

**The Production of Rurality:
Social and Spatial Transformations in the Tamil Countryside 1915-65**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation advances a critique of the "planetary urbanization" thesis inspired by Henri Lefebvre's writings on capitalist urbanization. Theoretically, it argues that Lefebvrian scholars tend to conflate two distinct meanings of urbanization: a) urbanization understood simply as the territorial expansion of certain kinds of built environment associated with commodity production; and b) urbanization as the reproduction of capitalist modes of production of space on an expanded, planetary scale. Empirically, the dissertation constructs a social history of Tamil Nadu (India) between 1915 and 1965, and seeks to explain how 'rural' spaces were reproduced during a period marked by greater market penetration into the countryside, democratization and regime change, and the reorganization of community relations at multiple scales.

The argument is developed in three inter-related but self-contained chapters. The second chapter focuses on how 'village communities' came to be imagined in political and academic discourse, through the economic writings of Gilbert Slater and N. G. Ranga. Whereas 19th century writers believed that the modern exchange economy posed an existential threat to village communities governed by 'custom', I show that Slater and Ranga inaugurated an empiricist approach that rendered village communities compatible with generalized commodity production.

Focusing on the history of rural roads, the third chapter examines how the conceptual distinction between 'productive' and 'unproductive' infrastructure reproduced under-investment in the countryside. Despite a significant democratization of local and provincial governments from the 1920s onwards, I demonstrate that the fiscal arrangements of colonial rule reproduced barriers against treating resources devoted to 'rural' infrastructure as capital investment, as opposed to a mere expenditure of revenue.

In the final chapter, I demonstrate the resilience of non-capitalist moorings in actually existing village communities, and their importance in enabling the social mobility of excluded communities. This chapter constructs a detailed case study of a group of villages in southern Tamil Nadu, where land owned by upper caste landlords was transferred to lower caste tenants in the mid-20th century. It is through these contestations surrounding land rights that village communities were reproduced well into the 20th century in southern India.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The production of *rurality*: Theorizing modes of production of space in the past and present

It is widely recognized that spaces of production and consumption in India have undergone drastic transformations in recent times, with much of the contemporary focus being on urban peripheries and highway corridors adjacent to India's mega-cities (Gururani, & Dasgupta, 2018; Nair, 2015; Balakrishnan, 2015; Bhattacharya, & Sanyal, 2011). As residents of farming villages begin to exit agriculture and turn to industrial and service sector opportunities in the new economy emerging in these spaces, one also observes a rapid transformation in what remains of the villages that dot the newly urbanizing landscape. In many villages adjoining the new highways, single-room homes with tiled roofs have given way to multi-storey structures with shops and dormitories catering to commuters and migrant workers, in turn producing a rentier class that profits from the process of urbanization. However, scholars have argued that a deeper process of urbanization is underway in other parts of the countryside as well. Urban demographers, for instance, point to the emergence of a large number of new "census towns" – places that continue to be classified as "rural" for administrative purposes, despite most of the workers being employed in non-agricultural occupations (Denis, Mukhopadhyay, & Zerah, 2012; Pradhan, 2017). Many such census towns are part of dispersed urban landscapes that do not conform to the familiar spatial morphologies of urbanization.

The emergence of such dispersed urban landscapes has been understood, in the most influential strand of urban theory in recent times, as evidence of "planetary urbanization" (Brenner & Schmid, 2017). Planetary urbanization is an idea that originates from the writings of Henri Lefebvre, the French social theorist, on the "production of space" in capitalist societies

(Lefebvre, 1991). In the United States, this idea has obtained prominence in the past decade due to the work of Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, who question the very tendency to conflate urbanization with particular morphological features, rather than seeing it as an institutional process that implicates social space (Brenner & Schmid, 2014; 2015; Brenner, 2013; 2014). They argue that much of contemporary writing on urbanization rests on the flawed conceptualization of social space, in which “social processes are bounded and self-enclosed within clearly delineated, mutually exclusive zones” (Brenner & Schmid, 2014: 15). This conceptual error leads to an excessive emphasis on identifying settlement typologies and attempting to map socio-spatial transformations through the spread of particular settlement types (“cities”, “suburbs”, “highway corridors”, etc.). By contrast, Brenner and Schmid insist on following the Lefebvrian framework, in which urbanization refers to the growing scale and scope of a distinctly capitalist *mode of production of space*. On one hand, urbanization implies the deepening of certain social relations by which space is *produced*; conversely, the production of “urban” space is also necessary for the reproduction of the capitalist social relations. Since the capitalist mode of production has acquired truly planetary dimensions in recent times, Lefebvrian scholars argue that urbanization is also planetary in scope, and cannot be confined to the territories occupied by a limited set of settlement types (Merrifield, 2013).

The primary resistance to the theory of planetary urbanization has come from a variety of poststructuralist theoretical perspectives, including postcolonial and feminist geographies of urbanization (Robinson, 2014; Buckley, & Strauss, 2016). In a recent collection of essays, critics like Kate Derickson (2018), Ruddick et al (2018), Tariq Jazeel (2018), and Rajyashree Reddy (2018) have sought to challenge the attempt to construct an “urban theory without an outside” as a universalizing approach, in which the “urban” is no longer theorized in reference to putatively

non-urban places or processes (Jazeel, 2018). In the past, Derickson (2015) has taken inspiration from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) to argue that the universals of Lefebvrian urban theory ("Urbanization 1") need to be countered with non-totalizing approaches that are attentive to the "relationship between circuits of knowledge and their geographical location" (p. 8) and therefore produce situated knowledge about the production of urban subjectivities ("Urbanization 2s"). Carrying forward this critique of the planetary urbanization thesis, Ruddick et al (2018), Jazeel (2018), Reddy (2018), and others have sought to identify forms of "radical alterity" that can be thought of as "constitutive outsides" of the urban, since they resist translation into universal categories. Jazeel, for instance, cites expressions of nostalgia for the Sinhalese village in the urbanism of postcolonial Colombo as evidence of the resilience of non-urban subjectivities even in conventionally urban settings. Postcolonial urban theorists see such non-urban subjectivities as ripe with political possibilities, and criticize the tendency to foreclose these possibilities by generating an aura of inevitability around the "complete urbanization of society".

In their responses to these criticisms, Brenner (2018), Schmid (2018), and other followers of Lefebvre have denied that their theoretical propositions flatten out social and spatial difference or reduce complex and uneven patterns of urbanization to the singular logic of capitalist accumulation. Nevertheless, they argue that differentiation and unevenness need to be analyzed on the basis of relational or dialectical approaches that "presuppose a broader totality" comprising of the "capitalist world system", or what they call the "context of context" (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). As Kanishka Goonawardena (2018) exasperatedly notes, the Marxian notion of *totality*, so central to the dialectical method, implies that universal abstractions are realized through an open-ended and continuous process of synthesizing apparently contradictory

processes that are always internally differentiated. Christian Schmid goes as far as to read into the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty such a dialectical orientation, arguing that “History 1 and History 2 presuppose one another; they cannot exist in isolation, but form interconnected moments of the same process of historical development and transformation” (Schmid, 2018: 599; cf. Hart, 2018). For their part, many postcolonial critics have made a distinction between the globalization of capital and its universalization (Roy, 2016a). While they do not deny the global reach of capitalist urbanization, they insist that it does not lead to the universalization of particular urban forms or political subjectivities. This is not a call for postcolonial urban theory to descend into a series of mutually incommensurable particularisms, but instead to develop new itineraries of theoretical practice that are more attentive to historical difference (Roy, 2011).

This dissertation owes a significant debt to the theoretical moves that emerge from this extended conversation between Marxist, Lefebvrian, and postcolonial scholarship on the urban. To begin with, the very fact that a dissertation on the production of rural space has been written in an urban studies department is testimony to the decentering of the city in the field of urban studies by Lefebvrian scholars. Meanwhile, it is because of the many achievements of postcolonial scholarship in the past decades that I am able to interrogate certain fundamental theoretical questions related to capitalist development while situating myself entirely in the south Asian context. Moreover, this dissertation also takes its cue from the theoretical gestures made by urban scholars over the past several decades in favor of deepening the engagement with parallel debates in agrarian studies (Roy, 2016b; Gururani, & Dasgupta, 2018; Goonewardena, 2014; Chari, 2004). Finally, the emphasis on historical trajectories of urbanization has opened up theoretical space in the literature for a deeper engagement with the historical processes of social and spatial transformation outside the familiar urban centers of South Asia. Nevertheless, this

dissertation is motivated by a deep dissatisfaction with the manner in which the problem of historical difference in the trajectories of capitalist development has been addressed within the urban studies scholarship.

My primary concern with the manner in which these debates have been framed lies in the fact that postcolonial critics, who have carried the mantle of foregrounding various forms of historical difference, have done so by entirely ceding the terrain of “History 1” to the supporters of planetary urbanization. The “constitutive outsides” to the urban that they are able to summon through their deconstructive practices are, as a result, mere “traces” whose relationship with any empirical referents must necessarily be tenuous.¹ Postcolonial urban theory has therefore failed to consider the possibility that non-capitalist *material* and social practices have also continued to survive in the interstices of global capitalism. Indeed, I believe that by failing to challenge planetary urbanization on the (relatively privileged) terrain of political economy, the theoretical practice of postcolonial urban theory has proved to be largely conducive for further reinforcing the view that capitalist urbanization has increasingly subsumed all other modes of production of space that might otherwise exist. In this dissertation, I have drawn upon an imaginative theoretical and historical reconstruction of the process of capitalist development by Kalyan Sanyal (2007) to advance an unapologetically *realist* critique of the premises on which the planetary urbanization thesis is based. Indeed, my dissertation constitutes an attempt to stage an extended debate between the traditions of Marxian dialectics that Sanyal and Lefebvre represent.

¹ As Vinay Gidwani (2004) has pointed out while staging a conversation between David Harvey and Dipesh Chakrabarty, such “outsides” ultimately prove to be toothless in terms of the possibilities for politics they generate, since they are merely “ways of being in the world” rather than ways of resisting or changing it. But more importantly, for the purpose of my argument, the “traces” that emerge from deconstructive theoretical practice have only *textual* referents. Deconstructive practice does not help us identify the referents of these traces outside the realm of discourse.

The three empirical chapters in this dissertation project study the production of “rural” space in the context of southern India in the late-colonial period and early-postcolonial periods (approximately 1915 to 1965). These three chapters are, for most part, free-standing essays with distinct objects of enquiry, as well as different data sources and methodological approaches. However, they are united by a common attempt to explain how non-capitalist modes of production of space were reproduced in this particular historical context, despite the integration of southern India into worldwide commodity markets during this period.

It is important for me to explain, at the outset, why I have chosen to respond to current debates about urbanization and its relationship with the countryside by delving deeply into the history of rural space-making. I believe that such a historical enquiry can be instructive in two ways while responding to current debates in urban theory. First, I find that historical study is a useful response to certain teleological assumptions in the planetary urbanization thesis. For instance, a common refrain among the defenders of the planetary urbanization thesis is that it is an ongoing and incomplete process. To the extent that certain places (and the socio-spatial processes that produce them) are partially “outside” the logic of capitalist urbanization, it is assumed that their subsumption is an impending reality. By contrast, my historical study of the production of space in the countryside shows that *reversals* of capitalist space-making are indeed possible, and the resulting spaces can be resilient over long periods of time. The incompleteness of planetary urbanization is therefore a structural rather than transitory condition of the production of space under capitalism. Second, a key argument in my dissertation is that non-capitalist modes of production of space have little to do with the modes of spatial production in earlier epochs; instead, they are constitutive elements of the “modern” world. By engaging in a historical study of a critical juncture in the imagination and institutionalization of “rural” spaces

in India, I am able to highlight the sharp breaks that separate non-capitalist modes of production of space that belong to the “modern” world from those that belong to earlier epochs.

While these theoretical arguments form the common spine of this dissertation project, the empirical chapters develop these arguments by focusing on three very different aspects of the production of rural space. In Chapter 2, based on a study of the career of N. G. Ranga (an economist and peasant leader from South India), I examine how the “village community” was conceptualized in India’s developmental discourse during the late-colonial and early-postcolonial periods. Chapter 3 focuses on the fiscal institutions for financing and managing road infrastructure in the countryside, and offers an institutional and political explanation for the skewed pattern of road networks serving the countryside. Finally, in Chapter 4, I focus on the reproduction of the “moorings” of a marginalized community (i.e. Dalits or ex-untouchables) in one village in South India over the course of the 20th century, despite the ongoing integration of the village in both labor and commodity markets. In each chapter, I will demonstrate that the production of rural spaces was made possible by the *reversal* of capitalist accumulation as a result of the gradual democratization of the developmental regime from the late-colonial period onwards. But before I describe the empirical research questions and methodological approaches I have taken up in each of these chapters, I begin by placing the common theoretical arguments that I develop through these analyses in relation to the scholarly literature.

1. Capitalist Urbanization and the Peasantry: A selective review of the literature

Let me begin by revisiting the argument that “society has been completely urbanized”, which appears in Lefebvre’s 1970 book, *The Urban Revolution* (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 1). Clearly, the “urban” in Lefebvre’s declaration does not refer merely to dense agglomerations of people and

economic activity (what Brenner and Schmid call “concentrated urbanization”), since large numbers of people continue to live in less densely populated areas. Nor does it refer to places with a predominance of non-agricultural economic activities, since the agricultural sector continues to represent a significant (if decreasing) share of the global economy. Instead, it refers to a stage of social transformation in which the *production of space*, which in earlier times was ancillary to the production of other commodities, becomes fully commodified and acquires a central place in the regime of capitalist accumulation. Just as an industrial society supersedes an agrarian one by subordinating agriculture to its own needs, so does Lefebvre’s “urban society” supersede industrial society. Whereas cities in an agrarian society perform primarily political, and subsequently, mercantile functions, the emergence of industrial capital makes the city productive in its own right, and eventually creates the conditions for the emergence of an “urban fabric” that transcends the boundaries of the city and “corrodes the residue of agrarian life”. Writing in 1970, Lefebvre presented this as a hypothesis for the future trajectory of the global economy. But he also offered the emerging pattern in the United States, where “peasants have virtually disappeared” (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]: 4), as a signpost for where things were headed in the rest of the world.

It is true that Lefebvre’s later writings are less teleological than *The Urban Revolution*. Nevertheless, Lefebvre remained committed to the notion that the capitalist mode of production reconstitutes social space in its own image on a worldwide scale. Writing in 1980, he insisted that “the capitalist mode of production realizes itself. It constitutes itself as a totality that circumscribes, destroys, and absorbs obstacles” (Lefebvre, 2009: 218). From a South Asian perspective, the obvious difficulty with such a formulation lies in the fact that petty commodity production (in which labor is not fully alienated from the means of production) remains, even in

the 21st century, the modal organizational form of large portions of the economy (employing an even larger section of the total working population). Lefebvre indirectly addresses this problem by making a distinction between the *relations of production* and the *mode of production*. Criticizing the tendency to conflate the two categories, Lefebvre argues that a mode of production consists not merely of the particular relations of production in a given instance, but also of the legal, social, and spatial institutions that mediate between different processes of production and consumption. Indeed, he points out that “a mode of production is only affirmed as such and only merits this name if it has given rise to a space (and a social time)” (Lefebvre, 2009: 216-18). Peasants, artisans, and other petty commodity producers might survive as part of the capitalist mode of production, but only after their economic activities have been entirely subordinated to the demands and rhythms of “urban society”.

Lefebvre’s arguments are similar in many respects to the work of Jairus Banaji (1977a; 1977b), who has produced some of the strongest theoretical justifications for rejecting any conception of peasant agriculture as a “mode of production” in its own right.² Intervening in the raging “mode of production” debates of the 1970s,³ Banaji (1977a) argued that a mode of production must be thought of in *epochal* terms, involving historically determinate “laws of motion” specific to it. In a related essay focusing on the peasantry in late-19th century Deccan, Banaji (1977b) argued that the increasing role of moneylenders and merchants in peasant production provides an indication of the *formal subsumption* of labor into capital, wherein capitalist domination occurs without any explicit change in the technological or organizational

² I am grateful to Sai Balakrishnan for first suggesting that I engage with the work of Jairus Banaji on this question.

³ For reviews, see Thorner (1982) and Byres (1985).

aspects of the production process.⁴ The trouble with the Banaji's use of Marx's concept of *formal subsumption*, however, is that Marx himself thought of it primarily as a transitional stage leading to the *real subsumption* of labor into capital, which occurs when the capitalist class "seizes the initiative" and takes direct control over the production process (Marx, 1986:196-198). The question then arises: more than 150 years after Marx's original exposition of this concept, why does the emergence of a "specifically capitalist" labor process elude peasant agriculture despite the continuing vitality of capital in general?

This is the problem that animates Kalyan Sanyal's recent attempt to intervene in this longstanding debate. Reviewing various Marxist theories of underdevelopment since the 1960s, Sanyal (2007: 8-37) notes that the theoretical problem posed by the survival of the peasantry has been solved by resorting either to historicism (in which the peasantry is represented as a residue of an earlier historical epoch that is bound to be liquidated sooner than later) or to functionalism (in which it is explained away by "capital's need"), or some combination of the two. Sanyal finds neither solution convincing, since the continued numerical preponderance of the peasant agriculture in many parts of the Third World cannot be denied, and it cannot be attributed to the superior ability of peasants to produce surpluses for capitalists either. Sanyal's imaginative solution to this thorny problem is based on a rejection of both historicist and functionalist explanations of the survival of non-capitalist labor processes (Sanyal, 2007: 38-39). Sanyal argues that earlier explanations of the peculiar character of capitalist development in the Third World have failed to appreciate the changed political circumstances since World War II.

⁴ Based on these arguments, Banaji rejects a variety of alternative characterizations of peasant agriculture: Utsa Patnaik's thesis of "semi-feudalism" (Patnaik, 1971); the "articulation of modes of production" thesis advanced by Althusserian structuralists; and Andre Gunder Frank's argument that the emergence of capitalism essentially coincides with the expansion of commodity production (Frank, 1975).

Whereas epidemics, famines, emigration, and military casualties took care of many of the populations rendered surplus as a result of capitalist development until the 1940s, these avenues of “managing” surplus populations are no longer available to postcolonial states as *politically legitimate* solutions (Sanyal, 2007: 44-47). According to Sanyal, capitalist development therefore takes the form of primitive accumulation and *its reversal*, in which the “outsides” of capital are reproduced by deliberately reuniting dispossessed surplus populations with the means of production necessary for their survival. Sanyal also attempts to conceptually distinguish this “need economy” from that part of the “informal sector” which is indirectly exploited by capital.

Sanyal’s work has been the object of sympathetic critiques by several post-Marxist thinkers, who have noted the difficulty of identifying non-capitalist modes of production that are not subject to indirect modes of exploitation by capital (Gidwani, & Wainwright, 2014; Jan, 2012). In my view, the main difficulty with Sanyal’s work is that he focuses his entire attention on the first moment in the “arising” of capital – the moment of “primitive accumulation” in which the bourgeoisie dispossesses peasants of means of production to give rise to capital *qua* capital, and to swell the ranks of wage labor (Sanyal, 2007: 51-54, 144-48).⁵ Sanyal proceeds to make a sharp distinction between primitive accumulation and subsequent moments in the process of capitalist accumulation: *formal* and *real* subsumption of labor into capital.⁶ By

⁵ Like many other scholars in recent years (Mezzadra, 2011; Hall, 2013; Ince, 2014; Nichols, 2015; Levien, 2015), Sanyal theorizes primitive accumulation as an ongoing process, rather than relegating it to the “prehistory” of capital. However, unlike some other scholars, Sanyal argues that primitive accumulation neither requires extra-economic compulsion, nor is it the result of extraction of surpluses from communities of petty producers. Instead, Sanyal argues that primitive accumulation must be identified (only) by its *effects*: primitive accumulation can be said to have occurred whenever the “capitalization of already existing means of labor” (Sanyal, 2007: 51) can be observed. More importantly, Sanyal does not limit his analysis of primitive accumulation to the transfer of “fixed” means of production (such as land); even when movable commodities like foodgrains flow to the capitalist sector as a result of market exchange, this may entail primitive accumulation insofar as the foodgrains no longer serves as the means of labor for certain activities in the non-capitalist sector (p. 144-151).

⁶ Whereas the former does not involve any surplus extraction, the expanded reproduction of capital in the latter moments depends explicitly on the realization of surplus value.

conceptualizing non-capitalist production as the result of reversals of primitive accumulation, Sanyal therefore suggests that petty commodity producers are also excluded from subsequent moments in the process of capitalist accumulation. Instead, he argues that these petty commodity producers are part a “need economy” that has no functional relevance for the reproduction of capital. Sanyal’s attempt to identify a set of economic activities that cannot be attributed to “capital’s need” however leads to a methodological contradiction – since he argues against functionalist explanations of peasant production on methodological grounds, his attempt to identify a surplus population whose existence is *not functional* for capitalist accumulation proves to be equally untenable for similar methodological reasons (Sanyal, 2007: 239-241). Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find peasants operating entirely on their own account without relying on banks, moneylenders, or other sources of finance tied directly or indirectly to global circuits of capital. In short, distinguishing between “surplus labor” and the “reserve army of labor” proves to be empirically untenable.

While these are indeed legitimate critiques, I believe that they are not as fatal to Sanyal’s theoretical project as many would believe. Instead, I argue that Sanyal’s theoretical project can be made defensible if it is modified in two key respects. First, despite conceptualizing primitive accumulation as an ongoing process, Sanyal appears to retain an implicit sequencing in his understanding of the process of capitalist accumulation, such that primitive accumulation necessarily precedes formal and real subsumption of labor. In reality, we can find all three moments of capitalist accumulation operating simultaneously upon peasant producers, and therefore it is not necessary to assume that the reversal of primitive accumulation necessarily frees peasant producers from the processes of surplus extraction associated with formal or real subsumption. Second, it is also not necessary to assume that the “outsides” of the capitalist

production are reproduced only through the reversal of primitive accumulation. In fact, there are many ways in which capitalist developmental regimes reverse the process of formal subsumption of peasant production into capital (e.g. by establishing state-subsidized cooperative banking for peasants). Similarly, developmental regimes have also been known to directly initiate improvements in the production process, while allowing peasants to retain some portion the surpluses generated through these investments (e.g. by investing in rural electrification while subsidizing the costs of farmers' electricity consumption). Insofar as developmental regimes in most parts of the world (including the advanced capitalist countries) routinely undertake such actions to protect smallholders, the articulation of capitalist and non-capitalist production relations in commodity space can therefore be conceptualized as a combination of three moments: a) primitive accumulation and its reversal; b) formal subsumption and its reversal; and c) real subsumption and its reversal.

If the existence of such reversals is acknowledged, many theoretical debates are reduced to mere semantic disputes that do not add much to our understanding of the world economy. Indeed, there is only a small gap between those who would see the survival of peasant production in a capitalist economy in terms of *multiple labor processes within the capitalist mode of production* (e.g. Banaji), and those who would describe it as the *complex articulation of multiple modes of production within a capitalist regime of accumulation* (e.g. Sanyal and other Althusserian structuralists). However, in this dissertation, I am interested in advancing a narrower argument against Lefebvre's claims regarding the "complete urbanization of society". It is worth noting that Lefebvre defines a "mode of production" as a set of relations of production which produce a "space" of their own – a social space that operates according to the logic of the production relations that give rise to it. Indeed, Lefebvre's argument is that capitalist

urbanization corrodes all the “traditional” spatial formations of the peasant economy – “customary” exchange relations, the “village community”, and the “Asiatic” mode of producing rural infrastructure. Lefebvre, however, fails to imagine the possibility that spaces reflecting the logic of non-capitalist production may also evolve in order to respond to changing circumstances, (such as the growing penetration of the commodity economy) without being subsumed into capitalist modes of production of space. It is this process of social and spatial transformation that I seek to map through this dissertation project.

Taken together, the three empirical chapters in this dissertation demonstrate that the reversals of capitalist accumulation are necessarily accompanied by the production of “rural” spaces – i.e. spaces that are not governed by the internal logic of capital. In Chapter 2, I focus on *spatial imaginaries* – new conceptualizations of “rural” space that accompanied institutional attempts to transform the countryside in the late-colonial and early-postcolonial periods. In Chapter 3, I shift my attention to the institutional frameworks through which “rural” space is produced by examining the financing of rural road infrastructure in colonial south India. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine how these changing imaginaries and institutions are reflected in the spatial practices of “village communities” during the periods under consideration. Each of the three chapters operates at a somewhat different “level” of analysis, because of which their geographical focus is also somewhat discontinuous. As we shall see, while these chapters have been ordered along the idealist-materialist axis (with the first chapter being more concerned with imaginaries, and the two subsequent chapters being more concerned with the “real conditions of existence”),⁷ this has also led to the selection of progressively smaller units of empirical analysis

⁷ Broadly speaking, the distinction I make between imaginaries, institutions, and practices is based on the “levels” developed by Louis Althusser in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (Althusser, 2014), though there are obvious parallels to Lefebvre’s influential “spatial triad”.

in the later chapters.⁸ In the following pages, I offer a chapter-wise overview of the specific research questions posed in this dissertation project, as well as a note on methodological approaches and the data sources used to answer them.

2. Spatial Imaginaries of the Indian Countryside

It is well known that many nineteenth century writers, including Marx, believed that the village community was the building block of Indian society, though they also believed that the penetration of the modern exchange economy posed an existential threat to the resilience of village communities. By the 1950s, however, India's developmental regime came to rest on a very different set of "spatial imaginaries" - ways of imagining and conceptualizing social and spatial relations in the countryside. Most of the participants in public debates on development continued to think of village communities as the building block of Indian society that ought to be preserved. And yet, across the ideological spectrum, these men also came to assume that the preservation of village communities was compatible with a "commodity-centered" approach to economic development. In other words, rather than referring to an institution that stood apart from the market and the state, the village community came to refer to an institution that could prevent or reverse surplus extraction from peasant producers within a commodity economy. I therefore argue that Indian development discourse experienced a process of *resignification*, in which inherited signifiers – such as the peasant household and the village community – acquired new meanings.

⁸ Chapter 2, which is concerned with spatial imaginaries, is based on a study of Indian development discourse at the national and provincial scales. Chapter 3 examines the fiscal institutions governing road infrastructure at the provincial and regional scales. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine land and labor relations in the countryside on the basis of a detailed study of one "village community". While it would have been ideal for me to analyze the production of rural space simultaneously at all three "levels", empirical constraints have compelled me to adopt a more schematized approach to this dissertation.

I attempt to trace this process of resignification by studying the remarkable career of N. G. Ranga (1900-1995) as a professional economist in the 1920s and as a peasant leader in subsequent decades. An intellectual history of N. G. Ranga is valuable because he straddled the worlds of academia and politics, because of which it is possible to draw relatively unambiguous inferences about the connections between academic and political discourse. I begin with a genealogical analysis of mid-twentieth century development discourse on the village community by emphasizing the distinctness of the empiricist moment in the late-colonial period, when the village community became an object of enquiry for professional economists unencumbered by the baggage of historicism. I argue that such an empiricist approach to the village community made it possible to conceptually reconcile it with generalized commodity production, and demonstrate how such a discursive terrain offered opportunities for both the defenders of colonial rule and anti-colonial thinkers to advance their political agendas. This argument emerges from a detailed analysis of the published writings, memoirs, and correspondence of two such economists – Gilbert Slater, the first professor of economics at the University of Madras (1915-1921), and N. G. Ranga, who studied under Slater at Oxford between 1923 and 1926. Finally, by examining the common presuppositions emerging from Ranga’s debates with a range of political interlocutors from the 1930s onwards, I attempt to demonstrate the normalization of these spatial imaginaries in India’s development discourse.

3. The Rural Infrastructure State in Madras Presidency

Focusing on the history of rural roads in late-colonial India, this chapter interrogates the conceptual distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” infrastructure, and examines how it was used to institutionalize under-investment in the countryside (thus reproducing the

distinction between “urban” and “rural” space). I demonstrate that the distinction between productive and unproductive infrastructure had important implications for the fiscal mechanisms used to finance the construction and maintenance of the transportation network. Whereas certain infrastructures (railways, in particular) were deemed to be productive, such that public investment would “pay for itself”, other infrastructures could only be built as expenditure of state revenue for social welfare. In the first half of the chapter, these theoretical arguments are illustrated using a detailed study of road construction in Tinnevely district in southern India. I show that unpaved rural roads in particular came to be marked as unproductive by a centralizing bureaucracy, because of which funds were systematically diverted for the purpose of railways and other “productive” infrastructures. I further argue that these choices were shaped by the peculiar fiscal incentives created by the prevailing mode of taxation of agriculture, because of which the colonial state was not able to extract the surpluses that investment in rural roads could potentially generate.

These skewed patterns of investment were remedied to a certain extent after the constitutional reforms of 1919-20, after which native elites were able to exercise partial control over the provincial and local levels of government. But even if the quantity and direction of the bias in public expenditure began to shift after the 1920s, it is my contention that the underlying categorical difference between investments in “urban” and “rural” space remained firmly in place. In the second half of the chapter, I defend this claim on the basis of a detailed study of local governments at the district and sub-district level in Tinnevely and Ramnad – two adjoining districts in southern India. My analysis relies on data collected at the archives of the provincial government, including budget documents, administration reports, applications for provincial grants, and papers regarding a number of local controversies regarding road construction. By

retaining control over the fiscal basis of local government, the colonial bureaucracy was able to systematically frustrate attempts of native elites to increase the pace of infrastructure investments in the countryside and to treat rural infrastructures as investments of capital that can “pay for themselves”. As a result, even as local government expenditures on rural road infrastructure grew significantly during the 1920s, these did not lead to the kinds of institutional reform in local government finance necessary to treat rural roads as forms of capital.

4. The mobility/moorings dialectic and the reproduction of village communities

Whereas the second and the third chapters focus on the ways in which rural space is produced at the level of imaginaries, and through fiscal institutions, the final chapter attempts to theorize the production of rural space the level of spatial practice. Specifically, this chapter argues that village communities are reproduced in the Indian countryside because, and insofar as, the moorings of village residents – *their freedoms to stay put* – are not translated into forms of capital. At an empirical level, this chapter attempts to demonstrate the resilience of non-capitalist moorings within a capitalist economy, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of such moorings for the social mobility of excluded communities. Moreover, I argue that the relationships between mobilities and moorings are necessarily contingent and operate differently during different historical junctures. Whereas there is a general tendency among scholars across the social sciences to equate social mobility with spatial mobility, this chapter attempts to highlight the indispensable role of moorings in the village community in shaping the trajectories of social mobility for many rural populations.

These arguments are developed on the basis of a detailed study of two adjoining administrative units (“revenue villages”) in southern Tamil Nadu for which I have been able to put together a historical archive based on village studies conducted since 1917, as well as oral histories collected during my own fieldwork in one of the villages in this region. My empirical analysis attempts to explain the remarkable social mobility experienced by the Pallars of this region, who belong to the lowest rung of India’s caste hierarchy,⁹ from the 1940s onwards. Specifically, I focus on the mechanisms by which land in these villages – which was previously held by the upper and intermediate caste landlords – came to be transferred to their Pallar tenants. Commenting on the same set of villages, previous observers have attributed the social mobility of Pallars to their migratory practices as plantation workers to various parts of South and South-East Asia, which enabled them to bring back small savings to invest in land. However, I argue that such explanations fail to explain why much of the transfer of land took place precisely at the juncture when the spatial mobility of these Pallars had been sharply curtailed – i.e. during and immediately after World War II.

By contrast, I argue that the transfer of land was enabled by a reconstitution of moorings as part of the process of political democratization from the 1940s onwards. By claiming rootedness in village communities, Pallar tenants were able to portray landlords as parasitic “outsiders”, and compel the postcolonial state to take their side in conflicts over land tenure. Precisely at the time when upper caste elites were trading off their moorings in the countryside for mobilities enabled by English education, Pallars sought to acquire moorings and re-embed them within the village community in order to resist the intensification of surplus extraction by

⁹ Like most of the other ex-untouchable (i.e. Dalit) castes, Pallars were subjected to a number of indignities and exploitative labor arrangements in the past, and continue to suffer from various forms of marginalization and discrimination.

proto-capitalist landlords. It is through these reversals of the accumulation process that village communities were reproduced well into the 20th century in southern India.

Chapter 2

The village speaks back: Village studies, peasant politics, and the spatial imaginaries of Indian developmentalism

So they use my phrases in their own way and to suit their own conveniences.

- Mahatma Gandhi to N. G. Ranga, Madras, 1927 (Ranga, 1969: 2)

1. Introduction

Whether as a site of authenticity, backwardness, or oppression, the village community has long occupied a central place in discourses of Indian developmentalism (e.g. Dewey, 1972; Jodhka, 2002). Indeed, the way in which village communities have been represented in development discourse provides a great deal of insight into how development itself has been conceptualized by different ideological formations at particular historical junctures. For this reason, scholars have examined the portrayal of Indian villages in the writings and speeches of bureaucrats, politicians, and public intellectuals (Dewey, 1972; Brass, 1994; Jodhka, 2002; Rudolph, & Rudolph, 2010; Mantena, 2012), in official enquiries, development projects, and reports (Zivin, 1998; Sinha, 2008; Sackley, 2013; Immerwahr, 2015), in architectural designs and physical plans (Glover, 2012; Windsor Liscombe, 2006), in sociological theory (Mayer, 1993; Jodhka, 1998; Marriott, 1989), and in literary fiction and cinema (Nandy, 2001; Mohan, 2012). Spanning two centuries of Indian developmentalism, this literature includes studies of utopian, romantic, realist, and dystopian portrayals of village India. Set within wider debates over the legitimacy of imperial rule, the meaning of national autonomy (*swaraj*) in the Indian context, the tension between Western modernity and indigenous tradition, and the historical necessity of a full-

fledged transition to capitalism on a worldwide scale, these ‘images’ of the village community have proved flexible enough to be used for multiple, sometimes contradictory, ideological and political projects.

In analyzing the political projects of the late-colonial and early-postcolonial periods (approx. 1915 to 1965), many scholars have tended to focus primarily on the chains of signification through which the village community is deployed in political rhetoric, often as a metaphor for other forms of community (ethnic, national, religious etc.). For instance, scholars have examined the ways in which the notion of the self-sufficient village community, first deployed by colonial bureaucrats as an “alibi for empire” (Mantena, 2010), was used by anti-colonial thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi to advance a radical critique of Western institutions and offer what he considered a more authentic vision of Indian nationhood (Jodhka, 2002; Mantena, 2012).¹⁰ Gandhi’s arguments were, in turn, the subject of sharp critiques by the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru (for whom national autonomy required that village communities be reorganized into rural cooperatives using modern techniques of production),¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore (who insisted that the nation form in itself was inauthentic and stood in contradiction to the spirit of village republicanism)¹² and B. R. Ambedkar (who argued that Gandhi’s village republics were merely an alibi for the perpetuation of caste inequality in India).¹³ Scholars have also recognized the transnational influences on development discourse in 20th century India,

¹⁰ Gandhi’s clearest statement of his belief in the centrality of the village community to Indian nationhood can be found in *Hind Swaraj* (Gandhi, 2014 [1909]).

¹¹ For a good review of the debates between Gandhi and Nehru in the mid-1940s, see Rudolph & Rudolph (2010).

¹² For a penetrating analysis of the differences between Gandhi and Tagore, see Chatterjee (2011).

¹³ While there have been many restatements of the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate, the most imaginative attempt to theorize what was at stake comes from the Kannada scholar D. R. Nagaraj (2010). For Ambedkar’s polemical critique of Gandhi, see Ambedkar (1946).

including the flow of ideas from American experiments in regional planning and community development (Sackley, 2013; Immerwahr, 2015), as well as Soviet and Chinese models of rural development made possible by inter-governmental exchanges (Khan, 1978) and the activities of aid agencies and missionary organizations (Zivin, 1998; Zachariah, 2005; Sinha, 2008).

However, while scholars have emphasized the multifarious *uses* of the village community in political rhetoric to represent processes of autonomy, exploitation, or exclusion, my concern is that these arguments presumptively reduce the village community to an empty signifier whose meaning typically bears no relationship to any particular class of referents. For instance, in his intellectual history of development discourse in late-colonial India, Benjamin Zachariah has argued that the village community was an “invented indigenism... put to different uses in different arguments” (Zachariah, 2005: 294). According to Zachariah, the concept of the village community performed both a descriptive and an evaluative function within development discourse, thus providing certain terminologies and conventions that competing arguments had to conform to in order to derive legitimacy in the public sphere. Zachariah’s argument nevertheless implies that these commonly used signifiers possess no meaning of their own, but instead derive meaning in any particular instance only through their usage in political rhetoric; their ability to generate legitimacy appears to be the result of homophily rather than any underlying ideological continuities inherent in Indian development discourse. It is in this sense that Zachariah’s history of development discourse in India reduces the village community to an empty signifier.

Like Zachariah (2005), I argue in this chapter that intellectual exchanges between competing political projects tend to *produce* a common discursive terrain consisting of a finite set of signifiers (such as the village community). However, this chapter also emphasizes the necessity of paying closer attention to the changing relationships between signifiers, their

meanings (both descriptive and evaluative), and ultimately their referents (in this case, actually existing villages) through which this common discursive terrain is produced and which makes it the object of ideological struggle. In other words, whereas Zachariah and other historians have sought to trace the shifting meanings of the signifiers used in development discourse primarily *within* discourse itself, I argue that contestation over signifiers and their meanings is often carried out by altering their relationship with certain *empirical* referents. In this case, I argue that a wide range of new entrants in the public sphere transformed the meanings associated with the village community in the late-colonial and early-postcolonial periods not just by fashioning new connections with signifiers such as “democracy”, “socialism” or “cooperation” (as Zachariah might aver), but also by deploying new modes of knowledge production about actually existing villages to decouple many of the characteristics that were previously assumed to go hand in hand in the making of a “village community”.¹⁴

In this chapter, I illustrate my argument by focusing on the remarkable career of N. G. Ranga, an economist of considerable academic repute in the 1920s who turned into an influential peasant leader and politician of national stature in subsequent decades. While Ranga’s politics (like that of many other peasant leaders) was invariably geared towards preserving the interests of the so-called “middle peasants” (Patnaik, 1976) as opposed to marginal peasants and landless farm laborers, the establishment of peasant associations and unions nevertheless constituted a significant widening of the public sphere outside the major urban centers of colonial India. And yet, my analysis complicates the tendency of some scholars to draw a straight line between

¹⁴ My argument needs to be differentiated from William Glover’s hypothesis that sociologists and urban planners in the mid-20th century reimagined the relationship between cities and villages by conceiving them along a “folk-urban continuum”, which allowed for the possibility that certain “traditional” social forms could be built into “modern” townships (Glover, 2012). However, such an argument merely places actually existing social formations along a continuum without interrogating the possibility that even the idealized notion of the village community was being imagined differently than in the past.

Gandhian nationalism and the ideology of populist peasant movements (Brass, 1994; Brass, 1997). I show that, as a self-acclaimed representative of rural interests, Ranga sought to establish a heterodox position within Gandhian discourse regarding the essential characteristics and the future role of the village community in an independent India. Like Gandhi, Ranga was committed to the notion that an authentically Indian model of development would place village communities comprising of peasants and petty producers at the center of development policy. However, whereas orthodox Gandhians remained committed to the notion of village self-sufficiency based on subsistence production and “customary” exchange as a necessary condition for ending the exploitation of the countryside (Kumarappa, 1946), Ranga placed greater emphasis on equalizing the relationship between cities and the countryside within a broadly commodity-centered framework of economic development.

I argue that Ranga was able to reconcile Gandhi’s advocacy for reviving village communities with the necessity of coming to terms with generalized commodity production because of two discursive shifts that one can observe in his career. First, there was a marked tendency in Ranga’s political rhetoric to evaluate the well-being of peasant households in terms of the money value of their farm profits, as opposed to other non-pecuniary ways of evaluating well-being. Second, he explicitly decoupled the meaning of autonomy for peasant communities from the goal of village self-sufficiency, and instead tied it to the concept of non-exploitation within the context of a commodity economy. But as I have argued earlier, the significance of Ranga’s discursive strategy did not lie merely in these acts of resignification. Instead, much of its persuasive power had to do with the connections he was able to forge between signifiers and referents, which lent support to the descriptive and evaluative meanings he wished to advance. For instance, drawing extensively on a newly emerging practice among economists of

conducting farm cost surveys (including many that he himself had conducted or supervised), Ranga sought to contrast the low income levels and growing incidence of peasant indebtedness in many villages with instances of prosperity among certain “progressive” peasant households. This, in turn, helped him argue that unequal and extractive exchange relations between the city and the countryside lay at the root of the decline of village communities, rather than commodity production as such.

Ranga’s interventions within the Gandhian discourse of “rural reconstruction” during the late-colonial and early-postcolonial periods (i.e. the 1930s-1950s) are important to understand, because they help illustrate the process by which a national consensus eventually emerged in favor of an essentially commodity-centered framework for economic development (which nevertheless sought to protect rural peasants from the vagaries of market capitalism). However, I do not mean to imply that Ranga’s understanding of the village community was more accurate or authentic than the orthodox Gandhian position merely by virtue of his peasant origins, or in deference to his academic expertise on the subject. Indeed, this chapter neither claims to offer an empiricist account of what the village community actually was at a certain historical moment, nor a “history from below” of how the village community has been conceptualized by the subaltern classes. Instead, I attempt to show that the expansion of the public sphere in the final decades of colonial rule was accompanied by a reconceptualization of the village community within development discourse, involving changing relationships between signifiers, concepts, and their ultimate referents. I therefore take seriously the vicissitudes of commercialization that actually existing villages were experiencing during the late-colonial period, while also acknowledging the role of new modes of knowledge production in generating particular representations of these processes within the public sphere.

Theoretically, my argument draws inspiration from on the critical realist tradition of discourse analysis, and particularly from Bob Jessop's work on the role that social and spatial imaginaries play in the making of economic policy. Jessop (2012: 8) defines an imaginary as "a semiotic ensemble (or meaning system) that frames individual subjects' lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world". As Charles Taylor (2002) has argued, such imaginaries consist of widely held beliefs which are often consumed in the form of images, stories, etc., even though they might have their origins in the theoretical work of a few influential thinkers.¹⁵ However, the critical realist approach is distinctive in its insistence that the selection and retention of imaginaries is dependent on a variety of extra-semiotic processes without which language and semiotics could not generate meaning (Fairclough, Jessop, & Sayer, 2002; Jessop, 2004).¹⁶ In this chapter, I have used the term 'spatial imaginary' to describe the common discursive terrain that is produced through the interaction between different ways of representing village communities. Such a spatial imaginary does not merely describe the social relations *contained* in a village community, but also the social relations that *produce* it. It is in this sense that Ranga's attempt to reconcile the village community with commodity production constitutes a shift in the spatial imaginaries of Indian developmentalism.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor's work, of course, does not bring spatiality into the conversation explicitly. For a discussion of the analytical advantages of thinking about social imaginaries in spatial terms, see Watkins (2015).

¹⁶ While I rely on Bob Jessop's recent theoretical writings for developing my argument, the same point was made many years ago by Stuart Hall in his appreciation of Althusser's early work. As Hall (1985) notes: "If Derrida is correct in arguing that there is always a perpetual slippage of the signifier, a continuous 'deference', it is also correct to argue that without some arbitrary 'fixing' or what I am calling 'articulation', there would be no signification or meaning at all. What is ideology but, precisely, this work of fixing meaning through establishing, by selection and combination, a chain of equivalences?"

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows. In the section II, I begin by engaging in a deeper theoretical discussion regarding the way in which the village community has been deployed within Indian development discourse. Navigating various strands of post-Marxist scholarship on Indian developmentalism, I develop the theoretical argument for thinking about the village community in postcolonial development discourse as signifying a space of non-capitalist commodity production.¹⁷ The second half of the chapter attempts to unpack the processes by which a new spatial imaginary became ingrained in India's development discourse in the final decades of colonial rule by tracing its evolution in the writings of two professional economists who were active participants in public discourse on agricultural and rural development: Gilbert Slater and N. G. Ranga. My analysis of Slater and Ranga is primarily based on a careful analysis of their published writings, speeches, memoirs and correspondence relevant to the period under consideration (approx. 1915 – 1965). In this section, I describe the emergence of an empiricist tradition of village studies in Madras Presidency after 1915, and the role of this new mode of knowledge production in unsettling established ways of thinking of the village community. Moreover, I argue that Ranga's peasant politics made him a natural champion of for petty commodity production as a way of life. Finally, based on a brief survey of Ranga's shifting engagements within the national movement, I show that his conceptualization of the village community as a space of non-capitalist commodity production was normalized within Indian developmental discourse by the 1940s.

¹⁷ The theoretical argument I present poses a clear and direct challenge to the urbanist discourse in Henri Lefebvre's work. However, since I have already offered a detailed critique of Lefebvrian urban theory in the introductory chapter (chapter 1), I do not repeat these arguments here.

2. Development Planning and the Village Community: An Analysis of Development Discourse

In early months of 1959, a major controversy erupted regarding the nature of agrarian reforms envisioned by India's development planners. In the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress party,¹⁸ Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his allies pushed through a resolution that called for the organizational pattern of Indian agriculture to move towards "cooperative joint farming, in which land will be pooled for joint cultivation".¹⁹ The immediate impetus for the resolution came from the need to minimize the inflationary effects of public investment in heavy industries by increasing agricultural production, and the limited success of the earlier "Community Development" projects in achieving this goal (Frankel, 2006: 153-155). As a first step, the resolution called for the immediate implementation of land ceilings and landlord abolition by state governments, and expediting the establishment of service cooperatives that would provide farmers with agricultural extension services, inputs (seeds and fertilizer), marketing support, and credit. However, the eventual goal was to increase agricultural yields by consolidating land parcels and introducing "joint farming" at the village level without entirely doing away with private property in land (Narayan, 1959). By pooling fragmented parcels of agricultural land, it was hoped that village cooperatives will be able to achieve efficiencies that increased agricultural yields, while also freeing up surplus labor in the village for the construction of durable assets (such as school buildings, irrigation channels, bunds, and wells) that could enhance the productivity of both land and labor in the medium term.

¹⁸ The Indian National Congress was the political party that took a leading role in India's independence movement, and it dominated over smaller political parties during the period under consideration.

¹⁹ Accessed in the pamphlet titled "Cooperative Farming: The Great Debate" published by the Democratic Research Service in 1959.

The proposal for joint farming was not a new addition to debates on development policy in India at the time – apex policy-making institutions such as the Planning Commission had been signaling their support for such an intervention in Indian agriculture since the early 1950s.²⁰ The report of the 1948 Agrarian Reforms Committee of the Indian National Congress, authored by J. C. Kumarappa, had also explicitly recommended joint farming as a necessary component of the land reforms to be carried out by Independent India – especially in areas with high population density and fragmentation of land.²¹ However, the push for joint cooperative farming (which borrowed some elements of the Chinese model of collectivization) coincided with the outbreak of military hostilities between India and China, and India’s growing dependence on American aid. In addition to these external factors, the extent of disquiet both within and outside the Congress ranks towards the Nagpur resolution forced Nehru and his colleagues to defer the enactment of Parliamentary legislation mandating the establishment of joint farming cooperatives (Frankel, 2006: 167). Absent the active support of the regional leaders of the Congress, it was evident to many observers that such a policy was doomed to fail from its very inception. By the mid-1960s, amidst massive food shortages and a crisis of confidence in the planning process, technological interventions associated with the Green Revolution had almost replaced all talk of joint farming and other organizational and institutional interventions in Indian agriculture (Rudra, 1978).

Scholars operating within Marxist and Weberian traditions of political economy have typically attributed the failure of Nehru’s land reforms policies to the weak institutionalization of

²⁰ Planning Commission (1953), *First Five Year Plan*, New Delhi, chapter 10.

²¹ Indian National Congress (1948), *Report of the Agrarian Reforms Committee*. New Delhi: All India Congress Committee. Accessed at: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.275621>.

the colonial state apparatus inherited at the time of independence, as well as the class composition of India's political regime. For instance, Francine Frankel (2006) has explained the limited impact of land reforms in the 1950s primarily in terms of the paradox between accommodative politics in an electoral democracy and the demands of radical social change in an underdeveloped economy. Since the state apparatus lacked a strong organizational presence in many parts of the countryside, and because the Congress party relied on traditional elites in order to mobilize support, the Nehruvian regime was unable to implement policies that would radically transform existing social structures.²² As a result, development interventions in the countryside, such as the Community Development projects inaugurated in the early 1950s, were typically captured by rural elites and failed to produce an impetus either for the redistribution of land and political influence, or for a rapid increase in agricultural output (Sinha, 2008; Immerwahr, 2015). The Nagpur resolution in 1959 regarding joint farming cooperatives was, from this perspective, a desperate effort by the Nehruvian regime to free itself from the political constraints within which it was compelled to operate.

And yet, as Frankel has observed, the ideological landscape of 1950s India was not neatly divided into 'progressives' or 'socialists' eager to pursue the twin goals of industrialization and agrarian reforms, and 'conservatives' committed to status quo. For Gandhians such as J. C. Kumarappa and Shriman Narayan Agarwal, the proposal for establishing village cooperatives was attractive because it elevated the village community to a central place in India's development policy.²³ While they questioned the necessity of capital-intensive industry except in

²² Variants of this argument can be found in the works of Pranab Bardhan (1999), K. N. Raj (1973), Rudolph & Rudolph (1987), Kohli (2004), and Varshney (1995).

²³ For an intellectual history of J. C. Kumarappa, see Govindu & Malghan (2016). A summary of Shriman Narayan's views on the institutionalization of village democracy can be found in his book titled *A Gandhian Constitution for Free India* (Agarwal, 1946).

some special cases (e.g. railways and steel), they were willing to accept some industrialization so long as the state ensured the balanced development of both rural and urban areas. At the same time, socialists like J. B. Kripalani, Jayaprakash Narayan, and Ram Manohar Lohia came to espouse the principle that industrial production should be as decentralized as technologically feasible to prevent the concentration of power (Appadorai, 1968). After Independence, many socialists were also willing to agree to a more gradualist and non-confrontational approach towards the socialization of agricultural land. Having left the Congress, either to form splinter parties or to lead in non-political reform movements, most of the Gandhians and socialists had no direct access to state power (Frankel, 2006). Nevertheless, with Nehru at the helm, much of this ideological consensus was reflected in the official plans of the national government.

The opposition to the proposal for joint farming also drew on a variety of arguments from across the ideological spectrum. At one end, peasant leaders like N. G. Ranga and Charan Singh were committed to ensuring that independent peasant proprietorship remained the predominant form of land tenure in the countryside.²⁴ They were also concerned about the possibility of cooperative farming being used by the state to transfer surpluses from the countryside to large-scale industrial investments, and the likelihood that joint farming will leave a large number of peasants redundant once “uneconomic” land holdings have been pooled together. By contrast, advocates of *laissez faire* (e.g. B. R. Shenoy and Mino Masani) were concerned that the proposal amounts to the bureaucratization of agriculture and will lead to further inefficiency and misalignment of incentives in agricultural production.²⁵ Congress dissidents such as C.

²⁴ This chapter contains a detailed assessment of Ranga’s intellectual journey. For a critical assessment of Charan Singh, see Byres (1988).

²⁵ For Shenoy’s straightforward advocacy of neoclassical economics in the Indian context, see Shenoy (1958). Mino Masani began his career as a member of the socialist party, but by the 1950s, he was seen as a representative of the Bombay business community in national politics. His association with big business possibly made him

Rajagopalachari and K. M. Munshi were also concerned about the centralization of political power in the hands of Nehru and his acolytes, and the resulting threat to India's fledgling democracy. By May 1959, most of these dissidents (with the exception of Charan Singh) had joined hands to form the Swatantra Party, united by their opposition to Nehru's model of state-led development.²⁶ Given that many of the second-rung leaders of the Congress also shared the concerns of these dissidents, the government was forced to postpone and eventually drop the proposal to establish joint farming cooperatives.

While the Nagpur Resolution and its aftermath has generally been analyzed in order to identify the structural and contingent factors that led to the failure of Nehru's agrarian reforms strategy, my purpose in beginning with these debates is to highlight the common ground upon which different ideological positions on the question of agrarian reforms were *discursively* articulated during this period. As the above discussion amply demonstrates, it is not possible to establish a one-to-one correspondence between class interests, forms of political representation, and the discursive strategies used by different ideological groups to make claims upon the developmental state. For instance, the necessity of protecting the autonomy of the peasantry was

unwilling to reject development planning entirely; instead he advanced a more limited critique of rent-seeking under the new regime. See Masani (1951).

²⁶ In 1972, Ranga himself provided a clear distinction between the three distinct ideological groups that came together to form the Swatantra Party in 1959:

“When we founded the Swatantra Party, I for one gave the highest priority for the protection of Peasant Proprietorship and self-employment of Peasantry and artisans. Bombay friends were more keen on the protection of private enterprise. Rajaji [C. Rajagopalachari] was specially bent upon developing Parliamentary Opposition and preventing totalitarianism from gaining a stranglehold on our nascent democracy. As we continued to develop our Comradeship, all of us managed to weave these three objectives into the political fabric of the Party; even while each of us continued to lay special emphasis on our varying favorite themes, making concessions to our respective special interests and themes.” (Ranga, 1974: 588-89).

By the early-1970s, Ranga's political goals had begun to diverge from the goals of the party as a whole, because of which he returned to the Congress. But, as he argued at the time, this did not necessarily imply any ideological inconsistency on Ranga's part. See also Erdman (1963).

cited both by the supporters and the opponents of village cooperatives. Indeed, in such cases, it is analytically rewarding to investigate the common underlying concepts and assumptions that make it possible for different political actors either to express their disagreements and engage in debate with their opponents, or to arrive at a negotiated consensus regarding the means and ends of development (Zachariah, 2005). Moreover, these discursive terrains are no more ‘natural’ than the ideological debates and negotiations that take place upon them; they are essential components of the ideological regimes that produce and are produced by what Althusser described as the “real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 2014).

Critical analyses of development have productively attempted to identify the common structure of development discourse and the political implications of such a discursive formation. For instance, Partha Chatterjee (1993) has argued that development discourse in the 1950s can be understood as an attempt to create conditions for the “passive revolution” of capital in an overwhelmingly pre-capitalist economy. Since the bourgeoisie in postcolonial India was too weak to wage a frontal attack on pre-capitalist social forms, especially in the agricultural sector, the developmental state sought to facilitate capitalist accumulation by establishing “a synthetic hegemony over the domains of both civil society and the pre-capitalist community” (Chatterjee, 1993: 212-213). From such a perspective, it is misleading for development planners to diagnose the food shortages of the 1950s and 1960s in terms of their failure to anticipate the opposition to productivity-enhancing land reforms generated by entrenched rural rentier classes. Instead, Chatterjee insists that development planning was consciously constructed as an apolitical and technocratic realm of decision-making whose very purpose was to enable capitalist accumulation in the “modern sector” *without* imposing upon pre-capitalist village communities the “unnecessary rigors” of a full-fledged transition to capitalism through a process of “primitive

accumulation”. A hegemonic discourse suitable for India’s “passive revolution” had to therefore represent development planning as “a positive instrument for resolving conflict” among different social classes, while simultaneously portraying the establishment of a modern industrial sector and the revival of village communities as mutually compatible goals (Chatterjee, 1993: 208-09).

For Chatterjee, such a representation of the development planning process by development economists constitutes an act of “self-deception” – not only because it attempts to render class conflicts amenable to technical solutions, but also because it equates the particular interests of the modern sector with those of the nation as a whole. For instance, drawing on the Sukhamoy Chakravarty’s definitive account of development planning in India (Chakravarty, 1988), Chatterjee notes the emergence of a “general consensus on a commodity-centered approach” among different ideological factions competing for state power. Such a consensus, for Chatterjee, represents the particular will of the modern sector (i.e. capital), and necessarily results in the “steady erosion of the viability of small-peasant agriculture” (even if this is not the stated goal of the developmental state) (Chatterjee, 1993: 214). To restate Chatterjee’s argument, a democratic developmental regime may not always be able to rapidly dispossess either rural elites or the peasantry from traditional agriculture, but so long as the regime sought to integrate various sectors into a single market economy, economic surpluses could be transferred from traditional agriculture to the modern sector through other mechanisms such as taxation, price manipulation in markets for manufactured and agricultural commodities, and by engaging in deficit financing for capital investment. At the same time, the discursive incorporation of the village community within a depoliticized development discourse made it possible to conceal the mechanisms by which the so-called “urban bias” is reproduced by India’s developmental regime (Lipton, 1977).

However, as discussed in the introduction, one of the difficulties with such an analysis of development discourse is that it tends to relegate categories such as the village community, which play a central role in the legitimation of the developmental regime, to the status of empty signifiers. Chatterjee's mode of argumentation shares the tendency of other post-development scholars to analyze development as a unitary discursive formation that takes the accumulation of capital as its primary object (Escobar, 1995).²⁷ In post-development theory, it follows that all other signifiers used in development discourse (such as the village community) must occupy subsidiary positions within the discursive formation, and their meanings can be fixed only in reference to the primary object of development discourse – the accumulation of capital. In my view, Chatterjee conflates a “commodity-centered approach” to economic development with one that emphasizes the accumulation of capital in the modern sector, thus failing to recognize the possibility that a commodity economy can also sustain non-capitalist modes of production. In his recent work, Kalyan Sanyal has pursued the theoretical possibility that generalized commodity production can serve as the basis for the emergence of a “complex hegemonic order” in which “capitalist development necessarily produces... non-capitalist economic processes in its own course” (Sanyal, 2007: 7). A hegemonic development discourse in such a situation would contain heterogeneous elements, including some that call forth new modes of knowledge production and subject formation that valorize non-capitalist commodity production in the public sphere and facilitate greater political participation among peasants and petty producers.

In Sanyal's historical account of development discourse, the emergence of a heterodoxy valorizing non-capitalist commodity production occurred concurrently with the “discovery” of

²⁷ For critiques of post-development theory, see Corbridge (2007) and Gidwani (2002). For a critique specifically directed at Partha Chatterjee's narration of postcolonial development discourse, see Bose (1997) and Ludden (1992).

the so-called “informal sector” by the International Labor Organization in the 1970s.²⁸ Whereas the earlier distinction between “traditional” and “modern” sectors was, according to Sanyal, steeped in the logic of “transition” (i.e. the historicist notion that pre-capitalist social formations must eventually be annihilated by capital), development economists and practitioners in the 1970s became more receptive to the possibility that the informal sector was a structural feature of capitalist development and had to be managed and provided for. However, Sanyal is curiously reluctant to trace the genealogies and historical antecedents of the informal sector idea in earlier versions of development discourse. Following Chatterjee’s line of reasoning, he portrays development planning in the early decades of postcolonial India as a discursive formation organized around accumulation as its primary “nodal point” (Sanyal, 2007: 94-96). Operating within this analytical frame, both Sanyal and Chatterjee have sought to highlight the strategic use of Gandhian metaphors (and the slippages of meaning within development discourse) to generate popular legitimacy for policies favorable to capitalist accumulation from the 1950s onwards. In both their arguments, it is only in the 1970s that the deepening engagement of subaltern classes and the state led to the reformulation of development discourse to acknowledge the need to manage the surplus populations produced by the capitalist accumulation of the earlier decades.

Chatterjee’s and Sanyal’s accounts of Indian developmentalism in the 1950s are not entirely implausible; indeed, they offer a fairly consistent explanation for Nehru’s agrarian strategy during this period. As mentioned earlier, while the establishment of village cooperatives were often represented as the fulfillment of the Gandhian vision of village republicanism within Indian development discourse, the main goal of development planners was to contain the inflationary pressures generated by rapid investment in heavy industries and to maintain what

²⁸ For an intellectual history of the “informal sector” as an idea, see Peattie (1987) and Bangasser (2000).

Sukhamoy Chakravarty has called a “cheap food regime”.²⁹ Chakravarty may be correct in noting that development planners in India in 1950s did not explicitly theorize the agricultural sector as a source of *investment surplus* to be transferred to the industrial sector (unlike Soviet theoreticians in the 1920s) (Chakravarty, 1988: 20-22). Nevertheless, as Michal Kalecki had observed at the time, the institutional challenge facing Indian development planners was to rapidly increase the marketable *food surplus* from the agricultural sector, without increasing prices or allocating scarce capital for technical improvements in agriculture. One could argue that village cooperatives were intended to solve this problem by channeling the labor power of previously under-employed peasant-workers to create productive assets in the countryside *without* any significant increase in their purchasing power. In other words, state-supported village cooperatives would serve as conduits for the modern sector to extract the *relative surplus* generated by the agricultural improvements made possible by cooperative farming, even as the developmental regime sought to legitimize itself by citing village cooperatives as examples of the revival of “village communities”.³⁰

However, it is important to stress that such an attempt to subordinate village communities to the needs of the “modern sector” was not successful – at least in this instance. Contrary to Lefebvre’s argument regarding the countryside being gradually incorporated into the “urban fabric” (Lefebvre, 2003), the events of 1959 demonstrate that peasant leaders such as N. G.

²⁹ This tendency is reflected in the writings of some of the leading technocrats of the Planning Commission in the 1950s, such as Tarlok Singh (1969) and V. T. Krishnamachari (1957).

³⁰ Sanyal (2007: 144-151) does argue that the policies of the Nehruvian state, insofar as they enabled the “capitalization of the means of labor” by directing agricultural commodities to the capitalist sector, constitute primitive accumulation even if they do not lead to any inter-sectoral transfer of surplus. However, Sanyal’s argument here seems to undercut his own premise that commodity production in itself does not entail a transition to capitalism. Consequently, in Chapter 1, I have argued against making a sharp distinction between primitive accumulation and the accumulation of capital and instead treat the former as merely one moment in the general process of capitalist accumulation.

Ranga and Charan Singh were able to exercise sufficient influence over development policy to defend the principle of independent peasant proprietorship. More importantly, it is important to note that both sides of the debate operated on a discursive terrain in which the necessity of protecting village communities and preventing the exploitation of the countryside was taken for granted. In fact, one could make the case that it is the industrial capitalists who appear to have suffered from false consciousness, since many of them vigorously opposed reforms that were aimed at curbing price inflation experienced by urban consumers (thereby preventing a steep rise in wage payments in organized industries). For this reason, I argue that the strategy of legitimation adopted by the state presupposed a discursive terrain that generated opportunities for a variety of class interests to be articulated in the public sphere. While the possibility of making countervailing claims did not always guarantee the protection of peasant interests, we can still infer that the hegemony of capital over developmental discourse in India remained incomplete.

This chapter focuses on how the presuppositions through which this shared discursive terrain, on which both the supporters and the critics of the Nehruvian regime were able to operate, was constituted. To begin with, the fact that Gandhian traditionalists and Nehruvian modernists found common ground on the issue of village cooperatives makes it evident the debate was no longer carried out on the terrain of modernity vs. tradition. While the need to reorganize villages along “modern” lines or to preserve certain “traditions” continued to be invoked,³¹ both sides of the debate on joint farming had equal recourse to modernity *and* tradition. Instead, the debate centered on the question of whether market actors was more likely

³¹ For instance, Nehru defended the joint farming proposal as the “only way to utilize science,” because the coordination between large numbers of peasants to achieve the efficiencies of irrigation management crop planning would not be possible otherwise. See *Cooperative Farming: The Great Debate*, Democratic Research Service (1959: 23-24).

to perpetuate unequal relationships between the city and the countryside as compared to state agencies. In my reading of this debate, competing ideological views were built on the common assumption that the preservation of the village community had to be rendered compatible with generalized commodity production in an industrializing economy. In other words, the operative assumption was that the penetration of the exchange economy into the countryside did not pose an *intrinsic* threat to the survival of village communities, so long as it did not serve as a conduit for exploitation of the countryside. For the supporters of the Nagpur resolution, this meant that the state had to put in place adequate arrangements (such as the establishment of cooperatives) to ensure that small peasants were not exploited by landlords, wholesalers, or moneylenders. By contrast, opposition leaders criticized the Nagpur resolution on the grounds that state-controlled cooperatives would enable the state to directly extract surpluses to meet its industrial investment goals, thus perpetuating unequal relationships between the city and the countryside.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I make two theoretical contributions to the scholarship on Indian development discourse in the 1950s. First, whereas Sanyal and Chatterjee seem to suggest that the Gandhian terminology deployed by the development discourse of the Nehruvian regime operated as empty signifiers, I argue that such an analysis fails to take into account the discursive shifts that occurred between the 1920s and 1950s. Earlier interventions, by professional economists and leaders involved in peasant mobilization (such as N. G. Ranga), had already cleared the ground for reconciling the notion of autonomy for “village communities” at the conceptual level with the participation of actually existing village communities in the market economy. By the 1950s, such an understanding of village communities became a part of the common discursive terrain that a range of political actors, representing different social classes and cutting across the ideological spectrum, operated upon. Second, I also argue that the

discursive incorporation of the village community in India's developmental regime was not merely a ruse meant to generate legitimacy for a regime of capitalist accumulation, but instead points to the fact that capitalist accumulation in a postcolonial context is necessarily accompanied by a series of reversals aimed at managing surplus populations engaged in non-capitalist modes of commodity production. Whereas Chatterjee and Sanyal associate these reversals with the deepening of electoral democracy in the 1970s, this chapter identifies the historical antecedents of both these processes, as well as the associated discourses and practices of knowledge production.

3. Reimagining the countryside: Village Studies and peasant politics in late-colonial Madras

In order to explain how the “village community” came to be reimagined by Indian elites in the late-colonial period, it is useful to begin with the meanings conventionally associated with the signifier during the heyday of colonial rule. As scholars such as Clive Dewey (1972) and Karuna Mantena (2010) have pointed out in their studies of colonial discourse in the nineteenth century, the colonial bureaucracy and its ideologues came to see the survival of the self-sufficient and autonomous ‘village republic’ in India despite repeated political upheavals as evidence of the static character of ‘traditional’ Indian civilization. In the famous minutes of Thomas Munro and Charles Metcalfe,³² which later inspired commentaries by the likes of Maine, Mill, and Marx,

³² To reproduce Charles Metcalfe's oft-quoted description of village communities:

“The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything that they can want themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down... but the village community remains the same... If a country remain for a series of years the scene of continued pillage and massacre, so that the villages cannot be inhabited, the scattered villages nevertheless return whenever the power of peaceable possession revives... This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of India through all the revolutions and changes which

such village communities were understood to be held together by ‘customary’ obligations between member-households based on their location in the social hierarchy of the village. As new transportation infrastructure allowed the circulation of people and commodities, and as ‘status’ gave way to ‘contract’ in the determination of prices, wages, and rents, it was assumed that the social cohesion of the village community would also disintegrate. Within this discursive framework, the British Empire could legitimize itself both as the inheritor of the great pre-colonial empires by allowing for the natural evolution of village communities, and as a necessary disruptive force that brings these static village communities into the ambit of modern civilization (Mantena, 2010). The reverse was also, to some extent, true: subjugated peasants could resist the extractive and exploitative colonial apparatus by speaking of the traditional duties of the ruler, as well as by representing themselves using discourses of propertied citizenship and agricultural ‘improvement’ (Sartori, 2014).

It has been argued that the colonial regime produced the village community as a space partially removed from the market economy by codifying certain kinds of entitlements as belonging to the realm of ‘custom’ (Washbrook, 1993). This would imply that the essence of the village community that traditionalists like Gandhi sought to reclaim was largely the construction of colonial rule. Moreover, for much of the nineteenth century, participants in the debate over the relative merits of different forms of land tenure (landlordism, individual proprietorship, joint control etc.) disagreed not just over the relative importance of defending ‘customary’ arrangements, but also over what constituted ‘custom’ in the first place. In other words, the village community operated to some extent as an empty signifier employed by different sections

they have suffered, and is in a high degree conducive to their happiness, and to the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence. (cited in Dewey, 1972: 296-97).

of the colonial bureaucracy to defend their preferred revenue arrangements (Dewey, 1972). However, underneath these differences within the colonial regime, colonial discourse in the nineteenth century operated on a teleological model in which ‘custom’ and ‘contract’ were located at opposite ends of the evolutionary ladder. As new communications infrastructure expanded into the countryside, and villages came into increasing contact with the outside world, it was assumed that the gradual penetration of the market economy into the countryside must lead to the gradual passing away of the village community as a mode of social organization (Mantena, 2010).

My argument is that the emergence of new modes of knowledge production about the countryside coincided with, and arguably gave rise to, the gradual shift away from evolutionary approaches to the ‘village community’. As many historians of colonial India have shown, the abilities of the colonial state to observe, classify, document, and eventually govern the various populations and activities over which it ruled increased substantially from the 1870s onwards (Cohn, 1996; Kalpagam, 2014). These data gathering capabilities were also reflected in the more centralized and standardized mechanisms of land revenue collection devised by district administrations in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Already by the 1890s, B. H. Baden-Powell (1896) had challenged Henry Sumner Maine’s evolutionary approach towards the Indian village community on the basis of more detailed revenue resettlement reports produced by district collectors in various parts of British India.³³ However, the full consequences of this shift

³³ According to Maine (1876), the communal ownership of land was the original basis of the formation of the village community, and the emergence of private property was one stage in the evolution of society from status to contract. Based on the more substantial evidence available to him by the 1890s, Baden-Powell (1896) insisted that institutional variations in land tenure that he was able to document cannot be seen as different stages of evolution in a single process, but instead reflect the natural heterogeneity in the internal structure of village communities. Consequently, Baden-Powell understood the role of the colonial state more in terms of directly managing these heterogeneous social forms in the manner in which they were found, rather than creating the conditions for their gradual evolution from one set of institutional arrangements to another.

towards a certain kind of empiricism in the representational practices of the colonial public sphere were felt only in the early decades of the 20th century, when the colonial state sponsored the establishment of departments of sociology and economics in many of the leading universities in India – those of Bombay, Calcutta, Allahabad, and Madras.³⁴ As I will show in this section, the institutionalization of the village as an object of empirical enquiry was an essential step in the processes of resignification that occurred around the notion of the village community in the inter-war period.

A slim volume published in 1918 by Professor Gilbert Slater, titled *Some South Indian Villages*, was one of the first instances of data on Indian villages produced outside the direct supervision of the colonial state (Slater, 1918).³⁵ Slater had been appointed Professor of Economics at the University of Madras in 1915, and the book consisted of twelve detailed case studies, authored by Slater and students from different districts in the Madras Presidency and nearby princely states.³⁶ Each case study included information on demographics, living conditions and public amenities, agricultural production and handicrafts, land tenures and employment relations, household budgets, etc. By modern standards, the survey lacked any

³⁴ For a history of the establishment of sociology departments in colonial India, see Patel (2016). A detailed history of the establishment of economics departments in India is yet to be written, though a contemporaneous note from H. Stanley Jevons provides some clues (Jevons, 1925). See also Sivagnanam (2016).

³⁵ Harold Mann's *Land and Labour in a Deccan Village* appeared in print around the same time as Slater's work, though Mann had begun his researches much earlier (Mann, 1917). Mann was an agricultural economist stationed at the Poona Agricultural College during this period. Indeed, as Slater records in his memoirs, Mann was one of the first men he visited when he arrived in India, and his surveys of villages in South India were inspired by Mann's work in Poona (Slater, 1936: 23-28). However, as we shall see, Slater was in a better position to influence the economics profession and therefore his work had a more lasting impact.

³⁶ According to Slater's memoirs, he began the project by carrying out a study of Eruvellipet in South Arcot district – a village whose biggest landlord happened to be the father of Slater's student at the University of Madras (Slater, 1936: 54-55). Slater's visit to Eruvellipet was only four days long. Based on this "survey", he created a questionnaire in the form of a bound notebook, which was distributed to students from various parts of the Presidency upon completion their B. A. degree. Prizes of 15 rupees each were announced for those who filled up the questionnaire over the summer with the greatest amount of detail, and these entries were edited to produce Slater's classic volume (Slater, 1936: 69-71).

rigorous methodology to guarantee representativeness, or even consistency across the twelve case studies. For the purpose of this chapter, however, what is significant is the absence of any consistent effort to locate these villages within any framework of historical development, evolutionary or otherwise. Slater's efforts eventually blossomed into a flourishing empiricist tradition of "village studies" among subsequent generations of sociologists and economists, especially in southern India.³⁷ But Slater was an unlikely candidate to lead the empiricist moment in the study of Indian society. Before arriving in India, he had authored a detailed study of the enclosures in the English countryside, a sweeping history of modern England (Slater, 1913), and a historical sociology of peace and war among the leading European nations (Geddes, & Slater, 1917). In most of his writings – including a later book on the Dravidian civilization (Slater, 1924) – he exhibited a keen historical sensibility that was at odds with the dogged empiricism that he sought to inculcate among his students – many of whom would become highly influential in policy circles in subsequent decades.³⁸

I believe that Slater's insistence on empiricism was a direct response to the particular social and political circumstances he found himself in. Writing a foreword to a book published by one of his students after his return to Britain, Slater bemoaned the tendency for economic enquiry by nationalist thinkers such as D. N. Naoroji and M. G. Ranade to become "the handmaid of political agitation," leading to the "search for economic facts and fancies that could be used against the government" (Slater, 1925: xi-xii). And yet, most of his students were drawn

³⁷ I discuss this literature in greater detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

³⁸ The illustrious list of economists who came directly under Gilbert Slater's influence include: P. S. Lokanathan, P. J. Thomas, P. Padmanabha Pillai, S. Subbarama Aiyar, K. C. Ramakrishnan, and N. G. Ranga (whose work I study in this chapter). Other economists, such as B. V. Narayanaswamy Naidu, B. Natarajan, C. W. B. Zacharias, and Malcolm Adiseshiah were indirectly influenced by the traditions of empirical analysis that Slater left behind in Madras. After a long career at the University of Madras, Malcolm Adiseshiah established the Madras Institute of Development Studies, which remains the leading center for village studies research in present day Tamil Nadu.

from those very social classes that were most prone to come under the influence of the nationalist movement, and he was aware that he was unlikely to be able to convince them that colonial rule had exerted a benign influence on India's rural economy. By insisting on presentism and empiricism while framing the research questions for the village studies undertaken by his students, Slater was able to sidestep the question of historical responsibility in these investigations – even as he continued to offer Malthusian and ecological explanations for Indian poverty in his general remarks.³⁹ At the same time, projects initiated by Slater and other empirical economists helped establish a discursive space in which both supporters and critics of the colonial state could usefully participate in the production of facts about the village economy (such as income levels of different social classes) regardless of their political leanings. At a time when Indian elites were demanding more avenues for political participation, such interventions therefore had the democratizing effect of bringing in competing viewpoints together on a more even discursive terrain.

This particular mode of expansion of the colonial public sphere in the early twentieth century had two significant implications for the way in which village communities were conceptualized as part of the political contestation between the colonialist and anti-colonial thinkers. First, I argue that it remained necessary for different participants in this discursive terrain to continue to treat “village communities” as the ontological basis for Indian society as a whole, and actually existing villages as the empirical referents of these “village communities”. To suggest otherwise, for apologists of the colonial regime, would have been to admit that colonial rule had destroyed the constituent units of Indian civilization even as the “material

³⁹ For instance, in the concluding chapter of *Some South Indian villages*, Slater insisted that high fertility rates caused by the prevailing social mores surrounding marriage and family life in India were the primary cause of Indian poverty (Slater, 1918).

progress” and “improvement” promised by colonial ideology had largely failed to materialize. At the same time, the success of the projects of “rural reconstruction” disseminated by anti-colonial thinkers equally required the survival, at least in a weak form, of what had come to be seen as the spiritual core of Indian civilization – the village community. This is not to say that all villages were assumed to meet specific criteria, such as reliance on “customary” modes of dispute resolution. But the empiricist approach did operate on the premise that, whatever the changes *within* a given village over the course of the nineteenth century, it continued to be the most legitimate *unit of analysis* for the study of the rural economy.

This leads me to my second argument. Whereas in classical colonial discourse, the village community was seen as an obstacle to the deeper penetration of the market economy in India, it was now conceptually possible to delink the village community from the notion of “customary” exchange. In other words, the resilience of community institutions and the level of commoditization of the village economy could be seen as two independent attributes of the village community, without making any a priori assumptions about their relationship or historical trajectory. For instance, in *Some South Indian Villages*, Slater (1918) began with a brief description of Eruvellipet, a village near Madras city that he had personally surveyed, as a “small, almost self-contained, Dravidian community” (p. 11) which continued to maintain a common fund for religious purposes paid for by the produce of roadside trees and fisheries – a “testimony to the existence of village solidarity” (p. 14) which one could no longer take for granted. For Slater, the fact that the same village was also deeply enmeshed in the worldwide market economy, involving the widespread circulation of both workers and commodities, posed no necessary contradiction. Slater’s approach also involved a significant change in how collective action by village communities was understood: whereas previously such collective

action could be thought of as passive adherence to “custom”, the new discourse treated it as the outcome of the active cultivation of cooperative instincts. On one hand, such a conceptualization of the village community was attractive to anti-colonial thinkers because it implied the compatibility of a “traditional” institution to modern challenges; on the other hand, it could fit easily within discourses of colonial tutelage due to its ahistorical character.

Gilbert Slater’s ability to uncouple the penetration of commodity economy from the resilience of village cooperation was a small but necessary step in the evolution of the discourse on village communities in India. As discussed earlier, nineteenth century colonial discourse (as well as the Gandhian orthodoxy of the twentieth century) conceptualized the ideal village community as a space of “self-sufficiency” unperturbed by the market economy. By contrast, I have shown that the empiricist moment in academic and policy discourse on the Indian countryside (for which Gilbert Slater serves as an exemplar) produced a significantly different spatial imaginary in which the market economy did not automatically indicate an existential threat to the village community as a corporate entity. However, I am yet to address two problems that have arisen in the analysis of development discourse conducted in the previous section. First, how did the new spatial imaginaries become normalized within Indian development discourse, such that they could be taken for granted in the debates on rural development of the 1950s (as we have seen in the previous section)? And second, to what extent did the resulting discursive terrain provide opportunities for peasants and petty producers to resist the primacy accorded to capitalist accumulation at their expense? In order to answer these questions, I turn to the remarkable career of N. G. Ranga as an economist and as a peasant leader starting in the 1920s.

* * *

In order to understand Ranga's unusual career in academia and politics, it is useful to begin with a brief biographical note.⁴⁰ Ranga was born in 1900 in a wealthy Kamma (intermediate caste) farming household in Nidubrolu, a village in the Guntur district of present-day Andhra Pradesh. The Kammas are one of two main land-owning castes in the coastal Andhra region, but like most intermediate peasant caste groups in colonial India, they lacked a tradition of higher education and the experience of migration to bigger cities like Madras.⁴¹ As a result, Kammas had typically lagged behind upper castes, and Brahmins in particular, in acquiring positions in government and the law courts; consequently, they were also under-represented in the newly emerging public sphere of the late-colonial period. As Ranga writes in his autobiography, he was initially drawn to the opposition of Brahmin domination by the non-Brahmin movement for this reason, but eventually came to reject what he saw as narrow-minded competition for governmental favors in favor of a more radical anti-colonial politics led by Gandhi, linked to the mobilization of peasants and artisans. As we shall see, Ranga's account of the development of his political consciousness helps us understand the particular projects he took up, both as a young scholar in the 1920s and as a peasant leader from the 1930s onwards.

When Ranga sailed to Britain at the age of twenty to train for the elite Indian civil service (I.C.S.) examinations, his immediate goal was to help alleviate the suffering of the peasants in his community by joining the bureaucracy responsible for revenue collection. However, he was influenced by Gandhi's non-cooperation movement (1920-22) to give up his pursuit of the I.C.S., and chose to get a research degree in economics at Oxford instead. Coming under the influence

⁴⁰ Much of my biographical information is based on Ranga's autobiography, *Fight for Freedom* (Ranga, 1968).

⁴¹ The spatial mobility of Kammas increased in later years, as Dalel Benbabaali (2018) has shown, though the patterns of mobility shifted after Independence and the establishment of Andhra Pradesh as a separate state.

of Gilbert Slater in 1923 (who had returned to Oxford by this time), Ranga wrote a thesis on the economic organization of villages of Andhra, with special attention given to the economics of cotton cultivation and handloom weaving. According to Ranga's autobiography, Slater expressed reservations with the attempt to produce a defense of khadi (handspun and hand-woven cloth) in the thesis and wanted Ranga to focus only on the economics of agricultural production. Ranga refused to relent, and to his credit, Slater defended Ranga's work when the thesis examiners raised doubts regarding the economic viability of hand-spinning and handlooms. He went on to publish the sections of his thesis concerning agriculture in two parts under the title *Economic Organization of Indian Villages*,⁴² while the sections on the handloom industry were published separately (Ranga, 1926; 1929; 1931). After graduating, Ranga taught economics at Pachaiyappa's College in Madras city between 1927 and 1930, while also conducting economic surveys for the provincial government in Madras.

While I have drawn on Ranga's autobiography to describe his early career in the previous paragraph, I suspect that he had a tendency to overstate Gandhi's influence on his thinking in those early years. More importantly, it is likely that Ranga was not fully forthcoming in acknowledging his intellectual debt to Gilbert Slater for the arguments he advanced on the economics of village industries. Indeed, far from being opposed to the handloom industry, Slater had consistently supported some form of protection for small-scale textile production in Indian villages at least since the early-1920s (Slater, 1936: 28). Because South Indian agriculture, in particular, required the participation of a large number of workers during the crucial time of

⁴² The first part of *Economic Organization* dealt with existing conditions in deltaic villages in coastal Andhra based on surveys conducted between 1923 and 1925. In the second part, Ranga carried out partial resurveys of the same villages, added new surveys of dry villages in coastal Andhra, and also examined the possibility of migration from the overpopulated deltaic villages to less populated areas in Hyderabad state.

sowing and harvest, but demanded fewer hours of work during other months, Slater appreciated the utility of village industries that can employ workers in the lean seasons (Slater, 1925: xv-xvii). Following Slater's line of reasoning in almost every detail, Ranga's thesis took the position that hand-spinning, handlooms and other village industries were needed to alleviate the problems of overpopulation and under-employment in the countryside, even if they were not likely to be competitive in comparison to mechanized textile mills. More importantly, unlike Gandhi, Ranga's advocacy for policies favoring the handloom industry was not part of an attempt to make village communities "self-sufficient" in meeting their subsistence needs. To the contrary, Ranga's study of the village economy implicitly assumed that both peasants and village artisans were engaged in commodity production for the market.⁴³

One of the most important factors that led to the Indian peasant being recast as a commodity producer was the belated interest in late-colonial discourse on the standards of living of the peasantry under colonial rule. Earlier village surveys had typically been carried out by the colonial bureaucracy with the purpose of determining the appropriate level of land revenue. Since the land revenue was technically seen as *rent* on land (rather than being a tax on *income*), the state was primarily concerned with the money value of the gross agricultural produce, of which a fixed portion was considered its rightful share.⁴⁴ Since the rent was collected in cash, nineteenth century surveys did treat the output of peasant farms as commodities possessing

⁴³ These conceptual differences had practical implications. For instance, orthodox Gandhians had an ambivalent relationship with a large number of handloom weavers, since they used machine-made yarn for their products, whereas the *khadi* cloth that Gandhi promoted had to be produced from handspun yarn. By contrast, Ranga maintained strong interest in mobilizing handloom weavers throughout his career (regardless of their choice of yarn) (Ranga, 1969: 1).

⁴⁴ It was common for the colonial state to argue that its "customary" share of the total produce, which it had inherited from the pre-colonial rulers of South Asia, amounted to about half the *gross* agricultural produce of land. If the actual rent amounted to a smaller share of the total produce, colonial writers – including Gilbert Slater (1918) – tended to view this as indicative of the benevolence of British rule in India.

exchange value. However, since the peasant was assumed to be a subsistence producer, the state did not have to consider either the cost of *purchased* inputs or the cost of *borrowing* money to sustain peasant agriculture as part of the circuit of commodity production.⁴⁵ By the 1920s, village surveys were being conducted for an entirely different purpose – estimating standards of living of different social classes. Under prevailing economic conditions, the cost of agricultural inputs (including the cost of borrowing working capital) could no longer be ignored in these surveys.⁴⁶ And yet, existing methodologies for surveying Indian villages were not designed to generate any useful information on these costs.⁴⁷

A new cohort of professional economists in the 1920s played an important role in developing new methodologies that could remedy the defects of earlier survey methods. For instance, in Ranga's village surveys, the emphasis on analyzing household and farm budgets played an important role in recasting peasants and artisan households as market actors engaged in commodity production. Ranga went to great lengths to triangulate data from multiple sources, calculate rates of depreciation for farming equipment and livestock, and to estimate the notional

⁴⁵ For a sample of such studies of agricultural production produced by the colonial bureaucracy in the 19th century in southern India, see Bagchi & Bandyopadhyay (2015). In the “ryotwari” system that prevailed in Madras Presidency, the state directly collected the revenue from the proprietor (who may or may not be the actual cultivator). The revenue was decided on the basis of soil classifications for different types of irrigated and unirrigated land, as well as the prevailing prices for the different crops typically cultivated on that land. Settlement officers were expected to apply a “commutation rate” to account for the cost of production. However, in the absence of any systematically collected data on the actual costs, commutation rates were determined on the basis of rough percentages rather than systematic investigations.

⁴⁶ Because of the privatization of village commons and greater state control over local forests, many of the inputs that peasant agriculture depended upon experienced a steady process of commodification from the late-nineteenth century. Furthermore, levels of agricultural indebtedness reached very high levels during the depression years. For empirical illustration of these processes, see Chapter 4.

⁴⁷ Indeed, even as late as 1921, when Gilbert Slater was asked to estimate income levels for the Madras Presidency as a whole, he had little information on the costs of cultivation that could inform his estimates of the value of agricultural production in the Presidency. In effect, he was compelled to use the gross output (itself prone to several measurement errors) as the best estimate of gross value added, thus entirely disregarding the costs of cultivation. See Slater (1918: 352-355).

costs of family labor, so as to produce a relatively complete accounting of farm and household budgets (compared to his predecessors).⁴⁸ However, so long as Ranga remained true to the particular combination of empiricism and presentism that Slater imposed on his students, he was unable to use this evidence to assess the role of colonial policies in the impoverization of the Indian peasantry. Instead, Ranga used comparisons between households to identify possibilities for more prudent farm management, as well as the development of new income-generating activities in the countryside.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, he attributed the weakening financial position of many small and marginal peasants (as manifested in the high levels of indebtedness) to wasteful consumption rather than structural causes.⁵⁰ Indeed, Ranga's emphasis on individuals who had skillfully managed their limited resources seemed to be designed to suggest that the roots of rural distress did not lie in commercialization per se.

As Ranga stepped out of Slater's shadow in his subsequent work, he began acknowledging the various ways in which *surplus extraction*, as opposed to the inability of peasants to increase their labor productivity, contributed to the poverty of village communities in coastal Andhra. The evolution of Ranga's economic thought is clearly evident in the report of the Economic Enquiry Committee constituted by the Government of Madras to look into the land

⁴⁸ In his memoirs, Slater (1936: 103) describes Ranga's approach to calculating the budgets of households and enterprises in the following terms: "His method was to have a talk with the man, whether master-weaver or wage-earner, first, then separately with his wife, his employer or the merchant with whom he dealt, and with the neighbors, and to reject the statements as unsatisfactory unless they tallied. Obviously much enthusiasm for the task, together with tact and perseverance, were needed for its accomplishment."

⁴⁹ Based on variations in the efficiency with which different cultivators were able to manage their farms, he identified the ideal farm size for maximizing yields. He also offered assessments of the potential for other income-generating activities such as horticulture and animal husbandry, handlooms, carting for road construction, etc. (Ranga, 1926: 43-50).

⁵⁰ For instance, he observed a rapid growth in the number of shops and coffee-hotels, as well as an increase in the tendency of young Kamma men to spend their wealth on unnecessary consumption expenditure (drinking coffee, engaging sex workers, seeking English education etc.) (Ranga, 1929: 194-97).

revenue resettlement for Godavari and Kistna districts (1928-30), of which he was the main author. In the more systematic surveys that he was able to carry out for this committee, Ranga was able to quantify monetary outflows in the form of purchase of inputs, rent and interest payments made to “outsiders”,⁵¹ land revenue etc. For several villages, Ranga found that the net income after accounting for these outflows was insufficient to meet the subsistence needs of the resident population.⁵² More importantly, Ranga came to see these forms of surplus extraction as unproductive, as very little of the extracted surplus was reinvested in the countryside in the form of new roads, drainage facilities, etc. Based on these results, the committee recommended a gradual reduction in land revenue, partly compensated by an increase in the budgets of elected local boards responsible for the construction of rural infrastructure.⁵³ The committee also called for increasing the number of cooperative societies in order to limit the dependence of peasants on middlemen, which amounted to the exploitation of the countryside by urban interests.

Despite its many limitations, the empiricist moment in colonial discourse inaugurated by professional economists such as Gilbert Slater therefore offered a useful discursive space for economists in subsequent years to highlight the adverse circumstances of India’s agricultural and artisanal economy. However, by using this space to generate claims against the colonial regime, economists like N. G. Ranga were also subscribing to certain presuppositions on which this

⁵¹ For Ranga, this category included town-based moneylenders and absentee landlords, though it is likely that he also thought of the distinction in terms of the absence of social ties that bind “outsiders” to the village.

⁵² Investigations were carried out for a total of 65 villages, of which complete details were collected for eleven villages so as to calculate aggregate agricultural as well as household budgets. The committee found deficits in the household budgets for all of the eleven villages. See Appendix 34(a) of the *Report of the Economic Enquiry Committee, 1931*.

⁵³ The committee concluded that the ideal level of land revenue should be 25% of net income, calculated on the basis of detailed investigations into the costs of cultivation. Predictably, the revenue bureaucracy responded by angrily criticizing, on methodological and empirical grounds, Ranga’s attempts to calculate the costs of cultivation, while reverting to the usual mode of fixing land revenue as a proportion of the gross output from the land during a typical year. See *Report by B. G. Holdsworth, I.C.S* (Settlement Officer, Revenue Department), 1931.

mode of knowledge production was founded. On one hand, by operationalizing an analytical scheme in which all the inputs and outputs of the agricultural and artisanal production process can be valued in terms of money, Ranga's analysis performatively reinforced a discursive terrain in which the complete integration of peasants into the commodity economy could be taken for granted. On the other hand, by retaining the village community as the unit of analysis for his surveys, Ranga also reinforced the view that generalized commodity production. Whereas non-exploitation in orthodox Gandhian thought required secession from the market economy leading to "self-sufficiency" of the village community (Kumarappa, 1946), Ranga implicitly conceptualized non-exploitation in terms of the *reversal* of surplus extraction through the deliberate actions of the state, operating through village-based institutions such as cooperative societies and village Panchayats. In other words, the village community no longer stood separate from the state and the market; instead, it became part of the developmental apparatus at the local scale that could potentially stem the flow of surpluses from the countryside to the urban economy.

In this section, I have highlighted the processes of resignification as part of which new connections were forged between these inherited signifiers and referents drawn from actually existing village economies. While my argument potentially applies to a number of economists who were involved in studying peasant production during this period,⁵⁴ I have focused on Ranga because of his peculiar social background and career trajectory. Given that Ranga straddled the realms of academic and public discourse, a careful examination of Ranga's intellectual trajectory from the 1920s onwards helps in explaining how a new set of imaginaries about peasant

⁵⁴ For instance, much of my argument could possibly apply to the work of P. J. Thomas, who was a member of the *Madras Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee* (1928-1930), and helped generate much of the accompanying evidence on rural indebtedness.

production came to be normalized within Indian development discourse more broadly.⁵⁵ In the final pages of this section, I provide evidence to support two further claims by examining Ranga's political career and the ideological projects he pursued. First, I argue that the particular spatial imaginaries embedded in Ranga's work became commonplace in nationalist development discourse more broadly, such that competing ideological groups were able to operate on the same discursive terrain while articulating their claims in the public sphere. Second, whereas post-Marxist scholarship on development discourse in postcolonial India suggests that this discursive terrain primarily served as ideological cover for the accumulation of capital under a statist political regime, I argue that it also allowed for ideological projects that sought to ensure the resilience of non-capitalist modes of commodity production.

* * *

Ranga may have trained as an economist in the 1920s, but his initiation to political activism occurred as early as in 1917, when he played a leading role in the movement to establish libraries in the villages of the Guntur region.⁵⁶ Between 1923 and 1925, he was involved in organizing district-level peasant conferences alongside the village surveys that he was carrying out under Slater's guidance. Indeed, throughout the late-1920s, Ranga's economic surveys were conducted in association with official and quasi-official organizations that were also involved in setting policies for land revenue, irrigation, forest access, and the formation of village Panchayats in the region. By the early-1930s, Ranga had become a full-time politician,

⁵⁵ Here, I do not mean to suggest that Ranga was the medium for the unilinear transmission of spatial imaginaries from the economic profession to the wider public sphere. Instead, my argument is that Ranga's ability to operate in both realms makes the underlying presuppositions about social space more transparent, thereby giving us a glimpse into the production of the common discursive terrain on which all social actors necessarily operate.

⁵⁶ This brief introduction to Ranga's political career is drawn from the editor's introduction to Ranga's *Modern Indian Peasant* (Ranga, 1988 [1936]).

and expanded his political operations to Zamindari areas by leading a movement of tenants in the estate of Venkatagiri against the existing conditions of land tenure.⁵⁷ As a peasant leader, he was one of the founding members of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 and the All India Kisan Sangh (AIKS) in 1935. Riding on the organizational strength of the peasant associations established in the 1920s, he entered the Central Legislative Assembly by winning the 1935 elections as the Congress candidate for the Nellore-Guntur constituency. He continued to represent various constituencies of coastal Andhra in Parliament for almost six decades thereafter.

However, for most of his career, Ranga operated at the edges of the political mainstream, and had a particularly uneasy relationship with the Indian National Congress (INC). In the period between 1935 and 1939, the relationship was strained due to the independent and vigorous mobilization of peasants by a coalition between communists and socialists within the AIKS, often in defiance of the commands of the Congress leadership.⁵⁸ The Congress leadership was also significantly concerned by the presence in the AIKS of communists like P. Sundarayya and E. M. S. Namboodiripad, who were opposed to the Gandhian ideals of non-violence and trusteeship (Ranga, 1969: 30-34). N. G. Ranga, Sahajanand Saraswati, and Indulal Yagnik – the three Congressmen who controlled the AIKS during this period – sought to walk a tightrope, arguing for the need of autonomous peasant organizations capable of mobilizing in defense of their interests (even if this meant opposing the policies of the Congress when the need arose),

⁵⁷ Unlike in “ryotwari” areas, the colonial state collected land revenue in zamindari estates through an intermediary, under whose rule cultivators had few legal protections against eviction.

⁵⁸ For instance, as the Congress establishment prepared for provincial elections in 1937, it was discomfited by Ranga’s insistence that several candidates who sought his support publicly swear by a separate pledge drafted by the AIKS (focusing on the protection of peasant interests). Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Vallabhbhai Patel all saw this pledge as evidence of Ranga’s organizational disloyalty. See Ranga (1968: 305-310), Ranga (1969: 40-45) and Ranga (1974: 9-12).

while also insisting on the subsidiarity of peasant struggle to the cause of national liberation.⁵⁹ This strategy was an utter failure; by 1942, the AIKS had fallen entirely into the hands of the communists, thereby forcing a chastened Ranga to reconcile with the Congress leadership (Ranga, 1945; Dhanagare, 1975). But Ranga's rehabilitation within the Congress was also of short duration – he lost the election for the president of the provincial Congress, and formed a new farmers' party in the 1950s (Ranga, 1968: 378-390, 478-480). The rapid growth of the communist movement in Andhra forced the Congress to attempt another reconciliation in the mid-1950s (Ranga, 1968: 508-513), but as we have seen, Ranga left the Congress to help establish the Swatantra Party in 1959. By 1972, the Swatantra Party had become defunct and Ranga had rejoined the Congress yet again (Ranga, 1974: 588-89).

There are two common ways of interpreting the twists and turns of a long and multi-faceted political career such as this. One is the lens of caste and factional politics, focusing on Ranga's relationships with various other individuals of different caste backgrounds, in which his ideological projects are attributed to shifting political coalitions in provincial and national politics. For instance, C. J. Baker (1976) has suggested that his experimentation with a distinctly combative genre of peasant politics from the early-1930s onwards must be understood as a consequence of the dynamics of factional politics in the Madras Presidency.⁶⁰ Similarly, Selig Harrison (1956) has explained his ambivalence with regards to the Congress mainstream as a consequence of the domination over the provincial Congress machinery from the 1930s onwards

⁵⁹ For a detailed elaboration of this strategy, see Ranga's essay titled "Whither Peasant?" (Ranga, 1937).

⁶⁰ According to Baker, Ranga's sudden interest in reforms to the Zamindari system in the early-1930s (and his return to the Congress fold around the same period) was due to the fact that his close political associate and former Chief Minister of the Madras Presidency, B. Munuswamy Naidu, was sidelined by the Raja of Bobbili in the pro-government Justice Party. As a leader of zamindari interests within the Justice Party, the Raja of Bobbili was therefore susceptible to attacks from Ranga on the state of the peasantry in zamindari estates (Baker, 1976: 207).

by Reddy and Brahmin leaders. The second lens through which Ranga's political career can be explained focuses on the relationship between the class interests that Ranga sought to represent, and the organizational repertoires and ideologies that he built over the course of his career. For instance, D. N. Dhanagare (1975) has argued that Ranga operated with remarkable consistency in defending the interests of the rich and middle peasantry.⁶¹ Such an approach explains why Ranga might have joined hands with the communists against the ruling coalition representing the bureaucracy, mercantile capital, and zamindari interests in the 1930s. Equally, the specter of price manipulation, land reforms and collectivization explains why he became a staunch anti-communist in the 1940s, and eventually turned against state-led planning as well (Ranga, 1968: 413-429).

While both of these are legitimate modes of political explanation, this chapter addresses a more limited question that one might raise when attempting to evaluate Ranga's politics. Given that Ranga had to build alliances with a wide variety of political actors over the course of his political career (many of whom had contradictory ideological beliefs), how was he able to tailor his political rhetoric at any given juncture to the particular needs of the coalition, while also remaining ideologically consistent to a significant extent? To be more specific, how do we make sense of the discursive resources that enabled this remarkable flexibility in Ranga's politics? In this chapter, I have examined the use of one such signifier – the village community – in India's developmental discourse. However, I argue that the village community was not merely an empty signifier that could be easily coopted into any political project without any substantive

⁶¹ Categories such as "rich peasant" and "middle peasant" cannot be defined with much precision, but they generally refer to farmers who are directly involved in the cultivation process (as opposed to landlords), but whose operations require the consistent use of hired agricultural laborers. There is some overlap between the category of "middle peasants" and the category of "bullock capitalists" popularized by Rudolph & Rudolph (1987).

implications on the ideological goals that discourse is meant to serve. In other words, the village community cannot be treated as an ideologically neutral signifier that created only the illusion of an underlying consensus; it had definite referents in the real world, and therefore its widespread use suggests that certain ideological presuppositions were in fact normalized by the common discursive terrain that different political actors operated upon.

In order to appreciate the ideological consequences of Ranga's conceptualization of the village community, it is useful to revisit the debate between the Gandhian orthodoxy, which stated that the predominantly agrarian character of India's economy should be preserved, and the socialist position that India should aspire to transform itself into an industrial economy. As a member of the Congress Socialist Party, Ranga rejected the contradiction between industrialization and revitalization of peasant agriculture, and sought to strike a balance between the two poles (Ranga, 1937: 259-63). However, the terms on which Ranga sought to resolve the contradictions between the two objectives went significantly beyond the doctrinaire versions of both Gandhian and socialist thought. On one hand, Ranga doubted the practicability of the Gandhian approach of protecting village communities from exploitation by disconnecting them from the world market and making them "self-sufficient".⁶² On the other hand, he also questioned the view, common among many socialist thinkers of his time, that increasing the land-to-labor ratio in agriculture through consolidation and mechanization of farms was necessary for industrialization, even if it led to the displacement of large numbers of peasants and the dissolution of actually existing village communities. Moreover, his conceptualization of the village community permitted him to reject the assumption that peasants were necessarily

⁶² Ranga made it clear that "however much Indian villages try to become self-sufficing, they cannot entirely become independent of world markets and so unaffected by world movements of prices etc." (Ranga, 1937: 261).

more politically quiescent than other social classes, and therefore incapable of organizing themselves to protect their interests (Ranga, 1945: 81-88).

Ranga's political rhetoric in the 1930s and 1940s anticipated the valorization of non-capitalist modes of production in subsequent versions of development discourse, as described in the work of Kalyan Sanyal, at least on two counts. First, he explicitly rejected both the inevitability and the desirability of the primitive accumulation of capital, which would entail transforming the peasantry into a rural proletariat. Instead, he sought to keep the peasant and the village artisan at the center of India's development policy. Like most Gandhian thinkers, Ranga justified this stance by pointing out that the modern industrial workforce was unlikely to absorb the surplus population in the Indian countryside in the near future, regardless of the vigor with which independent India pursued alternate sources of employment in the secondary and tertiary sectors. Second, by treating peasants as commodity producers driven largely by economic motives, Ranga rejected the tendencies within modernization theory to see the peasant economy as characterized by inertia and conservativeness. Crucially, Ranga insisted that modern peasants were "as much the product of the capitalism as the proletariat," and equally capable of developing class consciousness and organizing in defense of their interests (Ranga, 1945: 86).

Ranga was also not blind to the forms of class differentiation within the countryside, or to the conflicting interests between peasants and agricultural laborers, big and small peasants, and between landlords and tenants within the village. In order to resolve these conflicts, he advocated for the extension of minimum wage legislation to agricultural laborers, progressive taxation in favor of small peasants, and tenancy legislation to extend security of tenure (Ranga, 1937: 303-310). While it is true that his primary constituency, for most of his political career, consisted of the "middle peasants" of coastal Andhra (who were mainly from the Kammas caste), he did make

explicit efforts to organize artisanal classes like handloom weavers and oil-pressers, as well as agricultural laborers. However, many of Ranga's interventions on such questions were largely ameliorative in nature, i.e. he sought to minimize the extent of exploitation in economic relations without advancing a radical critique of class differentiation per se. By contrast, his critique of exploitation by "outsiders" (moneylenders, Zamindari landlords, etc.) was much more radical, insofar as it sought to extinguish any claims the exploiters might have over the surplus produced by the village community. Ranga's differentiated analysis of exploitation within and outside the village community underscores the continued importance of the village community in his thinking on rural reconstruction.

I. Conclusion

By the 1940s, Ranga's position on most of these issues was well aligned with the broader consensus within the Indian national movement. As Partha Chatterjee (1993) has observed, this consensus was based on a common set of spatial imaginaries based on which nationalist thinkers prescribed distinct objectives for development policy in urban and rural areas: whereas the state was expected to pursue capital-intensive industrialization in urban areas through a state-managed process of accumulation in both the public and the private sector, the role of development policy in the countryside was to gradually enhance standards of living in "traditional" agriculture without imposing the "unnecessary rigors" of primitive accumulation. However, as we have seen in the earlier sections, the very process of measuring and monitoring standards of living in the countryside had led to the reconceptualization of peasant agriculture as a form of commodity production from the 1920s onwards. By the 1940s, even those who were ideologically committed to the revitalization of village communities in their "traditional" form (such as Radhakamal

Mukerjee and J. C. Kumarappa) were compelled to operate on a discursive terrain in which peasants were assumed to be commodity producers.⁶³ Subsequently, a radical program of reviving the “self-sufficiency” of village communities was transformed, through a gradual process of resignification of the “village community” in development discourse, into a project to establish village cooperatives providing credit, marketing, inputs and other extension services to peasants.

In order to examine how competing ideological groups were able to inhabit this discursive terrain, it is instructive to return to the controversy over the proposal to implement “joint farming” through the consolidation of all land holdings in a village into cooperative farms. As we have seen, when the proposal was reintroduced by Nehru in 1959 to help solve the looming food shortage crisis, Ranga emerged as a vehement critic of the proposal. The proposal had, however, been debated since the mid-1940s, and the debate centered around two key questions: whether it would lead to the alienation of land from peasant communities, and whether it would affect the productivity of agriculture and the income of peasants. On the first question, the defenders of joint farming argued that the policy would help strengthen the ties of individual households to the community, thus preventing the alienation caused by the commodification of agriculture. By contrast, Ranga and other critics argued that cultivation methods on larger farms would invariably be more capital-intensive, thus depriving the surplus labor in the countryside of useful employment (Ranga, 1959; Singh, 1959). Moreover, since the status of peasant households in a village community was dependent on their *control* over specific plots of agricultural land, they feared that the pooling of all land holdings in the village would

⁶³ This is particularly especially true of their work on policy-making committees, such as the *Agrarian Reforms Committee* chaired by Kumarappa.

necessarily result in a form of alienation of peasant households from the village community.

Ranga called it “wage-slavery under the... bosses of cooperative farms” (Ranga, 1959: 27-29).

The two sides of the debate also disagreed over the effect of the proposal on agricultural productivity and the distribution of agricultural surpluses. Proponents of joint farming defended it as an attempt to eliminate the coordination problems that restrict the ability of the state to initiate improvements in agricultural productivity. By contrast, critics questioned the evidence on the relationship between farm size and yields, and argued that small farms often delivered higher yields because they were subjected to intensive cultivation (Singh, 1959). Moreover, since one of the motives of state intervention in traditional agriculture was to reduce the price of food for urban consumers, Ranga feared that the state would be able to engage in price manipulation to a greater degree if it had direct control over agricultural production through the cooperatives (Ranga, 1968: 528-533). In short, even if the village cooperative did increase agricultural productivity, Ranga believed that the cooperative itself might become a conduit for the extraction of surpluses from the village community for the benefit of the urban industrial workforce. As a result, operating within the common discursive structure of Indian developmentalism, Ranga and like-minded critics were able to issue a stiff challenge to the legitimacy of the proposal for joint cooperative farming.

In revisiting Ranga’s contributions to the debate on joint farming, my purpose is not explain the eventual outcome of this particular debate or to emphasize Ranga’s role in blocking the implementation of the Nagpur Resolution. Instead, my purpose is to offer an illustration of the manner in which competing ideological groups drew upon the same discursive resources while engaging in debates on the future of the Indian countryside. Moreover, this illustration demonstrates that the village community did not function merely as an empty signifier in these

debates, in which different sides could assign different meanings to the same phrase. Instead, the village community came to acquire a particular set of meanings through an extended process of resignification that involved changing its relationship with other signifiers, but also with its ultimate referents. Based on my analysis of the work of Gilbert Slater and N. G. Ranga, I have argued that one of the consequences of the empiricist mode of engagement with the Indian countryside was that the village community was rendered compatible with generalized commodity production. Previously, the valorization of the village community was associated with policies that might encourage non-market exchange and the reification of “custom”. By the 1950s, however, it came to be seen as an institution meant to prevent or reverse surplus extraction by urban economic actors within an economy geared for commodity production.

Chapter 3

Local boards and the birth of the rural infrastructure state: Madras, 1880-1935

As regards expenditure on education, roads, public health, etc., the money should come from the revenues of the country. The revenues have to grow from the earnings of productive undertakings; otherwise the State is likely to be burdened with a growing heavy unproductive debt.

- M. Visvesvaraya, *Reconstruction in Post-War India: A Plan of All-round Development* (1944: 58)

1. Introduction

The release of the Bombay Plan of 1944 sparked a heated exchange of ideas among Indian nationalists of various stripes about the economic and political future of India and the proper course of post-war reconstruction under an independent national government (Thakurdas, 1945).⁶⁴ Anticipating the big-push models of post-war development economics (Rosenstein-Rodan, 1943; Lewis, 1955), the capitalists of Bombay and their allies – like M. Visvesvaraya – sought to set the terms of the debate by advocating for a massive investment in industry with both state and private ownership (Thakurdas, 1945; Visvesvaraya, 1944). Socialists also desired industrialization but insisted that this required the suppression of the individual profit motive and wasteful competition (Banerjee et al, 1944; Parikh, & Roy, 1944), while the opposite was argued by Hayekian classical economists like B. R. Shenoy (1944). Many Gandhians, in turn, believed that resources available for economic development should be used for the reconstruction of village society and the decentralization of industrial production (Agarwal, 1944).

⁶⁴ The immediate object of the debate was the question of how the “sterling balances” accumulating in India’s overseas account as a result of India’s participation in the Allied war effort would be utilized once second world war came to an end. The sterling balances at the time amounted to nearly 10 billion rupees and participants in the debate offered a variety of proposals for its utilization.

While the ideological differences between these different groups is well known, I have argued in Chapter 2 that they rested on a common set of spatial imaginaries based on which the relationship between city and countryside could be debated in the first place. It could be said that there was an implicit consensus among the major political groups (socialists, Gandhians, peasant leaders, and the representatives of industrial/mercantile capital) about the distinct objects of development policy in urban and rural areas; villages would for the conceivable future remain home to peasants and petty producers engaging in “decentralized” production (albeit with certain technical/organizational improvements), while capital-intensive industrialization would be undertaken in “cities” (including new factory towns) and sustain a proletarianized working class. Much of the disagreement between opposing groups centered around the *sequencing* of plans and initiatives in order to obtain desired improvements in standards of living for both urban and rural populations. Even enthusiastic supporters of planned industrialization like M. Visvesvaraya (1944: 30) acknowledged the necessity of reviving collective institutions of village society and using them as conduits to enhance production and improve rural standards of living. But given his ties to leading manufacturers, Visvesvaraya naturally argued that investment in “productive undertakings” in large-scale industrial production must be prioritized as far as the use of accumulated capital was concerned (58).

Indeed, Visvesvaraya was insistent that “first things must come first”: infrastructure for railways, shipping, and air services should be prioritized and funded using borrowed capital if necessary, whereas “unproductive” public works should only be funded from annual taxes (52). However, what is curious about Visvesvaraya’s argument (and therefore worth historicizing) is his choice to lump road infrastructure with public spending on primary education and public health as examples of “unproductive” works. I find this is noteworthy because, unlike schools

and dispensaries, the connection between road infrastructure and the production process is more direct and was well understood.⁶⁵ Visvesvaraya's stance is all the more surprising given his reputation in India as a visionary thinker committed to technical education and broad-based technological modernization in agriculture.⁶⁶ Despite this, it is interesting to note that Visvesvaraya in 1944 made a sharp distinction between investment in roads, whose effects would primarily be felt in the countryside, and the railways, which would mainly benefit centers of industrial production.

Political economists have long interpreted the circulation of such arguments at the formative moment of the postcolonial state in India as evidence of a deep-rooted "urban bias" in India's political economy. For instance, Michael Lipton (1977) has argued that agricultural policies in the postcolonial period – especially price manipulation of commodities and factors of production – exacerbated the impoverization of the countryside in developing countries by extracting agricultural surpluses for the benefit of the industrial sector. Responding to a common criticism against his earlier work (Byres, 1979), Lipton has revised his thesis to acknowledge the importance of class differentiation within both the city and the countryside, and the myriad ways in which agrarian class relations reproduce the "urban bias" in developing countries by encouraging the leakage of agricultural profits in the form of consumption expenditure by rural elites (Lipton, 1984; 1993). In a similar vein, the failure of rural development programs in the early postcolonial years in India (including the much-touted "Community Development"

⁶⁵ Theories of "human capital" (Lucas, 1990) and "human development" (Sen, 2001) did not become part of the mainstream in development economics until recently, and advocates continue to experience a great deal of resistance against institutionalizing these ideas in government budgets and policies. The importance of improving "communications", by contrast, is almost axiomatic to most schools of classical economic thought, including Adam Smith.

⁶⁶ In the present day, Visvesvaraya's reputation is primarily linked to his role in building the dams on river Kaveri whose waters irrigate the southern districts of Karnataka. For an autobiographical account, see Visvesvaraya (1951).

program) is commonly attributed to the political resilience of rural rentier classes (Dube, 1958; Bardhan, 1999; Immerwahr, 2015). More recently, Lipton has updated his argument by suggesting that despite the relaxation of state controls over food prices, “urban bias” in many countries (including India) has been reproduced in the form of disparities in public expenditure and capital formation (Eastwood, & Lipton, 2002; Jones, & Corbridge, 2010).

Based on a historical study of rural road infrastructure, this chapter makes two contributions to this canonical narrative on chronic under-investment in the countryside. First, whereas historical sociologists have generally seen the decade immediately following World War II as the critical juncture when a number of institutional path dependencies were put in place (Chibber, 2003), my work shifts attention to the late-colonial period, when certain aspects of the institutional framework for rural infrastructure in India became part of political commonsense. Second, whereas Lipton (1977) sees “urban bias” as a *quantitative* disparity in the spatial distribution of investment, my work argues that there is a deeper *categorical* difference in the institutional frameworks governing “urban” and “rural” investments respectively.⁶⁷ In my attempt to account for under-investment in the countryside, I draw upon and problematize Marx’s distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” public works – the former is said to produce surplus values, and therefore investment in such works can be organized on a capitalist basis, while the latter at best produces use values, and can therefore be treated as nothing more than the expenditure of revenue by the state for public welfare. The thesis advanced in this chapter is that underneath the obvious neglect of the countryside in the policies of the early-

⁶⁷ My attempt to theorize urban/rural inequality as a form of categorical difference echoes Charles Tilly’s argument in *Durable Inequality* (1998).

postcolonial state in India lay an older and more fundamental distinction between the “urban” as the site of “productive” investments and the “rural” as the site of “unproductive” expenditures.⁶⁸

As discussed earlier, public intellectuals like M. Visvesvaraya took for granted the idea that basic infrastructure for the countryside (schools, dispensaries, roads etc.) was “unproductive” – i.e. it did not generate a surplus and therefore grow state revenues. Far from being a contentious suggestion, however, I have argued that these claims illustrate the continuities underneath competing development discourses in India in the mid-20th century. In the debates of 1944, the primary claim made by Gandhians upon the provincial and national state was for more liberal grants to be distributed to village institutions for the improvement of public facilities (Agarwal, 1944). But in the process, Gandhians also implicitly conceded that rural infrastructure could only be built as a direct expenditure of revenue as and when it became available. By contrast, “productive” undertakings (which were “urban” by definition) could be financed by a variety of different mechanisms (including involuntary mechanisms such as taxing consumption or raising public debt) since it was assumed that future increases in productivity, wages, and state revenue would compensate for the immediate costs of such policies.

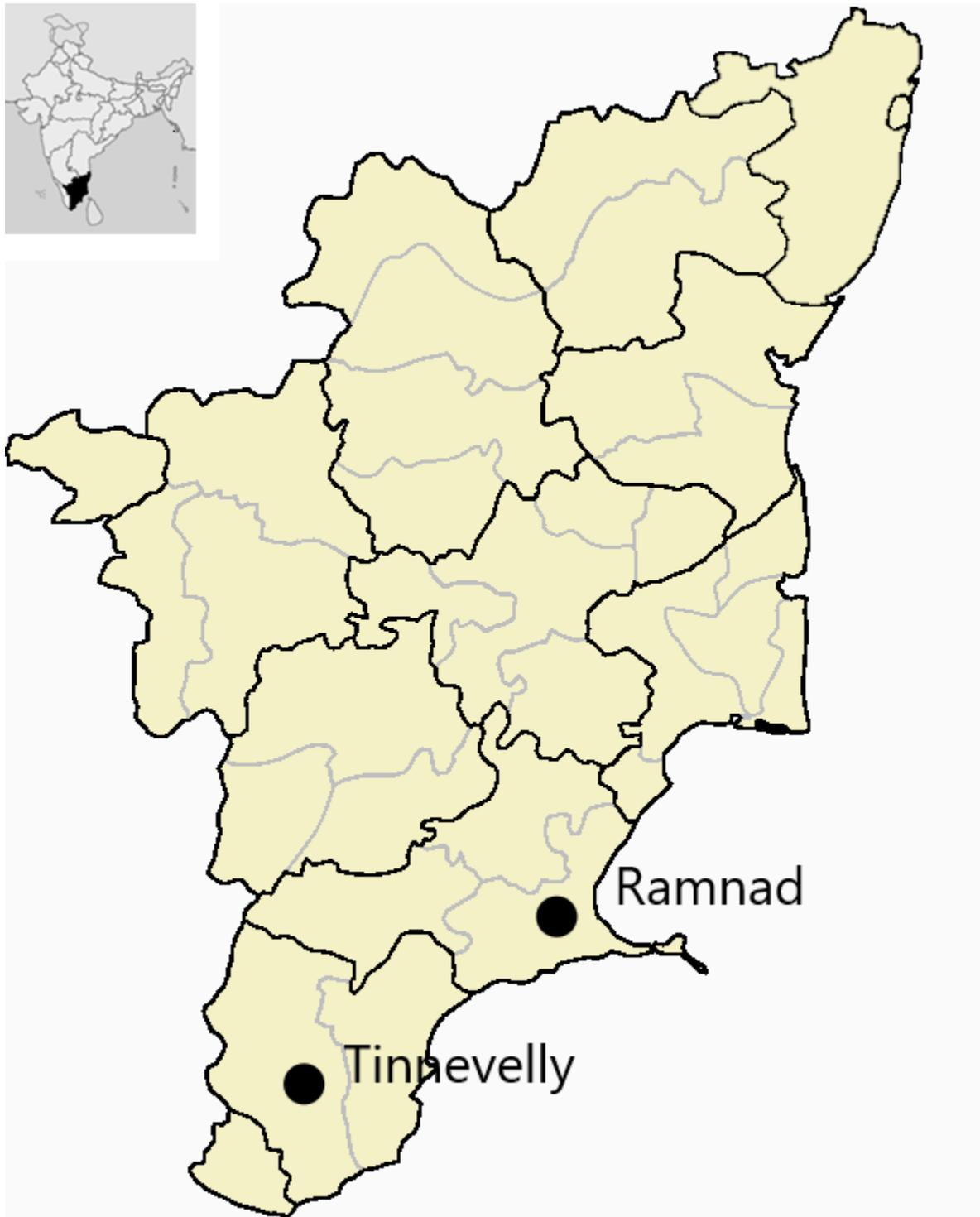
In this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate that by the 1940s, the institutional framework for treating rural public works as “unproductive” was already deeply institutionalized at the local and provincial levels. This institutional explanation for under-investment in the countryside complements the more discourse-analytic argument of the previous chapter against Lefebvrian theories of urban capitalism (Lefebvre, 2003; Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvrians like Neil Brenner

⁶⁸ As explained in the introduction, my argument makes no prior assumptions about the spatial contours of the “urban” and the “rural”. While I disagree with Neil Brenner’s Lefebvrian thesis of “planetary urbanization” (2013) in many respects, I agree with him that the “urban” as a theoretical construct cannot be reduced to particular patterns of spatial clustering of people and activities.

(2013) have argued that the “production of space” – which provides the general conditions necessary for production and social reproduction – has gradually come under the sway of capital in most parts of the world, such that infrastructure improvements are treated as capital investments yielding long term returns through some direct or indirect process of revenue generation. In other words, the infrastructure state is increasingly organized on a fully capitalist basis even when it is publicly owned and managed. This chapter, by contrast, offers a historical explanation for the apparent resilience of an institutional form in which “rural” infrastructure is funded through *simple deductions from the surplus* generated in the economy through various forms of fiscal transfer.

I advance my argument in three parts. Section II draws on Marx’s theoretical distinction in the Grundrisse between “productive” and “unproductive” public works to outline two ideal-typical modes of infrastructure production, and its relevance to infrastructure policy in late-colonial and postcolonial India (Marx, 1993). Sections III and IV attempt to trace the lineage of the present-day rural infrastructure state to the emergence of local government institutions in the Madras Presidency from the mid-19th century onwards, but with particular focus on the inter-war period (1920-1935). Both sections rely on detailed studies of roads in the southern districts of Madras Presidency (see Map 3.1), and the political economy of road transportation in these districts. Through this analysis, I seek to demonstrate that the fiscal relations between different levels and branches of government offer a useful lens to understand the relegation of rural road infrastructure to the status of “unproductive” works, which had become commonsensical by 1944 (as the preceding discussion suggests). Section V offers a brief account of the trajectory of the rural infrastructure state in subsequent years to argue for the path-dependence of institutional frameworks put in place during the inter-war years.

Map 3.1: Location of erstwhile Tinnevely and Ramnad Districts in a map of present-day Tamil Nadu



(Image source: [wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Tamil_Nadu_districts.jpg); approximate district borders)

Madras⁶⁹, in many ways, serves as an exemplary case: my contention is that conditions were arguably more favorable for organizing infrastructure investment on a capitalist basis than most other parts of British India. By the end of the 19th century, agriculture in Madras was already commercialized to a significant extent, and demands for improved transportation in the countryside frequently appeared in the newspapers. In the decades preceding independence, the province also experienced extremely rapid growth in motor traffic, and expansion of the road network was greater than any other major province in British India. Moreover, until the 1930s, the Madras Presidency was unique in its heavy reliance on local government institutions for the construction and maintenance of the road network.⁷⁰ My study will show that these institutions saw their revenues grow significantly in the 1920s, and expenditure on the road network therefore increased. By studying the institutionalization of the rural infrastructure state under conditions seemingly favorable to capitalist space-making, I attempt to show that the inability to treat rural roads as *capital* cannot be seen as merely a result of residual economic backwardness or lack of resources but rather suggests a categorical difference that reflects the broader institutional framework of rural governance.

⁶⁹ Throughout this chapter, “Madras” refers to the province as a whole, whereas “Madras city” or “Fort St. George” refers to the administrative capital of the province. Similarly, names like “Tinnevely” and “Ramnad,” unless specifically stated, refer to the districts named after their main urban centers. While most of these entities have been renamed after Independence, I consistently use the older names to in the interests of historical accuracy and consistency.

⁷⁰ This chapter takes up the invitation from historians of road transportation (Ahuja, 2009: 301-302; Tetzlaff, 2015) to investigate the institutional framework for development of road transportation in different historical and regional settings. I am indebted to their contributions to the literature for shaping many of the theoretical and empirical arguments in my work.

2. Postcolonial Capitalism and Transportation Infrastructure: Marx, Harvey, and Sanyal revisited

This section offers a brief overview of influential theories on the production of the built environment, and highlights the challenges of theorizing the production of the built environment under conditions of “postcolonial capitalism” (Sanyal, 2007). I begin with Marx’s famous maxim that “Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier” (1993: 524). For Marx, the inner workings of Capital were best visible through an analysis of the production process, and the “annihilation of space by time” was intrinsically linked to the fact that a product becomes a commodity only once it reached the market; the longer the delay, the slower the turnover of capital, and the lower the surplus value as a fraction of the capital invested. The 19th century instinct to revolutionize modes of circulation was, in other words, of the same genus as the instinct to revolutionize modes of production. But this presupposes the commodification of the production process as a whole: for so long as only the surplus product (after deducting the share of total production necessary for reproduction of labor power) is exchanged in the market, circulation remains a separate activity existing alongside the production process, whereas capitalist production on an expanded scale eventually integrates the process of circulation into itself.⁷¹

In Marx’s historicist framework, this moment of integration is marked by the “separation of public works from the state, and their migration into the domain of the works undertaken by

⁷¹ The Marxist perspective on public works rehearsed in this paragraph has been discussed in further detail by Ravi Ahuja (2009: 73, 89). As Ahuja notes, the centrality of communications to the production process was well understood by other classical economists, including Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. These ideas also informed Arthur Cotton’s searing critique of the preference for costly railways over cheap canal and road networks in the infrastructure policy of colonial India (Cotton, 1854). Cotton argued that a cheap road and canal network could make available a greater part of India’s agricultural produce (Berar cotton, for instance) to distant markets in Britain than the sparse railway network that was being proposed by the colonial state.

capital itself” (531). Indeed, the “highest development of capital” can be said to exist when “the general conditions of the process of social production are not paid out of *deductions from the social revenue*... but rather out of *capital as capital*” (532, emphasis supplied). Where a large enough concentration of capital becomes available, and a satisfactory rate of interest for capital is expected, capital becomes directly involved in its own reproduction by investing in public works (a task which otherwise falls upon the state). On the other hand, when the state takes up public works as an expenditure paid for by taxes, Marx sees it as a “forced transformation of a part of a country’s... surplus product” (525) not fundamentally different from the forced labor that Asiatic despots had relied upon to build roads and monuments from time immemorial. These public works brought about by the state are often “necessary without being productive in the capitalist sense” (531) – i.e. even if they increase production for the community as a whole, they cannot be seen as productive unless this surplus is realizable by the entity that made the investment.

At first glance, Marx’s distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” public works might seem to correspond to the present-day distinction between the “private sector” and the “public sector”. Closer analysis of Marx’s work however reveals that he had already anticipated the possibility that the state might behave like a capitalist, weighing possible investments in public works against future revenues generated by new productive forces. He had also accounted for the possibility that monopolies, taxation, and coercive methods of labor recruitment available to the state might be necessary to realize the surplus generated by investments in roads (532). The distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” public works therefore lies not in ownership (private vs. public) or the methods of resource and labor

mobilization deployed (free vs. unfree) but rather in the *realizability* of a surplus in the future.⁷²

Marx assumed that the increasing quantities of commercial traffic generated by commercialization, along with the growing concentration of capital, would make circumstances ripe for the capitalization of social reproduction in general.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Marx's writings anticipate many of the key arguments of Henri Lefebvre (2003) and David Harvey (1978; 2006), who have sought to demonstrate that the "urban process under capitalism" – i.e. production of the built environment – has been subjugated to the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. Harvey's elaboration of the Marxist framework offers an extremely coherent structuralist-functionalist account of spatial transformation that brings together several disparate elements of the "urban process" in advanced capitalist settings. In Harvey's framework, capital flows into the built environment and within the capital market constitute the secondary and tertiary circuit of capital respectively. He argues that bulky investments in the built environment (including transport) often occur when capital "switches" from primary to secondary and tertiary circuits of capital as a result of cyclical patterns in the rate of profit. These large investments in the built environment simultaneously tend to "fix" capital in space and freeze its productivity within certain limits for a certain period of time, till the built environment itself is restructured through the investment of fresh capital.

⁷² This theoretical argument marks the difference in emphasis between Ravi Ahuja's and my work. While both of us are interested in deconstructing the use of "productivity" as a criterion for assessing public works policy, Ahuja's critique is based primarily on highlighting the irrationality, coercion, and violence that underwrites the capitalist and civilizational pretensions of colonial public works policies (Ahuja, 2009). I have no quarrel with this conclusion, but I approach the question from the opposite direction. Whereas Ahuja investigates the institutions that allowed large-scale transportation infrastructure in the 19th century (e.g. railways and canals) to be considered "productive" capitalist projects (despite their connection with the state and unfree labor), my focus is on asking what makes local roads "unproductive". Why do they have to be designated as such despite their obvious role in the production process? This leads me to foreground the *realizability* of a surplus and to investigate fiscal aspects of road infrastructure to a far greater extent than in Ahuja's work.

Harvey (1978) goes beyond Marx's analysis (as discussed above) in two respects. First, he recognizes that transportation infrastructure serves simultaneously as both *fixed capital* (namely, those elements of the built environment necessary for the reproduction of capital), and as part of a collectively organized *consumption fund* necessary for the reproduction of labor power (106). This becomes particularly relevant in contexts where the growth in passenger traffic begins to outpace goods traffic and emerges as the central problematic of transportation planning (most 20th century cities). Second, he acknowledges that class struggle can shift the balance of power to such an extent that new investments in the built environment are aimed not just at the reproduction of labor power at the existing level, but also towards improving "quality of life" for the working class (both in terms of direct wages and collective amenities).⁷³ However, despite these concessions to non-determinist and class-centric (rather than capital-centric) analysis of the built environment, Harvey's analysis remains wedded to Marx's distinction between "productive" and "unproductive" works.⁷⁴ As Harvey insists, "[t]he main thrust of the modern commitment to planning (whether at the state or corporate level) rests on the idea that certain forms of investment in the secondary and tertiary circuits are potentially productive" (111).⁷⁵

⁷³ Harvey however maintains that, in the ultimate analysis, these improvements are functionally related to the reproduction of capital. It is possible that they constitute "efficiency wages" which are conducive for capitalist accumulation because they increase labor productivity, or that they are designed to ward off the problem of over-accumulation by creating new forms of domestic consumption when access to foreign markets is limited. But most importantly, they are necessary to quell the revolutionary instincts of labor and the associated impediments to production (124-25).

⁷⁴ Resnick & Wolff (2004) offer a useful reading of Marx's corpus as an attempt to strike an uneasy balance between capital-centric and class-centric accounts of capitalist development.

⁷⁵ Such a belief does not preclude the fact that many such speculative investments may fail to generate interest (let alone profit) for the capital invested, or they may begin to yield returns only after successive rounds of devaluation. Both Marx and Harvey see such risky investments and eventual failures as systemically necessary to prop up the falling rate of profit under capitalism.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Lefebvre (2003) referred to this growing involvement of capital in the production of the general conditions of production as the transition to an “urban society” which is indeed identical to Marx’s “highest development of capital”. However, if we chose to follow Kalyan Sanyal (2007) in discarding the transition narrative central to the historicist frameworks of Marx and Lefebvre, then we are confronted with the challenge of theorizing the co-existence of the “urban” and the “rural” as two ideal-typical modes of transforming the built environment and for the purpose of this paper, two distinct modes of producing transportation infrastructure. The “urban infrastructure state”, as theorized in the Lefebvrian tradition, relies on forward-looking capital which directly or indirectly obtains its returns from the surpluses generated by the enhanced production potentials. If we were to follow Marx’s historicist logic, the “rural infrastructure state” would then be merely a remnant of the pre-capitalist state, with its reliance on forced and irregular deductions from the surplus product (at the individual level) in order to produce necessary use values for the community.

But Marx’s understanding the “Asiatic” mode of producing infrastructure relied on the assumption that only a small portion of the total product (the economic surplus) is traded in the market, which is why investment in roads necessarily remains irregular and unsystematic. By contrast, Sanyal insists that postcolonial capitalism is not an instance of incomplete transition to capitalism, but rather a novel form of capitalism that makes possible the co-existence of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production *mediated by the market* (2007: 212). In other words, even when the “transition to capitalism” – i.e. the complete separation of workers from the means of production – is no longer a possibility, the mass of workers situated outside the capitalist mode of production (i.e. peasants, petty traders etc.) become increasingly dependent on

the market, just as any other social class.⁷⁶ It then falls upon the state to manage the consequences of this interdependent coexistence of a capitalist sector with a large sector of petty commodity producers, while maintaining the overall political-ideological hegemony of capital (217). This chapter attempts to situate the emergence of the “rural infrastructure state” within this complex dynamic.

As we have seen, access to the market requires not just institutional change, but also infrastructural change. To the extent that new transportation infrastructure in the countryside (i.e. rural roads) improves access to markets and proves conducive to the emergence of new productive forces, it is likely to produce a relative surplus even in the spaces of petty commodity production as imagined by Sanyal.⁷⁷ In other words, there is reason to believe that, from a purely economic perspective, it would be eminently feasible for “rural” infrastructure in many locations to be produced along the same lines as urban infrastructure – i.e. as an investment of capital. And yet, the Indian countryside continues to suffer from chronic under-investment – a fact that calls for a deeper investigation of the institutional mechanisms for infrastructure production. My argument in this chapter is that the structure of local government institutions in early 20th century Madras acted as a constraint against road infrastructure being treated as *productive capital*, and that this institutional trajectory has played a key role in reproducing under-investment in the countryside. By attempting such an institutional analysis in a specific historical setting, this

⁷⁶ Unlike Marx, Sanyal (2007: 1-6) does not assume that the commodification of the production process (i.e. reliance on markets and private property) necessarily leads to concentration of production eventually leading to the alienation of the means of production from labor. As discussed in Chapter 1, Sanyal sees the circumstances confronted by Marx in 19th century Europe to be historically unique and unlikely to be replicated in postcolonial settings.

⁷⁷ Indeed, recent econometric studies show that rural road projects generate the highest growth to agricultural incomes and the fastest rates of poverty reduction compared to several other types of rural development intervention undertaken from the 1970s onwards (Khandker et al, 2009; Fan et al, 2000; Binswanger et al, 1993). There is no evidence that they have any tendency to alter the distribution of land to any significant extent.

chapter seeks to go beyond the study of different strands of development *discourse* (as in chapter 2) and instead situates the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and its reversal (as theorized by Sanyal) in the trajectories of local government institutions.

My study situates the development of road infrastructure within four long-term institutional processes that restructured India's political economy in late-colonial India, and Madras in particular. First, the process of *commercialization*, which had already begun before the onset of colonial rule, became a particularly strong motor of social change from the mid-19th century onwards (Baker, 1984; Robert, 1983; Washbrook, 1994). Second, most political processes experienced a gradual process of *upward scale-shift*, such that the success of local political entrepreneurs began to depend on their ability to redistribute resources in their favor at the district and provincial levels (Baker, 1976; Washbrook, 1976). Third, one observes an increasing *professionalization* of many areas of government intervention (including road construction), with engineers striving to assert their technical expertise and autonomy from political institutions (Ramnath, 2017). Fourth, there was a trend towards *democratization* of political decision-making, especially after the First World War, with various social groups attempting to appropriate representative spaces within the framework of colonial rule (Legg, 2016; Baker, 1976; Tinker, 1954). Taken separately, each of these processes is entirely consistent with (if not conducive to) capitalist space-making. This paper therefore attempts to explain why the convergence of these four processes in the historical context of late-colonial Madras had the effect of relegating rural roads to the realm of welfare expenditure (as opposed to productive capital).

In the remainder of this chapter, I offer a detailed empirical account of the emergence of local government institutions in Madras Presidency in order to trace the lineage of the rural

infrastructure state in South India. Section III offers an overview of road infrastructure and its institutional framework prior to 1920, while Section IV offers a more in-depth analysis of the period from 1920-1935, which I see as the critical juncture in the emergence of the rural infrastructure state because of successive political and fiscal reforms. And yet, as I seek to demonstrate, the fiscal policies of the late-colonial state at the local and provincial levels prevented them from anticipating future sources of revenues and tailoring current investments towards these revenues. In other words, improvements in the road network in Madras continued to take place under a fiscal/political framework in which rural roads were deemed to be “unproductive” in the Marxian sense.

3. The Fiscal Politics of Road Infrastructure in Colonial Madras

This section, consisting of a fiscal-political history of local government in Madras, locates the birth of the rural infrastructure state in the evolving constitutional framework that governed provincial and local finance. As discussed earlier, Madras serves as a critical case for my argument, by which I mean that circumstances were more favorable in Madras for rural road infrastructure to be produced along capitalist lines than in other parts of British India. As economic histories of southern India have shown, the region had experienced a significant process of agricultural commercialization beginning in the latter half of the 19th century (Baker, 1984), which generated demand for improved transportation. My analysis in this section will further show that the main political and administrative reforms of the early decades of the 20th century increased the share of revenue available for investment in rural road infrastructure.⁷⁸ The

⁷⁸ I refer to the Madras Local Boards Act of 1884, the quasi-permanent settlement (1904) for tax-sharing between imperial and provincial governments, the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Decentralization (1909) and the wide-ranging Montagu-Chelmsford reforms enacted after the First World War. M. Venkatarangaiya’s history of local government in India (Venkatarangaiya, 1938) and P. J. Thomas’ history of provincial finance

possibilities for rapid and self-reproducing growth of the road network in the form of *capital* (to be distinguished from mere assets) was therefore particularly ripe in the Madras context. Based on this analysis, in Section IV, I evaluate the degree to which fiscal and political institutions during the inter-war period enabled (or foreclosed) the realization of these possibilities. It is on this basis that I identify the 1920s as a critical juncture that shaped the trajectory of the rural infrastructure state.

In studying the functioning of local government institutions in this chapter as a whole, my analysis oscillates between the overall trends at the provincial level and in-depth studies of local government institutions in southern Tamil Nadu (Tinnevelly and Ramnad districts). I view the districts selected for detailed study as typical cases, encompassing much of the variation in socio-ecological conditions, land tenure systems, and cropping patterns in a province as geographically varied as Madras.⁷⁹ As we shall see in a later section of this chapter, the politics in the two districts also closely mirrored the relative fortunes of different political parties in Madras as a whole. My discussion of the overall trends at the provincial level is mainly based on published books and reports, whereas I rely on archived government files in the Tamil Nadu State Archives, Egmore (TNSA) for my analysis of the local boards in Tinnevelly and Ramnad. Most of these files are from the Local and Municipal Department at the provincial level, which supervised the activities and finances of local boards and municipalities, but some files of the

(Thomas, 1939) have been used as the primary references for this part of my study, though much of the same material has also been covered in Misra (1954), Tinker (1954), Shah (1929), Ambedkar (1925), and many other books of the same genre.

⁷⁹ A. J. Stuart's "Manual of the Tinnevelly District" opines that "Tinnevelly may be considered as an epitome, or facsimile on a miniature scale, of the whole Madras Presidency, almost every feature of which is repeated on a smaller scale within this little area" (Stuart, 1879: 1).

Public Works Department have also been examined.⁸⁰ The division of responsibilities and finances related to road infrastructure among these different governmental entities is discussed below in further detail.

A. Road infrastructure prior to 1920: An administrative overview

The origins of an institutionalized framework for road infrastructure in Madras broadly coincide with the growing emphasis on “public works” in India as a form of legitimation of colonial rule following the 1857 revolt and the assumption of direct control by the British state.⁸¹ At the time, writers like Arthur Cotton (1854) had strenuously called for a reorientation of imperial policy in favor of a far-reaching program of “public works” in order to “open up” the countryside to civilization and commerce, with a preference to cheaper technologies like roads and navigable canals.⁸² And yet, the Public Works Departments (PWDs) at the imperial and the provincial levels remained focused on railways, irrigation, and the construction of government buildings.⁸³ The clear bias in favor of the railways in imperial policy meant that investments in road transportation that could potentially threaten the profits of railway companies were unlikely to be sanctioned.⁸⁴ As Ravi Ahuja’s study of transportation in 19th century Orissa demonstrates, the

⁸⁰ Given my focus on road infrastructure in the countryside, my study largely excludes municipalities which were responsible for cities and towns in the province.

⁸¹ Indeed, public works were an important component in the Victorian agenda of civilizing Indian society (Ahuja, 2004; Arnold, 2006; Sinha, 2012).

⁸² The debates and controversies existing between the pro-railway and anti-railway camps within the Indian public works bureaucracy as well as in the colonial public sphere have been examined in greater detail by Ahuja (2009).

⁸³ PWDs were generally divided into three sections: Railways, Irrigation, and Buildings & Roads (B&R). The majority of the works undertaken by the B&R section (the smallest of the three sections) related to government buildings. For instance, as per my calculations, the amount of money spent by the Madras PWD between 1901-1905 on new road projects was one-fifth the money spent on new buildings alone. See G.O.s 1393-94, d. 5/22/1901 (PWD B&R) and 1111-12, d. 6/9/1905 (PWD B&R) TNSA. In 1901, the PWD maintained only 500 miles of roads (as compared to 21,700 miles maintained by all the district boards collectively) (Francis, 1988[1908]: 77).

⁸⁴ For detailed histories of railway development in India, see Daniel Thorner (1955), Ian J. Kerr (1995; 2013), and Laura Bear (2012). Among economic historians, much of the debate has focused on whether the railways exacerbated famines by encouraging commercial agriculture or mitigated them by enabling imports during times of

long-term effect of this biased policy was to produce a differentiated and hierarchical space, centered around key sites of British economic and military power such as Calcutta, Bombay, and to a lesser extent, the city of Madras (Ahuja, 2009).

The bias against road transportation was particularly acute in Madras Presidency, which for most of the 19th century contributed a disproportionate share of the total revenues of the imperial administration headquartered in Calcutta primarily for military expenditures elsewhere in the British empire.⁸⁵ This left little fiscal space in provincial budgets for road transportation, even if the colonial establishment could be convinced about the necessity for such expenditures.⁸⁶ Even when road projects were undertaken by the PWD in Madras using provincial funds, these were generally located in the hilly tracts for the benefit of European-owned plantations in these areas.⁸⁷ Elsewhere, the PWD only involved itself in the construction of bridge crossings over rivers. However, unlike the roads in hilly areas, most such bridges were paid for from local funds rather than provincial, imperial, or military funds.⁸⁸ Till the 1920s, the

food shortage (Hurd, 1975; McAlpin, 1974; Collins, 1999; Donaldson, 2018). However, these histories do not study the institutional relationship between the railways and other modes of communication – a gap that transport historians like Ahuja (2009), Nitin Sinha (2012), and Stefan Tetzlaff (2015) have tried to correct.

⁸⁵ David Washbrook (2006: 33) argues that Madras was treated as a “milch-cow” in the 19th century since it had “the highest level of per acre land revenue assessment and kept the smallest share of it for local expenses of any Indian province.”

⁸⁶ It is worth highlighting that, until 1919, provinces were not generally allowed to take on debt, which gave the imperial government complete control over all long-term investments throughout British India. While the imperial government did allow for some debt-financing to invest in irrigation for the deltaic regions of Madras, other forms of state investment in the economy were almost entirely absent (Washbrook, 2006).

⁸⁷ The Gazetteer of South India attributes provincial control over the construction of roads in the hilly tracts to the need for “professional care” while building roads in a difficult terrain (Francis, 1988[1908]: 77, 113). However, the frequent petitions from organizations like the United Planters Association of South India (UPASI) to the PWD requesting the “prompt granting of funds to keep existing roads in order” appear to be more likely reasons for this preferential investment in these areas. See G.O. 2707(W) d. 8/24/1904 (PWD B&R) TNSA.

⁸⁸ For instance, between 1901-05, the only transportation-related project in Tinnevely district taken up by the PWD was the construction and maintenance of about 1.5 miles of road along the bank of a small dam on the Tamirabarani

provincial and central PWDs were not an important source of specialized technical expertise on road construction either,⁸⁹ since the engineers who staffed the department at the district level were mostly preoccupied with the management of the many irrigation projects located in various parts of the district.⁹⁰ The day-to-day work of road construction was therefore mostly left to traditional overseers under the management of civil officers who lacked formal training in engineering or road construction.⁹¹

The neglect of road transportation in imperial and provincial budgets meant that the work of constructing and maintaining roads for most of the province had to be organized locally at the district level, with the responsibility falling upon a much smaller district engineering establishment that reported to the district collector. At the village level, the headman was often required to mobilize villagers for construction and repair work.⁹² In the 1860s, a cess on the land revenue was introduced to pay for road infrastructure, to be spent within the district where it was

river near Srivaikuntam. The project was paid for fully from “incorporated” local funds, just as most of the bridges and roads constructed in other districts. See G.O. 266-67 d. 1/24/1902 (PWD B&R).

⁸⁹ For instance, as late as 1928, when asked about the usefulness of a testing station for road construction located in Alipore (Calcutta), R. Foulkes of Madras told the Indian Road Development Committee that “I do not think that Alipore can help us much. We know what the qualities of our road-making materials are from long experience, and we endeavor to use whenever possible, that which we have found in practice to be best” (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928b: 163).

⁹⁰ The distinction between the Buildings & Roads (B&R) section and the Irrigation section of the Madras PWD vanished once one stepped out of Madras city and entered the district establishments. In the southern-most parts of the province, for instance, the supervision of both irrigation and B&R was the responsibility of an Assistant Engineer stationed in Tinnevely, and he reported to a Superintendent Engineer stationed in Trichinopoly who toured the district three or four times a year.

⁹¹ For example, in 1900-01, 99.3% of the road projects funded from local funds in the province were carried out under the management of civil officers. G.O 1250-51 of 1901 (PWD B&R).

⁹² The position of the village headman was a semi-formal and often hereditary position with responsibilities towards tax collection and conflict resolution at the village level. The district administration could either require the village headman to carry out certain repairs using village funds or to supply labor for projects carried out by the district administration. In 1852, the Public Works Commission noted that even though such participation in public works was often described as “voluntary”, in reality workers were coerced into working at whatever wage the district engineer deemed appropriate (Madras Public Works Commission, 1856: 188).

collected.⁹³ However, critics of the additional cess quickly pointed out that given the vast size of each district,⁹⁴ this did not constitute much progress towards local government. A revamped Local Boards Act passed in 1884 consolidated a number of cesses, taxes, and fees to establish a common local fund to pay for roads, education, and public health,⁹⁵ and local boards were established to manage these responsibilities at three levels: the district, the taluk, and the village union.⁹⁶

The promise of autonomous local government was, however, systematically subverted; in most districts, more than one taluk was combined for the purposes of constituting a taluk board, and only a small number of union boards were ever established.⁹⁷ Even after the new boards were established, the district collector and his subordinate officers continued to dominate their proceedings, having packed the boards either with officials or with nominated non-official members whose role was at best advisory.⁹⁸ The district collector also exercised sole control over

⁹³ Between 1866 and 1920, this cess amount to approximately 6% of the land revenue paid by the cultivator to government. M. Venkatarangaiya (1938: 180) also suggests that the cess recovered from zamindari areas was disproportionate to the agricultural output on the land, since it was levied on the land rent paid by the tenant to the zamindar (of which only a small part was transferred to the government).

⁹⁴ Many districts of the province were over 10,000 sq. miles in area – bigger than New Jersey, and by the 1880s, most of them had populations of well over a million.

⁹⁵ Local boards also undertook certain other miscellaneous activities, such as making grants to rest houses, organizing weekly or annual fairs and markets, etc.

⁹⁶ A taluk is a sub-division of a district revenue bureaucracy under a *tahsildar*. A union, as defined in the Madras District Boards Act 1884, was any group of villages identified for the formation of a “union board” primarily for the purposes of managing sanitation and health. The headman of the main village was generally appointed the chairman of the union board. A separate act enabled the formation of independent municipalities for the major cities of each district.

⁹⁷ For instance, the eight taluks of Tinnevely were divided into four taluk boards, each of which could occupy a fairly large area by itself. Meanwhile, of the 54,000 villages in Madras presidency, only 382 village unions had been established by 1906-07 (Venkatarangaiya, 1938: 11). It is likely that the prospect of a substantial house tax in addition to the existing rates and cesses was a major disincentive against the incorporation of village unions.

⁹⁸ In 1904, only 6% of all members of local boards in Madras (at all three levels) were elected (Statistical Abstract of British India, 1904, table no. 104). Until 1920, the Collector served as the ex-officio President of the District Board in all 25 districts.

the local engineering establishment which implemented all infrastructure projects carried out in the district.⁹⁹ Taluk and union board budgets were reviewed by the district collector and he could alter the allocation of funds by the taluk boards.¹⁰⁰ Subordinate boards, in other words, were little more than local representatives of the district administration, and had little power to make policy decisions that conflicted with the priorities of the collector.¹⁰¹

Despite the grave neglect of local public goods, even the resources of district boards were often diverted towards the construction of railway lines. Starting in 1900, district boards were allowed to levy an additional 25% of the local cess to invest in railway lines, but once designated as such, these revenues could not be used for any other purpose.¹⁰² Meanwhile, the taluk and union boards were often expected to carry out their substantial duties with very limited resources, since the district collector effectively controlled the disbursement of the land cess which was the major source of revenue for all the boards.¹⁰³ Furthermore, having chosen not to

⁹⁹ Until World War I, the district board engineer was typically European, and drew a large salary of about 700 rupees. Many Indian elites complained about the high cost of keeping a European engineer for making roads, which they perceived to be a technically straightforward task for which domestically trained engineers and traditional overseers would suffice. For instance, see testimony of S. Annaswami Iyer on 27-11-1907 (Royal Commission upon Decentralisation, 1908: 137)

¹⁰⁰ Testimony of C. T. H. Johnson on 26-11-1907 (Royal Commission upon Decentralisation, 1908: 99-100).

¹⁰¹ Testimony of L. A. Govindaraghava Iyer on 26-11-1907 (Royal Commission upon Decentralisation, 1908, 118).

¹⁰² This meant that the revenues often had to remain locked up in government securities for substantial periods of time until a new railway line could be planned and constructed. In Tinnevely, for instance, the railway cess was levied from 1903 onwards, but construction of the first branch line (Tinnevely – Tiruchendur) began only after World War I. Some historians have referred to the fact that district boards like Tanjore and Tinnevely were able to construct and secure ownership over a branch line of the railways as evidence that these boards had significant resources at hand (Washbrook, 1973: 500). But this is somewhat misleading – these boards had the resources necessary to build railway lines only because the provincial government did not encourage substituting investment in the railways with, say, expenditure on primary education.

¹⁰³ In theory, the district and the taluk boards were expected to share the land cess equally. However, since the district collector wielded a great deal of authority over his subordinate officers (some of whom were often appointed taluk board presidents), he was often able to get taluk boards to accept financial responsibility for the expenses of the district board.

invest significantly in road transportation themselves, imperial and provincial authorities began exerting pressure on local authorities to concentrate their limited funds on the construction of “feeder roads” that served railway stations (even at the cost of more essential services).¹⁰⁴ By 1894, the provincial government had mandated that at least half of the annual revenue of district and taluk boards had to be spent on roads, in addition to the entire income from tolls (Venkatarangaiya, 1938: 135).

However, the financial resources available to local boards began growing after 1900. The failure of the railways to generate commercial traffic from a large enough hinterland convinced the imperial government to release some grants to the provinces for the construction of “feeder roads”, which in Madras were generally passed on to local boards.¹⁰⁵ The fiscal space for provincial expenditure on road infrastructure also expanded in the early years of the 20th century as a result of initial steps taken towards decentralization in provincial finance, which formalized the system of tax-sharing between imperial and provincial governments (Thomas, 1939: 262-265).¹⁰⁶ The volume of provincial grants to local funds in Madras increased tenfold in the short period between 1900 and 1906, and the share of provincial grants in local board budgets continued to rise in subsequent years as well (Venkatarangaiya, 1938: 201-202).¹⁰⁷ Local boards also attempted to expand their resources by increasing the number of toll gates and the tolls

¹⁰⁴ Suggestions that the railways themselves take up the construction of feeder roads by raising funds from the capital market were rarely given serious weight, and the railway companies typically exhorted local boards to pick up the slack (Andrew, 1884: 279).

¹⁰⁵ For instance, a special grant of 550,000 rupees for public works in 1902-03 included a rider that 250,000 rupees had to be spent on feeders for railway lines. G. O. 329 d. 10/4/1902 (PWD B&R) TNSA.

¹⁰⁶ Venkatarangaiya (1938) suggests that the new liberality of the imperial government was the result of the increase in opium revenues at the turn of the century.

¹⁰⁷ The share of provincial grants in the total income of local boards was 3.2% in 1901, 20.7% in 1906, and 30.1 in 1920 (Venkatarangaiya, 1938).

levied, as a result of which the share of tolls to the total income of local boards increased from about 12% at the turn of the century to 21% by 1920 (Venkatarangaiya, 1938: 188-89).

Provincial mandates on the expenditure of local funds ensured that the new revenues were overwhelmingly allocated in road transportation (as opposed to education or public health).

Table 3.1: Road network in different provinces of India, 1913-14

Province	Total Length (miles)	% Metaled	Road availability (miles per million population)	Road density (miles per 1000 sq. miles)
Punjab	23453	11.1	1174.1	235
UP	32110	21.8	680.6	299.3
Assam	8697	4.4	1295.4	164
Bengal	16113	16	354.3	204.7
Bombay and Sindh	26496	25	1350	215.5
Madras	26588	84.8	642.1	186.8

(source: Indian Road Development Committee, 1928a and Census 1911)

Despite these increases in expenditure, the mileage of roads maintained by the local boards in the province registered relatively slow growth during this period, with only about 240 miles being added each year on average in the 1890s and 1900s.¹⁰⁸ The fact that new additions remained relatively limited despite significant additions to revenue suggests that expenditure on improving the quality of construction and maintenance of existing roads was prioritized over undertaking new roads. As Table 3.1 shows, by 1913-14, Madras had succeeded in metalling a far greater proportion of the roads maintained in the province (85%) than the national average

¹⁰⁸ Calculated from various Administration Reports of Madras Presidency (1889, 1898, 1901, 1904, 1910, 1914).

(31%). By contrast, both the road density (per unit area) and the road availability (per unit population) were below the average for British India. It would be fair to surmise from these provincial statistics that the political and administrative structure of the new local government institutions was not designed to distribute investments on road infrastructure widely within the jurisdiction of the district board; rather, investments were concentrated along a small number of routes that connected the district headquarters to surrounding towns.

Tinnevely district offers a stark example of the concentrated nature of road investments. A message sent to the Local & Municipal department in Fort St. George in 1901 from L. E. Buckley, the collector of Tinnevely, instantiates the prevailing attitude of the district administrations towards the claims of rural road infrastructure:

I have noticed that the Taluk Boards in this district spend far less than the minimum of 50% of land cess receipts upon their roads... I request that the Government will be pleased to second my efforts and will not allow the claims (strong though they may be) of Education, medical attention, and sanitation, the allotments for which purpose will necessarily have to be curtailed, to prevail over what I believe to be the superior claims of public communications. At present the Taluk Board spend on what are called village roads various small sums from Rs. 20 to Rs. 100 which, I am inclined to believe are in the majority of cases, merely money thrown away. I wish to have more time for personal inspection before coming to a decision on the point, but I fancy that, unless there are special reasons in favour of any specific village road, the money would probably be better spent under present conditions on main communications... If the Taluk Boards allot the full minimum for communications, it may be possible to relieve the district board of some small portion of its present responsibilities, and to concentrate to that extent more of the District Board's allotment for communications on the more important roads.¹⁰⁹

The result of this administrative stance was a stark concentration of expenditures on a few roads deemed important. When A. J. Stuart's *Manual of Tinnevely district* (1879) was compiled and published, the district had 849 miles of road managed from local funds by the district engineering establishment, but large portions of the network consisted of mud roads that tended

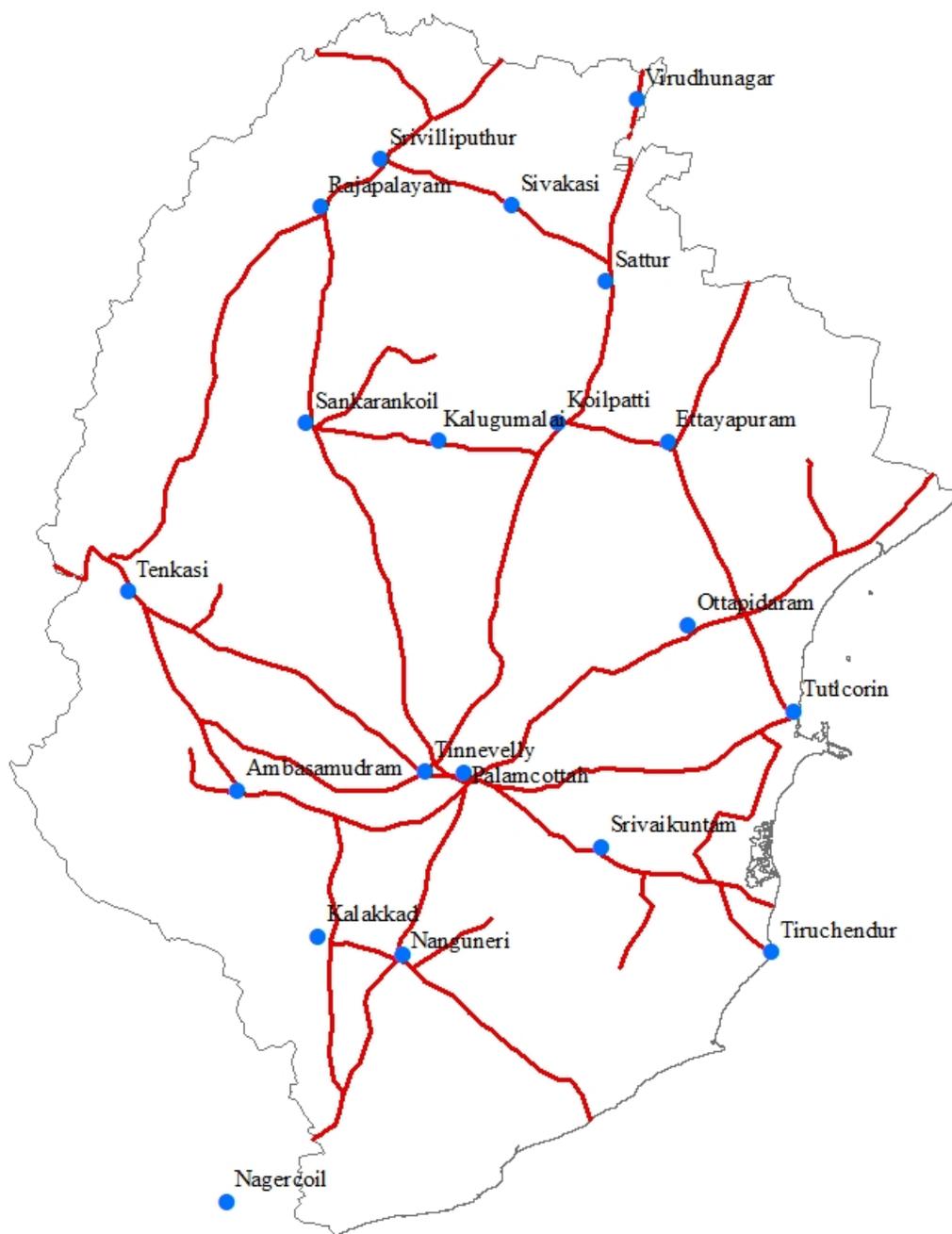
¹⁰⁹ GO 846W (L&M) d. 3/22/1901, TNSA.

to slow down wheeled traffic (see Map 3.2). By 1901, the length of the network had grown only 10%, but 88% of this total length had been metaled.¹¹⁰ Moreover, as Map 3.2 shows, much of the network of “made roads” (i.e. roads that were maintained by the engineering establishment) was designed to connect the district headquarters (Tinnevely/Palamcottah) to the smaller towns of the district which served as taluk headquarters or major commercial centers.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Report of the Administration of Madras Presidency, 1900-01 (p. 144). Total length was 945 miles and the length of metalled roads was 830 miles. A. J. Stuart's *Manual* (1879: 139) already anticipates such a complacent attitude towards expanding the road network: “It is probable that with the present rates of local taxation the limit of road works which the available funds are able to keep in order has now been reached, and on the whole the district may be considered very fairly supplied with communications”.

¹¹¹ Other than Tinnevely, eight towns – Srivilliputhur, Sattur, Sankaranainarkoil, Tenkasi, Ambasamudram, Nanguneri, Alwar Tirunagari, and Ottapidaram – served as taluk headquarters. Tuticorin was the leading port of the southern districts.

Map 3.2: Road Map of Tinnevely District (1879)



Source: Tinnevely District Manual (Stuart, 1879)

This concentration of resources at the district level reflects the specific distribution of political authority in late-19th century Madras. Unlike other provinces in British India, Madras

had achieved a relatively high level of *administrative* decentralization, i.e. where effective decision-making authority and the responsibility of implementation was located in the offices of the district collector and his subordinates rather than at the provincial level.¹¹² However, unlike the early decades of colonial rule, district administrations in the latter half of the 19th century were also able to exercise their autonomy from locally dominant social classes to a much greater extent.¹¹³ This resulted in a unique institutional framework for road development in Madras in the 20th century. In most other provinces, the management of the main lines of road transportation had been taken over by the provincial PWD by the 1880s, and resources for road construction including a portion of the local fund were typically allocated to the PWD.¹¹⁴ By contrast, Madras in the 1900s continued to rely on separate district engineering establishments, and most of the new revenues allocated for roads by the imperial government were also passed on to the districts (see Table A3.1). The provincialization of road transportation in Madras did not begin until 1919, and occurred only gradually (a process that I will describe later in this chapter) such that district boards retained significant influence over road infrastructure until the 1940s.

¹¹² David Washbrook (1976: 25-26) attributes this to the structure of provincial finance in the late-19th century: “The Madras Government was committed to supplying Calcutta’s inordinate demands and also found little left over to use in the development of projects and interests of its subjects. The centres of any spoils system of politics, therefore, had to be at the points where revenue was collected rather than where it was redistributed. Money, once it was allowed to become revenue, was lost. Those who wished to divert public funds to their own purposes, whether noble or ignoble, were best served by policies of influencing the administrators who were gathering it. The Government of India’s financial gluttony helped to keep the village and the tehsil as the most important political arenas in the presidency.”

¹¹³ For a study of district administration in the early decades of colonial rule, see Frykenberg (1965). For the transition towards more autonomous administration, see Ludden (1986: 119).

¹¹⁴ In Bombay, for instance, any project costing more than 2,500 rupees was automatically allocated to the PWD for implementation, regardless of the source of funding for the project (Tinker, 1954: 281).

Understanding the historical roots for this pattern of road development requires us to evaluate its relationship with the underlying political economy of agrarian production and trade in the countryside. It also requires a closer analysis of district administration in 19th century Madras, and its relationship to various social classes in the countryside. In the following subsection, I focus on Tinnevely district to examine in greater detail the changing relationship between the fiscal structure of government, the administrative framework for road development and the political economy of an agrarian society.

A. The political economy of road transportation: Tinnevely, 1840-1920

Like in many other parts of the world, the growing hunger for cotton in industrializing economies of the 19th century cast a long shadow over the local political economy of Tinnevely district (Beckert, 2015). Cotton exports grew rapidly, and by the 1900s, raw cotton accounted for about 15% of the total cultivated area in the district, with much of the production being concentrated in the northern taluks of the district (Ottapidaram, Sattur, Srivilliputhur, and Sankaranainarkoil) where a rich black soil offered conditions suitable for cotton cultivation (Table A3.2). Economic historians of the region have generally identified the second half of the 19th century as a period of gradual economic recovery within the broad constraints placed by colonial political economy after a long depression, though the region was also affected by two major famines (1876-78 and 1898-99) during the same period (Baker, 1984; Ludden, 1986). Commercialization produced both wealth and misery, and many forms of class differentiation also increased in significance, though they were often expressed through caste categories (Washbrook, 1973). But deeper penetration of the market did not always lead to significant concentration of the direct means of production (land, cattle, etc.) in the hands of “rural

magnates” (Robert, 1983; Kumar, 1975). Concentration of wealth, insofar as it occurred, was based on indirect mechanisms involving agricultural credit and marketing rather than through direct control of the production process (Washbrook, 1994).¹¹⁵

Nevertheless, the process of commercialization and regional specialization meant that large quantities of grain, cotton, and other commodities had to be traded and transported across the landscape on an unprecedented scale, which required a steep decline in transaction and transportation costs. There is some circumstantial evidence that there was a progressive reduction in the costs of overland transportation in the province throughout the 19th century.¹¹⁶ In Tinnevely, however, any initial impetus for internal trade and transport in the early decades has been attributed primarily to political stability and the establishment of peace.¹¹⁷ Even by colonial accounts, there was little direct government expenditure in roads before 1850, and it is telling that the budgetary head used to sanction such projects was titled “occasional works”.¹¹⁸ Other than small amounts of money sanctioned to the collectors as a discretionary allowance, all new expenditures had to be approved by the provincial government, and the revenue-hungry bureaucracy in Fort St. George rarely granted such permissions.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ This phase of commercialization should not, in other words, be conflated with an impending transition to capitalist modes of production (Sanyal, 2007: 1-6).

¹¹⁶ S. Srinivasa Raghavaiyengar’s *Memorandum on the Progress of the Madras Presidency* (1893) is the commonly cited source, and his evidence for the early 19th century is mainly drawn from Buchanan’s travels in 1800, the testimony of one European merchant regarding the travel costs from Wallajahnagar in South Arcot district to Madras recorded by the Public Works Commission in the 1850s, and reports of various collectors of Coimbatore district between 1850 and 1890. Raghavaiyengar’s partisan defense of public works undertaken by the colonial state have generally been reproduced by most social historians of the region, including Robert Hardgrave Jr. (1969: 95-96), C. J. Baker (1984: 79-81), and David Ludden (1986: 135-37).

¹¹⁷ In his history of the Nadar caste in Tinnevely, Hardgrave (1969: 96) cites missionaries like C. W. Gericke and Bishop Caldwell who attribute the reduction of highway dacoity to the establishment of “Pax Britannica”.

¹¹⁸ For more details, see the reports from the Tinnevely district collector in *Reports on the District Roads for 1855-56* (Government of Madras, 1857: 100-105).

¹¹⁹ While roads were not assigned a high priority in most districts, it is possible that Tinnevely was particularly disadvantaged because of its geography. Many roads connecting cantonments were rebuilt during the 1850s in order

Absent direct government investment, the district administration attempted to marshal non-state resources in imaginative ways to carry out public works, including surpluses accumulated on behalf of major temples in the district.¹²⁰ This required the administration to enter in complex agreements with major landholders in the district, which very likely involved some sort of quid pro quo. The Ettayapuram Zamindar received sole control of two temples in 1843, and in 1844 he bore the cost of constructing two bridges and one rest house along the trunk road to Madura.¹²¹ Similarly, leading families of the Vellala caste in Tinnevely town acquired control over several large and prosperous temples in the district.¹²² A year later, one local official associated with this group spent more than 40,000 rupees from his private funds to build a bridge

to speed up military communications, but Tinnevely's location on the southern tip of the peninsula meant that the only road to benefit from these efforts was the road from Madura to Travancore passing through Tinnevely town (Government of Madras, 1857). One report by the district collector in 1865 stated that cart-hire cost 25% more in Tinnevely than in other districts (Pate, 1917: 242).

¹²⁰ See *Communications in relation to the Connection of the Government of British India with Idolatry or with Mahometanism* (1849). In 1827, the district had taken over the management and revenue collection duties for the *inam* (rent-free) lands owned by nine Hindu temples in the district and undertaken the responsibility of paying a fixed allowance to the temple priests for their regular operations (p. 98, 439). In order to conform to the policy of non-interference in religious practice, the Board of Revenue wished to turn over the control of these lands to trusts operated by Indians without governmental oversight. But by this time, the administration had set its sight on the significant temple revenues in the district, and especially the surplus that had accumulated since 1827. The acting collector, E. B. Thomas (who was known to be partial to the evangelical wing of the colonial bureaucracy), rationalized the administration's claim to these resources by arguing that "the surplus funds are the result mainly of European vigilance and integrity, hitherto applied to the control and management of the pagodas [temples]. The accumulations would, most probably, not have accrued under native rule" (99). Thomas argued that, with the exception of the Brahmin priests prone to rapacity and mismanagement, no one in the district would have any objection to this large amount of money being used to conduct detailed land surveys or to construct "works of public benefit and general utility" (100).

¹²¹ These were the bridges over the Uppodai stream at Kayathar and over Chittar river at Gangaikondan (Pate, 1917: 377) and the rest house on the trunk road was located at Veppalapatti in Sattur taluk (Stuart, 1917: 258-59). The term "trunk road" generally referred to roads connecting district headquarters with each other or with capitals of neighboring princely states like Bangalore or Travancore.

¹²² The Nellaiappar temple of Tinnevely town was given to the eldest Dalavoy Mudaliar (the most influential landlord in the town) as a sole charge. Gnanasigamani Mudaliar secured a position in the governing board of an equally prosperous temple in Tiruchendur, along with another member of the Dalavoy family and Ramsingh of Tachanallur. See *Communications in relation to the Connection of the Government of British India with Idolatry or with Mahometanism* (1849: 99-100)

over the Tamirabarani connecting Tinnevely town to Palamcottah.¹²³ Several other bridges and rest houses were constructed using money collected from private contributions in subsequent years.¹²⁴ Like elsewhere, the colonial state in Tinnevely also made liberal use of involuntary labor in the construction of these new works – initially by forcibly drafting farm laborers and convicts for the construction of roads, and later by combining public works projects with famine relief.¹²⁵ While these works are generally seen as examples of what Ravi Ahuja (2009: 81) has called “public works of piety,” they may very well turn out, upon closer analysis, to be motivated at least partially by the profit motive.¹²⁶

Meanwhile, in 1846, the Board of Revenue sanctioned 100,000 rupees using the accumulated surpluses from temple revenues to build a road connecting Tuticorin and Koilpatti via Ettayapuram, and a further road from Sattur to Srivilliputhur via Sivakasi (Map 3.2).¹²⁷ The road, which connected the main part of the region to the cotton-rich taluks to the north of the

¹²³ I refer to Sulochana Mudaliar, who was the Naib Sheristadar at the collectorate - an extremely powerful position in the early years of colonial rule. Sulochanam himself appears to have belonged to the extended Dalavoy family, and I have reason to believe that there existed a longstanding connection between Sulochana Mudaliar and at least one of the other Vellala temple trustees in Tinnevely – Gnanasigamani Mudaliar. For one, Sulochanam’s bridge was constructed at the same location as Vengu Mudaliar’s *chatram* (rest house) which had since passed to Vengu’s son Gnanasigamani (Stuart, 1879: 262). When, in 1884, the minor grandson of Gnanasigamani lost control over a temple in Palamcottah, Sulochanam’s son Vedadrisadasa Mudaliar served as the legal guardian to wage a legal battle against the perceived usurpers of the temple property. See *Appasami & ors. vs Nagappa* (1884) ILR 7 Mad 499.

¹²⁴ Bridges over the Chittar at Alagapandiapuram, over Nambiyar at Dalapatisamudram, and over Tamirabarani at Srivaikuntam and Ambasamudram were built from local subscriptions over the years (Pate, 1917: 244). Several new rest houses built between 1843 and 1850 were also from private contributions; all of them were on the main roads selected by the district administration (Stuart, 1879: 250-265).

¹²⁵ Convicts were used in the construction of Sulochanam’s bridge in Tinnevely town (Pate, 1917: 489). One example of the latter is the road from Sankaranainarkoil to Rajapalayam, which was laid out as part of the relief works in the Sankaranainarkoil taluk in 1877 (250).

¹²⁶ In other words, the colonial state enabled capital formation using surpluses from non-capitalist sources.

¹²⁷ At the same time, the Zamindar of Ettayapuram paid for an extension of a road connecting Koilpatti to Kalugumalai, the village where the temple of his family deity was located, but also a major market for cattle and cotton (see Map 2)

district, also bisected the estate of the Ettayapuram zamindar. These new roads and bridges radically transformed the transport geography of the region within the span of a decade, with flows of passenger and goods traffic being redirected along certain routes.¹²⁸ Many old routes vanished or fell into disuse,¹²⁹ while newly constructed roads also brought new towns into prominence.¹³⁰ The cotton road from Tuticorin to Srivilliputhur was particularly successful in increasing the acreage of cotton cultivation for exports (Ludden, 1986: 160-62). Among the most prominent beneficiaries of the new road were the upper crust of the Nadar caste, originally residents of the southern coastal region, who had succeeded in capturing the trade between Tuticorin and the towns of the northern taluks.¹³¹ The construction of the road enabled more regular supply of cotton to Tuticorin, and therefore led to the establishment of deeper financial ties based on forward contracts between Nadar traders and the European-owned export firms in Tuticorin.

¹²⁸ During the first half of the 19th century, goods and passengers travelling from one town or village to another typically had a number of routes to choose from (see Butterworth, 1839). A traveler from Tinnevely to Madura, for instance, could choose from three different routes; one via Srivilliputhur, one via Aruppukottai, and the “official” route via Sattur and Virudhupatti. The construction of bridges along the “official” highway, however, gave it an overwhelming superiority over alternate routes. See also *An atlas of the southern part of India*, Pharoah & co., 1854, plate #1.

¹²⁹ Indeed, a number of routes shown in atlases and travel guides prior to 1860 seem to have been forgotten by the time A. J. Stuart’s *Manual* was compiled in 1879. One example is the route to Madura via Srivilliputhur, which was one of the tree-lined avenues constructed during the reign of the 17th century Nayaka queen, Rani Mangammal. Pate’s *Gazetteer* suggests that the reason for its falling into disuse was the poor quality of the surface which made it impossible to restore (Pate, 1917: 242). But this is probably post-facto rationalization, given that the official road via Sattur and Virudhupatti was equally infamous for being impassable in the rainy season until the 1860s.

¹³⁰ Koilpatti, located at the intersection of the Madura highway and the cotton road, is an obvious example.

¹³¹ A small section of merchants had established the trade in cotton between Tuticorin and towns like Sattur, Virudhupatti, Sivakasi, and Aruppukottai in the early years of the 19th century. The “six-town Nadars” (as they came to be called) developed a unique form of religious and economic organization which reinvested profits in collective assets and services necessary for carrying out trade in a hostile environment. Each Nadar household in the six towns belonged to the local *uravinmurai*, and paid about 10% of their profits or incomes as *mahimai*. These surpluses were often invested in the construction of new commercial facilities or to build fortified settlements to safeguard the community as a whole from vandalism and violence (Hardgrave, 1969: 95-129).

The introduction of railways in the mid-1870s further resulted in a significant centralization of the cotton trade along the major railway towns,¹³² with towns away from major railway lines, like Sivakasi and Aruppukottai, declining in relative importance (Hardgrave, 1969: 104-05).¹³³ However, by the end of the 19th century, the process of integration in the cotton trade appears to have hit a barrier. Trading firms, both European and Indian, could do little more than maintaining arms-length relationships with the cotton cultivators.¹³⁴ Neither the exporters nor their subordinate dealers possessed a sufficient foothold over the surrounding countryside to be willing to extend working capital to the cultivators.¹³⁵ Nadar traders were generally seen as a foreign and upstart community among the Naickers and Maravars who were numerically dominant in the countryside, and this might be one reason for their inability to establish backward linkages in remote parts of the countryside. However, there is little evidence that their Naicker competitors were able to secure more dependable supplies from the countryside either.¹³⁶ In this context, it is likely that the remoteness of the countryside was as important a

¹³² I suspect that improvements in the speed of passenger transport due to the railways were more significant than cost reductions in goods traffic in driving this process. For much of the 19th century, few Europeans and Anglo-Indians were willing to spend long periods of time in the smaller towns of the district where much of the initial procurement of cotton took place. For instance, in the 1871 census, only 3 Europeans and 3 Anglo-Indians are recorded as living in Sattur taluk. See *Census Statement of Population in Each Village of Tinnevely District* (1871). My speculation is that the drastic reduction in travel time from Tuticorin to Sattur or Virudhuagar made it possible for European managers to supervise their investments over a greater distance, thus enabling direct investment in facilities for cotton cleaning, ginning, and storage in these towns (Ponnaiah, 1944)

¹³³ Many Nadar firms from these towns ended up diversifying into other businesses and set up outposts in Madura and Tinnevely to expand their presence in markets for domestic consumption (Baker, 1984: 373).

¹³⁴ Based on statistical correlations, David Washbrook (1976: 74-75) has argued that cotton production in the period between 1880-1920 was tightly linked to cotton prices prevailing internationally, meaning that cultivators were able to secure reasonably reliable information regarding price risk. However, prices in cotton markets were fixed based on an “arcane system of secret negotiation conducted by hand-signals under a cloth” (Baker, 1984: 261) – a system that appears to have been more suited to *increase* the level of price uncertainty.

¹³⁵ By the 1890s, even the colonial state had come to see the difficulty in obtaining working capital at reasonable rates of interest as a significant barrier to agricultural production in the province (Nicholson, 1897).

¹³⁶ While Nadar prosperity led to several violent clashes between Nadars and other communities in towns like Sivakasi, Kamudi, and Kalugumalai (Hardgrave, 1969: 95-129; Good, 1999), there is little evidence that these

barrier preventing integration of the supply chain as the communal differences between mercantile and peasant communities.

Despite these barriers, the policy of the district administration for most of the 1880-1920 period was to focus on the main roads connecting Tinnevelly to taluk headquarters, which meant that even medium-sized towns like Sivakasi had to make do with limited road access.¹³⁷ As the road network began acquiring a radial pattern centered around Tinnevelly and Palamcottah (see Map 3.2), even the “chords” of this imaginary circle were neglected unless there was a strong commercial case to be made for them.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, the revenue bureaucracy during this period sought to eliminate the leakages in revenue that had previously been allowed village officers to undertake minor repairs upon local infrastructure, including village roads (Ludden, 1986: 125-27).¹³⁹ But the economic rationale for expanding the reach of the road network had not diminished; for instance, the system of agricultural marketing that had emerged in the cotton-rich parts of the district contained several inefficiencies that might have been alleviated with better transportation. Nevertheless, the substantial revenues made available by the Local Boards Act of

tensions had any visible impact on the balance sheets of Nadar traders. For one example of a Naicker entrant into the wholesale trade, see n. 160.

¹³⁷ For instance, when a proposal was made to use provincial funds to build railway feeder roads connecting Elayirampannai to Koilpatti and Sivakasi to Tulukapatti, the collector suggested that these connections would be superfluous since both Elayirampannai and Sivakasi were already connected to the railway station in Sattur. No mention was made of the benefits that might accrue to the villages adjacent to the proposed roads if they were to be constructed. See G. O. No. 206L, d. 31-1-1901 (L&M) TNSA.

¹³⁸ For example, the roads and paths along the southern coast of Tinnevelly that were so crucial to the transactions between the fisher communities and their upland counterparts completely vanished from the road map (See Map 2). For a historical study of the restructuring of the coast in Kanyakumari in the 19th and 20th centuries, see Subramanian (2009). The roads connecting Tuticorin-Koilpatti, Koilpatti-Sankarankoil, and Sattur-Srivilliputhur, as discussed earlier, were products of the rush to bring mainland cotton to export markets. See also, *An atlas of the southern part of India*, Pharos & co., plate #1.

¹³⁹ Taluk boards were expected to take over these functions, either by directly taking up the construction of village roads, or by continuing the practice of distributing small grants to village headmen. However, as we have seen previously, the stringent oversight over taluk board budgets meant that the resources available for such forms of distribution were rather limited.

1884 were primarily used to improve the quality of existing roads, rather than expanding the network by investing in village roads.

One plausible explanation for the neglect of village roads concerns the nature of fiscal incentives for the local state (i.e. the district administration) under the ryotwari system.¹⁴⁰ 19th century commentators often complained that the land tax – the main source of revenue for all levels of government – was “inflexible”, by which it was meant that since collections were based on a thirty year settlement of land, they could not grow with annual economic output.¹⁴¹ But one could just as easily argue that the ryotwari system of land revenue was designed to be inflexible, since it shifted a large part of the risk of cultivation back to the cultivator by levying a more or less fixed demand that did not depend on crop yields or the prices they fetched.¹⁴² Once this system was in place, the only remaining means of increasing the total revenue within the framework of the thirty-year settlement were a) increase in cultivated area (since each cultivated acre was taxed according to a fixed rate); b) increase in the extent of river irrigation (since irrigated land was taxed at a rate significant higher than that of unirrigated ‘dry’ land); c) the avoidance of famines, since these crises forced the colonial state to issue tax remissions liberally;

¹⁴⁰ For a detailed account of the complexities of land tenure and taxation in Madras, see Baker (1984: 56-72). The two main systems of land taxation in British India were the ryotwari, in which the state claimed to collect the land tax directly from the cultivator, and the zamindari, in which a landlord operated as an intermediary and owned the rights to tax collection in his estate of one or more villages.

¹⁴¹ Until the 1870s, district-specific exceptions in the practice of revenue collection allowed for some flexibility in the actual revenue collected. This flexibility was greatest in the irrigated tracts, where under the *olungu* system, demand was adjusted slightly based on prices obtained in the market. These were precisely the techniques of adjustment that the new revised settlement implemented by R. K. Puckle sought to eliminate (Ludden, 1986: 120-23).

¹⁴² The main alternative source of revenue devised by the 19th century colonial state – the excise duty on salt – was designed to be equally inflexible and easy to administer, since salt production along the coasts could be easily monitored and consumption was relatively inelastic.

and d) improvements in administration and monitoring to thwart leakages in revenue at the lowest levels of revenue administration.

Administrative policies and public works programs in the 19th century were invariably designed to cater to these particular incentives. Large-scale irrigation works were always favored by district and provincial administrations alike, since these projects increased the revenue assessment in villages irrigated by several multiples, and therefore often yielded satisfactory returns (Ludden, 1986: 142-43, 154-55). Road infrastructure was primarily designed to enable deeper penetration of the bureaucracy into the countryside – hence the emphasis on connecting taluk headquarters with Tinnevely/Palamcottah.¹⁴³ As in the case of the cotton road in Tinnevely district, investments on road infrastructure could also be valuable if they helped increase the amount of cultivated acreage by making cotton cultivation economically feasible in otherwise sparsely cultivated areas like the northern taluks (Ludden, 1986: 150-51). But from a fiscal perspective, it was the increase in “cultivated acreage” that mattered the most, rather than the yield or the profit to the cultivator, at least in the medium term.¹⁴⁴ However, as the amount of land classified as “uncultivated waste” diminished over the course of the 19th century, new roads reaching deeper into the agricultural hinterland offered few additional benefits to the provincial treasury. Fiscal incentives therefore offer a plausible explanation for the concentrated pattern of expenditure on roads in Tinnevely district.

¹⁴³ This pattern was summarized quite well by the nationalist newspaper *Desabhaktan*: “Usually it is only in such places as are likely to be visited by the District Collector that are linked with the headquarters by good roads.” *Desabhaktan*, 17 March 1920, NNPR.

¹⁴⁴ For instance, when the Public Works Commissioners of Madras (1856) – which included Arthur Cotton – set about the task of providing “proofs of the value of improved roads in augmenting the revenue,” (182) their entire argument relied on the case of Canara district, where roads connecting sea ports to hill tracts had “opened up” cultivation and generated revenue through increased acreage and through an increase in the salt trade (197-98).

The bias against investment in expanding the road network was exacerbated by the over-reliance on land taxes by the fiscal regime in Madras Presidency prior to 1920. Critics have pointed out that unlike pre-colonial states, the colonial regime refused to share the risk associated with weather-related fluctuations in yield/productivity of village society.¹⁴⁵ However, unlike capitalist states, this regime also refused to share the *price-risk* associated with cultivation in a commercializing society. Instead, it sought to protect itself against fluctuations in revenue by transferring the entire burden of price-risk onto the cultivator. Such a framework for taxation ensured that the state had neither the fiscal incentive to ensure that the cultivator obtained a better price for his produce, nor the administrative capacity to diversify its sources of revenue by taxing non-agricultural activities. At the village level, the state continued to be represented by a hereditary village headman and did not have the machinery needed to identify and tax supplementary incomes from commercial horticulture, rearing animals for meat and dairy etc. – activities most likely to benefit from improved transportation.¹⁴⁶ By contrast, a local state that taxed *incomes* in both agriculture and trade would have had a substantial fiscal incentive to improve transportation and marketing facilities.¹⁴⁷

This discussion of the relationship between fiscal regimes and infrastructure policy suggests that road infrastructure was a casualty of the tendency of the 19th century colonial state

¹⁴⁵ Parthasarathi (2017: 501) makes this argument forcefully in a recent article: “The pre-British rulers of Tamilnad were great bearers of risk. This was a feature of the social order as a whole, and up and down the social, political, and economic hierarchy, those below sought to force those above to bear some of their risk. The colonial transformation heralded, in an important sense, the break-up of this order.”

¹⁴⁶ That the colonial state would instead settle for minimalist methods of taxation was probably overdetermined by the minuscule size of establishment that was expected to administer and generate accurate information about the vast and diverse geographies that constituted a district in Madras Presidency.

¹⁴⁷ The colonial state did introduce income taxes beginning in the 1880s, but these only covered incomes derived from professional activities and business. This source of revenue contributed only a small part of the total revenue until 1919. Land revenue also declined in importance during this period (1880-1920), but it was mainly substituted by the excise on liquor and salt.

to relentlessly prioritize public works projects that were “productive” within the confines of an extremely limiting fiscal framework. The distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” works was therefore primarily concerned with the *realizability* of the surplus, rather than whether a surplus would be generated per se. But this also meant that the distinction was based on practices of accounting, rather than purely economic criteria. Railways, for instance, could be treated as a productive investment from the very beginning, even though it was far from evident that railway operations would be profitable without financial support from the government.¹⁴⁸ Road infrastructure benefitting petty commodity producers and traders, by contrast, was held to a different standard. For so long as they expanded the extent of cultivation or improved administrative efficiency, investment in roads was encouraged, but fiscal and political relations of representation limited the possibilities for further reinvestment of the surpluses generated. Once the “internal frontier” of cultivable land closed, district administrations did not have fiscal incentives to pursue expansion of the road network. This suggests that the distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” works should be understood as overdetermined by political and institutional processes, rather than being a purely economic distinction.¹⁴⁹

4. Local Boards under Dyarchy, 1920 - 1935

The detailed study of roads in Tinnevely in the previous section has shown that the 19th century colonial state in Madras had a propensity to prioritize public works considered “productive,” such as railways and irrigation, even at the cost of investments in basic education, public health,

¹⁴⁸ In the early years of railway construction, advocates of railway expansion were powerful enough to make the imperial government bear most of the risk in the construction of new railway lines, with companies being guaranteed a minimum annual return of 5% on invested capital (Thorner, 1955).

¹⁴⁹ The concept of overdetermination used here has affinities to the early work of Althusser (1967). See also Stuart Hall (1985) and Stephen Cullenberg (1999).

and roads – all of which responsibilities were handed over to local boards in the Presidency. Even at the district level, main roads (typically between the district and taluk headquarters) were prioritized, while other roads suffered from sustained neglect.¹⁵⁰ Not only were governmental resources channeled disproportionately into the service of the main roads, private resources were also marshalled in the form of “local subscriptions” from elites at the district level. It is likely that these payments were a component of what might be described as a state-landlord nexus involving both state and non-state institutions.¹⁵¹ I have further shown how the structure of fiscal incentives reflected and reinforced the social compact between the colonial state and local elites that gave the political regime its stable character.

This regime was transformed to a limited extent in the wake of constitutional and administrative reforms implemented during and after World War I, and the effects came to be felt almost immediately in the pattern of road investments. Between 1914 and 1944, Madras spent more on the maintenance and improvement of its road network than any other province in British India (see Table 3.2). But more importantly, there was a growing recognition of the importance of village roads. In the 30-year period between 1884 and 1914, the province had added about 240 miles to the total mileage of roads every year, and the focus was overwhelmingly on metaled roads connecting administrative centers. In the subsequent 30-year period, the province added more than 500 miles every year, but all of the increase was accounted for by unmetaled roads which mostly served the purpose of connecting villages to the nearest

¹⁵⁰ Similar complaints were made about the reach of other local services as well; critics argued that a disproportionate share of revenues were spent on secondary schools in the main towns, while primary education at the village level remained woefully inadequate (Venkatarangaiya, 1938).

¹⁵¹ In her study of Dalit politics in colonial Tamil Nadu, Rupa Viswanath (2014) theorizes this regime as a “caste-state nexus” given the central role of caste in defining land ownership.

main road (see Table 3.3).¹⁵² Over the course of this period, Madras experienced the fastest growth in the availability and density of roads (see Table A3.3). These provincial statistics suggest that the strong bias against cheap village roads that had previously prevented the expansion of the road network in the past was corrected to some degree. In this section, I attempt to relate these changes after 1914 to the altered fiscal-political framework of local government in Madras.

Table 3.2: Maintenance Expenditure on Roads, Province-wise, 1914-1943

Province	1913-14 (rupees)	1923-24 (rupees)	1942-43 (rupees)	% growth
Punjab	2,353,000	4,301,000	6,133,000	160.6
UP	3,042,000	5,001,000	7,074,000	132.5
Assam	1,507,000	2,153,000	3,866,000	156.5
Bengal	2,883,000	4,799,000	4,034,000	39.9
Bombay and Sindh	2,010,000	4,708,000	7,703,000	283.2
Madras	4,977,000	8,435,000	10,792,000	116.8

(Source: Indian Road Development Committee, 1928a; Vesugar, 1943)

¹⁵² Indeed, there was a slight *reduction* in the share of metaled roads in the province between 1914 and 1944 (about 500 miles) while the overall percentage of metaled roads in the road network reduced from 85% to 52%.

Table 3.3: Growth of Road Network in British India, Province-wise, 1914-44

Province	1913-14		1923-24		1943-44	
	Total (miles)	Metaled (%)	Total (miles)	Metaled (%)	Total (miles)	Metaled (%)
Punjab	23453	2615 (11.1)	24388	2656 (10.9)	27050	5050 (18.7)
UP	32110	7010 (21.8)	35110	7540 (21.5)	33000	8000 (24.2)
Assam	8697	386 (4.4)	8894	550 (6.2)	12800	800 (6.3)
Bengal	16113	2583 (16)	18933	3315 (17.5)	27300	4800 (17.6)
Bombay and Sindh	26496	6628 (25)	29222	8584 (29.4)	34500	13500 (39.1)
Madras	26588	22544 (84.8)	26948	20142 (74.7)	42000	22000 (52.4)

(Source: Indian Road Development Committee, 1928a; Kynnersley, 1945).

Historians like David Washbrook (1973; 1976) and C. J. Baker (1976) have generally sought to explain the transformations of the late-colonial period as the results of *commercialization* of agricultural production and distribution and *provincialization* of bureaucratic organization and political activity. According to Baker and Washbrook, the cumulative effect of these two processes ensured that the state-landlord nexus in Madras underwent a process of *upward scale-shift* with landholding elites finding themselves drawn into the vortex of political tussles at the district and the provincial levels.¹⁵³ However, these arguments under-emphasize the role of horizontal mobilization among previously disenfranchised social classes in the political settlement that emerged from the 1920s onwards (Hardiman, 1976; Hardiman, 1982; Pandian,

¹⁵³ For instance, Washbrook (1976: 62) has correctly pointed out that one of the most immediate effects of the establishment of new representative bodies was that “fragmented, personal empires of local notables became welded together at the point where they all jostled for power on the same district board, municipal committee, or taluk committee... their empires began to be pulled out even further to touch Fort St. George.”

1995), which went far beyond the mere reconstitution of the state-landlord nexus at a higher scale.¹⁵⁴ In this section, I demonstrate that the shift in the pattern of road development was one of the many ways in which a significantly altered political settlement manifested itself.

The evidence on the functioning of local boards offered in this section suggests that patterns of expenditure on roads had a definite relationship with the democratization of political representation in local boards. Despite the many limitations of electoral politics in late-colonial Madras that left the new institutions of representative democracy vulnerable to capture by self-interested elites,¹⁵⁵ I find that these new institutions nevertheless made important attempts to alter the investment priorities of the colonial state in favor of the previously neglected countryside. As a result, perhaps for the first time under colonial rule, the pattern of public expenditure did not constitute a straightforward and unidirectional transfer of resources from the countryside into infrastructure designed primarily for the benefit of those residing in cities and towns. If “urban bias” refers to the *quantitative* disparity between public expenditures in “urban” and “rural” spaces, then critics of Michael Lipton’s thesis (1997) might consider the inter-war period to be the moment when the outright transfers of resources out of the countryside came to be seen as politically illegitimate.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Indeed, both Washbrook and Baker generally emphasize continuity over change in the political economic trajectories of Madras. The concluding paragraph of C. J. Baker’s book on late-colonial Madras is a good example of this tendency (1984: 533): “The fact that this new era of state management [post-WWII] saw new systems overlaid on old practices, rather than any attempt to undermine existing forms of local organization, has contributed to the continuity of prevailing patterns of rural society... The heirs to the chieftain of the plains, the mirasidars of the valleys, and the pioneer farmer of Kongunad, still stalk the Tamilnad countryside.” The implication is that the state-landlord nexus of the early 20th century continues to operate with only superficial changes contributed by new political forms.

¹⁵⁵ For instance, C. J. Baker (1976) has recorded several instances of horse-trading, corruption, voter fraud, etc.

¹⁵⁶ I do not mean to suggest that the “terms of trade” between urban and rural “sectors” became balanced after the 1920s; only that political contestation against rural-to-urban transfers became more common.

But even if the quantity and direction of the bias in public expenditure began to shift after the 1920s,¹⁵⁷ it is my contention that the underlying *categorical* difference between investments in “urban” and “rural” space remained firmly in place. The fundamental challenge that investments in rural roads had to contend with was that the institutional mechanisms necessary to treat them as “productive” capital were highly underdeveloped, even in provinces like Madras with highly commercialized agriculture. When funds were available, roads could be built in the countryside in order to generate the necessary use values that could improve quality of life of peasants, and the new crop of politicians that emerged in Madras after 1920 attached significant value to such improvements. However, just as in the past, these roads could not be treated as productive of the constraints of revenue generation, i.e. even if the roads generated a surplus for cultivators, public works agencies had few direct or indirect means to capture a portion of this surplus and to reinvest it in the road network. In this section, I demonstrate that the fiscal constraints that systematically undermined the democratization of investment in rural infrastructure were central to “dyarchy” – the constitutional framework of government in India during the inter-war period.

A. The reforms of 1919 and the changing practices of infrastructure finance

Beginning in the early years of the 20th century, public works policies pursued by the provincial government came under severe and sustained attack within the nascent domestic public sphere of Madras city. The attack was threefold. First, the all-consuming pursuit of directly revenue-generating works was seen as resulting in skewed investment priorities. Much of the nationalist

¹⁵⁷ Ashutosh Varshney (1998) and Kalyan Sanyal (2007) have argued that the “terms of trade” have now shifted in favor of the countryside. The historical evidence presented in this section could be seen as a precursor to this historical reversal.

fury was directed against the railways, but the over-extension of canal irrigation in deltaic regions was also criticized for the unintended consequences on public health.¹⁵⁸ Second, newspapers vehemently insisted that the taxes and fees collected from cultivators in the village in order to pay for public infrastructure were not benefitting the cultivators.¹⁵⁹ The railway cess levied on the land revenue was particularly singled out for criticism, since additional railway lines offered little prospect of benefitting the cultivator directly.¹⁶⁰ Third, these newspapers insisted that skewed investment priorities were the result of lack of meaningful representation of local government institutions, which had to be urgently corrected.¹⁶¹ While the lack of representation on taluk boards was a common complaint, publicists writing for newspapers were also desirous of village panchayats being established at the lowest level.¹⁶² All of these were

¹⁵⁸ Annie Besant's *New India* complained that the prioritization of the railways came at the expense of irrigation, which might have indirectly yielded "a net income five times as large as that of railways... enough to make primary education free and compulsory in the country". *New India*, May 21, 1915, NNPR. But *Andhrapatrika* argued that irrigation works too had their costs; absent proper drainage facilities, the hasty transformation of entire villages in the Godavari delta to wet cultivation by revenue officers was seen as the cause of increased vulnerability to disease. *Andhrapatrika*, Feb 11, 1914, NNPR.

¹⁵⁹ The typical complaint was that "the inhabitants of villages are not provided with conveniences in return for the cesses they pay. The villages have no good roads and do not contain any hospitals." *Andhrapatrika*, June 13, 1914, NNPR. The newspaper, at the same time, publicized petitions from individual villages which instantiated these complaints. For instance, the paper ran a petition from a village called Vanapallu that lacked access to roads despite the 3000 Rupees it paid as a local cess. *Andhrapatrika*, July 4, 1914, NNPR

¹⁶⁰ "The railways will never benefit the district as a whole, whatever money may be spent on them. They can serve only a few villages, but the railway cess is levied from all. There are many villages which have not any means of communication at all. They have not even feeder roads, and this is extremely unjust in view of the fact that the district board collects a railway cess from them." *Kitsnapatrika*, July 10, 1915, NNPR. However, city-based nationalists did not always maintain consistent positions on this subject. During the same period, both G. Subramania Iyer's *Swadesamitran* and Karunakara Menon's *Indian Patriot* ran angry campaigns in favor of district board ownership of branch railway lines, rather than paying attention to the fairness of the taxes that enabled these investments. *Swadesamitran*, Oct 16, 1914; *Indian Patriot*, March 15, 1915, NNPR.

¹⁶¹ In criticizing the colonial state for its zealous advocacy of railway expansion, for instance, *New India* was also arguing that left to themselves Indians would not have had these skewed investment priorities. *New India*, May 21, 1915, NNPR. The insufficiency of elected representation in taluk and district boards was an almost constant refrain in most nationalist papers throughout this period. *Indian Patriot*, 5 Nov 1908; *Desabhimani*, 11 Nov 1908, NNPR; *Desabhakthan*, 16 March 1920, NNPR.

¹⁶² *Swadeshahimani*, October 29, 1915, NNPR.

longstanding demands, but newspapers gave these complaints wider circulation than in previous years.

If lack of representation in local and provincial government was the cornerstone of the early nationalist critique of the colonial state, then the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 offered significant concessions towards making government more accountable to elected representatives.¹⁶³ Under the new structure, the responsibilities and the financial powers of imperial and provincial government were clearly demarcated, thus guaranteeing the administrative and budgetary autonomy of provincial governments to a significant degree (Thomas, 1939: 310-322). The fiscal crises generated by increased military expenditure during World War I convinced the colonial bureaucracy of the unsustainability of over-reliance on land revenue, and the imperial government finally committed itself to diversifying its financial base after several decades of prevarication.¹⁶⁴ The expectation of growing revenues from these sources allowed the imperial government to assign land revenue, excise, and a few other sources of revenue entirely to the provincial government. Since Madras had historically taxed its agriculture more heavily than most other provinces in order to meet the needs of imperial finance, the reforms generated more fiscal space in the 1920s for developmental activities in Madras than in the other provinces (Thomas, 1939, 326).

At the provincial level, responsibilities were divided into “reserved subjects” such as finance and police, which the colonial bureaucracy continued to control, and “transferred

¹⁶³ Named after the British Secretary of State (Edwin Montagu) and the Viceroy of India (Lord Chelmsford) whose joint efforts led to the Government of India Act of 1919 being passed by the British Parliament.

¹⁶⁴ Rates of taxation of incomes of professionals and mercantile firms were raised steeply, along with tariffs on imports and exports that were extremely beneficial for import-substituting industrialization, especially in the textile sector. Between 1915 to 1920, income tax in British India increased from 31 million to 222 million rupees, while customs increased from 89 million to 319 million rupees. Meanwhile, land revenue decreased slightly from 330 million to 320 million rupees (Thomas, 1939: 499).

subjects” such as local self-government, public works, and education, which were handed over to ministers responsible to a legislative council with elected members.¹⁶⁵ This division of provincial administration into transferred and reserved subjects came to be called “dyarchy” in official parlance. Simultaneously, with the express urging of the imperial government, Madras introduced important reforms to the structure of local government institutions. The number of elected positions in local boards increased rapidly, and by 1926, most local boards had elected presidents.¹⁶⁶ Local boards at all levels were formally granted budgetary autonomy, and mandates over the allocation of local fund resources were removed.¹⁶⁷ With the transfer of local self-government to the elected ministry, the separation of the local boards from the local revenue bureaucracy was given a firm institutional footing. Effectively, this separation meant that dyarchy was reproduced at the local level, with the existing colonial bureaucracy retaining control over revenue and policing, and the emergent political class acquiring control over the provision of local public goods such as roads and education.¹⁶⁸

Under dyarchy, cabinet ministers, presidents of local boards, and the elected members of the legislative council (MLCs) worked in tandem to try to divert as much of the provincial

¹⁶⁵ The council consisted of 60 members elected from general constituencies, 32 members from special electorates to represent various minority groups including special economic interests (mercantile firms, plantations etc.) and 23 members directly nominated by the government. Franchise was typically limited to individuals who paid more than Rs. 10 of land revenue or Rs. 3 in municipal taxes (Baker, 1976: 35).

¹⁶⁶ An amendment to the Local Boards Act in 1930 did away with the practice of nominating members entirely.

¹⁶⁷ Local boards were also given the authority over staffing, including most of the members of the local engineering establishment; only the senior-most District Board Engineer was appointed by the provincial government.

¹⁶⁸ It is important to note that many MLCs were also presidents of their respective district boards. This was particularly common during the early years of dyarchy (before 1925) when most of the presidents were nominated by the Local Self-Government department. Throughout the dyarchy period, the chief minister always retained the local government portfolio because it was a useful way to appoint supporters in the legislative council to coveted positions like the presidency of a district or taluk board (Washbrook, 1976: 323-24). But even after these nominated positions turned into elected ones, many MLCs (e.g. S. Kumaraswamy Reddiar of Tinnevely) retained the position of district board president.

revenue as possible to the “transferred subjects” under their control, while the colonial administration led by the Governor saw its role as one of maintaining fiscal discipline. The bureaucracy had a superior position in such negotiations since it controlled the purse strings for both the reserved and the transferred subjects, and in the initial years many of the expansive demands emanating from the political class were routinely rejected.¹⁶⁹ After 1923, however, the political class found it possible to increase the share of revenue under its control, largely due to favorable economic conditions. Provincial revenue, incomes of local boards, and local expenditure on roads all grew at a brisk pace (see Table A3.4). It is worth noting that this growth in income and expenditure occurred over a period of sustained price deflation; real income growth was therefore even more substantial than the nominal figures suggest.¹⁷⁰

However, there were many competing demands over the revenues available for road transportation. After the arrival of motor vehicles in the Madras countryside (~1910), the cost of maintaining metaled roads grew significantly. Residents of towns and large villages in Madras took to traveling by motor buses with extreme rapidity and these new modes of transport imposed significant wear and tear on road surfaces that had not been designed for motor

¹⁶⁹ For instance, between 1922 and 1923, the president of the Ramnad district board made a number of requests for funds to undertake the construction of 3 roads at the cost of about 270,000 rupees, whose completion both he and the district collector had deemed very urgent. The president first requested an enhanced grant for new roads, which was declined. He then requested a loan from the provincial government, which was also declined on the grounds that the district board did not have the surplus funds necessary to pay the 6.5% interest over a 20-year period. The president reapplied for the loan, pointing out that the lack of surplus funds was due to a one-time allotment to repair flood damage, but to no avail. He then applied for borrowing from the district’s own railway cess fund (for which his district had no immediate use), and noted that unless funds were urgently sanctioned for the projects the district had undertaken, much of the work already undertaken would be damaged. But this request was also rejected for the same reason that the previous loan applications had been denied – i.e. the inability of the district board to demonstrate a satisfactory surplus for the current fiscal year. G. O. No. 748 d. 26-3-1923 (L&M); G. O. No. 1849 d. 21-8-1923 (L&M); G. O. No. 1956 d. 4-9-1923 (L&M); G. O. No. 2078 d. 19-9-1923 (L&M), TNSA.

¹⁷⁰ The wholesale price index for British India fell from a peak value of 276 in 1919 (as a result of wartime debt financing between 1914-19) to a low of 126 in 1932 as a result of the global depression (Baker, 1976: 174).

traffic.¹⁷¹ Between 1914 and 1924, local boards *reduced* the mileage of metaled roads maintained by them by more than 10%, despite a 69% increase in expenditure on road maintenance (see Tables 2 & 3).¹⁷² Meanwhile, for animal-drawn “bullock carts” that were used primarily to transport agricultural produce to markets, the main barrier was the poor quality of last-mile connectivity from the village to nearest highway. Carts that had to navigate the unimproved cart tracks outside the main road network generally consisted of a single axle balanced upon two narrow wheels fitted with iron rims. These traditional carts often left behind deep ruts on the roads, but many believed that improved designs were unlikely to make any headway unless there was significant improvement in village roads.¹⁷³ While complaints regarding the “inferior construction” of carts and their propensity to damage road surfaces were a common feature in colonial accounts of roads in the countryside (e.g. Madras Public Works Commission, 1856: 66),

¹⁷¹ The total number of motor vehicles in the province grew tenfold between 1913-14 to 1927-28, while the number of buses doubled in the mid-1920s within the span of just two years (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928a: 15). When the Tinnevely Gazetteer was compiled, “motor omni-buses” were plying between Palamcottah and Nagercoil, Palamcottah and Tiruchendur, and between Sankaranainarkoil and Ettayapuram via Koilpatti (Pate, 1917: 246). The main road from Madura to Tinnevely, however, had no bus service (see Slater, 1918: 67), the likely reason being that buses were not permitted to compete with the railways. By the late-1930s, however, a resurvey of the Slater village in Tinnevely (which lies on the main road to Madura) found that buses connecting Tinnevely to Madura were running on a 30-minute frequency, thus offering stiff competition to the railway line (Thomas, & Ramakrishnan, 1940: 55). The evidence given by Madras Presidency to the Indian Road Development Committee in 1927 included a list of more than 1,000 operational bus routes (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928a: 24-58).

¹⁷² Growth in expenditure has been calculated in nominal terms. Accounting for inflation the growth in expenditure is less dramatic (due to high wartime inflation), but the reduction in length of metaled roads nevertheless signals that real costs of maintenance were growing.

¹⁷³ These traditional carts had limited carrying capacity, but were preferred because of their nimbleness and ability to navigate the uneven terrain of country roads (Mitchell, 1947). As Kenneth Mitchell wrote in an influential report on road-rail communication, “so long as the village is separated by a mile or two from the public road, the objectionable features of the bullock cart from the point of view of modern road surfaces will not easily be corrected” (Mitchell, cited in Venkatarangaiya, 1938: 140).

engineers now began to realize that the combination of cart and motor traffic exacerbated the damage done to metaled roads.¹⁷⁴

Given these challenging circumstances, the political class fought hard to extract more resources from the provincial government for local investment.¹⁷⁵ In 1920, the provincial government attempted to rationalize the existing system of grants by linking the quantum of grants to the length of trunk roads in each district. But politicians interpreted the new grant as an undertaking on the part of the provincial government to cover all maintenance and capital costs incurred on trunk roads, rather than the supplementary grant that it was meant to be. Bureaucrats and loyalist politicians tried hard to dispel this impression, but the principle of provincial responsibility of trunk roads became widely accepted among non-official politicians.¹⁷⁶ District board presidents in later years scaled back the use of local funds on trunk roads, thus forcing the

¹⁷⁴ In a paper read at the Royal Society of Arts, Kenneth Mitchell (1947: 594) explained this dilemma based on his experiences in India during the 1920s and 1930s: "Motor traffic is by nature severe on ordinary stone metalling, but the combined effect on that surface of cart and motor traffic exceeds the sum of the two severally, since the motor vehicles disperse the protective cushion of dust and fines formed by the crushing action of the iron tyres. India cannot at present afford the luxury of dual roadways for motor and cart traffic save in exceptional local circumstances, and the search for a dual-purpose specification has been difficult." In Tinnevely, the method of providing separate lanes for motor and cart traffic was attempted on the Tuticorin-Koilpatti road where traffic was always heavy and the black soil made roads difficult to maintain. However, at least one complainant forwarded by the Tuticorin Chamber of Commerce in 1929 noted that the quality of the metaled strip had deteriorated so far that motor vehicles frequently crossed over to the earthen lane reserved for carts. G. O. No. 980 d. 26-2-1929 (L&M) TNSA.

¹⁷⁵ One of the main venues for district-level politicians to air their views and grievances with respect to road infrastructure financing was the "provincial road board". Constituted in 1921, the road board was convened occasionally by the secretary of the local self-government department and members were allowed to bring up relevant issues for discussion. The board included a number of district board presidents, the chief engineer of the PWD, representatives of European commercial groups like Burma Shell (which sold petroleum products in the province) and the United Planters' Association of South India. G. O. no. 1681 d. 11-4-1929 (L&M) TNSA.

¹⁷⁶ For instance, in 1923, the issue of provincial responsibility was raised in the legislative council by P. Kesava Pillai, who was the district board president and MLC from Anantapur. In the subsequent debate, Narasimhacharlu, representing the neighboring district of Cuddapah, chipped in with the suggestion that since "the cost of maintaining trunk roads has been undertaken by the government" the interest on these loans should be paid by government rather than the local boards (i.e. loans should effectively be treated as grants). Such demands continued to escalate through the 1920s, and were eventually accepted in 1931, when the government took absolute responsibility for all expenditure on trunk roads. G. O. No. 151 d. 18-1-23 (L&M) TNSA.

hand of the government to increase provincial allotments.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, in 1923, district board presidents used their presence in the legislative councils to secure an additional provincial grant to pay for a portion of the costs of maintaining a network of “second class roads” that were selected in consultation with the district collectors.¹⁷⁸ By 1926, money was also being set aside in the provincial budget for new village roads, and bridging important crossings on existing roads.

Local boards also generated a growing source of revenue by erecting toll gates on most of the main roads maintained by them and by issuing licenses for buses and private motor cars who wished to use these roads.¹⁷⁹ As a result, by the late-1920s, tolls and licenses came to account for a large share of the regular expenditure on road maintenance that had previously been paid for largely from the land cess (see Tables 5 & 6).¹⁸⁰ District boards also applied pressure on the provincial government to permit the use of the interest (if not the capital) accumulated in the railway cess fund to pay for expanding the road network by constructing new roads.¹⁸¹ For an all-too-brief period in the 1920s, district boards found that a growing and well-maintained

¹⁷⁷ Until 1926, local funds contributed about one-third of the total expenditure on trunk roads (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928a: 23); by 1929, they contributed less than 3%. See GO no. 1681 d. 11-4-1929 (L&M) TNSA.

¹⁷⁸ In this scheme, district boards received upto 200 rupees per mile of second class road as a matching grant, i.e. conditional upon an equal sum of money being spent on these roads from the board’s own funds. However, since several boards spent more than 400 rupees per mile (the average cost of maintenance in 1927 was 396 rupees per mile) the grant contributed only 30% of the total costs (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928a: 23).

¹⁷⁹ According to evidence provided by Madras to the Indian Road Development Committee, revenues from licenses to motor vehicles more than doubled between 1923 and 1927, while tolls contributed more than 3 million rupees to local fund incomes. In some places, licenses for commercial motor buses were as high as 1300 rupees for a 50 mile run (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928b: 332).

¹⁸⁰ In 1927, for instance, 6.8 million rupees were spent on maintaining trunk roads and second class roads. Provincial grants for this purpose amounted to about 2.8 million rupees and tolls and licenses contributed about 3.5 million rupees to the local funds (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928a: 23).

¹⁸¹ This longstanding demand was ultimately conceded by the provincial government in 1927, and opened up a substantial annual source of revenue for district boards. G. O. No. 231 d. 9-1-1927 (L&M) TNSA.

network of roads in the countryside could generate revenue on its own, and could therefore merit sustained reinvestment of the newfound revenue surplus into new road infrastructure. By the late-1920s, several districts had ambitious plans for using their revenue surpluses to inaugurate a program of expanding the road network.¹⁸²

By this time, professional groups also began laying greater emphasis on expanding rural road infrastructure as a necessary step towards rationalizing the transportation system as a whole. Agricultural scientists and agro-economists, many of whom were ardent supporters of the cooperative movement, often argued in their professional journals that the lack of village roads was a major barrier to the adoption of new techniques of cultivation and crop diversification.¹⁸³ Whereas much of the previous emphasis among engineers had been on drainage and the construction of the road surface, after the 1920s there was more recognition of the needs of diverse social groups for whom the quality of the surface on trunk roads might not be the most pressing issue.¹⁸⁴ When A. Vipan was given the responsibility of designing a scheme for expanding the road network in the province in the early 1930s, his report laid special emphasis on a new class of “agricultural marketing roads” aimed at connecting the centers of agricultural production to their markets (Vipan, 1935). Vipan went so far as to argue that the provincial government would do well to take loans to pay for new roads. The argument was that the

¹⁸² In Madura, the district board came up with a plan to build 100 miles of new village roads using 250,000 rupees that formed the accumulation of interest on the railway cess fund (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928b: 163). After provincial grants for village roads were introduced, Tinnevely became particularly adept at maintaining a roster of village road projects sanctioned and ready to execute at short notice (Administration report for Local Boards in Tinnevely, 1927-28, TNSA).

¹⁸³ For instance, see G. A. Natesan, *The Indian Review*, 1927 (vol. 30), p. 337; *Madras Cooperation Journal*, 1931 (vol. 23), p. 270.

¹⁸⁴ Two of the most prominent engineers involved in these efforts were T. R. S. Kynnersley, who served as an engineer for the Bombay Improvement Trust before joining the Indian Concrete Association in the late-1920s, and Kenneth Mitchell, who worked for the Central PWD. Kynnersley (1945) and Mitchell (1947) both penned articles and reports calling for greater investment in roads and discussing technical challenges from the 1930s onwards.

benefits in time and cost savings accrued by both public and private agencies due to better road transportation would ensure that roads would “pay for themselves”.

And yet, while engineers like Vipran were able to convincingly argue that a widespread network of roads in the countryside would generate significant benefits to users, not just in terms of time or convenience but also in monetary terms, the real challenge lay in finding ways for public agencies responsible for investments in road transportation to realize a portion of the monetary benefit so that a cyclical process of reinvestment could be inaugurated. For so long as bullock carts continued to be the main mode of transportation in the countryside, tolls remained the most convenient method to generate revenue from carts carrying agricultural produce.¹⁸⁵ However, the erection of toll gates was highly resented by many influential groups. Since the collection of tolls was often auctioned away with little subsequent oversight to the highest bidder, accusations of extortion and overcharging were common in many places.¹⁸⁶ The motor vehicle lobby was particularly opposed to the “medieval” system of toll collection, because toll gates significantly delayed motor vehicles and went against the ideal of free-flowing traffic that

¹⁸⁵ For a first-person account of the functioning of toll gates in Trichinopoly town, see Asirvatham (1986).

¹⁸⁶ Consider, for instance, evidence provided by R. Foulkes (District Board President, Madura) to the Indian Road Development Committee: “There is no question that toll-gates are a great nuisance to the travelling public. They are nearly obsolete in most western countries. They are wrong in principle, because a large share of the tax on the public (toll-fees) goes into the pockets of private individuals (toll-gate contractors). Yet the system of selling by auction the right to collect tolls is the only practical system of collecting the tax. Abuses, in the form of wrongful collections and insolence towards travellers on the part of gate-keepers are impossible to prevent, the sufferings of ignorant country cartmen from the insolence and exactions of dishonest gate-keepers are untold. It is very desirable therefore that toll gates should be abolished entirely, or at least that they should be restricted only to certain special cases such as new bridges, etc.” (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928b: 172). Note that despite his institutional position as president of the district board, Foulkes displaced the responsibility for these abuses onto the “ignorance” of cartmen and the “dishonesty” of gate-keepers, whereas the more likely explanation – high revenue expectations from the district board and its lack of oversight – was not considered.

was now being held up as the primary objective. One European motorist in Tinnevely district, for instance, indignantly compared toll collection on roads to “highway robbery”.¹⁸⁷

When the Indian Road Development Committee (IRDC) formed by the central government sought the opinions of concerned individuals in 1928, many respondents were willing to consider replacement of tolls with import duties on petroleum and quarterly taxes on vehicles as a solution that would offer significant relief to all social classes. Further, it was proposed that vehicle registration and tax collection should be provincialized so as to prevent extortion and enable free-flowing traffic across the districts, and the proceeds were to be distributed to local boards to compensate for toll income. However, the members of the committee side-stepped the possibility that vehicle taxes may not sufficiently compensate for tolls since they would not include bullock carts.¹⁸⁸ Pursuant to the final recommendations of the IRDC, toll gates were abolished for both motor vehicles and animal-drawn carts in Madras in 1931, even though district boards stood to lose a significant portion of their income due to this measure.¹⁸⁹ Simultaneously, the gradual decline in the land revenue caused by the depression of

¹⁸⁷ G. O. No. 980 L&M, d. 26-2-1929, TNSA.

¹⁸⁸ The question of whether animal-drawn carts would also be taxed on a quarterly basis was not addressed with the seriousness it deserved. Several respondents, like T. R. S. Kynnersley of Bombay, advocated for carts to be registered and evaluated for the potential damage they may cause to road surfaces, and accordingly levied a quarterly or annual tax (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928b: 541-42). However, the heavy demands that this would place on the administrative machinery was well recognized, and individuals with experience of administering rural districts (like R. Foulkes) acknowledged the resistance from the revenue bureaucracy towards such proposals. It was also acknowledged that these taxes would be easy to evade and therefore might not match the revenues collected at the time from road tolls. Ultimately, the central committee chose not to delve into these specificities but still included a recommendation that tolls should be abolished – thus effectively shifting the burden of devising a fiscally neutral solution to the provincial level (Indian Road Development Committee, 1928c).

¹⁸⁹ At the time the new measure for motor vehicle taxation was being considered in Madras, many district board presidents argued that tolls should be retained for all non-motorized transportation. However, this solution was not given weight by the local self-government department because motorists would still be subjected to the same delays as before. Ultimately, it was suggested by the government during the discussion of the bill in the legislative council that the quarterly tax on motor vehicles would suffice to compensate entirely for the loss of toll income, which was seemingly sufficient to satisfy the concerned district politicians about the sustainability of local board finances (Venkatarangaiya, 1938: 188-193). However, it is likely that the guarantee of substituting the toll income in its entirety was not made in good faith. For instance, a note written by the Secretary of the LSG department in 1929

the 1930s also added to the financial strain of both local and provincial budgets.¹⁹⁰ As governments at all levels struggled to balance their budgets, provincial grants for “village communications” decreased from 750,000 rupees in 1928-29 to 450,000 rupees in 1936-37.¹⁹¹ Facing a sharp decline local board budgets, the government completely dismantled taluk boards in 1933, and district boards were handed over their limited responsibilities.¹⁹²

The increased dependence on discretionary provincial grants also exacerbated the variability and uncertainty inherent in budgeting for local boards. Even when the amount of money distributed for roads remained constant at the provincial level, a system of discretionary grants meant that there could be significant year-on-year variation in the amounts distributed to any particular district. Moreover, the finance department was insistent that grants must be spent by the end of the financial year – a difficult proposition since expenditure on road construction was often dependent on weather and work could not continue at the same speed throughout the year.¹⁹³ It is important to note that finance departments tended to insist on the expenditure of

anticipated that the tax would be able to pay for only about 63% of the total toll income (GO no. 4605 L&M d. 11-10-1929, TNSA). In the initial years of the new tax regime, the tax generated less than 50% of the income from tolls that district boards had lost in the process.

¹⁹⁰ The total revenues of the provincial government declined from a peak of 181 million rupees in 1929-30 to 155 million in 1933-34, with the fall in excise being the main source of the decline (Thomas, 1939: 517).

¹⁹¹ See G. O. No. 1119 (L&M) d. 5-3-1929, TNSA for the 1928-29 allocation. For the 1936-37 allocation, see *Proceedings of the seventh session of the Madras Legislative Council*, 1936, p. 451

¹⁹² However, given that district boards were already controlling a major share of the local expenditure on roads (see Table A3.7 & A3.8 for the division of revenues in Ramnad and Tinnevely), this consolidation did not improve their financial condition very much.

¹⁹³ In the dry regions of Madras, rainfall was both a necessity and an obstacle to the construction of roads. As the name suggests, water and steam were important ingredients for roads surfaced using water-bound macadamization. In areas where large quantities of water were difficult to find, the months during and immediately after the monsoon were therefore ideal for metalling roads, but heavy rainfall and floods could also impede the work significantly. To the extent that many existing roads became impassable in the rainy season, finding labor and carting supplies to the construction site was also a frequent challenge during the monsoons. For one example, see G. O. no. 1849 d. 21-8-1923 (L&M) TNSA.

grants within the timeframe of the fiscal year precisely because they treated these projects as “ordinary expenditures” on services (i.e. as flows), rather than expenditures meant to maintain or enhance the capital stock.¹⁹⁴ This invariably resulted in a large portion of the grants being returned to the treasury unspent, and these lapsed grants were often not reallocated in the subsequent year.¹⁹⁵

Local engineers and politicians tried to develop several workarounds to the obstacles created by the policies of the finance department. In the late-1920s, some districts began the practice of using provincial grants to pay for work already completed as a method of smoothing the income and freeing up resources for new expenditure on village roads, but the finance department quickly put an end to this practice.¹⁹⁶ Another workaround was to use

¹⁹⁴ It is for this reason that the finance department assumed that unspent balances at the end of the year do not need to be reallocated. However, as engineers frequently writing on road infrastructure frequently reminded readers, a road that had received no attention in one year required a significantly greater allocation in the next (Mitchell, 1947). In other words, even regular maintenance had many of the characteristics of expenditure on capital stock. But this absurd policy of the finance department extended even to grants for *new* village roads, since the small amounts allocated to each stretch of village roads meant that they were classed as “ordinary” works rather than “original” ones (G. O. No. 1119 L&M d. 5-3-1929). By contrast, grants for major bridges once made could be claimed by district boards over a more flexible period – this was so because the construction of a bridge was treated as “capital expenditure” rather than “ordinary expenditure”. See Administration Report of Local Boards in Ramnad, 1927-28.

¹⁹⁵ In the late-1920s, as much as 50% of the total provincial grants for new village roads generally remained unspent by the end of the year. In order to allow for continuity, in 1926, the department of local self-government initially agreed to reallocate lapsed grants towards new roads the following year. However, the finance department would not raise the overall allocation equal to the previous year’s lapsed grants (instead, the failure to spend the entire amount in one year was frequently cited as a reason to reduce the allocation for subsequent years). In the context of a fixed total grant, the practice of reallocation of lapsed grants tended to put districts that had used up their entire grant in the previous year at a disadvantage (since there was little money left for new grants to be made). By 1929, the local self-government department decided to end the practice of reallocating grants (GO no. 1681 L&M d. 11-4-1929 TNSA). However, since it had no leverage over the finance department (one of the “reserved” subjects) it was unable to address the root cause of the inefficient use of provincial grants – the unreasonable expectation that construction work could be organized to suit the temporal cycles of the finance department, rather than vice versa.

¹⁹⁶ Finance was adamant on the principle that local boards must not be permitted to anticipate grants. The department of local self-government (LSG) sought to intervene in order to allow district boards the right to use the grants for those works which may have been begun in a previous year but remained incomplete, but this too was contested by the finance department. The secretary of the LSG department had to give way, noting that “some local boards start works under the impression that grants for village roads will be allotted from year to year. It is hard to damp their enthusiasm but as finance are particular there seems to be no help for it.” GO no. 1119 d. 5-3-1929 (L&M) TNSA.

provincial grants only for spatially concentrated investments, even when the grants were meant to be spent on village roads.¹⁹⁷ However, as the focus shifted from planning for new roads to outmaneuvering the bureaucrats of Fort St. George, the capacity of local boards to develop plans for investment in the road network in the medium-term and to accordingly set aside resources and manpower was gradually eroded. By the mid-1930s, local governments had lost any semblance of autonomy in their expenditures on road infrastructure, and it was therefore merely a matter of time until these responsibilities were handed over fully to the provincial government.¹⁹⁸

The rise and fall of autonomous local government during the inter-war period was a critical juncture in the historical trajectory of the rural infrastructure state. The infrastructure regime that emerged in the Madras countryside during this period can be distinguished from its predecessor by the fact that village roads and other forms of decentralized rural infrastructure were not entirely neglected as in the past. For a brief period of time, the growing income from tolls and changing professional standards might have even made it possible to think of improvements to the road network, taken as a whole, to be “productive” works. I have argued that these favorable circumstances for increasing the coverage of roads in the Madras countryside reflect the democratization of provincial policy after the 1919 reforms. However, with the premature abolition of tolls, local governments were denied the opportunity to grow

¹⁹⁷ One possible reason for concentrating the entire expenditure at one location might have been to speed up the process of getting projects sanctioned by the PWD Superintendent Engineer (which was necessary for drawing the grant from the provincial government).

¹⁹⁸ The provincialization of the engineering establishment had already begun in the early-1920s, when the provincial government began appointing the district board engineer from the provincial services. With the formation of the highways department in 1946, all the district engineering departments were finally amalgamated into one provincial service. At this time, the government also took full financial responsibility for all trunk roads and second class roads (later reclassified as “national highways” and “state highways”).

their own revenues in the long-term through their investments in road transportation. In other words, the institutional framework did not allow for investment in the road network to be treated as *capital*, from which a surplus was potentially realizable.

By placing finance outside the scope of representative politics, dyarchy therefore ensured that the process of democratization was contained within certain limits. Indeed, one could theorize dyarchy genealogically as the compartmentalization of popular authority held by elected representatives from the sovereign authority of the colonial state.¹⁹⁹ Within this broad framework, elected representatives could lay claim on a substantial portion of the state revenue for investments that might have been deemed “unproductive” in the past, since it was no longer possible for the state to dismiss the use values that these investments could potentially generate. Village roads, for instance, received significant attention during this period, and the result was an impressive long-term growth in the coverage and density of the road network in the province. The partial incorporation of an emergent political class in Madras therefore had real and meaningful impacts on the distribution of resources.

However, I contend that the distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” works was nevertheless carefully policed by the colonial state. From a fiscal standpoint, treating roads as intrinsically unproductive perpetuated the fiscal dependence of local boards and ensured that they will be able to make no *a priori* claim to economic resources; their budgets could therefore be flexibly scaled up or down depending on changing circumstances.²⁰⁰ But the distinction

¹⁹⁹ My argument hints towards Partha Chatterjee’s theorization of “political society” as a distinct form of rule in postcolonial settings, which develops on Ernesto Laclau’s conception of “populist reason” (Chatterjee, 2011).

²⁰⁰ For instance, during the depression years, as the revenues of the railways (the classic case of a “productive” undertaking) fell precipitously, the railways were still allowed the first claim over these revenues. As a result, the working expenses of the railways were allowed to stabilize around 70 million rupees through the 1930s, even as resources available for maintenance of “unproductive” works fell drastically in most parts of the country (Thomas, 1939: 509).

between “productive” and “unproductive” works was also important to maintain for political reasons. Treating local services (like roads) as productive meant that local boards had to be permitted to independently levy tolls and regulate traffic, and the colonial state ran the risk of allowing these boards to set themselves up as quasi-sovereign authorities with broad powers of regulation and taxation. By treating the provision of roads as mere welfare expenditure, the colonial state was able to ensure that local boards would remain in a subordinate position because of their dependence on the finance department of provincial government.

B. Fiscal constraints and representative politics in Ramnad and Tinnevely

The discussion of provincial and local finance under dyarchy in the previous sub-section suggests that the erosion of fiscal autonomy of local boards in the early-1930s prevented the institutionalization of a cyclical process of reinvestment in an expanding road network by local boards. In this sub-section, I offer greater texture to this broad argument by analyzing the complex interactions between political and fiscal drivers of change in the public works policies of district boards by studying two districts – Ramnad and Tinnevely – in greater detail. By situating several controversies related to the governance and financing of road infrastructure in the two districts within their local political contexts, I substantiate the broad outlines of the argument developed in the concluding paragraphs of the previous sub-section. My analysis also complicates the earlier narrative by examining in more granular detail the relations between local boards at the district and taluk level, and the tradeoffs between different kinds of investment in the road network.

Tables 7 and 8 shows that the division of resources and responsibilities between district and taluk boards was rather unbalanced through the 1920s. Immediately after the implementation

of the 1919 reforms, district boards in both Tinnevelly and Ramnad took over the responsibility of many of the major roads that Taluk boards had previously managed. Through the 1920s, district boards retained trunk roads and second class roads, while the remaining roads were left for taluk boards to manage.²⁰¹ Having been deprived of the responsibility of the most important roads, taluk boards rarely received a share of the toll income and provincial grants, either for “original” works or for routine maintenance. With the exception of some provincial grants under the head of “village communications,” taluk boards were therefore expected to rely entirely on their share of the land cess to maintain village roads at the lowest cost possible. Despite this, much of the growth in mileage of the road network was due to the efforts undertaken by taluk boards to convert existing cart tracks permanently into village roads under taluk board maintenance. By contrast, district boards focused their efforts on bringing roads annexed from taluk boards to the standard of second class roads suitable for motor vehicle traffic.²⁰² In other words, even before the collection of tolls was abolished in 1931, the regime of road infrastructure finance that emerged in Tinnevelly and Ramnad was already tending towards the exclusion of village roads from the category of productive works.

However, comparing Tinnevelly and Ramnad, Tables 7 and 8 also suggests that taluk boards in Tinnevelly had significantly greater financial leeway than their Ramnad

²⁰¹ Taluk boards were also tasked with the maintenance of rest houses near the main highways and ferry services at some river crossings. Union boards, municipalities and panchayats played a negligible role in building and maintaining roads during this period, and much of the funding for panchayats was distributed separately through a provincial Registrar of Panchayats.

²⁰² By the end of the 1920s most of the roads annexed from taluk boards had been relaid and metaled, and river crossings on these roads had been fitted by bridges or culverts. Almost all the bridged river crossings lay either on trunk roads and second class roads. Indeed, in many cases, the construction of bridges from local funds was understood to be a prerequisite for the provincial government to recognize a road as a second class road (which would qualify the district board to receive a half grant for its maintenance).

counterparts.²⁰³ Taluk boards in Tinnevelly maintained a larger network of roads at a lower per-mile cost, thus distributing their resources more widely than in Ramnad. By contrast, the Ramnad district board spent a larger share of its land cess receipts on “capital expenditure” which typically included bridges and culverts (see Table A3.5 & A3.7).²⁰⁴ This evidence suggests that dominant political coalitions in the two districts responded to the institutional framework of local government in very different ways when allocating resources at the district level. The following sub-section identifies certain differences in regional political economy that might offer a plausible explanation for the relatively concentrated pattern of road development in Ramnad during the 1920s.

(i) Ramnad

Ramnad district was established in 1910 by combining the Sattur and Srivilliputhur taluks of the erstwhile Tinnevelly districts with the zamindari estates of Ramnad, Sivaganga, and Devakottai that had previously been a part of Madura district (see Map 3.1).²⁰⁵ After the 1919 reforms, the zamindar of the largest estate in the province – a young man named B. Raja Rajeswara

²⁰³ Between 1923 and 1928, taluk boards in Ramnad put together spent only 6.2% of the total budget on road maintenance in the district, as compared to 14.4% in Tinnevelly.

²⁰⁴ Village roads were generally not considered capital works unless costly drainage elements had to be included.

²⁰⁵ At the time of the creation of the new district, the colonial regime felt that these regions had for far too long been left to their own ways. The northern parts of Tinnevelly had suffered for being too remote from the district headquarters, while the 19th century colonial state had also chosen to limit its interventions in zamindari estates out of respect to the rights of the zamindar. Moreover, since much of the cotton cultivation and associated mercantile trade in the southern districts was concentrated in these areas, they could no longer be treated as marginal to the economic prospects of the province. Also, at the turn of the 20th century, these regions had become centers of communal strife between Maravars and Nadars, and the creation of a new district establishment was considered desirable in the interests of maintaining law and order. By the early 20th century, the colonial state was secure enough to intervene in these regions, and the responsibility for law and order and local services was taken over by the colonial state. However, there was a concern that transferring to district headquarters to Ramnad town would weaken the authority of the district collector in comparison to the zamindar of Ramnad. It was therefore decided that Madura should be retained as the neutral location of the district headquarters (Baliga, 1972).

Sethupathi (titled the “Raja of Ramnad”) – was nominated to serve as the district board president.²⁰⁶ However, as the nominal head of the Maravar caste, the zamindar found himself locked in longstanding social conflict with upwardly mobile caste groups in the region, such as the Rajus, the Nagarathars, and the Nadars.²⁰⁷ Despite this, he was able to maintain his position as president of the district until his death in 1928, and was even able to get his allies elected to the posts of taluk board presidents in Ramnad and Sivakasi.²⁰⁸ A few years after his death, the heir to the Ramnad estate was installed as district board president, and the new zamindar remained influential in Ramnad politics until the 1960s.

For members of the landed gentry, control over district boards and other institutions of local government offered several opportunities to shore up their waning social status and to challenge the upwardly mobile castes that were diversifying outside the agrarian economy. In the early 1920s, the Raja of Ramnad unleashed a number of campaigns against his political and caste

²⁰⁶ The Raja of Ramnad enjoyed a certain prestige that few politicians in the district could match, and he was generally elected as MLC with little opposition (Baker, 1976: 72). When it became clear that the Justice Party would form the government, he was one of the many legislators who gave the government his support, and was nominated as district board president in return. David Washbrook (1976: 313,323) notes that only a few years earlier, the Raja of Ramnad had supported Annie Besant’s Home Rule League, which was opposed the constitutional reforms of 1919 and refused to support a government formed under the framework of dyarchy.

²⁰⁷ The Rajus were residents of Rajapalayam near Srivilliputhur. By the 1920s, leading members of this community had begun transferring profits from land into industries like textile production, cement, etc. The growing economic status of Nadars in cotton towns like Sattur, Virudhunagar, and Kamuthi has been discussed in the previous section. The erstwhile Raja of Ramnad (the present zamindar’s farther) had previously opposed the entry of Nadars into a temple in Kamuthi, which had resulted in a famous court case (Hardgrave, 1969). Nagarathars were a traditional mercantile community (also called “Nattukottai Chettiars”) and between 1850 to 1940, they made their fortunes as moneylenders in Burma and Malaysia (Rudner, 1994). Most of these families retained a base in the villages surrounding Karaikudi in the northern part of Ramnad district, and soon found themselves in conflict with the Maravar zamindars of this region. For 19th century histories of zamindars in Ramnad and neighboring estates, see Price (1996) and Dirks (1986).

²⁰⁸ Rajam Naidu occupied the position of taluk board president in Ramnad, while the zamindar of Seither, V. T. S. Sevuga Thevar, obtained the position in Sivakasi. Both men held their positions for more than a decade, even when they faced opposition within their respective boards. Since the Local Boards Act of 1920 did not prescribe a procedure for members of a board to remove the president, these men once elected or nominated had a great deal of security of tenure for the duration of their term. Administration reports for local boards in Ramnad, 1921-22, 24-25, 29-30.

opponents in different parts of the district, including the zamindar of Devakottai²⁰⁹ and a wealthy landlord of the Raju caste in Rajapalayam.²¹⁰ Many scholars have treated these campaigns as typical of the factional politics generated by the reforms of 1919, with caste groups sorting themselves idiosyncratically into different factions (Washbrook, 1973). However, the Raja of Ramnad's political project cannot be viewed through the lenses of factional politics and caste/class conflict alone. For the Raja of Ramnad, control over local funds was not merely a means to take part in the "division of spoils" within the framework of dyarchy; he also hoped to use it to restore the quasi-sovereign status of the Ramnad zamindari in the region.²¹¹

Inevitably, such an ambition led to a spate of jurisdictional conflicts between the Ramnad zamindar and the district collector over a number of issues. One of the main controversies that arose during the early years of dyarchy was connected to the question of licensing motor buses. In 1921, the Raja of Ramnad established a district board motor bus service functioning connecting the towns of Sivakasi taluk and began denying commercial licenses to competitors with the explicit purpose of establishing a monopoly on the Rajapalayam-Sattur route for the district board service.²¹² He also began denying licenses to buses above the weight of 3.5 tons

²⁰⁹ The Raja accused Chockalingam Chettiar, the elected president of the Devakottai taluk board (who belonged to the Nagarathar community) of usurping control over a temple and a cart-stand that belonged to the Sivaganga estate. The animosity between the Raja of Ramnad and Chockalingam Chettiar was most likely due to the fact that the Raja's father had been forced to sell the Devakottai estate to Chockalingam's family in order to clear his debts. Ultimately, the provincial government chose to give the taluk board president a clean chit as the Court of Wards for Sivaganga did not press its claims. GO No. 937 L&M dt. 20-4-23 TNSA.

²¹⁰ A. K. D. Dharma Raja was accused of using his influence in the Rajapalayam union board to weaken the prospects of a public market in order to increase the profits from his private market in the same town. Ultimately the wishes of the union board prevailed and Dharma Raja's license to maintain the market was renewed. GO no. 1984 L&M d. 7-9-23 TNSA.

²¹¹ If we follow the ideal-typical categories of styles of political leadership developed by Pamela Price and Arild Ruud (2012), it could be hypothesized that the Raja of Ramnad saw himself as more of a "lord" and less of a "factional boss". The references to the Raja of Ramnad in C. J. Baker's (1976) account of inter-war politics also suggest that the Raja saw himself as something more than the mere leader of a political faction.

²¹² Administration Report for Local Boards of Ramnad District, 1921-22.

with the stated intent of minimizing damage to the roads on the district. Both these measures proved to be extremely disruptive both to bus owners and to the elites of Sattur and Sivakasi taluks, and the affected bus owners were able to mobilize the leading residents of these towns (most of whom did not belong to the Maravar caste) against the Raja's "high-handedness" and the arbitrary style of decision-making.²¹³ Meanwhile, alarmed by the Raja's assertion of regulatory authority (which he considered arbitrary), the collector refused to assist the president of the district board in prosecuting bus companies operating without the district board license.²¹⁴ With the intervention of the Raja's many opponents, many of the bus licenses were restored and the maximum weight for buses was raised to 4 tons.²¹⁵

Challenges to the Raja's authority also took other forms. Retaliating against the Raja of Ramnad's attempts to disrupt bus services in his town, the municipal chairman of Srivilliputhur refused to grant the district board bus service a license to operate within municipal limits.²¹⁶ Throughout the duration of the Raja's tenure as president, the Srivilliputhur municipality also doggedly refused to pay the district board's share of the income from municipal toll gates.²¹⁷ When the Raja sought to install additional toll gates on certain district roads, he faced opposition from the municipal council in Sivakasi and the Devakottai union board.²¹⁸ Members of the Sivakasi taluk board systematically obstructed the functioning of the president, a relative of the

²¹³ G. O. no. 1613 d. 19-7-23 (L&M) TNSA.

²¹⁴ G. O. No. 919 d. 17.4.1923 (L&M) TNSA.

²¹⁵ G. O. No. 2827 d. 20.12.1923 (L&M) TNSA.

²¹⁶ GO No. 2182 d. 4-10-1923 (L&M) TNSA.

²¹⁷ Administration report for Local Boards in Ramnad district, 1928-29.

²¹⁸ G. O. No. 2321 d. 5-8-25 (L&M) TNSA; G. O. No. 2367 d. 7-9-24 (L&M) TNSA.

Raja of Ramnad, with many meetings having to be adjourned with no subjects taken up for discussion.²¹⁹ Lacking the administrative establishment needed to enforce his writ on subordinate boards and municipalities, the Raja was forced to raise every new controversy with the local self-government department in Madras and rely on their intervention.

In challenging the untrammelled exercise of the powers of district board president by the Raja of Ramnad, his opponents often relied on a racialized colonial discourse that depicted the certain communities including the Maravars as capricious, unaccountable, impulsive, and violent (Pandian, 2005). The district motor bus service was lampooned as being so unpunctual that no one could rely on it to reach the railway station at Sattur in time to catch a train. A petition to the provincial government from Srivilliputhur described the Raja of Ramnad's actions not so much as a deliberate effort to undercut the fortunes of his opponents, but rather as an irrational and mindless exercise of power over the residents of the town. Declaring that the Raja was merely "amusing himself and his zamindari exclusiveness," the petitioners demanded that he be replaced by a "sympathetic and broad-minded officer" more attentive to the wishes of his constituents.²²⁰ While the Raja managed to hold on to the position for multiple terms, the prospect of securing the support of members of his own board for any new initiative began appearing rather bleak, since many of the petitioners campaigning for his removal were also members of his district board.²²¹

²¹⁹ Administration report for Local Boards in Ramnad district, 1923-24.

²²⁰ G. O. no. 1613 d. 19-7-23 (L&M) TNSA.

²²¹ Prominent among the petitioners was P. S. Kumaraswami Raja of Rajapalayam, who was related to A. K. D. Dharma Raja (see n. 147). Kumaraswami Raja would go on to become the chief minister of Madras State in the late-1940s.

However, while many of the Raja's actions were evidently arbitrary and inconsistent, his objection to the rapid increase in motor buses was not fundamentally unsound. As discussed in previous sections of this paper, the rise in motor traffic had certainly increased the costs of maintenance of main roads in most parts of the province, and restricting the number and weight of motor buses might have been a reasonable policy for district boards to adopt in order to minimize maintenance costs. And yet, in his angry rebuttals to the complaints of his opponents, the Raja rarely tried to offer a convincing rationale for his decisions, because of which they were typically overturned. Nor did he make any attempt to mobilize the rural constituents upon whom most of the burden of road maintenance eventually fell, and who stood to benefit the most from controlling the growth of motor transport. But the Raja's aloofness from popular politics was to be expected – he was not, after all, a democrat either ideologically or by disposition. Combined with his ultimate dependence on the provincial government to get most of his decisions implemented, the lack of active political support meant that there was little possibility of his effecting any significant change in the pattern of road development.

(ii) Tinnevelly

Compared to Ramnad, local government in Tinnevelly appears to have relied on a much more diffuse political coalition with representation from different parts of the district. Throughout the dyarchy period, Tinnevelly was represented in Madras city by leading magnates of Tinnevelly town, like T. N. Sivagnanam Pillai and S. Kumaraswami Reddiar, who were committed members of the Justice Party and served as presidents of the district board before being promoted to the provincial cabinet. However, at the district level, the political process brought together men from

different parts of the district, with diverse backgrounds, and varying ideological propensities.²²² And yet, local administration in Tinnevely appears to have been a much smoother operation compared to Ramnad. In this sub-section, I use some controversies related to road development in Tinnevely that illustrate the relationship between local political regimes and road infrastructure during the 1920s.

One case that illustrates the functioning of the political coalition in the district concerns the construction of a village road in Koilpatti taluk. One of the first projects taken up by the taluk board president, P. N. Kondalrayaswami Nayudu,²²³ was the construction of a branch road to his own village (Kuruvikulam) from the main Koilpatti-Sankarankoil road (see Map A3.1).²²⁴ Since the existing cart track passed through low-lying ground and was prone to flooding, both the local fund engineer and the taluk board president desired to construct the new road on an altogether different route, as shown in Map A3.1. However, this proposal was opposed by the zamindar of Ettayapuram (who owned the village of Alankulam through which the road had to pass) because the new route would interfere with the flow of rainwater to an irrigation tank in his village, and because it would require acquisition of fertile and productive lands.²²⁵ The president of the district board (T. N. Sivagnanam Pillai) intervened by visiting the site and discussing

²²² At least one of the taluk board presidents in the mid-1920s, Sadhu Ganapathi Pantulu (president of Sermadevi taluk board) was a Swarajist. Unlike in Ramnad, I have found no evidence that the inevitable ideological disagreement between him and the district board president (S. Kumaraswami Reddiar, a Justice and a loyalist) caused any administrative difficulties.

²²³ Nayudu was the member of an old Kamma family with royal connections. After the settlement of the Inam commission in the 1860s, his family had held the Kuruvikulam estate on *kattukuttagai* tenure (i.e. fixed rent). He had been a member of district and taluk boards in Tinnevely district since the 1900s (Vadivelu, 1984). By the 1930s (if not earlier), his family had become deeply involved in wholesale trade in and around Kovilpatti. Source: Conversation (d. 23/10/2015) with a resident of Kuruvikulam.

²²⁴ Nayudu himself contributed 1,000 rupees for this road from his private funds, while the taluk board paid for the remaining cost (~5,000 rupees) from its own funds. Administration Report for Local Boards in Tinnevely, 1921-22.

²²⁵ GO No. 1158 d. 22-5-23 (L&M) TNSA.

alternatives with both parties as well as villagers from three other neighboring villages. By the end of 1922, he was able to suggest a new alignment that was satisfactory to both parties. The alignment ultimately agreed upon followed the route desired by the zamindar of Ettayapuram until the boundary of his village and then followed the boundary to join the path preferred by the taluk board president. As part of the compromise, the zamindar of Ettayapuram agreed to donate the land needed for constructing the road free of cost to the taluk board.²²⁶

In the 1920s, a number of other disputes were resolved in this manner by the district board president, including many cases of land transfer for village roads. Disputes over the distribution of toll revenue between the municipality of Palamcottah and the district board were settled without loud complaints from the disputing parties reaching Fort St. George.²²⁷ In 1924, when leading residents of some villages in Sankaranainarkoil and Nanguneri taluks complained against tolls being charged, a committee of the district board was willing to remove the toll gates, despite the reduction in toll revenue. These disputes were typically resolved by the district board president with little reliance on the local self-government department in Fort St. George.²²⁸ When complaints did reach the provincial government, such as when European commercial interests in Tuticorin complained against the poor upkeep of the cotton road that served the city and the failure to repair flood damage, the district board president was able to obtain special grants from the provincial government to carry out repairs.²²⁹ These cases suggest that the political machine in Tinnevely was, in some ways, more attuned to defusing conflict among

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ G. O. No. 651 d. 2-3-1924 (L&M) TNSA.

²²⁸ Administration report for local boards in Tinnevely district, 1924-25.

²²⁹ Administration report for local boards in Tinnevely district, 1928-29.

various political actors in the district than in the case of Ramnad. This offers a plausible explanation for the distributed pattern of taluk board expenditures on village roads in Table A3.8.

5. Conclusion

Political machines in Madras went through yet another phase of democratization in the 1930s as a result of the civil disobedience movement and a second round of constitutional reforms in 1935. In the 1930s, mobilization from below resulted in political challenges to the leaders of all major caste-based factions in both Ramnad and Tinnevely – Vellalars, Maravars, Nadars, and Nagarathars – with the Indian National Congress emerging as the primary beneficiary (Baker, 1976). Contemporary writers as well as historians in subsequent years have seen the victory of the Congress in the post-1935 elections as the death of dyarchy and the political regime it had produced. Indeed, it is quite true at the provincial level, the elected ministry was no longer beholden to the colonial bureaucracy for financing its developmental initiatives. All through the inter-war period, members of the Indian National Congress had hammered away at the neglect of the countryside in government policy. Now that the Congress had formed the government, the party declared its intention to devote a substantial share of resources to village infrastructure – including village roads. Even as the provincial budget recovered from a long depression, district boards were asked to draw up ambitious programs for the construction of new roads in their district to provide better connectivity to the countryside (Madras Legislature Congress Party, 1939).

However, the view from the district headquarters presents a contrasting picture of profound institutional continuity. It is worth reiterating that while the reforms of 1919 formally introduced dyarchy at the provincial level, in practice dyarchy was reproduced in local government as well.

Whereas the provision of local services had previously been an extension of the collector's authority to raise taxes and maintain law and order, by the 1920s, the institutional link between these two functions was irretrievably snapped. The divorce between local government and the magistracy was ridden with acrimony and heartburn in Ramnad; in Tinnevely it was achieved much more gracefully. But in both cases, the main outcome of the dyarchy period was that local government was firmly denied the authority to independently raise taxes from its constituents as long-term returns for the small-scale investments it undertook. By the time the Congress won provincial elections in 1937, this institutional framework was already part of the political commonsense, and in my opinion, it has continued to persist ever since.

Schools, dispensaries, supply of drinking water – if extending these services to rural areas is the fundamental task of what I have called the “rural infrastructure state”, then dyarchy ensured that this task could no longer be carried out through the application of *capital*. Road infrastructure, in many ways, is a temporary exception that proves the rule. Throughout the period of dyarchy, many politicians tried to find ways to treat their investment in roads as if it was a capitalist enterprise, and one could say that the Raja of Ramnad went further in his efforts than the usual politician (for instance, the typical Tinnevely magnate). Eager to raise income and reduce the cost incurred on his roads, the Raja went about erecting toll gates, establishing a monopoly bus service for the district, and denying licenses to competing bus companies. But in his efforts to reorganize the transport system along capitalist lines, the Raja ended up bargaining away his political legitimacy for a losing cause. The structural barrier to raising revenue for public services lay in the firm separation enforced between local government and the district magistracy; this not only prevented district boards from exercising any meaningful regulatory authority, it also limited the extent to which they could remodel their revenue sources so as to

bring fiscal incentives in alignment with the political incentive to expand investment in the countryside. By the mid-1930s, any remaining ability to generate revenue had also been snatched away as a result of the abolition of tolls.

Given its populist orientation, the Congress after 1935 had little incentive to bring about any radical changes in the institutional framework of local government in Madras.

Notwithstanding their Gandhian rhetoric, the leaders of the Congress had neither the desire nor the ability to create a more equal field for different kinds of infrastructure, large and small.

Having cobbled up an umbrella coalition containing a dizzying array of caste/class subjectivities, the party could not have possibly mustered the ideological coherence to undo dyarchy at the local level – a task that would have required it to simultaneously take on both local elites and the revenue establishment. The new ministry did eventually modify some of the earlier decisions – the right to levy tolls was allowed (but only on new bridges and roads in which significant amounts of capital had been sunk,) and district boards were permitted to use up the revenue that had accumulated in the railway cess fund for “capital” works (Madras Legislature Congress Party, 1939). However, the distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” infrastructure remained central to government policy on transportation.

By the 1950s, all the “services” previously offered by local funds (education, health, roads) had been provincialized, but absent any effort to remodel the tax regime in the countryside, the new state governments could not see its new responsibilities in the countryside as anything more than social welfare. As I have tried to argue in this chapter, while welfare subsidies and other “flows” of revenue to meet the needs of marginalized groups do signify a process of democratization at work, they are rarely able to destabilize the institutionalized distinction between certain kinds of infrastructure as “productive” investment and other infrastructure as “unproductive” expenditure

– a distinction that has historically had the effect of depriving the countryside of its fair share of infrastructure. When, in 1944, M. Visvesvaraya warned against the investment of accumulated savings and debt on “unproductive” undertakings such as roads and dispensaries for the countryside, his argument broadly reflected the prevailing commonsense on the question of rural infrastructure. Investigating the institutional roots of these assumptions, this chapter has argued that they must be situated in the fiscal arrangements first institutionalized during the period of dyarchy.

Chapter 4

Between exclusion and autonomy: The mobility/moorings dialectic and the reconstitution of village communities in the Tamil countryside

1. Introduction

In February 2017, I started conducting fieldwork in a village that I will call Shanmugapuram (~250 households) about 16 miles away from Tirunelveli town in southern Tamil Nadu.²³⁰

During one of the first interviews I conducted, I asked Chellathurai, a petty farmer about 65 years of age, what he considered were the most significant changes that had occurred in his village over the course of his lifetime. Initially, he responded by listing changes that were mainly technological in nature: electricity had relieved families from having to spend their nights in darkness, motorcycles and buses had shortened distances and had improved access to towns (and all the conveniences they can provide), and so on. But he concluded with a statement that seemed to me, even at the time, to be laden with more political significance than the initial observations: “If you look at it one way, this is just a *pattikaadu*. But now we have all the facilities... we are living to a decent standard. We are living with self-respect.”²³¹

The word ‘*pattikaadu*’ in daily Tamil usage is a reference to places that are devalued, and when used to describe people it conveys a lack of sophistication and culture. In the context of our conversation, this concluding remark appeared to me to be a clear reference to the caste-communities that resided in this village. Chellathurai, like all the other residents of Shanmugapuram at this time, is Dalit – he belongs to the Pallar caste, one of the erstwhile

²³⁰ While I have used the spelling ‘Tinnevely’ to refer to this place in most parts of this dissertation in the interests of historical accuracy, I revert to the current spelling whenever I am referring to the present city.

²³¹ Interview with male resident of Shanmugapuram, age 65 years, d. 2.7.2017.

untouchable castes that were consigned to the bottom of the social hierarchy of southern India.²³²

This being one of my first conversations with the residents of the village, neither of us were willing to explicitly bring up the sensitive topic of caste in conversation just yet. Nevertheless,

Chellathurai's comment appeared to me to be a reminder of the fact that caste in the Indian countryside attached itself not just to bodies and selves, but also to the spaces they occupied.

There was a definite pride in the fact that his village was now almost indistinguishable from any other settlement in the surrounding areas, at least in material terms, despite the many material, social, and *spatial* disabilities that his community had been subjected to historically.

In fact, such instances of Dalit social mobility are rather common in the context of southern Tamil Nadu,²³³ and they have resulted in a great deal of political friction between Dalits and the so-called “intermediate castes” (Pandian, 2000; Mosse, 1994).²³⁴ But Shanmugapuram is a particularly appropriate site for a historical study of social transformation in rural areas because its surrounding region has been the subject of repeated studies by economists and sociologists over the past century. A neighboring village, Gangaikondan, is one of the original “Slater

²³² Identification with the term “Dalit” is not universal among Pallars in southern Tamil Nadu, though they do belong to the constitutional category of “scheduled castes” that is often treated as equivalent to the “Dalit” category. The current popularity of the term “Dalit” must be attributed to the lasting influence of the Ambedkarite movement emanating from Maharashtra on lower caste politics in most other parts of India. However, it is important to acknowledge that competing nomenclatures with different political and ideological genealogies, like “Harijan,” “Adi-Dravida” and “depressed classes” (*thaazhthapatta makkal*) continue to circulate in this region.

²³³ Broadly speaking, by “southern Tamil Nadu” I refer to the erstwhile Tinnevely, Ramnad, and Madura districts (which have since been split into two or three districts each). The erstwhile Tinnevely district is now split into Tirunelveli (Tinnevely) and Thoothukudi (Tuticorin) districts.

²³⁴ “Intermediate castes” is an umbrella term for a variety of rural social groups whose primary economic base until recently consisted of small farming and related occupations. In the region where Shanmugapuram is located, this category would mainly consist of the Maravars, Naickers, Nadars, and Idaiyars. In Tamil Nadu these castes are officially categorized either as BCs (“backward castes”) – e.g. Naickers and Nadars, or as MBCs (“most backward castes”) – e.g. Maravars and Idaiyars. For a full list of relevant caste categories in the region, see Table A4.2. Some historical aspects of the caste relations in the Tirunelveli region have also been discussed in Chapter 3.

villages”;²³⁵ it was surveyed by Palamadai S. Lokanathan as part of Gilbert Slater’s landmark study of rural society in South India in 1916 (Slater, 1918).²³⁶ Follow-up studies of Gangaikondan were carried out from time to time in later decades, most recently in 2007-08 (see Table 4.1). Shanmugapuram and two nearby village settlements were also the subject of a detailed study by India’s Census Office in 1961 (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965), and K. A. Manikumar (2011) carried out a follow-up study of these villages in 2000.²³⁷ As a case study of Dalit social mobility, Shanmugapuram therefore offers the benefit of a particularly rich historical archive that might help us understand how social relations have changed over the past century.²³⁸

Table 4.1: List of Village Studies of Gangaikondan and Shanmugapuram

Year	Village Study	Author
1916	Gangaikondan	Lokanathan (1918)
1934	Gangaikondan	Natarajan (1940)
1957-58	Gangaikondan	Agro-Economic Research Centre (1960)
1981-82	Gangaikondan	Athreya (1984)
2007-08	Gangaikondan	Harriss et al (2012)
1961-62	Shanmugapuram	Nambiar & Ramanathan (1965)
2001	Shanmugapuram	Manikumar (2011)

²³⁵ I have chosen to refer to Gangaikondan by its original name because the village is well known to scholars of Tamil Nadu as a “Slater village”. However, when referring to any of my respondents who are residents of the administrative unit of Gangaikondan (which includes many village settlements), I have attempted to protect their anonymity by not referring to the names of the settlement they belong to (see Map 2).

²³⁶ The other “Slater villages” in present day Tamil Nadu include Iruvelpattu (South Arcot), Dusi (North Arcot), Palakkurichi (Tanjore), and Vadamalaipuram (Ramanad). In addition, Slater’s students also carried out shorter surveys of other villages in their respective districts.

²³⁷ The study area for these surveys encompassed the “revenue village” of Shanmugapuram, which includes the settlement of Shanmugapuram itself, as well as two other settlements that I will call Chidambarapuram (~300 households) and Gokilapuram (~10 households). A “revenue village” is an administrative unit consisting of several village settlements. My study focuses primarily on the settlement of Shanmugapuram (see Map 2).

²³⁸ Some aspects of the role that the village surveys by Slater and his colleagues played in producing knowledge about rural society in late-colonial India have been discussed as part of N. G. Ranga’s intellectual influences in Chapter 2.

It is worth noting that most of these studies confirm the general trend of caste equalization that I have referred to in the opening paragraph (Harriss et al, 2012; Pandian, 2000).

For instance, summing up their recent study of two Slater villages, Harriss et al (2012) note that:

the kind of rough equality established by the Pallars of this village [Gangaikondan] is very striking by comparison with what is so commonly observed in villages in northern Tamil Nadu where... Dalits are still quite heavily dependent upon agricultural labour for others.²³⁹

The authors go on to observe that poor Dalits in many villages in the northern districts can be found living in thatched huts, but Pallar settlements almost always consist of brick-and-mortar houses and either tiled or terraced roofs.²⁴⁰ Pallars in Gangaikondan and surrounding areas have also used their numerical strength to exercise influence in local politics, and to channel government funds for infrastructure benefitting their own settlements. Previous generations of Pallars in this region might had been, like most Dalits elsewhere, servants and farm laborers for upper-caste landlords. Over the course of the 20th century, however, they have acquired a significant share of the agricultural land, and they might indeed lay claim to being the “dominant caste” in Gangaikondan and Shanmugapuram.²⁴¹

²³⁹ Harriss et al (2012) arrive at this conclusion based on a comparison with another ‘Slater village’ – Iruvelpattu – which was also studied by the same group of authors at around the same time as the Gangaikondan study (Harriss et al, 2010).

²⁴⁰ The same point was made to me by a town-based Pallar activist on a joint visit to Shanmugapuram. Interview d. 1.20.2017.

²⁴¹ Harriss et al (2012) argue that the term “dominant caste” – which originally entailed the ability to command the labor power of other caste groups – loses meaning in these cases. Pallar land ownership might have guaranteed their independence, but it has not necessarily given them the ability to command the labor power of *other* caste groups located above them in ritual status. But this is an academic distinction; in local parlance, the Pallars are generally accepted to be the “main” caste in many of these villages.

Map 4.1: Gangaikondan and Shanmugapuram in relation to Tirunelveli town (boundaries belong to the respective revenue villages)



While these two groups of villages cannot be taken as representative of Dalit experience in Tamil Nadu,²⁴² they do offer a remarkable instance of Dalit social mobility whose enabling circumstances are not yet fully understood. In this chapter, I show that conventional explanations

²⁴² Based on their comparison of Iruvelpattu in South Arcot district with Gangaikondan, Harriss et al (2012) suggest that the impressive progress of Pallars in Gangaikondan reflects the Dalit experience in the southern districts more generally. However, in this chapter I do not make any claims about the generalizability of my findings from Gangaikondan and Shanmugapuram.

focusing on migration and access to a diversified labor market cannot fully account for the trajectory of Dalit social mobility in these villages. Instead, I argue that Dalit social mobility is the result of the successful *place-based* claims made by Pallars through their political mobilization from the mid-20th century onwards, leading to the *reconstitution* of the ‘village community’ as a spatial category in the Indian countryside. Emerging from the shadow of oppression and violence meted out to them by the upper castes historically, Pallars asserted their claim over large sections of the village and its land and water resources as spaces of *caste autonomy*. Relying upon a combination of primary and secondary data, I highlight the role of such place-based claims in shaping the trajectories of rural transformation. In previous chapters, I have shown how India’s developmental regime has produced and reproduced distinctly “rural” spaces discursively and through institutional frameworks of infrastructure production. By demonstrating the role played by the ‘village community’ in the political strategies employed by Dalits, I hope to extend my argument to the level of spatial *practice*.

2. Migration and Dalit social mobility: a conceptual intervention

Generally speaking, many explanations for Dalit social mobility tend to focus on the relationship between migration and social change in the countryside. In anti-caste movements and affiliated scholarship, B.R. Ambedkar’s critique of the Indian village as the locus of caste-based suffering from which Dalits need to escape remains an important point of reference (Jodhka, 2002).²⁴³ Among economists, Kaivan Munshi and Mark Rosenzweig (2016) have argued that whereas caste-based mutual insurance networks in rural areas keep a large number of villagers from

²⁴³ The Dalit writer Chandrabhan Prasad (2008) is an important contemporary example of this discourse. Similarly, Nathaniel Roberts (2015) has argued that it is only in the anonymity of the city that the Hindu religion is truly able to incorporate Dalits.

permanently migrating to the city to take advantage of the rural-urban wage gap, Dalits (who are assumed to lack strong social networks in the village) have a stronger incentive to do so.²⁴⁴

Alternatively, many sociologists and geographers have emphasized the role of circular migration in enabling Dalit assertion in the countryside through new styles of consumption and labor deployment (Gidwani, & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003a; Rai, 2018; Anandhi et al, 2002; Rogaly, 1998). Put simply, there is a growing consensus among South Asianist scholars across disciplines that the path to social mobility for Dalits lies in voting with their feet, either to force changes in extant labor and land regimes in the village, or to exit it permanently.

These perspectives on caste relations have been strengthened by a discernible “mobility turn” in the field of South Asian history that seeks to historicize current patterns of circulation (Stein, 1977; Ludden, 2003; Markovits et al, 2006; Kerr, 2006). For instance, David Washbrook (1993a) has called the late-18th century the “golden age of the pariah,” since landless laborers experienced high demand for their labour, and were able to desert oppressive employment conditions in search for better opportunities with little punitive cost (Ahuja, 1998; Parthasarathi, 2001). According to Washbrook (1993b), it was the 19th century colonial state that curtailed the mobility of landless workers in its effort to police the Indian countryside, guarantee sufficient supply of agricultural labor, and thereby generate a steady revenue. The trope of the sedentary and autonomous “village republic” was realized by the institutionalization of a stable state-landlord nexus through which surpluses were steadily extracted from the Indian countryside, and it is only relative to the 19th century regime that the mobilities of the 20th century appeared to be

²⁴⁴ Many historians have noted that these differentiated patterns can be traced back to late 19th century, since Dalits were more likely than the intermediate castes to migrate to industrial towns or European-owned plantations in search of work (Basu, 2011; Mosse, 1994; Evans, 1995; Satyanarayana, 2002; Parry, 2003). Luke & Munshi (2011) find that, even in the present day, Dalit migrants in plantations have a greater tendency to break ties with their natal village, as compared to the intermediate castes.

radically unsettling the social order of the countryside (Washbrook, 2004). Recent interventions in this scholarship suggest that historians must focus not just on the phenomenon of mobility, but also on the distribution of *immobilities* along the lines of class, caste and gender (Chatterji, 2017; Sinha, 2018). In these accounts, the extent of spatial mobility becomes the index by which changes in the fortunes of marginalized groups are assessed.

Meanwhile, sociologists like Dipankar Gupta (2005) have argued that the main trends in rural transformation, such as the declining profitability of agriculture, the growing share of non-farm work, and the migration patterns of villagers, all point to the gradual demise of the Indian village as we know it. Among earlier generations of Indian sociologists, many of the same processes were seen favorably as symptoms of the urbanization of the countryside,²⁴⁵ but the present mood is understandably more pessimistic. A number of recent studies in Tamil Nadu point to the resurgence, in agrarian as well as non-agrarian labor markets, of deteriorating labor conditions, and of spiraling debt that leave the worker bonded to his employer (Guerin et al, 2012; Carswell, 2013; Carswell, & De Neve, 2013). In his recent writings, Jan Breman (2007: 47; 2010) has argued that the lower caste quarter that circular migrants return to in the contemporary Indian village is little more than a “rural slum”, lacking in the strong community ties that are supposed to characterize the stereotypical Indian village. What remains is a capitalist land-owning class, capable of moving easily between rural and urban settings, existing alongside

²⁴⁵ In the work of M. N. Srinivas (1956), for instance, “external contact” in the 20th century was identified as the cause of the erosion of this order and the emergence of an entirely new worldview (“weltanschauung”). A “traditional” institution like caste might survive, but only because it morphs to take on new political and economic functions in this urbanizing landscape.

an equally “footloose” rural proletariat, migrating from place to place in search of increasingly scarce and insecure work (Breman, 1996; Cederlof, 1997).²⁴⁶

Scholars interested in the migration-development relationship are, of course, well aware of the fact that the local dynamics of source regions might make all the difference between “vicious” and “virtuous” cycles in circulatory regimes, with effects felt both at the source and at the destination.²⁴⁷ Studies of circular migration in India have also consistently acknowledged the importance of the social dynamics of the source region.²⁴⁸ Despite this, while several scholars have sought to demonstrate that Dalit cosmopolitans use their access to the “outside world” to resist local forms of exploitation (Gidwani, & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003b), the possibility that claims of “rootedness” in the village may also be part of Dalit political and everyday repertoire has rarely been considered.²⁴⁹ Indeed, both optimistic and pessimistic views on Dalit social mobility in the Indian countryside seem to converge on the idea that rural migration is invariably associated with the dissolution of the “village community” as the locus of class relations in the Indian countryside. For many, it would follow that any political strategy which relies on the

²⁴⁶ In recent decades, scholars have abandoned the search for the idealized “proletarian” in order to acknowledge the diversity of the “classes of labor”, which includes bonded laborers, sub-contractors, and petty producers (Lerche, 2009; Bernstein, 2004; Harriss-White & Gooptu, 2001; Amin, & van der Linder, 1997).

²⁴⁷ The metaphor of “virtuous” and “vicious” cycles has been used in the context of international migration by Alejandro Portes (2009), Hein de Haas (2010), Alan Gamlen (2014) and Sara Curran (2016). See also Arjan de Haan (1999).

²⁴⁸ This is particularly true of the historical scholarship on migration in India. See Samita Sen (1999), J. L. Racine (1997), Barbara Evans (1995), Rajnarayan Chandavarkar (2008), Crispin Bates (1985) and Gail Omvedt (1980).

²⁴⁹ There have been some studies in recent years of the role of place-making in Dalit political assertion in *urban* settings, focusing on practices such as the installation of statues, flags, and hoardings to mark Dalit territory (Gorringe, 2016; Jaoul, 2006; 2012; Lee, 2017). However, even those who might be sympathetic to a place-based politics among rural populations seem to suggest that rural Dalits in particular have little to gain from such a political strategy (Chatterjee, 2008). Luisa Steur’s research on Dalit place-based mobilization in Thervoy, a village in northern Tamil Nadu is one exception (Steur, 2015).

village community as the site of collective action must necessarily be guilty of backward-looking romanticism.

Against this trend, this chapter attempts to rehabilitate the village community as a category necessary to explain the uneven trajectories of rural social transformation in India. Needless to say, by making a case for the continuing relevance of the village community, I do not mean to resurrect the orientalist image of an isolated and static entity that reproduces itself without reference to extra-local events and processes (Srinivas, & Shah, 1960; Dewey, 1972; Breman, 1982). Instead, I take inspiration from Doreen Massey's call for generating non-essentialist and "extroverted" histories of place-based communities that acknowledge the myriad inter-connections and "external" influences involved, while simultaneously recognizing the significance (and at times, the normative legitimacy) of the place-based entitlements that such communities might enjoy or lay claim to (Massey, 1994). Like any other place in the world, the present-day Indian village too cannot be understood without reference to extra-local processes like colonial rule, the commercialization of agriculture, population movements, political democratization, and the rescaling of governance in the 20th century. Indeed, as Massey (1994) has argued, if the local is merely the accumulation of layer upon layer of global influences over time, the very distinction between global and local must be called into question.

However, Massey's appreciation for global connections and linkages needs to be theoretically distinguished from approaches that would treat place-based communities either in terms of immobilities that function as barriers to capitalist development, or as empty shells whose internal relations are constantly restructured at the behest of capital. In other words, the particular challenge is to reconcile the reproduction of the village community with the deep penetration of the market economy in the life of the village community. To address this

theoretical challenge, I borrow and adapt a set of terminological and conceptual innovations from the “new mobilities paradigm” in the field of human geography (Sheller, & Urry, 2006; Creswell, 2010).²⁵⁰ First, I argue that there is a need to complement the present focus on the distribution of spatial *mobility*, i.e. the freedom/capability to move, with equal attention to the distribution of spatial *mooring*, i.e. the freedom/capability to stay put.²⁵¹ Second, I argue that the production of space and place – in this case, the “village community” – must be understood in terms of a “mobility/moorings dialectic,” i.e. the dialectical processes through which the social contradictions between mobilities and moorings are resolved through time. In this chapter, I hope to show that envisioning the production of the “local” as the interplay of mobilities and moorings is a useful way of accounting for the reproduction of the village community at the interstices of global capitalism.

The empirical sections of this chapter use the mobility/moorings framework to study historical changes in spatial practice in one small region in southern India centered around Gangaikondan and Shanmugapuram. Methodologically, this chapter follows the rich “village studies” tradition that uses detailed research on a single case study rather than research using sample surveys of a wider population. Apart from previous village studies in this area, my analysis is based on four months of fieldwork in Shanmugapuram, leading to detailed conversations with respondents from 36 separate households, as well as more unstructured

²⁵⁰ This paradigm has been used thus far mainly by scholars of international migration, tourism etc. in predominantly Western contexts (Blunt, 2007; Hannam, 2008).

²⁵¹ As I explain in the next section, I understand moorings as the set of negative *and* positive freedoms that enable a person to remain in a particular place. The term would include all of those place-specific capabilities that enable a person to maintain a certain quality of life – they could include means of production like agrarian land, or assets that facilitate the reproduction of labor power, like housing and place-specific welfare entitlements. The denial of such capabilities would then imply a process of *unmooring*, regardless of whether it produces physical displacement or not.

observation which was recorded in the form of daily field notes. In addition, I conducted interviews with small groups in neighboring village settlements like Chidambarapuram and Gokilapuram as well (see Map 4.2). Interview respondents were selected based on a combination of purposive and snow-ball sampling with the aim of covering the extant variation in caste, religion, gender, and age.²⁵² Many of these respondents were interviewed twice – the first being a short structured interview aimed at collecting basic details regarding the household, and the second a longer unstructured interview aimed at understanding family histories as well as memories of the settlement as a whole. While my analysis of the first half of the 20th century is necessarily limited to secondary data from previous studies, I have sought to reconstruct a picture of the land and labor regimes from the 1950s onwards by triangulating oral histories with secondary data.

Map 4.2: Settlements in and around Gangaikondan (water bodies in blue, roads in pink)



²⁵² I obtained entry into the village and access to its residents by spending half my day teaching English at the local primary school. Some of the initial interview respondents were recruited by speaking to parents when they came to pick their children up after school. In other cases, I simply ended up speaking to strangers at the bus stop or at the “village square” where many of the older men like to sit during the day. But the school served as the base for me to operate from throughout my time in the village. Table A4.1 summarizes the caste, religion, age and gender profiles of individuals interviewed in Shanmugapuram.

My findings complicate the dominant narrative on Dalit social mobility, which emphasizes spatial mobility as the primary driver of social change. For instance, in their study of Gangaikondan, Harriss et al (2012) suggest that a “factor in the relative prosperity of Gangaikondan's Pallars is their long history of seasonal and of longer-term migration to plantations” and note that “incomes from plantation work have provided the means whereby Pallars have been able to purchase land and to construct relatively good houses”. However, given that Dalit migration to plantations was widespread in all parts of Tamil Nadu, there is a need to account for the specific circumstances that facilitated ‘virtuous’ cycles of reinvestment by migrant returnees. Based on available evidence, I show that one factor which potentially distinguishes Gangaikondan from villages elsewhere is that most Dalits had received ownership to their houses in their settlements (*cheris*) in the early 20th century. One plausible hypothesis is that ownership of residential areas created an embryonic space of autonomy and weakened upper caste influence over Dalits, while also making the reinvestment of savings by migrant returnees more likely. The importance of *prior* moorings in facilitating ‘virtuous’ cycles of reinvestment suggests that even if mobilities and moorings are mutually reinforcing, they might not be mutually *substitutable*.

A mobility/moorings framework also pays closer attention to the deep contradictions between mobilities and moorings, not all of which are easily resolved. For instance, an increase in mobilities can be accompanied by a rapid *unmooring* of rural populations, leading to a “footloose” rural proletariat (Breman, 1996). But the reverse is also possible – a constriction of mobilities might coincide with an increase in the moorings of the lower castes within the village, a possibility that is illustrated in the history of mobilities and moorings in southern Tamil Nadu. In the early years of the 20th century, the policies of the British empire encouraged Dalits from

several regions of the Tamil countryside to migrate in large numbers to plantations in the Nilgiris, Kerala, Malaya, Burma, and Ceylon (Evans, 1995; Satyanarayana, 2002). However, the movement of populations across the Indian Ocean was severely curtailed from the 1940s onwards, first due to World War II, and later due to decolonization and the establishment of national governments in the erstwhile imperial territories (Amrith, 2011). As I will demonstrate, the most significant change in the land regime took place not during the late-colonial period (when international migration was at its peak), but during the first two decades after India's independence in 1947. Taking advantage of important changes in the political regime (especially the introduction of universal franchise,) Dalits mobilized village communities numerically dominated by them to advance claims over land and territory that had no precedent in either tradition or history.

As these histories of land redistribution will demonstrate, villages like Gangaikondan and Shanmugapuram were deeply influenced by extra-local processes of political contestation and regime change. Indeed, it would be impossible to write “introverted” histories of these villages even if one were to attempt it. At the same time, these histories also demonstrate the limits of the mobility-centric scholarship that posits a strong relationship between spatial mobility and social mobility, in which an increase in the spatial mobility of Dalits is considered both a necessary and a sufficient explanation for caste equalization. Instead, they illustrate the possibility that Dalit assertion can also be driven by a change in moorings independently of changes in spatial mobility. Given the dismal record of capitalist development in India thus far, a Dalit strategy focused on mobilities alone might amount to little more than jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire (Breman, 1996). In this chapter, I hope to convince the reader that for a political project aimed at Dalit social mobility to succeed, it will need to incorporate a more nuanced

understanding of the mobility/moorings dialectic. Such a project will acknowledge that Dalit social mobility cannot be understood only as charting the path from exclusion to inclusion in the “abstract space” of capital; if they are to succeed in making room for themselves in India’s developmental regime, Dalits must also seek to carve out a space of *caste autonomy*.

3. The (re)production of the village community in the age of Capital

For several decades, scholars of the village studies tradition in India have used field surveys and ethnography to great effect to paint a remarkably rich picture of social relations within a single village.²⁵³ While many of the initial studies might have had a bland empiricist quality to them, couched in the language of modernization theory or structural Marxism, by the 1990s the tradition had developed significant sophistication in its treatment of sociological categories like caste (Mosse, 1994; Gidwani, 2000; Jeffrey, 2001), class (Athreya et al, 1987; Gidwani, 2000; Pattenden, 2011), and gender (Kapadia, 1995; Anandhi et al, 2002; Heyer, 2015). In a well-directed critique against his own colleagues in this sub-field, J. Jeyaranjan (1996) also highlighted the implicit assumptions being made about the nature of historical time. According to Jeyaranjan (1996, p.1166), village “restudies most often implicitly assume that the flow of time itself will explain the change and hence are content with enumeration and comparison at two

²⁵³ M. N. Srinivas’ *The Remembered Village* (1975) remains the exemplar of an older variant of this tradition built on post-war British anthropology, but Srinivas’ structural-functionalism now has few adherents (Jodhka, 1998). See Simpson (2016) for biographical notes on some of the early British pioneers of village studies research in India. Himanshu et al (2016) contains a useful collection of essays that reflect the findings of recent village studies scholarship that draws upon diverse theoretical frameworks, including but not limited to Marxist political economy. For a bibliography of this literature with respect to Tamil Nadu, see Nagaraj & Rukmani (2004). Other than the studies of the Slater villages discussed earlier, some of the most influential studies in Tamil Nadu include the work of Kathleen Gough (1987) and Andre Beteille (1965) in Tanjore, Haruka Yanagisawa (1996) and Goran Djurfeldt et al (2008) in Tiruchirapalli, Judith Heyer (2009) in Coimbatore, Joan Mencher (1974), Chitra and S. Sivakumar (1979) and Anandhi et al (2002) in Chengalpattu, and the famous studies of Arni and its surrounding villages in North Arcot district by Barbara Harriss-White and several other colleagues (Harriss-White, & Harriss, 2007).

points of time”. Drawing on the work of Peter Munz, Jeyaranjan objected to the tendency to view time as “a sort of objective container in which events can flow along,” and suggested that such seemingly value-neutral assumptions in fact leave village studies research open to being coopted into questionable metanarratives about rural social transformation. However, it is remarkable that few scholars have found it necessary to interrogate the *spatial* categories that appear in their analysis, the most fundamental of which are the categories of the village and the village community.

In order to conceptualize the village community as a spatial category, this section attempts to read into the work of village studies scholars an explicitly constructionist theory of space developed by scholars like Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Doreen Massey (1994). I begin by restating some important methodological propositions, borrowed from Lefebvre’s work on the production of space, that inform the analysis of spatial practice in this chapter. First, I take from Lefebvrian scholarship a sophisticated critique of what Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2014) have called *methodological territorialism* – the tendency to use exogenous partitions of space to derive the social relations contained within them, rather than examining how spatial scales and territories are dynamically produced alongside the very social relations that they are supposed to be “containers” of. While I do not mean to imply that an awareness of the endogeneity of territorial categories is entirely lacking in the historical sociology of rural India (Stein, 1977), there remains a tendency to study agrarian land and labor regimes by examining changes in the distribution of social power over time within the boundaries of a given unit – typically the administrative category called the “revenue village”.²⁵⁴ Indeed, the revenue village

²⁵⁴ A revenue village is the smallest administrative unit of the district bureaucracy consisting of several village settlements. Throughout this chapter, whenever I use the term “village” or “village settlement” without any

continues to be the unit of analysis even in the most recent revisits to “Slater villages” like Gangaikondan by Harriss et al (2010; 2012), even though their own evidence points to significant changes in territorial organization in this area over the past century.

Second, I take from Lefebvre the importance of guarding oneself against *spatial fetishism*, which occurs when “instead of concentrating our attention on the production of space and the social relationships inherent to it... we fall into the trap of treating space as space ‘in itself’” (1991: 90). One of the most common manifestations of this error, in my view, lies in the tendency to conflate fixity with moorings and circulation with mobilities. Many commodities and factors of production can circulate in space, though some – like land – are necessarily fixed. However, unlike circulation and fixity, which describe the spatial patterns traced by different physical entities, including human bodies, mobilities and moorings must be attributed to social classes.²⁵⁵ In other words, mobilities and moorings should be understood as socio-spatial relations between class-differentiated (and gendered) subjects, and not as relationships between objects and (exogenously produced) space. Moreover, these social relations not only occur in space, they also produce the space that they inhabit.

Consider, for example, the circulation of labor in the Indian countryside. What changes in social relations do they signify? In Marxist accounts, labor migration is often understood as some

modifier, I refer to what M. N. Srinivas and A.M. Shah (1960) have called the “social village” which is a social rather than administrative unit. These distinctions will be discussed in greater detail in section 3.

²⁵⁵ Lefebvre hints at the need to focus on the underlying social relations that govern circulation and fixity, but does not develop the terminology of mobilities and moorings. In his later work, he comments that

“a new contradiction appears on the horizon: that between flows... and fixities... Will this disjointed sum of realities allow itself to be grasped and understood?... What is certain is that, in space that is thus created, distances are no longer confused with proximities, the production of space detaches the far order from the near order, that of “natural” neighborhoods, and the geo-political is distinguished from the geo-graphical” (Brenner & Elden, 2009: 202).

combination of higher levels of spatial *mobility* due to changes in the labor regime, and the simultaneous *unmooring* of labor from the village economy due to various forms of dispossession.²⁵⁶ And yet, not all among those who choose to participate in migration networks are victims of dispossession, and conversely, those who experience a process of unmooring from the village economy may not end up participating in circuits of circular migration because they suffer additional burdens (lack of social networks, disability etc.) that render them immobile. In other words, there is a need to decompose patterns of circulation and fixity into the underlying distribution of mobilities and moorings. Absent such an approach, one might miss the fact that a hypothetical capitalist farmer who rarely leaves the village (but has the freedom and resources to do so at any time) might possess more spatial mobility than a migrant worker compelled to travel widely to meet her subsistence needs. But just as spatial mobility (the freedom to move) cannot be reduced to the circulation of commodities or labor, spatial mooring (the freedom to stay put) also cannot be equated with the sedentariness often attributed to village life.

Finally, there is an urgent need for greater engagement between longstanding debates on the “agrarian question” and the “urban question” (Goonewardena, 2014; Nair, 2015; Elden, & Morton, 2016; Gururani, & Dasgupta, 2018). At present, much of the impetus for this conversation emerges from attempts to theorize the spatial morphology of rapidly growing cities. This reflects the tendency to equate urbanization with the expansion of the built environment along the “rural-urban interface” and/or the diminished importance of agriculture in the rural economy (Balakrishnan, 2013; Gupta, 2005). For instance, Harriss et al (2012) suggest that

²⁵⁶ These are somewhat analogous, but not entirely reducible to the so-called ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors in migration research. Indeed, as many scholars have noted, ‘push’ and ‘pull’ might help explain permanent migration between two places, but they are not very useful in explaining the phenomenon of *circulation* (Breman, 1996). Breman and other structuralist theorists of migration also took issue with the individualistic orientation of push-pull models, and contraposed it with their own class-theoretic analysis.

Gangaikondan “exemplifies the kind of dispersed urbanization that has become characteristic of Tamil Nadu” since more than half of its workforce is now employed in non-agricultural activities. However, I take the view that questions of spatial morphology – typically borrowed from the discipline of urban design – offer a poor starting point for investigating the changing relations between the city and the countryside. Instead, I accept the Lefebvrian argument that urbanization as a process has more with the subordination of all forms of spatial production to the logic of capital (Lefebvre, 2003; Brenner, & Schmid, 2014), since this establishes a common ground for engagement between urban geography and agrarian studies.²⁵⁷

In this chapter, I particularly seek to use the Lefebvrian framework to add nuance to Kalyan Sanyal (2007), who insists that capitalist development in India has taken the form of an uneven combination of capitalist accumulation and its *reversal*, leading to the reproduction of non-capitalist modes of production.²⁵⁸ This complex dynamic results in the coexistence of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production *mediated by the market and the state*. Sanyal’s work, however, lacks an explicit theory of the production of space, despite his use of spatial metaphors (for example, he often likens petty production to the “wasteland of capital”). In a later essay, Bhattacharya and Sanyal (2011) suggest that the present trend is for capital to “bypass the squalor” of inner cities and to expand along the edges of highways through a series of land grabs supported by the use of eminent domain by the state, leaving inner-city slums and remote

²⁵⁷ For instance, both Lefebvrian urbanization and the agrarian transition presuppose the primitive accumulation of capital and the release of a large mass of surplus labor. However, there are longstanding differences in emphasis; Brenner and other geographers tend to focus on the land question, while the focus of agrarian scholars like Breman is on changes in the labor regime.

²⁵⁸ As discussed in chapter 1, I have broadened Sanyal’s argument (primitive accumulation and its reversal) to include two further moments in the process of capitalist accumulation: formal subsumption and real subsumption. Sanyal, of course, does not imply that accumulationist and countervailing forces arrive at any sort of equilibrium; indeed, the concept of equilibrium is quite foreign to the Marxist theoretical framework he is working within.

villages off the highway grid for petty producers to inhabit. And yet, Bhattacharya and Sanyal are able to partition “urban” and “rural” space in this manner only because they assume that slums and villages are dominated by self-employment in the so-called “need economy” – a proposition that does not account for the complex interplay between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production in the countryside.²⁵⁹ If, as Breman (1996) might argue, the village is merely the space that circular migrants retire to after having sold their labor power to capital, directly or indirectly, then does it really make sense to speak of this space as “outside” the capitalist mode of (spatial) production?

This chapter attempts to address this problem by examining the interface between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production using the lens of the “mobility/moorings dialectic”. Drawing inspiration from Sanyal, I argue that non-capitalist modes of production of space can be identified insofar as the moorings of village communities do not translate into capital. In order to elaborate upon this claim, let me begin by describing the mobility/moorings dialectic for a hypothetical case where capitalist production relations are tending towards universalization. The central concern of the proponents of the “new mobilities paradigm” is that even in a fully capitalist society, there exists a profound social contradiction between spatial (im)mobilities and (un)moorings (Sheller, & Urry, 2006). The very logic of the capitalist mode of production requires all factors of production to be fully able to circulate at the behest of capital, transcending every spatial barrier in its effort to sustain the rate of surplus accumulation.

²⁵⁹ Indeed, Sanyal (2007) himself concedes that even among those who are nominally self-employed, a substantial share consists of disguised wage labor whose exploitation by capital takes the form of unequal exchange relations with rentiers and merchant capitalists. Tellingly, his work offers no methodology to empirically distinguish between the “need economy” and the segment of the “informal sector” oriented towards capitalist accumulation. Even a sympathetic commentator like Vinay Gidwani (2015) therefore finds it necessary to say that “the modal condition of work within post-colonial capitalism may not be absolute expulsion of vulnerable populations from capital’s ‘reserve army’ as Sanyal appears to suggest, but rather the spatiotemporal flux in and hence tenuousness of capital’s embrace”.

And yet, all social classes also need some mooring in space – for instance, labor needs shelter and a wide range of other social infrastructures to reproduce itself, and most often these amenities are fixed in space. Even capital cannot be fully mobile; capitalists often have to make bulky investments in “fixed capital” in order to enjoy economies of scale and scope, and once made, these investments cannot be relocated without a significant loss of value. At first glance, it would therefore appear that moorings must come at the price of mobilities, and that such a contradiction constitutes the limit for capitalist expansion.

David Harvey’s theoretical apparatus of dialectical materialism (1978) can be used to delineate the ways in which these contradictions between moorings and mobilities are (partially and provisionally) resolved in a manner that enables a dramatic increase in the circulation of commodities. As discussed in chapter 3, Harvey’s explanation relies on the emergence of secondary and tertiary circuits of capital through which fixed investments can be leveraged in global financial markets, thus rendering capital mobile even as it remains moored in space and place. When it comes to labor, however, the contradiction is resolved primarily by turning all the means of reproduction of labor power – housing and various other forms of social infrastructure – into forms of capital.²⁶⁰ Once the moorings of labor are transformed into capital, the mobility/moorings dialectic leads to a deeper synthesis that allows for the circulation of all factors of production at an expanded scale. It is based on this dialectical method that Harvey reconciled the apparent fixity of land-related investments with the circulation of value necessary

²⁶⁰ Effectively, moorings are made interchangeable with mobilities, which enhances the easy circulation of labor power as a commodity. This is an essential step in Harvey’s reasoning, because unlike Marx (especially in his more polemical tracts like the Communist Manifesto), Harvey cannot assume the absolute polarization of social classes into capitalists and proletarians. Harvey’s framework allows proletarians to accumulate enough to take ownership of their own housing, for example, but only so long as these assets are linked to secondary and tertiary capital markets.

for the expanded reproduction of capital (the “spatial fix”).²⁶¹ Lefebvrian geographers have since gone further, arguing that the same dialectical process helps explain the repeated restructuring of not just the fixed infrastructures that enable capitalist production and the reproduction of labor, but also the institutional scales (village, city, nation etc.) through which they are governed (Brenner, 1998).

The Lefebvrian framework of spatial dialectics rests on two basic premises: first, it views capitalism as a *structured totality* whose constituent parts cannot be studied except in relation to one another; and second, it calls for a dialectical investigation of these relations by focusing on the emergent contradictions between these constituent parts and the ways in which these contradictions are resolved. This mode of investigation has been employed by a number of theorists to reconcile seemingly contradictory phenomena such as globalization (“space-time compression”), the resurgence of “global cities” as centers of financial capital, and the continuing relevance of “place attachment” in modern politics (Massey, 1994). Lefebvrian spatial dialectics, however, also relies on a third (often unstated) premise, in which it is assumed that the resolution of inherent contradictions between mobilities and moorings necessarily implies a step forward in the universalization of the capitalist mode of production (Harvey, 1978; Brenner & Elden, 2009).²⁶² Phenomena like petty production therefore continue to pose a

²⁶¹ It is possible to locate this resolution of the contradictions between mobilities and moorings in the “original” moment of primitive accumulation. In a typical Marxist rendering, primitive accumulation occurs when land and labor are alienated from each other, such that workers are now free to move in search of wage employment, but also entirely dependent on wages for the reproduction of labor power. Meanwhile, land is turned into means of production for capitalist enterprises. Decomposing the change in social relations along the axes of mobilities and moorings, it can be said that the bargain for the peasant consists of exchanging a set of moorings (which had allowed the laborer to claim for his sustenance a portion of the product generated by the pre-capitalist community from land) with a set of mobilities (which release him from his duties to the pre-capitalist community and enable him to seek wage employment wherever available). For the owner of the land, by contrast, the mobility of capital is not accompanied by any loss of mooring – the owner retains a claim over the value generated from the land. It is for this reason that the mobility/moorings dialectic under capitalism is resolved in favor of the ultimate mobility of capital.

²⁶² In an essay titled “Space and Mode of Production”, Lefebvre writes that “Capitalism, which is to say the mode of production, becomes worldwide, while the previous modes of production designated by Marx remain local and

problem for this theoretical framework. But so long as the capitalist regime ensures that different factors of production are fully alienable and circulate freely, occasional reunions between labor power and the means of production do not have to be given any special theoretical consideration. It is for this reason that the mobility/moorings dialectic is theoretically resolved by translating all moorings into forms of capital.

As discussed in chapter 1, given the overwhelming preponderance of petty production in India, a theoretical solution that treats it as a largely circumstantial phenomenon can hardly be considered satisfactory. The only alternative within the conventional framework is to posit, in some fashion or the other, a “blocked dialectic” that impedes the full incorporation of petty production into capitalism. Both solutions, however, are insufficiently dialectical in their treatment of this admittedly intractable problem. The former merely wishes the problem away by arguing that petty production is already fully subsumed under capital – i.e. it denies the existence of a contradiction in need of resolution. The latter, by positing a “blockage” in the unfolding of the dialectic, opens the door for tired dualisms to creep into Marxist analysis of petty production in countries like India. In my view, the significance of Kalyan Sanyal’s theoretical achievement was to show that these non-dialectical moves result from the deep attachment that Marxists have to the historicist notion that the unfolding of the dialectic necessarily enables the transition to a more advanced epoch of production, typically a more advanced stage of capitalism. This tendency is reflected in the assumption that the mobility/moorings dialectic necessarily resolves

diversified... It in fact gives rise to a worldwide space, a political space superimposed on the characteristics of the economy, encompassing them, integrating them” (Brenner, & Elden, 2009: 218). Lefebvre might have acknowledged that the universalization of capital always remained incomplete, but viewing the world from post-War France, he could not consider the possibility that it would give up on its quest to achieve universality.

all contradictions in favor of capital's need to mobilize more and more resources in its attempt to reproduce itself.

Discarding the transition narrative opens up the possibility of an alternate synthesis to the mobility/moorings contradiction that does not necessarily entail the translation of moorings into capital, but instead focuses on the ways in which petty producers might use mobilities of reinforce their decidedly non-capitalist moorings. Such processes would constitute significant *reversals* of accumulation which allow the village community to be reproduced partially outside the “abstract space” of capital. It is worth reiterating that there is no recourse to utopianism or romanticist nostalgia for the bygone in this argument. It does not require us to deny the existence of class differentiation among petty producers, or even the trade linkages between petty production and global value chains under the overall control of a capitalist regime. Nor is it necessary for us to deny the mobilities that various social classes in the Indian countryside do enjoy, or the circulation of people and commodities that ensue as a result. And yet, whereas Breman (1996) would have us believe that a radical unmooring of rural society is the natural corollary of freeing up the mobilities of petty producers,²⁶³ this chapter emphasizes the possibility that moments of democratization might create new moorings in the village community while also dissolving the old regime that tended to restrict the mobility of labor in the past.

²⁶³ Breman's assumption draws directly from Marx's argument that wage laborers experience a “double freedom”: they are free to sell their labor power, and but also “freed” from the ownership of any means of production that would lessen their dependence on wages for their own reproduction. Translating these “freedoms” into mobilities and (un)moorings allows us to give this argument a more general form. For instance, a house of one's own in the village does not constitute means of production, but it does generate mooring (freedom to stay put) because it lessens the owner's dependence on wage labor for sustenance. Similarly, place-specific welfare entitlements do not reunite the recipient with means of production, but they do weaken her dependence on wage labor. A fully proletarianized worker would be completely “freed” from all such moorings that “hold them back” in the village.

In such a situation, migrants can use their newfound mobilities to reinvest in, alter, and enhance the moorings that they derive as members of the village community. For example, many might use their savings to build a house back in their village, or to purchase agricultural land. It is important to stress that these attempts to acquire moorings in the village cannot automatically be theorized as an instance of accumulation of capital. While petty producers typically own agricultural land in the village as private individuals, it is often the case that their ability to deploy labor and extract a surplus from agriculture derives from their prior membership in the village community.²⁶⁴ Similarly, a villager might own a house in the village as private property, but she only derives value from it as a member of the village community. In other words, even when there are no barriers to the mobilities of labor, the translation of moorings into capital cannot be taken for granted without empirical investigation into the dynamics of accumulation and its reversal in specific political economic contexts.²⁶⁵ *Insofar as some moorings in the countryside are systematically delinked from the circuits of capital*, it becomes possible to imagine an alternative synthesis of the mobility/moorings dialectic that allows the village

²⁶⁴ In the unpublished chapter 6 of *Capital*, Volume I, Marx famously distinguishes between capital and non-capital in the case of guild production: “The master is admittedly in possession of the conditions of production, the tools of the trade, the material of labour... and the product belongs to him. To that extent he is a capitalist. But as a capitalist he is not a master. He is first and foremost a craftsman himself, and is supposed to be a master of his craft... The merely formal conversion of the handicraft trade into a capitalist enterprise, in which case the technological process therefore initially remains the same as before, consists in the removal of all these barriers — whereby the relation of domination and subordination also alters. The master is now no longer a capitalist because he is a master, but a master because he is a capitalist.” Jairus Banaji’s arguments regarding the applicability of the formal subsumption framework to peasant production has been discussed in chapter 1. Here, I am suggesting that even the formal subsumption of peasant production to capital is only partially achieved, and prone to reversal.

²⁶⁵ This claim shares some facial similarities with Hernando de Soto’s analysis of assets in the “informal sector” that are under-commodified because of the imprecise definition of property (de Soto, 2003). However, my concern is not with the precise identification of the property and the owner in legal documents, but rather with the substantive rights that ownership entails. Mere ownership does not automatically entail the *realizability of surplus value* (see also chapter 3). To put it differently, not all property is capital. This decentering of property in my argument is consistent with the mode of class analysis based on distribution of surplus as advocated by Resnick & Wolff (2004).

community a degree of autonomy over production processes and therefore the ability to reproduce itself in the interstices of world capitalism.

I conclude this section by summarizing the theoretical steps taken thus far, and highlighting their importance to our understanding of Dalit social mobility in Shanmugapuram – the phenomenon that I have sought to explain. I began this chapter by noting the tendency – far too common in Indian historical sociology – to draw a straight line between spatial mobility and social mobility in rural settings and to associate spatial mobility with the dissolution of the village community. In this section, I have advanced several theoretical critiques of this popular narrative. First, I complicate the traditional narrative on spatial mobility by arguing that circulatory regimes in the Indian countryside produce class differentiation by redistributing moorings and unmoorings just as much as mobilities and immobilities. The need for a deeper conversation between agrarian studies and human geography arises from this need to study the dialectical interplay between mobilities and moorings. Second, I challenge the view in classical Marxist scholarship that equates the resolution of contradictions through a dialectical process with the expanded reproduction of capital, and show that such an assumption disregards the many ways in which villagers might use mobilities to reinforce the non-capitalist moorings that constitute the village community. In the next section, I use a detailed case study of Shanmugapuram and Gangaikondan to describe the use of mobilities and moorings by some of the most deprived sections of India's rural population to achieve social mobility.

4. Producing the village: Notes from Shanmugapuram

A. An imagined village community?

Within the first few weeks of my fieldwork in Shanmugapuram, I began noticing a recurrent pattern in the answers I received during interviews. When I introduced myself by saying that I was conducting a study to understand how things had changed in their village, many respondents almost immediately gave me a response that went something like this: “in this village, we have been cultivating our lands and surviving on what we grew. Only in the past ten or fifteen years have some educated youngsters been going *outside* and earning money” (emphasis supplied).²⁶⁶ I found these statements to be odd and out of place because they seemed to suggest that out-migration was a new phenomenon in the village – but I knew that this was not the case, since there is extensive documentation of the history of migration in the region (Jayaraman, 1967). Moreover, most of my middle-aged and elderly respondents agreed that finding work outside the village was a common response to local scarcity when they were younger. Even in a relatively small sample of respondents, I heard a wide variety of stories about short-term and long-term circulation, ranging from daily commuting to migration for multiple years, both in previous generations and in the present.²⁶⁷ And yet, these histories were rarely brought up except when I specifically asked questions about circulation practices in the past. I do not mean to suggest that

²⁶⁶ Interview with male resident of Shanmugapuram, age 50 years, d. 2.24.2017.

²⁶⁷ Many of the respondents shared memories of migratory practices during their parents’ generation involving tea estates in Kerala (interviews with residents of Shanmugapuram, d. 2.24.2017, 3.20.2017, and 4.4.2017, age 50, 42, and 56 years respectively). One of the older respondents (age 75 years) similarly mentioned that, when he was young, his family would often camp for weeks at a time in villages located in the fertile Tamarabarani valley during the harvest season (interview d. 2.8.2017).

people related to the past with a sense of nostalgia – quite the contrary.²⁶⁸ But while they were forthright about their experiences with *poverty*, they appeared to be reticent to revisit histories of *unmooring*.

Just as the respondents seemed to suggest that the village had led a relatively settled existence until recently, they also seemed to suggest that the village had a largely homogeneous past. For instance, I had learned from the report on the survey conducted in 1961 (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965) that the village, at the time, had been home to a few caste groups other than the Pallars (the numerically dominant caste group in the village). After a few weeks of being frustrated by my inability to get my respondents to speak with greater detail about this aspect of the village's history, I began taking a copy of the 1961 survey report with me and using it as a conversation-starter. When some of my older respondents finally confirmed the village used to have residents of other castes, the younger and middle-aged people gathered around us during these interviews appeared to be genuinely surprised to hear that the village population had been more diverse in the past. Nor did they know any of the details about the conflicts that had led to the exodus of households belonging to these other castes from the village.²⁶⁹ Deliberately or not, villagers had constructed a timeless, homogeneous past for the village that left out much of the complexity, conflict, and political mobilization that has gone into giving the village its present shape.

Like most forms of historical memory, it is evident that this image painted of Shanmugapuram by its residents reflects more about their present than their past. It is only

²⁶⁸ This might be a particularly Dalit sensibility towards the past. Respondents often reminded me that, until a few decades ago, rice – the staple cereal in a middle-class Tamil diet – was considered a luxury food in their community. Such was the extent of their poverty in the past (Fieldnotes from 4.20.2017).

²⁶⁹ Fieldnotes from 3.10.2017. The causes of these conflicts will be described in section 6.

because villagers can imagine agriculture as taking place within the autonomous “inner domain” of the village community, defined in terms of a specific caste group, that going “outside” the village can be treated as identical to a somewhat more recent tendency – an increased participation in the non-agricultural workforce.²⁷⁰ In this section, I argue that it is largely because of the spatial *moorings* associated with the ownership of agricultural land that an increasing number of households in the village have been able to withdraw from the more arduous, exploitative, and demeaning forms of labor circulation. These moorings are of relatively recent origin, since most of my middle-aged respondents acknowledged that their families had acquired the land surrounding the village only during their parents’ generation. Nevertheless, the idea that the village, together with its resources, constitutes a space of *caste autonomy* appears to have become part of the local commonsense. The residents of Shanmugapuram might represent their moorings in the village community as entirely natural and unremarkable, but my purpose in this chapter is to denaturalize this phenomenon and to understand its enabling conditions.

B. The political geography of Shanmugapuram

It is important to note that the village community is not just an imaginary construct, but also a rather well-defined territorial unit. In fact, I found that residents of Shanmugapuram can define the territorial limits of the village with a reasonable degree of consistency (see Map 4.3).²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ The argument here is clearly inspired by the influential scholarship on nationalism by Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Manu Goswami (2004) – especially the latter. However, whereas Goswami’s work is largely restricted to the level of spatial *representations*, this chapter attempts to focus on the level of spatial *practice*.

²⁷¹ In some of my interviews, I asked respondents to describe the limits of the village. Most of them described the eastern and western limits along similar lines: the western limit was an outlet channel of the Parakrama Pandian kulam, while the eastern limit was marked by the burial ground used by residents of the neighboring village, located by the side of the road connecting the two villages. Interviews dated 4.1.2017, 4.4.2017, and 4.7. 2017 (ages 21, 56, and 38), and fieldnotes for 4.15.2017.

However, the village community as a territorial unit has a rather awkward relationship with the units of governance produced by the Indian state for the purposes of administrative and political decentralization. The smallest administrative category used by the district administration is the “revenue village,” but the Shanmugapuram revenue village includes three separate settlements – Shanmugapuram, Chidamabarapuram, and Gokilapuram (see Map 4.2). Similarly, the smallest political unit recognized by the state is the “village panchayat,” but most panchayats also comprise of multiple villages.²⁷² Meanwhile, when the residents of Shanmugapuram speak of the “village,” they generally include the territory where most of their agricultural lands are situated – even though a significant portion of these lands formally come under the jurisdiction of the neighboring Gangaikondan revenue village. In other words, the “social village” (Srinivas, & Shah, 1960) is governed through a complex patchwork of governmental agencies with different territorial jurisdictions, none of which corresponds with the boundaries of the village as understood by the villagers themselves.²⁷³

²⁷² Most panchayats correspond to the boundaries of revenue villages, but there are some variations. For example, the Shanmugapuram panchayat includes one more village in addition to all the villages in the Shanmugapuram revenue village (i.e. Shanmugapuram, Chidambarapuram, and Gokilapuram).

²⁷³ In fact, since Shanmugapuram and Gangaikondan revenue villages lie in different districts (with headquarters in Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli respectively), the “social village” of Shanmugapuram straddles the two districts.

Map 4.3: The social village of Shanmugapuram (overlaid over the boundaries of the Shanmugapuram revenue village)



Since several villages are clubbed together under a single panchayat or revenue village, these villages are forced to cooperate with each other in many respects when making claims upon the state, while simultaneously competing for scarce resources. The case of Shanmugapuram and Chidambarapuram perfectly illustrates the complexity of this relationship. Since the overwhelming majority of the residents in both Shanmugapuram and Chidambarapuram belong to the Pallar caste, they share many interests in common and political actors from the two villages often cooperate at the regional level.²⁷⁴ However, there is also a

²⁷⁴ For example, members from both villages belonging to the “Puthiya Thamizhagam” party (which specifically represents Pallar interests) coordinate while campaigning for their candidate to the Panchayat Union Board (a local government institution at the sub-district level). Interview with resident of Shanmugapuram, age 50, d. 2.5.2017.

longstanding conflict between the two villages, due to the fact that the residents of Shanmugapuram and Chidambarapuram belong to different sub-castes: Shanmugapuram residents are Pallars of the Devendrar lineage, while Chidambarapuram residents belong to the Veeranattar lineage.²⁷⁵ Veeranattars rank higher than Devendrars in the sub-caste hierarchy, and have been more successful in taking advantage of Christian mission schools and affirmative action policies of the government to secure positions in government service. The Devendrars of Shanmugapuram also resent the over-representation of Veeranattars in the village panchayat, which has enabled the latter to direct a greater portion of government benefits towards Chidambarapuram.²⁷⁶ However, it is Shanmugapuram that controls more agricultural land and water resources among the two villages.

The territoriality of the village becomes even more significant when one considers relations between Shanmugapuram and the village of Vadakarai to the west, which is dominated by Maravars. Most villagers I spoke to had very distinct memories of the violent caste clashes that erupted in the 1990s between Pallars and Maravars in southern Tamil Nadu, when even minor trespasses into what was effectively enemy territory could pose the danger of bodily harm to villagers.²⁷⁷ Indeed, one respondent observed that villages like Shanmugapuram, whose access to the main road passes through Maravar-dominated areas, often found themselves virtually

²⁷⁵ For more details on various Pallar sub-castes, see Raghupathi (2007).

²⁷⁶ This is a longstanding grievance of the residents of Shanmugapuram against Chidambarapuram. As Manikumar (2011) pointed out, Chidambarapuram has been the more influential of the two villages, despite Shanmugapuram being considered the “mother village” (which is why the panchayat is named after it). Even in the 1960s, Nambiar & Ramanathan (1965: 105) noted that “the Devendrakulathans have a feeling that because of the domination of the Veeranattu Pallars in the Panchayat board, [and] in other institutions like the cooperative society, they are being neglected” (sic). I found it remarkable that these complaints are being repeated almost verbatim more than five decades later (Interview d. 2.23.2017).

²⁷⁷ Fieldnotes for 3.15.2017. For a report on these incidents by a prominent Tirunelveli-based academic, see Manikumar (1997).

barricaded during these caste clashes.²⁷⁸ As several observers noted at the time, these violent incidents were different from previous instances of conflict between Dalits and intermediate castes (like the Maravars) because the Pallars in this instance fought back and tried to defend themselves and their territories (Pandian, 2000). In the case of Vadakarai and Shanmugapuram, the distribution of water from the irrigation reservoir shared by the two villages (Parakrama Pandian *kulam*) became a major source of tension.²⁷⁹ While these conflicts between the Pallars and Maravars have subsided in recent years,²⁸⁰ the basis for the present peace is the mutual acknowledgement of the claims over territory and resources made by both sides; in other words, it is a peace that reinforces rather than destabilizing the territorial claims of the village community in Shanmugapuram.

My claim that the village community is more than just an imaginary construct is also supported by the existence of informal institutional frameworks for resolving internal conflicts within the village. Like many Pallar villages in the region, residents of Shanmugapuram meet annually to nominate a *nattamai* (village chief) who is responsible for resolving minor disputes between villagers regarding marriage, property inheritance, and the use of local services.²⁸¹ In my conversation with many villagers (including some former *nattamais*), the commonly held

²⁷⁸ Interview d. 3.15.2017 (age 49).

²⁷⁹ As we shall see in section 6, the Pallars of Shanmugapuram ensured that they get a fair share of the water resources by retaining possession over the lands surrounding one of the two functional sluice gates.

²⁸⁰ On occasion, the Pallars of Shanmugapuram have even been willing to collaborate with the Maravar leaders of Vadakarai in demanding improvements to irrigation and road infrastructure that would be mutually beneficial. For instance, about 7-8 years ago, the leaders of the two villages held a joint protest in Tirunelveli town to demand that the Public Works Department (PWD) make necessary repairs to the Parakrama Pandian *kulam*. More recently, they were able to convince the Highways department to build a new bridge on the Chittar River that would ensure connectivity for the residents of both villages in the case of a major flood. Field notes from 3.10.2017.

²⁸¹ During my own fieldwork, I heard of two instances in which marital disputes were taken to the *nattamai*, and one case in which a property dispute between cousins had been resolved to everyone's satisfaction by the *nattamai*. Interviews d. 3.10.2017, 3.15.2017, and 4.7.2017 (ages 55, 49, and 38).

view was that the institution helps maintain a degree of cohesion among villagers, despite the informal nature of the *nattamai*'s mediating role.²⁸² Moreover, the institution has continued to evolve to meet the changing needs of the village community. Until the 1990s, the *nattamai* was also responsible for collecting contributions and conducting the annual festival of the local *amman* temple (temple for a Hindu goddess). However, with the growing influence of Christianity in the village (as well as an increase in sectarian identification) the strong connection between the religious and secular functions of the *nattamai* became a source of tension between Christians and Hindus, and a decision was taken to disentangle the two roles.²⁸³ The existence of such mechanisms of dispute resolution suggests that the village community continues to be a site for collective action by the residents of Shanmugapuram, despite some concern that the sense of unity (*orrumai*) among residents has diminished over time due to such disputes.

Of course, the village community is not merely an extension of a 'natural community' in which one automatically gains membership by birth. Like most actually existing communities, the village community in Shanmugapuram too is actively produced through processes of political contestation and accommodation – not just in terms of its relationship with other villages, but also with regards to who is allowed to claim membership within it. For instance, there have been

²⁸² Interviews d. 2.8.2017, 2.15.2017, 3.3.2017 (ages 75, 58, and 66).

²⁸³ Until very recently, the level of sectarian identification in Shanmugapuram was quite low. Intermarriage between Christians and Hindus was very common (despite the strong taboo against marriage between people of different caste and sub-caste backgrounds). As a result, different members of the same household would often identify with different religions, and it was common for all households to therefore participate in festivities associated with both Christianity and Hinduism. In such a scenario, the fact that the *nattamai* served both a secular function and a religious function with respect to the *amman* temple was not considered particularly anomalous. In the past two decades, however, it has become more common for households to identify more strongly with a single religion – in part, due to the influence of more exclusivist strands of both Christianity and Hinduism in the village. Villagers were therefore frequently faced with the unusual prospect of potentially having a Christian *nattamai* oversee a Hindu religious festival. After much discussion, a gathering of villagers about 20 years ago agreed to disentangle the secular and the religious functions of the *nattamai* in the interests of maintaining the unity of the village. Since then, the management of the *amman* festival has been handed over to a separate *karta* selected by the Hindus in the village. Interview d. 3.3.2017.

instances in the recent past of households residing in other villages choosing to move into Shanmugapuram and being permitted to do so. Though such arrivals are often facilitated by marriage, or by an extended relative already resident in the village, they do suggest that the membership of a village community is not entirely determined by birth.²⁸⁴ Conversely, when households migrate for long durations and fail to maintain social ties with the village, there have been instances of the re-entry of such households being effectively blocked.²⁸⁵ The reproduction of the village community in Shanmugapuram is therefore closely connected to the particular ways in which moorings are constituted and contested at different historical junctures.

C. Cultivating moorings in the village community

If the village community as it exists is the product of political contestation and accommodation, then understanding its resilience requires us to undertake a closer examination of the moorings enjoyed by residents *by virtue of being members of the village community*. Given their importance to the rural economy, it is useful to begin with agriculture and allied activities as a source of moorings, both for petty cultivators and for landless agricultural laborers.

Shanmugapuram contains about 500 acres of agricultural land, about half of which receives irrigation once a year from the Parakrama Pandian *kulam* (contingent on the availability of water). During seasons when sufficient water is collected in the Parakrama Pandian *kulam*, the

²⁸⁴ In one case, a man who had constructed an extra house invited his maternal cousin to settle in the village and occupy the house about fifteen years ago. The cousin and her family members then used their savings to purchase land in the village, and they have lived there ever since. I would not have learned that they did not “belong” to the village by birth had I not been attempting to uncover the history of the village going back several decades through my interviews. Interview d. 2.15.2017 (age 58).

²⁸⁵ Interview d. 3.10.2017 (age 55). The respondent described the case of her male cousin, who had left the village to work in Madurai a long time ago. Having spent almost all of his working life in Madurai, this man recently made an attempt to construct a home in the village where he could retire years, but this was opposed by many villagers (including his cousin,) who noted that the man had not visited the village for many decades.

irrigated land to the west of the village (*vayal kadu*) is typically used to cultivate paddy as the main crop, while unirrigated land to the east with black soil (*karisal kadu*) is used to cultivate either cotton or maize (depending on the amount of rainfall expected). In smaller garden plots (*thottam*) where borewells have been sunk and deliver a steady supply of water, the cultivation of vegetables has become popular. Compared to neighboring villages like Chidambarapuram, the relatively easy access to land and water has made agriculture more central to the economy of Shanmugapuram. Most of this land is cultivated by petty producers, and yields either one or two crops depending on soil quality and the availability of water.²⁸⁶

There are about twelve individuals own 5 or more acres of land each in Shanmugapuram (the maximum being 16 acres), but most of the remaining land is distributed among smallholders.²⁸⁷ As a result, agriculture does not produce very stark patterns of class differentiation within the village, and members of many households also work as casual farm labor for their neighbors. Such exchanges of labor between households of similar class position is rendered necessary because even small farmers need labor from outside the household for certain intensive but time-sensitive tasks like removing weeds. However, such intensive tasks are typically carried out only by women. By contrast, most men tend to spend more time on the maintenance of their own farms, arranging for inputs, irrigating their crops, using tractors and other heavy mechanical equipment to plough the field and harvest the crop, and applying

²⁸⁶ My own fieldwork occurred during a drought year, and the Parakrama Pandian *kulam* had not received sufficient water for any irrigation to be possible. This meant that even the land to the west of the village had been used to cultivate dry crops dependent on rainfall and some ground water. Many farmers had suffered significant losses in the monsoon crop, and had decided not to cultivate a spring crop at all, given the lack of water. Only about one-fifth of the total land in the village was under cultivation at the time of my fieldwork. Interview d. 2.1.2017 (age 52).

²⁸⁷ Most landholdings were a combination of irrigated and unirrigated plots (often located at different corners of the village). Interview d. 2.1.2017 (age 52).

fertilizers and pesticide.²⁸⁸ Many households also own small herds of goats, cows, and chicken; one modern poultry farm had been constructed in the vicinity of the village at the time of my fieldwork, but was not yet in operation. Some men who have been able to purchase mechanical equipment or trucks to transport goods also earn an income by renting them out to other cultivators in the village. Villagers who have been able to invest in such assets also tend to exercise more political influence in the village and tend to play a brokering role between members of the community and the local bureaucracy.²⁸⁹

Cultivation of agricultural land, casual farm labor, renting out of agricultural machinery, and small-scale production of dairy and livestock are therefore clearly important sources of mooring to many households in the village. However, it is important to recognize that these activities produce moorings not just at the level of the individual and the household, but also collectively for the village community as a whole. Control over productive resources within the village not only affords the immediate owners a certain degree of economic independence, it also creates a demand for casual farm labor within the village that to some extent obviates the need for villagers to seek work outside. For Dalits, who have long been relegated to the bottom of the caste hierarchy, the ability to work within the territory of a village dominated by their own caste has a significance that cannot be expressed in purely monetary terms, but rather requires a recognition of the material and affective dimensions of the violence and humiliation that often accompanies inter-caste interactions. Given the vulnerability of Dalit women in particular to sexual harassment by men of other castes, one of the consequences of Dalit assertion elsewhere

²⁸⁸ Though men find it harder to find work as casual farm laborers in the village, the tasks for which men are hired are deemed more physically arduous and daily wage for male workers tends to be about twice the typical wage for female workers.

²⁸⁹ Field notes for 2.23.2017.

has been a gradual reduction in female participation in the workforce among Dalit communities (Heyer, 2015). Within the Pallar-dominated territory of Shanmugapuram, however, women continue to participate in agricultural work, and are encouraged to do so.²⁹⁰ This is one of the many ways in which the village can be seen as a space of caste autonomy.

If control over agricultural land and associated resources produces moorings for the collective as a whole, the reverse is also true. Membership in the village community is not antecedent to one's control over certain productive assets in the village; rather it is their membership in the village community which enables villagers to control potentially productive resources and extract value from them. For instance, there are many instances of land formally owned by an absentee landlord, but cultivated by the family of a longtime occupant who may have ceased to pay any rent to the owner several decades earlier.²⁹¹ Similarly, a significant portion of the land is held in the name of two ancient temples located in the revenue village of Gangaikondan; longtime tenants sometimes pay a token sum as rent to the temple administration but hold effective control over the land they cultivated.²⁹² The convention within the village is to accept the claims of the long-term tenant to the land, including their right to sub-lease it. In all such cases, membership within the village community enables longtime tenants to effectively

²⁹⁰ Interview with female resident of Shanmugapuram, age 24 years, d. 3.25.2017. The respondent was a woman who had moved into the village a few years ago after her marriage into a household belonging to Shanmugapuram. Compared to her original village, located near Koilpatti, where Pallar households preferred that women (especially married women) stay at home, she found in Shanmugapuram a culture that encouraged women of all ages to continue participating in agricultural work within the village.

²⁹¹ During my interviews, many respondents acknowledged the existence of such land, and two respondents were willing to acknowledge that they themselves had only de facto occupancy rights to some portion of their land. Interviews d. 2.7.2017 and 4.4.2017 (ages 65 and 56).

²⁹² Interview d. 3.3.2017 (age 66). Details of such landholdings can be found in the revenue records for the village which I was able to access on the website of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HRCE) department of Tamil Nadu.

control potentially productive resources within the village, even when they lack formal titles to the underlying assets.

Let me clarify. I do not mean to suggest that the village community poses a barrier to the privatization and commodification of land. To the contrary, I found that villagers had also developed elaborate ownership claims even over common lands presently used for pasture and firewood, such that there is little land left in the village that can truly be considered a part of the ‘village commons’ (*poramboke*).²⁹³ And yet, extensive privatization of land and associated resources does not mean that the moorings so generated for owners of these resources translate into capital. This is because mere ownership cannot guarantee the *realizability of surplus value*, and the ability to use productive resources in the village to derive value also depends on one’s standing within the village community. As we have seen, even in cases where absentee landlords continue to possess legal title over agricultural land, the ability to extract value from agriculture remains with lessees who are necessarily members of the village community. Outside investors may, of course, retain legal title to the land in the hope of benefitting from future episodes of primitive accumulation. However, to the extent that the present agricultural use of these lands provides petty producers residing in the village a source of livelihood, my argument is that these moorings cannot be translated into capital. It is in this sense that I consider the resilience of the village community a manifestation of non-capitalist modes of production of space at work.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ As we shall see in the following sub-section, many of these lands are now being converted into housing plots for residents of the village to build new homes. But even in cases where common land is not being converted to housing plots, households are claiming ownership over the *prosopis juliflora* trees (*seemai karuvelam*) that dot the landscape. While all households are allowed to cut the outer branches of these trees for use as household fuel, the “owners” reserve the right to cut the main branches of the trees and sell them as firewood to brick kilns, where this material fetches a good price. Disputes regarding ownership of these trees and lands is generally referred to the *nattamai* or another village elder chosen by mutual agreement. Interview d. 3.15.2017 (age 49).

²⁹⁴ Petty commodity agriculture in Shanmugapuram is, of course, intimately connected with the market economy, and very little of the agricultural production is for self-consumption. It is entirely possible, therefore, that a variety of ‘middlemen’ involved in agriculture – moneylenders, wholesalers, suppliers of agricultural inputs etc. – use their

D. Labor Circulation, Housing, and the Welfare State

While I have sought to emphasize the role of agriculture and allied activities undertaken by petty producers in reproducing the village community in Shanmugapuram by generating moorings for its residents, I must not underestimate the changes in the rural economy in most parts of India over the past three decades. As many observers of the Indian economy have noted, farmers' incomes in most parts of India have stagnated or fallen (in real terms) due to growing input costs and weather risks (Reddy & Mishra, 2010). The welfare state has responded by introducing a variety of welfare benefits for rural residents, including an employment guarantee scheme for rural areas, a public distribution system for food and other consumer staples, and various schemes for rural housing (Chatterjee, 2008). At the same time, new work opportunities outside the village economy have made it more lucrative for young men and women to leave the village, at least temporarily. In most such cases, these individuals leave their family members (especially children and the elderly) back in the village because their "informal" jobs do not allow them to support their family at the place of work, where living costs are typically higher. In other words, the reproduction of such "translocal households" (Gidwani, & Ramamurthy, 2018) depends on some combination of remittances sent by family members, welfare benefits provided by the state, and incomes obtained locally from agriculture and other allied activities.

As discussed earlier, Marxist theorists like Jan Breman (2007) have argued that these patterns of fixity and circulation reduce the village to a 'rural slum' where households are

control over the commodity chain to extract surplus value. Scholars like Jairus Banaji have theorized such instances of indirect exploitation as instances of "formal subsumption" of petty commodity production within a capitalist world economy. However, Banaji's theoretical argument is developed using evidence on credit relations in the Deccan region in the 1870s. As explained in Chapter 1, the argument for the resilience of non-capitalist modes of production of space rests on the fact that the transition from 'formal' to 'real' subsumption is never completed.

supplied with the bare necessities required to reproduce labor power for capital. In Breman's narrative, the village community experiences a process of unmooring at the same time that its members acquire new mobilities as a result of the elimination of old forms of labor bondage within the village. By contrast, post-Marxist thinkers like Kalyan Sanyal (2007) begin with the premise that the village community remains relevant because it performs the function of warehousing 'surplus labor', i.e. it serves as a container for populations that are *not* useful for capital accumulation and therefore permanently excluded from the labor market in the capitalist economy. Partha Chatterjee (2008) has built on Sanyal's work to argue that moorings provided by the governmental state – motivated by its need to manage its population – have come to gradually replace moorings generated by village communities on their own through petty commodity production. However, having explained the resilience of the village community in terms of its function, i.e. providing moorings to 'surplus labor', Sanyal and Chatterjee are unable to account for the mobilities that enable many villagers to simultaneously participate in the capitalist labor market (Gidwani, 2015). This difficulty underscores the need to resist functionalist explanations and to instead understand the resilience of the village community in terms of the mobility/moorings dialectic.

The process by which new housing is produced in Shanmugapuram offers a useful illustration of the unfolding of the mobility/moorings dialectic. Due to the rapid growth of the population in Shanmugapuram and the growing demand for domestic space among households, nearly 70 houses have been built in the past decade in the peripheral areas of the village settlement. For many villagers, these new houses symbolize the growing prosperity made possible by incomes earned by family members in non-agricultural work outside the village. Because of the ability of migrant workers to return to the village with savings that enable new

forms of consumption (including new housing), most youngsters now see outmigration as a necessary part of their working lives.²⁹⁵ However, these investments in housing also partly reflect new forms of economic differentiation produced by discontinuities in the labor market, since some households are able to afford more elaborate houses than others. It is important to note that these relatively spacious houses are valued not only because they allow for more comfortable living, but also because they are seen as creating a good environment for children to focus on their studies, which could lead to more successful careers outside the village.²⁹⁶ These narratives seem to suggest that the village community has been restructured at the behest of capital, insofar as the quality of housing that villagers are able to access increasingly depends on their location in the labor market, rather than their status as petty producers in agriculture, or their membership in the village community.

However, a closer analysis of the production of new housing in Shanmugapuram suggests that moorings enjoyed by villagers cannot be derived from their location in the labor market in any straightforward manner – membership in the village community still plays a key mediating role. Most of these new houses necessarily lie on land belonging to the grazing commons of the village (*poramboke*) rather than land earmarked for housing in the village settlement (*grama natham*), since the latter has already been exhausted. To build a new house for oneself or a family member, a family needs to be assigned the title to a piece of *poramboke* land by the revenue bureaucracy with the consent of the President of the village panchayat. Typically, the family is first asked to secure the consent of certain influential members of the village

²⁹⁵ As one of the young women I interviewed observed, while people of their parents' generation took pride in being farmers rooted in the life of the village, their generation took pride in having traveled far and wide. Interview d. 5.25.2017 (age 31).

²⁹⁶ Field notes d. 5.24.2017.

community for using a plot of land in the grazing area for housing.²⁹⁷ Once the family has received the necessary local support, they typically put in an application for a subsidized rural housing grant program, regardless of their ability to pay for the construction.²⁹⁸ This is because government rules permit the revenue bureaucracy to reallocate grazing land for residential use only for the benefit of households deemed to be poor. In other words, regardless of their location in the labor market, villagers desirous of constructing a new house in the village are forced to become beneficiaries of the welfare state in order to access residential land. And since the relationship between the welfare state and the population is mediated by political brokers who derive legitimacy within the framework of the village community, membership in the community remains essential for a family to access good quality housing in the village.

Moreover, these new houses are valued not only because of the material comforts they afford to their residents, but also because they represent the continued investment of “translocal” households in the village community. In my interviews, especially with the older people in the village, I observed that young men investing their savings in the village is seen as evidence for good qualities like honesty and diligence.²⁹⁹ But it also seemed to me that these narratives tended to valorize the heroic migrant worker at the cost of the collective effort that had enabled the village community to gradually carve out a space of caste autonomy. After all, had Pallars in the

²⁹⁷ The panchayat president is typically a candidate from Chidambarapuram, but generally relies on his supporters from among the leading men of Shanmugapuram to make decisions on allotment of *poramboke* land surrounding the village.

²⁹⁸ These central and state government grants typically require the family to build the house according to a standard design using materials supplied by the government. However, the total value of the grant (excluding the land) typically accounts for only about one-third of the total construction cost (about 3-4 lakh rupees), and the villager is forced to foot the remaining cost. Villagers not always use the materials provided by the government at subsidized rates since they were of substandard quality – the main benefit of participation in these schemes was the easy access to land in the village. Interview d. 5.23.2017 (age 65).

²⁹⁹ Interviews d. 2.8.2017, 3.13.2017 and 5.23.2017 (ages 75, 70, and 65).

region not acquired political power by virtue of their numerical strength and land ownership, Pallar households would have been dependent on upper or intermediate caste patrons and brokers to access land and state subsidies. Without Dalit political assertion, the mobility/moorings dialectic might have unfolded in such a manner that the residents of villages like Shanmugapuram would have been forced to accept more exploitative forms of labor migration, perhaps similar to the patterns of unmooring described by Jan Breman (1996; 2007) based on his fieldwork in South Gujarat. If the experience of Dalits in this village has been significantly different, this is at least partly due to the fact that they are no longer dependent on intermediate castes for access to welfare benefits and housing within the village.

E. Theoretical Implications

The preceding discussion on the production of the village community in Shanmugapuram is helpful in illustrating two important aspects of my overall argument in this chapter. First, my observations suggest that the social mobility of Pallars in southern Tamil Nadu cannot be attributed in any straightforward manner to new modes of inclusion in the non-agricultural economy made possible by recent improvements in the spatial mobility of villagers. While it is true that some young men and women have taken advantage of affirmative action in the public sector to secure “formal” employment, the vast majority of migrant workers are necessarily forced to operate under informalized labor arrangements similar in most respects to those encountered by marginalized social groups from other parts of Tamil Nadu as well.³⁰⁰ Any

³⁰⁰ For instance, after giving me a detailed description of the terrible living and working condition he had experienced, one recently returned migrant from the industrial town of Tiruppur told me: “these companies are very good at squeezing the life out of all their workers. I came back to work locally because I could not bear living like that.” Interview with resident of Shanmugapuram, age 28 years, d. 2.23.2017.

explanation of Dalit social mobility in this region must, therefore, emphasize the *moorings* afforded by Pallar-dominated village communities as an important factor that differentiates Pallars in villages like Shanmugapuram and Gangaikondan from Dalits in other parts of the state. In other words, Dalit social mobility cannot be understood as a process in which previously excluded communities move primarily towards greater *inclusion* within the capitalist economy; there is also a need to recognize the importance of political processes that produce spaces of *caste autonomy* for Dalit communities.

Moreover, the evidence provided in this section also supports my argument that the production of the village community as a spatial entity cannot be explained by the standard solution provided by Lefebvrian dialectics, since the moorings enjoyed by village residents do not translate into capital. First, membership in the village community remains a precondition not just for enjoying the moorings traditionally associated with village life – i.e. those associated with agricultural production; the same also holds true of new forms of spatial mooring (e.g. new houses) that villagers are creating for themselves. Second, the exercise of new mobilities by members of most households in the village does not necessarily pose a threat to the reproduction of the village community. The mobility/moorings dialectic is resolved not by translating all moorings into forms of capital (and therefore delinking them from the village community), but rather by a process in which “translocal” households use incomes earned in the capitalist economy to reinvest in the moorings they enjoy within the village. In other words, the deep penetration of the market in village life does not automatically imply the restructuring of the village community at the behest of capital, and by extension, resolving the mobility/moorings dialectic does not necessarily imply the tendency of capital to universalize itself.

In this section, I have relied primarily on a synchronic narrative to identify the mechanisms by which the village community in Shanmugapuram is reproduced as a space of caste autonomy. I acknowledge that such a narrative cannot fully carry the burden of resisting the historicist tendencies inherent in Lefebvrian dialectics – it is always possible for my critics to argue that while moorings in Shanmugapuram may not *yet* be linked to global circuits of capital, the tendencies unleashed by the process of planetary urbanization will eventually crowd out or subsume these residual moorings. However, such an argument presumes that the non-capitalist modes of production of space that give rise to the village community (and its constituent moorings) are merely residues of pre-capitalist social formations waiting to be subsumed under capital. As discussed in Chapter 1, all three chapters in this dissertation contest the historicist tendencies of Lefebvrian dialectics primarily by challenging its underlying premises. If the village community, as it exists today, can be shown to be the spatial manifestation of the *reversal* of accumulationist processes, made possible by the process of democratization over the course of the 20th century, this would pose a significant challenge to the historical underpinnings of the theory of planetary urbanization.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I narrate the history of villages like Shanmugapuram using the trope of creative destruction – I first describe how the 19th century village was *dismantled* as a result of various colonial-era policies, and then show how democratization from the 1920s onwards *reproduced* the village in a substantively different form. My analysis therefore proceeds somewhat chronologically, with the first part of the historical narrative highlighting tendencies leading towards the dissolution of the earlier village community, and the second part focusing on its reconstitution. In the next section, I use the village of Gangaikondan as a case study to examine the effects of colonial economic policies on

the mobilities and moorings of various rural classes. While recent work on Gangaikondan (Harriss et al, 2012) have relied mainly upon the studies carried out by P. S. Lokanathan in 1916 and B. Natarajan in 1934, I am able to reinterpret this evidence in new light by introducing village-level data from the 1871 census, which has not been used thus far. In the final section, I use Shanmugapuram as a case study to highlight the emergence of new village communities under the influence of democratic politics from the 1920s onwards. For this period, I combine evidence from the survey of Shanmugapuram by Nambiar and Ramanathan (1965) with oral histories collected during my fieldwork in 2017. In both sections, I present the available evidence on Gangaikondan and Shanmugapuram first, and then use the mobility/moorings dialectic as an analytical device to study the trajectories of rural transformation.

5. Gangaikondan, 1871-1935

A. The 19th century *mirasi* village

Gangaikondan is a village of some historical significance, having been constituted as a *brahmadeya* (a royal land grant to Brahmins) several centuries ago.³⁰¹ There was good reason to have chosen this location for establishing a Brahmin settlement: it was located on the banks of the Chittar, a river that originates in the Western Ghats and merges with the more voluminous Tamirabarani only a few miles away from Gangaikondan. The waters of the Chittar were diverted into the Sirukulam irrigation reservoir (a “tank” in local parlance,) which then irrigated

³⁰¹ Gangaikondan is possibly a reference to a 11th century Chola ruler whose war machine is believed to have taken him as far north as the banks of river Ganga. Temple inscriptions in Gangaikondan record the land grant created by him for Brahmins who settled in this village.

about one-fourth of the total cultivated land in the village.³⁰² Another stream, the Uppodai, brought down the surface drainage of a vast but relatively dry rain-shadow area stretching from Sankarankovil to Kovilpatti, feeding into the Parakrama Pandian tank before joining the Chittar. Situated at the base of two relatively large watersheds (see Map 4.4), the location of Gangaikondan was therefore coveted despite the relatively poor quality of its soil³⁰³ and the uncertainties of an irrigation system reliant upon monsoon streams feeding into a complex network of irrigation tanks developed over the course of many centuries. Gangaikondan was therefore a quintessential example of a “mixed zone” village in David Ludden’s socio-ecological classification of the Tamil landscape (Ludden, 1985).

Map 4.4: Approximate representation of the sources of water for Gangaikondan



³⁰² By the 19th century, the Sirukulam tank in Gangaikondan was the last of seven irrigation tanks which received water from the Chittar through an elaborate system of *anaicuts* (small dams) used to divert river water (Lokanathan, 1918: 57). At the time of Lokanathan’s study, it irrigated about 1000 acres of land, while the total cultivated land fluctuated between 4000-4800 acres.

³⁰³ In revenue records, most of its agricultural land is classified as “inferior black loam”, “ordinary black loam” or “worst red sand” (Natarajan, 1940: 72).

In the early years of colonial rule (until ~1870), Gangaikondan was an important *mirasi* village, where the land-owning *mirasidar* class collectively owned and controlled all village resources, including land classified as part of the village commons (*poramboke*) – i.e. water bodies, pastures, forests, and other uncultivated lands. In the *mirasi* system, property rights among the *mirasidars* were generally expressed in terms of shares to the collective produce of the village (*pangu*).³⁰⁴ In Gangaikondan, these rights were distributed among individual Brahmin *mirasidars*, the two major temples of the Brahman settlement, and some non-Brahmans.³⁰⁵ Most of the intermediate and lower caste residents were incorporated into the village economy either as sharecroppers (*purakudi*), or as farm laborers (*pannaiyal* or *padiyal*) required to work under supervision in return for customary payments in kind.³⁰⁶ The *mirasi* collective could also extract unpaid corvee labor (*kudimarammat*) from sharecroppers and farm laborers for the repair of essential village infrastructures, such as the channels and sluices through which tank irrigation was controlled. The land and labor regime of *mirasi* villages was undoubtedly characterized by a significant degree of coercion and contention, even if labor relations were often couched in the grammar of mutual obligations.

Like most *mirasi* villages, caste identities were essential to the residential geography of Gangaikondan; the village was divided into an *agraharam* for the Brahmins, two *uur* settlements

³⁰⁴ For detailed studies of the *mirasi* regimes in various parts of the province, see Ludden (1985), Sivakumar, & Sivakumar (1993), Mizushima (2002), Yanagisawa (1996) and Dharma Kumar (1965).

³⁰⁵ Based on the testimony of an old Brahmin resident, Natarajan (1940: 61) reported that in the late 19th century most of the village resources including pasture land were held by Brahmins, divided “between 106 share-holders”. The use of the phrase “share-holders” distinctly points to a *mirasi* form of organization, as does the claim to all the land-based resources in the village, including the *poramboke*. Two temples possessed shares which were later converted into ownership over about 350 acres of land under *inam* (gift) tenure.

³⁰⁶ The distribution of responsibilities and rights over the produce between sharecroppers and the landlords varied depending on the nature of the tenancy contract (Lokanathan, 1918: 58-59). It is likely that sharecroppers were mostly from the intermediate castes, while most of farm laborers in Tinnevely district belonged to castes that were eventually classified as Dalits (Kumar, 1965).

for the non-Brahmin castes (Kizhur and Vadakarai),³⁰⁷ and five settlements for the lower castes – Anaithalai, Pungan, Aladi, Thuraiyur, and Rajam *pacheris* (see Map 4.2). The specificity of the settlement names was designed to highlight the caste status of residents – for instance, a *pacheri* was a settlement specifically for Pallars. And yet, in practice, caste segregation was strictly maintained only in the Brahmin *agraharam*; elsewhere, the system was much more imperfect than the settlement names might suggest. As Lokanathan (1918: 65) wrote, in Vadakarai “the depressed castes live in the same block along with the castemen – only they live a little apart”.³⁰⁸ Gangaikondan also had small numbers of specialized castes meant to serve artisanal and service functions (carpenters, watchmen, barbers, etc.)³⁰⁹ While claims about self-sufficiency and autonomy of the *mirasi* village in colonial discourse were no doubt exaggerated, it is therefore certainly possible to speak of Gangaikondan as a single corporate entity under the overall hegemony of the Brahmin *mirasidars*. As we shall see, Gangaikondan also offers a somewhat typical illustration of how this *mirasi* regime came to be dismantled as a result of the economic policies of the colonial state.

³⁰⁷ “Kizhur” means eastern village, probably a reference to the fact that the settlement is to the east of the *agraharam*. Vadakarai was also called Vadakkur, meaning northern village.

³⁰⁸ For instance, Lokanathan notes that Vadakarai also had Dalits of the Parayar and Chakkiliyar caste. Similarly, while Rajam *pacheri* had initially been a Pallar settlement (as the name suggests), it was now numerically dominated by the Idaiyar settlers.

³⁰⁹ Many of these service castes were typically paid an annual or seasonal payment in kind for their service (*swatantriyam*) by each cultivator, along with some agricultural lands that they had received. Lokanathan’s study (1918: 53) reports that the service professions owned about 180 acres on *inam* (gift) tenure. Since the colonial state did not grant new *inams*, these are likely to be a continuation, in modified form, of privileges enjoyed since pre-colonial times.

B. Effects of colonial policies: deindustrialization and decommoning

Perhaps the most debilitating effects of colonial economic policy were felt not by agriculturalists, but rather by the rural textile industry, of which Gangaikondan had been a center in the 19th century. Competition from machine-made cloth, fueled by the industrial revolution in Britain and free trade imposed upon the colonies, had succeeded in reducing the daily earnings for local artisanal producers below subsistence levels.³¹⁰ The long-run outcome of this decline in the textile industry was the exodus of the skilled weaver caste (Kaikolar), whose household count fell by 90% over six decades as members permanently migrated to factory towns or market centers.³¹¹ But market competition had also decimated the practice of hand spinning of yarn that had employed large numbers of women of all castes in the 19th century (Lokanathan, 1918: 66).³¹² To a lesser extent, Natarajan (1940: 60) also discerns a gradual exodus of artisanal castes like blacksmiths, potters, and leather-workers, since the demand for their craft was declining in the countryside, while new opportunities in urban areas were opening up. While it might be the case that technological adaptation enabled the survival of small-scale textile production in many small towns (Roy, 2002), their disappearance from the countryside was more long-lasting. Combined with the mobility that artisanal castes enjoyed due to their pan-regional caste networks (Haynes, & Roy, 1999), their *unmooring* from village society meant that town-country

³¹⁰ While the daily earnings of weavers were estimated to be about 4-6 annas (1 anna = 0.06 rupees) in 1916, they had fallen to 2-4 annas by 1934 (Lokanathan, 1918: 66; Natarajan, 1934: 95-97). By comparison, family budgets of Pallar sharecroppers reported in these reports suggest a daily expenditure of 5 annas in 1916 and 4 annas in 1934.

³¹¹ As Table A4.2 shows, the number of households of the Kaikolar caste fell from 69 in 1871 to 6 in 1934. The few who had remained also owned some land that they were cultivating. Because previous studies of Gangaikondan did not consult the 1871 census, the extent of the decline in Kaikolar population has not been remarked upon thus far.

³¹² In true Gandhian fashion, Lokanathan calls this the “real cause of poverty” since it was “a very big industry in this village some 25 years back” that had completely disappeared (74).

relations increasingly became synonymous with the relations between agriculture and merchant capital.

As David Ludden (1985: 122-23) has pointed out, this *mirasi* regime also came under serious strain due to colonial revenue policies, especially those concerning the governance of village commons. For instance, the studied indifference of the colonial state towards collectively-managed tank irrigation (as opposed to state-owned canals and private wells) ensured that the collective institutions of the typical *mirasi* village were already in decline by the late-19th century (Parthasarathi, 2017). With the colonial state systematically refusing to allow remissions in revenue to support repairs to irrigation tanks in the early decades of the 19th century, several irrigation tanks in Tinnevely district had fallen so far into disrepair and disuse that efforts by local elites in villages to secure government support for rejuvenating these tanks in the 1860s were deemed impracticable by the district collector (Ludden, 1985: 144-47). At the same time, a large number of the lands held in common by the *mirasidars* were assessed as “cultivable waste” and auctioned off to willing buyers to maximize revenue, thus converting almost all of the village land into taxable private property (Yanagisawa, 2008). Finally, wooded areas were surveyed, classified as “reserve forests,” and brought under a new forest bureaucracy which generated revenue by charging villagers for customary uses of forests (such as the collection of firewood) (Saravanan, 1998).

By the time Lokanathan began his study of Gangaikondan in 1916, there was little left of the collective institutions that historians have found for the early 19th century in many *mirasi* villages. A comparison of the village-wise data recorded in the 1871 census with the survey results in 1916 and 1934 supports the view that Gangaikondan experienced a rapid process of *decommoning* in the second half of the 19th century. The 1871 census reports that the village had

about 4,500 acres of land assessed for revenue,³¹³ 2,500 acres of *poramboke*, and 3,200 acres of “cultivable waste” that had not yet been assessed for land revenue or assigned ownership. By 1916, however, nearly all of the 3200 acres of “cultivable waste” had been divided up among private owners (see Map 4.5).³¹⁴ Much like the neighboring villages of Sivalaperi and Manur (Ludden, 1985: 147), the district administration in the 1860s decided that the Parakrama Pandian tank could not be restored, and the tank bed was also converted into *patta* lands (privately owned agricultural lands) between 1871 and 1916.³¹⁵ By the 1930s, the transition from collective to private land ownership was essentially complete.³¹⁶

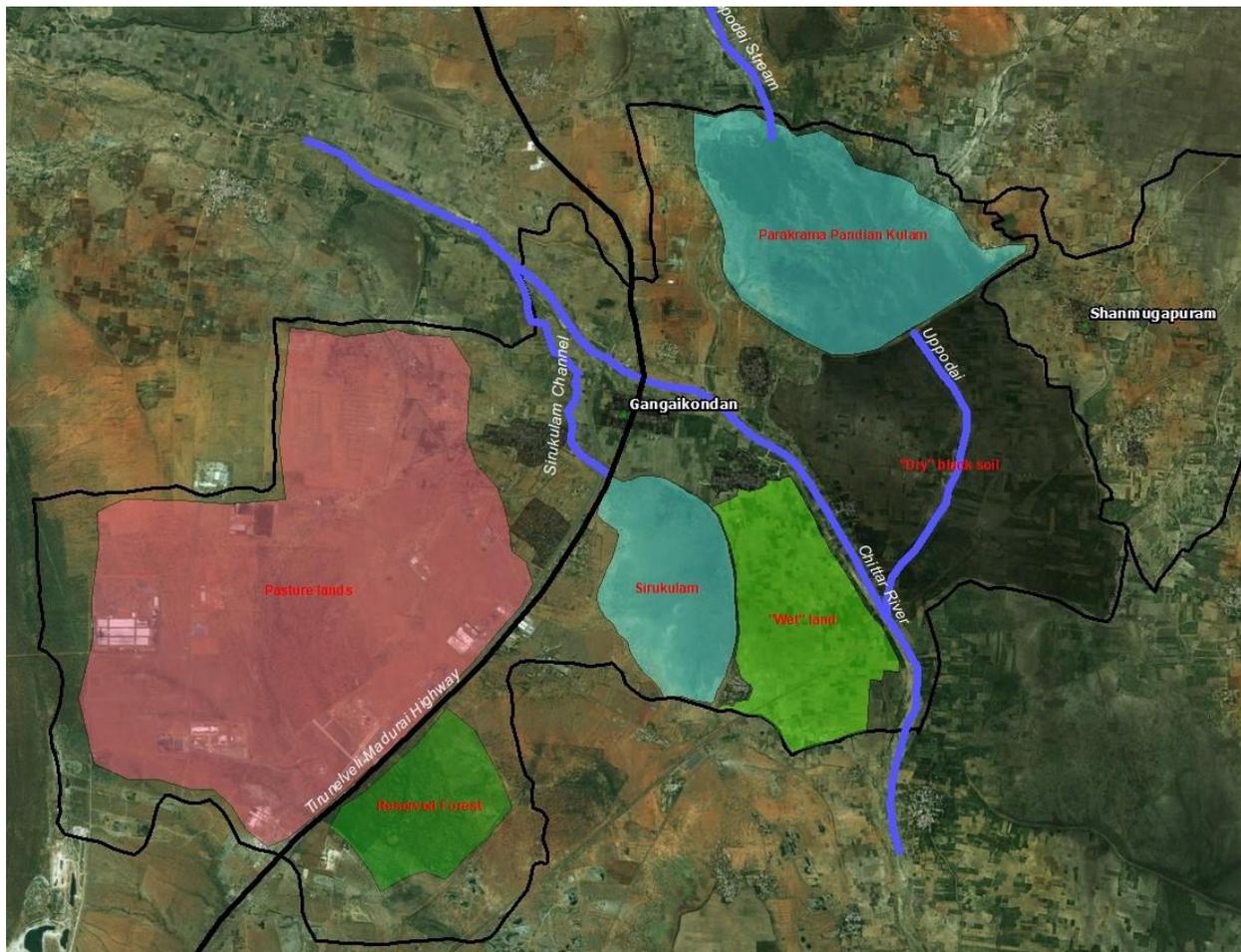
³¹³ The majority of this land (3,954 acres) had been assessed as *ryotwari* land, while 550 acres were under *inam* tenure.

³¹⁴ The forest land also came under official control in the 1870s, and was handed over to a forest panchayat in 1912. By 1916, it was generating a revenue of Rs. 300 for the government through user charges (73). However, Natarajan reports that the takeover of forests had led to a reduction in the number of sheep due to shortage of grazing areas. By 1934, shepherds were forced to lease dry lands with red soil to graze their sheep (99).

³¹⁵ I have not been able to determine the exact year when the tank bed was privatized, but it is likely to have occurred soon after the 1871 census, since a major process of land “resettlement” was underway at the time.

³¹⁶ Between 1911 and 1932, all of the remaining 250 acres of “cultivable waste” were turned into *patta* lands, such that all the land in the territory was now divided into assessed agricultural land and various kinds of *poramboke* (Natarajan, 1940: 64). However, it is important to note that despite this privatization of land, the extent of cultivation did not necessarily increase. Natarajan reports that the average extent of cultivation fluctuated between 4000 – 4,800 acres between 1911 and 1931, though the extent of privately held agricultural land was now in the tune of 7,000 acres. The remaining land (2,000 – 3,000 acres) were typically used as pasture.

Map 4.5: Approximate map of land use in the Gangaikondan revenue village, circa 1900



C. Changes in agrarian class relations

The social consequences of colonial policies like land privatization have been the subject of much debate among historians of south India (Kumar, 1975; Baker, 1984; Robert, 1983; Washbrook, 1994; Yanagisawa, 1996). There was, of course, widespread commercialization of rural society as a whole, driven at least partly by the need to meet the growing revenue demand, including the demand for revenue on what was effectively pasture land. In Gangaikondan, Lokanathan found that many forms of in-kind payments for agricultural wage labor and service

groups were being replaced by money wages.³¹⁷ There was also a shift towards commercial crops such as betel, senna, and cotton,³¹⁸ and by 1934, many more cultivators were growing rice paddy for the market rather than local consumption.³¹⁹ Lokanathan, like many of his contemporaries, depicts these changes as symptomatic of the decline of the old *mirasi* regime and associated forms of local cooperation, while others emphasized the emancipation of the working classes by the colonial state. And yet, despite some superficial similarities between enclosures of village commons in classical Marxist historiography and the privatization of land in *mirasi* villages in colonial Madras, historians have found it difficult to square their theoretical commitments with the lack of evidence for the expected polarization of social classes during this period (Washbrook, 1994). There is little evidence that land privatization and commercialization led to the consolidation of *mirasidars* into a class of capitalist farmers.

Instead, the privatization of the commons in Gangaikondan coincided with a significant decline in the influence wielded by *mirasidars* on the lower castes. According to an aged Brahmin man cited by Natarajan (1940: 61), at the time of revenue settlement in the 1870s, the Brahmin *mirasidars* had claimed superior rights over about 800 acres of irrigated land, and a further 6,000 acres of ‘dry’ land with black or red loam. In other words, Brahmins were either directly cultivating or receiving rent from about 88% of the land that would eventually be

³¹⁷ Lokanathan was emphatic that by 1916, there had been an “utter displacement of wages in kind by wages in money” for both artisans and farm laborers (57, 67). Natarajan, however, reported the continuation of wages-in-kind (*swathanthriyam*) in which a cultivator contracts the services of a blacksmith annually for a fixed quantity of paddy (98). But Natarajan also found that cash rents were becoming popular among tenants in dry lands (70) though share-cropping contracts continued to be prevalent for the irrigated tract.

³¹⁸ Betel is a leaf commonly consumed in India along with tobacco; senna was a popular medicinal plant in the early 20th century with a large export market.

³¹⁹ Natarajan reports that the amount of paddy sold in the market had increased from 400 kotas to 3000 kotas between 1916 and 1934 (101). It is remarkable that a greater share of the paddy output was being sold in the market at a time when prices had dropped calamitously – Natarajan himself attributes this partly to the timing of *kistbandi* (revenue collection) which forced cultivators to sell their grain immediately after harvest.

brought under private ownership.³²⁰ By 20th century, however, the extent of Brahmin land ownership had significantly declined, and Brahmins had either lost or given up possession of much of the ‘dry’ black cotton soil that was situated across the Chittar river.³²¹ Much of these lands had come into the possession of men belonging to non-Brahmin upper castes (like Vellalars, Moopanars and Chettiars), including many owners who lived outside Gangaikondan (Natarajan, 1940: 79).

Meanwhile, lower and intermediate caste households (e.g. Pallars and Maravars) also achieved significant gains. As Brahmins and other upper castes decreased their direct involvement in agriculture, a number of Pallars began operating as tenants rather than working under the direct supervision of the land owner.³²² In the 1871 census of occupations in Gangaikondan, there were 288 adult males listed as “cultivators” (owners + renters) and 237 listed as “laborers”. By 1916, Lokanathan reported that there were only 55 adult men who neither owned nor rented land for cultivation and worked as farm laborers – the rest had become tenants to the landlords (57).³²³ Many tenants, especially among the intermediate castes, also

³²⁰ “Directly cultivating” is, of course, a bit of a euphemism. Few Brahmins directly contributed the *labor* of cultivation; at best, owners purchased the inputs and played a supervisory role. Most of the actual cultivation was done by Dalit laborers.

³²¹ This is reflected in the reduction in the concentration of land holdings from 1916 to 1934 (Natarajan, 1940: 71). While the diminishing size of land holdings can also be caused by population growth, the extent of change in this instance is too great to be explained by sub-division within the family. The number of holdings in the ‘5-10 acres’ category fell from 250 to 50 between 1916 and 1934 (i.e. an 80% decrease), while holdings in the ‘1-5 acres’ category grew from 220 to 600 (i.e. an increase of 170%).

³²² Natarajan wrote that Brahmins had failed to take “personal interest” in cultivation, thus turning into “idle rent-receivers” with expensive and conspicuous tastes that agriculture could no longer support (61).

³²³ Lokanathan is not entirely clear about whether these workers are casual wage laborers or attached laborers. He writes that “Of *padiyals* there are none in the village. In the former times many families of the depressed classes were bought as slaves by Brahmins, and even now the latter have a claim on the services of the former” (69). I interpret this statement as a sign that Brahmin landlords were using quasi-legal mechanisms like debt bondage to maintain a claim over these workers (see also Harriss et al, 2012). However, what is clear is that landless laborers were not as numerous as in the late-19th century.

owned small or medium sized land of their own, often in the ‘dry’ belt, to supplement their income or to produce dry cereals for self-consumption, while others augmented their income by working as casual laborers. Such tenancies did not necessarily bring immediate benefits to the tenants, as the terms of the lease typically left very little for the cultivator by way of a surplus.³²⁴ By the 1930s, however, Natarajan could notice a tendency for sharecroppers to demand that the terms of tenancy contracts be shifted in their favor (70-71). For instance, he found that in many cases the *varam* tenure (which left the sharecropper with only one-third of the total produce) had been replaced by the *sev-varam* (in which the produce was shared equally between landlord and tenant).³²⁵

Many upper caste land-owners responded to these changes in production relations by setting up large money-lending operations, thus shifting to a more indirect mode of surplus extraction. For instance, about ten Brahmins involved in moneylending had about 275,000 rupees in circulation within the village as the total debt (Natarajan, 1940: 105). In my estimate, this amounted to 2-3 times the total working capital needed to cultivate both the “wet” (irrigated) and the “dry” (unirrigated) lands in Gangaikondan in a given year.³²⁶ Among the usurious practices of these moneylenders, Natarajan singles out the *muthalkadan* (an interest-free advance paid to the tenant for cultivation to be repaid at the time of harvest) as particularly advantageous

³²⁴ As Natarajan writes: “small wonder it is that land owners find it more worthwhile to let the land on tenancy and be content with their traditional share [while] the tenants on their part find it increasingly profitless to cultivate land” (Natarajan, 1940: 93).

³²⁵ The standard *varam* tenure obligated the tenant to give up two-thirds of the produce to the landlord, but the landlord was responsible for the land revenue to the government, and half of the harvesting charges. There were variations in which the landlord accepted greater responsibilities but took a greater share of the produce. *Sev-varam* generally applied to cases where the land was not irrigated or less fertile, and one possibility is that the change observed by Natarajan was due to increasing variability of water supply from the Sirukulam tank (67). But even if this were the case, the shift in tenancy arrangements would suggest that tenants were able to partly transfer the responsibility of ensuring timely irrigation to the landlords, which in itself signals a degree of bargaining power.

³²⁶ Calculated from farmers’ accounts provided by Natarajan (p.85-88).

to the moneylender/wholesaler, since it forced the cultivator to sell his share of the produce to the moneylender at harvest time, when prices were low (71). Brahmin *mirasidars* had also captured the local cooperative lending society, which enabled them to borrow for cheap while lending to cultivators at much higher rates of interest. Not surprisingly, Natarajan found very high and unsustainable levels of indebtedness among all the working class communities, including the Maravars and Pallars.³²⁷ Indeed, the moneylenders themselves agreed that “a great deal of compromise and tact are required for money dealings” and had come to the conclusion that only a portion of the total debt could be eventually recovered (Natarajan, 1940: 107).

D. Mobilities and moorings in a changing landscape: Brahmins and Pallars

I have thus far presented a somewhat economistic account of agrarian class relations in Gangaikondan by tracing the shifts in the modes of surplus extraction by Brahmin land-owners from direct exploitation of farm laborers to tenancy and money-lending. However, as Vinay Gidwani (2000) has argued, it is important to acknowledge the cultural and spatial aspects of these changes in class relations, which cannot entirely be derived from their economic consequences. While the availability of alternate methods of surplus extraction might explain the withdrawal of rich *mirasidars* with large landholdings from direct involvement in agriculture, it fails to explain why poor and under-employed Brahmins would adopt the same strategy. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological approach to class analysis, Gidwani (2000) has argued that these seemingly wasteful practices must be understood as part of a strategy in which elites withdraw from the production process to acquire cultural capital and reinforce social

³²⁷ However, the reader should keep in mind the fact that Natarajan carried out his study of Gangaikondan in 1934, at the height of an economic depression that hit the Madras Presidency hard. For an analysis of the effects of the depression on Madras Presidency, see Baker (1984) and Manikumar (2003).

distinctions. In this instance, it does appear the Brahmins gradually ceded the eminent position that they had enjoyed in the village in the 19th century, and both Natarajan and Lokanathan attribute this decline to their profligacy and failure to take “personal interest” in cultivation (Natarajan, 1940: 61; Lokanathan, 1918: 68). However, what the Brahmins had ceded in the form of rural moorings, they hoped to gain in terms of mobilities. Having maintained a near-monopoly over the education facilities in the village for several generations,³²⁸ they sought to take advantage of new opportunities for professional careers and industrial entrepreneurship in urban areas (Subramanian, 2015).³²⁹

The dissolution of the *mirasi* regime presented Dalits with a very different historical bargain. Throughout the period under consideration (1871-1935), the demand for labor in plantations ensured that the working classes in the Indian countryside had a ready “escape valve” during times of distress, or to escape the tyranny of their masters at home, and Dalits took up these opportunities in large numbers. In Gangaikondan, Natarajan found that until 1931, nearly 200 individuals (mainly of the Pallar caste) had been involved in migration to plantations in Kerala and Ceylon (58).³³⁰ As discussed earlier in this chapter, for many of these households, the purpose of migration was not to escape the village permanently, but rather to use the savings of returnees to invest in land and other assets at home that would reduce their level of dependence on landlords and creditors. In other words, the hope was to use their newfound mobilities to reinforce their moorings in the village. Harriss et al (2012) suggest that this hope was realized for

³²⁸ Both Lokanathan and Natarajan note that the taxpayer-funded Local Board school in Gangaikondan (which was located near the Brahmin *agraharam*) catered almost exclusively to Brahmin students (Lokanathan, 1918: 72-73; Natarajan, 1940: 114-15). In 1934, Brahmins constituted nearly 80% of the students in the school.

³²⁹ According to Natarajan’s data, nearly 25 Brahmin households had permanently migrated out of Gangaikondan due to a combination of these factors (see Table A4.2).

³³⁰ Most migrants had returned in 1933 due to the economic depression leading to stoppage of work.

at least some of the Pallar individuals who participated in these long-term migration circuits in the early 20th century,³³¹ since they were allowed to buy land from the upper castes on relatively easy terms.

These two facets of the changes experienced by different social classes in Gangaikondan have been used by scholars like Harriss et al (2012) to explain the remarkable social mobility of Dalits in Gangaikondan, which they consider to be somewhat representative of the southern districts in general. First, they have speculated that the southern districts might have had “higher incidence of upper-caste land ownership” and therefore suggest that “the withdrawal of most of these higher-caste people [i.e. Brahmins] from the rural economy has left a space for the Dalits that has not been opened up for them in the north”. Second, as mentioned earlier, they have argued that the reinvestment of “incomes from plantation work” have provided the means for the upward mobility of Dalits. Finally, they point to the historical role of Christian missions in educating Pallars, which helped many to secure better employment outside the village. In the first hypothesis, the spatial mobility of the landlord class is believed to have had the unintended effect of enabling Dalit social mobility (since Brahmins are assumed to be more likely to migrate than other upper castes who were less invested in education,) while in the latter two hypotheses, the spatial mobility of Dalits themselves is understood as the cause of social change. However, the difficulty with both these explanations is that they do not identify circumstances that might explain the specificity of Dalit social mobility in Gangaikondan. My point will become clearer when we compare the findings in Gangaikondan with the patterns observed in village studies conducted in other parts of the state.

³³¹ Harriss et al (2012) describe the case of a politician from Gangaikondan who became a member of the legislative assembly in the 1960s. His father was a *kangani* (labor contractor and supervisor) in a plantation and purchased 10 acres of irrigated land in Gangaikondan.

E. Gangaikondan in comparative perspective

The first point to note is that the high level of Brahmin land ownership is not particularly unique to Gangaikondan; the village studies literature in Tamil Nadu is littered with instances of *mirasi* villages that were dominated by Brahmins until the early 20th century (Gough, 1989; Fuller, & Narasimhan, 2014; Yanagisawa, 1996). Moreover, the mere presence of Brahmins did not imply that they would necessarily withdraw from agriculture; and even if they did, this did not necessarily “open up” a space for Dalit upward mobility. In Dusi, a Slater village in the North Arcot district, all of the cultivable land was owned by Brahmins in 1916, and the only change introduced by the out-migration of educated Brahmins to urban areas was that their lands were leased out on fixed money rents rather than under a system of sharecropping (Slater, 1918: 85-86). In other words, Brahmins in Dusi did not have to *exchange* their moorings for mobilities; they were able to have the best of both worlds (at least for a time). In *mirasi* villages in Tanjore district studied by Kathleen Gough and Andre Beteille, Brahmin monopoly over land did get weakened in the early-20th century, but Brahmins were typically replaced by non-Brahmins slightly lower down the caste hierarchy, like Vellalars (Beteille, 1965). Meanwhile, this heavily irrigated region today has more landless wage laborers in agriculture than most other districts in the state, who became politically mobilized only after the communist agitations of the 1940s and 50s (Gough, 1989). As these examples demonstrate, the mere withdrawal of Brahmins from the rural economy cannot be assumed to free up space for Dalit land ownership.

The second explanation offered by Harriss et al (2012) suffers from similar difficulties, given the extent of circulation of migrants between Tamil villages and plantations in the British Empire. Indeed, evidence suggests that districts like Trichinopoly and Salem were often bigger

recruiting grounds than Tinnevely for international migration (Satyanarayana, 2002; Jayaraman, 1967). Moreover, as scholars like Barbara Evans (1995) have shown, many of the labor practices that reduced the working classes in the village to a state of dependence were present in equal measure in the plantation labor regimes as well. Advances given by *kanganis* (labor contractors and gang leaders) often ensured that Dalit workers were as immobile in the plantations as they might have been had they chosen to work for landlords in the village. Real wage rates in plantations declined significantly from the 1910s onwards (Evans, 1995), and several village studies of this period speak of migrants returning without having saved any money (e.g. Slater, 1918: 82).³³² In other words, a mobility/moorings dialectic in which mobilities were being used to reinforce moorings could easily degenerate into one in which unmoorings and immobilities (including immobilities experienced at the plantation) reinforce each other.

The third explanation offered by Harriss et al (2012) holds more promise. It could be said that the education and cultural capital provided by Christian missionaries active in the Gangaikondan³³³ opened up opportunities for educated Pallars that represented a qualitative leap in social status, such as the clerical and teaching professions for which Christians were often preferred (Mosse, 1994). Similarly, mission-educated individuals were also preferred for the position of *kangani* in Indian plantations, since they had a reputation for sobriety (Evans, 1995). As labor contractors and supervisors, *kanganis* would have enjoyed a greater income, which would have allowed them to reinvest in land and other assets. However, even if this were true, there is still a need to explain how the upward mobility of a small number of individual

³³² Even in Gangaikondan, Natarajan (1940: 109) finds very few instances of Pallars who had been able to purchase irrigated land through their savings from plantation work. In 1934, no Pallar household held more than 1.5 acres of irrigated land. Most households owned only small plots of unirrigated land.

³³³ Christian missionaries had established a presence in the different Pallar settlements of Gangaikondan by the late-19th century, and by 1916 there were two mission schools in operation (Lokanathan, 1918: 72).

beneficiaries of missionary education led to a broader process of social mobility of the Pallars of Gangaikondan more broadly. In other words, there is a need to explain how the mobilities of some individuals enhanced the moorings of the community, and vice versa.

F. Spatial moorings and social mobility: Towards a hypothesis

As discussed earlier, the main difficulty with the explanations discussed thus far is that they tend to draw a straight line between spatial mobility and social mobility; insofar as moorings are considered, they are treated as derived from mobilities (e.g. land purchased by migrant returnees). The dissolution of the 19th century *mirasi* regime due to a variety of colonial interventions is therefore assumed to have opened up opportunities for Dalits mainly because of the mobilities enjoyed by both the upper caste landlords and the working classes in the post-*mirasi* period. However, as I have argued, changes in mobilities alone cannot explain how Gangaikondan entered a trajectory that would eventually lead to Pallars controlling much of the irrigated land (and political power) in the village. In my view, there is a need to understand how the village community was *reconstituted* through the assertion of place-based claims by Pallar communities in the region. As I will show in the next section, such place-based claims did not emerge in full form until the 1950s, when electoral democracy gave Dalits in several parts of Tamil Nadu an avenue to pursue their demands. However, it may still be the case that some of the developments in the 1871-1935 period laid the foundations for the place-based political mobilization that was to follow in later decades.

In this regard, one of the first changes in colonial policy that actively generated spatial moorings for the Pallars of Gangaikondan might relate to the ownership of housing plots. In the *mirasi* period, residential settlements were typically classified as *natham poramboke*, i.e. a subset

of the village commons specifically for residential use. Around the same time that the revenue bureaucracy had embarked on the project of privatizing “waste” lands, it also took the decision to distribute title deeds (*pattas*) for housing plots, and government rules required that these rights be granted to the households actually living in the settlement (Viswanath, 2014). As several scholars have noted, these rules in favor of residents were not always implemented in practice; in many cases the *mirasidars* had succeeded in obtaining *pattas* not just for their own homes, but also for the *cheris* (Dalit settlements) where the working classes lived, thus reinforcing the dependence of the working classes on landlords (Viswanath, 2014; Anandhi, 2000). Village studies in northern Tamil Nadu throw up several cases in which Dalits had to undertake a political struggle *after* independence to wrest control over their own *cheris* from the landlords (Beteille, 1965: 37; Harriss et al, 2010). In Gangaikondan, however, the evidence appears to suggest that most of the residential land had been distributed among the residents themselves by the late-19th century.³³⁴ It is possible that many of the differences in Dalit social mobility in the long-run may have their origins in the divergent policies adopted by the local state towards *mirasi* claims in different parts of Tamil Nadu in the colonial period.³³⁵

³³⁴ Lokanathan mentions that only about a hundred of the 729 houses occupied by Pallars was owned by Brahmins (55). Moreover, caste-based segregation ensured that these houses remained within Pallar hands. For example, Natarajan notes that Brahmin moneylenders typically refused to accept houses as security for loans, because these properties generate little revenue (113).

³³⁵ In fact, the colonial record suggests that the Tinnevely district administration in the late-19th century was reluctant to support the grandiose claims by *mirasidars* in other respects as well. For instance, while *mirasidars* in many districts claimed, and were granted, a right to first refusal on “waste” lands put up for sale (Viswanath, 2014), there is reason to believe that no such concession was extended in Tinnevely after the 1870s. This can be gauged from the following comment in the Tinnevely Gazetteer (Pate, 1917):

“Just about the time that the system inaugurated by the B register [i.e. Puckle’s settlement in the 1870s] was coming into force, a suit on the subject of swamibhogam [rent paid to cultivate “waste” lands] had gone against the *mirasidars* of a village. The pangalis [*mirasi* shareholders] still objected before the Collector to the issue of *pattas* in favour of the purakudis [tenants] and, failing to secure their object, appealed to the Board of Revenue. The Board, following the decision which the court had already given, declined to interfere. A few instances in which exception was taken to the issue of *patta*, on the ground that the objectors received swamibhogam from the occupants, arose even during the recent resettlement; most of these claims were either rejected on their merits or compromised on terms which gave the occupants

Given the limited evidence available, arguments about how home ownership might have turned the mobility/moorings dialectic in the favor of the Pallars of Gangaikondan are necessarily speculative. But it is reasonable to infer that home ownership must have expanded the range of employment options for a household. By securing the right to return to the village, ownership of housing plots may have enhanced the mobilities of Pallar households, for example by allowing them to choose seasonal migration to plantations within India rather than long-term migration outside India on terms that effectively amounted to indenture. As scholars interested in the migration-development nexus have noted, circulatory practices are more conducive to maintaining the links between migrants and their home communities than long-term or permanent migration (de Haan, 1999).³³⁶ But rights to housing may have also had more direct effects on local class relations by creating a space of *collective* autonomy from upper caste control, in addition to the individual benefits to those who had the ability to migrate. A collective dimension to the spatial moorings of Pallars of Gangaikondan would also suggest that we cannot treat mobilities and moorings as perfectly substitutable, even when they are mutually reinforcing.

Gangaikondan, the *mirasi* village that I have studied in this section, is an excellent case study to understand the dynamics of rural transformation since its trajectory shares several features with the general pattern of change in the Tamil countryside. For instance, the decline of *mirasi* institutions governing common resources, rural deindustrialization, the gradual withdrawal of Brahmins and other upper castes from agriculture, and extensive migration of Dalits to plantations are phenomena that occurred in most parts of Tamil Nadu during the early

their pattas. It may fairly be said that for the past half century *mirasi* and *swamibhogam* have been unknown to the revenue system” (p.292, translations supplied).

³³⁶ Lokanathan (1918: 65), for instance, observed that about 20 Pallar households (~9%) had tiled roofs in 1916 – which is remarkable when considered alongside the fact that many houses occupied by Dalits in the northern districts continue to have thatched roofs even today (Harriss et al, 2012).

20th century. Despite this, the social mobility of Dalits in Gangaikondan remains a somewhat exceptional outcome and its enabling circumstances have not been fully understood in the village studies literature. In this section, I have attempted to analyze these changes in class relations in Gangaikondan by decomposing them along the axes of mobilities and moorings. On this basis, I have argued that a plausible explanation for Dalit social mobility in Gangaikondan lies in the unusual distribution of spatial moorings, which allowed Dalits to claim a degree of autonomy from their upper caste landlords. In the next section, I use the case of Shanmugapuram to describe the process by which the *cheri*, which had emerged as an embryonic space of Dalit autonomy in the early 20th century, would grow to incorporate much of the potentially productive resources surrounding it. As the influence of the *agraharam* shrank, the *cheri* would come to assert its independence in the rural landscape as a village community in its own right.

6. From *cheri* to *uur*: Shanmugapuram, 1947-1977

Situated just across the eastern boundary of the revenue village of Gangaikondan is the small village settlement that I have called Shanmugapuram. We can infer from the 1871 census that the revenue village of Shanmugapuram was mainly populated by Pallars and Naickers, but the evidence is too thin to make any further inferences about class relations in the 19th century.³³⁷ However, as the historical account in this section will show, by the early 20th century the settlement had essentially become another *cheri* under the influence of the upper and intermediate caste landlords of Gangaikondan. In this section, I rely on oral histories and a

³³⁷ Local accounts place the village within the territory of the Naicker chieftain (*palayakkarar*) of Panchalakurichi before coming under the direct control of the colonial revenue administration as a *ryotwari* village, which would explain the Naicker presence in the village. It is possible that the Naickers were dominant at least in terms of ritual status. Interview with female resident of Shanmugapuram, age 50 years, d. 2.5.2017.

detailed village survey monograph produced by the Census of India in the 1960s (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965) to piece together an account of changes in labor and social practices between the 1940s and 1960s.³³⁸ Based on this combined archive, this section attempts to trace the changes in land and labor relations and narrate the emergence of Shanmugapuram as a space of caste autonomy for the Pallar residents of the village. Further, I highlight the influence to extra-local processes of political and religious mobilization – specifically, the organizational role of Christian missionaries and mainstream political parties – in enabling changes in land and labor relations during this period.

A. Tenancy and Dependency in mid-20th century Shanmugapuram

The earliest oral recollections of village elders in Shanmugapuram portray it as a source of labor for many of the surrounding villages. According to my respondents, only a few of the Pallars of Shanmugapuram owned any land of their own, and most households were forced to work for landlords belonging to other castes.³³⁹ A family would typically put children to work from the age of about ten years onwards; girls performed household chores or accompanied their mothers to nearby farms, while boys were often sent to work as attached farm laborers (*pannaiyal*) to

³³⁸ Much of the historical narrative in this section is based on oral recollections from twelve respondents between the ages of 60 to 85. This would place their earliest memories to some period between 1940 and 1970. Four of these were detailed interviews which offered fairly detailed recollections on the experiences of the respondents during their childhood and teenage years. The others painted only a broad picture of their early life, and I have therefore used them mainly for triangulation wherever possible.

³³⁹ When I had asked one of my respondents, aged about 75 years, how many households in Shanmugapuram owned agricultural land in his earliest memory, he replied that “there were a few, but most households cultivated for rent”. His approximate estimate was 10-15% (interview d. 2.8.2017). Most of my elderly respondents supported this account. The oldest person I spoke to (age 85 years) commented that “in my parents’ times not everyone in our village owned land; owning even 2-3 acres was very remarkable” (interview d. 3.1.2017).

Maravar or Naicker households in nearby villages.³⁴⁰ Among adults, gangs of male and female workers of the Pallar caste often had to travel to distant locations to seek work, but this was typically for harvesting operations on irrigated paddy fields on cotton lands which required additional labor to be brought in from outside paid more than the regular daily wage. Such jobs often meant that workers had to walk long distances of 15 km or more, leaving before dawn to reach the work site on time.³⁴¹ More commonly, however, Shanmugapuram residents worked as sharecroppers (*varamdars*) on lands within the village (i.e. the administrative village), or in the black soil lands (*karisal kadu*) in Gangaikondan. By the 1940s, most of these lands were owned by non-Brahmin intermediate and upper castes (Naickers, Maravars, Vellalars, and Moopanars) residing in villages like Vadakarai or Gokilapuram.³⁴² Given that Gangaikondan was bisected by the Chittar river, and most of the Dalit settlements within the boundaries of Gangaikondan on the south-western banks of the river (see Map 4.5), Shanmugapuram emerged as a natural source of sharecroppers for the black *karisal* fields on the eastern side of the river.

These tenancies may not have paid much more than the earnings of an attached farm laborer, but they earned the cultivator a certain degree of spatial mobility. Being an attached farm laborer meant that one had to be available at all times for work, at least during the cultivating season. In practical terms, this meant that farm laborers would have to be at the master's home by sunrise and wait for orders for the rest of the working day. A sharecropper's

³⁴⁰ This division of labor within the household was a common refrain in many interviews, and many older men recalled the economic difficulties that drove their parents to send them away to work as attached laborers at a young age (interview with male resident of Shanmugapuram, age 52 years, d. 2.1.2017).

³⁴¹ The locations commonly mentioned were Sivalaperi, Maniyachi, and Murappanadu, all of which entailed long distances that had to be covered on foot (interview d. 2.8.2017).

³⁴² Interview with female resident of Shanmugapuram, age 70 years, d. 3.13.2017. However, she did mention that there must have been Brahmin land owners before her time, because some of the privately owned wells in these parts were named after Brahmins.

family, on the other hand, enjoyed greater mobility as long as he carried out the necessary tasks, and this mobility freed up his family's time to undertake other income-generating (or cost-saving) activities, such as scouring for cattle dung to be used as manure, or maintaining small numbers of oxen, goats and poultry.³⁴³ Such tenants could also migrate outside the village for short periods to work as manual laborers, leaving other members of their family behind to tend the fields until harvest time (when the demand for labor peaked). Though much of the international migration of the working classes from Tamil Nadu had come to an end by the late-1930s, resulting in a significant constriction of the mobilities of villagers in the region, my elderly respondents could nevertheless recall instances of both short-term and long-term migration by residents of the village to various locations within the boundaries of post-independence India.³⁴⁴

Of course, even with these possibilities for migration, a majority of the Pallars of Shanmugapuram were still locked in relationships of dependence with the upper and intermediate caste landlords who owned the land surrounding the village. While land ownership was central to the social power exercised by the upper and intermediate castes, Pallars also suffered from overt forms of caste discrimination such as being barred from entering the local temple and the publicly funded school in Gangaikondan.³⁴⁵ Moreover, as the census monograph

³⁴³ The significance of transition from farm laborer to tenant was explained to me by one of my respondents who had personal experience working as a farm laborer in Kodiakulam even as a young adult (interview d. 2.1.2017, age 52).

³⁴⁴ According to my respondents, Tuticorin was favored sites for short term migration, since there was often demand for manual laborers to transfer loads of raw materials at the port and the railway station. Tea plantations in the Western Ghats (e.g. Munnar) were generally preferred for longer term migration. Interview d. 3.1.2017, age 85 years.

³⁴⁵ One of my older respondents recollected, in his childhood, that he was among the first from Shanmugapuram to be allowed admission to the high school in Gangaikondan. Interview d. 2.8.2017 (age 75).

notes, even the few households belonging to non-Dalit communities (Asaris, Lebbai Muslims, and Maravars) who lived in Shanmugapuram sought to avoid social intercourse with the Pallars (Nambiar & Ramanathan, 1965: 4). Oral accounts suggest that these families had settled in Shanmugapuram as clients of the upper caste landlords, and were locked into extractive relationships with the Pallar cultivators.³⁴⁶ The Lebbai Muslims, for instance, were the designated shopkeepers in the *pacheries* (Pallar settlements) in and around Gangaikondan, and did not allow any competition from Pallar households in their business. Meanwhile, one of the Maravar families in the settlement belonged to the “watchman” (*kaval*) for the village, and he extracted a fee from every cultivator supposedly for preventing theft of crops and cattle.³⁴⁷

If upper and intermediate caste control over agricultural land was central to these forms of marginalization, the village study monograph for Shanmugapuram offers definitive evidence that this state of affairs did not last for very long after India’s independence in 1947. Many of the elderly residents in Shanmugapuram I spoke to recollected that from their earliest memories that only a small fraction of households in Shanmugapuram owned any land to begin with. By contrast, according to the detailed study of the revenue village conducted in 1962, about three-quarters of the 275 households in the Shanmugapuram revenue village (i.e. Shanmugapuram, Chidambarapuram, and Gokilapuram combined) had some land in their possession,³⁴⁸ and

³⁴⁶ Interview d. 3.13.2017 (age 70).

³⁴⁷ The *kaval* fee was at least partly a bribe to the Maravar community for not committing the thievery in the first place. Who got to appoint the *kaval* in a village like Shanmugapuram remains an open question. Natarajan (1940) includes a description of the *kaval* system in Gangaikondan, where the responsibilities and benefits of *kaval* were traditionally shared by 22 families of the Kondaiyankottai lineage within the Maravar caste. One possibility is that the Maravar collective of Gangaikondan had extended its claim to include Shanmugapuram and sent a representative, but it is also possible that the landlords – or even the Pallars themselves – had invited the Maravar family as a way to reduce theft of cattle in the village.

³⁴⁸ It is true that some of the land holdings were very small, but even if we exclude very small land holdings of less than one acre, about 60% of all households had access to agricultural land (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965: 102).

cultivation of their own land was the primary occupation for nearly half of the workers enumerated in these villages.³⁴⁹ Much of this redistribution of land had benefitted the Pallar residents of Shanmugapuram and Chidambarapuram in particular, which now accounted for about 87% of the population, and a similar percentage of the total land holdings (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965: 102). However, while sharecropping arrangements had gone out of fashion, about one quarter of the workers enumerated were landless agricultural laborers working directly under the supervision of other cultivators, either within the village or elsewhere. The census monograph reports stark differences in the essential consumption expenditures of cultivators and agricultural laborers, thus highlighting the material significance of changes in land relations during this period.³⁵⁰

How is this rapid transformation of the agrarian class structure in the 1940s and 1950s to be accounted for? The village study monograph ventures to offer a brief explanation that is indicative:

It is said that about 25 years back a major portion of the lands in this village were owned by the absentee landlords of Gangaikondan. These lands were cultivated by the Pallans [i.e. Pallars] of this village as tenants. In the course of these 25 years the Pallans mostly of Veeranattar sect have bought up these lands from Gangaikondan landlords who seem to have felt that it is better to sell away the lands even though at a cheap price than having to deal with the poor tenants who were not paying the rents regularly and debts were accumulating from year to year... Some of the people who bought these lands are paying the purchase money in instalments while a few others have made outright purchases from their savings. Many of the people who had gone to estates and had managed to save considerable amounts have bought these lands (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965:101).

³⁴⁹ 330 out of 668 workers returned their primary occupation as cultivation (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965: 70), but many of the other workers also owned land and participated in agriculture alongside their other activities.

³⁵⁰ For instance, average monthly food expenditures for Pallar households primarily involved in cultivation of their own land were about 42 rupees, while average monthly food expenditures for households of agricultural laborers was about 22 rupees (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965:78-86).

This narrative, however, raises important questions about the mechanisms underlying this transfer of land from absentee landlords to the Pallar cultivators. First, there is a need to explain the *timing* of this shift in land relations – why did landlords begin to find it difficult to collect rents from tenants on a regular basis only at this historical juncture, and not earlier? Second, why were landlords not able to respond to these difficulties in other ways, such as by evicting the poorer tenants and consolidating their land holdings into larger farms, thus creating the necessary conditions for a transition to capitalist agriculture? And finally, why did these transfers of land in southern Tamil Nadu work predominantly to the benefit of the Pallars, thus reconfiguring caste geography in ways that did not necessarily occur in other regions? This section attempts to provide a historical explanation for these questions based on a history of social and political mobilization in Shanmugapuram and surrounding villages.

B. Christianity, migration, and the mobility/moorings dialectic

As discussed earlier, common explanations for the social mobility of Pallars in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu tend to emphasize an increase in spatial mobility, enabled by two factors: the educational efforts of Christian missionaries, and the demand for Indian labor in plantations across South and South-East Asia. At first glance, both these factors appear to have played a role in the social mobility of Pallars – especially those of the Veeranattar lineage who lived in Chidambarapuram (as opposed to the Devendrars of Shanmugapuram). As the village study monograph notes, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries had been active in Chidambarapuram since the early 20th century, and by 1962, more than half of all Veeranattar households belonged to either of the two Christian denominations. By contrast, proselytization among the Devendrars of Shanmugapuram had begun only in the 1940s through the efforts of

missionary of the Brothers' Mission who went by the name of Grandon Durai.³⁵¹ By 1962, only 15% of the Devendrars in Shanmugapuram had converted to Christianity. Not surprisingly, the benefits of mission education were also captured predominantly by the Veeranattars, regardless of their religion (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965: 41-45). Chidambarapuram boasted of a primary school run by the Catholic Church, a secondary school run by Protestants, as well as separate boarding facilities for children, and about 18 teachers lived in the village. By contrast, Shanmugapuram had only a small primary school run by a single teacher.³⁵² By the time of the census study, a small number of Pallars with basic education had found work as gate-keepers, pointsmen and gangmen in the Railways, as school teachers elsewhere in the region, and in the postal service.³⁵³

However, the data suggests that the relationship between Christianity and an increase in spatial mobility among the Veeranattars of Chidambarapuram was also applicable to jobs where access to school education was not a pertinent factor. For instance, at the time of the survey, 13% of all Pallar Christians in Chidambarapuram and Shanmugapuram had migrated to tea estates in the Western Ghats, as compared to 5% of all Hindu Pallars (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965: 5).³⁵⁴ At least some of the households who had maintained a foothold in these circuits of labor

³⁵¹ The correct name and origin of Grandon Durai and his congregation to remains a mystery to me, and Christians in the village were of little assistance since it has been many decades since they shifted to new denominations like Pentecostalism. My best guess based on available information is that Grandon Durai belonged to the Patrician Brothers, an Irish congregation with a history of working in southern India.

³⁵² This school had been established by Grandon Durai's assistant, and continues to function until today as a government-aided school. Incidentally, this is the same school where I worked for part of the day during my fieldwork.

³⁵³ Many of these workers in professional roles were Hindu, but one of my respondents mentioned that all but two of them were from Chidambarapuram (Interview d. 2.8.2017, age 75).

³⁵⁴ While Christians may be more mobile because they were more likely to be literate, they may have also been preferred for jobs in tea estates because the lower-level management in many of these estates was dominated by Anglo-Indians.

migration for multiple generations were able to accumulate sufficient savings to invest in relatively large land holdings in the village by 1962. For instance, the census study speaks of “five families which were previously doing petty business in Ceylon, Malaya and Burma” as important land owning families (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965: 101). The tabulated data on land ownership in the village appears to confirm the apparent relationship between sub-caste, exposure to Christianity, spatial mobility, and social mobility: ten of the fourteen Pallar households that controlled ten or more acres of land were Christian Veeranattars.³⁵⁵ The emergence of economic differentiation on the basis of sub-caste and religion can also be observed in the tabulated data on household incomes,³⁵⁶ the quality of the dwellings of these different households,³⁵⁷ and even in the ownership of household furniture and consumer goods like battery torches.³⁵⁸ All of this evidence led the authors of the census study to conflate “the continuous flow of migrants between the tea estates and this village” with the susceptibility to “urban influences,” as reflected in the “progressive attitudes towards education” and “a higher level of social awareness” (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965: 111).

Given the widespread influence of modernization theory in the 1960s, it is understandable that the authors of the census study would have interpreted their evidence as

³⁵⁵ Since the tables published in the village study monograph only use caste and religious categories, but did not distinguish between residents of Shanmugapuram and Chidambarapuram, it is not possible to distinguish between Hindu Pallars residing in the two villages. However, since religion, sub-caste, and village were strongly correlated, a comparison between Christian households and the rest can be seen as indicative of the underlying differentiation within the Pallar caste.

³⁵⁶ Of the twenty households with agricultural incomes above 75 rupees per month, sixteen households were Christian Veeranattars from Chidambarapuram, two households belonged to the Brothers’ Mission in Shanmugapuram, and only two were Hindus from either of the two villages (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965: 74-76).

³⁵⁷ 30% of all Christian Pallar households in Shanmugapuram and Chidambarapuram lived in houses with two or more rooms, as compared to 15% of all Hindu Pallars (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965: 17).

³⁵⁸ 35 Christian households in Shanmugapuram and Chidambarapuram owned battery torches, as compared to 3 Hindu households (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965:22).

indicative of the growing “urban influence” in village life. However, the authors’ analysis relies almost entirely on the experiences of a relatively small section of Veeranattars in Chidambarapuram who had experienced a qualitative leap in their wealth and social status over the course of the 20th century as a direct result of their migratory patterns. As a result, such an analysis presents a largely individualized narrative of Pallar social mobility, consisting of a few heroic migrants who pioneered the practice of Dalit cosmopolitanism as a way to challenge the permanent unmooring of Dalits in ‘traditional’ village society. At best, this offers an incomplete narrative of the process by which villages like Shanmugapuram and Chidambarapuram became spaces of caste autonomy. For instance, this narrative does not fully account for the experiences of the bulk of the Pallars of these two villages – those who made a more modest (but collectively more significant) transition from being sharecroppers to small peasants, often with land holdings amounting to less than two acres. It also fails to acknowledge the collective mobilization of Pallars that contributed significantly in the transformation of caste relations in this region as a whole.

As a result, the mobility-centric narrative runs into many of the same difficulties I have highlighted previously in this chapter. For instance, the rapid transformation of caste relations in this region occurred not during the peak of international migration, i.e. in the early decades of the 20th century, but rather in the 25 years preceding the village study conducted in 1961. This was a period when national boundaries became more prominent and emigration of “coolies” from Tamil Nadu became more restricted, first due to wartime restrictions, and then due to the introduction of nativist policies by independent political regimes in Ceylon and South-East Asia (Amrith, 2011). The improvement in moorings, in other words, coincided with a constriction of mobilities. Moreover, while the sudden and forced return of many Pallar emigrants from Burma,

Ceylon, and Malaya in the 1950s might have resulted in the emergence of a Pallar middle class, this cannot explain the discontinuous but broad-based shift in land ownership and caste relations that appears to have taken place in this region. Nor does it explain the specificity of the Dalit experience in southern Tamil Nadu, since similar patterns of migration can be observed for other Tamil-speaking districts as well. Explaining the social mobility of southern Pallars therefore requires a more open-ended investigation of the mobility/moorings dialectic, rather than beginning with the assumption that the origins of any change in the spatial moorings of Pallars must lie in the expansion of spatial mobilities.

An alternate approach might still take the activities of Christian missions as an important distinguishing factor in explaining the trajectory of Dalit assertion in the southern districts. However, whereas conventional narratives primarily emphasize the role of Christian missions in making Dalits spatially mobile, there is a need to recognize that the missions also served as organizational resources that enabled Dalits to collectively assert their moorings in rural space. After all, the churches and the schools that Christian missions established in Dalit settlements served as essential social infrastructure that contributed to the production of community within these settlements. As Rupa Viswanath (2014) has observed in her account of the “Pariah-Missionary alliance” in the early 20th century, Dalit communities across Tamil Nadu had actively invited missionaries to construct churches and schools in their settlements, often holding out the promise of conversion to Christianity as a bargaining tool. By the 1950s, however, Dalit communities had a more potent resource to mobilize around: the right to vote in elections. In the following pages, I highlight the relationship between political democratization in independent India and the creation of new moorings for Dalits in the Tamil countryside.

C. Anti-eviction struggles and the making of the village community

During my fieldwork, one of my respondents shared a second-hand account narrated to him by his parents of an incident dating back to the 1950s when I asked him how his parents had been able to acquire land in the village.³⁵⁹ Despite the limits of second-hand accounts, I find this account very useful in narrating the process by which the Pallars of Shanmugapuram came to transform the settlement into a space of caste autonomy. According to my respondent, his family had entered into lease arrangements with an upper caste landlord from Gangaikondan but found themselves unable to fulfill their obligations due to a major drought in the mid-1950s. When the landlord decided to evict the respondent's family and other defaulters from the land and replace them with tenants from a nearby village, the tenants refused to give up control over the land that they had been cultivating for a long time, and decided to violently thwart any attempt by the outsiders to enter the surroundings of the village. When the landlord sought to involve the police into the matter, the evicted tenants mobilized the support of other village residents and were able to convince the police to not intervene in this case. Unable to have his way, the landlord sold his title to a third party, and the new owner agreed to waive the rent and reinstate the evicted tenants. Eventually, the tenants arrived at an agreement with the new owner to get the land transferred in their name by making payments in annual installments over a period of 7-8 years.

Despite the obvious limits of using second-hand oral narratives as evidence, this incident is helpful in identifying some of the strategies that Pallar tenants might have used in order to resist the power exercised by landlords. First, the account suggests that challenging the right of a landlord to evict tenants at will was an important component of the strategy adopted by Pallars to acquire new moorings in the countryside. Second, the account suggests that tenants resisted

³⁵⁹ Interview d. 2.24.2017, age 50 years.

evictions and increases in rent not only as workers resisting their exploitation, but also as members of a village community mobilizing against the domination of outsiders. In other words, the re-imagination of Dalit *cheris* as village communities in their own right and the transformation of class relations in the countryside were simultaneous and mutually reinforcing processes. Finally, it is possible to surmise that various forms of Pallar assertion necessarily entailed some form of engagement with the institutions of the postcolonial state, including the police, the revenue bureaucracy, and the welfare state. Nevertheless, these strategies were not directly directed towards the legal procedures put in place by the postcolonial state to enforce agrarian land reform in favor of the actual cultivators of the land. Instead, Pallars exercised their newfound influence over the police power of the local state to *directly* resist the extraction of rents by upper caste landlords.

Several episodes recollected by respondents confirm the intuition that the crystallization of settlements like Shanmugapuram into village communities was an important step in the process of caste equalization. In many of these cases, the village community and the space it occupied came to be defined primarily in terms of population categories like caste and sub-caste. For instance, one elderly woman recollected the concerted efforts of the Pallars of Shanmugapuram in the mid-1960s to drive out the Maravar watchman (*kaval*) and the Lebbai shopkeepers in the village, who were seen as extracting rents from Pallar cultivators by controlling key services.³⁶⁰ Villagers collectively boycotted the shops of the Lebbai traders, refused payment to the Maravar watchman, and may have also resorted to violence against these families. As a result, Shanmugapuram became an exclusive settlement for Pallars (almost entirely of the Devendrar sub-caste), with the sole exception of two households of the

³⁶⁰ Interview d. 3.13.2017, age 70 years.

untouchable barber caste (“Puthirai Vannar”) that have continued to live in the village.³⁶¹ As I have argued in this chapter, these processes sought to reconstitute the Dalit settlement into a space of caste autonomy. Similar processes also took place in neighboring settlements belonging to Dalits, so much so that many were renamed: Anaithalai *pacheri* became Anaithalai *uur* (Anaithalaiyur), while Aladi *pacheri* became Aladipatti. Pallar residents sought to ensure that the process of caste equalization in the economic arrangements surrounding agriculture was also reflected in the new spatial categories through which the countryside was organized.

However, the real puzzle lies in the unusual efficacy of the spatial and political strategy adopted by the Pallar village communities in the southern districts, as compared to other parts of Tamil Nadu. The regional variation in the political coalitions that emerged in the immediate aftermath of independence provides a plausible explanation for this puzzle. By the time of independence, the Congress party in most parts of Tamil Nadu as a whole had reconstituted itself as a broad umbrella coalition across all caste groups, but was neither able nor willing to actively carry out any drastic interventions on behalf of Dalit communities. In districts like Tanjore, even the main opposition parties organized themselves as broad cross-caste coalitions that could challenge the hegemony of the Congress,³⁶² and were therefore unable to support the Dalit cause in conflicts with peasant communities from intermediate caste groups (Subramanian, 1999; Gough, 1989). In the southern districts, however, there was greater polarization in the caste composition of the various political groupings, with the Nadars and the Thevars consolidating

³⁶¹ Meanwhile, the possibility of the entry of Devendrar households from other nearby villages into the village was never entirely foreclosed, as I have discussed in section 4.

³⁶² For instance, the Dravidian movement emphasized linguistic nationalism of Tamil-speaking people to offer an ideological alternative to the Congress, while attempting to unite non-Brahmins (97% of the population) across the caste/class spectrum. Similarly, the communist movement in Tanjore sought to bring together small peasants, tenants, and landless laborers from various castes to mobilize against the landed elite and the postcolonial state.

under the Congress and the Forward Bloc respectively (Hardgrave, 1969; Forrester, 1970).³⁶³ With the emergence of a fierce rivalry between Pallars and Thevars in the southern districts in the mid-1950s, the Congress took unusual efforts to court the support of the Pallars and establish a numerically advantageous coalition (Manikumar, 2017).³⁶⁴ The polarized caste politics of southern Tamil Nadu in the 1950s and the dominance of the Congress at the state level provided ripe conditions for Pallars to exercise influence over the local state.

The restoration of the Parakrama Pandian kulam in Gangaikondan offers a useful illustration of the influence that Pallars exerted over the political process in southern Tamil Nadu.³⁶⁵ As mentioned in the previous section, the Parakrama Pandian tank had fallen into disuse in the 19th century and had been converted into agricultural land by the colonial administration. In the 1950s, the Congress government at the state level sought to project its commitment to the rejuvenation of “traditional” village institutions by unveiling a program to restore irrigation tanks under the aegis of the public works department (PWD). As a result of petitions by R. S. Arumugam (the state-level legislator from the Gangaikondan constituency), the Parakrama Pandian and Sivalaperi tanks were taken up together in 1958, and the dry lands in the eastern edge of Gangaikondan that Shanmugapuram residents had been sharecropping suddenly turned into irrigated lands suitable for rice cultivation. From the perspective of the farmers of Shanmugapuram, however, a key step in securing their control to the waters of the new irrigation

³⁶³ Under the leadership of K. Kamaraj Nadar, the Congress in the southern districts came to be dominated by members of the Nadar caste, whereas U. Muthuramalinga Thevar exploited the longstanding rivalry between Nadars and the Thevars to build a strong caste-based constituency for the Forward Bloc in Tamil Nadu.

³⁶⁴ In Shanmugapuram, the effort of the Congress to woo Pallar support took the form of the activities of the Harijan Seva Sangh (a Congress-affiliated social service organization) which channeled government funds to provide new water supply, construct housing, and provide other basic services to Pallar residents (Nambiar, & Ramanathan, 1965).

³⁶⁵ Interview d. 4.10.2017, age 68 years.

tank was to ensure that they had access to water from a separate sluice gate than the Maravar farmers of Vadakarai with whom they had to share the resource. According to memories of the respondent, this demand for a separate sluice gate to meet the needs of Shanmugapuram was eventually met because of the direct intervention of P. Kakkan (the PWD minister and himself a Dalit) into the matter.

These episodes in the history of Shanmugapuram suggest that the emergence of settlements like Shanmugapuram and Chidambarapuram as village communities in their own right was an essential part of the process by which Pallar residents were able to lay claim to new moorings in the countryside. While it may be true that those who had benefitted from previous cycles of migration were better placed to take advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves, this section emphasizes that the improvement in moorings was also a collective process affecting the village community as a whole. In section 4, I have argued that the village community is reproduced precisely because moorings enjoyed by villagers do not easily translate into capital, i.e. village residents enjoy these moorings by virtue of their membership in the village community. This section provides a historical explanation for the manner in which moorings in the countryside have been institutionalized. Since the residents of Shanmugapuram resisted the extraction of rents by upper caste landlords precisely by representing them as outsiders, the process has produced moorings that continue to be premised on one's membership and involvement in the everyday life of the village community.

7. Conclusion

Let me conclude this chapter by situating my argument in relation to one ongoing conversation on the history of Dalit political mobilization. *Pariyerum Perumal* (God Who Mounts a Horse,

2018) is a film about caste relations in the Tirunelveli region, which features as its hero a Dalit law student from the countryside who falls in love with an urbane Thevar woman, eventually leading to caste atrocities against the hero. In his review of the film, Karthikeyan Damodaran (2018) – a prominent commentator on art, culture, and politics in Tamil Nadu – writes that by painting the Dalit protagonist as a person who resolutely maintains restraint in the face of humiliation and violence, the movie tries to “emphasize the value and importance of civility against caste”. However, while appreciating the intentions of the director, Damodaran suggests that the film is able to craft its message on civility only by carefully omitting the history of the retaliatory politics that Pallars in the region have had to engage in over the past several decades. Damodaran concludes that “Dalits speaking and acting as equals are only possible precisely because of the groundwork of counter-mobilization and consciousness raising laid by Dalit movements”.

Nevertheless, by identifying international migration as the primary cause of the reduction in the agrarian dependency of Pallars, Damodaran commits a similar error by failing to recognize the importance of place-based mobilization in enhancing the moorings of Pallars in the southern districts in the mid-20th century. As a result, while Damodaran questions the emphasis of civility over violence, he fails to question the assumption that “Dalits speaking and acting as equals” is only possible when one leaves the countryside and steps into the city. In so doing, Damodaran is merely following the prevailing commonsense in the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement as well as in most academic scholarship on the subject of caste. This is the commonsense that I have sought to argue against in this chapter. Based on a close analysis of the existing evidence on Gangaikondan and Shanmugapuram, as well as fresh interview data from Shanmugapuram, I have shown that claims of rootedness in the village community played an important role in the

process of Dalit social mobility by creating spaces of caste autonomy in the countryside, especially from the 1950s onwards. Mirroring Damodaran's skepticism regarding the possibility of Dalit participation in the abstract space of civil society, this chapter argues that Dalit social mobility cannot be understood as mere inclusion in the abstract space of capital. If previous chapters have shown why the "rural" remains important in the ideological and institutional frameworks that constitute India's development regime, this chapter attempts to demonstrate that "rural" spaces (i.e. spaces produced by non-capitalist modes of production) necessarily continue to occupy an important place in the political practice of marginalized groups as well.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Village communities in the 21st century: Reflections on the resilience of the ‘rural’ in Indian developmentalism

When I was conducting fieldwork for this dissertation in 2017, I used to take a local bus every day from Tirunelveli to my destination about 16 miles away from the city. The bus would take me to Shanmugapuram, a place where my research indicated that the village community was well and alive, but only after passing through other places whose current state seemed to negate the arguments that were beginning to take a primitive shape in my mind at the time. All along the way, I could detect definite signs of capitalist urbanization in places that are administratively classified as villages. Just outside the municipal boundaries of Tirunelveli, a historically significant cement factory, first setup in 1949 by one of India’s leading business houses, looms over a bustling town called Sankarnagar.³⁶⁶ In many administrative maps, the area is still identified as the revenue village of Thalaiyuthu, though the original village settlements have now been overrun by new residential and commercial developments. According to some of my respondents, much of the remaining agricultural land in these parts is now in the hands of speculative investors.³⁶⁷

Further north, as we enter the limits of the Gangaikondan revenue village, one can find a cotton spinning mill and a rice mill, both of which have been in existence since the 1960s

³⁶⁶ Sankarnagar is named after S. N. N. Sankarakinga Iyer, who founded India Cements and built it into one of India’s largest cement manufacturers. N. Srinivasan, the founder’s son and the present Managing Director of the company, is also a prominent sports administrator.

³⁶⁷ Interview d. 2.1.2017.

(Harriss et al, 2012). The large pasture lands to the west of the highway³⁶⁸ have been acquired by the state government and converted into an industrial estate (the three main occupants of the estate are a tire manufacturing facility, a bottling plant operated by a subsidiary of Coca-Cola, and a small facility for gasoline systems belonging to Bosch, the German tool-maker). The proposal for an industrial estate in Gangaikondan was first mooted in the late-1990s as an attempt to defuse the caste clashes between Pallars and Maravars in the region by providing employment to local youth (Palanithurai, 2008: 30). However, effort to promote industrial development in Tirunelveli has not been very successful – for many years, the bottling plant was the only facility in the estate, lured by the promise of water from the Tamirabarani basin (Palanithurai, 2008). Even today, much of the land in the estate remains unoccupied. But while Tirunelveli remains a backwater in the manufacturing sector, its relatively educated workforce is beginning to attract firms in tradable and skilled service sectors. By the early 2010s, the state government diverted some of the land belonging to the industrial estate towards a Special Economic Zone promoted by a multinational corporation specializing in IT-enabled services named Atos Syntel.³⁶⁹

With the software development facility becoming operational as of April 2019, local observers expect the pace of conversion of agricultural land along the highways into residential real estate to also increase.³⁷⁰ Already two such residential developments have come up along the

³⁶⁸ See Map 5 in Chapter 4.

³⁶⁹ The Hindu, “Atos Syntel opens office at Gangaikondan IT SEZ”, April 29, 2019, accessed at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Madurai/atos-syntel-opens-office-at-gangaikondan-it-sez-tirunelveli/article26982674.ece>

³⁷⁰ Interview d. 2.1.2017. However, it is worth noting that Harriss et al (2012) encountered similar expectations during their field visits to Gangaikondan in 2008-09. And yet, the kind of urbanization that they anticipated has not materialized.

highway in Gangaikondan. In places like Gangaikondan, which have been included in the Local Planning Area for Tirunelveli town,³⁷¹ the conversion of agricultural land into real estate by private actors typically requires permissions from at least three regulatory bodies: the village Panchayat of Gangaikondan, the District Collectorate, and the Town and Country Planning Office. Like elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, these new developments are mediated by informal networks of land aggregators, speculative investors, real estate agents, and a variety of other middlemen whose participation is necessary for navigating the bureaucratic bottlenecks and socio-cultural relations governing land development in this region.³⁷² Case studies from other parts of Tamil Nadu confirm that the social capital associated with caste and other social identities plays an important role in these networks, because of which investors from outside invariably take the assistance of local agents to mediate land transactions (Raman, 2017; Trouillet, 2017; Vijayabaskar, & Menon, 2018). However, the institutionalized fungibility of social and economic capital in these instances is evident from the ease with which extra-local investors have been able to transform the landscape in the outskirts of towns like Tirunelveli. These are precisely the kinds of dispersed urbanization that lend credibility to the planetary urbanization thesis, since they provide definite signs of the capitalist mode of production of space being in operation (Gururani, & Dasgupta, 2018).

Observing these spatial transformations on a daily basis during my fieldwork, I could not help but ask myself whether Shanmugapuram is not already subsumed into the same processes of spatial production that were more clearly observable along the highways. After all, in my

³⁷¹ Housing and Urban Development department, Government of Tamil Nadu, G.O.Ms. 151, d. 20.06.2013, accessed at: <http://www.tniuscbe.org/download/go/go1521.pdf>

³⁷² Interview d. 2.1.2017.

research, I found a large number of new houses scattered across the *poromboke* (common pasture) lands of Shanmugapuram. Is it possible to make a sharp conceptual demarcation between these new houses and the residential colonies coming up along the highway in Gangaikondan? Visually, the terraced cement-and-brick structures being constructed in Shanmugapuram do not appear very different from the houses in peri-urban areas across southern India. They too are enmeshed in informal networks comprising of political brokers who arrange for the necessary permissions from the village panchayat and the district collectorate. Nor can the distinction be entirely based on the economic lives of the residents who live inside the houses. As I have conceded in the previous chapter, most of the residents of Shanmugapuram are not entirely dependent on peasant agriculture for their incomes; many do work as wage laborers in the non-farm economy to make ends meet. Moreover, the evidence does not permit me to make a distinction between village communities (such as Shanmugapuram and Vadakarai) and the new residential colonies on the peri-urban fringes of Tirunelveli merely on the basis of the salience of caste, since caste as an institution appears to transcend the rural-urban divide in Indian society (Gururani, 2019).

These observations continue to trouble me, since they reinforce the fact that the boundaries between the city and the countryside are constantly shifting and rendered inherently unstable by the process of capitalist development. Despite these lingering doubts in my mind, however, my dissertation has sought to identify non-capitalist modes of production of space that reproduce village communities such as Shanmugapuram. For instance, as I have argued in Chapter 4, the key aspect of the production of housing in Shanmugapuram is that residents obtain moorings by virtue of being members of the village community. It is important to note that, unlike in the residential colonies of Gangaikondan, the production of new housing in

Shanmugapuram is feasible only as part of rural housing programs subsidized by the state and central governments, with houses built on land taken from the village commons. In practice, claimants for such housing require the de facto approval of local politicians and community leaders, which makes it unlikely that a person not deemed to be a member of the community will be able to benefit from such programs. While such housing may eventually take the *commodity form*, and while beneficiaries can also continue to lead mobile lives, I have argued that the value generated by the housing is not easily rendered mobile through exchange outside the membership of the village community. In other words, since there is no clear mechanism already available for entrepreneurial residents to *mobilize* surpluses from their village moorings, such assets do not constitute capital *qua* capital. Instead, residents engage in the production of such space in order to accumulate moorings (i.e. the freedoms to stay put) *within* the village community.

In chapter 4, I have also acknowledged the limits of a purely synchronic explanation for the reproduction of village communities. Even if I am able to show that the subsumption of the countryside into capitalist modes of production of space remains incomplete, I have no way of being certain that the village community in Shanmugapuram will continue to be reproduced in the future. While the mechanisms to mobilize surpluses by translating moorings into mobilities may *presently* be absent in Shanmugapuram, it is certainly possible that these mechanisms can be brought into existence in the future. For instance, if the economic output of the Tirunelveli and its peripheral areas in manufacturing and tradable services grows fast enough in the coming years, it might become profitable to convert private agricultural land as well as the village commons in Shanmugapuram into real estate. If this situation arises, it will come as no surprise if the processes of spatial transformation involving speculative capital currently underway in

Gangaikondan get further extended into interior villages such as Shanmugapuram. Moreover, urbanization understood a mode of production of space does not require any reduction in the salience of agriculture in the countryside. If capital is able to obliterate the special claims the village community makes over its agricultural land, this too can lead to the subsumption of village communities into what Lefebvre has called “urban society” (Lefebvre, 2003). Similarly, the delivery of welfare programs can be restructured so as to eliminate the mediating role of the community between the individual and the state.

But for the fact that my fieldwork was geared towards investigating the history of Dalit social mobility in Shanmugapuram, I suspect that I might have been convinced that these possibilities are indeed likely to come to pass. However, I was steadied by my appreciation of the history of Shanmugapuram from the early-20th century onwards, since I could not discern a trajectory of gradual incorporation into “urban society” in the Lefebvrian sense. Instead, it appeared to me that the village community in Shanmugapuram is perhaps more cohesive and in greater control of its productive resources now than it had been in the past, when the village settlement was under the direct control of absentee landlords. I have therefore argued that the moorings generated by the reconstitution of a *cheri* (Dalit settlement) into a village community in its own right are an essential part of the process of Dalit social mobility in Shanmugapuram. The theoretical challenge I faced was to reconcile the reproduction of the village community with the dramatic expansion of mobilities in the twentieth century. The increased rates of labor circulation, the further commodification of agriculture, the rapid adoption of new consumption patterns – if Lefebvre’s theories were correct, all of these factors should have led to the dissolution of the village community under the onslaught of consecutive rounds of capitalist expansion in the 20th century. By situating the present day village community in a historical

frame, I have been able to dispute the certainties of Lefebvrian spatial dialectics and their predictions about the universalization of the capitalist mode of production of space.

This historical approach has also helped me avoid the limitations of the most prominent alternative to planetary urbanization in urban theory today. In recent scholarly debates, the main alternative to Lefebvrian spatial dialectics has been a poststructuralist strand of urban theory that emphasizes positionality and situated knowledge, while contesting the universality of Eurocentric concepts and categories. As I argued in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, such a critique fails to challenge the planetary urbanization thesis on the terrain of political economy, and instead conjures “constitutive outsides” using methods of deconstruction that lack determinate empirical referents. The theoretical framework used in this dissertation is different from the poststructuralist critique in many ways. First, I have sought to advance a critique of planetary urbanization that is more grounded in a critical realist approach to political economy, while also paying attention to the discursive constitution of spatial imaginaries in India’s development discourse (Jessop, 2010). Second, building on the work of Kalyan Sanyal (2007), I have attempted to break from the historicism and functionalism that is implicit in many strands of Marxist thought, even as I remain committed to other elements of dialectical reasoning in the Marxist tradition. Finally, I have sought to identify the functioning of non-capitalist modes of production of space at multiple scales, extending far beyond the confines of a single village community.

Based on my studies of the production of “rural” space in southern India during the late-colonial and early-postcolonial periods (approx. 1915 to 1965), I have arrived at the following theoretical propositions:

First, the capitalist mode of spatial production (characterized by the realizability of potential surpluses, either for private capitalists or the state) typically coexists with other modes of spatial production that either do not generate a surplus, or do not permit its realization.

Second, the resilience of non-capitalist modes of production of space can be attributed to reversals of capitalist accumulation in one (or more) of three moments – primitive accumulation, formal subsumption, and real subsumption.

Third, these reversals in the accumulation process are enabled by interactions between community formation, democratic contestation, and market institutions in societies characterized by incomplete proletarianization.

In defending these propositions, I do not mean to suggest that postcolonial regimes of accumulation arrive at an ‘equilibrium’, with the processes of capitalist accumulation being balanced out by their subsequent reversal. Instead, both accumulation and its reversal are seen as multi-faceted and constantly evolving processes that together act as the motors of change in India’s developmental regime. As a result, the distinction between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of spatial production (i.e. the urban/rural distinction) continues to be reproduced within the imaginaries, institutions, and everyday practices of Indian developmentalism. In other words, even as recent transformations destabilize the traditional territorial demarcation between the city and the countryside, the underlying “rural” mode of production of space remains resilient.

And yet, to what extent can the history of the production of “rurality” in the 20th century serve as a model for understanding its resilience in the 21st century? In order to answer this question fully, we must be able to identify both the continuities and the discontinuities through which the past and the present are related – a task that goes well beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, in the interest of demonstrating the present-day implications of my work,

I attempt to highlight some recent evidence of “rural” spaces being reproduced in India today. In the concluding pages of this dissertation, I offer some brief remarks on the possibility of accommodating the specificities of the historical present within the theoretical framework I have sought to defend in my dissertation.

1. The village community in Indian development discourse

On August 15th 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave his first Independence Day speech from the ramparts of the historic Red Fort in Delhi,³⁷³ in which he laid out his government’s plans for the next five years.³⁷⁴ During this speech, Modi introduced the Swacch Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), a government program which sought to direct greater attention on cleanliness, hygiene, and sanitation in India’s towns and villages. Modi billed the campaign to ‘clean India’ as a fitting tribute to Mahatma Gandhi for his 150th birth anniversary, since Gandhi had placed particular emphasis on hygiene and sanitation in his social reform efforts. Requesting parliamentarians to focus their efforts on making role models of a few villages in each constituency, Modi insisted that “if we have to build a nation, we must start with the village”. Modi’s speech clearly channeled Gandhi’s rhetoric on the centrality of the village community in India’s body politic, though Modi was not particularly faithful to Gandhi’s vision for India’s economic development. Even as Modi exhorted village communities to take ownership over the task of cleaning up their surroundings, the Swacch Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) quickly turned in a massive bureaucratic project aimed at the limited goal of toilet construction in rural areas, where

³⁷³ Accessed at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/full-text-prime-minister-narendra-modis-speech-on-68th-independence-day/>

³⁷⁴ Under Modi’s leadership, the Bharatiya Janata Party (a right-of-center Hindu nationalist party) had just won an unprecedented electoral mandate. For the first time since the 1980s, a single party had a majority in Parliament, thus marking the end of the era of coalition politics as well as the rapid decline of the Indian National Congress.

open defecation is widespread.³⁷⁵ Whereas the mobilization of village communities to end untouchability and caste-based discrimination was central to Gandhi's politics, Modi's SBA has turned Gandhi into a figurehead for a government program in which the village communities are conceived merely as recipients of government funds tasked with implementing project mandates.

However, just as I have argued in chapter 2 (with respect to N. G. Ranga's writings), the invocation of the village community is not merely an empty rhetorical device that masks Modi's particular combination of neoliberal economic reforms, authoritarian politics, and deference for conservative social norms (Chacko, 2018). Instead, it provides clues about the processes of resignification that this phrase has undergone in recent years, which can be used to interrogate the character of India's development trajectory more broadly. In this context, I find it interesting to ask – why does the village appear in Modi's speeches in some contexts but not others? In his Independence Day speech, for instance, Modi also brought up India's looming agrarian crisis and unveiled programs that address the difficulties of farmers through financial inclusion and technological improvement in agriculture. However, I found it noteworthy that the village as a collective actor is entirely absent in these plans for financial inclusion and technological improvement in rural areas, both at the level of discourse and at the level of program design and implementation. Whereas the community development projects of the 1950s had envisioned a strong relationship between the village community, rural cooperative institutions, and a statist

³⁷⁵ The project has been an unqualified success in strictly numerical terms, with more than 100 million toilets constructed since 2014, thus achieving near-universal access to toilets for rural households (Press Information Bureau, 2019). However, in the absence of social mobilization from below, toilet construction has not always resulted in the reduction of open defecation. There have also been reports of coercive measures being taken by the bureaucracy to reduce open defecation, while the construction of large numbers of new toilets in many areas has resulted in difficulties with respect to water supply as well as sewerage and septage treatment, which were not covered under the SBA. Moreover, the SBA has failed to address the stigma attached to sanitation work, with the result that the task of handling fecal matter remains confined to certain Dalit castes in most parts of India (Doron, 2018).

agricultural science establishment, the policies of the Modi government seek to produce an unmediated relationship between small farmers and financial institutions in the formal sector. Meanwhile, the participation of the village community has been encouraged – at least at the level of policy and political discourse – in programs that supply villagers with foodgrains, housing, drinking water, and toilets.

One possibility is that the village community has been conceptualized in recent times as a space of *collective consumption* enabled by direct transfers from the state. By contrast, I have shown in chapter 2 that the idealized village community in late-colonial and early-postcolonial discourse was a space of petty commodity *production*, governed either by the principle of self-sufficiency (Gandhi) or non-exploitation (Ranga). The transformation of village communities into spaces of collective consumption subsidized by the state in recent times marks the emergence of a different mode of engagement between the state and what Kalyan Sanyal (2007) has called “surplus labor”. Sanyal considers the resilience of petty production to be the result of efforts to reunite victims of primitive accumulation with the means of production. By contrast, many welfare programs directly provide residents of “rural” areas with the means of subsistence, which merely amounts to a reversal of the *effects* of capitalist accumulation, rather than the accumulation process itself (Chatterjee, 2008). However, the delinking of spaces of production and consumption in rural areas has not gone uncontested. For instance, we have seen a sudden resurgence of farmers’ movements in recent years in various parts of the country (Nilsen, 2018). While farmers are understandably unhappy about water scarcity, rising input costs, and the falling terms of trade in agriculture leading to large scale indebtedness, many farmers also express concerns about their falling status *within* the village community as a result of welfare policies that provide consumption goods for households merely on the basis of their place of

residence (De Neve, & Carswell, 2011). Farmers' movements have therefore utilized the social infrastructure of village communities to highlight the exploitation and dispossession of farmers in particular, as opposed to the poverty of "rural" populations in general. In so doing, they have sought to reemphasize the centrality of peasant *production* in the discourse surrounding the village community. At least for now, the process of resignification of the village community in India's development discourse remains open to contestation.

2. The rural welfare state and the mobility/moorings dialectic

In this section, I seek to extend my observations regarding present day discourses about the village community to the level of everyday spatial practice. As scholars like Dipankar Gupta (2005) and Partha Chatterjee (2008) have noted, village communities in India are undergoing a process of structural transformation because of falling agricultural incomes, labor migration, and changing caste relations within the village. In some regions, the extent of cultivated land has diminished significantly over the years as farmers choose to avoid the manifold risks of cultivation. With the decline in agriculture, households increasingly depend on the remittances of members living outside the village, as well as welfare services, for their consumption needs. In some cases, participation in the non-farm economy has weakened the power of the intermediate castes over the lower castes in village communities (Carswell, 2013). Meanwhile, there is some evidence that the focus of local politics has shifted away from agriculture and towards the provision of residential services in the form of public or private goods (Kurosaki, & Wada, 2015). For instance, when researchers in a recent study generated transcripts of the deliberative meetings of village panchayats ("Gram Sabhas") and analyzed their contents, they found that only a very small portion (~2%) of the discussion revolved around agriculture and employment,

whereas drinking water and roads were the most common topics of discussion (Ban, Jha, & Rao, 2012). If the village community is indeed being reduced to a space of collective consumption for “surplus labor”, as opposed to a space of petty commodity production, it becomes necessary to ask whether it can really be situated “outside” the space of capital.

In chapter 4, I have addressed this question by describing the production of housing in the village of Shanmugapuram, a Dalit village community that has experienced a remarkable process of social mobility over the past century. Analyzing the relationship between spatial moorings and mobilities in this case, I have argued that the mode of production of housing in a village community continues to generate moorings that do not fit within a typically capitalist framework. Under the capitalist mode of spatial production, the contradiction between moorings and mobilities is resolved by translating all moorings into capital, so that the moorings necessary for the reproduction of labor power (such as housing) pose the least resistance to the mobility of labor. By contrast, the mobility/moorings dialectic in the village community takes a very different form. While many village residents do migrate for varying periods of time, especially to Kerala and the Persian Gulf, and channel their savings into the construction of new houses in the village, I interpret this process as the accumulation of moorings in the village community. These moorings, insofar as they require beneficiaries to maintain their links with the village community, do not permit the beneficiary to realize a surplus beyond the long term use value of the housing. At a time when the moorings supplied by agriculture have ceased to suffice, my respondents in Shanmugapuram suggested that the moorings supplied by subsidized housing have proved to be a significant incentive for migrant workers to maintain social ties to the village community.

In arguing that moorings in the village community have been central to the process of Dalit social mobility in Shanmugapuram, both in the past and the present, I am going against the tendency to equate spatial mobility with social mobility, as well as the associated tendency to dismiss the importance of the village community as a site for Dalit politics. However, the case study of Shanmugapuram also highlights the fact that different kinds of moorings can interact in unanticipated ways to shape social relations within and beyond the village community over time. For instance, in my analysis of Gangaikondan in the late-colonial period, I have hypothesized that the distribution of titles over residential land to Pallars in southern Tamil Nadu put into motion a mobility/moorings dialectic that was qualitatively different than in other parts of Tamil Nadu. In the post-independence decades, Pallars were able to leverage their residential moorings (now enhanced by the institutionalization of electoral democracy) to reconstitute the erstwhile *cheris* in and around Gangaikondan as village communities in their own right and claim unprecedented rights over agricultural land. While agriculture may have declined in importance in recent times, Pallars continue to be able to wield political influence in the present as a result of earlier episodes of political assertion. The mutability of village moorings is perhaps the most important lesson in this account for Dalit communities who may not enjoy the particular advantages that history has conferred upon the Pallars of southern Tamil Nadu.

It is important to emphasize that the continued importance of “rural” spaces in the politics of marginalized groups is a direct consequence of the spatial differentiation built into India’s welfare regime. First, there is an absolute difference between the welfare entitlements that “rural” households can claim, as opposed to permanent residents of “urban” areas.³⁷⁶ There is

³⁷⁶ Large scale welfare measures (such as the employment guarantee program) are available only to rural households. In the case of municipal services like electricity and roads, “urban” households typically receive better quality of service but also have to pay local taxes unlike their “rural” counterparts.

also widespread variation in the delivery of welfare schemes at the state and district levels due to a combination of state government policies and local bureaucratic capacity (Corbridge et al, 2005). Moreover, the reliance on community-based brokers makes access to welfare entitlements conditional upon strong ties within the local community. In a society characterized by strong caste-based mutual insurance networks, these characteristics of the welfare regime exacerbate the already high cost associated with migration, because of which *permanent* (as opposed to circular) migration in India remains low compared to other economies at a similar stage of economic development (Munshi, & Rosenzweig, 2016). What this amounts to, in a post-Marxist theoretical framework, is the warehousing of “surplus labor” in village communities, where the welfare state (despite all its inefficiencies and leakages) attempts to compensate for the deterioration of the productive capabilities of village communities (Bhattacharya, & Sanyal, 2011). Meanwhile, capitalist development is concentrated in certain areas that are deemed “urban” (including urban peripheries and highway corridors). While there is no doubt that the boundaries between these two kinds of spaces are constantly shifting, the coexistence of capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production of space remains a central characteristic of India’s development regime.

3. The fiscal foundations of the rural infrastructure state

In the previous sections, I have argued that “rural” spaces continue to be a central part of the spatial imaginaries through which India’s development regime is conceptualized, and that the patterns identifiable at the level of discourse appear to mirror everyday practice. Between these levels of analysis, however, lies the mundane world of institutions – rules governing state and non-state actors and their interactions. In chapter 3, I have sought to explain the institutionalization of the urban/rural distinction in late-colonial India by examining the fiscal

institutions that governed the construction of road infrastructure in the countryside. My analysis emphasizes the coexistence of two modes of producing transportation infrastructure: one that treats infrastructure as capital, i.e. an expenditure that is capable of realizing a surplus, and the other in which expenditure is not associated with any *realizable* surplus. As we have seen in chapter 3, there are significant differences in the governance of spending if it is categorized as “capital investment” as opposed to “revenue expenditure”, which has significant distributional consequences. I have also shown that the distribution of powers over taxation and expenditure between different levels of government also have a profound influence over how different kinds of infrastructure are institutionalized. In this concluding section, I wish to show how many of the patterns observable in the early 20th century have been strengthened over time, as a result of which the difference between “urban” and “rural” infrastructure is more deeply institutionalized within the Indian state apparatus today than ever before.

My remarks focus on two aspects of fiscal institutions in contemporary India and the role they play in reproducing the urban/rural distinction: i) differences in the incidence of taxation over different segments of the economy; and ii) the differential powers of taxation in a federal system.

(i) For the state to treat an expenditure as an investment of capital, it must be identify mechanisms to realize a surplus that can be attributed to the investment. I do not mean to imply that it is necessary for surpluses to actually materialize, so long as the mechanisms to realize any *potential* surpluses are clearly laid out.³⁷⁷ In some cases, surpluses can be realized by making the

³⁷⁷ For instance, the colonial state in India continued investing in railways for several decades before the investments began generating any dividends for the government. However, what mattered is the fact that the investments had the *potential* to produce profits.

user pay; in other cases, it might be necessary to use taxation to extract surpluses from the class of potential users of the infrastructure, more broadly defined. Where such fiscal mechanisms can be devised, state institutions are incentivized to focus their efforts on productive infrastructure that is conducive to capitalist development. In chapter 3, I have used the case of rural road infrastructure in the colonial period to argue that the failure to undertake broad-based capitalist development had much to do with the inflexibility of the land revenue under the ryotwari system.³⁷⁸ It could be said that the absence of fiscal incentives for rural infrastructure has only become more pronounced over the course of the 20th century, since the political class has been very hesitant to subject rural economic activity, and agriculture in particular, to any form of direct taxation.³⁷⁹ Instead, by relying on indirect taxes which are levied upon mercantile classes rather than small farmers, the state has implicitly reinforced a mode of surplus extraction in which the state and mercantile capital are not fully exposed to the risks faced by the rural and agrarian economy.

Meanwhile, electoral incentives for greater public spending on rural infrastructure and services have become substitutes for fiscal incentives. In other words, rural populations are forced to organize as beneficiaries of the welfare regime rather than economically productive agents in their own right. In previous sections, I have discussed the consequences of these shifts for the political subjectivities and organizational forms that constitute the “village community” in

³⁷⁸ Since the land revenue rates were typically fixed for thirty year periods based on crude agronomic factors, colonial bureaucrats had few fiscal incentives to undertake investments in the kinds of dispersed infrastructures that village communities were most likely to benefit from (such as village roads).

³⁷⁹ In the early 1970s, a committee headed by K. N. Raj weighed in on the possibility of an agricultural income tax – a proposal that was discussed seriously by economists at the time. However, these discussions were carried out primarily from the perspective of inter-sectoral equity and resource mobilization, rather than from the perspective of creating the right fiscal incentives for rural infrastructure investments. See Rao (1972). Since then, the idea has come up from time to time in academic debates but it has not received much policy attention (see Rajaraman, & Bhende, 1998).

India today. From the fiscal-political perspective, however, the reticence of the state to engage with rural populations simultaneously as taxpayers and citizens seems to suggest that the postcolonial state has not been able to reconcile the demands of sovereign authority and popular legitimacy. In my view, this is one of the legacies of colonial rule that helps explain the resilience of rural spaces in the Indian countryside despite two centuries of capitalist development.

(ii) My analysis of the fiscal institutions governing rural road infrastructure in late-colonial Madras also points to another legacy of colonial rule that continues to shape India's development trajectory today – the limited fiscal autonomy of local governments. In chapter 3, I have argued that this was a consequence of the depoliticization of finance that accompanied the constitutional reforms of 1919, which severely constrained the power of local boards at the district and sub-district levels. In more recent times, while there is widespread recognition of the need for radical decentralization, advocates of political and fiscal decentralization have focused primarily on the devolution of *expenditure* powers to lower levels of government.³⁸⁰ However, they have generally failed to appreciate the significance of the limited *taxation* powers of local governments, particularly in rural areas.³⁸¹ Lacking any power to introduce new taxes or to modify existing ones, local governments have to rely largely on inter-governmental transfers, many of which are tied to particular programs and priorities of the central and state governments. Moreover, most local governments are also prevented from borrowing to invest in infrastructures

³⁸⁰ For instance, Kerala has been praised for devolving a significant share of the state budget to local bodies for their discretionary spending, coinciding with electoral reforms that have made local bodies more politically representative (Oommen, 2006; Heller, Harilal, & Chaudhuri, 2007).

³⁸¹ The work of Indira Rajaraman (2003) is one exception.

that are capable of enabling economic diversification, because of the absence of independent sources of revenue and rules that mandate balanced budgets. Cumulatively, the fiscal constraints imposed on local bodies in India compel them to carry out local infrastructure projects as if these are mere expenditures of revenue, since the mechanisms needed to treat these infrastructure projects as investments of capital are lacking.

While local governments in both urban and rural areas have been subject to similar constraints in the past, the gap between different kinds of local government has been widening. In recent years, steps have been taken to enable municipal corporations in large cities to develop the fiscal institutions necessary for undertaking infrastructure projects as capital investments. Due to reforms carried out under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), metropolitan cities have been encouraged to revise their property tax databases and given more autonomy over the tax structure. Meanwhile, the central government has been putting in place frameworks for encouraging the use of municipal bonds combined with mechanisms of land value capture that can pay for new transportation, water supply, and sanitation infrastructure. Entrepreneurial state governments have also been involved in the production of large scale infrastructure for newly urbanizing areas by operating through parastatal agencies such as urban development authorities and industrial development corporations. These organizations tend to combine the coercive authority of the state, especially in cases of compulsory land acquisition, with a mandate to pursue capitalist urbanization involving both public and private capital. It is precisely because certain kinds of infrastructure are systematically excluded from these mechanisms of public finance that rural spaces continue to be reproduced in India today.

APPENDICES

Table A3.1: Expenditures of Local Boards, Province-wise (1903-04 and 1912-13)

Province	1903-04 (in rupees)		1912-13 (in rupees)	
	Total Local Expenditure	Civil Works (%)	Total Local Expenditure	Civil Works (%)
Punjab	6,378,450	2,765,385 (43%)	10,305,210	3,947,175 (38%)
UP	7,902,360	3,634,395 (46%)	14,453,250	4,982,985 (34%)
Assam	2,136,495	1,235,535 (58%)	2,326,020	919,350 (40%)
Bengal	6,546,045	3,520,380 (54%)	13,074,150	6,028,710 (46%)
Bombay and Sindh	7,788,840	3,662,355 (47%)	13,243,290	4,062,120 (30%)
Madras	18,294,690	9,390,705 (51%)	26,650,800	12,211,500 (46%)

(source: Statistical Abstract of British India, table 104/102)

Table A3.2: Cotton cultivation in Tinnevely district, 1891-92

Taluk	Gross Cultivated Area (acres)	Cotton cultivation (acres)	% Cotton
Ottapidaram	160,041	44,930	28.1
Sattur	192,211	58,156	30.3
Srivilliputtur	196,692	43,930	22.3
Sankaraninarkoil	170,348	32,976	19.4
Tenkasi	95,997	1,624	1.7
Ambasamudram	104,443	2,004	1.9
Tinnevely	117,190	8,999	7.7
Tenkarai	190,197	15,696	8.3
Nanguneri	186,469	17,693	9.5
Total	1,413,588	226,008	16

(Source: Statistical Atlas of Madras Presidency, 1895: 383)

Table A3.3: Changes in Road Availability and Road Density, Province-wise, 1914-44

Province	% Change		
	Total mileage	Road Availability	Road Density
Punjab	15.3	-18.9	16.1
UP	2.8	-11.9	3.8
Assam	47.2	13.2	42
Bengal	69.4	27.8	72.2
Bombay and Sindh	30.2	0.7	28.5
Madras	58	32.6	78.2

(Source: Indian Road Development Committee, 1928a; Kynnersley, 1945).

Table A3.4: Fiscal Space for Infrastructure Investments in Madras Presidency, 1923-29

	(Rupees millions)		% Change
	1922-23	1928-29	
Total Revenue (Provincial)	125.8	175.3	39.3
Total Expenditure (“transferred” heads)	36.1	58.5	62
Total Income (Local Boards)	26.8	41.7	55.6
Local Expenditure on Roads	11	17.44	58.5

(Source: Thomas, 1939; Venkatarangaiya, 1938)

Table A3.5: Expenditure on Road Maintenance in Ramnad District, 1921-1928

		As % of total maintenance cost			
	Cost of maintenance	Net Toll Income (%)	Motor bus licenses (%)	Government Grants (%)	Total Receipts (%)
1920-21	294,420	42.7	0	14.4	57.1
1921-22	290,831	50.7	1.5	5.1	57.3
1922-23	299,466	72.6	1.8	29.7	104.1
1923-24	311,266	69.4	3	30.4	102.8
1924-25	287,402	85	12.1	28.9	126
1925-26	317,534	78.4	N. A.	26.1	104.6
1926-27	363,049	70.9	18.3	22.8	112
1927-28	360,127	71	20.5	23	114.5

(Source: Administration Reports of Local Boards in Ramnad District, 1921-1928)

Table A3.6: Expenditure on Road Maintenance in Tinnevely District, 1921-1928

		As % of total maintenance cost			
	Cost of maintenance	Net Toll Income (%)	Motor bus licenses (%)	Government Grants (%)	Total Receipts (%)
1920-21	309,563	52.6	0	46.6	99.2
1921-22	299,814	57.1	0	31.3	88.4
1922-23	285,402	71.9	0	32.7	104.6
1923-24	346,410	71.8	0	33.6	105.4
1924-25	358,051	52.1	9.3	24.8	86.2
1925-26	444,867	49.7	N. A.	21.8	71.5
1926-27	442,059	52.8	14.6	30.6	98
1927-28	416,424	54	14.1	38.1	106.2

(Source: Administration Reports of Local Boards in Tinnevely District, 1921-1928)

Table A3.7: Division of road maintenance between district and taluk boards in Ramnad District, 1921-1928

	Mileage	Miles of new road constructed	Maintenance Expenditure	Average cost of maintenance
District Boards				
1920-21	448.5		239438	534
1921-22	557.5	5	278848	500
1922-23	562.5		287387	511
1923-24	564	2	303190	538
1924-25	566	7	282694	499
1925-26	573		302786	528
1926-27	528	20.5	327767	621
1927-28	548.5		303046	552
Taluk boards				
1920-21	153.5		55442	361
1921-22	44.5		11928	268
1922-23	44.5	21.5	12446	280
1923-24	66		8076	122
1924-25	66		4708	71
1925-26	66.5	4	14748	222
1926-27	115.5	52.3	35282	305
1927-28	167.8		37336	223

(Source: Administration Reports of Local Boards in Ramnad District, 1921-1928)

Table A3.8: Division of road maintenance between district and taluk boards in Tinnevely District, 1921-1928

	Mileage	Miles of new road constructed	Maintenance Expenditure	Average cost of maintenance
District Boards				
1920-21	422.2		236705	561
1921-22	617		274470	445
1922-23	454		225068	496
1923-24	453.2		264416	583
1924-25	454		291373	642
1925-26	454.2		389832	858
1926-27	640.3	12.7	411855	643
1927-28	653		371396	569
Taluk boards				
1920-21	408.1		74835	183
1921-22	183.2		25683	140
1922-23	346.2	7	60758	175
1923-24	353.2	2.1	81993	232
1924-25	355.3	86.2	66678	188
1925-26	441.5	38.1	55035	125
1926-27	293.5	34.7	41445	141
1927-28	328.2		45028	137

(Source: Administration Reports of Local Boards in Tinnevely District, 1921-1928)

Table A3.9: Proportion of capital expenditure in the Communications budget of Local Boards in Ramnad and Tinnevelly

	% of capital expenditure in the total communications budget	
	Ramnad	Tinnevelly
1921-22	11.4	4.2
1924-25	15.1	5.5
1927-28	48.7	33.9

(Source: Administration reports of local boards in Ramnad & Tinnevelly, 1921-28)

Table A4.1: Summary Statistics of Interview Respondents in Shanmugapuram, Chidambarapuram, and Gokilapuram (Total Interviews = 40)

Variable	Categories			
Age group	18 – 25 years	25 – 40 years	40 – 55 years	55+ years
n (%)	3 (7.5%)	8 (20%)	12 (30%)	17 (52.5%)
Caste/Sub-caste	Devendrar	Veeranattar	Chettiar/Naicker	Puthirai Vannar
n (%)	35 (87.5%)	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	1 (2.5%)
Religion	Christian	Hindu		
n (%)	22 (55%)	18 (45%)		
Gender	Male	Female		
n (%)	27 (67.5%)	13 (32.5%)		

Table A4.2: Caste composition of Gangaikondan revenue village in 1871, 1916, and 1934

Name of Caste	Number of Households		
	1871	1916	1934
Brahmin	91	100	75
Vellalar	41	34	33
Maravar	NA	102	105
Chettiar	12	12	8
Muthurajar	39	50	40
Asari	7	18	12
Kaikolar	69	20	6
Idaiyar	6	60	50
Muslims	5	5	3
Nadar	7	16	24
Pallar	NA	175	161
Other	62	71	50
Total	540	663	569

Note: The 1871 census data only lists the total population for each caste – the number of households in Table A4.2 is estimated on the basis of the average household size for the village as a whole (= 4.57). In the 1871 census, Pallars and Maravars were enumerated together as ‘Vannians’ because of which the disaggregated number of households for the two caste communities is not available for that year. Put together, Pallars and Maravars constituted about 203 households.

Map A3.1: Proposed Village Road to Kuruvikulam in 1923



Source: GO No. 1158 d. 22-5-23 (L&M) TNSA.

Red: Engineer's proposed alignment

Green: Existing Cart-track

Black: Compromise alignment

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