT fails to properly address 'the differentiated nature of contemporary societies and the plurality of distinct spaces in which struggles are waged' (Crossley, 2002; 170). Contrary to political process theorists, NSM scholars acknowledge that movements may wage their struggles in many other social spaces (Ibid, 171). They recognize that the state is not the only source of authority and direct attention to the ways in which social movements locate power in cultural and sub-political domains (Ibid,152). NSM theorists thus place the study of the relationship between forms of domination and forms of challenge at the centre of the study of social movements (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008: 82).

Despite NSM theorists' important contribution to the development of a more inclusive definition of social movements and power, their approach to studying social movements has important limitations. These limitations are related to the question that NSM theories aim to answer. As opposed to PPT, which focuses mainly upon the 'how?' of collective action, the NSM approach focuses upon the 'why' by emphasizing the problems and issues around which movements attempt to mobilize (Melucci, 1985). Though this is a welcome addition to the political process model, it can be said that NSM theorists similarly fell into the structuralist 'trap' by explaining social movement's changing goals as a response to macrostructural changes in society (Pichardo, 1997: 413). The core idea here is that shifts in the structural conditions in society causes changes in the problems that social movements seek to engender

(Crossley, 2002: 161).[5] Some NSM theorists even hoped to identify *the* nature of contemporary society, or its 'historicity', along with *the* core movement and *the* struggle that the new social order would automatically bring about (Touraine, 1981: 24). Not only were these attempts to develop a universal societal model fraught with empirical complications (Polletta & Jasper, 2001: 287), the NSM theories also do not provide any tools for examining movement's actual strategic and tactical considerations. Referring back to the empirical case of the DHRC's strategic adaptions in the wake of shrinking civic space, it is thus necessary to find a framework that deals more explicitly with micro-level strategic dynamics.

The structural bias in social movement theory

In order to better understand the limited explanatory power of structuralist theories, this part of the chapter introduces its most important critics and their consecutive arguments. At the end of the 1990s, James Jasper and Jeff Goodwin started to criticize the structural bias of the political process model and NSM scholars' 'grand theories' of society. Their criticism is particularly addressed to the concept of political opportunity structures and casts serious doubt on the usefulness of the concept, as well as PPT in general, in understanding social movement strategy (Giugni, 2009: 363).

First of all, scholars have noted how the concept of political opportunity tends to become either too broad, thereby losing its explanatory power, or too narrow, causing it to only be able to explain one 'typical' form of social movements. On the one hand, the concept suffers from 'conceptual stretching' (Kriesi, 2005: 68), since social movement scholars use 'political opportunities' as a factor for practically all the conditions and circumstances that form the context for collective action (Gamson & Meyer, 1996: 275). On the other hand, the narrow definition of political opportunity structures that Tilly and Tarrow themselves advocate, poorly serves counter-cultural movements or any movements that do not target the state as their main opponent (Jasper, 1999: 34). Similar to NSM theorists, Jasper states that movements that challenge dominant cultural beliefs, ideologies and attitudes, do so without directly confronting, and sometimes even intentionally avoiding, the state or polity members. Though these movements are never completely sealed off from broader political forces, it cannot be assumed that they face the regular, automatic repression like state-oriented movements, nor that they care as much about specific political opportunities (Jasper and Poulsen, 1993).

[5] For the sake of space and time, I will not elaborate on this argument further. For a more in-depth discussion of this argument see Buechler (1995), Crossley (2002) and Pichardo (1997).

Furthermore, and central to Jasper's critique on political opportunity (2012: 3), is the fact that the political process model aims 'to systematize the unsystematic, […] to tame agency by reducing it to structures.' This is impossible since all players exhibit choices, and thus, agency. Factors that tend to get treated by political process theorists as stable structures, are actually affected by conscious strategies, decisions, and actions of protestors, their opponents, and state actors (Jasper, 1999: 37). The structuralist focus of PPT and its quantitative methodology thus inevitably reduces complex events and forms of collective action to categories, thereby flattening the variety of actions that can occur into standard 'repertoires' (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 6). Moreover, social movements are simply seen as groups with 'pre-existing desires and objective interests' who only await the opportunity to pursue them (Jasper, 2012: 15). As such, a structuralist, macro-historical perspective on social movements cannot answer the question of how social movements make strategic and tactical choices, or imbue them with meanings (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 6).

Given the variety and complexity of social movements and their strategic considerations, Jasper argues that a trans-historical theory on social movements like PPT (or NSMT) is simply not possible and should, therefore, not be the aim of social movement research (1999: 28). Rather, it seems that strategic decisions are the result of complex internal movement dynamics. As such, Jasper calls for a genuine 'theory of action' that focuses on actors' desires and experiences, and the way in which actors make and appropriate strategic choices (2010b: 969).

Field theory

In an attempt to incorporate meaning-making and strategic considerations, as well as to reconcile structure and agency in social movement theory, scholars have recently become more interested in interactionist approaches inspired by and built on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *fields*. As a key figure within the post-structuralist movement of the 1970s and 80s, Bourdieu, among others, aimed to conceptualize social life through a more culturally saturated lens than the Marxian inspired theories before them. This 'cultural turn' involved placing actions and intentions firmly in social and cultural contexts, institutional arenas and social networks (Jasper, 2010b: 970). Given the more culturally dynamic character of the post-structuralist movement, the social movement theories that developed as an extension of this tradition are promising when it comes to studying movement strategy.

Basically, what Bourdieu argues is that social practices are generated through the interaction of agents, who are all differently situated in terms of status and resources, within the limits of specific networks which have a game-like structure and which impose restraints upon them

(Crossley, 2002: 171). The most crucial building blocks of Bourdieu's theory are *habitus*, *fields* and *capital.* According to Bourdieu (1994), social positions of agents become embodied through a continuous process of internalization. This process is referred to as habitus. Habitus stresses that objective structures, such as institutions, social relations and resources, become embodied and internalized in the cognitive structure of agents, and that this is further realized in practice (Husu, 2013: 266). As such, the cognitive structures of agents tend to reflect the structural position of agents in social space (Ibid, 267).

The structural position in which agents are situated is referred to by Bourdieu as fields. Bourdieu's concept of fields implies 'a set of objective, historical relations between positions' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 16). Fields can be regarded as structures of differences between individuals, groups and institutions, while the positions of the agents are based on the distribution and possession of different forms of capital (Husu, 2013: 266).[6] The structural position of activists, which is, in turn, continuously internalized, shapes activists' perceptions and beliefs of what is appropriate, legitimate, or likely to be effective (Larson, 2013: 873). Unlike political process theory, which is exclusively focused on the polity and the state, field theory accounts for different fields, ranging from political and cultural, to judicial and academic. As such, social movements are 'required to play a different game in each of these fields' (Crossley, 2002: 180). Drawing on Bourdieu, Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam (2011: 14) more recently extended the concept of fields towards 'strategic action fields' (SAFs). Interaction within these SAFs is an 'ongoing game where incumbents and challengers […] make moves and countermoves' depending on actors' perceived tactical logic based on their position and resources in specific fields. Every movement thereby faces its own group- and issue-specific fields of external relations, and it is exactly these relations that appear to shape movement dynamics (Goldstone, 2004: 357). In other words, social movements and their strategic choices are best understood in relation to others in the field (Martin, 2003: 25). Consequentially, as Armstrong and Bernstein argue (2008: 83), social movement theorists should refrain from making assumptions about the importance of certain fields (or 'institutions') for social movements, nor about their logics and the ways in which power is executed and felt within these institutions. Instead, their 'multi-institutional' approach offers conceptual tools with which to investigate the nature of power within institutions and subsequently how activists understand, negotiate and challenge that institutional and cultural

[6] These various forms of capital can be divided into economic, (e.g. money and property); cultural (e.g. goods which are valued in specific social fields, such as knowledge about art); symbolic (e.g. status and reputation); and social (e.g. connections and ties) (Husu, 2013: 266).

power (Ibid, 93). Field theory-inspired approaches thus offer valuable insights into studying social movement strategy. They not only help to explain how internalized social and cultural positions can act as guiding principles to the actions and intentions of activists, but they also offer tools to empirically investigate these processes.

However, a valid point of critique on field theories is that they ultimately conflate actors and the environment within which they operate. Once linked together as fields, actors have little autonomy to actually oppose or change these fields (Jasper, 2019). In other words, by making structures internal to individuals, structures still act as guiding systems to the reflexive activity of individuals (Gorringe, 2007: 100-1). In the case of Dalits in India, though field theory might be suitable to explain the tenacity of the caste system and its continued significance within Indian society, it seems less useful in explaining how Dalit activists are creatively adapting to their changing environment to break with this system of oppression. In the end, without moments of 'creativity' that take place outside the confines of *habitus*, strategic players cannot change structures (Jasper, 2004: 7).

Strategic action

Similar to field theorists, Jasper (2004: 5) argues that strategic choices are made within complex cultural and institutional contexts that shape actors themselves, the options perceived, the choices made from among them, and the outcomes. Yet unlike field theory, Jasper (Ibid, 4) states that the effects of these constraints on action cannot be assumed without looking at the actual actions, interactions, and decisions-making processes that take place. It is precisely because repertoires are produced in interaction that the development of tactical forms cannot be separated from the social agents that construct them and from the meanings that they ascribe to them (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 5). Hence, Jasper (1999: 37) argues for an empirical focus on social movement strategies by studying what activists do, and the reasons they give for their actions, thereby putting at the forefront the experiences and decisions of protestors, rather than structures. Contrary to the structuralist theories on social movements, an actor-centered approach encourages studying movement ideas, cultures and traditions (Doherty & Hayes, 2012: 6). This involves detailed attention to the actions of activists, to the way they appropriate spaces, narrate actions and express preferences (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 8). This perspective corresponds with the fluidity of action and the diversity of experience found in social movements (Duyvendak & Fillieule, 2015: 30).

A strategic approach views strategy as a continuous engagement of movements in interpreting and changing the social world through action, thereby reflexively learning about

structures in a way that they can eventually change them (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 14). Jasper (2015: 10) makes this idea more concrete by turning to a conception of the structuration of society expressed in terms of 'players' and 'arenas.' Players are those who engage in strategic action with some goal in mind. Goals take players into different arenas, which can be defined as bundles of (formal and informal) rules and resources that allow or encourage certain kinds of interactions to proceed (Ibid, 16). Unlike field theory, which conflates players and arenas, the 'players and arenas' framework allows players to change, bend or break rules, because it separates people from (more or less) tangible spaces (Ibid, 15-17). In this way, the strategic action framework provides an opportunity to truly examine the lived experience of activists and the way in which this reality shapes their strategic choices, making it a valuable approach for analysing Dalit activists' experiences with shrinking civic space.

An important aspect of the strategic action approach is its focus on interaction between players. A strategic approach treats social movements and other players symmetrically, instead of reducing the later to the 'environment' of the former (Jasper 2004: 5). The strategic action approach sees various players adapting to each other, anticipating moves, and trying actively to block opponents. In this way, both sides are constantly moving targets (Jasper, 2015: 22). Tracing the interactions of players over time will address the goals of players, the rules of the arenas in which they are active, and the meanings players attach to those arenas (Jasper, 2015: 22). Consequently, analysis within the strategic action approach revolves around the processes by which players make decisions about actions, which always involve dilemmas and trade-offs (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 13).

Though Jasper (2006: 5) has made a considerable conceptual contribution to the study of social movement strategy, he largely refrains from explicitly defining what strategy is beyond 'getting others to do what you want them to.' Closely related to Jaspers' analytical vocabulary, Meyer and Staggenborg (2012) offer a more operational conception of social movement strategy. According to them, strategy is 'the overall plan for action, the blueprint of activities with regard to the […] series of collective actions that movements designate as necessary for bringing about desired social changes' (Jenkins, 1981: 135). Strategic decision-making revolves around making choices about three crucial aspects: *claims*, *arenas*, and *tactics* (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 3). Claims are the demands that players put forward. Though they are related to movement goals, claims are also strategic choices about which goals to pursue at what time and in what way (Ibid, 7). Secondly, similar to Jasper's concept, Meyer and Staggenborg define arenas as the venues in which movement actors press their claims. Movement actors need to strategically select these arenas (Ibid, 10). Lastly, movement actors

also make choices about tactics, which are the specific means or forms of collective action (Ibid, 10-11). To understand *how* strategic choices are made, Meyer and Staggenborg similarly point to the series of interactions within movements and between movement actors and their targets, opponents and allies.

Given its actor- and strategy-oriented approach, the strategic action perspective is most fitting for inquiring how the DHRC has made strategic choices in the wake of shrinking civic space. Hence, the thesis will lean mostly on the conceptual insights of Jasper and Meyer and Staggenborg. These insights will be complemented with insights from Snow and Armstrong and Bernstein, who, as has been shown throughout this chapter, have focused more on defining power and examining the different kinds of forms of societal change that social movements seek to address. Considering that the strategic action framework is still in need of further elaboration (Duyvendak & Fillieule, 2015: 295), the research also aims to make a theoretical contribution by being specifically attentive towards strategic change in the wake of interactions with 'opponents' and allies, the constraints these interactions bring about and the dilemmas or 'trade-offs' that follow. Furthermore, I also aim to make a theoretical contribution by focusing on actors that fall outside the classic definition of a social movement, thereby broadening theoretical understanding of movements with more implicit political dimensions.

Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed the most important voices within the debate on social movements and social movement strategy. The most influential strand within social movement theory has long been the political process model, which largely looks at the structural political conditions that allow or discourage movements to emerge, and the way in which these conditions in turn produce different repertoires of contentious performances. Scholars within the strand of new social movement theory started to criticize PPT's state-centeredness and its one-sided focus on policy reform as the ultimate movement goal, by pointing towards social movements that were, above all, interested in cultural change. In doing so, these theorists sparked a new definition of social movements and power in general. Yet similar to political process theorists, these scholars were primarily focused on explaining the emergence of social movements from a structuralist perspective, rather than on understanding the ways in which social movement make strategic choices. In an attempt to reconcile agency and structure in social movement theory, scholars then started to build on Bourdieu's theory of fields. Through the concepts of fields, habitus and capital, scholars attempted to show how the choices of movement actors are determined through a continuous internalization of external structures.

However, in doing so, field theory proved to be more adept in accounting for stability, rather than actual change. As a response to the grand paradigms within social movement theory, scholars started to shift away from structure in favour of a truly actor- and strategy-oriented approach. The strategic action approach prioritizes, above all, the ‘lived reality’ of movements and shows how their choices are a result of interpretation and meaning-making. Movement actors must make choices with regards to claims, arenas and tactics, during which they continuously interact with targets, opponents, and allies. Constraints on movement’s actions in this sense can be traced by looking at their interactions with other actors and their interpretation of these interactions, rather than by assuming the salience of pre-determined (political) structures. Given its the actor-centered nature, the strategic action approach is ultimately chosen as the vantage point for this thesis.

Chapter 2 | Shrinking civic space in Tamil Nadu

Before elaborating on the DHRC's strategic choices during their period of strategic reflection between 2018 and 2020, it is important to first obtain a better understanding of the contextual factors that have been connected to this change. As such, in this chapter, I aim to provide an answer to the following sub-question: what constraints have the DHRC and similar Dalit rights organizations in Tamil Nadu faced in the wake of shrinking civic space in Tamil Nadu since 2014?

Crucial to examining the issue of shrinking civic space is to first understand the structural position of inequality of the Dalit community and the lived reality of this situation by Dalits and Dalit activists in Tamil Nadu. Hence, the first part of this chapter will dive deeper into the interpretation of Dalit activists of their structural position, which simultaneously provides more insight into their grievances and their limited capacities for change. However, in accordance with Jasper's rejection of structuralist notions, the aim of this chapter is to unpack the concept of 'structural inequality' in the context of Dalits in Tamil Nadu as 'actors doing things' (Jasper, 2004: 2). In order to do so, I will employ the concept of 'arenas' and trace the everyday routinized interactions between Dalits and non-Dalits within these arenas and the rules and expectations that are attached to these arenas.

In a similar fashion, the concept of shrinking civic space will be unpacked, specifically within the context of Tamil Nadu. The aim here is to explore how the abstract concept of 'shrinking civic space' has manifested itself concretely in recent actions and interactions within arenas and the way in which Dalit activists have experienced these recent constraints. Different from the routinized interactions described above, the more recent actions that have resulted in the shrinking of civic space in Tamil Nadu can be seen as part of a conscious strategy by the BJP and affiliated organizations. Without the presumption of having complete knowledge of the intentions of these actors, this chapter will attempt to highlight the most crucial components of this strategy.

Arenas and interactions

As I have shortly touched upon in the first chapter, an important aspect of the strategic action approach is the concept of the arena. According to Jasper, arenas are bundles of rules and resources that allow or encourage certain kinds of interactions to proceed (Jasper, 2015: 14). The rules of the arenas vary from formal rules, such as laws, to informal ones, such as traditions

or moral expectations (Ibid, 15). In this way, arenas are similar to the more sociological concept of the institution, which can be defined as ‘a complex of roles, norms, and practices that form around some object, some realm of behavior in a society’, and which are enacted by people (Taylor & Zald, 2010: 305). Jasper, however, emphasizes that arenas are visible places, where (inter)actions of players can be traced and observed. Nonetheless, the concept can also be employed in a more metaphorical way, which is the case for public opinion or the media as arenas. These arenas allow players to interact and to generate decisions and outcomes (Jasper, 2019: 3).

Both arenas and players (in terms of capacities and positions) are shaped by the weight of history – that is, past decisions, accumulations, understandings and expectations (Ibid, 3). As such, the strategic action perspective emphasizes the importance of examining not only players' observable interactions ‘in the light of the contexts of action’, but also in the light of the history of individuals, meaning their socialization and their system of disposition, in order to understand their strategic choices (Duyvendak & Fillieule, 2015: 309). By reflecting their history, arenas and players contain some structural influences, but players ‘bring these to bear on concrete interactions’ (Jasper, 2019: 3). In other words, players' choices and actions are not just a ‘pure and simple replica of what has been internalized’ (Ibid, 310). Rather, players act and interact on the basis of their understanding of the objects populating their world (Ibid.). Hence, prior to investigating the strategic choices of the members of the DHRC, it is important to gain an understanding of their societal position. This is crucial to understanding their grievances, as well as their conception of what is strategically possible and necessary.

Being a Dalit

In order to better understand the ‘historical situatedness’ of Dalits in Tamil Nadu and the rules and capacities that are attached to this situation, it is first aimed to examine everyday interactions between Dalits and dominant castes. Although the concept of arenas has been primarily developed to analyse *strategic* interaction, it can also serve as a useful analytical tool to examine interactions on a more everyday basis. Similar to strategic interaction, tracing routinized interactions can help to address the rules of different societal arenas and the meanings players attach to them (Jasper, 2015: 22). Especially in the context of India, where inequality is not a matter of law but of ‘lived practice’ (Gorringe, 2007: 106), tracing these routinized practices will enhance our understanding of how historically unequal relations of power between Dalits and caste people are continuously reinforced.

In Tamil Nadu and India as a whole, neither constitutional change, nor reservations for Dalits in education, politics and government employment, have fully enabled a transformation of social relations between Dalits and caste members. Today, Dalits still face many different forms of humiliation and discrimination. This, above all, uncovers the interactional basis of caste (Gorringe, 2010: 106). As Rowena Robinson (2019a: 339) states in her ethnographic account of caste practices in Tamil Nadu, even when caste is not openly acknowledged, Dalits are humiliated and excluded by caste people in many indirect and covert ways. During our interview, Yesumarian elaborated on this stark contrast between *de jure* and *de facto* equality for Dalits. '*De jure*, we would say, "Yes, everything is open, you can come to the school, to the church, or temple." But many people fail to understand what is there. If you enter a Hindu temple, it looks very peaceful and fine. But how many Dalits can enter there? As soon as a Dalit enters, people feel it is desecrated. It has become impure. So, there's a real problem, that we have to face.'[7]

One routinized practice of exclusion that is strongly present in Tamil Nadu is the separate allocation of burial grounds to Dalits by Church authorities or outright refusal to enter places of worship (Shanmughasundaram, 2020).[8] When caste Christians are not able to keep out Dalits, they usually withdraw from church processions and celebrations or allocate separate churches to the Dalits.[9] These practices of segregation are not restricted to places of worship but extend to places such as schools, as well as to the entire socio-geographical layout of villages. 'If you go to any village, the mid-caste people are living in separate areas, and the Dalits are always segregated.'[10]

When Dalits and caste people do interact, caste people make sure to maintain group distinctions, for example by using separate receptacles in tea-shops (Gorringe, 2010: 107). Likewise, in our interview, Yesumarian narrated that that when Dalits go to a lawyer's office, they are expected to sit on the ground outside.[11] Practices to maintain caste boundaries such as these often turn much more violent, as will be elaborated on later in this chapter. What is important to note here, is that traditional caste norms and practices still prevail in such a way that they overrule the constitutional laws of equality that should formally be governing public arenas in Tamil Nadu. Not only do they form the basis for routinized interactions between Dalits

[7] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.

[8] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020; and Vincent Manoharan [Director NDCW], 13/08/2020.

[9] Interview with Yesumarian, 12/2017, in Robinson, 2019b: 6.

[10] Interview with Vincent Manoharan [Director NDCW], 13/08/2020.

[11] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020.

and caste people, they also largely determine the 'physical attributes' of many public venues (Jasper, 2012: 2).

According to Jasper, a society's history and its patterns of inequality shape arenas and ultimately what happens in those arenas by affecting what players can bring to these arenas (Jasper 2015: 15). Inequality in Tamil Nadu has historically been characterized by the dominance of intermediate sub-castes in practically all spheres of political, economic and social life. Dominant caste Hindus are able to uphold these unequal relationships of power by preventing Dalits from acquiring land or housing, barring them from participating in local government institutions and from accessing formal education (Bob, 2007: 173). As is stated in a report by the DHRC (2013), dominant castes often exploit the lack of legal awareness of Dalits, so that formal laws on reservation and entitlement can be disregarded. For example, in a report by Human Rights Watch (2014: 64), it is shown that supervision by state education departments and school authorities over the implementation of reservations in education is often very poor. This ultimately enables discriminatory behavior by dominant castes to continue and to go unnoticed. Moreover, even when Dalits are able to enroll in public schools, many of them still drop out after enrollment as a result of systematic verbal, physical and sexual abuse in classrooms, both by peer students and teachers (Sharma, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Similarly, regarding the law enforcement system, many of my informants expressed that although there are extensive reservation programs and laws in place to provide safety to Dalits (most notably the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act (PoA))[12] the real issue lies with the implementation of these laws.[13] According to Ramesh Nathan, the predomination of dominant caste people in law enforcement arenas, along with their loyalty to their caste, is manifested in a strong nexus between political parties, local police officials, public prosecutors, and the perpetrators of the law. 'What happens is that [the police] don't properly investigate, they don't provide proper reports, and fair trials won't take place. So, the perpetrators usually get acquitted in the Court.'[14] As Vincent Manoharan expressed: 'How will [the SC/ST PoA Act] safeguard us, unless it is implemented by the duty bearers – the political class, the bureaucrats, the judiciary? […] All these mechanisms are crowded by the mid-caste Hindus, who believe in the

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[12] The Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989) is an Act enacted to prohibit discrimination, prevent atrocities and hate crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Act only applies to Hindu Dalits, and not to Dalit Christians.

[13] Interview with Vincent Manoharan [Director NDCW], 13/08/2020; Kiruba Munusamy [Supreme Court Lawyer], 12/08/2020); Krithika Srinivasan [Journalist], 11/07/2020; Ramesh Nathan [Director NDMJ/NCDHR], 08/07/2020; Pandiyan Kemal [Director WITNESS for Justice], 28/07/2020; Manjula Pradeep [Director WAYVE], 28/07/2020]; Abirami Jothee, [Director AIDMAM], 24/07/2020; Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020.

[14] Interview with Ramesh Nathan [Director NDMJ/NCDHR], 08/07/2020.

caste system. They will not implement all these kinds of acts and rules in order to protect us wholeheartedly.'[15] As a result, Dalits in Tamil Nadu have great difficulty in claiming rights and entitlements, which limits their capacity to reject their position of subordination.

Through the same processes of caste favoritism, Tamil media and Indian media in general have historically been predominated by upper castes, while Dalits have lacked access to media platforms and discourses that shape public opinion, leaving their voices and issues largely unheard (Oxfam & Newslaundry, 2019: 2). In our interview, Radha Batharan expressed that Dalit students who apply for jobs at newsrooms are often asked what caste they belong to. 'Once they reveal their caste, they are denied jobs on different grounds. […] "Okay, no, you don't fit into our frame" – these things happen. So, you don't find representation from a group that is suffering.'[16] Further exacerbating these developments is the corporatization of mainstream media. In Tamil Nadu, the grand majority of television channels are currently either owned directly by local (caste) politicians or by businesses who enjoy political patronage. As such, Mehta (2015: 60) argues, the existing local news programs primarily serve as platforms for these politicians and corporates to voice their own interests, which are generally not in favor of marginalized communities.

The difficulties of making the 'Dalit voice' heard can be illustrated by narrating an experience of Krithika Srinivasan, a journalist in Tamil Nadu. During the state-wide COVID-19 lockdown in early 2020, a spike in Dalit atrocities motivated her to write an extensive piece on the matter. For her story, she interviewed several human rights activists about the atrocities, thereby making sure that all the cases she included in her story had an official police complaint. However, one of the chiefs of her media house informed her that her article would not be published because the activists' statements 'could just be allegations.'[17] Similarly, Semmalar Selvi shared her experience on a protest that was organized by Dalit activists in Chennai after the Supreme Court of India had attempted to dilute the SC/ST PoA Act in 2018 (Rajagopal, 2020). According to Selvi, even though thousands of people joined the rally, Tamil media kept silent on the event: 'Only through Facebook or other mediums were we able to get to know that there were thousands of people organizing themselves.'[18] This 'culture of silence' (or culture of silen*cing*) is characteristic to Indian society and appears to extend to all arenas of social and political life when it concerns the Dalit issue. Even within the church, it is difficult to address

[15] Interview with Vincent Manoharan [Director NDCW], 13/08/2020.
[16] Interview with Radha Batharan [Professor], 02/08/2020.
[17] Krithika Srinivasan [Journalist], 11/07/2020.
[18] Interview with Semmalar Selvi [Professor], 07/07/2020.

discrimination of Dalits. 'To tell them you cannot have two cemeteries, the church authorities will say, "Don't raise this issue. You're disturbing the peace within the church."'[19] Furthermore, as Batharan expressed, even if a story about Dalit atrocities is published, it is usually void of any in-depth analysis. 'What is the root cause, why are casteist atrocities taking place, and why in such high numbers? These are questions that remain unanswered, both in mainstream media and by politicians.'[20] Hence, according to the activists, not only is it difficult for Dalits to adequately claim their rights and entitlements, their position of subordination is also continuously reinforced through their absence from crucial arenas such as the media. Their absence from these arenas in turn limits their capacities to change the prevailing culture of silence that is characteristic of the Dalit issue.

Shrinking civic space

The next part of this chapter will examine the recent strategic actions of the BJP and affiliated organizations and explores how these actions have further exacerbated the position of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. According to Jasper (2019: 3), the constraints that activists face in their strategic engagement can ultimately be traced back to either the actions taken by players to block other players, and players' interpretations of their situations. The strategic approach thus severely questions the impact of factors that cannot be traced back to arenas or players in some way, either as resources and rules of the arenas or as knowledge and goals of players (Ibid, 4). Following this line of thought, this chapter aims to unpack the rather abstract notion of 'shrinking civic space' as a number of strategic actions undertaken by state- and non-state actors within various social and political arenas. These actions will be examined through the perspectives of Dalit activists.

In order to examine the phenomenon of shrinking civic space in the context of Tamil Nadu, it is first necessary to clarify how the concept is commonly understood. More often used by CSOs and policy analysts rather than academics, the concept of 'shrinking civic space' aims to define the dynamic relationship between repressive methods and political and social struggle, particularly in the context of established democracies (Transnational Institute, 2017: 3). Civic space, in this conception, is 'the practical room for action and manoeuvre for citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs)' (Buyse, 2019: 969). Within the discourse on shrinking civic space, several interrelated trends can be distinguished. The first trend – which is most often

[19] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[20] Interview with Radha Batharan [Professor], 02/08/2020.

covered by scholars and think tanks – is related to legislative constraints on domestic CSOs to receive international funding (Transnational Institute, 2017: 3; Buyse, 2019: 970; Wolff & Poppe, 2015: 19; Brechenmacher & Carothers, 2014: 7)). These measures are often accompanied by restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association, often in the name of 'public order' and 'security' (Transnational Institute, 2017: 3-5). Though much of these restrictions are enforced by governments through police and military forces, many formal democratic states have also seen an increasing trend of religious conservatives, far right groups, and other non-state actors using intimidation and violence against minority citizens and civil society actors (Transnational Institute, 2017: 5; Buyse, 2019: 969). This has been accompanied by often asymmetric and arbitrary online censorship of critical voices by states and big-tech companies, while extreme right-wing propaganda and hate speech largely continues to go unchecked (CIVICUS, 2018: 11). In tandem with these trends is the emergence of identity-based politics as an electoral strategy, coupled with the deliberate spread of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments by state and non-state actors. This is often at the expense of minority citizens and activists (Ibid, 7). In this way, shrinking civic space is not only a matter of government repression through restrictive measures, but is also related to issues of trust and civility, making it both a political and social problem (Waghmore & Gorringe, 2019: 305).

Experienced shrinking civic space

Since their ascendance in 2014, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has taken several measures aimed at the restriction of civil society actors. Most notable is the arbitrary use of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which many human rights organizations consider to be a key aspect of the BJP's strategy to curtail the work of activists (Amnesty International, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019). By 2018, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) had canceled over 20.000 NGOs, allegedly because they were in violation with the FCRA (Bhattacharaya, 2016). According to the 2010 FCR Act, CSOs are prohibited to use the funds they receive for political or 'antinational' activities and the organizations must reapply to the MHA for permission every five years. The fact that CSOs have to register under the MHA, which largely deals with internal law and order and security issues, indicates that state authorities in India treat CSOs on par with terrorists and fundamentalists (Jaladi, 2008: 172). According to my interviewees, this sentiment is increasingly reflected in the way that Dalit activists are treated during the application

procedure.[21] 'For any activity we have planned, the local Intelligence Bureau (IB) receives information. They will find the facts, and sometimes the communications by the local IB – it's a little threatening.' Furthermore, '[The IB] keeps strict monitoring. When you organize protests and allies, there is a local IB which keeps an eye on us. […] They take names of people, they have contact numbers… […] This was not happening earlier.'[22]

As Jasper states, the difficulty with some arenas is that they simply lack access. Political leaders and power elites usually meet 'behind closed doors', leaving other players largely in the dark about what is decided (Jasper, 2015: 17). Not only is it difficult for Dalit activists to know if they are being monitored by their local IB, the MHA's ambiguous definition of 'political' and 'antinational' makes it difficult for NGOs to tell which activities may be deemed as such (Bornstein, 2016: 84). Despite the arbitrary enforcement of the FCRA, my informants continued to draw faith from the fact that their activities are and have always been strictly on legal grounds. According to the activists, their organizations are primarily concerned with ensuring the constitutional rights of Dalits, and are therefore not involved in any activities that might be remotely 'anti-government'.[23] This accords with Bornstein's argument that rights-based NGOs and social movements in India have developed a distinct way of negotiating their contentious relation with state actors through a vocabulary that is based on a language that combines legal vocabularies with moral pronouncements, thereby evading an overly political connotation (Bornstein, 2016). In addition, the size and amount of funding also seem to be deciding factors for the BJP with regard to blocking foreign funding. 'Comparatively, DHRC is a small organization, with a very small size of funding. And the project proposals that we send [to MM] doesn't speak of controversial things like protests or anti-state activities.'[24] Nonetheless, referring back to the arbitrary nature of both the Act and its implementation, it can be argued that the FCRA is still an important constraining factor for small rights-based organizations such as the DHRC, as it essentially restricts them from increasing their scope and visibility.

[21] Interview with Ramesh Nathan [Director NDMJ/NCDHR], 08/07/2020; Yesumarian and Christy; Vincent Manoharan [Director NDCW], 13/08/2020.
[22] Interview with Manjula Pradeep [Director WAYVE], 28/07/2020]. The foreign funding license for her organization *Navsarjan Trust* (Gujarat) was cancelled in 2017.
[23] Interview with Vincent Kathir [Director EVIDENCE], 26/06/2020*;* Abirami Jothee [Director AIDMAM], 24/07/2020; Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020; Ramesh Nathan [Director NDMJ/NCDHR], 08/07/2020.
[24] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020]; Christy.

Another common reaction with regard to the BJP's stricter implementation of the FCRA is that it does not, in essence, differ substantially from the strategy of its political predecessors.[25] 'Even before the BJP, there were restrictions to people's voices. The government has always been hortative. […] But the BJP government has made it more vivid.'[26] In fact, even before the ascendance of the BJP, my informants regularly dealt with restrictions, particularly in the form of intimidation and counter-cases filed by police officers and higher castes, and in some cases even imprisonment.[27] 'See, fear – being scared – is very dangerous. The threats are part of our human rights work.'[28] This sentiment clearly resonates with Jasper's (2019: 4) remark that barriers to strategic action are only insurmountable if a player believes it is. Furthermore, the activists' resilient attitude in the face of growing restrictions also shows there is nothing inherently 'rational' about the actions of players – at least not when rationality is defined as the opposite of emotion or moral commitment (Jasper, 2004: 6).

A current trend that is more closely related to the DHRC's period of strategic reflection is the BJP's use of Hindu nationalism as a political strategy, which has not only resulted in increased caste-based and religious polarization, but has also emboldened vigilante groups in their use of violence against minorities (Thorat, 2019). Despite the BJP's historical negligibility in Tamil Nadu in terms of electoral seats (Pandian, 2000), it can be argued that the party has started to gain an ideological foothold in the last few years by deploying a strategy that has shown to be successful in other states (Karthik & Karunanithi, 2020). Before elaborating on this strategy, a distinction needs to be made between two crucial players, namely the BJP and the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS). Founded in 1925, the RSS is a Hindu-nationalist voluntary organization that aims to organize India's Hindu community and to defend its interest by operating on the grassroots level (Jaffrelot, 2019: 54). The para-military organization can be seen as 'the trunk of the Hindu-nationalist tree', having sprouted numerous Hindu-nationalist organizations since its emergence, including the BJP as its political wing (Jaffrelot, 2017: 53).

Though the RRS's priority has historically been to bring about societal and cultural transformation from below, the organization, as well as its growing group of affiliates, have

[25] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Pandiyan Kemal [Director WITNESS for Justice], 28/07/2020; Ramesh Nathan [Director NDMJ/NCDHR], 08/07/2020; Vincent Manoharan [Director NDCW], 13/08/2020.
[26] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020, Christy.
[27] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020; Pandiyan Kemal [Director WITNESS for Justice], 28/07/2020; Ramesh Nathan [Director NDMJ/NCDHR], 08/07/2020; Kiruba Munusamy [Supreme Court Lawyer], 12/08/2020]; Manjula Pradeep [Director WAYVE], 28/07/2020.
[28] Interview with Vincent Kathir [Director EVIDENCE], 26/06/2020; Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Manjula Pradeep [Director WAYVE], 28/07/2020; Pandiyan Kemal [Director WITNESS for Justice], 28/07/2020.

become increasingly involved in the BJP's electoral strategies by sponsoring a large network of service projects to build support for the party (Andersen & Damle, 2019: 32). According to a report released by DHRC in 2018, there has been a steady growth of grassroots Hindu fundamentalist organizations in the last few years, particularly in the Northern district of Kancheepuram, where the DHRC is active. '[These organizations] have grown like algae on an old lake. The growing rate looks dangerous and it looks devastating… Even in the remote villages in Tamil Nadu now, you have these orange colored flags of RSS.'[29] In 2019, RSS functionaries expressed that their increased presence was needed to 'reach out to the non-Hindi speaking population' in order to enlist popular support and to prepare the ground for the BJP (IANS, 2019). As such, the growing presence of the RSS and affiliated organizations can be seen as manifestation of their goal to be increasingly involved in the social engineering of everyday life in Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, the merging of the BJP and the RSS as an allied strategic player also points to Jasper's statement that the 'state' can be seen as a web of sub-players whose interactions are not only governed by formal laws but many times through informal partnerships (Jasper, 2014: 404). Given the strong (yet informal) connection between the BJP and the RSS, the recent strategic endeavors of both parties will be examined in this chapter.

Characteristic of the BJP's (and RSS's) electoral strategy has been the ambivalent combination of promoting Hindu-nationalism, thereby threatening the accommodation of both religious minorities (hence, Dalit Christians) and Hindu Dalits, while simultaneously attempting to expand their constituency towards lower castes and Dalits (Schoenhaus, 2017; Thorat, 2019; Gudavarthy, 2018; Wankhede, 2018). According to several of my interviewees, this strategy has become increasingly prevalent in Tamil Nadu over the last years, both in politics and at the grassroots level. A recurring concern among activists are the RSS's endeavors to recruit Dalits for the BJP-network by visiting Dalit villages and promoting Hindutva under the banner of Hinduism.[30] Though infinitely more complex and inherently heterogenous, the concept of Hindutva can be broadly defined as a political ideology that preaches a form of cultural nationalism based on the primacy of Hindu culture and religion (Schoenhaus, 2017: 55-56). By promoting Hindutva, the BJP not only alienates Muslims and Christians (and, hence, a large part of the Dalit community) but also implicitly reinforces upper caste dominance, since

[29] Interview with Krithika Srinivasan [Journalist], 11/07/2020.

[30] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Kiruba Munusamy [Supreme Court Lawyer], 12/08/2020]; Krithika Srinivasan [Journalist], 11/07/2020; Semmalar Selvi [Professor], 07/07/2020; Vincent Manoharan [Director NDCW], 13/08/2020; Pandiyan Kemal [Director WITNESS for Justice], 28/07/2020.

Hindutva as an ideology and its adherents generally do not explicitly reject the caste system (Shah, 2002: 13; MacLean, 1999: 497; Andersen & Damle, 2019).

Furthermore, the idea of 'one single Hindu identity' is problematic because Hinduism itself does not have a universal creedal formulation (Sharma, 2020: 42). In fact, the 'Hindu identity' that Hindutva promotes is largely based upon Brahmanical, upper caste values and cultural practices, from which Dalits have historically been excluded (Schoenhaus, 2017: 60). As Yesumarian espressed: ''We [Dalits] have our own Gods, or own culture, our own language. By saying "one language, one culture, one God", caste practices are just taking a different form. It is a reconstruction of Brahmanical hegemony that is acceptable to everybody [under the guise of] democracy and equality.'[31] Hence, it can be stated that the promise of equality that BJP and its affiliates advocate, brings no real solace to Dalits but merely reinforces – and arguably even worsens – existing power relations and higher caste hegemony.

At present, the RSS's and BJP's attempts to manipulate Dalits into supporting the BJP has taken several different forms in Tamil Nadu. 'They [RSS] are going to the villages, they preach to the already distressed farmers and oppressed [Dalit] communities, and they're telling them that Hinduism brings freedom.'[32] Besides grassroots work, the strategic spread of a pan-Hindu narrative also happens through social and mainstream media channels. An example is the BJP's recent narrative about how the God *Murugha*, a deity originating from Tamil culture who enjoys particular popularity among Tamil Dalits, should be seen as a pan-Hindu symbol. 'They're trying to capitalize *Murugha* and project him as their icon for their political gain. […] Day in, day out, you can see it on social media, in WhatsApp messages. The BJP IT cell manufactures ideas like this and spreads them.'[33] Lastly, another much-discussed tactic used by the BJP to create the image of 'the party for all Hindus' is the co-optation of Dalits. The most recent example of this political tactic is the appointment of a Dalit man as the BJP's state president.[34] In this way, the BJP is able to create the impression of being dedicated to instilling agency among marginalized communities, while simultaneously reinforcing the status quo of caste inequality (Karthik & Karunanithi, 2020).

The attempts to forage a unity among Hindus are simultaneously accompanied by the intentional spread of rumors and divisive narratives about religious minorities.[35] In a report

[31] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Yesumarian.
[32] Krithika Srinivasan [Journalist], 11/07/2020.
[33] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020.
[34] Interview with Pandiyan Kemal [Director WITNESS for Justice], 28/07/2020; Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Krithika Srinivasan [Journalist], 11/07/2020.
[35] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020;

released by the DHRC, it is narrated how Hindutva affiliates advocate *gar waphsi* ('homecoming') to Dalit Christians, which embodies the idea that Christians and Muslims should come back to the Hindu fold, which is their 'home', or else leave the country (Dalit Human Rights Centre, 2018; Salam, 2020). Another example is the rumor about Christian missionaries forcing people to convert to Christianity.[36] Again, these ideas are able to spread quickly through grassroots work and intensive social media campaigns carried out by supporters of the Hindutva movement. 'They have a strategy that is so modern. They have a team that is working with social media, a team who works at the grassroots... We need that as well.'[37] These messages of Hindu-nationalist propaganda, as well as hate speech targeted at Dalits and other marginalized communities, continue to be enabled by big-tech companies such as Twitter and Facebook and the Indian Government (Murthy, 2020). For example, Kiruba Munusamy narrated several instances during which Twitter and Facebook refused to remove messages containing clear anti-Dalit rhetoric or to block casteist troll accounts despite several collective attempts to report these accounts.[38] The same tech companies, along with the Indian Government, have been accused of taking arbitrary action against activists and social media users from marginalized castes and classes (Sing, 2019; Chandna, 2019). Consequentially, divisive narratives are spread freely by Hindutva affiliates, ultimately exacerbating polarization and causing further divisions among caste and communal lines.

Additionally, it can be stated that the BJP and RSS's political strategy has resulted in the exacerbation of violence against Dalit by giving ideological backing to expressions of caste superiority (Thorat, 2019: 230). As has been shown earlier in this chapter, caste distinctions and hierarchy in Tamil Nadu have been historically maintained by dominant castes through their interactions with Dalits. Despite these restrictions, Dalits across India have been able to bring about a slow but gradual improvement in their socioeconomic circumstances (Pandian, 2013: 14; Lerche, 2008). Dalit assertion, however, has simultaneously been accompanied by increased intermediate-caste resistance and retribution in the form of riots, torture, rape and murder (Carswell & De Neve, 2015: 1110; Human Rights Watch: 1999). According to scholars, the use of exaggerated violence by dominant castes in Tamil Nadu can be seen as a reaction to the new reality of Dalit mobility and their own inability to exercise caste power over them as in the past (Pandian, 2013: 14, Gorringe, 2013: 3). Though caste-based violence is not in any

[36] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Vincent Manoharan [Director NDCW], 13/08/2020.
[37] Interview with Semmalar Selvi [Professor], 07/07/2020.
[38] Interview with Kiruba Munusamy [Supreme Court Lawyer], 12/08/2020]. Cyber-bullying was also extensively discussed with Abirami Jothee [Director AIDMAM], 24/07/2020

way a new phenomenon in Tamil Nadu, the BJP and RSS are allegedly exacerbating these tensions by attempting to capitalize on them for their own electoral benefit (Ashraf, 2019; Ravishankar, 2016; Wankhede, 2018).[39] Referring to the experiences of people from villages around Chennai, Semmalar Selvi narrated:

> 'What I've been hearing is that […] when a local person is involved in some caste clash [against Dalits] […], he's appointed to some post within the BJP [network]. It won't be the BJP, but like 'Modi's army', or 'Hindu Union', RSS – something like that. So, they are paid every month – 50-60 thousand rupees as salary, through this organization. They've been given a car and everything. [...] Usually, this Hindu right-wing group will be associated with an existing caste group that takes caste pride. These newly started right-wing groups will start working along with these caste groups in the local villages. […] It gives a lot of courage for these caste outfits to commit crimes against Dalits so openly. Earlier, it wasn't like that. […] And the BJP is relying on them, these caste associations, as vote banks.'[40]

Similarly, Krithika Srinivasan shared her own experiences in her district:

> 'In every little developed town or city, you have this Hindu Forward Federation or something [similar]. And they [display the logo of] *Ksatriya*s – they are basically the [caste] soldier community. They are being told that warriorship is in their blood and that any day, they must be ready for a war. […] So, then they go to war on social media [or on] the innocent people in their village, who are the Dalits. These Hindutva organizations are working most smartly, I should say, because they have reached out to the villages more than the progressive parties have done in the last 20 years.'[41]

On a political level, the same trend can be observed. Despite their electoral negligibility, the BJP has been able to enter government through alliances with regional parties AIADMK and PMK, both of which are disproportionally represented by particular dominant castes. Especially the Vanniyar sub-caste in Northern Tamil Nadu, which is largely represented by the PMK, has a history of committing Dalit atrocities (Pandian, 2013: 13). The result of these strategic endeavors is that the normalized incivilities in Tamil Nadu's social life are turning increasingly violent, ultimately making violence a popular sentiment and a new form of political communication (Waghmore & Gorringe, 2019: 305).

Because of the increasing employment of RSS and BJP members within government services, the dense networks of caste loyalties within the political, bureaucratic and juridical arenas have allegedly become even less receptive towards Dalits. This has made it extremely difficult for Dalits to find justice for caste-based crimes (Dalit Human Rights Centre, 2018).

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[39] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020; Semmalar Selvi [Professor], 07/07/2020; Krithika Srinivasan [Journalist], 11/07/2020; Manjula Pradeep [Director WAYVE], 28/07/2020]; Abirami Jothee [Director AIDMAM], 24/07/2020*;* and Kiruba Munusamy [Supreme Court Lawyer], 12/08/2020].

[40] Interview with Semmalar Selvi [Professor], 07/07/2020.

[41] Interview with Krithika Srinivasan [Journalist], 11/07/2020.

‘The judicial system was already very poor – pro caste-system, pro-patriarchy… and now the BJP – the concept of Hindutva – has made an entrance [to it].’[42] In Tamil Nadu specifically, the performative and symbolic use of violence most often takes shape in the form of ‘honor killings’, whereby people are punished for marrying outside their own caste, especially when it concerns a Dalit (Pandian, 2013). Referring to the Udulmapet honor killing case, where a Dalit man was killed for marrying a woman from the dominant Thevar caste in 2016 (Shaji, 2020), Kiruba Munusamy expressed: ‘[The killing] was committed in broad daylight, [even] captured on an SSTV camera. But still, the Court said there was no evidence to prove that the parents conspired to commit this honor killing […]. This is a clear example of how the Indian judicial system is treating offenses against Dalits.’[43] Hence, it can be argued that the BJP and RSS’s attempts to consolidate power in Tamil Nadu have translated into limited justice and minimal equality, along with increased exclusion and performative violence against Dalits (Waghmore & Gorringe, 2019: 305).

The involvement of Hindutva vigilantes in the incitement of performative violence in Tamil Nadu is more explicitly visible in their ‘cultural policing’ of Christians, something which has become considerably regular after 2014, mostly without any form of punishment and in many cases with police compliance (Religious Liberty Commission, 2018; 2020). Illustrative of these developments is the following event described in a report by the DHRC (2018):

> ‘In Sogandi, Kancheepuram Disctrict, 150 Dalit Christian families live in between caste Hindus. During Christmas in 2016, their Christian Liturgy was disturbed by Hindu fundamentalist groups. Christians were harassed and attacked. 700 Policemen were brought to the village and all the Christian statues were removed from the hillock. […] Again, on Good Friday, nearly 300 Christian men gathered for the […] Good Friday service. There, 700 police men gathered and they disturbed the service; women and nuns were harassed. The Hindu fundamentalists also entered into the place of service. In the end, the police chased them all, beat them, and refused their rights to worship. False cases were filed against Fr. L. Yesumarian, the Parish Priest and some village leaders. Now they are facing trials in Court. […] The BJP government and the Hindu fundamentalist groups have become a challenge to Christians.’

This event clearly illustrates how Hindutva groups are increasingly acting as extra-constitutional policing bodies alongside official police forces, which is a phenomenon that has also been picked up by several media sources during the COVID-19 lockdown (Devasahayam, 2020; Karthik, 2020). As Jaffrelot (2019: 64) argues, the recent collusion between the police and Hindu fundamentalist groups is evidence of the start of a transition from a state-building process, in which the administrative and coercive apparatus is supposed to treat all citizens

[42] Vincent Kathir [Director EVIDENCE], 26/06/2020.
[43] Interview with Kiruba Munusamy [Supreme Court Lawyer], 12/08/2020].

equally, to a state-formation process through which the social and cultural order is increasingly imposed by non-state actors. This means that RSS and related 'deep state' organizations are becoming increasingly free in Tamil Nadu to impose their social norms on 'deviant' individuals whenever they seem fit, ultimately resulting in a *de facto* Hindu-nationalist state (Ibid, 64-65).

Summary

This chapter started with a detailed examination of the way in which Dalit activists have experienced their historical position of inequality in Tamil Nadu. This provided insights into the activists' grievances and their limited capacities for resistance. As has been shown, crucial political and social arenas in Tamil Nadu are governed by informal caste norms and practices instead of constitutional laws of equality. Hence, the real issue of continued inequality of Dalits is not the law itself, but the implementation of these laws, along with the continued normalization of Dalit inferiority.

In recent years, this position of structural inequality of Dalits and Dalit activists has been further exacerbated through the strategic actions of the BJP and RSS. Though my informants have been generally unyielding in the face of increased government restrictions on activists, other measures by the BJP and RSS have been experienced as more particularly worrisome. Closer cooperation between the BJP and RSS have essentially resulted in new manifestations of state power whereby the role of RSS and paramilitary actors have come to play an increasingly crucial role. The ideological backing that the BJP/RSS-partnership has given to caste hierarchy, coupled with their attempts to increase support for the Hindu-nationalist party's project of cultural nationalism, has created a situation in which the capacities of Dalits to claim their rights and to live a life of dignity are quickly deteriorating. Through their tactics, carried out in the villages on a grassroots level, as well as through mainstream and social media channels and governmental institutions, the BJP and RSS are not only giving ideological backing to caste hegemony, but are also actively creating and stirring up caste-based and communal tensions. The result of these strategic endeavors is that Dalits are not only structurally excluded but are now increasingly persecuted with impunity. The next chapter will elaborate further on the way in which these developments have played a role in the DHRC's process of strategic reflection.

Chapter 3 | Re-articulating claims

Now that the socio-political context of the Dalit activists in Tamil Nadu and the recent changes therein have been analysed, it becomes possible to further examine the strategic choices that the DHRC has made during this period of socio-political change and the part that MM has played in this process. As such, this chapter revolves around the DHRC's period of strategic reflection and the strategic choices that have followed between 2018 and 2020. The current chapter will provide an answer to the following two interrelated sub-questions: How and why has the DHRC changed its claims during their period of strategic reflection between 2018 and 2020? And what was the role of MM in this strategic redirection?

In order to answer these questions, I will first uncover the DHRC's original formulation of their claims, followed by examining how and to what extent these claims have been strategically altered in the new program. Furthermore, in order to fully grasp the DHRC's reasoning behind its recent strategic choices, it is important to first understand what the organization perceives to be the root causes of the (current) problems in Tamil Nadu and the way in which their new demands relate to these issues. In doing so, it is necessary to step away from conventional understandings of social movements as solely attempting to bring about policy change towards one that acknowledges the variety in movement targets, different forms of authority, and the different conceptions of what constitutes as 'social change' (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). Lastly, this chapter will dive deeper in the DHRC's period of strategic reflection. I aim to examine how the changes in the organization's claims are related to changes in their external environment, as well as internal changes in the movement community, in which MM plays a significant role. Though it is not the main subject of this thesis, attention will be given to the way in which MM and DHRC negotiated the new approach and what this tells us about the relationship between the two organizations.

From 'empowerment and liberation' to 'peace and dignified coexistence'

Within the study of social movements, the concept of 'claims' is most commonly understood as calls for action by at least one subject on the part of some object, whereby the claims can range in size and intensity, just as long as they would, if realized, affect the object's (and subject's) interests or well-being (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: 8). According to Meyer and Staggenborg, one of the basic strategic choices that movement actors make concern the demands or the claims they will put forward (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 7). Claims are similar to movement goals, but they are also strategic choices about which goals to pursue at

what time and in what manner. Since virtually all social movement organizations have multiple concerns, they are compelled to make decisions about what to emphasize at any given time (Ibid, 7-8). Furthermore, players' claims are always in motion because their salience shifts according to external circumstances, causing players to re-interpret and re-prioritize them (Jasper, 2015: 10-11). Before I elaborate on *why* DHRC and MM have chosen to reformulate their claims, it is first necessary to examine *how* these claims have been altered. As such, the first part of this chapter will firstly expand on the nature of the DHRC's demands, what these demands entail, and subsequently on the extent to which they have shifted during the period of strategic reflection between 2018 and 2020.

Since its inception in 1990, the DHRC has adhered to a certain claim that can broadly be defined as the empowerment and the liberation of Dalits. Though these concepts can be indicated as the officially stated objectives of the organization, it is simultaneously related to a much more personal experience. As Yesumarian states, 'It is more than a goal – it's a vision. It is our whole desire and longing. You see, we ourselves are Dalits – we want to see our own liberation through the stages. It's a desire for the empowerment and the dignity of the Dalits.'[44] This statement shows that, in articulating their claims, players do not solely 'choose the piece of their concerns that best serves their mobilizing and policy goals' as Gornick & Meyer (1998) suggest. Rather than acting on the basis of 'calculated maximization', movement actors reflect a form of rationality that goes beyond the traditional sense of maximizing utility towards one that acknowledges emotions as an important driving factor for strategic action without disregarding these emotions as simply irrational (Jasper, 2011: Jasper, 2004: 6). As Jasper argues, emotions and moral sensibilities – in this case the desire for human dignity and the personal obligation to safeguard these – permeate all stages of strategic action. Decisions based on these emotions are no more or less rational than calculated maximization (Jasper, 2004: 6). 'The type of humiliation I underwent, by the police, the officials and upper castes… I felt, "we need a place where Dalits feel comfortable and secure." […] This is something emotional that I also feel – that the DHRC is a symbol of Dalit liberation.'[45] As such, the DHRC's choice for the demand for Dalit empowerment and liberation can be seen as a strategic decision without having to downplay the emotional charge of the claim.

The claim for the empowerment and liberation of Dalits is not easily defined, but can be described as the demand for a society where Dalits' constitutional rights and entitlements are

[44] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[45] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020.

respected, protected and promoted, in order to ensure Dalits can live a life without discrimination or violence and with human dignity (Dalit Human rights Centre, 2013). '[Empowerment] means affirmation, it means legitimacy for the community, it means that their rights and entitlements are ensured […]. So, all aim towards ensuring a dignified life for Dalits.[46] Hence, an empowered and therefore dignified life can be regarded as a life in which Dalits are acknowledged as equal citizens who are protected from violence and are guaranteed their constitutional rights and entitlements, thereby enhancing their 'capacity for self-determination' (Gorringe, 2010: 115).

An important dimension of the DHRC's claim to Dalit empowerment and liberation is related to a level of personal and cognitive transformation. 'Liberation is holistic: socially, educationally, psychologically, you have to be liberated.'[47] The DHRC's claims of the liberation of Dalits clearly fits within the tradition of the broader Dalit Liberation Movement in Tamil Nadu, which took off especially following the 1990 Dr. Ambedkar centenary year, and within which Yesumarian has played a vital role (Mosse, 2009: 178). From the perspective of the Movement, caste is an historical set of relations and a mental state. This means that empowerment and liberation is not restricted to claiming rights and demanding injustices to be redressed (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 7), but also a matter of self-understanding and the removement of fear, pain and enslavement from the hearts and minds of those who have historically been subordinated (Mosse, 2009: 202). 'When people receive a social education, they will feel that there is something wrong, that there is an injustice. [Only then can they] come together and say "This injustice has to be set right."'[48] Likewise, Nilsen states that the 'cognitive transformation' has indeed been a crucial element to the empowerment of subaltern groups in India, since it changes the collective and only partly conscious emotional dispositions held by these social groups into one that can conceive of resistance against the everyday tyranny of local power holders (Nilsen, 2016: 37).

During the period of strategic reflection around 2018, the DHRC decided to make an addition to their already existing formulation of their demands. As stated in their project proposal of 2018, the DHRC's demand is now related to the creation of a culture of peace, within which Dalits and religious minorities are able to coexist alongside other communities with dignity and respect, thereby exercising their rightful claims and entitlements. In short, this could be phrased as 'peaceful and dignified coexistence' (Dalit Human Rights Centre, 2018). As Yesumarian

[46] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Christy.
[47] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 08/09/2020.
[48] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020.

expressed, though the formulation of the claim has changed, the core of the demand has not. 'We call it a value addition – we don't call it a kind of goal shift. We are not [forsaking] the empowerment and liberation of Dalits and the rights and the dignity that they should have. But a value, a strategic perspective [of peace] is added.'[49] This also corresponds with the idea that activists do not necessarily change their claims completely, but rather re-interpret them and prioritize certain aspects within a broader area of issues, depending on the situation at hand (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 8).

Peace, as formulated by DHRC, is meant as an *active* peace. 'We're not looking at a situation where there is no war, then it is peace – that is silence. Peace is more a proactive process that will ensure justice to the oppressed.'[50] According to Yesumarian, the concept of peace does not entail that the peace is kept at the expense of the rights and dignity of Dalits, but that it in fact includes these values within itself. 'If there is justice, dignity, rights, and all these things, that necessarily involves and implies that there is an active peace.'[51] In this way, the situation of 'peaceful and dignified coexistence' that DHRC envisions is closely related to Galtung's concept of positive peace. According to Galtung (1975), whereas negative peace is the absence of direct violence, positive peace also includes both the absence of structural violence (e.g. inequality) and cultural violence (factors that allow people to rationalize injustice). This also means that the intention of building positive peace is not only to create a structure of justice and equity. It also focuses on reconciliation and cooperation between opposing actors (Gawerc, 2006: 439). As such, central to achieving the DHRC's claim of 'peaceful and dignified coexistence' are the values of inclusivity and solidarity. 'It is a strategic move – bringing both of the communities together.'[52] Likewise, Christy expressed: 'Our mission of peace and dignified coexistence is that common people – at the grassroot level […], show empathy, express solidarity, respect, diversity. And that they experience opportunities irrespective of belonging to any caste or religion.'[53] Hence, the shift in focus can thus be regarded as moving from 'mere' justice to justice 'plus'.

Targets, authority, and social change

As has been discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the scholarly debate on social movements has long been characterized by a narrow focus on social movements that are

[49] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[50] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[51] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[52] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020, Yesumarian.
[53] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.

exclusively interested in policy change, thereby considering 'the state' (or 'the polity') as the primary target of their claims (Crossley, 2002: 170). The problem with such a focus, however, is that it excludes activists and organizations such as the DHRC that differ from this description. This has resulted in a systematic lack of understanding of such movements in terms of the targets of their claims, the forms of constraints that they might face, and their subsequent strategic decisions (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Zald, 2000). In order to obtain a better understanding of the DHRC's strategic choices after 2018, it is necessary to first examine the targets of the organization's claims (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 10). To pose it differently, we need to ask what and whom they consider to be the core barriers to Dalit empowerment and liberation. This ultimately involves looking at the distribution of societal power beyond 'the state' and the different ways that power can be challenged (Armstrong & Bernstein: 2008: 84).

The traditional definition of social movements is grounded within a narrow understanding of power as exclusively located within the polity, rendering law or policy change the only way to challenge existing power relations (Ibid, 77). However, it can be argued that the narrow allocation of the state as the only institution of importance fails to capture the ways that power is distributed in society and cannot capture the range of activity designed to challenge the ways that power operates (Ibid, 84). The DHRC's understanding of the location of power beyond the state can be seen in their increased focus on challenging institutional dynamics within other arenas, such as the Catholic Church. 'A very significant issue is that even the Church is very hierarchical and very casteist. […] So, [we] question that: if you're a Church, you're following the Church principles, meaning you're advocates of the poor and you should have at least some reservations for Dalits […]. This is basically trying to question the authority within the Church and why Churches are not following the Christian values of equality and justice.'[54] The point here is that, ultimately, authority is not exclusively located in the state, since the real barrier to Dalit empowerment is located within dominant meaning systems that allow and legitimize the practice of caste. These meaning systems extend beyond the state to all arenas of Indian society. This more Foucauldian view of power also implies that nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the state apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed (Foucault, 1980: 60).

As has become clear, the DHRC locates the core barrier to achieving their demands within the dominant culture of caste hierarchy and superiority that still prevails throughout India and which prevents Dalit from living their lives as fully recognized citizens. As Christy states,

[54] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020; Christy.

‘There is a big ideology that needs to be challenged. […] So, we are looking at mindsets at different levels. For instance, […] the mindset of people who are responsible to discharge their duties in the government system. And day-to-day practices [of people], which also align with this [situation of] inequality.’[55] As such, though the DHRC acknowledges that state actors are important in guaranteeing and enforcing the constitutional rights of Dalits – thereby acknowledging the government as an important factor to Dalit empowerment – they ultimately locate the source of the problem not in the absence of certain laws or policies but in the attitude of state actors and the way their attitude influences the actual enforcement of already existing laws. Hence, instead of challenging existing laws or policies, the DHRC challenges patterns of *cultural authority*: systems of beliefs that rationalize and justify the unequal distribution and exercise of authority and the practices and institutional logics reflective of those beliefs (Snow et al., 2004: 9; McCammon, 2017: 245). Within the Indian context, it can be argued that such a conceptualization of power is crucial, since it is more apt to explain the BJP/RSS’s recent tactics of spreading divisive narratives and the idea of Hindu primacy through grassroot networks. Such tactics, aimed at influencing the belief and value systems of local communities, extend beyond the political and institutional realm towards a much more cultural and everyday level. Building on this statement, it can be said that the DHRC’s choice to approach power in a similar way is a strategic decision in order to counter the BJP and RSS’s current Hindu-nationalist project. A more cultural notion of power enables the DHRC to address practices of exclusion that extend beyond policies, laws and formal institutions. As Yesumarian explained, ‘The [RSS] promulgates Hindutva, through grassroot level movements, and they carry [this ideology] over to ordinary, uneducated people. […] What is a way to counter that? Equally, you have to build movements on the same level. Not to spread a kind of hatred, but to balance it by developing a dialogue.’[56]

The narrow focus of social movement scholars on law and policy change has led many of them to unnecessarily differentiate between activism that is either ‘expressive’ (aimed at confronting existing norms and values) or ‘instrumental’ (aimed at achieving concrete and measurable goals) (Bernstein, 1997: 534). Within this categorisation, only the latter is considered to be a legitimate goal for social movements while the former is related to ‘identity’ or ‘lifestyle’ movements. The latter movements are said to seek, above all, personal transformation and recognition (Stammers, 2009: 164). However, the essentialist categorization

[55] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[56] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Yesumarian.

of movements as either expressive or instrumental leads to erroneous assumptions about the reasons for collective action and certain strategic choices (Snow, 2004: 14; Bernstein, 1997: 534). The DHRC's claim of personal, emotional, and cognitive transformation of Dalits and caste members is a necessary condition for moving them 'from the balcony to the barricades' and thus for implementing and sustaining the social changes sought (Snow, 2004: 10). To put it differently, in their demand for peaceful and dignified coexistence, the DHRC not only contests existing meaning systems, but simultaneously aims to change the practices of the objects of their claims. In this way, the members of the DHRC demand both a more just enforcement of the law, and fairer day-to-day interactions (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008: 85-6; Williams, 2004).

The 'new' perspective on movement claims, targets, and forms of authority ultimately also challenges established ideas about what constitutes movement success. In the case of the DHRC, an important aspect of achieving the organization's demands of peace and dignified coexistence has to do with the coordination of actions that, above all, challenge attitudes about others and therefore strike at the relational basis of caste (Gorringe, 2010: 117). As Christy expressed, 'If people's mindsets are changed, it comes out in their attitude, and when the attitude is slightly changed, […] the practice of equality becomes easier. Not just with people who are victimized, but also people who are oppressing.'[57] Hence, the only real difference between the DHRC and seemingly 'instrumental' social movements is the *character* of the intended social change, since it is less concretely measurable (Snow et al., 2004: 8). Change, in this sense, can be described as a 'democratic deepening' of state-society relations, as well as ending the 'everyday tyranny' of dominant castes over Dalit communities and the values and practices that are aligned with it (Hickey & Bracking, 2005: 851; Nilsen, 2016: 33). As such, it is important to acknowledge both the importance of instrumental and expressive dimensions of the DHRC's movement claims and to be attentive to the way in which their challenges to dominant cultural values are related to concrete institutional dynamics (Bernstein, 1997: 560).

Why change?

Now that it has become clear how the content of the DHRC's claims has changed (or rather, evolved) and how these new claims relate to interrelated systems of cultural and institutional authority, it becomes easier to assess *why* the members of the DHRC have chosen to strategically reformulate their existing claims. According to Meyer and Staggenborg (2012: 9),

[57] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.

in order to understand changing movement demands, it is necessary to examine the interactions of movement actors with other actors and how these relationships and the positions of movement actors have shifted over time. Within their model on strategic action, Meyer and Staggenborg (Ibid, 13) distinguish between three levels of interaction that impact the strategic choices of movement actors. The first level has been extensively analysed in chapter two and deals with the movement's political and cultural environment, whereby movement actors interact with targets and opponents within different arenas. The other two levels are related to interactions within the movement community, consisting of the various organizations and individuals within the movement, and the movement organization, which consists of leaders and members of the organization itself. Hence, changes in activists' strategic choices can be both the result of developments external and internal to the movement.

Furthermore, the last two levels also relate to Jasper's (2015: 12) argument that players that look unified from the outside are actually spaces for contestation from within. Groups and organizations that operate as a single player in various external arenas can be seen as arenas themselves when looking at their internal procedures. This also means that, when strategic choices are altered in the wake of changing interactions between movements and their targets and opponents, the actual choices made are the outcome of extensive internal decision-making processes intended to arrive at agreements about goals and means (Maeckelbergh, 2009). In other words, movement actors' strategic choices are influenced by multiple interactions at each level, whereby these different levels of interaction are connected and layered (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 13). In order to answer the question of why the DHRC has decided to make a strategic value addition to their existing claims, it is thus necessary to not only look at changes in their environment but also to the way in which these changes have been assessed and debated by the DHRC and within their broader movement community (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 8).

Since the BJP's advancements in the South, the strategic endeavors of the Hindutva movement have become an important topic for internal discussion between the DHRC and MM. According to Kees Schilder, because of the recent actions of the BJP and RSS, the issues of discrimination and structural inequality that were already present in Tamil Nadu have evolved into a situation that can essentially be deemed a violent conflict.[58] In other words, the DHRC's project of Dalit emancipation has come into direct conflict with the majoritarian sensibilities of the Hindutva movement (Waghmore & Gorringe, 2019: 305). Within this new situation, power is increasingly manifested in and exercised through complex and often invisible partnerships

[58] Interview with Kees Schilder [Former India Program Director MM], 09/09/2020.

between state and non-state actors such as RSS and other vigilante groups, who aim to gain an ideological foothold within local communities by spreading Hindu-nationalist narratives through grassroots campaigns (Jaffrelot, 2019; Jasper, 2014). Picking up on these developments, MM eventually deemed it necessary to move the claims of the DHRC to one that would properly recognize the changing nature of the problems at hand.[59]

Like every organization, MM's strategic decisions are not only shaped by external processes, but also the result of complex internal interactions. In order to grasp some of the complexity of strategic change within broader movement communities, it is important to highlight some important internal factors that shaped MM's decision to focus on peace and reconciliation in Tamil Nadu. MM's decision to adopt a more relational approach was preceded by their internal organization-level desire for a more specialized expertise in peace building and conflict-resolution. This was also expected to increase their opportunities for funding.[60] As Rodio and Schmitz (2010: 448) state, while some strategic decisions by transnational NGOs are to a certain extent driven by competition for media exposure and donor funding, the dichotomous idea of 'self-interest versus norms' should be rejected, as the pursuit of such interests does not necessarily come at the expense of the organization's mandate. Likewise, MM's accumulated expertise with peacebuilding provided the organization with the opportunity to adapt to the changing socio-political environment within the context of Tamil Nadu.[61] Hence, both the internal desire to specialize and the pressure to respond to new human rights challenges shaped MM's ultimate decision for a peace building strategy in Tamil Nadu (Rodio & Schmitz, 2010: 457).

According to Meyer and Staggenborg (2012: 23), activists' allies not only help enhance activists' resources but can also provide exposure to new values and ideas regarding arenas, tactics and demands. During our interview, Schilder reflected on the strategy that DHRC had traditionally taken prior their period of strategic reflection: 'The juridical approach that the DHRC takes is a confrontational strategy, and there are limits to this approach. […] Not only because the judicial system in India is quite corrupt, but also because it won't, on a more fundamental level, help dismantle the caste system as a whole.'[62] This accords with Gorringe's (2010: 115) observation that, over the years, Dalits in Tamil Nadu might have increasingly rejected casteist prescriptions and their position of subordination, but in doing so, have become

[59] Interview with Kees Schilder [Former India Program Director MM], 09/09/2020.
[60] E-mail contact with Ton Groeneweg [India Program Director MM].
[61] E-mail contact with Ton Groeneweg [India Program Director MM].
[62] Interview with Kees Schilder [Former India Program Director MM], 09/09/2020.

emboldened rather than empowered. Vital to the process of empowerment, he argues, is the recognition of the newly formed Dalit identity by 'the other' – in this case members of dominant castes. Ultimately, they are the ones who have the authority to guarantee and to enforce Dalits' rights (Gorringe, 2005: 292). Yet on the contrary, Dalit assertion in Tamil Nadu has resulted in a backlash from those outside the Dalit movement in the form of intensified caste antagonisms and Dalit atrocities (Carswell & De Neve, 2015: 1129).[63] In fact, as has been elucidated in chapter two, the tensions between dominant castes and Dalits, as well as between Dalits, are currently further exacerbated and strategically exploited by Hindutva affiliates through various tactics.

Referring back to the nature of the DHRC's targets and the forms of authority it aims to challenge, it can thus be said that the DHRC has, to a certain extent, been able to enforce a change in dominant castes' practices, but has yet to achieve a lasting change in the value and belief systems that lie at the heart of these exclusionary practices (Snow, 2004). Especially in the current socio-political climate, where the complex of relations between Dalit and non-Dalits has shifted towards a (proto-)violent conflict in which the RSS and other para-military actors play a crucial role in creating ideological backing for anti-Dalit violence, the danger of a confrontational approach is that it might only further antagonize relationships. As Schilder expressed, 'A confrontational approach won't result in higher castes changing their opinions or working more closely together [with Dalits]. On the contrary, it creates more divisions.'[64] Peace building claims and tactics, on the other hand, could potentially be a powerful tool for social change in this context, as they help to establish more enduring agreements (Roy et al., 2010: 349). Furthermore, a relational approach might be better suited for Dalit activists to respond to the RSS's intensive project of cultural and religious entrepreneurism. 'A lot of people are now under increasing pressure to go along with Modi's call to unite on nationalistic, Hindu cultural grounds. […] They are getting sucked into this Hindu-nationalist movement. If you are able to, instead, involve these kinds of people, then you have much more chance of success. […] So, seeking alliances with the Hindu majority, and within the police, the judiciary and politicians, instead of isolating yourself. This is much more aimed at cooperation and dialogue instead of judicial confrontation.'[65]

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[63] See, for example, the statistics on Dalit atrocities and the implementation of the SC/ST PoA Act in Tamil Nadu by the National Dalit Movement for Justice: https://www.indiaspend.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/NCDHR_REPORT-NEW2.pdf

[64] Interview with Kees Schilder [Former India Program Director MM], 09/09/2020.

[65] Interview with Kees Schilder [Former India Program Director MM], 09/09/2020.

The decision to specialize in peace and reconciliation in India was initially taken by MM internally without the participation of the DHRC.[66] However, after the initial decision was taken, MM provided a year-long period of reflection during which the DHRC was given the space to discuss the new plan – both internally and with MM – and to think about 'how peace and reconciliation would meet with the issues present in India.'[67] The financial partnership with those organizations unwilling to make the strategic change would be ended, but MM would offer support to those partners in finding financial alternatives (Mensen met een Missie, 2020a). Despite the asymmetrical donor-recipient relationship between MM and the DHRC, it can thus be argued that MM has been able to largely mitigate the possible negative effects of such a hierarchical relation. By providing space to discuss and build support for the proposed approach among the members of the DHRC, MM showed commitment to safeguarding the autonomy of the Dalit activists and to making sure that the new approach would be suitable to the local context (Waghmore, 2012; De Waal, 2015). In addition, MM's promise to support partner organizations in finding alternative financial resources might have reduced pressure on the DHRC. Such an agreement would have prevented the DHRC from losing funding in case of sustained ideological differences about strategy.

MM's proposal for a new perspective was initially met with resistance from the DHRC. This reaction can be understood by looking at several contributing factors. According to Meyer and Staggenborg (2012: 26), activists' views on the applicability of strategic options are strongly shaped by emotional climates and prevailing ideologies within a movement organization (Meyer, 2004: 183). Strategic choices in this sense are not simply neutral decisions about what will be most effective, but also statements about the identity of activists (Polletta & Jasper, 2001: 293). As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, besides it being an officially stated objective, the liberation and empowerment of Dalits is experienced by the members of the DHRC as a strong personal and moral obligation. As a result of this moral attachment, the members of the DHRC have been reluctant towards making strategic choices that might compromise the ideals of the organization, which they initially experienced to be the case with MM's new peace perspective. 'Peace building at the cost of Dalits or Dalit dignity… if you're not giving the rights and dignity to Dalits – what is peace?'[68] Furthermore, referring back to chapter two, the ideological and emotional dimensions of strategic claims-making thus also help to explain why the members of the DHRC continued their 'regular' activities despite their

[66] Interview with Kees Schilder [Former India Program Director MM], 09/09/2020.
[67] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[68] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020.

direct experience with increased intensity of government scrutinization, intimidation, and Hindu majoritarianism. Emotions, in this case based upon moral principles, as well as compassion for the unfortunate and indignation over injustice, affect the way in which activists give meaning to the changes in their environment. Hence, they are important in shaping the way in which movement actors respond to and negotiate the world around them (Jasper, 2011: 287-9).

Secondly, the history of past interactions of activists with other movement actors, and the ideas and experiences that result from it, influence activists' perceptions on the feasibility of certain strategic choices (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 25). As a result, historically salient demands and tactics might eventually become routine activities that cease to be regularly questioned (Jasper, 2004: 12). The DHRC traditionally followed a strategic approach that fit neatly within the ideological framework of the broader Dalit movement that took off in the 1990s in Tamil Nadu (Wankhede, 2008; Gorringe, 2012). 'In India, we have a strong tradition of a [movement] process that is empowering. Empowering means, you don't live in silence, you start questioning the systems, the authorities. […] That was the predominant framework that we had.'[69] Not surprisingly, the DHRC's initial response to the new perspective, as Christy expressed, 'was a shock – a lot of hesitation was there. Because it shifted the purpose to a completely different paradigm.'[70] As such, it can be argued that the DHRC members' past experiences, expectations, and historical relations with other similar movement actors were constraining factors in regard to the organizations' willingness for strategic adaption (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 27).

As a result of MM's initiated proposal to change the claims of the organization, it can be argued that the DHRC experienced what Jasper calls the 'dilemma of shifting goals.' This dilemma appears when activists have to 'decide whether to stick with their original goals, thereby trying to find the right means, or to adjust the goals to the situation at hand' (Jasper, 2004: 8). However, during our discussion of this dilemma, both Yesumarian and Christy expressed how the members of the DHRC in time decided that the 'peace perspective' was not necessarily a compromise, but rather an addition to their existing claims.[71] This accords with the idea that conflict resolution and social justice are both critical elements within the peace-building framework (Kriesberg, 2001: 62). 'We used to look at the authority and directly

[69] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020, Christy.
[70] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020, Christy.
[71] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020.

challenge it. We realized that, in a way, this is good – but not alone. Somewhere there has to be a meeting point – otherwise there is no space for dialogue. And MM gave us the idea that dialogue is an essential part of change process.'[72] This invigorates the earlier argument that allies within the broader movement community play a crucial role in providing movements with new ideas (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 24; Rootes, 2006). However, it can be said that strategic change usually only takes place within the bounds of an organization's moral and ideological framework (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 11). As Christy expressed: 'I think MM facilitated that process of introspection, […] that we were just giving a value addition, and there is nothing wrong with trying out a new strategy. As long as your fundamental vision is not compromised.'[73]

Summary

The aim of this chapter was to provide an answer to the following interrelated questions: Why and how did the DHRC change its claims during their period of strategic reflection between 2018 and 2020? And what was the role of MM in this strategic redirection? As has been shown, while their core demands of empowerment and liberation did not change, the DHRC made a strategic value addition to their core claims by focusing more explicitly on creating an atmosphere of 'peace and dignified coexistence'. Given the conceptual 'awkwardness' between the nature of the DHRC's demands and traditional policy- and state-oriented conceptions on social movement claims, this chapter also focused on examining the implications of the DHRC's demands in terms of targets, authority and social change. Characteristic of the DHRC's current strategy is a focus on cultural authority, whereby it is aimed to challenge dominant value and belief systems that legitimize the unequal and humiliating treatment of Dalits. This strategic decision is rooted in an understanding of power as diffused, 'everyday' and cultural, instead of exclusively institutional and political. Such a conception of authority is particularly necessary in order to understand the growing importance of the RSS and other vigilante actors for the BJP's political agenda and their goal to obtain an ideological foothold within rural communities through cultural tactics. By targeting belief systems and subtle everyday exclusionary practices rather than policies and formal institutions – thereby mirroring the tactics of the Hindutva movement – the DHRC and MM aim to meaningfully react to the Hindutva movement's project of cultural majoritarianism.

[72] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020, Christy.
[73] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.

Although it was MM who initially proposed such an approach – both for internal and external reasons –, the DHRC eventually followed suit. Despite initial moral and ideological opposition towards strategic change, the DHRC eventually agreed that a new approach was not necessarily a compromise and that it was needed to deal with the current issues in Tamil Nadu. Important to note is that MM provided considerable time to build support for the new approach among the members of the DHRC and to discuss the merits of a peacebuilding strategy. In doing so, they showed commitment to safeguarding the autonomy of the DHRC, as well as to making sure that the new claims would be relevant to the local context. Furthermore, MM's promise of assistance to the DHRC in finding financial continuity in case of strategic disagreements might also have taken some pressure away from the organization. As a result, MM eventually played a crucial role in exposing DHRC to new ideas about peace and justice, thereby enabling them to meaningfully adapt to an increasingly hostile socio-political environment.

Chapter 4 | Choosing peace(ful) tactics

Now that the DHRC's changes to their claims have been properly examined, it becomes possible to delve deeper into the tactics that the members of the DHRC have chosen in order to press their demands of 'peaceful and dignified coexistence'. Hence, the fourth and last chapter will revolve around the following interrelated sub-questions: How has the DHRC changed its tactics in the wake of shrinking civic space and following the re-articulation of the organization's claims between 2018 and 2020? What was the role of MM in developing these tactics?

In order to answer the abovementioned sub-questions, this chapter will first elaborate on what constitutes a tactic and the way in which strategic choices about the form of tactics are related to interactions with opponents within different arenas. In doing so, the current chapter is connected to the second chapter of this thesis, since it investigates the way in which the DHRC has made strategic choices about tactics in light of the current strategic endeavors of local Hindutva affiliates. This chapter will thus refer back to the different arenas in which the BJP and RSS are currently exercising their tactics and the way in which these tactical endeavors are reflected in the DHRC's choices about tactics and arenas. Subsequently, similar to the previous chapter, I will provide insight into the particular role of MM in the DHRC's process of tactical redirection. Lastly, this chapter will delve deeper into the form of the tactics itself and the ways in which these tactics are intended by the members of the DHRC to press their newly articulated demands. Given that many of these tactics are still in its initial phases, coupled with the fact that the DHRC and MM are still developing methods through which to 'measure the success' of relational tactics, this research will not go into the exact execution or the effects of these new tactics.

Tactics and arenas

In making strategic choices, activists must not only choose which claims to press, but also which specific means or forms of collective action to use in order to implement strategy (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 11). According to Taylor and Van Dyke (2004: 268), the broader conceptualization of social movement claims as targeting systems of institutional or cultural authority rather than the polity alone, likewise requires a more inclusive definition of what constitutes a protest tactic. By operationalizing a definition of movement tactics that acknowledges the different forms of authority and social change, it becomes possible to

understand the significant ways in which the DHRC and similar CSOs aim to shape social institutions and cultural codes (Zald, 2000).

Following Taylor and Van Dyke's (2009: 868) conceptualization, tactics can first and foremost be seen as the result of strategic, and hence, intentional decision-making processes. Tactics involve contestation in which bodies, symbols, identities, practices and discourses are framed and deployed to target changes in multiple institutional arenas, including cultural codes and practices. Lastly, acting collectively requires the development of solidarity and an oppositional consciousness that allows a challenging group to identify common injustices, to oppose them, and to resist the system of authority responsible for those injustices (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004: 269). This means that tactics are also a means by which challenging groups develop a new collective identity, and in doing so, serve both an external and internal movement-building function (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2009: 869). Moreover, collective identity also points to impacts outside the formal political sphere to the transformation of social norms, and the way groups see themselves and are seen by others (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Given the open-ended nature of tactics, it is thus important to ask what the intentions of the members of the DHRC are and how their tactics relate to promoting changes in dominant relations of power (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004: 269).

In choosing tactics, movement actors simultaneously select the arenas in which to pursue them. As has been shown in chapter two, each arena is characterized by distinct rules and traditions, and players that move within different arenas have different (and often unequal) capacities and resources at their disposal. Furthermore, each arena provides access to different targets, audiences and opponents (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 10). As a result, in deciding on tactics, activists simultaneously assess their opportunities and competencies in various arenas, as well as the impact that these activities in that arena will have on supporters and opponents (Ibid, 10). Hence, in examining why and how the members of the DHRC have chosen their tactics, it is necessary to empirically assess how they have negotiated their tactics in interaction with other players within various arenas (Doherty & Hayes, 2018: 8; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996).

Building counter-narratives

As movements and opponents build their strategies in interaction with one another, it is important to place the DHRC's recent tactical choices in the context of the actions of the BJP and RSS, both of whom can be considered to be the DHRC's ideological opponents. As has been shown in chapter two, the BJP and RSS rely heavily on a strategy that is focused on

shaping public opinion, which, on a more concrete level, takes place in arenas such as the media and local villages. Reflecting on these recent activities, Yesumarian expressed: 'Today, the media and social media is very wrongly used. Unauthentic news and information are spread, and people tend to believe that. So, through media and through training, we have to really sensitize people […].'[74] The DHRC's attention towards tactics that involve media and awareness raising in the wake of the actions of Hindutva affiliates thus accords with the idea that when opponents show signs of success in a particular arena, movement actors are likely to follow suit (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 17). However, given that the DHRC's strategy has traditionally featured a media- and sensitization-oriented approach, it is more accurate to state that the DHRC has adjusted their strategic engagement rather than started from scratch (Ibid,17). Though the focus of the first part of this chapter will be on the substantive changes to the DHRC's media tactic, similar changes have been made to the content of the DHRC's sensitization programs. Furthermore, though these tactics were developed by the members of the DHRC, MM played a crucial role in providing the underlying framework for these tactics. In the second half of this chapter, I will further elaborate on the role of MM within the DHRC's process of tactical change.

For the past 22 years, the DHRC has published its own monthly magazine with the aim to document human rights violations and to bring out these issues to the public. This magazine is circulated throughout the state. Among the audience members are not only the Dalits themselves, but also non-Dalits and government officials. 'All these people, they read it, every month. What we publish is sent to people and to the concerned departments of the government, to take action.'[75] Although the reach is regional and thus not on a mass scale, the DHRC perceives the magazines to be effective because they help to 'shape the thinking process' of its target readers.[76] The strategic use of alternative media can thus be considered a tactic, since it is an intentional use of discourses, aimed at bringing Dalit atrocities to the attention of the public and influential decision-makers within judicial and law enforcement arenas, thereby pressurizing them to take action (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004: 268). Furthermore, Yesumarian explained that the magazine 'is also a kind of way of educating our Dalit community, how, according to their rights, they have to defend themselves.'[77] Hence, alternative media is also a

[74] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[75] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Yesumarian.
[76] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020.
[77] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05-08-202]; Yesumarian.

way through which to sensitize Dalits, as it helps Dalits to form a shared consciousness and a 'new' sense of self in relation to the world (Polletta & Jasper, 2001: 296).

The consecutive adjustment that was made to this tactic in the wake of growing polarization revolved around the way in which the DHRC chose to *frame* their demands and the issues they address. Frames, in this sense, are 'schemata of interpretation' that enable individuals to 'locate, perceive, identify and label' occurrences within their life and the world more generally (Benford & Snow, 2000: 613). Frames condense aspects of 'the world out there' in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists (Ibid, 614). Before their strategic reflection in 2018, the DHRC generally employed a human rights-based discourse, which 'transforms people's needs into rights', and 'puts the states' legal responsibilities to its citizens under a lens' (Waghmore, 2012: 1316). A human rights frame emphasizes the obligation of states to ensure, among other things, the dignity, equality and freedom of its subjects, which is grounded in the idea that people have the same unalienable rights by virtue of their humanity (Merry et al., 2010: 102; Bob, 2007: 169). Moreover, as Yesumarian expressed, 'By publishing such kinds of injustice, it is also a lesson to the perpetrators that they cannot go around committing crimes [against Dalits].' As such, it can be said that the DHRC, in addressing human rights issues, relied strongly on 'naming and shaming' of opponents (Bakker et al., 2013: 581).

In 2018, significant changes were made to the DHRC's media strategy. 'What has happened in recent years is that the way things are communicated has become more non-violent – or rather, a more polite way of communicating. […] So, no one gets offended by reading the magazine – rather, they get an opportunity to reflect on it.'[78] This strategic choice accords with Bernstein's (1997: 536) argument that activists operating in different political and cultural contexts often choose to strategically adopt different ways in which they present themselves and their claims. Activists can choose strategically between confronting values and practices of a dominant culture by critiquing them, or challenging the dominant culture's perception of the marginalized community through gaining legitimacy by playing on uncontroversial themes and suppressing difference (Ibid,537). Likewise, the DHRC chose to focus more explicitly on emphasizing the unity among Dalits and non-Dalits. An example is the publications of stories about shortages of particular basic facilities such as infrastructure or water, which involves all the communities. These stories are used as a way of showing the mutual interests and struggles

[78] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.

of Dalits and non-Dalits.[79] As Christy explained; 'Outside forces come and divide people in the name of caste, in the name of religion, and they come with these divisive narratives. So, we want [them] to be challenged, by more bridging narratives.'[80] The DHRC's new 'bridging' frames can thus clearly be seen as a strategic response to the increasing ideological impact of a counter-movement's frames, in this case the BJP and RSS's Hindu-nationalist narratives (McCaffrey & Keys, 2000: 56).

Moreover, the way in which the members of the DHRC have chosen to frame the issues they address in order to create support is closely related to Benford and Snow's (2000: 624) concept of 'frame amplification', which involves the 'idealization, embellishment, clarification, or invigoration of existing values or beliefs'. Important themes that are used and emphasized within the DHRC's magazines, as well as during awareness-sessions, are constitutional values such as fraternity, equality and solidarity, or values that are shared across religions, like compassion and love. These values are communicated, for example, through religious parables and success stories on traditional indigenous peace building practices.[81] In this way, it can be argued that the DHRC aims to limit the scope of conflict by consciously avoiding the explicit problematization of certain norms of the dominant culture (such as caste), and rather chooses to amplify those existing values that do, in fact, align with their claim of peaceful and dignified coexistence (Bernstein, 1997: 538: Benford & Snow, 2000: 624). In this way, the members of the DHRC still aim to contest cultural and institutional forms of authority. But rather than directly confronting hegemonic systems of authority, they rely more on creating a sense of shared identity and solidarity between Dalits and non-Dalits.

This does not mean, however, that the members of the DHRC have forsaken their claim of addressing human rights violations and safeguarding the rights and entitlements of Dalits. 'Right now, "human rights" is not an appreciated term. When you speak of human rights, people perceive it as anti-government, or anti-nation.'[82] As a result of the increasingly negative connotation and the political nature of the term, it can be said that the DHRC has chosen to strategically approach and deploy human rights not as a system of international law but rather as a set of values (Goodale, 2007). 'We take those values, as the core message, and see if they are also present in religious scriptures, or other moral philosophies. In short, we try to use [people's] own "language".'[83] As such, the DHRC has appropriated the overtly 'legal' human

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[79] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Yesumarian.
[80] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Christy.
[81] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[82] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[83] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.

rights discourse in a way that it corresponds with existing normative structures, thereby expanding existing cultural frameworks rather than replacing them (Merry et al., 2010: 108). In this way, the DHRC still actively aims to develop a human rights consciousness among their public, but takes a more educational and inclusive approach, which they experience to be better suited to contribute to their goal of creating solidarity and empathy between opposing groups. Lastly, even though the BJP's stricter policing against 'anti-national' elements did initially not play a role in the DHRC's period of strategic reflection, the members of the DHRC acknowledged that the different articulation of human rights issues would ultimately also better safeguard them against restrictive government policies.[84]

Furthermore, in order to counteract the growing influence of the BJP's polarizing narratives, the DHRC decided to expand their visibility within the media by entering new (media) arenas. Firstly, the organization decided to actively engage in cultivating journalistic contacts.[85] According to Rohlinger (2006), these alliances are crucial for movements to increase their coverage in mainstream media and to influence the way in which they are framed. This especially rings true in the case of Dalit activists, given their structurally disadvantaged position within mainstream media arenas as opposed to dominant castes. However, despite the additional pressure that the DHRC is able to put on media houses through their alliances with journalists, the mainstream media remains an arena that is largely closed off for Dalits. Given the significance of media presence in countering the divisive narratives of the BJP, the DHRC also made the strategic decision to enter social media arenas. 'What is not heard by people through big newspapers and televisions, can be covered by social media. […] So, I think that social media is currently the best thing to pass on the information of our ideology.'[86] As Mitra (2004: 496) argues, the internet provides 'a unique forum for the dispossessed' to influence public opinion and to 'produce their presence.' An important factor is that social media does not rely on traditional media politics, which are heavily influenced by the resources of organized media. As such, social media gives Dalit communities the social and cultural capital to 'articulate counter meaning-making practices' despite their marginal position (Thakur, 2019: 361). That being said, social media arenas are not devoid of constraints. Especially given the increasingly arbitrary regulation of online spaces by the Indian Government and big tech companies, the members of the DHRC might encounter new restrictions within social media spaces in the years to come.

[84] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[85] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[86] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 08/09/2020.

Dialogue platforms

In the case of the DHRC, it can be argued that not only their claims, but also the forms in which they choose to press their claims depend upon their perception on authority and social change. The DHRC's focus on a level of personal and cultural change is most clearly reflected in their recent tactical choice to pursue activities such as inter-community dialogue and mediation. These 'bridging' activities are commonly used by peace organizations to develop a culture of trust and respect between opposing groups (Gidron & Meyer, 1999: 289; Meyer, 2004: 169). Though these initiatives have been developed by the members of the DHRC, MM played an important role in providing the theoretical ground work for these activities. MM defines peace building as 'a process of promoting knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behavior changes that will enable conflicting parties […] to prevent conflict and violence and to resolve conflict peacefully' (Mensen met een Missie, 2018). An important underlying inspiration here is the 'contact hypothesis', which contends that guided cross-community contact is the first step towards conflict resolution (Mensen met een Missie, 2020b). 'We should make people resilient to divisive narratives. Because only when that is addressed, they will have adequate time to think of other socio-economic justice discussions and deliberations.'[87] This conception of peace can be further clarified through Galtung's (1996: 196) conflict model, which consists of three different but interrelated components: behavior, attitudes and assumptions, and contradiction. According to Galtung, visible behavior (violence, discrimination) is shaped by latent attitudes and assumptions (prejudice, hatred) and deeper underlying contradictions involving someone's inability to attain certain goals. The latter shows a more systemic dimension of conflict, as it is often rooted in large-scale social and economic modes of organization (capitalism, poverty, inequality) (Gidron & Meyer, 1999: 289; Meyer, 2004: 169). Referring to this model, it can be said that MM views peace building as a tool to improve people's attitudes towards each other, thereby hoping to positively change their behavior, which in turn might help to broach and possibly supersede underlying problems over time (Demmers, 2017: 61). That being said, given the complexity of systemic issues underlying many conflicts, one might wonder whether CSOc such as DHRC and MM actually have a choice in deciding whether to focus on changing attitudes or solving underlying contradictions directly.

Furthermore, in order to obtain better insights into possible conflict breeding grounds within the Indian context, MM has started to develop their own research initiative. Through practical

[87] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020; Christy.

experience and discussions with experts, MM aims to further develop a better understanding of the ways in which religion interferes with current socio-political issues. Furthermore, the organization also explores the potential of religion as a positive, conflict-reducing force within peace building processes (Mensen met een Missie, 2020c).[88] As such, besides their more traditional role as financial donor, MM has become increasingly important to the DHRC in terms of knowledge sharing and capacity building. This also means that the DHRC's and MM's process of strategic redirection has ultimately resulted in a new form of transnational partnership.

Within the DHRC's current dialogue platforms, the opportunity is provided for different castes and religious communities to come together and to engage in a dialogue about current issues. One of these activities are cultural events for youths, which are organized around common themes such as environmental issues and women's rights. During the cultural events, people of different backgrounds are encouraged and supported to discuss these issues together. Additionally, the DHRC adopted a 'befriending strategy', whereby the DHRC organizes workshops and symposia for people with different caste backgrounds or ideological and religious affiliations, including those aligned with Hindutva who are willing to engage in a dialogue. Among them are also important actors from judicial and law enforcement arenas.[89] According to McCammon (2017: 248), by offering the space to cultivate new and oppositional ideas, activities such as the DHRC's dialogue platforms can help broaden the communities of actors who accept and put into practice these new ideas. Likewise, Yesumarian expressed: 'It kind of helps people to think at least. Coming together, the basic animosity is gone.'[90] 'To break this misconception and to create a space where they have a dialogue. It is an entry point for them to look at things from new perspectives.'[91] It can thus be stated that the DHRC's dialogue platforms are tactics, since they are intentional efforts to create changes in hegemonic cultural codes by exposing Dalits and higher castes to environments where new counter-hegemonic ideas and values can be cultivated. In doing so, the DHRC aims to create a sense of trust,

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[88] This initiative was started from the belief that the two existing approaches to interreligious conflict resolution – the classic interreligious approach and the secular perspective – were unable to provide an answer to the current problems in India. While the former only focuses on the religious dimensions of conflict, the latter focuses primarily on underlying conflicts and sees religion exclusively as a tool used by political actors to create societal divisions. From the belief that religion plays an important role in people's everyday lives, MM aims to develop an approach that is able to grasp the complex ways in which religion is woven into people's life worlds, practices and social structures.
[89] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[90] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Yesumarian.
[91] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Christy.

solidarity and a common identity between people from different castes and religious backgrounds (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2009: Meyer, 2004: 169).

The DHRC's decision to create dialogue platforms was made strategically as a reaction to growing inter-communal and caste-based polarization.[92] According to the members of the DHRC, the more structural situation of extreme segregation within villages in Tamil Nadu thereby serves as an important catalyst for the divisive narratives spread by the BJP and RSS.[93] This meant that both the polarizing narratives and the problem of segregation needed to be addressed in order to contribute to the claim of peaceful and dignified coexistence. 'There is never space for people to sit and talk. […] So, one way of breaking [polarization] is somehow trying to look at other ways that people can come together. […] Only when we have some space to discuss, these [narratives] can be discouraged and more understanding of the others' perspective can be encouraged.'[94] It can be argued that the programmed use of segregated space can contribute to the protection of the rights and entitlements of Dalits because it offers the opportunity to foster a public sphere of debate in which issues salient to all participating groups can be addressed, and shared understandings and policies can be forged (Nagle, 2013: 88). At the same time, the dialogue platforms help to air communal contestations and to prevent these through rational debate. This also leaves less space for political actors to exploit communal tensions for their own political gain (Ibid, 89). In this way, these platforms have the potential to ensure the dignity of Dalits, as well as foster a more sustainable culture of peace.

Besides tactics, the dialogue platforms can also be considered as an attempt by the DHRC to create new *arenas*. Contrary to other arenas such as the media, it becomes possible for the members of the DHRC to exercise some control over the 'rules of the game' within these new arenas, most importantly in terms of access (Jasper, 2019: 5). 'We try to map and identify people within the Hindutva force who are moderate, who also see a role in secularism. We try to identify and establish contact with this kind of people. That is our entry point.'[95] By seeking out those who are open to dialogue, the members of the DHRC essentially create 'free spaces' that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, in which people can participate voluntarily (Polletta, 1999: 1). The dialogue platforms thus offer an opportunity for the members of the DHRC to cultivate counterhegemonic ideas without interference of those who are likely to cause disruption (McCammon, 2017: 252). However, increasing the scope of

[92] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[93] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 08/09/2020.
[94] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Christy.
[95] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Christy.

cooperative relationships is often difficult, since it forces activists to consider the perspectives of these new actors, which might not align with their own goals or perceptions (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 8). This naturally also means that the DHRC needs to re-evaluate some of their *own* established ideas about caste-based, communal, and North-South distinctions. 'That is where we are in terms of process, right now – making a change in the thinking process in terms of our conception on who the 'enemy' or the 'other' is. This requires a more nuanced image of for example higher castes and Hindus, beyond one that only depicts them solely as the oppressor.'[96] Hence, the DHRC can be seen as both a provider and a participant in regards to their own dialogue initiatives.

In line with the changing nature of the MM-DHRC's partnership, an important role is reserved for MM within the process of creating new 'dialogue arenas.' The organization aims to enhance the scope of the peace building project from grassroots arenas to more regional venues (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 10). Through network activities, MM hopes to connect the somewhat isolated Dalit activists in the South with other like-minded social movements in the region, as well as with other (faith-based) organizations working from different religious backgrounds (i.e. Hindu and Muslim) (Mensen met een Missie, 2020a).[97] According to Meyer and Staggenborg (2012: 10), although larger venues often provide the promise of more substantial responses, they also expose activists to better organized and more powerful opposition. Referring back to chapter two, the BJP's strict regulation of foreign funded CSOs was initially not a deciding factor with regard to the DHRC's strategic claim change. Nonetheless, within the current political climate, MM's strategic choice to increase the scope of the DHRC's activities might attract more negative attention from local IBs. In that sense, the FCRA significantly reduces MM's ability to be visible, and hence, the extent to which MM and DHRC can expand their network.[98]

Mediation

In addition to the dialogue platforms, crucial to the DHRC's new program has been the strategic use of mediation. In specific cases of conflict, when violence is perpetrated against Dalits or when Dalits are denied their rights and entitlements, the DHRC now focuses primarily on Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). This means that considerable attention goes to settling issues outside the court, thus complementing the DHRC's more traditional judicial

[96] Interview with Kees Schilder [Former India Program Director MM], 09/09/2020.
[97] Interview with Kees Schilder [Former India Program Director MM], 09/09/2020.
[98] E-mail contact with Ton Groeneweg [India Program Director MM].

tactics. An important component of this approach is the deployment of 'Peace Committees' (PCs) – groups of peace workers that work on the ground to prevent conflicts or to address them as soon as they break out. 'We give very little space for conflict to get escalated to a level where it has to be addressed by the court. So, a lot of grassroots work is done. […] If a conflict happens, immediately some mediation work will take place.'[99]

It can be argued that the strategic use of ADR and grassroots PCs – as well as the dialogue platforms – align with the idea of prefigurative action. Prefiguration involves movement actors experimentally constructing alternative ways of living, organizing, and relating in the 'here and now', in order to challenge deeply embedded power inequalities (Sande, 2013). Rather than determining problems and mobilizing support – which is the case for the DHRC's media strategy – prefiguration implies the 'primacy of practice.' It departs from the idea that power relations are reproduced through everyday practices, and thus, that change should happen at the level of everyday actions (Reinecke, 2018: 6). Likewise, the DHRC and MM consider mediation or 'peace building' to be a process rather than an 'end state' or a 'means to an end' (Mensen met een Missie, 2018). As Yesumarian recalled: 'For the past three years, I myself see that there is a change in our approach and strategy – of bringing justice and peace together.'[100] In other words, in order to reach their claim of peaceful and dignified coexistence, the DHRC has committed itself to enacting their desired change by embedding 'peaceful' practices in their everyday interactions (Reinecke, 2018: 8). Especially in times of open conflict, these peaceful forms of everyday practice, and hence, the process itself, becomes crucial. 'We have these kinds of dialogue [platform] events. But we do [mediation] more regularly on an issue basis […]. Because when there is an issue, only then do people show their true colors.'[101] It is during these times of conflict that adhering to the ideals of inclusivity and non-confrontation become particularly challenging – not only for the victims and perpetrators but also for the members of the DHRC. As such, mediation can be seen as redesigning the way in which everyday interactions take place, which is not only pursued in the very process of struggle, but is also continuously learned through practice (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 13).

According to Yates, prefiguration goes beyond the embodiment of alternatives in present everyday practices towards more strategic attempts to ensure its future political relevance (2015: 19). Though less 'political' than the prefigurative movements that Yates refers to, the DHRC's mediation efforts are similarly strategic since they are not only used to enact change

[99] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Christy.
[100] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Yesumarian.
[101] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 08/09/2020.

in their own everyday practices but also to institute wider societal changes (Reinecke, 2018: 10). Given that the focus is more on the process of peace education, dialogue and negotiation instead of 'winning court battles', the solutions that are arrived at are perceived to be more sustainable. '[Mediation] looks at an amicable solution. It looks at remedies and healing injuries – not at taking revenge. Otherwise, when one person thinks that a solution is arrived at, the other thinks that revenge is taken. It's not a full stop. [...]. From that point of view, [mediation] is more effective.'[102] Hence, not only the process of settling conflict is more peaceful, but perpetrators also get an opportunity to reflect on their actions. Through mediation, the members of the DHRC offer the perpetrators 'viable alternatives', and they show them through doing that these alternatives are possible (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 14).

The DHRC's use of mediation can be regarded as a strategic reaction to increasing polarization at the hands of the Hindutva movement, as well as a more pragmatic (yet equally strategic) decision in the wake of the BJP and RSS's growing influence within judicial and law enforcement arenas.[103] Especially in a state such as India, where the logics of bureaucracy are centered around loyalties based on communal or caste identities, pursuing a strategy based on judicial tactics does not solely depend on the possession of 'domain-relevant skills' (Meyer & Staggenborg, 2012: 10). In the case of the DHRC, mediations provided a partial solution to the problem of ensuring justice to Dalits. 'Mediation helps us to solve many cases outside the court. In this way, it has given us a kind of breathing space.'[104] Hence, the strategic use of mediation is not only a result of progressive insight, but should also be seen in the context of limited and even reduced access to judicial arenas.

In choosing between an inclusive process of mediation or a more confrontational judicial tactic, it can be argued that the DHRC has encountered what Jasper (2004: 13) calls the 'bridge-builder's dilemma'. This dilemma implies that individuals who can mediate between groups, or different sides in a conflict, often lose the trust of their own groups by doing so. Reacting to this dilemma, Yesumarian acknowledged that 'peace building' indeed remains a balancing act between ensuring justice in the most literal sense and building sustainable relationships and a sense of solidarity. 'In the process of peace building, I make sure that Dalit dignity and Dalit rights are taken into consideration. We don't want to compromise on that – then, the Dalits will become suspicious of me and the DHRC.'[105] Similar to the DHRC's initial reluctance towards

[102] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Christy.
[103] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020.
[104] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 05/08/2020; Christy.
[105] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 05/08/2020.

changing their claims, there is a strong refusal within the organization to 'give up' on their judicial tactics despite corruption within the judicial system and the confrontational nature of the tactic.[106] This is not only because the DHRC needs to choose tactics that align with the interests of their core constituents in mind in order to sustain their support, but also because it simply does not align with 'who they are' (Polletta & Jasper, 2001: 293). According to Meyer (2004: 181), even though movements shift their tactics as a response to socio-political changes, their 'organizational identity' eventually determines to what extent they are willing to adapt the contentiousness of their tactics. Despite the organization's new 'non-partisan identity', the moral commitment of the members of the DHRC towards the equality of Dalits and their belief that Dalits deserve a process of justice regardless of the obstacles has limited the degree to which they have changed their tactics over time (Ibid, 183). As a result, even though peace and justice are two sides of the same coin in a theoretical sense, in reality there remains a sustained uneasiness between prefigurating the ideals of inclusivity and solidarity that are essential for creating a culture of peace, and the use of confrontational tactics as a way of holding perpetrators accountable.

Summary

In the previous chapter, it became clear how the DHRC strategically re-articulated their claims in the wake of increased caste-based and communal polarization and violence. In this chapter, I examined how these changes have since then been reflected into the DHRC's tactical repertoire. Though the DHRC largely developed the new tactics, MM played a significant role in providing the theoretical reasoning behind these tactics. Departing from the contact hypothesis, MM believes peace building to be effective when inter-community contact is used and facilitated responsibly. In order to better grasp the role of religion in conflict within the Indian context, the MM also started their own research initiative. As such, MM has become increasingly important to the DHRC as knowledge provider and capacity builder in addition to their traditional role as financial donor, ultimately resulting in a new form of transnational partnership.

Four major tactical changes have been highlighted throughout this chapter. As became clear, the DHRC closely followed the RSS's current culturally oriented tactics. Firstly, as a result of the intensive focus of the BJP and RSS on shaping public opinion, the DHRC decided to adapt

[106] Interview with Yesumarian [Director DHRC] and Christy [India Focal Point], 21/08/2020; Yesumarian [Director DHRC], 08/09/2020.

their existing media and sensitizations strategies. The most crucial adjustment that was made concerned the way in which the DHRC chose to frame their demands and the issues they address. Informed by their new claim of peaceful and dignified coexistence, the DHRC adapted their existing human rights frame to a less controversial, value-based discourse, since the former has become increasingly politicized within the current socio-political environment. Secondly, the DHRC started to engage in increasing their coverage through entering new (social) media arenas and by forming new journalistic alliances. Thirdly, another prominent addition to the DHRC's tactical repertoire is the use of dialogue platforms. By creating new spaces where oppositional ideas and identities can be cultivated, the DHRC attempts to counter the influence of Hindu-nationalist narratives, as well as the effects of extreme segregation in Tamil Nadu's villages. The use of dialogue platforms can also be seen as an attempt to create new arenas in which the DHRC has a firmer grip on the 'rules of the game'. An important role in the execution of the dialogue platforms is reserved for MM, who aims to connect the DHRC with regional and national civil society networks who are working from different religious perspectives. However, the extent to which MM and DHRC are able to expand their visibility, and hence, their network, is significantly reduced due to the BJP's strict regulation of foreign funded CSOs. Lastly, the DHRC started to use mediation and grassroots peace committees to construct alternative ways of living and interacting. The decision to use mediation as a tactic was made in light of the new claim of peaceful and dignified coexistence, but should also be seen in the context of limited and even reduced access to the Indian judicial system. However, despite these changes, in practice there remains a discrepancy between prefigurating the ideals of inclusivity and solidarity and the use of confrontational tactics as a way holding perpetrators accountable.

Conclusion

With this thesis, I aimed to tell the story of the Dalit Human Rights Centre and their struggle for Dalit liberation. The members of the DHRC have long fought against the systematic marginalization and dehumanization of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. However, since the landslide victory of the BJP in 2014, the position of Dalits and other (religious) minorities in India has quickly deteriorated. The BJP's promotion of Hindutva, a political ideology based on the primacy of Hindu religion and culture, has been followed by a significant increase in repression of minority activists and an upsurge in caste-based and communal violence throughout the country. Amidst what is essentially a transition towards a *de facto* authoritarian Hindu-nationalist state, the DHRC ushered in a process of strategic redirection. In this thesis, I analyzed the choices made by the DHRC during this period of strategic change. This story, however, is not about the DHRC alone. It extends to all of those people at the fringes of society, who are trying to sustain their fight against systematic marginalization and dehumanization under the weight of increasingly repressive populist-authoritarian regimes. Over the past decade, in liberal democracies or young democracies such as Turkey, Hungary, Brazil, Poland and Myanmar, leaderships have increasingly resorted to repressive methods and xenophobic rhetoric. Through an exploitation of deep societal, ethnic and cultural divisions, these illiberal regimes systematically repress and persecute minorities under the guise of electoral democracy. The rise of these anti-liberal democracies has become one of the core political problems of our time. Hence, this is a story that needs to be told, in order to expand our knowledge about the ways in which civil society organizations have responded, and how they might ultimately be able to push back.

Keeping in mind these parallels, I aim to formulate a comprehensive answer to the central research question of this thesis, while simultaneously providing insight into what can be learned from this specific case more generally. In this thesis, I aimed to answer the following research question: *How have the members of the* Dalit Human Rights Centre*, through their partnership with the Dutch INGO* Mensen met een Missie*, made strategic choices during their period of strategic reflection between 2018-2020, in the wake of shrinking civic space in India, which has been exacerbated since the ascendance of the right-wing Hindu-nationalist* Bharatiya Janata Party *in 2014?* Based on the proposed framework, I firstly provided a detailed examination of the Dalit activists' experiences with constraints resulting from the strategic endeavours of repressive actors. Subsequently, I examined the DHRC's consecutive process of

strategic rearticulation by applying the three analytical components of the strategic action framework, namely claims, tactics, and arenas.

By using an analytical framework that emphasizes the interactive nature of strategic players, I was able to unpack the actions of a seemingly unified power block ('the state') as several distinct (yet at times overlapping) players moving strategically towards a shared goal. Through an inquiry into the Dalit activists' experiences, it became clear how the BJP and RSS have collectively aimed to further their project of cultural nationalism in recent years. One of the most visible aspects of the BJP's repressive agenda is the crackdown on foreign funded CSOs and the politicization of transnational partnerships through nationalist rhetoric. Most importantly, this chapter showed how the power dynamic in Tamil Nadu has shifted from one that is state-centered towards one in which the RSS and other vigilante actors are playing an increasingly crucial role as informal local authorities, who aim to increase the power of the Hindutva movement by building ideological support and stirring up a culture of mistrust among local communities. Through a combination of grassroots recruitment, Hindu-nationalist narratives and performative violence, the RSS has succeeded in gaining an ideological foothold in the Southern state. Hence, the latter years have seen two important interrelated developments: the blurring of lines between state and non-state actors and the increasing importance of vigilantes as repressive agents, and the RSS's and BJP's use of cultural tactics as a way of increasing grassroots support for the use of violence against Dalits and religious minorities. More generally, this chapter thus provides concrete insights into how populist authoritarian regimes pursue an anti-minority agenda by using cultural tactics and through complex and often covert partnerships with para-military actors.

Through an examination of the DHRC's changing claims, it became clear how the actions of the BJP/RSS are related to the DHRC's period of strategic redirection. While their core demands of empowerment and liberation for Dalits did not change, the DHRC added a strategic value to its core claims by focusing more explicitly on creating an atmosphere of 'peace and dignified coexistence'. In order to understand the changes made to the DHRC's claims, it was necessary to step away from traditional conceptions of power, authority, and social movement claims. Rather than focusing on the state and its institutions as central to social change, the DHRC decided to focus on cultural authority. In so doing, the DHRC aims to challenge dominant value- and belief systems that legitimize the marginalization of Dalits and the violence perpetrated against them. This strategic decision is informed by an understanding of power as diffused, cultural and 'everyday', rather than imposed through top-down and formal institutional processes. Not only is this conception of authority more helpful in grasping the

changing dynamics of power witnessed by the members of the DHRC, it also helps the organization to strategically adapt to the changing socio-political situation. By making this 'cultural turn', whereby the DHRC considers the re-engineering of attitudes, belief systems and cross-communal relationships to be central to social change, the organization essentially mirrors the RSS's strategic decision to create ideological support for the violent policing of Dalits and religious minorities. Such a cultural approach to power thus enables human rights organizations under emerging populist authoritarian regimes to target repression and exclusionary practices that extend beyond policies, laws and formal institutions.

In the third chapter, it became clear how the DHRC' strategic decision to change their claims was the result of external changes as well as complex internal interactions. As became apparent, MM played a significant role in ushering the DHRC's claim change. Observing how routinized caste discrimination had essentially evolved into a type of proto-violent conflict, MM deemed the strategic redirection towards a more relational approach necessary. This decision was based on the belief that a confrontational approach would only further exacerbate violence and identity-based polarization, especially in the wake of the Hindutva movement's reliance on cultural tactics aimed at creating caste-based and communal divisions. Furthermore, given that the crackdown on 'foreign agents' by the BJP initially did not play a role in the DHRC's and MM's process of strategic redirection, it can be stated that there is a variation in the way that different forms and sizes of civil society organizations are affected by such measures.

Though bearing in mind that a donor-recipient relationship such as that between DHRC and MM is never equal, it can be stated that MM largely mitigated the possible negative effects of such a relationship during their period of strategic reflection. MM provided time and space for the members of the DHRC to consider the value of a peace building approach and to look at how reconciliatory efforts would meet with the issues present in Tamil Nadu. This was accompanied with the promise of support in finding financial alternatives in case of sustained (ideological) differences about strategic decisions. This is an important observation for transnational partnerships under populist-authoritarian regimes at large. The specific case of the DHRC-MM partnership shows that, despite the increasing need for strategic innovations, it is important to keep in mind the post-colonial dimension of 'development' cooperation. In order to create adequate strategic changes within transnational partnerships, it is crucial that such changes are relevant to the local context, and that the autonomy of local partners is warranted.

In the last chapter of this thesis, I analyzed the DHRC's tactical choices in relation to the strategic endeavors of the BJP and RSS. As a reaction to the Hindutva movement's xenophobic rhetoric, the DHRC adopted a value-based media narrative and entered new media arenas. In

this way, the DHRC aims to counter the Hindu-nationalist frames more strongly. Moreover, the DHRC created new spaces (or new arenas) in which people from different backgrounds could meet and create counterhegemonic ideas. With these platforms, the DHRC aims to counter intensified polarization at the hands of the BJP and RSS, as well as the effects of extreme segregation in Tamil Nadu's villages. The dialogue platforms were complemented by the DHRC's strategic use of mediation and grassroots peace committees to promote and construct alternative ways of living and interacting. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of both these tactics is their prefigurative nature. They depart from the idea that power relations are reproduced through everyday and culturally informed practices, meaning that change should happen at the level of such everyday actions. Referring to my earlier statement, it can be said that the DHRC's strategic 'mirroring' of the Hindutva movement's 'cultural turn' is concretely visible in their choice to focus on tactics aimed at changing attitudes and behavior, as well as their decision to enter the same arenas (media, grassroots networks) as the BJP and RSS. More generally, the way in which the DHRC developed their tactics in relation to their opponents thus uncovers the strong interactive nature of CSO tactics. In addition, the tactics used by the DHRC might help to normalize cross-communal interactions in other places marked by ethnic, cultural or religious polarization and create more sustainable relationships. If executed with care, these proactive efforts could result in new spaces and collaborative networks where people can collectively 'push back' against polarizing narratives.

While the DHRC's tactics can be regarded as a strategic reaction to increasing polarization, it should also be seen in the context of intensified government scrutiny and reduced access to judicial arenas. By avoiding an overtly human rights discourse, the DHRC avoids politicization of the organization's claims and being scapegoated as 'anti-nationalist'. Likewise, mediation provides a partial solution to the increasingly corrupt nature of judicial and governmental systems. These insights are important because it helps us to better understand the ways in which CSOs under authoritarian regimes experience repression, even though they might not (yet) feel the pressure to react to it.

Though the tactics within DHRC's new strategic program were developed by the members of the DHRC themselves, MM has begun to play an increasingly important role in recent years in providing innovative theoretical ground works for these tactics. Similarly, through network and lobby activities, MM has aimed to broaden the scope of the DHRC's activities. As such, the period of strategic redirection not only resulted in new claims and tactics, but ultimately also in a new form of transnational partnership. Nonetheless, the extent to which MM can be visible is significantly reduced due to the increasing politicization of transnational partnerships

by the BJP. As such, while there is variation in the extent to which different CSOs are scrutinized as foreign agents, the BJP still strongly restricts those organizations who have been able to avoid crackdown in extending the scope and visibility of their activities.

Moreover, though strategic innovation has proven to be necessary under changing socio-political circumstances, a certain uneasiness remains between prefigurating values of unity and solidarity and the use of confrontational tactics in order to hold perpetrators of human rights violations accountable. In the coming years, it will be up to the DHRC, as well as CSOs under populist-authoritarian regimes more generally, to decide how to further balance these values of peace and justice.

Lastly, a few recommendations for further research can be made. Firstly, given the qualitative nature and thus the limited generalizability of the findings presented in this thesis, I recommend further research into CSOs strategizing within populist-authoritarian contexts. For example, through comparative case-studies, knowledge can be generated about the ways in which different civil society actors react to similar changes in their socio-political environment. Secondly, although this thesis provided insight into the relationship between local activists and transnational partnerships, more research on the subject needs to be done. By examining the internal strategic processes of transnational movement communities, more can be learned about the complex post-colonial power dynamics that take place within such movements. Thirdly, I highly recommend more ethnographic research on the relationship between governments and paramilitary formations during transitions towards authoritarianism. As has been shown in this thesis, such shifts in the outsourcing of repression might be important first indications of a transition to authoritarianism. A better understanding of these processes might help to obtain a deeper understanding of the ways in which the shrinking of civic space manifests itself in formal democratic states.

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Appendix 1 | Interview List

List of interviewees

Name	Organization/Occupation	Date
Abirami Jothee	All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM)	24/07/2020
Ambrose Christy & Yesumarian Lourdunathan	Dalit Human Rights Centre (DHRC)	05/08/2020
Ambrose Christy & Yesumarian Lourdunathan	DHRC	21/08/2020
Kees Schilder	Mensen met een Missie (MM)	09/09/2020
Kiruba Munusamy	Supreme Court Lawyer	12/08/2020
Krithika Srinivasan	Journalist & Dalit activist	11/07/2020
Manjula Pradeep	WAYVE Foundation, Navsarjan Trust (form.)	28/07/2020
Pandiyan Kamal	WITNESS for Justice	28/07/2020
Radha Batharan	Professor	02/08/2020
Ramesh Nathan	NCDHR / National Dalit Movement for Justice (NDMJ)	08/07/2020
Semmalar Selvi	Professor & Dalit activist	07/07/2020
Vincent Kathir	EVIDENCE	26/06/2020
Vincent Manoharan	National Dalit Christian Watch (NDCW)	13/08/2020
Yesumarian Lourdunathan	DHRC	08/09/2020
Yesumarian Lourdunathan	DHRC	21/08/2020