

Sirumalai

The *Little Hills* of Tamil Nadu, South India.



Kevan Bundell

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This is an account of the history, lives and beliefs of the people of the Sirumalai Hills in Tamil Nadu, South India. I had the privilege of living among them in the year 1980. They were kind enough to welcome me into their village, their homes and their world – and they let me take photos of them too. I dedicate this book to all my friends in Sirumalai – those who have passed, those who remain, and also to their children, many of whom were not even born in 1980 but who have nonetheless welcomed me like an old friend on subsequent visits.

*For more photos of Sirumalai and of its people please see: **www.kevanbundell.co.uk***

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Sirumalai



According to those who live there, the origin of Sirumalai – the Little Hills - is this :

Lakshmana, brother of Lord Rama, lay mortally wounded during the great battle between the armies of Rama and of Ravana, King of Lanka, and abductor of Rama's wife Sita. Lakshmana's life could only be saved by the healing herb known as *sanjeevani*. But the herb only grew on a particular mountain in the Himalayas far to the North. The Monkey God Hanuman flew to the Himalayas to collect the herb. However, when he reached the mountain he found many herbs growing there and, either because he could not identify the herb, or because he forgot which herb he was supposed to bring, he picked up the entire mountain and flew back with it to where Lakshmana lay. The herb was found and the hero's life was saved. Hanuman then lifted the mountain again and threw it back to where it had come from. But as it flew through the air a small portion broke away and fell onto the plains below. This became the Sirumalai Hills. The *sanjeevani* herb is said to still grow there, its healing powers drifting in the air. That's why snake bites are never fatal in Sirumalai - as long as you wait for forty-eight days before going down to the plains.

The story of Hanuman and the healing herb is told in the Hindu epic poem *The Ramayana* and is well known throughout India. The details concerning the origin of Sirumalai and the snake bites are rather more local. Fortunately I did not have to put the latter to the test.

Getting there

I had the privilege of living in Sirumalai, in the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu, from January to September in the year 1980. I was a twenty-five year old postgraduate student of Developmental Psychology and I had come to conduct fieldwork, studying babies. I had previously studied Social Anthropology, so while this was my first time in India I was at least slightly prepared for investigating and understanding the non-western culture and situation into which I had inserted myself. Theoretically.

Of course nothing really prepares you for the culture shock which accompanies a westerner's first visit to India. I flew in to Bombay: the mass of people in the streets, at the station, everywhere; ox carts and man carts; the noise of vehicle horns; tin buses; the assault of smells - spices, incense, flowers, exhaust fumes, sewage. The heat and humidity. Meanwhile, I was on foot, looking for a hotel, and burdened with luggage and equipment enough for year. A European-looking woman stared at me in disbelief and then gave a wry smile - as she drove past. Every hotel I tried was full. It was Eid, and half the Moslem population of India was on its way to Mecca. Eventually I found a hopeful sign on a first floor balcony. I hauled myself up a dingy staircase and was beckoned in by a group of men standing around what appeared to be a reception desk. 'No rooms', they said. 'Then why did you invite me in?' I enquired. No reply. 'Where then?' I asked, and they pointed to a dirty, once-green door on the opposite side of the landing. I knocked. The door was opened by an elderly lady in a white sari. 'Have you got a room?' 'How long?' 'Two nights.' She let me in and led me to a large room with an iron bed, a very grey mattress and a chamber pot in the corner. 'No bathroom' she said. Okay - anything was fine. I unloaded and crashed onto the bed.

The chamber pot was taken away in the morning by a servant.

In the evening I stood on the balcony with the proprietress and gazed across the lights of the city. I had been out walking that day and seen families who had made their homes at the side of the street, a litter of vegetable skins and red gobs of spit. It was disconcerting to see red streaks of fluid shooting from people's mouths (from chewing paan - betel leaves) as well as snot shot from the nose on to the pavement. Horses, oxen and people thin, with every rib showing - skin on a frame of bones. A man with no legs scooted by on a board with caster wheels. I could see the obviously smarter areas of town across the bay and at the far end of Marine Drive. 'You like Bombay?' I asked my host. 'Oh yes' she sighed, 'I love my Bombay . . . '

Actually, the thing that shocked me first and most, as I was driven in to town by taxi, was that lorries and buses were running on totally bald tyres !

Culture shock indeed.

Not everything was shocking though, some things were just odd. I happened to pass the *Times of India* building and thought I'd like to buy a copy of the newspaper - to begin to inform myself about my adopted-for-a-year country. But there was no vendor or shop to be seen, so I thought I'd ask inside if they had a copy. I was taken up three floors and past numberless desks until we reached a gentleman who kindly provided me with the day's paper.

I expect he found the transaction as odd as I did.

I had a similar experience at Victoria Terminus Railway Station when I went to see if they had received my letter and reserved a booking for me to Madurai. They had not. But the gentleman behind the relevant desk - intended especially for foreigners - was as kind and helpful as one could ever wish. Still, the best he could do was book me passage for the day after tomorrow. And even then only part of the way.

The train journey was also a cultural experience - in two parts - one positive, one challenging. The journey from Bombay to Madras was the first of many times that I have experienced the long delight of travelling by Indian train. Pre-booked, Second Class Sleeper. Open windows, open doors where you can stand and watch the sub-continent go by, ceiling fans, railway meals, and fellow travellers eager to learn all about you and to tell you all about themselves.

Just never mind the toilets.

I have also travelled first class. Sealed windows so filthy you can see nothing beyond and arctic air-conditioning.

The toilets are the same as second class.

From Bombay to Madras, a mother and her young teenage son were my compartmental companions. The son and I got on so well that I gave him my cigarette lighter - at his request. We even became correspondents - by letter in those days. I went and stayed with them in Bombay when I'd finished my work in Sirumalai. That was another culture shock. Not so much the slums below the middle class tower block in which my hosts lived - huts constructed on stilts over oily, black and evil-smelling water, all with television aerials. I had seen other slums by then. It was that the boy dragged me round Bombay teenage city amusement arcades and cola cafés - a world away from the Sirumalai village life I had just left and was already missing.

We arrived at Madras Central after an overnight journey. From there I had to make my way to Egmore Station, across town. I was accosted by an army of touts for taxis, auto-rickshaws and cycle rickshaws. I took a cycle rickshaw. A small and sinewy gentleman loaded me and my multiple luggages on to his machine. He stood on his pedal and pushed with his foot while he gripped the handlebars and pulled with his arms. We began to move. Of course I had no idea how far it was - but he *had* offered. After a while we came to the upward slope of a long bridge. He got off and pushed. I got off and walked. The whole experience of being transported by the hard labour of another human being was highly discomfiting. Only the fact that I was providing my man with employment and income provided a smidgen of moral comfort.

I have since learnt that most cycle-rickshaw *wallahs* die young as a result of excessive exertion on too little sustenance.

From Egmore I had no reservation. I travelled Third Class Unreserved in a compartment packed with non-English speaking obviously poor people, on wooden benches, overnight, for twelve hours. Whenever I had to travel subsequently, and couldn't get a reservation on the train, I went by long-distance bus. At least I then had a seat-space to myself.

It was an adventure. All of it. However, were I doing it again, back then, I would have flown at least to Madras and better still to Madurai. But I was a student on a grant and used to living cheaply. Had I known how little I would spend in a year in India, I could very reasonably have been more generous to myself.

I had also taken the cheapest flight I could find from London to Bombay. This proved to be with Syrian Arab Airways. We had to change planes in Damascus. The airport 'terminal' was a large shed - possibly a hangar - in which we had to stand for hours waiting for our onward flight. Fortunately I got talking with Mr and Mrs George George, from London and Trivandrum, Kerala. We got on so well that I spent the soon-following Christmas with them.

Meanwhile, my destination on the train was the provincial town of Dindigul and the nearby Gandhigram Trust and Rural Institute. Gandhigram is both a rural development organisation and a rural college - now university - established to provide a university level education to local young people. I had written to them and they had kindly offered to host me. I disembarked at Dindigul and once again hired a cycle rickshaw - which was all there was - to take me to Gandhigram. I was taken to the bus station, in town, and then charged (I discovered later) a fortune - probably about 50p. It was another half an hour by bus to reach Gandhigram itself - about 10p.

My hosts were Sri¹ V Padmanabhan and Sri V Krishnamurthi, life-long Gandhians and among the founders of the Trust. Mr Padmanabhan was a thin and, I felt, rather austere gentleman. But then I was young and ignorant and he had a Trust to run. He handed me over to Krishnamurthi. He was a more stout man, with a gentle and welcoming smile and a huge kindness in helping me get organised to do my work. It was Krishnamurthi who first sent me up to Sirumalai. Gandhigram sat only a couple of miles from the abrupt and towering edge of the hills and I was immediately keen to explore them. He sent me with one of the Trust's workers who knew Sirumalai well. But the villages were small. I feared I would not be able to find enough infants of the right age for my study. I rejected it. However, I also discovered that I wanted desperately to be in the hills. I had only been in Gandhigram a month or two, but even by then I knew I did not want to be in the over-crowded, monotonously horizontal plains when there were hills and forest and green nearby. I also explored the Nilgiri Hills not far away to the west, but failed to find anywhere suitable. Eventually, with the clock ticking, I chose Sirumalai.

I did not go alone. I hired an assistant, Sri T. Rajendran, a post-graduate of Gandhigram Rural Institute.² He was sent to me by Krishnamurthi. His task was to translate for me and to help me navigate the social, the cultural and the practical. He was about my age and single. He was a gem. His courteous and sensitive manner, his traditional values and behaviour, endeared him to the people. The fact that he was from elsewhere, with no family or caste connections to the people of Sirumalai, meant that he was trusted by folk. In fact he became the confidant of a number of our neighbours.³ Meanwhile, he protected me from exploitation and rescued me from - or after - cultural gaffes. He enabled us to make friends and to

¹ i.e. Mr

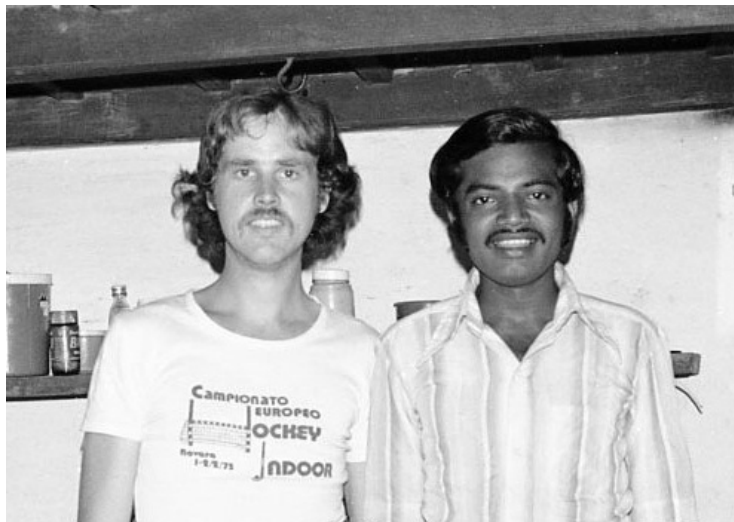
² And subsequently a Professor of Sociology at Gandhigram University. He never fails to lament that I never completed my studies - I changed direction and made a career in NGO Relief and Development work instead. In fact I owe that change in part to Gandhigram, to Sirumalai and to him. It was my first exposure to poverty and to efforts at development. I felt I had found something useful I could do. But that's another story.

³ Fortunately he had no compunction about telling me exactly what they were saying even as they spoke so that I too became privy to all kinds of interesting gossip and personal woes. Unfortunately, it would not be at all appropriate for me to repeat any of them here.

become part of the community. I believe we even became an *official* part of the community as the data gathering for the 1981 Census was carried out while we were there, and we were duly counted.

Rajendran was not only my assistant, but also, on many occasions, my informant. He shared a common culture - beliefs, customs, practices - with the people of Sirumalai and was able to explain to me in detail what was going on and the ideas behind what our friends and neighbours said and did. Of course my understanding was utterly dependent on his translations and his use of English. His translations tended to the literal - but I encouraged him in that. I wanted to know *exactly* what people had said. He also had his own - possibly unique - take on the English language which sometimes made me laugh and sometimes left me puzzled - which 'explains' one or two of the more obscure quotes in what follows. Rajendran had recognised at an early age the importance of English to getting on in life and pursued the learning of it relentlessly. He once found brief employment assisting a group of visiting Americans. He happened to report to them that someone had recently 'kicked the bucket'. He was strongly advised to study harder. One of his major motivations for working for me - apart from needing a job - was to improve his English. He was a sponge for the language and I thoroughly enjoyed teaching him. Anyway, the point is that everything I report about Sirumalai is necessarily as much a product of Rajendran's understanding and use of English as it is or was *my* understanding of what was going on.

It was a joint venture.



Geography

Sirumalai lies to the North of the ancient temple city of Madurai, to the South-east of the fortress town of Dindigul (not on the map) and to the east of the Palani Hills, in Southern Tamil Nadu.



In our nine months stay in Sirumalai I never found a map of the hills. Zig-zagging up the road from the plains was quite disorientating, and despite establishing directions to Gandhigram, Madurai and Dindigul, I still remained unaccustomedly confused about the geography of the hills as a whole. It was only after I returned to the UK and found a map on my Anthropology supervisor's office wall that I began to get my bearings. The map happened to include Sirumalai, although on no great scale. It also, curiously, happened to have been published by the US Air Force. It was obviously based on some earlier, pre-independence map as it labelled Sirumalai as being part of Ammayanayakkanur Zamindari – an administrative area which had been done away with in 1947.

Of course nowadays you can just look it up on Poodle Earth or Bling – map or satellite view.

⁴ Adapted from Wikipedia.



Roughly speaking, Sirumalai consists of a diamond shaped outer ring of hills which rise abruptly from the plain in the south, west and north while tapering away into low hills to the north-east. In the interior there is a wide bowl through which modest rivers run southwards, one to a waterfall and another to a small reservoir at the foot of the hills. The total area of the hills is about 430 square miles (1114 square kilometres). The ring and the interior hills reach an average height of around 1100m. However, a number of the peaks exceed 1350m, including the highest, known as *Vellimalai*, Silver Mountain, the abode of Shiva - one of the three major Hindu gods. There is a small temple dedicated to Shiva on its rounded top.

These hills were presumably called the Little Hills in contrast to the great chain of the Western Ghats immediately to the west, which rise to two thousand meters and more. The nearest of these - the spur of the Palani Hills - lies hardly eight miles away across the plain. Sirumalai is a discrete block of hills rising dramatically out of the surrounding plains. It obviously required a story of its origin. However, geology suggests that the story may not be altogether correct. The rocks of Sirumalai bear no relation to those of the Himalayas. Furthermore, while the common view is that the hills are related to the Western Ghats, geology shows that they are in fact the last gasp of the *Eastern Ghats*, which run down from the north on the eastern side of peninsular India.

Much of the hills was and remains Government Reserved Forest, with areas of more or less natural dry evergreen and semi-evergreen forest, and large areas of cultivation. There are coffee plantations, with mature tree cover, and banana plantations without. Coffee prefers shade; bananas prefer sun. Sirumalai is well known for its small, sweet hill bananas. The remainder of the land is cultivated by local smallholder/peasant agriculturalists, although some larger landowners have also established themselves in recent years. As well as coffee and bananas, lemons, limes, areca nut, cardamom, ginger, pomegranates, guava and jack fruit are also cultivated and sold down in markets on the plains.

There is only one road into Sirumalai. It winds up from the plains near Dindigul in a series of steep hair-pin bends offering fine views down the slopes of the hills and over the plains below. After eighteen such bends it finally levels out at approximately 1000 meters just before the village of *Annanagar*, named after a former Tamilnadu Chief Minister C N Annadurai. However, the village was also known as *Chakliarpatti* (Chakliar-Village). The *Chakliars* are a Scheduled Caste, Harijan or Dalit community - a community traditionally considered to be *untouchables*. As is also traditional, they lived in their own hamlet away from the main village. They preferred to use the name Annanagar

A quarter of a mile further on the road reaches Sirumalai Palaiyur (Old-village). This was where we stayed. The village stretches for half a mile along the road, with houses, small eating places, a warehouse and the village office on the roadside and more houses piled up on the slope above - including ours. In 1980 Palaiyur was as far as the tarmac road went. After that it was an unsurfaced, roughish ride on the bus or by lorry, or a perfectly comfortable walk. A couple of miles further on and the road reaches Sirumalai Pudur (New-village). Both Palaiyur and Pudur were/are mostly occupied by two communities - the *Pillais* and the *Naidus*. The Pillais are a traditional agriculturist community found all over Tamilnadu. The Naidus originally came from Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu-speaking country to the North of Tamil Nadu, but only a few of the oldest members of the community could still speak their original tongue. There were families of other communities too, which we'll come to below.

The rough road carries on to Agasthyapuram, a small settlement beside an Ashram of the followers of the legendary Sage Agasthya. The village also lies at the foot of the steep path up to the Shiva shrine on the summit of Vellimalai. Fortunately there is also a temple at the foot of the hill for those who cannot make it to the top.

In 1980 the unsurfaced road ended some miles further on at Thenmalai. I have not been there since to check that this is still the case and that it goes no further, but that would seem unlikely because shortly beyond Thenmalai the hills more or less plummet to the plains below. Thenmalai was a widely scattered and recent collection of huts, not houses, and a resettlement area for recently repatriated Sri Lankan Tamils. Their grandparents and great-grandparents had been sent in British times to work as labourers on the tea estates in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The Sri Lankans no longer wanted them. An agreement had been reached between the Sri Lankan and Indian governments to send them back to Tamil Nadu. Families had been given three acre plots in what had been Reserve Forest. It may have suited the former labourers in terms of geography and climate - being similar to the tea-estate hills of Sri Lanka - but it was desperately backward and remote.

All along the road there were tracks and paths departing mysteriously down to the interior or on to other parts of the hills. Many of these paths were only negotiable on foot - un-hewn rocks and steep slopes suitable only for the fit and for the scraggy ponies used to carry the

produce up from the distant fields to the road. Our landlord lived in the interior in a settlement of scattered huts and plots called Paliyankadu (Paliyan-field or forest). He would come up to Palaiyur with his pony and produce maybe once a week. We would give him our rent once a month.

Paliyankadu leads me to another community that live in the hills - the *Paliyar*. The Paliyar are a tribal or *adivasi* ('original inhabitants') people who live in and wander between Sirumalai, the Palanis, and elsewhere in the Western Ghats. They do not, as a rule, live in any particular village or place. They live here and there and sometimes. They are scattered across the hills and away from the main settlements. On later visits, Rajendran and I met some Paliyar families that have been given plots of land, or at least allowed places to construct their huts, but how far this has resulted in permanent settlement rather than traditional itinerancy was not clear.



History

Sirumalai has been occupied for millennia - first perhaps by the ancestors of the Paliyar. The evidence for ancient occupation is in the form of paintings on the walls of *rock shelters* - recesses in the cliff with a level area below which conveniently provide both shelter and a place to light a fire.

There are two such rock shelters known in Sirumalai. The first was discovered, I think, when a dam was built nearby, perhaps in the 1960s. We went to see it. The dam was not difficult to find. The rock shelter should not have been difficult to find either, but I started searching the steeper slopes above, whereas it turned out to be a little below. It was on a more gentle slope where no one coming up from the plains could possibly have missed it. But we had walked *down*, from the hills.



The second rock shelter was ‘discovered’ by Rajendran and myself in July 1984. A Paliyan⁵ we met took us to see it. We were staying with a young friend somewhere beyond Paliyankadu, in a hut of wood and thatch in the family fields. The Paliyan gentleman was also staying there, with his wife and children. They were employed as guards and *kulis* - farm labourers/daily wage earners. I asked him if he knew of any rock paintings.

He did. Nearby.

Together with a couple of lads, he led us through un-tracked forest for perhaps an hour. He carried a short sickle and as we walked he paused to cut and coil lengths of tough climbing plants for use as rope. Eventually we came to a cliff edge. We scrambled down to an ample ledge below - we didn’t need the rope - which led to the shelter. It was located at the head of a broad and forested valley which ran down to the plains perhaps three miles away - and far below.

⁵ Paliyan - singular; palayar - plural



Apart from their situations, the two shelters and their paintings are very similar. Being 'our' discovery, I paid most attention to the second. The shelter was some 30 feet long, varied between 16 and 6 feet in height and 20 to 4 feet in depth. The back sloped up some 30 to 40 degrees from the level ground. The presence of modern and un-faded Tamil letters among apparently prehistoric paintings suggested that this shelter had also been used in modern times. The remains of a fire suggested that the shelter had been used recently.



The paintings consisted of crude figures - drawn perhaps with a finger or a brush, mostly in white lime, but some in red ochre. The majority of the figures were of people, with elongated bodies, some with spears. But there were also animals - deer, dogs perhaps, a lizard - and, curiously, a ladder. The first shelter also had a figure with a bow and arrow, and many figures with strange halos in both red and white. Other paintings were impossible to interpret. Similar rock paintings elsewhere in Tamil Nadu have been dated at around 2,000 years old.



6

But when did people from the plains first come to Sirumalai ? Local history tells that the founders of Palaiyur were the *Pillais of the Seven Families*.⁷ They came to Sirumalai from Tiruchirappalli (Trichy) to escape the wrath of a powerful Moslem ruler who had been refused by a Pillai girl, Ammani; she chose to die rather than surrender herself. Presumably the families chose the hills as a safe haven. Other local Pillais from the surrounding plains, and the *Naidu* community, followed. However, precisely when they, or the other communities in the hills, arrived I have been unable to discover. It seems safe to say that people from the plains were already living in the hills by the 18th century, probably drawn by the possibility of harvesting and cultivating wild jack-fruit, lemons, limes, pomegranates, hill bananas and spices. It could be that that they were there long before. Sirumalai is noted in the earliest Tamil poetry for the rich variety of its fruits - which could mean that people from the plains were at least coming and going if not settled from ancient times.

According to one of our best friends and informants, Sri K Muthunaidu of Pudur :

“Palaiyur was established about 200 years ago and Pudur about 150 years ago. The land between was already being cultivated for coffee and other produce by Britishers. At first there were only three villages in Sirumalai - Chakliyarpatti, Palaiyur and

⁶ You can see the paintings at: www.kevanbundell.co.uk – *Rock shelter paintings - Sirumalai*

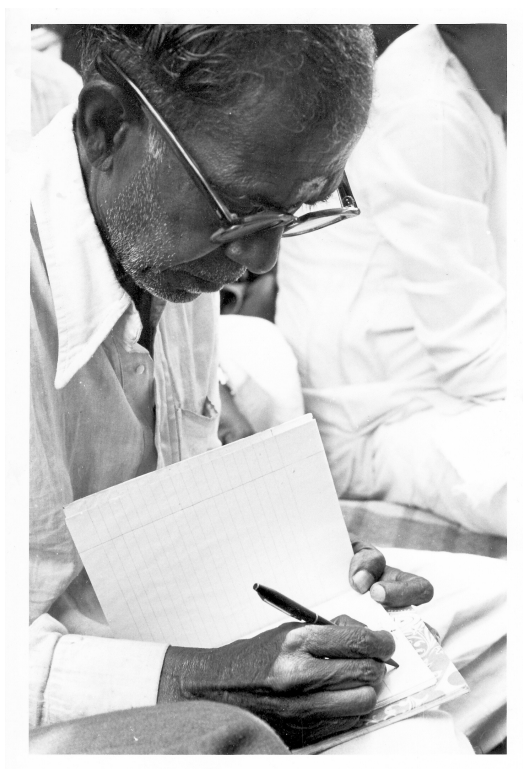
⁷ This I discovered, not from informants, but from the *Census of India 1961*, Village Survey Monographs 29, *Sirumalai*, Nambiar and Vijaya Bhanu 1967. It is my suspicion that the reason they chose Sirumalai for their monograph, out of all the thousands of villages that could have been chosen, was that they fancied a holiday in the hills. Very sensible.

Pudur. The Pillai and Naidu, and some other families, migrated to Sirumalai from the villages situated around the bottom of the hills. Under the British, some unreachable and hilly places in Sirumalai had been given to a Zamindar to manage.⁸ People were allowed to cultivate there for a small rent. Little by little the people inhabited the hilly places and brought the land under cultivation. My great-great grandfather, Perumalnadu, came from the village of Kauveripatti at the foot of the hills and settled in Pudur in the 1850s, renting land from the Zamindar.”

At this point Sri Muthunaidu’s account became positively Biblical :

“Then his [i.e. Perumalnadu’s] successors, Guruvappanaidu and his sons Muthunaidu, Perumalnadu and Ramaswamynaidu settled permanently. Afterwards, Guruvappanaidu, Siniyanaidu, Nalamanaidu and Nagamanaidu became the successors of the above Muthunaidu. Kondalswaminaidu was the successor of the above Perumalnadu. Alagarswaminaidu and Kondalswaminaidu were the successors of the above Ramaswamynaidu.”

Quite who our Muthunaidu’s father was remained a mystery.



Sri Muthunaidu was one of our very few informants who spoke English. He could also tell you what day of the week it was when you were born if you simply told him your date of birth. Neither pencil nor paper were involved. He was often referred to by others as *Durai* Naidu. Literally, *durai* means leader or chief, but it is also used, as here, as a respectful, honorific title.

⁸ A Zamindar was a local ruler, created by the Moguls, employed by the British. Most of Sirumalai came under the Ammayanayakkanur zamindari.

He continued his story :

“In 1947, at independence, the Zamindari system was abolished and the people were given *pattas* - land deeds - and became owners of the land they cultivated.”

Documentary evidence also suggests that there was a settled population - rather than itinerant Paliyar - before the start of the 19th century. The Gazetteer of the Madurai district of 1906 refers to a survey of 1815-16 which reports a population of eighty-nine people.⁹ However, this was after a ‘great fever’ had swept the hills in 1809-10 and the implication is that the population had previously been considerably more.

By the time of the 1961 Census there were 2,466 people in Sirumalai. By 1980, a count shared with me by a local health worker reported a population of 8,784. The increase was undoubtedly because between those years a tarmac road had been built. Earlier the pukka road wound only half way up the hills, but in 1964 it reached Palaiyur. This made it easier for yet more people to come to the hills. The road also made Dindigul the nearest town and market for Sirumalai produce. Previously, Sirumalai produce had been taken to Ambaturai - near Gandhigram - to the west of the hills - but now Dindigul was its market place. Some of the families in Palaiyur and Pudur had homes in Dindigul as well as in Sirumalai. There is still a path which runs from Palaiyur down to the plains in the direction of Ambathurai. I took it once. It was not too steep and I reached the foot of the hills in maybe a couple of hours - although it was then a long slog to Gandhigram - and Ambathurai was another mile further on.

Another history concerns the arrival in Sirumalai of the colonial British and other foreign folk - and also the cultivation of coffee. In 1868 Mr J H Neilson wrote a lengthy and detailed report on ‘The Madura Country’ for the Madras Government.¹⁰ Here is what he had to say about Sirumalai :

‘An attempt was once made to use it as a sanitarium: but after a while it was found to be very feverish, more so, in fact, than are most Indian hills, and consequently was abandoned forever.’

And :

‘The climate is very malarious and the only Europeans who have ever attempted to settle on the range (the American missionaries, see p. 250) were speedily compelled to quit it.’

Page 250 tells us that the American Missionaries of Madura were so often falling sick and having to take leave back at their base in Jaffna (Ceylon) that they looked for somewhere more local to recover, and settled on Sirumalai. In 1838 they built a couple of bungalows. However, ‘their occupants suffered so much from fever’ that in January 1845 they left.

There is also the coffee story :

‘Mr. William Elliott, Judge of Madura from 1838 to 1840, appears to have been the

⁹ Madras District Gazetteers, Madura, W Francis ICS, Madras, Government Press, 1906.

¹⁰ The Madura Country: a manual compiled by order of The Madras Government, J H Neilson, 1868.

first to start planting coffee on the range, and he is said to have obtained his seeds and young plants from Mysore. His estate (which is still called 'Elliottdale') eventually passed to M. Faure de Fondclair . . . and from his family to the Roman Catholic Mission. 'Vans Agnew's Estate' is another property on the range which is under European management. The coolies who work on the estates go up every day and return to their villages at night. The coffee grown is considered superior to that from the Palanis.'

Unfortunately :

‘M. Faure de Fondclair . . . (according to a report by the Collector) dealt so oppressively with the ryots [labourers] there that several of the hill villages were deserted and much land went out of cultivation. ‘

Whether or not Judge Elliot or M. de Fondclair actually stayed in Sirumalai is not clear. However, the Catholic Fathers seem to have done so and a small Catholic Church still sits beside the road at the entrance to the estate between Annanagar and Palaiyur. (Perhaps the Fathers had access to gin and tonic by the time they arrived, a well known preventative of malaria - the tonic anyway, which contains quinine).

Neilson also mentions a ‘St Mary’s’ estate, so perhaps the Roman fathers also renamed Elliotdale. In any case they presumably treated the labourers better than M. de Fonclaire because the estate still exists - although under a different name. It is now known as the PRK Estate. Sri Muthunaidu explained the history to us :

“There were lands between Palaiyur and Pudur, at the bottom of *Mosaparai Kuttu* peak which were cultivated by Roman Fathers and one British man called Hector. In 1942, during the war, the Roman Fathers sold their portion to one P.R.Karpiya Nadar of Pattiveeranpatti, and sometime before that Mr Hector also sold his land to one Nadar, who sold the same to PRK. The bungalow on the estate was built by Mr Hector.”

Apart from coffee, Sirumalai is also famous for its small hill bananas, ‘which’, says Neilson, ‘are vociferously hawked at all the neighbouring railway-stations.’ (They still are). These bananas are a traditional product of the hills and were presumably produced by local smallholders rather than by outsiders. However, in 1980 there were a number of commercial banana estates as well as smallholder production. Bananas prefer to grow in the open and large areas of forest had been cleared to accommodate them.

But back to history. The Madura Gazetteer 1906 has this to tell :

‘In 1870 Capt. E. A. Campbell, late of the Madras Army, was experimenting on these hills, on behalf of the Cotton and Silk Supply Associations, with mulberry trees and exotic cotton.’

It also reports that in the 1870s :

‘the expected needs of the extension of the South Indian Railway (or ‘Great Southern

India ' line as it was called in those days) led to increased interest in the Madura forests . . . A good deal of land was also cleared . . . on the Sirumalais for coffee gardens of an ephemeral kind which were abandoned soon after they were opened.'

Neilson also reports on the history of Sirumalai's forests :

'The Survey Account [of 1815-16] speaks with enthusiasm, also, of the timber trees 'of prodigious height and magnitude' which grew upon it in those days; but . . . its forests have been so recklessly denuded that much of the great damage done by the floods of 1877-78 (the breaching of roads, of the railway, and of 950 tanks in Melur taluk alone) was attributed by the then Collector to the utter bareness of its slopes.'

'On all these hills the growth (which is all deciduous) was cut to ribbons in the days before conservation began. In 1871 it was reported that almost every stick had been cleared as far as the base of, and for a considerable distance up, the slopes of the Sirumalais.'

This was also the case in 1980. Fire-wood collectors from the plains villages scoured the outer slopes daily taking a head-load of wood each, both for domestic use and for sale in the market.



Of course the same happened in the interior of the hills - mostly for domestic consumption by the inhabitants - but there was also removal of timber by the lorry load. Sri Muthunaidu explained :

“From 1964 the traffic convenience was begun. From then on the people started their timber business - by legal or illegal ways.”



The illegal side of the business was no secret and involved connivance and bribes to the Forest Guards and Officers.

However, when we visited in 2015, we found a noticeable increase in forest cover since 1980, particularly in the interior. This was despite some clearance for new farms. The increase was presumably at least partly the result of the efforts of the Forest Department. It was certainly the case that timber was no longer being extracted by the lorry-load. It may also have been due in part to smallholdings, many of which were only recently cleared in 1980, now having more trees, both for fruits (e.g. jack fruit) and to provide shelter for coffee. The arrival of a viral disease which afflicted bananas in the late 80s or early 90s may also have contributed. Unlike coffee, and as mentioned earlier, bananas like sunshine and their cultivation therefore led to large scale clearing of forest and scrub. Banana cultivation was now much reduced. There had also been an increase in forest cover on the Northern-most slopes of Sirumalai, where the road winds up from the plains, but the remaining outer slopes of the hills remained mostly denuded.

Sirumalai and I



The first time I went to Sirumalai was when I went for a walk. I needed to get away from the crowds in Gandhigram and the great cliffs beckoned only a couple of miles away. I walked a dusty track between small fields and goat-grazed scrub, past scattered hamlets with locals staring at this strange apparition heading apparently nowhere.



Where there are people there are tracks and at the foot of the hills I soon found one which lead upwards. It was not long before I discovered that others had recently used the track before me. A group of men stood around an old oil drum on a bonfire. They were brewing up illicit country liquor. Greetings and chuckles were exchanged - with none of us understanding a word of the other - and everyone had a look through my binoculars.¹¹

I carried on upwards. The path quickly became steeper and less well defined until I was half hill walking and half scrambling up the slopes. I soon gained height and sat to rest and look back over the plains below and across to the great wall of the Western Ghats. Suddenly there were monkeys. I think we both took each other by surprise. They were higher up the cliff and away to my right at a distance of perhaps fifty yards. They were lanky animals with silver grey fur, black faces and tails as long as their bodies. Perhaps a dozen of them. They

¹¹ My binoculars proved a great hit wherever I went, breaking the ice and causing much amazement. They also often caused users to take an involuntary step backwards when they first looked through them.

did not stay long. We observed each other for hardly half a minute and then they moved away, leaping effortlessly up the rock face.

My first wild monkeys ! Hanuman langurs I discovered later. I have seen many more since, in various parts of India, but in Sirumalai only once again, in 2015. They obviously keep to the more remote and inaccessible parts, away from people.¹²

I climbed on and found a small, shaded pool and - after checking it for crocodiles - immersed myself. I was then alarmed to discover an enormous bug-eyed monster at the end of a twig not two feet from my face. It turned out to be the empty shell of a cicada. In fact there were a number of them above and around the pool. All shells. I relaxed.

*



My second - and proper - visit to Sirumalai was with a *Sarvodaya* worker (a Gandhian development worker) from Gandhigram, known to all as ‘Sarvodaya’ Ramaswamy, a gentleman in his 40s. Sirumalai was part of his patch and Krishnamurthi had arranged for him to take me there to see if it would be suitable for my study. Ramaswamy had earlier taken me to visit Madurai. Being newly arrived, I accepted whatever odd customs occurred. Ramaswamy held my hand wherever we went. This was not customary I realised - later. I think it was a matter of proud and public possession, rather than anything else.

We went up to Sirumalai on the bus from Dindigul, hurtling round the hairpin bends with wild forest and precipices on either side. I was delighted, but anxious that the population would be too small to supply the age sample of babies I needed. We visited Palaiyur and Pudur. We called on various of his contacts and he explained that I had come there to study babies - and also, I learnt later, told them that I would bring all kinds of ‘benefits’ with me. We then walked for hours along a rock and mud road until we finally came to Thenmalai.

As mentioned earlier, Thenmalai was a settlement of scattered huts occupied by recently repatriated Tamil tea-plantation labourers from Sri Lanka. There were no *pukka* (permanent) buildings and it was unlike the usual clustered villages. The landscape felt almost desolate where scrub forest had been cleared to provide three-acre plots. There appeared to be only limited cultivation going on - some bananas, some castor oil bushes, a few limes - and stones.

¹² Confession: I actually took this photo later on and elsewhere. Nonetheless, it is so like my recollection of that first occasion that I can't resist sharing it with you here.



We made our way to one of the huts where we met Ramaswamy's friend. We were invited in. The hut was perhaps six yards long and four wide. The ridge of the roof was hardly higher than my head. The walls were made of short planks, strips of dried banana stem, and rock plastered with cow dung. The roof was thatched with straw and palm leaves. It was dark inside and the roof timbers were black and shiny with soot and oil from a fire which burned at the far end. A few cooking pots stood beside it. At the other end there were rolled up sleeping mats, sacks, thin blankets and a small box which contained a mirror, a comb and a tin of talc. Two brothers and their families lived here.

They prepared chicken for lunch. I gave some money for rice and vegetables to be bought, but I was very conscious that these two chickens - slaughtered and prepared in front of us - were the only two chickens to be seen. Later we ate rice and *sambhar* (a vegetable and dhal dish) with a smidgen or two of salted fish - although they were unrecognisable as such.

We stayed overnight in the hut, sleeping on the mats on the earth floor. Wonderful. Just the kind of adventure I was looking for. The only downside was that there was neither milk nor sugar so that I had to drink rough black coffee flavoured with *jaggery* - very unrefined brown sugar made from palm sap. It was foul. Fortunately, when I later settled in Palaiyur, both milk and cane sugar proved readily available.

The third time I went to Sirumalai was with both Ramaswamy and Rajendran and we spent enough time to discover that we could in fact just about find the necessary sample of babies. Rajendran quickly mobilised his former classmate, 'Sirumalai' Murugesan, whose family lived in Palaiyur, and accommodation was soon arranged for us - a one room house with stone walls and a tiled roof. We moved in.

The people of Palaiyur

Our house was located on the slope above the road and was reached by a steep and rocky path. It sat among a cluster of other - mostly larger - houses, including that of Murugesan's family. They arranged for a concrete water butt to be brought up from Dindigul and we arranged with a couple of the neighbouring women to bring water for us by means of large brass or plastic pots perched on their heads and on their hips. This was women's work, not something we could do for ourselves. In fact we undoubtedly lacked the carrying skills - and probably the strength. We paid of course. The 'wire man' strung a cable across from the neighbour's house and gave us light and power.

When we stepped out in the morning we were treated to a great panorama - across the rooftops, down to the interior of the hills and on to the plains and to Madurai, framed by hills to left and right. At night we could see the lights of the city - especially when we were having one of our regular power-cuts.



Our neighbours soon became our friends. Indeed, some of them practically moved in with us. They came round every evening to sit on our floor - Grandma, sons and kids. Eventually we took to locking the door when we needed to work, telling them - through the closed door - that we were busy. But mostly we enjoyed our visitors. We were a novelty and our generally open door brought friendships and acceptance - and copious amounts of information, both ethnographic and personal. As mentioned earlier, Rajendran, being an outsider became the confidant - or possibly agony-uncle - of a number of the lads of around our own age. Even some of the older people, men and women, came to tell him their life stories. Kids came round too. Some were happy just to sit while we worked - me on my notes, Rajendran on his translations. Some required a more playful response, of which Rajendran was a master. Younger women never came of course. The young woman from the house opposite would stand in her doorway and exchange banter with us, but she would rarely leave her step.

A number of our neighbours were from the *Manayam* community, including Murugesan's family who soon became our particular friends. While Murugesan had gone to Ghandigram to study and obtained a post-graduate qualification, his brothers Muthu - our age - and Ishwaran - a good bit younger - had remained in Sirumalai and were content to cultivate their family fields. The family immediately opposite were also from the Manayam community, and our landlord was their nephew. As none of our study subjects were from this community I failed to find out much about their history and origins. However, research suggests that if - as Rajendran informs me - *Manayam* = *Ambalakar*, they may originally have been either traditional village watchmen, or a criminal caste of thieves ! In Palaiyur, however, they were an accepted part of the community, although a minority.

Among our other neighbours were families from both the Pillai and the Naidu communities. The Pillai are more properly called the *Vellala Pillai*. They are a numerous community found all over Tamil Nadu. Their traditional occupation is agriculture, perhaps with a bit of shop-keeping and trading thrown in. However, in the past some Pillais also occupied more important positions - as *karnams* (Government appointed Village Accountants), for example, and even as crowners of the King.¹³ They may now be found in all walks of life - but in Sirumalai they are generally agriculturalists.

Meanwhile, according to one of Thurston's sources :

‘The Vellālans, by the effect of their ploughing (or cultivation), maintain the prayers of the Brāhmans, the strength of kings, the profits of merchants, the welfare of all. Charity, donations, the enjoyments of domestic life, and connubial happiness, homage to the gods, the Sāstras, the Vēdas, the Purānas, and all other books, truth, reputation, renown, the very being of the gods, things of good report or integrity, the good order of castes, and (manual) skill, all these things come to pass by the merit (or efficacy) of the Vellālan's plough.’

No pressure then. Mind you, none of our informants mentioned any of this. Probably they didn't know how important they were.

Vellala is the traditionally ‘proper’ name of the community it seems, and *Pillai* means ‘child’. Perhaps they were given the epithet *Pillai* by others - or by themselves - to imply that they were the true ‘sons/children of the soil’ ?¹⁴

Meanwhile, within the Vellalas there are numerous endogamous sub-groups - that is, groups which only marry among themselves, traditionally at least. Two such sub-groups live in Sirumalai. The Pillais of the Seven Families, having come from Trichy, were from the *Soliyar Vellala* sub-group. The other Pillais were *Pandiyar Vellalas*, from the surrounding Madurai District. According to the *Census of India, 1961* village survey on Sirumalai¹⁵ the descendants of the Seven Families still only married among themselves at that time. Whether that was or is still the case I have never discovered. Nor do I know the relative proportions of each group in the hills. In fact I only discovered this distinction among the Pillais from the Census, it was never mentioned to me in any of my visits to Sirumalai. This could be

¹³ *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol.6, Edgar Thurston, assisted by K. Rangachari, Government Press, Madras 1909.

¹⁴ No reference. My speculation entirely.

¹⁵ See footnote 7.

because it is no longer of importance, or, more likely, that my anthropological investigatory powers need a major upgrade.

Another thing I discovered from the Census report is that the Palaiyur *pujari* (Hindu priest) keeps a box. I mentioned earlier the story of the Pillais of the Seven Families and the girl Ammani, who chose to die rather than to surrender herself to the advances of a Muslim ruler. The *pujari* keeps a box - or casket - containing Ammani's sari and her toys. The *pujari*'s story - obtained on a later visit - was that Ammani was going to be raped so the families burnt her (willingly) on a fire. The casket used to be worshipped by all the people in his father's time, but now he simply keeps it in his house. He gives reverence to it and his wife does *puja* to it on festivals. Unfortunately he wouldn't open it for me as it was not a festival. However, he did show it to me :



On our 2009 visit we found that our *pujari* had passed away and his son had now taken over his duties. I asked him about the box. He had opened it, he said, and inside he had found old silver coins, a wedding sari and white flowers, but no toys. He had bought a new but similar box and put a new sari and flowers inside. So now he has two boxes to look after. He knew nothing of the box's origin and had never heard of any story about a girl. His sister had a different story. She said the box does indeed contain toys, a rattle for example, as well as a bamboo snacks box, a bracelet tied round with palmyra leaves and a sari. *Ammaniyammal* is their family god. She was a child who died in a fire accident. Since then the family have worshipped the box out of respect. The sari, by the way, is still looking as bright as new. Meanwhile, there is a photo in the 1961 Census report which shows the contents of the box. It does indeed seem to contain some toys.

Presumably, then, the *pujari* family belongs to the Soliyar Vellala Pillai community. However, according to the father his ancestors had come from Salem (rather than Trichy) about 300 years ago. This was the first family to come to Sirumalai and so they became priests for the other Pillai people who came after. The role of *pujari* has been inherited since those early times.

History gradually changes it seems, as details are forgotten or misremembered.

Meanwhile, according to the Gazeteer of 1906 :

‘Certain of the Valaiyans [i.e. Vellalas] who live at Ammayanayakkanur are the hereditary pujaris to the gods of the Sirumalai hills. Some of these deities are uncommon, and one of them, Papparayan, is said to be the spirit of a Brahman astrologer whose monsoon forecast was falsified by events and who, filled with a shame rare in unsuccessful weather-prophets, threw himself accordingly off a high point on the range.’

No one ever mentioned Papparayan to me, and its not clear that he actually lived in Sirumalai. Perhaps he came up from elsewhere to put an end to his embarrassment ?

The Naidus, as mentioned earlier, are originally from Andhra Pradesh. ‘Naidu’ was originally a Telugu community name, or a title - often conferred upon people in the service of the *Vijayanagar* kings - but it spread to be used as a community name throughout the South Indian states, including by non-Telugu speaking communities. However, the fact that the older Naidus in Sirumalai still remembered Telugu suggests they might have come rather more recently than the time of the Vijayanagar kingdom, which came to an end in 1646.

Pillais and Naidus in Palaiyur got on very well together as far as I could tell, being considered, mutually, of similar social status - and often being good friends. The one incident of conflict we became aware of was in Pudur soon after we arrived. Two different versions of what happened were reported to us :

The first story was that a Pillai fellow’s father, having got wind of a Naidu plot against his son, left in the morning for Dindigul to fetch the police. At around midday, a Pillai and a Naidu, both drunk, quarrelled. That night the Naidu man came with nine friends, broke in, beat up the Pillai man, and his mother and his wife, and then took the wife’s jewellery and some cash while they were about it. The police came - and took the mother to hospital in Dindigul. There was a long-standing dispute at the bottom of all this, and the village was now very tense. Pillai folk were saying that they should beat up all Naidus, not just the offenders and their relations.

Or, the second version: there was no long-standing dispute, it was purely a matter of drunkenness, abuse, a quarrel and a fight. No one went to fetch the police until after the night’s incident. Here the reports more or less coincide. The Naidu man came in the night with five brothers, three or four other relatives and one or two kulis (i.e. people who would have been in the employ of the Naidu man and therefore may have had little choice about joining in). They bound the Pillai man with a rope and dragged him out of his house. They stripped and beat his wife. A couple of people then went to Dindigul, and after consulting their community people there, reported matters to the police. Now the whole village, both Pillais and Naidus, have joined together in condemning this unnecessary and violent affair - the first such incident to have occurred in Pudur. As a senior and respected member of the village community, our friend Muthunaidu was involved in calming things down.

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Every village needs certain services and these are traditionally provided by particular communities. There was a dhobi and his wife from the *Vanna* community who, together with their donkey for transport of the clothes, provided a traditional laundry service to the villagers.



There was a goldsmith (*Asari* community) who turned British pennies I happened to give to a few friends into rings. There was a barber (*Maruthuvar* community) with a very fine and substantial barber's chair in a very small shop.



These people provided not just practical services, they also all had certain ceremonial and ritual duties to fulfil, as we shall see.

The Chakiliyars, as noted, lived outside Palaiyur in their own village, but they were also customarily required for various ceremonial functions. The traditional occupation of their community is as leather workers. This means that they are traditionally viewed as ritually 'unclean' and, like other Dalits, have therefore been consigned to the depths of the Hindu social hierarchy. Meanwhile they are in fact absolutely essential to its functioning. For a start they make and repair shoes and sandals. They also make drums - and play them. Their traditional role as drummers (hitting leather) and musicians is required by other communities for all kinds of ceremonial and ritual functions.

There was also a sweeper family from the Dalit community that lived in Palaiyur itself. They wove baskets from strips of bamboo and kept the pigs which wallowed in the roadside ditches and otherwise helped to keep the village clean and tidy. Well, tried. This was the only traditionally 'untouchable' family in the village, but a village needs a sweeper and some pigs. The man of the house was also the village watchman.



A family from Kerela ran a 'hotel' - that is, an eating establishment - not far from the bottom of the path down from our house. We took to calling it 'Omana's Hotel' because there was a delightful toddler called Omana in the family.



When Rajendran and I visited Sirumalai in 2009, more than twenty years since our last visit, we noticed that there was now a large sign above the hotel entrance saying 'Omana's Hotel'!

There was, in 1980, one other very important community in Palaiyur, a community of one - me ! At first, when I was still novel, the children would call '*Vellakaran !*' - white man - after me. I would reply '*Palipookaran !*' - brown man - back at them. Whether they understood my reply I was never sure, if only because my Tamil pronunciation was probably quite incomprehensible.

At the same time, I was part of a community of two - Rajendran and myself :

We were both outsiders. Nonetheless, as I have indicated, we were accepted - indeed welcomed - into the wider village community. Well, by most people at least. One day an old man stopped us on the road and enquired as to what I was doing in Sirumalai. Rajendran explained our purpose.

"Why doesn't he study in Dindigul ?" was the old man's parting reply.

*

Our study

The fact that we were studying babies - toddlers to be precise, from around 18 to 24 months of age - also helped us become friends with people all round the village. We would visit our selected families regularly to film or to observe as they played, or sometimes to conduct interviews. They lived in different parts of the village and there were always other women and children around - their neighbours - so that we got to know just about everyone.



It could have all gone horribly wrong - two strange *men*, one a *foreigner*, come to observe babies, to make home visits, to sit and talk to women/wives/mothers. We could have been instantly shooed away as potential child abductors - a common fear - or not been allowed to freely visit mothers and infants at home. In fact we probably ought to have been women ourselves before *even thinking* of undertaking such a study.

Fortunately that wasn't necessary. Our connection with Gandhigram, Murugesan and his family's help and welcome, and Rajendran's talent at getting on with everyone, proved enough. We soon found toddlers of the right age and willing parents. The only minor difficulty we had was with one family in Pudur who had only really agreed to participate because our friend Sri Muthunaidu had suggested to them that they must. To be fair to them, what with us living in Palaiyur, they didn't have the chance to get to know us - or to hear from others how charming we were.

The main point of the study was to observe how infants in their second year begin to participate in the norms and meanings of the culture into which they were born - not only learning language and joining in conversations but also joining in the routine activities of everyday life - using objects in a customary way, engaging in pretend play and imagining things. We filmed the infants with their mothers, or sometimes with their fathers (who didn't want to be left out), playing with a set of toys and other everyday objects. We would also sit and observe, taking notes, as the children played, or at family meal times, which provided a particularly rich opportunity both for observation and for entertainment. Most infants of this age are great performers and love to show off.



We interviewed both the parents and others about their beliefs, values, hopes in general and specifically with regard to their children - and we joined in the life of the village.

A Sadangu (puberty ceremony)



An example of our joining-in and of our acceptance by the community was that we were immediately and then regularly invited to significant social events. The first was to a *Sadangu*, or puberty ceremony. A sadangu, it was explained to me, is a ceremony to mark - and to publicly announce - the 'coming of age' of a young girl - to say that this girl is now marriageable. We attended a number of sadangus during our stay. They usually began with a band of drummers and a couple of *nadaswaram*¹⁶ players calling us all out of our houses to join the procession to where the sadangu was to be held. The band was from the Chakiliyar community, performing one of their traditional and necessary functions for the members of the other castes.



Women came round to each house beforehand, with vermillion powder and sandalwood paste which we smeared on forehead and neck. Then we joined the procession. Women and girls processed first, flowers in their hair and wearing their best saris. They carried brass or steel trays of bananas, apples, coconuts and garlands of flowers.

¹⁶ A traditional reed instrument somewhat like an oboe - but much louder.



We men followed after in our white cotton dhotis and kurtas. The venue - an open yard in one of the bigger houses usually - was covered over with a *shamiana* - a canopy - and the ground laid out with straw mats for the multitude to sit on. Banana leaves, fruits and colourful croton leaves were hung above. At the far end a cloth was hung to form a backdrop to the ceremonial event. A *pandal* was erected - a temporary, decorated pavillion supported on four banana plant stems - under which the ceremony took place. As we entered we were sprinkled with water and sandal-paste and vermilion powder was applied to our foreheads. The women placed their plates on the ground in front of where the ceremony was to take place and sat around them.



The ceremony itself was a mystery. The young girl, dressed in a fine sari, would be led out by older women. She would be garlanded and 'blessed' with sandal paste and rose water. *Appalams* (papadoms/popadoms) were placed on her head, shoulders and cupped hands, removed, circled three times round in front of her and then carried three times around her. Small vessels of paddy (uncooked, unhusked rice) and sticks from a domestic broom were held to her feet, to her middle, to her head, circled three times in front and then carried three times around. They would then lead her away, only to return again, after some time, dressed in another splendid sari. Then the same procedure all over again. After a number of these appearances and disappearances, the girl was sat on a chair, with a younger girl, or a young boy, or even both, sat beside her.



More ceremonial manoeuvres followed. During the whole procedure the band kept drumming and reeding, raising their music to a crescendo each time a significant ritual act was performed. This all took some time. We chaps chatted at the back. Our reward came after the ceremonials were finished and we were all treated to a feast, served on banana leaves as we sat on a mat.

Anyone familiar with Hindu weddings would have recognised at once that the whole affair was remarkably like a marriage ceremony. No one mentioned this to me and, even though I had attended our friend Murugesan's wedding down in Dindigul, I did not think to make the connection. Mind you, the wedding ceremony was as mysterious as the *sadangu*. I just

enjoyed them all as an incomprehensible and colourful cultural experience. After all, I was there to study babies.¹⁷

When I got back to the UK, I discovered that my anthropological university supervisor, Dr Tony Good, had already written a paper on the Sadangu which explained everything.

More or less.

The title of the paper was '*The Female Bridegroom*'.¹⁸ It confirmed that a sadanagu was indeed very much the same as a marriage ceremony (*kalyanam*), but with a young girl in the place of the groom. The main older woman is (ideally) the girl's father's brother's wife or her mother's sister; the successive saris are supplied by the mother's brothers; the 'female bridegroom' is a cross-cousin - i.e. mother's brother's daughter or father's sister's daughter.

Such are the complexities of the South Indian or *Dravidian* kinship system.

Meanwhile, the purpose of the sadangu is to ritually assert control of the pubescent girl's sexuality in the context of maintaining caste boundaries and forms the first part of a girl's passage from puberty to marriage to motherhood and, eventually, to widowhood.

To widowhood. Great.

What our friends in Sirumalai would have made of Tony's exegesis I have no idea. However, it is a well known fact amongst anthropologists that the Dravidian kinship system is second in complexity only to those of the Australian aborigines, and serves above all to define who you can marry and who you cannot, which in turn maintains both the caste and the various sub-categories thereof. In South India you can (generally) only marry a cross-cousin, or rather, someone who falls into that infinitely extended relationship category. Kinship terms distinguish between those who are marriageable and those who are not and it all gets very complicated - except to those who have been brought up with it who seem to find it all perfectly obvious. My wife for example.

On first attending a sadangu my culture-shocked concern was for the young girl. She kept her head bowed throughout, she never once smiled and she looked altogether as if she'd never been so publicly embarrassed in all her young life. But maybe not. This was her entry into womanhood, no longer a child, a step towards her becoming a wife and - above all - a mother - the most honoured status for women in Hindu culture and society. Hindu brides behave in just the same way. It is the proper way for a Hindu girl to behave in these ceremonies. Even my wife - mostly.

Tony also mentions another sadangu-related custom which comes before the actual ceremony - seclusion. When a girl first menstruates she is confined to a temporary hut constructed either outside the house, or, in Sirumalai, in the corner of an enclosed yard. In any case, she is not allowed to enter the house rooms. She is considered impure - as menstruating women customarily are - and should not be seen by men. She stays in the hut for some days and only emerges for the sadangu ceremony itself. Rajendran and I happened to visit a village down

¹⁷ As it happens, I had a Hindu wedding myself a few years later. I married an Indian, in India. The ceremony was equally incomprehensible. In any case, we had to go to the Registry Office afterwards to make it legal.

¹⁸ *The Female Bridegroom: Rituals of Puberty and marriage in South India and Sri Lanka*, Anthony Good, Social Analysis No. 11, October 1982.

on the plains where a fine 'hut' - a sort of wigwam - was there for all to see well outside of the house. Presumably the girl was sat inside - we never saw her - because, at the end of the seclusion period and before the sadangu ceremony, the hut is dismantled.

We were invited to a hut-making ceremony (*kudisai kattuthal*) in Palaiyur. In this case the girl's maternal uncles - and others - carried a pole with straw tied at one end like a besom broom and placed it in the corner of a room where a sort-of- hut had already been constructed. I think the broom and its placing were meant to be symbolic of the uncles' constructing the hut. The women brought plates of fruit plus jaggery and un-cooked rice. We were then all obliged to eat a splendid meal, and sweet *pongal* - made from a specially prepared rice, sugar, ghee, cardamoms and cashew nuts - was distributed as we departed.

A wedding

There was only one wedding in Palaiyur during our stay. It happened shortly after we arrived. It was a very small affair at an old-looking and very modest temple in the centre of the village.



The couple were from out in the fields, not from Palaiyur. Neither Pillai nor Naidu. The girl worked as a servant for one of our neighbours and the boy was the son of one his labourers. Our neighbour had arranged the marriage. The father of the boy was a widower and in need of a woman about the place.

The boy's family attended. There was no one from the girl's side. The Palaiyur *pujari* conducted the marriage. There was only room inside the temple for the *pujari* and the couple. We observed from the outside. They came out to tie the *tali* - the marriage necklace, with gold pendants - which the groom tied round the bride's neck with three knots. The couple were then led three times around the temple. Bananas and coconut were distributed and sandal paste and vermillion powder were applied to our necks and foreheads.

I took a photo. The couple stood stiff and stern. The bride then stayed exactly where she was, alone and unsmiling. The groom wandered off.

*

The next day we were eating our evening meal in Omana's Hotel as usual and learnt that the bride had gone back with her new husband to his home - and then run away. She also took with her the gold that had been provided by the groom's father, as well as her gold *tali* of course - which had also been provided by the groom's father.

It turned out she had pulled the same trick twice before - which was only discovered when the groom and his father went in search of her to where she had lived previously. The fellow who was telling Rajendran this tale also told him not to tell me lest I get a bad impression of what goes on around here. Meanwhile, Rajendran was translating for me merrily even as the fellow spoke.

The next day word was sent to me that they needed my photo. This was the only full-proof evidence of the marriage. They planned to go to court. This was worrying. I was pretty sure that, for technical reasons, my photo wouldn't have worked. (It hadn't).

In fact we heard no more about it, and when we met the groom and his father again a couple of days later, they didn't seem much bothered about the affair. Anyway, the father rather fancied getting married again himself - to a young woman of course. The next thing we heard was that our neighbour had found another girl for the boy, one who was from the same caste - which the runaway wasn't - and appropriately related.

We heard more later. It seems that the girl had originally run away from home because her father had got her elder sister pregnant. Fearing for herself, she left, and now she lived where she could, from man to man, stealing and disappearing again. However, we then heard that she was being 'kept' by some of the young men of the village in a hut out in the fields. It seems that - despite her efforts - she could not escape being someone's sexual victim. The last news we heard was that she had been got rid of 'in a clever manner' so that no trouble would follow. The 'lads' were now 'set up' (in English) with another convenience (I quote my notes).

*

A sadangu, a wedding and a scandal - all in our first couple of weeks in Palaiyur. The contrast with the long and frustrating weeks I'd spent in Ghandigram (worrying about where I'd find a place to do my work, waiting for people to show up as promised who never did, nothing to do so many days but read poetry, or scribble in my diary, or write long and lamentary letters to she who is now my wife) was wonderful ! This was what I'd come for. Real life. Real people. Strange (to me) customs to be observed and recorded.

And that was not all that happened in those first days :

A row broke out in one of our neighbours' houses. Husband and wife were slinging insults at each other at top volume. We got on with our work and pretended not to hear. The kids, meanwhile, crowded round the neighbour's door and peered in at the drama. Muthu called them away and made them do squats and stands with their hands behind their heads by way of punishment or distraction. After a minute or so of this one lad decided to make a break for it - and ran. Everyone laughed. The punishment came to an end.

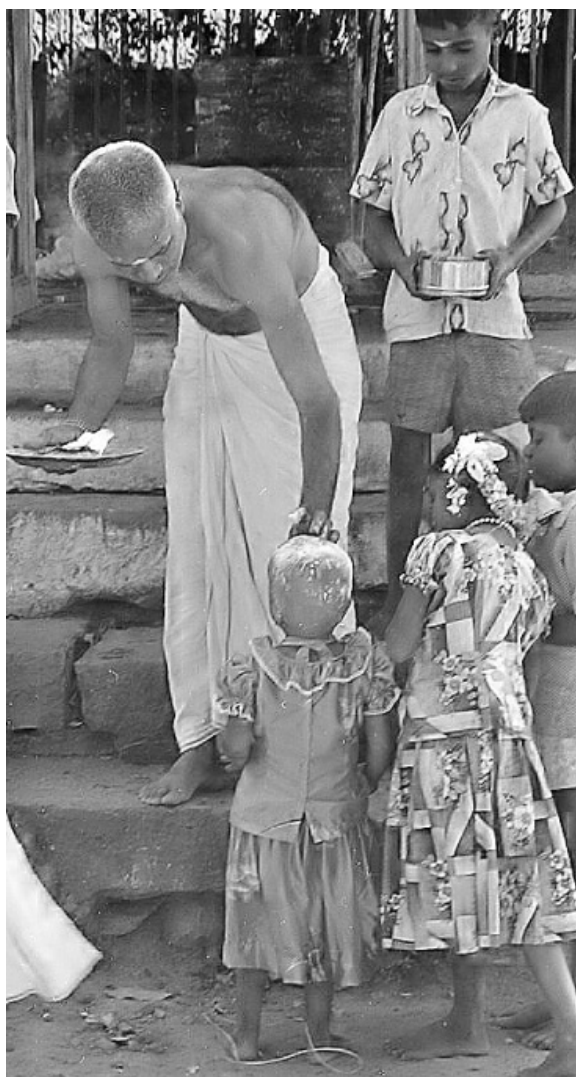
The next day Ishwaran came over to tell us that a Paliyan woman had been murdered by black magic. She was supposed to marry her cousin, but she married someone else, leaving the cousin wifeless. It was the cousin who had conducted, or arranged, the black magic in revenge, or in a spot of low dudgeon perhaps.

There was also a head-shaving ceremony - a *mudi erakuthal* - for the young daughter of our friend and neighbour Mohan.

A mudi erakuthal (head-shaving ceremony)



It is customary to conduct a head-shaving ceremony for children as an act of devotion to the god, and to bring the god's blessing on the child. We gathered in front of the small temple outside the village on the way to Pudur. The village barber carefully shaved the girl's ribboned hair with a cut-throat razor. The girl was then given a bath by her mother in the customary fashion - water was poured over her by the jug-full. You must have a bath after a haircut of any kind. Cut hair - and nail clippings - being waste products of the body, are considered *polluting*. A bath is necessary to restore *purity*. She was then dressed in a shiny blue outfit, garlanded with flowers, her head was covered in sandlepaste and her face smeared in yellow turmeric. The village pujari split some coconuts, circled an oil lamp three times round, held some bananas, and offered them all to the temple god. Lastly, he rang the temple bell.



Then we ate. A communal meal is a standard part of such ceremonies. On this occasion we ate pongal, accompanied by bits of banana and coconut from the offerings made to the god.

Head shaving is a common ritual not only for children but also for adults. Palaiyur folk usually went to the ancient Murugan Temple in Palani to have their heads shaved. They went to gain the god's blessing or in fulfilment of a vow - i.e. if you - the god - help me (materially, or to have a child or a good marriage, or to be cured of an illness) I will come to your temple and shave my hair off. It's a form of bargaining really. Meanwhile, the temple barbers charge of course for the privilege of being shorn and cash offerings are required by the temple.¹⁹

One of our friends suddenly appeared with his head shaved. When we had first met, he had noticeably long hair and looked rather like a hippy I thought. I had taken to him at once. He now explained that he had been ill with typhoid. He had spent Rs 500 to stay in the Government hospital but was still not cured. He therefore went to Palani and made a vow to Murugan - and gave a gift of money - *karnikal*. He didn't say how much, but anyway it worked and he was cured. He had vowed to have his head shaved seven times at the temple.

¹⁹ Furthermore, such temples also turn a good profit by selling on the shavings for hair extensions and wigs.

This was the sixth. He also told us that on this occasion he had placed his hands on the altar and asked for help against his many problems. His hands had moved together - a sure sign that his request had been granted.

Another informant told how he went to Palani to have his head shaved because his child was ill. He will go again sometime, but it will cost money so he can't go for a while yet. In the meantime, on his father-in-law's advice, he had made a vow to their family god instead.

One of our women informants told us of a less radical cropping of the hair known as *poomuthi uthal* - flower-hair taking. She had plaited flowers into her hair and then cut off just the end as an offering in thanks for the successful birth of her child.

Rajendran kept his hair respectable with the assistance of the village barber and his splendid chair. I somehow managed to remain at least semi-respectable.

Palaiyur - the village

As mentioned earlier, in the absence of map, I found it difficult to understand the geography of Sirumalai as a whole. I was similarly confused about the layout of Palaiyur. It gave the impression of being strung along a straight road with an s-bend kink towards one end which then carried on in the same direction to Pudur. In fact the kink turned the road significantly to the right before it left the village, when it bent again left and then headed off to Pudur. I only worked it out by walking up and over the banana field behind our house until I could see the other part of the village below.

Palaiyur begins - coming up the road from the plains and having passed Annanagar - with a clearly man-made pond, or tank, on the left-hand side. It looked like the sort of tank that might accompany a temple, but there was none. It was neglected, grown over with aquatic vegetation and the haunt of paddy birds (Indian pond herons - *Ardeola grayii*). Nonetheless, it was significant. The Vellimalai festival procession - as we will see - began there. A short distance further on and you came to, on the right, the entrance to the PRK Estate. The Roman Catholic chapel stood beside the gate and, nearby, a roadside Hindu temple. A little further on and the village proper began, with houses strung along either side of the road.

The ground sloped up on the right side and down on the left. Along the roadside there were 'hotels' - eating places - 'petty' shops - selling everyday items in very small quantities - the barber's shop, the government 'Ration shop' and people's homes.







There was also what Rajendran and I called ‘the rich man’s house’ - an enormous modern, three storey reinforced concrete structure freshly painted bright pink and light-blue - and a similar edifice beside it.



They were totally over the top and out of place in every dimension - but modern. They were a sign of changing times.

A path of rough stones went off on the left. The path descended to the village well. This was a deep open well with an electric pump-house beside it. The water was pumped from there up to a concrete tank sporting multiple taps in the middle of the village beside the road. When the pump was working the women filled their water pots from the taps. When it wasn't, they had to go down to the well and haul up the water by bucket - and then climb back up to the road with a pot on their head and another on their hip.



A little further on and the road began to widen. This was where the weekly *chandai* - market - was held, on a Friday. On the left there was the village office - a modest concrete building - and the Sirumalai Roadways *godown* (warehouse). This was a substantial, open-fronted, timber and thatch construction. The people brought their produce in from the fields loaded on small and skinny horses and deposited it in the godown before it was loaded on to the hourly bus or onto lorries and taken down to Dindigul to be sold. There was a corresponding godown-cum-bus station in Dindigul where the produce was received - small, sweet Sirumalai bananas, jack fruit and lemons mostly.



I was walking beside a bus one day as they were loading produce on to the roof. A jack fruit - a substantial item, as big as three or four rugger balls, but a good deal more solid - fell and landed on my head. There was a moment of panic from the boys on the roof, but it was only a glancing blow. We all laughed. The local bonnet macaque monkeys did something similar

to me while I was walking in the forest one day. They were chewing the jack fruit off its stalk and it fell just as I walked underneath. But they missed - just.

On the right was the steep path up to *our* house and beyond, a mixed cluster of traditional courtyard houses, thatched huts and more modern concrete buildings. Murugesan's family house was a typical courtyard house.



From the outside you were presented with a rectangle of walls, with a few small, barred windows, and tiled roofs. You entered through a single external door into a courtyard. There were rooms to left and right - one a kitchen or store room, the others sleeping rooms. The tiled roofs extended beyond the room walls so that there was a sheltered area. In many such houses the area under the extended roofs was raised above the level of the courtyard, forming a veranda. This was where cooking, eating and just sitting around chatting would take place. There were also houses without courtyards but also with a raised and roofed veranda in front of the rooms, where people would sit and chat. The village tailor sat daily on one such at work on his treadle sewing machine. The verandas gave shade from the sun during the day and, in the rainy season, kept you dry.²⁰

Most of the shops and homes in the village were modest single story - or one and a half story - buildings, a mix of thatched huts and pucca-built houses, some with tiled or tin roof and some of concrete. While some opened on to a front yard, others were crowded together down narrow alleys.

²⁰ *Veranda*, by the way, is an Indian word, except that it may have been borrowed originally from the Portuguese. But, it seems, the Portuguese may have originally borrowed it from India ! Look it up, decide for yourself.



At the head of the widening part of the road was Omana's Hotel, facing back down the way we've just come. The road continued on the right. It was narrowly cut through a ridge with a substantial but apparently abandoned old house on the left and a path leading up to another huddle of houses on the right. Exiting the cut, the road swung right and opened up to an area used by the lads as a volley-ball pitch, beside which stood the village school. There was no teacher living in the village. He had to come up from Dindigul. I discovered that this was a common situation in more remote villages and that as a result the teachers did not always attend. However, the children mostly did. The Tamil Nadu Government ran a mid-day meals scheme for primary schools and employed local people to cook and serve the meals.



This, plus an appreciation of the value of education among many Paliayur parents, meant that the school was fairly well attended. On the other hand I noted a couple of cases where boys were eager to grow up and join their fathers in cultivating the fields rather than stay at school. As for the girls, they were mostly withdrawn anyway at around puberty, when they needed to be protected and to contribute to the running of the household.

Beyond the school and behind the adjacent houses you came to the old temple where the runaway bride's wedding had taken place, set in its own open ground.



Further along the road and there were more houses on the right but on the downward slope to the left there were tall silver oaks with dark coffee bushes beneath. Finally the houses ended and a field of bananas grew on the slope above. At the same time the silver-oaks finished and you emerged into the sun with the whole of the Sirumalai interior laid out to view.



The road then took a long curve to the right and down to a perennial stream which flowed from the slopes of the forest above. The stream had been encouraged into a modest pool where the women would come to wash clothes and maybe have a bath - fully-clothed - unless the elephant was there first.

There was an elephant in Palaiyur when we first arrived, employed in the moving of timber. It had been walked up from the plains and one day it was walked down again and that was the last we saw of it. In between it was often staked out for the night in a field beside the village. An immense cauldron of rice was cooked for it daily on a wood fire. It came by one day when I was sitting on the bus and I took this portrait of it :



The road crossed the stream, curved and then climbed quickly up to the site of the temple where we had gone for the head-shaving ceremony - and on to Pudur. The temple - or rather temples and shrines - had been built on a prominence so that while you could shelter under the shade of the trees which surrounded the site you could also enjoy the view down into the interior. It was one of our favourite spots to rest for a while when walking back from Pudur, which we visited often for our work. We almost never took the bus in either direction - probably because I was after the chance to do some birdwatching along the route. The road ran between well-wooded fields and silver-oak forest most of the way. Fairy bluebirds, orioles, paradise flycatchers and racquet- tailed drongos - it was a birdwatchers' banquet.

Yen Tambi (My younger-brother) and so on

For a short while I had a companion to share my bird-watching forays. In the middle of our stay in Sirumalai my younger-brother Ivor came to visit. He arrived first in Gandhigram, noticeably armed with his portable typewriter. He has always liked to write - travelogue, poetry, songs, novels. Quite what he wrote while he was with us I have no idea. He particularly recalls needing a hat. He improvised and wore a banana leaf.

Meanwhile I was very proud to announce, as we walked round the village and met our friends, that this was indeed *yen tambi* - my younger-brother. He adjusted to our way of life at once, wearing a lungi, sitting cross-legged on our mud and cow-dung floor and eating with his hands off a banana leaf at Omana's. His presence led to frequent conversations about my family more extensively. Yes, I also have an *anna* (elder brother) and a *tangachi* (younger sister). (Strictly speaking I should have addressed Rajendran as *anna* as he was a year older than me. Many of our friends in fact did so, whatever their relative age, as a customary expression of respect). My *appa* (father) and *amma* (mother) are also there in 'London'. I even had a few photos to pass around. People were particularly impressed by my *tangachi*'s head of red hair. Had I had an elder sister she would have been my *akka*.

So far this kinship terminology is much the same as that used in the west - except there is already a distinction as to elder/younger. However, I have already mentioned that the Dravidian kinship system is complicated, and beyond the terms above, things bifurcate and multiply dreadfully. My older brother's wife - my sister in law - was my *anni*; my younger brother's wife, had he had one, would have been my *kolinthiya*. Meanwhile, instead of just aunts and uncles there are different terms for your father's brothers and sisters, older and younger, and your mother's brothers and sisters, older and younger. Most importantly you call your cross cousins - that is your father's sisters' children or your mother's brother's children - by one set of terms while you call your parallel cousins - your father's brothers' children or your mother's sisters' children - simply brother and sister. (Are you still with me?). The importance is that you can marry *cross* cousins, but you cannot marry *parallel* cousins - who are your brothers and sisters. In fact, as suggested earlier, the key feature of the system is reckoned to be this identification of those who you can and cannot marry. The next point is that there is then, logically, a *preference* for cross-cousin marriage. This doesn't mean - except occasionally - that you end up marrying your *actual* first cross cousin, but rather that you marry someone in that category. This means that your parents, who arrange it all, look for a spouse for you somewhere within your community as a whole and check that they're a classificatory cross-cousin. In practice, as long as it isn't traceable that the intended is somehow a brother/sister, it's okay.

No doubt my Anthropology supervisor, Dr Tony Good, would be horrified to read the above. It's probably wrong and certainly incomplete in many ways. However I was equally horrified to find that he had written an academic paper which began: 'The proposition underlying this paper is a simple one, namely, *that there is no such thing as the Dravidian kinship system*.'²¹ For a moment I panicked. Fortunately it turned out he was having an academic bargo with other anthropologists about the accuracy of the word *system* and not actually denying the existence of the terminology and practice I have attempted to describe.

²¹ On the Non-Existence of "Dravidian Kinship", Anthony Good, Edinburgh Papers In South Asian Studies Number 6, (1996).

Hierarchy, caste and living in a village

It must be impossible to live in a village in India without noticing the omnipresence of hierarchy and of caste. It has in fact been argued that hierarchy is the fundamental organising principle of Hindu society and culture.²² Not everyone agrees of course, but it was certainly important to understand ideas about hierarchy and caste because both were so clearly important in the lives and minds of the people of Sirumalai. It was also obvious that things like ‘appearances’, social status and public behaviour were key concerns of both individuals and families. As one of our informants told us : “ Before getting married [for example] one should think about one’s prestige, position and family opinion.”

I soon deduced that there were four main dimensions of hierarchy - age, wealth, gender and caste - and also that they all overlapped and interacted. However, when it comes to age, rather than hierarchy it is more accurate, in terms of how people actually thought, to talk of *respect*. It is axiomatic that you respect and defer to your elders. This was very obvious among the men because none of them would smoke in front of an older man. Also, when it came to deciding on anything of substance people would consult their elders : “Only after consulting our relatives and older people will we do anything” and “How can we do anything without consulting our relatives, elders and neighbours ?” Even when you’ve fallen out with your family, you will consult the elders :

“I will never consult relatives. They never listen to me - so I talk to the older people and through them seek the cooperation of relatives. They [the relatives] come to my house but don’t even drink water or eat food. We never agree. But they won’t disobey the elders. The elders will collect money from me and from my relatives and conduct puja and give holy ash to both of us to make us friends.”

Decisions on behalf of the village - whether to repair the water pump or to build a new temple, for example - were made by the older men. They were acting as a traditional community council - a *panchayat*. They would also pass judgement on and attempt to settle serious community and - as above - family quarrels. They would not be challenged, at least in public. Of course wealth and social status came in to it too. These men were, generally, better off and from the traditionally most respected families in the community.

Shortly after we arrived one of our older, male neighbours interrogated me as to my family status. He was satisfied that he had understood things well enough when I told him that my parents owned (only) half an acre of land (we had a small paddock). Rajendran expressed annoyance at this kind of easy categorisation. He needn’t have worried. My status as a *velakaran* - white person - as educated, and as a guest in the village, saved me.

One of our older friends was very annoyed one day because his son had taken and sold two brass water vessels. It was not just that he’d sold them cheaply but more that it implied that the family had no money. It was demeaning.

The bus driver, wearing a modern terry-cotton shirt, leant out of his cab window one day and remarked on the fact that Rajendran, an MA, was not wearing terry-cotton but only *khadi* (hand-woven cotton). Actually, I probably was too. This was not merely a comment on modern versus Gandhian fashion, but a matter of expectations of how an educated person

²² *Homo hierarchicus*, Louis Dumont (1970).

ought to dress. In fact Rajendran and I both dressed as most other men in the village did - in *lunghis* (a coloured cloth worn around the waist) and shirts, sometimes in trousers. For formal occasions, such as sadangus and festivals, we wore white *dhotis* (a white, cotton cloth worn around the waist) and a *kurtha* (a white, long cotton shirt). The older, higher status men wore white dhotis and kurthas most of the time, except at home.

A couple of our friends, on separate occasions, were very unhappy after they were scolded by their fathers in public - the usual things : too much playing cards and drinking with friends; too much spending money on fashionable clothes. What was worse was that the father had even scolded his sons' *friends*. The injury to self-respect was deeply felt, but respect for the father meant there was nothing to be said or done about it.

A friend told us how he had not wanted to marry the girl his father had arranged for him. He ran away to the plains to escape. After a couple of weeks he returned, hoping that things might have cooled down a bit. They had not. He was faced with a gathering of the village elders - i.e. not just people from his own community - who agreed with his father that he should marry the girl. He was obliged to concede as he would have brought shame upon his father by publically opposing him.

There were many ways to exert social control. We visited one of our mother-infant pairs for our work. Another woman, whom we also knew well, remarked that our mother never gave us coffee when we visited, unlike herself who always did. Our mother made coffee for us. We drank it awkwardly.

There were standard ways of bringing people down a peg or two when they were perceived to be getting uppity : "She talks as if she were Kanaki" - the heroine of the Tamil epic *Silapathikaram* (The tale of the Anklet), or "Are you Sita ?!" (Lord Rama's long-suffering wife). Both characters are considered the ideal of Hindu womanhood for their chastity and loyalty to their husbands. For men : "He speaks as if he were Harischendra" - a mythical King who never lied or broke a promise. There were of course plenty of other, less salubrious, words and phrases used against others - many identical in meaning to those commonly used in English.

As for caste, I had already studied the concept as an anthropology student so I was forearmed to understand - possibly - what was going on. Here's what you need to know about caste from an official point of view. First there is *varna*. According to Hindu scriptures there are four varnas - *brahmins* (priests, who may also be scholars or teachers), *kshatrias* (warriors, kings and rulers), *vaishias* (farmers and business people) and *shudras* (the labouring classes, those who provide basic and necessary services). The brahmins were made from the head of *purusha*, the cosmic man, or the universal principle; the kshatrias were made from his arms, the vaishias from his thighs and the shudras from his feet. However, the system left out another major group of people, variously known as *untouchables*, *Harijans* (*Children of God*, Gandhi's rebranding of 'untouchables') or, nowadays, *Dalits*. They were considered, it seems, not worthy of inclusion.

This brings us to purity and pollution. There is, inevitably, a huge dispute about this bi-polar concept among both anthropological and Hindu scholars. However, the jist of it is that brahmins - assuming they follow the correct practices - are pure, while untouchables - whatever they do - are utterly polluting - with the other varnas ranked in-between. In

practice, a key expression and indicator of this hierarchical ranking is who will accept food or water from whom - which I'll come back to in a moment.

Meanwhile, there is *jati*. *Jati* can be translated as *community*, or indeed as *caste*. It refers to the division of Hindu society into *endogamous* groups - that is, groups which marry only among themselves. Furthermore, each of these groups has a traditional occupation which also defines the *jati* - as a priest, a business person, an agriculturalist, for example. But also occupations such as a laundryman or *dhobi* (*Vanna caste*), a goldsmith (*Asari*), a barber (*Maruthuvar*) or a leatherworker (*Chakiliar*).

As I have mentioned, the two main communities in Palaiyur and Pudur - Pillai and Naidu - got on famously. They lived in the same streets, attended each other's family ceremonies, made decisions and settled disputes together, organised religious festivals together, ate together and they were often good friends. Both followed the same customary occupation as peasant farmers and appeared to consider themselves as of equal status. However, they never married each other. To step beyond the boundaries of your particular community through marriage was unthinkable.

Even Mahatma Gandhi, despite his advocacy on behalf of Harijans, believed at first in the continued separation of castes, although he later came round so far as to insist that if the young people in his ashram wanted to get married one or other of the couple *must* be a Harijan. He was always happy to change his mind in the light of his understanding of the greater 'truth'.

The Manayam community also took part in most of the village life, although it was noticeable that fewer people attended when they held a *sadangu* than was customarily the case with the Pillais and Naidus. It was also remarked to me that, being a minority, some of the younger men of the caste were foolish to be so 'bombastic'. On the other hand, our friend Murugesan's family were respected because of his educational qualifications, the first post-graduate in Palaiyur.

Meanwhile, the position of the Chakiliars and many of the *kulis* who worked in the fields was clear. The Chakiliars lived in a separate village. The Palaiyur 'hotels' kept separate drinking glasses for the untouchable castes for tea or coffee. They were not allowed to draw water from the village well. Other people would not take food or water from them and they were expected always to speak to others in a respectful manner and always use the formal, not familiar, form of address. This food restriction was also the case with the *dhobi* and his wife. She offered us some *vadai* (savoury rice and lentil cakes) one day when we were eating in Omana's Hotel. "Don't worry", she said, "It's not from my house, it's from here !" Her offering was in fact traditional good manners.

Rajendran was a master at such manners. We went along to a friend's house for dinner one evening. Another friend was already there, but just leaving. Rajendran invited him to eat. The friend declined and left. Two other men were also there - they'd come to collect something. Rajendran invited them to eat as well. They also declined and left.

We stayed and ate.

Caste was an accepted and valued part of people's identity. One's caste is one's extended family. The only complaints we heard about caste were when they lead to non-cooperation and conflict. As one of our female friends told us :

“Caste should be there - but with cooperation among the caste and between castes. Caste identity is a good thing. Inter-caste marriage is bad. It's good that each caste maintains its own characteristics. I don't like the ways of other castes.”

Her friend, meanwhile, who was sitting beside her, disagreed. But then she had recently married a chap from another caste.

The other thing about living in a village was that everyone knew everyone else's business. Gossip made the world go round in Palaiyur - as it does elsewhere. Even *our* business. There was much excitement when a couple of English lady friends visited and we all slept together in our little one roomed house. Rajendran was subsequently required to explain precisely who slept where. Meanwhile, each house or hut was no more than a couple or so yards from the next, and their windows were only shuttered. Disagreements might be kept quiet, but proper rows - and even beatings - were inevitably overheard by everyone in the locality. People were well aware of this and some did their best to keep things quiet: “Others shouldn't know what's going on in the house” one of our friends told us. Unfortunately he was living in a hut, from which it would have been difficult to keep any loud secrets at all.

There was also an apparently well known warning that “too much friendship will spoil your eyes”, metaphorically speaking that is. I'm not sure I understand the metaphor, but it was at least partly advising against getting too close and sharing too much information with others. This apparently applied to all kinds of relationships, even with your relatives.

As for the gossip, we were repeatedly informed and warned about the loose morals of various women around the village. Rajendran took it all to heart. “You could draw a sociometric diagram of these vamps !” he declared. To be fair, he was much admired by some of the village women - both young and older. There was also the occasion when he returned to our billet in a state of panic. He had been explicitly propositioned and shown more than he wished to see. He refused to visit there again unless I accompanied him. Fortunately I was not subjected to such things, being too different from what these ladies were used to and unable to converse - and therefore to be flirted with - in Tamil.

I was never shown anything.

The hunting party

Among our soon-made friends was the *Captain*. He hadn't been in the army – he was Captain of the Hunting Party. Rajendran and I were invited to join them one night. We set off at dusk, on foot, and walked for many miles until we were far from the village and cultivation and in the wild interior. Our quarry was wild goats or wild pigs. Two young teenage boys carried the heavy shotguns. I marvelled at how they walked burdened, barefoot and in the dark, on the rock-strewn paths without so much as a stumble or a stubbed toe. We struggled along as best we could, carrying nothing. We stopped for a smoke and I was offered a local cheroot. It looked and felt like a hard, knobbly twig. It tasted much the same. During one of our stops I suddenly felt something running up my leg - *inside* my flare-bottomed trousers.²³ I grabbed my leg with both hands, wrapping my fingers round in an attempt to stop the intruder climbing any further. It pushed its way past. Now it was making its way across my backside. At this point I quickly undid my belt and began taking my trousers off. Too late. It was already on its way back down my other leg. All this took only a few seconds and the rest of the party just stared at my strange dancing. I grabbed my other leg and persuaded the unknown beast downward until out it popped, a long and spindly lizard. It disappeared rapidly. My companions were more concerned than amused I think, but I assured them that all was well and we proceeded on our quest.

We then did a lot of sitting around very quietly while Captain and Ramu - his second-in - command - went off into the dark with their guns. We waited. At last, there was a shot. We waited some more. When Captain and Ramu finally reappeared it turned out they had shot a porcupine. Not good eating, so it was left with some nearby hut-dwelling labourers to consume.

The next day, after sleeping in late, we happened to visit another of our friends - a retired lady schoolteacher who lived in Palaiyur - and told her the amusing adventure of the lizard and my trousers. The lizard was identified as a *karatandi*²⁴, and also as very definitely *inauspicious*. When Rama - epic hero and god - had asked for a drink the *karatandi* had brought its urine to him, for which it received Rama's curse. Our friend quickly brought some milk from the kitchen and instructed me to sprinkle it on my head. It seems to have worked. I was fine.

I had quickly learnt from Rajendran that just about anything and everything was or could be *auspicious* or *inauspicious* - foretelling of good or of ill, or somehow polluting and leaving you in need of purification. It is, for example, a bad idea to keep porcupine quills in the house as they will cause family quarrels. It is, however, good to see women carrying water pots as you leave your house - as we happened to do when leaving on a hunting trip one day (another one). Unfortunately the first animal we saw was a rabbit, which is *inauspicious*. They shot nothing that day. By the way, you must not touch any spoor you find with the tip of your sickle; nor touch the dead quarry with your foot. Both are *inauspicious*. To trip on a stone or to bump into something means bad luck will follow you. However, it is easily sorted. You



²³ This was 1980.

²⁴ The Oriental Garden Lizard (*Calotes versicolor*), a generally thin a spindly creature with noticeable claws. Mine was over a foot long, at least.

just wait for a while and let the bad moment move on before you proceed. The appearance of a crow flying from left to right would be highly inauspicious. Fortunately, in 1980, there were no crows in Sirumalai as far as I noticed. Unfortunately, on our more recent visits, there were many. On the other hand, your chances were always 50/50 because a crow flying from right to left was a *good* sign. The Tamil month of Adi is inauspicious from start to finish and therefore not a time to embark on any venture or journey.

Raendran once took a flower from the hair of a little girl and gave it to me to smell. The flower was a withered wreck. After a quick sniff, I threw it in the fire. The girl protested vigorously - inauspicious. Mind you, the same girl protested even more when I once put a necklace of sea-shells round her neck. I had garlanded her. This meant I had married her. She wanted Rajendran to marry her !

It is inauspicious to travel in particular directions on particular days - *sulam*. But Rajendran assured me I need not worry. There is always a compensation or substitute action - *parikaram* - you can perform if the inauspiciousness doesn't suit you - like drinking milk, or chewing sugar cane. Mohan's mother agreed, but added "But we don't do it. Who does ?"

Incidentally, after Rama had cursed the karatandi a squirrel came and brought him a coconut full of its sweet water to drink. Rama blessed the squirrel for his kindness, which is why the common Indian squirrel has three stripes in its back - a symbol of Rama.²⁵ We had a 'pet' squirrel in the house for a couple of weeks. It was still young and not yet fully grown when we found it - or were given it by the kids - I don't recall. It would sit on my lap while we sat on the floor crossed-legged and wrote our notes. It would snuggle up to my face at night while we all slept. Then one day it was obviously not well, and in another day or two it died. The kids immediately brought us another one. But this was a wild adult and they had obviously caught it by its tail which was stripped bare of both hair and flesh. I asked them to let it go and please not to bring any more.

Apart from the matter of the auspicious and the inauspicious there was also the matter of significance. My sister had given me a plaited leather wrist band for my birthday which I wore on my left wrist – in the manner of Thor the Thunder God or Cohen the Barbarian, but less imposing. I wore a watch on my right wrist. I was frequently asked about the significance of my wristband. My answer was to hold out both arms and raise and lower them slowly in opposite directions, indicating that the band was there merely to balance the watch. Mostly, the curious were mildly amused, but they were only properly satisfied when I explained that my sister had given it to me.

²⁵ The official version of this story, by the way – from the Ramayana – makes no mention of the karatandi and his unwelcome offering. There the squirrel is blessed by Rama for helping build a causeway so that Rama's army can invade Lanka.

Possession and exorcism

An elderly gentleman whose house we passed every day on our way down to the road greeted us regularly, and we greeted him in return. He was obviously not well. He struggled to speak and his limbs and body shook so that he had great difficulty walking. He was believed - by some - to be possessed by a spirit.

This is what had happened : a 'rowdy fellow' had been murdered - not in Sirumalai but in a village down on the plains. Sometime later the gentleman's daughter-in-law - from that village and visiting her parents - was out collecting wood. At midnight. She became possessed by the spirit of the murdered rowdy fellow. When they attempted to exorcise the spirit it refused to leave her. She was therefore brought away from there to a hut in the fields in Sirumalai. Another attempt at exorcism revealed that she was possessed not only by the spirit of the rowdy fellow but by nine other spirits as well. Nonetheless, they must all have agreed to go because now she was no longer possessed. Her father-in-law was possessed instead.

The custom is for the possessed person to go with a priest to a chosen tree and then the spirits will leave to reside in the tree instead. Family members will normally keep well back, but on this occasion her father-in-law helped her walk to the tree. The spirits then left her but rather than enter the tree they possessed him.

This had all happened about a year earlier.

One morning, as we passed, the elderly gentleman's wife called us over and asked if we knew what was wrong with him and what could be done. Take him to a doctor ? We could see he was ill. So could she.

That evening there was a gathering at their house. It seems he'd been in a particularly bad way that day. He sat cross-legged in a corner of the room, shaking, holding his hands together as in prayer, whispering and uttering half-formed words which no one could understand, poking out his tongue and whimpering. His daughter sat in front of him gently chanting mantras. At the same time she held out an *erugalam* stick which she moved with her right hand while first holding a lemon in her left hand and then erugalam leaves. The white sap of the erugalam - a common shrub - is said to be poisonous and the plant is said to look at night like a ghostly figure as it nods in the wind. Her mother, who sat listening at the far end, called her away after a while.

At this point our friend Muthu decided to have a go. He sat in front of the old man and began aggressively to command and abuse the spirits, causing the old man to flinch and whimper. His wife kept pleading with Muthu to be gentle. She was repeatedly told to shut-up by the men and even the boys and eventually she retired to a back room. Muthu took ash from the house fire and spread it thickly on an up-side down flat basket, the kind used for winnowing stones out of rice before cooking. He drew various signs in the ash with his finger and raised the basket to his forehead. He told us afterwards that he had been silently addressing the gods of Sirumalai. He also told us what he had (silently) said :

Guru, guru - I sit here hoping that you will help me

*Forgive us our mistakes Sirumalai Chithargal²⁶
Velimalai, Murugan, Paliniandavare, Tenmalai Kurupiah
The God who comes leaping over the vermillion wood
The God who comes leaping over the sandlewood
If you have indeed come leaping over these woods
Come dragging ! (i.e. the spirits out).*

Then he spoke roughly to the spirits again - and the old man became agitated again, shaking and whimpering and uttering unintelligible sounds. We came away.

The next night some of the young men were discussing the event. The general opinion was sceptical of the notion that the old man was possessed and that he should be taken to a hospital. Muthu told us that the spirits had promised to keep quiet until Sunday when a priest would come.

Some time before this event Muthu had explained to us in detail how exorcisms are customarily conducted. First a priest is given an offering of Rs 1.25. This offering is called the *karnikai*. He is also provided with five *paans* (betel leaf and areca nut) and incense sticks. The priest takes ashes from a fire and spreads them on a suitable surface, the back of a winnowing basket, for example. He draws two circles in the ashes, one within the other. The inner circle is drawn in two halves, like a pair of brackets. On the outside of the outer circle he writes numbers, using only 1 to 8 but excluding 3. These numbers represent different gods who are thus invoked. The priest then holds the basket and ash to his forehead and chants various mantras and asks the spirits to speak, to say who they are and what they want in order to agree to go. At some point the priest pinches the ash in the centre of the circle between thumb and forefinger. If it remains standing the spirit will speak. If not another priest must be found. If the spirits agree to go they will be given what they ask for. Exactly what sort of things they might require Muthu did not say and I apparently failed to ask. The priest and the possessed individual, followed by the family, then go outside into the yard, onto the veranda or into the street.

At this point Muthu provided three different versions of what might happen next. On the one hand the priest might take a broken piece of clay pot (*oodu*) in his closed hand and ask the spirit what it is he's holding. After some guesses the spirit will say 'oodu' - which also means *run*. The priest will repeat it : 'Oodu/run !' and the spirit will depart. Alternatively the priest might take five stones and ask the spirit which one of the stones is he, the priest, thinking of. If the spirit gets it wrong they will try it again (If the spirit continues to get it wrong they will conclude that the person is just pretending and is not actually possessed). Once identified, the priest puts the stone on the person's head who then walks or runs off, followed by the others, in search of a tree. Meanwhile, during the interrogation, the priest has tied knots in the possessed's hair, one for each of the spirits identified. Once a tree is selected, the priest cuts off each knot and nails it to the tree. He then smears blood from the leg of a freshly killed chicken onto each nail. Finally he scatters some cooked rice and Bengal gram (lentils) at the foot of the tree and they all go home, leaving the spirits in the tree.

Muthu's third version involved placing three one-paisa coins in a row on the ground in front of the house, followed by a broom, a *chappal* (sandal) and a pot of cow dung. The line of

²⁶ Actually a holy man or sage.

the items points away from the house. The possessed person then steps across each of the items until they come to the pot. The priest takes all the items and puts them in the pot which he then circles three times round above the person's head. The priest then takes the pot to a cross roads and breaks it on the ground. The possessed individual has remained standing where they were. Now a stone pestle is placed in front of the person, and five erugalam leaves in a line pointing away. They step over each of them. A pot of water is then poured over their head - a symbolic bath - and they are now allowed to enter the house again, where they must immediately change their clothes.

As any anthropologist will tell you, what informants *say* goes on may be quite different from what actually happens. For example, the likelihood of the daughter-in-law- going out to collect firewood at midnight is nil. Maybe she went at midday - an equally inauspicious time - or perhaps she just stepped out to take some wood from the woodpile ?

It's also often a task and a half to write coherent notes from a leaping-about verbal telling of things. However, Muthu took a great interest in matters of spirit possession and exorcism and was keen to tell us all about it. He was also keen on possession not merely by a spirit - which is bad - but by a god. Personally, himself, I mean, which is good of course. But more of that later.

Mr Francis, in his 1906 Gazetteer of the Madura District, has this to say about possession by spirits, or, as he prefers, devils :

‘Devils are unusually numerous. Sometimes they haunt land and render it unlucky, and such fields . . . are unsaleable. Generally, however, they take up their abode in a woman. Women thus possessed may be seen at the great temple at Madura every Navaratri [festival], waiting for release. There are many professional exorcists, who are often the pujaris at the local goddess' shrine. Their methods have a family resemblance. At dead of night they question the evil spirit and ask him who he is, why he has come there and what he wants to induce him to go away. He answers through the mouth of the woman, who works herself up into a frenzy and throws herself about wildly. If he will not answer, the woman is whipped with the rattan which the exorcist carries, or with a bunch of margosa twigs. When he replies, his requests for offerings of certain kinds are complied with. When he is satisfied and agrees to leave, a stone is placed on the woman's head and she is let go and dashes off into the darkness. The place at which the stone drops to the ground is supposed to be the place where the evil spirit is content to remain, and to keep him there a lock of the woman's hair is nailed with an iron nail (Madura devils, like those of other parts, dislike iron) to the nearest tree.’

There was a case of possession of a woman by spirits while we were in Palaiyur.

A young couple from the plains, un-related to anyone in Sirumalai, had recently moved to Palaiyur. I gathered that they had made their own match - a ‘love marriage’ - which was maybe why they had come to Sirumalai - to get away from home and disapproving families. The husband set himself up as a doctor. He wasn't *actually* a doctor - but his father was. He therefore knew a bit about doctoring and had a stethoscope, a syringe and a supply of basic medicines. Mind you, he was also ready to advise that a patient should go to the hospital in Dindigul when their condition was beyond him. He was welcomed because access to any

kind of doctor was difficult in Palaiyur. Meanwhile, his wife was welcomed by the women, her neighbours - I observed - as a new friend to talk to. They became our friends too.

Rajendran and I returned from a few days away to find that while we'd been gone 'Mrs Doctor', as we called her, had been possessed by a spirit. Two spirits in fact. The story was this : before she got married she had watched the dead body of a man being carried to a funeral. She had been menstruating at that time and was therefore impure and vulnerable. She should not have watched. Sometime later she became possessed by the spirit of the dead man - and then by the spirit of her stepmother who had come to defend her. Now she had gone to visit her family and had walked by the graveyard. When she got back to Palaiyur she began to laugh and stare and say strange things. She then lay down and no one could wake her. An exorcist was called to interrogate the spirits. He cut a lock of her hair for each of them because they said they would leave the next day. But next day they wouldn't go. Some young people fetched a drum and began to interrogate the spirits again, but the older people said that because she was pregnant this was not a good idea. (That is, a tough and noisy interrogation would not be appropriate). She was taken instead to a lady exorcist in Dindigul who got the spirits under control. Whether or not she also got them to leave was not clear to me, but Mrs Doctor was now back in Palaiyur and back to her usual self and we heard no more about it.

However, there was another bit to this story which was most revealing. As Muthu's account explained, spirits are asked what they want to get them to agree to leave, and these demands are then granted. Mrs Doctor apparently asked to wear a lungi, to smoke a *beedi* (a rolled tobacco leaf) and to drink some liquor. These are standard requests by possessed women. They are also all customarily men's behaviours in which, in normal circumstances, a woman could not possibly engage. Meanwhile, my informants agreed with Mr Francis that it is most commonly women that become possessed, and added that it is most often *recently married* women.

I concluded from the case of our elderly neighbour that the exorcism served as a culturally understood way not only of winding him up but also of trying to calm him down from his distressed - possessed - state. However, in his case, the origin of the distress was clearly a physical and mental illness. In the case of Mrs Doctor, and perhaps of most other possessed women, the origin of the distress - or, rather, *stress* - appeared to be social/cultural and interpersonal.

Mrs Doctor had not only had a love marriage, but also a cross-caste marriage. She had left her parents, her home, her community and moved to a new village - and now she was pregnant. In fact most young women have a similar experience - except for the love marriage bit - only sometimes worse. They usually have to join a new family, often in a new village, and under the authority of a mother-in-law. Who wouldn't be stressed ? The newly married woman (girl) has just been transferred from the authority of her father to the authority of her husband - and mother-in-law. Being possessed by a spirit is a culturally acceptable means of temporarily escaping from this overwhelming stress.

The fact that these young and recently married women customarily ask to do things they are not normally, as women, allowed to do, also suggests another level of psycho-cultural goings-on. A girl/woman is, throughout her life, under the authority of a man. Her behaviour is closely prescribed and controlled, and clearly constrained in comparison with that of a boy/man from an early age. Being possessed is an opportunity to try out all those things

you've never been allowed to do, to take on the behaviours- the role - the authority - of a man.

Temporarily.

*

My lady neighbours in particular were much concerned for me when I went for an evening walk in the coffee estate forest above our cluster of houses. They were afraid that I would meet a spirit among the trees and become possessed. They also viewed the adjacent fields - in which they may have worked all day - as dangerous after dark and would hardly step outside at night for fear of spirits.

Of course there were also good social reasons why stepping out alone after dark might not be such a good idea . . .

Spirits were often put to use as threats to misbehaving children, as well as other similar creatures: devils, demons, ghosts, the dead, evil spirits from a nearby tree, a local version of vampires, *Thotiyanaicher* community people, who are said to perform puja in the graveyard at night. They would also refer to recently possessed women, dogs or cats which might bite, and, for some unknown reason, elephants. Some of our neighbours even threatened their children with *me* !

My first response to what I learnt of spirit possession and exorcism was to find it all wonderfully strange and fascinating - although the treatment of the old man was not at all kind or appropriate. With further reflection I was struck by the similarities of belief and practice between Sirumalai and my own European culture.

Belief in possession by devils or evil spirits is familiar and has a long history in Europe, as does the practice of exorcism. There is also exhortation to drive out demons "with prayer and contempt"²⁷, just like Muthu's mantras and rough treatment of the old man. In Muthu's third account, the priest takes the pot (with the spirit within it) to a cross roads. In European culture a cross roads is traditionally the place to bury executed criminals and suicides, with the idea that this prevents their spirits rising from the dead as ghosts or as the un-dead.

The association of trees and spirits is widespread across the world, though the spirits are as often benign as evil. In India certain trees are associated with particular goddesses and their shrines are often found at the base of the tree. However : 'St Ouen, writing in the 17th century, cautioned shepherds and others never to let their flocks pass a hollow tree, because by some means or other the Devil was sure to have taken possession of them.'²⁸

As quoted above, 'Madura devils, like those of other parts, dislike iron' says Mr Francis. This was also the case in Europe :

²⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exorcism>

²⁸ *Plant Lore, Legends, and Lyrics : Embracing the Myths, Traditions, Superstitions, and folklore of the Plant Kingdom*, Richard Folkard, S. Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1884

‘ “Cold iron” is historically believed to repel, contain, or harm ghosts, fairies, witches, and other malevolent supernatural creatures. This belief continued into later superstitions in a number of forms:

- Nailing an iron horseshoe to a door was said to repel evil spirits or later, to bring good luck.
- Surrounding a cemetery with an iron fence was thought to contain the souls of the dead.
- Burying an iron knife under the entrance to one’s home was alleged to keep witches from entering.’²⁹

There’s also the matter of cats. Our landlord told us how he was once returning home with his horse when he stopped to give the horse a drink at a nearby house. As he did so a cat jumped across the path, from east to west, then back again from west to east. Each time he heard a ringing sound. It was a devil, said the house owner (cunningly putting our landlord off from calling again).

I forgot to ask if the cat was black.³⁰

²⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_in_folklore

³⁰ Rajendran now corrects me by clarifying that a cat crossing from *left to right* is a good omen, whereas from *right to left* is a bad omen – i.e. inauspicious. How *east* and *west* came into it he has no idea.

Funerals, death and afterwards

You may have noticed earlier a reference to a graveyard. Everyone knows, of course, that Hindus cremate their dead and then scatter the ashes in one or other holy river. Therefore they don't need graveyards. In fact both burial and cremation are common and widespread in South India. Palaiyur sported three graveyards, Pudur at least one, and Ananagar also had its own. There were headstones of greater or lesser dimensions, but also what appeared to be mausoleums - substantial temple-like structures of stone.



There was also a fairly recent and quite separate grave consisting of a wide platform in its own compound lit with neon tube-lights in each corner. It 'belonged' to a local 'big man' in the village who had died not long before we arrived.



Interestingly, although the Pillai and Naidu communities joined in each other's head-shaving ceremonies, sadangus and weddings, and conducted religious festivals together, they kept separate graveyards. The third Palaiyur graveyard had been established by the Manayam community but was now used by other non-Pillai/Naidu communities as well.

Our informants went into some detail about how things were done when someone died. The body is laid out and there is wailing and lamentation ‘performed’ by older women. ‘Performed’ is fair I think because it is a ritual part of the process - and professional mourners may even be hired for the purpose. There are standard mourning songs for different types of persons - children, those who die after marriage, husbands, and so on. However, each type is adjusted to include particular personal details of the deceased. We collected a number of examples of these standard forms recounted for us at our request. Here’s one for when a wife has lost her husband. It is, I admit, my attempt to make sense of Rajendran’s somewhat literal translation :

*The banana leaf has sap.
At the corner of the street there are no relatives;
At the corner of the street the Bengali soldier keeps guard.
When you walk in the street carrying a coconut leaf,
The leaf has sap, but you have no one.
When you sit in the car and round the corner, death comes.
When you sit upon the vermillion seat and the car rounds the corner, death comes.
Yes, you went to Madurai and touched the holy lamp;
Yes, you touched the lamp, but this has caused the death of your King.*

Many of the examples we were given had a Bengali soldier keeping guard on the corner. I have no idea why. The car is probably not a motor vehicle but a carriage or chariot, like a temple ‘car’ in which the temple god is paraded round the streets. I don’t know why touching the lamp should lead to the husband’s death - unless it means that *despite* your prayers and your puja your husband has died.

Here’s how a funeral itself was described to us by our informants. The body (often in a sitting position) is carried by procession from the deceased’s house on a bier. The procession is led by Dalit drummers and includes an officiating priest. The procession stops at the *idukadu* - put-it field - and the body is circled three times round. The women then return to the house. Only the men are allowed to proceed beyond this point. They carry on to the *sudukadu* - burn field and the cemetery - where the body is *buried*. After the burial they return to the house and wash their feet. They then step across a pestle laid in front of the threshold of the house and enter. They pray in front of an oil lamp placed where the body had previously been laid. This is to ensure that the departed soul ‘will become a god’.

Rajendran described to me how things were done in his village on the plains. If someone is known to be dying, relatives and close friends will come and try to pour milk (a purifying liquid - the product of the cow) into the mouth of the dying person. If it is not taken, it means the dying person is not pleased with the pourer. They will then try and get them to say why, what’s wrong, or at least to look at them. Once the person has died everyone comes to mourn. (We witnessed a mourning in Sirumalai. Women gathered around the body and wailed loudly. One of our neighbours, an elderly lady, proved particularly good at this wailing). Even the dead person’s enemies will come to a funeral. They may not attend a sadangu or a wedding, but a funeral should not be missed. The mourners gather around the body and say all the good things they remember about the deceased.

Before the procession a fire is lit in a mud pot outside the house. This is carried by the eldest son of the deceased and is left on the grave after the burial. Other sons carry mud pots of water. At the *idukadu* not only is the bier carried three times round, but the sons follow and

another male relative - or the barber - makes holes in the pots with a sickle, allowing the water to pour out on to the ground. The women then return to the house.

The grave is dug aligned north-south. The body is lowered into the grave and placed in a sitting position facing north and against the south wall where a hollow has been made to support the torso. The eldest son then throws three handfuls of soil into the grave, after which it is filled in by Dalits - who also had dug the grave and formed the drum band which led the funeral procession.³¹ If a person dies on a Saturday there is a belief that the dead person will ask for or seek another body to occupy - i.e. they will wish to possess someone. In this case a small chicken is hung beneath the bier and then either buried live with the body or given to the Dalits to take away. The funeral party then return to the house, wash their feet and step over a pestle laid at the threshold. They remain only briefly in the house and then leave - but do not say goodbye.

Other accounts of Hindu funerals make it clear that an important aspect of the rituals is to keep the spirit of the deceased safely where they have been put. When the funeral party leaves the graveyard they do not look back³². Stepping over the pestle is presumably a final barrier to the deceased's spirit returning to their home. Another is to purify the deceased's relatives after the pollution of death. The sons have their heads shaved and take a special bath before the funeral and it is followed some days later by a specific purification ritual, including more head shaving - they have carried the dead body and been at the graveyard. Women never go on to the sudukadu. They should not witness the burial or cremation (as young Mrs Doctor did), presumably because they are especially susceptible to being possessed.

*

We met a friend one day with his head newly shaved. His father had died some time ago. Since then, he said, everything had gone wrong. His father had died at an inauspicious time according to the Almanac. Therefore - to please his wife - he had now had his head shaved again and had taken gingelly (sesame) seeds - which are very small - and put them in 108 cloth bags, each tied with a knot. This would remove the bad luck.

If it didn't, he could always tie 1008 knots instead.

*

A form of funeral ceremony may also be conducted after a cross-caste elopement and marriage. The families may - separately I presume - conduct a *kalukarumathi* - a stone-funeral ceremony. A priest is engaged and performs the same rituals as in a regular funeral. However, a stone is used to represent the errant son or daughter, who is now 'dead' to their family and community. The couple are banned from the village and not allowed to use the well or to attend functions. No one will give them embers to light their cooking fire. Neem tree leaves are hung across the doorway of the parents' house by the elders of the village to remind them that they must not allow their child to enter.

³¹ Both graves and drums - being made with cow hide - are polluting. Hence the need for dalits to perform these roles or functions.

³² For example : Indian Death Rituals: The Enactment Of Ambivalence. Submitted by Gillian Evison, Wolfson College, Oxford, for the Degree of D.Phil, in Trinity term 1989.

*

Clearly our fellow villagers were majorly concerned about the danger or threat of their dead relatives - or others - coming back to haunt or possess them. But they were also concerned *for* the deceased I think - that they should be untroubled in death. On a shelf in the house, photos of dead relatives accompanied the pictures of the gods. Both men and women prayed to them each day, seeking the blessings of both.

After death, then, you might become an unwelcome spirit forever envying and trying to possess a body of the living. But there were also other, more formal, beliefs about death and beyond. As everybody knows, Hindus believe in *reincarnation*. You will be born again. Who or what you will be reincarnated as depends on your correct or incorrect behaviour in your present life. That is, how far you have acted according to, or fulfilled, your *dharma*, your proper role in your particular born-into position in society and the universe.³³ Ultimately the goal is to achieve *moksha*, to escape *samsara* - the cycle of death and rebirth - and become one with *brahman* - the one, the great soul, the universal principle - on a plane of reality beyond heaven and even beyond the multiplicity of gods.

Our friends though had slightly different ideas :

There are only seven rebirths and then judgement before God - or indeed all the Gods. Then you go either to *sorgam* - heaven - or to *narakam* - hell. If to sorgam, you will dwell in happiness and will be waited upon by celestial servants. If you go to narakam you will suffer according to your sins. Devils will torture you forever. You may be bitten by snakes, your body crushed in a press, burnt in a kiln, pricked with sharp points or cut into pieces.

When, back at Gandhigram, I told Krishnamurti - a Tamil Brahmin - about this seven births idea he was as amazed as I had been. He had never heard of it.

At first glance it might appear to be a conflation of traditional Hindu beliefs with those of Islam or Christianity. The judgement aspect may be so, but the concepts of heaven and hell are also to be found in the ancient Hindu texts, and are much as described by our friends. However, the difference is that according to conventional Hindu belief, sojourn in heaven or hell is only temporary. The soul remains there only as long as is deserved, according to the store of merit or of sin built up by their behaviour in their past life, and indeed, lives. Once their time is up, they are once again reborn.

So why seven rebirths ? Perhaps the thought of having to go on forever suffering *life* is too much to bear. Seven rebirths might at least provide some psychological relief - with the hope that you might - somehow - at last - make it to heaven.

I speculate of course.

³³ There really is no equivalent of *dharma* in English, although the Victorians might have found the concept more familiar :

The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate
He made them high or lowly
And ordered their estate.

“All things bright and beautiful”, the now omitted verse 3.

Dharma, moksha, karma

I have already mentioned both dharma and moksha, but there is more to say about how our friends thought about these concepts, as well the notion of *karma*. Most Hindu religious concepts such as these are notoriously expansive and therefore hard to pin down. They have developed over thousands of years and hundreds of texts. However, the description of dharma above is practical if not exhaustive. Dharma is right-acting according to your particular place in both society and the universe. Moksha means - mostly - to escape from samsara, the cycle of births and deaths, which is achieved by adherence to dharma over successive lives. Karma literally refers to deeds or actions, but more importantly it means the store - or the accumulated balance of merit and demerit - arising from one's behaviour over many lifetimes.

In a nutshell : doing dharma accumulates positive karma and leads - hopefully - to moksha.

On the other hand, "You must do some dharma, otherwise your children and grandchildren will suffer" explained one of our informants. Dharma means good actions, charity, telling the truth, helping others whatever your condition, patiently and quietly suffering difficulties, tortures, oppression and wrong. It means leaving it to God. "You just do your work, your duty, and God will see to the results".

Another informant, more mainstream, explained that dharma means doing good for the poor and so gaining virtue; or making a vow to god to help others - providing food for a thousand people, for example - although they don't necessarily all have to be poor. However, all these things are done for one's own family's sake, to improve *their* condition. It's also good to give food to sanyasis (holy men). Meanwhile, if you are in trouble, dharma - all the good things you have done before - will help you. For example, a money lender lends and gets high interest from the poor. He therefore gets sin - *adharmā*. To get rid of it he must do dharma - good things - for the poor. Dharma helps to save you in times of trouble. It gets rid of sins.

These explications seem to suggest that it's all mechanical rather than moral, but another informant told us specifically that it is the *attitude* with which help is given that defines whether it is dharma - or not. For example, if a rich man gives to the poor just to show off his wealth, it is not dharma. Mind you, this did seem to be a minority view.

One of our friends, in confessional mode, told Rajendran, "You see I won't get good moksha after death. I'll be sent to hell." By moksha he meant "good things after death". Another explained that moksha is gained by all your good actions and means "getting joined to god" after death. Or : if someone dies at an auspicious time (according to the Almanac), then "he will have a good moksha and a place in heaven. Moksha and heaven are the same thing." It is common to scold someone by saying "You will never get good moksha."

On karma - or in colloquial Tamil, *karmum* - people will say "Oh it's my karmum" - the sins of previous lives, your fate or destiny. If you see someone you don't like first thing in the morning, for example, that's your karmum. Karmum is also selfish behaviour : "That fellow does karmum" - he does bad things, he's a cheat, he won't help anyone, even his relatives, he refuses to give money to beggars, he is useless to society.

Mohan, a good friend and neighbour, summed it all up pithily : “Those who do dharma will go to heaven; those who do karma will go to hell.”

However, others said :

“There is no rebirth.”

“There’s no life after. How can you know your soul is born again ?”

Meanwhile a lady informant said : “You can do what you like as long as people don’t come to know” - but she may well have been thinking more about everyday behaviour than her immortal soul . . .

Gods and festivals



Gods and the worship of gods were ubiquitous in both the personal and the social lives of the people of Sirumalai, as we've already seen. But there was more. As noted, every house or hut had a puja corner or shelf with pinned-up pictures of the gods, and usually with photos of deceased parents or grandparents as well. Mohan's mother told us how on the anniversary of their parents and grandparents death they would prepare the food that the deceased had particularly liked and, having performed puja, eat it as a family. They would also buy a dhoti or sari, as appropriate, and give it to the departed's son or daughter. She also told us that it is customary to prepare balls of rice and vegetable containing a particular green leaf and carry them in a winnowing basket to where the crows will come and eat them. If the crows appear at once it is a good sign, if not it is because the soul of the deceased is troubled. However, as I mentioned earlier, there were no crows in Sirumalai in 1980 so presumably this was a custom observed only in the breach. (Crows fighting in front of house, by the way, foretell a death).

People performed brief puja to the gods and to their ancestors every morning. They also fasted - no lunch, but puja and a meal in the late afternoon - once a month on Kartikai (Murugan) day, as listed in the Almanac. We went to Omana's Hotel for our evening meal one day and the place was full of the smell and smoke of incense. Omana's Grandmother was praying in front of a picture of *Velankanni* - otherwise known as the Virgin Mary. They were a Hindu family, but any holy character can be assimilated. Velankanni is a town on the Tamil Nadu coast and the location of one of India's biggest Catholic pilgrimage centres, the *Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health*. The church's founding is officially attributed to three miracles: the appearance of Mary and Jesus to a sleepy shepherd boy; the curing of a lame buttermilk vendor; and the survival of Portuguese sailors after a violent storm at sea. This last was the story we were told by our friends in Sirumalai.



There were also many small *shrines* throughout the village, at its boundaries and along the road between the villages. Shrines to Shiva/Vellimalai, Murugan and Ganesha were the most common, but there were many others. There were shrines to the *Sapta Kannimar* - the seven virgins, deities who protect the family and the village - as well as ensuring a bountiful harvest. A lorry we were travelling in stopped at a Sapta Kannimar shrine so that brief puja could be performed.

One family had built a small shrine to a saint³⁴ they believed had helped them. One day we heard the father of the house scolding his family for failing to give offerings whenever they passed the shrine. It seems he had just had to pay a bribe in order to get his regular business done and believed that it was the failure to give offerings that was the cause of it. Mind you, he also suggested that a bribe was inevitable as the situation was “beyond the power of this god.”

Just as you can become possessed by a spirit, so you can be possessed by a god. Our landlord became possessed by *Karuppuswamy*. This was at a festival we attended in Paliyankadu. He stood in front of the crowd, waving his arms and ranting that the god knew who had stolen the horse and the thief would receive his due punishment. Our friend Muthu, as mentioned earlier, was keen on possession and one evening he was kind enough to get possessed at our request. He sat crossed legged - as did we all, there were no chairs - closed his eyes and breathed deeply - and still more deeply, until spittle was flying. He knew that I had an Indian girlfriend back in the UK. The god had a message for me. I would return to London and find myself a nice London girl. Which god it was I failed to ask. Anyway, as it turned out, he/she was mistaken.

³⁴ Possibly St Francis, or St John the Baptist.

Karuppuswamy

The temple we gathered at with Mohan's family for his daughter's head-shaving ceremony was a temple of Vellimalai - that is, of the Lord Shiva. There may also have been a shrine to his son Lord Murugan (as featured in Palani). In any case, we were told that the temple had been built perhaps fifty years before to save having to trek and climb to the Vellimalai shrine above Agasthiyapuram.

Beside the main temple was a small shrine to Karuppuswamy. He was there to guard the main temple. Karuppuswamy is a 'vigorous' god, and those who become possessed by him behave in a vigorous manner (like our landlord). He seems to be something of a *local* god - only found in Southern Tamil Nadu and not featuring in the main Hindu texts. He is often to be found guarding a more senior god, but sometimes also on his own, guarding the village. The Madura Gazeteer of 1906 has this to say about him :

'The non-Brahmanical deities, as elsewhere, are legion, and space only permits of a reference to one or two of them which are especially characteristic of the district.

Of all of them, Karuppan is the most prominent . . . He is said to have been brought from the north and worship to him is done with the face turned in that direction . . . He delights in the sacrifice of goats and sheep . . . He has many different names : if his image be large, he will be called Periya (big) Karuppan; if small, Chinna (little) Karuppan; if his dwelling is in the piece of open ground belonging to the village, he will be known as Mandai Karuppan. In the Melur taluk his shrine may usually be known by the hundreds of iron chains hung outside it which have been presented to the god in performance of vows. The deity is said to be fond of bedecking himself with chains, and these offerings are usually suspended from a kind of horizontal bar, made of two tall stone uprights supporting a slab of stone placed horizontally upon the top of them. He is also fond of presents of clubs and swords . . . Bells are also welcome, and in Tirumangalam taluk these are often hung in numbers to the trees round his abode. On the Palni side, Karuppan's shrine is often furnished with little swings for the delectation of the god, and with terracotta elephants, horses and other animals so that he may be able to perambulate the village at night to see that all is well.'

The festival we attended in Paliyankadu involved the sacrifice of goats to Karuppuswamy. Four black, male goats had been bought the year before and were now led to his shrine with garlands of flowers around their necks. The band drummed and reeded loudly. Sandle-paste water was then sprinkled on the head and back of the first goat :



We paused. After some seconds the unsuspecting animal shook itself to get rid of the water. That was the sign.



One person held it still and another chopped its head off with one - vigorous - stroke of a sickle. Very red arterial blood pumped from the severed neck. The head lay on the ground with a look of horrified astonishment on its face. The mouth twitched and the eyes stared. As if this was not indignity enough, they then broke off the right front leg and put it in the

head's mouth. The other three goats were sacrificed in the same way - except that the second goat was sickled by a learner who didn't quite chop all the way through with his first blow. There had to be another. And the last goat moved as the sickle came down and the blade cut obliquely through the skull leaving the lower jaw still attached to the body. This made shoving its leg into its mouth problematic.

The heads-with-legs were offered to the god. The rest went into a splendid *kolumbu* - meat curry - on which we all feasted afterwards.



As it happened, a couple of lady friends from the UK were visiting at this time and came with us to Paliyankadu. One of them was a vegetarian and averted her gaze.

Afterwards, we all spent some time paddling in the stream that runs through Paliyankadu. The village boys went swimming:



Kamundiswami

Not long after we arrived in Sirumalai the *Kamundiswami* festival took place. On the 28th of February a temporary temple was erected. It consisted of a three tier construction of mud and was built in the widest part of the road - near the water tank, leaving room for the bus and lorries to get by. Four decorated silver-oak posts were erected around it, with a canopy of banana leaves to form a *pandal*. A sugarcane pole - or possibly three such canes tied together - was inserted vertically into the mud tiers. The sugarcane is a variety known as *pekarumpu*, and is specially grown for this purpose. The pole represents Kamundiswami. Dalit drummers played for a while that evening, but no one gathered. On the 29th senior men from the village came round collecting money for the celebrations. They did not call on Rajendran and me. On each of the following evenings the dalit drummers turned out after dark for half an hour or so's bash. Apparently they were accompanied by someone senior man narrating or singing the story of Kamundiswami. During the day the kids hung round the temple for something to do.

The festival itself took place on the 7th of March. It began, an hour or two after dark, with the band going round to each street and the women coming out with plates of various fruits, coconuts, flowers and a burning rice-flour oil lamp. (The rice-flour is mixed with sugar and rolled into a ball. A depression is made in the top and oil and a cotton wick inserted). Down on the road fire crackers were strung across which fizzled and sparked for half a minute before exploding with a fearsome bang. We all plugged our ears but I still flinched involuntarily at the report.

The plates of goodies - offerings to the god - were placed on saris laid on the ground in front of the temporary temple. Some women formed a circle around the temple and then young men and women as well as children and babies lay, or were laid, among the offerings, each with a rice-flour lamp on their stomach or chest. This was done either as a request for aid from the god or to give thanks for assistance already given. One of our neighbour's sons was laid there because he had a hollow in his chest which the family wanted to disappear.



At 10.30 pm the village priest took some burning embers in a dish in his right hand and circled it in front of the god, with his left hand's fingers touching his right elbow. This is a customary gesture when offering, or receiving. He then disappeared off behind the water tank and into the darkness with an attendant and carrying a flaming dish. This was, I was told, to do puja at a small shrine to *Vinayagar* - i.e. Ganesha, the elephant headed son of Lord Shiva. I hadn't even noticed there was such a shrine behind the water tank. Once returned, he began to split the coconuts which had been brought as offerings. They were passed to him one by one by a senior male member of the village while a boy rang a small bell. As this was going on a brass pot was passed round with a slot in the top to put money in and, I noticed, a *padlocked* plug in the bottom. I presume I was good enough to put some money in. When all the coconuts had been split - which took a while - further puja was performed briefly and then the priest took ash and put it on the foreheads of the still prone devotees.

That was the end of part one.

Part two was to commence at five o'clock next morning. To fill the hours in-between a group of travelling players had been engaged. They performed a traditional drama of the ancient days and of kings and queens which was also something of a morality play. It was all a bit late for me and I went to bed with the arrangement that one of our neighbours would wake me at five. They didn't, so it was not until after six that I got up and went down to rejoin the proceedings. I found the young men and boys dancing and drumming around the smouldering remains of the temporary temple :



Kamundiswami had been burnt.

I had to leave the village that day so I did not see part three. However, it apparently involved the resurrection of Kamundiswami. I was told afterwards how the whole festival was officially supposed to go. It was not an entirely coherent account (but I was already used to that). At five (or three) days after the new moon the festival begins with the building of the

temporary temple and the placing of the sugar-cane pole representing Kamundiswami. Fourteen days later (or possibly seven days later), when there is a full moon, a small temple to Shiva is built at a distance of 15 feet from the Kamundiswami temple. The next morning, early, Kamundiswami is burnt, along with the flowers, etc, given as offerings. Ashes from the fire are taken to a nearby temple tank and are thrown into the water by the priest at 6 a.m. - before sunrise - from the east. At 6 o'clock the following evening Kamundiswami is resurrected. The ashes are wetted and made into a pyramid. A decorated bow and arrow and pictures of Kamundiswami (and his wife - see below) are placed on the top of the pyramid by the priest who then conducts further puja. The proceedings end with a preparation of beans, bengal gram, puffed rice and sugar together with bananas - a symbol of happiness - and sweet pongal being distributed to the assembled multitude. This is *prasadam*, food which has been prepared for and offered to the god, after which everyone has a share of it to eat.

There is of course a story behind all these complicated, ceremonial goings-on. According to my notes, the idea is that Shiva shoots and kills Kamundiswami with a bow and arrow - or possibly with his third eye. This is the burning. However, Kamundiswami doesn't realise he's been shot until sunrise - which is why his ashes have to be in the water by 6am, while it's still dark. Presumably it is Shiva who then brings him back to life - resurrects him.

The times were obviously important as they were stuck to. The number of days between the building of the temporary temple and the day of the festival were not. By my calculations we had eight days between, certainly not fourteen. Whether or not the moon was full I failed to notice. Not only that, but Pudur had its Kamundiswami festival the day *after* Palaiyur - because the Dalit band couldn't be in two places at once.

But who is Kamundiswami ? He is also known as *Manmadhan* - beautiful man. His wife's name is *Rathi*. They are customarily invoked in response to outbursts of vanity from either men or women - "Don't talk as if you were Manmadhan !" or " You think that you're Rathi?!"

It turns out that Manmadhan - and therefore Kamundiswami - is the god *Kamadeva* - the deity of sexual love, desire and attraction. He carries a bow made of sugar-cane surrounded by bees. His arrows are made of flowers. According to the *Puranas*, he was asked by the other gods to take on the dangerous task of waking Lord Shiva from his meditations so that Shiva could then consort with his wife, *Parvati*, so that she could give birth to a son, who could then defeat *Tarakasura*, who was on the verge of destroying heaven, and who could only be defeated by a son of Shiva. I summarise of course. Manmadhan slipped past Shiva's guard and created a pleasant Spring atmosphere around the meditating god. It didn't work. When he fired a flower-arrow of love (or lust) at Shiva the god awoke in fury, opened his third eye and instantly incinerated the intruder on the spot. However, Parvati - who was I think in on the plot - implored Shiva to restore Manmadhan to life again. He did so, but in a *bodiless* form so that now the spirit of sexual love was disseminated across the universe. Unfortunately this meant that humanity was now afflicted with lust. So was Shiva presumably, because he then agreed to 'consort' with Parvati, and their son *Kartikeya* (or Murugan) was born. Kartikeya defeated Tarakasura and heaven was saved.

The sugar cane pole, then, represents Kamundiswami and his bow; the flower offerings his arrow. The bow and arrow on the pyramid of ash represent his bow and arrow. The burning represents his incineration by Shiva's third eye. The date in the calendar, the time of year,

makes this, apparently, a Spring festival. This not only picks up on Manmadhan's attempted Springy trick with Shiva, but also Spring as a time of fecundity and new growth. Mind you, Spring is much less Springy in South India than it is in more northern parts, being no more than a brief interlude between winter - the best time to grow veg and paddy (rice) - and the ravaging heat of Summer when grass and herbs dry and most trees lose their leaves.

Before the festival, on the 4th of March, while we were waiting for the festival proper to begin, some young men and boys came round the houses with a brass vessel collecting 'rain food'. There had been no rain for months. The collectors, I was informed, would now go and pray to 'the rain god' and then share the food together. I was also informed that it would rain around the time of the Kamundiswami festival anyway. This is a good example, I think, of how it was often impossible to work out exactly what's going on. Was the collecting of food and all a customary part of the festival, or did the lads just fancy a free meal ?

The Vellimalai festival

The *Vellimalai* festival was by far the biggest and most elaborate of those that took place in Sirumalai during our stay. Its main proceedings took place at the top of the Vellimalai hill above Agasthiyapuram. Our friend Sri Muthnaidu told us the following story :

“Three hundred years ago a man from the Gowda caste discovered the hills and climbed to the top of Vellimalai. There he found water in a natural but small and muddy pond. It is told that his knife, which was made of iron, was turned into gold as he washed it in the water. Astonished, he decided that this was a wonderful deed of god - Vellimalai (Shiva) - and from that time on that first man and his successors began to worship the peak as a god. ”

He also told us that there had already been a shrine to Ganesha (Shiva's son) at that time, but someone stole the idol. In 1965 the people of Pudur set up shrines to Siva, Ganesha and Murugan both at the top and - for convenience - at the bottom of the hill.

The first Vellimalai festival, we discovered, had only been conducted the year before we arrived in Sirumalai. The idea had been suggested by the elders of Palaiyur “in order to let people know that there is a Vellimalai temple in Sirumalai”, and it was all agreed at a village meeting. (Previously, people used to climb the peak at any time to do puja). The village decided to hold the new festival on the 30th of March because this was also the Murugan festival day at the temple in Palani. ³⁵

The festival proper began the night before with the band playing down on the road. But preparations had begun some *weeks* before. Those men (it was nearly all men) who wished to become a *swami* (a devotee) and seek blessings from the god had been abstaining from smoking and drinking - and possibly other things besides. Most had also been constructing portable shrines to carry on their shoulders. They had each taken turn to prepare food - pongal, tamarind rice - and, after offering it to the god, share it with their fellows. When it was our neighbour's turn to provide the food, he brought us some the following morning.

On the 29th March evening the swamis gathered at the call of the band and the village crier. However, I must have been knackered because, according to my diary, I went to bed. I had understood that nothing would happen until the next morning. What apparently did happen is that the swamis followed the band and the village *pujari* along to the old tank at the beginning of the village and left their portable shrines there overnight.

Things began again, near the tank, at six the next morning. I made it down in time for the first stop, at a small temple near the entrance to the PRK coffee estate, not far from the estate's roadside Roman Catholic chapel. The swamis and their portable shrines were magnificent. They wore orange dhotis - traditional garb for holy men - and thick garlands of flowers hung round their necks. They had strips of orange cloth around their right wrists twisted to contain turmeric and a 25 paise coin - to be offered to the god. They wore necklaces of sandalwood beads - *pasimalai* (bead-garlands). In fact they each looked altogether like a pucca holy man. The portable shrines were bamboo framed arches - *kavadi* -

³⁵ This would also save them having to travel I note.

Meanwhile, according to the 1961 Census report – see footnote 7 – the Vellimalai festival was celebrated once in ten years, and ‘on a grand scale’ - for fifteen days. However, this was at the temple on the way to Pudur because access to the ‘legendary forest clad temple is next to impossible’.

decorated with brightly coloured cloth and paper and plumes of peacock feathers attached on either side. Pictures of the gods and small bottles of rose-water were tied on here and there.



However, not every swami carried an arch, some held flower-decorated brass or stainless steel pots of milk - *paal kodam* - on their heads.



One paal kodam carrier was a young woman - the only female swami. At some point we asked her why she had decided to become a *swami*. It was for the blessing of a child. She had suffered a number of miscarriages and had no child. We also asked the men the same question. One was seeking a male child, his first having been a girl. Some had been sick and had prayed to the god and had been cured. Now they were thanking him as they had vowed. One was doing it because his mother was seriously ill. Another was seeking the god's help to stop drinking. A sixteen year old boy had become a swami because his father had become possessed by a spirit three days before last year's festival, and had promised that his son would carry a milk pot. Others said they had become *swamis* for 'general blessings'.

At this first stop near PRK's gates - the first of many at each temple or shrine along the way - priestly puja was performed and both the swamis and others - including me - were smeared with sandal paste and holy ash on our foreheads and arms. The swamis formed two lines behind the band and the priest and the rest of us followed on behind or walked beside them. A couple of young men – one of them dressed as a woman - danced wildly beside the band, and the procession began to make its way through the village.





At this point I was called to come and meet the Roman Catholic Priest. He was up from Dindigul for the day. I had noticed people standing at the chapel as we passed holding crosses made from folded blades of coconut leaf. I wondered at first whether these were intended as a statement, or perhaps a defence, against the pagan gathering passing by, but then a gentleman I knew from the estate reminded me that not only was it a Sunday that day, but it was also *Palm Sunday*. I relaxed.

I found the priest sat round the back of the chapel - out of sight. He was dressed in his priestly vestments; I was dressed in my finest white cotton *dhoti* and *kurtha* and smeared with holy ash and sandal paste. "I have come here to study Hinduism" I said. "For that" he replied "you need only read the Abbé Dubois" (an early Catholic missionary who famously wrote *Hindu manners, customs and ceremonies*). "Ah yes" I said "That is even now a standard source". "They will explain things differently in every place" he said - meaning it was all superstitious nonsense. "Yes, that's why I've come here to watch and ask them." I took my leave, politely I hope, and hurried to catch up with the procession.

Not only were there young men dancing wildly, but one of the swamis very soon became possessed by the god. He had to be supported by his fellows as he staggered around in a drunken manner. They had harsh words with him too, as if this was not the proper thing. He continued, so did the dancers, and others joined in the dancing. Others also became possessed. At the next temple stop the pujari himself became possessed, but rather than dancing about wildly he simply stood still and stared into space. What had they done wrong? they asked. Why didn't he speak? After a short while he recovered. But he never actually gave a reply.³⁶

³⁶ When I asked him about it afterwards he said he didn't remember anything, it was a blessing from the god, giving his words power - Only he didn't say anything.

There had been a general complaint in the air that people were behaving badly - without constraint, in contrast to the previous year. People were *wanting* to be possessed and were expressing disappointment that the feeling wasn't coming. One swami was encouraged by his friends with whistles and dancing to get him going - but it was a joke. They were all laughing too. Older people in particular were voicing their disapproval - but, said Rajendran, they too would be disappointed if there were no possessions.



The procession proceeded slowly to Pudur, stopping off at the Shiva temple en route for further puja-ing. When we reached Pudur, we picked up another swami - the star of the show. He carried an arch, but he also pulled a small, decorated chariot - a miniature version of a temple 'car' - a shrine on wheels. He pulled the chariot by means of two lengths of rope each with a hook at the end embedded in his back. (People gave him a hand with the pulling on occasions, especially over the bumpy bits). He also sported a small iron spear pierced through his tongue. No blood had run either from his back or from his tongue when pierced, indicating the blessing of the god. Later on - after the event was over and the spear had been removed from his tongue - we attempted to ask him what his reason was for becoming a swami. However, he seemed to be in a somewhat grumpy mood and walked off without telling.

As we passed the houses and huts en route to Vellimalai we were offered hot milk and fruit juice. The lady of each house we passed poured water on the feet of the swamis. Progress

was slow. Dancing continued and even I succumbed to the encouragement to have a go - briefly. I was rewarded, as others were, by having one rupee notes pinned to my kurtha.

Eventually, we came to the Vellimalai hill. It loomed just beyond the small settlement of Agastyapuram. Its sides were steep and rocky and its top was gently rounded. It rose singularly above its immediate surroundings, which is no doubt what caused it to be chosen as a place of worship in the first place – knives turning to gold notwithstanding.



Fortunately the weather was cloudy and so the long, slow, zig-zag climb of its slopes was, on the whole, comfortable. I looked back down on the ascending procession and thought, its like a traditional Village Outing - which of course it was – except that they were here for the serious business of worshipping the god rather than merely to have a picnic.



At the top we found a collection of simple platform shrines constructed it seemed from stones and cement - one to Vellimalai (Shiva) and, at a small distance, one to each of his two sons, Murugan and Vinayagar or Ganesha. A small tree grew at the rear of the Vellimalai shrine and a pandal of poles and woven mats had been erected over it, hung with banana leaves and flower garlands. A sound system had also been set up to blare distorted, devotional music to the multitude.



The swamis had got there before us and were sat on the ground with their arches and milk pots in front of one or other of the sons' shrines. The pujari - a rather thin fellow - had been joined by a rotund *Brahmin* priest brought up from Dindigul especially. Between them, with assistance from some of the older men, they performed puja at each shrine in turn, coming to the Vellimalai shrine last. They gave offerings from each of the swamis one by one, pouring oils, milk, fruit juices, rose water, honey, powders, and other things besides, over the black stone idols of the sons and over the *lingam* stone representing Vellimalai. Then they poured the milk from the swami's milk pots or the rose water from the little bottles that had been attached to the arches.



All this pouring took a couple of hours. Most people sat around and watched. Some wandered off to enjoy the view - including me. From the top of Vellimalai I could see the whole of Sirumalai, and beyond. I could also see how denuded of trees the hills were, mostly scrub and cultivated fields. I also noticed as soon as I walked away that I was being followed. As usual. I circled round the peak until I arrived back at where I'd started, by which time only about half of my original followers were still with me. Were they enjoying the view, or were they puzzling at the presence of this circumambulating *vellakaran* - white-man - dressed in local garb and armed with camera and binoculars ?



The festival over, we descended. As we reached the foot of the hill it began to rain. We made the long trek back to Palaiyur getting wet.

*

When we visited in 2009 we learnt that people no longer went to the top of the hill for the annual Vellimalai festival. They just went to the temple on the way to Pudur. They had been doing this for the last ten years or so. It seems that the attempt to put Sirumalai's Vellimalai hill shrine on the map had run out of steam. In any case, people didn't want to have to walk and climb so far. They had upgraded the temple on the way to Pudur instead. They had built a more substantial structure around the Shiva lingam - the symbol of Shiva/Vellimalai.

(They had also destroyed a special spot where one could sit beside semi-ancient structures under the shade of trees and look out across the interior of the hills and on to the plains below. However, they obviously had different and indeed more important requirements for a temple than I did).

*

Religious festivals, the making of vows and the giving of offerings to the gods were all clearly matters of serious business to the people of Sirumalai, for which they were motivated to expend both effort and expense. However, not everyone was entirely convinced :

“There is only one God,” an elderly neighbour told us. “What he looks like, who knows ? The multitude of gods is nonsense. God created the world and men and then lets them get on with it, to be either good or bad. You should be good because you will pay for being bad. All the rituals and vows are nonsense. God makes no bargains. They are simply done for men. In any case, they do all these public things but then carry on as usual. However, most people believe in it and in order that things should run smoothly I take part as necessary. I know how the rituals should be done and I therefore guide the younger people. A friend asked me to perform puja for him, so I did it, not for God but for the satisfaction of my friend. I do private puja in the morning before the pictures of the gods, for my own relief, telling my problems and asking for aid. That’s good, but the public stuff is nonsense.”

*



Witchcraft/sorcery and the evil eye

As far as I know neither Rajendran nor I, during our stay in Sirumalai, were ever the victims of either witchcraft/sorcery or the evil eye - although it *was* once suggested to me that I was a victim of the latter. One of our acquaintances - a woman - remarked that I was becoming lean. This is a common way of expressing friendly concern for someone whether it's true or not. I replied that our friend the ex schoolteacher is always saying I'm getting fat ! "Ah," said our acquaintance, "she's put the evil eye on you ! She did the same to me." I kept quiet, but looking at her, a big woman, it clearly hadn't worked on her, and I was equally certain it hadn't worked on me.

The evil eye is an *involuntary* power or influence and is the result of *jealousy or envy*. It is usually, I'm afraid, attributed to women. By women too. A childless woman is the most suspect. They will inevitably envy you if you have a child while they don't - although the danger is usually to the child, not to the mother. A childless woman is either not invited, or at least will not actively participate in, an infant's naming ceremony. But it may be envy by anyone of anything - your possessions, your animals, your wealth, your good-looks. The danger of becoming a victim is omnipresent and difficult to avoid. A new neighbour moved in next door to Rajendran's family house. She expressed surprise to Rajendran's mother that she should have such an old son - a compliment one would have thought. But by evening a boil had come up on his mother's leg - a 'seeing boil', the result of the evil eye.

Fortunately, there are methods of defence. Our neighbours' children were painted with black dots on their faces to make them look unattractive, or disfigured, before being allowed to join in the Kamundiswamy festival. The same may be done to babies to ward off the danger of the eye. A friend, whose mother had previously lost a number of infants, had been given a wretched name to help protect him. His parents, he said, had also put a hook in his nose and then gone round a number of villages down on the plains and become beggars in the market places.³⁷ Rajendran's mother's boil had been dealt with by his father chanting an appropriate mantra.

A newly built house, before the house-blessing ceremony, is hung with a full-size human effigy made from cloth and straw stuffing. It is painted all over with black dots - to ward off the evil eye. Meanwhile, every cultivated field has clay pots painted with spots perched upside-down on poles - although I am not clear whether this was to ward off envy of land and crops or to prevent evil spirits invading.

³⁷ His father later told us they had, as was traditional, begged food from five houses in the village.



Omana's grandmother told her grandson off for picking the vegetables out of the sambhar. "Don't show your evil-eye !" he replied. If other children behave better than yours do it may be because of the evil eye. Burn some camphor tablets - *soodam* - on the threshold to prevent it. If a child is ill or has pimples it may be because of the evil-eye.

To be rid of the evil eye : place three cotton wicks in a pot of water and circle the pot three times round the child's head. Take the pot to a three-way junction and pour away the water. Or, circle soodam three times round. Or, collect straw from the thatch of three huts, add salt, mustard seeds and chillies. Circle three times round and throw it all on to the cooking fire. If the chillies burst you can smell it and the evil eye is gone. This last remedy was known to everyone. (Of course chillies burst and smell if thrown in the fire).

Not surprisingly, no one confessed to us that they practised witchcraft /sorcery - *shaivinai*. Shaivinai, unlike the evil eye, is a deliberate attempt to cause harm by the use of certain items, actions and mantras. Rajendran's father once found a piece of fine cloth, neatly folded, in the road. He picked it up and opened it and found inside a folded piece of paper. He unfolded the paper and on it was a black dot. Shaivinai ! He threw the paper away immediately. But that night a spirit came knocking at the door threatening to kill Rajendran's father. Fortunately, Rajendran's Grandfather knew a thing or two about mantras and employed his knowledge to tell the evil to be gone. It went.

Rajendran didn't say what his father did with the fine cloth . . . ³⁸

If you suspected you or your family were the victim of shaivinai, you could ask an astrologer to try and find out the culprit. He would throw a handful of sea-shells on to the ground, three

³⁸ That is, I have nothing in my notes about it. However, having read this, Rajendran now tells me his father threw the cloth away and went home and told his father – Rajendran's grandfather - what had happened. His father told him not to worry, he would deal with it. That night a ghost/devil came to the house and tried to enter, but 'my father's father drove it away, applying his spiritual capability.'

times, and interpret the results for you. It was also possible to protect yourself and your family against shaivinai attack in advance. It was customary to have a shell embedded in the doorway of the house to prevent the entry of bad things, such as shaivinai-induced evil spirits, and spells, as well as the effects of the evil eye.

Many people knew how shaivinai was done. For example : write with black paste on a square of tin foil, roll it up and get it into the house or buried nearby. They knew how to counter it too: get another sorcerer or an astrologer to find the buried foil and do the appropriate mantras and actions to counter the spell.

Our informants told us a number of tales of shaivinai:

Someone did sorcery because the family had a good crop. They got someone in to do the necessary to counter it.

“Sorcery was done against Mrs X - She lost her usual senses, wandering forgetful, unmindful of her husband and children. Her husband had to do all the domestic work and look after the children. He suspected sorcery and consulted an astrologer/sorcerer who became possessed and found folded foil buried inside the house. Anti-sorcery was done and ‘Mrs X’ became normal again”.

‘Mrs X’ confirmed the story, sort of :

“Sorcery was done to me so that I shouldn’t like my husband and I’d run after people - like *you* people. My mind has been changed. Even now it is like that. (Because of sorcery he is not affectionate to her and does not stay in the house, added a neighbour). As soon as he sees me he runs away from me. I often feel we are not related - there’s no connection. In that way sorcery has changed my mind. I am here only because I am his wife - I cannot leave because of the children.”

Others were not too bothered :

“People say about it - but not very often. I don’t know about it.”

“If anyone does sorcery against us we should just leave it to the gods.”

“I don’t believe in it. Anyway, I have faith in our family god. The god would even blunt an attacker’s knife !”

Both the evil eye and witchcraft or sorcery are more or less universal in traditional cultures, including in some western societies. The evil eye was unfamiliar to me, but it is there in classical Greek belief and is still current in many Mediterranean societies. Witchcraft, of course, was a staple in Britain in the 17th Century - Macbeth’s three witches for example, or the Pendle Witches in Lancashire. Also the witches of Salem, Massachusetts in America. The Pendle and Salem witches were tried and some were executed. The people of Sirumalai were definitely worried about such sorcerers and witches - but less extreme in their reaction. In fact they were more concerned about the recurrent rumours of child abductors reported in the newspapers at the time. Fortunately, no such abduction occurred during our stay.

Mantras

It was never clear to me whether or not shaivinai could also include 'good magic'. Mantras, however - repeated chants, ritual prayer, often used for healing - were common and for positive purposes. Muthu, as we've seen, had some knowledge of them, and our ex-school-teacher friend had mantra'd me after the karatandi incident. Omana's grandmother was known for her knowledge of healing mantras. We watched her twirl the end of her sari in front of a girl while chanting - for which she was paid. What the girl's problem was we didn't ask - something minor. She had been sent by her parents for the cure.

Rajendran's grandfather used a mantra on the 'seeing boil'. He was also known for curing animals. For example, if a goat or a cow was ill, he would chant the following :

*One piece of gold, one flower
River water also,
The goat chokes,
Since it is now a good and fitting time
Poison go, wound go - Shiva !*

He chanted until he yawned or tears came into his eyes, signifying that the cure had been effective. Mind you, to make the mantra effective you must first stand knee deep in water at the time of an eclipse - of the moon I presume. You must then throw 108 or 1008 flowers into the water one by one, chanting the mantra each time, and finish before the eclipse has ended.



Illness and deaths.

I was called one day to the PRK Estate to photograph a teenage girl - one of the resident workers - who had died that morning. She had been struck down by diarrhoea overnight. The body was sat in a tall chair, dressed in a fine sari and decorated with jewellery and garlands of flowers. I took some photos - with black and white film - developed the film and gave the parents the negatives to take to be printed. My only other film was colour slide film which I had to post back to the UK to be developed. They were happy with the black and white.

*

Our friend Muthu's brother, Vellimalai, developed cerebral malaria. The malaria parasite - *Plasmodium falciparum* - blocks small blood vessels in the brain causing swelling and brain-damage. His father became angry with his disrespectful behaviour. We told them to take him to the hospital. They did. He died there.

*

We became friends with a couple in another part of the village partly because their daughter, Manimeghali - nine or ten years old - was among the children who would every so often invade our house. She seemed to be particularly fond of me. She would sit herself on my lap and look at my notebook and I would be careful not to touch her any more than I couldn't avoid. She was more or less the only human being I touched - other than the odd handshake - in all the months I stayed in Gandhigram and Palaiyur. Indian culture is very British in that regard. Manimeghali's father was well known for being a communist. I was given to understand that this was why they only had two children - an older boy and their daughter - rather than a tribe. It was modern thinking, modern values. Not long after we left I received a message from Rajendran informing me that Manimeghali had died. Probably diarrhoea. Or fever.

I cried.

On my next visit, I took a framed photo I had taken of her and gave it to her mother. In the photo Manimeghali is wearing nothing on top and posing like a film star. Her mother had the photo painted over with a blouse, garlands and a sari over Manimeghali's head. Much like a bride. As she *should* be remembered. This means it would not be appropriate to insert the original photo of Manimeghali here.

The market.

Every Friday a market - or *chandai* - was held along the road. I looked forward to it hungrily as this was the one day when I could eat *parathas*, an unleavened bread made of wheat, rather than the ubiquitous rice, iddly's (rice) and dhosas (rice). Some of the young men ran a pop-up 'hotel', or eating place. They cooked mutton too. Something to get one's teeth into, to actually chew rather than just move about a bit and then swallow (leaving me physiologically full but psychologically still hungry). To be fair, Omana's - where we dined most evenings - provided omelettes and *vadai*, made from deep-fried lentil and wheat flour, to go with our rice, but these could not compete with the serious chewing that had to be performed upon the leathery, unleavened *parathas* and the unidentifiable bits of mutton.

Traders came up from Dindigul on the early morning bus or lorry and laid out their wares along the sides of the street. There were spice sellers, vegetable vendors, purveyors of rice, pulses, salted fish, clay pots and metal pots, glass bangles, soaps and talcum powders, snacks, plastic items of all kinds - jugs, water-pots, combs. Some of the Palaiyur folk also joined in the selling, mostly vegetables.







There were barbers and cobblers at the far end - away from the main market - where kulis from the fields came for a haircut and to get their sandals mended.



There were sellers of traditionally colourful - not to say garish - pictures of Gods, film stars and politicians - especially of 'MGR' who was both a film star and the Tamil Nadu State Chief Minister.



There were children's clothes for sale, and the village tailor pedalled his sewing machine all day on his roadside veranda. The various 'hotels' up and down the street were constantly full, serving teas and coffees, tiffin (idlis, dosas) or 'meals' - rice and sambar with maybe an *appalam* (popadom) or a vadaï. Teas and coffees come by the yard in Tamil Nadu. Having heated up the milk and added the ingredients - sugar especially - the concoction is then cooled down by pouring it from one container to another, while at the same time smoothly stretching the vertical distance between the containers. It's a form of performance art.

Talking of food, I was puzzled from the beginning of my stay by constant reference to the *heating* and *cooling* effects of different foods. Chicken is heating, for example, while yogurt is cooling. This had nothing to do with the temperature of the food as you consumed it. Only later did I discover that it was all do with the traditional Indian health system of *Ayurveda*. Hot and cold foods are classified according to the innate nature of the particular food *and* how they relate to or affect the three different categories of human body type. That is, its all theoretical-traditional. Except that, when summer comes, and you're suffering temperatures reaching 40 degrees centigrade, you can actually *feel* the difference. A dose of chicken is in danger of sending you over the edge; a measure of yogurt keeps you - relatively - cool.



There was also a butcher in the market, selling chicken and mutton - i.e. goat meat. He skinned the goats as they hung from a pole - and as the flies buzzed around - then chopped the meat into small pieces in a somewhat random manner, bones and all. I fancied some liver to fry for dinner back at our house. Rajendran tried his best to negotiate for me but the butcher could not bring himself to sell me *only* liver, so he added pieces of regular meat to the package as well.

The market was always packed. Not only with the people of Palaiyur. Many, including whole families, came into town from all over the hills for their weekly supplies, and perhaps for the chance to meet friends and relatives and enjoy a chin-wag. There were kuli families from the fields and even the occasional Paliyan.



You had to wind your way through the throng, making especially sure not to bump into any of the women, which would not have been proper at all. Young boys ran through the crowd excitedly, small children held their mother's hand or were carried on their hips. The village dogs and the odd chicken trotted among the people's legs.

There was an astrologer who employed a trained parrot to assist him in the telling of fortunes. While the astrologer drummed, the parrot would come out of his cage, waddle across to a pile of special astrology cards and select one in its bill. Probably the top one. It would then waddle back to its cage, dropping the card en route. The astrologer then told the customer's fortune on the basis of the selected card. I confess that I was not convinced and so I never actually asked him to tell me my fortune. Meanwhile, many of the people of Sirumalai - the kulis in from the fields, for example - took this very seriously. They were prepared to part with hard earned money for it and the astrologer had no shortage of customers. This is, perhaps, not surprising when you live in circumstances where you have little control over your life materially (you are poor and dependent on others), socially (you are subject to a rigid hierarchy, as well the dangers of sorcery and the evil eye), or in relation to evil spirits or to the gods themselves.



Women, marriage and children

*“If need be, tell a thousand lies - but you **have** to get married!”*

A few years ago I took Rajendran to meet my ‘Aunty’ Joy - my mother’s old school friend. She had never married, as I had explained to Rajendran before we got there. After some time, drinking coffee and exchanging news, Rajendran couldn’t help himself and had to ask : why had she never got married ? I smiled sheepishly. Aunty Joy paused for only a moment. Well, there *was* a young man . . . but he had died during the war. She had looked after her father most of her life, after her mother died, as well as always gone out to work. Rajendran explained that, in India, *everyone* gets married. Aunty Joy smiled.

Most of the girls in Sirumalai were married at around sixteen to eighteen. Their grooms were customarily older, in their early to mid twenties. Parents arranged the matter, with the help of relatives. They might also consult an expert caste genealogist to make sure - if it was not certainly known - that the couple were properly marriageable - cross-cousins, not brother and sister according to the Dravidian kinship system. They might also engage an astrologer to check that the couple’s star signs were compatible, and so on, although there could probably be ways around any such problems should they arise. It could take some time to find the right match and get everything agreed between the families - including the dowry. So while on the one hand you were supposed to be eager to marry, on the other, you were enjoined to be patient : “Marriage is determined in heaven” or, “Goddess Meenakshi has to take the garland and give it [as in a wedding].”

In the meantime, what the parents must not do is “allow the cotton to get too near the flame”. Teenage boys and girls, young men and women, were kept strictly apart - except for the lads and certain lasses in the fields of course.

One of our male friends explained to us why he looked forward to getting married :

“My parents cannot look after me forever. I need a wife - and children - to look after me.”

Very practical.

Of course a woman also needed a husband to look after them and their prospective children. However, not one of our female interviewees would tell us anything of how they had felt about marriage - practical or otherwise. I suspect we needed to have been women ourselves to get this kind of information.

Of course there was much more to marriage than only the practical. Both men and women also needed to get married and have children to fulfil personal, social and even religious goals and duties. For a woman, having a child - becoming a mother - brings (hopefully) a new status and value in the eyes of her husband’s family as well as in society more widely. For a man, to be married, to have children, to be a *householder*, is a key stage and responsibility in the Hindu frame of life’s stages.³⁹ For both women and men, to have a child is to fulfil one’s

³⁹ The traditional stages of life - for men - are childhood/student, householder, hermit and sanyasa (i.e. total withdrawal from society). Some of our friends were yet to be married, most were firmly in the householder stage - married with children. We also knew many older people, but the nearest we came to knowing someone who might be thought to have withdrawn from society was an old man who sat at home cross-legged, perpetually playing the card game Patience with himself.

dharmā. And then, it is considered a religious necessity for a man to have a son to perform puja for his soul after death. A childless wife may even ask her husband to take a second wife “Because there is no one to say your name”. For a woman to be childless is a disaster about which she may be cruelly reminded : “There is more chance of a baby in a stone than in your stomach ! You were given birth to, but *you* are barren !”

To return to the positive, the ideal of marriage was summed up in the word *samsaram*. Literally it means *wife*, but it also implies a traditional Hindu housewife and also the wider meaning of living a traditional family life - married, with children, and all in harmony.

I couldn't help feeling the pressure was mostly on the wife. On waking, a wife should worship her husband by touching his feet and looking at his face. He is her visible god. If a man's wife should die he would be expected to marry again. If a husband should die, his widow could not remarry but must remain a widow. A friend's sister had been widowed when her husband got into a quarrel with his brothers and ended up dead. She was obliged to remain a widow. This was not a happy position to be in, especially if you had no son to look after you. “Widow” was commonly used as a highly derogatory term.

Meanwhile, wives with husbands might conduct a *Mangalyae Viratham* - a tali fast⁴⁰ - on Mondays to ensure their husband had a long life.

Very sensible.

*

A friend told us how he had lost his wife a few days after the birth of their first child. After two years he married his former wife's younger sister. This was a quite customary thing to do and also very sensible as the two families were already connected, and, in this case, already had a common grandchild. In another case, when a young man died, his widow was simply ‘adopted’ by his brother, alongside his existing wife. There was no formal marriage to my knowledge, and polygamy was not a custom, but, once again, it was a sensible solution from the family point of view.

*

If pregnancy did not follow marriage within a reasonable length of time - or if a woman suffered a miscarriage - you could just be patient : “Children are a gift from god”, “The God [or Goddess] has not yet seen my face” Alternatively, you could try and do something about it. Women might make offerings to cobras - *naga*⁴¹ - placing milk and eggs beside their holes among the roots of trees or in front of naga stones. This was believed to assist conception and prevent miscarriage. (An element of symbolism may be involved here . . .). Nagas are a mythical, semi-divine creature half snake, half human. They can be both helpful or dangerous (as indeed are cobras, helping keep down the rats while at the same time being best not bitten by). The seven-headed king of the nagas customarily protects the god Vishnu. Naga stones are placed at the foot of pipal trees (*Ficus religiosa*, as it happens), which are

⁴⁰ A tali is the necklace tied round the bride's neck at marriage.

⁴¹ Strictly speaking naga refers to the King Cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*) but ordinary cobras will do. In any case, there probably were and are no King Cobras in Sirumalai.

also considered sacred. A childless woman might take a bath fully clothed and then, with her clothes still wet, walk round the tree a number of times for a number of Fridays - the numbers of each being advised by an astrologer. Or, you can walk three times round a pipal tree anytime you wish to seek its blessings.

When a coconut tree produces its first fruits - or at least the first in the field - pongal is prepared, a sari is wrapped around the tree and a tali - a necklace, the sign of marriage - is tied around it. That is, the tree is got up like a married woman. A childless woman can take the tali and wear it and they will then have a child.

Assuming that pregnancy does occur, things start looking up. In the seventh month of pregnancy, for example, a *Valaikappu* (bracelet) ceremony is conducted in the mother-to-be's parents' house. Both families attend, along with relatives and friends. A bracelet seller is called and all the women are given gifts of bracelets. Meanwhile the girl's parents give their daughter bracelets enough to cover both arms from wrist to elbow, although it is the bracelet seller that puts them on her. If it is her first child, the daughter will then stay at her parent's house for the birth and for some time afterwards. Mothers-to-be might go to a hospital for the birth or stay at home, where the dhobi's wife might act as midwife.

Meanwhile, and inevitably, both pregnancy and birth were surrounded by the auspicious and - mostly, it seemed to me - the inauspicious. For example, a pregnant woman should not do any tailoring, sleep alone, cross a river or climb a hill (as the women did everyday carrying water). On the positive side, a wasp's or bird's nest being built in the house ensures a safe delivery. A pregnant woman should not be photographed. This was, potentially, a difficulty for me given that I went nowhere without my camera. I could have got into trouble. As it happened, I didn't - although one of our study mothers did complain that my movie camera was stealing her child's soul. As for the birth, a child should not be born at midnight or at midday, these being, generally, inauspicious times. It is lucky to be born under some stars, unlucky under others - a father will become a beggar if the child is born under *chitirai* (Spica, in Virgo); it will be bad luck for the child's uncle if its born under *Rohini* (Aldebaran, in Taurus). However, its lucky to be born under a waxing moon - the infant will flourish as the moon grows.

The birth of a child is welcomed of course - it will settle all troubles and quarrels in the family : "I will forget all my troubles looking at my grandchild's face." But childbirth is also considered polluting, involving as it does a lot of bodily fluids. The room in which the birth took place is cleaned and whitewashed and after thirty days a purificatory ritual is performed for the new mother and indeed the whole household. There will only then be a naming ceremony for the child. There is a belief that a child can be a reincarnation of a deceased relative and therefore the child may be given that person's name. Or the child may very commonly be named after one of the gods. One of our study infants was named Vellimalai - i.e. Shiva. However, he was always called Velli, "Otherwise it'll sound as if you're scolding the God !"

When I asked, people said they would be, or were, happy to have either a boy or a girl first. I asked because it's a well known fact that boys are particularly valued in Hindu society, for ritual reasons and for the practical reason that you need sons (and daughters-in-law) to look after you in your old age - *your* daughters will have left home and be looking after *their* in-laws. However, I was told that a girl as the first-born is often preferred - both according to custom *and* for the practical reason of having a girl to look after subsequent children and then

to help with the housework. Or, confusingly, “A boy for prosperity, a girl for beauty and delight.”

However, as the saying went, “If a man has five daughters in succession, even a king will become a pauper.” This was because of the institution of dowry. It was customary and required that a bride’s family should pay dowry to the groom and his family - gold, jewellery, brass water vessels, clothes, and a negotiated amount of cash, some of which may well have to be paid in instalments. Dowry was the subject of much negotiation and, sometimes, ongoing dispute - especially if the cash didn’t turn up on time.

Not everyone was merely avaricious. There was also the desire to help one’s close relatives. A middle aged couple we knew had the misfortune of only having daughters (they even dressed up the youngest one as a boy). An uncle decided that his son should marry the eldest daughter with only token dowry in order to help his nephew in his adversity. The son was not so keen as it happened, but they were married anyway.

As for children, infants would often be left to sleep in a cloth sling hung from the veranda rafters, or from a nearby bush if their mother was working in the fields. But there were usually plenty of other women - mother-in-law, sisters-in-law, neighbours - to help in looking after the child. Discreet breast feeding was the norm, but you had to be careful - if anyone steps across the legs of a lactating woman her milk will stop . . .



Infants were sung to sleep with lullabies - often by grandmothers and older women. They all begin with a refrain which is repeated between every couple of lines. This helps the lullaby last as long as it takes to get the baby to sleep. The refrain goes like this :

*Ra ra row, ra ra row
Apple of my eye ra ra
Row ra ri ra row*

Then, for example :

*My baby, I have searched for you
Searched for you in the field and found a flower.
My jasmine bud.
You are an unopened flower,
My unique treasure.
When your mouth dribbles honey
You are a summer fruit
Come to be kissed.
Honey, treasure, ever desirable mango,
Your father's pearl,
Your uncle's milk-pot.*

Or :

*You are descended from kings,
From kings you have been born.
My precious jewel, go to sleep,
Fragrant bouquet of leaves.
My baby, you jewel, you golden thread,
You pearl, you coral.
My baby whom we love,
Flower of our eye.*

The lullabies are full of images of praise for the child, of the value in which its mother and father, and the whole family, hold them.

It is then customary to also go on to praise the child's father with images of what a great and caring chap he is. For example :

*Your father commands the black dog,
He hunts the bear.
Your father is a good man,
He prepares the land,
He commands the red dog,
He hunts the lion.
Your father is a great man.*

*

Here's a story from the Hindu scriptures :

Lord Shiva and his wife, Parvati (or Ishwari) are with their sons Murugan and Vinayaga (Ganesha). The Sage Narada appears. He is noted for making trouble, but for good ends. He has a mango which no one can cut. He offers it to Shiva saying "If anyone can eat this fruit they will have eternal life. I think you are the right person to have it." But Shiva says, let the boys have it. But which one ? A contest is arranged. The first one round the universe gets the mango. Murugan sets off at once in his peacock-pulled chariot. But Vinayaga asks Narada, "Won't going round my parents be the same as going round the universe?" It would. So Vinayaga walks around Shiva and Parvati and wins the fruit.

Parents are the first gods. It is through them that understanding is gained of everything else, including of the gods.

*

One of the infants we studied was called Manjula, aged a little less than two. Her next older sister was called Meena, aged a little over three. Their Grandmother was looking after them : "A King and queen had two children, one called Manjula, one called Meena. Meena was a good daughter but Manjula was always up to mischief - so they beat her ! And so, step by step, Manjula learned how to behave properly."

Rajendran gave me another example of this common way of getting children to behave as they ought. A couple have two sons - the names of the two boys being told the tale are inserted here. One is good at fighting - he is adventurous, independent and courageous. The other is the opposite. But because they are always together the second brother doesn't bother to learn how to fight, despite being told. One day, alone, he is attacked by thieves and all his money is stolen. He returns home in a sorry state. You see, says his brother, you didn't listen to me.

Virapandiakatapoman (Vira-pandia-kata-poman) is a Tamil hero, a rebel against the British, renowned for his courage, self-respect, honour and independence, and for his contribution to the glory of Tamil Nadu : "Be like Virapandiakatapoman, be brave, don't give in !"

*

Concentrating for our study on mothers and infants (and their fathers of course) we failed to sit and listen to the older children while they played. However, it was obvious that the younger girls would be playing among themselves while also looking after and involving the toddlers, their own brothers or sisters or those of their neighbours. Sometimes their mother would be nearby about her domestic chores, sometimes away working - in which case there was always someone else about. The older boys would be running around the village together or helping their fathers at home or in the fields. Both boys and girls might be at school in the morning.



The older girls mostly stayed at home, and joined the older women carrying water up from the tank or the well. They helped with the household chores, and also looked after their younger siblings - until they got married and left.

*

A young woman friend - sitting next to her husband - told us that of course she wanted equality in the relationship between them (he didn't disagree), but if that's not possible, a wife has to adjust and obey : "Even if he is a stone - he is my husband." An older male friend - sitting next to his wife - told us "Don't listen to her, she's a wicked woman !" She was quite capable of giving as good as she got, but she chose to keep quiet.

This was the customary pattern of the relationship between husbands and wives. Once we'd got to know people we were even able to risk asking couples - sitting together - what they each thought about the proper role of wives - and also how they decided things between them:

Mr A : "Both must work and earn money. Women can do the same things as men - but we don't want women to do all these things. Who will look after the children ? They must do the domestic work. Women must listen to their husband and agree - which they do in time."

Mrs A : "It will be good if both of us earn money. But I don't like women working outside the house - like other people do. Domestic work is enough. Women can do anything ! I say what I think, but then I will keep quiet and he will decide."

Mr B - "She sometimes supervises in the field, but I don't want her to work hard like I do. Domestic work is enough. I don't like women in high positions, they are not capable, they are able to do domestic work only."

Mrs B - "Women can only go forward if they are educated. I am not educated. In the end, I will agree with what my husband says whether he is right or not."

Mr C - "It depends on the individual, but I don't think women generally are as efficient as men."

Mrs C - "I don't like to work outside. But women have the same ability as men !"

Mr D - "Ideally a wife should work at home. My wife will work in our relatives' fields if necessary, but not in others' fields. Ladies don't get any status for working [i.e. it is looked down on]. They should have education - or property - so they don't have to work. But women also have ability. I will accept my wife's opinions. When we disagree, after 3 or 4 days we will get friendly again and negotiate. But if she is adamant, what I say will go."

Mrs E - “I want women to help husbands do their work. Women have the same ability as men. I also supervise the kulis - both women and men - and I bring back more coffee than my husband ! Usually I accept what he says. I say too, but I have to be obedient to him if he doesn’t agree.”

There are clearly differing opinions - mostly among men - about the abilities of women, but both men and women were clear about practical matters. Wives have got to run the household and look after the children, but also earn if necessary. However, if they work outside the house, it ought only to be on one’s own fields or one’s own family business, as a matter of social status. It does not do to go out to work for others. It was also primarily a matter of social status, I think, that, when it comes to it, wives must obey their husbands.

One of our male friends tried very hard to be as egalitarian as possible, but still had to come down on the side of it being necessary that he should make the final decision :

“I have to adjust because I don’t want any problems - and others shouldn’t know [i.e. hear] what’s going on in the house.” “Uncle’s afraid of sister !” says his friend. “Not that !” he objects “But not to let others know.” He will disagree with his wife when he really does, but generally he will try to adjust. He will scold her and then adjust. “I will let her argue and express her opinions – it’s not simply a matter of obeying. In the end, though, I will take the decision.”

Women’s public role, in the running of the village, was more limited. There was a village meeting one evening where the senior males discussed and the younger men listened. There was only one woman there, an older woman - a particularly feisty character. She sat in the shadows at the back and spoke to no one. The water department officials had offered to repair the electric pump down at the well and provide a new water tank up beside the road. They would provide 75% of the cost and the village would have to raise 25%. The men met to discuss the matter. They decided to raise money to build a new temple to Vinayaga instead. The pump and taps never were fixed during our stay in Palaiyur and the women had to continue to carry water twice as far as before and up hill.

This is not to say that women had no status. Older women especially were expected to be respected - your mother in particular. Indeed, as Rajendran explained to me one day, Mary must be greater than Jesus - she is his *Mother* !

In public at least, women generally kept quiet and went about their business - usually together, fetching water for example. I soon realised how limited the women were in terms of where they could freely go in the village. They could be with their immediate neighbours, or visit a friend or relative elsewhere perhaps, or to the shops. However, it would not have been at all proper to be anywhere they did not have a very good reason to be. Of course that was also true for men, but never quite as much so . . .

Ladies' night

According to Thurston⁴² :

A peculiar ceremony, called Sevvai (Tuesday) Pillayar, is performed by some Vellāla women. . . . The ceremony takes place twice in the year, on a Tuesday in the months of Thai (February-March) and Audi (August-September). It is held at midnight, and no males, even babies in arms, may be present at it, or eat the cakes which are offered. A certain number of women club together, and provide the necessary rice, which is measured on the back of the hand, or in a measure similar to those used by Madras milk-sellers, in which the bottom is fixed high up in the cylinder. At the house where the ceremony is to be performed the rice is pounded into flour, and mixed with leaves of *Pongamia glabra* and margosa (*Melia Azadirachta*). The mixture is then made into cakes, some flat, and some conical, to represent Pillayar (Ganēsa). Flowers, fruits, betel, turmeric, combs, kunkumam (red powder), and other articles required in connection with the Pillayar worship, are also taken to the room in which the rites are performed. Of these it has been impossible to gather an account, as the women refused to describe them, lest ruin should fall on their families. Some say that, during the ceremony, the women are stark-naked.⁴³

I heard rumours of something very much the same going on in Palaiyur - from men of course. The story was that the women of each street, both Pillai and Naidu, gathered every Tuesday night in a room and locked the door behind them. (Tuesday is an auspicious day for women). The women made a small *sausage*⁴⁴ out of flour, coconut and other ingredients and worshiped their goddess - a vigorous one - into the early hours. The whole affair was kept utterly secret from men, who would go blind if they saw anything. Girls also attended, but boys only when they were still infants.

Of course I cannot confirm any of this as I was never invited.



⁴² See footnote 9.

⁴³ 1. Well they would, wouldn't they. 2. Like a coven of witches.

⁴⁴ Rajendran's translation. There's actually no such thing as a sausage proper in Indian cuisine, so it must be something about the shape . . .

The fields and forest - and the fruits thereof.

The difference between the village - *ooru* - and the fields and forest - *kadu* - was a significant distinction in people's minds. Especially in the women's minds. As I mentioned earlier, my women neighbours were worried for me whenever I went into the forest, or out in the dark, lest I be possessed by evil spirits. The men were more sanguine I felt. They were used to working in the often distant fields all day. As the hunting party shows, they were quite happy to be out all night as well. I only ever found the village women working in nearby fields, adjacent to the village.

Meanwhile, many kuli families were of course living in the fields full time.

And the Paliyars.

I can only conclude that the women of Palaiyur were a bunch of wimps.

Or I could be more anthropological. The village is a protected space, with its guardian gods and defined boundaries. Or psychological : the coffee estate was dark and deep . . . Or socio-political : the coffee estate was out-of-bounds, being private, and entirely separate from the life of the village. (Fortunately the owner of the estate had given me permission to roam freely. It probably saved my - psychological - life).

Concerning coffee - *everyone* grew coffee. However, while the PRK Estate grew it under the shade of silver oaks and the occasional jack-fruit tree, the villagers tended to grow it in more open plots. Growing coffee in the shade of forest trees (to be harvested for timber) is the 'traditional' commercial approach and reproduces the natural habitat of wild coffee bushes. The protected coffee bushes grow well and, as it happens, the forest provides a rich home for wildlife and for biodiversity more generally. Growing coffee in the open, in direct sunlight, is the modern way. It gives higher yields, but it may also require the application of pesticides and, when grown as a monocrop, it provides limited accommodation for wildlife. The small-scale, peasant farmers of Sirumalai operated somewhere in between. They grew many different crops on the same plot all jumbled together - coffee, bananas, lemons and jack-fruit were the main crops for the market but they might also grow pomegranates, ginger and cardamom - and do a bit of kitchen gardening besides, producing vegetables for home consumption.



As I mentioned earlier, what Sirumalai is most famous for - agriculturally speaking - is its bananas. They are short, broad, sweet and delicious. They were used as offerings in every festival and ceremony. We ate them daily. The field behind our house was a mono-crop plantation of Sirumalai bananas, their split and tattered leaves whispering together whenever a wind got up. Rajendran brought me a basket of them the first time he visited me in the UK.

(Don't tell Customs).



Unfortunately certain commercial interests had decided to cultivate Sirumalai bananas plantation-style. There were estates where the forest had been cleared and bananas planted over acres. The predictable followed. Somewhat after our stay a wilt disease arrived and attacked not only the plantation bananas but also those of the peasant farmers. It was evident on our more recent visits that some of our friends had been knocked back hard by the failure of the traditional banana crop. At the same time, coffee stem borer arrived affecting the coffee crop. The agricultural economy of Sirumalai - for the peasant farmers - our friends - was clearly depressed on our later visits.

Rajendran and I often went walking outside of the village - exploring the hills, looking for birds and wild animals (see below), visiting Paliyankadu. However, we were never far from the small plots of cultivation belonging to our village friends and others, each with thatched hut homes where the kulis lived and worked as labourers and guards. We were often invited to stop a while for coffee or goats' milk, bananas or jack-fruit.



The 'road' to Paliyankadu was long, hot and rough underfoot. The track was narrow and often stone walled on either side so that when a wide-loaded horse bringing produce up to Palaiyur appeared we would have to step aside as it hurried by :



We passed kulis whose main occupation always seemed to be weeding the fields - with crude mattocks.



Paliyankadu was largely a wide scatter of plots and huts on often steeply sloping ground, with only a couple or so pucca buildings on the flat of a small valley. We went to visit our landlord and his family. They lived in a typical thatched hut, with whitewashed mud walls, on the top of a ridge with the family's fields surrounding. There was a shelter beside the house for the goats.



The eldest of the two daughters went to fetch water from the stream a distance below while her mother ground rice and lentils to make dosa for us.



We sat and drank coffee surrounded by trees and with no other dwelling in sight, enjoying the company, the quiet and the green. This was the place for me, I thought - although whether my hosts would have shared my enthusiasm I doubt. They probably found it inconveniently remote and most certainly hard work.

Still, there *were* in fact neighbours not too far away, and we soon went to join them for the slaughter of the goats in honour of Karuppuswamy.

Wildlife

My relaxation - my escape - from the village and our ever-present neighbours - was to go wandering and bird watching in the mature forest of the PRK coffee estate just above our house. The estate kulis knocked off at around five and I therefore had an hour or so before dark to myself, to wander alone. I was lucky. It was otherwise impossible to be on your own. I needed to regularly escape the omnipresent pressure of the people and society I had intruded myself upon.



The tall silver oaks and other trees of the Coffee Estate were a favourite hang-out of Palaiyur's local troop of monkeys. If they were not there, they might be in the oaks beside the road on the way out of the village towards Pudur. Sometimes they were nowhere to be seen for some time. The estate was large. They had plenty of room to roam. They were bonnet macaques (*Macaca radiata*), so called because they wear a parted-down-the-middle hair style puffed up somewhat on either side. Not so much a bonnet as a double quiff. They are brown, the size of a medium dog, but sport a tail as long as their body. They are the common and endemic monkey of South India, often to be found in villages wherever there are mature trees. As I mentioned briefly earlier, I was walking in the forest one evening when a substantial jack fruit came plummeting to earth and missed me by a whisker. I looked up. The macaques looked back at me, having just dislodged it. I was always surprised never to see or hear anyone even taking pot-shots at them given that they must have been helping themselves not only to jack fruits but also to bananas and who knows what else. Was it because they were identified with the Monkey God Hanuman ?



There were birds in the forest as well. I had *too* many favourites. One was the simple grey tit - a black and white version of the European great tit.⁴⁵ There was a small tank, or open well, in the coffee estate. I used to sit there to see what came by. It was cut with vertical walls, about six yards square. The walls were festooned with the protruding roots of the nearby trees and bushes, and with the small stones that the digging of the tank into the earth had exposed. It was a scene of intricate patterns and subtle hues of earth and subterranean vegetation. A grey tit arrived and began searching among the roots, above the water, along the wall. A great tit in black and white and shades of grey. It was both the perfect contrast and the perfect complement to the subtle hues and intricate patterns of the walls of the well.

One of my favourite spots in the PRK estate, apart from the tank, was the ruins of a large bungalow constructed near the edge of the high cliff and known as *Sendercutti*. Only the foundation walls remained, grown over with moss, ferns and creepers. The story was that this was the place from which, in British times, semaphore messages were sent across the plains to the hill station of Kodaikanal, high in the Western Ghats opposite. I was drawn to it for its feel of times past and lives long gone.

There were scarlet minivets (*Pericrocotus speciosus*). The male is a bold red and black - the female is a similarly startling *yellow* and black. I saw them once on the coffee bushes. Coffee bushes have waxy, deep green leaves, rather like those of a bay tree, and clusters of white flowers which turn to green berries then ripen to cherry red. I cannot remember now whether the coffee bushes were in flower or in berry, only that the leaves were richly green and shining in the dappled sunlight that filtered through the canopy of the silver-oaks above.

⁴⁵ The grey tit was in fact a *race* of the great tit – *Parus major* – when I saw it. However, it has since been reclassified and is now a separate species – *Parus cinereus*- the cinereous (ashy grey) tit. This kind of thing happens all the time nowadays.

A pair of scarlet minivets were perched on this sea of coffee leaves. Scarlet, yellow, green, black.

Then there was the greater racket-tailed drongo (*Dicrurus paradiseus*). I spotted this bird fluttering in the forest - black, crested, and with a pair of unfeathered tail quills, until you got to the end, where there were oval shaped 'rackets' which danced about - apparently independently of the bird to which they were attached. A forest elf.

There was also another paradise bird about - the Asian paradise flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*). It was also crested and with a pair of extended tail feathers, but feathered along their length. This bird comes in two colours. Both are black headed and white breasted, but one is white bodied and tailed and the other is chestnut brown. Having seen others since, I really can't remember which one I saw. However, it had the typical flycatcher eye, round and enchanting, and, like the drongo, it danced through the forest.

Once I saw an orange-headed ground thrush (*Zoothera citrina*). It was on the forest floor, rifling through the fallen leaves. It was obviously a thrush, medium thrush-size, but with a beautiful black-banded and orange head. I searched for it again but only ever saw it that once.

But never mind birds. I mentioned much earlier about being taken aback by a bug-eyed monster which turned out to be the empty shell of a cicada. Sometime about half way through our stay in Palaiyur - probably around June - the silver oak forest began to rain. The trees, not the sky. The weather was hot and dry. A continuous, fine rain fell, so fine that I hardly even got wet. This was followed after a few weeks by the sudden appearance of innumerable cicadas smothering the towering trunks of the silver oaks completely. It was not only an appearance. For a month both the forest and the village below were filled - during daylight - by the continuous and incessant whirl of 'singing' cicadas.

I discovered only later that the fine rain was cicada pee. They were feeding up in the canopy, sucking the juices out of the trees, and peeing. A more delicate way of putting it is to call it honeydew. It wasn't in any way sticky or unpleasant - more, in fact, refreshing in the heat of the day.

The cicadas themselves were indeed bug-eyed monsters, each about two inches long including their folded wings - which extended beyond the abdomen. They had staring eyes. They were grey-brown-green in colour, matching the bark of the trees. They were in their millions.

At the end of three weeks or so they began to go wrong. They fell off the trees and I would find them lying on their backs on the ground, still singing, but in an erratic, broken manner. They were like machines whose mechanism was now worn out and failing.

I had two favourite birds in the village itself - indeed around our house. Both had delightfully odd voices. The red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) is indeed jocose, as well as amusing and waggish. About the size of a starling, it sports red and white cheeks, a white bib and a black, forward-pointing crest - a sort of super-quiff. It is also cheerily vocal with a mixture of squawks, pure notes and brief bubbings. The Indian Tree Pie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*) is obviously a member of the magpie family, but mostly black, grey and orange - with just a touch of white on wings and tail. It has all the raucous calls you would expect of a magpie, but then is also does a vocal like the knocking together of a collection of tin pots.

As for mammals, according to the Madura Gazeteer 1906 :

“Bison . . . used to be numerous on the Sirumalais, but (with every other sort of large game) they have long since disappeared from there.”

By ‘bison’ the writer meant Gaur (*Bos gaurus*), the largest member of the cattle family (since the demise of the aurochs), more substantial even than the Wild water buffalo (*Bubalus arnee*) of Assam. *Much* bigger than the Cape buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) of Southern Africa.

Big.

And also familiar. A Gaur bull was the subject of one of the tea-cards in Brooke Bond’s ‘*Asian Wildlife*’ which I had collected as a child. So when our informants assured us they were still to be found - yes, they had white socks, no they were not feral domestic water buffalo - I had to go in search of them. Rajendran was forced to accompany me. We went in the direction indicated as where we might find them. Nothing. We did see a mongoose and we did explore a path into an area of the hills we had not previously been, which was most interesting. But no Gaur. Until 2009. Then they were exactly where they said we might find them, not far out of the village and quite untroubled by our presence.



Unfortunately the Gazetteer was otherwise correct about ‘large game’. There was none. And no large predators - other than the Hunting Party of course.⁴⁶ But the hunting party went out to shoot wild pigs and wild goats - although even the goats were merely feral. Meanwhile, Wikipedia is undoubtedly *incorrect* in claiming that there are sloth bears in the hills, and probably wrong to claim Sambar deer. However, I can confirm that there are, or

⁴⁶ The 1961 Census report claims ‘panthers’. Well, maybe, but not now.

were, Indian crested porcupines (*Hystrix indica*) - we shot one if you remember. I also once saw a juvenile Indian hare (*Lepus nigricollis*) and I have also seen Grizzled Giant Squirrels (*Ratufa macroura*) in 2009 and 2015.

The one animal I have never seen in Sirumalai is the one for which it is most famous - the Slender Loris (*Loris lydekkerianus*). It looks like an emaciated bush-baby with huge forward-facing eyes and thin body and limbs. Much like Gollum in fact. It lives in the forest, moves slowly, and only comes out at night. The Wildlife (Protection) Act of India, 1972, accords it the highest level of legal protection.

I'm glad I never asked the village boys to find me one.

*



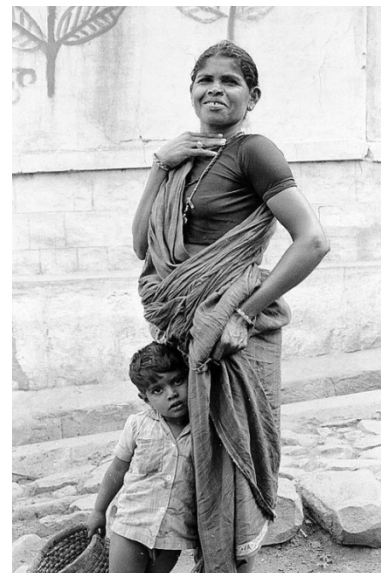
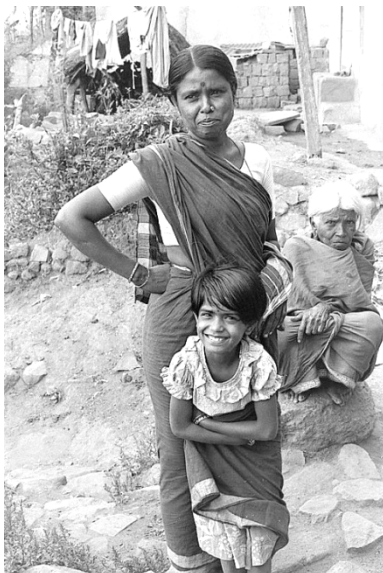
The 1961 Census report ⁴⁷

I have referred to the 1961 Census report on Sirumalai a number of times, but it deserves a section of its own. The authors were most impressed by two things, the utter backwardness of Sirumalai and the delightful nature of the people. They were shocked to discover that there is ‘No modern amenity worth the name’ and that ‘There is a mud road which is more an apology for a road.’ But the people are lovely. Here is the report’s conclusion :

‘It is a stimulating experience to go to the village of Sirumalai and meet the simple innocent folk living there . . . After reaching the village, we feel that we have come into a new atmosphere and we feel that Time has travelled back and we are sensing out-moded times and by-gone centuries. The villagers look at the new visitors with a slight bewilderment and a nervous smile. If you draw level with them, their shyness soon drops out and they begin to feel at home with you. A lively talk with laughter and fun now follows. The villagers like everybody that goes to study them, understand their plight and fathom their minds . . . The villagers of Sirumalai are not an aggressive lot. They are an endearing people with plenty of native goodness . . . It is in the interests of civilization to redeem such people to decent living and put them on the track of modern progress . . . Behind their crude exterior they have an exceeding abundance of elemental innocence. They are anxiously looking for help and guidance. They have nothing but regard for us and we should have nothing but good wishes for them.’

The authors’ heartfelt recommendations did the trick. By the time the report was published – in 1967 – the road had been tarmacked and Sirumalai was on its way to joining modern times. By 1980 Sirumalai was thoroughly connected. However, I am pleased to report that the people – on the whole – remained and remain both endearing and happy to be studied.

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⁴⁷ Census of India 1961, Vol. IX Madras, Part VI Village Survey Monographs 29, Sirumalai. P K Nambiar and A K Vijaya Bhanu 1967.

Finally . . .

As I said at the start, it was a huge privilege to have lived in Sirumalai, and more particularly in Palaiyur, for our few, brief months. We made friendships, many of which have lasted. When we visited in 2009, after a gap of more than two decades, we were greeted not only by those we'd known in 1980 but now also by those who had been children then, or had not even been born. They seemed to know all about us. We appeared to have become part of Palaiyur's collective memory.

Living in Sirumalai was the most interesting thing I have ever done, but it was also one of the most difficult. I have generally treated my experience lightly, humorously even, and that is how I most like to recall it. However, it could also be a torment. Omana's Grandfather once told us how good it had been in the old days, when the British were around, and what nice people they were - except that they would suddenly lose their temper for no reason ! I kept quiet. I understood completely - the temper bit I mean. I often had to quell my rising irritation, frustration and sometimes distaste at the behaviour and values I was there only to observe, not to judge. I was, shamefully, particularly bad with Rajendran on occasions - but I think he has forgiven me.

Of course I am not alone in having this experience. It is in fact rather normal for the western anthropologist doing fieldwork - or even for the ordinary traveller in India - to go through phases of fascination and horror, calm and exasperation, immersion and the desperate need to get away and have some alone time.

However, I was also bearing an extra burden. Shortly after arrival in Gandhigram my Indian girlfriend - my 'would-be' as Rajendran put it, from the Tamil - had written to say that she had broached the matter of the hitherto secret relationship between us with her Mother. She had been advised, in the strongest terms, to forget it. Our relationship was off. I was left suffering from a broken heart caused by the ridiculous attitudes and values of the very culture I was surrounded by and supposed to be objectively studying. I was devastated. Fortunately, she kept writing to me on a regular and frequent basis so I did not feel totally abandoned. In the end, after some time - eventually - she realised she couldn't live without me, changed her mind and we were back on again. In the meantime I had written some pretty good tragic love poems, but I won't trouble you with them here - or indeed anywhere else.

By the way, in case it is not clear, my girlfriend is now my wife.

*

Acknowledgments.

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And especially :

To the people of Sirumalai who were and have continued to be so welcoming (apart from that old man - see page 27) and among whom it was a privilege to dwell.

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