VILLAGE STRUCTURE IN NORTH KERALA

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(The material on which this article is based, was collected during fieldwork in Malabar District and Cochin State from October 1947 to July 1949).

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prefaced his excellent article on 'The Social Structure of a Mysore Village,' published in The Economic Weekly of October 30, 1951, with an account of the chief types of village organization in India. Although the presence of caste probably reduces the possible types to a finite number, local variations in the caste system, in the proportion of the non-Hindu population, in economy, in topography, and in other factors, have all contributed to produce considerable differences in different regions. Prominent among the factors that have distinguished the Malabar Coast from the rest of India in this respect are its relative isolation between the Western Ghats and the sea, its unique and formerly very strong gradation of castes, and its division into powerful, if fluid, chieftoms, some of which survive vestigially today.

Even within the area, the manner in which village communities are organized varies considerably between one locality and the next. No attention is paid in this article to the many predominantly Muslim (Mappila) communities in the southern taluks of Malabar district, nor to the villages in Travancore arid Cochin where Syrian Christians are in a majority. These require separate treatment. Despite the uniform administration through village officials which has been superimposed over the whole of Malabar district and Cochin State, with but minor discrepancies, there nevertheless remain appreciable variations in structure even among overwhelmingly Hindu villages. An attempt is made here to provide a general picture of village structure in North Kerala, rather than to concentrate on the detailed organization of a single village.

A broad distinction may be drawn between the northern part of Malabar district (briefly referred to as North Malabar) on the one hand, and Cochin State together with the southern taluks of Malabar district (South Malabar) on the other. This is partly connected with the formerly greater autonomy of local chieftains and headmen in the north, where the terrain is more hilly and the villages more scattered and isolated, in contrast to the thicker settlement of the rice-growing areas in the south. The southern village is often another of houses and trees surrounded by a "sea" of paddy. In the north the paddy-fields more frequently resemble lakes or rivers—indeed they often tend to be long narrow strips, irrigated from a central stream, with the houses hidden among the trees on the surrounding slopes.

Instead of living huddled in a street, as so many other Indians do, the Malayali prefers the privacy of his own fenced compound, at a distance from his neighbours. The density of palm trees, plantains, and other vegetation often renders one house invisible from the next. In localities where paddy-fields are low, settlement of this kind may be continuous for miles in one direction or another, with no obvious territorial boundaries to individual villages. Even the poorest household of the lowest caste lives a little apart from his neighbours and kin, though often on a perimeter of the village or close to the fields. With this exception, settlement is usually haphazard, with no special tendency for houses of a particular caste to cluster together.

It is necessary here to give some account of the more important caste divisions of North Kerala. Of the four varnas there are practically no Kshatriyas and few, if any, indigenous Vaisya castes: the bulk of the population comprises Sudras and untouchables.

Nambudiri Brahmins are a small but important patrilineal (makkathayam) caste at the top of the Hindu scale. Titularly the priests of the community, many of them are also wealthy landlords. Ranking ritually below them, but economically as powerful or more so, are various chieftain castes who are marumakkathayam, reckoning descent through the female line. One or two of them claim Kshatriya rank and precedence among them is constantly in dispute. All of them, separately and together, are normally exogamous, giving their women in marriage to Nambudiris while their men take wives from Nayars—the large patriarchal group of castes which form, so to speak, the middle-class backbone of the society. Traditionally soldiers, and today often in government service, the Nayars are primarily farmers. Ranking slightly above Nayars are some small castes of temple servants. The lowest Nayar sub-castes are washermen and barbers for all higher groups.

All these are caste-Hindus, and from the chieftain castes down all are Sudras. This latter group shares what is in many respects a common culture, made the more uniform by the system of hypergamy, by which men of the higher castes and sub-castes took wives from groups below them a practice now being superseded by a greater degree of endogamous marriage. The marriage links of the chieftain castes (and sometimes of the superior Nayars) with the Nambudiris forged some kind of unity among all caste-Hindus.

Nayars comprise about one quarter of the Hindu population, and the other caste-Hindus less than ten per cent: the remaining two-thirds are polluting castes. These fall into two broad groups. The upper group includes a populous caste of labourers and small tenants, known, in different regions, as Tiyyas or Iravas, together with lesser castes of carpenters, smiths, physicians, washermen, etc. Below these are many inferior polluting castes of basket-makers, cobblers, and other artisans, musicians, devil-dancers, beggars, and, most numerous, landless labourers who were formerly agrastic serfs.

Within the village, caste rank was and still is closely correlated with relationship to the land, especially paddy-land. In North Malabar the headman family of the village sometimes still remains the chief land-owner, while in the south the landlord may more often be a Nambudiri or a temple devaswam, in which case the headman family will have some freehold fields and hold the rest as a tenant. Although the headman family may till more than enough land for its own needs, the bulk of it is parcelled out among tenants, who may cultivate it themselves or sub-lease it yet again. Nam-
budiris and chieftain, castes tend to be land-owners; the higher Nayar sub-castes are either land-owners or non-cultivating tenants ("customary kanamadars"); the inferior Nayars and some Tiyyas are cultivating sub-tenants, either on permanent leases ("cultivating kanamadars") or on annual leases (verrumpattamdars); the majority of upper polluting castes are landless labourers; while the lower polluting castes were until recently serfs, tied to a particular block of land, and, if the land was transferred, themselves automatically transferred to the new owner.

Since, in a village there were: scarcely any families which, at some time of the year, did not have a connection with the land even if it only to supply supplementary labour for the harvest, this relationship to the land of the various social groupings was an important expression of their differential rank. The society also provided more detailed criteria of a ritual and occupational nature, which clarified the rank of each caste in relation to all others of the locality. Disputes over precedence between castes within a village are a novelty: formerly there existed no opportunity for social relations (except warlike relations) between individuals of castes whose mutual rank and corresponding behaviour were not accurately predetermined.

The village, containing a cross-section of interdependent castes (usually between 15 and 25)), was more or less self-subsistent. The local members of each caste were united by kinship bonds. In spite of the hypergamy already mentioned, they were mainly endogamous. Each had its own internal administration under its more prominent elders, and in extent this organization was usually co-terminous with the village, unless local membership of the caste was very small or very large. There was often a Nambudiri family which provided priests for the local temple, but it was the Nayar caste which held the political authority and economic control. The hereditary village headship normally belonged to the wealthiest Nayar family (which was often of a slightly higher sub-caste than the others), and while all castes had some, kind (A authority over those below them) it was the Nayar caste which was most concerned in maintaining local law and order.

Villages were grouped into petty states under higher chieftains, and these in turn often owed allegiance to most important rulers, such as the Maharaja of Cochin and the Zamo- rin of Calicut. The size and importance of any territorial unit, from village upwards, was reckoned in terms of the number of able-bodied Nayar warriors it could supply. The ritual authority of Nambudiri Brahmans (who were partly superior to terrestrial divisions) and the political authority of kings and chieftains acted as a check on each other. The Nayas, by the possibility of transferring allegiance to another ruler, could prevent chieftains from becoming too autocratic; but it was very seldom that the Nayar assemblies even threatened to apply this sanction.

The main structural cleavages were between territorial units villages, chiefdoms, kingdoms- not between castes. Inter-caste relations were, on the contrary, of a complementary nature, involving traditionally ordained and clear-cut rights and obligations, authority and sub-ordination, juridical authority neatly coincided with political authority and economic power, and the political and juridical authority of headmen and chieftains was also buttressed ritually by trusteeship of the chief temples in their area, and in certain other ways.

The village was the desam; the headman was the desavari. In the south the authority of the desavari was somewhat curtailed by the strength of the Nayar assemblies, since he could take no action of which they disapproved without losing the allegiance of arms on which his position so greatly depended. He was to some extent primus inter pares. Though he was in charge of administering the village temple, it was only as chairman of a committee of hereditary trustees, also generally Nayars. Administration of justice consisted mainly in ratifying decisions of Nayar elders. Every caste in the village, as we have seen, had some sort of internal organization through which internal disputes could be settled. In the lowest castes of serfs this was often inadequate, since then- were and there remain cleavages between local factions owing allegiance to different landholders. Within the village there was a constant tendency for disputes unsettled inside the caste to be referred upwards to a caste higher in the scale. The large Tiyya caste had some responsibility for maintaining law and order among the lower castes and a right to interfere in their disputes. The Tiyya elder of the village had to be present at weddings in the artisan castes and he or his representative had to accompany the marriage process if it went to another village. Individual Nayars (perhaps a landlord of one of the disputants) and the desavari, if necessary, arbitrated in cases that Tiyyas failed to settle. Serious punishments such as excommunication required the approval of the desavari (or, where higher castes were involved, of a superior ruler), who was also responsible for seeing that the punishment was properly carried out.

The consistency between this delegation of authority and distance pollution scarcely needs emphasis: whereas Nayars could not inconvenience settle Tiyya disputes at the statutory distance of 24 feet, the dispensation of justice to the lower serf castes at 64 feet would have been a less tractable problem. Approach of the lower castes closer than these distances was, of course, polluting to the Nayars.

Obviously then was scope in such a system for individual acts of oppression: the universal value of the society, that status was to be respected and defended, made them possible. Any sense of injustice, however, was felt only towards the individual who had exceeded his rights and was not extended to a cleavage between castes or between subject and oppressor. As in all hierarchical systems of this kind, what was suffered from a superior could be inflicted on an inferior. An oppressor also had supernatural retribution to fear. Furthermore, the society was united by the common philosophy of dharma, that the greatest good is to behave according to one's station in life. If a man committed adultery with a woman of higher caste, for example, it was a threat to the whole society. His own caste followed disapproved of his (rime- indeed, sin as strongly as the caste of the degraded woman. Excommunication was automatic for both. A family failing to disown such a delinquent member was itself liable to excommunication, but it would seldom refrain from holding the appropriate, death ceremonies to cut off the sinner. In this way, the conservation of the way of life of each caste and of the whole village was a responsibility shared by every individual.
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Since the British took over the administration of Malabar at the end of the eighteenth century, changes (foreshadowed during the Mysorean invasions of the preceding forty years) have been numerous and far-reaching. The large chief-tain families were given political pensions in exchange for their former sovereignty, and the boundaries of their separate temples, accepted leaders, and, in many cases, internally operative caste committees. In Cochin State, where officially the unit is unrecognized, and where an ancient desam may now have been carved into two or three separate villages, this process of fission is often clearer. One desam in central Cochin, for example, had consisted of four hamlets, spread out on the four sides of an important Bhadrakali temple. The whole locality was previously administered by the ecclesiastical commissioners of a larger temple desavari, and for internal administrative purposes a joint committee of Nayars from the desam replaced a desavari. Growth of population, especially in the hamlet nearest to an expanding town, led to fission of the desam into four smaller desams. Each now has its own Nayar committee, and the annual festival at the Bhadrakali temple is organized by each desam in turn, instead of being collectively organized by the four hamlets. Either the incorporation of the four desams as parts of three separate administrative Villages, or their former unity, affects the fact that each is now a separate village community.

In some areas, however, more particularly in North Malabar, either a smaller increase in population, or else surviving power of a hereditary desavari, has hindered the development of modern desams as relatively separate communities. Then the desam, coinciding with a former desavari, remains the social unit, held together by allegiance to the former desavari family in spite of the fissiparous tendencies of the more recently created desams into which it is nowadays divided.

One factor that has operated in many places to keep internal village structure relatively intact, despite sweeping changes in the broader political structure, has been the method of selecting candidates to become adhigari. From the beginning, in addition to their primary duty of collecting revenue, they were empowered to try minor civil and criminal cases. Except where they had been obstructive, or had vanished in the turmoil of the Mysorean invasions and their aftermath, the hereditary desavari of the old system were the obvious candidates for the new posts. In most villages they were given these positions, on the implicit understanding that, subject to good behaviour, the headship would remain vested in the family. Naturally there has been waste, but in many villages the traditional desavari family still supplies the adhigari.

Important differences have arisen between such villages and those where the adhigadi is simply a low-ranking government employee with the appropriate, residential and educational qualifications. In this latter type of village, if the headman family of the old system survives at all it has lost most of the economic and other sanctions behind its former authority and it has gained none of the new ones of such less is of an entity and much more closely caught up in the groupings and cleavages of modern society.

In villages where the modern headship remains vested in the family that held it traditionally, there is a very different picture, more particularly in North Malabar. Certain powerful Nayar joint-families still hold sway over the several modern desams that make up their former single desams. The senior member of such a family is sometimes called the yajaman, or lord. Some of his ritual sanctions have lost their force. Under modern conditions there is less meaning, for example, or to deprive a woman of a custom (a purificatory cloth with which higher caste women are supplied, after menstrual periods, by a low-caste washerwoman). The economic sanctions for his political and juridical authority nevertheless remain, and to these are added the sanctions issuing from his position in the modern administration. He thus derives from two sources downwards from the state and upwards from the village community.

It is his position as landlord, however, which seems to be the most compelling factor in his authority. In such a village the traditional sets of rights and obligations between castes and values of superiority and inferiority based on rank remain strong. The territorial loyalty which unifies the village community there is much more potent than the conflicting modern loyalty to one's own caste over a wider area. The recent tendency elsewhere for lower castes to settle internal disputes internally, and thus to shake off dependence on higher castes, is much less noticeable in such villages: upward refer-
for disputes for settlement is apparently as prevalent as ever and serves to bolster the ascendancy of the adhigari, in particular. And in spite of the strong Hindu-Muslim cleavage in India as a whole, quarrels within a local Muslim minority are not infrequently referred to the yajamanan for mediation.

There is a special interest in this aspect of the yajamanan’s functions. Disputes among Nayars and all lower castes tend to be referred either to leading Nayars or to the headman himself, in his capacity either as yajamanan or as adhigari. Owing to the increasingly circumscribed official authority of the adhigari, and proliferation of his relatively menial duties, the post is now not one that the senior member of a wealthy family is usually willing to hold himself; it might indeed detract from his hereditary prestige. More often, therefore, it is given to a younger member of the family. This man’s status, however, is defined by the villagers in terms rather of his family membership than of his official position, with the anomalous result that, if two disputants bring a case before him and one of them is dissatisfied with the verdict, an appeal is often made not to the next higher civil court but to the yajamanan himself, as senior member of the adhigari’s family.

I have heard such a yajamanan speak as if he felt a moral obligation not to let disputes go outside the village to the courts for settlement. His method, he said, in stubborn cases, was “to induce a spirit of compromise by repeated adjournments.” Settlements achieved within his domain are, of course, a constant implementation of his authority and prestige, and also an addition to his income, since unofficial litigants coming to him always bring gifts in kind. (This tribute is often given too when cases go before the adhigari.) Apart from disputes over property, which form the majority of those which the yajamanan is called upon to settle, cases of assault, malicious damage to crops, trespass, etc., come before him and the fines he exacts often go into his own purse.

The yajamanan still usually has the authority to see that his decisions are carried out and to prevent cases from going to court. Since most disputants are tenants of his own family he can hold the threat of eviction over their heads, while his retainers can resort to force if necessary. Even today pitched battles are occasioned by conflicts between retainers of two yajamanans who both claim suzerainty over a marginal area.

Power of the northern yajaman family is implemented not only by its managing trusteeship of the village temple but by its ownership of a collection of shrines to local deities, whose propitiation often remains the most important local festival of the year. Like temple festivals, these exciting and colourful propitiation ceremonies require active co-operation of a wide range of castes—perhaps twenty from the area of the yajaman’s authority. Certain families have the hereditary duty of supplying participants. Such a yajamanan also retains feudal rights and obligations at minor ceremonies, weddings, and so on.

All over North Kerala, the extent to which the various castes still play their traditional roles at the village temple festival indicates the extent to which the complementary independence of castes survives in the village. Temple entry (dating from 1947 in Malabar district and from 1948 in Cochin State) contradicts the principles of the temple, festival, which was ritually an epiphenomenon of caste interdependence: temple entry gives all castes an equal right to visit all parts of the temple, whereas one of the cardinal functions of the temple festival is to express the differential rank of castes in terms of spatial distance the lowest castes being those furthest removed from the sanctum sanctorum. Even before universal temple entry, however, participation of lower castes in temple festivals had begun to fall off, especially in villages where the upper castes—primarily Nayars—had lost, through excessive partition of joint-family property, their economic ascendancy and corresponding control.

It would nevertheless be difficult to find a village where very many examples of the independence of castes do not survive, not only in its economic but in its more ritual aspects. In spite of district and Kerala-wide organizations of individual castes that have sprung up in recent years to reform internal customs along the lines of all-Indian Hinduism, and, perhaps, to obtain political representation, these practices continue. Convention is too strong to allow them to fall into disuse for many years to come.

Many families are still bound together in their ancient master-servant relationship. In villages near towns, increasing numbers of people have abandoned traditional occupations for labour in industry; but there are few instances of Hindus entering occupations proper to castes other than their own.

Despite population growth and movement every village retains a nucleus of families from all castes who have lived there for time immemorial. Immigrant families, even down to the fifth generation, are remembered as foreigners, though they may have intermarried extensively with native families of their own sub-caste. Partly because of population movements, however, and more especially because of its lack of compactness, the Kerala village is probably a less self-contained entity than its counterparts elsewhere in India.

As Professor Srinivas points out, we must distinguish between the "vertical unity of many castes", which is the village, and the horizontal unity of individual tastes, with affiliations over a wide area. One can picture a vast expanse of Neapolitan ice cream, with its layers of pink, green, white, and yellow! cut into individual portions—the villages, which contain a fair share of each colour.

In Kerala, at least, however, the structure is not quite so simple as that. In a Cochin village, for example, the low caste of Velans may provide washerwomen to launder regularly for Iravas and to supply purificatory cloths (mattu) on special occasions for Nayars. In such a case half-a-dozen Velan families may do the Irava work while two more restrict themselves to serving Nayars. (It is this sort of distinction that could lead to the formation of separate sub-castes.) Alternatively, the family of such a caste may serve only a certain sector of the village. On the other hand, a family of the Kanisan (astrologer) caste might have less than enough work in its own village. A, and be the official astrologer family serving the adjoining village B as well. Basket-making families in B might serve villages A and C in addition to their own. The family of a small sub-caste that cuts hair and assists at funerals of the blacksmith and carpenter castes may well have a clientele in a dozen other villages.

Again, in Cochin, if two Nayars meet as strangers, the regular ques-
tion asked is not "What village do you come from?", but "Whose Nayar are you?". This refers to a special link existing between every Nayar family (at least of the Sudra Nayar sub-caste) and a particular Nambudiri family, to which it owes special services of a semi-ritual nature. Although Nambudiri families often take village names, a Sudra Nayar family may owe obligations to Nambudiris in quite a different village.

The "vertical" system of rights and obligations between castes is therefore not confined to the village. Indeed, this overlapping is probably one of the factors formerly contributing to the unity of the nad (chiefdom).

The horizontal layers of our Neapolitan ice the castes extend over wide areas, sharing a common culture; but previously only Nambudiris and Nayars had any form of organization deployed beyond the nad. Occasionally there was a conference of Nayars of a wider area (perhaps at a trial of strength between Nayars of two chiefdoms). but for the overwhelming majority of castes, the nad was the outside limit of any internal administration, which seldom extended so far. As already mentioned, internal organization of castes over wider regions is a modern phenomenon, and so also is conflict between castes within the village.

We see therefore that village unity in North Kerala is a somewhat nebulous conception. A physical, territorial unity may exist, but it is often not obvious, because of scattered settlement. Close neighbours may belong to different desams, and the modern often arbitrary administrative divisions may mean that a cluster of families on the perimeter of one desam have more social relations in the next desam than in their own. Economic unity may be modified by the extension of caste obligations to several villages or their restriction to a segment of a single village. The amsam, the modern administrative unit, is sometimes co-extensive with a former desam, and if the desavari or yajamanan family remains powerful enough the unit may retain its former political and juridical cohesion. In such cases the blossoming of its modern constituent desams into independent village communities has been inhibited; but more frequently the modern desam has acquired a community life of its own, perhaps focussed on a "great family" and temple which were formerly subordinate to an external desavari. The same considerations apply to the ritual unity of a village: the chief temple festival of the year may be at the desam temple, or it may occur at a temple shared by neighbouring desams.

Thus, although any sociological investigator in Kerala may provisionally take the modern desam as a suitable unit for study, he must examine the scale of social relations of all kinds over a broader area. Whatever internal self-subsistence there may have been in the desams of the eighteenth century and earlier, it is very difficult nowadays in Kerala to point to any unit as a clearly demarcated, coherent, independent village community.