

The Complex World of a "Gossipmonger"

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Chettipalayam hamlet is part of the Appipalayam revenue village, situated 10 km south-east of Karur town, a district headquarters in the north-western part of Tamil Nadu. It was founded in the middle of the nineteenth century (1849) by an enterprising Gounder farmer, Karuppanna Gounder, a resident of Kadambankurichi on the banks of Cauvery, about 15 km north of Chettipalayam. He purchased the lands in the hamlet - uncultivated and used as pasture - from the Brahmin and Vettuvar landowners who lived in the nearby villages. He foresaw the possibilities of using the Tirumanilaiyur Channel waters, flowing along the side of the Amaravathi river through the hamlet, for irrigation. He built the first house in the village; two of his cousins followed him later. They dug the first open well, developed the first thottam - garden land - in the hamlet; bought more land from nearby villages; cleared a major portion of the small timber forest land nearby and extended their thottam cultivation. They grew a variety of crops - rice, bananas, turmeric, groundnut, and even sugarcane (later in the 1930s) on the wetlands; cumbu, cholam, narippayir (horse gram) on the dry land; and fodder on pastureland. Falling agricultural prices hit the hamlet's economy hard during the Great Depression but the Second World War, when agricultural prices increased, helped the enterprising landed families in the village recover the losses they had incurred during the Depression.

At the time of Independence, Chettipalayam was essentially an agricultural village. Its socio-economic relations were governed and dictated by tradition and conventions dictated by landlordism, caste, and patriarchal equations: "A *jajmani* type of

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organisation prevailed in the village." Agriculture was the most prestigious and most important occupation in the village. But it is also noteworthy that the hamlet had a lead on the nearby villages in education: in the early decades of the twentieth century, the enterprising founding members of the hamlet had sent their sons for education to the Municipal High School in Karur town and provided private education up to primary level to their girls - an unusual practice among non-brahmins at that time in the area.

Karur town was, at the time of Independence, a small textile town with a population of around 42,000 in 1951. The economy of the town was dominated by the landed and trading families of the area, largely belonging to dominant and middle castes, including Brahmins, Gounders, Mudaliyars, Nayakars, Chettiars, Nadars, and others. All the 20 odd *lakhiers* (millionaires) in the town were from one of these communities: they controlled the textile mills and private banks; the moneylenders who loaned money to agriculturists were also from these communities. Caste played a central role in socio-economic relations: Karur's textile owners and other business people did not employ labourers from the Scheduled Castes, and if employed, they were segregated (p. 18). These workers, who were highly exploited, were a dispirited lot, resigned to their situation.

This book is a detailed account of the socio-economic and cultural transformations that have taken place in the village (Chettipalayam) and the town (Karur) over a period of nearly five decades, from around the time of Independence till around 2002-03. It is a complex story – often nuanced and fascinating, and at times repetitive and disjointed. It is based on the perspective of an insider/outsider: the late Professor S. Neelakantan, the author of the book, belonged to Chettipalayam, grew up there and spent the last quarter of his life (after retirement) in it. Neelakantan's education and work - as a teacher and researcher in economics - took him to different parts of Tamil Nadu and to the United States.

Neelakantan tells us that his account is based on "gossip." In fact, Part II of the book, based on material collected after Neelakantan returned to his village after retirement from the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS) is titled: "A Gossipmonger Revisits Chettipalayam" (hence the title of this review).

The transformations that Neelakantan documents have strong elements of continuity and of major, radical changes. Class, caste, and gender continue to play major roles in the social, economic, and cultural life of Chettipalayam and Karur but with major changes in their nature and characteristics. Unlike in earlier times, these relations are no longer totally internalised, accepted, and uncontested; they are now contested and questioned by the deprived sections of the people. The changes also seem to have brought forth new fault lines and contradictions not just within the village and the town but across spaces between the villages and between the villages and towns

in the region. All in all, it appears to be a story of the transformation of a sleepy village and a sedate town into much more complex, turbulent, restless habitations.

These transformations occur across many dimensions and in many forms. The book in fact documents a large number of these, some in great detail and some just touched upon. It is almost impossible to deal with all of them in a review and what we summarise below are some of the major, closely interrelated transformations documented in the book.

One such set of changes in Chettipalayam relates to agricultural modernisation. Neelakantan provides a detailed account, in different parts of Chapters 2 and 3, of the process of modernisation of agriculture that took root in the hamlet in the 1960s. Of the different interrelated dimensions of this process, the one relating to irrigation systems and the changes in them is particularly well documented. A series of innovative - and often illegal - steps spearheaded mostly by large landlords and dating back to late 1940s were adopted in the village for harvesting water from the irrigation channel and from the Amaravathi river in the hamlet. New techniques for water harvesting included the use in 1948 of the first oil engine to pump water from the channel to the fields in place of the traditional kavalai etram (manual lift mechanism); electric pumps and cement pipelines (the "pipeline revolution"), installed in the mid-1950s; drawing water in the 1960s from the Amaravathi river itself; abstracting water in the 1970s from the river bed by digging trenches and laying pipes after the surface flow ceased in the summer months; and running (illegally) a three-phase electric motor on two-phase power supply.

While all these changes helped in the extension of irrigation in the hamlet in the short run, they also led to overexploitation of groundwater in the river bed. The issues of long run sustainability of irrigation practices on the one hand, and of assured, timely access to irrigation water on the other, loom large in the hamlet. Irrigation practices also opened up new contradictions and conflicts and sharpened existing contradictions and conflicts, including those between different sections of farmers in the hamlet and between farmers in different villages served by the irrigation channel. The sharpening of these conflicts and contradictions occurred concomitantly with the decline and disappearance, for a number of reasons, of kudimaramath, a traditional system of irrigation management based on status and caste in which the vaikal *maniyagar* – a Brahmin landlord from the region – zealously enforced the irrigation rights in the villages served by the irrigation channel. His function was taken over by the state, a measure that introduced bureaucratic interference and corruption into the system.

There were also other factors - largely external to the village - that aggravated problems of sustainability and quality of the irrigation system in the village and of the conflicts and contradictions that the village faced. One of them was the

construction, from 1953 to 1958, of the Amaravathi Reservoir in the upper riparian region of the river. The contestations and the politics behind this reservoir, the consequences of the reservoir for the lower riparian villages – of which Chettipalayam was one – and the ensuing conflicts and contradictions that it entailed are all brought out in graphic detail by Neelakantan in Chapter 3 of the book. A second major factor affecting the sustainability of irrigation was sand mining in the river bed – indiscriminate, and mostly illegal – which occurred in a big way in the 1980s in response to burgeoning demand for urban construction. Sand mining had obvious consequences for the sustainability of the irrigation system and opened up fresh bouts of conflicts between sand contractors and farmers in the region. A third factor was the establishment of dyeing units in the vicinity of the village in the 1970s. These used river water for their operations and sent the untreated effluents into the river, polluting it.

Another aspect of modernisation covered in detail in the book relates to the mechanisation of agricultural operations. Big farmers began to hire tractors on a daily basis for ploughing, levelling, and transport in the early and mid-1960s. The widespread use of tractors for land preparation by small farmers began in the late 1970s, when the practice of hiring tractors on an hourly basis also began. The use of tractors facilitated the extension of double cropping since it reduced the time taken for land preparation, particularly of wet crops. Tractorisation was also associated – as cause as well as consequence – with a rapid decline in the number of draught animals in the hamlet. The disappearance of bonded labour system for tending to cattle on grazing land and village commons were also factors responsible for the decline in the number of draught animals. Another major area of mechanisation was the widespread use of power sprayers in the hamlet. And, as needs hardly be said, the use of high yielding varieties, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides became universal.

The changes in the irrigation system and process of mechanisation also led to far-reaching changes in land use patterns. The extension of irrigation to dry lands, an increase in the intensity of cropping, and the extension of cultivation to village commons and grazing land were some of these changes. Cropping patterns in the village witnessed radical changes: there was a sharp decline in the area under dry crops and diversification towards a number of new cash crops.

These processes of modernisation of agriculture were associated with major changes – although there were also major continuities – in agrarian relations in the hamlet. The book documents in detail the significant changes that have taken place in the labour market and in employer–employee relations in the hamlet. Neelakantan notes that a *jajmani* type of organisation prevailed in the hamlet on the eve of Independence. A hierarchy of occupations – agricultural work or work of complementary or customary nature –

was interconnected to continue to preserve and maintain an accustomed way of life. Those who performed their functions, apportioned and pre-ordained on them by the caste hierarchy, received a customary moiety that enabled them to survive but did not give them much opportunity to escape or improve (p. 100).

The rigid system described above changed almost beyond recognition in the hamlet. Neelakantan provides an interesting account of some of these changes. On the eve of Independence, the bonded labour system was one in which the pannaiyal, a live-in loyal servant, acted as prime workman of the landed family and supervisor of the labour force. He led the plough team. That system has now disappeared. The labour force now consists largely of casual labourers hired for specific tasks and paid by the day, or attached labourers (paid an advance and a cash payment annually), or, increasingly, gang-labour contract workers for specific, non-repetitive tasks such as harvesting rice and sugarcane and for various operations for other cash crops. The terms and nature of contracts in the labour market - such as job specification, work measure, working hours, and modes of payment - have all undergone major changes.

These changes have come about because of a number of reasons. Changes in irrigation, land use, and cropping practices and the mechanisation of agriculture have rendered most earlier, traditional agricultural skills obsolete, and modern agriculture requires an entirely new set of skills for on-farm and off-farm operations. The extent and nature of demand for the new set of skills are also different. The overall demand for labour in the new dispensation increased with the extension of irrigation to dry lands and an increase in cropping intensity. Given the criticality of time in modern agricultural operations, the distribution of this demand over time also underwent changes, with intense demand prevailing in certain periods.

A number of factors affected the supply of labour in the new labour market in the village. The rapid growth of small and medium industries in Karur increased the demand for skilled labour there. This, together with improvements in educational level in the village and improvements in rural-urban connectivity, has led to migration, particularly by educated youth from the village. The caste-occupation nexus has loosened a good deal for a number of reasons. The aspirations of the poor and of people of the oppressed castes have changed; they are no longer willing to accept the traditional status of life dictated by caste. Educated youth from the oppressed castes do not want to work as agricultural workers. While all these factors tend to reduce the supply of agricultural labour within the village, it also appears that there is some influx of labour from outside the village right now.

Gang-labour contracts are one such "external" source of supply of labour. With the increasing casualisation of labour and criticality of time in modern agricultural operations, ensuring adequate labour supply and enforcing contracts – supervision - became a major problem for landowners. The *pannaiyal* who earlier functioned as the supervisor of the labour force has disappeared. New mechanisms had to be found for the supply and supervision of labour. Gang-labour contracts were a response to this, although they are confined to some crops and some operations. In addition, the new skills required in off-farm operations – such as the maintenance of pumps and agricultural machinery, and the transport of commodities – are now increasingly supplied by skilled labour in nearby towns.

All in all, there has been a complete transformation of the labour market in Chettipalayam. The old and new markets differ in terms of skill sets, the supply of and demand for labour, and terms and conditions of labour contracts. Neelakantan provides a very detailed, insightful, and nuanced account of this transformation in the book (pp. 40-55).

Neelakantan claims that the bargaining power of workers vis-a-vis employers (the landowners) has increased considerably because of the changes in the conditions of labour demand and supply. All this has meant that agricultural workers today can command better working conditions and wages and enjoy better living conditions than before. Neelakantan is quite clear that the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, has nothing to do with the change that has occurred. According to him, it can "be stated without fear of contradiction that no one in the area had ever heard about it"!

Neelakantan's claim that the bargaining power and living conditions of labour have improved considerably in the new labour market, we believe, presents only a partial picture of the condition of the class of labourers in Chettipalayam. This is because the new labour market consists of those labourers in the traditional labour market who were able to make the transition from the old, traditional skills to new ones, along with workers in new streams of labour. It is very likely that wage rates have improved considerably for this new labouring class in the village labour market.

But what about those labourers in the traditional market who could not make a successful transition from traditional skill sets to modern ones? These would perhaps consist of bonded labourers, and workers from the artisanal and service castes in the traditional labour market. What are the constraints that they would face in making this transition? What type of livelihood strategies would they have adopted? Migration – circulatory or permanent – in search of work in the informal sector in nearby towns? There is next to no account of people who were left behind in Neelakantan's narrative. It is also noteworthy that the narrative – either for the hamlet or the town – says next to nothing on the informalisation of labour and unemployment. In a region which is ever changing and restless, there are bound to be people who lose out and their story needs to be told. This requires a comprehensive survey of the labour market, one that includes people who have not benefited from the development process as respondents – or conversations with some of them, at the very least.

The reason why Neelakantan's account of the labour market is only partial is because of a flaw in his methodology, which he acknowledges with honesty; he says that "the material is based on the weakest of all forms of evidence, namely, 'gossip'" (p. xxxi). More importantly, he states that there is an "inherent bias in (the) narrative, as most of the informants are from the land-owning class" (p. xxxii). Even with a fair-minded, keen observer like Neelakantan, such biases can be real, and this, we believe, is what shows up in his account of the labour market in Chettipalayam, and explains why his is a partial account. The voices of the excluded seem to be completely absent in his narrative, all the more so because the people who have been excluded from the process of development tend to be "invisible" and voiceless.

As for land relations, Neelakantan points out that land reform legislation - land ceiling or tenancy laws - were not implemented with any seriousness, and hence did not help the landless, the tenants, or small and marginal farmers to gain ownership of land.

Nevertheless, these legislations seem to have had other, rather unintended consequences, which did lead to a considerable decline in the economic and social power of the big landlords. The threatened imposition of the tenancy laws led big landlords to bribe the revenue and police officials rather generously to block their tenants - who were mostly on oral leases - from registering their tenancies. Agitations and litigation are costly. While the landlords mostly won the legal cases and succeeded in putting down agitations by the tenants and in evicting tenants, their successes entailed considerable expenditure and effort. Many landlords began to sell off parts of their land - often to middle and small farmers - to avoid these high and recurring transaction costs. Many landlords, medium-sized landlords in particular, entered into arrangements with their tenants. These arrangements included dividing leased land between the tenant and landlord, and paying tenants off to give up their leases. So while most tenants did not benefit from land legislation and many were evicted from their leased land, some of them made some gains. In general, however, tenancy in the village – and share tenancy in particular – declined sharply.

The big landlords also tried to avoid ceiling laws by partitioning land among members of their joint families. These hurried partitions often led to conflicts because they were seen as inequitable by some coparceners and resources had to be spent to renegotiate partitions. Such partitions also led to the loss of power and prestige of joint families, and of the patriarchs who managed the large, undivided landholdings of the past. In the face of loss of their power in rural areas, some landed families have diversified into investments in non-farm sectors and in the burgeoning finance corporations in Karur town, and some have pursued higher education and entered different professions.

Caste structure in the village displayed similar elements of continuity and change. As Neelakantan records,

In the 1940s, the caste system protected both the core of the life-cycle ceremonies and the social penumbra comprising touchability, commensality, employability, and entry into the house. In 1990–95, the core remained protected and had even turned more rigid, whereas the penumbra was altering over time (p. 4).

Over the last five decades, caste has lost its hold in some respects: restrictions on dress, movement, and temple entry have slowly dissolved or have become less restrictive; contract labour gangs are becoming increasingly multi-caste; and the caste-occupation nexus has loosened. On the other hand, caste associations are becoming stronger and "network externalities of caste organisations are fully utilized in the credit market," particularly with respect to sanctioning and repaying loans advanced by finance corporations. Caste also plays a major role in politics. People of the oppressed castes assert themselves against dominant castes' power, and often in response to such assertions by the people of other oppressed castes.

Compared to the detailed, comprehensive discussions on transformations in Chettipalayam hamlet, Neelakantan's descriptions of changes in Karur town are somewhat sparse. Some major features of his narrative follow.

First, on the eve of Independence, Karur was essentially a textile town, a booming one that catered to World War II demand. Over the next five decades, there was rapid diversification and growth of the industrial sector – of small and medium industries – in the town. The textile industry grew rapidly, and began to export to international markets in the mid-1960s. Other industries and businesses that emerged and grew in Karur included lorry body building units, dyeing factories, dairies, units manufacturing fish nets and mosquito nets, a *pottukadalai* (roasted chickpea) factory whose owner became a millionaire in a decade, and even a short-lived Dakota air service. Karur appears to be a bustling medium-sized industrial and trading town today.

Secondly, there was a concurrent, supportive, and rapid growth of financial corporations in the town. The sources of finance of these corporations ranged widely. They included business profits, illegal money from various sources, money from the sale of land by landlords, money from chit funds run by small and marginal farmers, and even workers' savings. These finance companies funded the small and medium capitalists in and around the town of Karur. The depositors and owners of these corporations came from almost all classes and castes – although their relative stake in the system and the gains they made would have varied a good deal.

Thirdly, the spirit of entrepreneurship, innovation, and risk-taking took strong roots across different social groups. This was in marked contrast to an earlier era, when

innovation was not valued and risk aversion prevailed. Innovations came in many forms, and included innovation in the organisation of production and marketing strategies, in providing travel assistance to students who had fellowships in universities in the United States (who provided, in return, market information from the United States), and in methods of retaining skilled workers whose savings also served as a source of finance for finance corporations.

Lastly, amidst all these transformations, old institutions were adopted to new uses largely because of the transaction cost advantages that they provided. While the hold of caste loosened especially in the maintenance of ritual purity status, caste networks played a very important role in establishing and managing enterprises and in the development of entrepreneurship in the region. These networks

helped in identifying potential depositors for finance corporations, securing repayment of loans, recruitment of dependable skilled labourers, arranging for arbitration in disputes especially in relation to credit – and locating partners for venturing into new businesses (pp. 18-19).

There is an interesting account in the book of the contemporary use of kattai panchayat, a traditional institution, for arbitration and dispute settlement in business enterprises in the town.

What have all these transformations in Chettipalayam and Karur meant for the general level of living of the people, and the poor in particular?

In overall terms, the hamlet and the town have become richer, wealthier. The income levels of all sections of the population, including workers, have increased. The gains have been distributed very unequally, so inequality has increased sharply. Neelakantan notes that the "increase in wealth had bypassed the depressed sections, especially Scheduled Castes, till the early 1980s" (p. 6), although some Scheduled Caste households did gain afterwards. As noted above, there could also be persons left out of the development process, such as those who did not make the transition from old skills to new. Neelakantan also notes that gains in income and wealth do not necessarily mean an increase in overall standards of living. They are not an unmixed blessing. The impact of the dyeing industry is a case in point:

The improvement in the standard of living also extracted a price. Working with chemicals in the dyeing units caused ill health. Unspecified diseases affecting eyes, ears, and limbs became common. The medical bills of many families increased. Pollution of drinking water causes diseases not only for humans but also for cattle . . . Yields from agricultural lands also began to diminish (p. 156).

With agricultural modernisation playing a major role in improvements in income and wealth, the question of whether economic gains could be sustained is moot, given the agrarian crisis that seems to have taken roots in Chettipalayam - and in the villages around - by the mid-1990s. References to various aspects of this crisis are dispersed

through the book. The factors underlying this crisis seem to be many, the foremost among them being the crisis in irrigation. Factors that rendered agriculture unviable for large sections of the farmers include sharp increases in input costs, decline in land fertility largely due to industrial pollution, problems associated with getting the right type of labour at the right time, particularly when agricultural operations had to be completed in a short time and labour had become more mobile, and a sharp decline in organised sector lending to agriculture, forcing farmers to borrow from private sources. Neelakantan says that by 1995, Chettipalayam "was a declining hamlet, where a majority of its farmers were not breaking even" (p. 90).

With increasing professionalisation and urban migration, many from the younger generation in the landed families are no longer interested in agriculture. Moreover, land values have increased in and around the village mostly in response to increasing demand for non-agricultural uses. Consequently, many landowners have sold their land – in particular, dry lands that command a premium price – and have moved over to urban areas. "Now, there are only about fifteen inhabited houses in the hamlet. It is slowly becoming a ghost hamlet" (p. 206). The power and prestige associated with landownership, particularly for big landlords, has come down considerably with the breakdown of old values, and the partition and sale of land. With all this, agriculture - still the mainstay of the economy of the hamlet - has begun "to lose its primacy in the value system of the village," and there is no longer the same pride in the ownership of land in the village. As Neelakantan notes very perceptively:

In marriage invitations, the old practice of farmers styling themselves nilakkizhars or mirasdars disappeared. Parents of brides preferred grooms from non-agricultural occupations over grooms from agricultural occupations (p. 154).

There was unprecedented drought in the region in 2001–03. In fact, water flowed in the Amaravathi river, the lifeline of the hamlet, for only 25 days in 2001. The drought had very serious consequences for the irrigation system; it made things worse for agriculture as well as for the dyeing industrial units in the vicinity. Neelakantan gives a very detailed account of this crisis in the book (Chapter 3).

Changes that have taken place in value systems, and cultural and behavioural norms are a recurrent concern in Neelakantan's narrative. Some of these changes, he points out, are positive. The poor and women have become increasingly conscious of their dignity and are not willing to accept many of the behavioural norms imposed on them by caste, status, and tradition. Their aspirations, particularly with respect to education, have increased. Neelakantan also points out that many earlier caste and patriarchal practices still persist, although in attenuated form. The entry of Dalits into (all but three) caste Hindu households is still prohibited, and struggle by Dalits for temple entry has led to a compromise, with Dalits gaining only restricted entry.

There are also negative developments. The village, which was relatively self-sufficient at the time of Independence, has today been completely integrated into the larger market network. Every sphere of life seems to be commercialised – the cash nexus rules everywhere now - and there is a "general feeling that if you dispense the right amount of cash, you can do anything, get anything done." Consequently, there is widespread corruption. Consumption norms have changed beyond recognition, and "conspicuous consumption" has increased even among the poor. Large expenditures on ceremonies such as weddings and house-warmings have led to sharp increases in debt burdens among the poor.

Apart from all these, there are two such negative developments that Neelakantan points out that are noteworthy. The first relates to the practice of dowry, which has increased a great deal among all classes and castes, including the poor and Dalits. A consequence of this is that "girl children are considered a 'burden' to be disposed of . . . Education has spread among girls, but it has not had any impact on the dowry evil" (p. 86). Neelakantan does not elaborate on what he means by "burden to be disposed of," but one interpretation is that it refers to the evil practice of female foeticide, which is prevalent in large parts of Tamil Nadu today, including the region where Chettipalayam and Karur are situated. While this practice is likely to have increased after the spread of the practice of dowry on a large scale, it was prevalent, as female infanticide, in the region even earlier. Perumal Murugan's excellent novel Kanganam (translated into English as Resolve) provides a poignant account of this practice and its consequences in Tamil Nadu, and indicates that the practice was prevalent over decades. This reviewer remembers a conversation with Neelakantan in which Neelakantan said that this practice was indeed prevalent among peasant castes in Northern Tamil Nadu over a long period, but that it had spread to other sections of society, including the poor, with the spread of dowry.

The second negative development relates to the role of the teacher. While there is a rapid spread of education, among all classes and castes in the hamlet and the town, the quality of teaching seems to have gone down.

The professionalism of high school teachers was very high in 1940–50... Teachers taught with devotion and students learnt with attention. In 1990–95, we see a reversal in the roles of both. Most teachers were reported to have started side business which engaged most of their attention (p. 5).

Going by this reviewer's personal experience, this rings true. And the observation is likely to hold true for many parts of South India, where the worth of good school education was recognised by the public early on. The poorly paid village teacher was a respected figure. Teaching was a vocation, and was taken seriously by large sections of teachers. Part of the reason was that many teachers were influenced by the freedom struggle and saw teaching as a nation-building vocation. Some were active in the Left movement, particularly in the Malabar region in Kerala. The school teacher in Niranjana's classic novel *Chirasmarane*, a novel on the peasant revolt in the Kayyur area in Malabar, typifies such socially aware, committed teachers.

The situation is altogether different today. With the withdrawal of the state, there has been rampant privatisation and commercialisation of education. Cost cutting by the state and private educational entrepreneurs has led to a situation in which most teachers are hired as contract workers, with poor pay and working conditions. Consequently, most teachers consider teaching to be a job to be done with, rather than as a vocation. Commercialisation and the cash nexus, which have pervaded almost every part of society, have also moulded their outlook. Systems of accountability of school managements and of teachers are almost non-existent. A very disturbing consequence of all this is the very poor quality of school education, a major problem today all over the country.

Neelakantan has provided an extremely useful, detailed descriptive account of the transformations in Chettipalayam and Karur over a period of nearly five decades, from the post-Independence period to early years of the present century. But his explanations for these transformations, we believe, are inadequate, and particularly so for changes in Karur town. This is largely because he views most changes in the town as a series of "accidents" in response to some internal stimuli. He states that, in attempting to explain the changes in Karur town, he sees them as incremental changes that

were the result of a series of favourable accidents that changed the forms of organisations. These flowed from innovations which were instinctive responses to particular situations prevailing at that time and modified the accepted modes of behaviour in the region. By and large, they all were reducing transaction costs at all margins . . . (p. 7)

And these were accidents in which the state had only a marginal role, except for the increase in the general level of education, which, in his view, only helped to intensify the process.

Thus, for example, the innovation of bedsheet production using the putting out system by K. Periasamy Gounder was in response to a sudden shortage in bedsheets in the market caused by an "accident." There had been a workers' strike in the factory of his rival Annamalai Mudaliar, during which there was a police lathi charge when someone set fire to a godown, resulting in the loss of several hundred bales of cotton yarn (p. 8). There are a number of such "accidents" in Neelakantan's explanation for changes in Karur town.

The reason why we believe such an explanatory framework is inadequate is that it fails to contextualise the hamlet and the town in the larger socio-economic setup in which they are situated. This larger context, the Tamil Nadu economy, is, in relative terms, a modern, diversified, balanced economy. It has a modern agricultural sector with a diversified cropping pattern, a wide use of modern inputs and a mix of irrigation sources. It boasts of a developed industrial sector, again with a mix of large, medium, small, and household sectors, and it can boast of a socially broad-based entrepreneurial sector. Its urbanisation pattern is rather unique in the country. As Rukmani Ramani's work has pointed out, not only is there a high level of urbanisation, but also a very good mix of large, medium, and small towns, all of which are spatially well dispersed. Many of the medium-sized towns are industrial towns. Tamil Nadu has a good transportation system and the rural-urban linkages here are very good. It also has a creditable record in the social sector – in education, health care, and social support. And it is a feature of Tamil Nadu that the state played a central role in each of these developments. The social reform movement the Dravidian Movement - has had a major impact in social and cultural terms. While Tamil Nadu can thus claim to be a relatively modernised State, it should also be noted that traditional institutions and relations - such as landlordism, caste, and gender - continue to play a major, but modified and sometimes diminished, role in the economy and society.

The northern tract of Tamil Nadu, stretching from Chennai in the east to Coimbatore in the west, is the region where all the characteristics noted above seem to have operated on a more magnified scale, though with their own specific features. The developments in this region should be seen as the results of interactions between the specific characteristics of the region and larger state policies.

Chettipalayam and Karur are situated in the western part of the region described in the previous paragraph and, like other villages and towns in the region, were obviously influenced and moulded by the characteristics of the region. Neelakantan is aware of this when he notes that Karur "is representative, in some respects, of the region which includes towns such as Tiruppur, Namakkal, Tiruchengode, and Erode" (p. xxxi). Each of these towns has seen transformations broadly similar to Karur - in the rapid growth of modern small and medium enterprises and of finance corporations and in other respects. But each one of these towns has its own specificities, and the type and form of enterprises that have come up in each, the rate of transformation, the problems and crisis each faces, all depend on the complex set of interactions between state policies, the characteristics of the region, and the specific nature of the habitat. The same, we believe, would hold for the villages of the region, including Chettipalayam. It is this study of complex interactions that can provide the necessary explanatory framework for the developments in Karur and Chettipalayam.

Neelakantan's efforts at explaining almost all the developments in Karur and Chettipalayam through the prism of "minimisation of transaction costs" has provided some very useful insights, as when he explains the role of caste networks and kattai panchayaths in the working of finance corporations in Karur, or the unintended consequences of land reform legislation in Chettipalayam. But as an

overarching explanatory scheme for almost all the developments in the town and hamlet, this attempt and approach, in our view, is inadequate.

This reviewer knew Neelakantan personally. Neelakantan was a rooted intellectual: rooted in Tamil society, in the north-western region of the State and in Chettipalayam, his beloved hamlet. It was always a pleasure - and an education to talk to him about Tamil Nadu society, and about Karur town and Chettipalayam village. He was full of interesting anecdotes, insights, nuances, and hidden facts and processes that one did not know of. He was modest to a fault and would not put pen to paper. It took a great deal of persuasion by some faculty members in MIDS to make him bring out his insights in two working papers of the institute. It is to the credit of MIDS that it published these papers - along with a useful introduction by M. Vijayabaskar, a faculty member at MIDS, and an "Author's Note" by Neelakantan - as a book, as part of its golden jubilee celebrations in 2024. Unfortunately, Neelakantan died a few months before the book was published.

The study, as it was pointed out above, is full of very interesting and useful insights and formulations and is an important addition to the field of village studies. It is a very interesting account of the region even for a general reader interested in Tamil Nadu's economy and society. Nevertheless, a study such as this one, based as it is on observations and conversations on a very complex, ever-changing, restless region is bound to have gaps and problems. These gaps and problems should, however, be seen as new avenues for further research. Many of the insights and formulations in the study need to be firmed up, and validated with further work using secondary data and survey-based primary information. Some of the gaps in the narrative need to be filled. The working of the labour market in the region is one such area, as is extending the study, which stops at 2003, to later years. A comprehensive review, we believe, of the explanatory framework also calls for future research. If the present study generates an interest in this complex world, and leads to further research work, that would be the best tribute to Neelakantan the "gossipmonger" (a description with which he would readily agree) and very good researcher (a description that Neelakantan, with his characteristic modesty, would be reluctant to acknowledge).

References

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