RESEARCH NOTES
AND STATISTICS

Selecting a "Village" in the Malabar Region, Kerala, India: A Note

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This brief note deals with two specific questions related to the study of rural society in Kerala, India. First, how have the definitional features of a "village" – as understood and explained by social scientists in the past – changed in Kerala over the years? Secondly, what are the implications of these changes for the method of village studies in Kerala in the contemporary period? I attempt to answer these questions by focusing on the Malabar region of Kerala, which was part of the Madras Presidency in British India.[1]

Villages and Settlement Patterns

To start with, there is no single idea of an "Indian village." Dube (1967) defines a village as a social and cultural unit with uniform organisation and a structure of values (Dube 1967). He wrote that

> . . . as a territorial as well as social, economic and ritual unit, the village is a separate and distinct entity. The residents of this settlement recognise their *corporate identity*, and it is recognised as such by others. It is not uncommon to find in them a sentiment of attachment towards their own settlement site (*ibid.*, p. 7).

Ramachandran (1990) argues that

> the *intricate web of interrelationships* that characterises village society continues to distinguish the village ("village" variously defined) in South Asia as an entity distinct from, say, a village that is merely *a unit of neighbourhood.* (*ibid.*, p. 21, emphasis mine)

In other words, Ramachandran argues that there are distinctive socio-economic relations within a village even as its isolation breaks down (in this context, see also Gough 1963; Connell and Lipton 1977).

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[1] This article draws on notes I wrote during my doctoral field work in the Malabar region of Kerala in the late 1990s.

According to Cohn (1971), Kerala villages are "dispersed" villages. Cohn classifies Indian villages into three types according to the settlement patterns: nucleated, hamleted, and dispersed. In the nucleated type, houses lie close together in a definite site, with narrow lanes and with the fields of the village spread around the settlement site. Such villages are found in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Punjab and some parts of South India. In a "hamleted" village, there is a central settlement, several hamlets, and many satellite settlements scattered over the fields of the village; these are found in the middle and lower Gangetic plains, and parts of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. In the dispersed pattern, found in Kerala and the deltaic areas in the mouth of the Ganga in lower Bengal, homesteads are dispersed and lie attached to the fields owned or worked by agriculturists. The boundary between one village and another is not clearly discernible.

Two reasons have been given in the literature for the existence of such a dispersed settlement pattern (Namboodiripad 1952; Raj 1970). First, the absence of compact settlements has been linked to the relatively abundant availability of water (Namboodiripad 1952). In other regions of India, because of the limited availability of water, people were forced to settle down as congregations near places of assured water supply. By contrast, a distinct feature of the geography of Kerala is the relatively easy availability of water. In a normal monsoon year, crop cultivation does not require any form of artificial irrigation like canals, which makes large-scale public irrigation works dispensable. Assured water supply greatly influenced the social structure and, consequently, political organisation, since people were less constrained than elsewhere by the absence of water when choosing where to live.

The second reason relates to the peculiar power structure that prevailed in the region. The existence of a particular kind of landed feudal property in Kerala gave rise to the development of small chieftaincies and independent principalities, which co-existed with a rigid and oppressive caste structure (Raj 1970). At the centre of this political setup was the upper caste landlord household, which maintained a number of tenant farmers, agricultural labourers, and agrestic slaves. In the opinion of Joan Mencher (1966), "co-operation between workers never extended beyond those working for one landlord, and that even among those was uncommon." Thus, each family living on the landlord's land did not share with its neighbours any communal interest in land.

The uniqueness of Kerala's settlement structure did not, however, preclude the existence of a vibrant village life. Franke (1993) writes that Kerala houses "are grouped into fairly distinct units in which people interact with each other more frequently than with outsiders." A village in Kerala continued for a long time to be marked by a main temple, a post-office, a market, and a cluster of old landlord estates, which may have acted as a traditional centre of authority of the village. In the following sections, my effort is to trace this social unit from the past and try to discuss its contemporary form and character.

The equivalent of the "village," in the conventional sense, as a social and political unit of organisation was the *tara* in Malabar.[2] According to William Logan, this unit came into existence during the rule of Tipu Sultan from the mid-eighteenth century. However, as K. N. Ganesh (1990, p. 51) points out, there is evidence to show that *taras* existed in the late Chera period (eighth to eleventh century) itself. Thus, *tara* was basically an arrangement of village administration by dominant castes, whose jurisdiction extended beyond their own caste to backward and oppressed castes as well (Revenue Selections I, cited in Logan 1989).

Ganesh (1990) argues that *taras* cannot be considered to be identical with villages as they existed in States such as Tamil Nadu. He traces the evolution of *taras* in the following way. During a phase of development, those regions delineated geographically from other regions and evolved into small brotherhoods (*samudayam*). Such units of neighborhoods came to be called *taras*. Assemblies of residents in *taras* were called *tarakoottams*. Within these *taras*, property rights over means of production were communal, and limited to landowning castes. Ganesh argues that the term *taravadu* could have emerged from the term *tara* when dominant members of these *taras* attained ownership rights. In such cases, other members of the *tara* came to be called *enangar* and *jnathi*. It was the lineages of these dominant groups that controlled local resources that emerged as developed *taravadu* in the later years. The *tara* was a self-sufficient unit of localised production of goods and services in which there was a clear division of labour according to caste (see Varier 1993, chapter 4). These castes lived in separate groups and their place of residence was named after the name of their caste.

The *nad* or counties were congeries of *taras* and the representative assembly or *koottam* of this *nad* was a powerful political institution. Their political power was enormous and they could prevent chieftains from being too autocratic. The *koottam* even used to overrule the dictates of the king and would even chastise his ministers for "unwarranted acts." Thus, in these villages, political power neatly coincided with juridical authority (Miller 1960). The warrior Nairs of these *taras* were not permanent employees of the king, but were only called in when required for particular duties (Ganesh 1990).

The presence of such a powerful local authority disturbed the British. After the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1792, the British began to reform the political system to the advantage of the East India Company. In the Company's argument, *taras* were simply territorial units with hereditary heads, created and maintained by Haider Ali

[2] A *tara* is a foundation, mound, ground, village or quarter, similar to *teru* in Malayalam and Tamil, *teruvu* in Telugu, and *teravu* in Tulu and Canarese (Logan 1989). A synonym of *tara* followed by some authors is *ur*, which is of Dravidian origin (Gurukkal 2000).

and Tipu Sultan as an "essential branch of their system." The Company abolished the *tara* system and introduced a new system known as the *hobali* system. Under the *hobali* system, the *taras* were enlarged to form subordinate district establishments under the East India Company, which formed the administrative units of governance.

However, the *hobali* system did not suit administrative convenience. The large size of the districts made their administration strenuous. As Logan wrote, this system broke contact between ordinary people and the establishment and hence, was not a village organisation at all. According to Thomas Munro in 1817, the *hobali* system was "inadequate to the object of its institution" and it required complete overhaul. In Munro's view, the Mysore rulers had disordered the original village system that existed in Malabar from the earliest times by forming the *tara* system. Munro recommended that the original village – which was the *desam* in his scheme – be reconstituted for the purpose of governance.

However, according to Logan, while *desam* or hamlet was the territorial unit of the military organisation in the ancient regime, *tara* was the actual territorial unit of organisation for civil purposes. *Taras* and *desams* were not conterminous; *taras* were larger than *desams*. For instance, the Calicut *nad* consisted of 125 *desams*, but only 72 *taras*. Ganesh (1990) notes that *desams* were never found in the historical documents as administrative units of the region. Each *desam* had a *desavazhi* and *desakoottam* and there is evidence that local chieftains used to appoint representatives in each *desam* to collect various forms of revenues and taxes.[3, 4]

The recommendations of Munro were implemented by Special Commissioner H. S. Graeme in 1822–23. Over time, *taras* started to become obscure in official records. Assuming *tara* and *desam* to be synonymous, Graeme grouped together many *desams* to form *amsams* or "parishes." An *amsam* was roughly equivalent to an old *tara* in its size, according to Miller (1960), though it was often larger. For each *amsam*, Graeme appointed an *adhikari*, who was always the most influential of the *desavazhi* under the ancient system. The elders or *karanavar* of the old *koottam* were ignored and the new *adhikaris* were the local representatives of the ruling chieftains. This, according to Logan, diverted attention away from the forms of ancient organisation and community governance that existed in Malabar. For all official purposes from then onwards, *tara* was never used and it was *amsam* or in some places, *desam*, that was considered as the "village" in Malabar. Logan remarks that,

> . . . in these popular assemblies (*tarakoottams*) existed the nucleus of what might have been organised by judicious treatment into real local self-government, and it was a

[3] *Desavazhi* – one who rules the *desam*.
[4] *Desakoottam* – assembly of people residing in the *desam*.

great misfortune that this important point escaped notice at that time (of Munro and Graeme).

It would not be incorrect to believe, with the available information, that this step accelerated the disfiguring of the old form of villages in Malabar.

From Desam to Amsam or a Village

There is a need to examine what happened to *desams* in the British era and the form in which they survive in the contemporary period in north Kerala. Miller (1960) noted that after over 150 years of British rule in India (roughly 1800–1950; Miller wrote the original article in 1952 in the *Economic Weekly*), the population grew rapidly. The pressure of population further accelerated the dissolution of the *tara* as well as the *desam*. In many places, *amsams* and *desams* were cut into many constituent parts, which became separate and independent *amsams* and *desams*. Quoting Miller's own example, one *amsam* in central Cochin, which had four small constituent hamlets earlier, had to be divided into four different *amsams*. Each of them grew into separate village communities (1960, pp. 48–49). While earlier, the larger *amsam* was known as a village, each constituent *amsam* was now termed a village. With time, they acquired their own community life as well, focused around a "big family" and a temple in the village (p. 54).

Further, the occupational congregations according to caste, which Varier (1993) had noted existed in the pre-British era, started to disappear under the influence of British policies. Traditional industries started declining and these castes looked out for other occupations, mainly in the agricultural sector (1993, p. 64). The breakup of traditional occupations that earlier caused people to congregate, also contributed to the further dispersal of population. Thus, gradually, the boundaries of *amsams* started becoming arbitrary and nebulous. It is these *amsams* that are actually studied by the Census of India as villages in north Kerala. At the same time, many village studies conducted in north Kerala by sociologists and anthropologists have followed *desams* as their study villages,[5] mainly because of the smaller size of *desams* and the persistence of some traditional inter-relationships among the population within them (for example, Aiyappan 1965, p. 18). As Miller (1960) concluded:

> . . . although any sociological investigator in Kerala may provisionally take the modern *desam* as a suitable unit of study, he must examine the scale of social relations of all kinds over a broader area. Whatever internal self-subsistence there may have been in the *desams* of the 18th century and earlier, it is very difficult nowadays in Kerala to point out to any unit as a clearly demarcated, coherent, independent village community. (p. 55)

[5] The *desams* are known as *karas* in the southern parts of Kerala.

From Villages to Panchayats

In the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly after 1957 when the unified State of Kerala was formed, the transformation of revenue villages into the administrative category of "panchayats" began. In Malabar, the Madras Local Self-Government Act was passed in 1884; under this Act, separate panchayat unions and District Boards were formed. The Madras Village Panchayat Act, constituting panchayats and District Boards, was passed in 1920. A new Madras Village Panchayat Act in 1950 retained the two-tier system in the rural areas set up in 1920. After the formation of Kerala State in 1957, the panchayat systems in its three constituent regions – Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar – were unified under the Kerala Panchayat Act of 1960. According to the 1960 Act, 922 panchayats were formed in Kerala, each with a minimum population of 10,000 persons and a maximum population of 25,000 persons. Each panchayat was sub-divided into five to seven wards.

After the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments of 1994, Kerala introduced a three-tier system of local governance, with district panchayats, block panchayats, and village panchayats as the three tiers. Each village panchayat was further sub-divided into wards. In the initial period, panchayats in Malabar were formed by merging two or more villages (*amsams*); the boundaries of the older villages were initially not altered. In course of time, however, these villages were divided and assigned into other or new panchayats. *Desams* that were demarcated during the 1922 village settlement also underwent divisions after this period, while new villages and panchayats were formed.

From 1996 onwards, a massive exercise of decentralised planning, with village panchayats as the lowest tier, began, and one-third to one-fourth of State Plan funds were allocated to the local bodies. These local bodies were free to spend these funds within some broad guidelines issued at the State-level. The intensity of decentralised planning led to the emergence of new community relations that ran across community structures based on *desams* and *amsams*.

In the contemporary period, the concept of a village is used for very limited official purposes.[6] It is used only for land registration, land revenue fixation, and record maintenance. To give an illustration, the village offices have jurisdiction over a plot of land but not over a building constructed over that plot of land. Such a dual system became possible because of the uniformity brought about in the land tax system, where all land was charged the same tax irrespective of whether it was used for cultivation or other purposes such as construction. The earlier system of land taxation involved different slabs of taxes according to the type and use of land, such as wetland (*nilam*) and garden land (*thottam*).

[6] While the Kerala government follows such an administrative classification, the Census of India continues to publish demographic data according to the older village taxonomy.

Conclusions

We can begin to list a few conclusions on the basis of four questions.

First, are the villages in north Kerala geographically distinct socio-economic units? Kerala villages are not geographically distinct units because they are neither nucleated nor hamleted, but dispersed in their settlement patterns. This nature of settlement, also, provides Kerala villages with unique socio-economic features that are distinct from villages in other States. As the discussion in this Note shows, these villages had existed as distinct and considerably self-sufficient socio-economic units till around 1800. Afterwards, their economic structure underwent a process of disintegration. Administrative classifications changed frequently, and accelerated the process of blurring village boundaries. Land reform weakened landlordism substantially.

Secondly, are villages in Kerala distinct units of neighbourhood? A part of the answer lies in the dispersed geography of the region. In general, there is no cluster or set of houses bound by some natural formation or agricultural fields. During my doctoral field work in Malabar villages, I had found one village boundary passing through the centre of a rubber plantation and the same again at another location passing through a house compound. Though the house officially belonged to one of the villages, one could not differentiate village settlements on the basis of simple observation.

Thirdly, does "an intricate web of inter-relationships" in village life continue to exist? The argument in this Note is not that there are no ties of inter-relationships within Kerala villages, but that they are weaker and differently laid out compared to villages in other States. At the same time, more detailed sociological and anthropological investigations are required. Over a long period of time, there was dissolution of traditional occupational groups and industries in the village, a process that occurred concurrently with frequently changing village boundaries. These factors, together with land reform after 1957, brought about radical change in the nature of the social inter-relationships that existed within the old village structure. The implementation of decentralised planning after 1996 is the most recent change to have contributed to the further weakening of traditional village hierarchies and community life based on traditional village structures.

Fourthly, are the factors of change discussed for north Kerala, such as the dissolution of traditional occupational groups and their inhabitational concentration, absent in other Indian States? Indeed, while such changes may have occurred across the country, the corresponding changes in Kerala were in the background of its particular geographical setting, settlement pattern, and the legacy of land reform. In addition, traditional village hierarchies have been undermined by the spread and growth of powerful class-based movements of peasants and workers. As a result,

there were more fundamental changes in the village structure, changes whose effects were direct and were easily visible.

Notwithstanding these conclusions, I believe that a study with a "village" as the site and unit of analysis might still be useful in understanding social change in north Kerala. In my view, for a cross-sectional study to be conducted in the rural areas of north Kerala today, there is no other way but to follow a *desam* (a smallest divisible part of an *amsam*) as the unit of analysis. Even in the contemporary period, a *desam* can easily be demarcated in most parts of rural north Kerala.

Yet a new question to ask might be: has a new "panchayat community" emerged in Kerala, and what has been its relationship with the old "village community"? A characterisation of the new panchayat community in Kerala is certainly an important future task for social scientists.

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