

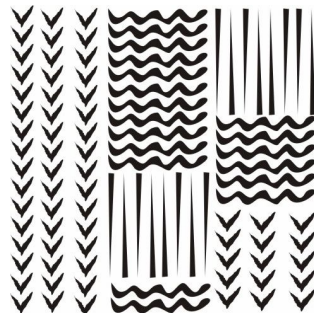
DRAFT PAPER

SOME KEY ASPECTS IN UNDERSTANDING
HISTORICAL CHANGES IN SOUTH INDIAN
VILLAGE SOCIETY: LANDHOLDING AND
NON-FARM JOB OPPORTUNITIES

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I. Introduction

In 1979-80 and 1981-82, I conducted a survey of villages in an irrigated area of Lalgudi Taluk, Tiruchirapalli District, Tamilnadu State as a member of an India-Japan joint research team. The team selected several villages located in different ecological zones in the Taluk. We are now re-surveying the villages previously examined in those years. In both surveys we collected information about various aspects of the economic life of each household, such as landholding, occupation, income, education and agricultural production, but we paid special attention to clarifying one key indicator: in the first survey we focused on changing patterns of landholding, and in the second (the re-survey) on the growing association of villagers with non-agricultural occupations. We selected these two aspects as they seem to be very important factors influencing and mirroring the structural transformation of village societies in south India for the period before and after 1980 respectively.

In section II, I delineate how we employed Village Settlement Registers as centrally important documents for clarifying landholding patterns, and analyze them in order to discuss the implications of our findings. In Section III, I argue that since rural areas have been the most important market for consumer durables since the 1980s, by examining through village studies the rural changes which have occurred in the last decades, we can contribute to identifying the backdrop against which the Indian economy accelerated its growth rate from the 1980s. For this purpose, I stress the importance of examining villagers' links with non-farm occupations and the changing patterns of consumption among the different segments of the village population.

II. Tracing Changes in Landholding Patterns

1. Village Settlement Registers: Recording 100 Years of Changes in Villages

In the surveys we conducted in 1979-81, special importance was attached to clarifying historical changes as far back as possible, especially focusing on changes in landholding and the socio-economic structure of villages. The most important source materials we used to trace these changes were the Village Settlement Registers, compiled for each village every thirty or so years after 1864. As is well known, under the Ryatwari system, a land revenue settlement was conducted every thirty years to confirm the person responsible for the payment of land tax for each plot of arable land, at which time a document called *patta* was issued to that person. The settlement registers meticulously recorded every detail about each plot of land: the name of the *patta* holder (*pattadars*), the area, the amount of land revenue, whether it was irrigated or non-irrigated, the source of irrigation, the number of crops, whether it was government land or land exempted from land revenue, and the nature of the soil. Settlement operations were conducted among villages in Lalgudi taluk and settlement registers published around 1865, 1895 and 1925; the 1925 registers were updated around 1985. The settlement registers for 1865 and 1895 are available in the Tamilnadu State Archives and the 1925 ones in the Taluk office, since they were still being used for as current records when we made our survey in 1979-81.

Therefore it may be safe to say that settlement registers are the most useful source, not only for reconstructing landholding patterns, but also for tracing changes in the irrigation system, cropping patterns, village common lands, and other lands for public purposes like house plots and roads for each village.

In particular, an analysis of the registers enables us to evaluate accurately changes in the caste/community composition of landholders, making it possible to elucidate trends in caste relationships and the economic structure of village societies. The names of *pattadars* indicate in most cases their caste, religion and gender, and in many cases, caste titles are included as part of the name. For example the suffix *Ayyar* indicates the Brahman caste. The most commonly occurring suffix in a woman's name is *Ammal*, though this does not indicate her caste (Yanagisawa 1983: Chapter 4; Yanagisawa 1996: Chapter 1).

Since the settlement registers for different years recorded details basically in the same manner, they provide us with a valuable key to trace historical changes from the middle of the nineteenth century. Though the survey numbers for each plot changed with each

settlement, the registers provided the “old” survey numbers that had been given to the plots in the previous settlement. By tracing old and new survey numbers, we can construct a history of over a century for a single plot of land, thereby tracing the history of land transactions as well as reconstructing rules of inheritance . We are also able to clarify the process by which village common land declined.

Each volume of the settlement registers for 1895 and 1925 has tables and descriptive information about the village at the time of the settlement. In particular, tables showing the cultivated area given to each major crop are invaluable, being the only available historical data on village cropping patterns.

2. Combining Settlement Register Data with Information Collected by Interviews and from Contemporary Village Records

At the same time, it is also necessary to take into account the limitations of the data recorded in the Settlement Registers. First, since the *pattadars* registered there were identified from the standpoint of land revenue administration, it would be too naïve to take the descriptions at face value. Consequently we have checked their accuracy through interviews with the descendents of those who appeared as *pattadars* in the old settlement registers for the village under survey. As far as landholding is concerned, the registers are likely to have recorded the real landholders, except for the often-occurring cases where the names of dead *pattadars* remained unchanged in the registers for many years.

Second, registers generally lack information concerning family relationships among *pattadars*. To overcome this shortcoming, we have constructed genealogical charts for the families appearing in the old registers by collecting information through interviews, so that we have been able to aggregate amounts of land separately registered in the names of different persons of the same family, for example husband and wife.

Third, the relationship between titles and communities or castes is not without ambiguity. A title could be used sometimes by different castes, and some groups of people did not use the same title continuously for generations, but altered them. To overcome these problems, again we need to collect information from local people.

In addition to combining recorded data with the information obtained by interview, we have made extensive use of official documents kept by contemporary village officials. As

mentioned above, at the time of the 1981 survey, village clerks still used the 1925 Settlement Registers as their most important landholding-registration record, continuously revising the descriptions contained in them. Another important record of landownership was and is the list of *pattadars* called "Chitta", which gives the extent and land revenue of all the plots (survey numbers) held by each *pattadar*. The "Adangal" is also important as it provides information on the cultivation and the name of the cultivator for each plot of land in the village.

Thus, by combining Settlement Registration data with information obtained by interview and from contemporary village records, we were able successfully to reconstruct, at least for the village we surveyed, the extent of landholding by family and were able to draw a fairly exact picture of the distribution patterns of landholding by communities and size-groups for the period between 1865 and 1980.

3. From a Village to a Taluk: Settlement Registers for 100 Villages

Based on our experience in analyzing the Settlement Registers of the village surveyed, Professor Mizushima and I started collecting and analyzing the settlement registers of all the villages in Lalgudi Taluk, amounting to around one hundred, for three time periods, i.e., 1865, 1895 and 1925. Lalgudi taluk can be divided into three areas based on the availability of irrigation facilities: the wet (irrigated) zone, the intermediate zone, and the dry (unirrigated) zone. The hundred villages are spread over these three areas, and this has enabled us to make a comparative study of changes among villages with different ecological conditions.

We have almost finished converting the data for the hundred villages (each for three years) into digital form and so far have finished reconstructing changes in the distribution of landholding, according to community and size, in 26 villages. In analyzing this digitalized data, we have confronted three problems. First, *pattas* were of two types, single *patta* (a *patta* owned by only one person) and joint *patta* (that owned jointly by more than one person). A landholder could have both a single *patta* and a joint *patta*, and sometimes may have registered his name in several *pattas*. To reach an accurate understanding of the area held by a landholder, we aggregated both the areas registered as single *patta*(s) and those included in the person's share in the joint *patta*(s). Second, as I have already mentioned, the relationship between titles and communities and castes is not very clear. To overcome this problem, I have collected information by means of fieldwork in the 26 villages about the connection

between titles and communities. Third, village boundaries changed between the 1865 and 1895 settlements. Generally by 1895 several villages had been combined to form a revenue village. But very often a village in the 1865 register was divided to form a part of two or more villages. Based on the information on changes in boundaries given in the 1895 registers, we reclassified village plots given in the 1865 register in accordance with the 1895 revenue village boundaries.

4. Major findings: Changing Patterns in Landholdings

By analyzing the Settlement Registers of villages in Lalgudi Taluk, we obtained the following findings on changes in landholding patterns in wet and intermediate zones (Yanagisawa 1996).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Brahmans clearly stand out as the major holders of large-scale wet land in the irrigated areas. In most of the villages they held more than half of the cultivated land. The Vellalars followed the Brahmans. In sharp contrast to members of higher castes, lower-caste people had only very small landholdings. The Dalits had very little, indicating they were almost excluded from landholding. Landholding was thus concentrated not only in terms of caste but also in terms of size groups.

The sixty years after 1865 witnessed notable changes in the pattern of landholding in the villages, the most conspicuous of which was, first, the increase in the area owned by members of the lower castes, and the Dalits too increased the amount of land they held. Thus a large number of small landholders emerged from among the Dalits and lower-caste Non-Brahmans. Second, there was a considerable decrease in the holdings of Brahmans between 1865 and 1925. Third, the decrease in Brahman landholding was most remarkable in larger-size groups. Fourth, in spite of the increase in landholding by members of the lower castes, higher caste members like the Brahmans still dominated landholding. Finally, the Chettiars and Vellalars, who were supposed to have accumulated wealth under British rule, expanded their landed property and some even became large-scale landholders. We later confirmed by interviews with the descendants of these newly enriched non-Brahman *pattadars* that they had accumulated their wealth by engaging in various non-agricultural businesses.

5. The Implications of the Findings

(1) By thus tracing the changes in landholding combining Village Settlement Register data and information collected by interview and from contemporary records, we are able to present extremely accurate statistical data on size-wise and community-wise changes in landholding from the middle of the nineteenth century. Some of our findings have already been indicated in previous studies. For example, some scholars have pointed out the increase in the area owned by Dalits and other low-caste Non-Brahmans in the colonial period, though this is based on patchy evidence.¹ Our findings, though only for one taluk in South India, statistically confirm this trend in landownership.

(2) There has been a long-continuing debate among Indian economic historians over the impact of British rule on Indian agrarian society. Nationalist historians have argued that British rule resulted, on one hand, in the disintegration of peasant society and a rapid increase in the landless population and, on the other, a massive transfer of landownership into the hands of non-agriculturalists. Revisionist historians like Dharma Kumar denied this view by showing that inequality among landholders in the Madras Presidency remained unchanged for the period between the 1850s and the 1950s. Against this scholarly background, by identifying the affiliation of landholders to caste/communities and other socio-economic groups in local society, our analysis points to two different trends in the British period: on one hand, the gradual deterioration of the high-caste dominated pattern of landownership, with an especially remarkable decrease in large landholdings by members of the higher castes, and the acquisition of landed property by non-agriculturalists and the resultant growth of large landholders among those engaged in various businesses. If the data used does not show caste affiliation, the growth of large landholders from non-Brahman communities is not easily noticed as it is offset statistically by a sharp decrease in large-size landholdings among Brahman communities. By identifying these two different trends in South Indian society, our findings conclude that while inequality among landholders appears to have remained unchanged, the British period actually witnessed the transfer of landed property into the hands of non-agriculturalists and the growth of large-scale landownership by them, which is the position argued by the nationalist historians.

(3) These findings, based mainly on an analysis of landholding, are not only suggestive in the context of the economic history of the colonial period but also imply the

¹ For example, for South India, Baker (1984: 182-83), and for Eastern India, Charlesworth (1985: 224).

transformation of the socio-economic structure of South Indian village society and agrarian relationships after Independence.

(a) Decreasing landholding by Brahmans and other high-caste villagers meant a decline in their controlling power over subaltern groups in agrarian society as well as the steady exodus of the high-caste segments of the rural population from rural society and their quitting agricultural pursuits.²

(b) The acquisition of small pieces of land by previously landless people such as Dalit agricultural labourers mirrored their increasing independence in economic and social terms from the dominant landowning villagers, as well as the growing assertiveness of the labourer classes.³ In many places, the process was accompanied by a decline in the number of permanent farm servants (Gough 1981; Athreya 1985; Byres et al. 1999). The emancipation of the labouring classes has not only been helped by various changes in the economic environment, like an increase in off-farm job opportunities, but has also been achieved through their everyday struggles against the landlord classes.⁴

(c) The largest gainers in terms of landholding have been OBC villagers. They are supposed to have been mainly tenants under the previous regime, but now their leading groups have been emerging as the dominant agriculturalists in place of high-caste landowning elites, pioneering agricultural innovations since the introduction of the Green Revolution

These changes, in particular, a weakening in the controlling power of village elites over the subaltern groups of villagers and the emancipation of the labouring classes, have been widely acknowledged by the village surveys conducted in many regions of India in the 1980s and 1990s. They are often discussed in connection with the agrarian changes brought

² The decrease in Brahman landholding and the transfer of land into the hands of "agricultural castes" including the SCs were widely witnessed in South India (Athreya [1985]; Yanagisawa [1983]; Guhan [1984]). For declining landholding by Brahmans and other dominant landowning groups in other states, see Byres et al. (1999:13, 73, 75, 89, 267).

³ The surveys undertaken around 1980 also noticed a trend towards independence among SC and other lower-strata of village societies (Mizushima [1983]; Nakamura [1982]; Ramachandran [1990], p. 232; Mayer [1984]; Athreya et. al [1990: 134]). For other regions of India, village surveys conducted in the 1990s saw a trend towards independence among Dalit rural labourers whom they found were becoming more assertive (Byres 1999: 2, 15, 84).

⁴ In the village I surveyed, the Dalit agricultural labourers organized themselves into an agricultural labourer union as a part of the anti-caste movement and conducted a strike demanding Brahman landlords provide them with tenancy rights, as a result of which the union won over 50 acres of land. The movement strengthened the bargaining power of the Dalits as well as socially empowered them in this village (Yanagisawa 1983). See also Athreya et al. (1990: 145); Byres et al. (1999: 8). For a significant achievement of tenant movements, see Athreya et al. (1990: 103-108).

about by the introduction of the Green Revolution. Our findings, however, suggest that structural change in village society started earlier, probably in the colonial period, and in the case of Tamilnadu possibly at the end of the nineteenth century, and that therefore it is more deep-rooted than if it were simply caused by changes in agrarian production, though the process seems to have accelerated since the 1970s. I shall return this point later.

6 Other Findings: Village Common Land

The village settlement registers provide us with useful information about local ecological changes. In the early nineteenth century, a large area remained uncultivated, serving as village common land ("commons") which villagers used for grazing their livestock, collecting fuel wood, fodder, manure, house-building materials, etc. In the village settlement registers, we can identify such land by excluding the area of "poramboke" land (house plots, roads, burial grounds, threshing floors etc) from areas with no *pattadar's* name. By tracing each plot that did not have *patta* holders over three settlement registers, we can clarify not only changes in the extent of village common land since the 1860s but also who privatized this land and converted it into cultivated land.

Our analysis of village common land in Lalgudi taluk points to the following findings. (a) Village common land was almost extinct by the middle of the nineteenth century in the villages in the irrigated area of the taluk. (b) In five unirrigated villages I examined, 21 percent of the total village land is supposed to have been village common land in 1865, which remarkably had become reduced to 3 percent by 1895. (c) Those who privatized this land in the last half of the nineteenth century were members of the dominant landowning caste. (d) From the end of the nineteenth century, and especially after the 1910s, previously landless villagers including SCs started to occupy and cultivate village common land, probably mirroring increasing empowerment of these village groups in South India (Yanagisawa forthcoming).

Furthermore, the settlement registers offer an interesting source for gender history, since by tracing plots under female *pattadars* we can infer landholding by female family members and also clarify actual rules of inheritance among descendents, including women. This is what we have yet to undertake.

III. How Can Village Surveys Contribute to Understanding the Contemporary Indian Economy? A Hypothesis

1. Contemporary Indian Economic Growth and Rural Markets for Non-Agricultural Products

The last quarter of a century has witnessed changes not only in the village economy but also a new phase of growth in the Indian economy as a whole, which started to grow at an annual rate of five to six percent in the early 1980s. Recent literature challenges the once widely held view that the growth was triggered by the pro-market economic reforms that mainly started in 1991.⁵ Balakrishnan et al. (2007) reveal that the most important trend break in the growth rate of Indian GDP since 1950 occurred in 1978-79, that is, before both the economic reforms and the most important breakdate in the growth of manufacturing which occurred in 1982-83, suggesting that agrarian growth since the latter half of the 1960s significantly contributed to the break in Indian GDP growth (Balakrishnan 2007). Already in the early 1990s, Ganesh Kumar (1992) suggested that the break in the GDP growth rate, which, according to him, occurred in 1981-82, was triggered by the break in the growth rate of the primary sector, which was followed by the secondary and tertiary sectors. Based on an examination of the links of growth among the agricultural, industrial and service sectors, using an input-output analysis and a simultaneous equation framework, Sastry et al. (2003) suggest that the agricultural sector still plays an important role in determining the overall growth rate of the economy through demand linkages with other sectors of the economy. A series of household budget surveys conducted since the 1980s by the Indian Council of Applied Economic Research present an interesting finding which seems to corroborate the observation by Shastry et al. The surveys (conducted in 1985 and 1989) found that in India the rural market for consumer durables not only was larger, but also expanded faster, than the urban market. Such consumer durables as radios, bicycles and watches rapidly penetrated into rural households in the 1980s. The surveys indicate that the expansion of demand for consumer durables was especially remarkable among the lower-income group of the rural population (Rao 1993; Natarajan 1998). Hence it cannot be denied that a rapid expansion in demand for industrial products by villagers was one of the important factors that led to the acceleration in the GDP growth rate.

⁵ For example, Kohli (2006).

2. Rural Changes in Recent Decades and the Growth of Rural Markets

It would be possible to argue that the following changes in the rural economy would have formed the backdrop against which the demand for non-agricultural products expanded. First, as is well known, agricultural production increased remarkably after the 1970s. Second, there is general agreement that non-farm job opportunities have increased in rural areas, in particular, in the last three decades. Third, the expansion in non-farm job opportunities has tightened rural labour markets, leading to a steady rise in the real wage level of agricultural labourers in India (Unni 1998; Lanjouw 2004; Hansda 2006). Hence it is likely that with increased wages and the additional income earned from non-farm employment, even a part of the poorer section of the village population was able to increase their consumption of industrial products. Consequently, the increase in non-farm job opportunities seems to be the key factor leading to the changes.

This said, it goes without saying that such a process of economic change was accompanied by a transformation in the socio-economic structure of village society, such as the weakening of control by the elites and the empowerment of the poor, as delineated above. My hypothesis is that those two are closely connected. As exemplified by the case I cited regarding the village I surveyed, movements by the Dalits to emancipate themselves not only socially empowered them but also hardened their position in economic bargaining with the landowning elites, thus directly or indirectly contributing to raising the real wage level of labourers.⁶ Access to chances of non-farm employment was not automatically guaranteed in the past. While in the nineteenth-century, Tamilnadu landlords often tried to prevent their farm servants from leaving their villages to work on plantations in Sri Lanka, contemporary landlords, with their controlling power much weakened, may not have tried to prevent their labourers from moving to non-farm jobs. Thus the higher wage and the increased income that some of the poor can earn in contemporary villages may in part owe to the empowerment of these lower segments of the village population. To put it in another way, their increased income is not a gain that has naturally “trickled down” as a part of the results of increased agrarian production but rather, to some extent, a reward they have won through their decades-long efforts for emancipation.

⁶ For example, in UP, “Rural labour struggles have intensified and . . . the position of labourers has improved” (Byres et al. 1999: 184). See also Byres (1999: 199, 291, 302).

3. Changing Consumption Patterns and the Emancipation of the Poor

My second hypothesis is that changing consumption patterns among the lower sections of the village population may be another channel through which their emancipation was translated into an increase in demand for industrial products and various services. Very clear differences were seen in consumption patterns between the upper and lower classes in nineteenth-century South India. The differences in consumption patterns were associated with the socio-economic conditions of these classes as well as with caste-based and other social regulations. The emancipation of the lower classes since the end of the nineteenth century is likely to have led them to diversify their consumption, sometimes beyond the social restraints that had been placed upon them. An aspect of this diversification took the form of imitating the consumption patterns of the upper classes, as exemplified by the spread among the lower classes of the custom of drinking coffee, which had been common only among the Brahmans and other higher castes at the end of the nineteenth century.⁷ Consumption behavior is not simply a function of consumers' income levels but may possibly mirror people's internal values system, in which consumption patterns could often be regarded as symbolizing their social status. This may partly account for an observation by the above-cited ICAER survey that villagers from the poorer section were purchasing more consumer durables than the increase in their income. It is also possible that they not only diversified their demands for industrial products but also for other products and services in various fields, like food, housing, education, transportation, traveling, marriage functions, religious services etc. Together with the demands from the richer sections of the rural population, these diversified demands would have partly been channeled into the growth of urban-based large industries, but they also have partly stimulated a mushroom growth in local non-farm occupations, like construction work, brick manufacturing, milk production and school teaching, as well as bus and car drivers, and marriage hall attendants.

4. Non-farm Occupations and Changing Consumption Patterns

Keeping these two hypotheses in mind, we are now re-surveying the villages in Lalgudi Taluk. As we collect ordinary household-census data using questionnaires, we are putting our focus on two points: the villagers' connection with non-farm occupations and changes in consumption patterns. As we have seen above (III 2), the expansion in non-farm job

⁷ For the connection between clothing changes among non-elite people and their emancipation in rural Tamilnadu, see Yanagisawa (1993).

opportunities has been instrumental in producing rural changes, including an increase in the income of the labouring classes. Though we have some hypothetical arguments on the factors behind the expansion of the non-farm economy, what led to the growth of non-agricultural job opportunities is, as far as I understand, an issue still to be clarified.

With the focus being put on these two points, our survey tries to examine mutual connections between the changes witnessed in the last three decades. The major changes include the emancipation of the lower strata of the population, an increase in the consumption of non-agricultural products and services by villagers, the expansion of non-farm job opportunities, increased exposure of villagers to non-farm activities through migration to urban areas, and the increased income of villagers, including the lower segments of the rural population, and we are attempting to clarify their connections. Another important point that we should not overlook is the possibility that the large section of the rural population that fails to take advantage of non-agricultural job opportunities may stay poor, their living standard remaining at the bottom level.⁸

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⁸ Our survey reveals that about 40 percent of the SC households in the village surveyed have no consumer durables at all.

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