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Arjun Appadurai

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INTRODUCTION

Anthropological theory and ethnohistory

Making the “implicit” meanings in other cultures explicit is a dialectical task in which the anthropologist potentially exposes his or her own principles to sociological scrutiny.¹ Because the body of this study is concerned with describing some “implicit” aspects of South Indian society, it is only fair that some of the analyst’s own methodological assumptions be made explicit at the outset. These assumptions have influenced my choice of subject (a single South Indian temple), my methodological approach, which is ethnohistorical, and my findings.

The theoretical context for the procedures and arguments of this study is provided by a set of interlocking ideas generated by social and cultural anthropologists in the last two decades. The common element in these ideas is the aspiration to transcend some of the characteristic limitations of functionalism, especially as it was exemplified by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Theoreticians who are otherwise distinct, such as C. Geertz, C. Levi-Strauss, V. Turner, and E. Leach, share this aspiration. It is to various aspects of their thought that I owe my own premises.

Following Clifford Geertz, I take culture to be “an ordered system of meanings and symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place.”² The social system, according to Geertz, is the pattern of social interaction itself. But Geertz rightly recognizes that such a distinction, although heuristically important, is only a reification:

On the one level there is the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgements; on the other level there is the ongoing process of interactive behaviour, whose persistent form we call social structure. Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations. Culture

¹ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London and Boston, 1975), Preface and Introduction.

² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), p. 144.

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and social structure are then but different abstractions from the same phenomena.³

But Geertz takes this distinction further when he argues that culture and social structure have characteristically different modes of integration. Following Sorokin, he argues that what holds culture together is “logico-meaningful integration,” that is, “a unity of style, of logical implication, of meaning and value.”⁴ Social structure, on the other hand, is characterized by “causal-functional integration,” the kind of integration “one finds in an organism, where all parts are united in a single causal web.”⁵

To make such a distinction, in Geertz’s view, is not simply to avoid the functionalist tendency to make one of these terms a “mirror image” of the other, a dependent and unoriginal variable. It also opens up the possibility of dealing with change in ways that functionalists have not done. For, because culture and social structure are characterized by different modes of integration, “because the particular form one of them takes does not directly influence the form the other will take, there is an inherent incongruity and tension between the two, and between both of them and a third element, the pattern of motivational integration within the individual which we usually call personality structure.”⁶ Geertz argues that this disharmonic view of the relationship between culture and social structure is more accurate than the functionalist one, “and the functional analysis of religion can therefore be widened to deal more adequately with processes of change.”⁷ In his own analysis of the breakdown of a funeral ritual in Java, Geertz provides a striking example of this possibility when he demonstrates that the disruption of a particular Javanese funeral was rooted in a single source, “an incongruity between the cultural framework of meaning and the patterning of social interaction.”⁸

The idea that moments of disruption and, in general, occasions of conflict provide lenses into the key principles of the social and cultural order and focuses for the study of change is a major methodological principle of the dramatisitic, symbolic, and processual analysis of Victor Turner. In his seminal essay, “Social Dramas and Ritual Metaphors,”⁹ Turner provides an extended methodological

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁹ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London, 1974).

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discussion of the relationship between conflict, structure, and process, which has considerably influenced the arguments of this study. Conflict, according to Turner, “seems to bring fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse, into frightening prominence.”¹⁰ Accordingly, “disturbances of the normal and regular often give us greater insight into the normal than does direct study.”¹¹ The pivots for Turner of a genuinely processual analysis are what he calls “social dramas,” which are “units of aharmonic or disharmonic process, arising in conflict situations.”¹² The analysis of such dramas, for Turner, reveals “temporal structures,” that is, structures that are organized “primarily through relations in time rather than in space.”¹³ In his own analyses of such social dramas, Turner is interested in testing a particular sequence of phases in given social dramas for its cross-cultural regularity.

But the methodological implications of this approach are more fundamental. He suggests that “religious and legal institutions, among others, only cease to be bundles of dead or cold rules when they are seen as phases in social processes, as dynamic patterns right from the start.”¹⁴ It is this larger implication of the dramatistic approach that is reflected in this study, for it suggests the link between occasions of conflict and those dynamic principles of “temporal structure” that they reveal in condensed form. Although my own, largely archival, data do not permit the detailed processual analysis of social dramas that Turner has conducted, I share his concern for “temporal structure” and agree with his recommendation that more extended case studies are required before such “temporal structures” can be cross-culturally compared. His argument, in this regard, provides the major justification for the detailed historical aspects of this study:

An extended case-history is the history of a single group or community over a considerable length of time, collected as a sequence of processual units of different types . . . This is more than plain historiography, for it involves the utilization of whatever conceptual tools social anthropology and cultural anthropology have bequeathed to us. “Processualism” is a term that includes “dramatistic analysis.” Processual analysis assumes cultural analysis, just as it assumes structural-functional analysis, including more static comparative morphological analysis. It negates none of these, but puts dynamics first.¹⁵

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.¹² *Ibid.*, p. 37.¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 43–4.

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It is in the above sense, following Turner, that this is a case study, for its primary object is to put dynamics first, to explore the dynamic links between the regularities of social structure and the dramatic moments of conflict. This processual orientation converges methodologically with Geertz's suggestion that the locus of change might lie in those areas of tension where culture and social structure do not fit each other coherently.

Extended case studies have always been the hallmark of ethnography. In his recent essay "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture,"¹⁶ Geertz has placed this distinctive feature of ethnography in a broader theoretical context. His central insight concerning ethnography is that it ought to constitute "thick description" (a phrase he borrows from Gilbert Ryle), by which he means descriptions generated in narrow spatial confines of aspects of social life (seen as discourse) whose strength is their specificity, their circumstantiality, their density, and their particularity. But Geertz's encouragement of such "thick description" has a tacit synchronic bias with textual and cognitive metaphors underlying it:

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of elipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour.¹⁷

This book is an ethnohistory,¹⁸ rather than an ethnography, for it seeks to apply the idea of "thick description" across major units of historical time. Thus it departs somewhat from the inclusive cognitive approach of Geertz, according to whom one of the many compacted conceptual structures in a given instant or action ("winks upon winks upon winks") may involve a reference to the past. "Thick description," in the ethnohistorical sense in which it is used here, entails the analysis of all the traces, structural or cultural, that the institution under study has left on the past. But the collection of such traces, however minute and detailed, would not constitute "ethnohistory," but rather history, pure and simple. What makes it ethnohistory is its link to the present, to the cognitive and structural

¹⁶ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 3–30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10. This bias, of course, has not prevented Geertz from making extremely important diachronic studies in Indonesia and Morocco.

¹⁸ I have presumed to define "ethnohistory" for my purposes partly because of the diverse traditions that currently place themselves under this rubric: see Bernard S. Cohn, "Ethnohistory," *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), 6:440–6.

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ways in which these traces have become compacted in the meaning systems of actors in the present.

Ethnohistory, in this sense of “thick description” across time, presents one route through which to avoid the twin illusions of synchronic functionalism that Levi-Strauss has so eloquently warned against:

When, in addition, one completely limits study to the present period in the life of a society, one becomes first of all the victim of an illusion. For everything is history: What was said yesterday is history, what was said a minute ago is history. But above all, one is led to misjudge the present, because only the study of historical development permits the weighing and evaluation of the interrelationships among the components of the present-day society. And a little history – since such, unfortunately, is the lot of the anthropologist – is better than no history at all. How shall we correctly estimate the role, so surprising to foreigners, of the *aperitif* in French social life if we are ignorant of the traditional prestige value ascribed to cooked and spiced wines ever since the Middle Ages? How shall we analyse modern dress without recognizing in it vestiges of previous customs and tastes? To reason otherwise would make it impossible to establish what is an essential distinction between primary function, which corresponds to a present need of the social body, and secondary function, which survives only because the group resists giving up a habit. For to say that a society functions is a truism; but to say that everything in a society functions is an absurdity.¹⁹

This critique of crude functionalism by Levi-Strauss offers an interesting perspective from which to consider a somewhat different critique from an anthropologist working far more directly within the functionalist tradition. In *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, Edmund Leach proffered a number of interrelated criticisms of his own British structural-functionalist heritage, of which one is of central importance, namely, the question of “how different structures can be represented by the same set of cultural symbols.”²⁰ Although my own understanding of the key terms in this question is somewhat different from Leach’s, I do share his view that a “one-to-one” model of the relationship between culture and social structure might, in many contexts, prove to be a dangerous fiction. Leach’s position, in this regard, is consistent with both the Levi-Straussian critique of functionalism and Geertz’s idea of the disharmonic fit between culture and structure. Given Leach’s own synchronic-functionalist tendencies, however, his notion of different social structures sharing a

¹⁹ C. Levi-Strauss, “History and Anthropology,” in *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1967), pp. 12–13.

²⁰ E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (Boston, 1965), p. 17.

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common culture remains static, although his study of the Kachin is filled with historical information. My own concern, given the ethnohistorical premise of this study, is slightly different. I hope to show how alterations in social structure, *over time*, interact dialectically with a fundamentally unaltered cultural system.

Briefly, this book is an ethnohistorical study of a single South Indian temple, over a period of two centuries, whose primary data are provided by occasions of conflict and whose purpose is to evaluate the present state of the temple in light of its particular past. But to understand this particular choice of subject, it is necessary to make a detour into the current state of South Asian, as well as South Indian, ethnography.

South Asian ethnography: the problematic in context

Since the early 1950s, published ethnographic works on South Asia have appeared in immense quantity, and it is both irrelevant and impossible to review that literature here. One aspect of this body of ethnography, however, is of great importance: its virtual concentration on the institutional and ideological complex known as caste. The history of this interest, starting from the major sociological synthesis of Max Weber²¹ and including the recent ethnological synthesis of Louis Dumont,²² conceals a shared and tacit premise, namely, that the sociological understanding of South Asian religion can largely be achieved by concentrating on the ideas and practices associated with caste as a sociological and cultural entity. Instead of reviewing this immense literature, I shall simply describe the following three issues, which a century of heated debate on caste has not been able to resolve.

1. What is the relationship between the economic and political domains of South Asian society and South Asian ideas concerning such things as salvation, pollution, ritual, and worship? With one important recent exception,²³ sociologists and anthropologists working on South Asia have approached this issue in terms of (culturally inappropriate) dualistic categories: secular versus sacred, interactional theories of rank versus attributional theories of rank, ritual status versus secular status, status versus power, and so on. These shared

²¹ Max Weber, *The Religion of India* (Glencoe, Ill., 1958).

²² Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago, 1970).

²³ M. Marriott and R. Inden, "Caste Systems," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974), 3:892–91.

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and interconnected dualisms have resulted in an isomorphic division within the scholarly community itself, which has retarded the resolution of the question.

2. What is the authoritative basis of ritual, economic, and social arrangements in South Asia? Much is known about power and dominance as an *aspect* of the caste system, and much is also known, from a textual and prescriptive point of view, about Hindu notions of power (in the sense of both royal *kṣatra* and divine *śakti*, for example). But little is understood about authority, that is, the way in which shared cultural understandings order relationships of obedience between men and preempt or resolve conflict of a disruptive sort.²⁴ This is largely due to the fact that castes, denuded today of their traditional context of king and state, appear to have a political life of their own, whether this be reflected in the “substantialization” of castes as Dumont analyzes it,²⁵ the seemingly modern feature of conflict between castes that concerns Srinivas and Leach,²⁶ or the pan-regional political organization of castes which were previously highly segmented on a territorial basis. Whichever of these developments one considers, what is less than clear is the authoritative basis, in cultural terms, of the caste system. Such attempts as have been made to link the present authoritative basis of the caste system to the textual wisdom of the Hindu tradition, on varna, on the political order, and on the role of the king, often reflect the present strained relationship between Indology and ethnology, “text” and “context.”

3. How is change in the caste system to be defined and measured, and how can analysts actually test models of change? This problem has generated almost as many positions as there are theorists and the phantom scheme of “modernity and tradition,” though in disrepute, continues to haunt and obfuscate scholarly discussion of change in the caste system. This is partly because, from a strictly ethnographic point of view, Indian villages (which provide the context for most caste studies) often resist historical analysis. Because there is inadequate documentation, historical information on particular systems of caste (local or regional) is partial, scattered, and cryptic. This encourages a reification of the “traditional” system, based on a synthesis of textual information, odd bits of pre-British records, and scattered

²⁴ An important exception is the work of Bernard S. Cohn, for example, “Anthropological Notes on Disputes and Law in India,” *American Anthropologist* 67, No. 6 (December 1965): 105, Pt. 2.

²⁵ Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, pp. 227–8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 225–7.

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information from the early British records.²⁷ Thus, the attempt to genuinely assess the impact of colonial rule on caste is repeatedly confounded by the lack of adequate information on caste as a functioning institution immediately before and during British rule.²⁸ This encourages arbitrary definitions of the “traditional” system and, therefore, of the nature of contemporary change.

In fact, the three problems in caste studies identified above are related. The absence of a coherent notion of the authoritative basis of the caste system both supports and is encouraged by the dualist notions that dominate most analyses of the relationship between the economic/political domain and the religious/cultural domain. Both these problems are, in turn, exacerbated by the difficulty of conducting intensive *diachronic* studies of caste in particular regional contexts. And finally, the inadequate understanding of caste, as a historical phenomenon, supports the theoretical confusions in the literature about the relationship of authority, economics, and ritual as various components of caste society.

In South India, at any rate, the Hindu temple presents an alternative locus²⁹ from which to consider these larger issues that plague and intrigue students of caste. In many ways the Hindu temple is the quintessentially South Indian institution. The extensive construction of temples in South India goes back to at least the Pallava period (circa A.D. 700). The vast number of temples in South India is indicated by a recent census report which, “reckoning only the important and well-known temples in Tamil Nadu,” identified 10,542 temples in the fourteen districts of the state. Temples come in every

²⁷ Needless to say, there are important exceptions to this state of affairs: B. S. Cohn’s numerous articles on the Benares region at the beginning of British rule; Tom Kessinger, *Vilyatpur, 1848–1968: Social and Economic Change in a North Indian Village* (Berkeley, 1973), is a pathbreaking attempt to discuss various aspects of a single village over a century, although its substantive concerns are somewhat different from those of this study; Ronald B. Inden, *Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle-Period Bengal* (Berkeley, 1976), is an outstanding ethnohistorical analysis of a single regional system in pre-British India.

²⁸ Two recent historical studies of caste in the modern world are exceptions to this statement: Karen Leonard, *Social History of an Indian Caste* (Berkeley, 1978), and Frank Conlon, *A Caste in a Changing World* (Berkeley, 1977). Although matters of ritual play an especially important role in Conlon’s study, neither Conlon nor Leonard is principally concerned, from a theoretical point of view, with the relationship between authority, ritual, and economy. Nevertheless, these studies, especially Conlon’s view of the Saraswat Brahmins, do suggest that the theoretical argument of the present study may be applicable in useful ways to the study of caste.

²⁹ Geertz has recently argued that “the locus of study is not the object of study” (*Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 22). In Geertz’s spirit, I believe that the grand South Asian issues are the same, whether one starts with caste, temple, or any other institution.

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size and scale, from small family shrines to village temples, to lineage temples, to regional temples, to great pan-regional pilgrimage centers.

The importance of temples in South Indian history has been the subject of numerous references in the historical literature. In South Indian ethnography, the economic, social, political, and cultural importance of temples has been frequently noted, though rarely analyzed.³⁰ Temple architecture, temple economics, and temple ritual have been the subject of many learned monographs. Information on medieval temples in South India, in the form of published stone inscriptions, constitutes a vast, though relatively untapped, scholarly resource. Given their number, cultural importance, and economic status, temples had to be dealt with by British administrators and judges, thus often generating a rich and continuous body of information concerning many temples from the beginnings of British rule.

This wealth of information about South Indian temples is, however, matched by its frustratingly disaggregated quality. Among historians, the standard view of temples has been a “loose-leaf” model, with observations on temple management, temple ritual, temple economics, and temple iconography simply juxtaposed but not synthesized.³¹ More specialized studies suffer from the opposite drawback, namely, an excessive emphasis on one or another aspect of the temple, without any analysis of the temple as an institutional whole. In South Indian ethnography, the temple generally appears as a subordinate and marginal arena in which ritual and status issues, primarily enacted in the context of caste, lineage, and village, are seen to have a secondary manifestation. In part, it could be argued that it is precisely the methodological insulation of historians and anthropologists from each other, in respect to the study of temples, that has resulted in the present state of affairs, wherein much is known about various aspects of temples but no coherent analysis exists of the temple *as such*, as a total functioning institution viewed from the “inside.”³²

³⁰ Notable ethnographic reports and analyses of various aspects of temples in contemporary South India can be found in L. Dumont, *Une sous-caste de l'Inde du Sud: organisation sociale et religion des Pramalai Kallar* (Paris, 1957); B. E. F. Beck, *Peasant Society in Konkku: A Study of Right and Left Subcastes in South India* (Vancouver, 1972); S. A. Barnett, “The Process of Withdrawal in a South Indian Caste,” in M. Singer, ed., *Entrepreneurship and the Modernization of Occupations in South Asia* (Durham, N.C., 1974), pp. 179–204; A. Beteille, “Social Organization of Temples in a Tanjore Village,” *History of Religions* 5, No. 1 (1965): 74–92.

³¹ Some important exceptions to this characterization are cited in Chapter 2.

³² An important exception to this methodological rift is the work of Carol A.

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This analysis is, in part, an effort to remedy this situation by tracing a single temple over an extended period of time, linking the historical past with the ethnographic present. The following section presents a general, factual picture of the cultural ecology of the Śrī Pārtasārati Svāmi Temple, the case on which this work is based.

The Śrī Pārtasārati Svāmi Temple

The Śrī Pārtasārati Svāmi Temple is located in the neighborhood of Triplicane in Madras city, which is the capital of the state of Tamilnāṭu in India. The state of Tamilnāṭu, which came into existence in 1956 (previously Madras State), is situated at the south-eastern extremity of the Indian peninsula and Tamil is its dominant language (Figure 1). Bounded on the north by the states of Mysore (now known as Karnāṭaka) and Andhra Pradesh, on the east by the Bay of Bengal, and on the south by the Indian Ocean, and on the west by Kerala State, it has a coastline of 620 miles and a land boundary of 750 miles. It lies between 8°5' south latitude and 13°35' north latitude, and 76°15' west longitude and 80°20' east longitude. It covers an area of approximately 50,000 square miles, making it the eleventh largest state in the Indian Union. As reported in the 1961 census, its population was 33,686,953.

The city of Madras, which is an administrative district in itself, was founded by the British in 1639 and is now a major industrial, commercial, political, and religious center.³³ The city occupies an area of 48.9 square miles and is situated on the coast, at the virtual northeastern extremity of the state of Tamilnāṭu (Figure 1). According to the 1961 census, Madras had a population of 1,729,141; it is divided into numerous zones and subdivided into divisions (Figure 2), of which Triplicane is one. Some impression of the sacred geography of Madras city can be gained from Figure 3, although it covers only a small number of the 296 important temples reported to exist in Madras city by the 1961 census.

Breckenridge, "The Śrī Mināksi Sundarēsvarar Temple: A Study of Worship and Endowments in South India, 1800–1925" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1976). Some of our joint conclusions concerning the cultural system of the South Indian temple in a schematic form have appeared in Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, "The South Indian Temple: Authority, Honor and Redistribution," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, N.S., 10, No. 2 (Delhi, 1976):187–211.

³³ Susan Lewandowski, "Urban Growth and Municipal Development in the Colonial City of Madras, 1860–1900," *Journal of Asian Studies* 34, No. 2 (February 1975): 341–60; also see Lewandowski, "Changing Form and Function in the Ceremonial and the Colonial Port City in India: An Historical Analysis of Madurai and Madras," *Modern Asian Studies* 2, No. 2 (1977): 183–212.