Anganwadi as a social reproduction site: Dalit feminist resistance to gender, caste and class

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Drawing on ethnographic data about the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), a welfare programme for children in Tamil Nadu, India, this article addresses the question: How do spaces providing social reproduction labour, embedded in social relations of gender, caste and class, become sites of Dalit feminist resistance? The article discusses how the Anganwadi became a site of Dalit feminist resistance where gendered and casteist norms were contested vis-à-vis the state, community or sometimes among workers themselves. It describes three axes along which workers contested their exploitation—labour, gender and caste. First, as a labour movement, Anganwadi workers highlighted how the state expanded the job responsibilities of workers without adequate compensation and engaged in gendered exploitation of their care work. Second, Dalit union leaders used their influence to challenge casteism among workers. Dalit women also approached the courts to implement a caste-based affirmative action policy in worker recruitment. Finally, we see how Anganwadi workers supported each other to resist gendered norms around widowhood in rural Tamil Nadu. Theoretically, the article brings social reproduction theory in conversation with Dalit feminist theory to examine the Anganwadi as a site where devaluation of care labour and caste bias coexists with workers' resistance to such exploitation and discrimination.

Keywords: social reproduction, social inequality, caste, gender, resistance, Dalit feminist theory

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I
Introduction

> Such reservations will not only help empower the members of underprivileged sections of the society to get economically empowered, but it will also bring social integration in the civil society which is already fractured by communal and caste divisions.[1]

The above extract is from a judgment in the case *D. Pothumallee and Others v District Collector, 2010*, where a Dalit woman in the Thiruvarur district in Tamil Nadu approached the court to argue that the state administration must follow a caste-based affirmative action policy to reserve jobs for Dalits, Bahujans and Adivasis in the recruitment of *Anganwadi* workers. The Tamil Nadu administration put forth the view that there was no stated caste-based reservation policy for Anganwadi worker posts, and that the recruitment was based solely on merit. In the judgment favouring caste-based reservation in Anganwadi recruitment, Justice Chandru opined that ensuring the recruitment of more Dalits and Adivasis as teachers and cooks could interrupt the intergenerational transfer of caste bias as privileged-caste children would come to view them as professionals with knowledge and power, rather than as victims. By approaching the court to claim the right to work in spaces that typically exclude Dalits, Dalit women demonstrated that the Anganwadi could be utilised as a place of resistance. Drawing on similar acts of resistance, this article addresses the question: How do sites providing social reproduction labour, embedded in social relations of gender, caste and class, become sites of Dalit feminist resistance?

Social reproduction is defined as 'a range of activities, behaviours, responsibilities, and relationships that ensure the daily and generational social, emotional, moral, and physical reproduction of people' (Strauss and Meehan 2015: 9). Social reproduction labour includes paid or unpaid activities that are essential for life-making such as health, education, other social provisioning, voluntary work and even affective services such as sex work (Kotiswaran 2023). This article examines Anganwadis,

[1] Madras High Court, *D Pothumallee and Others v District Collector, Thiruvarur*, 19 April 2010, p. 10.

neighbourhood childcare centres, as sites often founded on caste-coded social reproduction labour. Anganwadis, as part of a national scheme known as Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), provide nutritional meals, preschool education, primary healthcare, immunisation, health check-up and referral services to children under six years of age and their mothers.[2] While laudable, these objectives are achieved alongside the devaluation of women's care work and discrimination against Dalit and Adivasi women and children (Palriwala and Neetha 2010; Thorat and Newman 2010). Theoretically, the article brings social reproduction theory in conversation with Dalit feminist theory to examine the Anganwadi as a site where the devaluation of care labour and caste bias coexist with workers' resistance to such exploitation and discrimination.

Following an overview of relevant theories, the research setting and methods, I turn to the observational and interview data gathered as part of a study about the ICDS, a welfare programme for children in Tamil Nadu, India. The data demonstrate how the Anganwadi is a site where gendered and casteist norms are contested, sometimes vis-à-vis the state, the community or even among the workers themselves. I describe three scenarios, demonstrating how workers contested the exploitation of their labour, gender and caste. First, as a labour movement, Anganwadi workers highlight how the state expands their job responsibilities without adequate compensation. Second, we see how Dalit women elected as union leaders come to challenge casteism among the workers. Finally, we see how Anganwadi workers support each other to resist norms around widowhood in rural Tamil Nadu.

II
Theoretical framework: Social reproduction and Dalit feminism

Social reproduction refers to the essential activities and relations required for the daily and intergenerational maintenance of human life (Backer and Cairns 2021). These activities include meeting basic needs such as food, shelter, affection and care, as well as the broader processes that sustain people's social life (Hall 2016; Hoskyns and Rai 2007; Kotiswaran 2023).

[2] See https://icds.gov.in/en/about-us. Accessed on 25 May 2025.

Social reproduction theory helps us understand contradictions in capitalist systems that devalue reproductive labour even as they continue to benefit from such labour (Bhattacharya 2017). Social Reproduction Feminism (SRF) places the often undervalued and disproportionately gendered care labour as central to feminist struggles (ibid.). When referring to a space as a social reproduction site, SR feminists seek to make visible the care labour that goes unnoticed, unpaid or underpaid and how race, caste, gender and class intersect in those spaces (ibid.; Backer and Cairns 2021). Thus, home is not only an uncritical space of love and affection but also a social reproduction site where women are assumed to be natural caregivers with little choice and Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim domestic workers are discriminated against (Arcilla 2020; Sharma 2016). According to SR feminists, the dependence of capitalist systems on social reproduction labour also provides opportunities for resistance in social reproduction sites.

Central to this article is the exploration of social reproduction as a site of resistance (Hall 2016). Marxist scholars have debated whether socially reproductive work has the same potential as productive labour for anti-capitalist resistance, given its indirect relation to the means of production (Fee 1976). Marxist analyses point out how workers can withhold their labour at the production site to make demands from their employers to secure higher wages or better working conditions. These scholars have further analysed the role of domestic labour in resistance in three ways: (a) Domestic labour is productive labour essential for the reproduction of the labourers that capitalism needed. Thus, revolutionary movements have to acknowledge the contradictions under capitalism that depend on socially reproductive labour and yet devalue it (Dalla Costa and James 2017). These contradictions provide revolutionary potential to domestic labour. (b) Housework is considered 'unproductive' as it is not directly related to the production of capital and therefore limited in its potential for power over the capitalists (Seccombe 1975). (c) Housework is neither productive nor unproductive, but a separate economic category which is integral or similar to that of productive labour (Fee 1976). In advanced capitalism, where gender roles in domestic labour and wage labour are blurred, even those doing productive domestic labour with direct relation to capital, such as Anganwadi workers, continue to be devalued. This article squarely stands with those who see the potential of resistance in social reproduction labour (Bhattacharya 2017; Hall 2016; Jeffries 2018).

Further, the binary between paid and unpaid reproductive work needs to be expanded when considering race and caste.

In the United States, migrant workers and women of colour are engaged in underpaid caregiving activities, often leaving their children and the elderly with less care (Parreñas 2015). In India, caste intersects with gender and class in social reproduction labour, both as a tool of exploitation and exclusion. As Ambedkar (1917) contends, caste is an enclosed class, a stratification system that divides labourers into hierarchical social positions based on ancestry. Caste society is built on the labour of Dalit Bahujans, even as they are not valued appropriately for their labour. Caste and gender intersect in ways that determine how productive and reproductive activities are distributed in Indian society.

For example, it is often argued that unequal distribution of care responsibilities on women has resulted in a low rate of labour force participation of working age women in India, which was 33.6 per cent according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023–24.[3] Time Use Surveys in India show that urban women spend an average of 299 minutes per day on unpaid domestic services for household members compared to 97 minutes by men, demonstrating the unequal distribution of care work in the home (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2020). However, variations in women's labour force participation across caste categories demonstrate how gender, caste and class intersect. As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023–24, labour force participation among working women was highest amongst those belonging to the Scheduled Tribes (51.9 per cent), followed by Scheduled Castes (33.6 per cent) and Other Backward Classes (32.3 per cent). Participation was lowest among the 'others' (28.7 per cent), which refers to women from relatively privileged castes in the caste hierarchy, falling in the general category.[4] Thus, privileged-caste women were 'protected' from participating in paid work while the labour of women from oppressed castes was exploited in the care economy. However, when women from privileged castes participate in paid work, their care work responsibilities are often transferred to Dalit Bahujan women for a pittance, rather than shared with men in their own

[3] Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023–24, 'Labour force participation rate by sector, gender, caste, religion, age and activity status'. https://sedp.ceda.ashoka.edu.in/data-portal?sf=1. Accessed on 20 May 2025.

[4] Ibid.

families. Thus, processes of capitalist accumulation that benefit the privileged classes and castes are constituted through the social reproduction labour performed by Dalit and Adivasi women (Lerche and Shah 2018). Besides exploitation, Dalit Bahujan and Muslim women who perform care work also face untouchability, exclusion, devaluation and stigmatisation because of their caste (Sharma 2016).

Caste structure has particular impacts on how social reproduction labour is distributed and treated. For example, Dalit women, when they engage in the social labour of a midwife, are stigmatised, even as they engage with similar forms of labour as a medical professional (Gopal 2013). Untouchability practices are evident in what food is consumed and how food is shared between caste communities (Thorat and Lee 2005). Anganwadi workers from dominant castes have discriminated against Dalit children by feeding them separately or not at all (Thorat and Newman 2010). Dalit women are more likely to be excluded from performing certain forms of care work, especially cooking-related tasks (Sharma 2016). Further, caste intersects with privatisation when privileged-caste families choose to send their children to private schools rather than to an Anganwadi that serves Dalit children or is managed by a Dalit worker (Krishnan 2020). Thus, these social reproduction sites that contribute to the health, education and well-being of workers are shaped by the social relations of gender, class and caste. Yet, just as sites of social reproduction reinforce inequalities of gender, caste and class, they also emerge as potential sites of resistance and change.

That social reproduction is a site for resistance is visible as Anganwadi workers withhold their labour through strikes for more salaries, retirement benefits and better working conditions in different parts of India (Krishnan 2020; Sreerekha 2017).[5] The struggle against the exploitation of care labour is both a labour struggle and a feminist struggle. Feminist struggles have demanded 'wages for housework', redistribution of household chores and public care systems to help recognise and redistribute care responsibilities that are often placed on women (Dalla Costa and James 2017; Federici 2012; Folbre 1994; Fraser 2016). The Indian state has reinforced cultural notions of gender by operating on the belief that caring comes 'naturally' to women and that good women (including workers) love and care for

[5] See 'AIFAWH – Movement of the Anganwadi Employees', 30 October 2014. https://aifawh.org/struggles-and-experiences/centre#. Accessed on 20 May 2025.

children without expecting fair compensation (Federici 2012; Palriwala and Neetha 2010). In their struggles, Anganwadi workers have highlighted how the state exploits women's care labour by recruiting them as voluntary or honorary service providers, depriving them of benefits and rights available to other full-time state employees (Palriwala and Neetha 2010; Sreerekha 2017). While discussions on these struggles have focused on wages and exploitation of care labour, these sites are also spaces for intersectional feminist resistance that engage with issues of gendered and casteist violence.

When women workers share the same space, the site also enables the development of 'feminist consciousness'. Feminist consciousness is a 'highly articulated challenge to or defence of the system of gender relations in the form of an ideology, as well as a shared group identity and a growing politicization resulting in a social movement' (Gerson and Peiss 1985: 326). Even in sharing details about their lives in women's spaces, they make visible the forms of gendered violence that they face in public and private and develop a shared identity as both workers and women (Reger 2012). However, Dalit feminists have highlighted how caste blindness within mainstream Indian feminist movements renders invisible the burden that caste places on women's lives within the realm of social reproduction (Arya and Rathore 2019; Rege 1998; Sowjanya n.d). Therefore, it is necessary to examine anti-caste resistance in social reproduction sites.

How the tentacles of social reproduction are distributed in society, whose work is devalued and who is excluded from certain work indicate how social relations of gender, caste and class are structured. In social reproduction sites, the demands made by Dalit women highlight inequalities of gender, caste and class, even if those grievances do not always find space in the formal demands made by the union (Krishnan 2020). Dalit women's challenges to the exploitation of their labour have taken overt and covert forms as they seek more wages, engage in passive resistance and demand recognition for their care labour at work and home (Bama 2005; Pratibha 2022; Racine and Racine 1997). Moving beyond the binary of victim and resistor, Dalit feminist theory locates Dalit women in political struggles against caste, patriarchy and capitalism and calls for feminist solidarity built on a recognition of differences and a commitment to dismantling all forms of oppression (Rege 1998). Grounded in Dalit women's experiences, a Dalit feminist standpoint offers a liberatory vision even for non-Dalit feminists, as it challenges and rejects the interlocking

social relations of caste, gender and class that affect everyone (ibid). Therefore, workers' struggles in social reproduction sites that are embedded in power relations of caste, gender and capitalist exploitation may draw on a Dalit feminist standpoint to challenge intersecting inequalities of gender, caste and class.

The Anganwadi is a neighbourhood childcare centre under the government programme ICDS, where nutrition for mothers and children, food and preschool education is made available. Recent research on the ICDS has foregrounded food rights for children and labour rights for Anganwadi workers (Kent 2006; Palriwala and Neetha 2010; Sreerekha 2017). However, the struggles of Anganwadi workers are seldom discussed within the frameworks of feminist or anti-caste politics. On the ground, Anganwadi workers are unionised, and their strikes articulate demands that align with broader labour movements, including higher wages and improved working conditions. Anganwadi workers have protested to demand appropriate recognition for their care work through retirement benefits, weekly offs and wages (Krishnan 2020; Sreerekha 2017).[6] At the local level, workers have also mobilised beyond labour concerns to support colleagues facing domestic violence (Krishnan 2022). This article also foregrounds the anti-caste struggles that are prevalent in this space. Thus, the Anganwadi constitutes a site where gendered and caste inequalities of caring are made visible by the social reproduction of the feminist struggles of Anganwadi workers.

Theoretically, the article brings social reproduction theory in conversation with Dalit feminist theory to analyse the Anganwadi as a site of both the devaluation of care-labour and of workers' resistance to such devaluation. It utilises social reproduction theory to show how the Anganwadi, as a space of vital life-making activities—such as caregiving and education—is systematically devalued by the state and society under capitalist regimes that exploit care labour. However, the article moves beyond a critique of capitalism and patriarchy by foregrounding the Indian context, where social reproduction is inextricably shaped by caste hierarchies. Here, the exploitation and struggles around care labour are not only gendered and classed but also deeply caste-marked. Drawing on the insights of Dalit feminist theory, the article theorises the Anganwadi not just as a site of

6 See, 'AIFAWH - Movement of the Anganwadi Employees', 30 October 2014. https://aifawh.org/struggles-and-experiences/centre#. Accessed on 20 May 2025.

economic and social reproduction, but as a terrain of Dalit feminist resistance. It demonstrates how Anganwadi workers—many of whom are Dalit women—contest the structural devaluation of their labour, assert dignity and recognition for Dalit women's contributions and mobilise collectively in solidarity against gendered and caste-based violence. In doing so, the article advances theoretical understandings of social reproduction by showing how struggles over care labour are shaped by the intersecting oppressions of caste, gender and class, and how such struggles can serve as a critical ground for transformative, anti-caste feminist politics.

III
Context

ICDS in Tamil Nadu

Founded in 1975, the ICDS is a welfare programme conceived by the Indian government at the national level but implemented by the state governments on a cost-sharing basis. The ICDS offers six services: supplementary nutrition, preschool non-formal education, nutrition and health education, immunisation, health check-up and referral services.[7] The ICDS services are provided through the Anganwadi, which is staffed by an Anganwadi teacher and a helper. Tamil Nadu is documented as a success story for the implementation of the ICDS, a service that is primarily used by women and children (Citizens' Initiative for the Rights of Children Under Six 2006; Vivek 2015). At the time of the study, in 2016, there were over 50,000 Anganwadi centres in Tamil Nadu.[8] The ICDS programme in Tamil Nadu aims to bridge the gap between access to primary healthcare and education, and disadvantaged communities, by focusing on the welfare of the mother and the child.

The ICDS programme in Tamil Nadu, as it exists today, is the combination of three different nutritional and child-centric programmes in the state: The Noon Meal Programme (NMP), the Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Project (TINP) and the national ICDS programme. The NMP is a historical welfare service that was institutionalised in 1982 by the

[7] See https://icds.gov.in. Accessed on 20 May 2025.

[8] See 'Monitoring and Evaluation.' https://icds.tn.gov.in/icdstn/monitoring.html. Accessed on 26 May 2025.

Tamil Nadu government to provide hot meals to children aged 2–14, pregnant and lactating women, the disabled, destitute widows and senior citizens. The TINP was a supplementary nutrition project launched by the Tamil Nadu government with supported funding from the World Bank that included behavioural elements such as changing mothers' behaviour rather than addressing the structural concerns of poverty (Sridhar 2008). The NMP and the TINP were later both merged into the ICDS programme in Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Nadu politics: Education, gender and caste

Tamil Nadu's populism based politics, as commonly debated, may not seem to fit the image of a neoliberal state that privatises care (Harriss 2000; Kalaiyarasan and Vijayabaskar 2021; Wyatt 2013). Yet policies encouraging privatisation, deregulation, dispossession of land and the informalisation of labour that capture the essence of neoliberalism are discernible here as well. According to the 2015 Annual Study of Education Report, the number of children enrolled in private schools in rural Tamil Nadu increased to 31.9 per cent in 2014, from 19.5 per cent in 2011 (ASER 2015). Nearly 46 per cent of first-grade children in rural Tamil Nadu were enrolled in private schools in 2018 (ASER 2020). With the growth of private English-language schools, several private, and often unregulated, pre-schools emerged to provide a pipeline of school-ready students.[9] The emergence of private schools in Tamil Nadu has only exacerbated the caste-based segregation in the state.

Private pre-schools have created a segregated environment where privileged and dominant-caste parents send their children to the private school rather than to the Anganwadi, which are attended primarily by poor Dalit children or are staffed by Dalit teachers or helpers (Krishnan 2020). While the anti-caste movement has a long history in Tamil Nadu, especially with the non-Brahmin dominant caste achieving political power in the state, Dalits continue to face discrimination. The National Crime Records Bureau recorded a spurt in crimes against Dalits in Tamil Nadu,

[9] S. S. Rajagopalan, 'Removing Thatched Roofs Is Not the Solution: Interview with Dr. S. S. Rajagopalan by Asha Krishnakumar', *Frontline*, 31 August 2004. https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/article30224064.ece. Accessed on 7 June 2025.

from 1,377 crimes in 2021 to 1,761 in 2022.[10] Several cases of honour killings where Dalit men married dominant-caste women continue to be reported in Tamil Nadu (Castro 2022). These reports demonstrate the enduring nature of caste violence in the state.

The story of gender equality in Tamil Nadu is also similar. Even though the National Family Health Survey (2019–21) finds that 99.8 per cent of women in Tamil Nadu have institutional births and 92.2 per cent of women have bank accounts, cultural attitudes regarding gender and care work are retrograde (IIPS and ICF 2021). In the National Family Health Survey (2019–21), more than 67.7 per cent women and 32.9 per cent men agreed that 'a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife if she neglects the house or the children'. More than 79 per cent women agreed that a husband was justified in hitting or beating his wife for at least one of the seven specified reasons, which include reasons like 'she goes out without telling him', 'she argues with him' and 'she shows disrespect for in-laws' (IIPS and ICF 2021). These shocking numbers demonstrate that the gendered distribution of care work is supported by a cultural narrative where both women and men believe that mothers are primary caregivers. Although survey research as a tool is limited in bringing out the dynamic ways in which women evaluate their power and value in the household, these numbers are indicative of the ideologies of gender that underlie Tamil society. In the case of the Anganwadi, despite the wide prevalence of domestic violence, unionised Anganwadi workers have supported their colleagues when they faced violence (Krishnan 2022). Thus, the Anganwadi must be examined as a social reproduction site that is shaped by intersecting and contesting relations of gender, caste and class.

Data and methods

Three types of data informed this study: participant observation, semi-structured interviews and documents collected in 2016 in Tamil Nadu, India. Primary data for this study include: (a) ethnographic notes and observations at the Anganwadis, official meetings and rallies; (b) semi-

[10] National Crime Records Bureau, Rajya Sabha Session-265 Unstarred Question No. 1887, 'State/UT-Wise Crime/Atrocities against Scheduled Castes from 2020 to 2022', 7 August 2024. https://www.data.gov.in/resource/stateut-wise-crimeatrocities-against-scheduled-castes-2020-2022. Accessed on 20 May 2025.

structured interviews with Anganwadi workers, mothers, Anganwadi union leaders and state representatives; and (c) institutional records and documents including policy documents, training manuals, newsletters, government orders and documents from the Anganwadi workers union.

This article is based on ethnographic data collected for a broader study on the ICDS, which included semi-structured interviews with mothers, Anganwadi teachers and helpers, union leaders, state representatives and ICDS officials. This article largely focuses on the experiences of Anganwadi workers and draws on semi-structured interviews held with 35 Anganwadi workers and union leaders across 18 Anganwadis. While not included in this article, the study also included semi-structured interviews with mothers, state representatives, activists and ICDS officers. Besides structured interviews, ethnographic research methods also allowed for informal conversations with all the stakeholders, the details of which were included in field notes. Observations were conducted at selected Anganwadis, union rallies, official meetings and training sessions.

I shadowed two Anganwadi workers—Gouri and Amala—in two Anganwadis as they carried out their tasks at the Anganwadi, in the village mobilising mothers and adolescents for participation in awareness events and organising a union rally. Gouri's home was close to the local ICDS office and was a space where her colleagues spent time before or after official meetings. This gave me the opportunity to spend time with workers outside work settings and provided me with fascinating insights into their lives regarding their jobs and families. Such 'hanging out' allowed me to listen to conversations unobtrusively and less influenced by issues of social desirability. While I spent time with a group of workers through my friendship with Gouri, I had a personal connection with Amala, who was more reserved in her interactions but deeply reflective and open about various issues. With Amala, I had insightful conversations about work, rights, life and society. As a widow, Amala expanded my understanding of what it means to challenge and navigate a stigmatised identity in Tamil culture. Gouri and Amala were my key informants who developed an understanding of my research interests and began to enlighten me about events or observations that they thought it was important for me to know.

Although I visited 18 Anganwadis during my field work, repeated observations were focused on two purposively selected Anganwadis. Gouri's Anganwadi serviced Dalit families mainly but was staffed by Anganwadi workers who belonged to the Other Backward Class (OBC)

community. Although there were OBC families nearby, many did not use the Anganwadi because it was in the Dalit neighbourhood. In Amala's centre, the Anganwadi helper belonged to the Dalit caste and was more educated than the Anganwadi teacher who came from an OBC caste. This centre also serviced mostly Dalit families, even though there were OBC families in the area. Variations in caste between the Anganwadi workers and the communities they served allowed me to examine how caste intersects with the provision of food and care.

I was also able to participate in the training sessions conducted by the state government for Anganwadi workers. Some of these training programmes had role plays and discussions, which gave me insights into concerns across several sites that I could not visit. I also observed some union meetings held at the block level and rallies at the state level. I also interviewed past and present union leaders at the local site and different levels of the Tamil Nadu state. Union leaders offered me insights into the concerns of Anganwadi workers historically and across the state. I also downloaded union documents from the union's website.[11] The ICDS training manuals were critical for examining how gender norms regarding motherhood and care are represented in state policies. As a native Tamil speaker, admittedly with limited vocabulary, I conducted all interviews in Tamil and later translated and transcribed these interviews to English.

Interviews were usually held at different Anganwadi centres. All names used in the article are pseudonyms. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated for further analysis. Informed consent was sought from all participants. They were informed that they could withdraw from the interaction whenever they wanted. When participants did not want to be recorded, I took elaborate notes.

Reflexivity is critical for an ethnographic study as the researcher's background, caste and gender influence the process of gathering and analysing data. As a researcher conducting field work in Tamil Nadu, I tried to be aware of how I was perceived by the members of the community. Given the association with food and caste, I was intentional about accepting food and water when offered. While caste may have played a role in how people perceived me, I believe that their initial perception of me as a government official was most significant in my data gathering process. These perceptions changed over time with repeated interactions. With

[11] https://aifawh.org/. Accessed on 22 May 2020.

frequent visits, the workers realised that I was interested in their rights and began to speak about their union activities more openly. Spending time with the workers at Gouri's home allowed for several moments of joy, fun and teasing, which were crucial for me as an ethnographer not just to physically access the space but also to allow for emotional comfort where natural interactions could occur. Before turning to the findings, the next section briefly examines the Anganwadi workers' union in the field site.

IV
Brief note on the Anganwadi Workers Union

At the state level, the Anganwadi union landscape in Tamil Nadu is shaped by affiliations with different political parties, primarily the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. A prominent presence in the state has been the All-India Federation of Anganwadi Workers and Helpers (AIFAWH), affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). Elizabeth, a Dalit leader whose insights are referenced in this article, serves as a state-level representative of the AIFAWH. At the local level, workers referred to their unions as the '*sangam*', meaning collective. A few years prior to the study, internal divisions within the leadership led to a temporary pause in formal union activities. Nevertheless, workers remained strongly committed to the union, which had played a central role in securing wages, rights and benefits over the years. In the lead-up to a union rally planned in Chennai, a nomination process led the workers to select Malathi, a Dalit woman, as their district secretary. Her experiences are also discussed in this article.

V
Findings: Three axes

This section presents three axes along which Anganwadi workers contested the exploitation of their labour and marginalisation due to gender and caste. Anganwadi workers in India have gone on strike to demand higher wages and benefits, but their class struggle in the context of social reproduction entailed significant challenges during everyday practices pertaining to caste and gender as well.

Care work is work

The Anganwadis, in many ways, are the local arm of the state government, closest to the people. As Sharada, a former Anganwadi teacher, told me:

> Since we live in the same village, we know people from the womb to the grave, we know them in our hearts … we visit them in their homes, we know who lives in the homes, how educated they are; do they have a cycle, car or bike; is their home double storied … we have all the details from their birth to their death.

The official duties of the teachers include teaching and caring for children, ensuring that the children are fed during the day, and doing nutritional assessments of lactating mothers and children under three in the neighbourhood. It has been highlighted that the state does not hire Anganwadi workers as full-time workers but only as honorary or voluntary workers, depriving them of benefits that are available to other state employees (Krishnan 2020; Palriwala and Neetha 2010). In Tamil Nadu, teaching at the Anganwadi and the nutritional assessment in the neighbourhood was initially done by two people, but it is now expected to be done by one person. The ICDS in Tamil Nadu had utilised World Bank funding to address malnourishment in the state through supplementary nutrition as part of the TINP that lasted from 1980 to 1997.

Many workers described the evolution of their job description over the years. During TINP years, World Bank funding ensured that a worker was assigned to nutrition-related activities such as monitoring children's growth and distribution of supplementary nutrition for mothers and children in the village. Two additional Anganwadi workers were hired as a teacher and a helper. The teacher was responsible primarily for the early education of children and the management of the centre. The Anganwadi helper assisted the teacher in cooking, cleaning and the maintenance of the centre. Thus, educational and nutritional responsibilities were separate. While the Tamil Nadu government, rightly, continues the monitoring of growth and the distribution of supplementary nutrition, the responsibility of both education and nutrition has now been assigned to a single individual. So, the responsibilities of the workers have increased over time.

Besides increasing the official workload of the Anganwadi workers, the state had also utilised Anganwadi workers as foot soldiers to implement various government schemes, such as vaccination drives. This is how a union leader, Elizabeth, a Dalit leader who serves as a state-level representative of AIFAWH, described their expanding job descriptions:

> Today, polio has been eradicated, and we had a huge role to play in that achievement. How many schemes have we helped make successful in this society? Today, adolescent girls are going to school—we prepared them for that step. When the government announces a population survey, we carry it out. We assist with voter registration work—even the Election Commission has acknowledged that.
>
> It's difficult for even two people to manage this workload. It's hard, but we're still doing all of it. And yet, what is our salary? When we say, 'Please give us an increment', we're told, 'What work have you done to deserve it?' If that's the case, then give us a month's leave—because I feel mentally exhausted. But then they say, 'How will the Centre run if you go on leave?' They say both things at the same time.

Social reproduction feminist discourses have brought attention to unpaid or underpaid but socially necessary care work. Anganwadi workers are central to this discourse as they demonstrate pride in contributing to societal well-being while simultaneously demanding appropriate recognition for their work. They are routinely expected to perform tasks that extend beyond their official job descriptions. In the quotations above, we see Anganwadi workers assert that their socially necessary labour warrants formal acknowledgement through fair salaries and benefits. These demands for recognition at the local level were also visible in the charter of demands of the CITU-affiliated Anganwadi workers union (AIFAWH) at the Tamil Nadu state level that was collected from their state office in 2016:[12]

[12] The charter of demands also known as 'Korikkaikal' in Tamil, of the CITU-affiliated union AIFAWH was collected from the CITU office in Chennai in 2016. The author has photographs of the Tamil document. The demands were translated to English and presented here.

> Demand No 1: Anganwadi workers and helpers who have been working for thirty-two years must be made full-time permanent workers with benefits provided on a regular basis.
>
> Demand No 4: Since workers in Tamil Nadu work for four hours more than what is required in other states, they should be offered federal/central government salaries.
>
> Demand No 15: Anganwadi workers should be exempted from work outside of ICDS work. When utilized for other jobs, officers should compensate workers accordingly.

The care work performed by Anganwadi workers is deeply valued by mothers in the neighbourhood. However, ensuring fair compensation for delivering these essential services is the responsibility of the state. By highlighting the 'honorary' or 'voluntary' designation of their employment, Anganwadi workers and their union actively challenge the state's systematic devaluation of women's labour.

Challenging caste

In India, food choices and dining practices are deeply embedded in the caste structure. Cooking and eating are not merely everyday activities but social spaces where caste hierarchies are reinforced—most notably through the exclusion of Dalits from interdining and from preparing food consumed by caste Hindus. Therefore, spaces related to food also provide the potential to challenge caste-based norms. The verdict in the legal case cited at the beginning of the article[13] played a significant role in ensuring that Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan women were recruited as Anganwadi teachers and helpers. The legal fight itself was led by a Dalit woman who contended that a critical mass of Dalit teachers was essential to ensure that the Anganwadi would be an inclusive space where Dalit children are treated with dignity.

Caste bias was present not only among parents but also among Anganwadi workers themselves. Dalit mothers recounted instances where dominant-caste Anganwadi workers treated their children differently. In interviews

[13] Madras High Court, *D Pothumallee and Others v District Collector, Thiruvarur*, 19 April 2010.

with Dalit Anganwadi workers, several shared that even their fellow workers from dominant castes avoided eating food prepared by them. Casteist norms, therefore, operated at multiple levels within the Anganwadi—through parents who discriminated against Dalit workers and through Anganwadi staff who discriminated against Dalit children and colleagues. Yet, despite these entrenched hierarchies, the Anganwadi also emerged as a space where caste-based practices were being questioned and contested.

An interview with Malathi, a Dalit Anganwadi worker elected as a union representative, offered valuable insights. Her experiences demonstrated that though the caste structure persisted, it was not without its cracks. At the time of the interview, Malathi was managing two Anganwadi centres. Her primary charge was at Centre A, which predominantly served children from the OBC community. The second centre, Centre B, that she had recently taken charge of was in a neighbourhood that predominantly catered to Dalit children, even though there were children from other castes under her purview as well. Here, Malathi explained:

> Both of us [the teacher and the helper] are from the Dalit community and the OBC [dominant caste] people in Centre A did not differentiate workers based on caste. They respect me a lot. We cook in that Centre. Usually, caste-based issues are largely about cooking and food, right? Mothers themselves eat at that Centre. They feed their kids, and they also eat the cooked food. But here [Centre B], there is considerable discrimination. For example, here, the mothers won't eat the food that we have cooked. They come here for the eggs. If they take the food at all, they throw it away. The previous teacher here, who is not a Dalit, wouldn't even drink a glass of water offered by the Dalit helper or eat the food she prepared, all this despite being a teacher herself!

In Centre A, where Malathi had been working for a few years, she felt respected by parents from dominant-caste communities, but in Centre B, which she had just joined, she experienced caste discrimination from dominant-caste families. Thus, even as the presence of Dalit teachers contributes to alleviating caste bias, casteist interactions continue to provide unpleasant experiences for Dalits.

Malathi's presence, as an elected Dalit union leader, was important in interrupting caste-biased norms among workers as well. Her election was significant in that while some senior Anganwadi workers, mostly from

dominant-caste communities, were sceptical of her leadership, most of the younger Anganwadi workers of all castes supported her candidature. Thus, the younger generation of Anganwadi workers was able to identify Malathi as their leader irrespective of her caste. Further, Malathi was committed to confronting caste bias when she encountered it. For example, she challenged the blatant casteism from dominant-caste workers at the retirement farewell party of an Anganwadi worker from the Dalit community:

> For her retirement function, the teacher Mekhala had cooked and organised a grand event at her home. When the attendees began to leave without eating anything, I stood on the road and told them, 'If you leave today, I will not participate in the events you organise nor contribute money for any of them. Why do you need my money? Doesn't money have a caste?' I said. When I said that, all of them came back and sat down. Among Anganwadi workers, there are those who think that we've all come to work at the same place and shouldn't pay attention to caste differences. I appreciate those people. But there are also workers who think otherwise.

The anti-caste struggle that Malathi and other Dalits take on is commendable. However, that too is an additional burden that Dalit workers alone must bear. Even though several of Malathi's colleagues from dominant castes were supportive of Malathi, they did not lead any conversation or struggles against caste at work. Despite this, Malathi's experience and interventions at the Anganwadi show that Justice Chandru's hope of checking caste biases with more Dalit Adivasi Bahujan teachers as role models was being realised in some Anganwadis. Having more Dalit Bahujan Adivasi women as teachers through the reservation policy offered possibilities for disrupting caste, even though it was not without its struggles. While this article foregrounds experiences of Malathi and Elizabeth as Dalit union leaders, other Dalit workers also shared the many possibilities and challenges of navigating the ICDS system as Dalits. That Dalit women themselves had made this possible through a legal fight made this social transformation, however slow, even more significant.

Resistance to widow discrimination

Norms around widowhood are rooted in a caste society that seeks to control the sexuality of upper-caste women (Ambedkar 1917). Endogamous

marriages and relationships are essential for a caste society to maintain the 'purity' of caste. Given that caste is based on birth, sexual liberation of women poses particular fears for proponents of caste society (ibid.). Therefore, the clampdown on widowed women was fundamental to the maintenance of caste.

Although the initial research plan did not specifically focus on the experiences of widows in rural Tamil Nadu, norms surrounding widowhood emerged repeatedly at the field site. Societal discrimination against widows was evident in the village. Widows were stigmatised as bad omens, were not invited to weddings, were not allowed to wear flowers in their hair or a *bindi* on their forehead and were rarely invited to celebrations. Due to the Tamil Nadu government's recruitment policy that prioritised women who were widowed or abandoned by their partners, many widowed women were employed as Anganwadi workers. It was often the case that in many villages, people helped widowed women seek and secure job opportunities at the Anganwadi. Yet, the recruitment of widows to the Anganwadi was a double-edged sword. While it offered women job opportunities, according to some union leaders, it also meant that they were less likely to join protests for fear of losing their family's only source of income. For the widowed women I spoke to, the experience of being a widow was very traumatic because of how society treated them. In such situations, the job at the Anganwadi offered financial and emotional support. Widowed women were able to navigate norms that stigmatised them in society because of the support that they got from their colleagues. Gandhimathi, an Anganwadi worker, shared her experience:

> My son would ask me why I don't attend my relatives' weddings. How can I go when they don't respect me? Even if I go, they ask me to stand by the side. They ask me to wear a white saree. They say that I should not wear a black blouse or a gold chain. They think one should stay in the corner if the husband dies. I don't want that. I don't need those relations. I will live the way I want. If I come to this work, the madams [officers] who come here, they say that I can do everything. Just because your husband has died, they would say, you don't have to sit in a corner. When our madam retired, she invited us to the function. When I went, they would not let me stand aside. She would say you

> are equal to everyone. You don't have to stand in a corner. That is why … for me, my world is the office and our madam. There is no one else.

Gandhimathi experienced a sense of dignity and inclusion at her workplace that she did not experience in her extended family. In many cases, the government policy of recruiting widows encouraged village members to support widowed women's applications for the job. Thus, enlightened policies helped challenge societal norms around widowhood. Yet another worker, Amala, shared her apprehensions about wearing a bindi on her forehead as a widow.

> People tell us not to wear the bindi when the husband dies, but they don't realise that the bindi gives us protection at the time we need it the most. When I don't wear the bindi, people look at me differently. At the office, my colleagues reiterated that the bindi is my protection. So now, I wear it. It sometimes feels bad, but I still wear it.

For Amala and Gandhimathi, the office was a space that helped them challenge deep-rooted gender norms about widowhood that were prevalent in their community. The Anganwadi workers were expected to wear a colourful blue saree as their uniform, as opposed to the norm of white sarees for widows. Workers were expected to organise culturally rooted celebrations such as baby showers known as *seemantham* in the community, a celebration from which widows had been typically excluded. Thus, the Anganwadi was not just another job that provided them economic independence but rather a space where women engaged with families in ways that questioned the traditional norms around gender and widowhood.

The Anganwadi presents a fractured space as far as gender is concerned. Many state policies are designed on the assumption that women are natural caregivers and that the state is the paternal benefactor of women in need. Women are expected to be submissive in return. However, these collective spaces of caregivers also allowed them to challenge gender norms in their community, especially in the case of widowhood. Both Amala and Gandhimathi were categorical about the critical support provided by their co-workers in enabling them to live their lives beyond the societal norms that were imposed on them.

VI
Conclusion

The social reproduction work performed at the Anganwadi is embedded in social relations of gender, caste and class and therefore offers much potential for resistance against those very structures. Social reproduction labour is essential for a capitalist system, and yet, is heavily undervalued in it. While literature on social reproduction has engaged with the intersections of gender and class in the context of social reproduction, very few scholars have engaged with caste in relation to social reproduction (Gopal 2013). Dalit feminist theory, which draws from the experiences of Dalit women's political struggles, offers us the tools to think about intersectional resistance to gender, caste and class relations that can be emancipatory for all (Rege 1998). Dalit feminist theory shows how gender, caste and class all constitute each other. Therefore, liberation from one power structure cannot be isolated from the other. By examining the Anganwadi as a social reproduction site where Dalit feminist theory comes alive, this article argues that Anganwadi workers, especially Dalits, have fought for space and dignity of Dalit women, disputed the exploitation of their care labour and confronted unequal gender norms that oppress women.

This article shows the Anganwadi to be a site of contradictions. The state and other funding institutions have consistently deployed gendered and caste-based norms to their advantage. The ICDS system (as is the state system itself) is built on the notion of women as primary caregivers and Dalits as stigmatised care labourers. In assuming that women are natural caregivers, the state expects Anganwadi workers to offer their services for the larger good of society for little or no payment. While mothers in the village benefit from such a service, Anganwadi workers are recruited as part-time or voluntary workers and expected to work for most of the day without the benefits of full-time employment (Krishnan 2020; Palriwala and Neetha 2010).

Dalit women workers experience further exclusion when they experience discrimination from parents and other workers. While offering the same services that dominant-caste workers provide, Dalit women have had to tolerate caste discrimination and take on the burden of educating their communities about caste. However, unlike many engagements with law that seldom hold much power in practice, a Dalit woman's legal

battle to implement caste-based affirmative action had secured positions for more Dalit women at Anganwadis in Tamil Nadu. As Justice Chandru envisioned, Dalit women's presence in the role of a teacher and cook may have the potential to form cracks in the intergenerational transfer of caste bias. As a Dalit teacher, Malathi's presence in the village, as the embodiment of knowledge for her students and their parents, is significant. However, such a possibility will be undermined if Anganwadi workers' social reproductive labour continues to be devalued. The Anganwadi workers' union continues to shift the discourse on social reproduction by demanding that their care labour is valued, by challenging gender and caste norms around care labour, and by highlighting the concerns around privatisation of care. This quote from an Anganwadi teacher in Tamil Nadu sums up the significant role that the Anganwadi affords as a site of resistance: 'We have come up in life to some extent through our struggles. We still have our issues, but the people coming after us, we want them to gain. Let our struggles benefit them'.

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