Conclusion

The politics of civil society in twentieth-century India—participating in debates about policy, writing newspaper columns, and so forth—included only a small segment of the body politic, as has been widely recognized.\(^1\) Although access to the liberal public sphere was limited to those privileged by race, gender, class, religion, and caste, its actors represented themselves as unmarked by any of these identities, and therefore as representing universal interests. This bourgeois public sphere was rooted in private property, for its activities occurred indoors, conducted by unseen bodies. But outside these closed spaces was a vast world where visible bodies daily performed other kinds of politics. On village and urban streets, in open fields, at factory gates, along rivers, near temples, and outside tea shops, some people claimed their rights and some people put down others’ rights. In these politics that were very much embodied, identities of community, far from being abstracted away, were central.\(^2\)

Alongside subject-citizens negotiating unequal status, there was another necessary participant in the communal politics of public spaces. This was the police officer, who was invested with the task of maintaining public order. In fact, public arenas stand “conceptually between the state and society . . . a zone of interaction.”\(^3\) Neither colonial nor postcolonial policemen treated all subjects equally, from a distance. Contrary to the colonial myth of the neutral state that stood above partisan disputes, policemen acting in public arenas were guided by colonial knowledge that objectified native communities. Bernard Cohn wrote that the British in India “conquered not only a territory but an epistemological space as well.”\(^4\) Indeed, policemen drew on colonial knowledge to provide some communities greater state protection while subjecting others to more coercive surveillance. Not only were the objects of policing determined by caste; its agents were too. In colonial Madras, police recruitment drew explicitly on objectified notions of caste, so that certain castes were represented far more than others in the force. Although the postcolonial government disavowed this policy except for affirmative action for the lowest castes, some castes remained better represented than others. The influx of certain castes into the force
at certain moments in the post-independence period suggests that the presence of sympathetic caste members in the police was valued in those communities. Thus, in addition to being agents of state authority, policemen were also social actors with caste identities. Conversely, despite the ideal of an equal law, legal subjects had varying levels of access to state authority in the form of policing. Far from existing in two distinct realms, the everyday enactment of state and caste authority informed each other. Upper-caste actors drew on police authority to enforce caste hierarchy, even as police intervention in caste conflict helped reproduce state authority. Certainly, policing also helped those of the lower castes resist caste authority on occasion. My point here is not that the police always reaffirmed caste authority, but that caste politics and policing were not independent of each other.

In the course of their routine tasks—surveillance on the beat, registering a crime, interrogating a suspect, or monitoring a public gathering—police-men brought legally sanctioned state violence, or the threat of it, to bear on societal disputes. Well-versed in the priorities and methods of policemen, subject-citizens maneuvered criminal procedure to their advantage where possible, channeling the force of law into the embodied politics of public spaces. Together, policemen and the objects of their coercive gaze built a world where criminal law was a real and continuous presence, a world where state authority was routinely performed and experienced instead of being an abstraction. Policing practices simultaneously constituted the everyday authority of the state and popular, sometimes violent politics, especially among lower castes and classes that were frequent objects of police authority. Hence, “communal” violence did not take place independent of modern state authority. This was neither a domain of criminal violence that was clearly distinct from legal violence nor a domain of subaltern politics that was autonomous from modern state power. Rather, popular violent politics were constituted in relation to the law and its criminal procedure.

Contrary to the notion that the colonial police’s purview was largely limited to urban centers, this book has argued that the institution extended its reach, albeit unevenly, into the countryside. In order to use its scarce resources optimally, the Madras police differentiated communities, spaces, and times, deploying more men and arms into communities deemed criminal, to dense or tense villages, and on festival and market days. Even if policing in provinces across British India differed in some ways—including the strength of the force and its literacy—it shared some common features.
First, policing across the country allowed for escalation from unarmed civil to armed military action, enabling the normal exercise of exceptional, violent state authority. Second, colonial policing employed the language of community in designating its objects, deeming certain communities more criminal than others. Race, of course, was the primary line dividing colonized subject from colonizer, and rendered all Indians vulnerable to state violence under colonial rule. But there were other divisions too. Religious identity proved important in categorizing colonial subjects in some parts of the country. In the Tamil regions of the Madras Presidency, however, caste was central, for historical reasons. Here, caste identity mattered even in cases of ostensibly religious conflict, as for instance in disputes between Christian Nadars and Hindu Nadars or Muslim Labbaïs and Hindu Padayachis. The vitality of the anti-caste movement, which had started by the late nineteenth century in this region, added to the importance of caste in influencing conflict and, concomitantly, in informing police knowledge of social dynamics. While the salience of race as a political identity and police category disappeared with independence, that of caste increased as Dravidian parties that built on Periyar’s Self-Respect movement came to power in Tamil Nadu.

The application of caste as a category guiding policing was not limited to occasional encounters, to instances when caste groups were politicized enough to confront more powerful castes and the police. Instead, identity seeped into everyday life, in how individuals encountered social and state authority combined. I focus on the politics of public spaces not to neglect the politics of writing and the intellectualism of caste radicalism or to recycle stereotypes of caste politics as violent politics, but to highlight the vulnerability of the casted body in resisting power and the imbrication of the state in enacting routine violence. Indeed, this everyday exposure of the body occurred in tandem with other forms of caste politics that included the creation of origin narratives, conversion to other religions, migration to plantations across the Empire, and the politics of associations. This is illustrated vividly when we consider police interaction with the Nadars, a caste whose status changed dramatically over the period studied. During these years, Nadars appear prominently in the archival record at moments when they were engaged in fierce riots with Maravars, in 1899, 1918, and 1957. But that was not their only encounter with violence or with the police. In the years immediately after 1899, the colonial police extended extra protection to the community, whom they saw as important traders, in the
form of stations and beats. Individual instances of police violence, as for instance against a Dalit male suspected to have played a role in the death of a Nadar woman, also indicate that police tactics were shifting in tune with increasing Nadar status. It is well documented that Nadars altered their social position through forming associations and writing caste histories, which, in fact, located the 1899 riot as a key moment of community formation. But in addition I suggest that they also fashioned their community identity through mundane acts like filing “false complaints” to buttress their status against that of the Naickers of one village, or petitioning the police to relocate the station in another. Interestingly, the Nadars begin to disappear from police records in the 1960s, by which time their new caste status had been consolidated and their politics had migrated more fully to the bourgeois public sphere.

If some castes like the Nadars had achieved their desired status after a prolonged struggle, for others like the Dalits, the struggle was only beginning. From the 1960s on, Dalits faced violent retaliation for their activism and for the legislative protection extended to them by the new Republic. Although police force typically accompanied and supported upper-caste violence in these incidents, judicial redress was rarely effective, since police violence was usually deemed legal. Instead, protest on the streets framed in the language of community had a better chance of being heard—by political leaders and by the media. Thus, even as the judicial institutions of the liberal state allowed for the reproduction of caste violence, democracy provided the conditions to challenge caste inequality. The renewed vigor of the politics of the street in democratic India, its gendered nature and tilt toward majoritarianism notwithstanding, has allowed marginalized caste groups like Dalits to protest the violence of the law. All the same, violent interactions between police and legal subjects have endured, illuminating the role of a superior state force in reproducing social violence. In understanding recent caste wars, it is important to see community relations not as distinct from the state but as part of the longer history of the policing of public spaces, which helped normalize violence along community lines in colonial and postcolonial Madras.