The Social Structure of a Tanjore Village

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This is the seventh of a series of village studies published in the earlier issues of The Economic Weekly.

Two types of village structure appear to be present in Tanjore district. The most prevalent is the mirasi village, where the land is owned in small amounts by a number of separate patrilineal joint-families. This type apparently dates in its essential features from the period of the Tamil Chola kings, whose power declined with the Muslim invasions of the early fourteenth century, and ended with the invasion from Vijayanagar in 1534. The other type, the inam village, dates from the Mahratta conquest (1674-1799) when the alien Mahratta kings made grants of whole villages to individual families of Tamil Brahmans and immigrant Mahrattas and to religious institutions. Here, I attempt to outline the social organization of a mirasi village in the northwest of the district, and to indicate what seem, after four months of observation, to be the most important trends of change.

Tanjore village people divide the many castes of Hindus into three sub-divisions: —Brahman, non-Brahman and Adi Dravida ("original Dravidians", sometimes called Harijans, most of whom were once servants of the soil). The structure of a mirasi village varies according to whether it is a "Brahman" or a "non-Brahman village". In the "Brahman village ", the land is owned by the several families of a Brahman street (agraharam). Some of this land is leased in small amounts on an annual tenure to landlord families of one or more non-Brahman streets, usually of the "lower" non-Brahman castes of Ahambadiyas, Padayacchis, Konar, Muppenar or Vanniyar. Other land, retained by the landlords (who are called mirasdas), is cultivated directly by labourers from an Adi Dravida street situated at some distance from the rest of the village. In the "non-Brahman village", the land is owned by joint-families of a street of non-Brahmans, usually of one of the "higher" non-Brahman castes of Vellalar or Kallar. Some land may be then leased to other, "lower caste" non-Brahman, or more frequently cultivated directly with the aid of Adi Dravida servants. In these villages there is usually only a single Brahman family, of priests who serve the village temple.

Kumbapettai is a fairly typical "Brahman village ". One-and-a-half miles square, with a population of about 1200, it lies on a bus route eight miles from a town. Behind each house in the streets is a small garden of coconuts and vegetables, while round the whole village, for about half a mile, stretch its double-crop paddy fields, watered by the intricate system of irrigation channels from the Kaveri and its tributaries.

Just off the main road, in the northeast of the village, lies the Brahman street of forty-six houses, ten of which are now empty, their owners having moved to the towns. The tiled-roofed houses adjoin, and the two long rows face each other across the narrow road. Behind the houses, on each side of the street, the gardens lead down to irrigation channels bordering the paddy fields. Two temples stand near the agraharam: that to Siva, in the northeast, and that to Vishnu, in the west. Nearby are a bathing tank, a shrine to Ganapathi near which the Brahman families recite daily jahams after performing their ablutions, and a second shrine built over the tomb of a Brahman saint of the village. The Brahman, with their gardens, temples, bathing pool and caste-shrines, thus occupy the northwest corner of the village. A single non-Brahman house of Kutthadis, a caste whose men formerly performed religious puppet plays and whose women are dancing girls, stands alone on the northwest boundary of the village.

Southwards, across garden and paddy land, lie twenty houses, in two streets, of the non-Brahman Konar caste. The Konar are herdsmen by tradition. Their houses are smaller than the Brahman houses, thatched, and set slightly apart in their gardens. Today, the income (derived from all sources) of Brahman families living entirely in the village, varies from about Rs 80 to about Rs 900 a month. The average Konar household, by contrast, appears to earn one kalam of paddy per adult per month, plus Rs 20 to Rs 60 in cash; thus bringing the value of the total income to between Rs 50 and Rs 100 per month. Adi Dravida families, by contrast again, appear to demand rather more paddy and less cash; the average income of an Adi Dravida household may be estimated very roughly at a value of between Rs 40 and Rs 80 per month. Most Konar families keep one or two cows, and in addition milk the cows and do garden work for Brahmins. Their service was formerly hereditary: the same families served Brahman families for generations and could not change their allegiance without consent from their original masters. Today, individual Konar men, like Adi Dravidas, sometimes become "attached" for a period to a particular Brahman landlord through indebtedness; they borrow money from the landlord and must then work only for him until the debt is repaid. In the old type of service, in which families of Konar and Adi Dravidas worked by hereditary right for Brahman families, the servants were called adirnai (serfs). This word is now seldom heard. A few people, both Konar and Adi Dravida, do however still work from choice for their traditional masters, who distinguish between hereditary servants and hired labourers, and feel greater responsibility for the former, giving them gifts at marriages and sending food during sickness. Hereditary servants are paid at least partly in paddy, which they prefer. An ordinary hired labourer may be paid daily in the same way, or monthly in cash: he is called a pannaiyal (workman).

Konar are also tenants to Brahman landlords, usually to the men whom they serve. The tenure is called kuthakau. An annual rent in paddy is fixed according to the fertility of the soil, and paid in two instalments, after the two harvests in February and October. In a bumper year, the tenant may retain one-third or even half the crop after his rent is paid; in a bad year (like the present one) he may lose all or retain just enough for the next year's seed and cultivation expenses. The landlord may theoretically demand the whole rent in paddy or its equivalent in cash at the controlled price, whatever the harvest, and a very few do so. Most know their tenants' circumstances and give small concessions...
in a bad harvest. Always, however, the power of eviction puts the tenant at his landlord's mercy. A few fields in Kumbapettai are given on _varam_ tenure. The tenant takes a fixed fraction of the crop, usually one-fifth, and surrenders the rest to the owner. Though unprofitable, the tenure is a more certain one for the tenant in a bad year, and with the recent succession of poor harvests some tenants have come to prefer it.

Also in the Konar streets live the village servant castes: one family each of barbers, washermen, carpenters and blacksmiths, and three of potters. These all intermarry and interdine only in their own castes, and so have links with other villages. Formerly, all landlords and tenants paid them twice annually in paddy; today, they are often paid in cash after each job of work.

These non-Brahman streets are traditional in the village, but two other streets of non-Brahmans have grown up in the past fifty years. They live on the eastern boundary of the village, on a tract of garden land once granted as _inam_ to a Mahratta servant of the Rajas. The Mahratta family lost its wealth during British rule and sold the land fifty years ago to rising non-Brahman families from other villages. These now include six houses of Nadar, a "low" non-Brahman caste of toddy-tappers; five houses of Kallar, paddy merchants; a poor Brahman family who have set up a "hotel"; and single houses of Maharrats, Parayas, and Konars from the Kallars and Kumbapettai who serve Brahmans or outside landlords for a monthly wage in cash. Both Kallar and Nadar lease some land from the Brahmans, but families of both also now own a few acres of their own, and lease other land from Muslim traders of the nearby town who have recently bought land from emigrating Brahman households. The Nadars before prohibition tapped toddy and still work as coolies, for a wealthy trader of their own caste some six miles away; while the Kallar depend mainly for their living on transporting the landlords' paddy to a rice-mill, three miles away, whence the rice is passed on to the district supply office. These two streets of newcomers, only partly integrated in the village economy, will be seen to be important when we consider trends of change in Kumbapettai.

Finally, half a mile south across paddy fields, lies a large Adi Dravidia, street of about eighty houses. These are the Pallas, a caste of _adimali_ (serfs) who were formerly "owned" by the landlords. Today, they too lease _kathakai_ lands and work in the paddy fields for a daily wage, in some cases for their traditional masters. Unlike the Konar, they were traditionally prohibited from entering the Brahman street, and none do so today. Conversely, Brahmins may not enter the Adi Dravidia street; to do so would, it is believed, bring misfortune on its inhabitants. Also in the south is a small street of Parayas, the "lowest" Adi Dravidia caste whose traditional work is to remove and sell the carcases of dead animals and to watch over the cremation grounds at night. Parayas, like Pallas, work for day wages in the fields, though, unlike Pallas, they are not "attached" to particular families of Brahmans.

Having outlined the caste groups, we may see where lie the most fundamental unities and the cleavages within the village structure. Most striking in a Tanjore village is the unity of the individual caste group: this was usually, until recently, the unity of a single street. The members of a caste within one village are first united by similarity of occupation, of rights in the land, of income, and of ritual beliefs and practices. Formerly, all the Brahmans were _mirasdars_, all the Konar _kathakai_ tenants, and all the Adi Dravidas, landless labourers. The non-Brahmans are set off from the Brahmans by numerous differences of custom, chief of which are that Brahmans, unlike most non-Brahmans, eschew meat, fish and eggs, and do not perform animal sacrifices in temples. We have already mentioned the Brahmanical temples; these, now officially open to all castes, are still almost exclusively used by Brahmans, though non-Brahmans (but not Adi Dravidas) occasionally enter the outer court at a festival of the Sanskrit deities. The Konar have their own village goddess ( _grama devata_ ) housed in a shrine between the Konar streets. Her name means "Konar mother of the village"; she is outside the Brahmanical pantheon of deities; and she is propitiated daily by a non-Brahman priest and annually, with sacrifices, at a festival peculiar to Konar. The Pallas, similarly, have a shrine to the goddess Kali amman which stands at the end of their street.

Only they may worship her, and she has a separate priest and annual festival.

Other ritual symbols and institutions emphasize the unity of the caste. Brahmans possess a single cremation ground; Konar now share theirs with the other incoming non-Brahman castes; and both Pallas and Parayas have their separate burial grounds. Bathing pools, again, are distributed between the three major groups of castes. Births, marriages, deaths, and propitiations through witch women may pass messages to each other.

Caste unity, and the authoritarian role of the landlords, appears again in village administration. The village forms a local revenue unit under a village headman appointed by government. The headman must collect the revenue from _mirasdars_, and has the right to try small civil cases within the village. He is assisted by a clerk, and commands the services of two revenue collectors and a peon. Theoretically, these officials may be of any caste; actually, of course, the headman and clerk are Brahmans and the three servants, non-Brahmans. In addition, the village forms a _panchayat_ under an elected _panchayat_ board with a president and seven members. The board control a hind derived from a small portion of the village revenue; their chief work is to maintain roads and wells. As might be expected, all are Brahmans, since Brahmans own the land of the village. The relatively modern institutions of village headman and _panchayat_ board have, in fact, been welded into a much older form of administration which is still of great importance. With the exception of the Brahmans, each caste street annually elects two headman ( _nattu nekkar_ or _talavai_ ) who are responsible for maintaining order in the street. Any offence such as theft, adultery, assault, or encroachment on another's land, demands the attention of the head-
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men, who haul the culprit before an assembly of men of the street. Pallas hold their meetings before the Kaliamman shrine; Konar, in the yard of the village goddess temple. If the offence is slight, the headmen may pronounce justice, themselves administering a fine or a public whipping. In a more serious dispute, the Brahman landlords of the culprits must be called to ratify the headmen's conclusions and themselves execute judgment. In particular, any dispute affecting the reputation of the general peace of the village requires Brahman intervention. In a recent case, a Palla stole a brass vessel from the non-Brahman street of a neighbouring village. Having caught him, the owner sent him bound and escorted by two Pallas of the offended village, back to his own landlord for justice. The Brahman landlord of our Palla called a meeting of the thief's caste fellows in the yard of the village goddess temple. There he elicited the facts of the case, exacted a fine of Rs 10, administered a whipping, and obliged the culprit to drink a pot of cowdung mixed with water, "to humble him", as he said. The whole caste group retired, satisfied that justice had been done. The Brahmanse themselves have no headmen, and rely less on arbitrators to settle their private disputes. This is in keeping with their position of authority in the village and with the fact that in general, Brahmanes admit no superiors and pay less formal respect to their elders within the caste. It is difficult to say how Brahman disputes are settled. A few go now to the urban courts; many drag on for months, kept in check by the need to maintain Brahman unity and authority before the lower castes, until at last the ritual obligations of kinship force the opponents to co-operate.

In a Tanjore village, the unity of the caste street overrides the individuality of the dwelling-group, thus contrasting with the situation in a Malabar village. There, as Dr Miller has described, the land of a whole village may be owned by a single landlord family, often of the Nambudiri Brahman sub-caste. Among the Nayar landholders of the village, each large matrilineal dwelling group stands supreme in its ancestral garden, shut in by walls or hedges and with its own cremation ground, ancestor shrine, snake-grove, and often, goddess temple. In Tanjore, despite the ownership of land by patrilineal joint-families, the dwelling-group has no such individual strength. Kinship ties, instead of being strongly unilinear, as in Malabar, ramify widely in both paternal and maternal lines; the joint family divides every generation; and the local group of agnatic kin (koottam—comparable to the Nayam matrilineal taravadi) lacks corporate unity and is bound only by the observance of death pollution. Houses and ancestral land are readily bought and sold. The history of land rights in Tanjore villages is relevant to this contrast. For until 1865, the land in mirasi villages was not owned by patrilineal joint-families at all, but held in common by the whole caste group of mirasadars of the village, who periodically apportioned shares by mutual consent for the maintenance of their separate families. In Kumbapettai, this institution persists in the "common lands" and "common money" of the Brahmanes. In the cremation ground, certain threshing grounds, a stretch of garden land, and the fishing rights in their bathing pool all fall under this category, the income derived from these common possessions being devoted to the temple funds. In short, the Hindu joint-family organization appears to be at its weakest in Tanjore, and at its strongest, in Malabar, the reverse being true of the unity of the local caste group. The two areas probably represent the extremes of variability in a basically common South Indian pattern.

As in all Indian villages, however, a unity of the whole village overrides the separateness of each caste. The basis of this unity is the economic interdependence of landlords, tenants, labourers and village servants, and its perpetuation, in my view, depends on the maintenance of these economic arrangements. In everyday life, this unity of the village is hidden beneath the separate economic, social and ritual activities of each caste and each dwelling-group; it is sometimes temporarily rent by quarrels between individuals or between kin-groups. Periodically, however, some event, ceremonial or haphazard, occurs at which the unity of the village is affirmed. Such events always relate to the welfare of the village as a whole rather than of any single part of it. Concern for the welfare of the village is expressed in the institution of the grama devata or village deity. This deity is always primarily a possession of the non-Brahmans of the village: in Kumbapettai, the goddess is herself a Konar woman who died of small-pox, and the temple priest is a non-Brahman. But besides being a deity of the Konar, propitiated by them at their own annual festival, the goddess commands the allegiance of both Brahmanes and Adi Dravidas at specific times of the year. Her shrine stands on a boundary of the village and her idol is believed to protect the whole community from crop-failure, infectious diseases, female barrenness and deaths in child-birth. Households of all castes propitiate her, in terms of their particular ritual idioms, in cases of insanity, barrenness or disease. By far the chief event in the village calendar is the larger, fifteen day festival to the goddess celebrated by the whole village in the summer season. At this festival, the image of the deity is nightly taken in procession throughout the streets of the village and propitiated in every street in a manner peculiar to the caste. As in all parts of South India, the village temple festival dramatizes the separateness and also the interdependence between castes and the need for their co-operation. Of recent years, since newcomers of diverse non-Brahman casts came to Kumbapettai, there have been disputes concerning precedence in the rites. These once settled, the rank of a particular family in the town village structure becomes publicly accepted.

Other events and festivals unite the village as a whole. Chief of these are Pongal, the annual festival for the harvest of the second crop in January, and the day of the first ceremonial ploughing, at the start of the Tamil New Year. It is interesting to note that fights between neighbouring villages often take place on one or another of these festival days, thus further reinforcing the unity of the village as a whole. Spectators from neighbouring villages, coming to watch the fun after their own celebrations are over, or if their own take place on another day, have several times recently fallen foul of Kumbapettai non-Brahmanes and Adi Dravidas, so that a pitched battle with stones and staffs resulted. The ability to mass forces against interfering outsiders is a measure of the unity and self-sufficiency of the village. So, too, is the degree to which crime and scandal are kept
within the confines of the village. Until recently, the police had little part to play in Kumbapettai, for the village was united against outside legal interference. Two murders and three suicides have, in the past fifteen years, been disposed of and hushed up by village authorities, the police being quietly bribed and sent about their business.

The stability of the traditional village organization may be seen as a balancing out of various unities and antagonisms which cut across each other. We have mentioned the unity and separateness of the local caste group, and this, no doubt, has always been accompanied by a certain antagonism between the three major groups of castes—an antagonism always engendered by differences of wealth, of custom, and of interests in the economic: resources. But this antagonism could not, traditionally, break out into a quarrel between two whole groups of castes. Non-Brahmans could not, for example, rise up as a body and combat their Brahman landlords. There are several reasons for this, the chief being the lack of economic corporateness of each caste group. Konar and Adi Dravidas were employed not as whole castes, by all the Brahmans collectively, but in separate families, by individual families of landlords. The system of tenure, and the landlord's traditionally recognized power of eviction, keeps the separate families of non-Brahmans competing amongst each other for land and for employment. Perhaps a more important factor was the sanction given to the traditional rights between castes by ritual beliefs and by moral maxims acceptable to the society as a whole. It is these beliefs, together with their continued economic dependence on the Brahmans, which even today prevent Adi Dravidas from entering the Brahman street and temples, lest the deity should take vengeance on them in the form of disease or death.

As long as the system remained stable, therefore, it seems as though, in spite of covert antagonism between people of different castes, that is between the members of groups of different order in the society, open quarrels demanding united action on the part of the group could take place only between groups of the same order—for example between branches of the same joint-family, joint-families of the same caste-group, between all non-Brahmans or all Adi Dravidas of adjacent villages. Such quarrels are still common, and cut across, and therefore weaken, the cleavages between castes in the village. Even today, indeed, when the system is far from stable and antagonisms between castes have deepened, it is possible to find two Brahman landlords dragged into opposite sides of a quarrel which began between their Adi Dravida servants. So strong, still, are the traditional feudal obligations and loyalties between individual families of different castes.

Today, however, the village structure presents no longer a nice balance of unities and antagonisms between caste and kinship groups in a self-sufficient little republic. For obviously, the economic basis of the system has been fundamentally upset within the last fifty to seventy years. It is impossible to enumerate all the ways in which this has happened, but we may mention a few. Most important in Kumbapettai is the departure to urban work of a large number of Brahman families and individuals. A few of these have sold their lands to middle-class trading families of the nearby town; the majority leave their empty houses locked and return after each harvest to collect their rents, now in cash. Many of these men will return to Kumbapettai on retirement from a government post; some, after more than half a lifetime away in the towns of South India, have already done so. One result is that the number of competent young or middle-aged Brahman men left to manage; the affairs of Kumbapettai is very few, while those who do remain tend to feel inferior and swamped by their more adventurous kinsmen. Relations between absentee landlord and tenant are unsatisfactory. Often, the landlord barely knows his tenants by name and knows nothing about their circumstances or the business of cultivation. Often his only interest in the village is to take away money from it twice a year. A few landlords of Kumbapettai do not know the site and acreage of their lands. Among both Adi Dravidas and the poorer Konar tenants it is beginning to be said in secret that such owners have no right to their lands; since, as Brahmans, they no longer spend their lives in praying for the community and administering its affairs, they should no longer share its income. To this the Brahmans reply that without urban work they can no longer maintain their standard of living; and this, considering the increase in population and the small size of holdings, is indeed usually true. The bad harvests of the last few years have of course exacerbated the opposition between landlord and tenant. One temporary solution would seem to lie in fixity of tenure and the fixing of fairer rents; but there is no doubt that absentee landlordism and the tendency (less in Kumbapettai than in some other villages) towards the amassing of large estates by a few landlord families, must soon be checked by more drastic remedies.

A stronger blow has been dealt at the Kumbapettai social system by the influx, in the last fifty years, of the two new streets of mixed non-Brahman castes. These, owing no traditional allegiance to the Brahmans, tend to resent their authority and to set up an administration of their own. In one street, the Nadar have founded a shrine to a local non-Brahman sanyasi, and recently assemblies of the two new streets, and sometimes also of the Konar, have met to settle their disputes before this shrine rather than before the village goddess temple, and have declined to call in Brahmans to ratify their judgments. The standard of living of the families in these two streets, partly employed as they are in trade and by landlords from outside the village, tends to be higher than that of other non-Brahmans and allows them to dictate terms to the local landlords. The Kallar middle-class family, in particular, have become powerful non-Brahman leaders: though hand-in-glove with the landlords in the sale of black-market rice, this rising middle-class family refuse to observe all the old rules of ritual pollution with their employers; one of their sons, together with two other non-Brahman hoyos of incoming families, attends high school with the Brahman youths.

It is important to notice that the people who oppose the traditional village system are not those who suffer most acutely under it, but those who have partly extricated themselves from it through some change in their economic circumstances. It is not, for example, the very poor Konar tenants in Kumbapettai who support the anti-Brahman Dravida Kazakam movement, but rather the somewhat wealthier and more independent "upstarts" of the two new streets, and to a much larger
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ORISSA was formed into a separate province in 1936, a year before the introduction of provincial autonomy. The territories constituting the province were carved out of the provinces of Bihar and Orissa, Madras and the Central Provinces. As distant corners and tail ends of the provinces concerned, these areas had long been neglected and their administrative development starved. The newly created province came into existence as a particularly undeveloped administrative unit. Bihar and Orissa was the poorest province in India, where the scale of public expenditure was the lowest. On account of its poverty, this province was exempted, under the Meston settlement, from making any contribution to the central revenue.

Of this poor province, the Orissa portion was much the poorer and less developed. It was essential to appreciate the position in order to determine the treatment to be accorded to Orissa. Given the opportunity of shaping her own destiny, Orissa was faced with the enormous task of making up the leeway. Her poverty and undeveloped economy elicited sympathy from time to time; but she did not receive the requisite assistance necessary for her development.

For appreciating the financial position of Orissa, it is necessary to appraise how she fared with the Niemeyer Award. Sir Otto Niemeyer was appointed to conduct an enquiry with regard to any special assistance needed by any province and the time and manner of distributing the provincial share of income-tax. It had been recognised that at the inauguration of provincial autonomy, each of the provinces was to be so equipped as to enjoy a reasonable prospect of maintaining financial equilibrium. It was particularly important to bring to an end the chronic state of deficits into which some of them had fallen. The Niemeyer Award was determined on the basis of these short period considerations of balancing the budgets more or less on the levels existing at the time.

Under the Niemeyer Award, 62½ per cent of the jute export duties was assigned to the provinces. This was intended to provide a special assistance to Bengal on account of her financial difficulties. Assam, Bihar and Orissa received small shares as minor jute-growing provinces. Orissa's share amounted to about 2 lakhs of rupees in the first year of autonomy; but thereafter till the end of war, it seldom reached even one lakh a year. There was no doubt considerable, increase after the war; but the amount was so small that it had scarcely any significance in Orissa's finance.

The distribution of 50 per cent of the proceeds of income-tax among the provinces was of outstanding importance in the Niemeyer Award. The distribution was determined on the basis of residence and population, and of the provincial share, 2 per cent was assigned to Orissa on this basis. Before the war, the amount distributed was exceedingly small and Orissa's share did not exceed 3 lakhs of rupees. But owing to the war-time expansion of income-tax revenue, the provincial share rose to 29 crores and Orissa received 58 lakhs in the last year of the war.

Of fundamental importance to Orissa was the annual subvention of 40 lakhs granted to her under the Award. Niemeyer was impressed with the crying needs of Orissa. It was impossible to ignore the fact, he remarked, that the existing standard of expenditure in Orissa was exceedingly low. But in recommending the subvention he did not take all the relevant factors into consideration. It is indeed unfortunate that when financial settlements were made, policies were revised in the light of experience and circumstances, but the basis of these settlements was never changed. In 1935, before the creation of the province of Orissa, budgets for Orissa were framed in parts in the three provinces of Bihar and Orissa, Madras and C.P. and the deficit was estimated to be 40 lakhs. This was clone at a time when the central and the provincial governments were carrying out retrenchment and ruling out all schemes of new expenditure. The three provinces concerned had no interest in the new province to be created and the financial position was not given proper consideration. Above all, the province had yet to come into