The un/selfish leader
Changing notions in a Tamil Nadu village

Björn Alm
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Preface

A book as long in the making as this has accumulated a lot of debts. I own the biggest debt to the many people in Ekkaraiyur who took an active interest in me and my study. Not only did they find the time to answer my many questions, they also let me share their daily life and concerns, often treating me as a family member. I foremost want to thank Ramakrishnan Udaiyar, Balumani Udaiyar, Padma Iyer, Subramani Vattiyar and my assistant Sekar, but also all the people who together made my stay in Ekkaraiyur an enjoyable time.

I own another big debt to my supervisors Gudrun Dahl and Bengt-Erik Borgström at the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University. Without their help and encouragement this book would never have been written. Their creative suggestions, and also their power of endurance, made it possible. My thanks go also to the many people who have read and commented on the manuscript in its various stages. I am principally thinking of Amare Tegbaru, Beppe Karlsson, Christer Norström, Christina Garsten, Gunnel Cederlöf, Göran Djurfeldt, Inger Lundgren, Marie Larsson, Sten Hagberg and the late Tomas Gerholm. Needless to say, they are not responsible for the views and errors in this study. These are entirely mine.

Several other people have also helped this study to come about. My teachers at the Department of Asian and African languages, Uppsala University and the International Institute of Tamil Studies, Madras, taught me Tamil, and the latter also help me get established in the field. In Tamil Nadu, C. Jeyakaran, Håkan Wahlquist, Joop and Els de Wit, Stina Vasu, Tor Skaarud, Åke Nilsson generously gave me hospitality and friendship.

At home, my mother Ingegärd and my late father Gunnar Alm, my wife Sara and my son Gabriel have consistently encouraged me to write about Ekkaraiyur. So have also my colleagues at the Department for Religion and Culture at Linköping University.

Finally, there is a financial side to all research. This side was taken care of by a generous grant from SIDA/SAREC, and several minor grants from the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and Svenska Sällskapet för Antropologi och Geografi.
Note on transliteration and names

It is far from unproblematic to use Tamil words in an English text. Regardless of which of the several different systems for writing Tamil in Latin script that is used, the tendency in the literature is to follow faithfully the spelling of a literary written Tamil. Unfortunately, this gives the reader unfamiliar with the language little indication of how to pronounce the Tamil words. In the interest of the non-specialist, I therefore follow two strategies: (i) I keep Tamil terms to a minimum, translating them as often as possible into corresponding English terms. (ii) When I use Tamil terms, I adopt a near-speech spelling.

There are exceptions. The two most important are: (i) ‘Tamil’ is properly pronounced with a very guttural ‘l’. Noting it as ‘a sound peculiar to Tamil’, Arden defines it as ‘a slurred, obscure sound between r and l.’ (1976:49) (ii) ‘Ekkaraiyur’ is the fictitious name of the village of the study. I spell it in English as it would be spelt in Tamil, if such a name were possible. It is to be pronounced with an initial ‘y’, except in high prose.

Villages in Ekkaraiyur’s surroundings have also been renamed, and so have most of the people who appear in the study. This has been done in order to protect their privacy.

It should also be noted that: (i) I consistently use ‘Brahman’ instead of the variant ‘Brahmin’. (ii) I add the polite suffix ‘-ar’ to caste names instead of the sometimes seen, and impolite, suffix ‘-an’ (the exception is for Brahman, for which the final ‘-an’ does not seem to carry such a meaning). (iii) I use the old-fashioned term ‘Tamilian’ in order to distinguish the people from other things Tamilian.
Chapter 1 Introduction

‘Alam, look here!’ Ambrose called, using the local version of my name. He picked up a magazine and leafed through its pages until he found the article he wanted to show me. ‘Look’, he said, ‘they don’t even bother to hide their shamelessness any more. Here it is, their greed is made public now and they even publish their fees in the press.’

The magazine article that upset Ambrose dealt with alleged corruption in the Department of Education. The writer claimed that corruption in diverse forms had become an institutionalised practice in the department, and a list of the fees that had to be paid for recruitment, transfer and so on was published. Civil servants and politicians at the highest levels officially sanctioned these fees, the journalist claimed.

Allegations of official corruption were not news. The Department of Education had been accused of corrupt practices before, and neither were other government departments believed to have ‘clean hands’. It was common knowledge that corruption existed and was widespread. As a primary school teacher, Ambrose had his own experiences of corrupt demands.

Although the article confirmed what he already knew as the reality, Ambrose was deeply upset. He chose to understand the article as a factual statement of the official policy of Department of Education, and it shook him to read that the corrupt practices were now officially sanctioned, with an attached list of fees and all. To Ambrose, this meant that moral decay in the Department of Education and elsewhere had gone so far that public shame had lost any significance. The article told Ambrose that corruption no longer had to be veiled.

Ambrose showed me the article in early 1990, when I was living and doing fieldwork in the village of Ekkaraiyur, in Tamil Nadu, India. This was only a minor incident during fieldwork that spanned almost two years, but it was an incident emblematic of a theme repeatedly and forcefully articulated in private conversation and public debates in Ekkaraiyur namely the theme of selfishness.
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Deep tensions were involved in Ekkaraiyur notions about selfishness. Selfishness was understood as the individual’s tendency to further his or her own ambitions, desires and interests without any concern for other people. Selfishness was considered as potentially harmful. Since any individual was liable to selfishness, according to Ekkaraiyur notions, human relationships in general were thought to be threatened.

This study is about selfishness. Notions surrounding selfishness in Ekkaraiyur could provide material for a complex and far-ranging study, as could any other human value or trait. This study is however limited to how people in Ekkaraiyur voiced social critique by censuring other people’s selfishness, particularly the selfishness of people in positions of leadership. The term ‘social critique’ is here focused on value judgements about societal relationships. Private conversation and public debates in Ekkaraiyur strongly suggested this focus. People in leadership positions were not only singled out as selfish, they were also held responsible for ‘the ruin of society’.

In discussing selfishness, I allow two perspectives to interact. The first perspective is based on people’s perceptions and evaluation of changes that had taken place recently in Ekkaraiyur. This perspective is found mainly in Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 7 of the study. In these chapters informants give their views of changes of which they themselves have been part. The chapters deal with the altered social, economic and political conditions of Ekkaraiyur, which I argue have made it possible for local leaders of a new kind to emerge.

The second perspective lacks the empirical solidity of the first. Instead, it focuses on the ideals of leadership and society. These ideals may never have been realised in Ekkaraiyur, but they provided people with a rich repertoire that was used for evaluating the present state of society, censuring other people’s selfishness and their own. This perspective is mainly found in Chapters 5 and 6.

The perspectives are different in that one has an essentially empirical basis, while the other has an essentially imaginary basis. Nevertheless, the distinction between an empirical basis and an imaginary one is difficult to uphold. In the final analysis it has to be acknowledged that both perspectives represent interpretations. This is why I unite them. Approaching the censure of selfishness from the two different angles that the perspectives represent, the one brings
out the attitudes and reactions of people towards the society in which they live, while the other brings out their beliefs about the past and the foreign, their hopes and dreams for the future, as well as the standards they used for evaluating their everyday experiences. In this respect, the two perspectives merge into one.

This study is also about leadership. It focuses on leadership that is locally grounded but also part of a state context. The state, in one form or another, has had a long historical impact on South Indian villages. Nevertheless, the increasing sphere of competence assumed by the modern Indian state cannot be overlooked. The state was part of everyday life in Ekkaraiyur.

Among other things, the state was understood to have been instrumental in creating the conditions for a new kind of local leaders to emerge. The state served not only as a point of reference for these leaders. In part their ability to be leaders derived from it, and the context of the state also formed people’s understanding and evaluations of leadership in general.

The directions of change brought about by the state were not always appreciated. Association with the state brought up a number of ‘problems of leadership’ for local leaders as well as for their critics. This study works through some of these problems. While Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the changing contexts of leadership in Ekkaraiyur, Chapter 4 specifically focuses on the association of leadership with the state. Finally, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 deal with the critique of leadership.

Many questions follow from the Ekkaraiyur censure of the selfishness of leaders. The most basic one is: Why did people in Ekkaraiyur argue that leaders were prone to selfishness? The answer, I suggest, is to be found in the changed economic, social and political conditions that have allowed a new kind of local leaders to emerge. This answer, however, breeds new questions about the standards by which selfishness was defined and censured, about the effects of selfishness on the social fabric, and about the viability of a society without selfishness. This study will attempt to answer these questions, from the viewpoint of the people of Ekkaraiyur.
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Structure of the study

Chapter 2 introduces the village of Ekkaraiyur, as it was in the early 1990s. Sketching life with broad strokes of the brush, the chapter aims at creating a sense of what it meant to live in Ekkaraiyur at that time.

I have chosen to focus on language, religion and caste. These aspects of life were important identity markers for people in Ekkaraiyur when they talked about themselves and about other people. They will therefore recur frequently in later chapters of the study. There is a large literature associated with South Indian aspects of language, religion and caste, from which I have drawn selectively for this introduction.

The chapter is intended to convey something of the social complexity of Ekkaraiyur. I therefore aim at emphasising collectively shared traits, organised diversity and particularities of language, religion and caste. The theme of complexity recurs in a discussion of possible and ambiguous meanings of being a villager, which ends the chapter. I here consider notions of residence and belonging.

Chapter 3 asks whether there has been a shift in modes of leadership in Ekkaraiyur. Based on informants’ accounts of the dissolution of former relationships of interdependence within Ekkaraiyur, I suggest that this has been the case. Focusing on accounts of conflicts about land, about tenancy agreements and about contracts for labour recruitment, I suggest that changes in these areas have been of particular importance in creating novel conditions for local leaders. Whereas earlier leaders based their positions on kinship, caste and local landowning, the state and political parties have become the important references for the new leaders.

I end the chapter by suggesting a rough outline of the long process of change in the association between land and leadership in South India. Comparing the situation in Ekkaraiyur at the end of the 1980s with that described in earlier studies of other villages, I argue that the gradual weakening of relations with landed property and access to land as the basis for patronage, and hence for political dominance, has been central to this process.
CHAPTER ONE

The association between relations with landed property and access to land and leadership has been an important theme of anthropological studies of South India, pursued among others by Béteille (1971), Gough (1981, 1989), Harriss (1982), Robinson (1988), and Srinivas (1988). It is a topic that anthropologists share with researchers from other disciplines. Baker’s history of rural economy (1984), MIDS’s study of the Tamil Nadu economy (1988), and the studies of Athreya, Djurfeldt, and Lindberg (Athreya et al. 1990; Djurfeldt & Lindberg 1975) have been important for my understanding of rural change. Nevertheless, I want to point out that my study differs from these non-anthropological studies in one basic way. Whereas they generally employ the analytical perspectives of outside observers, I try to depict the villagers’ own perspectives. In other words, instead of attempting to measure change in some objective way, I explore how people in Ekkaraiyur understood the connection between changes in relations to landed property and access to land and leadership.

The new leaders of Ekkaraiyur are in focus in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I discuss how patronage continued as the central mechanism for local leaders, despite the eroding importance of land, which I suggested in Chapter 3. However, by the late 1980s, the patronage that underpinned leadership in Ekkaraiyur was oriented towards the provision of state-derived benefits. The state also legitimised local positions of influence. In view of the fact that the state was the obvious reference point for leaders in Ekkaraiyur, I ask how the state was conceptualised locally. I also explore the various strategies leaders used to establish their positions, comparing these strategies with those conveyed by Mines (1984, 1994) and de Wit (1985, 1993) in their discussions of South Indian leadership. Mitra’s study of elites in Orissa and Gujarat (1992) has also been important for my understanding of leadership in Ekkaraiyur.

Focusing on a small number of leaders, I also note leadership positions in Ekkaraiyur that did not rely on the state, asking whether their legitimacy and leadership strategies were different from those of leaders associated with the state. Finally, in anticipation of the focus on the censure of leaders’ selfishness in the following chapters, I consider the view held by the leaders of Ekkaraiyur of themselves as altruistic ‘social workers’.
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Chapters 5 and 6 deal with stories of ideal societies and with the idealisation of foreign countries and of the recent village past. These stories, I argue, provided people in Ekkaraiyur with a benchmark against which to compare contemporary conditions. They involved an explicit critique of the perceived contemporary conditions, focusing both on the moral qualities of leadership and on people’s mentality.

Chapter 5 introduces the subject of ideal societies. Against the background of change outlined in earlier chapters, I suggest that the stories associated with ideal societies served as a repertoire for the critique of society as it was experienced by people in Ekkaraiyur at the time of my fieldwork. Focusing on aspects concerning social interaction, social mentality and the moral qualities of leadership, I discuss the three ideal societies of the Sangam Age, the Ummah and the Ramaraj: the first a golden age of the Tamilians, the second the first period of Muslim society, and the third Rama’s kingdom of Ayodhya.

The myth of the golden age of the Sangam Age holds a central place in contemporary conceptions of Tamilian history and identity. The literature is vast and varied, ranging from scholars who explore the glories of the golden age, to those who see it as the ideological core of what is variously called the Tamilian or Dravidian renaissance movement or nationalism. Muttarayan’s attempt to establish a historical identity between the Sumerians and the Tamilians (1975) and Manickam’s discussion on Dravidian versus Aryan culture (1999) are two examples from the former end-point of the range, while Arooran’s (1980), Hardgrave’s (1965), Irschick’s (1986), Rajagopal’s (1985), Ramaswamy’s (1997a), and Washbrook’s (1976, 1989) studies on the politics and identity of Tamilian nationalism belong to the latter end-point.

Less has been written about the Ummah from a South Indian perspective. The notion of the Ummah as an ideal society is, however, common among Muslims worldwide. Indeed, insofar as God’s will is taken as a blueprint for the ideal society, it can be argued that the notion is fundamental to Islam. Here, I focus on the interpretation Muslims in Ekkaraiyur gave to what they called ‘the true Muslim principles’.
There is a vast and varied literature on the Ramaraj. The Ramaraj comes in many Indian versions, but here I focus on the Ramaraj as it was conceptualised by the participants of a devotional cult in Ekkaraiyur. A number of studies explore similar devotional cults from a historical and textual perspective: Cutler (1987), Hardy (1983), Hart (1979), Peterson (1989), Shulman (1990), Pillai (1989), Yocum (1973) and Zvelebil (1973, 1977). In contrast, fieldwork studies on contemporary devotional cults are few. The one example I know of is Singer’s research into the modernisation of tradition (1968, 1972).

Chapter 6 adds to the examples of imaginary social constructs, used as a repertoire for the rhetoric of social critique. The chapter also broadens the discussion, following the suggestion made by my Ekkaraiyur informants that people’s mentality determines the course of society. While the moral qualities of leadership were the focus of the previous chapter, this broader view involves arguments about the mentality of people in general. Turning to another source of imaginary constructions associated with the ideal society, I explore the importance of self-reform for the people of Ekkaraiyur, if the ideal society was to come about. For this purpose, I discuss the idealisation of people of foreign countries and the idealisation of the not so distant past when a person named Marimuttu lived in Ekkaraiyur.

Indian idealisations of foreign countries appear to have attracted limited interest from social scientists of whatever discipline. One of the few attempts to look at them is Indian only in the widest sense, dealing as it does with Sri Lanka (Spencer 1995). Since Indians routinely compare themselves with people of other countries in order to highlight alleged Indian deficiencies, this shortage of studies is indeed surprising. It is probably a passing scarcity, since there is a growing interest in studies of non-Western discursive constructions of the West, termed occidentalism (Carrier 1995).

That there is no literature at all about Marimuttu is not surprising, as he was a person unique to Ekkaraiyur. Nevertheless, the stories about Marimuttu share traits with stories about devotees of other religious traditions (see, for example, Hudson’s study (1990) of devotion among the Nayanars). In particular, Marimuttu appears to be related to a category of people known as sittars. The available
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studies on sittars, however, are all textually based and historically oriented (see, for example, Brammarajan (2000), Raja (1984), Scharfe (1999), and Zvelebil (1973)). This perhaps puts Marimuttu into the unique class of a near contemporary representative of an otherwise historical sittar tradition.

In this study, I suggest that the stories about Marimuttu express a social critique of contemporary society. It has been noted that there is such a social critique suggested in the historical sittar texts, but no scholar has to my knowledge argued that contemporary popular beliefs about sittars express a critique of contemporary society. No doubt, this is mainly due to the absence of empirical studies of contemporary sittars.

Chapter 7 takes the study back to the reality of everyday life in Ekkaraiyur. In this chapter, I examine the critique of leaders from a different angle, turning to a different analytical context. This involves notions about corruption expressed in everyday conversations as well as during public discussion in Ekkaraiyur. Beginning with the censure of the leaders as corrupt, I move tentatively towards an understanding of the critique as aimed at a particular type of selfishness characteristic of contemporary society.

The claim that corruption is the subject of South Indian conversations is not more than a slight hyperbole. Yet, anthropologists have written surprisingly little about corruption in South India. Instead, corruption appears to be the preserve of economists and political economists, who have produced an abundant literature on the topic.

Inspired by Akhil Gupta’s article (1995) on the discourse on corruption in a North Indian village, I propose a different implication from his. While Gupta argues that the discourse on corruption is an important element in the construction of images of the state, I suggest that the discourse on corruption in Ekkaraiyur was part of a critique of a particular kind of individualism associated with selfishness. I link this suggestion to what appears to be an exclusively anthropological discussion of Indian individualism.1 Triggered off by Dumont (1988b [1966]) in the early 1970s, this discussion has led to suggestions by Béteille (1983, 1985, 1986), Mines (1992, 1994) and Mines and Gourishankar (1990) about the need to differentiate between different kinds of individualism.
Chapter 8 sums up the arguments of the study, and also briefly relates them to the ongoing discussion of reflexivity in a globalised world.

**Not a village study**

It needs to be pointed out that this is not ‘a village study’. Village studies were typical of an earlier anthropology, but according to Fuller and Spencer have been in decline since the 1970s, partly because ‘anthropologists got bored with them’ (1990: 86). A more striking reason than boredom, however, must have been the obvious lack of realism in presenting the village as an enclosed and self-contained world apart (cf. Breman 1989).

Consequently, there is much information typical of village studies that the reader will not learn about Ekkaraiyur. There are no lists of castes, no statistics on rainfall, temperature, types of soil, land ownership, and no elaborate sketches of the dinner seating arrangements. There is not even an account of all the pots and pans of silver, steel, brass, plastic and earthenware that are essential to a South Indian household.

Nevertheless, the decline of the genre of village studies does not necessarily mean that the village has to be abandoned as the context of study. Although my study is set in a village context, and most of my data concern people who were living in the village, their world as presented in this study was far bigger than the village. This study is thus primarily about South Indian society from the perspective of the village of Ekkaraiyur. Perhaps the anthropological quip that we do not study ‘a village, but in a village’ best sums up the character of the study.

**South Indian studies**

South India scholarship can be seen as a vast but unified research field of many different perspectives, which has attracted numerous scholars from the human and social sciences. Differences between perspectives do not necessarily coincide with conventional
disciplinary boundaries, and scholars from different disciplines have often attempted to answer the same questions with different kinds of data and from different perspectives. Sometimes, they have used similar kinds of data, and employed similar methods of data collection.

The interdisciplinary crossbreeding has proved to be productive. One example is given by Hockings’ *Blue Mountains* (1989), which includes essays on the Niligiri Hills by researchers from a variety of disciplines. The multi-perspective view adds up to something that neither anthropology, nor any other discipline, could achieve on its own. Another example is given by the interpretation of the nature of South Indian medieval state that Stein put forward in his seminal work on the Cholas (1985). Transplanting the concept of ‘the segmentary state’ from African anthropology (Southall 1956) to a South Indian context, Stein built the basis for an ethno-historical approach, the continued productivity of which is exemplified by Bayly’s study of the spread of Christianity and Islam (1989), by Dirks on the polity of a little kingdom (1989), by Ludden on peasant history (1989), and by Price on kingship (1996b). Yet other examples of the productivity of interdisciplinary crossbreeding between historians’ and anthropologists’ perspectives are given by Cohn (1987) and Fuller (1977).

Anthropology has contributed importantly to this field of South Indian studies. In its modern sense, anthropology in South India began in the 1940s with Dumont’s study of the Pramalai Kallars of central Tamil Nadu (1986b [1957]) and Srinivas’ studies of the Coorgs (1978 [1952]) and of a Mysore village (1988 [1976]). Since this beginning, South India has continued to attract the attention of anthropologists, with an apparent peak of interest in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Nevertheless, anthropological studies are not spread uniformly over Tamil Nadu. Instead, anthropologists have tended to cluster in three types of regions: major cities, rural regions near major cities, and major river deltas. For example, the studies of Caplan (1987), Dickey (1993a, 1993b, 1995), Fuller (1984), Mines (1984), Appadurai (1983), Singer (1972) and de Wit (1985, 1993) are all located in major cities. Rural regions near major cities are the scenes studied by Harriss (1982) and Moffatt (1979), while the studies of
Béteille (1971) and Gouch (1981, 1989) are set in a major river delta.

There are, of course, exceptions to the regional tendency. Beck’s (1972) and Dumont’s (1986b) studies fit neither of the types, nor do Daniel’s study of concepts of personhood (1984), Deliège’s study of the Paraiyars (1997 [1988]), Roche’s study of Parava fishermen (1984), and Nabokov’s study of spirit possession (2000).

The anthropologists’ tendency to study certain types of regions leaves large parts of Tamil Nadu anthropologically less explored. These include the Dindigul valley where Ekkaraiyur is located. The sum of anthropological studies of the Dindigul Valley is meagre. In addition to government manuals and gazetteers (Nelson, J H 1989 [1868]; Baliga 1960),³ four Village Survey Monographs were published for the region in association with the Census of India of 1961. However, none of these monographs survey villages in the Dindigul valley.⁴ Beck’s study of the Kongu Vellalars (1972) focuses on a region to the north of the valley, while Dumont’s study of the Pramalai Kallars (1986b) focuses on a region to the south of the valley. Indeed, the only anthropological study that in some measure deals with the Dindigul Valley is to be found in Beck’s collection of essays on the Coimbatore region (1979).

**Strength and weakness**

The present study is strong on two points, in my opinion. First, the location of the study on an intersecting line between different perspectives in the field of South Indian studies gives it a strength that more circumscribed approaches would lack. On one side of the intersecting line there is an interest in rural conditions, often based on fieldwork. On the other side is an interest in ideologies, often based on textual sources. My ambition is to bring the two perspectives together in this study, and thereby to contribute something to the productivity of the interdisciplinary and multi-perspective approach that I described above.

The second point of strength is the classical anthropological one, namely, the data are based on fieldwork. In 1990, Béteille noted that there has been a shift in Indian anthropology from ‘a field view’ to
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‘a book view’ (Béteille 1990: 490, in Fuller & Spencer 1990: 87). The same shift can also be seen elsewhere, where anthropological fieldwork is threatened by the rationality of educational policies. It would be a pity if fieldwork was allowed to fade from the anthropological scene, and I hope that my study will strengthen ‘the field view’ approach, while also using something of the perspective of ‘the book view’.

There are, of course, also weaknesses. First, the principal data for this study were collected between 1988 and 1990. We are now 2006, and people in Ekkaraiyur are living in an India that is different from the India of the late 1980s. Among other things, the state’s hold over the economy has been liberalised, tensions between Indians have been accentuated, and new technology has come within the reach of ordinary people. This means that life in Ekkaraiyur has undoubtedly continued to change. I have not revisited Ekkaraiyur since I left in May 1990, and my contacts with the village since then have been sporadic and limited. Although friends in Ekkaraiyur have continued writing to me, telling of things that happen in the village and their lives, I cannot claim to have a comprehensive view of developments in Ekkaraiyur. I therefore want to stress that this study’s context is located in the past. It is not a distant past, and it is not an irrelevant past, either. But, it should be remembered that a new generation has come of age in a village that is different from the Ekkaraiyur of my experience.

Second, I never managed to learn much about the Muslims in Ekkaraiyur. I had several Muslim friends, but I did not get to know as much about their lives as I would have wished. The reason was that the Muslims tended to keep apart from village life. In retrospect, it is regrettable that I did not make a greater effort to get closer to them.

Neither did I learn much about women in Ekkaraiyur, but for a different reason. Women and men tended to live segregated lives, and communication between them was surrounded by restrictions, which made it difficult for me to interview women. Early during my fieldwork, I became aware that the attempts I made to speak with women gave rise to slander. As this slander was harmful both to the women and to me, I soon became circumspect in my contacts with women. With a few exceptions, I could only speak freely with old
women and very young girls, and to some extent with mothers, sisters and wives of friends. Therefore, much of what I think I know about women in Ekkaraiyur, I have been told by their men. Consequently, men’s perspectives dominate this study.

Third, something should be said about translations. In Ekkaraiyur, my languages for conversation were Tamil, Tamil-English, and English. However, I tried to write my field notes in Swedish in order to prevent other people from reading my notes. Consequently, my field notes had gone through a number of translations already when they were collected. An interview sequence could run as follows. Questioning in Tamil, I was answered in Tamil. My research assistant then explained the answer in detail in Tamil-English, which I wrote down in Swedish (or in a mix of Tamil, English, and Swedish). Finally, the present text in English adds one more layer of translation. Regardless of the difficulty of translating concepts between different languages, these successive translations open up the introduction of biases, misunderstandings and corruptions of meaning. Obviously, the wisdom to be learnt is that explorations of meanings are risky ventures. If they are to be undertaken, they demand a linguistic skill that is denied to most anthropologists who work in foreign languages.

**Doing fieldwork in Tamil Nadu**

I visited Tamil Nadu for the first time in 1986. Looking for somewhere to do my fieldwork, I searched for a place that contained diversity both in people and in viewpoints. At first, it seemed that a small town would suit my purpose. However, I soon realised that small Tamil towns were quite large by Swedish standards. As I doubted my ability to fathom the complexities of town life, I decided to look for a large village instead.

On a friend’s advice, I established myself in a Dindigul lodge from where I set out to explore the surrounding countryside. One day I visited the village that I call Ekkaraiyur. I walked around, drank tea at a stall, spoke with some people, and ended up spending the afternoon in a garden with an old couple and their children and grandchildren. As I did not speak any Tamil and they did not know
any English, neither of us understood much about the other. When I left Ekkaraiyur by bus in the evening, I was nevertheless impressed by the friendliness of the people living in the village. Moreover, Ekkaraiyur seemed to fit my criteria well. It was a village of about 5,000 people, within easy reach of several large and small towns. In addition, the rural university of Gandhigram was located not far away. Consequently, by the time I left India some months later, I had decided to try to do fieldwork in Ekkaraiyur.

I returned to Tamil Nadu in early 1988, where I enrolled as a language student at the International Institute of Tamil Studies in Madras. I had studied some Tamil at Uppsala University in Sweden, but needed to improve my language skills. Eventually, the Institute also affiliated me as a research student of Tamil culture.

As it turned out, my tutor, Dr Ramasamy, was well acquainted with the Dindigul area, and he introduced me to one of his relatives there, who subsequently introduced me to a school teacher living in Ekkaraiyur. The teacher was the secretary of the Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangam, and after having interviewed me in Dindigul, he invited me to Ekkaraiyur to meet some of the members (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of the Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangam).

Accompanied by another relative of Dr Ramasamy, I took the bus to Ekkaraiyur on the appointed day. My companion was a landowner from a nearby village, and on the road we picked up some of his friends. In Ekkaraiyur, we met the office-bearers of the Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangam in their meeting-hall. They interviewed my companions and me, and then decided to welcome me to come and do fieldwork in Ekkaraiyur.

A few days later, I visited Ekkaraiyur again to participate in one of the Sangam’s meetings. The president took the opportunity to invite me formally to Ekkaraiyur. Besides the invitation, he promised on behalf of the Sangam that its members would act as my hosts and sponsors. As powerful loudspeakers broadcast his speech, I quickly became a well-known person in the village. After a brief visit to Madras, I settled down in Ekkaraiyur. At first, the Sangam put its meeting-hall at my disposal. Later, I rented a house in the village square, which became my home for the next two years.

My fieldwork in Ekkaraiyur fell into two periods: a first period of six months, from June to December 1988, and a second period of
thirteen months, from March 1989 to May 1990. The first period was one of largely unstructured activities. Some time passed before I was comfortable with the Tamil spoken in Ekkaraiyur. To acquaint myself with the village also took some time. I spent a lot of time simply walking about and sitting at tea-stalls and in small shops, talking to people about Sweden, India, and Ekkaraiyur. People generally had a lot of patience with me. They brought me to their homes and took me along to their work, festivals and family functions. They often decided my daily schedule, and for me it was a period of learning and feeling my way, rather than of systematic inquiry. Most of the people I met belonged to the middle and upper strata of the village, in terms of both class and caste, and many of them were landowners.

When returning to Ekkaraiyur in March 1989, I arranged things differently. In addition to participating in daily village life, I began to collect data systematically on the topics that interested me. I also engaged research assistants. Earlier, my range of activities had largely depended on the availability and inclinations of my friends, and this dependency had some drawbacks. For example, some of my friends were convinced atheists and they needed great persuasion to accompany me to religious festivals. After engaging a research assistant, I became free to schedule my activities according to my own wishes, doubtless to the relief of my friends.

Sekar became my first and principal research assistant. At that time, he was twenty-five years old, spoke English fairly well, and had been unemployed since he graduated from Gandhigram University four years earlier. His family had lived in Ekkaraiyur for the last twenty years, and his father worked as a peon in a government office in Velpatti.

Sekar began a survey of Ekkaraiyur’s households for me. Then his principal task gradually became accompanying me on to visits and interviews. He had an extensive network in the village to which he introduced me. He also acted as my interpreter and discussion partner. The Tamil I was speaking by then can be described as a mix of literary and colloquial Tamil infused with a heavy dose of English, all poured into not too complex Tamil grammatical forms. In general, it served me well, unless conversations became too sophisticated - when I badly needed an interpreter.
INTRODUCTION

With time, I employed more research assistants. Sekar’s brother, Mayilsamy, completed the survey of Ekkaraiyur’s households and sometimes acted as a stand-in for his brother. He also carried out a survey of other villages in the Dindigul Valley. John transcribed my tape recordings, and Angelo wrote short essays on subjects he found interesting in Ekkaraiyur. We all copied the land registers of Ekkaraiyur.

Mayilsamy, Angelo, and John were at the time in their early twenties, and they had all studied at college. Angelo lived by himself, but had several relatives in Ekkaraiyur. John lived with his family. His father was a retired police officer. My assistants belonged to very low-rank castes: Angelo and John were Roman Catholics of the Paraiyar caste, and Sekar and Mayilsamy were Hindus of the Pallar caste; and none of their families were economically well-off. Thanks to them, I was able to extend my network of contacts in Ekkaraiyur to range from well-off high-caste landowners to low-caste landless labourers.

Nevertheless, I never got to know everyone who lived in Ekkaraiyur and the surrounding villages. Clearly, my informants formed a small fraction of Ekkaraiyur’s 5,000 or so inhabitants. In total, maybe about a hundred people acted as my informants at one time or another. The number of people I knew, or knew something about, was far greater. Despite their small number, my informants were spread out over the village and came from every class, occupation, and caste. They included rich and poor people, landowners and agricultural workers, businessmen and clerks, students and teachers. They were Hindus, Christians, Muslims and atheists, and from every caste. Most people readily gave me their time, and many, I believe, even liked talking to me. To my mind, the few who deliberately tried to avoid me believed that I was aiming to expose their private affairs.

While I had restricted access to Muslims and women, and consequently limited knowledge about their lives, I never found caste to be a problem. Béteille (1971), Gough (1981), and Moffatt (1979) have reported their problems in crossing ‘the caste barrier’. In other words, a close rapport with people of some castes is said to limit more or less automatically the anthropologist’s possibilities of rapport with people of other castes. ‘The caste barrier’ is
undoubtedly part of Indian reality, whether it is due to people’s notions about purity, auspiciousness, or propriety. It seems to me that anthropologists are sometimes too willing to conform to such notions. In fact, I never had any problems in crossing ‘caste barriers’. One reason perhaps was my directness about caste. When people asked about my attitudes on caste, which they did frequently, I made it very clear that caste did not apply to me as a foreigner. Also, I emphasised that my study concerned everyone who was living in the village. Therefore, no one should expect that I would restrict my choice of company or informants on the grounds of caste. This argument was accepted partly because it agreed with the general, at least rhetorical, view of caste as ‘a social evil’. More important, perhaps, was people’s willingness to overlook my cultural failings, for a variety of reasons. No doubt, I was considered as something of the Joker in the Ekkaraiyur pack. Most anthropologists are Jokers in the initial stages of their fieldwork, and I think I managed to retain this enviable research position throughout my fieldwork. I perhaps over-emphasised the fact that caste did not apply to me. Anyway, I do not think that my frequent crossings of ‘caste barriers’ provoked anyone very much. Although I did not broadcast the fact, I did dine on beef in a Pallar family and sup in a vegetarian Brahman family on the same day, without any ritual purification in between.

I used a variety of methods for collecting data during my fieldwork. Participant observation, the classical anthropological method, was my principal method. This I supplemented with extensive interviews, focused and not so focused. I wrote notes during the interviews and observations, and I taped speeches at political and other functions. As already mentioned, John transcribed these tapes into Tamil. Some of the transcripts I have had translated into English, others remain in the original Tamil.

Sekar and Mayilsamy carried out two surveys for me. One covered every household in Ekkaraiyur, recording data about the family members, such as age, sex, place of birth, religion, caste, educational level, occupation, income and property, etc. Some of the answers were not reliable, and those on income and property were systematically unreliable. In other respects, however, the survey gave me a good overview of the people who lived in Ekkaraiyur.
The other survey focused on caste and religion in about a hundred villages in the Dindigul Valley. Its aim was to see if there was a connection between castes and village deities. In a rough way, the survey also provided an overview of the distribution of different castes in the valley, a pattern which may be related to different stages of immigration (cf. Beck 1979).

Angelo wrote a number of essays for me about topics he found interesting in the village, such as ‘habits and customs’, ‘temple origins and deities’, and ‘social evils’. He selected and interviewed his own informants, some of whom in turn became my informants. I also tried to interest the headmaster of the secondary school in Ekkaraiyur in an essay project. I wanted the students to write essays about their plans and dreams for the future. Unfortunately, this project was never realised because of the tight school schedule. However, I was able to collect other essays from the library of Gandhigram University, written by students for their final exams. These were based on short spells of fieldwork in villages in the Dindigul Valley. Some students were natives of the villages they wrote about. Their essays were sometimes remarkable if uneasy attempts to reconcile ‘the native’s point of view’ with the perspective of the university student.

Copies of manuscripts of novels, dramas, and poetry written by people in Ekkaraiyur can be mentioned among other types of data that I collected. I also constructed kinship diagrams (which were very popular among my informants), copied land registers, collected voters’ lists, pamphlets, and diverse forms of party propaganda, and took a lot of photographs.

I find it difficult to evaluate my use of the different types of data for this study. Interviews and observations provide the mainstay. Yet, although most of the other data are not used directly at all, they have helped to build up my understanding of life in Ekkaraiyur.
Chapter 2  The village of Ekkaraiyur

This chapter introduces the village of Ekkaraiyur. The brief description of the Dindigul Valley and Ekkaraiyur’s surroundings attempts to capture something of the region’s character. Thereafter, I focus on the village itself, concentrating on the most pervasive factors that united and divided people in the village: language, religion and caste.

I present the way in which varieties of language use were associated with the sacred, with religious and ethnic affiliations, and with prestige. With regard to religion, I outline the syncretistic ‘religious landscape’ of Ekkaraiyur, shaped by the major strands of religion: Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. In relation to caste, I discuss popular notions of given caste characters, the physical division of the village into caste territories, and caste associations. In addition, I discuss the extent to which villagers’ ideas about the caste composition of the village represented a systemic and comprehensive structure. Finally, this introduction of Ekkaraiyur ends with a discussion of the variable meaning of being a villager, focusing on notions about residence and belonging.

The Dindigul valley

The Dindigul Valley has been an important route of communication between the central and southern parts of Tamil Nadu since early times. The valley runs in a north-south direction between the Palni Hills, which are part of the Western Ghats, and the small massif of Sirumalai. Roughly shaped like an hourglass, the valley is about 30 kilometres long and about 10 kilometres wide at its narrowest point. It opens into the plains of Kongu Nadu to the north, and into the river valley of Vaigai to the south.

The town of Dindigul, located at the northern end of the valley, was an important regional centre in the late 1980s, with markets, schools, small industries, and a teeming population of about 200,000 inhabitants. It was also the district headquarters for Dindigul
A handful of small towns that served as centres of trade and communication for the surrounding countryside were located in the valley: Vattakundu and Nilakottai in its southern part, Ottanchattram and Kannivadi in its north-western part, and Chinnalapatti on the eastern side of the valley’s narrow waist.

Communications were easy as several main roads traversed the valley. One road followed its western side, linking the industrial city of Coimbatore and the temple town of Palni with the market towns of the valley. Another road, which followed the eastern side, linked the cities of Trichy and Madurai. Yet another traversed the valley diagonally. In addition, the railroad from Madras to Madurai and Rameswaram ran through the valley.

The roads and the railroad are facts of the present. But, traders, travellers, migrants and pilgrims have been passing through the valley since early times, and so have armies. The once strongly fortified Dindigul was an important strategic position guarding the northern reaches of the successive kingdoms that centred on Madurai. Numerous ruins and village names suggest that the valley was once literally studded with small forts and fortified homesteads. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century the valley was poligar country, ruled by local chieftains who were associated with the kingdoms of Madurai.

In 1792, at the time when the British were establishing their control over the Dindigul Valley, the two artists Thomas and William Daniell noted:

This part of the country, though not entirely uncultivated, has a wild and most romantic character; broken into hill and valley, and covered in many parts with thick woods of great extent, giving shelter to herds of elephants, and numerous other wild animals, that would oft-times quit their gloomy retreats, and carry havoc [sic] and destruction among the plantations of the peasantry, were they not strictly watched by a class of human creatures, whose shaggy forms and ferocious aspect appear sufficient to strike terror into the hearts even of lions and tigers. (Archer 1980: 143)
The elephants had disappeared by the time of my fieldwork, humans of shaggy form and ferocious aspect were seldom seen, and fields and gardens had replaced the thick woods. Nevertheless, the valley was not known as a particularly fertile tract of land. The rock-fortress at Dindigul, situated some hundred metres above the plain, commanded a good view of the northern part of the valley. From there it could be seen that the mountains bordering the valley were denuded or covered with scrub and low trees. Trees were scarce on the level valley floor and the occasional grove suggested the position of a village, surrounded by irrigated gardens. Some irrigated fields were to be seen, but unirrigated fields on which little or nothing grew in the dry season dominated the valley landscape. Brown was the predominant colour. However, when the monsoon arrived, the valley became painted into different shades of green, which turned into tones of golden hue as the crops of paddy ripened.

**Ekkaraiyur and its neighbours**

The village of Ekkaraiyur was located in the middle of the valley, where the river Aru descended from the Palni Hills. Built along the southern bank of the Aru, Ekkaraiyur was the first village upstream. On the northern bank of the river, the village of Erpatti faced Ekkaraiyur. This village was in many respects a large hamlet of Ekkaraiyur, and the daily life of the two was intermingled. People of the two villages were closely related to each other, and they owned land in each other’s village. While most of Ekkaraiyur’s land was irrigated, Erpatti’s land was unirrigated.

A Jaina statue, found when a road was being built, and Ekkaraiyur’s location on a river perhaps indicated the village’s roots in the first millennium AD, but nothing was known with certainty about the beginnings of Ekkaraiyur. By the nineteenth century, however, it appeared to have attained the character that it still retained in the late 1980s. The agricultural conditions of Ekkaraiyur and the legacy of migration had given shape to a village, the population of which saw itself as consisting of a large number of differing groups.
Central to the character of the village was the large irrigation works, which watered a wide expanse of wetland paddy fields in the otherwise predominantly dry Dindigul valley. The fertility of Ekkaraiyur’s wetland supported a relatively large population and a more complex social structure than in other villages in the valley. Some traits in this structure, notably the presence of a relatively large group of Brahman landowners, gave Ekkaraiyur something of the character more typical of the Brahman-dominated villages of the Kaveri river delta (Gough 1981, 1989; Béteille 1971, 1974).

The fertility of Ekkaraiyur had attracted settlers. Beck (1979) has described the Dindigul Valley as ‘an entrance point’. According to her, entrance points differed from other more homogeneous areas by the fact that many different groups had settled there. Settlement had mainly taken place in connection with agriculture and soldiering, but settlers had also been engaged in trade, manufacturing and services. Many families in Ekkaraiyur did in fact tell stories about settlement. According to these stories, a main wave of settlement took place in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries, when people from different parts of Tamil Nadu came together in Ekkaraiyur. The predominant units of migration were said to have been groups of families. This was supported by the fact that family groups within a caste were often distinguished by their points of origin. A commonly given reason for migration was the need to escape from political and religious oppression, wars and epidemics, and Ekkaraiyur had been attractive because of the availability of new agricultural land in an already prosperous village.

The British established their overlordship of the Dindigul Valley at the beginning of the nineteenth century, curtailing and co-opting the power of local chieftains and powerful families. British rule meant new changes for the rural society. The colonial interest in trade was gradually extended into a concern for control. Land was surveyed and assessed, irrigation works were constructed, and cultivation of cash crops and export trade was promoted. Leadership in the villages came to be based on having contacts with the British colonial administration.

World wars and Independence in 1947 further increased state interest in rural life. It became necessary for the state to increase agricultural output to feed a growing population, especially the
rapidly increasing urban population. Rural development schemes were initiated, loans made available to farmers, land laws altered. Administrators and technical experts were appointed to become directly involved in village life, setting up local centres to which farmers could turn for advice and for subsidised agricultural inputs, such as fertilisers, pesticides and improved seed. In the Ekkaraiyur of the late 1980s, the farmers exclusively used these improved seeds, which matured faster and gave higher yields, although they complained that the new strands of paddy were less tasty than the old varieties. Occasionally, the farmers attended seminars on crop pests or new methods of transplanting the paddy.

Independence introduced universal adult suffrage in India, and with time political parties became established in the villages. With the growing importance of Tamil nationalist parties since the 1960s, the separate and unique character of the Tamilians was emphasised, resulting in the targeting of Brahmans in Ekkaraiyur and elsewhere. This coincided with profound changes in the social structure in Ekkaraiyur. As the result of a tenants’ revolt, which challenged the large landowning families, the control of land was dispersed and new forms of land and labour agreements were established. By the late 1980s, the earlier kind of leaders, based on the patron-client networks dominated by the large landowning families, had been replaced by leaders for whom the political party and contacts with the state administration were a new source of legitimacy.

With their 5,000 and 1,500 or so inhabitants respectively, Ekkaraiyur and Erpatti accounted for a sizeable portion of the 20-25,000 people who lived in this part of the Dindigul Valley in 1989. Only the nearby small town of Yarkottai with its 10,000 or so inhabitants surpassed them in population. Yarkottai also overshadowed them as a local centre for commerce. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Yarkottai was little more than a collection of small villages. At that time, however, the construction a road from the Palni Hills amalgamated the villages into a small town. The town of Yarkottai was thus of comparatively recent date, but its individual villages had a longer history, as was suggested by an ancient Siva temple and an old fortress.10

A new road was similarly the making of the village of Velpatti. Located only a few kilometres from Ekkaraiyur, Velpatti consisted
of little more than wasteland until the middle of the twentieth century. Then, a new road from Coimbatore and Palni was opened, and Velpatti grew into a local centre of communications and commerce. At the time of my fieldwork, Velpatti’s weekly market for goods and cattle attracted traders and customers from neighbouring villages and towns. A bus station, a cinema, shops and small restaurants were additional attractions. Small workshops were also located there, as was a police station and the offices of the panchayat union and some branch offices of government departments. Velpatti was considered to be a hamlet of Ekkaraiyur in earlier days, and one part of it was still administratively one of the wards of Ekkaraiyur’s village panchayat (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of panchayat union and village panchayat).

Like many other South Indian villages, Ekkaraiyur consisted of a central settlement (ur) and several adjoining hamlets (patti). The terms ur and patti generally referred to two different kinds of settlements. In the case of Ekkaraiyur, the ur gave the impression of having been created by a history of planned construction. The main streets were laid out in a grid pattern, from which numerous alleys branched off, and the houses were typically large and solidly constructed. The major temples were located in the ur, as were other public buildings and the bazaar. The pattis of Ekkaraiyur were typically located at a short distance from the ur, and lacked its planned design. Some pattis consisted of houses strung out along a single street, while others consisted of little more than a maze of alleys. Often, the patti seemed to have grown up around a farmstead or along a country road.

A third type of settlement was known as the cherry. While physically similar to the patti, it was exclusively the settlement of people of the lowest castes; that is, the formerly untouchable castes. The ur and the patti, in contrast, carried no or few overtones of caste and people of any caste lived in them.

The residential pattern of Ekkaraiyur was associated with differences based on caste and religion, as I discuss below. Moreover, economic stratification was clearly visible in the village residential pattern. Landowning, relatively well-to-do families generally lived in the large, well-built houses in the central part of
the village. Poor, landless families generally lived in small, inexpensively built houses on the village periphery.

Although considered an agriculturally favoured village, few families in Ekkaraiyur were able to support themselves entirely from agriculture, whether they were landowning or not. Many families consequently had some members in non-agricultural professions, in or outside the village. These ranged from manual labour on hill plantations and city building sites, to industrial jobs, technical professions, military service and white-collar jobs. With the necessity of finding a non-agricultural occupation, education assumed an added importance, producing one more kind of stratification in Ekkaraiyur. Two people of my acquaintance illustrate the wide range of education among the villagers: One was a young man with a master’s degree in political science who took the opportunity to discuss the late UN secretary Dag Hammarskjöld with me when we first met. The other was a middle-aged illiterate woman for whom ‘foreign countries’ began where she did not understand the language. This, incidentally, classed the larger part of India as ‘foreign countries’ to her.

**A multi-linguistic scene**

Tamil was the language of everyday life in Ekkaraiyur, and the large majority of the inhabitants considered it their mother tongue. A sizeable minority of about 10 to 15 per cent claimed Telugu as their first language. Tamil and Telugu are closely related languages, and the large proportion of Telugu speakers in Ekkaraiyur was the result of a long history of northern migration, particularly into the western and northern parts of the Tamil country (Shulman & Subrahmanyam 1990: 233; Stein 1985: 379, 394-96). While using Tamil in public settings, the descendants of the northern immigrants typically seemed to prefer to speak Telugu at home. However, neither Tamil nor Telugu were unambiguous linguistic labels in Ekkaraiyur. Both languages were spoken in several forms, relating to caste and education, and the different forms blended into each other across any formal distinction between two different languages.
In addition to the various forms of Tamil and Telugu, other languages were also used in Ekkaraiyur. The fact that English was the predominant language of higher education made it into a local prestige language, even more than what has been called contemporary standard Tamil, that is, the Tamil commonly used in the media. Indeed, similar to the blending of forms of Tamil and Telugu, contemporary standard Tamil and English appeared to be two points on a scale of gradual transition from the point of usage. Not only did many everyday words have an English origin (cf. Schiffman 1979a, 1998: 360), people also filled Tamil sentences with English words in order to impress others, or switched completely from Tamil to English in the course of conversation. Once, for example, I overheard a civil servant who told his assistants about the recent launching of an Indian satellite. He started out speaking in Tamil. As he proceeded, English technological terms increasingly entered his sentences. Reaching the climax, the story was told in completely English sentences. Apparently, he thought that the subject demanded the use of English, and thereby also impressed his listeners with his own knowledge and importance.

Yet, English was not only the language of the educated; it could also be used to create an impression in romance. What ought not to be said in Tamil could be expressed by an English sentence, as when the film star in a coy flirtation scene huskily whispered to the heroine - ‘I love you!’. A tailor in Ekkaraiyur, who manufactured fancy shirts decorated with equivocal tags for a youthful clientele, used English for the same purpose.

The free use of English in Ekkaraiyur, and the prestige associated with it, contrasted strikingly with local opinions on Hindi. Many people in Ekkaraiyur, as well as elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, took pride in denying any knowledge of Hindi. Often they expressed scorn, sometimes hostility, against those who spoke Hindi, showed a professed knowledge of it, or took an interest in learning it.

The typical reason for the hostile attitude towards Hindi was the claim that it posed a threat to the purity of Tamil. Sanskrit, it was claimed, had corrupted the ancient forms of Tamil, and now Hindi was continuing the process (see Chapter 5 for notions of the corrupting influence of Sanskrit and Hindi). The massive Sanskrit and Hindi vocabulary of contemporary standard Tamil was often
unfavourably contrasted with the assumed purity of the ancient forms of language called *Sentamil* and *Kodungtamil* (see Chapter 5 for notions of Sentamil and Kodungtamil). Surprisingly, English contributions to the vocabulary of Tamil were seldom mentioned in similarly negative terms.

Consequently, in spite of Hindi’s dominant position in India and its official recognition as a national language, its position in Ekkaraiyur can be described as marginalised and suppressed. Yet, quite a few villagers did appear to know Hindi despite the typical censorious views. For example, young people who aspired to positions in the civil service outside Tamil Nadu privately studied Hindi. Men who had served in the Indian army were likely to be fluent in Hindi, and women who habitually watched Hindi films on the afternoon TV broadcasts also seemed to be able to master the language. Male informants who were hostile to the use of Hindi argued that women were led astray by the movies. As they put it, they disliked their women learning Hindi for the sake of entertainment, while they strove to purify Tamil from Sanskrit and Hindi influences. Nevertheless, many men did not think it feasible, or advisable, to ban the Hindi afternoon films from their homes.

Tamil, Telugu, English, and to some extent Hindi, served as languages of everyday life. Another group of languages was primarily associated with religious beliefs and activities. Seen as a kind of sacred languages, this group included Sanskrit, Latin, Arabic, and Urdu, associated with Hindu, Christian and Muslim worship, respectively. Most people’s knowledge did not go beyond single words and set phrases. Yet, in addition to the handful of men who had learnt Arabic and Urdu while working in the Middle East, Muslim children in Ekkaraiyur were systematically taught Urdu and some Arabic. Neither Sanskrit nor Latin was taught in a similarly systematic way to Hindu and Christian children. Apart from a handful of old Hindu and Christian men who took an interest in studying Sanskrit and Latin, no organised teaching took place in Ekkaraiyur while I was living there, and the languages were not used as a means of everyday communication.
THE VILLAGE OF EKKARAIYUR

A religious landscape

The majority of people in Ekkaraiyur were Hindus. Hinduism is a rich and varied religion that defies easy definition. To simplify matters considerably, most Hindus in Ekkaraiyur belonged to one or other of two major strands of Hinduism. That is, the people who considered Shiva to be the supreme Hindu god can broadly be classified as Saivaites, while the people who recognised the supremacy of Vishnu can equally broadly be classified as Vaishnavites. In these broad terms, Saiva Hinduism was the predominant form of Hinduism in Ekkaraiyur as well as in Tamil Nadu, whereas Vaishnava Hinduism was more predominant in the North. The Vaishnavites in Ekkaraiyur typically belonged to any of the Telugu-speaking castes.

However, while most Hindus recognised one deity as supreme, few confined their worship to that deity alone. Individuals, families and castes followed different religious traditions in worship. Worship was often focused on particular family and caste deities, as well as on popular deities. Particular deities could be chosen because of their reputation for power or because they were worshipped by the powerful. Moreover, certain deities were believed to be exceptionally powerful in a particular locality. Consequently, they attracted the worship of the people who lived there.

Despite such a practical and eclectic polytheism, many of Ekkaraiyur’s Hindus argued that Hinduism was essentially a monotheistic religion. The vast number of deities was explained as so many different manifestations of the same – essentially feminine - divine force. This ultimate force was alternatively seen as concentrated in the goddess Parvathi, the consort of Shiva, or in a force called sakti. Sakti can be defined as the ‘Power of the Supreme Being conceived as the Female Principle through which the manifestation of the universe is effected’ (Bhattacharyya 1990: 137; see also Wadley 1991, particularly Egnor’s article 1991).

There were literally scores of Hindu shrines in Ekkaraiyur, housing as many different deities. The shrines ranged in size from large public temples to the small private shrine for family deities. In this multitude of deities and places of worship, the goddess Vandikaliyamman held a supreme position. Located centrally in
Ekkaraiyur, her temple was an unimposing building, at least compared with the mosque and the parish church. It consisted of a low, whitewashed, rectangular building with a vaulted roof and a small cupola at one end.

Vandikaliamman was considered to be the protectress of the three villages of Ekkaraiyur, Erpatti, and Velpatti.¹⁹ This role reflected the sense of unity between these three villages that was also apparent in the notion of their ur-patti relationship.²⁰ In other words, Erpatti and Velpatti were considered as earlier pattis of the ur of Ekkaraiyur. It was believed that Vandikaliamman could not be turned against anyone from these three villages. Consequently, she was said to refuse to listen to any petitions for her support in conflicts among people within the three villages. In contrast, she was said to side invariably with people of the three villages in their conflicts with outsiders. Acting on her own initiative, however, Vandikaliamman readily turned against anyone — fiercely.

Vandikaliamman’s temple was a centrally located Hindu landmark in the religious landscape of Ekkaraiyur. The goddess and her temple also expressed something of the interplay between religions in Ekkaraiyur. Vandikaliamman was respected and feared by Christians and Muslims who did not worship her. In Ekkaraiyur, non-Hindus did not necessarily deny the reality of Hindu deities. In fact, parts of Vandikaliamman’s temple were said to have been built by a past Muslim ruler.²¹

A covered porch led into the temple, through two massive doors of wood that closed off the interior. Inside, the temple was designed as a string of rooms: first an anteroom, then a long hall, and finally the inner sanctum. A pair of huge gaur craniums flanked the doorway between the hall and the inner sanctum.²² Donated by a devotee, who had shot the gaurs in the Palni Hills, they were thought to be a fitting gift to the goddess who was renowned as the slayer of Mahisasura, the buffalo-demon.²³ The hall was decorated with frescoes depicting episodes from the lives of Rama, Krishna, and the goddess Kali. One fresco on the wall of the inner sanctum depicted Vandikaliamman, and the temple worship took place in front of this fresco. A cast bronze icon of the goddess was also placed in the inner sanctum, but it was not used as the main representation of the goddess. The icon, a gift from a devotee, had not pleased the
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goddess, the temple priests told me. Manifesting her displeasure, Vandikaliamman had killed the donor by means of faulty electric wiring shortly after the donation had been made. A divergent opinion on the matter alleged that the priests disliked the bronze icon for two reasons: it was heavy to carry in processions, and the priests wanted to preserve their privilege of making the goddess’s clay image for her festival. Nevertheless, partly as a warning, partly to impress me with the goddess’s power, the priests told me about other instances of Vandikaliamman’s displeasure. The goddess once blinded a man who took photographs of her image during a festival, and she drowned an English colonial administrator who planned to pull down a part of the temple in order to straighten the road.

The priests of Vandikaliamman’s temple belonged to a group of related families of the Velar caste in Erpatti. The men of these families were considered to be priests of the temple by hereditary right. A Velar family of Ekkaraiyur had earlier held this right, but as that family no longer had any male members, the right had passed to the related Velar families in Erpatti. The Velars were also potters and charcoal-burners, and they made the clay icons to the temple festivals.

Vandikaliamman was said to be a northern immigrant, as were Ekkaraiyur’s Telugu-speaking castes. Stories about the goddess linked her closely with two of these castes: the high-ranking Tottinayakars and the low-ranking Sakkliyars. The stories also explained why Vandikaliamman shared the temple with another goddess. The goddess Muttalamman had lived alone in the temple before Vandikaliamman joined her, it was said.24 One of her priests told me the following version of the story of Vandikaliamman:

In a northern village a powerful warrior chieftain of the Tottinayakar caste was the ruler.25 One day a young man came to the chieftain’s palace, asking for employment. He was put to work in the fields, but also in the palace. There, the chieftain’s young daughter chanced to see him, and the two fell in love. Because of their love, the palace and the power of the chieftain were destroyed in a great conflagration. The chieftain and all his people perished, except the two lovers who fled to the south.
The young man and the chieftain’s daughter eventually came to Ekkaraiyur where they settled down as husband and wife. The young man worked as a wood-cutter, and initially they lived a peaceful and harmonious life together. After some time, however, the chieftain’s daughter began to wonder about her husband’s frequent and unexplained absences. Secretly following him one day, she discovered that he visited the Sakkliyars. Horrified by seeing her husband gorging himself on beef in company with the Sakkliyars, she then realised that he too was a Sakkliyar. The chieftain’s daughter ran to the Lotus-pond (earlier Ekkaraiyur’s pool of drinking water) where she drowned herself. Overcome by grief, her husband also committed suicide.

After her suicide, the chieftain’s daughter became the goddess Vandikaliamman, and she began to wander about Ekkaraiyur looking for a place to rest. One day she met the goddess Muttalamman who invited her to share her temple. Since that day the two goddesses have lived together like two sisters. The temple belongs to both of them. When Vandikaliamman settled in the temple, curious people asked Muttalamman about her. Muttalamman replied: ‘Vandikaliamman and I are one and the same. There is no difference between us.’ Moreover, Muttalamman told the people to celebrate her and Vandikaliamman’s festivals in alternate years.

I have mentioned that the Velar priests and potters made clay icons for the festivals. These icons represented Vandikaliamman and Muttalamman on their alternate festivals, and were carried in processions through the village during the nine days a festival lasted. The icons mirrored the different characters of the two goddesses. Vandikaliamman was believed to be the goddess who was easily angered, a fearful goddess who punished quickly and vehemently. Hence, her icon featured two threatening tusks, protruding between her lips, and her skin was red, indicating anger. Muttalamman’s icon, in contrast, lacked tusks and her skin was yellow. A friend of
mine said that she had a face that was ‘lovely and soft’. In harmony with her icon, Muttalamman was believed to forgive sooner than to punish. However, she was said to be as vindictive as Vandikaliyamman when angered. Despite her fearsome character, Vandikaliyamman was the more popular of the two goddesses, possibly because she was believed to be the more powerful.

The Muslims formed about one-tenth of the population of Ekkaraiyur, and most of them lived in the part of the village called the Muslim Street, which was also where the mosque was located. Large and with two tall minarets, it caught the eye of any visitor to the village. It was the place for daily and Friday prayers, and housed an evening school for Muslim children, as well as a small boarding school for boys studying the Quran.

The tombs of Hussain Sahib and Kombu Ravuthar were visually less imposing Muslim sites. Hussain Sahib’s tomb was located on the eastern boundary of Ekkaraiyur, and Kombu Ravuthar’s tomb could be found in the foothills. It was said that Hussain Sahib had come from far away, maybe from Arabia, to convert the Hindu ancestors of the Muslims in Ekkaraiyur. Kombu Ravuthar was said to have been a hermit in the Palni Hills some hundred years ago. He was reputed to have the power to cause the rains to fall. Hence, when the monsoon rains were late one year, the Muslims of Ekkaraiyur staged a communal prayer to Kombu Ravuthar in the foothills.

Ekkaraiyur also had a large Christian population. About one-third of the people in Ekkaraiyur belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, whereas a handful of families were members of various, and varying, Protestant churches. The Roman Catholics lived mainly in two different parts of the village, each furnished with a church. In addition, small chapels dedicated to various Christian saints and angels dotted the Christian parts of the village.

Most of the high-caste Roman Catholics belonged to a high-ranking Vellalar caste and their part of the village was known as the Vellalar Streets. The parish church, dedicated to Saint Mary, was located in one of these streets. It was a large building, constructed in the 1950s. Designed in a neo-Gothic style, it was adorned by a lofty bell-tower. The old parish church, also located in one of the Vellalar Streets, housed a small convent of the Sisters of the Immaculate
Conception, who ran an elementary school there. Most of the other Roman Catholics belonged to a low-ranking Paraiyar caste. They lived in clusters around Saint Xavier’s Street, named after the church dedicated to a renowned sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary to India, whom Ekkaraiyur’s Christians regarded as the Christian guardian of the village.

The religious landscape of Ekkaraiyur was neither exclusively Hindu nor Christian or Muslim. Instead, elements of different religions were brought together to form one syncretistic religious landscape. Such syncretism was visibly suggested in the three prominent buildings in the village: the mosque, the parish church, and the temple of Vandikaliamman. Not only did these three places of worship manifest patronage and a will to make sacrifices; they also proclaimed the diversity of beliefs, as well as the possibilities and problems of religious co-existence.

**Aspects of caste**

People in Ekkaraiyur belonged to a large number of different castes. The larger caste units numbered about twenty-five, but counting the various subdivisions the total came to about three times that number. Caste distinctions were not so unambiguously marked that it was easy to establish the caste membership of a stranger. Nor were people in general aware of the sub-distinctions made within castes other than their own. Yet, caste was understood to organise people into different groups with characteristics that partly reflected an inborn essence, called *gunam* and representing an unchangeable quality in a person’s character. Other parts of a person’s character were understood to be acquired, and thus more fluid and open to personal reform, for example by adapting the diet.

In Ekkaraiyur, the members of a caste were thought to share a particular gunam, revealed in a distinct caste character more or less different from other castes. The Brahman gunam, for example, was said to favour intellectual work, while the Vellalar gunam made the Vellalar into more of a practical person. The interpretations and evaluations of inborn characters could, of course, differ radically. For example, a Kallar could assert that his gunam made him into a
proud and assertive person, whereas a non-Kallar could describe him as destined to be crude and overbearing. Similarly, gunam made the Paraiyar appear humble and submissive in other people’s eyes; in contrast, a Paraiyar could describe himself as calm and reasonable. Gunam thus cast people into pre-existing character types, determined by their caste (see Chapter 3 where I discuss the influence of stereotyped caste characters on expected behaviour; cf. Daniel 1984: Chapter 5; Daniel, S. 1983: 30-35).

This stereotyping of human character involved a moral evaluation, resulting in a moral ranking of castes. The actual ranking varied according to different points of view, but, for example, intelligence, rationality and responsibility were generally considered as morally superior traits that were associated with higher castes. Similar kinds of ranking between men and women, and between adults and children, existed parallel to the moral ranking of castes. In general, low-caste people, women and children were to some degree considered to lack the morally superior traits.

The belief that people of different castes possessed dissimilar professional abilities was another aspect of gunam. Chettiyars and Nadars, for example, were believed to have an inborn talent for doing business. When difficulties of commercial life were discussed, their gunams were given as the typical explanation for their success in commercial competition. An early training, secret business methods, and support from fellow caste members were considered to be other relevant causes. 31

Interestingly, although farming was considered as a prestigious occupation, it was only weakly associated with any particular caste’s gunam. Only people of Vellalar, Udaiyar and Pallar castes in Ekkaraiyur claimed any inborn talent for farming. Whatever their actual occupation, Vellalars and Udaiyars typically described themselves as farmers, and Pallars considered themselves as experts on paddy cultivation. For people of these castes, farming could be seen as a way of realising an inborn talent. Mr Mahendran, a farmer of the Udaiyar caste, illustrates the idea. Possessing a bachelor degree in English literature and once intending to become a teacher, Mahendran instead became a farmer. Teaching was a vocation that he had to be taught; farming he had learnt ‘like a fish learns to
swim’, he told me. In other words, agriculture came naturally, without any effort, to him.

Caste territories and panchayats

The residential pattern of Ekkaraiyur reflected economic conditions, as I have mentioned. Nevertheless, different parts of Ekkaraiyur were associated with different castes. The fact that a person lived in a certain part of the village therefore said something about his or her caste. The association of caste with different parts of the village was obvious in many of the street names. For example, the Agraharam was the Brahmans’ street. Vellalars lived the Vellalar Streets, Muslims in the Muslim Street, and Pallars in the Pallar Street. In a less obvious reference to caste, Hindu Paraiyars lived in the Nandanar Street, named after a Vaishnava saint who was believed to have been a Paraiyar (see Vidya 1988: 172-74; Vincentnathan 1993).

Nevertheless, while many people lived in the part of the village that was associated with their caste, others did not. A residential pattern that took the form of a mosaic of groups of related families emerged at the detailed household level. This pattern was obviously the result of the combination of two factors: a village roughly divided into caste territories, and a preference for living close to near relatives. The residential pattern of Ekkaraiyur thus reflected caste as well as kinship groupings.

Most people of Ekkaraiyur also belonged to local caste associations, which organised people of the same caste. Elected office-bearers, who collectively were known as the caste panchayat, directed the association’s activities. Their degrees of authority, and spheres of activities, varied between different caste associations. Often, such associations provided a platform that could be used for other leadership careers (see Chapter 4).

Caste panchayats were said to have exercised a greater degree of authority in the past, when they had the power to judge and enforce sentence on the members of the association. As one example, I was told that the caste panchayat of the Christian Vellalars used to impose punishments that were virtual dramas of humiliation. A
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verdict could involve, among other things, the offender being forced to wear a crown of thorns during church services, in explicit imitation of Christian mythology. At the time of my fieldwork, the caste panchayat of Saint Xavier appeared to be the only caste panchayat able to command something of the claimed past authority. It did so by staging a public drama of humiliation that aimed at restoring ‘unity and harmony’ among the members of the caste association. I shall discuss this drama in Chapter 4.

The spheres of activity and the exercise of authority varied a great deal between different caste associations in Ekkaraiyur. Resembling a guild or a trade union, the Maruttuvar Sangam, the barbers’ caste association, fixed the barbers’ prices. Other caste associations focused their activities on their members’ welfare, providing funds for funeral expenses and relief to poor members, while some associations were activated only for the purpose of worship at the time of religious festivals. Some caste associations sponsored religious festivals of their own. One such festival provided the context for the public discussion on the state of society, which I discuss in Chapter 7.

A village caste system?

On arriving in Ekkaraiyur, I expected that it would be relatively unproblematic to explore what I thought of as ‘the village caste system’. Such a system, I thought, would be made up of systematic relationships between most or all of Ekkaraiyur’s castes. I expected that the castes would be ranked in relation to each other, based on either notions of purity or economic status, or a combination of the two. I did expect that different people would give different versions of the ranking, but I also assumed that almost anyone in Ekkaraiyur would be able to outline the system to me, in one version or another. My previous readings on Indian caste were the principal source of these expectations, compounded by the failure of both myself and much of the literature to distinguish clearly between reality and models of reality (see Dumont 1988b for an example of the difficulty of making such a distinction. Other examples are provided
I was gradually cured of my naivety. Systematic relationships between castes did exist in Ekkaraiyur. Castes were ranked in relation to each other, and different opinions on the ranking were certainly also common. Indeed, people spoke of castes as if they were part of one comprehensive system. Yet I was to find that no one was ever able to give me the details of such a system. The notion of a caste system in Ekkaraiyur was an ideal construction, rather than a reality. This ideal construction was so vaguely articulated that neither were all, or even the majority, of castes included in the system, nor were the criteria for ranking clearly expressed. The sum, to my initial disappointment, did not add up to any comprehensive village caste system.

The literature on caste sometimes singles out notions on purity as a principal criterion for the ranking of castes (see, for example, Dumont 1988b). As a coherent caste system did not exist in Ekkaraiyur, it is perhaps not surprising that notions of purity in connection with caste ranking appeared to be relatively unimportant. Informants typically accepted the possibility that notions of purity could rank every one of Ekkaraiyur’s castes into a comprehensive system, but during my nearly two years in the village I never met anyone who was able to even sketch a locally grounded system based on ranked purity. In fact, notions of purity seemed relevant to only two groups of castes: the Brahmans, who were considered as the most pure, and those castes that were formerly named Untouchables. As this name indicates, they were considered to be the most impure.  

Opinions on purity, or the lack of it, in association with caste, were seldom expressed in public in Ekkaraiyur. The principal reason appeared to be the stigma that was attached to such views. Notions that associated caste and purity were branded as old-fashioned and as signs of personal backwardness. Labelled as ‘casteism’, they were defined as ‘a social evil’ that ought to be eradicated. Accordingly, people often expressed disgust or ridicule at ideas that associated castes with different degrees of purity, and sometimes commented on such views with the superior indulgence of those who know better. ‘He is a relict of the past’, a man told me about an old relative.
who reportedly did not allow people of low caste to enter the kitchen of his house for fear of impurity.

However, in Ekkaraiyur comments about the lifestyles and habits of different castes were used to much the same effect as comments on purity. For example, people from higher castes explained to me that people from low castes were noisy and dirty. It was therefore best that they should live on the village periphery where their uninhibited lifestyles did not disturb other people’s respectability (cf. Kolenda 1981:134). In the idiom of purity, the low-caste people would have been termed as untouchable rather than as disturbing. Anyway, they were undesirable neighbours for people of higher castes. Similarly, a favourite Brahman argument was that the lifestyles of other castes were so rough and uninhibited that it was better for the Brahmans to live apart in their Agraharam.

I think that one reason for the typical failure of my informants to include the majority of the village castes in their versions of a village caste system was their ignorance and indifference to the details of other people’s castes. I doubt that more than a handful of people in Ekkaraiyur could list correctly every one of the village’s castes. Commonly, the sum of knowledge totalled little more than the names of those castes that were considered to be most characteristic of the village. Furthermore, many of the castes in Ekkaraiyur were divided into divisions or sub-castes, and outsiders seldom knew that these divisions existed. Certainly, nobody in Ekkaraiyur knew of every division of caste in the village.

The common non-Brahman view that the Brahmans of Ekkaraiyur belonged to one single Brahman caste exemplifies this ignorance. However, the Brahmans did not share this understanding. They recognised Brahmans of four castes in Ekkaraiyur, called Telugu Iyar, Telugu Iyengar, Tamil Iyar and Malayali Iyar, respectively. From the Brahman point of view, the four Brahman groups were distinct and differently ranked. They shared a Brahman identity, but they were not one and the same caste.

Similarly, the typical non-Paraiyar view was that Ekkaraiyur’s Paraiyars belonged to one single Paraiyar caste. The Paraiyars, in contrast, recognised the existence of three Paraiyar castes in Ekkaraiyur: Hindu Mottiyar, Christian Mottiyar and Christian Koliyar. The differences between the three Paraiyar castes were
more complex than in the case of the Brahman divisions. First, there was a distinction between Hindus and Christians. Thus, Christian Mottiyars and Koliyars formed one distinct group, and Hindu Mottiyars another. In addition, a distinction between Christian Mottiyars and Christian Koliyars was also recognised, and people from these two castes did not intermarry as a rule. To complicate matters, Christian Mottiyars did intermarry with Hindu Mottiyars. Consequently, depending on the perspective chosen the Paraiyars of Ekkaraiyur appeared variously joined and separated. Religion separated them into two groups, intermarriage into two other groups, and the combined perspective of religion and marriage produced three castes. Nevertheless, while they were three distinct castes to the Paraiyars, they were seen as one single caste by the typical non-Paraiyar (see Béteille 1991: 86-88 for an argument on the fission and fusion of caste groups).

The same ignorance of the details of other people’s castes applied in some measure to all the castes in Ekkaraiyur, but it did not prevent people from expressing ideal models of a village caste system. Yet, these ideal models typically referred more to a general understanding of caste in South Indian society than to the realities of Ekkaraiyur. Ignoring the existence of many local castes and their divisions, such ideal models typically sketched a village caste system in a rough drawing of general categories. Details were not vaguely expressed, they were typically completely lacking.

One common Ekkaraiyur ideal model used only the three categories of ‘Brahmans’, ‘non-Brahmans’, and ‘Scheduled Castes’ to represent high-ranking, middle-ranking and low-ranking castes. The model’s three categories and their names showed an interesting combination of different sources, using a common three-part structure of Tamilian caste models, which can be seen as essentially a reduced form of the pan-Indian varna system with its four (or five) categories. In fact, it seems never to have been possible to fit South Indian society fully into the pan-Indian varna system. The system therefore appears to have been typically reduced to a three-part model that includes the two varnas of Brahman and Shudra plus the unmentioned fifth category of Untouchables.

It can be noted that the name of Brahman was included in both the three-part model and the varna system. The names of the two
other categories, non-Brahman and Scheduled Caste, had other sources. The term non-Brahman was connected with the movement of Tamilian nationalism, which I discuss in Chapter 5. Structurally, it can be compared with the Shudra category of the varna system. The name of Shudra was hardly ever used in Ekkaraiyur. Neither were the subdivisions of ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ Shudras, which sometimes occur in other models of caste in South India (Thapar 1985: 212). Scheduled Castes can likewise be related to the pan-Indian varna system, as it compares structurally with the unmentioned fifth category. The name, however, was derived from one of the categories of the state policy of positive discrimination.

At the time of my fieldwork, the government of Tamil Nadu was promoting a policy of positive discrimination, which aimed at eliminating caste-related differences of an economic and social nature. The policy was based on the argument that, as people of low castes had been systematically oppressed and exploited since ancient times, they had temporarily to be given better opportunities in order for them to achieve equality with people of other castes. The policy’s roots are to be found in the colonial period when a few categories of people classified as ‘scheduled’ and ‘backward’ castes were given special benefits by the state. In 1990, however, the policy had vastly increased in scope, and most people in Tamil Nadu were able to benefit from the policy of positive discrimination in some way or another.

The policy imposed a classification into five administrative categories on the people of Tamil Nadu: ‘Forward Castes’, ‘Backward Castes’, ‘Most Backward Castes’, ‘Scheduled Castes’, and ‘Scheduled Tribes’. Apart from Forward Castes, these categories were liable to be positively discriminated against, in varying measures. A broad variety of resources were allocated through the policy, ranging from government jobs, political posts, and places in institutions of higher education, to free slates, books, and uniforms for children in elementary school. Benefiting from the positive discrimination could mean access to bank loans, housing projects, education and white-collar jobs.

As the policy of positive discrimination was directly related to a claim on state resources, strategies to improve the position had also arisen. Some were personal, as when a person tried to get his
officially recorded caste membership changed. Other strategies involved whole groups of people. Large regional associations had become common, uniting numbers of castes which saw themselves as related. Such associations negotiated directly in state politics for a larger share of state resources, which led to intensive competition between them. The way the policy focused on the state tended to embed caste identities in a political and economic context that transcended the locality. To the extent that caste became a criterion for differential access to state-controlled resources, castes came to resemble national interest groups that competed with each other for the resources of the state. As caste interests became the causes of national interest groups, party politics became a principal arena for defending and claiming shares in such resources.\textsuperscript{36}

If organised by militant leaders, such competition sometimes set off riots, as it had done in ‘the Vanniyar riots’ over large parts of central Tamil Nadu in 1987-8. There was a series of riots in the surroundings of Ekkaraiyur related to the policy of positive discrimination on three occasions in 1989-90. Although a different mix of motives triggered and sustained the riots on each occasion, resentment over the working of the policy was a common background factor. The first series of riots left an official total of 28 deaths, and took a week for government troops to quell, while the latter two series of riots each led to a couple of stabbings to death (see Alm 1996). All the time I was in the field, Ekkaraiyur itself was spared serious caste violence. But, a new potentially powerful pressure group in relation to the policy of positive discrimination was in the process of formation in 1990. This time the formerly untouchable Christians were getting regionally organised, and planning large-scale demonstrations in order to be reclassified as Scheduled Caste.

The categories of the policy were based on caste, as is evident from the names of the categories used. Entire castes, rather than individual persons, were sorted into the categories. This meant that the policy of positive discrimination reinforced existing caste identities at the same time as it produced a concept of caste that focused on the state. The state-focused concept of caste was evident in the creative blurring of boundaries between the terminology used in the policy discourse of the state and that used when describing the
ideal model of a village caste system in Ekkaraiyur. For example, people categorised as Backward Caste and Scheduled Caste by the state policy were known in Ekkaraiyur by the acronyms of ‘BCs’ and ‘SCs’, respectively. The same acronyms were also used for designating the middle- and low-ranking castes in the three-part Ekkaraiyur model. Consequently, ‘SC’ meant low-caste as well as Scheduled Caste, whereas ‘BC’ could stand equally well for non-Brahman, Shudra and Backward Caste. The different meanings of ‘SC’ were, however, not strict synonyms. The Koliyar Paraiyars, for example, were not classified by the state as Scheduled Caste, yet they were known as ‘SCs’ in Ekkaraiyur because of their otherwise low-caste ranking. The same divergence of meanings applied also to the label ‘BC’.

The Ekkaraiyur three-part model of Brahmans, non-Brahmans and Scheduled Castes was weakly grounded in Ekkaraiyur reality. It reduced a large number of castes into three general categories. Other local versions of models of caste systems were better adapted to the realities of Ekkaraiyur. I discuss in Chapter 3 one model that an informant used for outlining changes in agricultural relations within the village. This model did not amount to a comprehensive model of a village caste system because it focused on only a few of the village’s castes. Other models were similarly restricted in scope. For example, the structure of Ekkaraiyur’s farmers’ association, the pattadari committee (see Chapter 4), implied a village caste model of the (fictitious) seven landowning castes of Ekkaraiyur. Symptomatically, most people found it difficult to list these seven castes.

In fact, models of caste systems appeared as highly contextualised constructions. An outline of changing agricultural relations produced one model, notions of landownership produced another, and a third model was found relevant when Ekkaraiyur was related to a South Indian political context. Although there were several models around, none of them included every one of the Ekkaraiyur castes. Restricted to their contextual scopes, no comprehensive model of a village caste system appeared to exist (cf. Washbrook 1989: 205-7).
CHAPTER TWO

To be a villager

Language, religion and caste served readily as labels for categorisations when people in Ekkaraiyur spoke about themselves and about others. The labels created circumscribed conceptual categories, but they also produced residual ambiguities. I have attempted above to capture something of these ambiguities by pointing to the relativity and fluidity of boundaries. The similar uncertainty of boundaries will appear as I end this chapter with some reflections on the meaning of being ‘a villager’.

The Ekkaraiyur of the late 1980s was not a closed world, but was integrating with and dependent on the world outside the village. People, ideas and resources were constantly moving in and out of the village. People came to work and live in Ekkaraiyur, for shorter or longer periods. Others left it, worked outside and perhaps returned at some later time. The networks of people in the village were not confined to the village, but extended over wide areas. People who took an important part in daily village life did not necessarily live there. Clearly, to define ‘a villager’ simply as a person living in the village would give a false picture of the dynamics of village life.

At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed some different spatial units to which the name of Ekkaraiyur could be applied. To recapitulate, Ekkaraiyur could stand for the ur only, but also for the complex of ur, pattis, and cherries. To this can be added the fact that Ekkaraiyur was also the name of a revenue village and the area of a village panchayat. The former, a unit of taxation and administration, and the latter, a unit of local self-government, were overlapping, but not identical, units. Neither of them was spatially identical with the ur or with the complex of ur, pattis, and cherries.

Consequently, the name Ekkaraiyur was an ambiguous label, which referred to units from different contexts. This, of course, created one kind of ambiguity around the question who and who did not live in Ekkaraiyur. Nevertheless, a more important ambiguity was related to the notions of ‘living in’ Ekkaraiyur and ‘being of’ Ekkaraiyur: that is, a difference between the village as a place of residence and as a place of belonging.
‘Being of’ Ekkaraiyur was reflected in the notion of *sonda ur*. People often translated sonda ur as ‘native village’. ‘Which is your native village?’ was the typical question to ask a stranger. The notion of sonda ur referred to the assumption that every person was associated with a particular locality to which he or she ultimately belonged, regardless of place of residence. The sonda ur was typically thought of as the village of one’s ancestors and ancestral lands, and the focal temple of one’s family deities was located there (cf. Mines 1984: 26-27, 62). Moreover, the sonda ur was a recurring feature, often the point of departure, in family histories. Thus, the sonda ur was a place of origin as well as a place of belonging.

People in Ekkaraiyur argued that the sonda ur and the place of residence ideally ought to be the same. In other words, a person ought to live in his or her sonda ur. Daniel (1984) has discussed similar ideas in his study on Tamil personhood. Daniel’s informants argued a connection between soil and people, believing that if a person was to live well in a locality, the soil had to be compatible with the person’s caste. In fact, the soil of the person’s sonda ur was thought to be the best for him or her (Daniel 1984: 61-104, 79). Although my informants in Ekkaraiyur did not express themselves in terms that associated caste and soil, similar ideas seemed to be involved. They typically stressed the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the deities of one’s sonda ur. If the deities were neglected, they would engineer misfortunes and illness, I was told (cf. Mines 1984: 26-27). In fact, many people visited their sonda ur at the time of the deities’ festivals, and continued to worship the deities in their new place of residence.

The distinction between place of residence and sonda ur meant that ‘being a villager of Ekkaraiyur’ schematically included three categories of people. One category consisted of those who lived in Ekkaraiyur, which was also their sonda ur. Another category consisted of those who lived in Ekkaraiyur but regarded some other locality as their sonda ur. This category covered a considerable number of people, including the many women who settled in their husband’s sonda ur on marrying. The third category consisted of those who did not live in Ekkaraiyur but regarded the village as their sonda ur. Large numbers of the latter attended the festivals of Ekkaraiyur’s deities. Consequently, neither did one necessarily have
to live in Ekkaraiyur in order to be identified as a villager, nor did many who lived in Ekkaraiyur regard themselves as being villagers in more than residential terms.

Nevertheless, the distinction between places of residence and place of belonging was seldom as clear-cut as I have outlined. Indeed, the fact that people who lived in Ekkaraiyur did not look on it as their sonda ur did not altogether exclude their identification with the village, which could become something of a sonda ur for them by a gradual merging of residence and belonging.

Remoteness in time, and often also in geographical distance, could be one cause behind the turning of residence into belonging. Some informants did not know the name and precise locality of their sonda ur, because, they explained, their ancestors had left it such a long time ago. At most, they could indicate its general region, which name was often attached to the name of their caste. Knowledge was relative to perceived distance in time and space. For example, one informant told me about his family’s successive sonda urs, organised in his story as if they were knots on a string that wound itself through time and space. His family’s history of successive migrations appeared to have produced new localities of residence and successive sonda urs, each superseding the one before. Telling his family’s history backwards in time, specific details became increasingly vague, until only Ramnad was remembered as the region of the original sonda ur. While retaining the memory of earlier sonda urs, such a lack of precise knowledge provided scope for the identification with a new sonda ur.

Notions associated with landownership could also facilitate the recognition of a new sonda ur. I have mentioned that the sonda ur was often associated with ancestral lands. The claim that one’s ancestors had been great landlords in the sonda ur was typical. Although the land was invariably said to have been lost long ago, the very claim to landownership did appear to mark a locality as a sonda ur. The similar association between belonging and landowning was expressed in Ekkaraiyur by landowners who strongly identified themselves with the village and in an exclusive sense claimed the village as their own. As the village land belonged to them, they belonged to the village. Consequently, acquiring land in Ekkaraiyur
could possibly facilitate the translation from residence to belonging for the person from another, perhaps forgotten, sonda ur.

The long-term tendency to translate residence into sonda ur was certainly of varying force for different persons, and there were brakes on the process. Family deities provided one such brake. Recognising a new sonda ur could entail casting off old family deities. There was a deep uneasiness in Ekkaraiyur about the wisdom of doing so. Old family deities were indeed discarded, but the more prudent strategy was to add new deities to the family pantheon. However, the act of recognising the goddess Vandikaliamman as a family deity could be a statement that marked a reinforcement of belonging to Ekkaraiyur.

Notions of residence and belonging were part of a process relationship. Both were liable to changing interpretations over time, and their interpretations were mutually influencing. In conclusion, people, who from an outsider’s point of view could be called villagers of Ekkaraiyur, looked on their relationship to the village in different ways. Ekkaraiyur was little more than a convenient place of residence for some people, and a place that invoked strong feelings of belonging for others. Moreover, numerous people who did not live in the village looked upon Ekkaraiyur as the place to which they belonged.  

When I did fieldwork in Ekkaraiyur in 1988-90, the village was still adapting itself to thorough-going changes in hierarchies of power and ranking, which had been effected by changes in the distribution of land rights and in the opportunities offered by the state government’s policies on caste. They were neither affected as yet by the consequences of India’s economic liberalisation and opening up to the world, which was to be implemented in the 1990s, nor by the central government’s increasing emphasis on Hindu nationalism.

People in Ekkaraiyur had become drawn closely into the domain of the state by becoming dependent on opportunities for education and work. Their expectations had also been raised by central discourses on development. Nevertheless, most people in Ekkaraiyur said that life had not become better. The common explanation was that moral flaws, such as corruption and selfishness, were ruining
society. Not only was the state administration said to be corrupt, but people included themselves and the representatives they elected in the judgement. This was attributed to a general selfishness on the part of the people.

The social complexity of Ekkaraiyur, which I have attempted to capture in this chapter, implied that a rich repertoire of cultural models, myths and metaphors could be mobilised by the inhabitants to formulate social criticism and discontent with current conditions: notions imported through the discourses of modern politics, myths of golden ages and of affluence in foreign countries, stories about human weaknesses attracting ritual curses. Before venturing into these rhetorical resources, however, I shall however take a closer look in the next chapters at some of the overarching economic and political processes that impinged on Ekkaraiyur.
Chapter 3 Remodelled local relationships

In 1971, Béteille noted that ‘…change is a fundamental feature of the social structure of Sripuram today.’ (1971: 185). Sripuram is a village in the Tanjore region of Tamil Nadu, and Béteille arrived at his conclusion after doing fieldwork there in 1961 and 1962. Béteille’s words about Sripuram could be applied to Ekkaraiyur in 1988-90. Not only could an outside observer note changes in village life. People who lived in Ekkaraiyur also understood themselves to be living in a changing world. Present conditions were routinely compared with earlier ones, and directions of change were often commented on.

In this chapter, I discuss three aspects of change in relation with landed property and access to land. These are conflicts over land, changes in forms of tenancy, and shifts in forms of agricultural labour. Conflicts over land are represented in this chapter by what I call a tenants’ revolt. This revolt against the landlords involved the refusal to pay the rents and sometimes the forcible takeover of land. I understand the changes in tenancy forms to reflect the landlords’ response in the conflict with their tenants. Moreover, shifts in forms of agricultural labour were intertwined with new tenancy forms and conflicts over land.

These aspects concern the remodelling of village relationships, resulting in the overthrow of an earlier pattern of local interdependence. In particular, a shift away from permanently employed agricultural labourers became a major aspect of the dissolution of former relationships within the village, paving the way for the emergence of the new kind of leadership that I discuss in Chapter 4.

I end this chapter by comparing the situation in Ekkaraiyur at the end of the 1980s, with village studies by Srinivas and Béteille from the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1960s, respectively. Focusing on landownership, tenancy forms and forms of agricultural labour, I present a sketch of a long process of changing agricultural conditions in South India. Central to this process has been the
gradual weakening of relations with landed property and access to land as the basis for patronage and hence with political dominance.

Tanisamy’s model of local change

Mr Tanisamy, a former president of the village panchayat, once summed up the major changes in relation with landed property and access to land in Ekkaraiyur. He told me that in the past the Brahmans and Vellalars had owned the land, the Kallars had been their tenants, and the Paraiyars and Pallars their labourers. Nowadays, the Vellalars were still landlords, and the Paraiyars and Pallars still worked the land as labourers. However, the Brahmans had lost their land to their Kallar tenants.

Tanisamy’s model of change gave a simplified overview of past and present relations with landed property and access to land in Ekkaraiyur. It focused on some factors and neglected others, as any model does. Most of the village’s castes, for example, were ignored, and relationships that were not related to land were not mentioned. Also omitted were the many specialised agricultural tasks. People were simply landlords, tenants, or labourers.

Tanisamy’s model was built on a one-to-one relationship between caste and land. This relationship blotted out variations on both caste and individual levels. Apart from the fact that not every Brahman and Vellalar had been a landlord, every Kollar a tenant, or every Paraiyar and Pallar an agricultural labourer, Tanisamy’s model ignored the singularities of relationships. Clearly, neither in the past nor in the present, had any landlord had an identical relationship with his tenants or labourers.

Nevertheless, Tanisamy’s model served as sociological shorthand for a village caste system, as I mentioned in Chapter 2. Stressing the importance of land, the model allotted castes to different positions in relation to land, as landlords, tenants, or agricultural labourers. These positions in turn provided the pattern for how individuals were thought to relate to each other. The model was dynamic in the sense that it allowed for altered positions and relationships. However, while outlining a process, it did not explain it. The model
merely said that some things had changed, but others had not. It did not explain why.

Tanisamy’s model expressed in a condensed and simplified way what he and other informants believed to have taken place in relationships with landed property and access to land in Ekkaraiyur. For them, it represented a process that had remodelled village relationships in a fundamental way. In part, this was connected to the overthrow of Brahman overlordship. Below, I explore their understanding of this process of change.

**Mirasdars and the great houses**

The Brahmans and the Vellalars had owned Ekkaraiyur’s land, according to Tanisamy. These castes were ranked locally as the village’s highest castes. Consequently, high-caste landlords had earlier, according to Tanisamy’s model, dominated landownership in Ekkaraiyur.

In Ekkaraiyur, *mirasdar* was one term used for these high-caste landlords of the past. Mirasdar is a technical term associated with pre-colonial and early colonial land revenue (see Stein 1979, 1985: 435, passim; Frykenberg 1979; Ludden 1985; Dirks 1989: 118-19, footnote 5). But, the term was used in a popular sense in Ekkaraiyur at the end of the 1980s. Any contemporary landowner could be known as a mirasdar, but the term was typically reserved for the large landlord whose family had owned village land over several generations. The term had other popular associations as well. It indicated, for example, a position of honour and respect, and in this sense it was used contemporarily by the office-bearers of Saint Xavier’s caste association, who were known in the plural as the mirasdarkal (see Chapter 4).

Moreover, a person who upheld an inherited right that was known as a *miras* could be called a mirasdar. The miras, in particular, referred to different kinds of village office, but in a general sense it could refer to an established, but vaguely defined, right in the village as a whole. This restored something of the technical revenue meaning of the term, but rather than referring to economic rights in village resources, mirasdar in this general sense had the connotation
of social belonging. A mirasdar, in fact, belonged to Ekkaraiyur because he was a landowner. Thus, the term mirasdar suggested a publicly recognised local position of honour and respect associated with belonging and landownership (see Chapter 2; also Winslow 1987: 868). However, the term mirasdar was typically used for the high-caste landlords of the past.

The high-caste landowning family of the mirasdar of the past was collectively known as ‘a great house’, periyavidu. This term carried connotations of seniority and legitimacy. The term ‘great house’ could also be used to designate a man’s legitimate family, that is, the family established together with an officially married wife. In contrast, sinnavidu, ‘a small house’, referred to his secondary family, for example the family established with a concubine. Incidentally, the families of ‘the great houses’ had lived in the large houses in the central parts of the village.

In Ekkaraiyur, most of the mirasdars of ‘the great houses’ of the past were said to have been from the Brahman and Vellalar castes. However, whereas most of the Brahman families appeared to have ranked as ‘great houses’, most of the more numerous Vellalar families had not. The Vellalar castes in Ekkaraiyur had included people of very varied social and economic standing, and relatively few families had been wealthy enough landowners to count as ‘a great house’. In addition, a handful of families of the Udaiyar and other castes had also counted as ‘great houses’. As in the case of the Vellalar ‘great houses’, these landowners had formed the elite of their castes.

The mirasdars of ‘the great houses’ of the past were said to have upheld extensive networks of patron-client relationships within the village. By means of their landownership, particularly their ownership of the productive land of irrigated gardens and fields, they had been able to act as patrons to a large number of clients who had depended on them for their living (cf. Srinivas 1988). Principally, their clients had included tenants and agricultural labourers, such as the Kallars, Paraiyars and Pallars of Tanisamy’s model. The status as clients was said also to have involved the obligation to provide political support. The clients had provided the means for the mirasdars of ‘the great houses’ to dominate the local village institutions.
The networks of the mirasdars of ‘the great houses’ of the past were said to have extended into the state’s political and administrative systems. Only members of ‘the great houses’ had any formal influence in extra-local politics. A Brahman informant recalled how his father had been one of the only four persons in Ekkaraiyur who had the right to vote in state elections. The other three voters had also been mirasdars of ‘great houses’, he told me. The right to vote could be associated with close contacts with members of the higher levels of the administration. A former servant of a Vellalar mirasdar told me about the lavishness with which the British District Collector had been entertained in the mirasdar’s house. There had been a respectful relationship of equals between this high-ranking civil servant of the colonial regime and the local mirasdar, my informant stressed.39

Such memories of the mirasdar’s hospitality to visiting civil servants recall Srinivas’s description of life in Rampura in the late 1940s, which was the same period to which my informant referred. The man Srinivas names as the headman of Rampura appears to be a close parallel to the mirasdars of Ekkaraiyur, as they were described to me. The headman of Rampura was a landowning patron with many clients. By acting as host to visiting civil servants, he represented the village and established his claim to pre-eminence within the village. As there were several contenders for the pre-eminent position, these aspects of hospitality were strategically important (Srinivas 1988). The mirasdars of ‘the great houses’ of Ekkaraiyur were, no doubt, similarly involved in intense rivalry for local pre-eminence. An example of such a rivalry concerns a long-drawn-out conflict among the Christian Vellalars.

This conflict, which occasionally flared up during my fieldwork, appeared to have been going on, in one form or another, for the last 200-250 years. Probably, it existed even before the Vellalars settled in Ekkaraiyur in the middle of the eighteenth century, as affinally related ‘great houses’ were said to have been opposing each other already at the time of their settlement. Despite this initial opposition, the alignments of different Vellalar families appeared to have shifted during the centuries of conflict. Families that were opposed in the eighteenth century were not necessarily opposing each other in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some of the Vellalars became
Christians as they settled in Ekkaraiyur, and the conflict then acquired denominational overtones and a focus on the control of church property. At least by the late nineteenth century the split among the Vellalars was aligned along the rifts between two branches of the Catholic mission. A generation ago, the Christian Vellalars were once again pitted against each other over the control of church property in Ekkaraiyur resulting in the excommunication of many of them. Then, during my fieldwork, the Vellalars were split into two hostile groups, in which young men occasionally clashed with each other. The focus of the conflict was as before the ambition to control church property, this time through the Christian Vellalars’ common caste association in Ekkaraiyur.

When my informants talked about the earlier stages of the conflict, they spoke about it in terms of rivalry between different ‘great houses’. However, they used other terms to describe the alignments of the recent stage of the conflict. This stage was described as involving people of two opposing factions, called ‘the majority’ and ‘the minority’. The shift in terminology from ‘great houses’ to factions could indicate that faction alignments had replaced earlier patron-client alignments, as Mitra argues has happened in Gujarat and Orissa (Mitra 1992: 89-90, 143-46).

‘Factions’ and ‘patron-client relations’ are analytically related concepts and are in practice difficult to distinguish from each other. Nevertheless, the faction can be taken as a leader-centred group primarily united for political action, whereas the patron-client relationship is a dyadic relationship of wider scope than political action (Seymour-Smith 1986: 40, 110, 219). Factions are often based on patron-client relationships, and the relative weight can shift between people’s loyalties to the faction as such and to an individual patron. Loyalty to an individual patron can be overriding, as the notion of ‘great houses’ indicates, or the loyalties entailed in patron-client relationships can be encompassed by the loyalty to the faction as such, as the notion of ‘a majority’ and ‘a minority’ indicates.

There is no certainty on the point, but some indications appear to favour a shift in the loyalty entailed in patron-client relationships towards a loyalty to the faction not just in terminology but also in fact. 40 A patron-client alignment in the earlier stages of the conflict is hinted at by the fact that numerous non-Vellalars were also
mentioned as having taken part, possibly as clients of various ‘great houses’. Correspondingly, the factional character of the recent stages is indicated by the fact that it was mostly Vellalars who participated in the clashes between ‘the majority’ and ‘the minority’ in the years of my fieldwork. Nevertheless, there has probably been scope for both factions and patron-client alignments at every stage in the long and involuted history of the Vellalar conflict.

It should be noted that the participants in the conflict had continuously acted in relation to non-village, extra-local authorities. Authorities of the Catholic Church, for example, have been involved in the conflict since at least the end of the nineteenth century. This has led one church historian to conclude that Ekkaraiyur ‘. . . is known for its internal splits and in-fights’ (Gnanapragasam 1988: 71). Church authorities have unsuccessfully attempted to mediate in the conflict between ‘the majority’ and ‘the minority’. In addition, Vellalar faction leaders have successfully involved different branches of the police, the district courts, and the representative of Ekkaraiyur in the legislative assembly and at least one cabinet minister of the state government in the conflict.

The tenants’ revolt

Although individual landowners could still be known as mirasdars at the end of the 1980s, and landowning families were referred to as ‘great houses’, their past monopoly of local influence and leadership was understood by people in Ekkaraiyur to be a thing of the past. The tenants’ revolt was said to have been instrumental in achieving this.

The tenants’ revolt stands for a process that involved the shift of control over land from landlords to tenants in Ekkaraiyur. The term is of my choosing, and it captures the mood of my informants’ stories about the shift. These stories were characterised by drama and violence, and represented the shift as having shattered long-established relationships.

My informants spoke about the tenants’ revolt as a process of relatively long duration. It had begun in Ekkaraiyur in the 1970s, I was told. In fact, the revolt was still going on at the time of my
fieldwork in 1988-90. As described by my informants, the revolt was a gradual process that was characteristically low-key, but punctuated by dramatic incidents. It was also, apparently, a process that had not yet spent its force.

The fact that landlords had lost land to their tenants was a sensitive subject in Ekkaraiyur. Discussions invariably aroused very mixed feelings among my informants. Landlords who had lost their land were reluctant to talk about it with me, and so were tenants and others who had acquired the land that had belonged to landlords. Others, for example landlords who had not lost any land, or tenants who had failed or never attempted to take over land from their landlords, were less unresponsive. So also were people who considered themselves as standing apart from the conflict between landlords and tenants. Nevertheless, I only came to know about the tenants’ revolt after having lived for almost half a year in Ekkaraiyur in daily contact with some of the landlords and tenants involved. Obviously, the tenants’ revolt was not the first issue that people cared to discuss with an anthropologist.

The middle-aged son of a Christian landlord, whose family had been one of ‘the great houses’ of the past, was the first person to tell me about the revolt. One day we were visiting one of his family’s fields where an overseer was directing a planting labour force. On our way home he pointed out the fields belonging to certain other landlords. Saying that those fields had been taken over by tenants, he began to tell me about the conflict between landlords and tenants in Ekkaraiyur. After having listened for a while, I asked: ‘Who are these landlords and tenants?’ His answer surprised me: ‘Why, you know them. They are your friends.’

This first informant about the tenants’ revolt painted a very vivid picture of the conflict. Brahman landlords and Kallar tenants were its principal actors, as they were in Tanisamy’s model of the changing relations with landed property and access to land in Ekkaraiyur. According to my informant, Brahman landlords had owned the most fertile land in Ekkaraiyur. Being Brahmans, they did not work the land themselves. Instead, the land was leased to farmers from the Kallar castes, who cultivated it with the help of agricultural labourers. This arrangement had satisfied everyone since time immemorial, according to my informant.
One day, however, the Kallar tenants revolted against the Brahman landlords. Typically, most of them stopped paying the rents that were due to the landlords. Some tenants subsequently forced the landlords to sell them land on cheap terms. Others took over land without paying anything at all. Whatever strategy was used, my informant claimed that the Kallar tenants effectively took control of the land that they had previously held as tenants of the Brahman landlords.

My informant blamed the Brahman landlords for creating their own predicament. However, instead of referring to the lack of interest shown by the Brahman landlords in agricultural concerns, or expressing the opinion that the landlords had exploited the work of others, my informant suggested that they had made a key mistake when they ceased to live in the prescribed Brahman way. In his opinion, the Brahman ought to focus on the performance of rituals, which should take up most of his time and interest. In Ekkaraiyur, however, the Brahman landlords had ceased to perform the rituals, my informant alleged. Instead, they lived in idleness, which cost them other people’s respect and led them into excessive sexual preoccupations. These moral shortcomings made the Brahman landlords vulnerable, which fact their Kallar tenants had taken advantage of, my informant said.

He told me, in detail, about the methods used by some tenants to intimidate their Brahman landlords. The following scenario was typical, he claimed. The tenant turned the landlord’s preoccupation with sex to his advantage by setting a trap. The tenant’s wife was first encouraged to become the landlord’s concubine. Scandalous scenes were then publicly engineered in the Brahman household. The tenant’s wife raved against the despoiler of her chastity, and when a spiteful crowd gathered outside the house the enraged tenant-husband made a timely entry on the scene vowing violent revenge. The Brahman landlord had to make concessions. This meant appeasing the tenant with gifts of money, jewellery, and, above all, land. Consequently, when harmony was restored to the Brahman household, the Kallar tenant was in control of the landlord’s land. Whether this scenario was based on an actual incident, I do not know. It could have been.
Later, other informants told me how Brahman landlords had been divested of their land. Their accounts were no less dramatic, but idleness, loss of respect and sexual preoccupations were not given a similar central place. Instead, the aggressiveness of Kallar tenants and the corresponding Brahman timidity in the face of threats of violence were said to be the crucial factors. For example, one informant told me that a tenant had threatened to cut the landlord’s throat if he ever dared to visit the fields again. The landlord was said to have sold his land on cheap terms to the tenant, thus formalising the de facto takeover of the land. Another tenant was said to have forced his landlord to sell land to a third party by means of a strategy that involved several steps. He first threatened to disrupt the cultivation unless the landlord accepted him as a tenant. Then, having become a tenant, he took to visiting the landlord’s house in the company of armed and drunken henchmen, in order to persuade the landlord of the wisdom of selling the land. Finally, when a buyer conveniently appeared, the tenant extracted substantial sums from both the landlord and the buyer in return for a promise to cease causing further trouble.

To my mind, these examples show the drift of the accounts of the conflict between landlords and tenants. It should be remembered that they were hearsay and thus did not necessarily accurately reflect the reality of the conflict (but, see Robinson 1988: 42-3, 125-129 on forcible takeover of land in an Andhra village.) My informants added both drama and after-thought to what they told me. The bias in favour of the landlords, who were principally represented as the victims, was also not surprising. Several of my informants belonged to landowning families and obviously feared losing their land in similar ways. The tenants who were said to have been involved in the above examples would have had different stories to tell, but, as I have mentioned, none of those pointed out as participants in the specific incidents, whether as landlord or tenant, were ever eager to discuss the subject with me. People who had bought Brahman land similarly tended to gloss over the possibly violent context of the sales. The fact that many people adopted a defensive attitude to the subject was largely due to feelings of shame, I would think. Few non-Brahmans in Ekkaraiyur would have been prepared to side with the Brahman landlords, and many had been ready to take advantage
of their vulnerability. Nevertheless, it was generally held that the Brahman landlords had been treated brutally, and therefore the acquisition of Brahman land was not an accomplishment to boast about in public. Similarly, it was also considered shameful to have lost land. Among other things, this indicated vulnerability.

For the tenant’s perspective on the conflict, I have to rely on tenants who had failed in their revolt or had never attempted to take over land from their landlords. These informants stressed their fear of losing their tenancies. They argued that, although the tenants did not own the land, they had a right to cultivate it. This right had been established by the fact that they had worked the land for years, perhaps for generations. In their view, the landlords had until recently implicitly recognised this right by entering into long-term tenancy relationships with their tenants. However, new attitudes and conditions had eroded these long-term relationships, and present-day landlords increasingly ignored the tenants’ right. As short-term tenancies replaced long-term ones, tenants who did not comply were evicted, my informants suggested. Consequently, my tenant informants argued that tenants were forced to choose between defending their right to the land and becoming landless. Unless they revolted, they would risk ending up without any land at all (cf. Kapadia 1993: 108 on the eviction of tenants in a Tamil village; Gouch 1989: 44-48).

My tenant informants did not gloss over the aggressive methods that were used occasionally against certain landlords. Instead, they explained the methods as a response to the tenants’ fear of eviction. Threats of violence, forced sales and takeovers could be the necessary means to secure their right to the land, they argued. Nevertheless, a distinction was made between the motivations of different tenants. On the one hand, there were the tenants who tried to take over the land that they had worked for a long time. Their motive for revolting was considered to be legitimate, almost regardless of the means they used, because they were defending their legitimate right to the land. On the other hand, some tenants were understood to be motivated principally by personal profit, and the actions of such tenants were criticized as selfish. The above-mentioned tenant, who allegedly forced himself on a Brahman landlord, was frequently quoted as an example of the latter kind of
tenant. I was told that he had not been defend any right to land, but had been using the tenants’ revolt for his own profit.

I shall discuss the censure of selfishness associated with leaders in later chapters. In the case of leaders, allegations of selfishness tended to undermine acceptance of their legitimacy. Similarly, allegations of selfishness worked to throw in question tenants’ actions. However, as far as I know, notions of unselfishness were not ascribed to tenants whose actions were deemed to be legitimate. After all, they had been struggling for their own sake. Consequently, while allegations of selfishness served to define the illegitimate action, the legitimate action did not imply unselfish motives.

Tenants tended to explain the tenants’ revolt as a response to the erosion of established relations to landed property and access to land. Landlords, in contrast, understood the revolt as causing that very same erosion. In the landlords’ view, the tenants’ revolt forced them into the use of short-term tenancies, because a long-term tenancy would invite the tenant to take over the land. As tenants no longer could be trusted, the landlords believed that they had to safeguard their land.

The landlords also stressed that state legislation and the national political context had created conditions for conflict in Ekkaraiyur between landlords and tenants. Culminating in the 1970s, various acts of state legislation aimed at strengthening the tenants’ position had been issued. For example, a ceiling had been introduced on land holding and on tenant’s rents. The tenant’s right to cultivate the land had been strengthened, and it had become difficult to evict defaulting tenants (cf. Kapadia 1993: 106-111; Mencher 1978: 111-114). These acts of state legislation were associated with the political shift in Tamil Nadu to the advantage of Tamil nationalist parties, which I outline in Chapter 4. What Presler has noted about temple land tenancies in Tamil Nadu pertains to the situation in Ekkaraiyur as well:

. . . the general thrust of the state’s policies does not encourage tenants to take their rent obligations seriously. The land reforms . . . and the rhetoric of political parties: all these work together to convey to tenants the message that tenants have every right to the land they cultivate and that
the state is doing its best to secure it for them. (Presler 1989: 99)

Landlords in Ekkaraiyur suggested that national as well as local politicians belonging to the Tamil nationalist parties were either neutral or supported the tenants’ revolt. In addition, it was frequently suggested that, had sympathetic and powerful politicians not backed the tenants, they would never have revolted against the landlords. Indeed, the tenants’ revolt was sometimes spoken of as a local version of the struggle between the national political parties. The landlords, one informant suggested, represented the Congress party, while the tenants represented the Tamil nationalist parties. Just as the Tamil nationalist parties had wrested state control from the Congress, so the tenants had wrested the land from the landlords. Thus, establishing a link between the local incidents of the tenants’ revolt and national party politics, my informant argued that local and national conflict alignments were parts of the same struggle.

Why Brahmans and Kallars?

The tenants’ revolt was the unstated mechanism of change in Tanisamy’s model of the changing relations with landed property and access to land in Ekkaraiyur. As I have already mentioned, the perspectives of class and caste were merged in his model. The tenants’ revolt was likewise seen as simultaneously a conflict between landlords and tenants as classes, and a conflict between Brahmans and Kallars as castes. I have already noted that this merging of class and caste was an obvious simplification of reality. In Ekkaraiyur, class and caste did not overlap in such a neat way. There were landlords of several castes, and the tenant who was pointed out as having been the most aggressive against his Brahman landlord was in fact a member of the Agamudiyar caste. The Agamudiyar caste was habitually grouped with the Kallar castes, but the fact remains that one of the outstanding actors in the tenants’ revolt was not a Kallar.

Furthermore, non-Brahman landlords were also confronted by revolting tenants. Tanisamy himself provided an example of this.
Tanisamy was a Vellalar and had once faced a revolting tenant from the Pallar caste. According to Tanisamy, he had employed a Pallar man as an agricultural labourer. After some time, the man asked for land in tenancy instead of wages. As Tanisamy considered him to be a good worker, he leased the man land on *kai varam* terms (a kind of share-cropping agreement; see below), in addition to working on Tanisamy’s land. However, the man gradually devoted more and more of his time to his own cultivation, while neglecting Tanisamy’s fields. Consequently, Tanisamy began to regret having given him a tenancy. Eventually, at the time of the harvest, the man refused to hand over the landlord’s share to Tanisamy. When Tanisamy remonstrated with him, the tenant told him that he would neither pay any rent in the future, nor would he leave the land, as these were his rights according to the tenancy legislation.

Tanisamy told me that he had tried several ways to evict the tenant, but none of his attempts had proved successful. According to Tanisamy, the principal reason was that certain undisclosed powerful local politicians were supporting the man. Nevertheless, they reached a compromise when Tanisamy threatened to take the case to court. Tanisamy paid the man a substantial sum of money and got his land back. This outlay still galled Tanisamy several years after the incident, but things could have been worse, he told me; he could have lost his land.

Tanisamy’s experience did not appear to be uncommon among non-Brahman landlords, but many of them seemed to have been able to hold on to their land, as Tanisamy did. In contrast, many of the Brahman landlords appeared to have lost their land to their tenants. Tanisamy’s model did not explain why Brahman and non-Brahman landlords fare so differently. Neither does a class perspective provide an explanation. A caste perspective, however, may to some degree be enlightening in order to explain why tenants’ confrontations with Brahman and non-Brahman landlords produce different results.

Brahman landlords in Ekkaraiyur were burdened with a number of disadvantages in the conflict with their tenants. One such disadvantage was the limited support a Brahman landlord could count on in Ekkaraiyur. The ability to muster local support was an important factor in deciding who was to control the land. A vital part
of such support consisted of the number of men who were ready literally to fight on one’s side, and any Brahman landlord in Ekkaraiyur would probably be at a disadvantage in this respect. A generally hostile attitude towards Brahmans in Ekkaraiyur (see Chapter 5) meant that a Brahman landlord would find it difficult to rally support for his cause among non-Brahmans. The lack of non-Brahman support was aggravated by the fact that the Brahmans were not numerous in Ekkaraiyur. A Brahman landlord would be unlikely to mobilise enough Brahman men to evict a tenant by physical force.

A Brahman landlord’s ability to muster support would probably have been better during the time of ‘the great houses’. Using the patron-client networks of his ‘great house’, a Brahman landlord could then call on a large number of non-Brahman clients. Ironically, the tenants’ revolt turned ‘a great house’s’ power against itself. Without loyal tenant-clients, a Brahman landlord would find it difficult to defend his land against tenants who repudiated their clientship.

The tenants’ revolt obviously eroded the patron-client networks for landlords of other castes, too. Yet, as the Vellalar belonged to one of the most numerous castes in Ekkaraiyur, a Vellalar landlord would probably be able to gather a force of Vellalars that could match anything a tenant could put into the field. In the situation when the power of ‘the great houses’ was quickly eroding, the relative success of Vellalar landlords can thus at least partly be explained by the fact that they belonged to a numerically strong caste. Similarly, the relative failure of Brahmans in Ekkaraiyur can be related to their numerical weakness.

Numerical strength and local power are two aspects that have been associated in anthropological studies of caste in village India. Srinivas argued that numerical strength was one among several factors that characterised what he labelled ‘a dominant caste’ (Srinivas 1985, 1991). Srinivas’s concept of a dominant caste has been discussed, developed and criticised in an extensive literature on the subject, to which I want to make one small contribution. I would suggest that the numerical strength of a dominant caste was less important in earlier days in villages that were dominated by ‘great houses’. For example, the position of the relatively few Brahman ‘great houses’ could not have been based on Brahman numerical
strength. A patron-client network based on landowning, which is another of Srinivas’s factors, seems to have been the more important factor at that time. I argue that the tenants’ revolt shifted the focus from inter-caste patron-client networks to intra-caste alignments. The same shift can possibly be seen in the alignments during the Vellalar conflict, as I have suggested above. In either case, conflicts would tend to be talked about in terms of caste alignment rather than as conflicts involving the multi-caste networks of individual patrons.

Ideals of landownership can have been another Brahman disadvantage during the tenants’ revolt. These ideals tended to disfavour the landlord’s active participation in agricultural operations and therefore possibly made it easier for a tenant to take over the land.

Ideally, the landlord in Ekkaraiyur ought to be ‘a gentleman farmer’. That is, he ought to direct agricultural operations in a general way, but not to soil his hands. He could decide what crops to cultivate in which fields, when to plant and when to harvest, but was not expected to participate in the day-to-day agricultural operations. That was ideally left to hired overseers (cf. Mencher 1978: 216) or to the leaders of work gangs.

Many farming landlords in Ekkaraiyur, and farming tenants, strove to attain the ideal of ‘the gentleman farmer’. The ideal was perhaps most pronounced, and realised, among Brahman landlords. Indeed, not only was the Brahman expected to refrain from agricultural work, he was also presumed not to have the capacity for it. The following incident is an illustration. One day I went to interview the office manager of the development block in Velpatti. The manager did not have time to speak with me, so I talked instead to Ramachandran who worked as a senior office clerk. Both the manager and Ramachandran were Brahmans and lived in Ekkaraiyur. I knew Ramachandran well. He and his brothers lived in a large rambling house in the Agharam, and they were one of the few remaining landowning Brahman families. The manager I knew less well. It was said that his family had owned a large amount of land in Ekkaraiyur in earlier days, but that now most of their land had been lost.

Ramachandran told me that he would soon retire on a pension from the office. ‘What will you do then?’ I asked. ‘I shall plough my
fields’, Ramachandran answered, meaning that he would give his attention to the farming of his family’s land. At that point, the manager, who had been listening to our conversation, exclaimed in a loud mocking voice: ‘Plough your fields? You’re a Brahman! You don’t know how to plough!’ Ramachandran replied, rather piqued, that certainly he could handle a plough. The manager and the rest of the office staff laughed him into a sullen silence. It was a good joke, they apparently thought, that a Brahman clerk, although a landowner, would contemplate farming, not to mention claiming to know how to plough. 41

Ideals of farming and caste stereotypes are not, of course, to be taken as statements that represent how people actually behave. But, the strongly pronounced ideal of non-participation in farming could make it difficult for Brahman landlords to choose the option of farming their land without intermediaries. Hence, the typical Brahman landlord would easily have been locked into a dependence on agricultural intermediaries. During the tenants’ revolt, these intermediaries would have been a potential threat to the Brahman’s land.

Landowners generally favoured ‘the gentleman farmer’ as an ideal, but a few landlords, principally from the Udaiyar and Vellalar castes, strove for the very different goal of active participation in farming. These landlords, a very few, took a pride in working together with the labourers in fields and gardens. They boasted of working harder and better than the hired labourers, and claimed that they possessed expert knowledge in all kinds of agricultural operations. In contrast to the landowners of the more common ‘gentleman farmer’ kind, these landlords did not see any need to rely on intermediaries in farming. Undoubtedly, their habitual involvement in agricultural operations and their independence of intermediaries made them less vulnerable as far as the tenants’ revolt was concerned.

The ideals of ‘the gentleman farmer’ were strengthened by the stereotyped caste character of the Brahmans, based on notions of inherited mentality (see Chapter 2). By becoming internalised and part of a person’s self-representation, strongly held stereotypes could set the pattern of expected interaction. Thus, it is suggestive that the stereotyped caste characters of Brahmans and Kallars were in some
respects represented as opposites. Not least, they represented good
dramatic types in the accounts of the tenants’ revolt. Any story that
featured Brahmans and Kallars had dramatic potential.

The caste stereotype of the Brahman described a person who
cherished a life focused on religious rituals and learning. He was
also expected to be a vegetarian and a teetotaller. There was
believed to be a direct connection between this diet and Brahman
intelligence and mastery of complicated theories. On the other hand,
the Brahman was thought not to be very practically minded.
Moreover, he was expected to shun physical violence.

The Kallar was stereotyped as having a very different character.
He was an eater of meat and a drinker of alcohol, a diet associated
with muscles, anger, and violence. The Kallar was stereotypically
featured as a fighter, expected to react physically to any slight. It
was often said about the Kallar in general, in a tone of fearful
respect mingled with disdain, that he had made an ideal of using
physical violence to enforce his will.

The contrast between the stereotypes of the Brahman and the
Kallar can be taken further. For example, while the Brahman was
said to be rational, for-sighted and cunning, the Kallar was
personified as irrational and not given to thoughtful planning. While
the Brahman was from the highest caste, the Kallar belonged to an
ambiguously ranked but relatively low caste. While the Brahman
was said to be descended from non-Tamilian immigrants from a
Sanskrit North Indian civilisation, the Kallar was represented as
uncivilised, descended from semi-tribal and lawless Tamilian
groups. In fact, the name Kallar can be translated in English as
‘thief’ or ‘robber’, and the colonial authorities labelled the Kallars as
‘a criminal caste’ (Dumont 1986b: 26-30).

In a hypothetical encounter between a Brahman landlord and a
Kallar tenant, and as far as caste stereotypes set the pattern of the
expected interaction, the Brahman landlord would be likely to take
account of his Kallar adversary’s stereotyped character. Similarly,
the Kallar would probably consider acting on the Brahman’s
stereotyped character. Consequently, from the Kallar a propensity
for physical violence would be expected, while from the Brahman a
vulnerability to the same would be suggested. Whether or not
founded on reality, such apprehensions could possibly intimidate a
Brahman landlord in advance, as well as leading a Kallar to choose a physically aggressive strategy. Consequently, a Kallar strategy of violence could prove successful against a Brahman landlord in particular. Would a similar strategy be equally successful against a Vellalar landlord? The Vellalar stereotype suggests that it would not.

The stereotyped character of the Vellalar had something in common with both the Brahman and the Kallar, but it also differed from them. One difference was particularly marked in the case of farming. It was sometimes said that, whereas the Brahman was too detached from agricultural concerns, the Kallar had never achieved any noteworthy point of attachment. In other words, neither the intellectual nor the fighter was believed to know anything significant about farming. The typical Vellalar, in contrast, thought of himself as a model farmer who possessed an age-old mastery of agriculture. Associating Tamil culture and Vellalar farming, Vellalars spoke of themselves as having spread Tamil civilisation by clearing new tracts of land for cultivation (cf. Stein 1985).

This aspect of the Vellalar stereotype was associated with notions of martialism. In other words, not only did the Vellalar bring new land under the plough, he was also ready to defend it. The Vellalar was stereotyped as a fighter, but of a different kind from the Kallar. Whereas the Kallar stereotype featured the freebooter, the martial aspect of the Vellalar stereotype featured the peasant warrior, the backbone of a regular army. In other words, the Vellalar extended control over land, while the Kallar raided for spoils. This difference was readily translated into their stereotyped different propensities for farming, featuring the Vellalar as diligent and knowledgeable and the Kallar as hasty and ultimately destructive.

While the Vellalar shared a fighter quality with the Kallar, he also shared an interest in intellectual matters with the Brahman, according to the Vellalar stereotype. The Vellalar, too, looked upon scholarship as his domain. However, in contrast to the Sanskrit learning of the Brahman, the Vellalar was said to be the master of Tamil learning, representing an ancient Tamil scholarly tradition. Summing up the Vellalar, he was stereotypically presented as the perhaps unlikely peasant warrior with a scholarly bent. He was the member of a caste that upheld Tamil civilisation as farmers, warriors, and scholars.
CHAPTER THREE

The notion of stereotyped caste characters suggests that they existed in fixed forms, but in reality they included an array of variations, disagreements and agreements. Informants with different perspectives naturally gave differing versions. A Kallar understanding of the Brahman caste character would differ from a Brahman’s own understanding, or for that matter a Vellalar’s understanding. Nevertheless, my outline of stereotyped characters describes the basic traits associated with the three castes, as they represented themselves and as they were represented by others.

The caste stereotypes of Brahmans, Vellalars, and Kallars were probably of some importance in the tenants’ conflict. Insofar as people acted on these stereotypes, they could possibly give a Kallar tenant the edge over a Brahman landlord, but less so over a Vellalar landlord. In practice, however, each confrontation between a landlord and a tenant has to be considered on its own merits, involving different people, personalities, loyalties and circumstances. Nevertheless, I suggest that caste stereotypes can in part explain in general terms why Vellalar landlords were able to hold on to their land while Brahman landlords lost their land in Ekkaraiyur.

New forms of tenancy

The fact that Tanisamy’s model of relations with landed property and access to land omitted to mention any contemporary tenants could lead to the conclusion that the institution of tenancy had ceased to exist in Ekkaraiyur. Such a conclusion would not be correct. In fact, people did farm the land of others and tenancy contracts were concluded. The tenants’ revolt had, however, changed the relationships between landlords and tenants. Landlords in Ekkaraiyur viewed tenants with circumspection. A Brahman landlord told me that the tenant could ‘swallow’ everything, leaving nothing for the landlord. As a measure of protection, landlords in Ekkaraiyur strove to change the conditions of tenancy.

Sharecropping was said to have been a common form of tenancy in Ekkaraiyur before the tenants’ revolt (cf. Kapadia 1993: 102-4; Mencher 1978: 84-85, 89-94). The harvest was divided between the
landlord and the tenant, and in that sense they shared the risk of agricultural failure. Two kinds of sharecropping had been common in Ekkaraiyur: *Kai varam* and *varam*. On *kai varam* terms, the tenant contributed his labour while the landlord supplied all other inputs for the agricultural operations. The tenant’s share of the harvest was small, being only about one-seventh or one-eighth of the harvest. On *varam* terms the tenant contributed both labour and other inputs, and the harvest was customarily shared in equal parts in Ekkaraiyur, I was told.

*Kuttagai* was another form of tenancy said to have been common before the tenants’ revolt (cf. Kapadia 1993: 102-4; Mencher 1978: 94-96). Under a *kuttagai* agreement the tenant paid a fixed amount for the use of the land, supplied the labour and other inputs, and kept the whole harvest for himself. In contrast to the *varam* forms, a *kuttagai* tenant bore all the risks of agricultural failure. *Kuttagai* consequently meant that the land was rented, not sharecropped. The rent consisted of either a sum of money paid over before the agricultural operations began, or an agreed number of bags of paddy or other produce that was handed over after the harvest. Brahman landlords were said to have particularly favoured *kuttagai* tenancies because they involved them to a lesser extent in agricultural operations than did *kai varam* and *varam* tenancies.

By the late 1980s, *kuttagai* and *kai varam* appeared to have all but disappeared as forms of tenancy from Ekkaraiyur. In fact, I never heard of a single contemporary case of a *kuttagai* tenancy, whether involving a Brahman or a non-Brahman landlord. *Kai varam* had earlier been given to permanently employed labourers instead of wages, and I only got to know of two contemporary cases. One case led to the conflict between Tanisamy and his tenant, which I related above. As Tanisamy gave the man land on *kai varam* terms instead of wages, this case appears to conform to the earlier use of *kai varam* (see below). The other case of *kai varam* occurred in early 1990. The main paddy harvest was over and it was possible to plant a second crop in the most favoured fields, that is, the fields that were located close to the irrigation dams. However, Mr Velsamy, an Udaiyar landlord, decided not to plant a second crop in his fields. He did not believe that the water would last, and he felt overworked, he told me. Nevertheless, rather than waste the opportunity, one of his
permanently employed labourers proposed being leased the fields on kai varam terms. Velsamy accepted his proposal, but limited the kai varam to the one extra crop only. Velsamy told me that he did not like to lease any of his land, but had made an exception in this case for a person who he trusted would honour the tenancy agreement. In fact, the man had worked for Velsamy for a long time as an overseer. In both these cases of kai varam, the landlords’ reluctance to accept tenants was pronounced. Only a personally motivated trust overcame their reluctance. The trust proved unfounded in Tanisamy’s case, and Velsamy found it prudent to restrict the length of the tenancy to one crop only.

Varam tenancies still existed in Ekkaraiyur during the time of my fieldwork, although they seemed to be given on a more limited scale than before. In fact, several tenants held land on varam terms from Brahman and Vellalar landlords. In certain cases, however, the varam tenancy masked the fact that the tenant had taken over de facto control of the land from the landlord. In these cases, the landlords were neither free to choose their tenants, nor able to control how much of the harvest they were actually given. If barred from visiting the fields at the time of the harvest, the landlord could do little more than receive whatever was given him as ‘the one half of the harvest’. The varam tenancy, in such a case, represented more a tenant’s successful revolt against the landlord than a mutual agreement on land use.

By the time of my fieldwork in Ekkaraiyur, tenancy agreements appeared to have been largely replaced by contract agreements. These contract agreements were called otti (cf. Kapadia 1993: 104-5; Mencher 1978: 96), yidu and limit-kurayam. Strictly speaking, they were not forms of tenancy.

Otti and yidu were two variations of the same theme: in return for advancing a sum of money as an interest-free loan to the landlord, the lender acquired the right to cultivate the land. When the landlord repaid the loan, the right to cultivate the land expired. In Ekkaraiyur, this was known as pledges one’s land. The difference between otti and yidu consisted in the fact that, whereas the yidu agreement prescribed a time-limit for the loan, the otti agreement did not. Yidu agreements ran from three years and upwards, and periods of ten and fifteen years were common. Otti agreements were declared illegal in
the 1970s, a landlord pointed out to me, precisely because they failed to specify a time-limit. Nevertheless, in practice the difference between the otti and yidu was hard to pinpoint in Ekkaraiyur. The two terms were used indiscriminately, and there were several ways of circumventing the time-limit of the yidu. Many yidu agreements, in fact, appeared in practice to be otti agreements.

On an estimate, the sums advanced in yidu and otti agreements ranged from 50% to 75% of the land’s market value. The sums that were advanced for particular pieces of land varied according to a number of factors, as did the market value. Such factors were, for example, the quality of the soil, the supply of water for irrigation, and the location of the land. The duration of the agreement and the landlord’s need for money were also important. For irrigated land of good quality and location, substantial sums of money were involved. In 1989 and 1990, for example, 1.20 acres, 0.75 acres, and 0.60 acres were given in a three-years yidu agreement, against Rs. 35,000, 20,000 and 25,000 respectively. In one five-year yidu agreement, Rs. 30,000 was advanced for 0.60 acres. These sums can be compared with the standard daily wage for a male agricultural labourer in Ekkaraiyur of Rs. 12.

Yidu agreements typically involved the right to cultivate land, but the right to use other kinds of assets could also be given in yidu. Thus, a man pledged the house that he had received at a nominal cost from the state, in a yidu agreement for two years against a loan of Rs. 2,000.

Limit-kurayam similarly involved a loan from the tenant-to-be to the landlord. However, under the terms of limit-kurayam, the landlord paid interest on the loan instead of surrendering the use of the land. The land was mortgaged as security against the loan, and the lender could take it over in case of default. Limit-kurayam was not popular among landlords who saw it as a risky way of raising money on their land. In their opinion, the principal risk was that unless the interest was promptly and regularly paid, which many landlords feared they would not be able to do, the compound interest would soon lead to the loss of the land.

In contrast, landlords told me that the yidu agreement was a safe way to put their land to use, because the agreement could always be extended or renewed if it proved impossible to repay the loan on
time. Nevertheless, effective ownership often became illusory as renewed yidu agreements on the same land followed each other, or turned into an undetermined otti agreement. A yidu agreement could be the first step in the alienation of the land, perhaps merely postponing an inevitable decision to let go of the land. To counteract such an eventuality, landlords typically continued to pay the taxes on the land that they had pledged. The tax receipt was a documentary proof of their continued ownership.

One major advantage of yidu and otti agreements for the landowners was that these agreements made it unnecessary to keep up potentially troublesome relations with tenants. Instead of seasonal quarrels about the number of bags of paddy that counted as ‘the one half of the harvest’, the yidu and otti agreements settled the landowner’s profit in advance. The fact that the agreements were not formally recognised as tenancy agreements also meant that they were not covered by the tenancy legislation. Consequently, landlords saw the pledging of land on yidu and otti terms as a means of protecting their land against possible tenants’ take-overs. In contrast, tenants saw the shift to yidu and otti agreements as an incentive to revolt against the landlords.

Landlords saw another advantage with yidu and otti agreements. The agreements meant that their income from the land became less dependent on the vagaries of the agricultural seasons. Compared with the terms of the varam tenancy, this was a noticeable advantage for the landlord. The sharing of the harvest stipulated by the varam tenancy made the landlord’s income dependent on the quantity and quality of the harvest. The yidu and otti agreements, in contrast, were based on the market value of the land, and one bad harvest would make little difference to the long-term market value of the land. Consequently, from the landlords’ perspective, yidu and otti agreements involved a shift from an income based on what the land produced to an income related to the land’s market value.

While landlords tended to favour yidu and otti agreements because they provided them with a secure income from the land, regardless of seasonal variations, for the same reason tenants tended to think of yidu and otti as disadvantageous agreements. Yidu and otti agreements made different demands on them, from those of a varam tenancy. Not only did the risks involved in seasonal variations
fall on the tenant; yidu and otti agreements also made an initial capital investment necessary, in the form of a loan to the landlord. The tenant had to invest under varam terms as well, but the need for capital was obviously much greater in yidu and otti agreements. Clearly, a prospective tenant without ready access to relatively large sums of money would find it difficult to get any land to cultivate if yidu and otti agreements dominated access to land.

The need for capital possibly favoured the tenant who planned to sub-lease the land, instead of cultivating it himself. In fact, one of the yidu agreements mentioned above illustrates this. In 1989, a junior civil servant lent a landlord Rs. 30,000 for five years against the right to cultivate 0.60 acres of irrigated land. The civil servant, in turn, put one of his relatives in Ekkaraiyur on the land as a tenant on varam terms, to cultivate paddy with the help of temporarily hired labourers. At the time of the harvest in 1990, the civil servant and his relative shared the paddy in equal parts, and the former immediately sold his paddy to a local dealer. The Rs. 3,000 that his part of the harvest realised equalled a 10 per cent interest on the loan.

Although landlords looked with favour on the shift to yidu and otti agreements, one major drawback was frequently mentioned. The person who cultivated on yidu and otti terms was not likely to make any long-term investments in the land. Instead, he was assumed to squeeze as much as possible from the land before the agreement expired, with a minimum of investment. Paradoxically, while yidu and otti agreements protected the landlord’s long-term right to the land, the agreements were believed to harm the fertility of the land.

New forms of agricultural labour

Tanisamy’s model of relations with landed property and access to land in Ekkaraiyur had little to say about agricultural labourers. According to the model, the Paraiyars and the Pallars were agricultural labourers after as well as before the tenants’ revolt. This masked the fact that forms of agricultural labour agreements had also changed in Ekkaraiyur.
When Athreya et al. studied an area in central Tamil Nadu in the late 1970s, they noted that permanently employed agricultural labourers had become rare (1990: 134). Such workers were few also in Ekkaraiyur in the late 1980s.\textsuperscript{43} In Ekkaraiyur, a permanently employed labourer was called a \textit{pannaiyal}, a term that suggested a person attached to a farm or an estate, and which had overtones of a personal patron-client relationship between employer and employee.

A generation ago the pannaiyal had been a common form of employment for agricultural labourers, I was told. ‘The great house’ was said to have employed a large number of pannaiyals. According to a Vellalar landlord, his father had employed fifteen men and five women as pannaiyals. While tenants had cultivated one part of the family’s land, his father had farmed another part with the help of the pannaiyals. The pannaiyals had also taken care of the livestock, which my informant remembered as having been thirteen pairs of oxen, ten water buffaloes, one hundred cows and one hundred goats - then, and today, great wealth.

Pannaiyals did still exist in Ekkaraiyur in the late 1980s, although they were few. Some women who worked as domestic servants were pannaiyals, as were some men and young boys who were employed in farm work. Commonly, the women and the men had been pannaiyals in the same service since childhood, and some old men directed the agricultural operations on their employers’ land. The young boys were often working off a family debt, doing relatively light farm work.

As the pannaiyal institution was thought to have worked in the past, and ideally should work, the pannaiyal was employed throughout the year and received wages. These wages were lower than those of other kinds of agricultural labourers, but the pannaiyal in addition received daily food and occasional gifts such as new clothes for festivals.

Earlier, the pannaiyal could also expect land in tenancy, usually in the particular form of lease called kai varam, as discussed above. Because of the small share of harvest given to the tenant, it was generally not considered an advantageous proposition to cultivate land on kai varam terms. However, for people who had little else than their own labour to contribute, a kai varam tenancy could possibly be the only feasible way to get access to any land at all.
Therefore, in earlier times the prospect of a kai varam tenancy could well have been an incentive for becoming a pannaiyal. Nevertheless, due to the changed conditions of access to land in Ekkaraiyur, kai varam tenancies were no longer freely given even to pannaiyals.

However, the people who were employed as pannaiyals in Ekkaraiyur at the time of my fieldwork appeared to have preserved one other advantage of their permanent relationship with the employer. This was the understanding that the pannaiyal could borrow from the employer, when in need. Loans between the pannaiyal and the employer played an important role in their relationship. Several of the pannaiyals had entered into a permanent relationship due to the compulsion to pay off existing debts, or motivated by the desire to get access to a source from which they could borrow.

Neither pannaiyals nor employers made too fine a distinction between wages and loans. Pannaiyals and employers alike spoke about the pannaiyal’s initial payment, received at the time of the agreement, sometimes as wages in advance and sometimes as a loan. In addition, not every pannaiyal in Ekkaraiyur was in fact in debt to the employer; in some cases, the employer owed money to the pannaiyal. The pannaiyals of Velsamy, the Udaiyar landlord whom I mentioned earlier, used to draw only a part of their monthly wages. The remainder they left in Velsamy’s safekeeping. They could use the accumulating sums as needed, and they could borrow additional sums from Velsamy. Velsamy used to joke about serving as his pannaiyals’ bank. In his typical paternalistic mood, he expressed concern about his pannaiyals’ financial as well as moral welfare. The money, he told me, ought not to be used for frivolous expenditures; his pannaiyals should either save their money or spend it sensibly.

Different views on the pannaiyal institution were represented in Ekkaraiyur. Some landlords remembered with nostalgia the time when pannaiyals were common, which was also the time when ‘the great houses’ had dominated the village. They emphasised the strength of mutual bonds between different groups of people in the village, and the paternalistic protection that ‘the great houses’ had given to their pannaiyals. For Tanisamy, the Vellalar landlord already mentioned, the landlord-pannaiyal relationship had been part
a stable and harmonious village hierarchy of landlords, tenants, and labourers. The landlords had ruled the village wisely, he told me. They had taken care of landless people and provided them with work and land, as pannaiyals and tenants.

Although there were varying estimates of the extent to which ideals historically coincided with actual reality, landlords as well as other people in Ekkaraiyur tended to agree on defining the ideal relationship between pannaiyal and landlord as involving more than an economic agreement. The relationship was thought to have been based on a strong personal bond between landlord and pannaiyal. In cases where the relationship had endured over several generations, landlord and pannaiyal were said to think of themselves as members of the same family, in other words as family members of markedly different status, but with intertwined lives and interests. Even when such an enduring bond belonged to the past, the descendants of landlord and pannaiyal were expected to honour the obligation of serving, supporting and helping each other.

Nonetheless, not everyone thought of the pannaiyal institution in this way. ‘The pannaiyal lived like a slave’, Mr Xavier once told me, arguing that high-caste landlords had devised the pannaiyal institution to keep low-caste people in poverty and servitude. Xavier told me that ‘all’ low-caste people in Ekkaraiyur were employed as pannaiyals at the time when he moved to Ekkaraiyur in the 1940s. They worked the landlords’ fields and gardens, they tended their cattle, they took care of their homes, and for all their hard toil, the pannaiyals got little profit. Barely able to support their families, they had little opportunity to better their lot, and the children were destined to live the poor, hard life of their parents, Xavier said.

Being a member of a Paraiyar caste, Xavier belonged to one of those low castes that had supplied the pannaiyals, but he had never been a pannaiyal himself. Instead, he had studied to become a teacher, and he took up a teaching position in an Ekkaraiyur school.

Xavier told me that he had done whatever he could to prevent others from becoming pannaiyals. Convinced that education would free people from the necessity of becoming a pannaiyal, Xavier had encouraged children to study, and held night-classes for adults and working children. If low-caste people were educated, Xavier told me, they would be able to find salaried jobs outside the village, as
teachers, clerks, policemen, and soldiers. Xavier had particularly encouraged young men of low caste to join the army. Army service generated cash incomes, which could be used to buy houses, house sites, and agricultural land. An independent source of income would break the low-caste people’s dependence on the high-caste landlords, Xavier maintained. He suggested that the present scarcity of pannaiyals in Ekkaraiyur could be partly explained as the result of his success both in educating low-caste people and in campaigning against the pannaiyal system. Among men of Xavier’s own caste several were enlisted as soldiers in the Indian Army, and no member of the soldiers’ families was today a pannaiyal, he pointed out to me. Their families had plenty of money, Xavier said, adding that nowadays some needy landlords borrowed money from them.

Efforts such as those of Xavier and other people had undoubtedly been important in reducing the number of people who became pannaiyals in Ekkaraiyur. As he suggested, a pannaiyal literally traded freedom for security, and when people saw better opportunities elsewhere, they did not want to become pannaiyals. Yet, other factors had also contributed to the decline of the pannaiyal institution. When kai varam disappeared as a form of tenancy, one incitement for becoming a pannaiyal was gone, I would suggest. Moreover, changes in agricultural practices must be recognised as having undermined the pannaiyal institution. New cash crops, improved systems of irrigation and the introduction of high-yielding varieties had contributed to make farming more intensive and land more valuable, and a changed pattern of demand for labour should be seen as part of this context. Insofar as a farmer could manage with a combination of a very few permanent workers plus temporarily hired labourers and labour gangs, the need for a relatively large, permanent labour force of pannaiyals became superfluous (cf. Baker 1984: 194-199; Athreya et al. 1990: 143-45; Gough 1981,1989; Alexander 1981, 1989). In fact, labour arrangements that combined a few pannaiyals with a large number of temporarily hired labourers were typical of farming in Ekkaraiyur in the late 1980s.

At the time of my fieldwork, the bulk of agricultural work in Ekkaraiyur was done by labourers who were temporarily hired either as individuals or as members of labour gangs. The individually hired
labourer was called a *coolie*, and appeared to have largely replaced the pannaiyal. There had also been coolies earlier, but in relative numbers the coolies seemed to have increased as the pannaiyals decreased.

Athreya et al. have concisely defined the coolie as ‘... a male or female worker who works on a daily basis for any farmer who comes forward and is prepared to pay the current rates’ (Athreya et al. 1990: 137). The period of employment was typically short in Ekkaraiyur, ranging from one day up to a week, and the coolie received a daily wage, ‘the current rates’ of Athreya et al. Some employers also served meals, but more commonly the coolies had to provide for themselves. Gifts at the time of festivals were exceptional.

In contrast to the pannaiyal who was permanently employed, the coolie sold his or her labour on a daily market. The coolie’s wage was typically higher than the pannaiyal’s, but unless an employer was prepared to hire them, the coolies were unemployed.

Employment opportunities for coolies varied greatly with the agricultural seasons. Periods of full-time employment alternated with periods of almost no employment at all. During the agricultural peak-seasons, the demand for labour was so high in Ekkaraiyur that few if any coolies were unemployed. In the off-seasons, however, a majority of coolies were unemployed. The insecurity of employment made the individual coolie’s reputation an important asset. The coolie who was reputed to be hardworking and reliable could expect to find employment even in the off-seasons, when the coolie of indifferent reputation went unemployed. In addition, one means of ensuring regular employment was to maintain a good relationship with a particular landlord.

Coolies saw the lack of employment security and the large seasonal variations in the demand for labourers as principal disadvantages. Yet, some informants told me, in the spirit of Xavier, that as coolies they had secured a measure of personal freedom that would have been denied to them as pannaiyals. Economically, they were not better-off than the pannaiyal, but they valued their freedom to choose when to work and for whom. Some informants realised the possibilities of such freedom by combining coolie work in
Ekkaraiyur with seasonal work on estates in the hills and on building sites in the towns.

Coolies were hired individually for agricultural tasks that did not demand the combined effort of a large labour force. The manuring of a field, the clearing of an irrigation channel and the harvesting of a garden’s crops are a few typical examples. However, some agricultural operations were tasks for the specialist day labourer. Rather than keeping oxen, ploughs and carts, many farmers preferred to hire ploughmen and carters who brought their own oxen and equipment. Similarly, the man who sprayed the fields with pesticides used his own sprayer and was paid a daily wage. Such agricultural specialists worked as a kind of specialised coolies. Other agricultural specialists were classified neither as pannaiyals nor as coolies. The nirkatti, for example, supervised the irrigation of his employer’s fields. Hired for the season, the nirkatti was paid with a part of the harvest. Specialists such as the nirkatti often had a long-term relationship with their employer, and their situation resembled that of the pannaiyal. Specialised day labourers and long-term specialists were relatively few in numbers compared with the coolies. They were also few compared with the number of agricultural labourers who worked in a kottu.

The kottu was a kind of labour gang. As Athreya et al. have noted, the kottu worked according to ‘... a kind of collective piece-rate system in which a contract is negotiated between a cultivator... and a gang leader. Payment is for the whole operation, and is generally shared equally between the members of the gang’ (1990:139). Athreya et al. have noted that the kottu is typical in paddy cultivation and when banana and sugarcane are cultivated as cash crops (1990: 140). Being a common form of agricultural labour in Ekkaraiyur, the kottu appeared to have a wider scope than the kottus noted by Athreya et al. Paddy cultivation was the typical context also for the Ekkaraiyur kottu, but kottus were used whenever a large number of labourers were required for agricultural purposes.

In Ekkaraiyur paddy cultivation, a kottu would be hired to supplement the work of coolies, pannaiyals and other agricultural labourers. When, for example, a paddy field was planted, agricultural labourers of several kinds worked together: Hired teams of men and oxen ploughed the field; pannaiyals levelled the surface
and spread chemical fertiliser; a nirkatti controlled the water flow to
the field; coolies made last-minute adjustments to the bunds and
carried the seedlings from the paddy nursery; the kottu uprooted the
seedlings in the nursery and transplanted them in the field.

Focusing on the role of the organiser of the kottu, Athreya et al.
distinguished between two types of kottus. The organiser was a
labour contractor in the first type, whereas he was a fellow worker in
the second type (1990: 142-43). Kottus of both types were
represented in Ekkaraiyur.

Mr Raman’s two kottus exemplify the first type of kottu
mentioned by Athreya et al. Raman lived in a hamlet close to
Ekkaraiyur, and organised two kottus that worked for farmers in
Ekkaraiyur and elsewhere in the paddy seasons of 1989 and 1990.
Several of the members of the kottus were relatives of Raman, and
other members were his neighbours. Raman had appointed one of
his sons as the leader of one kottu, while a male relative led the
other. These two leaders directed the other workers as well as
working themselves. Raman, in contrast, spent his time alternating
between the village tea-stalls and the two places of work. He did not
take part in the actual work, but preferred standing on the bunds
talking to the employers and the kottu leaders, while still finding
time to hurry on the workers. Clearly, Raman acted and thought of
himself as principally a labour contractor. He organised and
administered the kottus, but did not work along with them.

Kottus like that of Raman were in a minority. The second type of
kottu mentioned by Athreya et al. was more typical of agriculture in
Ekkaraiyur. Ms Sinnamary’s paddy transplanting kottu exemplifies
this more common type. Sinnamary’s kottu had a stable membership
of about thirty women, consisting exclusively of Christian Paraiyar
women who lived in Saint Xavier Street. The women were friends,
relatives, and neighbours. Girls could join the kottu when they
reached maturity, and women typically left it when they became sick
or too old to keep up with the kottu’s pace of work. Childbirth was
another typical reason for leaving the kottu. Women could also be
forced to leave the kottu if they were considered to be lazy or
undisciplined.

Sinnamary was about sixty years old at the time I interviewed her.
She told me that she had been working as an agricultural labourer
since her teens. She was widowed and headed a household that included an unmarried daughter and the family of a married son. She was illiterate, but knew in detail the ownership and size of every village field. Because the kottu’s payment was calculated partly on the size of the fields they worked, such knowledge was invaluable for a kottu leader, Sinnamary told me.

Sinnamary summed up the kottu leader’s principal responsibilities as negotiating a contract with the employer, directing the kottu’s work, and sharing out the wages. The employer booked the kottu in advance, and the final terms of the contract were usually settled the night before the work began. The contract specified the work to be done and its payment. One *kani* of land was recognised as amounting to one day’s work of paddy transplanting for a kottu of about 25-30 women.\(^{47}\) The payment was principally based on the size of the field to be planted, but fluctuated according to supply and demand. The variations could be great. In 1989, the normal rate for one kani of paddy transplanting was Rs. 250 in Ekkaraiyur. In 1990, when the supply of labour was greater, Sinnamary’s kottu planted the same area for only Rs. 150.

Paddy transplanting was paid in cash, and the kottu leader received the money to share out among the kottu’s members. Harvesting kottus were instead normally paid in kind, and the employer paid out the grain to each labourer individually. In addition, the harvest payments were standardised, in contrast to the fluctuating payments for paddy transplanting. In 1989 and 1990, each harvester received two small *marakals* of the paddy they had harvested for one day’s work.\(^{48}\)

The kottu’s working day lasted from about seven in the morning until about two in the afternoon. In the morning, the women assembled at the church in Saint Xavier Street, and then walked together to their place of work. Kottu leaders typically arranged some means of transport if the place of work was far away, but Sinnamary’s kottu worked only in fields within walking distance of Ekkaraiyur.

When the kottu had arrived at their place of work, a few bundles of paddy seedlings were uprooted and Sinnamary led the kottu in prayer. The kottu thereafter uprooted and bundled the seedlings, which had been growing in the paddy nursery for the past month.
The bundles were transported by male labourers, typically coolies or pannaiyals, to the field that was to be planted, to which the kottu also went after having finished its work in the nursery.

After Sinnamary had divided the field into individual sections for each woman, the kottu started transplanting the seedlings. Moving slowly, with their backs bent at right angles and in sludge up to their knees, holding a bundle of paddy seedlings in one hand, the women used the other hand to plant each seedling in its place. The expert planters worked swiftly and accurately. Sometimes they helped the slower members of the kottu, sometimes they rested after having completed their own work quotas. Sinnamary told me that it was important for the kottu to maintain its reputation by doing an expert job. Otherwise, employers might be reluctant to hire the kottu in the future. Expertise in transplanting involved swift and accurate planting in straight rows with an equal distance between the plants.

When the allotted field was planted, the day’s work was over for the kottu. The employer was then expected to hand over the kottu’s payment in cash to Sinnamary. She could agree to a delayed payment if a trusted employer did not have ready money, Sinnamary told me. Most employers honoured the contract and paid promptly, in her experience. Several kinds of sanctions were possible against the employer who delayed too long, or defaulted. Not only would he find it difficult to contract any kottu in the future. In addition, he could expect a visit to his home by the angry and verbal women of the kottu. This would undoubtedly delight the neighbours, but most employers would find it less embarrassing to pay up.

Having received the payment for the kottu’s work, Sinnamary shared it out among the members. Each member got one share, while Sinnamary reserved two shares for herself as the kottu’s leader. Any odd money was saved to pay for a mass during the festival of Saint Xavier, to whom the kottu prayed for wealth and future employment.

While Raman acted as something of a labour contractor for his two kottus, Sinnamary worked along the women of her kottu. She too stood knee-deep in the sludge, transplanting paddy seedlings. Sinnamary told me that it was not necessary for the leader of the kottu to work alongside the other women, but she had chosen to do so because she thought of herself as being principally a fellow
worker. Nevertheless, she made it clear that she expected to be obeyed while at work. She supervised how the work was executed, and she corrected any member of the kottu who worked badly. Typically, the culprit was first scolded, and unless she mended her ways she was expelled from the kottu, Sinnamary said.

Only women could be members of Sinnamary’s kottu, and the kottu worked exclusively at paddy transplanting, which was understood in Ekkaraiyur as being exclusively female work. Men claimed that they did not know how to do it. Sinnamary’s kottu also worked exclusively in fields located within Ekkaraiyur itself. This saved them the problems and time of transport, Sinnamary told me. These self-imposed restrictions limited their employment opportunities. At an estimate, Sinnamary thought that her kottu was employed for only about three months a year. Others of Ekkaraiyur’s kottus both transplanted and harvested, and worked in other villages as well, in order to extend the period of employment. Nevertheless, Sinnamary’s kottu was not the only form of employment for its members. When the kottu was unemployed, some women stayed at home. Others worked as coolies, as did Sinnamary.

Many of the agricultural labourers in Ekkaraiyur alternated between working as individual coolies and working together in kottus. Mr James, for example, worked as a coolie, organised a kottu, and also managed to include some aspects of the pannaiyal in his relationship with employers.

James was about 35 years old. He lived with his wife Maryamman and their two young sons in a small house in Saint Xavier Street. James’s two brothers and their families lived next door. During the first years of their marriage, James and Maryamman had lived with her parents in the Palni Hills, where James had worked as a coolie in the fruit orchards and plantations. It had been easy to find casual work there, he told me. The work had been hard, but the wages had also been high. But, the need to spend a lot of money on warm clothes and fuel in the chilly hill climate had been a major drawback.

James neither owned nor leased any land in Ekkaraiyur. Instead, he and Maryamman supported their family on what they earned as agricultural labourers. James worked as a coolie most of the time, and he was seldom unemployed owning to his reputation as a
hardworking and reliable labourer. In addition, he kept up the relationship with a landlord who had employed his late father as a pannaiyal, and who preferred to hire James whenever he needed a labourer. Sometimes James worked for the landlord for a daily wage, and sometimes on a piece-rate basis. James also organised a small kottu for which he contracted work during the paddy harvest season. This consisted of James and Maryamman together with some of their friends and relatives, among them James’s brothers and sisters-in-law. The kottu was paid in grain, as were all harvest kottus. In a good season the kottu earned them enough grain to last the family until the next harvest, James told me.

James and Maryamman were doing comparatively well compared with other families who depended for their livelihood on doing agricultural labour. But it was a simple life without any luxuries. According to Maryamman, the family’s economic situation benefited from the fact that James neither drank, smoked nor gambled – activities on which many men in Ekkaraiyur appeared to spend considerable sums of money.

The cases described in this chapter bring out certain values that people in Ekkaraiyur thought worth striving for, regardless of their social and economic standing. The desire to have control of the land one owns or leases has fuelled the conflict between tenants and landlords, as perhaps to some degree did the wish to avoid manual labour. Frugality, especially the disapproval of frivolous expenditures, was prominent both in the case of Velsamy’s attitude to his pannaiyals’ wages and in Maryamman’s management of her family’s economy. The need for employment was a central question that pannaiyals, coolies and members of kottus had to face. Underlying the diverse interests and ambitions of people in Ekkaraiyur was concern for a balance between secure living conditions and freedom of choice. In a village where earlier relationships were eroding, new forms of interdependence were being established.
Land and leadership

My informants argued that the tenants’ revolt and the associated disappearance of earlier forms of labour and land agreements had restructured relationships within the village of Ekkaraiyur. Although they held different, and conflicting, views on the causes of the process, as well as on its desirability, they interpreted the process as an erosion of earlier bonds of dependency and loyalty.

An old mode of local leadership had been based on these bonds, intertwining local leadership and structures of unequal influence and resource control. The new forms of labour and land agreements seemed to lack this intertwining. In fact, when talking about the situation after the tenants’ revolt had begun, informants did not stress the association between the control of land and leadership. Although landownership could be a quality of belonging, as I suggested in Chapter 2, landlords were not talked about as being local leaders.

This emerging divergence between leadership and the control of land was not unique to Ekkaraiyur. On the contrary, I would suggest that it formed part of a long-term trend in South India, and possibly elsewhere in India (see, for example, Mendelsohn 1993). The trend’s long time-span can be tentatively illustrated by comparing Ekkaraiyur with the studies of Srinivas (1988) and Béteille (1971; see also Béteille 1974). Srinivas carried out fieldwork in a Mysore village at the end of the 1940s, and Béteille did fieldwork in a Tanjore village in the early 1960s. There are obvious difficulties in comparing studies from different parts of South India. Yet, to my mind, the studies of the three villages broadly outline a gradual divergence of land and leadership. It is suggestive that Srinivas’s description of the village of Rampura at the end of the 1940s and Béteille’s description of the earlier structure of the village of Sripuram correspond in broad terms with my informants’ accounts of the time of ‘the great houses’ in Ekkaraiyur. Let us first take a look at the village of Rampura in the Mysore region.

When Srinivas was studying Rampura in 1948, it was a predominantly agrarian village of about 1,500 inhabitants. Most villagers were wholly or partly dependent on agriculture, and land appeared to be the supreme value. ‘The villagers were preoccupied,

The productive wetland, the irrigated land, was a scarce and unevenly distributed resource in Rampura (Srinivas 1988: 212). A few households owned more than 20 acres of irrigated land, a substantial number owned less than 5 acres, and a large number were landless (Srinivas 1988: 211-12). One exceptional household was that of the village headman. His household owned 114 acres of wet, dry and garden land, and managed additional land for several absentee landowners (Srinivas 1988: 54).

The headman’s land was cultivated through a combination of tenants, sharecroppers, labourers and servants (Srinivas 1988: passim 57-62). Unfortunately, Srinivas is not clear about the meaning of some of these terms. He does not state clearly on what grounds he distinguishes between tenants and sharecroppers. The two terms are used sometimes together and sometimes as alternatives, and Srinivas fails to mention whether there is a difference between them, or if they are synonymous. In fact, they both appear to refer to varam-like tenancy agreements. Possibly, Srinivas’s ‘tenant’ refers to an agreement like the kai varam in Ekkaraiyur, whereas his ‘sharecropper’ refers to the varam agreement. Moreover, Srinivas primarily refers to the casual labourer with the term ‘labourer’. The same was called a coolie in Ekkaraiyur. Srinivas also mentions a form of gang labour in paddy transplanting, which appears to be similar to the kottu in Ekkaraiyur (1988: 126, 199). Finally, by ‘servant’, or more precisely ‘jita servant’, Srinivas refers to a form of labour contract that appears to be similar to that of the pannaiyal in Ekkaraiyur (1988: footnote on page 13, 55). Consequently, as far as Srinivas can be followed, there appear to have been tenancy agreements in Rampura that were similar to the kai varam and varam of Ekkaraiyur, and also agricultural labour categories similar to the pannaiyal, the coolie and the kottu.
The headman’s mode of putting the land to use was typical of big landowners in Rampura, according to Srinivas. The big landowners cultivated parts of their land with the help of labourers and servants, while other parts were leased out to tenants and sharecroppers (1988: 110, 212). This mode of land use turned landowners into patrons, who were able to create clients by agreements on land use and labour. This was particularly apparent in the case of the headman. The headman also had other sources of patronage, but many people in Rampura were his clients because they worked his land under various agreements. The headman’s dominant position in Rampura was clearly based on control of land and agreements related to land use.

When Béteille studied Sripuram in 1961-62, the village had a population of about 1,400 people. Located in the Kaveri delta, it was a predominantly agrarian village, like Srinivas’s Rampura. Béteille’s study focuses on cleavages of caste, class and power within the village. His analysis works with three categories of caste (Brahmans, non-Brahmans and Adidravidas) and three classes (landlords, tenants and labourers), and he attempts to outline a shift of power between these classes and caste categories.

Béteille argues that caste, class and power tended to ‘run along the same grooves’ in an earlier village structure (1971: 4-5). In general, Brahmans dominated this structure, both as a caste and as a class. As a rule, the Brahmans were landlords, the non-Brahmans were their tenants, and the Adidravidas were agricultural labourers.

This earlier structure held sway in Sripuram until the first cracks in it emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century (Béteille 1971: 116-17), when, for a number of reasons, the dominance of the Brahman landlords began to decline. At the time of Béteille’s study, non-Brahmans monopolised power within the village (Béteille 1971: 6,173, 199-200).

A critical note should be added here. Béteille understands the earlier structure of Sripuram as having been ‘a traditional’ structure. This understanding can be questioned. Béteille, in fact, describes an extensive migration of Brahmans to Sripuram during the twentieth century, and many of these ‘new’ Brahmans appear to have had few previous connections with the local Brahman landlords (1971: 30-32, 114). Insofar as these ‘new’ Brahmans were Béteille’s
CHAPTER THREE

informants, their accounts of the earlier structure of Sripuram could be more a matter of expressing a generalised notion of the Brahman role, applied to the local case, than a representation of Sripuram’s past reality.

In fact, Srinivas’s study cautions against taking Brahman dominance as a feature of the traditional structure. Srinivas noted that communities of Brahman landlords had earlier lived in Rampura and other villages in the area of his study. These Brahmans, however, were recent immigrants. They had settled in the villages since the British gained control over the area at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and had acquired their land during the colonial regime, using their privileged position within the colonial administration. At the time when Srinivas carried out his study, many of these Brahmans had left the villages, having migrated to the cities (1988: 213). Hence, Brahman landownership was a transient aspect of the area Srinivas studied. They were neither part of the local structure at the time of his study, nor had they been part of a pre-colonial structure. However, it should also be noted that Béteille’s argument about the Brahmans as part of the traditional structure of Sripuram is supported by the fact that the Kaveri delta is known for its long-established Brahman rural communities (see Stein 1985).

Nevertheless, the question of whether the Brahman dominance found in Sripuram was a traditional structure or just a transient phase is of secondary importance to my argument about a shift in the association between leadership and the control of land. What is more important is that Béteille describes how the non-Brahmans of Sripuram had begun to replace the Brahmans as leaders in the early 1960s, but not in landowning. Non-Brahmans, particularly those who had acquired local leadership positions, were also acquiring land on a limited scale. But, the Brahmans were still the big landowners, and earlier relations based on land were still intact in Sripuram. In other words, most of the Brahman landlords leased their land to non-Brahmans, who either sub-leased or cultivated it (Béteille 1971: 116-17).

Béteille mentions two kinds of tenancy agreements, which I have also described for Ekkaraiyur: varam and kuttagai (1971: 119-20). According to Béteille, kuttagai was the predominant form of tenancy
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agreement in Sripuram, whereas varam had disappeared. This is in contrast to the situation in Ekkaraiyur, where kuttagai belonged to the past and the varam agreements concluded sometimes masked a de facto takeover of the land (see above). The prevalence of Brahman landownership combined with the Brahmans’ increasing detachment from agricultural concerns may explain the situation in Sripuram. As Béteille notes, kuttagai was the typical complement to the detached mode of landownership of the Brahmans (1971: 119), and such a detachment appears to have been pronounced at the time of Béteille’s fieldwork in Sripuram. Earlier Brahman landlords had also detached themselves from agricultural concerns, typically having the land cultivated by tenants, but by the 1960s many of the Brahman landlords did not even live in Sripuram. Instead, they had become absentee landlords who possibly favoured kuttagai agreements rather than varam agreements.

Béteille, unfortunately, gives scanty and confusing information about the different types of labour agreements in Sripuram, simply subsuming all types of agricultural labourers under the general category of ‘day labourers’. In several respects, these day labourers appear to be similar to the Ekkaraiyur coolies. But, Béteille confuses the issue by also calling the day labourer ‘a pannaiyal’ (1971: 123-25). Consequently, it is impossible to tell from his study whether the coolie and the pannaiyal existed as separate types of agricultural labour in Sripuram. Possibly they did, as in another context Béteille mentions that some landlords cultivated directly with the help of servants and casual labourers (Béteille 1971: 128), the servant perhaps corresponding to the pannaiyal and the casual labourer to the coolie. This mode of direct cultivation Béteille calls ‘the pannaiyal system of cultivation’, while he calls the more common detached mode of landownership ‘the kuttagai system’. It should be noted that Béteille also fails to mention the kottu. Yet, to my mind, kottus were almost certainly operating in Sripuram in the early 1960s (see Athreya et al. 1990: 143-146).

To sum up, Rampura, Sripuram and Ekkaraiyur appear as three points in a gradual process in which the structures of land-holding and village leadership diverge. In Rampura at the end of the 1940s, Srinivas describes how control of land generates local leaders. In Sripuram in the early 1960s, an earlier overlap between power based
on caste and the control of land has broken down. The Brahman landlords control their holdings, but this does not generate local power, according to Béteille. Similarly, in Ekkaraiyur at the end of the 1980s, land was no longer associated with local leadership.

In Ekkaraiyur, however, relationships based on land had also changed, which they had not done in Sripuram, according to Béteille. In Ekkaraiyur, the tenants’ revolt put in question the landlord’s right to control the land, new forms of tenancy undermined the tenants’ right to cultivate the land, and new forms of agricultural labour dissolved earlier personalised bonds of dependence. In Sripuram, Béteille describes the corresponding relationships as being largely intact, even if the Brahman landlords were no longer participating in the daily life of the village, having turned into absentee landlords (Béteille 1971: 116-17). Béteille does not say anything about conflicts between landowners and tenants, or about new forms of land and labour agreements. He notes tensions between landlords, tenants and labourers, but discusses these tensions as primarily expressing disagreement over the details of agreements. There is no questioning of the rights implied in the relationships themselves. Clearly, the tenants’ revolt had not arrived in Sripuram.

If land no longer produced positions of leadership in Sripuram, on what did leaders base their positions? Béteille points out that ‘connections with influential people outside the village’ had instead become the principal means for local leaders (Béteille 1971: 173, 199-200). In fact, he suggests that the ability to dispense patronage continued to be the important feature of local leaders in Sripuram in the 1960s. Land could, as formerly, be one source of patronage, but extra-village political connections had to a large extent taken over. As Béteille writes:

Ownership of land, however, is by itself neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for the acquisition of power. What seems to be more important is the ability to dispense patronage, and ownership of land is one of the means for achieving this end. (Béteille 1971: 173)
The same situation applied also to Ekkaraiyur in the late 1980s. The tenants’ revolt and new forms of tenancy and labour agreements combined to dissolve earlier patron-client relationships between landlords, tenants and labourers, and were in themselves a symptom of the dissolution. I would suggest that leaders in Ekkaraiyur still based their positions on patron-client networks, but that these networks were not primarily oriented towards the control of access to land. Thus, the ability to act as a patron was still the factor that produced a leader, but patrons used other means than before. The repertoire of resources that could be used for creating followers had changed. In the next chapter, following this suggestion, I discuss how contemporary leaders in Ekkaraiyur maintained their positions.
Chapter 4  New modes of leadership

One of the most important aspects of the way social and economic change was perceived in Ekkaraiyur concerned the nature of village leadership. Having discussed old modes of leadership in the previous chapter, I shall now discuss contemporary leadership in Ekkaraiyur in this chapter.

Mines remarks that leaders are to be found at all levels of organisation, from the family onwards (1992: 132, footnote 4). Mines’s notion of ‘the leader’ is obviously related to the common-sense definition of the leader as a person who attracts followers and makes decisions on their behalf. Although this defines a large number of people in different contexts as leaders, I prefer this broad definition because it points to the fluid and multi-faceted nature of leadership. Rather than viewing leaders as occupying fixed positions, the definition allows for the fact that the group for which a leader acts need not be formally organised, that the position of the leader can be transient, and that the kinds of decisions depend on the contexts in which leaders operate. Most important, the definition allows for the view that leadership is a quality of relationships, as well as a quality of a person.

Nevertheless, this chapter will not deal with all the people in Ekkaraiyur who attracted followers and took decisions for them. Primarily, I shall discuss formally elected public leaders of different levels and contexts. Some of these were associated with the state through the parliamentary and panchayat systems. Others occupied positions of leadership autonomous from the state, for example in Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee and in the caste associations.

The decision-making contexts of these leaders were in part formally specified by their positions. However, as I attempt to show in this chapter, their scope for decision-making was not limited by and to these contexts alone. On the one hand, some leaders made decisions in contexts that were not part of their formally specified spheres; on the other hand, some were decision-makers more in name than in substance.
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This raises the question of the power of the leaders. The concept of ‘power’ has been used in a variety of ways by social scientists (see, for example, Seymour-Smith 1986: 230; Jary & Jary 1995: 513-15). Dumont even dubbed it ‘… the obsession … in contemporary political science.’ (1986a: 176). In this study I follow the definition of ‘power’ that was used by Béteille in his study of the Tanjore village discussed in the previous chapter. This definition rests on the meaning given to ‘power’ by Weber, namely:

In general, we understand by ‘power’ the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action. (Weber 1948: 180, quoted in Béteille 1971: 143)

To this Béteille adds that ‘power’ in the widest sense may be backed by physical force, and by economic, ritual and other sanctions (Béteille 1971: 143). With this definition in mind, it follows that ‘power’ is distributed in different degrees among leaders. Some are more powerful than others. It also follows that ‘the power’ a leader can wield differs in different contexts and relationships. This notion of ‘power’ thus underlies the qualities of leadership that are discussed in this chapter.

Following a brief overview of the parliamentary and panchayat systems, I discuss party politics in Ekkaraiyur and ways of conceptualising the state. After that, using the concept of ‘machine style politics’ (de Witt 1993), I take a look at the interplay between the state administration and the leaders of the parliamentary and panchayat systems. The usefulness of the concept is then discussed in relation to the leadership structure in the pattadari committee and the caste associations of Ekkaraiyur. Moreover, the concept of ‘the institutional big-man’ (Mines & Gourishankar 1990) is introduced in order to highlight aspects of leadership in Ekkaraiyur that are not covered by the concept of machine-style politics. Using this concept, I discuss the leader as a broker and patron. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of leaders’ view of themselves as ‘social workers’.
The parliamentary system

At the time of my fieldwork in Ekkaraiyur, Mr Perumal was Ekkaraiyur’s Member of the Legislative Assembly in Madras, and Mr Krishnamurthi was Ekkaraiyur’s Member of Parliament in New Delhi. A short excursion into the constitutional structure of India is helpful to clarify their positions.

Briefly described, the Republic of India is a constitutional republic with a federal structure. The republic consists of twenty-eight states, six union territories, and the Delhi national capital territory. Tamil Nadu is one of the twenty-eight states, and Madras (Chennai) is its capital.

The union government of the Republic of India comprises three branches: executive, legislative and judicial. A president, a vice-president, and a Council of Ministers, led by a prime minister, form the executive branch. The legislative branch is divided into two houses of parliament: the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and the Rajya Sabha (Council of States). The judicial branch consists of courts at different levels, with the Supreme Court at its apex. Members of the Lok Sabha in New Delhi are elected at union elections. Krishnamurthi was elected from the Dindigul constituency of which Ekkaraiyur was part. In Ekkaraiyur, Krishnamurthi was popularly known as ‘the MP’ (Member of Parliament).

The state government of Tamil Nadu has a structure that resembles the union government: an executive branch, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. A governor and a council of ministers, led by a chief minister, form the executive branch. The legislative branch consists of the Legislative Assembly. The judicial branch is composed of courts at different levels, with the High Court at its apex. Members of the Legislative Assembly in Madras are elected at state elections. Perumal was elected from the Ekkaraiyur constituency. In Ekkaraiyur, Perumal was popularly known as ‘the MLA’ (Member of Legislative Assembly).

The electoral constituencies of the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assembly were of different scope. This is illustrated by the fact that, in 2001, Tamil Nadu had 39 members in the Lok Sabha, while there were 235 members in Tamil Nadu’s Legislative Assembly. \(^{49}\)
The panchayat system

Believed to have their roots in pre-colonial institutions of local government, panchayats were given an important role in the intended restructuring of rural society in independent India. Gandhian thought influenced the formation of panchayats, stressing the essentially rural nature of Indian society in the economic and social as well as the moral senses. According to this school of thought, the Indian village was assumed to have been a self-governing ‘small republic’, ruled by a local council, the panchayat. Modern panchayats, it was hoped, could have a role in a restoration of rural society. Some people even dreamed of an India composed of a voluntary union of autonomous, self-governing villages. It is a matter of debate to what extent Gandhian ideas have been realised in the India of today. However, the kind of rhetoric that bravely ignores all inconvenient realities proclaimed that India entered the era of Panchayati Raj at the end of the 1980s. (Cf. Maheshwari 1985: Chapter 4).

Several of the leaders whom I discuss in this chapter held positions within the panchayat system. The system involved elected councils at different levels, and the leaders discussed belonged to the first and second levels of the system: the village panchayat and the panchayat union.

The members of the village panchayat of Ekkaraiyur were elected by adult suffrage based on village wards, except for the village panchayat president who was elected directly by all the voters of the village panchayat. In 1990, the village panchayat had 14 members, one of whom was a woman.

The village panchayat was entrusted with the local government of Ekkaraiyur. In practice this self-government appeared to be highly circumscribed. A former village panchayat president told me that the responsibilities of the president consisted of ‘drainage, light, roads, and water’. This, indeed, summed up the core activities of the village panchayat of Ekkaraiyur (cf. the evaluation of the responsibilities of the village panchayat made by Mencher (1978: 271)). The village panchayat collected certain taxes in Ekkaraiyur, but most of its funds came from the state, either directly or indirectly through the panchayat union and the development block (see below).
In addition, the village panchayat received funds ear-marked for the implementation of various development programmes and special projects.

The panchayat union was entrusted with similar local government responsibilities, but it covered a far larger geographical area than the village panchayat. The panchayat union of Ekkaraiyur included 22 village panchayats. The panchayat union was governed by a council of 24 members, comprising the 22 presidents of the village panchayats, the panchayat union chairman, and Ekkaraiyur’s MLA. Whereas the 22 presidents and the MLA were appointed to the council, the chairman was elected directly by the voters of the panchayat union.

**Party affiliation of local leaders**

The parliamentary and panchayat systems were associated with the state. The notion of a bounded state defined their scope, and elections and positions within the systems were regulated by state decrees. The state stood for the legitimacy of the panchayat leaders, the MLA and the MP.

Working as systems of democratic representation, the parliamentary and panchayat systems were arenas for the interests and activities of political parties. This, however, created different local evaluations of the legitimacy of the leaders in the two systems. The difference was grounded in a negative evaluation of party politics, portrayed as creating divisions, discontent and conflict. While party politics, with its alleged negative influence, was accepted as a fact in the case of the parliamentary system, people in Ekkaraiyur were loath to admit the importance of party politics in the panchayat system. In fact, I was consistently told that political parties ought not to play any part in the elections of the panchayat leaders (cf. Robinson 1988: 53). It was also routinely claimed that the elections to the village panchayat and the panchayat union were non-party affairs. People, it was suggested, voted for the best candidates - or the less bad ones, as some put it - without any regard for the candidates’ party affiliation.
Nevertheless, the distinction between party-ridden parliamentary elections and non-party panchayat elections was illusory. In reality, party politics was involved also in panchayat elections. Many candidates were active members of political parties, and the candidates for the presidency of the village panchayat and the chairmanship of the panchayat union were in fact nominated at local party meetings, and expected their parties to support them. Mr Ramadurai, the panchayat union chairman, told me that he would have had little chance of being elected if the ADMK party (see below) had not nominated him and supported his election campaign. The nomination meant that he was permitted to use the party symbol of the twin leaves; he had also received party funds and other help for his campaign. Perhaps most importantly, Ramadurai said that his trust in the support and votes of ADMK sympathisers had boosted his confidence during the campaign.

The involvement of political parties in panchayat elections is not surprising. Although the scope of the constituency decreased progressively from chairman to ward member, the election process created a demand on the part of candidates for some kind of electoral organisation. The political parties provided an obvious solution to this need. Also, political parties offered members of the village panchayat something of an extra-village state-associated legitimacy. Yet, I would suggest that the negative evaluation of party politics tainted the legitimacy of the panchayat leaders. As party politics was considered harmful to the desired village unity, any kind of legitimacy based on party support could be nothing but questionable.

Party politics in Ekkaraiyur

The negative evaluation of party politics did not, however, stop people in Ekkaraiyur from expressing a keen interest in political affairs at the state, union and international levels. The entanglements of political life were followed through the television and the radio, and through newspapers and magazines of different party affiliations. The public library in the village kept an assortment of newspapers and magazines, and private subscribers circulated their
copies among their friends. Moreover, several tea-stalls kept the newspaper that reflected the owner’s and the customers’ political preferences. Something akin to a political café-culture was budding in Ekkaraiyur. In addition, the local party activists used the village as an arena for expressing their political views.

Coming home late one night, I surprised a painters’ team at work on my house. Someone shouted a warning, and a light was flashed in my face. A voice said: ‘It’s only Alam. Let’s go on painting!’ The morning revealed the painters’ work. Huge hammers and sickles in black and red covered the front wall of my house. Many other houses had been similarly decorated in Ekkaraiyur and other parts of the Dindigul Valley. Yet, no proletarian revolution had erupted overnight. Instead, activists of a communist party and the DMK party (see below) had devoted the night to advertising their joint candidate in the coming election to the Lok Sabha. The hammers and sickles were the communists’ symbols, black and red were the colours of the DMK.

However, the diligence with brush and paint demonstrated by the combined parties was put to shame by the creativity of the ADMK activists in Ekkaraiyur. Pressing coloured bottle caps into the asphalt surface of the village’s main road, they created a large and intricate intaglio, featuring their party symbol of the twin leaves.

That intaglio was not unrivalled for long. Some DMK activists in Madras were apparently the first to hit on the idea of constructing a large papier-mâché model of a howitzer. Within days, DMK activists constructed model howitzers all over Tamil Nadu. Painted in green, the Ekkaraiyur howitzer was tagged with insinuating questions, in Tamil and English, about Mr Rajiv Gandhi and the Bofors howitzer deal (cf. Gupta1995: 386). At someone’s suggestion, the Ekkaraiyur howitzer was fitted with a device that threw out live flames through the tube, thus spewing fires of doubt on the moral integrity of ‘Mr Clean’ and the Congress (I) leaders.50

Party politics in Ekkaraiyur could indeed be lively. It was also highly visible and audible. The political parties had their flagpoles in the village square, and the party flags were flying whenever there was an opportunity to celebrate. The village square was also the favourite place for party public meetings. The typical meeting lasted for several hours, and there were meetings most evenings in the
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week whenever elections approached. A dais was built at one end of the square, decorated with lights, party colours and pictures of party leaders, and equipped with a speaker’s rostrum as well as chairs for party notables and speakers. The meetings invariably began with the reading of a formal address and the hoisting of the party flag. Making use of powerful loudspeaker systems, speakers then addressed the audience lounging in front of the dais and at the adjoining tea-stalls. Local talents were given the opportunity to speak first, after which the more experienced speakers addressed the audience. Well-known party politicians were often invited to speak in Ekkaraiyur, and some of them appeared to have specialised as itinerant party speakers. A good speaker attracted an audience from nearby towns and villages, and people taped the speeches for their friends at home. Taped speeches circulated for days and weeks after a meeting, and were sometimes broadcast on private loudspeakers. If important speakers had to be awaited, or the list of speakers was believed not to be attractive enough, a popular movie would be screened in the village square. Whenever the ADMK held a meeting, one or a number of swash-buckling movies by Mr M. G. Ramachandran, the late chief minister of Tamil Nadu, would probably be on the programme.

When no public meeting was scheduled and the flags were down, party sympathies were still highly visible in Ekkaraiyur. Banners in party colours flew over streets, and house walls were decorated with party symbols, refreshed as elections approached. Even the oxen could be pressed into propaganda service by having their horns painted in the party colours. Pictures of party leaders hung on shop walls and in many people’s homes, and one ADMK loyalist had the party emblem tattooed on his arm. He wanted people to know that his party loyalty was life-long, he explained to me. A loincloth with the border in party colours was a more discreet way of showing party sympathy. The obvious drawback was that a new wardrobe was needed whenever one’s political views changed.

The symbols of three parties dominated the visual display of political sympathies in Ekkaraiyur, as they did elsewhere in Tamil Nadu: the rising sun of the DMK, the twin leaves of the ADMK, and the palm (of the hand) of the Congress (I). These three parties had dominated Tamil politics since the early 1970s. Below, I briefly sum
up their background and the major political events that took place during the years 1988-90, when I lived in Tamil Nadu. These years were a politically entangled time for the Tamilians, associated with changes in government both in Madras and in New Delhi. But, then, which time is not politically entangled in India?

Congress (I) reads as ‘Indira’s Congress’. The party had dominated Indian politics since Indira Gandhi became its leader. It was associated with such famous politicians as M. K. Gandhi (better known as the Mahatma), V. J. Patel, C. Rajagopalachari, V. K. K. Menon, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. Yet, in Tamil Nadu, the Congress (I) had not been able to form the state government on its own since the late 1960s. Its role in Tamil Nadu was normally to be a major ally of either the DMK or the ADMK parties.

The DMK and ADMK read as Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, which translate as the Dravidian Progress Party and Anna’s Dravidian Progress Party, respectively. Both trace their origin to an organisation called the Dravida Kazhagam, abbreviated as the DK, and translated as the Dravidian Party. The DK was founded by Mr E. V. Ramasami (popularly called Periyar) in 1944. He conceived of the DK as a means of radically changing popular beliefs. Primarily, Periyar aimed at spreading what he saw as a rationalist outlook, based on scientific thought. This rationalism involved the wholesale rejection of gods, religion and caste. Another important theme in Periyar’s thoughts was to resist Brahman and North Indian dominance. In consequence, he advocated the formation of an independent state for Tamilians and other Dravidian peoples. Periyar died in 1973, but his thoughts and the DK were still alive in Tamil Nadu in the late 1980s. The DK was said to have only a small membership. Yet, it was considered to be something of the ideological hard core of Tamil nationalism.

The DMK party emerged directly from the DK, and gradually became a serious contender in Tamil politics. Winning the state election in 1967, the DMK leader Mr Annadurai formed the DMK’s first ever government of Tamil Nadu, thereby breaking the earlier political hegemony of the Congress party. When Annadurai died in 1969, Mr Karunanidhi became the leader of the party. The DMK
split in 1972, with the formation of the ADMK party by a dissident DMK leader: Mr M. G. Ramachandran, popularly known as ‘MGR’. The ‘A’ added to the DMK stood for anna, meaning elder brother, and referred to the late Annadurai of the DMK. Thus, M G Ramachandran indicated his claim to be the rightful heir to the legacy of Annadurai (see Barnett 1976; Diehl 1977; Hardgrave 1965; Ramaswamy 1997a: Chapter 4; Pandian, J 1998; Perinbanayagam 1971; Price 1996a; Washbrook 1989).

The ADMK party soon unseated the DMK government in Tamil Nadu, and M. G. Ramachandran came to dominate Tamil politics as state chief minister until he died in 1987. A short-lived attempt on the part of the ADMK leaders to continue in office was followed by ‘president’s rule’ in 1988, which meant that the state of Tamil Nadu was ruled by the governor, appointed by the President of India, or in reality, by the Prime Minister of the union government, Mr Rajiv Gandhi, Congress (I).

State elections in Tamil Nadu were held in January 1989. M. G. Ramachandran’s ADMK had by then split into three different parties, and bitter infighting between them prevented any of them seriously contending for state office. Instead, the DMK won the election, and Karunanidhi formed the state government. With the Congress (I) in office in New Delhi, the new DMK government lived precariously, however. Relations between the Congress (I) and the DMK were strained in Tamil Nadu, as were also relations between the DMK state government in Madras and the Congress (I) union government in New Delhi. It was popularly believed that the leaders of Congress (I) were looking for a pretext to re-impose ‘president’s rule’, in order to further their party’s local interests. The fact that the ADMK emerged re-united with Ms Jayalalitha as its leader added to the complexity of the situation.\textsuperscript{54} When the ADMK joined forces with the Congress (I), they formed a strong opposition block to the DMK government in Madras.

Their combined strength became evident in the election to the Lok Sabha in New Delhi in 1990, when they won a landslide victory in Tamil Nadu. Yet, Mr V. P. Singh’s National Front unseated the Congress (I) and formed the new union government in New Delhi. A new constellation of state and union governments then emerged. Allied to the National Front government in New Delhi, the DMK
continued in office in Tamil Nadu, despite the fact that its local political support quickly eroded. With the National Front in office in New Delhi, the DMK need not fear any imposition of ‘president’s rule’ in Tamil Nadu.

Nevertheless, the state and union elections, in 1991, proved unlucky for both the DMK and the National Front. The Congress (I) returned victorious in New Delhi, as did the ADMK in Tamil Nadu, after yet another landslide victory. Jayalalitha became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu,\textsuperscript{55} and Rajiv Gandhi the prime minister in New Delhi (cf. de Wit 1993: 41-61).

The shifting political fortunes in Tamil Nadu and India were reflected in party politics in Ekkaraipalayam. Perumal (DMK) was elected to the Legislative Assembly in the state elections of 1989; Krishnamurti (ADMK) was elected to the Lok Sabha in the union election in 1990; and ADMK candidates were elected to both the Legislative Assembly and the Lok Sabha in 1991.

The paradox of party politics

Party politics was seen as creating popular divisions and disagreements. As already mentioned, I was repeatedly told that ideally any concern with political parties ought to be banned from the village because of the harm they inflicted on the desired village unity. This view was expressed by local members of political parties and non-members alike. The lively interest and involvement in party politics therefore seemed to be a paradox.

In an article on local politics in a Bengali village, Ruud (2001) addresses a similar contradiction between a moral distancing from and an active involvement in politics. According to Ruud, people talked ‘dirty’ not only about individual politicians, but also about politics in general. They believed that politics ‘…represented a continuous social disturbance that caused unease, brought disharmony to society, and ruined its elaborate design and calm stability.’ (2001: 116) However, despite the fact that people evaluated politics in negative terms, they still took part in politics.

Ruud suggests several explanations for solving the paradox, only to reject them as incomplete. For example, he does not see the
resistance perspective promoted by Scott (1985, 1991) and the Subaltern Studies group (for example, Guha 1982-, 1997; Guha & Spivak 1988) as fitting the political context of West Bengal (Ruud 2001: 131). Neither does he see what he calls the perspective of ‘modified subalternism’ (represented by Chakrabarty 1989) as sufficiently explaining the paradox. Although agreeing with the emphasis provided by the latter perspective on ‘big-man patronage’, which gives Indian representative democracy its peculiar twist, Ruud notes that it leaves unexplained the popular vilification of politics and politicians (2001: 132). Instead, the one explanation that Ruud finds most credible is inspired by Dumont’s analyses of the concepts of *dharma* and *artha* (Dumont 1988b; see also Dumont 1970: 62-88).

Following Dumont, Ruud relates dharma and artha to two different realms of social life. Defining dharma as ‘higher religious principle’, he relates the concept to an ideal social hierarchy in which ranking is based on notions of purity and impurity (2001: 133). In contrast, artha is ‘the realm of the pursuit of worldly interests’ (ibid.). This is a ‘…very real field of activities with its own rules and logic, which are normally, albeit not invariably, in conflict with moral ideals governing social conduct’ (ibid.). Dharma and artha are thus associated with the behaviour expected of different realms of life, and Ruud notes that the behaviour associated with artha is considered as inferior when evaluated by the moral principles of dharma. Moreover, noting that artha is associated with power, he argues that this association made his informants set politics within the realm of artha. Politics involves power and thus becomes ‘a dirty game’ because ‘… power contributes towards ranking, in very real and tangible ways, but it remains morally dubious, shamefaced and in some ways inferior’ (ibid.). Evaluated by his informants from the moral perspective of dharma, the realities of politics become problematic.

The dharma evaluation of politics outlines one part of the paradox, which to Ruud explains why his informants spoke about politics in negative terms. The other part of the paradox, their involvement in politics, he explains by people’s pragmatic interests. In point of fact, artha has to be accepted as the harsh reality of everyday life. In other words, politics is a game that most people
consider it necessary to play. Moreover, although morally unsavoury, politics ‘…has its own fascination and attraction because it is about real and tangible issues’, Ruud suggests (2001: 134). As Fuller and Bénéï put it in the introduction to the volume that includes Ruud’s article:

Clearly, the evidence in our seven essays is not decisive, but given the obsession with ‘resistance’ in so much current scholarship, it is striking that the ordinary people described in this volume are mostly not resisting the state, but using the ‘system’ as best they can. (2001: 25)

And, as Ruud’s argument implies, ‘using the system’ does not mean that one necessarily embraces its morals.

Ruud’s analysis of the paradox of politics is attractive. Applied to Ekkaraiyur, its focus on the tension between ideals and pragmatic considerations gives one explanation of why people claimed to despise all things political and yet participated in party politics. Nevertheless, it must be noted that many people in Ekkaraiyur displayed an enthusiasm for party politics that appears alien to the passive acceptance that Ruud describes for the Bengali village he studied. Moreover, people in Ekkaraiyur, whether Hindus, Christians or Muslims, did not habitually make distinctions in terms of dharma and artha. Even if an unspoken association between artha and party politics existed, personal and contextual variations also have to be taken into consideration. In fact, there were degrees of toleration of the dirtiness of the game. As discussed above, panchayat elections were represented as apolitical, while the party character of the elections to the Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha was taken for granted. Both were in reality ‘dirty games’, but what was accepted in the one case was not accepted in the other. In other words, while people refused to admit the role of party politics in the panchayat elections, they were certainly aware of the fact. Perhaps the reluctance to accept a misfit between ideals and reality in the local context indicates an increased sense of responsibility for the situation.

Based on the situation in Ekkaraiyur, I would suggest that dharma and artha can be taken as broadly referring to different moralities,
but not necessarily as realms with undisputed boundaries to which everyday actions can be clearly assigned. Otherwise, it would seem that a perspective that describes the negative evaluation of politics as a traditionalist critique of society is close at hand. Ruud does not explicitly use this perspective. Nevertheless, as his argument is grounded in Dumont’s association of dharma with caste ideology (that is, ranking based on notions of purity and impurity), this perspective appears implicit in his argument. Such a perspective would involve many of the difficulties associated with Dumont’s view of ‘the traditional’ that I discuss in Chapter 7.

Even if party politics was negatively evaluated in Ekkaraiyur from a moral point of view, few people hesitated to reveal their party preferences, and many eagerly took part in party politics. Some, indeed, proudly announced in public that their family not only voted for, but was also of, a particular party. Such statements did not, of course, reveal how people actually voted on election day. But, they served to define individual as well as shared political identities, and structured some of the conflicts in the village.

Local affairs and personal conflicts were often interpreted in a party perspective. It was not uncommon for conflicts between neighbours, or within families, to be identified as grounded in conflicts between different, antagonistic, political parties, thus reinforcing the notion of the socially harmful nature of party politics. However, split party loyalties did not necessarily mean antagonism. They could also be spoken of as a joint strategy among closely affiliated people, as was sometimes the case when different party affiliations occurred within a family. For example, each of the three brothers of a joint family of landowners was a member of a different political party: the DMK, the ADMK, and the Congress (I). They were hedging their bets, it was said; whichever political party happened to be in power, the family would have its local representative.

Public statements about party loyalties can thus be seen as statements about relationships within the village. Although party politics was spoken about in negative terms, associated with divisions and antagonism within the village, the identification with different political parties created relationships of loyalties, intimacy and dependency, as well. Although these relationships were
primarily personal and individualistic, they were often talked about in terms that made them appear as relationships between groups and categories of people. Entire families were identified with particular political parties, and even entire castes were typified as supporting a particular party. Other statements used established categories, such as those pertaining to caste and to land, but cross-cut with categories of age and gender. For example, some young DMK sympathisers outlined village politics to me in a model that combined party sympathies with such diverse categories. As they told me, high-caste landlords supported the Congress (I); women and low-caste men voted for the ADMK; the men of the middle-ranking castes were split between the DMK and ADMK; finally, young educated men of all castes leaned towards the DMK. They therefore assured me that the DMK could look forward to a promising future.

**Conceptualising the state**

South Indian villages like Ekkaraiyur have over the centuries been part of state polities of very different kinds. As state polities have replaced each other in South India, so also has the people’s relationship to the state changed. This is not, however, the place to trace the changing nature of the state in the long historical perspective. Suffice it to note that, at the end of the 1980s, the state was an active and constant companion in ordinary people’s lives in Ekkaraiyur (cf. Fuller & Bénéï 2001; Hansen & Stepputat 2001).

Numerous state institutions were located in the village or nearby. The state ran schools in Ekkaraiyur, a public library, a post office, a small hospital and a veterinary clinic. A government department supervised the management of Ekkaraiyur’s major temples. A branch office of the nationalised Canara Bank was located in the village. There were two ‘Fair Price’ shops, which were part of a state system of distribution. Most of the buses that served Ekkaraiyur belonged to a state-owned company. A police station and several branch offices of various state enterprises, such as the Agricultural Department and the Electricity Board, were located at nearby Velpatti and Yarkottai. At a rough estimate, a couple of
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hundred people in Ekkaraiyur were employed by the state in one form or another.

This local presence of the state did not, however, mean that the state was unambiguously conceptualised. Instead, it took on a diversity of shapes in people’s imaginations, as became apparent in an informal discussion that took place one evening at a tea-stall in Ekkaraiyur. Someone’s remarks about the behaviour of a civil servant set off an animated attempt to try to pinpoint the nature of the state.

At first, the state was talked about as some kind of super-institution, distant and impersonal – as machinery far removed from village life. If it had a human face, national leaders in New Delhi, for example Rajiv Gandhi, the prime minister, supplied that face. Yet, these people remained remote and anonymous, despite their almost daily appearance in the media. Even when they occasionally toured the region, they were seen only at a distance, and it was next to impossible to approach them - on the dais of a huge public meeting, in a speeding caravan of limousines shielded by security men, or hovering by in a helicopter.

The discussion gradually brought the state closer to the village. Not only New Delhi, but also Madras, Dindigul and even Velpatti, just a few kilometres away, were talked about as centres of the state: the government of Tamil Nadu was located in Madras, Dindigul housed the district headquarters, and government departments were represented in Velpatti. More actors, less remote than the national leaders, also peopled the state. Several people in Ekkaraiyur claimed a personal relationship with Karunanidhi, at the time chief minister of Tamil Nadu. On the run during the national emergency declared in 1975, Karunanidhi had hidden for the night in the house of a loyal party member in Ekkaraiyur, only to be arrested the following day on the road to another village. Other state ministers and politicians had visited Ekkaraiyur in less discreet circumstances, and so had the Collector of Dindigul and other civil servants.

At this point in the discussion, a schoolteacher pointed out that his school was a state institution and that he was employed by the state. Consequently, he too was part of the state, he argued. Looking at it from this point of view, it was evident that many other people shared the teacher’s particular relationship to the state. Teachers, the
Village Administrative Officer, the employees of the local bank, the soldiers and policemen living in the village, and even the drivers and conductors of the state-owned bus company, were part of the state because they were state-employed. In consequence, the state at this point appeared to be firmly entrenched in the village, whether it was thought of in terms of people or of institutions.

Lastly, someone capped the discussion by suggesting that anyone who was a citizen of India was in fact part of the state. As this definition included everyone at the tea-stall, except the anthropologist, there was little more to be said.

Our discussion at the tea-stall expressed something of people’s everyday familiarity with the state. As Kaviraj argues, the Indian state ‘…has become something vast, overextended, extremely familiar at least in its sordid everyday structures – the panchayat, the revenue departments … and above all the elections’ (Kaviraj 1997: 243-44, quoted in Fuller & Bénéï 2001: 25). To my mind this familiarity, although not apparent in the tea-stall discussion, extended also to the understanding of state morality that Fuller and Bénéï summarise as: ‘…that modern impersonal norms of secularized government and formally rational bureaucracy do and should apply in government offices and other locales of the state’ (Fuller & Bénéï 2001: 23).

In Ekkaraiyur, the familiarity with the state was expressed not only in terms of norms, organisation and personnel, but also in personalities. The discussion on the state was in this sense highly personalised, including party leaders, civil servants, state employees, and even every citizen. These persons not only represented the state, they also served to define it, and allowed the state to be conceptualised in highly varied ways. Personalised, the state lost much of its monolithic, unitary character. In contrast to the implicit assumptions in much of the literature on development and the state that ‘…presuppose a unified intentionality and internal consistency …’ (Fuller & Bénéï 2001: 3) of state actions, the people at the Ekkaraiyur tea-stall recognised that different segments and levels of the state were at cross-purposes with each other. In their view, personal commitments, interests, conflicts and alliances were built into the very nature of the state. Similar to how matters were perceived at the Ekkaraiyur tea-stall, Gupta found, in his study of a
North Indian village, that the state was conceptualised as having plural centres, multiple layers of authority, and widely disparate institutions with little or no apparent co-ordination among them (Gupta 1995: 392. Cf. Hansen & Stepputat 2001: 4-5; Osella & Osella 2001: 237-38)

Abrams has suggested that the state can be studied as ‘an ideological project’ (Abrams 1988: 75, in Fuller & Bénéï 2001:4). This point was made in our tea-stall discussion, expressed in the capping suggestion that as the Indian state was constructed to embrace every one of its citizens, it should ideally be the personal concern and project of every citizen. In Chapter 7, I discuss the moral implications of this individual concern.

The tea-stall discussion certainly did not lead to any unequivocal formulation of the character of the state. Instead, it suggested a wide range of connected possibilities for conceptualising it. The discussion also articulated the difficulty of isolating the state and the village as two separate and bounded entities. The people who debated the nature of the state did indeed perceive boundaries between village and state. Yet, the discussion made it clear that these boundaries were not only blurred (Gupta 1995) but also contextually shifting (Fuller & Bénéï 2001: 10, passim).

The development state

A notable feature of India, ever since its creation in 1947, has been the expressed commitment of its successive national governments to a direction of change that has been labelled ‘development’. The base for this commitment was laid even before India became an independent nation. National development planning started at an early date. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, took a personal interest in planning. Inspired by Soviet experiences in the 1920s, he became the chief architect of Indian planning (Robertson 1984: 16; Chakravarty 1987: 12-13). In 1938, he established the National Planning Committee of the Congress Party. In 1950, he set up the first Planning Commission of the country, and remained its chairman until he died in 1964 (Divekar 1978:1, 3, 6; Robertson...
Nehru’s commitment to development planning was based on a desire to turn India into a modern nation (Inden 1995:248, in Fuller & Bénéï 2001: 7-8). Dams and steel plants were to become independent India’s ‘new temples’ (Fuller & Bénéï 2001: 8), and the first three five-year plans gave ‘concrete shape to the vision of transformation, social and economic, to which the modernising élite subscribed’, according to Chakravarty (1987: 8-9). The five-year plans aimed at achieving a high rate of growth through industrialisation, especially through the growth of heavy industry. This was to take place in a mixed economy in which the state would play a leading role both in directing change and as an owner of industries (Chakravarty 1987: 8-24). The emphasis on industrialisation was accompanied by an ambition to transform rural society. To achieve this, the state assumed the role of initiator and planner of rural change. This transformation may well have been a necessity in order to be able to feed a growing population, the inhabitants of expanding cities and the workers of an emerging industrialisation. It was also the expression of a commitment to development.

The emphasis of India’s development policy has been shifting over the years, but the commitment to development had retained its strength in the late 1980s. The opening lines of ‘The Seventh Five Year Plan 1985-90’, signed by Rajiv Gandhi, then prime minister and chairman of the Planning Commission, emphasised that economic concerns are firmly associated with moral values, such as equity and justice. Rajiv Gandhi wrote:

> It is now almost four decades since we first embarked on a path of planned economic development. Over the years, the planning process has grown in depth and sophistication and today it is an integral part of our national polity. It has helped evolve a national consensus on how to pursue our basic objectives of removing poverty, building a strong and self-reliant economy and creating a social system based on equity and justice. (1985: vol. 1 page v)
In Ekkaraiyur, economic development, associated with equity and justice, was locally the task of the development block.  

The development block

The development block was a basic unit for a regional administration that had been set up to bring about rural change. It was intended to administer and supply technical assistance to development programmes and projects (Misra 1983: 292-296). The geographical size of a development block typically matched that of a panchayat union. In Ekkaraiyur’s case, the development block covered about 130,000 people in more than 20 villages in the Dindigul Valley.

The headquarters of the development block catering for Ekkaraiyur was located in the nearby village of Velpatti, where two block development officers headed a staff of about 20 extension officers and assistants, including an engineer and a roads inspector. In 1990, one of the block development officers was in charge of programmes labelled ‘family planning’, ‘small savings’, ‘biogas’, ‘smokeless chulams’ and ‘eye-camps’. The other officer supervised programmes for loans to farmers and poor people (that is, to people deemed to have an income below the official poverty line). Extension officers were active in such diverse and broadly defined fields as ‘rural welfare’, ‘social welfare’, ‘Adidravida welfare’, ‘education and people’s communication’, ‘animal husbandry’, ‘social forestry’, ‘co-operation’, ‘landless employment guarantee scheme’, and the ‘noon meal scheme’. The precise content of the various schemes, programmes and projects need not concern us here. Suffice it to note that comparatively large state funds were channelled through the development block and that the panchayat union and the village panchayats were expected to co-ordinate their aims and activities with those of the development block. The technical expertise and administrative skills provided by the development block were eventually expected to:

... bring about a stage of development where the change from the government’s programme to a people’s
programme might become possible with the help of a permanent extension agency locally available, . . . (Misra 1983: 296).

Panchayats and the development block

It may be presumptuous of me to pronounce on the quality or direction of the extension work in Ekkaraiyur’s development block, but making such an evaluation has some relevance for my views of the interaction between the officers of the development block and the panchayat leaders. My conclusion at the time of my fieldwork was that no transition from government to people’s programmes was to be expected in the near future.

The principal reason for this pessimism was the apparent professional interest of the block development officers and their extension staff in civil service careers, rather than in extension work in the villages. An indication of this attitude was the fact that the block development officers rarely visited Ekkaraiyur. Very few people in Ekkaraiyur had met any of them, and hardly anyone knew their names. I cannot judge with certainty the situation in other villages of the development block, but I suspect that they, too, were rarely visited. The invisibility of the block development officers appeared to set the rules for the rest of the extension staff. Except for the engineer and the roads inspector, members of the extension staff were not often seen in Ekkaraiyur, and probably not in the other villages of the development block either.

The block development officers were extremely difficult to meet even in their headquarters in Velpatti. When in the office, they appeared to be fully engrossed in administrative work, when not preparing for audits and visits from their civil service superiors. They were commonly absent, being ‘out of station’ or ‘in camp’, as it was expressed in officialese. Members of the extension staff were less often absent from headquarters, and appeared largely to be, metaphorically speaking, tied to their office desks.

I do not wish to imply that useful work cannot be done at the office desk. But, the office desk may involve a performance oriented
towards another audience than the public. This other orientation would be towards the civil service as such, as was noted by Mencher in her comments on the work situation of agricultural extension officers in Chingleput District in the 1970s. According to Mencher, the Chingleput extension officers were prone to conform to the values of the bureaucracy to which they belonged, and these values ‘… make it very difficult to devote much time and energy to extension work’ (1978: 264). Mencher suggested that such an orientation created other forms of communication difficulties. As she put it:

Even among those who have come up from poor circumstances, a kind of amnesia tends to develop, a tendency to forget what things are like at the village level. This amnesia is probably necessary if a man is to survive and function professionally in the bureaucratic environment. (1978: 264)

The development block channelled state funds in the form of schemes, programmes and projects, and panchayat leaders were, as I have mentioned, expected to co-ordinate their aims and activities with those of the development block. The development block was therefore a potentially important local component of what de Witt calls ‘machine style politics’ (1993).

de Wit uses the concept of ‘machine style politics’ to characterise the relationship between politicians and slum-dwellers in Madras (1985, 1993). In his usage the concept is closely related to the more familiar concept of ‘a political machine’, which is a particular form of political organisation. The North American cases of urban political machines are perhaps the best-known examples, but political machines have been described in a number of other countries as well (see Scott 1972). Based on Nelson (Nelson, J M 1979, in de Wit 1993:37), de Wit describes a political machine as

… a stable, centralized and disciplined hierarchy, normally a party. It seeks mass support usually in a context of electoral politics and universal suffrage. The party head, whether a single boss or an inner circle, controls
nominations tightly and choices are rarely contested. … a political machine relies heavily on material incentives/inducements and rewards to win and retain the loyalty of both cadre and followers. These material incentives are of types that can be channelled to individuals and their families, or to clearly designated communal and neighbourhood groups. That is, patronage, pork-barrel and bribes are the major machine techniques. These benefits are usually of a particularistic nature and outside the law. (de Wit 1993: 37)

Barring ‘pork barrels’, which taken literally would probably not be a major inducement in South Indian politics, de Wit argues that the major techniques of a political machine can be seen in Tamil Nadu. Yet, even the best of metaphors is apt to become misleading at some point, and the machine metaphor is no exception. The metaphor suggests a unity of purpose and design of politics that de Wit finds difficult to match with the reality of the Madras slums. For example, he points out that no single party has been able to dominate politics in Tamil Nadu as a political machine since the late 1960s. He, therefore, prefers to speak of machine-style politics as the looser version of the political machine (1993: 38, 300-03, passim).

The notions of a political machine and machine-style politics attempt to describe a type of politics in which political support and votes are more or less systematically traded against valued goods, services and other benefits. Political machine and machine-style politics differ, however, in their modelling of the control over machine politics. Whereas the political machine tends to emphasise one single monopolistic command, the concept of machine-style politics allows for a control dispersed to several competing centres. Machine-style politics is thus a decentralised and diffused version of the political machine (de Wit 1993: 37-38). Another difference, which is related to its decentralised nature, is that the concept of machine-style politics focuses more on the nature of the political mechanisms, whereas the notion of a political machine accentuates the organisation of politics (cf. de Wit 1993: 36-39). As such, machine-style politics stresses the kind of trade-off between politicians and voters that is found in any type of populist politics.\(^6\)
In this context Duverger’s discussion of the notion of ‘a political machine’ should be noted. Duverger found that the distinction between official and unofficial party organisation was the key to understanding politics in the United States, and he named the unofficial party organisation ‘a political machine’. In Duverger’s view (1967: 22, 147), the official party organisation was controlled by ‘leaders’ who were constitutionally elected, while the unofficial party organisation was controlled by ‘bosses’ who derived their power from ‘co-option or appointment from above, from conquest or from inheritance’ (Duverger 1967: 147). In certain cases in US politics, the machine wielded more power and influence than the official party organisation (1967: 148). Profit was the incentive of the machine, and profit was generated by the successful machine’s ability to appoint various officials to the US government services, Duverger argued (1967: 147-48).

Duverger’s distinction between official and unofficial party organisations is not easily applied in the context of Tamil Nadu. However, despite his basic distinction between ‘leaders’ and ‘bosses’, Duverger noted that the categories sometimes fused, and that machines of different types existed (Duverger 1967: 147). Consequently, political machines do not have to be exact replicas of his US examples in order to fit the definition. Tamil Nadu, for example, does not in principle have the US system of political appointments to government services. Yet, politics in Ekkaraiyur displayed features associated with a US political machine. For example, the revolting tenants whom I described in Chapter 3 were said to look for support from influential politicians. Similarly, as I discuss below in this chapter, those who wished to enter government service, or to change their positions within it, turned to politicians for help. Moreover, Duverger saw that misappropriation and abuse of power, as well as corruption, were sources of the successful machine’s profits. The same were certainly familiar to people in Ekkaraiyur as a central aspect of both official and unofficial leadership. Consequently, although the political landscape of Tamil Nadu may not have been an exact replica of its US counterparts, it seems reasonable at least to describe it in terms of machine-style politics.
CHAPTER FOUR

Machine-style politics suggests an important role for the state as a source of resources, and the concept turns the focus towards leaders who are either elected or appointed by state decree, or people who are allied with them (for example, Duverger’s ‘bosses’ (1967: 22, 147-49)). In the case of Ekkaraiyur, this focus includes the leaders of the panchayat and parliamentary systems and the local civil servants. Seen in terms of machine-style politics, the development block could provide the means for local leaders to reward followers and build up their own positions.

Nevertheless, the functional smoothness suggested by the machine metaphor does not imply that the trade-off between local leaders and the development block was smooth. On the contrary, the relationship seemed to be characterised by simultaneous dependency and conflict, with the balance changing due to state decrees and local alliances as well as local personalities. This situation brings to mind Long’s concept of ‘a social interface’ (1989), which he suggests as a suitable focus for the study of government interventions in the rural sector. Insisting on the agency of the social actor, Long nevertheless expects the concept to go beyond the specific encounter, functioning ‘… as a metaphor for depicting areas of structural discontinuity inherent in social life generally but especially salient in "intervention" situations’(1989: 221). The interface situation involves an encounter between people or parties, backed by different resources, and with conflicting or diverging interests and values (1989: 1-2, 221) but also a possible overlap of identities and interests. Long draws particular attention to the inter-party linkages that may develop in the interface situation as well as to the sometimes ambiguous social position of party representatives (1989: 237-8). Below, I shall sketch the outlines of the encounter at the interface between the local leaders and the officers of Ekkaraiyur development block.

The civil service orientation of the officers of the development block was one feature that partly defined their position in the encounter of the development block, the village panchayat, and the panchayat union. Being part of a state administrative organisation, the development block officers participated in the efforts of the state to bring about rural change. These aims were in effect formalised into measurable targets. Higher administrative levels set the targets,
which the development block officers were to achieve in the various schemes, programmes and projects of the block. The targets provided a means of measuring the ability and efficiency of the development block, spelling out that a certain number of people had to be given loans, a certain number of smokeless chulams had to be built, and so on. Good results were important for the professional records of the accomplishments of individual officers and for their future careers in the civil service. The development block officers who did not achieve their targets could risk making an unfavourable impression.

As Mencher put it in the Chingleput context, ‘… Above all, good reports must be sent in’ (1978: 264), implying that the good reports were primarily the products of the office desk, rather than grounded in the reality of extension work. To use a South Indian colloquial expression, the reports were ‘on the paper level’, which implied that their relevance was limited to the paper they were written on (see footnote 117). Nevertheless, although administrative manipulations can possibly to some extent produce the semblance of success, I would suggest that good reports also have to rest on some semblance of reality. If for no other reason, because the widespread awareness among common people of the working of the state machinery would eventually expose too blatant a fraud (cf. Fuller & Bénéï 2001; Gupta1995).

Given the administrative over-emphasis by the development block, the officers’ focus on civil service careers, and their need to fulfil and possibly exceed the targets handed down from senior administrative levels, local co-operation appeared to be necessary for the block’s officers. The panchayat leaders were one obvious choice of partner for them. The panchayat leaders, for their part, had strong motives to co-operate with the officers of the development block as the block represented a source of the funds needed for running local machine-style politics. Thus, the logic of machine-style politics merged different interests in the development schemes, programmes and projects: for the one they could be a means for professional advancement, for the other a way to reward followers. Each and every ‘smokeless chulam’ could be of importance.

Differences in motives do not necessarily hamper co-operation. Amicable and mutually benefiting relationships undoubtedly
occurred between panchayat leaders and block development officers. Yet, officers also complained about obstructive panchayat leaders, and panchayat leaders complained about the unhelpful attitudes of the officers in bringing schemes, programmes and projects to the area. Mencher noted a similar conflict of interests in her Chingleput study, quoting a former ‘development officer’ who claimed that the chairmen were ‘all-powerful’. In Chingleput, contracts on public work and postings to public positions were the major areas of conflict between officers of the development block and the panchayat union chairmen (Mencher 1978: 277-78). Contracts provided opportunities for making money in the form of bribes and profits, and postings could be ‘…a way to reward one’s supporters or to get rid of unwanted individuals’ (1978: 278). With praiseworthy Weberian faith in bureaucratic set-ups, Mencher concluded that ‘Both [contracts and postings] are areas where political goals may often be at odds with efficiency or competence’ (1978: 278).

The ‘all-powerful’ chairmen mentioned by Mencher’s informant hint at a sharp edge in the interaction between the block development officers and panchayat leaders. In Ekkaraiyur, this edge was the threat of removal that was said to hang over the unhelpful civil servants. Thus, it was suggested that Ramadurai, the panchayat union chairman, could at will remove any officer of the development block. If displeased, Ramadurai would simply ask his patrons within the ADMK party to arrange the matter, it was believed. Whatever the reality of this influence, the unspoken threat of ending up in the backwaters of the civil service was probably a powerful incitement to co-operate. Indeed, Ramadurai’s reputed strong position within the ADMK, involving links with powerful party patrons, was typically used to explain his alleged ability to get the officers of the development block to comply with his wishes.

Yet, to argue as Mencher did, that ‘…most of the development officers are under some compulsion to placate their union chairmen …’ (1978: 278) would make the case too strong for Ekkaraiyur. The panchayat leaders needed the officers of the development block, however much they complained about them. After all, an officer could make things difficult for the individual panchayat leader, or favour one leader at another’s expense. In Ekkaraiyur, the panchayat
union chairman was not the only actor in machine-style politics. Ramadurai’s position was strong, as the panchayat union chairman and member of the ADMK party, and his words and opinions appeared to carry great weight with the block development officers. But, there were 22 village panchayat presidents in the panchayat union, some of whom did not unquestioningly consider the chairman to be their obvious representative with the development block. Apart from these presidents, Ramadurai had to take account of Perumal, the MLA from the DMK party, and Krishnamurthi, the MP from the ADMK party, whose party positions and patrons possibly surpassed those of Ramadurai. It was unlikely that panchayat leaders and politicians, such as the MLA and the MP, presented a solid front vis-à-vis the officers of the development block for Ekkaraiyur. They were divided among themselves by parties, factions and personal interests, and by loyalties to different and competing patrons. Although they aimed at pursuing machine-style politics, they were not parts of one single unitary political machine. Obviously, the more competitively divided they were, the greater was the scope for the block development officers’ freedom of action.

Finally, it should be noted that the interplay among local leaders and the officers of the development block took place within a wider context. Relative positions and strengths were, for example, subject to state decrees and likely to change with political conditions. Indeed, during a mere eleven years, state decrees altered the structural conditions three times. First, the village panchayats and the panchayat unions were suspended in Tamil Nadu from 1977 to 1986. In that period, there were no officially elected panchayat leaders, but the development blocks remained functionally active. Second, when the village panchayats and the panchayat unions were restored in 1986, the funds for schemes, programmes and projects were largely channelled through the panchayat unions, which enhanced the role of the panchayat union chairman. Third, in 1988, Rajiv Gandhi, at the time prime minister of the union government, decided to allocate funds directly to the village panchayats, thereby strengthening the position of the village panchayat president.
Janus-faced leaders?

Leaders in Ekkaraiyur operated in a context of competition and alliances. They competed with each other in influence over local followers by proclaiming their ability to help others. Success depended on locally recognised achievements, which in turn often required contacts with the administration and alliances with more powerful leaders. Perhaps the leaders in Ekkaraiyur could be described as ‘Janus-faced’, as Mitra (1992: 80) remarks about the leaders he studied in Orissa and Gujarat. Mitra argues that like the two-faced god, the leaders in Orissa and Gujarat faced in the directions of both the state and the local society. Locally, they drew legitimacy and power from being singular individuals in competition with other leaders; in relation to the state, they appeared as advocates for group and sectional interests (Mitra 1992: 80-81).

Although the state as seen from Ekkaraiyur appeared as less unitary than is implied in Mitra’s study, to my mind Mitra notes a point that was essential also to the nexus in Ekkaraiyur between panchayat leaders, politicians, and officers of the development block. That is, he relates the local leaders to the ambition of the state to spread ‘the benefits of development’ among yet larger groups of the rural society. For success in achieving out this ambition, the civil servants and politicians of the decentralised administrative and political institutions, who control the process, have come to depend on local leaders for support, Mitra argues. Thus, the local leaders are positioned as crucial intermediaries between the rural society and state patronage, deriving their power ‘…from their ability to present themselves as indispensable for transactions by the villagers with outside authorities and representatives of the state, the market, and voluntary and non-governmental organisations’ (Mitra 1992: 78).

The Ekkaraiyur leaders correspond also in other respects to Mitra’s representation of the local leaders of Gujarat and Orissa. As is suggested by my informants’ accounts of the remodelled relationships between people in Ekkaraiyur, which I discussed in Chapter 3, members of the local leadership appeared as a more open, fluid, and socially heterogeneous category than they had been earlier. The erosion of the leading position of the mirasdaras of ‘the great houses’ was a key feature of this remodelling of relationships,
and those who replaced them were neither necessarily large landowners nor of high caste (cf. Mitra 1992: 78). Given the orientation of the new leaders towards the political system and the state, it can perhaps be said with Mitra that they generated an important aspect of their power ‘in the rough and tumble of the political market place’ (1992:103).

**Non-state legitimacy**

Leadership in Ekkaraiyur was nevertheless not exclusively directed towards the political system and the state. The limitation of the concept of machine-style politics is that it tends to focus the attention on leaders connected with the state. This focus can obscure the role of those who did not found their positions on the legitimacy of the state or on a state-oriented system of patronage. In the context of a state that pursues planned development, it is not obvious how such leaders can engage in machine-style politics except in a toned-down, locally circumscribed mode. This mode may include, I would suggest, an emphasis on other sources of legitimacy than the state, perhaps expressed in a consciously achieved distancing from the state as well as the appropriation of some of its features. Two organisations in Ekkaraiyur provided examples of such a mode of leadership: Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat and Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee

I mentioned in Chapter 2 that Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat was one of the few in Ekkaraiyur that retained something of the past authority that was attributed to caste panchayats in general. A public drama of humiliation illustrated this.

The drama took place one evening in front of Saint Xavier’s church. When it began, the members of the caste panchayat were sitting in the church porch; facing them stood four teenage boys, surrounded by a large crowd of men, women and children. The boys were to be prosecuted for stealing paddy. Members of the caste panchayat started to question the boys. When the boys refused to admit their guilt, they were shouted at, kicked and beaten, and denounced by witnesses. Then, as the cowed boys reluctantly
admitted the amounts of paddy they had stolen, the time came for
their sentence, humiliation and penance.

The caste panchayat sentenced the boys to pay the very heavy fine
of Rs. 1,000 each. This was an unreasonably large sum of money,
and the panchayat intentionally meant it to be so. Clearly, the boys
could not pay. Prostrating themselves in front of the caste panchayat,
they repeatedly pleaded their inability to pay. In return, they were
lashed with spiteful comments. However, after some time the caste
panchayat reluctantly agreed to reduce the fine - by one rupee. As
the evening went on, the boys continued to plead, and the caste
panchayat reduced the fine by one rupee at a time. Eventually, as the
relatives of the boys joined them in their pleading, the reductions
came quicker and grew larger. By midnight, the fine had reached a
level that seemed reasonable to all – each boy had to pay Rs. 40.
This money was to reimburse the owners of the stolen paddy, and
any remaining money was to be put in the caste association’s fund.

Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat aimed at achieving several things
by staging this public drama. The boys had already been thrashed at
home, but the caste panchayat did not consider that the thrashing had
settled the matter. According to the caste panchayat, the boys had
transgressed the limits of what could be settled within their families
for two reasons: they belonged to different families, and they had
stolen paddy also from others than their own families. In
consequence, the boys’ crime was a public matter. Defining it thus
did not mean, however, that the caste panchayat placed it outside its
sphere of authority, for example by handing the boys over to the
police. On the contrary, the caste panchayat asserted its unique
competence to deal with the matter. Central to this claimed
competence was the notion of the drama as a process of social
healing. Had the caste panchayat not acted, the crime could have
developed into a potentially disruptive conflict, one of its members
told me. If left to the police, hostility and bad feelings would have
continued to smoulder among the members of the caste association.
Being beaten and screamed at, and having to listen to spiteful
comments on their characters was without doubt a painful public
punishment for the boys. Yet, the pain was perhaps somewhat eased
by the knowledge of the aims and the ritual nature of the
proceedings. People appeared to know their roles, as well as the
drama’s eventual outcome. In fact, the caste panchayat, the boys, their relatives and the spectators together affirmed that avowed values had been violated, but were now re-established. In the process, the caste panchayat presented itself as the guardian of these values and upheld its authority to settle conflicts between the members of the caste association without involving any outside authority.

The members of Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat were the elected representatives of the Saint Xavier’s caste association. The association formally included every married man living in two adjoining streets: Saint Xavier and Poonjolai Streets. The great majority of these men were Christian Paraiyars by caste, but the handful of non-Christian, non-Paraiyar married men who lived in the streets were also considered to be members of the association. They, however, rarely attended the meetings of the caste association, although they paid the taxes the caste panchayat decided to levy, and typically joined in the caste association’s festivals.

Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat included five different types of office-bearers. The maniekar was the formal head of the caste panchayat, and the nattamai was his assistant. The kovilpillai was the secretary of the caste panchayat, and the news announcer spread information about the panchayat’s decisions and scheduled activities. These four office-bearers were collectively known as the mirasdarkal, the term that was also used for large landowners, as discussed in Chapter 3. The caste association elected the mirasdarkal, except for the kovilpillai, for an unspecified term of office. The office of kovilpillai was considered to be hereditary within one family, and the caste association appointed a kovilpillai from this family. In addition to the four mirasdarkal, there were five juries in the caste panchayat in 1989. They were appointed by the mirasdarkal, and most of them were former mirasdarkal. The juries’ principal task was to organise the festivals of the caste association.

Periyasamy, the maniekar of Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat, told me that the office-bearers’ principal duty was to ensure ‘unity and harmony’ among the members of the caste association. The public sentencing of offenders was one way of doing this. In other contexts, the same values were expressed by arranging public festivals, and by the office-bearers’ participation in family functions. The members of
the caste panchayat, for example, collected money to cover the expenses for funerals and helped with the arrangements. Moreover, when a person married outside the village, the presence of the members of the caste panchayat at the ceremonies vouched for that person’s local standing.

The authority of Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat was obviously based on its ability to ensure what Periyasamy included in ‘unity and harmony’. Its activities were performance-oriented, directed towards the members of the caste association. Its performance was also evaluated by the members of the caste association, as the unspecified period of office for the caste panchayat indicated. Thus, the legitimacy of the caste panchayat ultimately rested on the approval of the members of the caste association. As the public sentencing of offenders illustrated, this legitimacy sometimes involved a rejection of the institutions of the state, in this case the police.

Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat was exceptional in Ekkaraiyur. In contrast, my informants generally doubted the ability of present-day caste panchayats to emulate the authority of past panchayats. ‘They would not listen to me. If they do not like the panchayat’s decision, they take the matter to court’, one elderly head of a caste panchayat told me, explaining why he did not make any attempt to enforce norms of conduct in his caste association. The prudent member of a caste panchayat did not attempt to exercise authority, unless he had reason to expect that he would be obeyed, it seemed.65

The pattadari committee of Ekkaraiyur provides another example of leaders in an organisation outside the state context. The pattadari committee was a self-constituted local organisation that claimed to represent the landowners in Ekkaraiyur. It was not formally associated with any organisations of a similar or wider scope, and it did not have any formal links to the state. In important ways, Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee operated as a local alternative to the state.

Although the pattadari committee claimed to represent everyone who owned village land, the right to be represented on the pattadari committee was regarded as limited to the landowners of seven castes only, each of which was expected to appoint two representatives to the committee by a method of their own choice. Hence, the pattadari committee was said to ideally include 14 members, who elected
among themselves a president and a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer and a person to be responsible for the works.

The reason for this limited membership was that only seven castes were said to own land in Ekkaraiyur. This did not correspond to reality. On the one hand, people from more than seven castes owned land in Ekkaraiyur. On the other hand, there were only 12 members on the pattadari committee in 1990 and they represented fewer than seven castes. In fact, no one in Ekkaraiyur, not even the members of the pattadari committee itself, was able to list the seven castes that ideally were to be represented. Consequently, the notion that seven landowning castes were represented on the pattadari committee was a fiction. The ideal neither settled the number of members of the committee, nor its actual composition.

The ambiguity surrounding the identity of the seven landowning castes made possible a flexible approach to membership of the pattadari committee, serving as a means for including desirable, as well as excluding undesirable, members. In broad terms, the membership of the committee in 1990 mirrored village influence connected with landownership: high and middle-ranking castes were represented, and so were the medium to large landowners. Low-caste and absentee landowners were in general excluded. The pattadari committee therefore upheld something of the eroded association between landownership and power that was discussed in Chapter 3. However, significantly, no Brahman landowner was represented on the pattadari committee.

The committee’s interest focused on three areas: the agricultural irrigation system, crop protection, and landowners’ rights. The maintenance of Ekkaraiyur’s agricultural irrigation system, which extended from the nearby foothills to the village’s fields, was in principle the responsibility of government departments and also of the village panchayat, in return for the landowners’ taxes. But, the pattadari committee had in practice assumed the task of maintaining the system. Supervising the functioning of its channels, locks, overflows and dams, the committee organised the removal of the silt and vegetation from the channels and kept up the strength and height of the dam walls. It also controlled the distribution of water to the fields, setting the dates when water was to be released from the dams, and regulating the order of the releases and the timing and
amount of water to each section of the fields. This gave the committee a powerful means of enforcing its decisions on recalcitrant farmers. Those who did not comply with the decisions of the committee could easily be cut off from access to irrigation water.

The pattadari committee had also assumed the responsibility for crop protection. This responsibility was limited to the village’s fields during the main agricultural season, from the planting of the first crops until the harvesting was over. The crops were protected by means of field guards. The village’s fields were customarily divided into three sections, and the pattadari committee appointed a chief field guard to each section. The chiefs in turn recruited their own gangs of helpers. As a gang generally consisted of 15 men, armed with cudgels, and sometimes long slashing knives, the pattadari committee had a force of about 45 armed men at its disposal.

Grazing animals and human thieves threatened the crops. Grazing animals were banned from the fields during the growing season, and the field guards caught any offending animals and fined their owners. The fines went into the pattadari committee’s funds. Human thieves appeared as the crops ripened, and the field guards then patrolled the fields and threshing-grounds. This crop protection was worked by a kind of insurance system. The farmers paid a fixed amount of grain at the time of the harvest to the field guards. This grain was stored and any proven thefts were reimbursed from the store. When the field guards were disbanded at the end of the agricultural season, the remainder of the grain was divided among them as their wages. This system provided the field guards with a strong incitement to prevent thefts, to recover stolen grain, and to dispute the facts of a theft.66

While field guards struggled with grazing animals and crop thieves, lawyers were enlisted to combat other menaces to landowners. At the end of the 1980s, the pattadari committee was fighting several lawsuits on behalf of the landowners in Ekkaraiyur. Some of these lawsuits had progressed to the Madras High Court. Probably, the legal involvement of the pattadari committee was vital for the viability of agriculture in Ekkaraiyur.

The pattadari committee of Ekkaraiyur was not a unique type of organisation. I heard about pattadari committees in two other villages in the region, and there were no doubt other similar
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organisations in other parts of Tamil Nadu. Wade (1988) describes a similar type of organisation in his study of a major irrigation system in Andhra Pradesh, where he found several ‘village councils’. The one he describes in detail, Kottapalle’s village council, is strikingly similar to Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee. Kottapalle’s village council employed field guards to protect the crops, maintained the local irrigation system, and regulated the use of water.

Like Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee, the council of Kottapalle was a self-constituted local organisation. The state controlled neither its activities nor how its members were elected. In fact, the village council did not exist insofar as the state civil servants were concerned. Not being a registered organisation, the pattadari committee of Ekkaraiyur was similarly invisible to the official eye. Some local civil servants were undoubtedly aware of its existence, organisation, and aims, but others probably did not realise that they were facing the elected representatives of a local organisation when they met the president or other members of the pattadari committee. The lawsuits of the pattadari committee were filed in the name of its president, to my knowledge, not in the name of the organisation.

Kottapalle’s village council derived an income from auctioning various rights. Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee similarly partly financed its activities by means of auctions. The rights to keep petty shops during harvest at the common threshing-grounds of the village were auctioned, as were the rights to fish the irrigation dams. In 1990, the petty shops contributed Rs. 3,000 to the pattadari committee’s funds, while the fish netted it about Rs. 120,000. A substantial surplus remained that year, which the pattadari committee invested in building a marriage hall in Ekkaraiyur, which it was hoped would yield future income. The committee also used other ways to collect funds. The landowners were taxed in kind for the crop protection and grazing offences were fined, as already mentioned. In addition, a tax in kind was levied on the landowners to finance the maintenance of the irrigation system, and the grain was either sold or used as wages in kind. In addition, the Ekkaraiyur committee had on at least one occasion levied an extra tax on the landowners to finance its lawsuits.
The fact that the committee had taken over the practical responsibility for several areas that the state claimed as its own, made the pattadari committee appeared in some respects as a local alternative to the state. Not only did the committee levy taxes on its own authority, it also possessed the means of enforcing its decisions. As already mentioned, it controlled the distribution of irrigation water and disposed of a substantial number of field guards. Recalcitrant farmers could be cut off from access to irrigation water, and the field guards could deal severely with thieves. For example, I was told that the field guards once caught a member of a crop-raiding party from a nearby village. The man was whipped and strung up by his hands on a flagpole, where he was left hanging until his family came to plead for him. The field guards were also used in contexts that were not related to crop protection. On one occasion, they caught and punished a man who had stolen a sheep in a nearby village. Indeed, Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee wielded the means that both ensured compliance with its decisions and upheld locally defined law and order in equal measure.

Although the pattadari committee disposed of means of coercion that could be used in the interest of the landlords, it did not, as far as I know, involve itself on the landlords’ side in the tenants’ revolt. On one occasion, field guards evicted a tenant from a disputed plot of land. This was an exceptional case that was related to the direct interest of the pattadari committee as one party in the conflict. A Brahman landlord had once gifted some land to the temples of the Kannimar goddesses for celebrating a yearly festival. However, when the tenant who worked the land stopped paying the rent, the temples were unable to find the funds to celebrate the festival. After vain attempts to force the tenant either to pay or to leave the land, the Brahman landlord and the temple trustees enlisted the help of the pattadari committee, which tried to evict the tenant by means of the field guards. Enlisting help from the police and other strongmen, and assisted, no doubt, by the lukewarm enthusiasm of the field guards, the tenant managed to regain possession of the land. The pattadari committee subsequently took the matter to court, and a favourable decision provided the excuse for a victory celebration which I discuss below. Among other things, this incident highlights
the limits of the authority of the pattadari committee in local conflicts.  

Nevertheless, the pattadari committee’s appropriation in practice of the fundamental rights of the state to levy taxes and use violence could also be turned against the state. Claiming to represent the landowners’ interests, the pattadari committee opposed the state on a number of issues. These fights were partly fought out in the courts of law, financed by taxing the landowners, and partly by local shows of violence. The most pressing lawsuit during my fieldwork in Ekkaraiyur concerned the water rights of the river Aru. 

The conflict over water rights had been building up since the early 1960s, when a dam for supplying water to the town of Dindigul was constructed on the river Aru. The river was the principal source of irrigation water to Ekkaraiyur and other villages in the area, and an agreement on how to divide the river water between the villages and the town of Dindigul was reached at the time of the construction of the dam. However, Dindigul’s need for water had grown considerably since the original agreement, and the farmers who irrigated their fields with water from the Aru were pressured to relinquish more water to the town. 

The municipal authorities of thirsty Dindigul had managed to enlist powerful support for their cause in this conflict over scarce water. In 1986, a cabinet minister conducted a number of public meetings in Ekkaraiyur and nearby villages on the water issue. Incidentally, the cabinet minister was at the time Ekkaraiyur’s representative in the Madras Legislative Assembly. Informants in Ekkaraiyur told me that the minister’s principal purpose was to notify the farmers that the government intended to divert all of the Aru’s water to Dindigul; not a drop would be left for irrigation purposes. At a public meeting in Ekkaraiyur, the cabinet minister was said to have suggested that it was unnecessary to grow any paddy at all in Ekkaraiyur. Instead, the government would supply the villagers with all the rice they could eat, at a subsidised price, the minister was reported to have promised. Accordingly, there was no need for any irrigation water. The cabinet minister’s suggestion was said to have met with little public approval in Ekkaraiyur. In nearby Yarkottai, where farmers also used water from the river Aru, a shower of stones hailed his similar suggestion, I was told.
Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee went to court to prevent the drying out of the village’s fields. A final court decision was still pending at the time of my fieldwork. Meanwhile, the pattadari committee’s labourers and field guards kept a close eye on the activities of the Dindigul employees stationed at the dam. Incidents of violence between them and the field guards bred a crop of related lawsuits.

The pattadari committee does not easily fit into a pattern of machine-style politics that is orientated towards the state as the distributor of resources. For the committee, the state appeared as an opponent when cabinet ministers and government decisions threatened farming in Ekkaraiyur. It appropriated the state’s fundamental rights of taxation and violence, which it used to fight the state locally as well as in the state’s own courts.

Nevertheless, the pattadari committee’s contacts with the state were not all conflict-ridden. Although it had assumed functions that the state was supposed to fulfil, primarily the maintenance of the irrigation system, the committee consistently sought the cooperation of various government departments whenever large and costly works had to be carried out, in particular the Department of Public Works, and that of Agriculture. Thus, the committee also attempted to gain access to important state resources, using the state’s ‘plural centres’ and ‘multiple layers of authority’ noted by Gupta (1995: 392) and also mentioned in the Ekkaraiyur tea-stall discussion.

The institutional big-man

The concept of machine-style politics does not quite account for the leaders of Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat and Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee, since an analysis based on the concept tends to focus on the state as providing the resources that are to be fed into machine-style politics. This obscures the role of a leadership that is distancing itself from the state. In order to take account of such a leadership, I suggest that the concept of ‘the institutional big-man’ used by Mines and Gourishankar is a useful complement.

In an article on South Indian leadership (1990) Mines and Gourishankar argue that the institutional big-man is a typical leader
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in South India. The institutional big-man gets his name from the fact that he enacts leadership through institutions, or organisations, that he controls or creates. ‘Big-men come in many sizes’, the authors write (1990: 783). Describing the leadership pattern created by the big-men, they outline how centrally located and less powerful big men form hierarchies of patron-client relationships at successive levels. These hierarchies are often fluid and contested, and therefore unstable in their nature. Essentially, the strength of a hierarchy depends on the apical big-man’s ability to hold it together (1990: 762-65).

Mines and Gourishankar stress the institutional big-man’s role as a patron who distributes benefits (ibid.). This comes close to the understanding of leadership that is central in the concept of machine-style politics. Mines and Gourishankar’s big-man is involved in a trade-off between leaders and followers, as are the participants in de Wit’s machine-style politics. The similarity between the two concepts is further enhanced by the fact that de Wit writes in some detail about patron-client relationships as a step towards the emergence of machine-style politics (1993: 29-32).

Nevertheless, Mines and Gourishankar point out that the legitimacy of leaders has additional sources than the political (1990: 763, 765-7). The arena for the institutional big-man is larger than that of the operators in predominantly state-oriented machine-style politics. For example, Mines and Gourishankar note that big men are to be found in association with temples, charities, medical dispensaries, caste associations, schools, loan societies, political parties, labour unions, and other institutions that profess to serve the public good (1990: 763). In fact, their article focuses on the Kanchi Sankaracharya, the successor to Sri Sankara, the founder of the advaita school of Hinduism.71

Moreover, the institutional big-man pattern includes aspects that are commonly muted by analyses of machine-style politics, such as the richness of nuances expressed in honours, respect and devotion that is involved in the relationship between the institutional big-man and his followers. In addition to a trade-off of votes and benefits, the leader strives to establish his, or her, public fame and honour, and to gain social credit for being a generous and trustworthy person (Mines & Gourishankar 1990: 763-5).

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The state is thus less necessary for an analysis in terms of the institutional big-man. Instead, this concept orients us towards the way a leader establishes and maintains his constituency. As Mines and Gourishankar put it, the institutional big-man embodies ‘valued features of identity for anyone acting as a socially significant leader’ (1990: 784). These valued features involve ‘individuality, achievement, and agency’ (ibid.).

Brokerage, achievements and closeness

Patronage appears to be a key feature both of institutional big-manship and of machine-style politics, whether leaders are associated with the state or not. The leader who cannot ‘deliver the goods’ will not hold his position for long, as Mitra pertinently puts it about leaders in Orissa and Gujarat (1992: 80). Neither will followers who do not ‘deliver their goods’ remain followers for long, I would add. In Ekkaraiyur, the trade-off between leaders and followers in votes and benefits from the state, which is emphasised in the concept of machine-style politics, was of central importance for the leaders who strove to establish themselves as brokers between the state and their followers. The publicly acclaimed honours and achievements, which Mines and Gourishankar point out as crucial for leaders, were equally important whether they were associated with the state or not.

The way a leader was able to act as a broker was suggested by the manner in which the affairs of Ekkaraiyur’s village panchayat were allegedly conducted. Many people in Ekkaraiyur seemed to have only a vague idea about how the village panchayat reached its decisions and how it used its funds. Not only was the president of the village panchayat somewhat evasive about how the village panchayat reached its decisions and how it used its funds. Not only was the president of the village panchayat somewhat evasive about the affairs of the panchayat, he also gave the impression of running the panchayat in a very flexible and personal way, a way which may not have been uncommon elsewhere as well.

One of the president’s strategies was to make himself the exclusive broker in relation to the ward members of the village panchayat. For example, critical ward members claimed that the full panchayat hardly ever met to discuss matters. Instead, the president
was said to control the decisions of the panchayat by negotiating in private with individual ward members. When he had collected a majority through these private negotiations, the decisions were formally recorded as if a panchayat meeting had taken place, whereas in fact none had. According to one informant on the village panchayat, the outcome of these private negotiations was that the president secured the loyalty of individual ward members. In return for their support, the president rewarded them by means that profited both them and ideally their wards, the informant suggested. For example, running the panchayat the Ekkaraiyur way, the president could arrange for a loyal ward member to be contracted to construct a drainage ditch in his ward, thus enabling the ward member to make a private profit, and also to claim the credit for taking care of the interests of his constituency. In contrast, ward members who were excluded from the negotiations would not be able to profit in either way.

Attempts at exclusive and individualised control appeared to be a common strategy for the leaders. One of the complaints raised by Ramadurai, the panchayat union chairman, against the village panchayat presidents was that they tried to bypass him in dealings with the development block. According to Ramadurai, the chairman ought to be the exclusive channel between the development block and the village panchayats. As far as I can judge, Ramadurai devoted great energy to curtailing all direct links between the village panchayat presidents and the officers of the development block.

New positions of leadership created new channels replete with possibilities for brokerage. As soon as Perumal had been elected as Ekkaraiyur’s Member of the Legislative Assembly, several of his followers tried to establish themselves as brokers between him and other people. They volunteered to arrange meetings with the MLA, to elicit letters of recommendation, and to enlist his interest in causes they sponsored.

Leaders in Ekkaraiyur were acutely aware of the need to ‘deliver the goods’. Successful accomplishment became known locally as the achievement of that particular leader. As Mines and Gourishankar note, achievements are important for South Indian leaders (1990: 762-5). The advertising of achievements took place on many levels in Tamil political society. After the DMK party had returned to
power in Tamil Nadu in 1989, songs and documentary films featured Karunanidhi’s achievements as chief minister during his first six months in office. Among the highlights were the vast mass of laggard documents that were now being processed by the state bureaucracy, all the new welfare schemes provided to the people of Tamil Nadu, and exposures of the corruption of the earlier regime.

In Ekkaraiyur, achievements similarly formed part of how the leaders portrayed themselves publicly. Achievements implied influence as well as the power to accomplish things in an efficient way. When I interviewed past and present panchayat leaders, they typically began by listing their achievements (cf. Mines 1994). Some examples follow below.

Mr Ameer Ravuthar, a former president of Ekkaraiyur’s village panchayat, claimed the establishment of a veterinary clinic, the construction of drainage ditches, the covering of the streets with soil, and the building of a village pipe system for drinking water as his achievements. Mr Tanisamy, another former president of the village panchayat, claimed the river bridge to Erpatti, a house for mat weavers, and regular bus services between Dindigul and Ekkaraiyur as his achievements. Mr Abdul, the present president, credited himself with the construction of 60 free houses for people of Scheduled Castes, a new rest house for the Collector, a drinking water tank, and a new building for the Muslim school in Ekkaraiyur. To this he added his part in persuading a Madras-based company to establish a chemical processing plant near the village.

Abdul was not satisfied with what he had succeeded in doing so far. He planned additional achievements: piped drinking water to every house in Ekkaraiyur that paid Rs. 500 as deposit, and a new road to the burial ground. Neither was Ramadurai, the panchayat union chairman, satisfied with his achievements. He told me that he had wanted to accomplish great things at the time of his election. Gradually, however, he had come to realise that he could do very little. In his opinion, the partiality and corruption of the police, local civil servants, and panchayat leaders had stopped him from achieving anything noteworthy. Indeed, he claimed that most of his efforts had been spent on helping and protecting people from becoming the victims of partiality and corruption. This had entailed giving private loans, arbitrating in conflicts, intervening in the
decisions of civil servants, and protecting the innocent from police harassment. Yet, notwithstanding his difficulties, Ramadurai told me that he had achieved most of his election promises while in office: he had supplied drinking water to all the villages of his constituency, improved the roads and bus services, and built schools.

One could also partake in the achievements of one’s patron. Ramadurai also listed the noonday meal scheme as an achievement in which he had a part. The noonday meal scheme, in short, provided every school child with a meal a day (Harriss 1991; Subbarao 1992: 245-50). Ramadurai claimed the noonday meal scheme as an achievement, but not as his personal achievement. Above all, the noonday meal scheme was the achievement of Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran, the late leader and creator of Ramadurai’s party, the ADMK.

Tanisamy, the former president of the village panchayat, expressed the same willingness to advertise the achievements of a superior leader. He focused on Ms T S Soundaram, who had founded Gandhigram in 1947. There had been nothing in Ekkaraiyur before 1952, Tanisamy stated. However, in that year, Soundaram took an interest in Ekkaraiyur, and the village started to change. Later, as Soundaram was elected as Ekkaraiyur’s MLA in the late 1950s, the change accelerated. Roads, dams and schools were built, and electricity came to the village; the streets and houses were lighted and pump-sets began to work in the gardens. Moreover, Soundaram built tanks for drinking water, a village hospital, a veterinary clinic (also claimed as an achievement by Ameer Ravuthar), and a school for the Muslim children. Tanisamy carefully explained to me that Soundaram’s impressive list of achievements became possible only after India had become independent, and because the country was ruled by the Congress party. Soundaram took an interest in the transformation of rural society, as witnessed by her founding of Gandhigram. Being a member of the Congress party, as was Tanisamy, she had the means to achieve the transformation to hand. Subsequently, she was elected to the Lok Sabha in New Delhi and became deputy education minister in the union government. For Tanisamy, Soundaram had been a guiding light in his early political life.
Advertising another leader’s achievements as exemplified by these two cases was a way of emphasising one’s links and closeness to that leader. Public advertisement of achievements could also be a way of honouring a leader. For example, when Perumal, Ekkaraiyur’s MLA, attended a meeting of the panchayat union he was presented with a poster that, in acrostic verse, hyperbolically compared his achievements to those of the Pandava brothers of Mahabharata fame. Each letter of the name Perumal was made to correspond with one of the great feats of these mythical brothers.

People who offered brokerage emphasised their personal closeness to more powerful leaders. As noted by Fuller and Bénéï (2001: 10-11), patronage involving the leader as a broker emphasises personal contacts with clients as well as with leaders who are more powerful. Thus, several people in Ekkaraiyur claimed to know the Chief Minister personally, as I mentioned in connection with the tea-stall discussion about the nature of the state. Other cabinet ministers and Ekkaraiyur’s MLA and MP were enlisted in similar claims to personal relationships. For example, Karuppuvan, whom a group of DMK youths considered as their leader, told me that he was always invited courteously into the MLA’s home. Other people from Ekkaraiyur, he was careful to point out, had to wait outside the house until the MLA was ready to receive them. On another occasion, I spoke with Yoganathan, a ward member of the village panchayat and a member of the ADMK, as he was supervising the construction of a drainage ditch in his ward. When I asked about Ekkaraiyur’s MP of the same party Yoganathan rattled off the MP’s personal telephone number, in English, telling me that he was free to call the MP at any time.

Such claims to a personal relationship were evidently made in order to impress the listener, suggesting the influence that could be derived from the attachment to a powerful leader. Whatever the real influence, flashing claims to close relationships was a way of suggesting one’s potential influence as a broker. Incidentally, both Karuppuvan and Yoganathan offered to arrange appointments for me with the MLA and the MP, respectively.

Claims of personal closeness also served to enhance the claimant’s esteem with other followers. Being fellow-followers did not entail equality. The follower who was reputed to have the closest
relationship with a leader was also viewed as the leader’s most important follower (cf. Mines 1994). Similarly, the leader’s value to his followers was enhanced if he in turn could claim closeness with leaders who were even more powerful. Thus, Karuppuvan on other occasions was careful to tell me that his patron, Perumal, Ekkaraiyur’s MLA, maintained a close relationship with Karunanidhi, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and the leader of the DMK party. On Karunanidhi’s birthday, for example, Perumal went to Madras, accompanied by Karuppuvan and others, to present a valuable gold chain as a personal gift to the Chief Minister. Karuppuvan thus established a chain of closeness from himself, via Perumal, to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. As intended to be understood, even Karuppuvan could influence decisions at the highest levels. Claims of closeness to the more powerful thus ran through the hierarchies of machine-style politics and institutional big-men.

Closeness was also expressed in action. Thus, people who were acclaimed as leaders were often invited to various types of public meetings and private functions. They appeared as speakers at weddings and Independence Day celebrations at schools, as mediators in conflicts, and as guests of honour at public discussions. Typically, the ceremonial presentation of shawls and flower garlands singled them out as honoured guests.

The honouring was a two-way process that reflected equally the importance of the host and the guest. At times, deities could be enlisted for a similar function. For example, the public debate, the padimandram, which I discuss in Chapter 7, was part of the festival for the goddess Mariamman. The Isanadu Kallar Sangam, which was a local caste association, sponsored both the festival and the padimandram. Mr Pitchai, who I mention in Chapter 5 as leading an agitation against a teacher of Hindi, was the headman of the sangam. He took an active interest in the preparation and execution of the Mariamman festival, although I suspect that he was not otherwise much engaged in religious concerns. At the festival, he was the first person to present offerings to the goddess, on behalf of the sangam. In return, the goddess awarded her first honours to him, which in turn he distributed to the other members of the sangam. To receive the first honours from a deity was considered to be a highly
prestigious matter in Ekkaraiyur. Not only did first honours single out the foremost devotee of the occasion, they also confirmed that the recipient was the most prominent person present. Divergent opinions about who were to receive first honours were a typical cause of conflict in Ekkaraiyur festivals (cf. Appadurai 1983; de Neve 2000). Sometimes, uncompromising viewpoints led to the cancellation of the festival. In Pitchai’s case, however, no disagreement was publicly expressed during the festival. Pitchai received similar, but secular, honours during the padimandram debate, in the form of a garland, a shawl and praise from the speakers.

Pitchai was a native of Ekkaraiyur, and he worked as a health inspector for the panchayat union. This job, and its localisation to Ekkaraiyur, was his reward for helping Perumal to get elected to the Madras Legislative Assembly, Pitchai told me. Pitchai, who described himself as a follower and kinsman of the MLA, had invited Perumal to the Mariamman festival in Ekkaraiyur. If Perumal had attended the festival, Pitchai would probably have relinquished the goddess’s first honours to him, and then received them himself from Perumal.

Honours between deities and human leaders were central to religious festivals in Ekkaraiyur (cf. Appadurai 1983). Used to bolster a position of leadership, divine honours were also invoked at another festival in the village, which took place at two temples to the Kannimar goddesses on the upper reaches of the Aru River, some kilometres to the west of Ekkaraiyur. This festival was arranged by the pattadari committee. Mohan, the president of the pattadari, received the goddesses’ first honours.

The background to the festival involved a complicated story of a lawsuit, which I related earlier in connection with the pattadari committee. As mentioned above, although the matter was not yet fully settled, a favourable decision of the court led the pattadari committee to feel that it held the advantage in the conflict. Consequently, the committee decided to celebrate the festival for the first time for twelve years. As the monsoon was delayed, the festival was staged as a prayer for rain.

Although no one involved in the affair believed that the favourable court decision would remain uncontested for long, the
festival was clearly a personal success for Mohan. The Ekkaraiyur Brahmans were there in strength, standing in the river and incanting Sanskrit hymns that nobody else understood. When making the offerings, Mohan received the first honours from the Kannimar goddesses. After that a sumptuous meal for the prominent guests, and a simpler version for the 200 or so other people, was served. The prominent guests made up an impressive local collection: landlords, businessmen, politicians and civil servants - Brahmans, non-Brahmans, Hindus, Christians, Muslims and atheists – from Ekkaraiyur and the neighbouring villages. However, the most important guests had failed to turn up: the MLA and the District Collector. Perhaps they shied away from taking part in the celebration of one side’s victory in a local conflict. Anyway, the festival afforded Mohan an opportunity to advertise his closeness to both the Kannimar deities and human prominence. The festival became in part a public statement of his leadership and of his closeness to patrons, whether divine or human. It also signalled the legitimacy of the pattadari committee’s claim against the opposing party.

The leader as a social worker

Brokerage appears as an apt term to describe important activities of leaders in Ekkaraiyur, but they did not refer to themselves as brokers. Instead, they favoured the English term ‘social worker’ to describe themselves. For them, being a social worker meant that they helped other people. They arranged matters such as selections for state schemes, programmes and projects, selection for jobs, transfers of postings, bank loans, admittance to schools, recommendations for scholarships, and so on. What they did not tell me was that they, or at least some of them, were also ready to ‘explain’ matters to potentially unfriendly civil servants, to cover up irregularities, and to negotiate bribes. However, this unmentioned aspect of brokerage was implied in Ramadurai’s listing of his achievements above. It should be noted that leaders who acted as ‘social workers’ deliberately aimed at creating social debts. Cash could repay the debt, but personal loyalty appeared to be the
CHAPTER FOUR

preferred payment. In other words, the activities of ‘the social worker’ created followers.

Leaders had varying success as ‘social workers’. People would normally not approach a leader of minor standing and with few contacts. A powerful position and links to more powerful leaders and high-ranking civil servants were the means that ensured success. Consequently, the strategy was to build up a reputation for being able to ‘deliver the goods’. In this respect, the public advertisement of closeness to the powerful and a record of achievements became important means of establishing a position of leadership. The expectations varied with the circumstances and the leader. Whereas a MLA was reputed to be able to persuade the local police to overlook a crime (cf. Jeffrey & Lerche 2001: 99-100), a ward member of the village panchayat could perhaps do little more than write a letter of recommendation of little importance.

Perumal, Ekkaraiyur’s MLA, provided several examples of the wide range of activities that a successful leader of local importance could be engaged in as ‘a social worker’. I do not have direct knowledge of all the activities of Perumal, and do not know if he too spoke about himself as ‘a social worker’. But, people in Ekkaraiyur did speak about him in such terms.

I have already mentioned that Pitchai, the headman of the Isanadu Kallar Sangam, attributed his job as a health inspector to the influence of Perumal. Pitchai was only one among several for whom Perumal arranged jobs and related matters. For example, a teacher in Ekkaraiyur had a letter of recommendation from Perumal, not only advising the district school authorities to transfer the teacher to a more conveniently located school, but also detailing a proposed chain of transfers, involving teachers from three different schools, which would result in the transfer of my informant to the school he desired. The teacher took the letter to the district school authorities and the teachers’ trade union, and Perumal’s proposal was adopted.

The letter, the teacher estimated, had saved him about Rs. 10,000 in bribes, and a lot of effort. I was told about a number of similar cases in which Perumal was said to have intervened. It was popularly assumed that the local school authorities reserved a special quota about which the present MLA could make personal decisions. It was also assumed that quotas were set aside for the MLA to admit
students to schools, as well as to jobs, preferments and transfers in state institutions and enterprises. It made sense to enlist Perumal’s interest. His letters of recommendation produced results.

The development block was another alleged area of Perumal’s influence. It was believed that he had the power to direct the decisions of the block development officers. A word from Perumal could arrange for people to be included as beneficiaries of the block’s schemes, programmes and projects. The force behind his influence was his ability to engineer the transfer of an uncooperative civil servant, as was said about Ramadurai, the panchayat union chairman. The police were also believed to listen to Perumal’s proposals. He appeared to have arranged people’s release from police custody on a number of occasions. On occasion he was appealed to for protection against police interference in what were considered to be private affairs. Rumours attributed to him successful attempts to keep the police from finding out the true facts of family tragedies.

Others of Mr Perumal’s interventions were directed towards collective rather than individual concerns. For example, when a private bus company closed down an unprofitable route through Ekkaraiyur, Perumal was said to have persuaded the state-owned bus company to take over the route. When the local bank had trouble fulfilling its target for savings, Perumal deposited a large sum of money at the bank manager’s request. When the conflict between two factions of Christian Vellalars threatened to involve other people as well, Perumal tried to arbitrate. In this, he did not have any noticeable success, however.

When Perumal became Ekkaraiyur’s MLA in 1989, his followers in the village were highly elated. Several of them attempted to introduce themselves as brokers for Perumal, as I have mentioned. They expected to take part in a windfall of benefits, as a reward for their support and loyalty. These expectations were accentuated by the fact that Perumal was married to an Ekkaraiyur woman, which allowed several of his followers in Ekkaraiyur to claim kinship ties with him.

To some degree Perumal disappointed his followers, at least verbally, by publicly proclaiming in Ekkaraiyur that he did not consider himself to be representing only those who had actually
supported him. He was the MLA of all the people of the constituency, whether they had voted for him or not, he said. This announcement was superficially quite unremarkable. But, its implied meaning was that his followers could not expect any preferential treatment.

Perumal’s announcement was received with a certain scepticism. Political opponents simply did not believe it. Perumal was saying what he was expected to say, they claimed. He would act differently, they suggested. Nor were followers of Perumal convinced. They expected at least some reward for their efforts in promoting his election. Yet, Karuppuvan, who, as an ardent supporter of Perumal, had worked hard for his election, thought that his statement reflected the proper attitude of an MLA. It was the duty of the MLA to listen to all the people’s grievances, and to right their wrongs, regardless of individual party affiliations, Karuppuvan told me.

I cannot judge whether Perumal acted in accordance with his announcement of party impartiality. People who were his followers claimed to have been rewarded for their loyalty, and he got the police to release some of his followers who had been arrested for various offences, among them gambling in public. These examples point to Perumal’s partial use of his influence, especially since he did not intervene on another occasion when people who were loyal to an opposing party were arrested for the same offence. Political loyalties were hard to pin down in other cases, and several of Perumal’s interventions appeared to benefit his political opponents as well. A show of impartiality could have been a strategy on the part of Perumal to widen his following. However, impartiality was expected of ‘a social worker’, and as the pre-eminent ‘social worker’ of Ekkaraiyur Perumal was expected to conform. This ideal was apparent in leaders’ views of themselves.

The leaders’ views of themselves

Honours, a display of closeness to the powerful, a reputation for efficiency in delivering ‘the goods’, were all part of a leader’s public presentation of himself in Ekkaraiyur. Primarily, these associations featured the leader as a powerful and influential person. Yet, as
leaders in Ekkaraiyur also presented themselves as ‘social workers’, values other than power and influence were brought forward as well. Impartiality, associated with selflessness and humility, was also involved.

Popular wisdom in Ekkaraiyur held that all people were inherently selfish, and that the leaders were especially prone to selfishness, notions that I discuss in Chapter 7. It was therefore striking that leaders in Ekkaraiyur advertised themselves as being unselfish. As ‘social workers’, they claimed to act primarily for the benefit of others, individuals as well as communities. They were the servants of the people; they worked for others, not for themselves.

The servant metaphor inverted the relation between a leader and his followers, and concealed the leader’s real power of doing something for others that they could not do for themselves. Notions of rank were also involved in the metaphor. As the servant of the people, the leader ranked lower than the people. Often, the alleged low rank was further accentuated by substituting ‘the poor’ for ‘the people’. The behaviour associated with low rank was humility, and leaders consequently also described themselves as humble. As the servant of ‘the poor’, the leader appropriated the lowest rank possible and thereby magnified his claim to humility.

It is, of course, impossible to say whether the leaders who I interviewed really believed that they were unselfish and humble. But, they liked to talk about themselves in such terms, and expected that demonstrations of selflessness and humility would win them the support of others. Tanisamy, for example, claimed that a show of humility had secured his one-time election to the presidency of the village panchayat. Tanisamy was the candidate the first time the president was to be elected directly by the public. Realising that he had to stage a village-wide election campaign, Tanisamy had a pamphlet printed that listed his promises of future achievements. Pamphlet in hand, he then toured the village on foot, knocked on every door, and asked for people’s help to realise his intended achievements as village panchayat president. As he explained to me, he was known as being a rich landlord whom people approached for various favours. Now he reversed the situation by coming to their homes as a petitioner. The impression was immense, in Tanisamy’s opinion, and secured him the electoral victory. His opponent had
relied on the method of singling out locally influential people and making them private promises, and he was soundly beaten.

Humility was also attributed to Abdul’s election as the village panchayat president. A nephew explained to me that Abdul had beaten a far more powerful opponent because he was known as a humble person. Interestingly, while Abdul described himself to me as ‘a social worker’, his nephew told me that his uncle was ‘a socialist’. The nephew did not imply that his Congress (I) uncle espoused ideas that are commonly associated with socialist politics. Instead, he meant that people could approach Abdul without any formality, ceremony or restriction. Other versions of the word ‘social’ similarly denoted aspects of humility in Ekkaraiyur.

According to Abdul’s nephew, his uncle’s opponent had lost the election because of his overbearing manners. He had behaved like a king, as the nephew put it, and kings were not generally associated with humility (see Chapter 5; Price 1996b). In fact, leaders who failed to act with humility were often denounced as behaving like kings. Similarly, they could be denounced as having ‘a superiority complex’.

Such psychological jargon was common in Ekkaraiyur, and individuals, as well as groups, could be attributed with either ‘a superiority complex’ or ‘an inferiority complex’. Perumal, Ekkaraiyur’s MLA, liked to use both expressions in his public speeches. However, in a usage typical of Ekkaraiyur, Perumal employed the terms not as antonyms, but as notions pertaining to different, but related, areas. One area referred to the evaluation of individual leaders. A leader could be censured for having ‘a superiority complex’, but not, it seemed, for having ‘an inferiority complex’. At least, I never heard of anyone being so characterised. For a leader to have ‘a superiority complex’ meant that he lacked humility.

The related area of usage referred to an evaluation of people’s worth in terms of caste, and in this usage ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ were employed more or less as antonyms. A person (or a group of persons) with ‘an inferiority complex’ tended to devalue himself because of his low caste. Thus, a low-caste man who acted out a stereotypical low-caste role could be said to have ‘an inferiority complex’. Conversely, a high-caste person could be denounced as
having ‘a superiority complex’, manifested in an overestimation of his own value and in a correspondingly derogatory view of people of lower castes. It is to be noted that the notion of humility came into both areas of usage. A leader with ‘a superiority complex’ lacked humility, and so did high-caste people with ‘a superiority complex’. Conversely, a low-caste person with ‘an inferiority complex’ showed an excess of humility. Ironically, when Perumal failed to show up at the festival at the Kannimar temples arranged by the pittadari committee, Mohan explained his absence by suggesting in private that Perumal had ‘a superiority complex’.

Mohan’s comments about Perumal implied a sceptical attitude towards demonstrations of humility. This was a common attitude, associated with the censorious views of leaders that I discuss in the next chapters. For example, a low-caste man of my acquaintance worked as a peon at the local office of a government department. At home, he displayed a proud attitude, while at work he was a model of humility in front of the government officers. The contrast was astonishing. He spoke loudly in the one place and walked with his back erect; in the other place, his back was bent and he almost muttered. When I asked him why he behaved so differently at home and at work, he laughed with embarrassment, telling me that humility was expected of a low-caste peon. It was the role he took on when at work to please his superiors, he implied. He did not say whether or not his superiors realised that he was playing a role. Perhaps he took it for granted that they also adopted their expected roles when at work.

I argued in the previous chapter that the conclusion of an old mode of leadership in Ekkaraiyur was associated with changes in land and labour agreements, which dissolved existing patron-client bonds within the village. In this chapter, I have argued that the emerging kind of leaders also based their positions on patron-client relationships, but the repertoire of resources of these leaders was of a different kind. Whereas earlier patron-client relationships were based on the control of landed property and access to land, the new patron-client relationships were primarily oriented towards the state and political parties. The old-mode leadership of the mirasdars had
been replaced by leaders who based their positions on political patronage.

I have also argued that this implies a change in the view of the legitimacy of the leaders, from a legitimacy that was locally grounded to one that drew its strength from extra-village contexts. However, the change-over was not complete. Not only was the village still the principal arena for important sections of Ekkaraiyur’s leadership; strong opinions also expressed the ideal that extra-village sources of legitimacy ought to be kept at bay in the village. Used to evaluate the quality of local leaders, this ideal formed part of a larger discourse, formulated in Ekkaraiyur as a critique of the nature of leadership and society. In the next chapter I shall discuss the critique as it was expressed in the notions of an ideal society located in past golden ages.
Chapter 5  Golden ages

In this chapter I discuss a repertoire of cultural models, myths and metaphors mobilised by people in Ekkaraiyur talking about the ideal society. This repertoire associated the ideal society with the past, formulated in the notion of a past golden age. However, instead of appealing to one single golden age, people in Ekkaraiyur argued the merits of several different ones. Referring to particular understandings of different historical societies, the myths of these different golden ages partly overlapped and partly contradicted each other, expressing both consensus and disagreement.

I discuss three of these golden ages, which I have called the Sangam Age, the Ramaraj and the Ummah. The Sangam Age focuses on a South Indian golden age some two thousands years ago, the Ramaraj refers to the time when king Rama ruled the North Indian kingdom of Ayodhya, while the Ummah tells of the rule of the Prophet and the first four Caliphs.

The arguments about the merits of different golden ages include views on social man as well as on society in the wider perspective. My discussion will focus on aspects concerning social interaction, social mentality and the moral qualities expected of ideal leaders. It should be noted that the Ekkaraiyur golden ages were ‘imagined’ in Anderson’s sense of the word (Anderson 1983). That is, they are neither necessarily rooted in factual conditions, nor are they necessarily false. They were simply imaginative expressions of popular understandings of past societies prevalent in Ekkaraiyur.

I shall first give brief outlines of the three societies of the Sangam Age, the Ramaraj and the Ummah, as they were presented to me by informants in Ekkaraiyur. After that, focusing on the central notions about kingship, equality and caste found in the stories, I shall discuss the roles given to the golden ages in the present. A common feature of the imageries of the past was precisely their orientation vis-à-vis the present. They functioned in Ekkaraiyur as standards against which the deficiencies of contemporary conditions were routinely measured. While this use of the imaginaries relocated the past in an unrealised present, the past itself was largely a mirror-like image of
the present that dissolved contemporary problems and ascribed present-day values to the past. Competition and conflicts between castes, for example, turned into peaceful and harmonious interdependence. Corrupt and selfish leaders became paragons of integrity and altruism. Cherished values of the present, such as democracy, socialism and equality, were freely attributed to the past. In other words, when people spoke about the past, they were using a present-based critique to comment on the present. This makes it difficult to separate the past and the present as two different realms, and hence to view the notion of past golden ages as a sort of traditionalistic critique. The golden ages did not necessarily refer to the past, although they claimed to do so. Rather, they can be seen as examples of an invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) for the purpose of evaluating the present.

The Sangam Age as the foundation story for a language, a culture, and a people

The name Sangam Age has an established position in academic interpretations to denote a period some two thousand years ago in South Indian history (see, for example, Nilakanta Sastri 1984; Subbarayappa 1997; Stein 1985. See also Zvelebil 1973: 45-64 for a discussion of texts of the Sangam Age). To my informants in Ekkaraiyur, the Sangam Age stood for the golden age of the Tamilians. This golden age covered the conventional time-span of academic interpretations, but was also thought to extend far back into the misty past. Moreover, rather than serving as a convenient label for a historical era, the Sangam Age served people in Ekkaraiyur as a foundation myth for Tamil culture. The Sangam Age was in sum the era during which the Tamil language, the Tamil culture, and the Tamilians had come into being. My informants did not think of the Sangam Age as a process of development. Instead, they argued that Tamil culture and particularly the Tamil language had come into existence already perfected. The Sangam Age appeared to be a timeless entity, marked by an inherent and continuous excellence. Nothing changed between origin and apogee, until the Sangam Age was destroyed.
Tamilian origins

Stories about the Sangam Age could be found in many contexts. Magazines and newspapers wrote about the era; the Sangam Age provided the stage for historical novels and movies; and it was an oft-repeated theme for both popular and academic historical studies. In addition to these public representations, there was the private story-telling by the many Ekkaraiyur people who took an interest in the Sangam Age. My account of the Sangam Age is based on such personal stories.

The literary and political interest in the Sangam Age would suggest that there was a master narrative of the Sangam Age. Ramaswamy appears to take the existence of such a master narrative for granted (Ramaswamy 1997a: 19-20). Insofar as a literary master narrative is to be sought, the search is complicated by the fact that there are several different literary versions. My informants’ oral stories were formed by literary sources that differed in detail, scope, emphasis and interpretation. Each informant’s story was in effect a personal reconstruction of the Sangam Age. Consequently, as I refer to my various informants’ accounts of the Sangam Age, this is not to be taken as the telling of so many interchangeable parts of one unified story. They are personalised fragments, which I myself have fitted together within a loose framework.

One afternoon as we were sitting on the porch outside his house, discussing Tamil history, Mr Sundarajan told me about the origin of the Tamilians. Sundarajan was a subscription agent for newspapers and magazines in Ekkaraiyur. He took a keen interest in Tamil history, and the Sangam Age was a favourite topic of his. His interest in history was not purely academic. As a long-standing member of the nationalist organisation the Dravida Kalazham (see Chapter 4), Sundarajan combined strongly held political views on present-day society with his interest in the search for the historical roots of Tamilness. History was for him of contemporary political relevance. It taught him how things had once been, and what ought and what could be done for the future, he told me.

The Tamilians, he explained to me, had once lived on a vast continent in the ocean to the south of India. No Tamil name was remembered for that continent, but Western scientists nowadays
called it Lemuria. Building their first great city of Madurai, the Tamilians had created their first civilisation on Lemuria. One day, however, a catastrophe overtook Lemuria. The continent was flooded and sank into the ocean. The city of Madurai was destroyed and most of the people were drowned. The survivors of the catastrophe settled in southern India, which may have been the northernmost part of Lemuria, according to Sundarajan. A second city of Madurai was built there, called Tenmadurai (that is, South Madurai), and the Tamilian civilisation flourished anew. But, the ocean struck again and the city of Tenmadurai was submerged by the waves.

Undaunted, the Tamilians re-established their civilisation further to the north, building the third city of Madurai. This is the present-day city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu, and so far the city and the land of the Tamilians have escaped the ocean waves. The country was then divided into three Tamilian kingdoms: the Chera, Chola and Pandyan kingdoms, and the city of Madurai became the capital of the Pandyan kingdom.

Sundarajan’s version of the Tamilians’ origins was one among different versions in Ekkaraiyur. These different myths agreed that the Tamilians had been immigrants to South India, but they differed on the issue of where the Tamilians had come from. Sumerian Mesopotamia and the nearby Elam competed with Lemuria as favourite locations. Linguistic evidence was commonly used to establish a claim of origin. For example, one informant favoured Mesopotamia as the Tamil homeland because of the similarity of the Sumerian city-name of Ur and the Tamil word for village (ur). Other favourite home areas, sometimes combined with Mesopotamia and Elam as stages in a chain of successive migrations, were located in Sind and the Punjab, and associated there with the Mohenjodaro-Harappa culture.

**The city and the sangam**

Whether my informants located the Tamil homeland in Lemuria or elsewhere, the repeated stages of alternating construction and destruction of the cities of Madurai occupied a central position in
their stories about the Sangam Age. Even those informants who made the Tamilians track overland from Mesopotamia included accounts of successive floodings of the cities in their stories. Another recurring element was the association of the city of Madurai with the existence of a sangam. A Madurai without a sangam, or a sangam located elsewhere, seemed almost unthinkable to my informants. When the city was destroyed, so was the sangam; as a new Madurai was built, a new sangam was established.

Sangam translates as an assembly, and there were several kinds of sangams in different contexts in Ekkaraiyur. The three sangams of Madurai were considered as the pre-eminent of all sangams. According to my informants, they had consisted of assemblies of learned men and women, whose principal aim had been to advance the Tamil culture, particularly the Tamil language. Some informants compared the sangams to modern academies and research institutes. The sangams’ members were remembered as having been expert users of the Tamil language, including poets, writers, singers, musicians, grammarians and philologists. They were thought to have codified the forms of the Tamil language and had produced its literary masterpieces.

The three sangams of Madurai were institutions of the past. But, there was a fourth sangam in contemporary Madurai. Founded in 1901 and called the Madurai Tamil Sangam, this sangam was dedicated to the improvement of the Tamil language, as were several other sangams founded at that time. The Madurai Tamil Sangam brought together scholarly activities with the founding of a journal, a library, a printing press and a school (Ramaswamy 1997a: 38, 220-22).

The Madurai Tamil Sangam had provided the inspiration for founding a sangam in Ekkaraiyur, which celebrated its 25th anniversary shortly before I settled in the village. It, too, was dedicated to the study and propagation of the Tamil language, which it did by means of inviting guests to lecture on Tamil poetry, science and history. The sangam arranged meetings every fortnight during the first months of my fieldwork. Thereafter its activities largely ceased, regretfully, due to sickness and conflicts among its leading members. Only for a short time was it revived as the co-organiser of the public debate that I discuss in Chapter 7. The sangam’s hundred
or so members belonged to a variety of castes. Notably, non-Brahmans dominated the membership and the sangam’s activities. The members were from widely different economic circumstances and professions; teachers and other white-collar workers dominated, but farmers, shopkeepers and artisans were also active in the sangam. Interestingly, people who claimed Telugu or Kannadam as their mother tongue were also members of the Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangam.

The Madurai and Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangams were calculated to evoke echoes of the sangams of ancient days. Indeed, the founder-patron of the Madurai academy, Mr Pandithurai Thevar, ‘… came to be narrated in devotional writings as a Cankam [Sangam] king reincarnate’ (Ramaswamy 1997a: 220 [diacritical marks omitted]). In Ekkaraiyur, the ancient sangams were spoken of as ideals of an unattainable linguistic excellence, which contemporary followers were reduced to learning, admiring and imitating. Rather than seeing themselves as contemporary codifiers of the Tamil language and creators of new literary masterpieces, the members of the Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangam typically called themselves students of the past sangams’ excellence.

The studies of past excellence were intimately associated with the task of propagating the Tamil language. I shall discuss later in the chapter why members of the Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangam thought that the Tamil language had to be propagated, and even defended. First, however, the Pandyan kingdom needs to be introduced.

The Pandyan kingdom

My informants on the Sangam Age gave me only a few details about life in the first two cities of Madurai. The third city of Madurai, the Pandyan capital, however, was central to their understanding of the Sangam Age as an ideal society. Social structure, moral leaders, and learning combined in the Pandyan kingdom in what my informants represented as a harmonious and creative interplay.

According to my informants, the work of the sangam associated with the third city of Madurai had reached unrivalled heights in codifying and enriching the Tamil language. The academy was a
centre for the sciences that attracted scholarly foreigners to Madurai. According to Sundarajan, the foreign visitors were keen on learning about medicine. He particularly mentioned that accounts had been preserved that were written by Chinese scholars about visits to the third city of Madurai. He was convinced that these accounts indicated that Chinese medical knowledge ultimately went back to Tamil origins.

However, not only did the Pandyan kingdom attract visitors from far-away countries. The Tamilians themselves were also reputed to have been great travellers. Large merchant fleets, which traded in exquisite textiles, rare objects and medical drugs, had sailed over large distances, regularly visiting ports in the Middle East, Africa, South-east Asia and China.

Not all fleets had peaceful intentions. The Tamilians also went abroad to conquer, creating vast overseas dominions in Ceylon and South-east Asia, which my informants described as part of a civilisatory process that spread the advancements of Tamil culture to other peoples. Pandyan kings had also invaded the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent, where their victories and overlordship had been proclaimed by literally cutting the Pandyan royal emblems into the side of the Himalayas, I was told.

In their own country, the Pandyans had been just and wise kings. They had been the patrons of the Tamil learning espoused by the third sangam, whose members had served as royal advisers. Consequently, the activities of king and sangam were closely associated.

As described by my informants, this association partly fits the pattern that Dumont has argued as being typical of Indian caste ideology. Dumont argued that secular and sacral kinds of authority were kept apart in classical caste ideology. Secular authority was the domain of the Kshatriya varna, whereas sacral authority was vested in the Brahman varna (Dumont 1970: 62-88, 1988b). A similar division of authority was evident in my informants’ descriptions of the association of king and sangam. The Pandyan kings were primarily said to have exercised secular authority. However, the sangam’s authority focused on linguistic scholarship. Unlike the Brahmans in Dumont’s pattern, its members did not hold sacred roles. Nevertheless, my informants invested them with other central
characteristics of the Brahman varna: learning and teaching. Thus, while the Pandyan kings conformed to the ideal Kshatriya, the sangam’s members were represented as being like Brahmans, but desacralised ones.

Dumont argued for the interdependence of the Kshatriya’s and Brahman’s different kinds of authority. In essence, the ideal Kshatriya was to protect the social order as the Brahman interpreted it (Dumont 1970: 62-88, 1988b). A similar interdependence was suggested by my informants’ association of the king with the sangam. As patrons of the sangam, the Pandyan kings offered protection, funds, honours and encouragement. In return, the sangam contributed to the prestige of the kings, and helped to govern the kingdom wisely.

Nevertheless, my informants’ stories diverged from Dumont’s analysis in some significant respects. First, the relationship between king and sangam was not expressed in terms of varna. The Pandyan king was not a ruler because of his caste, nor was membership of the sangam based on caste. Indeed, caste was thought to be irrelevant in relation to both king and sangam. Second, it should be stressed that my informants did not represent the authority of the sangam as sacred. It was no coincidence that they deviated from Dumont’s suggested pattern in respect of caste, kingship and the sacred. These topics were problematic for many of them (cf., for example, Dirks (1989) and Mahapatra (1977) on the nexus between kingship and caste). Typically, my informants on the Sangam Age were negative towards kingship; most of them denied the morality of caste; and some of them were professed atheists. Yet, a disbelief in gods and goddesses was often balanced by a tendency to deify the Tamil language (cf. Ramaswamy 1997a: 24-34). This may in part explain why the sangam’s members were primarily represented as having been experts of language, rather than as experts of the sacred.

Having outlined some key features of the Sangam Age stories, let us now look at two alternative golden age versions of the ideal society: the Ramaraj and the Ummah.
The Ramaraj

Ramaraj translates as the rule of Rama - a name used in India to refer to the time when king Rama ruled the kingdom of Ayodhya. Popular and scholarly opinions are divided on whether king Rama and his kingdom of Ayodhya represent a historical reality or belong only to the realm of mythology. However, what is beyond doubt is that Rama and the kingdom of Ayodhya are part of Hindu historical mythology.

Rama is one of the most popular gods of the Hindu pantheon. His adventures are literally known to every Indian, and have for a long time been a common theme in religious iconography and retold in innumerable texts, oral as well as written. At the end of the 1980s, Rama was also the subject of a popular television serial; whenever little Indian boys armed themselves with bows and clubs, they were probably re-enacting some of the adventures of Rama and his ally, Hanuman the monkey-king.

The adventures of Rama are told in the epic Ramayana. Put very briefly, Rama was the heir to the kingdom of Ayodhya, but due to intrigues, he was unfairly banished and withdrew to a forest retreat together with his wife Sita and his brother Laksmana. Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, subsequently abducted Sita, and Rama and Laksmana set out to rescue her. After many adventures, Rama attacked Lanka, with the help of Hanuman and his army of monkeys, among others. Ravana and his army of demons were slain in a great battle, and Sita was rescued. As Rama’s prescribed time of exile had expired, they returned to Ayodhya where Rama regained his rightful throne. The Ramaraj, the rule of Rama the god-king then began.78

The Ramaraj expressed in Ekkaraiyur bhakti

The name Ramaraj was frequently used in Ekkaraiyur, as elsewhere in India, as a synonym for the ideal society. In Ekkaraiyur, one example of a deliberate elaboration of this understanding of Ramaraj was to be found in a devotional form of worship called bhakti.

Bhakti has been prominent in Tamil religious life since early times.79 It is one of several ways in Hinduism to establish a
relationship between man and the sacred. Bhakti implies devotion, and can be defined, according to Bhattacharyya, as to demonstrate ‘loving faith in God and surrender to him’ (1990: 35). Through devotion, the devotee strives to achieve liberation by attaining the god’s grace or favour (ibid.). Bhakti forms of worship are directed towards different gods and goddesses, and take many different forms. In fact, bhakti practices seem to be part of many cases of devotion in Ekkaraiyur. For example, some people endure self-inflicted torture and mutilation to show their devotion to a particular deity during religious festivals, while others worship by means of singing devotional hymns.

Several hymn-singing bhakti groups were active in Ekkaraiyur during the time of my fieldwork. Three of them focused their worship on the gods Rama and Krishna, both avatars of Vishnu, and on their consorts, the goddesses Sita and Rada. One bhakti group consisted exclusively of Brahman men and women. Their devotion primarily concerned the devotees’ personal relationship to the deities. Nevertheless, an understanding of the Ramaraj was of central concern in their worship, which involved hymns and the re-enactment of the lives of the gods and goddesses as they took place in the imagined context of the Ramaraj. Members of the Brahman bhakti group also saw their devotion to Rama and Krishna as a way of improving themselves as social and moral beings. Thus, worship and desire for personal reform were played out in relation to their understanding of the Ramaraj.

The Brahman bhakti group met every fortnight in a temple in the Agraharam, the Brahman street. These meetings were relatively simple affairs lasting a few hours. Only the few people who formed the core of the bhakti group attended regularly. Once a year, the bhakti group staged a festival that lasted from dawn to dawn; it was organised locally, but attracted many visitors. In 1989 and 1990, the ritual expert Mr Raghanathan was invited to direct the festival activities.

Raghanathan became one of my informants on bhakti and the Ramaraj. I met him at the Ekkaraiyur festival of 1989, and later at a similar festival at another village. Raghanathan was a Brahman who lived in the town of Pudukottai where he was employed as a technician in the state telephone company. But, his true vocation
was the bhakti worship of Rama and Krishna, he told me. He had the reputation of being a leading bhakti expert and was in great demand among the Brahman communities of the region. Consequently, he spent considerably more time directing bhakti worship during the festival season than servicing the state telephone system.

In Ekkaraiyur, Raghanathan conducted the many devotees attending the bhakti festival through a complex schedule of processions and worship in temples and private houses. The re-enactment of the lives of Rama and Krishnan, Sita and Radha, involved long sessions of devotional singing interspersed with theatrical performances. In addition, the staging of the gods’ lives was intertwined with hymns that followed the history of bhakti worship in South India.

The Ummah

The Ummah is my name for a third version of a golden age. Ummah, in Arabic, stands for ‘the world-wide Muslim community’ (Waines 2003: 321) or ‘a “community of believers” as well as a political organization’ (Khosravi 2003: 24), but here I use the term for a golden age particular to the Muslims of Ekkaraiyur. That is, few, if any, non-Muslims in Ekkaraiyur recognised it as a golden age.

Like the Sangam Age and the Ramaraj, the Ummah was located in the past, but unlike them, it was situated outside India. As Mr Omar Karim, the supervisor of Ekkaraiyur’s mosque, explained to me, the Muslim ideal society had been fully realised only once, namely during the rule of the Prophet and the first four Caliphs in Medina and Mecca. Other Muslim polities had all contained flaws that prevented them from fully realising the ideal.

The notion that the rule of the Prophet and the first four Caliphs represents a golden age is common among contemporary Muslims (see, for example, Naipaul 1987). Indeed, it appears to be fundamental to Islam. In other words, the beliefs that God’s will, expressed in the Quran, concerns the ordering of social relationships, and that the first Muslim community was governed by God’s will, combine to produce the notion of a golden age. The notion is further strengthened by the persistent attempts to use the traditions
associated with the first Muslim community to formulate the sacred law, the *shari’ah* (see Waines 2003).  

Omar Karim referred to God’s will as ‘the true Muslim principles’, saying that they had been laid down in the Quran and were henceforth expressed in the decisions of assemblies of learned Muslims, the *ulama*. The notion of divinely ordained principles was widespread among the Muslims of Ekkaraiyur. However, the meaning of these principles was variously understood. Omar Karim and many others associated ‘true Muslim principles’ primarily with specified laws and punishments. For example, Omar Karim explained to me that people were honest and helpful in countries ruled by ‘the true Muslim principles’, while elsewhere dishonesty and crime were rampant.

In other contexts, the wider code of moral behaviour involved in ‘the true Muslim principles’ was stressed. For example, Mohammed, a college student, once drew my attention to some old women who were boarding our bus, telling me that these women’s way of dressing indicated that they had neither any notion of shame, nor any knowledge of modesty. In contrast, women in a country that was ruled by ‘true Muslim principles’ were chaste and modestly dressed, he asserted. The fact that the women were not wearing blouses prompted Mohammed to make this categorical contrast. This style of dressing was common among old women, so it was not the first time that he was seeing a woman ‘top-less’. Nevertheless, he used the women’s dress to highlight the immorality of an India that was not ruled according to ‘the true Muslim principles’. Their bare breasts symbolised the negation of the morality entailed in those principles.

**Kingship, caste and equality**

Having introduced the three past golden ages, I shall now discuss how my informants on the Sangam Age, the Ramaraj and the Ummah rationalised the relationship between three notions that kept recurring in the stories: kingship, caste and equality. These notions combined in different and sometimes uneasy ways. This unease was due to the seeming incompatibility of kingship and caste, on the one hand, with equality, on the other hand. I shall start with my Muslim
informants’ view of the Ummah, which gives the most unequivocal outline of the relationships between these notions.

According to my Muslim informants, Indian notions of caste had not existed in the early Middle Eastern Muslim community. Hence, distinctions based on caste were a non-issue for my informants on the Ummah. Moreover, they asserted that Muslims did not recognise any caste distinctions among themselves in Ekkaraiyur. It is true that the Muslims in Ekkaraiyur stressed their Indian and non-Muslim origin, typically describing themselves as descendants of converted Tamilian Hindus. Nevertheless, they argued that caste distinctions did not apply to them after conversion. There were, in fact, two named groups of Muslims in Ekkaraiyur that did not intermarry, and non-Muslims insisted on describing these two groups as different Muslim castes. Muslims themselves, however, insisted that the two groups were not castes, because all Muslims were brothers and hence equals.

Kingship was a more difficult matter for my Muslim informants. Kings generally were seen as neither wise or just, nor as caring for the opinions or well-being of others. A man who behaved in an overbearing and arrogant way could be criticized in Ekkaraiyur with the comment that he was behaving as if he were a king, as I discussed in Chapter 4. As the Ummah had in fact been ruled by a sort of king, namely the Caliphs, kingship did have a place in the stories about Muslim ideal society. The common strategy for reconciling kingship and equality in the Ummah was exemplified by Omar Karim’s reasoning. Arguing that any Muslim, whether ruler or ruled, would naturally strive to follow ‘the true Muslim principles’, because they were given by God, he refused to acknowledge any contradiction between the inequality implied by kingship and the equality of all Muslims. The ideal king combined the roles of a political and a spiritual leader, as the early Caliphs had done, and ultimately he was the instrument for realising ‘the true Muslim principles’, Omar Karim explained to me. The king had the means to enforce obedience to the principles and ought to use these means, but this power did not detract from the general equality of the Muslims. Whenever people strove to attain the ideal of the Ummah, the continuous reform both of oneself and of others, of force and voluntary choice, were interwoven parts of one single process.\textsuperscript{82}
This interpretation made Omar Karim name Saudi Arabia and Iran as contemporary examples that approached the ideal of the Ummah, while rejecting every Indian Muslim polity of the past. Although there had been plenty of Muslim rulers in India in the past, none of them had ruled fully according to ‘the true Muslim principles’, following Omar Karim. In his view, incidentally, contemporary India was not ruled according to any principles at all.

A degree of uncertainty about the relationship between kingship and equality could be detected in Omar Karim’s account of the Ummah, and a similar uncertainty recurred in my informants’ accounts of the Sangam Age. Similar to the Muslim brotherhood of equals, these informants argued consistently that all Tamilians had been equal during the Sangam Age. Yet, as the historicity of Pandyan kingship could not be denied, they had to reconcile the claims of equality with the unequal power relationship that kingship implied.

In contrast to Omar Karim’s refusal to acknowledge the problem, my informants on the Sangam Age often chose one or other of two strategies for resolving the contradiction between kingship and equality. One strategy stressed how the Pandyan kings’ exceptional sense of wisdom made them shed the typical arrogance of kings. Instead, the Pandyan kings had ruled with humility. The other strategy consisted of playing down the power of the Pandyan kings, representing them as devotees of the sangam rather than as its patrons. The sangam was elevated to share royal power, and was sometimes said even to have dominated the kings. Thus, the members of the sangam were explained as the true bearers of the wisdom of the kings in their capacity as royal advisers.

If the reconciliation of equality and kinship caused some concern to my informants, their worries became acute with regard to caste in the Sangam Age. Caste was difficult to reconcile with equality, especially since my informants typically included the absence of distinctions and differential opportunities based on caste in their definitions of equality. The questions my informants had to deal with were: Did caste exist in the Sangam Age? If so, what did caste then mean?

As in the case of kingship, different narrative methods were followed in order to reconcile caste and equality. The boldest
strategy did away with the problem by simply denying that caste had existed in the Sangam Age. The argument was that caste was a social phenomenon that had been introduced later. Less bold strategies acknowledged the existence of caste, but reinterpreted its meaning. For example, some informants argued that caste names were used as family surnames in the Sangam Age, on the analogy of the Western use. Therefore, a caste name indicated a kinship group without any implications of inequality or ritual closure. Ranked according to ideas of purity and pollution, different origins, abilities or substances were said to be later introductions, which had been imposed on previously equal kinship groups. A third strategy was to espouse a functional view of caste, arguing that caste groups in the Sangam Age had expressed a social division based on different occupations. For example, potters, weavers, priests, warriors and farmers had formed separate and named groups. These groups had been different and complementary in social functions, but no inequality was implied in the division of functions. People followed different occupations, but were still equals.  

In fact, it seemed as if the very terminology of social divisions appeared to create a crucial dilemma for those who wished to reconcile caste and equality in the Sangam Age. In Ekkaraiyur, people were used to thinking and speaking about themselves and others in terms of caste. Yet, many informants declared that they could easily envisage a society devoid of caste. Such a declaration, however, was difficult to uphold in practice, when speaking of the Sangam Age. My informants managed to avoid most references to caste as long as they dealt generally with the Tamilians. Nevertheless, whenever their accounts of the Sangam Age became more detailed, and they found it necessary to name specific persons and groups, caste terms invariably appeared. The more detailed the stories, the more imprisoned within a caste terminology my informants’ stories appeared to be. This dilemma appeared to be most difficult to overcome for those of my informants who denied that caste had existed in the Sangam Age. If they wished to avoid caste references, they had to keep their Sangam Age stories to a general level. Otherwise, they soon found themselves in the world of caste that they had denied existed. The taken-for-granted institutions
of the present, although rejected, thus wove uneasiness into their stories of the past.

Kingship and caste were also of central concern to my informants on the Ramaraj. However, kingship and caste appeared in the Ramaraj stories in a combination that contrasted forcefully with the idealisation, as well as the dilemmas, of the Sangam Age. As presented by Raghanathan, the Ramaraj offered a contrasting model to the ideal society of the Sangam Age. Whereas the Sangam Age stories typically advocated equality and uneasily censured kingship and caste, Raghanathan’s Ramaraj espoused kingship and caste, and censured equality.

Raghanathan first told me about the Ramaraj during a midnight pause in the Ekkaraiyur bhakti festival. Ayodhya had been the perfect kingdom, he said, and King Rama was the cause of this perfection. Being its rightful ruler, Rama had ruled the kingdom in a righteous way. In Ayodhya, Raghanathan told me, low-caste people had respected high-caste people, the young had respected their elders, the children their parents, and the women their husbands, and everyone had respected King Rama. The Ramaraj was a society of several interlocking hierarchies. Primarily, there was a hierarchy of castes ranked along classical Hindu lines (see Dumont 1988b). Furthermore, men ranked higher than women, and the old ranked higher than the young. Finally, Rama, the king, ranked above the people. Raghanathan’s Ramaraj was thus a society that organised inequality on the lines of caste, gender, age and political roles.

The fact that the Ramaraj was a society primarily structured by caste appeared to deny any positive assessment of equality. Nevertheless, Raghanathan also expressed some uneasiness about caste, as did my informants on the Sangam Age. If Raghanathan had faithfully followed the reasoning of classical caste ideology, he would have explained the ranking of Ayodhya castes in terms of ritual purity. Although this line of thought was definitely implied in his description of the Ramaraj, he chose, however, to explain caste in other terms. Similar to how some of my informants on the Sangam Age argued about caste, Raghanathan told me that Ayodhya’s castes were to be understood as complementary social divisions based on occupational specialisation. In other words, Ayodhya’s castes were primarily groups of occupational specialists.
Raghanathan acknowledged that castes were differently ranked, but he also argued that every caste filled a necessary social role. Thus, people in Ayodhya were not equals, but the fact that they necessarily depended on each other meant that they were equally important as parts of society. Moreover, the inequality expressed in caste ranking was further defused by Raghanathan’s belief that the relationships between people in Ayodhya had been neither oppressive nor exploitative. Instead, Raghanathan claimed that people had worked for the common good, whatever their caste, gender, age or political position.

In contrast to how the Sangam Age stories tended to marginalise the role of the Pandyan kings, King Rama held the central and all-important position in Raghanathan’s Ramaraj. In fact, while it was plausible that the Sangam Age would have fulfilled my informants’ notions about the ideal society better without the Pandyan kings, Ayodhya without King Rama would indeed not have been an ideal society. Raghanathan’s perspective on Rama’s kingship drew on notions concerning ideal kingship that have been outlined in Indian philosophical, religious and legal writings. These traditions emphasised that the ideal king ruled in accordance with what is called dharma.

Dharma, which I discussed in the context of party politics in Chapter 4, is a concept that has been given a range of meanings by different philosophical-religious schools. Commonly, dharma has been equated with a lawful and moral order, and what constitutes such an order has been the subject of interpretation since early times. In fact, Shulman notes that dharma is a term that eludes definition (1979: 652). Even Rama, the ‘… very embodiment of divine order in universe’ (1979: 654), occasionally found it difficult to define dharma. As Shulman writes:

Rama himself expresses this idea in his reply to Valin in the Sanskrit text [of the Ramayana]: “Dharma is subtle and very hard for {even} the virtuous to understand. … only the inner soul knows what is right and what is wrong.” (1979: 664)
A recurring notion is that dharma involves the ordering not only of human relationships but of the whole universe of which humans are but a part (Shulman 1979: 652). This notion was central to Raghanathan’s account of the Ramaraj, which suggested that what happened in one part of the universe affected the other parts. Rama upheld the ordered interdependence between people, nature and the supernatural, as well as between castes, genders and age groups, and within the family. As Raghanathan told me, hunger, disease, death and misery were unknown during the Ramaraj. Neither wars nor demons were able to devastate the kingdom. The rains never failed. Fields and gardens yielded abundantly year after year. Not even the cobra’s bite was deadly then, Raghanathan asserted.

This perspective was also apparent in a story about the Ramaraj that Mr Govindasami once told me. Govindasami was a postgraduate student of computer science at a Madurai college, but lived with his mother in Ekkaraiyur. He, too, was a member of the Brahman bhakti group in Ekkaraiyur. Travelling home from a bhakti festival, Govindasami told me the following story about how the dharma of Rama’s rule had once been disrupted:

Ramaraj was the perfect society. Death, except by old age, was unknown in Ayodhya during King Rama’s rule. Yet, one day it so happened that a small boy died. The father brought the boy’s corpse to King Rama and said: ‘King Rama! Some misdeed must have been committed in your kingdom. Otherwise my boy would not have died.’

King Rama investigated the matter and soon discovered a man of mixed castes who was reading the Vedic scriptures. As only Brahmans were allowed to read the Vedic scriptures, Rama realised that this was the misdeed that had caused the boy’s death. The misdeed had opened the way for evils to enter the kingdom, and death had come to the boy.

King Rama acted promptly: The Vedic scriptures were taken away from the man of mixed castes, and he was returned to his appropriate occupation as an agricultural
labourer. Having thus corrected the misdeed, Rama had restored the perfection of the Ramaraj, and the boy immediately came back to life.\footnote{86}

The interconnections between different parts of the universe are evident in the events of Govindasami’s story. One man’s wrongful action upset the lawful and moral order of dharma, death entered the kingdom and a small boy died. In fact, Govindasami told me the story in order to illustrate that King Rama’s dharma primarily consisted of upholding the differentiation between castes. The moral was that each caste, as well as each person, was to occupy a single and exclusive position in the hierarchical order of Ayodhya. Different moral and lawful actions were appropriate to each position, and a violation in one part of the order was a threat to the whole order. It is worth noticing that Govindasami described the wrongdoer as being a man of mixed castes. The wrongdoer was thus the result of an earlier violation of caste endogamy. Govindasami implied, in my view, that such a person would be most likely to violate the dharma of King Rama, illustrating how one misdeed begets another. Raghanathan had told me that people in Ayodhya were content with their different lots and did not desire changes. They were happy, and honest because strife and competition did not exist. Instead, people worked together for the common good, content with their different lots. As Raghanathan expressed it, ‘neither did the washer-man wish to become a farmer, nor did the Brahman desire to become a merchant’. Of course, in Govindasami’s story that did not apply to the man of mixed castes.

As I have shown above, kingship was assessed differently in the stories of the Ramaraj, the Ummah and the Sangam Age. King Rama was the instrument for dharma, the lawful and moral order, and the Ramaraj was a perfect society only so long as he successfully upheld dharma. The problem of the king negating equality was not an issue, because the Ramaraj was not built on equality. Also in the Ummah, the ideal king served as an instrument for imposing ‘the true Muslim principles’, ruling according to laws ordained by God. Nevertheless, kingship associated uneasily with the equality of all Muslims. Kings also ruled uneasily in the Sangam Age stories, negating as they did notions of equality. In contrast to the Ramaraj and the Ummah, there
was no dharma or ‘true Muslim principles’ to uphold. The kings had to rely on the sangam and notions of Tamilness for strength. Caste was likewise differently assessed. In the Ramaraj, caste structured society and the king’s principal task was to uphold the differentiation between castes. While caste held an ambiguous place in the Sangam Age, it was a non-issue as far as the Ummah was concerned. Opinions on caste came to a head when the role of the Brahmins was evaluated.

The Brahmins in the Ramaraj and the Sangam Age

One point of striking difference between advocates of the Ramaraj and the Sangam Age was found in their understanding of the Brahmins’ role. First, I shall discuss how the Brahmins in Ayodhya were represented by my Brahman informants on the Ramaraj. Then, I shall turn to the role of the Brahmins in my non-Brahman informants’ accounts of the Sangam Age.

The Brahmins in Ayodhya held the uppermost position in the hierarchical, and ideally static, caste society of the Ramaraj. My Brahman informants on the Ramaraj asserted that the Brahmins’ role had been important and influential. They had pursued scholarship, conducted the rituals necessary for the well-being of the kingdom, and advised the king on how to rule in accordance with dharma. The Brahmins had not used their position to exploit people of other castes, but had been motivated by a will to serve the kingdom and its people. Hence, their motives were represented as altruistic. As Raghanathan told me, the Brahmins of Ayodhya had been poor because of their lack of interest in amassing worldly wealth. The Brahmins had loved knowledge and wisdom, and had lived on other people’s charity, accepting only what was given without the asking (cf. Mauss 1980: 53-59). As Raghanathan expressed it, the Brahmins’ entanglement with ‘the nonsense of worldly wealth’ came later, after the Ramaraj was no more.

Representing Ayodhya’s Brahmins as altruistic servants of the kingdom and its people obviously gave legitimacy to the caste-based inequality of the Ramaraj society. As one version of the Ramaraj among many others in India, it also revealed my Brahman
informants’ understanding of their appropriate role in contemporary society. To some extent, it also explained why my informants believed that contemporary society fell far below the ideals of the Ramaraj. Any society that devalued the Brahman clearly negated their version of the Ramaraj, as did an acknowledged Brahman entanglement with ‘the nonsense of worldly wealth’.

In contrast, the devaluation of Brahmans was a central theme of the Sangam Age stories. These uniformly accused the Brahmans of wilfully having destroyed the Pandyan kingdom, where kings had ruled without the arrogance of power and where caste had not implied inequality. The ocean’s waves had not drowned it, but the Sangam Age had been submerged by the waves of corruption for which the Brahmans were held responsible.

The devaluation of the Brahmans was grounded in the argument that they were immigrants from North India. Their migration to the South was represented as one episode in an Indian history of successive waves of migration. The Tamilians had fled the sinking continent of Lemuria. The Aryans had entered India from the steppes of Central Asia. The North Indian Brahmans had settled in South India. I have already discussed the Tamilian migration. Now it is time to recount how the migrations of the Aryans and their descendants, the Brahmans, were represented.

The Aryans entered India through the Khyber Pass, Mr Natarajan told me. Natarajan was a primary school teacher, who also served as the secretary of the Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangam. He was a well-known and outspoken sympathiser of Tamil nationalism, although not member of any political organisation or party. Deeply interested in Tamil history and culture, he was particularly fond of ancient epics and poetry from which he could quote extensively. Below, I give his version of the coming of the Aryans and the Brahmans.

According to Natarajan, the Aryans were pastoral nomads of little civilisation when they arrived in India, where they encountered the flourishing Dravidian civilisation of an urbanised and agricultural society in the Indus Valley. The Dravidians had tamed the rivers by extensive and sophisticated systems of irrigation, and the agricultural fertility supported great cities, such as Mohenjodaro and Harappa.
The Aryans realised their inferiority when they saw the Dravidian accomplishments. Ridden by envy and greed, they coveted the Dravidians’ wealth and therefore attacked the Dravidians and their cities. However, as they were inferior to the Dravidians also in military and political accomplishments, they resorted to ‘trickery and cunning’, instead of fighting in an open manner. ‘Trickery and cunning’ had always been the leading themes of Aryan warfare, Natarajan asserted, comparing Aryan warfare with the strategies of the British conquerors of India. As the British had subdued the Indians by means of ‘divide and rule’, so the Aryans exploited Dravidian dissensions and naivety to their advantage.

The Aryans’ strategy of ‘trickery and cunning’ succeeded, according to Natarajan, and they eventually managed to impose their lordship over all the Dravidian societies of northern India. Dravidian civilisation was destroyed in the process. The Dravidian cities were razed to the ground, and the systems of irrigation fell into ruins. Aryan language, religion, and ways of life were imposed on the Dravidians, whose culture vanished so completely that people stopped regarding themselves as Dravidians.

The Brahmans were the descendants of the Aryans, Natarajan explained to me. They were as envious and greedy as their Aryan ancestors. Having destroyed the Dravidian culture of the north, the Brahmans cast their eyes on South India. Attracted by the prosperity of the Sangam Age society, groups of northern Brahmans began to settle in the Pandyan kingdom. They settled peacefully, realising that they were too few to conquer the Tamilians by force. However, aiming at establishing their overlordship, the Brahmans again resorted to using deceit in order to fulfil their avowed goal of destroying the South Indian Dravidian civilisation.

I have stressed the uneasiness about caste in the Sangam Age stories. Yet, however problematic caste might be in the Sangam Age, any sense of unease left my informants as the Brahman settlers entered their stories. In fact, my informants uniformly claimed that caste had been the Brahmans’ principal means of suppressing the Tamilians. Castes, as imposed by the Brahmans, became the units of a rigid hierarchy of inequality with the Brahmans at its apex. A hierarchy complete with moral, religious, economic and political underpinnings was established.
The Brahmans were said to have used a twofold strategy to force their notions of caste on the Tamilians. On the one hand, some Tamilian groups were deliberately corrupted or denigrated, and then assigned to low positions in the hierarchy. As a final touch, the Brahmans imposed a stigma of untouchability on some Tamilians. On the other hand, the Brahmans encouraged selected groups of Tamilians to imitate Brahman habits, their reward for compliance being a high position in the caste hierarchy. The imitation of Brahman habits involved in the latter strategy was given an ironic twist by my informants’ claim that habits nowadays associated with high castes had earlier been the habits of all Tamilians. Similarly, the Brahmans’ original habits were said to be comparable with those nowadays associated with low castes. In a reversal of conventional stereotypes of caste and diet, Natarajan thus claimed that the Brahmans had eaten meat and drunk alcohol when they were settling in South India. This was clearly spelt out in the Brahmans’ own Vedic scriptures, he told me, where one could read how the Aryans and Brahmans had habitually slaughtered cows and got themselves drunk on the intoxicating soma drink. The Tamilians, in contrast, had been vegetarian teetotallers, as all Dravidians had been originally. Nonetheless, as the Brahmans recognised the moral superiority of the Tamilian diet, they soon took to imitating the Tamilians, while shedding their own inferior dietary habits. Consequently, Natarajan argued that the conventional stereotype of the Brahman as a vegetarian teetotaller first became a fact following the Brahman settlement in the South, and by conscious imitation of Tamilian habits. Implicit in this reversal of conventional stereotypes was the claim that the original diet of the Brahmans marked them out as inferior to the Tamilians. The Brahmans could have been satisfied with sharing the morally superior diet with the Tamilians, but this was not the case, Natarajan argued. As they aimed at suppressing the Tamilians, the Brahmans set out to degrade the dietary habits of the Tamilians. Thus, the Tamilians were successfully converted to a diet of meat and alcohol, marking them as inferior.

My informants typically left much unexplained about the Brahmans’ overthrow of the Sangam Age society. They agreed that the Brahmans had imposed caste inequalities on the egalitarian
CHAPTER FIVE

Tamilian society, but details about how they went about it were habitually omitted from their stories. The expression ‘trickery and cunning’ served to sum up the Brahman strategy. However, the deceitful means and ambitions of the Brahmans were said to be unknown to the ideals of the Sangam Age. The Tamilians had therefore found it difficult to defend themselves against the cleverness of the Brahmans. The Tamilians were said to be naive and trustful, an easy prey for the Brahmans’ assaults. The Brahmans were overwhelmingly represented as frauds, pursuing a long-term master-plan to establish their overlordship by creating conflicts among the Tamilians, or exploiting already existing ones.

My informants spoke about this purposeful corruption in terms of degradation, impurity and unchastity. Sometimes, the Brahmans were spoken of in an erotic imagery as having seduced the Tamilians (cf. Ramaswamy 1997a: 114-121, 1997b). The idiom of corruption focused on the Tamil language, which the Brahmans were said to have deliberately tainted. As one of my informants put it, ‘the chaste Tamil was seduced and defiled’. Promoting their language of Sanskrit, the Brahmans were said to have replaced Tamil words by Sanskrit ones. The names of gods, people, and places were sanskritised. The literature of the Sangams was subverted. Epics were rewritten in order to depict Tamilian heroes as villains and Tamil was belittled as a literary and religious language. Since Sanskrit became in practice the exclusive medium of school instruction, education was made a Brahman privilege.

The Tamil language had been pure at the time of the Sangam Age, my informants claimed. This notion of linguistic purity linked Tamil to purity in other contexts. In Ekkaraiyur, for example, watered milk was said to be impure. The original substance, the milk, lost its purity by being mixed with another substance, the water. Similarly, a marriage between people of different castes could be said to be impure, as it involved the mixing of people of different qualities. Purity was also linked with notions of chastity. Tamil was commonly spoken of and visualised as a mother or a maiden, thereby emphasising chastity as an ideal of womanhood (cf. Schiffman 1999: 29-32; Ramaswamy 1992, 1997a: Chapter 3, 1997b; Annamalai 1979).
The Tamil language of the Sangam Age was said to have existed in two forms: Sentamil and Kodungtamil. In addition to their status as pure forms of Tamil, Sentamil and Kodungtamil represented a high degree of language refinement. My informants in Ekkaraiyur described Sentamil as the most ancient and original form of Tamil. It was a literary language, and said to be the most refined form of Tamil ever known. Most people found Sentamil difficult to understand when they encountered it in texts, or more rarely in speech, and it was not used in Ekkaraiyur except in poetry, proverbs and formalised phrases of address.

Kodungtamil was similarly said to be an ancient form of Tamil, but it was typically described as a colloquial form of Tamil, in contrast to the literary Sentamil.\(^8^8\) However, while the ancient roots of Kodungtamil were an agreed fact, opinions in Ekkaraiyur diverged on its contemporary status. Some informants asserted that Kodungtamil was a language of the past that no one either spoke or wrote nowadays. Other informants argued that Kodungtamil, in addition to its ancient status, was also a cultivated but colloquial form of contemporary spoken Tamil. People of this opinion did not hesitate to describe themselves as speakers of Kodungtamil.

Despite disagreements on the contemporary status of Kodungtamil, both Sentamil and Kodungtamil were seen as ideal forms of language. In addition to purity and refinement, age was considered to be one of their core qualities. Informants stressed two central aspects of the notion of age. First, Sentamil and Kodungtamil were assumed to have come into being in a distant past as already complete and highly refined forms of language. In this sense, they represented a primordial linguistic excellence.\(^8^9\) This excellence was one of the most persistent qualities of the Tamil language throughout the ages, informants argued, for example claiming that contemporary Tamil was capable of expressing thoughts, nuances and connotations that could not be expressed in other languages (see, for example, Durairaj’s arguments in Chapter 7). The most enthusiastic advocates in Ekkaraiyur stated that Tamil was the most beautiful language ever known. Secondly, people in Ekkaraiyur took a delight in insisting that Tamil was the oldest language still in use among contemporary Indian languages. This continuous use was understood as a testimony to the superior qualities of Tamil. The
notion of a long and unbroken linguistic history characterised by primordial excellence was an expression of people’s belief that they were the heirs to a linguistic tradition that not only had its roots in the distant past but also was of contemporary relevance.

My informants explicitly connected the purity of Sentamil and Kodungtamil with the idea of their primordial linguistic excellence. Indeed, they were pure because they owed nothing to other languages, being exclusively Tamil (cf. Schiffman 1999 and Annamalai 1979 on notions of linguistic purity). The two functioned primarily as idealised forms of language against which actually spoken and written forms of Tamil were measured. The history of the Tamil language was not seen as one of a static maintenance of initial linguistic perfection. On the contrary, informants argued that Tamil had gone through a process of linguistic degeneration, mainly due to the harmful influence of other languages and starting with the wilful corruption by the Brahmans. Thus, although the continuous use of Tamil represented an unbroken link with the past, contemporary forms of Tamil did not attain the ideals of the past. Yet, many people believed that the process of linguistic degeneration could be reversed.

The purity of the Tamil language was central to my informants’ understanding of the perfection of the Sangam Age society. The destruction of the language was thus the highpoint of the overthrow of that society by the Brahmans. Almost as an afterthought, some informants added that, after having spoilt the Tamil language, the Brahmans ousted the Tamilians as the royal advisers, and thereby secured their position as political overlords.90

The destruction and resurrection of the Sangam Age in a local context

The stories located the Brahman destruction of the Sangam Age in ancient days, but my informants saw the destruction as also relevant for contemporary Ekkaramaiyur. In a way, the details omitted by the generalised ‘trickery and cunning’ were filled in by references to contemporary local events. In other words, my informants’ understanding of the remote past was fleshed out with their
understanding of the near past and the present, and vice versa, leading to an intertwining of stories relating to different times. For example, my informants argued that the Brahmans had established their lordship over the Tamilians by means of imposing caste divisions. Similarly, Ekkaraiyur’s Brahmans were said to have suppressed the non-Brahman people of Ekkaraiyur by means of caste. This was, for example, Mr Arumugam’s argument as he told me that people of the village had earlier been treated as the servants of the Brahmans. Arumugam was the assistant librarian of the public library in Ekkaraiyur. As a Pallar he belonged to one of the formerly untouchable castes. Focusing on Brahman oppression, he told me that the Untouchables had been forced to live under a particularly harsh regime. They had been forbidden to enter the temples and barred from visiting public tea-stalls and from drawing water from the village wells. They had also been denied entry to the Agraharam, the Brahman street. As the only village school had been situated in the Agraharam, the children of the Untouchables had effectively been denied an education. As Arumugam put it, echoing Xavier’s account of the life of the pannaiyals (see Chapter 3), the Untouchables had been put to such hard work by their Brahman lords that their lives had consisted of little more than working, eating and sleeping.

Arumugam claimed that the overlordship of the Brahmans in Ekkaraiyur had begun when the latter destroyed the Sangam Age in ancient days. In this sense, Ekkaraiyur was seen as one local arena in the establishment of Brahman overlordship, associating the village with the Sangam Age. However, when Arumugam talked about the harsh regime of the Brahmans, he was mostly talking about the recent past of the village. Aspects of the destruction of the Sangam Age had prevailed until the Tamilians had eventually freed themselves, Arumugam argued, but Brahman overlordship was nowadays effectively broken in Ekkaraiyur and elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. Indeed, Arumugam claimed that he himself, together with other people in Ekkaraiyur, had been instrumental in breaking Brahman dominance in the village.

The Brahman rule in Ekkaraiyur was said to have been challenged in a variety of ways. For example, Arumugam told me that he had questioned the notion of caste in a number of public speeches. In
particular, he had attacked the superior position of the Brahmins. He also claimed to have put his arguments into action. In one instance he had refused to address an Ekkaraiyur Brahman in the respectful terms expected from an Untouchable. In a similar defiance of Brahman superiority, another informant, a non-Brahman but not an Untouchable, vividly remembered the day when he first dared to challenge the Brahmins by walking through the Ekkaraiyur Agraharam with his sandals on.

Arumugam did not consider his verbal attacks to be directed against individual Brahmins in Ekkaraiyur. In fact, he remembered the kindness of a Brahman schoolteacher who had discreetly allowed him to attend the village school in the Agraharam. His attacks had been aimed at the Brahmins in general, he told me, and had been part of a widespread national agitation against Brahmins in the 1960s and 1970s. Local Brahmins were attacked as representatives of their caste, not as individuals.

The breaches of etiquette quoted could be ascribed to the personal quirks of malcontents and glossed over as insignificant. Yet, my informants spoke about such acts of defiance as meaningful acts of rebellion on behalf of the Tamilians against the Brahmins. They argued that something of the Sangam Age had been redeemed by their daring. Sandaled feet in the Agraharam did not, of course, break Brahman dominance. But, the sandals stated publicly that the time had come when Brahman superiority could be questioned. Such acts had wider ramifications for my informants than was implied by personal encounters and private motives.

These wider ramifications were evident in Mr Pitchai’s memories of his schooldays. Now a middle aged health-inspector, Pitchai, whom I mentioned in Chapter 4, told me that he had once led a successful agitation against a schoolteacher who taught the Hindi language. According to Pitchai, one aim of the campaign had been to defend the Tamil language from being corrupted by Hindi. Nevertheless, the schoolteacher was also an Ekkaraiyur Brahman, and Pitchai stressed that the agitation had been directed against the position of the local Brahmins as well as Brahmins in Tamil Nadu collectively. In Pitchai’s memory, the act of opposing his Brahman teacher of Hindi was entangled in politics that extended into both the Sangam Age and contemporary Indian politics. Defending the Tamil
language was, Pitchai argued, an opportunity to exact some measure of revenge for centuries of Brahman oppression in Tamil Nadu. As one of the co-organisers of the padimandram debate (see Chapter 7), Pitchai continued to view himself as a defender of Tamil and opposer of Brahmans, albeit in less exciting ways than in his schooldays.

Defiance of Brahmans did not need to take assertive forms. More typical in Ekkaraiyur was to consciously weed out things that were considered Brahmanic, and by implication Sanskrit, from one’s life. Family functions were often celebrated in ways that dispensed with Brahman priests and Sanskrit ritual. Tamil names replaced Sanskrit names of gods and humans. Those who were most keen on the issue strove to eliminate any Sanskrit vocabulary from their everyday speech, an almost impossible task. These, and similar low-key actions, were interpreted as part of devotion to the Tamil language (cf. Ramaswamy 1997a; Schifferman (1999). Such devotion was also expressed in a reverential attitude towards the Tamil language that maintained that it was the oldest and most refined of Indian languages, and its writers the greatest men and women of Indian and indeed world literature. Tiruvalluvar was particularly singled out as the greatest of India’s ancient literary sages. His kurals were quoted in everyday conversation, at home and in public places, as a guide to moral conduct and judgement.

Devotion to Tamil and defiance of Brahmans appeared as two sides of the same coin. Just as devotion to Tamil could arouse strong emotions, so the attitude towards Brahmans could become very emotional. ‘I hate them’, a young man told me bluntly. His family had taken part in the conflict between landlords and tenants and now controlled the land of their former Brahman landlord. The refusal to pay rents to a Brahman landlord was for him part of his family’s defiance of age-old Brahman oppression.

The Ramaraj in a local setting

Given its alternative and more positive assessment of the role of the Brahmans, the Ramaraj held a special appeal for Ekkaraiyur’s Brahmans. It presented them with an inverted image of
contemporary conditions in Ekkaraiyur. The dissimilarities between Ayodhya and Ekkaraiyur were obvious. While people of different occupational castes had lived in harmony in Ayodhya, the tenants rebelled against the landlords in Ekkaraiyur. In Ayodhya, people had worked for the common good, but in Ekkaraiyur everyone was said to strive for himself. King Rama had ruled with justice, but the Ekkaraiyur politicians were believed to be motivated by self-seeking greed, although they presented themselves as altruistic ‘social workers’.

My Brahman informants on the Ramaraj attributed the inverse conditions of Ayodhya and contemporary Ekkaraiyur to the fact that, while the Brahmans had participated effectively in ruling Ayodhya, they had lost their leading position in Ekkaraiyur. Many of my Brahman informants felt themselves to be victimised by the state, by the politicians and by self-seeking non-Brahmans in general. For them, the Ramaraj served as a blueprint for how the ideal society could be organised, one which simultaneously referred to Ayodhya ruled by King Rama and to Brahman idealisations of Ekkaraiyur’s recent past. It expressed a Brahman analysis of the wrongs of present-day Ekkaraiyur.

Several of my Brahman informants were convinced that the Ramaraj could be created anew, even without the direct intervention of Rama the god. In order for this to come about, personal reform was said to be necessary. The theme of personal reform that was prominent in bhakti devotion pointed in this direction. In Raghanganth’s view, his devotion to Rama served to counter his selfishness and material entanglements. By freeing himself from selfishness and ‘the nonsense of worldly wealth’, he was taking one small step towards the recreation of the Ramaraj. I shall return to similar topics in the following chapters, discussing how self-reform was thought to be a means of attaining the ideal society.

The negative role given to Brahmans in the Sangam Age stories would certainly make it problematic for a Brahman to embrace the Sangam Age enthusiastically as an ideal society. I did not come across any Brahman in Ekkaraiyur who spoke without reserve about that era. On the other hand, Brahman criticism of the Sangam Age was typically low-key. Nevertheless, Ramaswamy documents that several Brahmans have made important contributions to the
movement of Tamil revivalism (1997a: 194-204), but she pertinently notes that:

For most sections of the devotional community, and indeed for the bulk of the Tamil-speaking populace today, the very category “Brahman devotee of Tamil” would be a contradiction in terms. (1997a: 194).

In Ekkaraiyur, the Sangam Age raised further difficulties for the Brahman. The claims of political parties and organisations that they had succeeded in freeing Tamil Nadu from an age-old Brahman stranglehold combined with popular accounts of local Brahman oppression. Exposed as an oppressive, arrogant, and exploitative usurper of foreign extraction who had distorted and subverted Tamil values, the Brahman was denied the Sangam Age.

**Critique of the Ummah**

While Muslim informants could agree on the necessity of ‘the true Muslim principles’ for attaining an ideal society, there were different opinions on whether or not Middle Eastern countries were ruled by these principles. Omar Karim admitted certain flaws, but argued that, for example, Saudi Arabia and Iran were more or less ruled by ‘true Muslim principles’. People who had worked in the Middle East tended to disagree. Apart from complaining that the food was different and the cost of living high, they resented having to live in segregated workers’ quarters where their freedom of movement was severely limited. In addition, they complained about the Arabs’ condescending ways towards them. A lorry driver for example, told me that he had been treated as something akin to a working animal that could talk. Such resentment could become particularly acute because of the shared religion. On the bus to Madurai, for example, a man told me about the disappointment he had felt as a worker in a Gulf state. Initially, he had been happy to go to a Muslim country where he would be among fellow Muslims. He was soon disillusioned. In the eyes of the Gulf Arabs, he was
simply another Indian worker, he told me. The fact that he was a Muslim did not seem to matter to them.

People with first-hand experience of working in Middle Eastern countries thus tended to be sceptical about the Middle East as a region for the realised Ummah. Whereas Omar Karim and others imagined a society that was built on a shared religious understanding and where all Muslims were equals, the people who had worked in the Middle East spoke of societies that discriminated on ethnic and national lines. However, the Muslim guest workers’ criticism of the Middle Eastern countries was never aimed at the validity of ‘the true Muslim principles’ as such. Rather, they argued that the principles had not been implemented in the Middle Eastern countries, as was proved by the treatment of Indian Muslims.

Non-Muslim critics tended to question ‘the true Muslim principles’ in a way that challenged the validity of the principles for an ideal society. Obviously, this criticism was related to the complex relationships between Hindus and Muslims in India, as well as between India and Pakistan. At the time of my fieldwork, these relationships were as complicated and strained as ever. Agitation, particularly in North India, centred on alleged age-old differences and enmities between Hindus and Muslims. Tension seemed to grow steadily in volume and intensity in the immediate region of Ekkaraiyur, and violence occasionally erupted. Although there was a growing sense of mistrust between them, Muslims and non-Muslims in Ekkaraiyur were at the same time stressing their mutually peaceful relationships (see Alm 1996).

The non-Muslims’ critique of the Ummah involved two incompatible arguments, neither of which was directly related to the Middle East. On the one hand, it was claimed that the Muslims formed their own moral community within Ekkaraiyur. According to this argument, the Muslims applied two different sets of values: one among themselves and another towards non-Muslims. As one informant expressed it, the Muslims were willing to help people of their own faith, but were ready to take advantage of any other people. While they were helpful and generous towards other Muslims, they were callous, ruthless and greedy in their dealings with non-Muslims.
This view was often combined with the incompatible argument that the relationships between Muslims were characterised by feuds and violence that negated a moral community. After hesitating for a long time, a non-Muslim schoolteacher decided one evening to reveal to me the ‘truth’ about Muslim family life. He mainly hinted at the nature of different acts of violence and never let himself become involved in too much detail. That is, he did not explicitly name any people, and warned me that most of their crimes had never been revealed to the public. In fact, he did not choose to reveal how he had come to know about the crimes. Despite these caveats, I was told a chilling story of murder, incest, greed and betrayal in local Muslim families, a story which I find it unnecessary to relate here.

In fact, the schoolteacher seemed to apply a textbook perspective to the lives of local Muslim families. His story about local Muslim family life referred in equal parts to local rumours and to the colourful stories about bloody strife within bygone North Indian Muslim dynasties that could be found in the textbooks. He constructed a synthetic story from these two sources, arriving at a stereotypical Muslim mentality. In his story, the mentality of the Muslims was essentially identical, whether they were his neighbours or lived in the Middle East, whether they were contemporaries or belonged to the pages of textbooks. Therefore, as the sordid accounts of bygone palace intrigues served to illustrate what went on behind the doors of Muslim families in the next village, the alleged moral failings of an Ekkaraiyur Muslim served to characterise the typical Muslim mentality.

Although the two arguments about the Muslims were contradictory, they served the teacher and other critics as grounds for rejecting the validity of ‘the true Muslim principles’. They concluded that people who lived by such principles could never aspire to an ideal society. On the contrary, ‘the true Muslim principles’ ensured disharmony and strife. The principles turned people against each other, even within a moral community and the family. Against this rejection stood Omar Karim’s claim that whenever ‘the true Muslim principles’ were observed the ideal society would be realised.
A pattern of who embraced which golden age was noticeable in Ekkaraiyur: Brahmans tended to favour the Ramaraj, non-Brahmans the Sangam Age, and Muslims the Ummah. Nevertheless, a preference for the Ramaraj, the Sangam Age, or the Ummah can not be seen as mirroring a simple division of values within Ekkaraiyur between Brahmans, non-Brahmans and Muslims. Even if the rhetorical uses of the different golden ages clashed, they had core notions in common.

One such notion was the concern for good leadership. Leadership was the pivot of the imaginaries of the ideal society - vested with the Pandyan kings and their sangam advisers; in the guise of King Rama and his Brahman advisers; and attributed to the ruler who enforced ‘the true Muslim principles’. In any of these cases, the golden age came to an end as the nature of the leaders changed. In fact, my Brahman informants on the Ramaraj, my non-Brahman informants on the Sangam Age, and my Muslim informants on the Ummah tended to share the similar dismal view of present-day leadership. Even though leaders in Ekkaraiyur described themselves as humble altruists, their alleged selfishness was seen as failing the standards expressed in the stories about ideal societies.

Although the Ramaraj, the Sangam Age and the Ummah stories provided people in Ekkaraiyur with very different models of the ideal society, the desirability of social harmony was another shared concern. In 1966, Bailey published his article ‘The peasant view of the bad life’ (1971). The article was based on his fieldwork in Orissa, and Bailey described a moral community that could be roughly equated with the village world. Within this moral community, people shared a set of values that governed their interactions, but the same values were not seen as relevant in relations with outsiders, Bailey argued. In fact, the people of the moral community were deeply suspicious of outsiders, in particular of the representatives of the state. Outsiders were set apart from the moral community by ‘. . . the way they speak, the way they dress, their deportment, the things they speak about as valuable and important . . ..’ (1971: 303). Their intentions were mistrusted and even overt benevolence was suspected as a ‘hypocritical cover’ for ulterior designs. As Bailey put it, ‘by definition all horses are Trojan’ (1971: 302).
A moral community in Bailey’s sense, that is, governing interaction, did not exist in Ekkaraiyur. Yet, taken as a dreamt-of golden age, understood as a harmonious society governed by a unified set of accepted values, the notion of a moral community did flourish in the several versions of the Sangam Age, the Ramaraj and the Ummah. They differed in scope, detail and outline, but represented a yearning for a society in which people lived in harmony both with themselves and with others. In contrast to Bailey’s moral community, the Ekkaraiyur examples were neither confined to the village, nor to a village world. Instead, Ekkaraiyur was routinely imagined as being but one small part of a larger world, expressed in the notion of a golden age. In the next chapter I shall take a look at other imaginary constructions of the ideal society, belonging to the near past and to the present, in contrast to the golden ages discussed in this chapter. One of these imaginary constructions was located in Ekkaraiyur, while the other focused on foreign countries.
Chapter 6  The mentality of the ideal society

The professor of Govindasami, the postgraduate student of computer science who told me how death had once entered the Ramaraj (see Chapter 5), spent a month in the United States. On returning to India, he told Govindasami that American society was probably as close as one could get to the Ramaraj. Although Govindasami did not know which particular aspects of American society his professor had in mind, he guessed that the unselfishness and altruism of the Americans had impressed his professor. This remarkable opinion of the Americans sets the theme of this chapter in line with that of the social mentality necessary for achieving the ideal society.

My discussion of the stories about the Sangam Age, the Ummah and the Ramaraj in the previous chapter focused on the mentality of leaders. In this chapter, I broaden the discussion to the mentality of people in general, tapping into another source of imaginary constructions associated with the ideal society. People’s mentality, it was insisted in these stories, determined the course of society.

First I discuss the idealisation of people of foreign countries. I touched on this issue when I described how Omar Karim viewed Saudi Arabia and Iran as contemporary near-examples of the Ummah. This practice of idealising ‘the moral foreigner’ was widespread in Ekkaraiyur, commonly aiming at highlighting Indian deficiencies. Stories were told about the material affluence of foreign countries, but primacy was given to the social mentality that had created that affluence.

Having dealt with these images of ‘moral others’ in other parts of the world, I discuss the notion that a changed social mentality was possible, turning to the stories told about a man named Marimuttu, a deified man pertaining to the not so distant past of Ekkaraiyur. The stories about Marimuttu not only explained the misfortunes of Ekkaraiyur, they also spelt out the way to overcome the obstacles to the ideal society. According to the morality of the Marimuttu stories, the people in Ekkaraiyur could become as unselfish and altruistic as ‘the moral foreigner’ if they would only pursue a process of self-reform.
Knowing ‘the moral foreigner’

Imagining ‘the moral foreigner’ is linked to a perspective that has attracted a mass of scholarship since Said’s path-breaking study of Western discursive constructions of the Orient (Said 1979). Using the label ‘orientalism’, Said argued that the learned European discourses about the East both shaped and were an instrument of Western colonial domination. Opponents and supporters have elaborated considerably on the concept of orientalism and its scope, mapping the nuances and contradictions in constructions of the non-West. Teng, for example, notes the similar practice of imperial China to ‘orientalise’ the indigenous people of Taiwan (2004). In this light, orientalism appears not only as a Western strategy, but also as associated with other forms of colonial hegemony.

Orientalism has spawned the mirror-like concept of ‘occidentalism’, which refers to discursive constructions of the West. It has been noted that occidentalist and orientalist discourses often appear together and are dependent upon each other (see, for example, Chen 2002; Spencer 1995). Occidentalist discourses likewise appear to crop up in a variety of contexts. In a volume edited by Carrier (1995), this is amply exemplified. Carrier, moreover, differentiates between occidentalism within and outside anthropology. The former kind of occidentalism is associated with the comparative perspective of anthropology when people ‘outside the core of the West’ are studied (1995: 12). It is often ‘the silent partner of their [the anthropologists’] work and debate’ (1995: 1). The latter kind of occidentalism refers to ‘the ways that people outside the West imagine themselves, for their self-image often develops in contrast to their stylized image of the West’ (1995: 6). Carrier defines this kind of occidentalism as ‘an object of anthropological study’ (1995: 12).

Occidentalist discourses express a wide range of attitudes towards the West. Buruma and Margalit, for example, exclusively connect the concept of occidentalism with a hostile view of the West (2004). Chen, on the other hand, documents how different occidentalist discourses have been evoked in post-Maoist China by different groups for different purposes. As he concludes, occidentalism can
serve ‘...both a discourse of oppression and a discourse of liberation.’ (2002: 3)

The fact that the Ekkaraiyur notions about foreign countries cover a wider geographic area than is implied by the Western focus of occidentalism makes it preferable to speak about ‘the moral foreigner’ rather than in terms of occidentalist discourses. Nevertheless, apart from the wider geographical scope of the Ekkaraiyur notions about foreign countries, they share similarities to other instances of occidentalism. An interesting parallel between the occidentalist discourses in post-Maoist China and the notions of the imagined ‘moral foreigner’ in Ekkaraiyur is their principal aim. As Cheng argues, the discourses of occidentalism evoked within post-Maoist China are primarily aimed at Chinese contexts, as hegemonic discourses aiming at disciplining the population or as counter-discourses against such attempts (2002: 3-6). Similarly, I suggest that the Ekkaraiyur notions of ‘the moral foreigner’ primarily served as a critique of Ekkaraiyur and Indian contexts.

But differences should also be noted. For example, Buruma and Margalit argue that the denigration of the Western mind is typical of the anti-Western occidentalism they are studying. As they put it, the typical argument is that:

The mind of the West is capable of great economic success, to be sure, and of developing and promoting advanced technology, but cannot grasp the higher things in life, for it lacks spirituality and understanding of human suffering. (Buruma & Margalit 2004: 75).

In Ekkaraiyur, it should be noted, both the superior material standard and the superior mentality of the West were emphasised, with the material standard seen as a consequence of the mentality. In fact, people in Ekkaraiyur in the late 1980s were convinced that foreign countries were better societies than India and that foreigners embodied a superior social mentality. This conviction was primarily based on impressions from media sources, such as films, newspaper and magazine articles, and television and radio programmes. Accounts of travels abroad and of foreigners in India also played a role. Few people in Ekkaraiyur had personal experience of foreign
countries. In addition to the handful of people who had worked in the Middle East, a couple of old men had been abroad as soldiers during World War II. More people had met foreigners of diverse nationalities in the cities and in the hill resort of Kodaikanal. For example, Swedish missionaries kept an office in Dindigul, and foreigners often visited the nearby University of Gandhigram. An American couple who studied at Gandhigram had lived in Erpatti for a short while. Mr Newman, an Englishman, was connected to Erpatti where he had established ‘a Boys’ Town’, but he lived elsewhere and only visited the Erpatti Boys’ Town occasionally.

The material affluence of foreign countries

Far from all foreign countries qualified as examples of the ideal society for people in Ekkaraiyur, but many did. Countries of Western Europe, North America, South-east Asia and Japan, and the Middle East, were typically singled out as examples. Africa, in contrast, was not believed to harbour any ideal societies. Dhruba Gupta (1991) has shown that Indian images of Africa tend to draw upon Western colonial stereotypes of the continent. This was true also of Ekkaraiyur, where people were of the opinion that Africa was a poor and uncivilised continent, inhabited by childish and backward people. This understanding of Africa did clash with locally observable reality. Some African students at Gandhigram University used to visit me. Their standard of living, manifested in fashionable sportswear, portable tape-recorders, and expensive bicycles, was clearly beyond the reach of most people in Ekkaraiyur. The display of material abundance did nothing to change Ekkaraiyur opinions on African poverty, however. On the contrary, it seemed to strengthen the prevalent views, attributing the affluence of the African students to their supposed elite status.

The negative evaluation of Africa highlighted one of the points involved in the idealisation of foreign countries, namely, the material affluence of a country. The affluence of foreign countries was a favourite topic of conversation in Ekkaraiyur. The media fed the image, which was strengthened by the video recorders, TV-sets, radios, watches, jewellery, and money that Indians who had worked
abroad displayed. Rumours about their possessions, as well as about the possessions of foreigners living in India, were another source. Discussing occidentalism, Spencer puts it nicely:

…the West is not primarily encountered as a discourse, an epistemology, or even a politics, let alone a real place with real people. The West is encountered in the forms of things, items of consumption and objects of desire. (Spencer 1995: 252)

Although I think Spencer overstates his case, the imagined material affluence of foreign countries was matched by a fascination with what people in Ekkaraiyur called ‘foreign goods’. By definition, ‘a foreign goods’ object was manufactured abroad, and was assumed to be superior in quality and technology to anything Indian. ‘A foreign goods’ object was costly and relatively difficult to come by. Its ownership was highly valued, and the object was handled with care and displayed with pride. To cater for the demand, a semi-illegal trade in ‘foreign goods’ objects flourished at the time of my fieldwork, principally bought and sold in the cities’ Burma Bazaars, which name indicated their foreign connections. In addition, shops selling watches, claimed to be of foreign manufacture, could be found in any sizeable town, and hawkers and small tradesmen also took part of the trade. For example, a barber in Ekkaraiyur regularly made secret trips from which he returned with a small store of watches and pocket calculators, which he claimed to have bought from smugglers. No doubt, many of ‘the foreign goods’ objects were spurious, a fact most people were aware of. As the label ‘made in Japan’ out-priced anything tagged with ‘made in India’, it made sense businesswise to manufacture ‘foreign goods’ objects in India.

The imagined material affluence of foreign countries was typically explained in terms of natural resources and government policies of industrialisation. For example, oil had made the countries of the Middle East wealthy. Western countries were rich because they were ‘countries of factories’, whereas India was poor because it was ‘a country of farms’, as one Ekkaraiyur informant pointedly put it. Incidentally, this informant blamed Mahatma Gandhi for the
Indian situation. If Gandhi had not chosen to promote handicrafts and cottage industry, India would have been a wealthy, industrialised country, he told me.98

**Mentality in the foreign countries**

Despite the fascination with ‘foreign goods’ and the affluence of foreign countries, informants argued that people’s mentality was the decisive factor in making foreign countries into ideal societies. One important aspect of this mentality was said to be people’s sense of social discipline, meaning that they obeyed the laws. The cleanliness of the streets in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore was often brought up as an example. People there did not scatter garbage because it was forbidden, I was told. The large, quiet, disciplined masses of commuters in the Japanese underground were also a constant object-lesson of social discipline in conversations about foreign countries carried on in Ekkaraiyur.

These Asian examples conveyed a strong aspect of self-critical comparison to my informants. As they lauded the Japanese, the Malaysians, and the Singaporeans, they at the same time commented on the Indian lack of social discipline. The rowdy Indian crowd and the littered neighbourhood were contrasted with the social discipline of foreign examples. Yet, the comparisons also pointed out the problems connected with social discipline. While ascribing a strong sense of social discipline to the peoples of Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan, it was often pointed out that social discipline was forced on them. Threatened with strong sanctions and severe punishments, they had to act in a socially disciplined manner.

The belief that social discipline had to be forced on the people of Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan made these countries into something less than ideal. The notion that enforced social discipline detracted from the ideal was clearly spelt out in the views on China. In fact, despite the belief that the Chinese were better-off materially than the Indians, I never heard China mentioned as an example of an ideal society. On the contrary, China often exemplified the undesirable society in conversations. Focusing on the alleged rigidity of government dictates, my informants argued that the Chinese obeyed
without any enthusiasm or inner conviction, and hence would never build an ideal society.

If the ideal society was to be realised, social discipline was both necessary and desirable. But social discipline had to come about through a voluntary conviction, my informants argued. The voluntary precondition for social discipline was explicitly associated with the ideal society in Govindasami’s beliefs about the Americans and the United States. Many people in Ekkaraiyur shared this view, believing that the Americans in general had chosen to be unselfish and altruistic. Indeed, as such a choice was believed to characterise Western people in general, Western countries were seen as being closer to the ideal society than were Japan, Singapore, or Malaysia.

It was routinely claimed that Westerners cared for other people. According to one informant, poverty and want had been eliminated in the West, because the rich gladly helped any of the poor to a better life. This, it should be noted, was in stark contrast to what was said about the mentality of the Indian rich who were discussed during the padimandram debate (see Chapter 7). The willingness to help other people was attributed to the fact that Westerners had succeeded in taming the inherent selfishness of human being. Laws also governed people in the West, but Westerners obeyed the laws of their own free will, informants argued. They did so because the laws were fair, built on mutual trust and institutionalised for the common good. This concern for the common good was the point of a story about war-time England, which a speaker told during the padimandram. According to the speaker, it so happened that the British soldiers ran out of food during World War II. However, when Churchill made a public appeal, the English people voluntarily handed over their private stores of food to the government, keeping rations for only two days for themselves. ‘Could you imagine the same thing happening in Madurai if there were a shortage of rice or cement?’ the speaker asked the audience.

Several similar stories about the altruistic Westerners circulated in Ekkaraiyur. The stories were given a humorous twist at times, but they still conveyed the same message. For example, during the padimandram a speaker related a friend’s experiences from a visit to Australia. One day his friend noticed a stray dog standing at a pedestrian zebra crossing. The dog waited on the pavement as long
as the pedestrian red light was on, and crossed the street when the light became green. Leaving it unsaid how a Madurai dog would have gone about crossing the street, the speaker’s conclusion was: ‘In Australia even the dogs are taught orderly manners!’

Ekkaraiyur possessed its own examples of Westerners who were believed to have cared for other people. The Jesuit Fathers Prince and Mouton served as parish priests in Ekkaraiyur in the middle of the twentieth century, and many stories were told about them. Typically, they were said to have lacked any sense of self-seeking or self-interest. For example, it was believed that they had renounced great wealth in their native France in order to help the Indians of whatever religion. Moreover, it was said that they had distributed the considerable income of the church among all the needy people in Ekkaraiyur.

Mouton’s ‘development plan’ for Ekkaraiyur was perhaps the most striking example of such altruism. As I was told by people in Ekkaraiyur, Mouton had drawn up ‘a development plan’ that was based on a geographical and economic description of the village as well as detailed descriptions of the social and economic conditions of every family. He intended to use his ‘development plan’ to better the life of everyone in Ekkaraiyur, but unfortunately he died before having time to realise his ambition. Mouton’s ‘development plan’ was widely talked about, but its whereabouts was something of a mystery. As he died it disappeared, it was said. Only one person claimed to have any certain knowledge of its fate. According to this person, Indian priests had destroyed the development plan, because they were not interested in helping the people of the village. The fact that this informant, a Christian primary school teacher, intensely disliked Indian priests, particularly the resident parish priest, may have motivated his accusation. To many of my informants, Mouton’s ‘development plan’ represented a lost opportunity for creating a better Ekkaraiyur.

It is in fact doubtful whether Mouton’s ‘development plan’ ever existed outside the imagination of people in Ekkaraiyur. A colleague of Mouton, who had known him personally, told me that Mouton was an unlikely man to have drawn up any development plans. He had been more a man of action than a drawer of plans. However, perhaps the real value of the development plan lay in its mysterious
disappearance. As long as it was believed that Mouton’s ‘development plan’ had once existed, but that its fate remained a mystery, it served to draw a fine contrast between alleged Western altruism and Indian selfishness.

As they were remembered in Ekkaraiyur, Prince and Mouton were infused with an aura of sanctity that was not commonly attributed to Westerners. Yet they did not appear to be exceptional examples of Western altruism to the people in Ekkaraiyur. On the contrary, the typical Westerner was understood to lack selfishness. More often than not, Westerners in India were believed to be motivated by altruism. The motif of renouncing great wealth at home and having ‘a development plan’ was recurrent.

The attribution of altruism to contemporary Westerners also coloured views of India’s colonial past. Admittedly, colonial society was never, as far as I know, put forward as an ideal society. But, local British colonial officials were sometimes remembered as having been impartial and incorruptible. They were said to have stood above local conflicts, aiming at the justice of the common good. As they were remembered in Ekkaraiyur, the British local officials had also been motivated by a streak of altruism.100

To sum up, the stories about foreign countries stressed the importance of people’s mentality. A voluntarily achieved social discipline was said to be the necessary foundation for the ideal society. The West was a case in point. Western societies were ideal societies because people had achieved a social discipline by inner convictions. Thus, the one important point of the stories about foreigners and foreign countries was that, when people managed to rid themselves of selfishness, the ideal society could be a possibility.

The blessings and curses of Marimuttu

The imagining of ‘the moral foreigner’ stressed the importance of people’s mentality and highlighted self-reform as a way of achieving a better mentality. A similar focus was to be found in the stories about Marimuttu and the activities surrounding his cult.

The stories usually agreed in their outlines, but often differed in contradictory details. Thus, one informant told me that Marimuttu
had been an Untouchable, whereas another informant, pleading ignorance on the subject of Marimuthu’s precise caste, asserted that he had definitely not been an Untouchable. Another informant told me that Marimuthu had been a native of Ekkaraiyur. Yet, Mr Ramalingam, a trustee of Marimuthu’s temple in Ekkaraiyur, claimed that Marimuthu had been a native of a nearby village called Kassavampatti.

Among these contradictory statements about Marimuthu’s origins and caste, the one fact my informants agreed on was that the people of Ekkaraiyur at first considered Marimuthu to be a lunatic. One reason for this initial conclusion was his unkempt appearance. Marimuthu was said to have been extremely dirty, his hair was long and dishevelled, and his eyes were wild.

Marimuthu’s seemingly irrational activities confirmed people’s initial conclusion about his mental status. He made himself at home in the burial ground outside Ekkaraiyur by occupying a grave. He threw out the grave’s rightful occupant, the corpse of a recently deceased Christian landlord. Not surprisingly, this antagonised the landlord’s family, who tried on several occasions to evict Marimuthu, but each time Marimuthu frustrated the attempt. Having evicted Marimuthu in the evening and replaced the corpse in its grave, the landlord’s family the following morning found the corpse evicted and Marimuthu resettled in the grave. Marimuthu eventually grew weary of the persistent attempts to dislodge him. Cursing the landlord’s family, he killed the male head of the family. After that, he was left in undisputed possession of the grave.

The lethal effect of Marimuthu’s curse made it clear that it was dangerous to annoy him. Marimuthu was feared, I was told. Moreover, the fact that he lived happily in the burial ground, the haunt of demons and the spirits of the dead, amply proved that he possessed supernatural powers. None of my informants knew how Marimuthu had come to acquire these powers, which they vaguely suggested were associated with a short period he spent as an ascetic in a cave in the Palni Hills. One informant located this period between an initial sojourn in Erpatti and his final settlement in Ekkaraiyur. Ramalingam, however, argued that Marimuthu had possessed supernatural powers even earlier, because a landlord in
Erpatti, whom Marimuttu had befriended, had benefited from them in several ways.

Marimuttu’s supernatural powers were not only to be feared. He also possessed the power to bless. His blessings had auspicious effects, but sometimes in disturbing ways. The incident of the kidnapped baby, which was included in most stories about Marimuttu, illustrates this:

One day a baby disappeared from a house in Ekkaraiyur. Its mother searched everywhere, but she could not find her baby. Someone told her that he had seen Marimuttu carrying a baby, and people at once began to search for the pair of them. But neither Marimuttu, nor the baby could be found.

Three days later Marimuttu reappeared in Ekkaraiyur with the baby. Without saying a word, he went to the house from where he had taken the baby. Holding the baby by the foot, he threw it onto the sloping roof. As the baby fell from the roof, it either remained suspended in mid-air above the street (according to some informants), or fell into the street but without crying or being hurt (according to other informants). Marimuttu picked up the baby and blessed it, predicting that it would grow up to become a powerful and wealthy man. The blessing was indeed fulfilled. The baby grew up to become one of the richest and most powerful landlords of Ekkaraiyur.

The baby incident was characteristic of the Marimuttu stories in that his curses and blessings were aimed at individual villagers. Those he blessed became prosperous and powerful; those he cursed met a miserable end, unless they repented. Yet, these individual fortunes were played out against a background of collective destiny. As my informants pointed out, while Marimuttu lived in Ekkaraiyur he proved to be a blessing for the whole village. His very presence was beneficial to all. For example, the fact that Marimuttu was living in Ekkaraiyur made its paddy fields yield abundantly three times a year, because there was always plenty of water and hence it
was possible to cultivate throughout the year. It rained three times every month, during the night and irrespective of the season, and the irrigation dams were always full.

The collective benefit of Marimuttu’s presence made Ekkaraiyur at that time into a localised image of the ideal society, comparable to the Sangam Age, the Ramaraj, Ummah, and foreign countries. The favourable agricultural conditions were stressed in the stories, but the benefits of Marimuttu’s presence were also said to extend to other spheres of life. The harmonious social relationships within the village were particularly mentioned. Marimuttu’s learning was different from that of the members of the sangam. Neither was he an active guardian of dharma as King Rama had been, nor was he promoting the altruistic policies of foreign countries or upholding divinely ordained principles. Yet, when Marimuttu lived in Ekkaraiyur, people had lived in plenty and in harmony with each other.

Marimuttu did not stay in Ekkaraiyur for long. The village’s prosperity caused his fame to spread widely. Eventually, it reached the small kingdom of Pudukottai where the agricultural situation was critical because of a prolonged drought. The King of Pudukottai had other problems as well. He was afflicted by leprosy, and the English who had given him large tracts of land demanded either payment or the return of the land (cf. Dirks 1989: 197). The king’s adviser told him that all his problems would be solved if Marimuttu could be persuaded to come to Pudukottai.

Consequently, the King invited Marimuttu to settle in Pudukottai. Marimuttu, however, refused to leave Ekkaraiyur. Piqued by the refusal, the king ordered his soldiers to bring Marimuttu by force. The soldiers easily caught Marimuttu in Ekkaraiyur, locked him into a palanquin, and started out for Pudukottai. However, after having crossed the village boundary they discovered that Marimuttu had mysteriously disappeared from the locked palanquin. The same sequence was repeated three times: the soldiers caught Marimuttu and locked him into the palanquin, only to discover that he had mysteriously disappeared as the village boundary was crossed. Frustrated, the soldiers went back to Pudukottai with the empty palanquin.
CHAPTER SIX

The King and his adviser realised that Marimuttu could not be moved from Ekkaraiyur against his will. The adviser therefore travelled to Ekkaraiyur to plead with him. When they met in Ekkaraiyur, the adviser asked Marimuttu’s conditions for coming to Pudukottai. Marimuttu answered that there was only one condition. He would come if anyone in Ekkaraiyur agreed to sell him to the King. Accordingly, the adviser began to search for someone willing to sell Marimuttu. Everyone refused, I was told, except for one family, which agreed that the King could have Marimuttu if he paid 30 silver rupees. Promptly paying the price demanded, the adviser then announced that the people of Ekkaraiyur had sold Marimuttu to the King of Pudukottai. True to his word, Marimuttu decided that he had to accompany the adviser to Pudukottai.

Marimuttu cursed Ekkaraiyur and its people before leaving. Different informants specified the curse in different versions. According to one version, no straw would be left in the fields after the grain had been harvested. This indicated both poverty and wastefulness. Another version stated that whenever a new house was built in the village, four old houses would fall into ruins. Thus, one family’s prosperity would cause the poverty of several other families. A third version stated bluntly that the people of Ekkaraiyur would hereafter always be ready to sell and betray one another.

The different versions of the curse indicated a profound change in the life of Ekkaraiyur, in short the destruction of prosperity and harmony. General poverty would be caused by wastefulness. Individual prosperity would only be possible at other people’s expense. People would turn against each other. The removal of Marimuttu would destroy Ekkaraiyur.

Meanwhile, Marimuttu went from fame to success in Pudukottai. Abundant rains broke the drought as soon as he arrived. He discovered a hidden treasure of gold and jewels that served to pay off the English. Finally, he manufactured an anointment that cured the King of leprosy. The King built himself a new palace from the proceeds of the discovered treasure. A small temple was attached to the palace for Marimuttu to live in, and Marimuttu taught a disciple how to prepare the anointment that cured leprosy. As the disciple grew rich by manufacturing and selling the anointment, he and the King endowed Marimuttu’s temple with a large amount of property.
– said by one informant to be a staggering 340 acres of irrigated paddy land.

While Pudukottai prospered and Marimuttu’s temple there became wealthy, Ekkaraiyur suffered from Marimuttu’s curse. All of my informants agreed that the curse was amply fulfilled, and that life had turned to the bad in Ekkaraiyur. Drought came to stay, houses and temples decayed, and public and private morals moved towards their nadir.

Nonetheless, Marimuttu made a promise as the day came when he realised that he was dying. He promised that he would remain in Pudukottai for an additional one hundred years during which time Pudukottai would prosper. After that, he would return to Ekkaraiyur. The curse would then be brought to an end and Marimuttu would bring prosperity and harmony anew to Ekkaraiyur.

About Marimuttu

Marimuttu was an enigmatic figure in many respects. He embodied several elements commonly associated with religious renunciation. His supernatural powers and his unkempt appearance, for example, parallel descriptions of such devotees as Shiva’s slaves, who through their devotion to Shiva merged with the deity and acquired his powers (Hudson 1990). But, it should be noted that Marimuttu was not remembered in Ekkaraiyur as having been a devotee of Shiva, or for that matter of any other deity. The stories about Marimuttu did not refer to any deities at all, except for one informant who commented on Marimuttu’s devotion to a cow in the village of Kassavampatti. This devotion had caused a quarrel between Marimuttu and his brother, leading to Marimuttu’s expulsion from Kassavampatti.

The stories did not represent Marimuttu as a deity. Apart from the attribution of supernatural powers, Marimuttu was spoken about as a man, albeit an extraordinary one. He was neither worshipped as a deity while he lived in Ekkaraiyur, nor was it said that he ever claimed such worship. On arrival in Pudukottai, however, Marimuttu’s status began to change, as indicated by the fact that the king built him a temple. His transformation into a deity became
effective only upon his death, when a yearly festival for his worship was said to have been started in Pudukottai. Marimuttu had ordered this festival on his deathbed, it was said.

Commenting on Marimuttu’s supernatural powers, some informants told me that he had been a sittar. According to Bhattacharyya, sittar is

... [a] Tamil term for South Indian Tantric Siddhas who were zealous adepts in alchemy. Their works are written in verse, using easy colloquial and ungrammatical words and often concealing the names of the herbs and minerals in big phrases and metaphors. Many recipes containing minerals, metal, herbs and salts are mentioned in these works. (1990: 147)

The way Marimuttu healed the leprosy of the Pudukottai king and the medicine he taught his disciple to prepare, do evoke associations with the Siddhas as described by Bhattacharyya. They also fitted with my informants’ notions of the sittar. One informant believed that Marimuttu had acquired his supernatural powers by scientific studies. Another said that the sittars were religious men who taught people rules for good living, and also practised medicine and science in general. Sad to say, most of their knowledge had been lost because it was either secret or was written down in palm leaf manuscripts that had been destroyed by time and termites. Among this lost knowledge had been, for example, the technology for building aeroplanes.\textsuperscript{102}

There is no certainty as to whether Marimuttu ever existed. The fact that the stories about him included a considerable amount of all-Indian mythical properties as well as references to Christian mythology does tell against his authenticity, or at least against the acts ascribed to him. Yet, certain facts speak for the belief that he was a historical person. For example, several of those Marimuttu was said to have interacted with, cursed or blessed, were certainly authentic persons. Moreover, people like Marimuttu are not uncommon in India. Some present-day sittars were said to live in villages not far from Ekkaraiyur, and a religious renouncer, who claimed to possess supernatural power, settled down outside
Ekkaraiyur in 1991. Incidentally, he also occupied a grave, a Muslim one.

**Has Marimuttu returned?**

Marimuttu did not appear to occupy much of people’s everyday thoughts. At most, some people habitually went to the yearly festival in Pudukottai, while others liked to dwell on the ingratitude that the people of Ekkaraiyur had once shown him. One informant, for example, always started to cry when we talked about Marimuttu. In 1989, however, the concern with Marimuttu increased. In that year, one hundred years had passed since Marimuttu died in Pudukottai. If Marimuttu was going to keep his promise, he could be expected back in Ekkaraiyur at any moment.

The year went by and Marimuttu did not appear. The disappointment was comparatively mild. Ekkaraiyur had never been charged with fervent expectations, and many people did not seem to care whether Marimuttu would fulfil his promise or not.

Nevertheless, some people in Ekkaraiyur were deeply worried about Marimuttu’s failure to return, believing that the village was still cursed, for whatever reason. Discussing the meaning of Marimuttu’s century-old promise, the question was raised as to whether the promise had been misunderstood. Two different, but compatible, interpretations emerged among those who were concerned about Marimuttu. The first interpretation questioned the received time-limit of his promise, suggesting that Marimuttu had not promised to return in any specific year. Rather, he had promised to stay away from Ekkaraiyur for a minimum of one hundred years, and thereafter he would return at any time he chose. Consequently, the curse could possibly last for longer than the hundred years. The alternative interpretation suggested that Marimuttu would return to Ekkaraiyur whenever the people were ready for him. Marimuttu had been driven to curse the village by its people’s selfishness, and he had given them a hundred years in which to improve their ways. As Marimuttu had not returned, the people were evidently persisting in their earlier failings. Taken together, the two interpretations pointed
to the need for self-reform for the people of Ekkaraiyur if Marimuttu was to return.

Not everyone was satisfied by these interpretations of Marimuttu’s promise. Rejecting the idea that the promise had been misunderstood, one group argued that Marimuttu had in fact not failed to keep his promise. Indeed, they claimed that Marimuttu had already returned to Ekkaraiyur - in disguise, according to some; as a barely visible spirit, according to others. Mr Nehru, for example, publicly claimed that he had seen Marimuttu. Many people questioned the quality of Nehru’s competence as a witness, but he was also strongly supported by others. For instance, Ramalingam, the trustee of Marimuttu’s temple in Ekkaraiyur, in support of Nehru attributed the year’s abundant rains to the beneficial effects of Marimuttu’s presence in the village.

Marimuttu’s festival

Ramalingam was a former moneylender on a small scale, who had pursued his business in Bombay before retiring to Ekkaraiyur. Nehru was an employee of Dindigul’s municipal waterworks. Working at the dam close by Ekkaraiyur, he had established there what he called his ashram, consisting of an awning and a small shrine. Nehru had an extensive knowledge of ancient Tamil and Sanskrit poetry. He was skilful in fortune-telling and medicine and feared for his reputed magical skills. His long unkempt hair seemed to imitate aspects of Marimuttu’s appearance.

Nehru and Ramalingam were members of Marimuttu’s temple committee in Ekkaraiyur. The committee was of recent origin, formed in 1989 as the time came to celebrate Marimuttu’s yearly festival. Marimuttu’s festival was traditionally celebrated in Pudukottai, as it was said to have been for a century, but Nehru, Ramalingam, and certain other people argued that because of Marimuttu’s return the festival ought to be celebrated in Ekkaraiyur. Accordingly, they formed the temple committee in Ekkaraiyur for this purpose.

The temple committee was interested in planning and announcing the Ekkaraiyur festival in as grand manner as possible, not least
because its claim that Marimuthu had returned was questioned. Dressed as mendicants, Nehru and Ramalingam went around collecting funds for the festival, Nehru blowing a conch while the retired moneylender kept the account-book. A temple for Marimuthu was also arranged. There had been no public cult of Marimuthu in Ekkaraiyur up to now, and the temple committee therefore had no temple in which to celebrate its festival. A small building, consisting of one room and a covered porch, adjacent to the village square, was converted into a temple for Marimuthu. The building already housed an ancient stone statue that had been found buried outside the village. The statue was popularly thought to be a statue of Buddha, belonging to the ancient time when Buddhism flourished in South India (see Chapter 2 for my alternative interpretation of the statue). Now, the statue was made to serve as a cult icon for Marimuthu. In addition, the temple was invested with something else of Marimuthu. Two men, whose names Ramalingam refused to reveal to me, secretly removed some soil from Marimuthu’s grave in Pudukottai and put it in his new Ekkaraiyur temple. In this sense also, Marimuthu had returned to Ekkaraiyur, Ramalingam told me.

The rival festivals of Ekkaraiyur and Pudukottai were celebrated on the same day. Despite the efforts of Nehru and Ramalingam in promoting the Ekkaraiyur festival, most of Marimuthu’s devotees in Ekkaraiyur chose to attend the festival in Pudukottai. An informant who took part in the Pudukottai festival estimated that some five hundred people from Ekkaraiyur had been there. This was probably an exaggeration, but the Pudukottai festival clearly outnumbered its rival in Ekkaraiyur where only about fifty people took part. The poor attendance in Ekkaraiyur was perhaps not only the result of the choice between two places. The Tamil Nadu government chose the same day to celebrate the chief minister’s birthday. Food and clothes were given away, and many people spent the day in Ekkaraiyur queuing for the distribution of the government’s largesse. Nevertheless, even though most of the Ekkaraiyur devotees of Marimuthu went to Pudukottai, Marimuthu himself was definitely taking part in the Ekkaraiyur festival.

The Ekkaraiyur festival began in the morning when we assembled at Marimuthu’s temple. A procession was formed, and we set off through the village. A band of pipes and drums played, rockets were
fired, and people chanted. We were on our way to a Vinayakar shrine by the river.

Marimuttu joined the procession even before we had left the village streets. Suddenly, a young man lost control of his limbs and fell down in the street, grunting unintelligibly. Marimuttu had possessed him. Barely losing a stride, we picked him up and carried him along with us. At the Vinayakar shrine, he was put in the shade to rest. The musicians also took a rest, while the men bathed in the river and donned saffron-coloured loincloths. A barber shaved some of them, removing all the hairs from their heads. Women arranged offerings to Vinayakar and offerings to carry back to Marimuttu’s temple.

Breaking the peacefulness, another man was possessed. Dancing wildly, he shouted that Marimuttu was speaking through him. At that point, several other men also became possessed. They, too, danced wildly, and shouted that Marimuttu was speaking through them. The frenzy of possessional expression shortly calmed down somewhat, and our procession of possessed and non-possessed alike wound its way back to the village. Again preceded by pipes and drums, we carried the offerings to Marimuttu in his new temple. At the temple, milk was poured on a lingam (that is, a representation of Shiva) in front of the statue that represented Marimuttu.

The man who was the first to become possessed by the river now renewed the vigour of his possession. Dancing and shouting, he announced that Marimuttu was going to speak. Instantly, the other already more or less possessed men joined him, and a lengthy uproar of dancing and shouting followed in the small, crowded temple. Nehru of the temple committee was the most vigorous dancer and the loudest shouter. We, the non-possessed, tried to keep out of the way. When things calmed down, a meal that ended the festival was served to whoever cared to eat.

The temple committee met afterwards to discuss the authenticity of the possessions. There were conflicting opinions and the committee wanted to establish who had been possessed by Marimuttu and what he had said. The problem was that if every possession was taken as genuinely Marimuttu, he appeared to have contradicted himself. After a short discussion, the temple committee agreed that every possession had been genuine, except for that of the
man who had first become possessed by the river and again experienced a renewed possession at the Marimuttu temple. The committee refrained from commenting on whether the rejected possession had been faked, and, if not, on the identity of the possessor. However, they made it clear that Marimuttu had not possessed this man, but that everyone else had been genuinely possessed by Marimuttu.

The temple committee had a weighty reason for denying the authenticity of the rejected possession. Obviously, one purpose of the Ekkaraiyur festival was to object to the fact that Marimuttu’s festival was celebrated in Pudukottai. Now, another level of disagreement surfaced about the proper whereabouts of Marimuttu’s festival. The rejected possession had criticised the location of the Ekkaraiyur festival: Velpatti was the right location for the festival, not Pudukottai, nor Ekkaraiyur. This announcement was unacceptable to the temple committee. Luckily for them, Marimuttu had intervened. As soon as Velpatti was promoted, as it was by the river and in the temple, Marimuttu, speaking through the other possessed men, instantly used his veto, affirming that Ekkaraiyur was the right location. Hence, in a nice circular argument, the temple committee ruled out the man’s possession as a non-Marimuttu possession because it contradicted what Marimuttu had ‘really’ said. Incidentally, most of the committee members had been genuinely possessed by Marimuttu.

The pronouncement on the location of his festival turned out to be the main message from Marimuttu. The temple committee had perhaps expected him to make a firm statement against the Pudukottai festival. But, the Pudukottai question was overshadowed by the immediate Velpatti threat to the Ekkaraiyur festival. Frankly, I felt disappointed with Marimuttu. True, he had strongly asserted his presence in Ekkaraiyur, and the dispute over the location of the festival revealed unknown levels of disagreement to me. Yet, after weeks of discussing Marimuttu’s return with Nehru and Ramalingam, I had come to expect that he would have something to say about his promise and its consequences for Ekkaraiyur. I expected that he would make sweeping comments on the morality of the people of Ekkaraiyur. Questions on my mind were: Would he boldly exhort them to reform? Was the curse ended? Would
Ekkaraiyur prosper anew? Would Marimuttu renew the curse because people did not believe that he had returned?

None of these questions seemed to be on Marimuttu’s mind that day. Perhaps he was satisfied with having established the fact that he had returned to Ekkaraiyur. Anyway, the one remaining announcement from Marimuttu turned out to be something of an anti-climax, I felt. That is, a tea-stall partly was obstructing the entrance path to the Marimuttu temple in Ekkaraiyur, and the committee had unsuccessfully urged the owner to move his stall some metres to the side. Now, firmly siding with the committee, Marimuttu threatened to curse the owner unless he moved his tea-stall. He complied.

**Self-reform**

However disappointing an advocate for social reform I found the returned Marimuttu to be, the stories and discussions about Marimuttu clearly had something to say about people’s self-image. The fact that people often warned me against trusting other people in Ekkaraiyur may not be remarkable. More noteworthy is the fact that people often included themselves in the judgement. Elaborating on it, they indicated that they could not be trusted because they lived in Ekkaraiyur. This remarkable negative self-evaluation associating moral corruption with living in Ekkaraiyur was widespread in the village.

Daniel notes a similar notion about the potentially harmful influence of place on human well-being among the people of the village he studied in Tamil Nadu. For example, people there argued that a house with the wrong proportions and orientation could harm its inhabitants in various ways, even morally. Moreover, the essences (the gunams) of the soil and the people had to be compatible for people’s well-being (Daniel 1984: 61-104, 79, Chapter 3).

In contrast to Daniel’s case, the harm inflicted by Ekkaraiyur on people’s morals was not attributed to wrong proportions and orientations of the village houses, or to the village’s plan of construction. Neither was the nature of the village soil blamed.
Instead, many people ascribed the beginning of the moral corruption of people in Ekkaraiyur to Marimuttu’s curse, which was aimed at both the people and the village as a location. It had brought to an end the fertility of the village land and created permanent strife among the people. Because of the curse, trust was no longer to be counted on. Everyone was willing to sell another, as one family had sold Marimuttu. In fact, this expressed something of the lack of trust that many informants felt had come about with the dissolution of village relationships (see Chapter 3). Whereas people formerly worked together in stable relationships, they were now pitted against each other in competition.

Nevertheless, Marimuttu also pointed the way to a better Ekkaraiyur. This was contained in the argument about his return, suggesting that as Marimuttu had been betrayed by selfishness, he would return when the people in Ekkaraiyur were no longer selfish. To my mind, this was the essential moral of many of the stories about Marimuttu. Just as Marimuttu’s curse had been motivated by selfishness, so those who freed themselves from selfishness would enjoy his blessing anew. Ekkaraiyur would come aright again if people went through a process of self-reform to curb their selfishness. But it should also be noted that the people who organised the Marimuttu festival in Ekkaraiyur did not stress self-reform as a necessary condition for the return of Marimuttu. Nehru and Ramalingam claimed that Marimuttu had returned, despite the fact that they did not believe that people in Ekkaraiyur had become less selfish to any significant degree. Reversing the sequence of self-reform and return, Nehru and Ramalingam suggested that Marimuttu’s presence in Ekkaraiyur would create the conditions for self-reform.

Ironically, the motives of Nehru and Ramalingam for promoting Marimuttu’s festival in Ekkaraiyur were questioned as self-seeking. Their many critics alleged that they were certainly not acting from unselfish motives. On the contrary, they were accused of using the festival and the establishment of Marimuttu’s temple to promote themselves. Among other things, they were believed to covet the alleged wealth of Marimuttu’s Pudukottai temple, which, they claimed, ought to be transferred to Ekkaraiyur along with Marimuttu. Whether or not this was a realistic proposition, many
people believed that the transfer of wealth from the Pudukottai temple to Ekkaraiyur was a future possibility. One young man, who was neither on the temple committee nor an outspoken devotee of Marimuttu, did indeed envisage Ekkaraiyur as a wealthy centre of pilgrimage, organised around a cult of Marimuttu. Another line of criticism suggested that Nehru and Ramalingam, as well as other members of the temple committee, were using Marimuttu to gain recognition as important men of the village (cf. the strategies of the institutional big-man that Mines and Gourishankar (1990) describe, which I discussed in Chapter 4). In their critics’ view, however, this was not a very successful strategy on the part of Nehru and Ramalingam.

Despite possible lapses into self-seeking motives as well as their silence about the need for a prior process of self-reform, the fact that Nehru and Ramalingam organised an institutionalised cult of Marimuttu in Ekkaraiyur included an understanding of the need for personal reform in order to attain a better society. Whether or not self-reform was necessary to bring Marimuttu back to Ekkaraiyur, the eventual outcome was the betterment of the mentality of the people in the village. In other words, while some argued that getting rid of personal selfishness was a pre-condition, others suggested that it would be the result of Marimuttu’s return.

An individual perspective on selfishness permeated the stories and discussions about Marimuttu. The Marimuttu stories thus highlighted other aspects than those in my discussion of the stories of the Sangam Age, the Ramaraj and the Ummah. Focusing on the order of social relationships, that discussion emphasised the role of leaders. The Marimuttu stories, in contrast, focused on the mentality of the individual.

A similar focus on individual mentality was central to the idealised representations of ‘the moral foreigner’ contained in the stories about foreign countries. Yet, the stories and discussion about Marimuttu went one step further than these. In general, the representations of ‘the moral foreigner’ neglected to point out a way of betterment, confined as they were to self-critical comments on the differences between the mentalities of Indians and others. The Marimuttu stories, in fact, pointed to the ideal society as a feasible individual project for people in Ekkaraiyur, highlighting questions
about individual morality. This theme will return in the next chapter, which begins with a discussion of how the corruption of contemporary man and society was discussed in a village evening debate arranged by two village sangams.
Chapter 7 Debating corruption

My verdict is that when good social behaviour prevails, all social evils will vanish from society. Our country is wealthy enough in money and gold, but we its people are too selfish. Therefore, our selfish mentality ruins our country. That is my verdict.

With these words Dr Durairaj, the principal of Madurai Sentamil College, concluded the public debate, the padimandram, which was staged one evening in the middle of June 1989 in Ekkaraiyur. Durairaj summed up the arguments produced during the padimandram in his concluding speech. His verdict sets the theme of this chapter as that of selfishness and of corruption as the social consequences of this selfishness.

The padimandram was one arena in which the topic of leaders’ selfishness and corruption was discussed. The leaders referred to were of the kind that I discussed in Chapter 4, that is, the new kind of leaders who were associated with machine-style politics, and acting in the style of the institutional big-man. The present chapter begins with a discussion of the padimandram as a specific form of debate and social event. Thereafter, I review the arguments about the selfishness and corruption of the leaders that were put forward during this particular padimandram.

The padimandram highlighted the discrepancy between the ideals and the reality of people labelled as ‘the rich’ by the speakers. That this label did not solely indicate an economic privileged status, but also carried strong connotations of power, was apparent from the inclusion of politicians and civil servants in the category. In fact, politicians and civil servants were held up as the best examples of selfishness and corruption. Nevertheless, it is problematic to assume that the label ‘the rich’ stood for leaders in general. There was no necessary equation between an economic privileged status and a position of leadership in Ekkaraiyur. People did believe that leaders tended to become rich, and also that access to wealth facilitated a
leader’s display of expected generosity. However, wealth on its own
did not make a leader. Consequently, ‘the rich’ can best be seen as a
social elite to which leaders belonged.

It should also be noted that ‘the rich’ who were castigated during
the padimandram did not belong to Ekkaraiyur. No local members of
‘the rich’ were mentioned. Instead, ‘the rich’ who figured in the
speeches operated elsewhere and at other levels of society. Some
were well-known named characters, others were anonymous
representatives of a stereotype. Of course, local examples could have
been used except for reasons of politeness and the speakers’ lack of
local information. However, the selfishness and corruption of the
local ‘rich’ were by implication also censured.

One of the most popular topics of conversation in Ekkaraiyur was
the discrepancy between how leaders wished to project themselves
and how others saw them. Everyone seemed ready to comment on
the morality of the leaders. Therefore, having used the padimandram
as a primary focus, I go on to a closer discussion of ideas about
selfishness and corruption in association with leaders in Ekkaraiyur.

Following this focus on the leaders, I shall broaden the discussion
by suggesting that ideas on selfishness and corruption can be seen as
expressing an anti-individualistic critique that was aimed in part at
the leaders, but also at man and society in general. Contemporary
society compared unfavourably with the ideal societies discussed in
the previous chapters, because it did nothing to curb man’s inherent
selfishness. The suggestion about the role of the anti-individualistic
critique, which concludes the chapter, relates notions about
selfishness to the ongoing debate on Indian individualism.

The padimandram

A padimandram is a kind of public discussion of a pre-arranged
question in which the debaters are ascribed fixed standpoints to
defend. This form of discussion is common in Tamil Nadu, as well
as elsewhere in India, and it is typically used for discussing
religious, political, and social issues. The Ekkaraiyur padimandram
was part of the goddess Mariamma’s festival and took place in
front of her temple. It had been organised by members of the two
village organisations: the Isanadu Kallar Sangam and the Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangam. The former organised people of Kallar caste in Ekkaraiyur,\textsuperscript{106} while the latter organisation was more generally dedicated to upholding Tamil culture and language (see Chapter 2).

Durairaj, whose verdict introduces this chapter, had been invited by the organisers to lead the padimandram. In consultation with Durairaj, the organisers had taken great care to select and formulate a question that would interest the speakers as well as the audience. After long discussions, the question chosen was: Does poverty or mentality cause the ruin of Indian society?\textsuperscript{107}

In his opening speech, Durairaj jokingly traced the padimandram’s origin to the proverbial street quarrel. Saying that ‘a quarrel in the street is a wonderful sight for the passers-by’, he claimed that a large crowd of people would gather whenever two women were quarrelling at the public water tap. Taking sides, the onlookers would fan the flames and enjoy the fight. After a while, however, responsible men would try to stop the quarrel. Even responsible men relish a heated argument and do not want it to end too soon, but being good members of society they cannot allow the quarrel to shatter village harmony.

The padimandram was a means of solving such a dilemma for responsible men, Durairaj argued. Being an ordered debate, the padimandram was controlled, confined in place and time, and open to all arguments. As to its outcome, it was expected to lead to decisions that maintained harmony.\textsuperscript{108} Nevertheless, the padimandram was also in Durairaj’s words ‘a fight with words between scholars’. Like any fight, it was expected to be exciting. Although far removed from the quarrel at the public water tap, the padimandram also built on the love of a forceful argument. As Durairaj said, ‘if there is no fight, the debate isn’t interesting’.

The Ekkaraiyur padimandram was indeed interesting. Discussing what caused the ruin of Indian society, the padimandram turned out to be a scathing critique of that society. The weight of the criticism fell on those who were considered the elite of society - collectively termed by the padimandram’s speakers as ‘the rich’. The behaviour and morality of ‘the rich’ were scrutinised during the evening. The speakers denied them any virtues, forcefully alleging that they indulged in every conceivable vice.
The word-wielding scholars of the Ekkaraiyur padimandram gave their speeches in a cultured, spoken form of Tamil. They strove to find elegant, sometimes archaic, expressions, and yet to remain intelligible. The padimandram was in fact a performance of the valued art of speaking Tamil well (cf. Schiffman 1999).

As I have mentioned earlier, speakers of Tamil often asserted that their language possessed qualities that other languages lacked (see Chapter 6). Tamil, it was claimed, was easy to learn as well as exceptionally elegant and rich in vocabulary and speech associations. On this occasion, Durairaj told the audience that the padimandram was a unique Tamil custom because of the superiority of the language. Padimandrams conducted in English always turned out as failures because of the poverty of the English language. A similar fate was to be expected of padimandrams in Malayalam, Telugu, or Kannadam, despite their close linguistic relationship to Tamil. These languages were poorly suited to serious arguments, Durairaj said.

The speeches that were given during the padimandram were liberally sprinkled with references to conditions in foreign countries and to the sayings and writings of well-known politicians and writers. Anecdotes were frequently used to illustrate an argument, as were proverbs, puns and jokes. The anecdotes were peopled with stock characters - human stereotypes of everyone’s experience - who exemplified the behaviour and mentality of different categories of people. Vice was represented by the stereotypes of ‘the rich man’, ‘the business man’, ‘the contractor’, ‘the civil servant’, ‘the film producer’, ‘the actor’ and ‘the politician’, together with ‘the quarrelsome woman’ and ‘the dishonest student’. Virtue was illustrated by ‘the Tamil pandit’, ‘the faithful servant’, ‘the simple peasant family’, and ‘the village elders. ‘The petty thief’, ‘the poor man’, ‘the toiling child’, and ‘the poor widow’ served as victims.

Besides Durairaj, four other speakers had been invited to the Ekkaraiyur padimandram to argue whether poverty or mentality was ruining Indian society. These four speakers were paired off into two sides. Mr Ramasamy and Dr Chinnappan argued the case for poverty, while the case for mentality was allotted to Mr Rajarathinam and Mr Alagarisamy.
Mr Manimaran, the secretary of the Ekkaraiyur Tamil Sangam, introduced the speakers as ‘Pulavars - eminent scholars and Tamil poets’. Professionally, the speakers were teachers in secondary schools or university colleges. They were well-known and widely travelled speakers in public debates such as the Ekkaraiyur padimandram. Durairaj introduced Rajarathinam as giving speeches in any country where you found Tamilians. Chinnappan, Durairaj said, frequently spoke on the radio, and Alagarisamy had recently returned from a lecture tour in London.

The speakers had debated with each other on several earlier occasions and were not personally committed to any particular side of an argument. The padimandram gave them roles to act out, and they chose their arguments accordingly. What Durairaj said about Chinnappan could be applied equally well to any of them: ‘Chinnappan is prepared to speak on any subject and argue on whichever side.’ In this sense, the speakers were professional debaters.

The padimandram followed a fixed course. First, the speakers and Durairaj were welcomed. Honorary shawls were presented to them and to the organisers, sponsors, and prominent guests in the audience. Thereafter, Durairaj introduced the speakers and the question that was to be debated, and the speakers delivered their speeches in turns. After each speech, Durairaj summed up its arguments, commenting on particularly elegantly turned phrases and noting the writers who had been quoted. After the first round of speeches, the two principal speakers on each side, Chinnappan and Rajarathinam, summed up the arguments of their own sides, while attempting to confound those of their opponents. Finally, summing up the debate and giving his verdict on its outcome, Durairaj took the opportunity to speak at some length himself on the subject of society and morality.

Well-known speakers, like those who were invited to Ekkaraiyur, were able to draw a large audience to a padimandram. When the Ekkaraiyur padimandram started at ten o’clock in the evening it had attracted an audience of about 200 people. Many lived in Ekkaraiyur, but people from nearby villages had also come to listen. Men were in the majority, but a fair number of women and children were also present. When the padimandram concluded at two o’clock
in the morning, after four hours of uninterrupted debate, about half of the audience were still there and still awake.

What did the audience expect of the padimandram? This question probably has as many answers as there were people in the audience. However, I think that two general points can be made. First, people expected an entertaining evening. They wanted to listen to speakers who attacked and confounded each other with forceful arguments in elegant Tamil, and who eloquently showed their erudition by referring to and quoting from Tamil literature. They also expected the speakers to be witty and funny, telling jokes and amusing stories. Second, people expected the speakers to attempt a serious analysis of the causes of the ruin of Indian society. Nonetheless, the outcome of the debate appeared more or less as a foregone conclusion. Already when the question was formulated, it seemed clear that the speakers who argued that people’s mentality was primarily responsible for the ruin of Indian society would carry the day - unless their opponents made a heroic effort. After all, according to local common sense, mentality was the dominant factor in social destruction, as well as in social reconstruction, as was emphasised in the stories about foreign countries and the Ekkaraiyur of Marimuttu.

A society in ruins

India was a society in ruins. This was local common sense in Ekkaraiyur, whether the present society was compared to the imagined ideal society of the Sangam Age, the Ummah or the Ramaraj. Indeed, the view was explicit in the formulation of the question to be debated as well as in the discarded alternatives. It was a widely held view, according to the speakers at the padimandram. As Rajarathinam said in his opening speech:

Whenever three or four people meet, they speak about the ruin of our villages, towns, cities, and country. They say: ‘Our days have gone. How wonderful those days were.’ Tonight we say the same thing: The present society cannot be compared with our old days.
CHAPTER SEVEN

What did the allegory of ruin imply for the padimandram’s speakers and who did they cast as responsible for the ruin of society? ‘The rich’ were allegedly responsible for the ruin of Indian society. ‘The rich’ were collectively seen as a social elite that included politicians, civil servants, industrialists, businessmen, merchants, film producers and film actors. The speakers focused on the typical crimes of ‘the rich’. A sketched review of these crimes follows below, as they were listed and denounced during the padimandram.

The politician disregarded the very laws he instituted. To exemplify this, Alagarisamy told an anecdote about a politician of his acquaintance:

When he [the politician] returned from abroad, he attempted to smuggle a huge suitcase filled with foreign goods into India. He was caught by a customs officer and forced to pay a heavy fine. Afterwards, when privately upbraided by me for intentionally breaking the law, he justified himself by quoting Bharati: ‘Go to the corners of the world and bring precious elements to our country!’ He [the politician] even had the impudence to quote to me our great poet Bharati’s words.

Alagarisamy was indignant, explaining to us that by precious elements, Bharati had meant knowledge, art and wealth. Such treasures ought to be brought to India for the benefit of all, and were not meant for individual enjoyment. Yet, the politician planned to keep his ‘precious elements’ for his own amusement or to sell at a profit. Not only was the politician a law-breaker, he was also a selfish man, Alagarisamy concluded.

The civil servant was habitually corrupt. Rajarathinam asked the audience:

Do you remember the dam constructed near Dindigul? The one that broke down after a heavy rain, because the contractor had used mud and soil instead of bricks and cement?
Answering himself, Rajarathinam claimed that no one had dared to bring the contractor and the engineer to account, because civil servants as well as politicians had been bribed. Adding force to his argument, Rajarathinam quoted a cynical saying:

Until dawn, the contractor works on the bridge. When the day breaks, the minister inaugurates the bridge. When the first car uses it, the bridge collapses.

Adding to Rajarathinam’s example, Durairaj later took the opportunity to remind the audience of a hospital building that had recently collapsed. ‘Hundreds of children were killed there’, Durairaj said, noting that he had seen photographs of the dead children in the newspapers, but not of the engineer or the contractor. His conclusion was the same as Rajarathinam’s: The culprits had evidently bought their immunity by bribes.

The industrialist amassed wealth by mercilessly exploiting the poor. For example, Durairaj told his audience that no one did anything to help the poor children who were forced to work in the matchbox factories in Virudunagar and Sivakasi, despite the fact that writers and journalists had written numbers of stories about the children’s horrible conditions. Durairaj concluded:

While the poor people’s children toil and live in want, the children of ‘the rich’ eat choice biscuits and sleep on soft cushions. Since we are selfish people, we do not put an end to this injustice. As long as the money rolls in, we are satisfied. As long as our children study, we are satisfied. As long as we have rice to eat, we are satisfied. We do not care how the poor people live.

The businessman was a swindler and a forger. To illustrate this, Durairaj told an anecdote about a businessman’s dealings with the tax department:

The businessman paid without complaining the first time he was assessed by the tax department. The businessman again paid without any comment the second time he was
assessed, although the tax had been raised. However, when he was assessed a third time and his tax was again raised, the businessman asked the tax department how high his assessment was likely to be in the future, and he was told a certain figure. The businessman went home. He called his servants and told them: ‘The tax department is going to raise my assessment again and I need more money in order to pay my taxes. Here is a printing press and blank currency paper. Print as much money as possible. Ordinarily, I would have done the printing myself, but today I have to attend to other urgent business.’

The merchant was guilty of adulteration, that is, the diluting of food, in particular, by cheaper and inferior substances. As everyone knew, rice that contained pebbles, coffee powder mixed with cheap substances, and watered-down milk were part of people’s daily experience. In fact, adulteration was believed to take place as a normal activity of production and commerce in India. Rajarathinam, for example, told us that a shopkeeper had disclosed to him that the mills used a special machine for producing pebbles to mix with the rice.\textsuperscript{114}

People often attributed death and sickness to the eating of adulterated food,\textsuperscript{115} and this theme was also highlighted during the padimandram. Alagarisamy told a dramatic anecdote about a man who tried to commit suicide:

Once a man went to the doctor and complained that he was vomiting and shivering. He told the doctor: ‘I have lost all hope in life. I’m so frustrated that I bought the poison \textit{Killbug} and drank it, but I didn’t die.’ The doctor prescribed an antidote against the poison, but the man died immediately he drank the antidote. Both the poison and the antidote had been adulterated. \textit{Killbug} did not kill, but the antidote did.

Finally, the film producer was said to be driven exclusively by a desire to make profits. Rajarathinam told us that this desire explained why film producers made indecent films, aimed
intentionally at corrupting people’s morals. Nowadays, not even a husband and wife could watch a film together without embarrassment, he said. In addition, the actors participated in deceiving people. While the actors faked artificial sentiments, the women who spent their hard-earned money on seeing the film wept real tears, Rajarathinam said.  

Other examples of the crimes of the ‘the rich’ were given during the padimandram. The drift of the critique is clear from the examples, to my mind. Covering a wide range of morally censured behaviour, the crimes attributed to ‘the rich’ were related to their alleged greed. India was thus a society in ruins because its social elite, ‘the rich’, was greedy. The greed of ‘the rich’ simultaneously signalled the ruined state of Indian society and was the alleged cause of its ruin. As far as I can judge, this argument found a response in the thoughts of ordinary people in Ekkaraiyur. The padimandram’s speakers presented their arguments in a refined and persistent form, but their views did not differ in substance from those of the people who I knew in the audience.

The legitimacy of the pursuit of wealth

Despite their censure of the greed of ‘the rich’, the padimandram’s speakers argued that the pursuit of wealth was legitimate. The pursuit of wealth, even in the form of money, was not seen as a problem in itself. Chinnappan, for example, reminded his audience that Tiruvalluvar, without doubt the most respected of Tamilian teachers of wisdom, had written to this effect. Quoting the same saying of Bharati that Alagarisamy’s politician had used to defend smuggling, Chinnappan also said:

Mahatma Gandhi taught you twelve different kinds of fasts.  
I tell you a thirteenth: Go and search for wealth!

Moreover, the speakers argued that people’s desire for wealth was understandable from a practical point of view, even without the legitimacy given by authorities such as Tiruvalluvar and Bharati. It was impossible to live without money, Chinnappan noted:
Words are only good for speaking or writing on paper. Can we build a school, a hospital, or a community hall without money? Can we build a dam or heavy industries?

In reply, Ramasamy pointed out ironically that unless the speakers’ expenses had been paid, there would not have been any debate on the problems of wealth in Ekkaraiyur that evening.

Not only did the speakers argue that money was an everyday necessity. Money could also bring personal security. As Ramasamy observed, the police punish the poor for the slightest offence, whereas they do not harass ‘the rich’:

The poor person who steals a few pennies is imprisoned for months, while the rich swindler who steals *lakhs* of rupees is rewarded and awarded [that is, given awards].

The speakers also made numerous resentful comments about the respect that people extended towards ‘the rich’. Wealth could be respected, but not wealth acquired by greed, they seemed to argue. Neither ought wealth to be the principal reason for respect, as was the case nowadays, according to the speakers. This is suggested by Durairaj’s ironic saying:

*If we have money, the world is ours; ten rupees in the pocket make us big men.*

More to the point, Rajarathinam said:

*No one listens to the penniless man. Even his mother who bore him for 300 days, even his darling wife, turns away from the penniless man. No one in his village respects him.*

Chinnappan added to the theme by quoting the poet Pattukottai Kalyana Sundaram:

*I earn money, but it does not enter my pocket. When I get money, the moneylenders line up in front of me to tear me to pieces. I can’t go home because there I meet my wife’s*
lover, and my wife does not care. What can I do? The poor have no right to speak. I see jewels and fabrics spread out in the bazaar, and I want to buy them. But I haven’t any money. There aren’t any good times for the poor.

Moreover, the speakers claimed that the respect ‘the rich’ get was insincere and feigned, illustrated here by Durairaj’s hilarious anecdote about the man who suddenly became rich. People made fun of the man behind his back, Durairaj assured the audience. Some fragments that give the gist of the long anecdote are the following:

Before the man became rich, people considered him lower than a dog. Yet, when he became rich, everyone began to treat him as an important man. He believed in his own importance, and began to talk a lot of claptrap about philosophy, about which he knew nothing. Yet, his spongers said ‘yes, yes’ to everything he said, however absurd it was.

Before the man became rich, he had travelled in a bullock cart. Now he bought an Ambassador car and hired a driver. He even had a toilet installed in the car, and thus equipped he took his spongers on a lavish pilgrimage.

The driver was an old man, but the rich man did not treat him with respect. During a drive, he asked the driver what he was doing. The driver answered that he was at present changing the gear from second to third. At that, the rich man shouted: ‘What nonsense! You should have done that before we started the journey!’ His spongers joined in: ‘How dare the driver do such a thing. What will he not change [that is, steal] when he is alone in the car? Surely, one can’t trust him. He ought to be dismissed.’

Jokes apart, Durairaj’s anecdote pointed to an implicit distinction that the speakers made in the matter of respect. This distinction, which ran as an undercurrent in their arguments, associated one kind of respect with wealth that had been acquired by selfish motives.
This kind of respect was essentially insincere and temporary. The rich man did attract a following if he was generous, but as Durairaj said:

The rich man has plenty of friends, but once his money is gone, respect and friends are gone too. Such is people’s mentality.

Another kind of respect was associated with learning and with age. This respect was thought to be sincere and lasting, in contrast to the kind of respect that was associated with selfishly acquired wealth. It did not invite malicious jokes behind one’s back, and it was not associated with self-seeking.

The speakers appeared to think of these two kinds of respect as situated differently in a historical perspective. The kind of respect that was associated with selfishly acquired wealth was held to characterise the present, whereas the other kind of respect was associated with the past. The change from a societal situation characterised by sincere and lasting respect to one where respect was predominantly insincere and temporary was one aspect of the speakers’ notion of a society in ruins. The present situation was, according to the speakers, that people were motivated by their own self-seeking interests to feign respect towards others. Selfishness thus permeated the society in ruins. Not only were ‘the rich’ selfish, so also were those who paid them respect.

Not only did the speakers appear to argue that one kind of respect had superseded another. Durairaj also argued that the very idea of what constituted wealth had changed. In the not so distant past, children had been seen as a family’s wealth, he told the audience. Durairaj’s father, for example, used to call his nine children ‘his nine lakhs of rupees’. Durairaj claimed that, in contrast, money nowadays was understood as the only form of wealth and children were seen as a financial burden. He jokingly told the audience:

Ask any man nowadays and he will tell you: ‘It is my fate to have four children. I wanted to stop after two, but now I have four. I don’t know what to do.’

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To sum up, the pursuit of wealth, even in the form of money, was not seen as a problem in itself. Yet, driven by selfishness ‘the rich’ had turned the legitimate pursuit of wealth into censured greed. Greed generated by selfishness, it was argued, caused the ruin of society.

**Corruption**

The form and aim of the padimandram made possible a concentrated and forcible critique directed collectively at those labelled ‘the rich’. In the same manner, the morality of individual leaders was a recurrent topic of everyday discussions in Ekkaraiyur. Such discussions involved allegations that leaders were economically self-seeking and primarily interested in filling their own pockets. It was said that they regarded their political or administrative positions as business ventures, as investments in order to reach positions of influence and power. As economic investments had to be recovered, preferably at a handsome profit, they had to look for the means to amass as much money as possible, which involved them in corrupt practices. The notion of leadership was thus intertwined in Ekkaraiyur with notions of corruption caused by selfishness (cf. Varma 1999 and Parry 2000, in Fuller & Bénéï 2001: 13-14).

This understanding of the motives of leaders was buttressed by the media’s daily reports on corruption in political life. Exposures of individual politicians were common in the news. Ironically, incorruptibility appeared to be the favourite claim of politicians. Against all odds, it seemed, they persisted in projecting themselves as having ‘clean hands’ (for example, Mr Rajiv Gandhi), or sometimes as having ‘cleaned their hands’ (for example, Mr Karunanidhi, at the time Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu). In fact, the more incorruptible a politician claimed to be, the more his motives seemed to be questioned (cf. Chakrabarty 2001). Pointedly put, any declaration of honesty was interpreted as a front for hidden motives, and a simple and humble appearance was understood as a disguise for selfish motives. For example, it was said about those who dressed in white homespun cloth, the classic Gandhian dress of
simplicity, that ‘their cloth is brilliant white, but their hearts are black’.¹²¹

Promises to intervene against the corrupt practices of others were commonplace in election speeches. The quality of the trust that such promises inspired can be illustrated by the grim joke a Muslim teacher in Ekkaraiyur once told me:

Once, at a UNESCO meeting, a delegate proposed that Islamic law should be introduced worldwide. That is, criminals should be punished by having their hands and feet chopped off. However, it was realised that the proposal was impossible when another delegate objected that politicians, civil servants, and generals without hands and feet would not be able to rule a country.

The media described an India beset by rampant corruption. Yet, from the viewpoint of the anthropologist, the media image of corruption sometimes seemed imbued with fictional qualities. Reports about couriers arrested with suitcases full of bank notes, or gold bars stashed in secret safes guarded by cobras drugged on opium, belonged more to the cinema than to everyday village experience. Nevertheless, the often astronomic sums involved in allegations of large-scale corruption did not appear to surprise anyone in Ekkaraiyur, and large sums were said to be part of the local scene as well. A member of the village panchayat, for example, told me as a matter of common knowledge that, whereas Ekkaraiyur’s MLA could be bought for some lakhs of rupees, Ekkaraiyur’s MP would expect crores.¹²² Evidently, the different corruption levels of the MLA and the MP referred to an estimate of their respective potentials of power and influence, rather than to their moral integrity.

The typical local politician was believed to habitually siphon off funds meant for the public works in the village. Allegedly, one way to go about this was to take illegal commissions from contractors. Another way was to secure contracts by means of front men. In either case, the public works would be executed with as cheap and sub-standard materials as possible, it was assumed. The
constructions deteriorated quickly and sometimes caused tragedies, as Rajarathinam and Durairaj pointed out during the padimandram.

Local politicians were also understood to involve themselves in corrupt practices as givers of bribes. A popular topic of discussion was to estimate how much the candidates had used, or were likely to use, during an election. With regard to Abdul, for example, it was calculated that he had spent between Rs. 40,000 and 70,000 to become the president of the village panchayat. His election costs were considered to have been comparatively high. Ramadurai, who occupied the more influential position as the panchayat union chairman, was estimated to have spent a mere Rs. 100,000 on his election. To become a MLA or a MP was said to involve far larger sums. For example, Perumal, the MLA, was believed to have spent between Rs. 400,000 and 500,000 on his election.

The sums that the candidates for election were said to have spent included expenses for pamphlets and posters, travel, meetings and free tea for the audience. Such costs were typically seen as various kinds of bribes. But, other expenses for securing votes were also included. Thus, it was taken for granted that votes were bought and sold in cash transactions, but there were other ways as well. For example, candidates often presented public gifts to collectives of voters. Or, with regard to Abdul, it was admiringly told how he had spirited away a large number of an opponent’s reliable voters by taking them on an all-free sightseeing tour on election day.

Opposing candidates typically accused each other of buying votes. Yet, the trade in votes appeared to be so strongly associated with political practices that candidates often made no secret of the fact that they participated in the trade, if they had the means. For example, once when I was discussing the coming election to the Lok Sabha (the union parliament in New Delhi) with Karuppuvan, the youth leader whom I mentioned in Chapter 4, he told me that his political opponents, the local members of the Congress (I) and ADMK parties in Ekkaraiyur, intended to pay Rs. 10 for each vote. In fact, the pay-off was going to take place the same night, and Karuppuvan declared that he and his friends planned to patrol the streets in order to disrupt the transactions. When I asked Karuppuvan whether the DMK was also buying votes in Ekkaraiyur in this election, Karuppuvan answered with sorrow in his voice:
‘Alam, this election we don’t have any money’. The people in the barber’s shop, where our discussion was taking place, doubled up with laughter.

I asked Karuppuvan about the DMK’s intentions, because on an earlier occasion he had revealed to me that his party used to buy votes. But, Karuppuvan also voiced concern about the effectiveness of the practice, telling me that it was an unreliable method of winning elections. The drawback was that one could not control how the people actually voted. According to Karuppuvan, people took the money and gave whatever promises were required, but they voted as they pleased. In addition, some people allegedly sold their votes to several parties. Other local politicians with whom I discussed the transactions expressed a similar unease about the effectiveness of the practice. Ironically, to be effective, bribes in election matters presupposed the kind of honesty that the practice itself appeared to negate. The same was, of course, true of all bribing matters.

Political life was permeated by venality in the Ekkaraiyur view. According to local common sense, to be a politician was to be corrupt. Nevertheless, just as selfishness was not associated exclusively with ‘the rich’, so corruption was not considered as the politicians’ exclusive prerogative. A deep mistrust of motives and actions was expressed about everyone who in any way controlled common funds or influenced decisions on the allocation of funds. To choose one example among a large number, Christians in Ekkaraiyur several times questioned me about the Vatican’s aid. As I did not know anything about the subject, it was explained to me that the Vatican was sending large sums of money for the relief of poor Christians in Tamil Nadu. However, none of those in Ekkaraiyur who considered themselves to be poor Christians had ever received any money from the Vatican. Therefore, the obvious conclusion was that the money was being embezzled. Wealthy local Christians in collusion with the priest were pointed out as the culprits. The allegation that priests generally lived in luxury was taken as telling proof.

Other allegations of venality appeared to be more realistic than the perhaps largely imaginary beliefs about the Vatican’s aid. For example, bribes appeared as a regular practice at the local level of the civil service. In Ekkaraiyur, bribes paid to local civil servants
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ranged from a modest Rs. 5 for a signature on a certificate, to Rs. 5,000 for an electrical connection to an agricultural pump-set. The sums accumulated were no doubt substantial, and bribes seemed to be an important part of the salary of a civil servant. A surveyor’s assistant, for example, estimated that he earned as much in bribes as in monthly salary.

Bribes were often considered as a necessary cost when dealing with the civil service. A free-lance writer of legal documents told me that he regularly gave part of his income to the civil servants he dealt with. Unless he paid them, his documents would be rejected as incorrectly written, he claimed. The farmer who paid Rs. 5,000 for electricity to his garden pump-set grudged the cost. Nevertheless, he thought of it as an investment that would eventually pay off, because of the enhanced productivity of his garden. Unless he paid, he would have to wait for electricity for at least seven years, he had been told.

This cost-benefit attitude was often apparent when people spoke about the necessity for paying bribes. For example, a donation was often needed to gain admittance to schools of higher education, and such a donation was understood in Ekkaraiyur as masking a bribe. When one informant tried to secure a place in a polytechnic college for his nephew, he found that the colleges had fixed the amount to be donated. The polytechnic colleges in the region demanded donations ranging from Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 12,000. My informant eventually chose what he called a ‘Rs. 3,000-college’ for his nephew. Yet, even the ‘Rs. 12,000-college’ was comparably cheap, he thought. Colleges, he told me, could be far more expensive. A polytechnic college in Dindigul was said to demand donations of Rs. 20,000 for civil engineering and Rs. 45,000 for mechanical engineering, and a medical school in Madras was said to demand a staggering donation of Rs. 600,000 (cf. Overland 2002). Incidentally, my informant’s donation of Rs. 3,000 was meant to go towards the building of a student hostel.

Bribes were also expected for securing white-collar jobs (cf. Jeffrey & Lerche 2001: 97-98). The bribe was typically calculated to amount to something more than a year’s salary for the job. If money were raised in disadvantageous ways, the cost could be far higher. For example, I was told about a family that had paid Rs. 20,000 to secure a teaching position for their daughter. The pawning of
jewellery had raised half the sum and the other half had been borrowed from a moneylender. My informant calculated that the girl’s entire salary for the first two years would go to repaying the loan to the moneylender. Another informant estimated that a good teaching position for his daughter would cost him about Rs. 50,000. However, when his daughter had become a teacher, he would be in a position to contract an advantageous marriage for her, he told me. He therefore regarded the Rs. 50,000 as an investment for both a job and a marriage. Moreover, any future costs would be the responsibility of the husband and his family, he said.

The practice of bribing was strongly condemned in Ekkaraiyur, despite the cost-benefit attitude to the transactions. Bribes were typically said to destroy social life, causing society’s ruin, as was pointed out in the padimandram. Although most people’s experience of bribing amounted to transactions with local civil servants, the practice was principally associated with rich and powerful people, manifesting their overall corruption. One informant, for example, described bribes as ‘the rich people sucking the blood of the poor’.

The contradiction between people’s everyday experience of bribing and their belief that the rich and powerful were primarily responsible for the corruption of society was resolved in a number of ways. One typical argument was that locally paid bribes travelled upwards in the civil service hierarchy (cf. Gupta 1995: 384). In other words, the local civil servant collected for his superiors. One civil servant in fact told me that he was expected to regularly pass a certain amount of money to his superiors. Therefore, whether he liked it or not, he was forced to demand bribes. Another informant explained that he was forced into demanding bribes in order to save up for the costs associated with the visits of high-ranking civil servants. They expected to be entertained lavishly, and neither the office budget nor his salary could bear the cost, he claimed. Other informants argued that bribes were their only means of recovering what they themselves had been forced to pay when posted or transferred.

These informants were local civil servants, and their explanations were meant to justify their actions. Although they admitted that they took part in corrupt practices, they largely, represented themselves as the victims of corruption. Ultimately, they attributed corruption to
their superiors who were represented as rich and powerful. The corruption of their superiors forced them into corruption, they argued. Corruption, then, was seen as spreading from the top down.

Representing themselves as essentially the victims of the corruption of the more powerful, local civil servants as well as local politicians expressed unease about the subject. Several of them claimed to be disgusted by the corrupt practices in which they were themselves participating, telling me that they were considering resigning or not standing for re-election. Some such statements were undoubtedly made because they were believed to be expected, but most of them seemed to me to be at least in part sincerely motivated.

When people in Ekkaraiyur talked about bribes, they commonly referred to payments of money. Yet, bribes could also take other forms. As mentioned above, free transport, tea, and cakes at party meetings or political rallies were often considered as bribes, and even a letter of recommendation could substitute for a bribe in certain contexts. The primary school teacher whose letter of recommendation from Ekkaraiyur’s MLA I discussed in Chapter 4, estimated that the letter saved him about Rs. 10,000 in bribes. As the MLA’s letter cancelled out the need for a cash bribe, the letter was like a bribe in some respects, the teacher told me.

The monetary form and the monetary value did not seem to be the defining features of the bribe, to my mind. Instead, any transaction that appeared to go against what was considered as ideal behaviour tended to be seen as a bribe. In the case above, the letter came to be represented as a bribe because the school authorities ought to have acted on other grounds than the MLA’s proposal. Ideally, they would have considered factors such as the work situation of the teacher, the schools’ need of teachers, and so on, but they chose to accommodate the wishes of an influential local politician. Although my informant was happy that his strategy of enlisting the MLA’s support had ensured his transfer, he recognised the illegitimacy of the strategy, defining the letter as a kind of bribe because both the MLA and the school authorities had deviated from the ideal behaviour that was expected of them. Deviation from an ideal similarly appeared to define the corruption of a civil servant. The reasoning was, in my opinion, that since he was paid a salary by the state, the civil servant ought to serve his clients free of charge.
Whatever else he demanded was labelled as a bribe. The same argument likewise appeared relevant for the politician. Past and present achievements ought to win the ideal politician his position. Other means were labelled as bribes.

When actual behaviour was evaluated by the standards of the ideal, one dilemma of the way leaders wished to present themselves became apparent, namely, an ambiguity surrounding a leader’s achievements. In other words, what a leader and his followers announced as his achievements, others could speak of as telling facts about his venality. Thus, what was labelled as a bribe marked the tension between the ideals of leadership and the reality of machine-style politics. The central mechanism of machine style politics, the pay-off between benefits and votes, could equally be seen as achievements and as examples of corruption. Not surprisingly, people in Ekkaraiyur argued that politics typically involved corrupt practices.

Corruption and the state

The association between corruption and politics in Ekkaraiyur implies that any particular conception of what constitutes corruption, and the moral evaluation of it, is contingent on a particular political context. Ludden’s (1989) and Dirks’ (1989) historical studies, for example, give abundant examples of transactions that would be labelled as examples of corruption if they had taken place in contemporary Ekkaraiyur. Yet, there is no indication that these transactions incurred such allegations in their own historical contexts.

It may be a frequent observation that any definition of corruption is contextually limited. Yet, the observation can open up an interesting perspective on the topic of corruption, as does Akhil Gupta’s article (1995) on the discourse of corruption and accountability in a North Indian village. By drawing attention to how people speak about corruption, Gupta’s focus provides a refreshing break from what appears as mainstream writing on the topic of corruption. Mainstream writing tends to concentrate on the phenomenon of corruption, explaining why and when it occurs, and
also its economic, political, and social consequences. Answers and arguments vary with discipline and perspective, but the orientation is essentially towards corruption as an objective phenomenon (see, for example, Girling 1997; Harriss-White 1996; Huntington 1968: 59-71; Jagannathan 1986; Palmier 2000; Parekh 2001; Shrivastava 1990, 1998; Singh 1997; Verma 1999; Vittal 2001; Tummala 2002; Wade 1982, 1985).

In contrast, focusing on the contextualisation of corruption, Gupta argues that the post-colonial Indian state has generated new standards of accountability that have come to be widely accepted also in rural India. As a populist democracy, the post-colonial Indian state insists that its legitimacy derives from the people. Civil servants, as well as politicians, are therefore to be accountable to the people. Consequently, actions that were tolerated or considered legitimate during earlier political regimes have come to be considered as corrupt. Thus, the sense of pervasive corruption in India may well be a consequence of changes in the understanding of the post-colonial state’s accountability, rather than referring to a reality of increased levels of corruption (Gupta 1995: 388-89).

Gupta’s argument provides an alternative to the frequent argument that the prevalence of corruption has risen in India since Independence, which was also heard in Ekkaraiyur where people argued that corruption was an increasing phenomenon. The idea of an increase is held by many writers on corruption in contemporary India. For example, Padhy (1986), whose initial pages read like a vitriolic denunciation of the greed of Indian politicians, and Bhatnagar and Sharma (1991) state that corruption permeates Indian society on an unprecedented scale. Yet, neither of them bothers to substantiate their statements. No doubt, the problem of measuring corruption in a meaningful way would make their statements difficult to prove. Incidentally, allegations of an unprecedented scale of corruption appeared in colonial times in India, as well (Nelson 1989: passim book IV).

Gupta tries to give an answer to why the topic of corruption so cropped up frequently in everyday conversations in the North Indian village where he did his fieldwork. The answer leads him into an interesting analysis of the state as seen from the village perspective, and to the argument that the discourse on corruption and
accountability is one important element in the construction of the image of the state. The discourse is, Gupta writes:

. . . a key arena through which the state, citizens, and other organizations and aggregations come to be imagined. Instead of treating corruption as a dysfunctional aspect of state organization, I see it as a mechanism through which “the state” itself is discursively constituted. (Gupta 1995:376)

Discursive images of the state are created in the context of people’s everyday interactions with government bureaucracies and through representations of the state in the media, in particular the press. Also noteworthy is Gupta’s argument that the discourses on corruption indicate that the people he is studying see themselves as part of the Indian state, which is also the central argument of Fuller and Bénéï (2001).

**Indian individualism**

Corruption at both the local and national levels was a favourite topic of everyday conversation in Ekkaraiyur, as in the North Indian village that Gupta studied (1995: 375). People in Ekkaraiyur argued about how much of the Bofors howitzer bribes Rajiv Gandhi had received personally (cf. Gupta 1995: 386); about the exact cost of the MLA’s election victory, and his moneylending father’s attitudes towards investment in politics; about how much public money the president of the village panchayat could be expected to divert before his term was over; about whether or not the pattadari committee’s expenditures on court litigation would enable its president to obtain more land for himself. Information was shared about how much the land surveyor and his assistants would be likely to demand for surveying a field, and about the current rate for the stamp on official documents.

There were elements in the conversations that puzzled me. The topic of corruption appeared to arouse two very different reactions, often from the same person. On the one hand, disclosures of
corruption were typically answered by a worldly-wise ‘I told you so’. On the other hand, the same disclosures set off a strong anti-venality indignation (see the opening scene of Chapter 1 for an example). This contradiction between expectations and emotions relating to corruption did not seem to make sense. After all, if anyone in a position to divert funds from their proper purpose was expected to indulge in corrupt practices, why did cases of corruption cause such indignation? Moreover, why were people so quick to accuse each other of being corrupt, and why were they so ready to believe unconfirmed allegations?

A beginning of an answer to these questions is suggested in the argument put forward during the padimandram that anyone was likely to become corrupt. Although the speakers attributed selfishness to ‘the rich’, they made it clear that selfishness was not associated exclusively with ‘the rich’. Essentially, the discourses on corruption in Ekkaraiyur, in their varying forms, made the same point: as people were inherently selfish, anyone was likely to become corrupt.

Alagarisamy exemplified this by telling an anecdote about a man who got angry one day with his family:

After a quarrel in the family, the man spat to left and right and said: ‘I want neither field nor house, jewellery nor property, kith and kin nor neighbours. Let me go to the Palni Hills to live like a sanyasi!’ However, on leaving for the mountains he noticed a silver vessel in the front garden of his house. Instantly, he dropped all intentions of becoming a sanyasi. Instead, he called his wife and told her to bring the vessel inside the house before anyone else found it.

Selfish greed overrode even the man’s anger with his family in the anecdote. This was in line with the speakers’ argument that anyone was liable to become selfish. Selfishness did permeate the whole of contemporary society and all its social bonds, they argued. Durairaj said that evidence of this widespread selfishness could be found in an eroded respect for learning, claiming that his students mocked him because of his simple appearance. Arguing that respect
for learning had been replaced by respect for material appearances, he told his audience: ‘If I were neatly dressed, well shaven, and drove a car, then my students would certainly speak to me in a different way.’

Pursuing the same theme, Ramasamy told an anecdote about a Tamil pandit and his daughter, concluding that ‘unless we live in luxury and wear gold rings, people do not treat us with respect’:

The pandit was a learned man who lived a frugal and contented life. His friends, in contrast, lived in luxury, and whenever they visited him, they wore fine clothes and expensive jewellery. On growing up, the pandit’s daughter began to compare their own simple life with the splendour of her father’s friends. Gradually she became discontented and began to nag her father to buy them fine clothes. The father explained to her that learning was true wealth, but she was not convinced. Eventually, the pandit gave in and bought his daughter a costly silk sari.

The idea that learning was true wealth was widely accepted in Ekkaraiyur. People expected that education would lead to a well-paid white-collar job, but education was also understood as a means of improving one’s moral character, particularly by restraining selfishness. Thus, expectations of economic betterment did not necessarily exclude those of moral growth. However, a balance ought to be maintained between moral character and material conditions, and this balance was often upset nowadays, the speakers argued. According to them, the majority of students were more concerned with the economic benefits of education than with its moral worth. The schools were even said to teach the students to value money-making by dishonest and selfish means. Rajarathinam contrasted the uneducated thief who was severely punished for stealing a few pennies with the educated swindler who became ‘awarded and rewarded’ for his crimes, while Durairaj exemplified dishonesty in academic circles by disclosing the reason why the tumblers were chained to the containers of cool water at his college in Madurai. Otherwise, the tumblers would be stolen immediately, Durairaj told us, asking:
If we cannot trust the educated not to steal even a simple tumbler, how can we trust them with things that are more important?

In the following anecdote Durairaj combined student disrespect towards the teacher, and by implication to their elders, with student dishonesty:

When I taught at a college in Usilampatti, a theft of Rs. 300 took place. To clear up the matter, I told my students that in the old days the village elders had used an ingenious method in similar situations. If someone stole a gold chain from a child, the elders gave a ball of cow dung to each family in the village. The next day, the balls were collected and brought to the child’s house, where they were dissolved in water. The chain would then invariably be found in the water. No further investigation was needed.

Adapting the method to the college circumstances, I gave each student an envelope. I asked them to drop the envelopes in my letterbox by the next morning, saying that I expected to find the stolen money in one of the envelopes. The next morning I found only a few empty envelopes in my letterbox. No one had returned the stolen money.

Durairaj exclaimed: ‘Most of the students were so dishonest that they even stole the envelopes!’

The universal attribution of selfishness to human beings, exemplified by the would-be sanyasi, the dissatisfied daughter and the dishonest students, suggests that the venality ascribed to the leader should be seen in an analytical framework that has a wider focus than that of the nature of leadership. It is true that the notion that selfishness was socially destructive was used tactically by leaders to represent their rivals as falling short of standards and as a generalised critique of leaders in general. However, to see allegations of selfishness only as instrumental in contexts of
struggles over power would be to lose much of the complexity of the notion, I would suggest.

Gupta’s (1995) focus on the discourse of corruption, which leads him to consider the function of the discourse as contributing to the conceptualisation of the state, is an example of one such wider framework. Yet, the universal attribution of selfishness combined with the tacit acceptance and strongly expressed emotions suggest to me that a more generally critical reflection on the nature of man was implied when corruption was discussed in Ekkaraiyur. Specifically, I suggest that the arguments about morality and selfishness implied in the debate on corruption reflected a kind of anti-individualistic critique. This suggestion raises questions about the place of individualism in India.

Dumont’s controversial book on Indian caste, Homo Hierarchicus (1988b [1966]), initiated an ongoing debate on Indian individualism. Homo Hierarchicus was the first book in an impressive comparative study, in which Dumont set out to investigate the values that related to the individual and the group in different types of societies.\(^{127}\)

While Dumont dealt with Indian caste in Homo Hierarchicus, he focused on Western notions of individualism in other books (Dumont 1977, 1986a, 1994).

Dumont argued that ‘traditional India’ and modern Europe differed in their dominant values. Whereas he associated values of individualism, equality, and liberty with modern Europe, he argued that values of holism and hierarchy had dominated ‘traditional India’. Holism and hierarchy, which for Dumont implied a tendency to see society as a whole and a ranking of the components of the whole, left no or little place for individualism in ‘traditional India’, not to mention the associated values of equality and liberty.\(^{128}\)

Dumont found the values of holism and hierarchy expressed in the Indian ideology of ranked castes.\(^{129}\) This ideology was, according to Dumont, essentially based on religious notions about purity and impurity, which defined the unity and uniqueness of every caste, as well as shaping the hierarchy of castes. Neither power nor economy were ideologically ranking factors, Dumont argued. The caste ideology therefore exemplified a ‘pure’ form of hierarchy for him. As he expressed it, echoing Durkheim and Mauss,
the religious domain in ‘traditional India’ had encompassed the economic and political domains.

Much can be, and has been, said about Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*. Appadurai dubbed it ‘the swan song’ of ‘a Western journey in the social scientific invention of India’ (1986: 745). Berreman labelled it a ‘travesty’, which ‘bears little relationship to the experience of caste in the lives of the many millions who live it in India’ (1991: 91). More precisely, Berreman argued that *Homo Hierarchicus* gives a distorted understanding of caste, because the book is based on Brahmanical traditions and on some selected classical Sanskrit texts, to the exclusion of post-Independence ethnographic literature on village India and on caste (1991: 91). Other commentators have been less categorical in their judgements of *Homo Hierarchicus*, but are still critical of its weak aspects. A lack of a historical perspective has troubled many critics. Béteille noted that Dumont failed to recognise the historical forces that have shaped notions of caste (1983: 47), and Madan (1991) was concerned about his neglect of change, although he recognised that Dumont did not intend to ‘provide a history of the caste system’ (Dumont 1988b: xix). Dirks’s ethnohistoric study of the Pudukottai ‘little kingdom’, *The Hollow Crown* (1989), is a long argument for the necessity of seeing caste in a historical perspective. Dirks argues consistently against Dumont’s contention that religious beliefs were pre-eminent earlier. In the ‘little kingdom’ of Pudukottai, for example, political power gave shape to castes and their relations. The king, not the Brahman of Dumont’s model, was the arbiter of caste in Pudukottai, according to Dirks (1989: 4, passim).

The commentators on the neglect of history in *Homo Hierarchicus* touch on an important point. Despite the fact that Dumont used texts with a wide historical span, the ideology of caste is treated in *Homo Hierarchicus* in an a-historical way that is indeed problematic. In fact, Dumont’s perspective fails to put notions of caste into a specific context. His ‘traditional India’ is a Hindu society, but it is not clear whether all Hindu societies exemplify ‘traditional India’ to Dumont. They probably did, in some respects. It appears to me that ‘traditional India’ for Dumont meant anything from contemporary village India to a Hindu India antedating Muslim domination. To bracket such a wide range of societies under the one
label of ‘traditional India’ is to create a social scientific invention; whether or not it is a Western invention is another matter.\textsuperscript{131} Moreover, it can be noted that not all India counted as ‘traditional India’ for Dumont, who also recognised the existence of an India to which his arguments did not necessarily apply (1988b: 217-31). However, as a consequence of its counter-position to ‘traditional India’ this ‘non-traditional India’ also remains embarrassingly vague. The presence of non-Hindu influences seems to have been the defining feature. Western, and also Muslim, influences appear to turn Dumont’s ‘traditional India’ into a ‘non-traditional India’ (cf. Béteille 1987: 675).

The lack of precision makes it problematic to either verify or falsify Dumont’s arguments. Cases that do not fit his scheme can always be discarded as not representing ‘traditional India’. For example, Mines’s discussion of the Beeri Chettiyar merchants of Madras (1992) is intended as a partial refutation of Dumont’s claim that ‘traditional India’ lacked notions of individualism. Mines argues that individual achievements were important for the Beeri Chettiyars as they were involved with British trade from the middle of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth centuries. However, as I understand it, it could plausibly be argued that Mines’s example is irrelevant to a discussion about the lack of individualism in Dumont’s ‘traditional India’. As the Beeri Chettiyars were involved with the British, it can be argued that they had ceased to be part of ‘traditional Indian society’, and any indication of individualism among the Beeri Chettiyars could be ascribed to Western influence.

Another difficulty with Dumont’s approach results from the fact that he was primarily concerned with ideology. This concern was recognised by Madan (1991) but not by all the other critics. Dumont himself insisted on the point (1987: 669-70, 1986a: 8-12),\textsuperscript{132} recognising that the expression ‘individual man’ has two senses. First, the individual is ‘the empirical subject of speech, thought, and will’ (Dumont 1977: 8, italics in the original). Second, there is the notion of the individual as ‘the independent, autonomous, and thus (essentially) non-social moral being’ (ibid., italics in the original). In fact, Dumont argued that the individual in the first sense is to be found in all societies, whereas the individual in the second sense is ‘found primarily in our modern ideology of man and society’ (ibid.).
Dumont made it clear that his study was about ‘the individual man’ in the second sense, for which he wished to reserve the term individualism.

The focus that Dumont puts on the ideology of the individual implies that empirical studies neither necessarily negate nor support his arguments. In other words, unless the relationship between ideology and the actions of ‘the empirical subject of speech, thought, and will’ (Dumont 1977:8) is made clear. This, unfortunately, Dumont failed to do, apart from attributing primacy to ideology. Consequently, empirical studies do not necessarily apply to his argument, as has been noted by Marriott and Tambiah, among others (Mariott 1969: 1169 and Tambiah 1972: 834, in Mines 1992: note 2). The same observation seems to underlie Berreman’s above-quoted statement about the irrelevance of Homo Hierarchicus for caste in daily Indian life (1991: 91). Madan, it should be noted, was also troubled by Dumont’s lack of concern for the fit between ideology and empirical observation (1991). In fact, Dumont’s approach appears to be in danger of falling into a trap that Douglas warns against. Criticising her own study on the abominations of Leviticus (1991) for its lack of ‘anchorage’, Douglas argues that in order to be credible the analysis of systems of ideas must be related to how the ideas are mobilised in the regular habits of people (Douglas 1996: 126-131). Likewise, in his article on ‘thick description’, Geertz argues that an analysis of symbolic forms must be tied to ‘concrete social events and occasions, the public world of common life’. If not, ‘appeals to dark sciences’ are involved, Geertz warns (1973: 30).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the numerous problems associated with Dumont’s study, it has initiated a stimulating and interesting exchange of arguments that express underlying, and usually unvoiced, assumptions about man and society. To my mind, Dumont was right to insist on the importance of values, but there is no need to accept his approach to ideology wholeheartedly. If the pre-eminence of ideology is less strongly stated, empirical studies can be used to test his arguments. Clearly, if values have the pre-eminent position Dumont accorded them, then they are also very much part of people’s daily lives and can be studied through the same. Thus, while it is possible to distinguish analytically between Dumont’s two
senses of ‘individual man’, the moral individual cannot stand fully without the support of the practical individual. In other words, values have somehow to be concretely expressed in empirically discernible action, if the analysis is to be credible.

Béteille (1986) takes this approach as he discusses the relevance of Dumont’s arguments in the context of contemporary India. Prompted by an interest in the government policy of positive discrimination, which I outlined in reference to Tamil Nadu in Chapter 2, Béteille argues that inequalities in contemporary India are perceived in a different way from that of the past. They are no longer idealised, because they are no longer made part of an unquestioned ideology. Béteille acknowledges that values of holism and hierarchy are in evidence in contemporary India. But, he also points out that there is plenty of evidence for the presence of values of individualism, equality and liberty, which Dumont associated with modern Europe (Béteille 1986: 123). Béteille’s conclusion is that to characterise contemporary India as a hierarchical society would be to obscure rather than to illuminate reality (1986: 133).

Béteille goes on to question Dumont’s argument that individualism is always associated with equality (1986: 123). Building on Simmel’s observations on individualism, Béteille suggests that we distinguish between two different kinds of individualism, which he terms ‘an individualism of equality’ and ‘an individualism of inequality’. One important difference between the two concepts is that ‘individualism of equality’ stresses what is common to all individuals, while ‘individualism of inequality’ emphasises what is unique to each individual (1986: 126-27).

The suggestion made by Simmel and Béteille of two different kinds of individualism opens up the recognition of an Indian individualism that is not associated with equality. Mines has taken up this suggestion, arguing that ‘an individualism of inequality’ can be established for ‘traditional’ as well as for contemporary India. Mines puts forward his argument in his article mentioned earlier on the Beeri Chettiyar merchants (1992). The argument is also central to Mines and Gourishankar’s article on South Indian leadership (1990; see also my Chapter 4), and is most clearly stated in Mines’s study on community and individuality in South India (1994). 133
In his study on community and individuality, Mines sets out to demonstrate that ‘... Tamils do recognize individuality as an essential feature of ordinary life’ (1994: 2, italics in the original). But, Mines argues that the individuality Tamilians recognise differs from the common Western notion of the individual. Whereas the Western notion of individuality emphasises a person’s right or obligation to act autonomously (1994: 3), this Tamilian understanding of individuality stresses that the person is primarily created within a social group. In other words, a person’s individuality is defined by the sets of status and role that he or she occupies within the group. Individuality is unequally distributed within the group, and leaders are singled out as the group’s pre-eminent individuals (1994: 21-22). This ‘individualism of inequality’ shows both similarities and differences to Dumont’s characterisation of ‘traditional India’. They share the holistic perspective and the concern for ranking, but differ in that ranking is not necessarily based on caste in Mines’s analytical model. Moreover, another point in Mines’s view is that the group creates and gives scope for the individual, rather than negates it. It is a kind of individualism that stresses the uniqueness of individuals but not necessarily as equal or autonomous persons in the way that Dumont associated with individualism (1977, 1986a, 1994).

Mines formed his understanding of this particular Tamilian individualism during his extensive fieldwork in South India. When interviewing leaders of various kinds, he noted a typical pattern of self-presentation that focused on those interviewed as public persons. Achievements, reputation and roles were central to this pattern, as were also agency and responsibility for one’s actions (Mines 1992: 154). Interpreting this pattern, Mines argues that this Tamilian individuality is primarily expressed in a public dimension. The social group, ranging from ‘...the household, one’s kin, and one’s caste community ... [to] neighborhood, political parties and other institutions, and in the case of important persons, the state or even the nation’ (Mines 1994: 21), is the principal arena in which such individuality is created, and leaders in their public character are singled out as the foremost examples of individuals.

Interesting as it is, Mines’s argument, like Dumont’s, can be taken too far. The debate surrounding Dumont’s study of values
leaves an enduring impression of the inherent danger, indeed futility, of attempts to characterise entire societies in terms of values. People represented as either Homo Hierarchicus or Homo Equalis easily turn out to be pasteboard characters, as Béteille has noted (1983: 35). Little would be gained if Mines’s suggestion was used for inventing a new Indian pasteboard character. I therefore refrain from ascribing a particular conception of the individual to the people in Ekkaraiyur. In fact, Béteille’s observations about contemporary India appear relevant:

The most striking feature of Indian society today is the co-existence of divergent, even contradictory, beliefs and values. Hierarchical values are in evidence everywhere; yet people proclaim loudly, and not always insincerely, that equality should be placed above every other consideration. Individuals compete with each other and claim their dues as individuals in a growing number of fields; yet loyalties to caste, tribe, sect, clan, lineage and family have a continuing and in some fields increasing hold over people. (1986: 123)

The Ekkaraiyur critique of the selfish individual

The diversity of beliefs and values alluded to by Béteille also characterised Ekkaraiyur in the late 1980s, which makes it problematic to label the people there according to either Dumont’s or Mines’s schemes. Nevertheless, the discussion on Indian individualism provides the wider analytical framework within which I suggest that the Ekkaraiyur debate on corruption can be seen. As already mentioned, I would suggest that the arguments about morality and selfishness implied in the debate on corruption reflected a kind of anti-individualistic critique. More specifically, I would suggest that it was a critique of the particular notion of individualism that Béteille labels ‘individualism of equality’.

By making this suggestion, I do not wish to deny that accusations of corruption can be seen as tactical means between competing leaders, nor for that matter as a means of creating discursive images
of the state. However, by their insistence on a universal, inherent selfishness the arguments about corruption in Ekkaraiyur also suggest their role as a generalised critique that is focused on the nature of man.

Notions surrounding selfishness appear as the core in this critique of ‘individualism of equality’. As Mines writes:

…the Western notion of individualism – the idea that the person has an identity separate from others and has a right, nay, an obligation to act as an autonomous person [that is, individualism of equality] – is considered selfish by most Indians even today. (1994: 3)

Mines’s strong claim that Indians censure this ‘individualism of equality’ as selfish finds a parallel in the Ekkaraiyur attitudes towards selfishness, put forward during the padimandram and in other contexts. Censuring the selfishness of ‘the rich’, the padimandram denounced, among others, the public servant as venal, the businessman as dishonest, and the industrialist as greedy. In other contexts, politicians and leaders in general fell under the similar censure of selfishness. Among my Ekkaraiyur informants, selfishness seemed invariably to be associated with a disregard for the interests and welfare of others. The selfish person was not only said to act in his own interests, but also to the destruction of others. Thus, it was argued that selfishness wrecked the social relations that were necessary for the ideal society.

When the notion that selfishness fragments society is taken as a basic understanding, this explains why the Ekkaraiyur censure of selfishness targeted the leaders. As perhaps everywhere, the ideal leader was expected to work for the benefit of others. As Mines writes about Madras and other places in Tamil Nadu, the leader ought to be achievement-oriented and generous, serving in the first instance his own group. Ideally, the leader ‘is to serve others altruistically’ (Mines 1994: 14). The range of altruism varies, of course. At the one extreme, leaders in Ekkaraiyur claimed that they were working as servants of the people. Somewhat less encompassing, Ekkaraiyur’s MLA stated that he represented everyone in the constituency. At the other extreme, altruism could

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be limited to a close circle of followers. Nevertheless, despite the expectation of altruism, Mines observes that self-seeking of a kind is permitted for the leader, but that this permission is qualified by the expectation that the leader’s self-seeking serves his or her group in some form (1992: 154).

To sum up, I would suggest that the ideal leader in Ekkaraiyur was expected to realise an “individualism of inequality”. That is, the ideal leader was expected to take care of his or her followers by providing them with benefits of various kinds. Employment, education and loans ranked importantly, but so also did protection, influence and prestige. At the same time as the ideal leader served the followers, he or she was expected to strive for personal ‘gain, dominance and prestige’ (Mines 1992: 154), in order to create the conditions for providing service to the followers, and also in order to create ‘an individualism’ that would be reflected on the followers.

In contrast, ‘an individualism of equality’ implied that the leader viewed himself or herself as ‘an autonomous person’ (Mines 1994: 3), who cared more for himself or herself than for serving the followers. In Ekkaraiyur terms this was a selfish person, who expressed a trait inherent in all people, but not appropriate to the ideals of leadership. Claimed to be driven by selfish motives, such a leader attracted allegations of corruption. In the Ekkaraiyur view, ‘an individualism of equality’ was typical of the leaders of contemporary society, but did not characterise the leadership of ideal societies.

Nevertheless, there is always an ambiguity about the difference between selfishness and serving. Mines’s observation that ‘… the appearance of altruism often masks the self-interest of leaders’ (1994: 14) is obviously a matter of opinion and perspective, as I discussed in regards to achievements in Chapter 4. What loyal followers could claim as achievements that benefit others, rivals and enemies could denounce as solely motivated by personal interests.134

In concluding this chapter, I wish to make two points. First, my discussion of the association of different kinds of ‘individualism’ with notions of selfishness does not exhaust the Ekkaraiyur subject of the individual. It provides one focus, leaving much about the individual unsaid. Mines, for example, applying a pattern of Tamil poetic conventions, argues that Tamilian individuality has one
interior and one exterior dimension. The former is a private dimension and the latter a civic dimension (1994: 22). In my discussion of individualism, I have focused on the civic dimension.

The second point is that I do not want to give the impression that I am attempting to establish an exclusively Indian type of individualism. In fact, the Tamilian version of ‘individuality of inequality’ that Mines describes, can by no means be said to be unknown in the West. Obituaries and any *Who’s Who* give evidence of parallel understandings of individuality achieved through pre-eminence within social groups. To argue an exclusively Indian individualism would be to recreate the pasteboard characters Béteille warns against. Moreover, this would clash with Ekkaraiyur realities. For example, when discussing once with friends the basic sameness of all people, I made the rather pompous remark: ‘Are we not all born naked; do we not all cry when hurt; isn’t everyone’s blood red?’ My friends loved it, assuring me that this summed up their views to a point. As I found out later, Periyar, the grand old acrimonious man of Tamil nationalism to whom my friends were devoted, had said something similar. While my friends embraced this as their view of the individual, they eagerly claimed membership in groups characterised by ‘individuality of inequality’.
People in Ekkaraiyur routinely spoke in terms of change even when they were commenting on the trivialities of everyday life in the village. One day, for example, my assistant and I happened to see a young mother fondling her baby. Unprompted, Sekar told me that nowadays few mothers could be seen stroking their babies in this way. He did not know why. Mothers had just stopped doing it. Another time, an old farmer commented on the fact that people nowadays did not eat much *ragi*, a sorghum variety grown in Ekkaraiyur. The *ragi* had made people of earlier generations strong and healthy, he told me. Nevertheless, he was happy about the shift in diet, because he had hated the taste of the porridge made of *ragi* that he had been forced to eat as a child.

Similar examples can be multiplied. Each of them may not amount to much by itself, but taken together they created a sense of living in a process of change. People in Ekkaraiyur believed that their lives had changed in profound ways compared with former generations, and they expected that they would continue to change. This made the future an uncharted territory, filled with possibilities as well as dangers. Many of my informants did express concerns about what the future might hold in store for them and their children, worries which some of them associated with the digestive disorders prevalent in the village. The future sometimes made their stomachs ache.

I am attempting to describe some facets of change in this study, describing them perhaps not always ‘from the native’s point of view’ but at least with the aim of listening to local views rather than projecting external models. Primarily, I focus on changes in patterns of local leadership.

Based on the accounts of informants, I suggest that an earlier type of leaders combined aspects of high caste and landownership. These leaders based their positions primarily on relations to landed property and access to land in the village. Through particular forms of tenancy agreements and labour recruitment, they dominated patron-client relationships between people of different castes and
economic standing. High caste and landownership were of less importance to the new kind of leaders, who instead strove to position themselves as intermediaries between the people of Ekkaraiyur and the state.

The changes in patterns of leadership were associated by people in Ekkaraiyur with the erosion of earlier bonds of dependence in the village, partly effected by local initiatives. Among such initiatives, I point out individuals who lobbied against certain forms of labour agreement as well as against a perceived Brahman dominance. Importantly, a tenants’ revolt questioned the control of landed property and access to land in the village, resulting in some cases in the forcible takeover of land from landlords.

The new leadership was seen as having both emerged in and caused this new context of social relationships in Ekkaraiyur. I explore their strategies for establishing themselves as leaders, and discuss how they described themselves as ‘social workers’, who worked altruistically for others. However, there was a widespread dissatisfaction with the moral qualities of the new mode of leadership, which was censured as being selfish.

Selfish leadership was a common theme in people’s everyday conversations. I suggest that this criticism was also expressed in stories about other societies, separated from Ekkaraiyur in time and space. In people’s comments about everyday change, the past was used as a reference point, contrasted with the present. However, notions of several different pasts were mobilised by different people in Ekkaraiyur. One past was the period characterised by the old mode of leadership. Others were past golden ages, with which imagined excellence contemporary society was compared. I discuss a number of examples of such golden age stories, focusing on what they had to say about the ideal relations between ruler and subjects, or between citizens.

The critique of the leadership was also directly expressed in Ekkaraiyur in the form of allegations of corruption. Discussing arguments presented during a public discussion as well as those emanating from conversations about people’s everyday experiences, I focus on the complaints about corruption and selfishness associated in particular with political leaders, but also with ‘the rich’.
Notwithstanding the focus on leaders in such criticism, I argue that it also represented a critique aimed at the self. I find the basis for a social critique with such a perspective in beliefs about the moral excellence of people in foreign countries as well as in the relatively recent past of Ekkaraiyur. These imaginations about the social excellence of others highlighted the selfish mentality that allegedly characterises contemporary Indian society. They suggested self-reform as the road to a better society.

The basic tenets of this generalised critique were that people are innately selfish; that selfishness harms the fabric of the relationships that make up society; and that people’s selfishness has to be curbed if a better society is to be created. Such standpoints related to conflicting evaluations of different kinds of individualism, particularly as they were related to ideals of leadership.

Discussing the changing patterns of leadership, I suggest that patronage remained a successful strategy for both old and new leaders. The content of patronage had changed, however, moving from a concern for control of people and land towards a reliance on state-distributed resources, suggesting that the shifting modes of leadership in Ekkaraiyur need to be understood in relation to the changing role of the state. Although the state was not a newly arrived actor in the public common life of Ekkaraiyur, the scope of its influence was clearly greater there at the end of the 1980s than it had been one or two generations earlier. Espousing the principles of parliamentary democracy and universal suffrage, it was also a different kind of state from the previous regimes of colonial and immediate post-colonial times.

I argue that the changes in patterns of leadership were seen in Ekkaraiyur as having come about as the result of local initiatives in combination with external pressures from political parties and the state. Having been instrumental in breaking up local bonds of relationship, the state created an arena in which local leadership could take on new forms. Local positions of leadership were more open to a more diverse group of people than before. In principle, anyone of stipulated age could become a ward member, a panchayat president, a panchayat union chairman, a member of the legislative assembly or a member of parliament. The openness of positions of local leadership and their association with the state made them less
secure than earlier ones, because they were more easily contested. Sometimes a leader’s position could only be as secure as was allowed by the volatile state politics with which he was directly or indirectly associated.

One can see the Ekkaraiyur critique of leaders as associated with the insecurity of the new mode of leadership and its dependence on continuously assured legitimacy. The prevalence of a habitual critique of leaders in Ekkaraiyur reflects the fact that leaders are expected to be accountable to the public. Indeed, the critique can be seen as a process of holding them accountable.

Perhaps it was simply due to the hindsight rationalisations of people in Ekkaraiyur, but I never heard of a leader of the old mode being accused of venality. Individual leaders were characterised as having been mean-spirited, arrogant or exponents of a dubious personal morality, but not as corrupt. In contrast, venality was a habitual allegation against contemporary leaders. They, but not the earlier leaders, were measured against standards of leadership borrowed from the repertoire of stories about ideal societies.

The insistence on public accountability conveyed by the critique of leaders therefore appears to belong to the framework created by the modern state. I suggest that it was an insistence shared by the public and the leaders themselves. The latter were keen to portray themselves as ideal leaders. Seen in this perspective, the critique of contemporary modes of leadership was not aimed at the state as such, but rather expressed a growing will to take part in it.

Reflecting on other societies

The Ekkaraiyur stories about past golden ages, foreign countries and local holy men convey a sense of ‘…shared awareness of living in one world society’ (Lechner & Boli 2005:2). The risks involved in the certainty of change, but the uncertainties of its directions, placed the people of Ekkaraiyur in a global world characterised by ‘reflexive modernization’ (Beck et al. 1994; Giddens 1991).

The Ekkaraiyur stories also bring to mind Appadurai’s discussion of the role of imagination in what he calls a post-electronic world (2000: 5). In line with Appadurai’s argument about the new role for
imagination, stories telling about other societies were part of ordinary people’s everyday life in Ekkaraiyur. They were used as points of reference for commenting on features of contemporary social conditions at home.

Nevertheless, conditions of the post-electronic world that Appadurai appears to take as facts, hardly applied to Ekkaraiyur in the late 1980s. Mass-migration and the electronic media, which Appadurai singles out as the creative forces of the post-electronic world, were largely absent. It is true that people did travel a lot, but almost all of their travels were confined to South India. It is also true that there were plenty of mass-media around, but these hardly qualified as media associated with a post-electronic world. Today, as mobile telephones and computers are becoming increasingly common in India, Ekkaraiyur can perhaps reasonably be included in Appadurai’s post-electronic world.

Despite the possible ‘pre-post-electronic’ condition of Ekkaraiyur in the late 1980s, I find Appadurai’s suggestions about imagination valuable for thinking about Ekkaraiyur notions about the conditions of other societies. His analysis of ‘ideoscapes’ as ‘concatenations of images’ does capture something essential in the Ekkaraiyur stories about other societies. They too, but not solely, can be described as ‘. . . composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, which consists of a chain of ideas, terms, and images, including freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation, and the master term democracy’ (Appadurai 2000: 32).

Equally interesting is Appadurai’s note that imagination involves desire. In the Ekkaraiyur stories about other societies this was often a desire to bring about change in contemporary society. It could take the form of a critique of the moral qualities of leaders, reflecting the censure of a particular form of individualism, as I have suggested in this study.

Yet, Appadurai’s stress on mass-migration and electronic media ties the imagination to the post-millennium world. His suggestions about the role of the imagination cannot fully account for the case of Ekkaraiyur in the 1980s. Appadurai’s stress is perhaps motivated by his concern to describe a ‘rupture’ in global conditions. However, as far as the imagining of other societies is concerned, neither mass-migration nor electronic media seem to me to be necessary
conditions. The fact is that people in Ekkaraiyur readily imagined other societies without having visited them, either in person or on the net. Indeed, one could hardly visit the Ekkaraiyur examples of ideal societies. Most of them were past and gone, and visits could only take place in a fictional, imaginary, sense, as when the Ramaraj was temporarily recreated during a devotional session.

The suggestion made by Appadurai that imagination is a ‘constitutive feature of modern subjectivity’ (2000: 3) involves the possibilities for ordinary people to compare different contexts of social conditions. There is no reason for limiting this to contemporary contexts, however. In fact, the missing part of Appadurai’s argument can be supplied from another part of the world.

Writing about the Melanesian concept of ‘kastom’, Keesing (1982) has drawn attention to such a form of self-distancing. As societies and social features become units for comparisons, a degree of self-distancing vis-à-vis one’s own society also takes place (cf. Robertson 1992). Kastom is an indigenous concept that concerns what people see as their traditional ways. It has the character of being ‘an idealised reformulation’, claiming to preserve traditions while in fact recreating them (Keesing 1982: 300, in Carrier 1995: 6).

It is obvious that Melanesians speaking in terms of kastom are comparing different social contexts, but they are not comparing different societies. Different stages of one and the same society are being compared, the traditional versus the non-traditional. Comparisons take place on a time-scale, not on the place-scale that Appadurai stresses. Kastom implies a comparison within society, while Appadurai focuses on comparison between societies.

The Ekkaraiyur examples discussed in this study are to be found on both scales. While not fully consistent, the stories about the Sangam Age, the Ramaraj and Marimuttu tended towards kastom-like comparisons, while the stories about the Ummah and foreign countries fell more in line with Appadurai’s suggestion.
Is there a better tomorrow?

Comparing and a self-distanced reflective stance go together. This was evident in the fact that people in Ekkaraiyur not only expressed a profound dissatisfaction with the society they lived in, but also had plenty of ideas about how to change it for the better. The social critique and the censuring of selfishness were grounded in a view of the proper relationship between man and society.

Tentatively, I would outline this view as involving the adjustment of an inherently selfish man to a society that ideally ought to be permeated by altruism. Two main approaches of adjustment appear to be possible: Man’s selfishness is curbed either by external control, or by an inner process of self-reform. In Ekkaraiyur, both approaches found their advocates. While people argued the need for strong leaders who were responsible for creating good social conditions, they also argued the need for individual self-reform. Of course, the emphasis varied between different informants and in different contexts, but some generalisations are possible. I would suggest that the inner process of self-reform was given most weight for creating the ideal society, while external control was ascribed a secondary associative role. Thus, by self-reforming a person could create the necessary individual preconditions for the ideal society, in a sense located within or limited to him or herself. However, the fact that the process of self-reform could be helped, or hindered, by external conditions also gave external control a role in the establishment of the ideal society. For example, corrupt leaders worked against the possibilities of an inner process of self-reform. Society and the individual, leaders and the people, were thus mutually interdependent in the creation of the ideal society. But, the ideal society was ultimately the project and responsibility of the individual, to be achieved through a process of inner self-reform.

This outline brings to mind the notions that people in Ekkaraiyur had about the factors that formed a person’s character (see Chapter 2). Gunam was seen as an unchangeable and inborn quality of people, but actual character was the outcome of gunam’s interaction with more malleable factors. In other words, a person’s character was partly a given at birth, and partly acquired during life. Although there are differences, the analogy with the possibilities of controlling
selfishness, outlined above, is evocative. Despite the fact that selfishness was neither seen as unchangeable, nor differently associated with castes, informants stressed that selfishness, like gunam, was a given human quality. Since a conscious process of self-reform could change the character, formed by the interaction of gunam and malleable factors, self-reform was also the way to deal with selfishness. This suggested concord between character-formation and society-building opens up an area of inquiry, which is not, however, addressed in this study.

If the ideal society is everyone’s project, to what extent did ideal societies function as blueprints for a better society? I have given several examples of conscious attempts to recreate something of an ideal society. Weeding out Sanskritic influences in speech and life, personal reform through devotion to a deity and living according to true Muslim principles, are a few examples. Nevertheless, I do not suggest that any of my informants were aiming at a literal recreation of any of the ideal societies that I have discussed in this study. Instead, their aim was typically an adapted version for the contemporary world. Such versions stressed people’s mentality rather than specific social arrangements.

Altruism was the core element of the mentality of these adapted versions. The argument that unless people were motivated by altruism an ideal society could never be recreated provided a common ground between different informants on different ideal societies. While it was stressed that ideal leaders subordinated their self-interests to others, the ideal of subordinating one’s selfishness was extended to all social relationships. Perhaps the different views of people in Ekkaraiyur could be expressed as follows: society was an unfinished project that could be brought to a successful conclusion. Although society was in ruins, every tomorrow could become a better tomorrow.
Footnotes

1 Arguments that contrast the West and India in matters of individualism have, however, been produced earlier within other disciplines. See, for example, Bettany (1892: 125, in Almond 1988:49).
2 Anthropology understood in its broadest sense does, of course, belong to this large field of South Indian studies. Starting when outsiders began to comment in writing on South Indian societies and peoples, this includes early Roman, Hellenistic, Chinese, Persian and Arabic accounts (see Sastri 1984: 25-29), as well as the writings of Marco Polo (1980) and Ibn Battuta (1958-2000) and other travellers. Examples of other early material, relevant to Ekkaraiyur, are Dubois’ *Character, manners & customs of the people of India and of their institutions religious and civil* (1989; in manuscript 1806), J H Nelson’s *The Madura country. A Manual* (1899 [1868]), Baliga’s *Madras district gazetteers: Madurai* (1960), Whitehead’s study of village gods (1976 [1921]), the collection of historical manuscripts known as the *Mackenzie Manuscripts* (Mahalingam 1976), and Thurston’s monumental work on the castes and tribes of South India (Thurston 1975 [1909]).
3 I have seen mentioned the Gazetteer of Madurai District of 1906 and the Supplementary Gazetteer of 1930. Unfortunately, I have never been able to get hold of copies of them.
4 One monograph describes the village of Thiruvalavayanallur, which is a lowland village to the south of the Dindigul Valley (Nambiar & Narayana Kurup 1968). The other three describe hill villages on either side of the Valley: two in the Palni Hills (Nambiar 1964; Nambiar & Krishnamurthy 1966), and one in the Sirumalai Hills (Nambiar & Vijaya Bhanu 1967). Norström’s study of the Paliyans of the Palni Hills (2003) should also be mentioned.
5 In 1986, Dindigul was separated from Madurai District and named Anna District. The name was subsequently changed to Quaid-e-Milleth District, but after a few years it was renamed Anna District. Now it is known as Dindigul District. Locally, many people have always preferred the name Dindigul District.
6 Trichy is the short and colloquial form for Tiruchchirappalli.
7 Rameswaram is a famous temple town in Ramnad on the east coast. It attracts many pilgrims from all parts of India. Rama is believed to have launched his attack on Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka, from Rameswaram.

8 Madurai has been the centre of several kingdoms, among them the kingdoms of the Pandyans and the Nayakkars (see Sastri (1984); and my Chapter 6). On poligars, see, for example, Aiyar (1991), Baliga (1960), Dirks (1987, 1989), Ludden (1989), Mahalingam (1976), Nelson, J H (1989), and Shulman & Subrahmanyam (1990). For a discussion of the transformation of a poligar into a landowner, only to lose the estate after Indian Independence, see Good (2001) and Price (1983).

9 Jainism is an Indian religious tradition beginning in the 7th–5th century BC.

10 Yarkottai’s fortress is built of bricks and dressed stones. It is today in ruins, but must once have been a powerful stronghold. Some informants told me that a king had once lived there. Others claimed it as a stronghold of Kattabomman and Omadurai, the famous poligar brothers who rebelled against the British at the end of the 18th century (see Dirks 1989). Whoever held the fortress, the ruin obviously suggests that Yarkottai was once of political importance.


12 See Galanter (1972) for an outline of the legal aspects of untouchability.

13 Telugu is related to Tamil and is nowadays mainly spoken in Andhra Pradesh and parts of Karnataka. Some people in Ekkaraiyur said that they spoke Kannadam, the present-day language of Karnataka, rather than Telugu. As there seemed to be little difference in speech between them and those who spoke Telugu, I have chosen to simplify the matter by grouping all of them as Telugu-speakers. One family in Ekkaraiyur spoke Malayalam, which is also closely related to Tamil. Today, it is the language of Kerala.

14 Linguistic refinement provided a scale for grading different social categories in the Ekkaraiyur of the 1980s. The general idea was that people of high caste used more refined forms of language than did people of low caste. Likewise, it was assumed that the educated used refined forms of language. The two criteria of caste and education were conflated in practice, as people of high caste were assumed to have attained a high level of education. (See Ramaswamy 1997a on the constitution of the concept of Tamil; Schiffman 1979b on sociolects; Ramanujan 1968 and Southworth 1975: 186-191 on variation in speech between castes.) However, what was considered as language refinement varied. One refined form of Tamil was represented in Ekkaraiyur by what Schiffman alternatively
calls ‘Standard Tamil’ (cf. Schiffman 1979a: iii) and ‘Standard Spoken Tamil’ (Schiffman 1988, 1998). People in Ekkaraiyur did not use any of these terms, but they recognised a cultivated form of contemporary Tamil as a standard. This ‘standard Tamil’ was connected neither to a specific region nor to a particular caste. Found in films and plays, and to some extent in newspapers and books, this was the form of Tamil that educated people were expected to use (cf. Schiffman 1998: 376).

A sharp line was drawn in the realm of linguistic refinement between Sentamil and Kodungtamil (see Chapter 5), on the one hand, and the contemporary standard Tamil, on the other. Representing another kind of refinement, the contemporary standard Tamil was not idealised in terms of age and purity. Too firmly anchored in a contemporary setting, it lacked any nimbus of ancient roots, and to call it ‘pure’ would appear highly misplaced. Not only had the contemporary standard Tamil incorporated elements from other Indian languages, it was also liberally sprinkled with an English vocabulary. Linguistic chastity was certainly not one of its virtues.

On code-switching, see for example Kulick (1990: 70, passim) and Auer (1999).

 Attempts to make Hindi the national language of India have been vigorously resisted by Tamil politicians and have resulted in widespread hostility towards Hindi in Tamil Nadu. In Ekkaraiyur, hostility to Hindi was sometimes coupled with advocacy favouring the use of English as a national Indian language (cf. Ramaswamy 1997a: 46-62).

 People of the same family usually worshipped a particular deity as their ‘family deity’. In some cases, this deity was also associated with the caste to which the family belonged.

 A discussion of the Hindu gods that were worshipped by the people of Ekkaraiyur is outside the scope of this study. I confine the matter to noting that the range of deities was great. At one end were deities of Sanskritic tradition that are worshipped all over India. At the other end of the range were local deities that are worshipped at one or a few localities only. At this end of the range, goddesses dominate.

Vandikaliyamman’s name is a compound of three words: vandi, Kali and amman. Vandi translates as (temple)-car, Kali is the name of a well-known goddess (see Price 1996b: 137-38 on the identification between Kali, Durga and village goddesses in Tamil Nadu), and amman is a female suffix.
Vandikali amman can thus be translated as ‘the goddess Kali of the temple-car’.

20 Vandikali amman, and her co-resident goddess Muttalamman (see footnote 24), also reflected the internal unity of the three villages. The two goddesses were said to be the goddesses of everyone and their festivals the common village concern. As de Neve (2000) shows for the festivals of village goddesses in another part of Tamil Nadu, festivals are able to create a symbolic village unity.

21 This could have been one of the Nawabs of Arcot, who nominally controlled the area until 1801 (see Dirks 1989: 22).

22 Gaur is a kind of wild ox that lives in the Palni Hills.

23 Vandikali amman’s festival was earlier famous for its sacrifice of buffaloes (see Thurston 1975: volume V, pages 485-86), and old people claimed to remember them well. Buffaloes were slaughtered in front of the temple and the carcasses buried in pits. The law nowadays forbids such sacrifices, but buffaloes are still sacrificed in a symbolic way in Ekkaraiyur. A temple attendant touches the buffalo’s neck with a slashing knife, and then the animals are auctioned off. In 1988, they ended up in the stew of a non-vegetarian restaurant. Some informants argued that the buffalo sacrifice had replaced an earlier human sacrifice. Traditionally, a man of the goldsmiths’ caste had yearly been sacrificed, one informant specified.

24 Muttalamman’s name is a compound of the word for pearl and a female suffix, and her name can be translated as ‘the pearl goddess’. In fact, ‘pearl’ may associate the goddess with smallpox. See Kapadia (1996) for another case of two goddesses sharing a temple, in this case Mariyai and Kaliyai. In her article, Kapadia discusses an intriguing association between class, caste and possession.

25 Northern here refers to the Telugu country, located to the north of the Tamil country.

26 The transformation of a dead woman into a goddess is not uncommon in Tamil Nadu or elsewhere in India. See, for example, Trawick (1991) for the story of Singamma.

27 The story identifies the two goddesses with each other: they have separate identities, but they are nevertheless the same goddess. In a similar manner, people in Ekkaraiyur often identified deities with other deities, leading some of them to maintain that Hinduism is a monotheistic religion.

On Xavier, see (URL 1).

Gunam is a religious and philosophical Sanskrit term, whose general meaning is ‘... some unchanging essential characters of a substance...’ (Bhattacharyya 1990: 65).

The Chettiyar was thought to live on a small part of his profits only. He reinvested the larger part in business and never touched the capital. The Nadar was thought to act in a similar manner, and to have the advantage of assistance from fellow Nadar tradesmen. For studies of the Nadars, see Hardgrave (1969) and Templeman (1996). See Rudner (1989, 1994) for a study of Chettiyar bankers.

Agraharam is the generic name for a Brahmans’ street in Tamil Nadu.

Dumont, in fact, argues that Brahmans and Untouchables are the two essential points of the caste system (Dumont (1988b); cf. Mosse (1996).

Confusion over caste appears to be not uncommon in India. See, for example, Pandian’s account of what may be called ‘the enigma of the Thulluva Vellala caste’ (Pandian, J 1987: 113-118).

See Galanter (1968) for a discussion of caste as a legal concept. See Dushkin (1972) for an Indian overview of positive discrimination and Dushkin (1985) for an example from Karnataka.

I suggest that the transformation of the categories of the policy of positive discrimination into political interest groups provides a contemporary illustration of Washbrook’s analysis of the emergence of caste politics in Madras Presidency at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries (Washbrook 1975: 150-203). The gist of Washbrook’s argument is that the expanding activities of the Government of Madras and the increasing involvement of Indians in provincial political life and administration led to a kind of nationally aggregated castes, which Washbrook calls ‘mega-categories’. Washbrook argues that the provincial government became increasingly directed by caste concerns. Because of its assumption that caste had been the building block of traditional Indian society, the provincial government found castes to be natural political interest groups of contemporary society. In response, caste associations that claimed to represent the mega-categories began to emerge. Consequently, Washbrook suggests that the provincial government indirectly produced the mega-categories by
establishing appeals to caste solidarity in political life and language, and by creating a political role that they could fill. However, with due respect to the creativity of colonial administrators, British as well as Indian, I do not think that they invented mega-categories out of nothing, as Washbrook seems to imply. Caste aggregates similar to the colonial mega-categories existed long before colonial times, as for example in the Sanskritic varna system. Yet, Washbrook is suggestive in connecting the emergence of caste associations with the legitimacy that the colonial administration gave to castes as political interest groups. Indeed, the same legitimacy was at the end of the 1980s upheld by the policy of positive discrimination.

37 It should be mentioned that Scheduled Castes had several synonyms, less often used in Ekkaraiyur. Such synonyms were: Untouchables, Harijans, and Adidravidas. ‘Untouchable’ was considered a highly derogatory name, whereas ‘Harijan’, popularised by Mahatma Gandhi, had a tinge of officialese. ‘Adidravida’, which translates as ‘original Dravidians’, was becoming popularised by a political movement but was not often used in Ekkaraiyur while I lived there. See also Jaffrelot (2003).

38 In a very different context, the Voxna valley in Sweden, Ekman has discussed indigenous ideas of belonging (1991: 9, Chapter 4, passim). She notes that the central concept is that of hembygd. Standing for ’… a person’s birthplace and is associated with genealogy and territory’ (1991: 9), the sense of belonging to a hembygd is expressed in local knowledge in ’everyday practice’ (1991: 91). The similarities between the Swedish hembygd and the Tamilian sonda ur are interesting, but, not surprisingly, the dissimilarities highlight two different ways of thinking. The sonda ur is not defined as a birthplace, but genealogy and territory are central to it. They are, however, interpreted in a different way from that in the Voxna valley. The central difference appears to be the idea that a family deity resides in the sonda ur. Being thought of as the territory of the family deity, the sonda ur brings together genealogy and claims to past landownership in a way that is utterly foreign to the Voxna valley. Nevertheless, a pertinent similarity between hembygd and sonda ur is their potential for creating outsiders as well as insiders, the latter forming the ‘real’ population. However, the boundary between the two categories is fuzzy, being subject to people’s different interpretations.
Indeed, the hospitality expected to be extended to high-ranking civil servants currently appeared to be the duty of local civil servants. See, for example chapter 5, on the reasons that local civil servants gave for the need of corruption.

An alternative explanation could be that my informants tended to focus only on the leading participants, as they told me about the long conflict. In other words, what was in fact a conflict between earlier factions could be represented to me as a conflict between individual mirasdars and single ‘great houses’.

Compare Bhattacharyya (1977: 25) who notes that agricultural work was forbidden to Brahmans by the laws of Manu, a central Sanskrit code of law.

See Thurston (1975 [1909]) for a rich mine of information on stereotyped caste characters.

The relative scarcity of pannaiyals is probably a general phenomenon in Tamil Nadu (cf. Athreya et al. (1990) who have studied another part of Tamil Nadu). It seems plausible that state legislation against bonded labour played a role in the disappearance of pannaiyals (see for example Robinson 1988: 220; see also Robinson’s discussion of forms of attached labour in the Andhra village she studied (1988: 27-31)). However, none of my informants in Ekkaraiyur ever made this connection. Instead, they understood the disappearance of the pannaiyals to be a result of the fall of ‘the great houses’. See Ramachandran (1990) for a detailed study of labour in agriculture in nearby Cumbum Valley.

When he compared pannaiyals to slaves, Anthony may not have been far from the point. Gough (1981) has suggested that pannaiyal agreements represent an outgrowth of an earlier system of slavery, officially abolished in 1861. Slavery, Gough writes, was tied to the organisation of land-control. Village land was held in common by a community of landlords, who owned slaves in common or individually, and a common slave could become personally tied to a master by accepting a loan (1981: 126,180-81). The tying of workers through debt to landowners became a standard practice after the abolition of slavery. Many slaves became pannaiyals, attached to individual landowning families. As Gough puts it, ‘Once tied by debt, the pannaiyal relationship appears to have been only a little better than that of the former . . . individually owned slave. . .’ (1981: 193). In Kumbapettai, one of the villages she studied in the Kaveri Delta, Gough estimates that more than half of the village's households were tied in one or another form of slavery in 1827.
Slaves were thus a substantial part of the village's labour force, which also included ‘free labourers’, who worked for daily wages as coolies. See also Mayer (1993), Mencher (1972: 39-41), and Kumar (1965).

Yule avoids a definite pronouncement on the origin of the word coolie, but notes that it is undoubtedly of Indian origin. In Upper India the word is used for ‘. . . the lower class of labourers . . . as distinguished from the skilled workman, and even the digger’ (Yule 1986: 249). Coolie appears to be connected with the people named Koli who live in Western India, but Yule notes that the matter is 'perplexed' by the Tamil and Kanarese word *kuli* which signifies 'hire' or 'wages' (Yule 1986: 249-50; cf. Winslow 1987: 350). In common Tamil the word coolie has two meanings: daily pay, and a person working for daily pay (properly *kulikaran* (man) or *kulikari* (woman)). Whether referring to pay or person, in Tamil the word lacks the derogatory meanings that were attached to it in European languages.

Moffatt translates kottu as literally ‘bunch’ (1979: 161). Among the Harijan castes of Endavur, one of the villages he studied, kottu is a unit of social organisation, approximately ‘a lineage’ or ‘a sublineage’, Moffatt claims (1979: 158).

The kani was an area measure for paddy fields. The kani equalled 1.20 acres.

The marakal was a dry volume measure for paddy. There were two sizes of marakal, the small and the big marakals. The small marakal equalled about 3 litres, the big about 4 litres. The harvest rates could fluctuate depending on the bargaining powers of harvesters and employers. For example, in 1990, two farmers paid 4 marakals to each of their harvesters, which was twice the normal rate. In these two cases, the bargaining position of the farmers was weak: their fields were small, the harvesters were in high demand, and they claimed that the distance between the fields and the threshing-ground was unusually long. In contrast, the employer who could give prolonged employment to harvesters would be in a stronger bargaining position, and hence pay lower harvest rates (cf. Athreya et al. 1990).

Former members often accompanied harvesting kottus to work, and farmers customarily allowed them to collect the waste grain. On a good day, such a former member could collect in this way nearly as much grain as a regular member of the kottu received in payment.

For the constitutional structure of the union and the states, see URL 2 and 3.
50 Cf. Osella & Osella (2001: 146) for a similar expression of criticism in a Kerala setting.
51 The full name, but seldom used, of ADMK is *All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*, abbreviated as AIADMK.
52 Periyar translates as ‘the great man’. Similar honorary nicknames were in common use. For example, Karunanidhi was known as ‘the artist’ (Kalignar), and Annadurai was known as ‘elder brother’ (Anna). In Tamil politics there is a strong connection between the cinema and politics. Several of the DMK and ADMK leaders were scriptwriters, producers, or film stars. Party members were enthusiastic cinema goers, like most Tamilians, and film and fan clubs were powerful vehicles for disseminating political views. Hence, DMK and ADMK battled not only for voters but also for the control of the Tamil film industry. The connection between film and politics in South India has produced a number of interesting studies. See, for example, Hardgrave (1971), Baskaran (1981), Pandian, M (1992, 1996), Elder & Schmitthenner (1985), Lakshmi (1995) and Dickey (1993a, 1993b, 1995)
53 At the time of my fieldwork, the DK still published a magazine called ‘The Modern Rationalist’.
54 See Raman (2001) for a short presentation of Jayalalitha.
56 See Hiriyanna (1976) for an outline of dharma and artha in Indian philosophy.
57 The Village Administrative Officer was the local civil servant in an administrative state hierarchy. He headed the administrative unit known as the revenue village. The revenue villages formed a taluk, which was headed by the talukdar. The taluks, in turn, formed a district, which was headed by the District Collector. The village administrative officer kept a land register and collected land taxes. He also issued certificates of various kinds.
58 See also Stade (2004) who argues that anthropologists have to take account of the fact that a ‘globally diffused cultural model of modern statehood indeed informs day-to-day, face-to-face interactions.’ This is a cultural model of ‘a modern democratic res publica’.
59 Although the emphasis on economic development has remained an imperative in Indian politics, the conditions as well as the means changed radically during the 1990s. For structural reforms in India during the 1990s, see, for example, Kanda et al. (2001), Forbes (2002), Stern & Mattoo (2003).
Briefly, family planning was a euphemism for birth control. Small savings stood for promotion of savings. Biogas implied the production of gas from dung and household residues. The smokeless chulam was a type of cooking stove that supposedly used less fuel than ordinary stoves, and produced less smoke as well. Eye-camps were temporary clinics established for the purpose of checking for eye diseases (see Maurice 2001). Adidravida was one of several alternative names for people who were formerly regarded as untouchable, that is, of the lowest castes (see footnote 37). The noon-meal scheme provided schoolchildren with a free meal at school.

Cf. Hansen & Stepputat’s general statement about politics: ‘The most widely used and most immediately effective methods used by political force to exercise power and to consolidate its popularity and support is intervention into the implementation and administration of specific policies and regulations at the local level. When lists of those entitled to new agricultural credits are drawn up, when children are admitted into government schools and colleges, when new clerks are employed in a government department, when liquor licenses are issued, when builders are allowed to build on certain plots – the list is endless – local politicians are often involved in putting pressure on local officials. Nation-level politicians are involved in similar efforts, only on a larger scale concerning the sanctioning of large industrial projects and large construction projects.’ (Hansen & Stepputat 2001: 31) (See also Robertson 1984.)

The following quote is too delightful to withhold from the reader. Commenting on McCloskey’s critical assessment of Weber, Wilk writes: ‘McCloskey thinks that the idea that modern bureaucracy is rational and efficient can only be maintained by someone who has never worked for one or who has [never] served in the armed forces. McCloskey says that the whole Weberian lament about the increasingly material, secular, and rational nature of society emerges from a deep hostility that intellectuals have toward the middle class. This is why they write so much that portrays the bourgeoisie as crass, small minded, grasping, materialistic, and the “embodiment of rationality,” and it explains why they long for the good old days when people respected the elite ([McCloskey] 1994, 189).’ (Wilk 1996: 109-110)

It can be noted that taking ‘efficiency or competence’ as bureaucratic realities, and not mentioning officers’ possibly complex interests in contracts and postings, Mencher evidently wrote from the perspective of the officers.
64 Mirasdarkal is a plural and derives from the noun *mirasi* of Arab origin. Mirasdar (the singular of mirasdarkal) translates as ‘one who holds land or office’ (Winslow 1987: 868), and one who holds a ‘right’. Maniekar is derived from a title meaning ‘chief officer of a village or town’ (Winslow 1987: 841). Nattanmai translates as ‘chieftain of a country’ (Winslow 1987: 660). The nattamai in Ekkaraiyur was also called sambar, which is an ‘honorary appellation of a Pariah’ (Winslow 1987: 436). Kovilpillai is a compound of kovil (temple) and the respectful appellative pillai (Winslow 1987: 381, 783). News announcer is my English translation of a Tamil word with the same meaning. The juries’ title derives from the English word jury. Thus, the titles of the Saint Xavier’s caste panchayat combine Tamil with English and Arabic influences.

65 Cf. Robinson (1988: 82), and Templeman’s discussion on the changing role of Nadar local caste associations (1996: Chapters 8 and 9).

66 See Dumont (1986b: 32) for a description of techniques for stealing grain on the stalk. Dumont also noted a system of crop protection that was similar to the one in Ekkaraiyur (Dumont 1986b: 140). Also this system could implicitly induce one village’s field guards to become the raiders of the next village’s crops.

67 Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee had been operative since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, according to informants. Possibly, the pattadari committee had developed out of an earlier type of state-focused village organisation.

68 In addition to describing a largely unnoticed type of organisation in a major irrigation system, Wade (1988) uses the example of the Andhra village councils to make a contribution to the debate about ‘the tragedy of the commons’. He argues that village councils like Kottapalle’s show that communities by themselves are able to organise the management of common resources, so that individual exploitation is restricted and ‘free riders’ controlled. The same argument obviously applies to Ekkaraiyur’s pattadari committee.

69 Mr Mohan, the president of the pattadari committee, inaugurated the marriage hall in September 1990. The pre-eminent guest at the inauguration was Mr Perumal, the MLA of Ekkaraiyur.

70 In fact, the pattadari committee used its means of enforcing local law and order in a selective way. Moonshining (that is, the illegal distilling of alcohol) was socially strongly rejected. Yet, the pattadari committee did not interfere
with the distillers. On our way to the Kannimar temples, members of the pattadari committee, among them the president, literally looked the other way as we passed a group of cheerful men around a still.

71 At the time of Mines and Gourishankar’s study, Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal Sri Subramaniyamwas was the 69th successor to Sankara. The Kanchi Sankaraacharya resides in Shri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham at the town of Kanchipuram. See Singer (1972: 88-89), Mines & Gourishankar 1990: 767-84). See also the homepage of Shri Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham (URL 4).

72 There were alternative names for the golden age that I have called the Sangam Age. While Sangakkalam or Sangayugam could be heard, the English-Tamil/Sanskrit compound Sangam Age was the most common. The generic Sanskrit terms for a golden age, Uttamayugam and Kiretayugam, were hardly used.

73 See Ramaswamy (1997a) for a study on the confluence of language, culture and people.

74 In order to explain similarities in the faunas of India and Madagascar, the ornithologist Philip Sclater assumed in 1864 that a now sunken continent had once spanned the Indian ocean. He named the continent as Lemuria after the lemur, an animal of Madagascar. (Miller 1983: 20) Since the understanding of the continental drift, the sunken continent has become an obsolete theory. How the name Lemuria has entered Tamil historiography is not obvious. Possibly, the Theosophical Society in Madras has been an influential disseminator. See also Ramaswamy (2000).

75 The Chera, Chola and Pandyan were the three classical kingdoms of the Tamilians. The Pandyan kingdom was associated with Madurai, and the Kaveri delta was recognised as the heartland of the Chola kingdom. The whereabouts of the Chera kingdom is uncertain. Possibly, it straddled the Western Ghats at Coimbatore (see Stein 1985: 45). The traditional symbols of the three kingdoms were the Chera bow, the Chola tiger and the Pandyan fish. As Ramaswamy notes, these symbols are nowadays used in political symbolism (1997a: 176, 225, 230). The Pandyan fish possibly alludes to the great Madurai temple of Minakshi - the fish-eyed goddess. Curiously, a central episode of the standard story about the temple appears to be told by Megasthenes, the Greek envoy to northern India at the end of the fourth century BC. According to Megasthenes, the city of Methora was ruled by a woman named Pandia. Pandia was married to a god, who was also her father. (Dessigane et al 1960: xiii, in Harman 1987:302). See Fuller (1984) for a
study of the Minakshi temple and its priests. See Shulman (1978) for a
discussion of Tamil flood-myths, sangams and their association with the cities
of Madurai.

76 Tamilians or Dravidians—the two terms were used interchangeably in
Ekkaraiyur. Strictly speaking, Dravidian and Tamilian are not synonyms.
Dravidian was coined by Caldwell at the end of the nineteenth century as a
linguistic term (Ramaswamy (1997a: 14), whereas the term Tamilian is far
older. Caldwell derived Dravidian from Sanskrit and used it to refer to the four
principal languages of South India: Tamil, Telugu, Kannadam and Malayalam.
Later, the term Dravidian came to be applied to the people who spoke these
languages, to their culture and to their race. Some of these connotations were
already present in the Sanskrit version (Arooran 1980: 33-35). Tamil is thus
only one of several Dravidian languages, and Tamilians are one among several
Dravidian peoples. Nevertheless, Tamil-speakers in Ekkaraiyur, like Tamil-
speakers elsewhere, argued that Tamil is the original language from which the
other Dravidian South Indian languages have descended. By analogy, other
Dravidian peoples have descended from the Tamilians. Therefore, people in
Ekkaraiyur felt justified in using Dravidian and Tamilian as synonyms. To
them, Tamilians were the earliest Dravidians, and contemporary Tamilians
were the most Dravidian of the peoples of South India.

77 For example, Muttarayan (1975) argues that the Sumerian language was a
primitive kind of Tamil. Muttarayan claims that there are evidences of the first
sangam in Sumerian texts, and that the language of the first sangam was
Sumerian. McAlpin (1979) postulates a Dravidian migration from Elam to
India, based on the argument that Elamite is related to Tamil and other
Dravidian languages. Southworth (1979), comparing lexical evidences,
considers the possibility of connections between the Mohenjodaro-Harappa
culture and Dravidian people. In addition, Central Asia, East Africa, and
Finland have been proposed as possible Tamilian homelands, but not, alas, by
people in Ekkaraiyur.

78 A fuller, but still brief, account of the Ramayana is given by Klostermaier
Valmiki’s version of the epic, in Sanskrit, is the primary source on the
Ramayana. It can, for example, be studied at (URL 5). Other sources are
Kampan’s Tamil and Tulsidas’ Hindi versions of Ramayana (see URL 6-8).
See also R.K. Narayan (1977) for Kampan’s version of Ramayana.
79 See, for example, Cutler (1987), Pillai (1989), Fuller (1992), Peterson (1989: Chapter 2), Shulman (1990), Spencer, G W (1970), Venkateswaran (1968), Yocum (1973), Zvelebil (1977). The Bhagavad Gita is the most famous discourse on bhakti, given by Krishna to the warrior Arjuna as the battle of Kurukshetra is about to begin. See, for example, Mascaró’s translation of the Bhagavad Gita (1985).

80 Avatar can be translated as an incarnation (Bhattacharyya 1990: 30). Traditionally, Vishnu is said to have ten avatars. Kalki, the tenth and last of the Vishnu’s avatars, will end the Kali Yuga, the present era.

81 See Khosravi (2003) for a study of ‘the Islamic order of things’ in Iran after the overthrow of the Shah.

82 While revising these pages, I read Cook’s book Forbidding Wrong in Islam (2003) (see also Khosravi 2003). The injunction on Muslims to ‘command right and forbid wrong’ obviously opens perspectives on my Muslim informants’ notions of ‘the true Muslim principles’, their evaluation of Muslim leaders, and on their notions about the ideal relationship between the individual and the community. Unaware at the time of this rich, and varied, tradition in Islamic thought, I did not pursue the matter with my Muslim informants in Ekkaraiyur. These perspectives are therefore not discussed in this study.

83 The similar perspectives can be found in scholarly analysis of caste. See, for example, Dumont (1986b, 1988a, 1988b) for castes as kinship groups, and Hutton (1983) and Wiser (1988) for castes as groups of occupational specialisation. See also Mayer (1993) for a critique of the latter perspective.

84 For example, Bhattacharyya notes that the Brahmanical tradition typically equates dharma with law and behaviour, while in Puranic tradition it typically stands for a moral order (Bhattacharyya 1990: 52-52). On various interpretations of dharma in Indian philosophy, see Hiriyanna (1976) and also (URL 9-12). An indication of the continued importance of King Rama was to be found at the homepage (URL 13). Similarly, the debate on dharma is alive in India. See, for example, Vishva Hindu Parishad’s homepage (URL 14). Point 18 on its ‘Points of Hindu agenda’ read the 9th of September, 2003: ‘Teaching of Bharatiya culture and Dharma will be made compulsory’ (URL 15). See also Jaffrelot (1996). Also the Ramaraj is of current political importance. Discussing the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991, the journalist Phillips (1991: 24) notes that the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) leader
Advani exhorts his followers to make India a Hindu state. According to Advani, this would result in a return to the Ramaraj.

85 Cf. Dirks (1989: 60-71, 121) for notions about the dharma of kingship in a ‘little kingdom’.

86 A similar story is included in the Ramayana, according to Nirad Chaudhuri. In this account, the offending man is a Shudra named Sambuka who performs religious duties that are reserved for the twice-born. When he is beheaded, the dead boy, the son of a Brahman, comes to life again (Chaudhuri (1983: 145).

87 See Pandian, J. (1982) for a discussion of the notion of chastity and Dravidian revivalism reflected in the cult of the goddess Kannagi, the heroine of the Epic of the Ankle Bracelet (Ilango Adigal 1993).

88 Cf. Winslow (1987: 550). Note also Schiffman’s (1998: 361-2) distinction between the written and the literary. In the case of Tamil, he argues that ‘the real distinction may be between writing (marks on surfaces) on the one hand, and literacy (including oral literacy) on the other’ (Schiffman 1998: 361-2).

89 A common notion among Tamilians is that the Tamil language was originally taught by the god Murugan to the Vedic sage Agastya, who in turn taught his disciples (Schiffman 1998: 362; see also Duvvury 1991: 21). Moreover, Schiffman notes the idea ‘that grammatical rules existed a-priori’ (Schiffman 1998: 362).

90 a. That Aryan imperialism is taken for granted by scholars, see the example of Manickam (1999: 10, passim). Manickam was at the time the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, at the Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram in Bangalore.

b. My informants’ failure to stress the political replacement of the Tamilians may partly be explained by their notions about the effect of different kinds of food and drink on the human mind and body. In brief, a vegetarian diet is generally thought to strengthen the mental faculties of the eater, while a diet of meat and alcohol strengthens the physical faculties. In other words, a vegetarian diet makes a person brainy, while meat and alcohol make a person brawny. Thus, having appropriated vegetarianism from the Tamilians and tricked them into a diet dominated by meat and alcohol, the Brahmans enhanced their own intelligence while the Tamilians’ intelligence decreased. Thus outpacing the Tamilians in intelligence, the Brahmans were able to supplant the Tamilians as the kings’ advisers, an office that was open only to the ablest and wisest. In this way, the Brahmans acquired political power partly due to the shift in diets.
FOOTNOTES

c. It is not my intention to pronounce on the historical veracity of my informants' story of the Sangam Age and the Ramaraj. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to mention that the historians Romila Thapar and Nilakanti Sastri both ascribe the blossoming of the Sangam Age to the meeting of North and South Indian cultural traditions (Thapar 1985: 70-108; Sastri 1984: 68-145). Thapar and Sastri’s arguments would possibly not carry much weight with my informants on the Sangam Age, who would probably point out that the arguments are biased because one of the historians is a North Indian and the other a South Indian Brahman. Nilakanti Sastri, incidentally, associated the ending of the Sangam Age with the '…mysterious and ubiquitous enemy of civilisation, the evil rulers of Kalabhras…' (1984: 144). It is uncertain who these Kalabhras were, but Sastri notes that their rule of South India was ‘…marked by the ascendancy of Buddhism, and probably also of Jainism, …also by great literary activity in Tamil.’ (1984: 145).

d. A note on the sources for the Ekkaraiyur stories on the Ramaraj and the Sangam Age may be of interest.

The stories of the Ramaraj belong to a Hindu religious tradition that has aptly been described as ‘a Great Tradition’ by Redfield and Singer (see Singer 1972; Maloney 1974: 115-17). The Ekkaraiyur versions of the Ramaraj corresponded to typical accounts of the Ramaraj in this Great Tradition. Yet, the stories current in Ekkaraiyur were not simply reproductions of a traditionally standardised understanding of the Ramaraj. Anachronistic and alien ideas were also incorporated in the stories. In addition to comparing the US to the Ramaraj, Govindasami, for example, claimed the Ramaraj as an example of ‘real socialism’. Moreover, the Ekkaraiyur Ramaraj stories appeared to be shaped by the stories of the Sangam Age. Thus, they represented a Brahman defensive standpoint against the notion of the Sangam Age as the ideal society. Not surprisingly, the force behind this defensive standpoint was the negative representation of Brahmans in the Sangam Age stories. The reverse influence was obviously true of the Sangam Age stories. That is, the Ekkaraiyur stories of the Ramaraj and the Sangam Age can be seen as mutually dependent but partly incompatible arguments about the nature of the ideal society.

Two major sources appeared to dominate the stories of the Sangam Age. The first was history as it was taught in Ekkaraiyur’s schools. Children were, for example, taught about the Dravidian association with the Indus Valley civilisation and about the Aryan migration to India. The second source
involved traditions associated with, and often already established in, ancient Tamil literature. There was abundant material on the sangams in this literature. In fact, the Sangam Age stories appear as part of a Great Tradition of contemporary Tamil Nadu. Beginning as a rather exclusive elite interest in ancient Tamil literature at the end of the nineteenth century, notions about the Sangam Age have nowadays come to supply a dominant common-sense understanding of Tamilian history and identity. This movement consisted of many strands already in its beginning, and its followers fought on many fronts. Yet, as Ramaswamy (1997a) shows, the followers have shared a devotion to the Tamil language, which has fed on a belief that the Tamil language was threatened. Intense emotions and deeply held convictions have urged devotees to sacrifice not only their professional careers but also their lives in the defence of the Tamil language (see also Schiffman 1999). At different times, different devotees have given different interpretations of the gravity of the threat, as well as of the identity of the enemy. Nevertheless, Sanskrit and Hindi have consistently been singled out as linguistic enemies. Consequently, much of the Tamil devotees’ efforts have been directed, often successfully, against the use and the users of these languages. The movement has from its beginning been characterised by a search for an exclusive Tamilian history. Typically, little distinction has been made between the Tamil language and the Tamilian people. Instead, the two have been understood as being inseparable. As Ramaswamy (1997a) points out, the Tamil language has been given such a central place by its devotees that it has acquired the power to define its speakers (see also Ramaswamy 1993, 1998), and Schiffman who argues that Tamilians see the Tamil language as ‘the very essence of their selfhood or ethnicity’ (1999: 25 [italic in the original]) Thus, the search for an exclusive history has produced conflated historical stories of language and people, typically focused on the Sangam Age as the high point of the civilisatory process assumed to have taken place around the Tamil language. Tamil devotees have also characteristically combined an antiquarian interest with present-day political ambitions. For example, the identification of Sanskrit and Hindi as threats to Tamil has actualised new interpretations of the historical relationships between North and South India. Such interpretations have typically been conceptualised in the form of a deeply set opposition between Aryan and Dravidian peoples, and between Aryan and Dravidian languages.
Many Tamil devotees have argued that conditions of political autonomy were necessary for defending the inseparable Tamil language and Tamilian people. Demands for political autonomy were made on two fronts during the early phase of the movement: against the English-speaking British, and against the Hindi-speaking North Indians. The latter demand has remained a commonplace element of Tamilian politics since Indian Independence. Moreover, as many devotees believe that they also have to fight the enemy at home, the South Indian Brahmins have been identified as enemies of Tamil and Tamilians. Consequently, demands for political autonomy for the Tamilians have typically been associated with demands for the elimination of Brahmans from positions of influence in Tamil Nadu.

e. See Osella & Osella (2001) for a comparable golden age in a Kerala setting. During the Onam festival the lost golden age of King Mahabali is celebrated. In various versions of Mahabali’s kingship, values such as sincerity and equality are emphasised, and contrasted with latter-day exploitative caste and class divisions. Moreover, Mahabali is represented as a Dravidian king whose kingdom was destroyed by ‘the trickery and bad faith’ of non-Dravidian North Indian Brahman settlers (2001: 142).

91 The so-called ‘self-respect marriage’ was a common example of a de-Brahmanised ritual in Ekkaraiyur (see Arooran 1980: 162-3 on self-respect marriages). On other ritual occasions, people invited their non-Brahman friends to partake of a meal, instead of traditionally inviting Brahmans as guests.

92 Reversing the alleged Brahman rewriting of Tamilian epics, M.S. Purnalingam Pillai wrote a version of Ramayana that was entitled Ravanna the Great. King of Lanka (1928). As Nambi Arooran notes, ‘. . . the Self-Respect writers rewrote the Ramayana to depict Ravanna as a Dravidian hero repelling Rama, the invading Aryan generalissimo’ (Arooran 1980: 165, and footnote 53 [diacritical marks omitted]).

93 Tiruvalluvar is the most renowned of Tamil authors. Little is known about his life, except what can possibly be inferred from his famous work Tirukural. This consists of a large number of couplets (kurals), some of which are widely known and often quoted. See Pope (1984 [1986]) for one among several translations of Tirukural. Yet, reverence for Tiruvalluvar was often tempered by humour. For example, the state-owned bus company was named after Tiruvalluvar and every bus carried a picture of the sage: a semi-naked man
with long hair, sitting in the lotus position. Foreigners often believed that this was a picture of the owner of the bus company, I was told.

94 See Castles & Miller (1998: 147-149) for an overview of Asian labour migration to the Middle East.

95 Another link leads to the debate on ’globalisation’. For example, Robertson, particularly in his critique of ’world system theories’, draws attention to the cultural plurality of ’world images’. He proposes a model that ’… is conceived as an attempt to make analytical and interpretive sense of how quotidien actors, collective and individual, go about the business of conceiving the world, including attempts to deny that the world is one’ (Robertson 1992: 26).

96 A third mode of comparing countries is argued by Cannadine (2001). This mode, historically important in the British Empire, does not look for differences, as mainly do studies on orientalism and occidentalism, but for sameness and familiarities.

97 The dearth of first-hand experiences did not hamper the richness of accounts about the lives of foreigners and conditions in foreign countries. These accounts sometimes focused on the exotic - even the bizarre - similar to the way Western media tend to report on India. For example, in 1988 a magazine article dealt with dramatic events in Sweden. It related how two men, one a post-mortem dissector, the other a general practitioner, had been accused and acquitted of kidnapping, murdering, and cutting up a female prostitute in Stockholm in 1984 (see, for example, the Swedish daily Aftonbladet 2000-05-30: 18). The article began by stating that a doctor who drank human blood and ate human meat was living in Stockholm. He kept meat and blood handy in a clinic refrigerator, in case he wanted a quick snack. I read the article with interest but, unfortunately, I was unable to include it among my field material. Another time, an old man eagerly questioned me about Western funeral customs. Claiming that he had once witnessed an Englishman’s funeral in Kodaikanal, he tried to convince me that the corpse had been fitted with steel springs to its feet. That is, the corpse had walked by itself, or hopped rather, to the grave. He now wanted to know from me whether this was a common Western funeral custom. To this day, I do not know if the old man was trying to pull my leg.

98 A different perspective on the West is discussed in Favero’s study of a ’young urban India’ located in Delhi (2005). Also Favero’s informants use the West as a point of reference when speaking about themselves and about India.
However, Favero notes that for them 'The West represents ambivalent values. It is at once a symbol of progress, richness and development, and also a loss of morality and the triumph of individualism and egoism’ (2005:101). This is not how the West was talked about in Ekkaraiyur. Nevertheless, Favero’s informants and the people in Ekkaraiyur seem to share a deep distrust of present ‘Authorities, institutions and politicians’ (Favero 2005:92). The different attitudes towards the West voiced by Favero’s informants and by the people discussed in my study are probably largely to be explained by two factors. First, the different times of the studies (namely, late 1990s versus late 1980s). Second, the different choice of field and informants (namely, ‘…small-scale cultural brokers between India and the outside world …’ (2005:35), young, educated, and living in Delhi versus farmers, day-labourers, schoolteachers, among others, in a South Indian village.

Intriguingly, this belief is matched by what has been called the cult of ‘affective individualism’ (Stone 1977, quoted in Marshall & Williams (1982:144)) among the British upper classes society of the late eighteenth century. Marshall and Williams write about the cult: ‘Individual happiness and self-fulfilment were in the first instance considered to be more important than subordination to larger groups. Happiness came through cultivating ‘natural’ feelings towards others rather than through imposed discipline and repression. But in the properly-developed individual, feelings would be kept under self-imposed restraint. A society composed of such individuals would in fact have greater strength and cohesion than would be the case in an authoritarian society. Secure in what was due to him, the fulfilled individual would voluntarily accept obligations to his family and to his fellow-citizens. Society thus rested on the solid basis of interlocking self-interests’ (Marshall & Williams 1982:144-45).

See Osella & Osella (2001: 159, footnote 16) for a different evaluation of the British colonialists. The authors briefly discuss the movie ‘Indian’/’Hindustani’, in which ‘Violent, prevaricating British colonialists are equated with modern-day corrupt officials’. Both the British and the corrupt officials are seen as having replaced ‘the morality of traditional Indian values’ with ‘the amorality of modern society and the state’(ibid.).

See Dirks (1989) for an ethno-history of the Pudukottai kingdom. Alas, I have not found any references to Marimuttu in Dirks’ study.

See Zvelebil (1973: 218-236) for a discussion of sittars. See Brammarajan (2000) for the poems of the 'eighteen Siddhars’. Some of the sittars are
reputed authors of medical treaties. One sittar, Boghar, is reputed to have visited the Roman empire in order to study medical herbs (Brammarajan 2000:159). See also Raja, P (1984). For a brief overview of Siddha medicine, see Scharfe (1999) and Subbarayappa (1997).  

103 A new temple to Marimuttu was established outside Ekkaraiyur in August-September 1990. I had by then left Ekkaraiyur, and have therefore never seen it.  

104 The two men were probably Nehru and Ramalingam.  

105 See Chapter 5 for a discussion of Sentamil.  

106 The majority of Kallars in Ekkaraiyur were Isanadu Kallars, in contrast to the Pramalai Kallars of neighbouring villages. The names indicate their different geographical origin: Pramalai, south of Vaigai River and west of Madurai; Isanadu, in the southern part of the Kavari Delta. See Dumont (1986b) on the Pramalai Kallars.  

107 Two discarded alternative questions dealt with the presumed harmful influence of film songs on social life and people’s morals.  

108 Cf. the notion of the panchayat as a means of solving a conflict in an ordered manner, discussed in Chapter 4.  

109 Examples were such well-known persons as Bharati, Kalyana Sundaram, Tiruvalluvar, Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill and Karl Marx. Among foreign countries mentioned were Japan, Malaysia, Australia, Great Britain, Dubai and Pakistan.  

110 A pandit is a Tamil scholar.  

111 Pulavar is the honorary appellative of a man learned in Tamil, also a philosopher and a poet. The title may also indicate a college degree in Tamil studies.  

112 I have not followed the course of the speeches as they took place during the Ekkaraiyur padimandram. Instead of following the speakers’ train of argument, their dialectic interplay, or the judge's synthesis, I have chosen to organise the arguments under a few themes regardless of speaker. The English translation of the debate runs into about fifty pages of typescript. The discussion was, of course, held in Tamil. I recorded it on tape and one of my assistants transcribed it on paper in Tamil. Mr Domenic Savio of Shenbaganoor later translated the text into English. It is difficult to translate between Tamil and English, and Dominic's translation cannot be used as it is without seriously misrepresenting the speakers' way of expressing themselves. In a probably vain attempt to recreate at least something of their original
eloquence, I have edited those parts of the text that are used in the chapter. To catch something of the padimandram's atmosphere, I have written parts of the text in direct speech as if they were the speakers' own literal words. They are not. However, I have tried to preserve meaning and intent as truthfully as possible, but I have condensed and reworked the arguments from Dominic's sometimes rough translation into a more readable form, especially for those who are unfamiliar with the Tamil language.


114 For jokes on food adulteration, for example pebbles in the rice and water in the milk, see Ferro-Luzzi (1990: 41-42)

115 People examined the quality thoroughly when they bought food, expecting to be offered adulterated, inferior food. Not only did they object to paying high prices for inferior quality, they also thought that adulterated food could be dangerous to health. Ideas about purity and impurity also entered into the associations surrounding adulteration. Purity as a quality was valued in many other substances than food. In general, the pure and unmixed was considered superior to the mixed and impure. See Schiffman (1999) and Annamalai (1979) for a discussion of linguistic purity.


117 This refers to the popular expression 'paper level', which is used for unrealistic ambitions, intentions and decisions. When a decision, for example, is said to be on the 'paper level' it means that it looks well but will never be acted upon.

118 One lakh is 100,000.

119 Pattukottai Kalyana Sundaram was called the ‘people’s bard’ according to Zvelebil (1973:313). For a short biography, see (URL 16).

120 Durairaj’s argument is understandable when it is borne in mind that if children are to study at good schools, marry prestigiously, and get good jobs, very high costs are involved for their family. Official policies discourage families from having a lot of children. They emphasise the view that the small family is the happy and prosperous family. Overall, families with many children have come to be associated with impoverishment, as well as irresponsibility and backwardness. Therefore, Durairaj also claimed that he was embarrassed even to reveal the number of his father’s children - a claim,
however, that seems to be nullified by the fact that he did indeed reveal it willingly.

121 Cf. the critique of leaders in Gluckman’s classic article on ‘the frailty of authority’ (1991 [1956]).
122 One crore is 10,000,000.
123 See Osella & Osella (2001: 149-150) for a discussion in a Kerala setting about categories of bribes and the associated different attitudes towards them.
124 As in other kinds of human activity, there were bad manners and good manners in bribing. Consequently, one can talk of an Eckkaraiyur etiquette of bribing (cf. Gupta 1995: 379-80). Even though bribes were spoken about from a cost-benefit standpoint, it was considered bad manners to carry out bribing as a straightforward economic transaction. Neither ought the price to be asked bluntly, nor the bribe demanded openly. The etiquette of bribing prescribed, first, that the bribe was called by another name, labelled, for example, as a gift or a donation. Second, the sum to be paid was to be revealed only indirectly, accompanied by frequent protestations that the receiver would be happy with whatever was given. Third, the bribe was preferably to be handed over by an intermediary.

I witnessed how some of these aspects of good manners in bribing were put into practice during an evening in the office of a local civil servant. The civil servant was this evening writing out a number of certificates for applicants. The certificates were nominally to be given free of costs. Yet, every applicant presented the civil servant with a banknote of either Rs. 5 or Rs. 10. The typical procedure was as follows. The applicant asked for a certificate. The civil servant wrote out the certificate and handed it over to the applicant. The applicant handed over a bank note to the civil servant. Never did the civil servant mention anything about the necessity of paying, nor did the applicant ask. Instead, after having handed over the certificate, the civil servant quietly waited until the applicant, unprompted but unfailingly, gave him a banknote. The banknote was handed over in a respectful manner with both hands and bowed head, and the civil servant received it correspondingly.

The civil servant afterwards told me that these banknotes were in fact bribes, but he qualified his statement by saying that he considered them as being like gifts. The fact that the banknotes were given to him without his asking, combined with the manner of presenting and receiving, transformed them into something like a gift. Nevertheless, the transformation worked only partly, and the ambiguity of bribes was still attached to the banknotes. In other words, the
civil servant told me that he would accept whatever people gave him spontaneously in a respectful manner, but he also said that those who failed to pay him the proper amount, or paid in a tactless way, would not readily be served the next time they were in need of his services. Consequently, although treated as a gift, the banknotes were still bribes, even to the civil servant. They could only be called gifts insofar as they took on aspects of the Maussian gift: mandatory and imbued by obligation, but disguised as voluntary (Mauss 1980).

125 However, see Pavarala (1996) for a ‘social construction’ perspective on corruption in India.

126 The sanyasi is a Hindu mendicant.

127 The relationship of the individual and the group is an evergreen in anthropology and other human sciences. For this basic, and unresolved, question in economic anthropology, see Wilk (1996).

128 Dumont argued that traditional India was dominated by values of holism and hierarchy, apart from when exceptional circumstances permitted individualism, as, for example, in the sects and among renouncers (Dumont 1988b:184-200, 267-286).

129 That is, in the notions of varna and jati. Varna refers to the categorisation of people into four, or five, categories; jati refers to the localised caste.

130 Dirks defines the ‘little kingdom’ as a political region that constituted the lowest level of the late pre-colonial state (1989: 5). The term is borrowed from Cohn (1962).

131 But, see Fuller 1977: 107-114 who argues that Dumont’s traditional India is a creation of British colonialism.

132 Perhaps Dumont’s words in the introduction to his essay on the conception of Indian kingship are the most revealing for his general approach: ‘If, to be called historical, a study has to be aimed primarily at detecting changes between one period and another, then this study [on Indian kingship] should not be called historical, for, on the contrary, it is concerned in the first place with something permanent. Just as actual happenings or ‘behaviour’ are understood within an appropriate conceptual framework, I also think that actual historical changes cannot be understood, or even identified, before one has gained some general idea of ‘what it is all about’. On one point, I shall submit that the supposition of an important, but entirely imaginary historical event can profitably be repelled by the understanding of a relation of extremely remarkable permanence.’ (Dumont 1970: 62)
See also Stein (1985) for an example of the individual in ‘traditional India’. Stein identifies emerging big-men as the Vijayanagara empire establishes its control over the Tamil country during the 14th century. During the preceding Chola periods there is a ‘pervasive anonymity of leadership’ (1985: 417-18, 434) in extant inscriptions. In contrast, ‘In the Vijayanagara period, it is as powerful individuals that we encounter local leadership.’ (1985: 434). Stein defines the big-man by the fact that power is derived from wealth and achievement. It is based on ability, not on office or birth. This definition derives from Sahlin (1963, in Stein 1985: 417-18, and footnote 135).

In an essay on Swedish development discourse, Dahl (2001) discusses the similar ambiguity of interpretation, noting that terms current in the discourses, such as ‘partnership’, ‘solidarity’, ‘aid’ and ‘charity’, serve as ‘paradigms of interpretations’ rather than as ‘exclusive and absolute categories’. She also stresses the rhetorical use of different interpretations.
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