



TRANSFORMATIONS

comparative study of social transformations



CSST
WORKING PAPERS
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor

THE ORIGINAL CASTE: POWER,
HISTORY, AND HIERARCHY
IN SOUTH ASIA

NICHOLAS B. DIRKS

CSST Working
Paper #10

CRSO Working
Paper #367

November 1988

THE ORIGINAL CASTE:
POWER, HISTORY, AND HIERARCHY IN SOUTH ASIA

Nicholas B. Dirks

The University of Michigan

Traditionally, power was what was seen, what was shown and what was manifested and, paradoxically, found the principle of its force in the movement by which it deployed that force. Those on whom it was exercised could remain in the shade; they received light only from that portion of power that was conceded to them, or from the reflection of it that for a moment they carried.

Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, (p. 187)

The Politics of Caste

In pre-colonial Hindu India, the king--both as an historical figure and as a trope for the complex political dynamics underlying the Indian social order--was a central ordering factor in the social organization of caste. This statement directly opposes the prevailing theories of comparative sociology, and in particular the theoretical position of Louis Dumont (1980). As is well known, Dumont holds that the political and economic domains of social life in India are encompassed by the "religious." The religious principle becomes articulated in terms of the opposition of purity and impurity. For Dumont, the Brahman represents the religious principle, inasmuch as the Brahman represents the highest form of purity attainable by Hindus. The king, while important and powerful, represents the political domain, and is accordingly inferior to, and encompassed by, the Brahman.

There are in fact many textual confirmations of the view that Brahmans, and the spiritual authority (brahma) that they possess, are seen as higher, both relationally and ontologically, than kings, and the temporal authority (ksatra) that is theirs. However, these same texts provide evidence as well of what has been called "the central conundrum of Indian social ideology" (Trautmann 1981; also see Heesterman 1978). At times the king is above the Brahman, as for example in the royal consecration ceremony. At other times the Brahman appears to be superior to the king, as for example in the Manu Dharma Sastras, and in passages from the Mahabharata. This conundrum is often addressed in terms of the postulation of two levels of truth, a higher level in which the Brahman is clearly preeminent, the source of everything else, and a lower level in which kings must protect and sponsor Brahmans in order for them to exist, as gods, on earth. Dumont's resolution of this conundrum extends the notion of higher and lower truths from a classically Indic epistemological contextuality to his well known ontological separation of the religious from the political. The major development of political thought in India, he contends, is the secularization of kingship, that is the separation of the magico-religious nature of kingship--preserved in the form of the royal chaplain in particular and in the function of Brahmans in the larger polity more generally--from the political aspects of kingship, depicted, inter alia, in the Machiavellian Arthasastra (Dumont 1962).

While Dumont is not wrong to insist on radical differences in the "ideologies" of India and the West, the irony is that the way in which he postulates difference is based on a fundamentally Western ideology, in which religion and politics must be separated. Dumont's position in many ways caricatures the Orientalist assumption that India is the spiritual east, devoid of history, untouched by the politics of Oriental Despotisms. Critics of Dumont have often accepted his basic epistemological premises, but then reversed them. They take a materialist perspective and view social relations in India in terms of power, pure and simple (e.g., Berreman 1971). Recent work--often by those committed to an ethnosociological approach to the identification and description of cultural domains in India--has suggested that this separation of religion from politics, like many other dichotomies in Western social science, is inappropriate at the level of ideological (or cultural) analysis in Indian social thought (Marriott and Inden 1977; Appadurai 1981; McGilvray 1983; Dirks 1982, 1987). It is in this sense--as also of course in the running critique of Dumont--that the following analysis is ethnosociological.

Not only is there no fundamental ontological separation of a "religious" from a "political" domain, but religious institutions and activities are fundamental features of what we describe here as the political system. Kings derive much of their power from worship, and bestow their emblems and privileges in a cultural atmosphere that is permeated by the language and attitudes of worship. Further, temples are key institutions in the formation

of social communities (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976), even while they reflect structures of power worked out both in and outside their own walls (Dirks 1987). In turn, temples represent the preeminent position of the king by granting him the highest honor in the temple, before even the learned (srotriya) brahman. Religion does not encompass kingship any more than kingship encompasses religion. There are not two distinct forms of power, secular power had by kings and sacred power had by Brahmans. Kings and Brahmans are both privileged but different forms of divinity in a world in which all beings were, however distantly, generated from the same ontological source. And power--whether defined as a constellation of cultural conceits or as an analytic concern--can not be restricted to a single domain of Indian social life.

Dumont has suggested that caste is fundamentally religious, and that religious principles actualize themselves in the domain of purity and pollution. In my ethnohistorical study of a south Indian kingdom in which Kallars were the royal caste and Brahmans were heavily patronized according to scripturally mandated forms of royal gifting activity, I have found that purity and pollution are not the primary relational coordinates which endow hierarchy with its meaning and substance. Royal honor (*mariyatai*, *antastu*) combined with the notions of restriction, command, and order (*kattupatu*, *atikaram*, *orunku*) are the key discursive components which are embedded in and productive of the nature and order of hierarchical relations.

My analysis will, I hope, do more than simply contest Dumont over the issue of which key terms underlie the structural logic of hierarchy in South Asia. Indeed, I wish to reintroduce concerns with power, hegemony, and history into studies of culturally constructed structures of thought, whether structuralist or ethnosociological. The forms and relations of power in southern India efface our social scientific distinctions of materialist etics from culturalist emics, for even the domain of ritual action and language suggests the complex and conjunctural foundations of hierarchical relations. At least this is true among the Kallars of Pudukkottai, less affected perhaps than most other groups by colonialism and the demise of the old regime in the nineteenth century. For the concerns of comparative sociology are not only the products of a nineteenth century Orientalism, but also of the colonial intervention that removed the politics from society and created a contradictory form of civil society--with caste its fundamental institution--in its place. It was not only convenient to render caste independent of political variables, but necessary to do so in order to rule an immensely complex society by a variety of indirect means. Colonial sociology represented the eighteenth century as decadent, and all legitimate Indian politics as past. Under colonialism, caste was appropriated, and in many respects reinvented, by the British. However, the British were able to change caste because caste continued to be permeable to political influence. Ethnohistorical reconstruction is thus important not only for historians confronting new problems of data and

analysis, but for anthropologists who confront in their fieldwork a social system that was decapitated by colonial rule.

Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom

The Kallars, like the Maravars, settled in mixed economy zones (Ludden 1985) such as Pudukkottai on the borders of the central political and economic regions of the south. In these areas they quickly attained dominance in late medieval times by exercising rights of protection (patikkaval) over local communities and institutions. The Kallars were successful in this role because their strongly kin and territory based social structure and cultural valuation of heroism and honor were highly conducive to the corporate control of the means of violence and coercion. It was no accident that Kallars, like Maravars, were often, when not granted rights of protection, the very groups from which others sought protection.

The Tondaiman dynasty of Kallar kings wrested control over a significant swath of the Pudukkottai region in central Tamil Nadu in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Whereas Kallars had been branded as thieves in much early Tamil literature and as criminals by the British under the Criminal Tribes Act, in Pudukkottai--a little kingdom that became the only Princely State in the Tamil region of southern India--they became the royal caste. Kallars controlled much of the land, occupied the greatest number of authoritative positions, particularly as village and locality headmen and as miracidars, and ran the most important temples as trustees. These temples were often their

lineage, village, or subcaste-territorial (natu) temples, in which they received honors only after the king and Brahmans. In short, Kallars were dominant not only in terms of their numbers, but for economic, political, and ritual reasons.

Pudukkottai, which at its most extensive did not exceed 1200 square miles, was located in an exclusively rain-fed agricultural zone right in the middle of the Tamil speaking region of southern India, straddling the boundary between what had been the two great medieval Tamil kingdoms. Ruled by Kallar kings, it provides an excellent place to test many of the proposals of Dumont, who, before he shaped the concerns of much contemporary Indian anthropology in his general proposals in this journal and in Homo Hierarchicus, portrayed Kallars in his major ethnographic work in India as a ritually marginal group that exemplified the Dravidian isolation of kinship from the influence of caste hierarchy. But in Pudukkottai, less than one hundred miles north of where Dumont conducted his fieldwork, Kallars were kings; they exercised every conceivable kind of dominance and their social organization reflects this fact.

Pudukkottai rose, as did other little kingdoms throughout southern India, within the context of a late medieval Hindu political order. In both its emergence to and its maintenance of power, it exemplified the social and military vitality of certain productively marginal areas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period that has commonly been characterized as one of decline and decadence. But the eighteenth century was not the "black century:" the decentralization of political forms neither

a condemnation of the capabilities of the Indian state nor a natural prelude to British colonial rule. The British conquest of the little kings in the south was anything but absentminded, and there are indications not only that the economy was buoyant in part because of the active court centres ruled by these little kings, but that small and local level states were learning the political, military, and administrative lessons that the French and the English were learning at the same time. But win the British did, and thus their version of the eighteenth century has collaborated with a subsequent neglect of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Western and Indian historians to provide the grist for comparative sociology's Indian mill.

Colonialism purposefully preserved many of the forms of the old regime, nowhere more conspicuously than in the indirectly ruled Princely States. But these forms were frozen, and only the appearances of the old regime (without its vitally connected political and social processes) were saved. Colonialism changed things both more and less than has commonly been thought. While introducing new forms of civil society and separating these forms off from the colonial state, colonialism also arrested some of the immediate disruptions of change by preserving many elements of the old regime. But by freezing the wolf in sheep's clothing it changed things fundamentally. Paradoxically, colonialism seems to have created much of what is now accepted as Indian "tradition," including an autonomous caste structure with the Brahman clearly at the head, village based systems of exchange, isolated ceremonial residues of the old regime state, and

fetishistic competition for ritual goods that no longer played a vital role in the political system.

In my research on Pudukkottai, it took little study of local land records to uncover the most surprising historical characteristic of the political system: how little of the land was taxed. According to mid-nineteenth century records, less than thirty percent of the cultivated land was either taxed (9%) or given out from year to year on a share basis (18%) in which one ninth of the produce was accorded to village servants and four ninths each to the cultivator and the government. Seventy percent of the cultivated land was inam, or tax-free. This mid nineteenth century statistic was if anything far higher in the eighteenth century, when there were at the very least another five thousand military inams, i.e. forty percent more than the total number of inams in the mid nineteenth century, before the gradual dismantlement of the military system of the state. Roughly thirty percent of the inams (numbers of inam units rather than acreage) were for military retainers, their chiefs, and for palace guards and servants; twenty five percent were for village officers, artisans, and servants; and the remaining forty five percent were for the support of temples, monasteries, rest and feeding houses for Brahman priests and pilgrims, and land grants to Brahman communities. In terms of acreage, roughly nineteen percent of the alienated land was for military retainers et. al., seven percent for village officers, artisans, and servants, fifty one percent for temples, monasteries, and charities, and twenty two percent for Brahmans. Remember that these statistics reflect

a demilitarized political system, so that both the numbers and percentages had earlier been far higher for military categories. Remember also that this particular kingdom was ruled over by kings of what have been said by most observers to be an unclean caste, inappropriate for Hindu kingship, and therefore inappropriate donors for Sanskritic temples and Brahmans.

This structure of privileged landholding reflects the structure of political power and socio-cultural participation within state and village institutions. The chief landholders were the great Kallar Jagirdars and Cervaikarars. The former were collateral relations of the Raja. Jagir estates were created for the two brothers of the Raja after a succession dispute in 1730 severely threatened the stability of the state. These collateral families kept these estates intact until their settlement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Jagirs were, in effect, mini kingdoms in their own right, each containing a small court and a full set of inam grants, including "military ones." Importantly, however, the jagirs were not made up of contiguous villages and were therefore never geographically isolable units.

Just below the Jagirdars came the Cervaikarars. All but one of the Cervaikarars were of the same subcaste as the Raja, and most had one or more affinal ties with the royal family. The Cervaikarars were given large grants of land, titles, honors, and emblems. Each of the Cervaikarars was awarded a specified number of retainers, or amarakarars, to serve them at home, to go to battle with them abroad, and to carry their honors and emblems to

ritual occasions in the royal court and in temples. Lesser chiefs, called Kurikarars, came from Kallar subcastes other than royal one. Lands and privileges throughout the state were also given to other Kallars, called in diminutive form Cervais, to keep watch over villages and localities not dominated by loyal Kallars (i.e., all groups other than the Vicenki Nattu Kallars who were only finally brought under nominal control in a series of wars in the late eighteenth century). The Cervais were mostly members of the royal subcaste who had no affinal ties with the royal family.

The royal family and court was itself protected by Uriyakarars, all of whom were Akampatiyars, members of a non Kallar caste which was aligned with the Kallars through membership in a special metacaste of three warrior groups along with the Maravars called the mukkulattur. These royal protectors in fact became a separate subcaste marked off terminologically and affinally from other Akampatiyars in the region by virtue of their connection with and service to the Raja. A number of Uriyakarar chiefs had a prominent role in the kingdom. Like most of the lesser chiefs, these chiefs were given extensive lands but no formal group of military retainers under them.

In addition, within each village in the state, headmen were given lands in recognition of their rights to local authority as well as to render this representative of the state's power at large. These headmen came from the locally dominant castes. Kallars were dominant in the northern and eastern parts of the state. Maravars had a significant presence in the south.

Ampalams (the title for headman, literally meaning the central common ground of the village, used by most of the castes in Pudukkottai) were also called miracidars after the mid-eighteenth century. This new label, borrowed from Persian revenue terminology, was used in an attempt to render local authority as dependent as possible on recognition by the "bureaucratic" state. Nonetheless, well into the twentieth century these local headmen were often as powerful as small kings, with retinues and legends sufficient to cause their power to be felt over significant areas of the countryside.

Various village officials, artisans, and servants were also given inam (more properly maniyam) lands by the state. In addition to this land, each village servant was also rewarded with shares of the village grain heap. Since the one-ninth share of the harvest that was owed to village servants was taken from the grain heap before its division into the Raja's and the village's share, this classic jajmani payment was borne equally by the village and the Raja. Thus, the sets of relations usually characterized as jajmani, that is as an institution of the village community alone, were sanctioned and underwritten not only by the community but also by the king both through inams and the share system.

Maniyam, the term used for many village grants, meant land that was held free of tax, as well as privilege in a more general sense. Maniyam derives from the Sanskrit manya, which means honor and privilege. Many of the land grants to Brahmans were called carvamaniyam, meaning completely tax free and honorable.

However, the term maniyam was not reserved for Brahmans, as British categories which separated "religious" from "nonreligious" grants implied. Indeed, in its most unmarked form maniyam was sometimes used for inams in general. Maniyam was also used in a more marked sense for land grants given to village servants whose task was to maintain and operate irrigational facilities, to village officers or headmen, to the pujaris or priests of small village temples or shrines, and to inamdars (holders of inams) who had such variable responsibilities as blowing the conch for a village festival or tending a flower garden which produced garlands of the village deities. These maniyams reveal that royal grants sustained the entire structure of local village ritual.

Even small locality temples were linked to the king through the inam. These local temples organized the ritual systems of villages, often constituting some of its fundamental cultural coordinates as well: they demarcated boundaries, centers, the relationships of social groups within the village, defining and internally ranking lineages, subcastes, and castes. Service to the temple was in many respects structurally equivalent to service to the village community, even as most village service inams specified services to both temples and the village, as suggested for Sri Lanka as well in the work of Hocart, who saw each village service group as a priesthood, and thus saw caste as an institution that was simultaneously political and religious.

In addition to many inams granted to village and local temples in the form of maniyams to local priests and village

servants, many inam grants were also made to Brahmans, temples, and charities of various sorts. As is well known, the principal sources for south Indian historiography are epigraphical records of such grants, publically proclaimed because of the merit which accrued to the donors from them and because of the centrality of these gifts to the ideology of kingship. One of the fundamental requirements of Indic kingship was that the king be a munificent provider of fertile lands for Brahmans who would study and chant the Vedas, perform sacrifices and provide ritual services for the king so as to ensure and protect his prosperity and that of his kingdom; for temples which were the centers of worship and for festivals such as Dassara which renewed the sovereignty of the king and regenerated the kingdom; and for cattirams (chatrams, also called choultries, which were feeding, sometimes lodging, houses for pilgrims) which provided sustenance and shelter for itinerant Brahmans and pilgrims. The merit (punyam) of the king who made the grant could be shared by all those who protected the gift, a duty enjoined upon all subsequent kings. In spite of Pudukkottai's marginal social and political position, it was well endowed with temples and brahmanic institutions precisely because of the prevailing force of royal ideology.

The underlying political base of any little kingdom in the old regime was its military capacity. This capacity was in turn based on structures of alliance and command, which were articulated by gifts, privileges of varying kinds, and kinship. No little kingdom could survive if it did not have an efficient system of military mobilization. These systems were organized

around subordinate chieftains, connubial connections, and privileged landholding rather than a centralized or bureaucratically organized system of revenue collection and military rule. Royal grants helped to sustain military organization as well as local village ritual and an impressive complex of larger temples and brahmanic settlements. The political economy (by which I mean here the institution of kingship, the distribution of authority, and the nature and structure of resource allocation) was based on a logic of redistribution that penetrated far and wide.

The gift of land without onerous burdens of taxation, the occasional participation in wars in which honor and booty could be won, and the organization of land and military rights in relations of ritual clientage to chiefly and kingly patrons resulted not only in a political system of great fluidity and dynamism, but one in which individuals could vie for relative distinction in a social system where honor was intimately tied up with rank through interpenetrating forms of political and ritual action. The valued constituents of sovereign authority were differentially and partially shared through the redistributive mechanisms of the gift. Service was offered as a way of entering this redistributive system. Kinship (a relatively open and inflected system) became the social base and expression of social and political relations. Honor, in particular the emblems and privileges that were given with each grant (itself a privilege), but also the honors in temples that were procured through worship and were ordered in relation to local and royal prerogatives, was

both the mediation and the mechanism by and through which relations were established.

Thus I argue that the royal gift was basic to statecraft in all the kingdoms of the old order in southern India. All gifts were not the same; but they all shared one thing in common: they were given by the king. The substance of the gift (the land rights, titles, emblems, honors, and privileges of service, usufruct, and command) was the partial sovereign substance of the king. Participation in the king's sovereignty was not, however, unranked, for the differential nature and contingent character of all these entitlements provided the basis for the creation of a political hierarchy. Ultimately, entitlements by their very nature constituted hierarchy through a logic of variable proximity to the king, to sovereignty itself. What Geertz has written about Bali is true of the old order in south India: "The whole of the negara (court life, the traditions that organized it, the extractions that supported it, the privileges that accompanied it) was essentially directed toward defining what power was; and what power was what kings were."

My sense of the meaning of royal gifts was initially based not only a reading of land records, which though they gave histories of grants, revealed a thick infrastructure of gifting, and suggested that land rights were necessarily conjoined with other rights to privilege, service, and honor, were themselves insufficiently explicit about the ideological content of the system to permit a full or satisfactory interpretation. Rather, I developed an understanding of kingly beneficence from textual

sources that depicted the centrality of gifts and their various forms. Using eighteenth century texts (genealogies, chronicles, ballads) as cultural discourses, I found persistent motifs, events, narrative forms, tropes, and images, and I read the parts they played in the poetics of power. I used this textualized discourse not only, as at first I thought was all I could do, to get a sense of how these Indians conceived their own past, but also to demarcate the key elements of my subsequent inquiry, to create an historiographical frame for understanding key structures, events, and their relations: and I found that my textualized readings were indeed realized in historical processes. Thus I was able to identify and focus on the core conceptions of sovereignty; the interpenetrating transactions in gifts, service, and kinship; the structure and form of political hegemony. I was able to understand what had previously been obscured in the colonial writing on the little kings, or poligars, that the adoption of Hindu forms of kingship by what were said to be low caste (later often defined as criminal castes under British rule) chiefs was not just an ideological ruse but was rather reflected in the entire structure of the political system; that rights to landholding were political rights, and reflected the structure of the little kingdom at the same time that they revealed the pervasive importance of royal honor; and that the states were not absolute failures because of their lack of emphasis on the bureaucratic demarcation of land rights and the collection of revenue, but rather successful, vital, and to the British highly threatening political systems because of the

interplay of rights and privileges to land, service, kinship, honor, and local resources.

The Cultural Poetics of Power

But I was still not altogether clear if, and if so how, a logic of variable proximity to the king actually informed social relations in the little kingdom. It was this, in a general sense, that was the subject of a subsequent year's ethnographic research. It was only in my fieldwork that I was able to find that the forms of clan and caste structure that the British had seen as organic growths from the Indian soil had in fact been vitally transformed by the political histories of local level chiefs. First, through inquiries conducted in the field I determined that the political hierarchy was also, with certain crucial exceptions, a social hierarchy. As I mentioned above, the Jagirdars were collateral chiefs, the Cervaikarars affinally connected warriors, the Kurikarars mostly Kallars but from subcastes other than the royal subcaste, and so on down the line. The Kallars themselves were, as Dumont also found for the Pramalai Kallar, territorially segmented, but in Pudukkottai the royal subcaste occupied a uniquely important position, dominating all the other segments, or subcastes. The internal organization of the royal subcaste, markedly different than all other subcastes, itself reflected a systematic if sometimes paradoxical inflection by political forces. And the settlement of Kallar chiefs, both great and small, throughout areas of non-Kallar settlement, as well as in the area inhabited by a large and often

unruly Kallar subcaste, effected both the ideological and instrumental dominance of royalty. These Kallars often had royal retainers under them, privileged rights to local lands, and the right to receive first honors on behalf of the Pudukkottai Raja in all village and locality temples and festivals.

The hierarchical force of royalty was expressed in many ways, not least through the comments of one of my principal informants, the titular head of the royal clan or kuppam. "When we assumed our royal status (antastu)," this man told me, "we became, as it were, a royal family. Hence, we the five top lineages of the clan, began to have affinal relations only with royal families. So we became more elevated and dignified than the other groups and other clans. While the influence and glory of the Raja was high, the influence of those of us living in our group also went up accordingly. Others who do not have marriage ties with the five chief lineages also reside here but we classify them at a lower level." All members of the royal subcaste were loosely called rajapantu, meaning that they had a connection with the raja. While this term was used to designate all members of the subcaste in an unmarked sense, within the subcaste itself there were multiple distinctions of rank, all of them, as it turned out, having to do with proximity of the king. In one particularly lucid discussion, my informant explained to me the logic of hierarchy in Pudukkottai. "Why are we (meaning royal Kallars) superior?" he asked rhetorically. "Because we maintain control and order (kattupatu) in our community. We do not allow widow remarriage and we abide by the moral codes of our

society strictly. Other Kallars may say that all Kallars are the same. It is popularly assumed that all Kallars are thieves. But we are not thieves. How can the ruling Kallars steal from others? Our Kallars are pillars of the community, chiefs, village leaders, politicians, and nobles. We have to maintain law and order. How can we go off thieving. We decided that we should lead a life of order and restriction. Others are not like us. We live for honor and status. Our Kallars base our lives on the temple and on marriage relations. Only if the temple and the lineage are correct can we seek an alliance; Our honor is displayed in the palace and in temples. When honor is measured, in the same way the number of carats is measured in gold, will we like less dignified groups taking seats on a par with us. No, they are not fit to sit with us."

The preeminence of the royal subcaste is thus explained not only through reference to the fact that the king hailed from this subcaste, but by noting that this subcaste has the most rigidly defined and maintained code for conduct of all subcastes. These Kallars have the most order, and they enforced order through the set of restrictions which are implied by the term kattupatu. Kattupatu, which can be taken to mean code for conduct and discipline, literally means something more like restriction, or even constriction, deriving from the root kattu, meaning tied or knotted. The code for conduct includes rigidly defined kinship rules, some of which, like the Brahmanic prohibition of widow remarriage, mark the royal Kallars off from all other Kallars and suggest a kind of Sanskritization, others of which involve

working ones way through the myriad gradations of upper Kallar society by trading political, social, and cultural capital back and forth, often through affinal transactions. Kattupatu is a term that is used frequently by all Kallar subcastes and indeed all Pudukkottai castes, though only among Kallars, and specifically within the royal subcaste of Kallars, does it have the particular kind of inflection I just described. For all these groups, though again most importantly for the royal subcaste, kattupatu does not mean simply a code for conduct, but a set of authoritative procedures which renders this code enforceable within the community.

My informant's statements, and the general ideological orientation they reflect, reveal the continuation of concerns about the past reputation of Kallars as thieves, bandits, outlaws. The ethnographic discourse here shares much in common with the eighteenth century family histories that I mentioned earlier. In these texts as in the statements of Kallar informants the acknowledged past becomes totally transformed by the attainment of kingship. Again, there is an implicit opposition between the representation of the activities of thieves and the activities of kings. In this case, the royal duty of protecting and subduing disorder is combined with an ideology of order and restriction which organizes and becomes the subtext of the social relations of the subcaste.

The very word Kallar means thief in Tamil, and no one, at least none of my informants, disputes the fact that at certain places and times particular groups of Kallars engaged in

predatory activity. In fact they constantly bring it up with a certain kind of relish, suggesting only partial embarrassment about their past. And as I and others have written elsewhere, this in itself is not necessarily a problem in any case, since predation was often the principal means used to accumulate wealth by kings who were not so concerned about a regularized tax base as the British became when they began in the early nineteenth century to gain most of their profit from land revenue. In Pudukkottai, Kallars attained their position of royal authority in the first place by providing protection to local communities and institutions, and this is amply documented in inscriptions recording protection contracts from the fourteenth century on. Indeed, Kallars were given rights of protection because of their capacity to control, and to a very large extent monopolize, the means of violence, and there is much in Indian tradition to suggest that the opposition of bandit and king is a complementary opposition. But it is, culturally speaking, an opposition: the violence of the bandit is illegitimate, and it represents and causes the disorder that the legitimate violence of the king must control. Kings are not only legitimate, they define the realm of the legitimate. And the way in which the royal subcaste organizes its social relations makes it impossible that they could be thieves, or affected in any way by this general reputation. The royal subcaste is headed by a king, and it provides almost all the royal nobles of the kingdom. The fundamental duty of these members of the elite is to subdue disorder, destroy lawlessness, and enforce law and order, both

within the kingdom at large, and within the subcaste itself. And of course, as kings, by virtue of defining what is legitimate, they define disorder too.

But this is true in more than just the obvious, or for that matter the Foucaultian, sense, as I discovered when doing fieldwork with other caste groups. For most castes, there is a steady decrease of order as one goes down the caste hierarchy, in the sense defined by my Kallar informants and assimilated with only minimal dissent by many non-Kallar informants. Maravars, for example, who in all fundamental respects were like Kallars except for the crucial fact that they were not kings, had found it impossible to organize their social relations in the larger territorial units, the natus, that Kallars had, and the Maravars lamented this loudly and frequently. Indeed, the Maravars themselves attributed this disorder not just to the general decline and fall of the world in general, but more particularly to their loss of political control. For other groups, there was not only a noticeable decline in order, and a laxness in defining and maintaining the kattupatu, there was also a decline in the autonomy to define what order was. Untouchable groups, for example, took the locality, and sometimes the lineage, names of their dominant caste patrons. Whereas other groups had traditional rights called kaniyatci to land, honor, etc., untouchables told me that for them kaniyatci only meant the right to serve their patrons. The fundamental structures of their social relations were inscribed by the hegemony of the dominant classes. Notions of honor, order, royalty, and command have been

operationalized in the practices that produce and reproduce hierarchy. These practices (embedded as they are in cultural forms and historical processes) are themselves based on structures of power as well as on the hegemonic nature of cultural constructions of power.

If it be argued that my interpretation, though perhaps true for marginal regions like Pudukkottai, can hardly apply generally to south India, let alone to the subcontinent as a whole, I reply that is precisely the marginality of Pudukkottai that makes it possible to detect the forces that were at work elsewhere. Because Pudukkottai was not brought under patrimonial control (neither that of the Islamic rulers in the south nor later that of the British) caste was never set completely loose from kingship. Many current theories of caste, particularly those emphasizing Brahmanic obsessions concerning purity and impurity, but also those aspects of ethnosociological theory that stress the proper and improper mixing of substances, are in large parts artifacts of colonialism, referring to a situation in which the position of the king and the historical dynamic of royal power has been displaced, and sometimes destroyed. However much Dumont's theory is predicated on an a priori separation of what he describes as the domains of religion and politics, which the former encompassing the latter, he was also almost certainly influenced by an ethnographic reality in which kingship played only a very small, residual role. As for early ethnosociological proposals about caste, Inden has himself recently noted that his early work is largely derived from texts which were generated

only after the demise of kingship as a powerful cultural institution (Inden 1983). The texts, he now says, reflected new traditions which attempted to deal with the problem of regulating caste interaction in an environment in which there was no longer a king.

On Dumont: The Politics of Hierarchy

Politics, as we define it here, has both to do with the processes by which authority is constituted at each level of representation and with the linkages of the constituent groups in society to the king (usually through the authoritative figures who represent their social groups). Politics has a territorial dimension, but is not exhausted by territorial forms. In the royal subcaste of Kallars in Pudukkottai, the intervention of the king changed and reconstructed (as well as decomposed) the internal order of the system, affecting both social and territorial forms. Even in other subcastes, less directly influenced by kingship, social organization was only understandable within a framework which is fundamentally political, realized over time (i.e., in history).

It is my argument here that structures of power play a central role in the social organization of caste and kinship, that politics is fundamental to the process of hierarchialization and the formation of units of identity. Dumont has great difficulty with the notion that kinship can be politicized. When he does see hierarchical tendencies develop in the domain of kinship he blames them on the ideology of caste, which has to do

not with politics but with purity and pollution. Dumont's elevation of alliance as the fundamental principle of south Indian kinship is in large part because alliance mitigates the asymmetrical effects of marriage relations through the generalized exchange of marriage partners within the endogamous group. Hierarchy creeps to the borders of the endogamous group, but only enters in the sense that it can bring about the creation of new endogamous subdivisions. Nonetheless, even though Dumont suggests (Dumont 1957a; 1957b) the powerful role of political dominance in creating alliances and particular marriage patterns, he explains any such endogamous subdivisions by saying that they arise through bastardy or the differential status of wives in a polygynous marriage. Endogamous groups develop within previous endogamous groups only because of the lower status attached to marriages with women from outside the proper alliance group.

Politics not only occupies a subordinate position in Dumont's general theory, but is eclipsed on the one side by the preeminence of kinship, invaded by social bastardy and caste hierarchy, and on the by caste, which elevates the brahman, and attendant principles of purity and pollution, above the king. Caste, and the hierarchical principle it entails, is fundamental because it is religious, and in Indian social thought, according to Dumont, the religious encompasses the social, the economic, and the political.

Dumont therefore sees caste authority and political authority as fundamentally different. He writes that "the notion of caste and of a superior caste exhausts all available

transcendence. Properly speaking, a people's headman can only be someone of another caste. If the headman is one of their own, then to some degree they are all headmen" (Dumont 1957b, 206). This is true in Pudukkottai in that headmen are at one level simply primus inter pares in their social group. However, by virtue of their connection to the king, they do "transcend," at some level, their own community. Most importantly, the king himself is at one level simply a Kallar, and not the highest one at that. But by virtue of his kingship, not caste transcendence, he is also the transcendent overlord of the entire kingdom.

Hierarchy in Pudukkottai concerns transcendence in the context of kingship, where the king is both a member of a segmentary lineage system and the overlord of the entire kingdom. What would seem contradictory to Dumont is the paradox upon which the entire caste system rests. Kinship is inflected, at its core, by politics; and politics is nothing more than the curious paradox of a king who encompasses all even as he is one of his own metonyms. In the social and political world of the little kingdom, this meant that the king was an overlord, but one who was nonetheless always embroiled in the strategic concerns of kinship, status hierarchy, protection and warfare, and in the maximization of his own honor and sovereign authority within the little kingdom and in a wider world of other kingdoms and greater overlords.

Part of Dumont's resistance to acknowledging the political inflection of caste and kinship may result from the political marginality of the Pramalai Kallars, a marginality rendering them

far more similar to the unruly Vicenki Nattu Kallars who lived in the northwestern part of Pudukkottai State than to the royal subcaste. With both the Pramalai Kallars and the VN Kallars, the lack of well developed affinal boundaries corresponding to discrete territorial units, as well as of a distinct sense of the hierarchy of groups, can perhaps be explained by their incomplete incorporation within (and therefore inflection by) the political system of a little kingdom. Everywhere in Tamil Nadu the Kallars had highly developed notions of territory, but subcaste organization achieved its particular level of territorial segmentation and hierarchical articulation in Pudukkottai alone. And only within the royal subcaste of Pudukkottai did Kallars develop the pronounced and complex forms of territorial bounding and hierarchical marking that they did, and which I describe in great detail elsewhere (1987). Kingship does make a difference.

Some of Dumont's theoretical problems stem from the fact that he does not pursue an interest in the ethnohistorical reconstruction of the Pramalai Kallars. He is aware of the modern decline of headmanship, and that it no longer expresses itself as fully as it might once have done in the social logic of Pramalai organization. Characteristically acute, he senses a correlation with recent political change: "If authority rests on external sanction, it is to be expected that it cannot maintain itself without formal government recognition" (Dumont 1957b, 203). Unfortunately, he does not consider the possibility that colonialism, and the attendant break down of the old regime, have much to do with the development of the separation of religion and

politics which he has identified and reified into a timeless Indian social theory. A combination of theoretical program, ethnographic "accident," and historical disinterest have conspired to render Dumont's understanding of the Kallars, however brilliant, limited in fundamental ways.

Here and elsewhere I have argued that the social relations that made up Indian society, far from being "essentialist" structures predicated on the transcendence of a set of religious principles, were permeated by "political" inflections, meanings, and imperatives. Caste, as it is still portrayed in much current anthropological literature, is a colonial construction, reminiscent only in some ways of the social forms that preceded colonial intervention. The structural relations that made up the "caste system" in Pudukkottai thus reflect--albeit with the distortions of ethnohistorical time--the ideological proposals of my informants. These ideological statements consistently referred to the historical means by and through which meaning was constructed and maintained. Caste, if ever it had an original form, was inscribed from the "beginning" by the relations and conceits of power. And in medieval and early modern south India, it is clear that Geertz was indeed right: power was what kings were.

Ethnohistory and Ethnosociology

"We need history, but not the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it."

Nietzsche, Of the Use and Abuse of History.

When I first began to use the term ethnohistory to describe the particular blend of history and anthropology that I sought to practice in my study of India, I thought that "ethno" should do the same thing to history that it seemed to be doing to sociology. Of course the place was Chicago, the time the mid-seventies, and the word was culture. But even then, and even despite the fact that in my work I sought to construct my sense of what it meant to do history in light of "indigenous" historical texts, ethnohistory struggled against itself. Not only did ethnohistorians seem constantly to pose the questions about epistemological mediation that began only rather later to deconstruct the original assumptions of ethnosociology (questions such as, how does an outsider attain access to or re-present a culturally specific form of knowledge?), but culture as a domain was much more difficult to lock up (or off) as a separate area of inquiry. The injunction, "Always historicize!," seemed always already there. But, then as now, it was not always clear what the injunction meant.

Originally, ethnohistory meant the reconstruction of the history of an area and people who had no written history. As such, it was used to denote in particular the field of studies concerning the past of American Indians, and secondarily of other so-called primitive or pre-literate societies. But, as many have since demonstrated, ethnohistory cannot be restricted to the unwritten or oral sources for history in most parts of the world where texts and written sources exist, even if they do not seem to penetrate some sectors of society. In India, as in many other

places, there are no pure oral traditions: texts have provided the basis for tradition as often as the other way round. Indeed, both texts and traditions relate not only to each other, but also to historical processes of production and social forms of contextualization, interpretation, and certification. Ethnohistory in India is clearly not about the history of primitive or preliterate people.

As suggested above, ethnohistory is also not simply a gloss for a cultural analysis of historical sensibilities in India, whether embodied in texts or traditions. However, part of the task of ethnohistory is to contest the dominant voice of history, which in India has always been a Western voice. This voice has always disparaged India, insisting that the relative absence of chronological political narrative and the unsettling presence of myth and fancy are indicative of an underdeveloped sense of history. Ethnohistory can therefore assist in the project of recuperating a multiplicity of historical voices, revealing for India an active, vital, and integral historiographical industry. I have also argued that ethnohistory can help determine a culturally specific set of relevancies, moments, and narrative forms to expand and alter the sense of how to think about India's past. But this past is never contained solely within the texts or traditions that would be used for this task. If ethnohistory is used to situate history, it is always seen as itself situated in history (see also Denning 1980, 38).

Thus the difficulties in anthropologizing history are not simply removed by the inverse call to historicize anthropology,

for we never seem to reach explicit agreement about what history actually means. But in this case the problem and the solution are integrally interrelated. For if an investigation into the culture of history has both the strengths and the weaknesses of ethnosociology, an exploration of what is involved in the history of culture can assist in making a creative critique of culture theory, whether in ethnosociology or elsewhere. Not only has ethnosociology been insufficiently clear about the epistemological privilege it assumes in its claim to re-present indigenous forms of knowledge, it has completely excluded a wide range of historical questions, as also any consideration of the relations of knowledge and power beyond a narrow cultural domain.

This is not the place, however, to summarize the arguments of Gramsci, Williams, Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Foucault, and other theorists who have helped specify and problematize the historicity of culture. It must suffice here to note that when culture is situated in history rather than opposed to it the concept of culture inevitably opens up. I began by using culture as a method and conceit to privilege the discursive claims of my Kallar informants in relation to Dumont's proposals about the nature of hierarchy in India. That is to say, I began by participating in the ethnosociological claim that if you investigate native terms and meanings you will find that hierarchy is about x and not about y. However, the cultural statements of my informants subverted the autonomy of a presumed cultural domain, and in particular the opposition between the political/historical and the cultural/religious. At the same

time, the injunction to historicize, vague though it sometimes seemed, enticed me to enter the web of power, knowledge, and history that constituted both the world of reference as well as the necessary conditions for contemporary cultural discourse. Culture thus was a conceit that deconstructed itself through its own historical reference, for culture distilled and displayed (and often displaced) the historical legacy of its own hegemonic ascendance.

The necessarily ambivalent position of history within any ethnohistorical project provides critical access to much of the current theoretical debate about culture. But ethnohistory should not simply disparage ethnosociology. For in calling attention to the hegemony of Western social science, ethnosociology both set some of the conditions for this kind of critique in Indian studies, and may yet have the last laugh. The theoretical concerns about culture articulated above are as Western in their dominant figures and intellectual histories as the more positivist social science from which we tried to free ourselves in previous decades. However, if "history" teaches us anything at all, it should at least help us dispose of the idea that culture can exist outside of history, however much this history--and I suspect any history--is always mediated through a multiplicity of cultural forms.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1981. Worship and conflict under colonial rule: A south Indian case. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun, and Carol Breckenridge. 1976. The south Indian temple: Authority, honor and redistribution. In Contributions to Indian Sociology n.s. 10 (2):187-211.
- Dening, G. 1980. Islands and Beaches: discourse on a silent land, Marquesas 1774-1880. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. 1979. The structure and meaning of political relations in a south Indian little kingdom. Contributions to Indian Sociology 13(2):169-204.
- _____. 1982. The pasts of a palaiyakarar: The ethnohistory of south Indian little king. Journal of Asian Studies 41 (4):655-683.
- _____. 1987. The hollow crown: ethnohistory of an Indian kingdom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dumont, Louis. 1957. Hierarchy and marriage alliance in South Indian kinship. Occasional papers of the Royal Anthropological Institute. 12. London.
- _____. 1962. The conception of kingship in ancient India. Contributions to Indian Sociology 6. Reprinted in Dumont 1980.
- _____. 1980. Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1986. A south Indian subcaste. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Heesterman, J. C. 1978. The conundrum of the king's authority. In Kingship and authority in South Asia, ed. J. F. Richards's. Madison: University of Wisconsin Publications Series.
- Inden, R. 1983. Orientalism and India. Modern Asian Studies.
- Lingat, R. 1973. The classical law of India. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ludden, David E. 1985. Peasant history in south India. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Marriott, McKim, and Ronald Inden. 1977. Toward an ethnosociology of caste systems. In The new wind: Changing

identities in South Asia, ed. Ken David. Mouton: The Hague and Paris.

McGilvray, D. 1982. Mukkuvar vannimai: Tamil caste and matriclan ideology in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka. Caste ideology and interaction, ed. D. B. McGilvray. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trautmann, Thomas R. 1981. Dravidian kinship. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

PROGRAM ON THE
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

WORKING PAPER SERIES

The Program on the Comparative Study of Social Transformations is an interdisciplinary research program at the University of Michigan. Its faculty associates are drawn primarily from the departments of Anthropology, History, and Sociology, but also include members of several other programs in the humanities and social sciences. Its mission is to stimulate new interdisciplinary thinking and research about all kinds of social transformations in a wide range of present and past societies. CSST Working Papers report current research by faculty and graduate student associates of the program; many will be published elsewhere after revision. Working Papers are available for a fee of \$1.00 for papers under 40 pages and for \$2.00 for longer papers. The program will photocopy out-of-print Working Papers at cost (\$.05 per page.) To request copies of Working Papers, write to Comparative Study of Social Transformations, 4010 LSA Building, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1382 or call (313) 936-1595.

- 1 "Program in Comparative Study of Social Transformations," by William H. Sewell, Jr., Terrence J. McDonald, Sherry B. Ortner, and Jeffery M. Paige, May 1987, 15 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #344.
- 2 "Labor History, Uneven Development, and the Autonomy of Politics: The Dockworkers of Nineteenth-Century Marseille," by William H. Sewell, Jr., July 1987, 45 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #346.
- 3 "Coffee, Copper, and Class Conflict in Central America and Chile: A Critique of Zeitlin's Civil Wars in Chile and Zeitlin and Ratcliff's Landlords and Capitalists," by Jeffery M. Paige, September 1987, 10 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #347.
- 4 "In Search of the Bourgeois Revolution: The Particularities of German History," by Geoffrey Eley, September 1987, 61 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #350.
- 5 "The Burdens of Urban History: The Theory of the State in Recent American Social History," by Terrence McDonald, May 1988, 50 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #355.
- 6 "History, Sociology, and Theories of Organization," by Mayer N. Zald, May 1988, 42 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #357.
- 7 "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations," by Maris A. Vinovskis, May 1988, 55 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #358.
- 8 "Revolution and the Agrarian Bourgeoisie in Nicaragua," by Jeffery M. Paige, 42 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #363.
- 9 "Nationalism and Class as Factors in the Revolution of 1917," by Ronald G. Suny, October 1988, 42 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #365.

- 10 "The Original Caste: Power, History, and Hierarchy in South Asia," by Nicholas B. Dirks, October 1988, 30 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #367.
- 11 "The Invention of Caste: Civil Society in Colonial India," by Nicholas B. Dirks, October 1988, 24 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #368.
- 12 "Sociology as a Discipline: Quasi-Science and Quasi-Humanities," by Mayer Zald, October 1988, 43 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #369.
- 13 "Constraints on Professional Power in Soviet-Type Society: Insights from the Solidarity Period in Poland," by Michael D. Kennedy and Konrad Sadkowski, November 1988, 37 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #371.
- 14 "Evolutionary Changes in Chinese Culture," by Martin K. Whyte, November 1988, 20 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #372.
- 15 "World Market, Class Conflict, and Rural Coercion in Post-Colonial Buenos Aires," by Karl Monsma, November 1988, 22 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #373.
- 16 "Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact," by Nicholas B. Dirks, December 1988, 39 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #375.
- 17 "Social Transformations of Gender in Andean South America: A Working Annotated Bibliography," by Janise Hurtig, December 1988, 24 pages. Also CRSO Working Paper #376.

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON SOCIAL ORGANIZATION
WORKING PAPER SERIES

CRSO Working Papers report current research and reflection by affiliates of the Center. Working papers which are still in print are available for a fee of \$2.00 for any paper under 100 pages and \$4.00 for papers over 100 pages. The Center will photocopy out-of-print working papers at cost (five cents per page). To request copies of working papers, or for further information about the Center, write us at 4501 LS&A Building, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48109, or call (313)764-7487.

- 359 "Innovative Participation in Neighborhood Service Organizations," by Barry Checkoway, August 1988, 32 pages. Also PCMA Working Paper #12.
- 360 "Facing the Challenge of Diversity and Multiculturalism," by Judith H. Katz, Ed.D., August 1988, 55 pages. Also PCMA Working Paper #13.
- 361 "Changes in Mate Choice in Chengdu," by Martin King Whyte, September 1988, 32 pages.
- 362 "Changing Organizational Racism: A Workshop for University Staff Leaders," by Mark Chesler and Cheryl Hyde, October 1988, 68 pages. Also PCMA Working Paper #14.
- 363 "Revolution and the Agrarian Bourgeoisie in Nicaragua," by Jeffery M. Paige, 42 pages. Also CSST Working Paper #8.
- 364 "Psychosocial and Social-Environmental Problems and Needs for Support Services of Off-Treatment Survivors of Childhood Cancer," by Mark Chesler, October 1988, 87 pages.
- 365 "Nationalism and Class as Factors in the Revolution of 1917," by Ronald G. Suny, October 1988, 42 pages. Also CSST Working Paper #9.
- 366 "Organizations, Industry, and the State," by David Jacobs, Michael Useem, and Mayer N. Zald, October 1988, 34 pages.
- 367 "The Original Caste: Power, History, and Hierarchy in South Asia," by Nicholas B. Dirks, November 1988, 30 pages. Also CSST Working Paper #10.
- 368 "The Invention of Caste: Civil Society in Colonial India," by Nicholas B. Dirks, November 1988, 24 pages. Also CSST Working Paper #11.
- 369 "Sociology as a Discipline: Quasi-Science and Quasi-Humanities," by Mayer Zald, October 1988, 43 pages. Also CSST Working Paper #12.
- 370 "Mediating Ethnic Minority Conflict in the Classroom: The Case of Blacks and Jews," by David Schoem and Marshall Stevenson, November 1988, 44 pages. Also PCMA Working Paper #15.
- 371 "Constraints on Professional Power in Soviet-Type Society: Insights from the Solidarity Period in Poland," by Michael D. Kennedy and Konrad Sadkowski, November 1988, 37 pages. Also CSST Working Paper #13.
- 372 "Evolutionary Changes in Chinese Culture," by Martin K. Whyte, November 1988, 20 pages. Also CSST Working Paper #14.
- 373 "World Market, Class Conflict, and Rural Coercion in Post-Colonial Buenos Aires," by Karl Monsma, November 1988, 22 pages. Also CSST Working Paper #15.

