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978-0-521-05372-3 - The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom

Nicholas B. Drinks

Excerpt

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PART 1

**Introduction**

## 1

*The study of state and society in India***The legacy**

The Indian state is barely visible to comparative sociology. When the state is evident at all it appears as a weak form of Oriental despotism, destined to disappear as suddenly, and as casually, as it emerged. It seldom possesses mechanisms – hydraulic or otherwise – that could enable it to sustain itself for long. It depends mostly on ruthless short-sighted taxation of the countryside, which eventually leads to such chaos that it dissolves on its own or is conquered by some new entrant on the political scene.

Weber, Marx, Maine, and more recently Dumont have all held that in India, in marked contrast to China, the state was epiphenomenal. Marx's view is typical: "Just as Italy has, from time to time, been compressed by the conqueror's sword into different national masses, so do we find Hindustan, when not under the pressure of the Mohammedan, or the Mogul, or the Briton, dissolved into as many independent and conflicting States as it numbered towns, or even villages" (1972, 35). Marx saw these village communities as the necessary complement of Oriental despotism: "these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies" (p. 40). While states came and went, village communities endured.

For sociology, caste, not the state, held these village communities together. In a more general sense, caste is seen as the foundation and core of Indian civilization; it is responsible for the transmission and reproduction of society in India. Caste, like India itself, is represented as based on religious rather than political principles. The state is always about to dissolve into fragments made up of various "communal" elements. Modern day journalistic coverage of India has its roots in the early writings of British travelers and administrators, as well as in the more systematic work of such theorists as Weber. Weber writes that

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“Caste, that is, the ritual rights and duties it gives and imposes, and the position of the Brahmins, is the fundamental institution of Hinduism. Before everything else, without caste there is no Hindu” (1958, 29). Weber goes on to say that the caste order is itself based on the greatest authority in the system, the sacerdotal Brahmins: “Caste is, and remains essentially social rank, and the central position of the Brahmins in Hinduism rests primarily upon the fact that social rank is determined with reference to Brahmins” (pp. 29–30). For Weber as for sociology in general, Indian society, headed by a Brahmanic elite,<sup>1</sup> is based on other-worldly and spiritual principles.

While Louis Dumont (1980) has rightly been hailed as one of the most important writers on India in recent years, he has in many ways only updated the view of India found in Marx and Weber. Dumont holds that the political and economic domains of social life are “encompassed” by the “religious.” The religious principle becomes articulated in the Indian case in terms of the opposition of purity and impurity. For Dumont as for Weber the Brahmin represents the religious principle, inasmuch as the Brahmin 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 Brahmin. Caste is fundamentally a religious system.

Prevailing conceptions about Indian state and society reflect the larger history of Orientalism, in which the colonial and now post-colonial interest in controlling the East, an interest which entailed the delegitimization of pre- or postcolonial state forms, has merged with a nostalgia for spirituality and, more specifically, a religiously based society (Said 1979). India’s represented past haunts not only studies of colonialism, but even the historical legacy handed down to modern India. India’s need to invent the nation, the state, and to find the basis for a society which is neither narrowly religious nor ethnic is made far more difficult by prevailing forms of Orientalistic knowledge which have their immediate roots in representations of the old regime as despotic, decadent, and deformed by decontextualized versions of caste or the village community as the sole (and autonomous) basis of Indian society.

It is my contention in this book that until the emergence of British colonial rule in southern India the crown was not so hollow as it has generally been made out to be. Kings were not inferior to Brahmins; the political domain was not encompassed by a religious domain. State

<sup>1</sup> In a recent review of two books, one by a Sanskritist and the other by an anthropologist, Wendy D. O’Flaherty confirms this by writing that “In Indological Studies, it appears, all roads lead to the Brahmin” (1984, 1357).

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forms, while not fully assimilable to western categories of the state, were powerful components in Indian Civilization. Indian society, indeed caste itself, was shaped by political struggles and processes. In using the term “political” I am of course conscious of imposing an exogenous analytic term on to a situation in which, as I will argue, ritual and political forms were fundamentally the same. However, I must stress the political both to redress the previous emphasis on “religion” and to underscore the social fact that caste structure, ritual form, and political process were all dependent on relations of power. These relations were constituted in and through history; and these relations were culturally constructed. And it is on the cultural construction of power, in the final analysis, that I rest my case.

**The book**

This book is about the relationship between the Indian state and Indian society in the old regime, and the transformation of this relationship under British colonialism, when the crown finally did become hollow. The particular focus for the study is a small region of southern India. This region was one of many similar political regions which constituted the lowest level of the late precolonial state, and is here called, borrowing a term from Bernard Cohn (1962), a little kingdom. While what I write about the Indian state must always be qualified by the fact that I am not looking at large transregional states, my perspective is one that will reveal the complex and integral interrelations of political processes which ultimately culminated in larger kingdoms with the social forms that are held to be autonomous and nonpolitical. By focusing on the cultural, political, social, economic and ritual basis of the little kingdom, I will show the inherent problems of these analytic categories and the distinctions they imply.

The little kingdom under scrutiny in the pages to follow is a place called Pudukkottai (Putukkōṭṭai), meaning “new fort.” Pudukkottai, which at its most extensive did not exceed 1,200 square miles, was located in an exclusively rain-fed agricultural zone right in the middle of the Tamil speaking region of southern Indian, straddling the boundary between the two great medieval Tamil kingdoms. Ruled by *Kallar* kings from the end of the seventeenth century until 1947, it provides an excellent canvas for a study of the political history of Indian society, or, rather, a social history of the Indian state. Kallars were elsewhere thought to be highway robbers: the term itself is still used in Tamil for thief. Dumont, in his first work on India and his only ethnographic monograph (1957b), used Kallars as examples of a ritually marginal

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group that exemplified the Dravidian isolation of kinship from the influence of caste hierarchy. But in Pudukkottai Kallars were *kings*; they exercised every conceivable kind of dominance and their social organization reflects this fact.

I base my understanding of Pudukkottai on my reading of late medieval and early modern inscriptional and textual sources relating to local chiefs and kings, as well as on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century administrative and land records, colonial reports, and the results of my recent ethnographic fieldwork. 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 before it began its long decline under a distinctive form of colonial hegemony engineered by the British.

Colonialism purposefully preserved many of the forms of the old regime, nowhere more conspicuously than in the indirectly ruled Princely State, of which Pudukkottai was the only one in the Tamil speaking region of India. But these forms were frozen, and only the appearances of the old regime – without its vitally connected political and social processes – were saved. The historical method in the book is thus both genealogical and archaeological; I trace connections but I also search for disjunctions in the historical, ethnographic, and textual shards I have found.

The book begins with one of the most momentous episodes in the British conquest of the south, the capture of the rebel chief Kattapomman in 1799, only to become an extended flashback to the old regime. In the first chapter I attempt to reconstruct the principal dynamics of the last millennium of south Indian history, exposing the changing political logic of social and ritual relations from medieval times to the old regime. I then turn my attention to the cultural construction of king and kingdom in the old regime. Using eighteenth-century texts – genealogies, chronicles, ballads – as cultural discourses,<sup>2</sup> I find persistent motifs, events, narrative forms, tropes, and images, and I read the parts they play in the poetics of power. This textualized discourse suggests the key elements to which I must attend in my historiographic inquiry: the core conceptions of sovereignty; the interpenetrating

<sup>2</sup> My use of the term discourse is influenced by Foucault's view of the structure and power of discourse, and of the practical nature of its formation and implementation: i.e., power and its technologies. For an anthropological reading of Foucault which I have found particularly helpful, see H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, 1983.

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transactions in gifts, service, and kinship; the structure and form of hegemony.

I then close in on Pudukkottai, sketching in miniature my argument about the nature of the old regime political system and assembling inscriptional evidence to substantiate my sense of the rise of chiefs in areas like Pudukkottai in the period from the fourteenth century on. Building on my argument about the process of transformation implicit in the nature of south Indian little kingdoms, in brief the movement from bandit to little king through relations with higher kings, I show how textual readings are realized in historical processes. For I describe the political system of Pudukkottai in the old regime historically, as a dynamic system based on relations of service and protection, kinship and caste, lordship and gift, military might and discursive domination. In particular I show how rights to landholding were political rights, which reflected the structure of the little kingdom at the same time that they revealed the pervasive importance of royal honor.

But then, abandoning chronological consistency, I present my ethnographic evidence about the structure and ideology of social organization, both among Kallars and between them and other castes. Only through my fieldwork was I able to reconnect society and state; caste and kinship were profoundly political in their operation and their conceptualization. My conclusions directly oppose those of Dumont: thus I consider and often argue against his general writings about the nature of caste hierarchy, his technical writings about kinship, and his ethnographic conclusions about the nearby Pramalai Kallars of Madurai.

Specifically, I argue that caste was embedded in a political context of kingship. This meant among other things that the prevalent ideology had not to do, at least primarily, with purity and pollution, but rather with royal authority and honor, and associated notions of power, dominance, and order.<sup>3</sup> My analysis reintroduces this concern with power and dominance into studies of culturally determined structures of thought. It is a mistake to try to separate a materialist *etic* from a culturalist *emic*: even the domain of ritual action and language is permeated with the complex foundations and lived experience of hierarchical relations. At least this is true for the Kallars of Pudukkottai,

<sup>3</sup> This is not a totally new proposal. Arjun Appadurai (1981), Carol Breckenridge (1976), Valentine Daniel (1984), Dennis McGilvray (1982), and others have raised various aspects of this agenda in important ways. I hope, however, that this book will provide the ethnohistorical evidence to give still greater credibility and sharper clarity to this alternative to the dominant theory of caste.

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less affected perhaps than most other groups by colonialism and the demise of the old regime in the nineteenth century. 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 colonial societies. It was not merely convenient for the British to detach caste from politics; it was necessary to do so in order to rule an immensely complex society by a variety of indirect means. Colonial sociology was an outgrowth of letters and reports which represented the eighteenth century as decadent and all legitimate Indian politics as past (Cohn 1983). But caste – now disembodied from its political contexts – lived on. In this dissociated form it was appropriated, and reconstructed, by the British. Paradoxically, they were able to change caste only because caste in fact 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.

The final section of the book concerns the impact of colonialism and the “modern state” on south Indian society, closing the flashback historically and historiographically. It is meant both as contribution to colonial history and as a way of critiquing colonial historiography, in which little kings were at worst rebels and at best landlords, and in which the Indian state was deconstructed and the nature of Indian society misconstrued. 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, the ceremonial residues of the old regime state, and fetishistic competition for ritual goods that no longer play a vital role in the political system. The book ends with a picture of the Princely State as the “theatre state” (Geertz 1980), the final and only realization in the south Indian context of a state where ritual has been set apart on a stage with dramatic but ultimately only fictional power for the anonymous audience.

My work on Pudukkottai and other little kingdoms in the south has led me to the realization that the history of these little kings (called “poligars” by the British) has been substantially based on the writings of colonial administrators who had developed a systematic view of old

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regime state and society in order to justify and facilitate their own land settlements, including the Permanent Settlement, the subsequent *ryotwari* settlement, and finally the settlement of *inams* (tax-free lands) in the late nineteenth century. The land settlements were predicated on the dual aim of securing order and extracting revenue, the cornerstones of colonial policy. Taxonomies of land type and use, caste constituency and status, and political relations under the Raj became first fixed and then reified through the colonial institutions that promulgated and implemented this colonial sociology. This process of the reification of new forms took place against the background of the old regime. Whether we are concerned with the changing nature of the state, the implementation of new forms of private property and revenue collection, the creation of new forms of social relations and communal tensions, or the formalization of a colonial sociology in which the immediate past of India was represented for the purpose of controlling and appropriating the political dynamics of Indian society, the old regime must be studied.<sup>4</sup>

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 it is precisely the marginality of Pudukkottai that makes it possible to detect there 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, or 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 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, Dumont was also almost certainly influenced by an ethnographic reality in which kingship played only a very small, residual role. As for the ethnosociological theories that compete with Dumont for credibility in the contemporary marketplace of cultural theories of 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

<sup>4</sup> This period, sometimes labeled the “old regime,” sometimes late pre-colonial India, and sometimes not labeled at all, has recently received some important, if as yet only preliminary, attention. See Barnett 1980; C. Bayly 1983; S. Bayly 1984; Dirks 1979; Gordon 1977, 1978; Leonard 1979; Perlin 1978, 1983; Richards 1976; Stein 1984; and Washbrook 1984.



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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.

To resolve in such a clear-cut historical manner the “great conundrum of Indian social thought” – whether the Brahman or the king had precedence (Trautmann 1981; Heesterman 1978) – is perhaps to do injustice to the complexity of the issue. However, the historical case of Pudukkottai strongly suggests that the caste system, and its attendant hierarchical forms, reached a particular stage of development and articulation under a social formation in which the king was supreme. The demise of kingship, in some areas as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, progressively later in southern India, and perhaps last of all in Sri Lanka, led to major changes in the caste system. The demise of kingship was accompanied by the steady ascendancy of the Brahman, as the maintainer of social order and the codes of caste. Brahmans reached a new high under British colonialism both in their participation in the development of Hindu Law and in their preponderance in colonial administration (Dirks 1974). Even in the realm of the ideological basis of the caste system, the role of Brahmans, not as honored and valued members of kingdoms, but as the colonially constituted arbiters of caste order, has changed in major ways in the last two centuries.

The importance and reference of a study of a region such as Pudukkottai should now be clear. Kings in Pudukkottai continued to rule until very recently. And Brahmans were heavily patronized by these kings. The ethnohistorical case before us facilitates rather than obstructs the reconstruction of a caste system that was profoundly political.

### **History and anthropology**

In this book I propose new methods and new possibilities in the emerging collaboration of “history” and “anthropology,” what is here and elsewhere called ethnohistory. Ethnohistory has many meanings (Cohn 1968). It can mean the reconstruction of the history of an area and people who have no written history. As such, it has been used to denote the field of studies concerning the past of American Indians, or of other “primitive” or pre-literate societies. Ethnohistory can also mean the use of anthropological theory and methods in historical practice; we sometimes call this historical anthropology. As such, ethnohistory unites a concern for the social and cultural forms studied by anthropologists with the multiple contexts and temporal dimensions invoked and identified by historians. Like all hybrid labels, whether in history or in

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anthropology, it is most useful when it points us to the possibility of a collaborative enterprise which is both open-ended and more than simply the sum of its parts.

Unfortunately, however, such hybrids often serve to do little more than lend mystique and legitimacy to traditional practices. It is not enough to borrow some terms, and perhaps even some theories, from another discipline. What we get then is too often nothing more than the reproduction of the attenuated and decontextualized notions of Malinowski, Turner, or Geertz; or a preliminary chapter in an ethnography based on brief archival forays. Instead, ethnohistory must operate as a reflexive critical technique, challenging our basic presuppositions at every point. It must push us to revise our standard historiographical methods and theories, or to “explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience of culture” (Sahlins 1985, 72). It must also identify the limitations of anthropological practice and theory, investing time, process, contingency, discontinuity, and agency into functional, structuralist, or semiotic models. In all of these respects, I believe that ethnohistory has the potential to rework basic parameters in the study of society, culture, and the past.

I am, of course, alone neither in believing this nor in attempting to practice it. The book that results in this case, however, is long and in some ways unwieldy precisely because it seeks to reconstruct the basis for the interdisciplinary study of Indian society. I do not want to finesse fundamental problems. I want to engage the inherited legacies of political history, caste and kinship studies, textual hermeneutics, and colonial historiography. So the book tacks back and forth between a new set of methods and the recognition that it is difficult to engage these methods in scholarly contexts where many discourses have remained unexamined for far too long. Historians will recognize some ground as familiar, some as less so; anthropologists will recognize some of the debates, and perhaps be bored by details on landholding; textualists will find texts but then lose them when they are resituated in their referential worlds. My hope is that my challenge to conventional strategy and taxonomy will indeed result in a kind of culture shock, but one that will be welcomed as the necessary accompaniment to deeper understanding, not disparaged as an annoying and unsettling experience.

There is, nonetheless, precedent for my approach. Historians as various as Robert Darnton, Natalie Davis, William Sewell, Hans Medick, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Jacques Le Goff, and Keith Thomas – to name only a few – have advocated new ways to anthropologize history. As one of the most sophisticated consumers of anthropology, Sewell (1981, 10) has written that the “deepest and most