People in Katrampatti had nowhere to cremate their dead. Or, as the residents of this small, southern Indian hamlet would put it more bluntly, “We’ve got no place to croak” (maṇṭaippōṭratu itam illai). The Dalit community of Katrampatti had been allotted a small plot of land some years back to use as a cremation ground, since they were barred from sharing a cremation ground with the caste-Hindus who lived in nearby villages. This land was surrounded by fields owned by the dominant Kallar caste. While the fields were left fallow, no one bothered about the cremation ground’s location. But when farmers began planting on these fields with the advent of bore-well irrigation, they started objecting to the passage of dead bodies through their fields, already polluting and thought by some to be dangerous to crops. There is a long history of caste violence in this region.

The problem of the cremation ground had been troubling the whole village for a number of years. Justice was not forthcoming in the village council and all appeals to local political party cadre had failed. It
was only when a young man from a neighboring village began teaching
literacy lessons that the possibility of a different kind of solution arose.
Karuppiah, an activist working for the political Left, had organized a
study group composed of women from the village who toiled together
transplanting rice for meager daily wages. He was determined to make
literacy relevant to their lives and to prove that these Dalit women could
make a difference in the dispute over land. It was therefore with a great
deal of encouragement from their activist neighbor that the women of
Katrampatti finally decided to write a petition requesting that provisions
be made for a cremation ground. Their petition would be addressed to
the collector, the administrative officer who heads district governance.
The Katrampatti literacy group had been convinced through Karuppi-
ah’s pedagogical efforts to exercise their rights as citizens by participating
in the weekly “Grievance Day,” when peasants and rural workers have
an opportunity to bring their problems directly to the attention of the
powerful officer and the district-wide bureaucratic order he represents.
Most important for Karuppiah, they would bring their grievance to the
state through the medium of writing. Their trip to submit a petition at
the collector’s office in the town of Pudukkottai represented not only the
culmination of over one year’s worth of work learning basic reading and
writing skills; it also represented a new form of social action. Most of the
petitioners would be signing their names in an official context for the first
time in their lives.

When people asked where we were going as we left the village on
that cloudy monsoon morning, the women all answered with a degree of
newfound confidence, “We’re going to see the collector. We need to give
him a petition!” Before going to the office, the women first had to feed
their families breakfast and take time to tie on their best saris. They had
stopped at the bus station after the one-hour ride to town to put flow-
ers in their hair. Karuppiah had been talking with the literacy group
about this petition for months. But it was only that morning that he could
finally persuade these women to skip a much-needed day of work during
the transplanting season to go to town. We arrived at the office a little
later than hoped for. Karuppiah knew that the collector would leave at
exactly one o’clock and that it was necessary to file one’s name early to get
a chance to see him. Because we were so late, he ended up quickly writing
a petition by hand himself. The literacy group would then not be able to show off their literacy skills to the collector, other than to leave their newly acquired signatures. Karuppiah thought that at least they would have the satisfaction of handing their petition over to the collector as a group and telling him about their problem in person.

An unhappy intersection of the rural laborers’ schedule and bureaucratic time conspired against even that form of participation. We stood in line with hundreds of villagers, from all over the district, waiting for their number to be called, until one o’clock, at which point the collector promptly got up and left for his next appointment. The Katrampatti literacy group simply filed their signed petition at an office downstairs, rather than being able to hand the petition in person to the collector. The signatures they had been learning and practicing for the past year would have to take on the full burden of representing an absent subject. Everything rested on a written piece of paper. On the bus ride home, the women seemed disappointed at not being able to see the collector, but everyone agreed it had been a very important day.

The act of petitioning the state was in no way an ordinary or obvious course to take for these women, who had never stepped foot in a school. It was the result of massive amounts of work. The people described above were all participants in the Arivoli Iyakkam, the “Light of Knowledge,” or “Enlightenment,” movement. The villagers from Katrampatti, their activist neighbor, Karuppiah, and even the collector were taking part in this social movement, which sought to make political agents of rural women and to disseminate scientific knowledge through the spread of written language. Over the course of nearly twenty years, from 1990 until the movement ended in 2009, the Arivoli Iyakkam managed to mobilize huge numbers of people from across the Tamil countryside. In the small, rural district of Pudukkottai over three hundred thousand villagers participated in literacy lessons, science demonstrations, and other Arivoli events. Across southern India the number reached the millions. By the time of my fieldwork in the early 2000s, it was no longer unusual for groups of women like those from Katrampatti to write petitions or to pursue other forms of interaction with local state offices. This was, by all accounts, a very new phenomenon.
Literacy activists worked for the Arivoli Iyakkam in the name of enlightenment, citizenship, and development. They claimed acts of written self-representation, such as composing and signing petitions, for a politics of emancipation from the traditional power structures of caste, class, and gender. Teaching everyone to read and write would lead to India’s “true independence,” as many workers in the literacy movement and sympathetic allies would put it. To activists, the petition submitted by the women of Katrampatti represented a form of self-determination and stood as a sign of their participation as agents in the political process. But the forms of knowledge and social life that the Arivoli Iyakkam had, in fact, enabled cannot be grasped adequately within these terms of enlightened citizenship.

In rural India, as elsewhere, the enlightenment ideals of citizenship and self-determination couple easily with new forms of subjection to state power and bureaucratic rationality. The Dalit petitioners from Katrampatti were ambivalent about their encounter with the logic of official writing. Petitioning was a means by which people like them, otherwise excluded from government offices and politics, could meet the collector in person. The petitioners had expected that their intense efforts to learn to write over the course of the year would culminate in a face-to-face encounter to make their case for social justice. Their palpable disappointment on the bus ride home illustrated how their desire to engage directly with political processes remained unfulfilled. The written signs left by these women in the petition “efface as they disclose,” to borrow a phrase from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010, 21). There is no simple correlation between literate interaction with state offices and empowerment (Gupta 2012, 191–233). We can see that what activists had promoted as a medium of transparency and agency was experienced by the women of Katrampatti as an erasure of sorts. Disappointments like this about the impossibility of pure self-representation routinely challenged activists’ understandings of literacy’s promise of emancipation.

This book is about contradictions in the project of Enlightenment that emerged over the course of two decades in rural Tamil Nadu. In their endeavors to remake the Tamil countryside through literacy activism, workers in the movement found that their own understanding of the politics of writing and enlightenment was often transformed in the
encounter with deeply rooted practices surrounding entirely different notions of language and imaginations of social order. Arguing that the Arivoli Iyakkam faced contradictions and reformulations in its quest to enlighten the countryside through the spread of literacy and scientific rationality, however, is not to claim that Indian villages are somehow ill suited for, or even resistant to, such a project. The Tamil region has a long history of philosophical literature beginning before the Common Era, missionary efforts and colonization have substantially altered orientations to language and society since the eighteenth century across southern India, and Tamil Nadu has seen a wide range of modernist political movements over the course of the twentieth century. My study of the Arivoli Iyakkam instead seeks to foreground irreconcilable elements and paradoxes of agency within an Enlightenment pedagogy that would claim to remold the very people it aimed to emancipate through the written word.

In postcolonial studies it has become common to criticize discourses of modern progress for the way Enlightenment reason encompasses alterity through a narrative of historical incompleteness (Chakrabarty 2000). Talk about national development, for example, tends to assume movement along a universal scale of time, such that people may express anxieties about being “left behind” or “not yet modern” because of the particularities of their culture. Anticolonial politics had already developed a counterargument to this logic. For many anticolonial thinkers, cultural resistance to the instrumental rationality of Enlightenment stood as the realm of national autonomy (Chatterjee 1993; Cheah 2003). Liberal thought, on the other hand, continues to divide the world into those who enjoy the freedom of rational self-determination and those who are constrained by their culture (Mahmood 2005; Povinelli 2011). To the degree that these positions require one to be for or against Enlightenment reason, they recapitulate what Michel Foucault (1987, 167) once called the “blackmail” of the Enlightenment. But is it possible to construe a contemporary activist movement carried out in the very name of enlightenment in terms other than the binary of cultural resistance and instrumental rationality? What if something else was also at stake in the practice of literacy activism, which neither those championing the cause of Enlightenment nor their critics fully recognize? How might a critical analysis of the Arivoli Iyakkam offer an escape from the blackmail of Enlightenment?
These are certainly difficult questions in light of the ongoing legitimation crisis of both liberal and left political thought in recent Indian history. I raise these concerns, however, after some years of reflection on ethnographic materials suggesting that the Arivoli Iyakkam’s mass mobilization gave rise to forms of social relation, immanent to the field of activism, that are reducible neither to the utopian world envisaged by literacy activists nor to the putatively traditional society that was supposed to be transformed through literacy activism. In fact, activists of the movement successfully mobilized large numbers of rural women through logics that often pushed against the very Enlightenment rationality they hoped to foster, and the results of their efforts were often unanticipated. It is in moments where activism hit the limits of its own ideology that we can catch glimpses of forms of sociality overlooked not just by the activists but also by the conceptual vocabulary of social science.

This story must account for the perspectives of a wide set of social actors, from Dalit literacy students, to activists from a range of backgrounds, and on to government administrators from across India, all of whom were brought together in novel ways through the Arivoli Iyakkam. Among these protagonists, I focus in particular on the women and men who worked as rural activists, because it is they who wrestled most squarely with the contradictions of bringing Enlightenment to the Tamil countryside through literacy. Arivoli’s workers were caught between a vision of literacy as radical freedom from social constraints and the realization that writing is an embodied technique as well as a technology of governance. They continually reflected on this as well as other tensions in their quest to produce newly empowered villagers through the spread of literacy. Compelled to address these problems, activists undertook numerous experiments with pedagogy. Their efforts to respond to the contradictions of Enlightenment allowed the Arivoli Iyakkam to become a mass movement extending deeply into the wider social world of the Tamil countryside. Within this particular story lies a more general narrative about knowledge, representation, and Enlightenment in the postcolony. It is the workers of the Arivoli Iyakkam who will serve as our guides in this journey of leaps back and forth, between specific moments of activism in Pudukkottai’s villages and intellectual problems
that have universal significance for those of us interested in questions of self-determination and mediation in politics.

Pedagogies of Enlightenment and the State

The Arivoli Iyakkam was indebted to visions of emancipation upheld by the political Left that stood in constant tension with the neoliberal conditions of possibility allowing for the movement to grow so quickly. The ideology of the Tamil literacy movement resembles certain earlier mass literacy programs that could also lay claims to inheriting and elaborating a modernity based on the principles of Enlightenment. Early Bolshevik experiments, for example, were carried out by the “liquidators of illiteracy” of the youth and women’s wings of the Communist Party in the name of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). Later in the twentieth century, Mao Tse-tung initiated campaigns to persuade villagers to “believe in science” through the spread of literacy, and we can find numerous examples of similar efforts among the socialist revolutions of Latin America, many of which were inspired by the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), as was the Arivoli Iyakkam. Naming the literacy movement the “Arivoli Iyakkam” was therefore not an arbitrary choice. The Tamil literacy movement drew on a long tradition connecting the written word to the project of producing a rational and self-determining human subject. But in some important respects the Arivoli Iyakkam also differs from these earlier state-led experiments in modernization at the level of political organization. It began as a nongovernmental initiative that was then absorbed by a rapidly changing capitalist state.

The Arivoli Iyakkam was originally conceived as a social movement to spread Enlightenment rationality through literacy by an activist organization. The volunteer movement that became the Arivoli Iyakkam was first initiated by the largely urban, middle-class members of the Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry Science Forums in the late 1980s as a means of teaching basic science and literacy to villagers and the urban poor in the cities of Chennai (then called Madras) and Pondicherry. In addition to teaching people how to read and write in Tamil, these scientists and academics
also held public demonstrations to explain basic science using microscopes, telescopes, and globes. These were efforts to awaken a general curiosity about the world among the poor, and more specifically to argue that the subaltern classes had political stakes in government science policy. It was only through their literacy classes, however, that the Science Forums were able to recruit large numbers of volunteers among the urban and rural poor. Their success captured the attention of the central government of India.

In 1990, a joint NGO-state initiative advanced the Arivoli Iyakkam model of mass literacy through voluntarism under the newly established National Literacy Mission. Activists across the Tamil region sought to replicate the successful experiments in Chennai, Pondicherry, and the neighboring state of Kerala on a much larger scale. From a small volunteer initiative run by academics and scientists to recruit activists for a “people’s science,” Arivoli had become a development program. This move allowed activists to make use of central government funds to print primers and gave them access to material resources such as jeeps from the Collector’s Office. The Arivoli movement also garnered a new form of legitimacy in the eyes of other government workers whose cooperation was necessary if the movement was to grow. Local administrators become involved and university professors were offered a year of paid leave if they decided to work for the literacy movement. The move to inhabit the state’s development infrastructure allowed the movement to recruit many more volunteers than it would have otherwise. But unlike the state-led efforts of the Bolsheviks and Cuban revolutionaries, the convergence of state interests and activism came at a very different time in Tamil Nadu.

The literacy movement was launched at a time of political upheaval and economic restructuring that signaled what many consider to be the demise of the Nehruvian state in India. The once-unquestioned national dominance of the Congress Party had eroded. With the rise of Hindu nationalist politics new anxieties emerged about the future of secularism across much of the country. But perhaps most important, the Arivoli Iyakkam’s initial mass-mobilization in the early 1990s coincided with policies of economic liberalization. As a number of scholars have noted, many of the functions of governance and rural development were
formally shifted into the nongovernmental sphere as a result of neoliberal socioeconomic reorganization (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan 2010; John 1996; Kamat 2002; Menon and Nigam 2007; Sharma 2008). The Nehruvian state had claimed a paternalist legitimacy through its monopoly on modernity through development.5 Under this older regime, nongovernmental organizations worked in a clearly separated sphere, and they affiliated themselves with social movements that were often critics of state-led development. Under the new development regime, these divisions were increasingly blurred as the state took the initiative to administer its welfare projects precisely through these nongovernmental organization forms.6 In the process, issues surrounding social redistribution, once discussed in terms of political struggle, were often reframed as technical problems with the old, inflexible, state-led development regime.

Research on the neoliberal reorganization of welfare projects frequently draws on Foucault’s (2007) concept of governmentality. Scholars working in this tradition have noted that the demise of high-modernist development planning strategies does not necessarily mark a retreat of state power as much as it facilitates the dissemination of governmental rationalities across the domains of state, society, and family. The Arivoli Iyakkam certainly fits this global pattern of neoliberal governmentality. Governmental communicative logics, epistemologies ofenumeration, and moral narratives of self-development were strengthened through volunteerism and entrenched by institutions that blurred the divide between the state and nongovernmental organizational forms. Arivoli activists remained volunteers rather than paid government workers. They worked for the betterment of their society without the security of government employment that their predecessors in the Nehruvian development apparatus would have enjoyed. This form of development work was facilitated at the national level by organizations, like the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), which were established in the late 1980s to connect movements like the Arivoli Iyakkam both to the central government and to social movements in other regions.7 Much like other organizations, such as the Mahila Samakhya women’s development initiative studied by Aradhana Sharma (2008), the BGVS and its affiliated social movements were led by activists whose political
upbringing was in the parties of the leftist movement in the 1960s and '70s. Arivoli Iyakkam activism was therefore the curious product of a state-sponsored volunteerism under conditions of neoliberal governance that was nevertheless shaped by radical traditions of the organized Left.

The concept of governmentality focuses our analytical attention to the political structure of the Arivoli Iyakkam as well as to the forms of instrumental reason propagated by this form of activism. But as Aradhana Sharma’s work makes clear, the world inaugurated by neoliberal governmentality does not only consist of the “antipolitics” described by earlier critiques of development in anthropology (e.g., Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994). Drawing on the work of Akhil Gupta (2001, 2012) and Partha Chatterjee (2004), she notes that the strategy to install a hierarchical technocracy in the name of “empowerment” may also “spawn political activism centered on redistribution and justice” (Sharma 2008, xxi), sometimes drawing on older roots in the Nehruvian welfare state. Sharma represents the second generation of critical development studies in anthropology when she argues that development is, in fact, generative of struggle and politically ambivalent. My own concern is that too strict an adherence to the analytic of governmentality and the instrumental rationality undergirding this strategy of power might easily obscure a politics that is neither about the demand for state welfare nor about the rhetoric of “self-help” and entrepreneurship that has been propagated as a technically superior form of development in the age of neoliberalism.

The questions guiding this book are not only about the enabling or disabling of agentive life under neoliberalism, but also about how the Arivoli Iyakkam arose through modes of mobilization that cannot be captured through received narratives of agency in the first place. As we will see, the Arivoli Iyakkam advocated the empowerment of women through a language of individual rights, but its successes came from a practice that upheld obligations to others. It was a movement to foster autonomy that worked instead through duty. It was a movement designed to craft a disembodied public sphere through writing that gained traction through embodied forms of orality and traditions of recitation. These are just some of the paradoxes that have convinced
me that the pedagogical practices of Arivoli activism often worked against its own Enlightenment ideals, and that the political logics fueling the movement produced a field of social action exceeding that which the lens of governmentality can bring into focus. An account of Arivoli activism demands that we listen carefully to the echoes of socialist politics in a decidedly neoliberal age, but also that we attend more carefully to the contradictions of Enlightenment at the heart of pedagogical practice.

A Linguistic Infrastructure for Citizenship

Contemporary pedagogies of citizenship have been shaped by a history of colonial domination and postcolonial statecraft. Much of what postcolonial theory has taught us revolves around the question of this historical inheritance that continues to animate a wide range of political interventions in contemporary India (Chakrabarty 2000; Chatterjee 1993; Dirks 2001; Gupta 1998; Kaviraj 2010; Scott 1999). Postcolonial statecraft, for instance, rests on the persistent premise that the subaltern classes do not yet have the full capacity to represent themselves as rights-bearing citizens. Literacy rates and the ability to sign one’s name, in particular, have long stood as indexes of the capacity for self-representation and even as signs of fitness for democratic self-rule in both colonial and postcolonial India (Cody 2009). But it was only just as women were becoming the primary targets of development policy, in the 1990s, that mass literacy came to the fore as the solution to this problem of incorporation within the nation-state. It was therefore according to the tenets of this particular form of statecraft that villagers were taught to embody literacy as an infrastructure, enabling erstwhile subjects to become citizens through pedagogical projects like the Arivoli Iyakkam.

Mass literacy held out a promise that formerly excluded women among the rural poor might one day join the homogeneous space and time of the Indian nation. Written language would work as a medium allowing for the imagination of a modern subject that has been abstracted from an immediate context, enabling the production of large-scale identities commonly understood to transcend the worlds of kin and caste. National citizenship has, in fact, been the paradigmatic case through
which academics as well as activists have understood the unifying effects of mass literacy and print publication.\textsuperscript{10} The theoretical perspective on language taken in this book, however, argues that it is not the technology of writing itself that causes such radical changes, whether positively valued in terms of the evolution of rationality, as Jack Goody (1977, 1986) would have it, or negatively construed as the violent intrusion of modernity, as in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1973) famous lament in his best-selling \textit{Tristes tropiques}. India’s acquaintance with the written word dates back to the Bronze Age, and Tamil has an unbroken literary tradition that spans over two millennia. If Lévi-Strauss (1973, 300) was perhaps correct to argue that “the fight against illiteracy is connected with an increase in governmental authority over citizens,” he was certainly wrong to assume that the appropriation of written language initiates an irreversible fall into the iron cage of instrumental rationality and the end of a transparent, face-to-face community. This view attributes an unmediated nature to nonliterate people by ignoring the textual dimensions of language use more broadly, in addition to assuming a monolithic effect of writing technology.\textsuperscript{11} Writing, like other media technologies, has unpredictable uses, effects, and value.

Philosophies that claim literacy as a medium of political emancipation, such as Freire’s \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed} (1970), often share more with Goody and with Lévi-Strauss’s theories of the modern subject than they appear to on the surface. There is a common assumption in social thought on literacy, often shared by activists, that writing breaks the bonds of orality by objectifying the world through processes of mediation and abstraction. Variegated logics of textuality and language already operating in the Tamil country, such as the modern devotional orientations to the power of language studied by Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) and Bernard Bate (2009), inevitably pose problems for a pedagogy that would conflate literacy with humanist emancipation or Enlightenment. The variety of textual genres at play in Tamil literature, many of which are circulated orally, cannot be captured through any general theory that would seek to account for the effects of literacy. Traditions of cultivating virtue through the embodiment of ancient poetry at the core of Tamil pedagogies, for example, may well be seen as incommensurable with the approaches to language that the literacy movement had adopted from Freire’s philosophy. The cultural relativism of what
has been called the “new literacy studies” (e.g., Gee 1996; Street 1984, 1993; cf. Collins and Blot 2003) that has dominated in the discipline of anthropology, however, does not suffice to engage with the universalizing claims being made on behalf of writing in the Arivoli Iyakkam’s Enlightenment project.

Where writing works both as an ideational and a material infrastructure of citizenship, as it does in India and elsewhere, to argue that there are alternative literacies is not enough. Critical social theory must instead focus on the historical intersection of technologies of mass mediation with ideologies of self-abstraction and stranger sociability that have come to determine our understanding of political modernity. The task, as I see it, is to understand how citizenship acts as a link between democracy and the nation-state through technopolitical assemblages that limit or enable the agency of the modern subject qua citizen. This is not to claim that literacy is a requirement for electoral participation, nor is it to assume citizenship is the only form of political agency. Rather, it is to develop a broader understanding of political participation from which much of the population is excluded owing to the uneven distribution of literacy and formal education (Drèze 2004). More specifically, the persistent structural violence of poverty, caste, and gender requires detailed attention to the bureaucratic logics and practices of inscription that determine the everyday course of postcolonial state formation (Gupta 2012; Hull 2012; Rao 2009). It has become clear in recent years that the narrative of modern citizenship, understood broadly as a capacity to make demands on the state, remains compelling for large numbers of rural women where the very infrastructural means of entry into the sphere of citizenship is not something that people can expect of the state itself. A great proportion of the education system in rural Tamil Nadu is now privatized, for example. It is as a result of such large-scale political and economic reorganization in the direction of unfettered capitalism that so much social responsibility had fallen onto the shoulders of literacy activists.

Methods in Activism and Ethnography

People living in districts where the Arivoli Iyakkam was strong commonly liken the movement to India’s epic struggle for freedom from
British rule, calling it the “second independence struggle.”¹³ There are number of reasons for people, even those who were not affiliated with the movement, to make such a weighty claim. It is partly the sheer scale of social mobilization that seems to invite this comparison. But there are other respects in which the similarities between these movements, which are separated by half a century, resonate with more depth. Both moments in history have been experienced as tangible breaks with the past, as ruptures that were animated by new forms of collective action. Just as important, both the independence and Arivoli movements produced a set of remarkable people who acted as catalysts in focusing social energies among the marginalized in rural India. In the otherwise dreary world of development expertise, it was the activists who made the Arivoli Iyakkam a social movement of political importance.

Activists are intellectuals, not only in the general sense of being people who self-consciously produce new modes of thought and conceptions of the world, but also in a more limited, sociological meaning of the term. If everyone can be said to be an intellectual in the former sense, what distinguishes some people is what Antonio Gramsci would call their intellectual “function” within a “general complex of social relations” (1971, 8–9). It is in this particular sense of playing a mediating role in the production of social relations that I would like to place literacy activists as intellectuals. Although ostensibly working as volunteers under the auspices of India’s Delhi-based National Literacy Mission, activists often viewed their job as that of standing between what they would often call a “machine-like” state bureaucracy, on one hand, and the aspirations of rural Tamils in a struggle for forms of social justice that had been denied them because they could not read and write, on the other hand. Like the schoolteachers of West Bengal described by Chatterjee to illustrate his conception of political society, activists “mediate between domains that are differentiated by deep and historically entrenched inequalities of power . . . between those who govern and those who are governed” (2004, 66). The expertise of activism drew from professional development discourse; from transnational feminist politics; from communist and rationalist social thought; from idioms of Enlightenment and social service that are widespread in the Tamil countryside; and from a range of other intellectual traditions that I describe in greater detail in the following chapter. The field of knowledge entailed in mobilization and
pedagogy in the Arivoli movement therefore sat at the intersection of a number of otherwise disparate domains.

Many workers with relatively little schooling from farming families had entered the movement through personal or political-party connections, fully inhabiting the intellectual function through their engagement with activism. It was also through activist practice that many rural workers developed the “attention to the formal properties and values of semiosis” that characterizes intellectual life (Boyer 2005b, 43). These were the activists who tended to devote their whole life to the cause, like Karuppiah, the young man who had organized the petitioning expedition described above. Some were university professors, teachers in small towns, or some other type of knowledge professional before entering into a social movement that would forever change their relationship to rural life. Professionals who worked for the movement nevertheless ended up returning to their jobs after some time, or they took up other causes. Both women and men were drawn to the movement from the range of caste and religious backgrounds representative of the region where they worked, although the state-level leadership was certainly dominated by upper-caste Hindus. What the workers of the movement generally had in common was an orientation to intellectual life that could make no claims to being autonomous or independent of the social relations of knowledge production. This awareness of the socially and materially grounded nature of knowledge was due in part to the importance of Marxism in the movement, and perhaps also because activists came from such a wide range of social backgrounds. Like the nationalist struggle, the Arivoli Iyakkam specialized in attracting and eventually producing people who learned to inhabit multiple lifeworlds that others would find to be irreconcilable.

Activism is, in many respects, a search for pedagogies that would provide the right fit, adhering to historical inheritance as experienced in the present, while also pulling toward an imagined future. Karuppiah’s best friend and colleague in the Arivoli Iyakkam, R. Neela, for example, is one the activists I came to know who had developed a keen sense that the movement must ground its methods of mobilization in contemporary forms of social life among the rural poor. An avid reader and local intellectual who had never finished the tenth standard of primary schooling
because her labor was needed at home when she was being raised by a single mother, Neela had risen through the ranks to become the Arivoli coordinator for the whole development block of Tiruvarangulam. It was in her capacity as a coordinator also involved in more formal political organizing that Neela made frequent trips to the state capital in Chennai, and that she once went to the National Literacy Mission offices in New Delhi, for training. She also worked closely with the Dalit literacy group from Katrampatti that Karuppiyah had organized. But when she visited this group, they would never go through the normal lessons plans of learning the script and practicing signatures. They would simply talk about work in the fields and compare the songs that the women of Katrampatti sang while transplanting rice paddy with those sung in other parts of the same district.

Once, early in my fieldwork, Neela saw that I was somewhat surprised that an Arivoli lesson need not be about literacy at all. She explained to me: “We get all these instructions about how to run classes, but we really need to run this movement according to the qualities of the mud of this place [inta man tavunta mätiri inta iyakkam naṭakkānum].” Using this potent agricultural metaphor to invoke the substantial powers of locality, Neela was explaining to me the importance of working with that which learners themselves bring to Arivoli lesson. She told me that it was more important that the group keep coming and finding in the Arivoli literacy circle some relief from their difficulties than it was for them to go through the lesson plans that had been devised for them by activists and academics in Chennai. Knowing very well that she was participating in a national literacy program that held lessons across India, Neela was often driven by her work to reflect on what is particular to the places where she conducted lessons. For Neela too, then, I came to understand that visiting the literacy group in Katrampatti was part of a larger research project. Neela’s village is not far from Katrampatti, where material living conditions are quite similar. It was therefore not some generality about rural life that interested her, as it might some anthropologist. Rather, it was the details of an unorthodox ritual that intrigued her, or the imaginative lines that some field laborer had inserted into a work song she already knew. How might a story or song collected in one village be used to pedagogical ends in another? These were the questions motivating her research.
Neela’s orientation to pedagogy tells us much about the Arivoli Iyakkam’s broader methodology, and can furthermore help serve as a guide to my own approach insofar as the questions activists ask have deeply influenced the shape that this research has taken. Neela’s research project was centered on those idiosyncratic aspects of everyday life that could be turned into grounds for building something new. It is important to explain here that Neela is a widely published poet and short-story writer, in addition to being a literacy activist. Also a very active member of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association, Neela collects stories both for their aesthetic qualities and for the value they have as pedagogical tools, and she does not necessarily distinguish between the two. She has shared some of her work with Tamil readers in the form of a collection of short essays based on her activism, called Paṇamara Taricanam (Darshan of the Common Folk [2002]), and she is a frequent contributor to a range of literary weekly magazines in Tamil. Within Pudukkottai District, Neela discovered a whole world of cultural differences tied to religion, caste, and location that she feels compelled to share with a wider world. She taught me that the fishermen of the Palk Strait coastline, for example, sing in a particular rhythm that is timed to the motion of their rowing, and she further explained how her colleague in the movement wrote Arivoli Iyakkam songs about women’s emancipation and composed them in this meter to be sung among the literacy groups in fishing villages. Activists like Neela would often echo a claim that Mao is said to have made, that they were simply “giving back to the people with more clarity what they have already given us.” Activist methodology was based on a self-conscious reciprocity, wherein workers in the literacy movement objectified aspects of rural life that could then be represented to build a progressive politics, mobilizing experience to shape visions of the future. Active programs of research and reflexivity on the part of activists like Neela and Karuppiyah were an integral part of this process.

Most of my research time was spent following these activists to literacy lessons and events around the district, learning from their research. After living for one year on my own in the town of Pudukkottai, where I worked closely with the district leadership, I ended up living with Karuppiyah in his village for another year, focusing on activism in the village of Katrampatti and in the surrounding area. We
would meet with Neela and other activist friends and colleagues nearly every day in the room Karuppiah rents in the small town of Alangudi. I have hence focused my ethnography on this particular class of people to understand the styles of reflexivity that had come to define the creative process of activism. There were certainly many working for the Arivoli Iyakkam at the grassroots level who did not share in Karuppiah’s or Neela’s intellectual endeavors, and some of the movement’s leadership had developed such a close relationship with state institutions that they did not share in the sense of mediating between cold bureaucratic machinery and the aspirations of villagers. Some activists had become full-fledged development professionals and consultants over the course of the movement. It was a particular variety of activist, then, who had developed a sense of their work as that of yoking the particulars of village life to some grander narrative of Enlightenment, and rethinking key elements of this narrative in the process. This form of activism shares some ground with ethnographic research, and I became friends with Neela and Karuppiah precisely because we were interested in similar questions about language, culture, and power, even if we have cultivated our methods for pursuing these questions in relation to somewhat different ends.

Anthropology has often used stories like the one I have just presented about Neela to engage concretely with the abstractions of social theory. Victor Turner’s (1967) memorable portrait of Muchona, “the Hornet,” is an example of how the ethnography of a rural intellectual can be used to question epistemological hierarchies. Much late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century ethnography has furthermore responded to earlier critiques of the discipline’s compulsion to exoticize by developing a fieldwork program specifically among subjects who appear to share certain styles of thinking with anthropology (Boyer 2005b, 2007; Brenneis 1994; Holmes and Marcus 2005, 2008; Maurer 2005; Riles 2000). For instance, Bill Maurer (2002) draws attention to striking parallels between the rhetorical structure of Islamic accounting and that of anthropological accounts, as each attempt to reconcile theory and data tends to be encompassed by a higher level of abstraction in both of these knowledge systems. Many ethnographers who have studied experts and intellectuals have emphasized the sociological reflexivity developed by their interlocutors, as I do in this book, raising the question of methodological traction in a
world where the knower and the known appear to operate with the same theoretical tools.

Anthropologies of activism have been particularly concerned both with the place of anthropological knowledge in activist discourse (e.g., Merry 2006; Warren 1998) and with the potentials of activism to reshape anthropological knowledge (e.g., Hale 2006; Tsing 2004). Sally Engle Merry (2005), for example, has emphasized the “porous borders” between activism and anthropology when studying the globally circulating discourse on human rights and gender violence. Although greatly inspired by the new anthropological attention to intellectual production among activists, the investigations presented in the following chapters take a somewhat different tack from that pursued by those who have focused primarily on the similarities between ethnographers and their subjects. There are indeed similarities between some of the conclusions reached by activists and those arrived at through academic research. Activists and ethnographers often share an engagement with problems of legal normalization and ethical closure in political mobilization (Dave 2012) and a deep antipathy toward centralized state power (Graeber 2009). Sometimes our forms of knowledge even share a common source, as when I went to interview the Arivoli activist and author S. Tamilcelvan in his home in rural Tirunelveli and found him reading a photocopied version of Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). But there is often a substantial difference between activist and anthropological perspectives. This difference has more to do with our differential relationship to the social world at hand than with some cultural gulf that lies between us. Activist knowledge is shaped by epistemologies and deeply embodied affects tuned to lifeworlds that I have only traveled through as a part-time resident. The very fact of my being in the position of an outside observer in the world of agrarian labor renders my understanding of the events unfolding around me as reflections of a different order than those produced by activists, for whom such research constituted an immediate social necessity.¹⁵ Work on activism has wrestled anxiously with questions of representation raised by this differential relationship to the social world that activists work to change, especially when scholarship itself also aims to produce activist knowledge (Chari and Donner 2010; Hale 2008; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006;
Scheper-Hughes 1995). This book can make no such claims to identification, but it is nevertheless resolutely partial and concerned with the question of how to represent activist experience and activist research.

It is in their retrospective accounting of what happened in the Arivoli Iyakkam that activists have engaged in the sort of work that more closely resembles the perspective of social science, and I draw liberally from the Tamil writings of activists such as S. Tamilcelvan (2003, 2004b), N. Karunanidhi (2003), and R. Neela (2002, 2004) and publications of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association (1993, 2002, 2006), in addition to the English-language reports of administrators and academics who played a part in the movement.16 Tamilcelvan’s Irulum Oliyum: Arivoli Iyakka Aṉupavaṉkal (Darkness and Lightness: Experiences in the Light of Knowledge Movement), published first as a series of essays in the Tamil cultural studies journal titled Tımtrikiṭā (Drumroll) while I was conducting fieldwork (2002–4), and later as a book in which the questions of enlightenment and political responsibility are turned back onto his readers has been my most important guide in this respect. His post hoc analyses of the pedagogical experiments he undertook as an Arivoli leader in Tirunelveli exhibit a depth of insight and a degree of reflexivity that allowed me to conduct fieldwork in a much more effective manner. His work has also helped me develop the understandings of ethnographic data that I present in this book. Breaking with an anthropology that would assume a perspective of objective distance with regard to “local” knowledge production, whatever that may be in this age, my investigation therefore places itself in conversation with literature written by activists with a full understanding that we often write with different ends and for different publics.

Outline of the Chapters

The structure of this book makes an argument concerning the Arivoli Iyakkam’s struggle to mediate the everyday lived reality of villagers and the movement’s vision of literacy as transcendent Enlightenment. Having begun with the story of women submitting a signed petition at the
Introduction
district administrative headquarters, we must now go back to learn about how these unlikely agents of social change had come to the center of rural governance by means of activism around written language. The first half of the book is about mobilization in the literacy movement, and the second half focuses on pedagogy. In each chapter we will see how attempts to spread light and knowledge through the written word hit certain limits, forcing those involved to rethink their strategy and orientations toward literacy.

The first two chapters of this book introduce Arivoli Iyakkam activism by focusing on how the movement sought to unify experiences of space and time and to produce new forms of agency through literacy. Combining ethnography of the movement in the early 2000s and historical reflections on the movement’s origins in science activism and the broader Left, in chapter 1 I seek to understand how and why the literacy movement built its self-image through the trope of enlightenment. In trying to account for how the Arivoli Iyakkam came to attract many more women than men, in chapter 2 I then develop this exposition of the movement’s vision of progress with a sharper focus on the different models of agency and gender used in activist pedagogy. The Arivoli Iyakkam worked through a range of idioms in developing their version of grassroots feminism. I argue that the movement was, in fact, successful to the degree that it developed a style of “reciprocal agency” through which women paradoxically participate in a movement designed to foster a sense of autonomy out of a sense of obligation or duty to activists themselves.

Moving closer to the ground of language as an embodied knowledge, in chapters 3 and 4 I concentrate on the teaching of literacy in village lessons organized by the Arivoli Iyakkam. I first explain the development of Paulo Freire’s liberation pedagogy, in which subjects understand themselves to be agents through processes of verbal objectification. In an attempt to develop a radical pedagogy suited to awakening adults’ sense of their own agency, the Arivoli Iyakkam used models of personhood and language that map only partially onto those that obtain among the movement’s villager learners. Learners themselves provided a critique of this pedagogy through questions they asked about the poetics of Tamil learning traditions and about how written language becomes memorable and meaningful, forcing activists to reconsider their methods.
Tracking a shift of emphasis in the Arivoli Iyakkam’s critical pedagogy toward reading aloud, in chapter 4 I argue that experiments with literary approaches had forced a new awareness of the social and embodied qualities of language among activists. As a result of the struggle to devise a new mode of literary production fit for activism, the Arivoli Iyakkam turned away from vanguardist pedagogy toward folklore in their attempts to shape a literature appropriate for neoliterates to read aloud. Experiments in education constituted the search for a linguistic practice that would be both enlightening and true to forms of expression characteristic of village life. Once again, activism was confronted with the question of which cultural forms can be recontextualized so as to suit the vision of progress fueling the movement.

In the final ethnographic chapter in the book I return to the scene of petitioning first described in the introduction. Providing ethnography of petition writing, scribal mediation, and signature in the practice of governance, in this chapter I follow the social life of discourse as village-level complaints are performed orally for scribes and volunteers outside administrative offices, and then rendered in writing so as to be presentable to state power. Attempts to reorder the political economy of language through literacy activism, such that people can be said to represent themselves in writing, nevertheless inscribe neoliterate petitioners as “underdeveloped.” It is the Arivoli Iyakkam’s pedagogy that held out the promise of a future alignment of communicative frameworks allowing for the transparent self-representation of an already-constituted citizen.

Arivoli activism made an argument for why mass literacy would enable new forms of agency among the most disenfranchised, all the while reflecting on the paradox that the movement must remake the very people that it aimed to empower and recognizing that the movement worked through forms of social life that cannot be fully captured through the lens of Enlightenment. What insights this book might offer are often critical elaborations of problems activists themselves report to have faced in their work. I draw on ethnographic examples from across the district of Pudukkottai, as well as interviews with activists from other districts and cities to make sense of the larger contradictions within the project of Enlightenment through literacy. But it is
my experience with Neela, Karupiah, and the literacy group from Katrampatti, accumulated through two years of fieldwork and through yearly visits to this hamlet ever since, that serves as a grounding reference point throughout. These people will serve as our companions for the remainder of this book.