CHAPTER III
Chapter III
The Region and the Village

An understanding of the regional demographic and socio-economic history is necessary to obtain an idea about the way the different sub-regions have developed and adjusted to subsequent economic and political integration or homogenisation. It has been noted that within the present day Tamil Nadu social organisation of villages in different sub-regions, particularly between those in wet and dry regions, differ characteristically in terms of the agricultural activities, crop pattern and productivity, tenure system as well as in landed-landless relation (Mizushima, 1997; Baker, 1984). These differences are historical and they continue to have demographic significance.

The Tamil civilisation flourished by the first century AD in the southern regions of the peninsula. The tropical and sub-tropical region which was sparsely populated by nomadic herdsmen and hunters saw the growth of one of the earliest civilisations in the world with the development of rice cultivation in the deltaic regions of the south eastern coast particularly along the river Kaveri (Baker, 1984; Stein, 1969). Subsequently, the civilisation spread to other river valleys as well as to the upper reaches of the rivers, as far as the Kongu region. This happened as waves of migrations from the valley to the inner regions as attempts to colonise more and more lands and to turn them into cultivable lands and settlements were undertaken. In the course of this expansion the society adjusted to as well as assimilated the people of the plains who were more or less unsettled herdsmen, hunters or groups under feudatory groups.

Till around twelfth century, the entire Tamil country can be seen as large number of scattered settlements or "nuclear regions"1 (either brahmadeyas or sat-sutra villages) along the river valleys, separated by vast expanse of sparsely populated or uninhabited forestlands. The nuclear regions were knitted together into some sort of larger social units by territorial organisations like periyanadu, mahasabhas of brahmadeyas, merchant guilds like nanadesi etc., temples as well as by the powers of valley rulers. Brahmins dominated the brahmadeyas while the sat-sutra villages were composed of agricultural communities, merchant groups and 'lower' caste landless groups. The latter were organised into two major divisions of valangai castes, associated with agricultural occupation, and idangai castes associated with artisan and husbandry occupations. While these

river valley centred "nuclear regions" were stratified in this fashion, the large tracts of sparsely populated forest and drier regions were largely under subsistence economy in the form of nomadic hunter-gathering, pastoral and / or dry land farming communities. The subsistence economy did not allow the growth or thriving of the form of stratification that was found in valley regions.

The entire Kongu region, was inhabited by and/or were under the control of number of tribal groups and feudatory chieftains till around seventh century AD and From the seventh century onwards the region was open to repeated attacks from neighbouring powers such as the Ganga, Pallava, Pandya, Chera and Chola powers. These attacks at best can be described as raids for plunder. These attacks did not alter the political situation or ethnic composition of the region in any significant way. The different local tribal groups continued to have autonomous control over different sub-regions. Even in the tenth century we get references to native tribal chiefs having autonomous control over certain pockets when Chola power raided this region. It is only after the tenth century, probably close to the fourteenth century that a major geo-demographic change took place when a large scale migration of valley people from the Chola country to this region took place. Till then, the region can only be seen as large tracts of forest with sparsely scattered villages which were open to occasional raids from the neighbouring powers. With extremely low precipitation and uneven land, the region was more suitable for grazing than full-fledged cultivation. Only after the onset of the vellala migration conversion of forest lands into settled agricultural villages began to take place in a significant way. Even at this point, such creation of villages took place only along the courses of tributaries of Kaveri. Rest of the drier and hilly areas largely remained under subsistence economies in the hands of tribal chiefs. Chola raids, vellala migration from the Chola country and subsequent emergence of Kongucholas saw the growth of a network of brahmadeyas, sat-sutra villages and a powerful network of temples along the water

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2 Which included the area covered by the present day Coimbatore Trichirappali, Salem, Erode and parts of Dindigul districts.

3 Reference of Kongar, aviyar, irular, anndar, kurumbar, and vettuvar communities inhabiting this region is found in Agananuru, an anthology of Sangam period.

4 These sort of migrations and the opposition posed by the plains people are testified by the themes of folk ballads such as Annanmar Swami Kathai and Ponnalakar ennum Kallalakar ammanai. The main theme of the former is the skirmishes between the migrating vellalas and the vettuvas. Cholan Poorva Pattayam (16th Century AD) speaks about the emigration of the vellalas from the Chola country to the Kongu country. Vettuvan Purva Patayam (17th to 18th Centuries AD) speaks of seven agreements between Tennalai Vettuvas and Vellalas regarding the transfer kaniyatchi and uratchi by the former to the latter.

5 This period saw an unprecedented growth of Siva temples throughout the Tamil Country. After reaching its pinnacle the importance of siva temples declined in the late medieval period. B. Stein, (1977) for instance, finds that between 1300 and 1750 AD, there was a decline in number and importance of Siva temples in the Tamil country. In parallal was the growth in number and importance of Amman temples.
courses. Endowed with large tracts of land temples and brahmadeyas became power centres of power at the local levels.

Trade had flourished from early centuries but was extremely limited to the river courses and a few land routes that linked the major valley centres with each other and with the coasts.

Perhaps, the southward pushing of Deccan powers and the subsequent Vijayanagara rule transformed the vast drier regions more than that was done by the valley centred powers. From the early fourteenth century onwards, the society was prone to heavy political turmoil with the of powers of Deccan beginning to push their control further south and establishing a sort of "tributary overlordship" in the place of village assemblies and the territorial organisations. The Kongu region which provided easy passage both from west to east and from north to south was strategically very important and any power from the north to run through the south descended first to the Kongu region (Arokiyasamy, 1956).

Establishment of tributary overlordship undermined the powers of brahmadeyas, sat-sutra villages and the temples. The revenue from the land which were earlier managed by the nuclear areas was now collected by individual warriors, parts of which were given as tribute to a hierarchy of overlords. Depending on the strength of the imperial ruler, a share of the tribute reached the top. In addition, the lower level warriors also had to support the higher level lords with military strength.

Thus, in the medieval Tamil Country, the importance of warfare led to the development of settlements around the fortification of a local warrior unlike earlier towns which developed around centres of agricultural importance. Thus the valley lost its overwhelming importance and the plains region saw an unprecedented growth in extent of land brought under cultivation. The constant need for recruitment of warriors as well as heightened agricultural activities in the plains brought in scattered groups of huntsmen and herders to the 'mainstream' society as separate groups of agricultural settlers. The importance of herding as the principle economic activity shifted towards settled agriculture. The positions of caste groups hitherto in oblivion improved as they enrolled in the military in large numbers or began to take up agriculture and gained economical and political strength in different localities.

In the second half of the 17th century, a great part of Tamil country mainly the Kongu and surrounding region went into the hands of Mysore rulers. Kongu was in the hands of the Mysore

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6 ibid., 1969, p.189.
rulers until it was conquered by the British in 1799 from Tipu. This marked the entire Tamil country falling into the hands of English East India Company. The period started off with bouts of famine that plagued the country severely in the first three decades of the century and continued its sway intermittently throughout the century. In the first half of the nineteenth century the ‘Company Raj’ was not involved fully in administrating the region. It’s only motive was extraction of revenue through taxation mediated by Tax was collected only in the form of money, paving the way for linking local prices and the market to the eccentrically changing international market. Largely, the warrior lords who had seized large tracts of lands were left undisturbed or even strengthened, except in regions where they had faced tough opposition from them in which case they were replaced. The administration thus strengthened these large owners as intermediaries between the administration and the peasants either by encouraging the existing palayagars or promoting new groups of gentry in the name of zamindars or mittadars. Moreover, at least to begin with, the administration had to yield to severe opposition shown by the local elites for any regulation which aimed to alter the existing landholding pattern considerably. Introduction of ryotwari system to the whole of the presidency in 1822, again, did not change the situation in any significant way, for the administration firstly did not make any detailed survey to assess the actual land held by people, and secondly it did not care to know who the actual owner was. Further the flexibility given by this tenurial system, altered to the whims of district collectors and to the needs of local requirements, made the system totally different from what the system was theoretically supposed to be. In all in the initial few decades the administration functioned under the constraints dictated by the existing system.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the administration woke up with renewed attempts for regulations. Between 1860 and 1890 a full-fledged ryotwari land assessment survey was undertaken. Steps were taken to improve and intensify irrigation, particularly in the valley region. The traditional village level maintenance of irrigation sources (kudimaramath) too was encouraged in plains where tank irrigation dominated.

Within the Tamil region, the crucial change was, once again, the increasing economic importance of plains and the relatively diminishing importance of the valley region. The valley regions saw an increase in intensification of wet-cultivation mainly by adopting double cropping. The upper irrigated reaches saw the gradual expansion of cash crops such as sugarcane, banana plantation and betel-vine. In the drier plains and in the Kongu region traditionally two types of agriculture generally existed side by side. One was intensive cultivation practised along irrigation
sources mainly where labour - of both human and cattle - was intensively used. The crop cultivated was chiefly rice. The other was in drier parts of villages where a sort of "minimal cultivation" was practised. This cultivation needed very minimum labour input and was totally dependent on rain. The crops cultivated were primarily coarse food grains such as cholam, ragi and the like. In addition, in the Kongu region a third type of cultivation called thottam or garden cultivation was practised. These lands were irrigated by wells and hence needed more private investment, but proved to be extremely successful for crops like cotton, tobacco, groundnut in some areas and coarse grains like cholam and ragi in others. In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was the gradual expansion of cash crops such as cotton, groundnut, sugarcane, and spices such as chilli.

Both groundnut and the new varieties of cotton introduced could be cultivated in drier plains region with meagre water sources and could be successfully cultivated even in small pieces of land with very little capital. The expansion of cash crops in the plains was at the expense of production in coarse grains. The shift was not only in the acreage of land under course grains but also in terms of a tendency to concentrate more resources and better quality land for production of cash crops (Baker, 1984).

By the end of the century the region’s agriculture was deeply linked with the overseas market. Valley rice was faced with competition from better rice production from Burma and Thailand. From 1860 onwards, due to stagnation in agriculture and falling wages, there was a large-scale emigration of agricultural labourers from the all the coastal districts to neighbouring Asian countries as well as to South Africa as plantation workers. This migration continued even till the early decades of the next century. This caused a sharp decline in supply of labour pushing the wages up but not as high as it was probably in the plains. The reasons for this lay in the traditional tenurial system under kaniyatchi form of land holding which kept the tenants and the landless labourers under conditions of servitude and perpetual debt bondage. This system of land-labour relation was not flexible enough to cope up with the fluctuating demands of the market.

In the case of the plains and the Kongu region on the other hand the overseas demand for commercial crops cultivated here was constantly increasing unabated till at least the First World War. The agrarian situation here too, with lesser extent of tenancy, relatively unattached labourers (unlike in valley region), provided sufficient flexibility to get attuned to the demands of market. The increasing demand for commercial crops led to two changes demographically significant. One
was a sharp decline in the production of food grains especially the coarse grains (Baker, 1984; Raju, 1941) which formed the essential staple food of almost the entire population of landless labourers and marginal subsistent farmers. The fall in grain output was not due to a fall in acreage alone but also due to diversion of more resources and better quality of land towards commercial cropping. There was also an increase in the periods of fallow which the commercial cropping pattern imposed both for recuperation and to adjust to demands of the market. The second change was the steady increase of real wages at least when overseas market was favourable. Significantly the province became a net importer of food grains from being net exporter from the early decades of the twentieth century. Given that the province was deeply entrenched into the world marked that was eccentrically fluctuating, fall in the availability in coarse grains and thus the need to buy from the market proved disastrous especially for vast number of landless labourers and marginal farmers.

It is true that food production or as "Sen has demonstrated food availability is a very imperfect indicator of food distribution as 'entitlement' greatly varies within the population..." with increasing wages and better prices for whatever little crops they cultivate, peasants could now theoretically buy cheaper food in the market. But the explanation is not all that simple for various reasons. Considering the case of wage labourers first, their only source of income is their wages. While their wages did increase in real terms, whether this increase made any contribution to improve their economic conditions needs further elaboration. Notably, the period and extent of fallow increased precisely in areas where commercial crops were cultivated. This brought down the amount of land under cultivation by leaving land to lie fallow, while the land holder gained by reducing risk, improving quality of the land and at the same time more intensively utilising resources like water and capital, it reduced the scope of agricultural employment in the area which affected the agricultural labourers. Thus lesser number of labourers could now get more wages as more and more could get no employment. Cash involvement and lack of grain surpluses altered the traditional relation between the landowners and landless labourers. The labourer not merely had to buy grains from market, but had to go in for rice instead of coarse grains. Further the labourer was also deprived of benefits, other then the grains he/she usually received as wages, such as access to interest free loans, access to grazing lands or fodder, doles of grains provided say during festivals etc. The landowners were increasingly able to divest oneself from these traditional

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obligations towards the labourers.

The position of marginal farmers was better off as they could supplement their wages with earnings they gained by cultivating commercial crops as well as with husbandry work which they traditionally combine with minimal agriculture. But in some ways they were even more vulnerable than the landless. With smallholdings, their livelihood was solely at the mercy of the fluctuating market. Without sufficient capital in hand as a buffer, the line between making a handsome profit and getting trapped into indebtedness was very thin and purely drawn by the vicissitudes of market. In the war period there was appreciable increase in demand for agricultural produce of plains; nevertheless from this period onwards overseas demand was becoming more and more uncertain.

Extension of commercial cropping affected all those families depending on husbandry operations in one way or the other. Pressure from administration for higher revenue collection and meticulous survey of ryotwari land brought more and more land under cultivation seriously eroding the reserve land traditionally left as tarusu meant for grazing. Decline in availability of coarse grains also limited the availability of fodder which again affected those sections depending on husbandry.

The above analysis is of importance, as the situation remained the same in the latter decades of the twentieth century as well. In fact in between 1950 and 1975, as Kurien (1981) finds, coarse grains output has continued to decrease with the worsening situation of falling real wages.

Guilmoto, analysing mortality declines in the first half of the twentieth century in Tamil Nadu, makes an interesting observation. Restricting his analysis to Salem district, he points out the uncoupling of the relation between death rates and prices in this period, which is more discernible from 1920s onwards. From around 1875 to the early decades of this century, there is a striking relation between inflation and death rates, but after 1920s death rates behaves rather increasingly inelastic to food prices. This was largely due to intervention by the government, during the times of crises or otherwise, in the form of Famine Codes, providing employment to the most affected sections during crisis periods, introduction of rationing, and Grow More Food campaign. Through these interventions the government was able to protect the most vulnerable section during the periods of famine. The schemes ensured a minimum availability of food grains, a threshold level below which mortality sharply increases. This effectively means that political and economic integration of a wide geographical area under the British had began to undermine the regional or
local factors - in this case crop pattern and availability of food grains - affecting mortality and in all likelihood fertility also.\(^8\)

Coimbatore district lies along the western border of Tamil Nadu, contiguous with border districts of Kerala and Karnataka. The tail of the Western Ghats, running south after its confluence with Eastern Ghats, forms a natural border separating the district from the two states. It lies between \(10^010'\) and \(11^030'\) N latitudes and \(76^040'\) and \(77^030'\) E longitudes. The district is one of the highly urbanised districts of Tamil Nadu. In fact, Coimbatore is the only district apart from Madras and the surrounding Chengalpattu district, which has urban population higher than the rural population. The district, covering an area of 7469 square kilometres has a population of 3.53 million. It has the lowest sex ratio in the state, 910 females per 1000 males as per 1991 census. The percentage of main workers to total population is 44.5 which is relatively higher than the figure for the state of Tamil Nadu which is 41.50. The percentage of main workers to total rural population is 51.76 which is the second highest in the state. For the urban population, it is 38.12 per cent which again is higher than the state average.

The district generally has a moderate mean temperature and moderate to low annual rainfall around 70cm, received during north-east monsoon, south-west monsoon periods as well as in the summer. Noyyil, Palar, Aliyar, Amaravathi, Bhavani and Siruvani are the prominent rivers flowing across this district. Palar and Aliyar originates from Anamalai hills and flow from the east to the west. Other rivers, which are tributaries of Kaveri, flow to the east. Siruvani, which is a perennial stream rising in the Attapadi range of Kerala, provides drinking water for the bulk of Coimbatore city and the areas around.

The district has more than 20 per cent of the total area under forest mainly concentrated in the western side along the Western Ghats. Around 50 per cent of the total area in the district are cropped area. (429,423 hectares out of 749,073 hectares - 1981 census). Close to 40 per cent of the net sown area is under irrigation. Well water forms the major source of irrigation in the district, followed by canals, and tanks.

The soil type is predominantly black soil followed by red sandy loam with or without gravel in certain pockets of the district. The black soil is heavy and tough to work with. It gets waterlogged if too wet and tessellate if the land gets too dry. At the same time, it retains moisture longer, and it is rich in iron and humus. These conditions make agriculture more expensive for want of more

\(^8\)Guilmoto's article is concerned only with mortality trends and not with fertility levels.
power for tilling and better provision for irrigation. With sufficient investment in irrigation (sinking a well or tube well especially) and in power to till the soil and lift water successfully, intensive garden cultivation is possible. Millet, tobacco, oil seeds, bengal gram, coconut and chilli are the principle crops cultivated. In places where canal or tank irrigation is possible, paddy, sugarcane, plantain, betel-vine, turmeric and coconut are cultivated. Red soil is light to work with and its utility depends solely on irrigation. In dry uplands these lands are at the mercy of monsoon rains. Millet such as cumbu, cholam and ragi, pulses, oil seeds - mainly castor and gingelly, and cotton are cultivated with minimum input of labour and capital. Land is left fallow for long periods for recuperation. Production likewise is minimum. Here again if irrigation is made possible a very successful agriculture is possible. The fact that the region is very hot, dry, and record very low annual rainfall amplifies the difference that a well or tube-well would make in agricultural production.

The nature of the soil, predominance of well irrigation and of course historical events have had a profound influence in shaping the economy and the society of this region. This has been characteristically different from the rest of the Tamil country. Settled agriculture started in a significant way only by tenth century. It was sparsely populated even in the middle of nineteenth century. Vast tracts of land in this region remained under thick forest. This provided scope for expansion from the end of nineteenth century when commercial cropping got sudden impetus. Till then one can say the Kongu country concentrated more on the production of food grains rather than other crops of commercial value. Dry land agriculture was coupled with animal husbandry, providing the much needed cattle to the garden lands to run the kavalai. The need for intensive labour power, both men and cattle, for watering, limited but perennial supply of water and the heavier initial investment led to a system of agriculture dominated by owner-cultivator farming, with predominance of food grains but with a variety of other crops in small quantities. These minor crops had commercial values and were sold in local markets or sandhai. Varam, a tenurial arrangement (with a fixed ratio of the output as rent) common in valley region or kuthagai (with a

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9C. J. Baker (1984) writes that there were 18,000 to 22,000 wells at the start of the nineteenth century, the census in 1814 gave a figure of 27,097. In 1880 the figure had increased to 64,985.


11A mode of drawing water from a well using cattle power. A pair of yoked cattle runs down and up a slope lifting and dipping a large leather bag. This is different from yetham (picotah) which is used to draw water from sources like canal and tank wherein water level is not very deep (unlike wells). Yetham is a sea-saw like arrangement, a person walks to-and-fro on it to dip and lift water alternatively. No cattle are used. In Kongu region kavalai is more popular than yetham.
fixed amount in kind / money as rent) common in dry lands (Raju, 1941) were rare in Kongu particularly in thottam lands.

Labour was in two forms: one was padiyal or pannaiyal labour, who were relatively permanent labourers, who, along with his family, most often is attached to the farm family, and paid in doles of grains. The other was wage labour engaged on daily basis. These workers, generally from 'lower' castes, often formed work-groups, taking up agricultural work on contract. They moved over a wide area outside their village looking for work (Baker 1984, Harriss-White 1996).

The sort of "semi-subsistence" farming, smaller sized owner-cultivated farming and familiarity with capital intensive farming enabled the thottam farmers to easily and efficiently adapt to market oriented commercial cropping ushered from the latter decades of the nineteenth century. This adaptation and adjustment to the fluctuating market took place through changing the acreage under different crops and through more entrepreneurial farming with readiness to take risk in investing in capital intensive methods. Coimbatore's agriculture was much more commercial in nature than anywhere in Tamil Nadu when the British left and the trend has continued in post-colonial phase also. For instance, the district has the maximum number of electrical pumps in the state. In the early fifties the district accounted for almost fifty per cent of pumps installed in the state (Kurien, 1981). Between 1967 and 1976 alone around 100,000 electric pump-sets were installed (Harriss-White, 1996). If the number of pump-sets in use could serve as a proxy, indicating number of wells in use, it could well indicate the extent of capital intensive farming that has been practised in the district. The extent of land under irrigation as a percentage of net sown area has almost doubled between 1950-51 to 1972-73 (Kurien, 1981).

During the Second World War period when agriculture of all other regions suffered a set back, this region gained with increasing the land under cotton acreage to an unprecedented high, for during the war, the defence demands for cotton textile increased many folds. Importantly, as many scholars have noted, in the Kongu region, the wage and the general state of landless labourers were better then those in other regions (Baker, 1982; Harriss-White, 1996; Dharma Kumar, 1992).

Cultivation of cotton and subsequent growth of cotton mills were the important factor behind

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12 C. J. Baker, 1984, p.204
the growth of Coimbatore city.\textsuperscript{13} Even by the turn of the nineteenth century, cotton was an important crop of the region.\textsuperscript{14} The introduction of Cambodian cotton and the expanding needs of the Bombay market in the early twentieth century led to the expansion of the area under cotton to ten to twenty per cent of the net sown area. It more than doubled by the end of the war period. In 1916, a trading centre was set up in Tiruppur a neighbouring small town, by a group of Bombay merchants. This streamlined cotton market in the district. Largely, cultivators themselves took great interest in trading. Particularly kammavar naickers and gounders, the main landholding communities with the support from chettiyar bankers, began to dominate in the cotton market of this region. The slump in Bombay textile market in the late 1920s indirectly paved the way for the development of cotton mills and gins in the district. The first spinning and weaving mill owned by an European enterprise came up in 1890 and one owned by an Indian, in 1908. In the next three decades, floatation cotton mill saw a boom. In the 1930s alone around thirty units were floated. By 1928 a hosiery unit came up in Tiruppur. The number of gins rose from five in 1911 to 90 in 1933 and 149 in 1941 (Baker, 1984).

The boom in cotton attracted chettiyar, marwari and multani bankers leading to the growth of financing industry. In 1930 there were about 125 private co-operative banks or \textit{nidhis}. Along with cotton industries, other related industries such as manufacturing, machinery and spares for textile mills and agriculture grew.

As per the 1981 Census, 52-57 per cent of its main workers depend on non-agricultural employment. Coimbatore is also known for handloom, manufacture of textile machinery, agricultural implement, motor and pump sets. The city has shown tremendous growth from the beginning of this century and is now one of the ten highly industrialised cities in the country.

Presently there are more than 200 spinning mills, nine weaving mills, 33000 power looms and 25000 handlooms. Apart from these cotton related units, there are around 300 units manufacturing electric motors, 3000 units for pumps and 450 foundries (Krishnakumar, 1995). There are 135 large and medium industries and over 17000 small units. There are more than 2000 registered factories employing two lakhs of population. The district has 6137 persons per lakh of population employed in the organised sector as compared to the figure of 4115 for the

\textsuperscript{13}See for a detailed discussion on urbanisation in Coimbatore, J. Harriss, 1986 and A. Krishnakumar, 1995.
\textsuperscript{14}John Hodgson, a member of the Board of Revenue, in his Report in 1807 has noted that cotton was one of the important crops and handloom weaving was one of the main industries in the district. Cotton produced is much more than the demand and perhaps could be shipped to China (cited in R. Ratnam, 1966).
state of Tamil Nadu.

The population composition of the city and the district is extremely heterogeneous for historical and contemporary reasons. Dominant land-owning castes are gounder and kammavar naicker groups. Caste groups like mudaliyar, konar, agamudayar, vanniyar, etc., dominate in certain pockets by owning bulk of the land and/or in numbers. Dalit communities who are invariably landless are more or less distributed all over the district. Their settlements are located most often on the outskirts of the villages. Different dalit communities live separately in different settlements. Industrial, trading and banking sectors are dominated by kammavar naicker, gounder, chettiyar as well as north Indian business communities.

In the recent decades, the agricultural scene has not been all that bright, especially for those in the lower rungs of the economic ladder. From the end of seventies, the problem of lowering water tables began to appear. The area under irrigation did not see the increase it did happened in previous decades. Whatever increase there was, was by virtue of public sector investment in canals in wet lands than by private investment in wells. Existing wells had to be deepened further and had to be installed with more powerful motors. Bore-wells began to replace wells, which were not as costly as digging a well but were nevertheless riskier. As Barbara Harriss-White notes, the agricultural scene in the district has become more and more differentiated. With increasing need for investment, access to rural credit facilities being more skewed in favour of affluent farmers, small and marginal farmers have got affected seriously. Land under tenancy has decreased from 20 per cent in 1940s to five per cent in 1980. The proportion of cultivators having less than a hectare of land has doubled between 1947 and 1970, and the miniaturisation of holdings has accelerated during 1970s. While the proportion of cultivators has declined from 31 per cent to 23 per cent in the post-colonial period, the proportion of landless agricultural labourers has increased from 16 per cent in 1951 to 34 per cent in 1981. Real wages for labour has also fallen considerably in this period (Harriss-White, 1996; Kurien, 1981).

Agraharasamakulam, the village selected for the study appears to be a microcosm of Kongu region. As it would be seen in the following pages, in many of its features and in the kind of agricultural and non-agricultural changes that the village has been witnessing, the village appears to be typical of the region. For instance, the village has three types of agriculture - wet, garden and dry - with minimal cultivation in dry lands supplemented with animal husbandry and predominant well irrigation.
Agraharasamakulam, is 20 Kilometres to the north of Coimbatore city. The village is along the gentle slopes that run down from the foot of Kurudi hill that is around 15 kilometres to the west of the village. The lofty Kurudi hill stands far apart from the rest of its links running north-south forming a natural border of the district in the west.

As the name suggests, there is an agraharam or a brahmin settlement and a kulam or irrigation tank in the village. The village, probably, was a brahmadeya or devadana village under the control of brahmins or a temple. The village possibly came into being before thirteenth century, for it was only during the Chola or Kongu Chola period that such brahamadeya villages were founded. However, this village is not mentioned in the inscriptions found in Sarkarsamakulam, dating between the tenth and the fifteenth century. Possibly the village was known by a different name.

The village is well connected to nearby urban centres like Periyanaickenpalayam, Thudiyalur, Koilpalayam and the city by motorable roads and public transport. From the city the village could be reached by a public transport bus roughly in an hour. Direct, frequent buses ply between the village and the city. The village is connected by road to three urban centres: Koilpalayam located on Coimbatore - Sathyamangalam highway, Thudiyalur and Periyanaickenpalayam on the Coimbatore - Mettuppalayam highway.

The village spreads on either side of the road running between Koilpalayam and Vellamadai. It is a village panchayat with its revenue limits spanning roughly two to two and a half kilometres. north to south and a little above 4 kilometre west to east. The road running south to north divides the village into two unequal halves. A majority of the households are located in a dense settlement spreading on either side of a short span of the road. There is another, dense, but a smaller settlement in the northern border of the village contiguous with the adjacent village Thottipalayam. Households are also scattered, either isolated or in small clusters, all around in the agricultural lands and along the main road.

As per the 1991 Census, the population of the village is 2340 (1211 male, 1129 female). The local Primary Health Centre gives a figure of 2017 (1053 male, 964 female) for the year 1995-96 comprising of 522 households. As per the baseline survey conducted for the current study there are 520 households.

The major caste groups in the village are vanniyars, arunthathiyars and gounders in the order of their numerical strength. The majority of vanniyars are landless labourers. But a good
percentage of them do have land in the eastern upland called as sengadu. All but two arunthathiyar households are landless and the majority of them work as wage labourers. The gounders along with the less numerous naickers of this village and a neighbouring village own the bulk of the irrigated lands. There are, of course, a considerable number of gounder households without agricultural lands. Apart from these communities, there are other communities like brahmin, mudaliyar, chettiyar, nadar, padayachi, aasari, vannan, nasuvan and mannudayar represented by just handful of households each, as indicated in the table below.

Table 3.1 Distribution of households by caste:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Number of Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vanniyar</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arunthathiyar</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gounder</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naicker</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>520</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A few decades before the brahmin caste seem to have enjoyed overwhelming economic, political and ritual dominance in the village. The caste had decisive say in almost all the affairs of the village. Old arunthathiyar men recall the names of some of the brahmin men who were glaringly powerful in the village. No dalit was allowed to pass through the agraharam street. Other non-dalit castes too had severe restriction in this street. Even the servants working in brahmin households were supposed to enter only through the back yard. All village affairs were dealt by traditional village office holders like village karnam, maniyam and kanakkar. Persons occupying these offices usually hailed from the same set of brahmin families. Thus, we hear people speaking about families known as karnam family, maniyam family and kanakkaiyar family. Brahmins households have owned considerable wet as well as dry lands. Having control over the local Siva and Perumal temple they had a control over large tracts of land belonging to the two temples. As in any other part of Tamil Nadu, brahmins themselves did not cultivate the land. Instead their lands were worked by gounder and naicker households on lease. In the post-colonial period, the brahmin families seem to have started to migrate to cities gradually. Some of the families continued to retain their land in the village and continued to have paddy and other agricultural produce carted to them from their lands.
Things have changed considerably after that. At present there are only four brahmin households, three of which are of recent immigrants, that of the priest in the local Siva temple, the family of a retired railway employ and a couple working as school teachers. The other is the family of kanakkaiyar. None of the four families own land. Only one family, not living in the village any more, owns land in the village. The lands held by brahmin households have gone into the hands of other caste groups, mainly gounder and naicker who were tenants of brahmins. The following table provides a rough idea about the extent of land held by the brahmins and how it has changed hands.

**Table 3.2 Immovable Property sold by Brahmin households to Non-brahmin Households**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sold by</th>
<th>Property sold</th>
<th>Sold to</th>
<th>Price in Rs.</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narasamuthuair</td>
<td>19 acres land</td>
<td>Palanigounder</td>
<td>26,500</td>
<td>1950s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narasamuthuair</td>
<td>10 acres land + 1 well</td>
<td>Kittuvanaicker</td>
<td>45,000</td>
<td>1950s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narasamuthuair</td>
<td>7 acres land + 1 well</td>
<td>Kittuvanaicker</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>1950s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narasamuthuair</td>
<td>10 acres land</td>
<td>Appanaicker</td>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>1950s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narasamuthuair</td>
<td>House, courtyard (.75 acre)</td>
<td>Krishnasamynaicker</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>1950s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sreenivasaiyar</td>
<td>5 acres land</td>
<td>Senniyappagounder</td>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>1960s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoraiyar</td>
<td>9 acres land</td>
<td>Kodeeswaragounder</td>
<td>450,000</td>
<td>1990s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The data is based on oral information collected from people in the village and not from any written documents. It is not an exhaustive list.

Power positions of various caste groups have altered considerably over the past few decades and there are signs to show that changes are continuing to take place. Traditional offices such as karnam, maniyam and kanakkar have been abolished. Elections are held for the village head from the late 1950s and a full-time government employee is being appointed as Village Administrative Officer from the 1980s.

Gounders, who own more wet and garden lands, have come to occupy the dominant position in the village. Although naickers too own almost equal amount of land, the fact that the number of households living in this village is numerically insignificant has deprived the caste, as a group, from
a dominating position in the village. Obviously, the dependence of vanniyar, arunthathiyar and other servicing caste groups on gounders for employment, water, fodder and loans has made them subservient to gounders.

The dominance of gounders in the village cannot be fully explained by restricting our analysis to the factors within the village. The caste enjoys pre-eminence in numerical strength, land holding and economic power in this region as well as in the district. They have much wider and powerful kin and caste network which gives them easier access to better paid jobs as well as to the state machinery. Moreover, in terms of landholding and even in numerical strength, this group dominates the vanniyar caste in the villages around this village. This is the only region where vanniyars live in large numbers as a pocket in the entire district, while gounders are more widely distributed across the district.

The dominance of gounders over vanniyars and arunthathiyars is maintained and expressed at the symbolic level too. Gounders claim ritual superiority over the other two castes. They claim not only that they do not accept food or water from arunthathiyars but also that in earlier days they were not taking food or allowing a vanniyar in to their house. They expect a dalit to address them as gounder or goundachi and a vanniyar is supposed to address them as appa and aatha. On the other hand, gounders address others by their name, irrespective of their age. Particularly a 'higher' caste male finds pride in addressing a 'lower' caste woman by her name in the presence of her husband.

Vanniyars on the other hand contest these claims by gounders and claim to be on par with the former in ritual status. They use "gounder" as their surname just as the gounders. The largest vanniyar clan in the village, the annanmar clan, claim their descent from an ancestral mythical duo from whom gounders of this region also claim their descent.

Out of their numerical strength vanniyars have consistently shown their dominance over the gounders in the past and in the present particularly in the sphere of religion and politics within the region. For example, vanniyars traditionally shared an Amman temple with gounders, where the

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15. The only community that could challenge in economic strength is the naicker community.
16. In fact the title gounder is used by a number of castes all over Tamil Nadu like vanniyar, pooluvar, kurumbar.
17. According to a myth, in the past, it was the gounders who celebrated the annanmar festival and the temple belonged to them. Many years before, when the time came for the celebration of the festival, i.e., when the pantheon of 109 gods descend, all the gounders had gone to the fields for harvest. From then onwards vanniyars have taken over the temple and the right to celebrate the festival. Even today the clan elders formally invite important persons of the gounder caste to initiate the preparations for the function (mudippu katrathu). Gounder elders donate a token amount and on the same day the annanmar clan members make the decisions regarding the conduct of the festival.
latter enjoyed certain special rights in performing the rituals while the former did not. A few years back vanniyars began to contest for equal rights. Gounders had to give up the temple to the numerically preponderant vanniyars and had to construct a separate temple.

Likewise in the sphere of politics, vanniyars have managed to capture the post of village president for two successive periods between 1965 and 1975. In the recent local body election too, a candidate from this community managed to win the post of president and a majority among ward members despite the fact that three candidates from the same community contested. Along with political power comes, albeit only for a small group, better control over public affairs in the village like de-silting the tank bed, distribution of tank water, implementation of government schemes, providing water and power connections etc.

In economic status vanniyars in general, however, are much poorer than gounders. Except for a group of brothers living close by owning a land with a well, none of the vanniyar households own irrigated land\textsuperscript{18}. Around half of them own rainfed lands. Despite owning land, many of these households depend on hiring out their labour, for the level of income that could be generated from the land is barely sufficient to eke out a living. Among the landless households, the majority are wage labourers. Both landless and landed supplement their earnings with husbandry.

Arunthathiyars live along three close lying streets and in the Thottipalayam settlement isolated from other caste groups. Untouchability of sorts does prevail as observed in many contexts, and expressed through restrictions on commensality. Road-side tea shops, owned by vanniyars, maintain separate tumblers for dalits and non-dalits. Non-dalits rarely enter dalit localities. Dalits do not face any strict restrictions in using the streets in non-dalit settlements to and from work, school or the tank area as long as they conduct themselves in "disciplined" way, but it is not possible to see dalit children play in non-dalit areas or dalit men and women quarrel or talk aloud here. Restrictions, however, do not get extended to the public road.

The relation between arunthathiyars and land owning castes such as naickers and gounders is one of subservience and dominance respectively. However, it is not a monolithic sort of relation between all arunthathiyars and all naickers or gounders. The relation varies in terms of degree,

\textsuperscript{18}In the past some of the vanniyars had owned lands which are presently irrigated and in the hands of gounders or naickers. This is testified by both gounders and vanniyars. In fact, it is possible that vanniyars settled in this village much earlier than all other communities and owned the entire land. Evidence for this is that the clan temples of vanniyars are located inside the village, scattered all over the village, even in the lands now belonging to other communities. Even the sluice gates and the channels of the tank are believed to be the abodes of deities propitiated by vanniyars.
depending upon whether a gounder household is a land owning household or not and whether an arunthathiyar family depends on agricultural labour or non-agricultural industrial labour.

Arunthathiyars depend largely on the landed gounders for employment. Still, during the recent local body election a large section of them stood en masse, cutting across party affiliations, in support of the vanniyar candidate and collectively bargained to win the post of vice-president and two ward members. On demanding the vice-president post, they had to face the ire of vanniyars who also vied for this post. Once the ambience of election was over, arunthathiyars resumed work under gounders and faced no rancour from the latter unlike other smaller groups like households of aasari (carpenter) community who were asked to vacate their homes by their gounder house-owners. This showed the dependence of land holders, particularly wet land holders on arunthathiyar agricultural labour force which is increasingly turning towards non-agricultural employment.

The domain of religion provides yet another illustration of arunthathiyars challenging the superiority of gounders. The mariamman temple which gounders had to build after parting company with vanniyars is shared by gounders and arunthathiyars. Yet the latter are not allowed inside the main hall of the temple even on special occasions. They are allowed inside the premise surrounded by a compound-wall but not inside the temple per se. In recent days some arunthathiyar youth have started feeling that they have to break this norm. But they do not say this openly in public fearing resentment from the gounders. On getting married an arunthathiyar couple visits the mariamman temple. The temple priest (common to both the communities) is expected to conduct a ritual for the couple. Conduction of such rituals is expected even during the number of religious festivals that involves the temple.

On narrating how the mariamman festival is conducted, they give altogether different version from that of the gounders. The temple being shared by both the communities on the day of the festival gounder finish their poosai in the forenoon and arunthathiyars in the afternoon. Arunthathiyars come as a procession from the caste-Hindu streets, playing drums.

A gounder woman narrated that "during the mariamman festival everybody (i.e., all gounder families) will bring vilakkuma (lamp and sweetened raw rice-flour in a plate). All the plates will be placed on the floor inside the temple. Ur-gounder family's vilakkuma alone will be placed inside

18Probably this was a mechanism to enlist the latter's support for political and economic (labour force) necessities in opposition to the estranged vanniyars who are numerically stronger.
the sanctorum. Poosaari will conduct poosai for the ur-gounder's family and would give the plate to ur-gounder and ur-goundich. After that one by one he will quickly do poosai to others... For Chakkiliyars too the same poosaari will conduct the poosai. But their plates will be placed on the cemented floor just outside the main temple. Poosaari will just make one common poosai for all of them and will ask them to take their respective plates. They will come once all our poosai are over... No, they will not contribute any money towards the expenses... Three or four Chakkiliyars will be asked to do activities such as erecting posts, fixing lights, cleaning the temple premise and the like. They will play the drums as well."

Suppan, a person belonging to arunthathiyar community, who was earlier the ur-madari in the village gave a different version. "Our people will do all the preparatory work like decorating the temple, arranging posts for lights etc. It is only for the name sake we go and invite the goundamaaruga. They will come just for ten minutes and will leave. After that we start the celebration."

Each caste is divided into a number of exogamous clans. Each clan has a clan deity and a clan temple. Among gounders, there are more than a hundred clans (kootam) and only a handful of them are represented in the village. Only five of them have numerically significant membership and the rest of them are represented by just one or two households. The Gounders' clan temples are scattered all over the Kongu region, many of them beyond the district. Their clan deities are one or other forms of amman or mother goddess. Likewise the clan temples of arunthathiyars are scattered outside the village but relatively closer, with in the district. Their deities are various forms of Perumal.\textsuperscript{20} The community is divided into twelve clans (kulalu) of which nine are represented in the village. The nine clans are grouped into two unnamed groups and inter-marriage within the clans in a group is taboo. As per norms, alliances are made only from one of the clans belonging to the other group. Vanniyar clan (oru koil kaaranga - persons belonging to the same temple) temples are found within the village or in the neighbouring villages. They have both male as well as female deities as their clan deities. Deities are either different forms of amman or male deities such as karupparayan and miniappan.

The wide distribution of members belonging to a clan, as well as affinal relations that are established through marriages, provide individuals with highly useful networks of kinship. For the landed, it provides a network for prospective affluent marriage alliances and hence transfer of

\textsuperscript{20}Perumal is also the deity of Naickers, who are staunch Vaishnavites.
substantial amount of wealth as dowry, procuring skilled employment, access to state machinery etc. To the landless, the kin network provides a channel for recruitment to labour. Membership to work-groups, for instance, is mostly based on kinship relations, although it is not the rule.

Within the village, clan organisation is efficiently put to use to regulate intra-caste relations. Among the gounders, for example, the rights to conduct ritual in the amman temple on various festivals are distributed among different clans. Each clan is represented by a socially important family. These families have the right to conduct the rituals assigned to the clan. Collection of the temple fund is again done using the clan organisation. This is the case among the vanniyars also. Among vanniyars, one of the clans, namely annanmar, is so large that in the local body elections members of this clan ultimately decided the results. The clan itself is divided into many kothu (bunches or groups) represented by a kothukkaarar. These kothukkaarars decide about the temple affairs, collection of temple fund etc. Clan structure is weakest among the arunthathiyar. Among them the clan has no explicit function apart from providing a structure for marriage alliances.

Agriculture continues to be the lifeline of the village. As in many parts of the Kongu region, this village too characteristically has scope for three, not clearly distinguishable types of agriculture viz. wet, dry and thottam. Agriculture is centred around a sprawling irrigation tank which lies to the west of the settlement spreading over 158 acres of land. The western part of the village, that is the lands immediately around the tank and stretching far in east and north east, is low-lying and plain with fertile black cotton soil with better irrigation facilities. In contrast to this part, the lands to the east of the road are uplands with gravelly red soil. These eastern lands are completely rainfed lands. The tank gets inundated with rain water received through three gullies from the west running down from the Kurudi hills. An outlet runs from the tank to the east and turns immediately to the south. A gully runs from the eastern uplands to this outlet canal.

Based on soil types and irrigation, agricultural lands are distinguished into three types viz., vayakadu, erankadu and sengkadu lands, correspondingly related to wet, garden and dry agriculture.

Vayakadu lands are wet-lands to the south of the tank, with black cotton soil, with the possibility of receiving tank water through canals at least for two or three months in a year. Wells in these lands are perennial with a good yield of water. The tank water is sufficient for one yield of

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21It is believed that in the ancient period a river by name kauska nathiflowered through this way along the valley called thannasppalam.
paddy. Yet, people prefer not to cultivate paddy these days. Sugarcane is the only major crop here apart from a large variety of vegetables and chilli cultivated in small plots of land. In the recent decades, the chance of obtaining canal water has greatly diminished.

A marked feature in vayakadu lands is absentee-landlordism. Many of the naicker families owning vayakadu lands do not live in the village. They live in the city or in other nearby villages and come as and when it is required. Either no one lives in the farm house or a padiyal lives with his family.

Erankadu lands are black cotton lands other than vayakadu lands. They lie to the west, north and immediately to the east and south-east of the tank. They do not get canal water. Wells are the chief source of irrigation. Many, but not all plots, have adequate water in their wells. In recent years a considerable part of these lands in each farm are kept uncultivated or rainfed for want of water. Hence there is a wide range of variation in the value of erankadu lands. On the one hand, are the lands adjoining the tank with good water supply all through the year and, on the other, are lands which are primarily rainfed. The major crops here are sugarcane, cotton, cholam and bengal gram. Some farms are exclusively coconut plantations.

A general observation regarding irrigated agriculture is that over the years, the amount of rainfall received has drastically reduced and that water table in the region has gone down. In some of the wells in vayakadu as the landowners say "water used to be right at the ground level in the past." There were days when the tank used to overflow frequently. Now the tank has water for just two or three months in a year.

Paddy was cultivated quite extensively in all vayakadu lands and some of present erankadu lands. Even seven to eight years back paddy was cultivated to a limited extent in all these lands. At least one crop of paddy per year was cultivated. Paddy has been replaced by extensive sugarcane plantation now. At present paddy is very rarely cultivated; when it is, it is primarily to clean up and rejuvenate a land under prolonged sugarcane cultivation.

Erankadu lands, slightly far from the tank, is slowly coming into extensive coconut plantation for want of water and difficulties in attracting good labour force. In some farms, sunflower and tobacco are being tried.

The eastern uplands are sengadu lands. They are rainfed, with gravelly red soil. Rain-water runs off too rapidly from these lands. The major crops cultivated are gingelly, cotton, cholam and pulses like green gram, thuvai, black gram and thattai payaru. In these lands a sort of minimal
agriculture is carried out with very little labour and capital input. Plots are left fallow periodically for recuperation. Animal husbandry continues to occupy an important place in these lands. The only difference from the way Baker has described it (Baker 1984) is that in today's context, there is no demand for draught animals, for the kavalai system has become obsolete.

Instead, in these days milch animals are grown and sold. The most common practise is to buy a female calf or a viduthi. The animal is taken care for ten or twelve months and is sold just before it gives birth. Most often a family maintains only one animal at a time. Here again no great capital investment is involved. The only major investment is that goes in for buying the animal. Once an animal is sold, a part of the money is invested to buy another animal. Cholam cultivated in the dry lands every year would be more than sufficient for an animal all through the year. Apart from dry fodder, the dry land also provides green fodder in the form of weeds and grass, for a major part of the year. Green fodder may also be available in the common lands around the tank or could be procured freely from the fields where one works. In addition, many of the households owning dry lands maintain goats and sheep as well.

Within the village, agriculture offers the bulk of paid employment. The scope for paid employment is more in vayakadu and erankadu lands than in sengkadu lands. The sort of rainfed agriculture provides a few days of work for the land owners' household alone. For a major part of the year these landowners themselves look for employment somewhere else. Nevertheless for the shorter periods during which these people are tied to their own lands, the overall demand for labour is increased in and around the village.

In sengadu agricultural activities like sowing, weeding and harvesting involves not more than ten man days of work per acre. As they are done, piece by piece, over a period of a week or so, by the members of the land owning household or their close kin, there is hardly any scope for employment for others.

In vayakadu and erankadu sugarcane is the greatest source of employment, providing work for large number of workers, almost throughout the year. The crop requires works like removing the left over root butts, loosening the soil, ploughing, planting, watering, weeding, periodical removal of shoots, harvesting and making vellam (jaggery cubes). A second crop also requires as much labour as the first one except from the work of making and planting the runners.

Bengal gram and cholam requires labour in bulk for a short period. Cotton requires labour over an extended period mainly for picking. Vegetables and other crops like chilli, cultivated in
lands with good irrigation facilities, provides good employment throughout the year. These crops are generally cultivated in small plots, thus demanding the labour of a handful, most often, that of the *padiyal* family.

Agricultural labour recruitment is done in three main forms, viz., *padiyal*, work-groups, and daily worker basis. *Padiyal*, invariably denotes a male worker, who works in a homestead on a contract for one or more years. A *padiyal* is expected to do both agricultural and domestic work, depending upon the situation. In addition to the annual payment that is made in cash, a *padiyal* may receive one or two meals per day and occasionally cloths. *Padiylas* are invariably from the vanniyar caste. Middle-aged dalit men say that when they were young they did work as a *padiyal*, but now no dalits work as *padiylas*. Typically a boy aged 13 or 14 years may starts as *padiyal*. After working for around ten years as *padiyal* he gives up this work and takes up either more lucrative agricultural work like sugarcane work or he may go in for some or other non-agricultural work.

Male as well as female workers operate as work-groups, collectively bargaining and taking up a range of agricultural work on contract. The most common work taken up by male work-groups is *aalai* work, i.e., the work of making jaggery cubes from sugarcane. These work-groups often may also take up work outside, camping in far off villages for months at a time. Female work-groups are found only among the vanniyars. These groups, usually consisting of ten to twelve members, engage themselves in number of agricultural activities like harvesting of cholam, sun flower, bengal gram and cotton, weeding, and cleaning harvested sugarcane fields. During cholam harvest more temporary groups consisting of both men and women are formed among dalits and vanniyars.

The bulk of agricultural work in and around the village is carried out through engaging work-groups. The work-groups account for the best and the most able agricultural work force. Men and women, who are physically less capable or who can not work fairly regularly for reasons like household work pressure, are engaged on a daily wage basis. In lean seasons, persons who otherwise work in a group may also work on a daily basis. The most common activity carried out through engaging daily wage workers is weeding. Wages are around rupees twenty five for females and rupees forty five for males depending upon the age of the labourer and the type of work.
Land held under tenancy is very less. Whatever lands under tenancy are either temple lands that are being held by a the tenant-family for many years together for a bare minimum rent. Or lands leased out by a person to his/her close kin. Hence this can not be considered as a form of labour recruitment as it could be seen in other parts of Tamil Nadu. However, till recently, lands belonging to brahmin households were leased in by gounder and naickers as tenancies in the most popular sense. At present the situation has changed with the lands changing hands from brahmin to non-brahmin households.

Another form of labour recruitment is exchange of labour between close kin, mostly between two married sisters or mother and her married daughter. This arrangement is found among dry land owners who own very little land. At the time of cholam harvest, for instance, the two households jointly finish the work first in one land and then in the next pooling in all the family labour available, thereby obviating the need for engaging outside labour. This work may not necessarily deter them from taking up paid work elsewhere, as work in their own lands could be done after coming back from the paid work.

A very conspicuous fact is that women take part in productive activity and paid employment as much as men do. The majority of women from landless and marginally landed households take up paid employment within and outside the village. Only among the larger landholding households hiring-in outside labour and households in which males are employed as skilled industrial labour or in government employment, the contribution of women either in the form of working on their land or taking up paid work outside is noticeably less. In large land-owning households, women's contribution is restricted to supervision of farm work, maintenance of cattle if any, and management of day to day activities in the farm. This, of course, needs further qualification: labour demand on women in such households depends further on their relation to the head of the household and age.

Yet, a significant fact is that women's earnings, particularly of married women with dependent children, without any question goes automatically into household expenses. This is just taken for granted. While men's income do also largely go into household expenses, it is not necessarily so.

Dowry as an institution prevails among all castes except the arunthathiyars. Dowry is mostly given in the form of gold ornaments, household articles, vessels and cash. Land is rarely given to a daughter as dowry, and this only if there are no sons. The transfer of wealth from a bride's family to groom's family continues long after the marriage in the form of obligatory seer (gifts) that have
to be bestowed on a married girl by her parents, maternal uncles and brothers. These obligatory seer are done on occasions like first *aadi* (a month in Tamil calendar) festival, first *deepavali* or first *pongal* after the marriage of the girl, during the first or even subsequent confinements, childbirth, going back from mother's house to husband's house with new born, tonsure, ear piercing and puberty ceremonies of the children etc.

These seers are legitimate rights of a daughter which she gets at the expense of forgoing a claim over a share of parental property. While this is the generally accepted norm, the norm does get abrogated by both brothers as well as sisters. Frequently brothers are not in a position to meet the demands of a married sister. Rarely the married sisters make a claim for a share of family property.

Among the gounders and naickers, dowry and seer are given more importance and the wealth transferred is also considerable. Among vanniyars, the amount of wealth transferred is comparatively very little, restricted to one or two *pavun* (eight grams) of gold, large size brass and or stainless vessels and other minor items.

Among the arunthathiyars there is a practice of *pariyam*, which involves the groom's family giving rupees 1000 to rupees 2000 to the bride's family. Depending on this amount, the bride is expected to 'come' with nose studs, ear rings and a pair of silver anklets. Apart from this no other wealth is necessarily transferred. The practice of seer giving prevails among arunthathiyars too. A newly married bride expects her brothers and/or parents to be invited along with her husband on secular and religious festivals that follow after marriage. On the eve of pongal, also known as *moda*, parents are supposed to buy a moda, new clothes to their newly married daughter and invite her for the festival.

Among all households married women enjoy good support from their natal family even many years after marriage. The mother's house is a place of constant support for almost all married women. Visiting the mother's home is almost a day to day affair in the village. A girl comes back to her mother's house during the late period of pregnancy and stays till the new born is three, five or seven months old. This stay may even extend longer in some cases. In case of fights between a young couple, the girl often comes back to her mother's family and would refuse to go back to her husband till they patched up. Incidents of a girl's parents or brothers beating up her husband on her repeated complaints is also not unheard of in the village. In this regard, one may argue that South

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22 *moda* is a large earthen or brass vessel used for storing water or grains.
Indian practice of marrying girls within the village provides more security.

But it is important to note that support given to a married daughter does not stop with physical or moral support alone. It extends to monetary support too. After a point, this monetary support may become so much so that it becomes a real drain on the girl's natal family. If the proportion of drain goes beyond the family's capacity or a level beyond which they do not want to give any more, it may strain the relation between this family and daughter's husband, as well as between the girl and her husband. In extreme cases, the couple may get divorced. Whatever may be the outcome - whether the girl manages to live with her husband in a bad situation or she comes back to her natal family - in the long run, the perception gains ground that having a daughter is a problem compared to having a son. A daughter who is not able to live properly with her husband may cause a drain of her parent's wealth or may bring a bad name to the family. This sort of social pressure is felt more among gounders than among the other two castes.

Among the landless labourers, a sex-wise difference could be noted in children attending middle or higher secondary school. Children in large numbers attend the two primary schools each situated in the main settlement and in Thottipalayam. But there is a sharp decline in the number of children attending middle school and higher secondary schools situated outside the village. The decline is more among girls than boys. Among the wet land holders and a few affluent vanniyars there are many girls and boys attending or who have attended colleges. This is not the case with arunthathiyars and vanniyars in general. The sex-wise differential in level of schooling is a feature of earlier generations as well.

In the local primary school while enrolment of girls of 'backward' and 'most backward' (i.e., mostly gounder and vanniyars respectively) castes are almost equal to that of respective enrolment figures for boys, among 'scheduled caste', enrolment of girls is less than 50 per cent of boys. Out of 58 drop-outs in the period June 1993-May 1996, 35 are girls and only 23 are boys. Out of 58, only four (1 male and 3 female) belong to 'backward caste' and the rest to 'most backward' and 'scheduled caste' communities.

The village is a 'village panchayat', falling under Koilpalayam (Sarkarsamakulam) panchayat union. As already noted, the village is well connected to urban centres by motorable roads. There is a Primary Health Centre (PHC) at Koilpalayam and a sub-centre in Agraharasamakulam. The functioning of the sub-centre is far from satisfactory. It is located, right next to a pigsty, at the entrance of a road running to wayakadu lands. The stretch of the street close to the sub-centre
building is also used for answering nature's call. The entire area gives a foul smell. The nurse in the sub-centre, who had a few months to retire and suffered from severe wheezing, was not able to cope with her work. Once she retired, her place was not replaced for around three months i.e. as long as the researcher was in the village.

Apart from the PHC, there is a large private hospital, a nursing home, clinics of two private allopathic and a homeopathic practitioners at Koilpalayam -- km away. Within the village and in nearby villages, there are a number of non-western and herbal religious healers.

The village has a primary school located in the main settlement along a cross-street that connects the Iyer lane and the gounder lane. The school has five teachers and 150 students on rolls. Apart from this school there is another primary school at Thottipalayam, a high school at Vellamadai (two kilometres away), a higher secondary school at Koilpalayam and an aided private higher secondary school at Vaiyampalayam (also two kilometres away). The primary school premise functions as anganwadi and Community Nutrition Work centres as well.

All the residential settlements have adequate supply of potable water with public and some individual tap connections. The public tap connections are available along the main road and along the parallel streets that run from the road. People living in sengkadu have some problem in reaching the public taps. Some of them living far from the main road have to trek close to one kilometre. The region being relatively elevated, water connections have not been provide as.

Public busses started plying from late 1950s. People have no real problem in commuting to urban centres and back for employment, to schools and to markets. In the morning tens and scores of people leaving the village to the city for employment is a routine.

The village received its first power connection in 1938. Yet, not all the houses have subscribed for power even today. It is either felt to be unnecessary or too costly. Houses located in sengadu particularly do not have power connection, reflecting...

Barring a handful of households, no household has lavatory facilities. The need for it is not felt as defecation is carried out in the vast tank bed, along the main road or in unused lands on the outskirts of the village. Drainage or disposal of waste is not a major problem. Every house having sheep, goat or cattle maintain a separate dung pit in the farm lands or along the main road right outside the main settlement. Of late, drainage has become a problem particularly in one street where the newly made gutter has got blocked and the drainage flows in the middle of the street. Incidentally, no other street has gutters or the accompanying drainage problem.
The village, Aghrasamakulam, thus has visible signs of the interplay and mediation of class, caste and gender stratification. Kinship, religion, polity, and other cultural elements evidently mediate the complex stratification. The village has undergone striking changes as a result of both endogenous and exogenous forces. These changes reflect as well as have contributed to the changes that have been taking place in the region as a whole. The historical differences that have prevailed between different regions of the present day Tamil Nadu has been maintained in agriculture, labour as well as in industrial and urban growth. As it is going to be seen in the following chapters, the stratification and regional peculiarities contributes to demographic behaviour of people and can explain how local factors influence and get influenced by broader homogenising forces - economic and political.