1. On Being a "Thumbprint": Time and Space in Arivoli Activism

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On Being a "Thumbprint"

Time and Space in Arivoli Activism

I first started to understand the extent to which literacy activism is really a form of cultural work, not simply a matter of teaching people how to read and write, one evening in a seaside village. It turns out that many villagers were taught to desire literacy and they learned a number of other things about themselves and their place in the world along the way. The occasion of my awareness was a street-theater performance by the Dawn Arts Group, a drama troupe that had been organized by Karuppiah and Neela to encourage people to join Arivoli classes and to recruit more volunteers for the movement. The central street of the fishing village where this performance took place was loud and lit brightly, lined with blaring loudspeakers interspersed with neon tube-lights fastened to bamboo poles. The saturated atmosphere would have reminded everyone of the yearly temple celebrations of local gods that also take place in the dry season. Young actors of the Dawn group started their performance by singing a song in the folk style of the Pudukkottai region. Their voices were distorted by the mic and speakers, which broadcasted their song

powerfully into the air. The lyrics announced that this evening's event was indeed a festival, but one devoted to the dissemination of a specific kind of knowledge:

> Street by street, we come in festive procession;
> We rise up and come to spread literacy.
> (Vītiyilē vītiyilē ūrvalam varukiṉṟōm
> Eḻuttaṟivai pōtikka eḻuntē varukiṉṟōm.)

> Because the Light of Knowledge movement comes to teach
>   the darkness of ignorance
> Because we are waging yet another independence struggle.
> (Kallāmai iruḷakaṟṟa aṟivoli iyakkam varuvataṉāl
> Iṉumoru cutantirap pōr nāṅkaḷ naṭatta iruppataṉāl.)

Like the procession (*ūrvalam*) of a deity in a temple festival, the Arivoli Iyakkam had come to dispel the forces of darkness.

Following this song, the dramatic performance began by depicting a man, played by Karuppiah, sitting in his doorway attending to some sort of work with his hands. He wore a wrapped towel on his head signifying his status as a rural worker. A woman, presumably his wife, was sitting next to him preparing food. Two of the younger actors in the group held straight sticks at a right angle over their heads, giving the visual impression of a house. Another man walked up to the house carrying a clipboard and some papers in his hand. As he was approaching, the peasant told his wife to go inside the house. The stranger introduced himself as someone who was taking a survey for the government and asked the character played by Karuppiah how many people were living in the house. The peasant responded with some suspicion in his voice, and when asked to sign his name on the survey form as head of household, he refused. Wondering why he would refuse to sign his name, the survey taker went on to the neighbor's house asking the same information, this time successfully collecting a signature. He then asked the neighbor why his first respondent had refused to sign. The neighbor explained that the peasant's son was wanted by the police, and that he was probably afraid to talk to anyone from the government. The survey taker, still a little perplexed, went back to the first house calling Karuppiah's character, explaining that this was only a government census and had nothing to do with the police.

Still he would not come out and sign his name. The neighbor finally said, "He's just a thumbprint [*ḵaināṭṭu*]," trying to explain his unwillingness to sign his name and also indicating that he should be counted as an illiterate in the census. All the actors froze in place. Leaving a few seconds of silence after the play ended, giving the audience time to absorb the lesson, the whole Dawn Arts Group stood in a straight line facing the audience, pointed at them, and sang:

> This is the time of footprints on the moon.
> Shame on you for using your thumbprint!
> (Itu cantiraṉ mēle kāl vacca kālam
> nī kaināṭṭu vaikkiṟatu alaṅkōlam!)

Some in the audience seemed stunned by the accusation coming from the mouths of these young actors. After this short play ended, there were a few moments of silence before the Dawn Arts Group launched into their next play, which was similarly about the difficulties nonliterates face in the modern world, but this time peppered with a healthy dose of comic relief. Following the performance that evening, our hosts in the village fed the actors a late meal, thanking them for the efforts they had made to come to this relatively remote part of the district. Songs from a cassette player continued to blast from the loudspeakers as the drama troupe packed their microphones and instruments back into the van. Before leaving, Karuppiah had managed to secure a promise from the local Arivoli Iyakkam volunteer that she would make renewed efforts to start a literacy group among the women of the village. The drama troupe's van then drove into the night, stopping to drop off the actors in their respective villages.

Chronotopes of Enlightenment in the Tamil Country

It is now quite well known that the social imaginary of the development state is premised on a sense of a temporal difference attributed to those who are considered not yet modern. To claim that this is the "time of footprints on the moon" as the drama troupe did, for example, is to invoke a sense that those who do not read and write are living in the past. Akhil Gupta (1998) has provided a detailed ethnography of such

temporal difference in agricultural development discourse among villagers in northern India. He explains how farmers feel behind in the race to become fully developed even if many had also become critical of what they see as an urban bias in government policy. Writing about Egypt, Lila Abu-Lughod (2005) shows how state and development agency–funded television serials worked in conjunction with adult literacy programs to fulfill a national pedagogical project by teaching the rural poor from Upper Egypt their marginal place in a broader story of modernity centered in the city of Cairo. It seems that in Egypt, as in India and elsewhere in the postcolonial world, political modernity "generates a tension between two aspects of the subaltern or peasant as citizen. One is the peasant who has to be educated into the citizen, . . . the other is the peasant who, despite his or her lack of formal education, is already a citizen" (Chakrabarty 2000,10). But there is still much to understand about the contradictions that arise in attempts to cultivate and manage the sense of dual temporality splitting these two aspects of the subaltern as citizen. The tension between these two aspects of the subaltern as citizen is, in fact, contradictory, profoundly unstable, and given to constant reformulations. Where the two aspects of the subaltern as citizen jostle each other is the very space of politics.

In this chapter I explore how activism works to produce senses of time and place among activists and villagers in the Arivoli Iyakkam. I focus in particular on ideological conflicts ensuing from a pedagogical desire to bring villagers within the narrative of the Indian development state, on one hand, and countervailing recognitions that Tamil villagers are already citizens with their own histories and senses of self that are not easily folded into the national narrative of progress, on the other. After examining the intellectual foundations of the literacy movement in the projects of state building, Left politics, and modern science, I then move on to examine how the discourse of Enlightenment itself has undergone significant transformations in the process of the Arivoli Iyakkam becoming a mass movement in villages across the Tamil countryside. In their attempt to build a mass movement among villagers, the leaders of the Arivoli Iyakkam found that they had to ground their narrative of national awakening in forms of experience and knowledge that would make sense to those they would seek to compel.

It is for these reasons that I find it useful to think of the cultural work of the Arivoli Iyakkam in terms of what the linguist and literary theorist M. M. Bakhtin (1981) has called "chronotopes," the frameworks of time and space that serve to ground the movement of events and characters in a narrative structure. A national vision of progressive time sat at the core of this Enlightenment activism. Activists sought to teach villagers to think in terms of an affiliation to this large-scale chronotope, connecting villagers to their fellow citizens. The accusation that was often made of those who refused to participate in the Arivoli Iyakkam was that they were caught up in the narrow, hierarchical, and anachronistic socialities of kin, village, and caste, unaware of the role they have to play in the larger national drama. But this chronotope of national progress would constantly have to contend with other senses of time and place that could appear to activists either as resistance to the universalizing narrative of Arivoli or as narrative resources that could be used in the service of propelling the movement, and thus encompassed within the narrative of Enlightenment.

The festival-like drama performance, described above, is only one example of the techniques used by the Arivoli Iyakkam to teach, not only that everyone must read and write, but also the particular senses of time and place that characterize the developmental imagination. The peasant played by Karuppiah, who continued to live in the "darkness of illiteracy," could not be counted as a full member of the national community. He could not legitimately represent himself to the state through a written signature and he would be counted in the census as an "illiterate." To "teach the darkness of ignorance" to such people, such that they might mend their ways, is therefore to inaugurate what activists commonly call a "second independence struggle," the true arrival of the nation in its tryst with destiny. In fact, among the signs of illiteracy that have been stigmatized as anachronistic departures from the narrative of progress perhaps most prominent has been the use of a thumbprint (*kaināṭṭu*, or, *kairēkai* "hand line") in lieu of a signature on official documents. The thumbprint that many among the rural poor still use to identify themselves on government documents has, for a long time, carried connotations of ignorance and even criminality.[1] A "thumbprint" is not something someone would call themselves. It is an epithet that is likely to be hurled at someone who

cannot sign their name, indicating not only they do not write, but also that they are not smart and can easily be fooled.[2] But to be "just a thumbprint" is no longer only a sign of being an uncultivated person; it is increasingly seen as a sign of a person who is living in the past. Many activists who ended up devoting much of their youth to the movement point to plays like the one described above depicting the lowly condition of a "thumbprint" as the reason they joined. Such plays invoked a collective sense of shame, serving as a call to action.
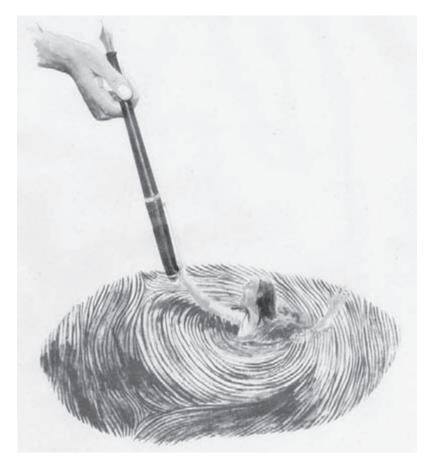

Figure 1. An Arivoli Iyakkam image produced by S. P. Raju for a World Literacy Day poster depicting a woman being saved by a pen from drowning in her own thumbprint. Reproduced with permission from the Tamil Nadu State Resource Centre.

Work on the cultural politics of citizenship and statecraft has underscored the extent to which the modern state is not only defined by what Max Weber famously identified as a "monopoly over legitimate violence," but also by what Pierre Bourdieu would call "a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical and *symbolic* violence over a definite territory and over the totality of the corresponding population" (1999, 56). This second form of state power, or "metacapital" can be defined simply as a capacity to determine the legitimacy and political efficacy of signs within state space. Distributions of social power are calibrated in relation this field of value to the degree that the state can set the basic parameters of what counts as a successful performance of citizenship and what does not. The task for an anthropology of state power must then be to account for how a semiotic monopoly is produced and maintained.

How do people come to think that they are lacking certain qualifications for entry into the sphere of full citizenship? It is in plays and images like those above that we can begin to appreciate how the politics of time and space is integral to the project of producing a monopoly over legitimate sign usage in the context of postcolonial state formation. It was the capacity to be counted in the census as a literate person and, by extension, as a full-fledged citizen, and not simply as a body, that was at stake in the drama. The desire for full literacy, I argue, was premised on the unification of a field of social and political power that would determine the value of semiotic acts such as the thumbprint and the personal signature. This is a politics of time and space insofar as entry into the sphere of legitimate intercourse with the state through signature correlates with entry into the very chronotope of "footprints on the moon" depicted in the song above. To the degree that activists working in the Arivoli Iyakkam were devoted to such a unification of time and space in the homogenizing narrative of progress, they participated in reproducing a form of state power premised on the destruction of older structures of semiotic legitimacy. But these claims remain rather abstract at the moment. Let us return to the modes of cultural work employed by the movement to produce the "allochronic" (Fabian 1983) effect that would render these structures and modes of social behavior as archaic or out of time, and specifically to the question of how this effect is related to the very technology of writing.

Divisions of Linguistic Labor

Arivoli Iyakkam activists' understanding of the difference between prog-
ress and retrograde social habits was built in part on their experience of
change over the course of their lives. Rural Tamil Nadu has seen massive
transformations in the social division of linguistic labor, for instance, such
that there is now a more generalized stigmatization of "illiteracy" and of
dependence on others to mediate interactions with the worlds of writing
and state officialdom. Norms had been shifting away from the assumption
that literacy and education are the domain of a privileged few, and activ-
ists saw themselves as agents in establishing a new consciousness (*viḷippu
ṇarvu*) of the need for everyone to read and write. This new understand-
ing of one's place in the world also turned on the premise that the lowli-
ness or humiliation (*kēvalam*) of illiteracy must be identified as such, and
as subject to change through pedagogy. But this was a process of raising
consciousness that remained grievously incomplete in the eyes of many, re-
quiring the ongoing "second independence movement" announced in the
song reproduced above.

   While chatting one afternoon on the front veranda of her small home
in the village of Mangalapuram, Neela once explained to me the positive
changes she had seen as a result of the Arivoli Iyakkam in particular:

> Now common folk [*pāmara maḳḳaḷ*] know about the necessity of lit-
> eracy and education. Before they would have just relied on others and
> avoided going to government offices or the banks themselves. But now
> they go, and if everyone else is signing their name and they have to put
> a thumbprint, they'll be shy [*veṭkappaṭuvāṅka*], they'll face difficulty
> [*kaṣṭappaṭuvāṅka*]. People will say, "Oh, she's just a thumbprint [*ḳaināṭṭu*]."
> They will see the necessity of literacy [*eḻuttaṟiviṉ avaciyam*].

The empirical claim that Neela was making, that everyone now under-
stands the need and uses of literacy, remains open to question, as we will
see in a moment. Even if villagers were perhaps more ashamed to leave a
thumbprint now than in the past, and they were more likely to find them-
selves in situations in which literacy is required, it was not necessarily the
case that they were conscious of a need for total literacy. But Neela was

also making several other claims worth our attention. First, she identified illiteracy as an undesirable social identity, as something that should and can be overcome. Second, Neela was also making a normative claim, providing important clues about the strategies of Arivoli activism. She was in a sense arguing that people *should* be made to feel ashamed, that "shyness" and facing difficulty are in fact signs of progress spurring "common folk" and "thumbprints" to pursue literacy. As Neela's fellow activist, the famous essayist and short-story writer S. Tamilcelvan, wrote of the Arivoli Iyakkam's efforts, "Our strategy to get the uneducated to come, sit and learn at Arivoli lessons, was to make them feel guilty and to use that feeling" (2004b, 18). He recounts how he would go out to villages and give speeches quoting from classical Tamil texts, saying that lack of literacy is like wearing two sores on your face instead of eyes, trying to shame people into joining a literacy group. But, he continues, in the reflexive mode, the Arivoli mission was also "to make educated people understand that it is shameful for us [*nammai*] to be surrounded by so many uneducated people" (19). In the second quote, Tamilcelvan uses the inclusive first-person plural pronoun to include his readers. Activists consistently argued that nonliterates would be partaking in a general national shame, which must be felt by all Indian citizens.

Many unlettered villagers I talked to during the course of my fieldwork, however, remained unsure whether learning to read and write as adults would lead to any significant positive change in their lives. They might well have felt ashamed of their lack of literacy skills, but many villagers who were targets of literacy mobilization lived in a world in which lack of literacy was just one problem among many problems of more immediate consequence. Such people had long lived in a world in which it is perfectly normal for some people to read and write on behalf of others. Literacy appeared to many to have a marginal place in a more encompassing division of labor and political power, making it difficult for activists to organize literacy groups based on a shared assumption that literacy was the most pressing need for everyone. For activists, the question of literacy must be objectified as a solvable problem and as a means to greater freedom. I would like to now discuss, through two episodes, how this shared understanding of the power and meaning of literacy was cultivated. Both cases are about people who took

their inability to read and write as self-evident, but in different ways and from different perspectives. These cases also illustrate how literacy activists engage with the division of linguistic labor and seek to reframe it as out of date.

Quarry Workers' Perspective on Literacy in the Wider Political Economy

I once accompanied Neela's fellow activist, Sheik Mohammad, as he was visiting a hamlet near his own village in the evening to persuade the mainly nonliterate quarry workers there that they should form Arivoli Iyakkam literacy circles. Although not a quarry worker himself, Sheik was from a very modest background, and he worked in his father's small corner shop when he was not working for the literacy movement. The village we visited that evening, like many that the Arivoli Iyakkam targets for mobilization, was a Dalit "*cēri*"—a hamlet that is spatially separate from the main caste-Hindu village settlement.[3] Sheik had already told me that this was a particularly impoverished area, as most of the residents worked in the nearby granite quarries as bonded laborers for a daily wage of less than twenty-five rupees, about fifty cents. The soil is too rocky for agriculture in this area. As we pulled up on our motorcycle at about eight thirty in the evening, the hamlet was completely dark. Thinking that this was a temporary power outage, a common problem even in well-off villages, Sheik went around from house to house asking people to come out for a meeting. While initially reluctant to leave their duties at home, many came outside to sit in the central square in the dark.

Sheik started by introducing me as a researcher from the United States who had come to study the important work that the literacy movement was doing in helping the rural poor. He then told them how they too could take part in this important movement to improve their own lives, when one young woman stood up and said, "Sir, get us electricity and streetlights first! Then we can talk about holding literacy classes. How can we study when there's no light?" Our eyes followed her hand as she pointed up to the lamppost and we saw that there was a very faint flickering, but that there was insufficient power to illuminate the fluorescent bulb. It seems

that the darkness that evening was not from a simple power outage, usu-ally the result of a blown fuse or a scheduled "load shedding," but that this village had not been supplied with enough electricity even to light a street lamp. The lack of electricity resulted from the villagers' lack of political power to influence a village council controlled by upper castes, those who owned the very quarries where these Dalits worked. A transformer had broken down months ago and no one had been called to fix it. Several others from the crowd also complained of lack of water for drinking and washing.

Sheik was dismayed that I should see such a difficult state of affairs in his own area. He responded to the young woman and other villagers, saying that he would try to press the local panchayat to fix these problems. But Sheik also told the villagers that evening that if they learned to read and write, they could themselves write a petition addressed to the district collector, who would order the block-development officer to take action. When faced with such opposition, Arivoli workers tried to turn such situations into pedagogical opportunities, telling villagers that if they could read and write, then they too could be more effective in demanding basic services from the government. Activists would often tell literacy groups that the district authorities would take special interest in a petition written by an Arivoli literacy groups, because it would show their commitment to development and to national progress (Cody 2009). Petitions from literacy groups were understood as signs of entry into legitimate interaction with the state bureaucracy.

Lack of literacy was only one sign among many distinguishing Dalits, women, and wage laborers more broadly in terms of lack or lowness—what villagers might call "*kēvalam.*" This lack is measured in many ways: not only are lower-caste settlements spatially separated and sometimes poorly connected to government services, I have been told by people from a range of different communities that the very work of transplant-ing rice, the domain of labor associated with Dalit women, is a "lowly work" (*kēvalamāṉa vēlai*).[4] Construction and quarry work fit into a simi-lar category. The task of literacy mobilization, as Sheik himself dem-onstrated, was to therefore objectify literacy as a separate and solvable problem that can help solve other problems, like the manifold ways in which the rural poor face social domination and exploitation. Here we

begin to see the layered difficulties facing literacy activism and the type of cultural work required to persuade people of literacy's importance.

A Neighbor's Perspective on the Political Economy of Literacy

A second illustration of these issues presented itself when my neighbor from across the road in the village of Kovilpatti wanted to apply for a ration card. While not in the same marginal social position as the Dalits, because he belonged to the dominant Kallar community and because he owned some land, Arumugam was nevertheless another person for whom learning to read and write was not a priority. When I asked about his education and whether he wanted to learn to read and write, like many villagers he responded, "I'm too old to learn to read and write, what's the use of it now?" Arumugam was in his early thirties when I moved to Kovilpatti. He was the married father of two children and he worked both on his own half a hectare of land as a farmer and on a crew that went across the state drilling bore-wells for irrigation. This second job took him away from home for days, sometimes weeks, at a time. Although Arumugam had gone through two years of schooling as a child, he could do little more with written language than sign his name and recognize a few words. He was unable to read the newspaper. While not quite a "thumbprint," he was considered by most in the village to be a "*paṭikkātavaṉ,*" someone who is uneducated, or unable to read.

Arumugam had separated from his older brother's household soon after his wedding. The two families lived on two sides of the same structure, but they maintained separate cooking areas and finances. They had divided the land between them and were considered by all to be separate households. Although Arumugam had split the joint family household some years back, he was still relying on his elder brother's ration card to buy government-subsidized supplies at the ration shop in nearby Kilattur village.[5] Ration cards are issued to the head of every family and may be used by anyone in that household to buy supplies. The card lists members of the household by name and can also serve as an official form of identification for other interactions with the government, such as requesting an electricity connection. Arumugam bought mainly sugar and kerosene there, and unlike those who had no land, did not need to buy rice at the shop. For Arumugam, getting his own ration card would increase his

spending power because there are limits to how much can be bought on one card over the course of the month. More important, getting a card for his family in his name would mark the final step toward independence from his older brother.

Obtaining a ration card is not easy. One must first obtain a proof of address from the local village administrative officer (VAO).[6] Arumugam also needed the VAO to certify that his family was indeed living below the poverty line, allowing him to buy supplies at a lower cost.[7] While in principle this should not be difficult, the problem was that in Kovilpatti, the VAO lived in the town of Alangudi. He rarely showed up at his office in neighboring Kilattur village. One had to go by bicycle to check every day in order to catch him in his office at the right time to make the request. The VAO would then take his time, sometimes weeks, to verify the address and notarize an official document attesting to financial status and residence. The VAO was also known to demand some money in the form of a bribe in exchange for this document. Once Arumugam had obtained his verification, he would have to have it photocopied and take it, along with two passport-sized photographs, to the Taluk Supply Office in Alangudi Town to fill out the application. This is where the process became even more difficult.

Rather than fill out and submit a form on his own, Arumugam explained to me how he had to find an application vendor outside of the Taluk Supply Office and pay fifty rupees, about one day's wages for him, to have the vendor fill out the form. Along with the address, financial status, and personal information for everyone included on the card, applications for a new card require a written memo explaining why the applicant had not filed for a card earlier. Although he had been told by others to expect this, and he assumed that this was how an application must be made, Arumugam complained to me later about the price. "First he asked for a hundred rupees in addition to the twenty-five I gave him for the sheet [application]. But we talked and I paid him fifty. Already, I had to skip a day's work on the bore-well in Mattur to go there." The vendor had also promised to submit the application to someone he knew in the office to make sure it was properly filed. Every vendor claims to have a special connection to a bureaucrat on the inside. Having no choice but to trust the document vendor, Arumugam paid him and then went home. He was then to wait a few weeks for the inspector from the supply office

to come to Kovilpatti village and verify the claim before actually filing the application.

Arumugam waited at home, but no one ever came. Again, he had to decline a bore-well drilling job to wait for the inspector. He went back several times to look for the scribe who had sold him the written application in Alangudi, only to be told by the other vendors that Arumugam's document seller had not been around for some days. So, after much frustration, Arumugam ended up buying a new form from another vendor, and this time asked Tangavelu, Karuppiah's younger brother and a schoolteacher, to fill it out for him. Tangavelu filled out the form after giving Arumugam some trouble for not asking him sooner and for not being able to do it on his own. Arumugam was used to such comments and appeared unfazed. Karuppiah's uncle, who was also in the process of establishing a separate household, saw that Tangavelu was helping Arumugam fill out the application and decided to get his own form and ask his nephew to do the same for him. Tangavelu did so without complaint.

This account of Arumugam's trials provides an illustration of how many in rural Tamil Nadu manage the world of written documents. Arumugam, when asked about literacy, saw no reason to learn to read and write. The actual writing of the application and explanation for why he had not applied earlier appeared to him as just one task in a whole series of tasks involved in the application process. He found it perfectly normal to ask and even pay others to do this work for him, just as it was natural for him to go to the tea stall and simply listen to people read the newspaper headlines aloud and discuss them to get his news. Getting the ration card was a matter of asking the right person and being a little patient. Like many other villagers who had had limited or no schooling, he took such difficulties for granted. Arumugam and Karuppiah's uncle had always relied on a well-established social division of linguistic labor. Just as it was normal for only women of lower castes to transplant rice, or for men of the Pandaram caste to act as priests at the village temple, it was quite normal for some people to do the work of reading and writing on behalf of others.

Karuppiah, while seeing Arumugam's search for a ration card unfold from across the street, however, shook his head in disappointment. This whole process appeared to him as symptomatic of what is wrong with how

government works and with village life. "The government should respond
to people's needs," he would often complain. But Karuppiah was critical
not only of the labyrinthine application process. While more forgiving of
his older uncle being unable to manage these things on his own, Karup-
piah was especially critical of his age-mate, Arumugam. Watching his
brother come home after work at the school, only to fill out the application
for Arumugam, Karuppiah remarked to me, "Look at that guy. . . . What a
lowly situation [*evvaḷavu kēvalamāṉa viśayam*]. Whatever you say he won't
listen," explaining that he had tried long ago to persuade Arumugam to
join a literacy class and learn. But the problem was that his neighbor had
"head weight" (*talai kaṇam*), like many men, and would not listen to rea-
son. The word "*kēvalam*" (lowliness) was here again used by Karuppiah
to characterize the condition of illiteracy. Although he had a good deal of
affection for Arumugam as a neighbor and as his "*maccāṉ*" (fictive cross-
cousin), Karuppiah attributed the stubborn refusal to learn as a sign of
what he called "*piṟpōkku karuttukaḷ*," retrograde, or backward looking
ideas. This is lowness that was understood by Karuppiah through a dis-
tinctively temporal lens. It was in fact because they had grown up together
that he would get so frustrated with Arumugam and other young men of
the village who refused to go to school. It was probably to avoid Karup-
piah's moral condemnation in the first place that Arumugam had gone to
Tangavelu instead of his older brother for help.

Karuppiah was working to reframe this social division of linguistic
labor as deviant and out of date through his dramatic performances with
the Dawn Arts Group and other forms of activism in the Arivoli Iyakkam.
Seeing a great deal of exploitation in unequal control of writing, activists
like Karuppiah and his colleagues were convinced that people must learn to
manage these sorts of affairs on their own and assert a certain independence
before government offices and other bureaucratic authorities that require
literacy. In fact, the first among the measures of functional literacy accord-
ing to the National Literacy Mission is "achieving *self-reliance* in literacy
and numeracy," followed by "being aware of the causes of deprivation and
moving towards amelioration of oppressive conditions through organiza-
tion and participation in the process of development," and "imbibing the
values of national integration." In order to be true, fully belonging citizens
of India, villagers should be able to petition the government on their own,
and Arumugam, for example, should be able to apply for a ration card on

his own. For the Arivoli Iyakkam, it was crucial that they have not only the literacy skills to do so but also the consciousness and self-confidence to do so. Arivoli activists wanted someone like Arumugam to go beyond seeing the application for a ration card as a personal or local act of completing the separation from his brother's household. Activism was premised on tying such local acts to a chronotope of enlightened citizenship and to the ongoing emergence of the nation from a backward state.

Science Activism, the Left, and the Development State

The reason that Karuppiah's criticism of the division of linguistic labor should correspond so closely to India's national policy was not only because of the many official training programs he had attended as an Arivoli Iyakkam volunteer. The sense that literacy is a technology enabling emancipation, progress, and even secular-rational thought is of course widely shared. This is a position that has been articulated perhaps most systematically by the Nobel Prize–winning economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (1999), who has demonstrated correlations among literacy rates, health, effective governance, and gender equality across India in his influential arguments for a social capabilities approach to the question of freedom. Sen has gone so far as to cite low adult literacy rates in the "Hindi belt" of central and northern India as indexes of the "gullibility" and "militant obscurantism" that fuel Hindu chauvinist threats to secular democracy in these regions (1993, 17–20).[8] In the case of Arivoli Iyakkam activism in Pudukkottai and India's National Literacy Mission, however, the shared vision of literacy as a project of encouraging self-reliance, becoming aware of the causes of one's deprivation, and integrating the rural poor into the nation-state points back to a common pedagogical source that is more firmly rooted in the political Left.

The Arivoli Iyakkam was first imagined and organized as such by urban, middle-class intellectuals from Chennai and other cities in their capacity as members of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum (TNSF) and of the Pondicherry Science Forum (PSF). In the early 1980s, nearly a decade prior to their entry into the field of large-scale activism, the Science Forums first started as discussion groups among graduate students and professors from the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology and

Indian Institute of Science. These groups initially formed with the aim of organizing a public critique of the government of India's science policies from within the scientific community itself. Decades of centrally planned development efforts focused on big science, dams, and, by the 1970s, nuclear technology had done very little to improve the lives of the majority of Indians, many of whom continued to live in poverty. The environmental costs of the Nehruvian mode of development were also becoming more and more apparent, with the poor, once again, suffering more than anyone. "We were all training to join the government as scientists, and so we began asking questions," explained one of the founding members, a mathematician who now works for an NGO in Delhi, where I interviewed him in his office. He continued, "Why does nuclear research get more attention than solar energy? Who decides that the science of weapons needs more money than the science of agriculture? Why should the government subsidize research that benefits only the rich? Why must we pour our money into big dams instead of local rainwater harvesting? These are questions of social choice and they decide what science is done." Such were the concerns that drove early meetings, leading these socially conscious researchers and teachers to register their organizations as the TNSF and the PSF in 1986.

It was also around this time that the Science Forums began to find that if they wanted to democratize the way in which decisions are made about how science would operate in India, they would have to reach out precisely to those communities that are most affected. As part of the effort to bring villagers and the urban poor into a discussion on the political significance of science, then, the Science Forums began organizing extra training in science outside the classroom. Science activists would often hold their tutorials in the government school building itself, after school hours. The project to engage in criticism of government science policy had, by the late 1980s expanded into efforts to educate people about science more generally, eventually leading to science classes designed for those who had never gone to school.

"The science movement has tended to view the propagation of science as a virtue in itself," explained Dr. T. Sundararaman, in an interview I held in his Pondicherry apartment. "In some sense it would be materialist, it would combat superstition, it would lead to more rational thinking and the soil would be more fertile for radical thought."

Dr. Sundararaman was an important figure in the Left movement, the president of the Pondicherry Science Forum, and one of the early leaders of the shift to concentrate on science education among the poor and eventually on the more basic issue of literacy. As I asked him about other movements that had influenced him and his generation of science activists, he continued, "The science movement draws consciously from the Marxist ideology. And that also is atheistic. That also sees science as intrinsically materialist, and science as an ideology, which is not necessarily the Marxist paradigm, but commonly interpreted by our friends in that framework, somewhat filling the gap that religion would do for a believer."

The Science Forums drew on what Sundararaman would repeatedly mention as the "Bernalian science and society framework," referring to J. D. Bernal, the Irish Marxist scientist and sociologist of science whose book *The Social Function of Science* (1961 [1936]) provided twentieth-century modernizers with a theory of scientific enlightenment as much concerned with the social as it is with the natural and material. This book is required reading for all in leadership positions in the Science Forums. According to Bernal, "science implies a unified and co-ordinated and, above all, conscious control of the whole of social life; it abolishes, or provides the possibility of abolishing, the dependence of man on the material world. Henceforth society is subject only to the limitations it imposes on itself" (1961 [1936], 409). Heavily influenced by the Soviet model, he therefore comes to the conclusion that "the full development of science in the service of humanity is incompatible with the continuance of capitalism" (410), because capitalism leaves too much agency to economic forces beyond direct human control. Sundararaman continued his description of the science movement: "It is not a political movement in the narrow sense, and not an agitational movement, though in specific circumstances this may become essential. It is a political movement in the broader sense, defining what issues elections should be fought on."

The friends Sundararaman had alluded to when explaining the rise of the Science Forums include the All India People's Science network, a nationwide alliance of groups modeled on earlier efforts of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). This latter organization of what is sometimes called the "Indian new left" was founded in the early 1960s,

and has played a very important role in shaping the course of decentralized planning policy under Communist Party of India (Marxist) rule in Kerala (Heller, Harilal, and Chaudhury 2007; Isaac and Franke 2002; Menon and Nigam 2007; Zachariah and Sooryamoorthy 1994). Many of the founding members of the Science Forums, the KSSP, and other science activist groups had studied elsewhere in India or abroad. M. P. Parameswaran, one of the leaders of science activism in India and an important planner of the Arivoli Iyakkam campaigns in Tamil Nadu, for example, had studied physics at the University of Moscow in the late 1950s before returning to India to eventually become president of the KSSP and a leader of the adult literacy movement. It is, in fact, through the stories of science activist leaders like Parameswaran that we can gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between village-level activism and globally circulating theories of Marxism, science, and the question of freedom.

When I visited him at home in Trissur, on a Kerala monsoon-soaked afternoon, the spritely white-haired man who had inspired generations of activists told me how he had first been exposed to Marxian approaches to the liberating role of science in society while in the Soviet Union.[9] During this time, Parameswaran was a science journalist for the Malayalam newspapers in Kerala, reporting on his experience as a student. "I was incredibly impressed with the social progress I saw, how they were able to take care of children and the way they were catching up to America, but I also found the party structure very hierarchical and undemocratic." On his return to India, he started a science activist group in Bombay (now Mumbai) and eventually moved back to Kerala, where he joined the CPI(M) in 1970, and ultimately played a leading part in shaping Kerala politics for the next thirty-five years, both within the party structure and without. Parameswaran was central in shaping the KSSP, redirecting its aims from providing simple science education to pursuing the cause of "Science for Social Revolution," and bridging a range of social gaps between academics, grassroots activism, and party bureaucracy (Zachariah and Sooryamoorthy 1994, 64–65). It was under his leadership in the 1970s that Marxism was promoted across Kerala and southern India as a "science of society" through village activist efforts supported by the party. He went on to organize science and literacy activism at a national level through the

Total Literacy Campaigns of the 1990s. Parameswaran was eventually expelled from the CPI(M) while I was still doing fieldwork in 2004 for his persistent demand that the party democratize its decision-making process at the state and local levels.[10]

Unlike the KSSP, which had already grown into a mass movement by the 1980s, prior to their work in the field of literacy activism the Tamil and Pondicherry Science Forums had very small memberships, limited primarily to urban academics. J. Krishnamurthy, a teacher from Pondicherry and a longtime science and literacy activist, explained, "People were keeping their distance from the science movement and from our ideas. There was a gap [*iṭai veḷi*] between us. We saw the literacy movement as an instrument [*karuvi*] to reach the people and get closer to them." Kerala already had high literacy rates and a robust Communist tradition, and Tamil thinkers such as M. Singaravelar had already tried to fuse scientific rationalism and working class politics in the early twentieth century (Babu 2004). But since the mid-twentieth century, Tamil politics had been dominated by parties that, while receptive to secular rationalism, worked through forms of ethnolinguistic populism and critiques of caste dominance that left little room for the type of internationalist claims made by the largely upper-caste Science Forums. Many activist leaders I interviewed over the course of my fieldwork attested to the fact that the slide shows and science experiments they conducted in villages in the late 1980s, prior to the literacy movement, failed to attract many people's interest and enthusiasm. Activists would sometimes travel to villages with posters explaining scientific principles that few people could read.

Members of the Science Forums found their opportunity to broaden activities and engage villagers in 1989 by entering into partnerships with the central government of India for large-scale science education and mass-literacy campaigns in what would come to be known as the Arivoli Iyakkam. Experiments with district-wide literacy movements that year in Kerala, where the KSSP had partnered with the newly established National Literacy Mission, provided inspiration. In order to mediate this new partnership, Parameswaran had worked with members of the Congress government at the Center and established a national nongovernmental organization, called Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), specifically designed to coordinate science and literacy activist efforts from

the political Left with a government policy that had become increasingly invested in promoting "grassroots" and "participatory" development initiatives. The BGVS therefore acted as the institution through which the government of India would provide a limited set of funds and allow movement organizers to make use of the district development apparatus, while activists and volunteers would do the work of mobilizing villagers and holding science and literacy classes. Over the course of only one year, in 1991, some twenty thousand volunteer teachers had been recruited for the movement in Pudukkottai District alone, and a good number went on to become members of the Science Forums. It was at this time, for example, that villagers like Karuppiah and Neela became involved with science activism and Left politics more broadly. This model of activism worked so well in part because government workers, like schoolteachers and university professors, were given paid leave from their jobs for one year to devote themselves to the movement. But as much as the Arivoli Iyakkam campaigns required state support, they soon found that such partnerships could come at a very high cost.

In 1992, only two years into their Arivoli Iyakkam mass-literacy campaign, the Pondicherry Science Forum found themselves under attack from local politicians in a legislative assembly that eventually shut the movement down in the Union Territory of Pondicherry, on the Tamil coast. It appears as if the Arivoli Iyakkam and the Science Forums were posing a threat to the monopoly on political action that parties had established, because villagers were going to local literacy volunteers for help with their problems instead of going to representatives of the political parties. "We had over twenty-thousand people attend one of our rallies, much more than either party could manage. They got scared," Sundararaman explained. According to Nitya Rao, a journalist who was covering the movements at the time, "One lesson in the literacy primer raised issues of poverty and unemployment in India and of the inequitable distribution of resources, and called people to struggle for a just society. Citing this chapter as 'evidence' the speaker of Pondicherry's legislature actually called the Total Literacy Campaign 'anti-national'" (1993, 915). Both the ruling Congress Party and the opposition DMK eventually teamed up and terminated government support for the Arivoli Iyakkam in the middle of the Postliteracy phase in the state legislature, claiming that it was "subversive."

While perhaps strengthening the state's general monopoly on legitimate representation, in this case the literacy movement had shown that its might and charisma could rival that of the established political parties and their capacity to mediate access to state power.

Even after officially severing relations with the government of India in the mid-1990s because of such friction, Science Forum activists continued to occupy almost every position in the Arivoli Iyakkam, and the literacy movement continued to act as the means by which people joined other Left activist groups and political parties. Science Forum activities that Arivoli Iyakkam activists carried out in Pudukkottai's villages during my field-work, for example, included performing simple physics experiments for the public and bringing telescopes into villages to teach people the basics of astronomy or microscopes for biology lectures.[11] Science Forum visits to villages also consisted of demonstrations of the ways in which god-men and magicians perform what appear, in the eyes of some, to be "miracles," such as producing sacred ash from the palm of one's hand. Such scientific demonstrations in villages predate the mass-literacy movements but have continued in Pudukkottai and elsewhere under the name "*Mantiramā Tantiramā*" (Magic? or Trickery?). Science Forums hold public functions to commemorate the abuses of science in the service of violence and political expedience, not answerable to more generalized human material needs, through annual public presentations on the anniversaries of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. In the words of the TNSF's own policy document, the aim has been to "create a scientific culture, building on the heritage of the freedom struggle and of democratic, socialist, and women's movements."

The convergence of orientations between science activism and a wing of the state represented by an Indian Administrative Service cadre in district administration had rested on a broad set of shared assumptions about modernization, rationality, and the unification of spheres of social action. For science activists, literacy was initially seen as the means to a much larger project of building a "rational society" through knowledge of a wider world. J. Krishnamurthy, a teacher, Science Forum leader, and organizer of literacy campaigns across Tamil Nadu, explained in an interview I held with him at his house in Pondicherry,

> Look at all the things happening around you. There is a need for some kind of platform to get them to understand these things. That is, many things don't reach them. Things reach through oral language, through their ears, whatever they see on TV, or they will say what they read in the newspaper. Someone will read and tell them. But if they hear it, see it on TV, or in a newspaper, this needs to be discussed in a group. To decide what is wrong or right, what is needed or not, they need to be in a group, right? One needs to build a structure, right? We thought that's it, that's all we need to bring. So we could use writing as a vehicle to develop a structure for all these things.

There was a lack of integration of sorts, from Krishnamurthy's perspective, requiring a structure or platform for critical debate and understanding of the world outside villages. It is not only that "many things don't reach them"; the Arivoli Iyakkam would provide a forum through which people could exercise their reason in a group.[12] Both the government and science activists were concerned with villages being left behind in the race for development, and it was this shared concern that led to their partnership in conducting the Total Literacy Campaigns of the 1990s. Even in Pondicherry, where serious opposition came not from district administrative offices but from political parties, Krishnamurthy explained to me with a chuckle, "The government shut it down, and then gladly accepted the UNESCO King Sejong award for achievement in the field of adult literacy!"

The general model of partnership between local science and literacy NGOs and district administration offices proved tremendously effective in mobilizing large numbers of people in support of the mass-literacy movements. The Science Forums quickly changed from relatively marginal groups of politicized academics to leaders of one of India's largest social movements. The Science Forums' effectiveness in gaining a public legitimacy that would extend well beyond political party affiliation lies in using a reformist language already well rehearsed in the anticolonial and Dravidian nationalist struggles of the early twentieth century. The TNSF was able to enter into a sometimes uneasy relationship with the central government of India for the purposes of organizing mass-literacy movements precisely because it is devoted to the popularization

of science. This has been a powerful nationalist theme since the Nehru-vian era and was given renewed salience with Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as prime minister (1984–89) shortly before the Arivoli Iyakkam began, and more recently with Abdul Kalam's presidency (2002–7). The All-India People's Science Network that grew around the literacy movements is now one of the largest voluntary organizations in the world with nearly 2 million members.[13]

Although the Science Forums' desire to build a structure for public de-bate through literacy and science activism might have brushed against en-trenched party interests in monopolizing access to state power, they were nevertheless able to appeal to an urban audience by drawing on the theme of national modernization along secular lines. This is a familiar way of narrating the progress of the nation's movement forward through the homogeneous time of history, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has famously argued. But how did the Science Forums come to appeal to Tamil vil-lagers, and how was their message absorbed on a mass scale through the literacy campaigns? How were these goals of Enlightenment interpreted by activists and other Arivoli Iyakkam participants in Pudukkottai's vil-lages? And what happened to the "gap" between Science Forum activ-ists and the villagers they sought to reach? Science Forum discourse on Enlightenment and literacy was grafted onto already existing ideas about education and progress through a number of interdiscursive resonances, introducing alternative histories and temporalities into the narrative. It is to this process that I now turn.

Resonances: The Senses of Enlightenment

We have so far focused on one aspect of the chronotopic politics under-pinning the Arivoli Iyakkam's claims to bring light to the Tamil country-side through literacy and science, namely the narrative of modernization that would construe other orientations to agency as out of date. Yet even radically modernist attempts to remake the world require histories and memories that would resonate with those who must be mobilized for such purposes. The need to build a past in the service of a revolutionary present is a point that was articulated forcefully, if somewhat pessimis-tically, by Marx (1963 [1852], 15) himself when he wrote that efforts to

create "something that has never yet existed . . . conjure up the spirits of the past to their service in order to represent the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language." We saw in the opening to this chapter, for example, how Arivoli Iyakkam mobilization drew both on the dramatic techniques of temple festivals, with their bright lights and songs carried over loudspeakers, and on forms of realist theater to produce a moral narrative of national progress that would resonate with a village audience. Activists attempted to suture otherwise heterogeneous orientations to time and space through such dramatic performances.

Another mode of emplotting the Arivoli Iyakkam with reference to a prior text was to depict Arivoli as the "*iraṇṭāvatu cutantirap pōrāṭṭam*" (second independence struggle). This strategy of invoking the independence movement was used by activists of all sorts, even by bureaucrats affiliated with the movement and by many other villagers in Pudukkottai. In this example, the national struggle for independence is targeted as an event that is available to all as a template for interpretation through which Arivoli's struggle for emancipation through full literacy can be grasped as one of world historical significance. Indian independence acts as an intertext, mediating interpretations of the present by framing a chronotope of progress toward freedom and by situating the nation as the correct locus of agency. Participants in the Arivoli Iyakkam would thus be responding to a call for collective self-determination that was first made a century before.

Whereas the text of national liberation is one that was likely to be shared by everyone, other narrative pasts are more likely to be used by some participants in the Arivoli movement than others. Some activists draw heavily on more specifically Tamil traditions of thought on education as the fusion of light and knowledge in order to frame or ground their own activism, while some draw on traditions that they take to be more global in reach. As we will see shortly, the choice of which past and which cultural forms to invoke in the service of narrative propulsion is conditioned in large part by the activist's place in a social structure, and this fact of a less-than-unified narrative framework across social classes has led to some contradictions in the project of making autonomous subjects—a point I will return to later in this chapter.

The simpler point I would like to make here is that invocations of existing discourses or intertexts are means of fashioning the present, and

not simply restrictions on agentive action as in Marx's complaint with the pull of the past. Such texts mediate self-understanding. For Marx, the narrative forms of the past sit like a weight, indeed, "like nightmare on the brain of the living" who would seek to revolutionize themselves (1963, 15). However, Arivoli activism reveals that the past need not only appear as weight, a source of pure drag, but the appropriate past can also appear as an ethical source in the project of remaking the social world. Jürgen Habermas, writing on the problematic developed by Marx, expresses it quite nicely: "A modernity that has been evaporated into what is actual at any given time, as soon as it attains the authenticity of a now-time, must constantly take its normativity from mirror images of pasts whose services are enlisted for this purpose. . . . Inasmuch as we appropriate past experiences with an orientation to the future, the authentic present is preserved as the locus of continuing tradition and innovation at once" (1987, 11–13). It is this production of tradition that is "enlisted" to shape horizons of future projection that I would like to focus on. Bernard Bate's (2009) ethnography of political speech in Tamil Nadu, for example, has shown how aesthetic forms associated with the ancient past could be mobilized to deepen political commitment in the present. Similar processes were under way in the Arivoli movement, even if its politics were somewhat different from those of the dominant Dravidian nationalist parties. By beginning from the present, then, we can understand how the very idea of "Arivoli" can resonate with a range of narrative structures from different perspectives, a resonance that serves to recharge and shape the present itself.

Some Village Views on Light and Knowledge

We saw how the founding members of the Science Forums draw on a global history of the Left. Their story is vitally connected to this history in concrete ways. Here, I would like to shift social locations away from the largely urban leadership, to look at how the idea of Arivoli has been viewed from the perspective of activist and nonactivist villagers in Pudukkottai. The progressive Left, or what Tamil speakers would commonly refer to as the "*iṭatu cāriḳaḷ*" (the Left lines) is, in fact, quite plural, as the Tamil words used to refer to it indicate. Moreover, villagers who are not at all politically active in the Left movement also have their own ways of narrating a connection between light and knowledge that

resonates with a number of intertexts. The rural poor who made up the core group of volunteers in the movement drew on a wide range of narrative pasts to interpret their present actions, from Tamil literature to the twentieth-century linguistic nationalisms that have given the classical past renewed political salience. While we will have occasion to investigate how villagers' orientations to questions of literacy and knowledge are entangled in the broader Left movement, it is important to understand the degree to which global histories of the Left stand in a peripheral relationship to these other narratives of enlightenment in Tamil Nadu.

Most of the village-level literacy workers I interviewed claimed that the word "*arivoḷi*," a compound of the roots for "knowledge" (*arivu*) and "light" (*oḷi*), was coined in 1990 by Science Forum activists in Pondicherry as they were launching their Total Literacy Campaign. It appeared to most as a neologism. Some had heard of a publishing house by the same name and a few knew that "Arivoli" was the name of a famous orator on the public-speaking circuit. If many people I asked took the name Arivoli to be a neologism, they nevertheless found it to be a particularly apt word to use for the literacy movement. The name "Arivoli" was, in fact, already in limited use as a proper name given to boys in the wake of the pure Tamil movement of the 1930s. Led by the neo-Saivite philosopher Maramalai Adigal, this movement has had profound impact on the politics of the Tamil language because it encouraged people to search for names and words in Tamil that drew on non-Sanskritic, Dravidian etymology. As I was told by a village literacy coordinator in Pudukkottai who was aware of the word "Arivoli" prior to its use in the literacy movement, "It is a beautiful *Tamil* name," with emphasis as she said it on the name's etymological origins. "Arivoli" probably first arose as a purified, Dravidianized form of similar Sanskritic names like "Gnyanadeepam" or "Gnyanaprakash," which may have Buddhist or even Christian roots. While such Dravidian names were first used by those influenced by this movement only to de-Sanskritize south Indian culture, by the later twentieth century it had become very common for even marginally educated villagers to search for properly Dravidian names for their children. The purist ethos of the Tamil language movement now saturates the cultural world of Tamil Nadu, where Dravidian nationalist parties inspired by this movement have been in power for the last forty years.

It was, in fact, the Dravidian nationalist and rationalist movements of the mid-twentieth century that served as the most obvious pasts to draw on for village-level Arivoli activists. Led by the anti-Brahman social reformer E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, or Periyar (the Great One), the movement calling for a separate homeland for the Dravidian people of south India drew very heavily on radical thought from Europe while playing a large role in recasting texts like the *Tirukkuṟaḷ* as sources for a secular Tamil past. Like some of the early leaders of the science movement, Periyar had traveled to the Soviet Union and had been greatly impressed with the progress he saw in what he took to be a society without caste or religion. A mass movement in its own right, the self-respect movement is responsible for popularizing the thought of many non-Indian scientific and social thinkers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Marx, and Engels in the Tamil language through its journal *Kuṭi Aracu*. Even if there is no evidence that Periyar himself used the word "Arivoli" to refer to Enlightenment, his frequent denunciations of "*mūṭanampikkai*" (superstition) has been replicated in the discourse of scientific rationalism in the Science Forum activist and in the Arivoli Iyakkam, referring to that which obscures the light of knowledge. The European Enlightenment and its conceptual vocabulary of transparency and opacity has certainly served as an important model for the modernist imaginary across a range of similar movements.

Periyar also drew heavily from the vocabulary of revolution. His concept of *maṉitatarma* (human dharma) is in many senses also quite close to the Arivoli Iyakkam's emphasis on *maṉitanēyam* (humanism), emphasizing human self-determination as an ethical duty (Cody 2011). Periyar's rationalist self-respect movement for caste and gender equality lasted from 1926 to 1949 and was subsequently institutionalized as a political party that would not contest elections, the Dravida Kazhagam (DK). Periyar's legacy is also claimed by the major Tamil nationalist parties that have controlled the state legislative assembly since 1967. Many would argue, however, that the radical secular spirit of earlier Dravidian nationalisms has been dulled and pushed to the background of ethnic, linguistic, and caste politics. The DK nevertheless continues to maintain a high profile in the Pudukkottai region, and I had the opportunity to attend many public functions that were jointly organized by the DK and Arivoli Iyakkam village volunteers in their capacity as members of the Tamil Nadu

Progressive Writers Association. During my fieldwork, for example, Arivoli workers worked in tandem with members of the local DK chapter to celebrate Periyar's birthday in public events. On such occasions I was often asked to speak about possible intellectual connections between the man people call the "Voltaire of south India" and other movements for social justice in the United States. Within Pudukkattai's literacy movement there have been a number of secular "Arivoli Weddings," often across castes and celebrated without priests, modeled on DK self-respect weddings.[14] It is also through the DK that the first large network of village reading rooms was established in Tamil Nadu, again providing a model for Arivoli libraries as a place where villagers could meet, read, and discuss pressing political issues. But the cultural appeal of Arivoli goes well beyond Dravidian nationalist politics.

The Arivoli Iyakkam also draws from a deeper well of images and narratives that are more widely distributed among Tamil villagers. The equation between written language and light, or more specifically the power to see, has recognizable roots in Tamil literary and folk traditions. For example, in what is perhaps the most widely celebrated ancient Tamil text, the *Tirukkuṟaḷ,* the very well-known verses 392 and 393 read,

> Those called figures and letters, the wise declare,
> Are eyes to live with.
> (Eṇṇeṇpa ēṇai eḻutteṇpa ivviraṇṭum
> Kaṇṇeṇpa vāḻum uyirkku.)
> Only the learned have eyes—others
> Two sores on their face![15]
> (Kaṇṇuṭaiyar eṇpavar kaṟṟōr
> mukattiraṇṭu
> Puṇṇuṭaiyar kallātavar.)

These couplets from the subchapter on education are learned by heart by students in their formal schooling and they are featured in the front of public buses across the state. The verses were readily proffered to me by literary-minded activists in Pudukkottai's Arivoli movement when asked about the place of literacy and education in Tamil culture. The same lines are also used by activists in their mobilization efforts in order to shame people into joining the literacy movement, precisely because

the *Tirukkuṟaḷ* carries such moral authority (Tamilcelvan 2004b, 19). The great poet Auvaiyar is credited with a very similar verse, "Numbers and letters are equal to eyes" (*eṇṇum eḻuttum kaṇṇenat takum*), which also serves as an ethical text used in primary schooling, emphasizing the virtues of literacy through the idiom of sight. In the case of Auvaiyar, the verse is taken from her famous *Koṉṟai Vēntaṉ,* a text used in traditional schooling that is itself arranged in alphabetical order to aid beginning students in their memorization of the Tamil alphasyllabary. These texts have been attractive to a range of modernizing social reformers, including the Dravidian nationalists, because of their largely secular character.

Texts such as the *Tirukkuṟaḷ* point back to pedagogical traditions that differ in significant ways from the literacy-as-enlightenment practiced by the Arivoli Iyakkam. However, these memorable texts circulate very widely across the Tamil-speaking world and have nevertheless been absorbed into the literacy movement's grassroots presentation of itself as consistent with Tamil educational traditions of the classical era. One might also assume that, because these are literary texts learned through formal education systems, they would not be available to villagers who would actually take part in literacy lessons, precisely because they had never gone to school as children. But the equation of literacy with eyesight was, in fact, also familiar to many villagers I spoke with across Pudukkottai District who had had little or no formal education and would not have come across these tropes through their own reading of these classical texts in school but rather through a differently formalized familial oral circulation. There is a certain continuity between these classical models of ethics and everyday formulations of progress and literacy, a point that has been emphasized by Anand Pandian (2009) in his book on the trope of cultivation and the practice of everyday ethics in rural Tamil Nadu. Images from the classical past intersect with twentieth-century politics and twenty-first-century activisms in ways that could not be anticipated.

For example, when I asked a group of Arivoli learners in the village of L.N. Puram the naive anthropologist's question "What does Arivoli mean?" I received the following response from a woman in her forties who had never gone to school:

Arivoli means like an eye seeing [*oru kaṇṭerikiṟatu māṭiri*] for those who can't read, that's all Arivoli means. If you don't know how to read, it means it's like an eye that cannot see [*oru kaṇṭeriyāṭuṉṉu arttam*]. Arivoli means, we'll read and that eye will see light [*kaṇṇukku ōḷikiṟatu*]. That's Arivoli [*atutāṉ aṟivoḷi*].

Without hesitating, this unlettered villager drew on the metaphor of an eye seeing the light and opposed literacy to the condition of being blind much like the sage Tiruvalluvar had done in his *Tirukkuṟaḷ*. She had done so without quoting the text directly. The *Tirukkuṟaḷ*'s figuration serves rather as an implicit intertext. I have received a large number of similar responses from learners and teachers alike. While prompted by a question that few people would ever ask themselves, such responses attest the degree to which the assimilation of literacy and knowledge with light and seeing is in the air, although this trope has undoubtedly been amplified through its use in the literacy movement.

The Arivoli concept's contemporary power in circulation, though propelled by central government funds and a robust activist network associated with the broader Left, therefore also rides on classical literary tropes and the polythetic traces of twentieth-century reformist projects, including Tamil nationalism, but also a more specifically Dravidian rationalism. It was through the forging of ideological ties to these resonant pasts that the Arivoli Iyakkam could legitimately claim to be a "people's movement" with tens of thousands of rural activists working for the cause in districts like Pudukkottai. It was the sheer scale of efforts like the Total Literacy Campaign in this district, which mobilized over 250,000 learners at its height that lends weight to the claim that the literacy movement is in fact a "second independence struggle."

"Arivoli" as Enlightenment, "Enlightenment" as Arivoli

I would now like to return to the Arivoli Iyakkam's urban leadership in the Science Forums in an effort to flesh out some of the conceptual connections that have been made across social barriers. Recall that from the perspective of the urban middle-class leaders who initiated Arivoli activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they were participating in a global

movement. Connections to Tamil reformist nationalism and to literary tropes connecting script to the eyes are more strongly felt at the district level, especially among the rural Tamil-language literati, than in India-wide official ideology of the people's science movement. But certain new resonances, suturing the narratives of Tamil classicism and Dravidianist reform to those of a global vision of progress, have been forged through the course of nearly two decades of rural literacy activism. It was through the Arivoli movement that many came to think differently about the Enlightenment itself.

When I initially asked Dr. T. Sundararaman, one of the early leaders from Pondicherry whom many credit with coining the very word "Arivoli," about the origins of the idea and possible connections to Periyar's Dravidian rationalist humanism, he told me that it had not even occurred to him. He attributed the coining of the word "Arivoli" for the literacy movement to his wife, Sudha Sundararaman, a prominent feminist at the all-India level and general secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA)—the women's wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). In contrast to Pudukkottai's literati activists and village learners, the urban intellectuals who had founded the Science Forums were much more likely to refer to models of literacy activism from other countries or to anticolonial and democratic struggles in India more generally. The European Enlightenment is easily invoked as a precedent by many urban activists in the Arivoli Iyakkam, as are the Russian Revolution and similar educational experiments in Fidel Castro's Cuba and Julius Nyerere's Tanzania. Sundararaman did eventually concede that there may be some broad affinities among these varieties of social critique and earlier Tamil nationalist claims to an anti-Brahman secularism, but he was quite weary of associating literacy and science activism with what he took to be an overly ethnicized vision of political action that would conflict with his universalizing claims to the Enlightenment project.

While discursive resonance with appropriate pasts may be cultivated for strategic ends by the movement framers, their vision of activism was only slowly influenced by their encounters with visions offered by subaltern activists and learners. Inspirational texts offered by the urban leadership were more easily incorporated by village-level activists than vice versa. Even those who write primarily in the Tamil language

consistently sought to tie their work to revolutionary models inspired by events elsewhere, often in Europe. For example, a recent Tamil-language book documenting songs that were written in the service of Arivoli Iyakkam takes its title, "A Terrible Beauty Was Born" (*Pēraḻaku Piṟantatu*) from the famous poem by W. B. Yeats depicting the failed Irish uprising of Easter 1916. According to the author, N. Karunanidhi, Arivoli Iyakkam's Velur District coordinator, as well as a Science Forum leader and a school headmaster, the concept of Arivoli Iyakkam as a revolutionary idea and call for continuous change is purposefully open ended:

> The very words "Arivoli Iyakkam" made many think. Government officers would pronounce these words and make efforts to discern their meaning. They grumbled that there could even be a revolution within this movement. But the movement's friends were attracted by the very feelings captured by this word. The word's true bundle of meanings can be seen in the continuing Arivoli library and cultural movements taking place after the first Arivoli literacy movement. . . . The Arivoli movement serves as a base for many social works, movements for social change, and ongoing struggles. These struggles are all suitably joined, as part of the very meaning of the word "movement" [*iyakkam*]. "In proclaiming the French Revolution a magnificent terrible beauty was born."[16] Like this, through Arivoli a great beauty was born in Tamil Nadu. (2003, 27)

The author is very conscious of the phrase's extensional meanings for both government officials and volunteers, and he makes explicit use of comparisons to earlier revolutionary moments to argue for the global import of the movement toward enlightenment through literacy. I would particularly like to draw readers' attention to Karunanidhi's use of citation to explain and perform similarities between Arivoli Iyakkam and already available narratives of social change.

The line Karunanidhi quotes is attributed by a footnote to W. B. Yeats, but it has in fact been rendered to refer explicitly to the much better-known French Revolution, rather than to the original subject of Yeats's poem.[17] What is interesting for our purposes here is not so much the slippage between the Irish uprising and the French Revolution (from the original source of translation), but rather the desire on the part of the narrator of Arivoli's importance to attach *likeness* and perhaps even continuity to these events of social rebellion. "*Like this*, through Arivoli a great

beauty was born in Tamil Nadu." The French Revolution can thus act as
an explicit icon, a parallel case, in the cultural poetics of Arivoli discourse.
The literacy movement can be understood in terms of its predecessor,
an event that would be well known to an already literate audience. The
author is clearly well aware of what he terms the "bundle of meanings"
that are gathered in the Arivoli idea and seeks to exploit the possibilities
of such bundling, specifically seeking to represent Arivoli as a source of
perpetual movement and progress. The Yeats quotation shows how the
Arivoli movement can be seen through the lens of the French Revolution,
or any movement for progressive social change that has preceded it, for
that matter. Prior revolutionary events could act as the ground on which
the more recent Arivoli Iyakkam stands, and Arivoli could be seen as a
translation of the original Enlightenment or prior revolutions into Tamil
language and onto Tamil soil.

But the converse is also true as the discourse on enlightenment circu-
lates, and this is a critical point lest we reduce this desire to find likeness
as just another case of postcolonial mimicry, or a simple case of "vernacu-
larization" (cf. Merry 2006). Appropriation quickly turns into *retrospective
incorporation*. The word "Arivoli" can now, in the wake of mass mobiliza-
tion, be used retrospectively to refer to the European Enlightenment itself
in the Tamil-language cultural and literary press in ways that were not
possible prior to the literacy movement. An example of such usage can
be found in the science activist T. V. Venkateswaran's review article on
the field of cultural studies in the March 2000 issue of the political journal
Putu Vicai (New Force), which uses the word "Arivoli" to refer to the Eu-
ropean Enlightenment in the context of explaining critiques of scientific
reasoning. It is, in fact, through a proliferating literature on modernity and
postmodernity in Tamil that the idea of Arivoli has come to be so closely
associated with Enlightenment philosophy, in addition to the broader cul-
tural influence that the literacy movement can be said to have had.

For rural activists who have taken to reading journals like *Putu Vicai*
and books about modernism and postmodernism through their involve-
ment with the movement, Arivoli acts as a lens through which prior
similar events in India and elsewhere can be interpreted. It thus seemed
perfectly natural for the village-level activist Neela, who had been reading
about theories on modernity in books and journals that circulate among

Science Forum members, to state that she had just read somewhere that an "Arivoli Iyakkam" had already happened in Europe in the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment itself, then, can be rendered as a prior instance of what activists already know through their encounters with science and literacy activism. Note, however, that this sense of priority is temporal and not necessarily prior in the sense of being somehow more foundational in the eyes of village-level activists. The very act of retrospection can be understood as an agentive enlistment, preserving the philosophical priority of the present.

Failed Resonance: A Geography Lesson

This last example of a Pudukkottai villager learning about the European Enlightenment and its scientific rationalism through the lens of her own activism demonstrates a sort of circular motion of interpretation that serves to knit narratives together across contexts. Arivoli activism was full of such attempts at alignment that can cut across spatial and social divides. Discourses on Arivoli drew on different understandings and experiences of the past, and through the work of activism and reflection, these varied pasts can be made commensurate to a certain degree. But sometimes activists were struck with the extreme difference in orientations toward space and time that are both a product and continuing cause of social difference. To the extent that the Arivoli Iyakkam was a program associated with the state and with urban orientations to personhood, time, and place, it oftentimes failed to resonate with the villagers it sought to mobilize. Rural women who were subject to Arivoli's pedagogy often responded critically, forcing activists to rethink their orientations to enlightenment. I would therefore like to end this chapter with a few episodes excerpted from the writer S. Tamilcelvan's memoirs of his days as a literacy activist, titled *Iruḷum Oḷiyum* (Darkness and Lightness), in order to suggest what the experience of failed resonance and a rupture in the chronotope of national development might mean for the practice of the Arivoli Iyakkam.

Tamilcelvan was a leader in Tirunelveli District's Arivoli Iyakkam during the Total Literacy Campaign and Postliteracy phases of the

movement in the 1990s. Today he is a prominent short-story writer and essayist, an activist in the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, and the president of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association. Tamilcelvan is from a middle-class background, hails from the small town of Pattamadai, and represents someone who dwells at the intersection of urban leadership and the rural grassroots. His thoughtful reflections provide an indispensable window onto the class contradictions that were made manifest through the practice of activism. He also shares his insight into what these contradictions might mean for attempts to foster enlightened citizenship among villagers by means of literacy activism. Throughout his book, Tamilcelvan describes events that lead him to reconsider his relationship to knowledge and to people. He had sought to teach people their place in world history and in the nation by writing pamphlets and speaking about the struggle for independence and the problems of contemporary communalist politics, only to find that his activism required him to learn much about his own place in relation to the world of rural marginality.

For example, on one occasion Tamilcelvan went to a village named Ayiraperi to oversee an Arivoli lesson in which the literacy teacher asked a group of villagers which district they were living in. Districts are the primary administrative units for development projects and tax collection within the state of Tamil Nadu. Much to Tamilcelvan's surprise, however, the students of Ayiraperi responded that they do not live in a district. The following is the excerpt in which he reports this encounter (2004b, 41):

> This was an Arivoli literacy circle run by Kandasamy, a very loving and committed volunteer. The students in this circle were all women. This is a conversation that happened between them that night at the lesson:

> *Kandasamy asked, "Which district is your village [ūr] in?"*
> *The students replied, "Our village is not a district."*
> *Then he asked, "Which subdistrict is your village in?"*
> *Again, "Our village is not a subdistrict."*

> Thinking perhaps they misunderstood the question, Kandasamy explained:

> *"So, you know there's Madurai District and Virudunagar District, right? Like that, which district are you in?"*

The students then said very clearly and patiently,

> *"Our village is not in any district. It's always here. The subdistrict is in Tenkasi. The district is in Tirunelveli. Do you understand?"*

After the lesson I took a walk with Kandasamy and we talked with amazement about our lack of understanding. They had made us understand that the *town of Tirunelveli itself was the district*. The idea that Ayiraperi (their village) was located *within* the area of Tirunelveli District had not reached the people *even fifty years after Independence*.

This incident is of interest because of what it tells us about the middle-class activist's dilemma when faced with resistant villagers, and more specifically because of the idioms of space and time in which this epistemological struggle is conducted. Tamilcelvan was shocked at what he took to be the villagers' expression of their own marginality with regard to the state and to his own world of spatial experience. Their response raised the question for Tamilcelvan of whether they were really living as fellow citizens of an independent India if they had no meaningful experience of living *in* a district called Tirunelveli. He had assumed that they would also take for granted his approach to place. However, his was an approach to the categories of place that had been saturated, by virtue of his formal education, middle-class experience, and work as a postal employee, by state-centered principles of classification. In another passage meant to capture this social difference the activist tells readers that "the distance between us was much more than that between letters *ā* and *ī*." (2004b, 25).

Tamilcelvan's interlocutors were purposefully marking their social difference through the idiom of place. For these rural women learners, the district (*māvaṭṭam*) and subdistrict (*tāluka*) were distinct places in other towns. They appeared to resist the assumption that they were living *within* an encompassing government spatial unit known as the district. E. Valentine Daniel (1984, 61–105) has written extensively about the pragmatic meanings of the Tamil "*ūr*"—the word I have unsatisfactorily translated above as "village" but which could also be translated as "home" or "place." Daniel explains how a person shares substantial qualities with their *ūr*. The answer to the question of what is one's *ūr* also depends completely on the context in which such a question is asked.

An *ūr* must therefore be understood in contrast to the rationalized and abstracted government spatial categories that children learn in school: stable, bounded categories that cannot shift in the same manner according to the context of interaction (see also Scott 1998). A series of *kirāmam pañcāyat* (revenue villages) are bound within the *tāluka* (subdistrict), which is within the *māvaṭṭam* (district), which is in a state, and so forth. The villagers of Ayiraperi who had insisted that their *ūr* is not a district were using this idiom to argue that their village does not have that quality of being a seat of state power.

Using the activists' own language of geography, the villagers clarified their point. The Tamil locative case marker in Tamilcelvan's reported dialogue, "*eṅka ūr enta māvaṭṭattilēyum illai*" (our village is not *in* any district) points not only to a simple spatial location but to a much more profound distance. Tamilcelvan has interpreted the villagers' use of a spatial distinction between villages being *in* a district and the district being in the town of Tirunelveli as a social index, indicating a great epistemological disjuncture between him and his interlocutors. They had made him understand that the "district" is an office building in the town of Tirunelveli where the field of state power is centered. Theirs was an *ūr* that had perhaps been abandoned by the state and certainly did not share in the substantial qualities of a "district." Their *ūr* was enmeshed in a rather different regime of power. The villagers' orientation to place appeared to resist Tamilcelvan's attempt to teach them how to address the district administration with their grievances, the initial purpose for the activist's line of questioning. They had refused the very premises of such an act.

It is crucial to note that Tamilcelvan also interpreted this difference immediately within the frame of the Indian nation and state. How could they understand national issues if they did not even know their place in local administrative structures? Here, epistemology, a way of knowing place, has been tied to the questions of agency and belonging to the nation-state. It was the distance between Tamilcelvan and the villagers that brought into serious question the effectiveness of simply teaching them how to write a petition in order to ensure their full rights as citizens. These villagers would need to be taught a different sense of place and not only how to write in order to participate in modern citizenship. The Tamil Nadu Science Forum, in fact, has a slide show that they bring to villages precisely

to socialize people to an objectifying Cartesian sense of space through satellite photos showing villagers the place of their district in the state, in the country of India, on the globe, and eventually, through diagrams, in the solar system and galaxy. From the activist's perspective, in order for learners to make demands on a government and to act as empowered agents, they first need to think in terms of a Cartesian spatial imaginary different from their own, and to think of themselves as having stakes in the forms of power connected to state institutions. Villagers would need to know themselves as living under an administrative unit known as a district. We can again glean a sense of the many-layered epistemological difficulties facing Arivoli activism.

What Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) would call the "historicism" of the reformer's perspective becomes evident when the problem of multiple topographies is easily translated into a problem of multiple temporalities: "The idea that Ayiraperi was located *within* the area of Tirunelveli district had not reached the people *even fifty years after Independence*." The problem in Tamilcelvan's eyes was not just that they spoke as if they did not know that they lived in a district, but that they were living in a time outside that of independence. They had not yet been brought into the fold of national contemporaries who experienced freedom. They would have to be "educated into citizens" for Indian independence to be complete. Arivoli as a "second independence movement" would thus entail pedagogy as the unification of national space and time that would act as the interpretive ground for new forms of agentive social action. It seems that overcoming this first, epistemological gap between rural topographical imaginaries and state-centered delineations of space is precisely what leads to a greater exposure of a second, embodied-communicative gap requiring that villagers must learn to write. That is, they would need to be taught to think in terms of living in a district only to learn that they were not in a position, *yet*, as nonliterate members to make use of this fact until they could write a petition. The Arivoli Iyakkam has thus been invested in a project of cultural work that serves as a prerequisite to the task of teaching people the skills of literacy. It is a pedagogy that teaches people "the gap between membership and belonging," thereby redefining people's marginality as something *within* the state's field of power (Das and Poole 2004, 17). Through this encounter, however, Tamilcelvan was made very aware of

the fact that he was also writing about villagers as full contemporaries, who despite their lack of formal education were already *supposed* to be fellow citizens of India.

Tamilcelvan becomes all the more critical of the gap between formal and substantive citizenship as he teaches villagers of their marginal place in the nation-state. The propensity for self-criticism among Arivoli activists is born of this realization that villagers are already supposed to be citizens, even when it is subsumed under the larger project of unifying the nation. It is the very desire for unity that brings heterogeneity into relief. Tamilcelvan's narrative construction of spatial and temporal difference within the frame of the nation, sparked by the interaction he witnessed between the Arivoli activist and the villagers of Ayiraperi, therefore also signals his recognition that such forms of difference are organized along the lines of gender and social class. The residents of Ayiraperi lived not far from Tamilcelvan's own home, but they appeared to live in different worlds because of who they were.

Reflecting further on the conversation about the village of Ayiraperi not being in any district, Tamilcelvan continues, "Only a week earlier in that same village I had spoken for half an hour about the importance of national unity.[18] Speaking to people who did not even know about the ideas of a district and subdistrict about nations and nationalism . . . made me feel ashamed" (2004b, 42). He was reproaching himself for giving a speech on national unity in the wake of violence between Hindus and Muslims in North India, for assuming that it would be of concern to the villagers of Tamil Nadu who were struggling for their own survival. The author turns this event into a parable about India's middle classes and the problems they foist on the rural poor without understanding that these are, in fact, the problems of a nation-state that is often quite distant from the concerns of Tamil villagers. The question of citizenship that had driven Tamilcelvan to go out into the villages of his district and teach his fellow Indians how to read and write in the Arivoli Iyakkam was turned back onto himself and his social class. Discussing a similar visit to another village in Tirunelveli, where an old man had asked him where he had been all these years if was he so excited about bringing national unity and literacy to everyone, Tamilcelvan writes, "I started to hate my pants and shirt. It occurred to me that I could have worn a *vēśṭi*. Even if I had come wearing a *vēśṭi* I could not have been one with him.

After forty years of powdering my face I could not just wipe my middle-classness off" (2004b, 19).[19] The "darkness" of ignorance in the title of his book *Iruḷum Oḷiyum* (Darkness and Lightness) turns out to be his own and that of his readership, not that of the villagers.

The Cultural Work of Chronotope Production

Historians of the subaltern studies collective have argued that the experience of state and nationhood among those at the rural margins is of a radically different order than that of those whose proximity to modern state power has rendered its ways of organizing the world as natural (e.g., Amin 1995; Chatterjee 2004; Guha 1983). In the episode above, we can see that, to the extent that Tamilcelvan's orientation to place and time had been coterminous with that of the state, the enlightenment project he had devoted himself to sat in tension with his desire to be "one" with subaltern villagers on their own terms. The rupture felt in the activists' narrative of progress is palpable: "we talked with amazement about *our* lack of understanding . . ."

Here, we confront squarely one of the major intellectual conundrums facing activists who engaged in the cultural work of Arivoli: producing autonomous subjects through enlightenment activism requires activists to recognize actually existing social conditions and cultural formations in rural Tamil Nadu. It is this fact that prompts Tamilcelvan to turn his criticism back on himself, his fellow activists, and his readers, if not to denaturalize state-centered categories of space and time completely, at least to delineate the limits of their hold on rural people's imagination.

If this realization was not to be incapacitating, it would have to serve as a means to develop a more expansive vision of progress that could incorporate such forms of difference within the project of Arivoli as Enlightenment. Indeed, despite their recognition of the limits of state reason, activists like Tamilcelvan nevertheless took the task of teaching the villagers of Ayiraperi that they live in Tirunelveli District to be a necessary step in the long journey toward unifying the nation, even as many in the Arivoli movement became increasingly critical of the Indian state as a result of their work. But it is only when we return to

the perspective on Arivoli offered by village-level activists that we can
appreciate the real depth of the contradictions that unfolded as result of
the literacy movement's project to create autonomous subjects by tying
their sense of self to larger social formations such as the nation-state.
When Tamilcelvan's fellow activist and progressive writer Neela says
that "we need to run this movement according to the qualities of this
soil," it is precisely to argue for a different orientation to the project
of Enlightenment itself, one that let the qualities of the *ūr* confront
the instrumental rationalities of district governance. Such a method
would ideally never take for granted the end point of Arivoli, but al-
ways use the experience to speak back the work of projecting an as-yet
unattained future.

   In this chapter I have therefore dealt with the production of chrono-
topes in at least two, interrelated, ways. First, we have been concerned with
the claims being made on behalf of literacy, such as the underlying claim
fueling activism that mass literacy would unify a national space and time.
To claim that Tamil villagers must become literate to enter the imagined
community of the modern nation-state is to claim that they must adopt
a new vision of sociality. People must be taught to think in terms of an
affiliation to this large-scale spacetime, connecting villagers to their fellow
citizens. The second kind of chronotopic action of interest concerned the
ways in which the Arivoli Iyakkam formulated its self-image through
discursive links to the past, and especially to other, comparable move-
ments such as the struggle for Indian independence. We can moreover
observe how this second project—that of racinating the literacy movement
in the history of a place to produce a sense of continuity—is entailed by the
primary project of producing autonomous subjects through the unification
of a nation-state spacetime.

   Activists in the Arivoli Iyakkam quickly realized that their task could
not be that of imposing perfectly new senses of place, time, and person-
hood. Such a form of cultural domination would too readily contradict the
premise that people must make themselves, and it would undoubtedly fail
from the start. While part of the role of activism was to make people feel
ashamed of aspects of their lifestyles that are deemed anachronistic, the
Arivoli Iyakkam also drew from what Reinhart Koselleck (2004) would
call the "space of experience" to inform their vision of the future. The
movement's task was to cultivate and elaborate those aspects of peasant

life that would fit into their model of modernity. My analysis has therefore focused on the forms of reflexivity that arise in such a project when the chronotopic politics of modernization conflict with the equally strict requirement that the subject of modernity must forge herself. The production of a rural modernity that sat at the core of Arivoli pedagogy forced a heightened self-consciousness on the part of activists of their role as epistemological and ethical mediators, sitting between competing visions of knowledge and of the good life.

People like Tamilcelvan, Sheik, Neela, Karuppiah, and their colleagues in the literacy movement took on a responsibility to produce specific pasts that could be enlisted for their work, and the question of how to build an affective connection to history and locality was interpreted differently depending on the social positioning of the activist. Learners in the Arivoli movement also had their own understandings of the connections among light, knowledge, and literacy. In the analysis of Arivoli efforts, we must therefore move beyond Marx's notion of a "time-honored disguise" that would somehow hide the true intent of the modernizer, or rather understand the degree to which such a mask would, in fact, shape its wearer's understanding and experience of the drama at hand. Once chosen, the "borrowed languages" that serve to root the modernizing project in a time and place do more than impede the forward motion of history. The available means of invoking Enlightenment often raised new questions about the very project they were meant to serve. This last argument about the power of narrative and social praxis to produce reflexivity on the part of activists is a thesis that will be developed in depth over the course of this book.