

1 Introduction

India is an ancient civilization and consequently immensely complex. Jumbled into India's present is a medley of traditions and contrasts with which Indians appear to be eminently comfortable. As an anthropologist working in south India, I have often felt that our accounts of contemporary Indian society fail to convey a sense of this fascinating complexity of myth, history, beliefs, and a heritage of state organizations, or even to convey a full sense of the manner in which castes are integrated into the state societies in which they have existed for thousands of years. This book is about the complexity of south India. How do all these elements—caste, history, beliefs, and state organizations—fit together?

This study is oriented by four questions. First, *what do we learn about south Indian society by studying artisan-merchants?* Most studies of south Indian society focus on agriculturists and their dependent castes. In so doing, they tacitly ignore the artisan-merchants, who form the second largest sector of the Indian economy, or treat them as anomalous actors in an agrarian-based world. This book presupposes the importance of the artisan-merchant castes in understanding south India's complexity, and focuses on one such community, the Kaikkoolars, who are an ancient weaver-merchant caste living today predominantly in Tamilnadu State.

How is our image of south Indian society altered when we take a regional perspective? Most anthropological studies of India focus on highly localized village communities. I worked not in a single locality but within a number of localities in a traditional area of south India. This study is an examination, therefore, of weaver-merchants in the context of the organization of a region.

What role have state/local relations played in the organization of south

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Indian society? I have found that weaver-merchants change their organization in response to changes in the state that affect regional administration. They do so in order to conduct the supralocal affairs that are an important aspect of weaving, itinerant trade, and state administration. Significantly, the organizations of weaver-merchants reflect their integral roles in the fragile kingdoms of the past and the bureaucracies of the present.

How does the study of artisan-merchants modify models of Indian caste society? Anthropological models of Indian society are usually based primarily on the behavior of agriculturists and their dependents, and seem unable to account for the behavior of castes whose organization is in many ways independent of the agrarian-based system. Integrating these castes into our models requires that we rework our understanding of Indian society.

Nearly all caste persons in India can relate tales of their castes' past greatness. In south India, many speak of their service to great kings and generals; they point to ancient eulogies of kings and courts and sometimes castes. Those with a warrior heritage relate with relish stories of their courage and sacrifice, loyalty and fierceness. They tell of their honors and titles, of their caste gods and sponsorship of major *pujas* (religious rites), and sometimes of their control of temples and temple offices. The traveler in south India encounters fortlike temples in which ancient inscriptions have been cut, telling of donations and endowments and of the persons and villages that offered them. There are references to kings and to the special rights granted to castes. One observes the symbols of bordering kingly states cut into the rock of medieval temple pavilions. Clearly, Indians give eminence to their temples and kings, to their own pivotal roles in states, and to their antiquity and heritage.

The complexity of contemporary Indian society is enhanced by its contrasts. Folk beliefs contrast with the traditions of Brahmanical Hinduism; fierce, small gods with benevolent high gods; and blood sacrifice with vegetarian customs. There are kingly caste traditions of dominance based on control of land and armies. These kingly traditions, which emphasize conquest and human sacrifice, contrast sharply with the Brahmanical castes' traditions that maintain priestly superiority, emotional restraint, vegetarianism, and priestly functions. Yet other castes mix elements of these schemes and stress autonomy and comparability in status to the highest ranking of the kingly and priestly castes. There are also the contrasting heritages of past kingly states, colonialism, and contemporary democracy. Forts and ruins spot the south Indian countryside, and fortlike temples mark communities and larger social domains. There are epigraphs that speak of great mercantile

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associations and of artisan and mercantile armies. Land control and commerce intermingle in the realms of former kingdoms and form an intriguing potpourri in contemporary south India. What imprint does this legacy of kingly states, of myth and history, and of agrarian-based dominance and warrior mercantilism have on the organization of contemporary society?

Indigenous Indian social theory holds that Indian society is organized around agriculture and a Brahmanical interpretation of the social order. Accepting this theory, anthropologists argue that landowning castes integrate the society politically and economically through their employment of dependent non-Brahmans, and ritually through their adherence to a hierarchical interpretation of society that ranks castes by degrees of ritual purity. In south India, the secularly powerful Brahmans provide the ideological basis of this order through their ritual acts as priests when, in the course of ritual performances, they symbolically reinforce this interdependent caste hierarchy. Together, Brahman and non-Brahman landowning castes and their dependent service castes form an integrated, hierarchical, locality-delimited caste system. Landowners command an array of economic and ritual services from the castes of their community. Carpenters, blacksmiths, potters, priests, barbers, washermen, and agricultural laborers all perform services in exchange for a share of agricultural production. Service castes are ranked subordinately to castes to which they render services, whereas other castes rank above those they can command.

But not all Indians participate in this integrated, interdependent social order. Artisans and merchants are frequently independent of the landowners' control, although they engage in production and trade aimed at servicing agricultural villages and indeed may live in these villages. However, many live in cities and towns that function as hubs of local and regional trade networks, serving a local rural area. Indigenous social theory is largely silent about these castes. Although the artisan-merchant castes are not as numerous as the populace integrated by agriculture, their economic and social significance has at times rivaled that of the agriculturists. The artisan-merchants are the producers of textiles, gold ornaments, and sculpture. They also include castes that produce blacksmith and leather goods. Together these castes draw around them an array of service castes such as barbers, washermen, traders, untouchables, and even some landowners. Among these, some serve and others ally themselves with the artisan-merchants to gain support in their opposition to more powerful agriculturists. Together these castes form a loosely integrated system of castes that roughly mirrors the system of their agriculture-based counterparts, but without the latter's characteristic in-

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terdependence. The importance of this dichotomy among the castes in south India was regularized ritually and socially by the formal conceptual separation of the two categories of castes. The agriculture-based castes were designated the “right-hand castes”; the artisan-merchants and their allies were called the “left-hand castes.” These castes worshiped separately, lived separately, and took different symbolic insignia as signs of their identity. They were often rivals in the pursuit of status and power.

The left-hand castes are important for several reasons. Their economic behavior has generated a separate source of wealth, and so a power base separate from that of the agriculturists. They have been more mobile, less tied to a specific locality, and through their trade networks they have helped to link the settlements of agriculturists. They have also provided the wealth and commodities important to foreign trade. Not only have they produced and traded products essential to local inhabitants, but they have also proved to be a source of revenue for polities, and political leaders have sought to control them. Their trade networks distribute goods to rural areas and act as channels through which local products are traded up and out of a region. In ancient times, some of the left-hand castes maintained armies to protect their trade and formed large associations to administer their interests (Hall 1980). Unlike the agriculturists, their associations involved supralocal organization in order to administer interlocal relationships that arose from their itinerant trade. The left-hand castes’ organization and economic independence made these castes a locus of political power rivaling that of the agriculturists. The importance of the left-hand castes is reflected in their rivalry for status with the right-hand castes and in the special ritual status they were accorded by Brahmans and kings in the historic past.

Clearly, a description of Indian society that ignored this important sector of society, the artisan-merchants, would be incomplete. Yet on the whole, accounts of artisan-merchants do not form a part of the image of Indian society projected by anthropologists.

Anthropological descriptions of India portray it as a land of agricultural villages in which traditional urban society is “basically similar to village society” (Mandelbaum 1970, vol. 1:9-10; see also Pocock 1960; Lynch 1967; Marriott 1968; Dumont 1970b:224). With four-fifths of India’s population living in villages, it is only natural that anthropologists have focused their field studies on village life, or occasionally on particular castes or rural-urban relationships. In the images of society that emerge, caste organization and kinship are the basic components, and control of land is the basis of power relationships within the village locality and the source of traditional urban dominance. “Land is the

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most important possession, the only recognized wealth, and it is also closely linked with power over men” (Dumont 1970b:156).

Politically dominant castes control land and the services of other castes. This control determines the patterns of interdependence among castes and local caste ranking. Caste as a hierarchical system is limited to a single village or a few linked villages (Koler:da 1978:40-41). Localism and the self-sufficiency associated with it produce “a *tendency* for regions to close in on themselves, a tendency sufficient to differentiate the regional systems, but not sufficient to shelter them from external influences and upheavals” (Dumont 1970b:156).

The image of Indian society that emerges is provincial. The impact of state organization is described as remote and only indirectly felt in the countryside. The significance of commerce and mercantilism is given little consideration. Localism, an agrarian-based economy, and the political and economic interdependence of the people living in these small village worlds prevail. Each caste within a locality is recognized as having a traditional occupation and a ritual status that reflects its place in the local social system.

The localism of this small world is also reflected in the fundamental organizational role of kinship. Each subcaste of a locality is an endogamous descent group. The descent organizations of the locale’s dominant caste and its other high-ranking castes form the basis of local organization and the local judicial-political organization (Mandelbaum 1970, vol. 1:273-293; Fox 1971; Beck 1972; Kolenda 1978). Descent organization is seen to form the basis of ties with higher levels of political organization in some parts of northern India (Fox 1971), but in south India kinship seems to organize only narrowly delimited territories (Beck 1972:78ff). This means that for most villagers, ties with states are indirect and are administered through the kinship organization of a localized segment of a dominant landholding caste.

Although reports of Indian society stress its village orientation, it has long been recognized that the village is not a social isolate. Ethnographers depict the integration of villages into regions as occurring both in the past and in the present through a variety of extensions that also bring to regions the influences of the greater civilization (Marriott 1955; Opler 1956; Mandelbaum 1970, vols. 1 and 2). Markets, traveling plays, priests, pilgrimages, the extensions of kinship, newspapers, schools, films, radio, and various systems of travel increasingly make involvement and integration the norm. In addition, taxation, elections, public administration, and the police make the presence of government a commonplace in the twentieth century. Despite these extensions of village awareness of the greater civilization, however, the basic ingredients of the social order and the ideology that supports them are

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demonstrated to be resistant to change (Dumont 1970b:223-224). Caste and kinship remain basic, and concerns of ranking and interdependence associated with local caste dominance characterize caste relationships. All are features of localism.

Because social change in the twentieth century involves the formation of caste associations and the development of state and national ties that transcend localities, modern change is commonly described as something new that has little meaning for or impact on the lives of villagers until they leave their localities and become involved in modern urban life. Although modern cities still exhibit elements of localism in their migrant sections and traditional residential areas (Fox 1970; Rowe 1973; Beck and Joy 1979; Joy and Beck 1979); they are also the centers of supralocal extensions and associations. Regional, national, and international corporations abound. Economic diversity and industrialization offer alternative sources of income to residents, and weaken caste dominance and the caste interdependence that integrates local systems of village ranking. Nonetheless, Indian society is depicted as resistant to change (Pocock 1960; Ames 1973; Khare 1973). India's population is still largely rural, and most of the urban population adheres to traditional values and social forms. Only a small westernized elite may be seen as deviating from this conservatism (Kolenda 1978:141-143); cities, industries, and the state have, with but few exceptions, adapted to this conservative traditionalism (Dumont 1970b:223-224). Localism prevails.

If anthropologists were to use a regional perspective, as opposed to this locality-oriented one, would this portrayal of Indian society be significantly altered? As a student of south Indian society, I am often made aware of differences between northern and southern India that suggest the two regions are organized differently. True, caste and kinship are fundamental ingredients of social organization, and agriculture and caste dominance produce similarly integrated systems of localized caste ranking in both regions. But there are also major differences that come into relief only when a regional rather than a local perspective is taken.

The first difference between the two regions involves marriage patterns (Kolenda 1968). Marriage ties are more localized in the South than in the North, and suggest that marriage alliances and descent may not be as important in the South for integrating an area as they are in the North. Second, major temple complexes are a common feature of the south Indian region and appear to exist in greater numbers than in the North, suggesting that they play a different role in south India. Except for studies of pilgrimages (Obeyesekere 1974), the importance of these temples to south Indian social organization is rarely analyzed

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carefully by anthropologists (however, see Beck 1972; Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976; Appadurai 1981). Third, whereas agricultural dominance is associated with castes claiming a kingly mode for behavior (*Kshatriyas*), and Kshatriya dominance (*Kshatriya raj*) is characteristic of political organization in villages and locales in north India, Kshatriyas and Kshatriya raj are absent in the South. Instead, south Indian society until recently was characterized by three different features: the secular and ritual supremacy of Brahmans, who have legitimized the social order and provided its ideology; the organization of the region into *naaDus* (territories administered by caste councils) dominated usually by an area's preeminent agriculturists; and the division of non-Brahmans into contrasting left-hand and right-hand sections. All three characterizing features of south Indian society were closely associated with each other and with the uses of temples, and they were an integral part of the segmentary organization of south Indian states.

What was the nature of this regional social organization? How were these three social forms interrelated, and what importance did temple use and state politics have in determining the development of south Indian social organization? Previous studies have focused on the supremacy of Brahmans in south India (Miller 1954; Gough 1955, 1956, 1960; Harper 1964; Beteille 1965; Mencher and Goldberg 1967; Appadurai 1981) or on dominant agriculturists (Epstein 1962; Beck 1972; Barnett 1973), but except for the work of the historian Hall (1980), who described trade in the age of the Cholas, almost nothing has been written about the social integration of the artisan-merchants into the region, nor has there been much consideration of the social organization of the region or its characterizing features (Beck 1979; Murton 1979; Stein 1980; Pfaffenberger 1982).

I offer a regional analysis in this book. I concentrate largely on the organization of the region in Tamilnadu known indigenously as *VaTa Konku* (northern *KonkunaaDu*), which extends north and west of the Kaveri River to Salem City in what is today Salem District (Map 1). My social focus is the Tamil caste of handloom weavers, the Sengunthar Mudaliyars, who are also known by their ancient name, *Kaikkoolar*. Tamilnadu State is historically well known for its handloom textiles, and VaTa Konku is the location of a number of weaving centers in a district that is today still an important locus of this trade. The Kaikkoolars, who speak Tamil, and the *Thevanga Chettiar*, who speak Telugu, together represent over 60 percent of the total weaving population of Tamilnadu State. The Kaikkoolars are a caste that formerly belonged to the left-hand section of castes.

The VaTa Konku region is part of the larger *KonkunaaDu* region,

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one of the five macroregions of the pre-British Tamil-speaking area. This is both a “naively given” and an “instituted” region (Saberwal 1971:83 following Schwartzberg 1967). It is “naively given” in that it is an indigenously recognized territory; it is an instituted region insofar as its territorial limits explicitly define the boundaries of certain features of local organization and administration. The geography of VaTa Konku still reflects the location of native administrative towns from the pre-British eighteenth century. These towns are nodes in the region’s networks of textile trade in which Salem City has played the role of regional market center or *entrepot*. Among the Kaikkoolars the region is known as the *EeRuurunaaDu*, the “Seven-City Territory.” These seven towns and their hinterland areas together form a hierarchy of caste councils that administers interlocal affairs. The region stretching from Taramangalam in the north to Trichengode in the south also forms an interlinked network of major temples, which in conjunction with the *EeRuurunaaDu* defines the Kaikkoolars’ membership and territory. VaTa Konku is a region, therefore, that exhibits its own structure even today when it is overlain by contemporary state organization.

One might ask why I have chosen to study weavers; what have they to do with the integration of south Indian society? The answer is complex. Beck (1972, 1979) has depicted, in two useful and intriguing studies, the integration of the KonkunaaDu region in terms of agriculturists, who formerly belonged to the right-hand section of castes. In her work, she contrasts the two sections of castes as, on the one hand, incorporating interdependent agriculturists and service castes (the right hand) and, on the other hand, as including independent artisans and merchants (the left hand) who were to a degree free from the control of agriculturists. Agriculture formed the greater part of the economy, and control of agricultural resources gave the dominant castes power over the castes that were economically dependent on them. Next to agriculture, commerce formed the largest sector of the economy, and within commerce textile production and trade was most prominent. Artisan-merchant castes were nondominant, but their occupations and mobility gave them autonomy from dominant agriculturists. Landholders adhered to a kingly model of caste behavior in accord with their political dominance, and the artisan-merchants adhered to a priestly model that depicted them as independent and Brahmanical in behavior.

The right-hand castes, according to Beck, were organized into *naaDus* (territories) controlled by dominant agriculturists. *NaaDus* were kin-based political organizations with a strong locality bias created by the dominant caste’s ties to land. By contrast, the left-hand castes

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lacked local political organizations and important kin organizations beyond the level of the lineage, and they were characterized by the mobility and social separation encouraged by their occupation as itinerant traders. In Beck's view, therefore, dominant agriculturists are the source of the area's social integration, which can be understood as a product of the economic control of the main source of production, land.

However, there are no studies focusing on castes formerly of the left-hand section. Consequently, we know little about the left-hand category and the manner of its integration into society. In her analysis, Beck seems to follow Dumont in believing that there is no separate normative status for merchants. They must either be subordinated to dominant agriculturists or assume a priestly, Brahmanical mode of behavior.

One can say that just as [in Hindu ideology] religion . . . encompasses politics, so politics encompasses economics within itself. The difference is that the politico-economic domain is separated, named, in a subordinate position as against religion, whilst economics remains undifferentiated within politics. Indeed one can study kingship in the Hindu texts. . . . But if we go one step further and raise the question of the merchant, the normative texts are silent. (Dumont 1970b:165)

Although the "normative [Hindu] texts are silent" about the question of the merchant in south India, epigraphs do reveal much about merchants in history (Hall 1980). Indeed, merchants seem not always to have been encompassed by agricultural dominance, but rather to have been assigned frequently to the left-hand section of society, where they established a dominance of their own. Clearly, south Indians once had an idea about the place of merchants. If we are to understand this place, we must first know the nature of the right-hand/left-hand division.

What is the place of artisans and merchants in the organization of the Konku region? Are they relegated to positions of subordination, inferiority, and marginality—to the left side—as their moiety identity suggests, or are they, like agriculturists, an integral but separate part of the political economy of south Indian states? Perhaps they are integrated differently or occupy a different social space, again as their left-hand designation might alternatively imply.

In this book, I argue that the Kaikkoolars as artisan-merchants are integrated differently and once occupied a separate social space. By studying weavers, we can determine how an important sector of the society and economy is integrated into the region, what role the three features of south Indian society have played in the weavers' organization, and what their place in the political economy of local states has been.

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This book is also about change, for south India, despite its centuries of cultural continuity, has evolved and developed throughout its history, and in the twentieth century the society in its broadest sense has been transformed. The three characterizing features of south Indian society have either disappeared or have been considerably altered and weakened since the 1920s. The Kaikkoolars today show a complexity of traditions and behavior that are understandable and explainable only in the context of their history and relationships with their region. If they are studied without regard to these factors, they appear ambiguous in their status and mixed in their traditions. However, if a historical and regional perspective is taken, this confusion disappears.

Historically, the Kaikkoolars' caste organization has been determined by the political organization of their region. As states have come and gone, the political economy of the region has changed, and the Kaikkoolars have responded by reorganizing their caste to serve them better in their relations with the state and its regional administration. This is as true of their efforts in the twentieth century as it was in the past. Twentieth-century reorganization has involved the creation of new institutions, but the impetus for these changes has been the same. It is erroneous to depict change in the twentieth century as being different from change in previous centuries. I argue in this book, therefore, that state-hinterland relationships today and in the past have had considerable importance in determining caste organization.

Another conclusion of this book is that the importance of commerce and the textile industry in south Indian social history has been overlooked. Next to agriculture, the textile industry has been and still is the largest sector of the economy. This has given textile production and trade an important place in south Indian society that is reflected not only in the wealth this industry produces and the desire of governments to control it, but also in the central symbolic role of textiles in Hindu ritual and worship. It is this acknowledged importance of the textile industry, and of artisan-merchants in general, that is reflected in the division of south India into left-hand and right-hand castes.