In subsequent visits to meet with the Katrampatti Arivoli Iyakkam literacy group, I learned that the Adi-Dravidar Welfare Office had sent someone to their village to inquire about a path to the cremation ground for Dalits. This was one concrete result of having submitted a petition. The official who was sent appears to have noted the survey number of some land that could potentially be used for the purpose of a path and even talked to some of the men in Katrampatti. The women who actually presented the petition at the collector’s office never talked to him. It was only when I visited Katrampatti in 2009, however, a number of years after the literacy group had submitted their petition, that I discovered how the district administration eventually determined that it would be best for the residents of Katrampatti to use the government-owned, dry riverbed as a path to their cremation ground. Dalits would still not be passing through the fields claimed by the Kallars, nor would they be given land of their own. Caste dominance was therefore legitimated by state action taken as a result of the Katrampatti petition. Theirs was a petition and a set of
signatures that may well have marked partial entry into a new field of citizenship for the women of Katrampatti, but it cannot be said to have done much to reduce the injustices they continued to face. The promise of emancipation had instead faded into a new form of caste domination, now sanctioned by bureaucratic authority.

In that same year, the National Literacy Mission of India decided to stop funding for the Arivoli Iyakkam continuing-education program in Tamil Nadu. The main office in Pudukkottai was closed. The central government would fund more limited adult-literacy projects only in those districts with especially low rates of literacy among women. Pudukkottai had failed to qualify for these funds. Some of those who had occupied leadership positions in the Arivoli Iyakkam had already gone off to work for one of the many private development agencies that were hiring people with field experience in the literacy movement. A number of private organizations, such as the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, had started “village knowledge centers” designed to advance the project of participatory development that had once been the domain of the state. Some who had worked as volunteers in the Arivoli Iyakkam simply went back to farming or working in any number of small business in the villages and small towns of Pudukkottai. Most of the women from Katrampatti who had participated in literacy lessons are still finding daily-wage work in the fields around their village, while a few have moved to Chennai in hopes of building a better life for their children.

A great number of activists who had been working for the Arivoli Iyakkam, however, have continued about their business of trying to teach their fellow villagers about the world around them in the name of a certain humanist emancipation. They do so now mainly through the Tamil Nadu Science Forum and the Progressive Writers and Artists Association, both of which maintain a strong presence in Pudukkottai and other districts across the state. These activists did not receive even the minimal honorarium that the government had promised them for some years in any case. They had been working out of their own convictions, not because it offered them any special job opportunities in the government or in private firms. Neela and Karuppiah, for example, had started teaching literacy classes for prisoners in the Pudukkottai Town Jail in the last days of the Arivoli Iyakkam. They had already put much effort into this project and had built a degree of goodwill among the inmates and
the wardens, so they decided to continue with their lessons, even when the literacy program officially ended. Neela eventually wrote a series of essays reflecting on her experiences teaching in the jail, and about the new methods of imparting literacy that they had experimented with in this context. UNESCO decided to sponsor an English translation of her book to bring this work to an international audience, once again rewarding the actions of Arivoli Iyakkam’s volunteer activists after the state had given up on the project. But the broader field of political possibilities for people like Neela in Pudukkottai has changed dramatically since the heady days of mass mobilization.

The time of the Arivoli Iyakkam was one of incredible, sometimes hyperbolic promise, when it seemed perfectly possible to people from a wide range of political positions that rapid changes in technology and structures of governance would lead to a complete remaking of the agrarian world. The then-president of India, Abdul Kalam, could confidently claim that the country would be “fully developed” by the year 2020. The advent of e-governance would ensure that there was a computer in every village where farmers could download their land deeds from the Internet and print them out. For those on the Left who entered into the once-proscribed field of NGO activism, the task would be to steer the changes that were coming to India’s villages in a more socially equitable direction. Literacy activism was a means toward this end of building a more unified nation-state. Through mass literacy, India’s peasants would finally be able to “represent themselves,” in the words of Sundari, the activist I have quoted earlier. A sort of postcolonial Enlightenment in the Tamil countryside appeared imminent in light of the new social energies that had been unleashed.

From a more sober, macrosociological perspective, we can see that the Arivoli Iyakkam and similar efforts of the 1990s and early 2000s were the products of a particular political conjuncture. The demise of a state structure that had long sought to monopolize claims to material development, and even to modernity itself, coincided with the rise of vast social movements making demands on behalf of people who felt they had never been adequately cared for by the paternalist Nehruvian state. The rise of these social movements was indeed concurrent with the growing influence of neoliberalism in India, and a turn toward Hindu nationalism at the national level, prompting a political struggle over the future course of
development. Although a number of large-scale movements emerged from the turn to NGO activism during this time—some like the literacy movement working in conjunction with the state, but many working against it—a general sense of disillusionment has since grown among those who took part in these movements, as the ideology of market fundamentalism coupled with corporatist political party apparatuses appear to drown out socialist visions of emancipation.

At a more global level, there is a profound sense in which the imaginary of a common future to be planned for underpinning earlier articulations of modernity has been hollowed out in a number of contexts. Marc Abélès (2010), for example, argues that as a result of the evaporation of the common future under neoliberalism, the North Atlantic world has shifted from a political imaginary organized around the problem of “making a society” together, toward a “politics of survival.” Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) tracks a parallel shift in what she terms “late liberalism,” focusing on the afterlives of settler colonialism in Australia and the United States, where “the futures of some, or the hopes they have for the future, can never be a future. . . . And for others, no matter what harms they do, the truth of these harms is deferred into the future” (27–28). But if much of the global North has entered the post-9/11 era of security without a positive shared sense of futurity, India’s love affair with the horizon of what is yet to come has propelled it in somewhat different directions. A shift away from state-led planning in India certainly corresponded to a downturn in the political fortunes of the mainstream Communist parties, coupled with the rise of Maoist violence and repressive paramilitary assaults on Adivasi indigenous communities in the name of security. The question of the common future in India nevertheless continues to animate political struggle, now defined primarily by the rise of lower-caste claims on democracy (Jaffrelot 2003; Omvedt 1994; Rao 2009); ultra-Left challenges to the state’s monopoly on violence (Shah 2010, 2011; Sundar 2006, 2010); a groundswell of queer critique and activism (Dave 2012; Narain and Bhan 2005); and the always-present specter of organized religious violence (Chaturvedi 2011; Das 2006; Hansen 2001; Valiani 2011), and it is accompanied by consumerist aspirations animating a range of middle-class populisms (Fernandes 2006; Lukose 2009). The problem of “catching up” to an imagined West does not carry the same weight it once did, survival remains an essentially collective issue, and liberal visions of the political cannot be taken as
hegemonic. Efforts to “make a society” together, such as those undertaken by the Arivoli literacy movement, have for the most part taken a backseat to other formulations of what the common future might be.

Such a macrosociology of changes in the neoliberal development state is certainly necessary to interpret the rise and fall of movements like the Arivoli Iyakkam. But this lens also strikes me as inadequate to the task of understanding the forms of social life that the movement enabled, nor can such a perspective provide compelling accounts of why and how activists and learners chose to participate in the Arivoli Iyakkam in the first place. It is for this reason that I have felt the need to narrate the story of Arivoli Iyakkam activism in at least two registers. One has focused on questions of social positioning and on the morphology of social action, whereas another has been more attuned to the “spirit” that can be said to have animated the work of activism, immanent to that social field, and to the intellectual problems that were raised through this work. Even when focusing on the perhaps less tangible spirit or ethos of activism, it has been necessary at various points to draw a distinction between the explicit goals and ideology of the Arivoli Iyakkam and the often tacit modes of social relation through which this movement reached hundreds of thousands of villagers. This distinction between ideology and practice is even made by activists in moments of reflection—for example, when Dr. Sundararaman told me that the “concept of empowerment never happened,” but that “empowerment did happen in a major way, because of who we were.” The enlightenment that literacy activists claimed to spread through literacy and science lessons was belied by the very modes of reciprocal agency calling fellow villagers to action in the movement. It is this less obvious spirit of responsiveness and responsibility animating the peculiar dynamic of give-and-take at the core of activism that I have found to be of most interest in telling the story of the Arivoli Iyakkam.

The Arivoli Iyakkam was a charismatic Enlightenment movement. This may sound like a paradoxical formulation to the degree that the forms of secular rationality, scientific objectification, and self-mastery that activists sought to foster among villagers would seem to mitigate against the sense of time-bound mysticism or devotion that inheres in the concept of charisma. But I think that what Weber (1978, 245) would term the “anti-economic force” of charisma captures nicely that particular sense of responsiveness to a call that drove Arivoli Iyakkam activism. This is a
charisma that adhered to the movement itself and not necessarily to a partic-
ular individual, as this concept is sometimes thought of in the Weberian
tradition, even if it may well be said that the Arivoli Iyakkam was popu-
lated by a number of extraordinary people who compelled social action
through their personalities. It is indeed worth recalling, in this context, the
notions of gifting and grace that attach themselves to the Greek roots of
this concept. In calling the Arivoli Iyakkam a charismatic Enlightenment
project, I am simply claiming the movement was able to articulate the aspira-
tions of a wide set of social actors, less through its ideology of enlighten-
ment, than in its mode of operation through reciprocity.

It is true that the Arivoli Iyakkam promised forms of enlightenment
and emancipation that could never be delivered through the propagation
of literacy alone, as the story of the Katrampatti petition makes devastat-
ingly clear. The promises it did make, however, appear to have had a per-
formative effect of drawing people to the movement that far outweighs
their positive content. That the Arivoli movement should fade out and
become routinized even as it produced new generations of activists was a
fate that was perhaps built into its charismatic mode of mobilization. But
if the movement worked only to the degree that it moved according to the
quality of Pudukkottai’s soil, as Neela would put it, we can also surmise
that the quality of this soil was itself forever changed as a result.