THE NARATIVES

1

Road to Bodinaickanur and the Villages

The journey began some years ago, in June 1986. Travelling by train, one followed the chord line, from Chennai (Madras until a few years ago, and also now for many people) to Dindigul and then took bus down the Dindigul-Bodinaickanur highway. It was an overnight journey by train and an early morning rush to the Dindigul bus stand to take an early bus. It was two hours by road to Bodi. The road to Bodi stretched long and most in the slept through their travel. It was cool or warm depending on the season one travelled. In summer months, it was always warm but, in winter months, the traveller felt cold because of the early morning dew. There was foul smell in the air from the tanneries as the bus left the town of Dindigul. Past the district town, farmhouses lay scattered on both sides of the road among the small, neatly cultivated fields. The crops were mostly dry crops, maize or corn, pulses and occasional sugarcane. Rounding a bend, one saw a field being harvested by three or four women in traditional *selai*, conveniently tucked at the waist, and men hurrying across to work in their *veshtis* and *mundaasu* on their heads. Even as early as 5.30 or 6.00 am, the traffic was lively, with buses horning at the back and overtaking the bus. Along the way, one saw lorries and trucks. Many drivers honked at each other in greeting as they passed; some stopped in the middle of the road to have some words and pleasantries exchanged with friends and moved only when the bus behind them honked harshly.

The first major town was *Vathalagundu.* About here the bus passed through a most beautiful countryside, luxuriously green; then onwards past the town of Periyakulam around 7.30 am and a few minutes later stopped at the entrance to the bus stand at Theni. Theni was market town and the biggest rural weekly market in Asia. It was not yet the district town it is today. On the market day, which was invariably a Sunday, the town became very alive. Farmers made a beeline for the town from the villages around, with their products for sale. In the market, some became instantly rich and had more money than they could throughout the year. Some of course were crestfallen, for the prices had plummeted because of the sudden glut and there were more *goods* than the buyers demanded. In Theni, which is a twin town with Allinagaram towards Periyakulam, farmers made their fortunes,

sold their paddy, cotton, grams, vegetables, jaggery and sugar, and cattle. There was enough time for the bus travellers for a cup of hot tea or coffee. Then the bus moved on, with some more passengers heading towards Bodi, 13 km away in the southwest.

Some distance south of Theni, the road took a turn towards the hills. Halfway down this road to Bodi, there was an *elephant* sitting on the hills. People in the bus wondered whether they could take a ride on the elephant, which could be seen from many miles around the place. The hill was wonderfully shaped and, as one ascended, with a cool breeze behind, one could feel that one was entering a new world of green and beauty. There was a temple on top of the hillock that overlooked the cardamom town that was Bodi. It was the final destination. For a week or more, it would be home for the team that travelled up there in the last twelve hours.

The winding road continued on through nearly 20 villages, and through the villages of Silamalai and Rasingapuram, past what used to be a shelterbelt along the main road, with tall trees and shrubs and of course large perforations through which one could see sand drift across the road and on to the fields as one sat in the bus, in the months of June to September. It was much worse in August, when the winds were heavy and high speed or with gale force. People of Bodi Ammapatti, Maniampatti, Pottipuram, Rasingapuram and Silamalai, on every occasion, spoke of the troubles with the winds and sand, its drift, encroachment and continuous piling on the dunes. There was an old lady from Rasingapuram who distinctly remembered the time when she was lifted off the ground where she stood while grazing her cattle and dumped. She at another time told a story of how two sisters who went to graze their cattle escaped the wrath of the winds and hard hitting sand pebbles by getting into gunny bags until the winds blew themselves out; and how the entire area became hazy and air laden with finer sand for four or five days in August, when women did not cook and men and children went without food, lest fire broke out in homes where cooking was on. Many told the story how their roofs were blow away even as they were beginning to go to bed; or how in the dead of night, the winds howled and the children cried.

Here the fields were strewn with sand and encroachments that did not allow cropping. If cropped, there was no good crop at the end of the hard labour. There were castor, ragi, cotton, and corn. It was here one saw fields fenced high, higher than a man’s height, and fences reinforced with mud to

save the well and the crop inside the enclosure. Further up, there were the towns of Thevaram, Uthamapalayam, Kambam and the Lower Camp, where the Periyar-Vaigai irrigation system began and the 54 villages of the Kambam Valley prospered, agriculturally and socially. The valley housed an enterprising people and, if one was asked the question of where was prosperity in Tamil Nadu, one was always sure to be told that it was in Kambam Valley without doubt. That was even when the Cauvery Delta did better than the Kambam Valley. But not any more. Where the water and irrigation were plenty in the Valley, there were *Thanneer Maniams* (water managers) and *Paravu Kaval* (Area Policing Force). And there were farmers' associations, federated and functioning in the entire Valley.

But that was not to be everywhere. Amidst the 18 villages of Thevaram Basin where the five villages where winds and sand ruled the roost. There was a community of about 50 thousand, which suffered the winds and sand; there were brides who were not married off; there was a society which bore the brunt and suffered an attitude, was laughed at and not sympathised with.

As one climbed altitude, from the Lower Camp towards Kerala, one saw beautiful scenary, luxuriant vegetation, green and breaking out in flowers of rainbow colours, soothing to the disturbed. In the mornings, the swirling mists gave the landscape a mystical air, obscuring vision; in the afternoons, clouds swept down low; and in the evenings, a gentle breeze – *thendral* in Tamil - made poets out of the visitors. While the Valley looked lovely, idyllic, productive and prosperous, a community of several thousands lived in abject poverty, penury, and amidst unproductive sand. There was heartache but determination to hold the fort; and there was suffering and also hope in a future for themselves and their children.

2

Here and Now and How We Came to Where We Are Now

We have travelled the train and the bus several times and in the last several years. Sometimes, there have been just two of us; but in other times, there have been several of us. We have brought with us several people from different cultures; men and women who are concerned. Every visit has been a revelation; and every visit will be a revelation, too. Things have changed, though. The people we see today are the old acquaintances and some trusted

friends. There are some new people, newer friends. There are some we trust most; there are others we want to be friends with. Now that we are familiar, there are not many with a questioning look. But there are still some who stay a distance from us, but are friendly enough to give a smile, lift a hand in salute, and say some words. There are still people who are suspicious of us. Occasionally, someone comes up to you and asks what we are doing. They go back in the happy understanding of what we are concerned with. We are beginning to feel we are trusted and the trust we cherish.

It took 15 long years to get to know a people, and to get accepted by them. There was a time that we thought we shared with them what we knew. But now is the time we know that they have shared with us many things: the words, the actions, and the concerns. We are in debt, and they are not.

Divided though they are, the whole of society is built on a rock solid foundation of village culture and values. It is based on an unconditional acceptance of all life forms and all things as they are. Unequal. Values are eroding; true, but values are not forgotten, as well, even by the bad. The good among them are still uphold the values and tell the bad to do so. It is a society where none is afraid of the other. Not anymore, because each one knows his / her worth. We have found an outspoken-ness among women, which was absent some years ago. Children are even more natural today than they were ever before. They tell us more about the life they know, and what they have seen around them. There is in all of them, men and women and children, acceptance of the real, and the perceived. This acceptance is based on recognition of all people being mutually dependent on each other. There is that symbolic relationship with nature. Equality is a distant dream, but it is not a goal to be attained. Many have told us that they will be unequal. It is how their society is structured. It is the natural outcome of the real and the perceived. The people are unassuming and simple. There is a tendency in some of them to feel what they are is because of their fate. But that does not make them depressed. There is that fire in them that wants them to achieve, in their own little ways.

People are given respect and status, according to their contribution to society. Children are perceptive about these things, more than adults, men or women. There is sharing among the poor. The rich are not bothered with. Even they are dependent on the poor, for their livelihoods. They need labour. Labour is expensive. They have to pay or perish. They of course complain. They do. But the poor know where they stand. They sometimes give in;

sometimes don not. At other times, they make the rich feel that they are dependent; not the other way. The society is changing.

Among the poor of the five villages, there is an yearning for doing better, and make it in life and also provide a future for their children. This yearning is explicit in whatever the poor women say. More than poor men, the poor women use natural and social resources within their villages to improve their quality of life, considering a range of resource use and access to these resources. They work more harder; children help them. They do not support their idle / lazy fathers. There are rotten fathers, and the children know them. So they help their mothers. There is at any given time a bargaining and struggle that take place within the village between the poor and the rich over resources. The poor are winning or are beginning to win. The poor have the innate urge / wish to end poverty. They have shown a potential for building abilities among themselves and used strategies that offer opportunities for support by external actors like the universities, even collaborating foreign ones. Most important, the poor of the villages here offer experiences to the outsiders, lessons for development and sustainability, and share knowledge with them. There is a treasure house of indigenous or local knowledge, which offer insights into how they have managed, and are managing, their environments and resources and how they have developed coping mechanisms. They have biotic, cultural and technical knowledge and they are willing to share them. There are two things that hamper them: the unresponsive government and its machinery; and the politicians and the corrupt village functionaries. The panchayat is in place but it is not doing much, as it is not effective. In some place, may be; but not here, as yet. The poor have the ability to shape their societies by struggling with the elites, the government and the greedy among them over resources. We could help them achieve what they want: development, relief from poverty, a little happiness and much desired quality of life, for them and their children. An effective development approach would be to build on the way the poor manipulate the village power structures for their own benefit and the way in which they fight for resources and respect. This book is about their Community Action Plans (CAPs) and about what they want to do and how.

In the remainder of the chapter, the discussion turns to five broad strands of development understanding. Much of it is from the literature, and also from our own experiences in the field. The strands are however disparate. This chapter is introductory to how a community in the five

villages of the Thevaram Basin, in the Kambam Valley of Theni district, Southern India wants to shape the villages, in cooperation and partnership with the external actors, the government and the local body, the NGOs/CBOs and the universities.

3

The Setting

The setting of this book, then, is the group of five villages in Bodinaickanur taluk of Theni district, Tamil Nadu, in Southern India. The villages of Bodi Ammapatti, Maniampatti, Pottipuram, Rasingapuram and Silamalai are in the rainshadow of the Western Ghats. In the last fifteen years, these five villages came close to our hearts, for two compelling reasons. We were interested first in the whole of Kambam Valley, a fascinating place, with very interesting folks and economic activity. The prosperity one notes in the Valley today is of post-independence origin. The economic history is tied with the Periyar-Vaigai Basin System, which provides water and power to this region. A benevolent Englishman built the dam, which diverts water from the west flowing Periyar in Kerala. This river is connected to the Suruliar and Mullai Periyar which are the tributaries of the Vaigai river system. Ever since the dam was built during the British Raj, the Valley has become very prosperous, even though much has happened in the recent years: the last 50 or so years.

It was, and is, an enterprising place and even more enterprising community. Life in the valley was, and to a great degree still is, characterised by a mixture of indigenous, linguistic elements. It gets better if we talk about them in the present, for a while. There are people who speak Kannada (*Gowder* community, equivalent of *Gowda* community in Karnataka) who have lived several generations here and the way they speak their language tells us that they were here for very long. Sprinkled with a lot of Tamil words, the Kannada dialect of the Valley has become typically *Tamilian*. There are people who speak Telugu, again a Telugu so localised (*Tamilised*) that a native Telugu speaker from Andhra Pradesh would disown the folks here, without hesitation. There are of course *Malayalis*, the speakers of *Malayalam* language, who have descended the hills on the eastern side, from the western slopes of Kerala. They have a very large, floating presence in the Valley here. Many families have migrated from the adjacent Kerala and have made the Valley their home. They have prospered,

too, in several businesses, especially in hospitality industry (tea and coffee stalls, restaurants, and eating places). In these parts of the country, they say that '*you may find a Malayali even on the moon, offering hot* '*chai*' for the morning.' They are a very mobile people, have found Gulf money / petro-dollars and Kerala is a veritable '*Paradise on Earth*', as this is the image created by the state tourism department.

The *Tamilians,* native to the Valley, and *Tamil* are a minority, but everyone here speaks Tamil, the regional and link language. The people of the four southern states of the Indian Union live in such amity, the diversity of culture, language, and tradition is soothing to the minds disturbed by the occasional communal clashes reported in the south of India in more recent years, on the lines of religion and creed. We have in the fifteen or so years of our association with the Valley have not heard of an incident that upset the communal amity. Instead, we have made friends with a secular Muslim man who renovated a Vaishnavite (Sri Perumal) Temple just the last year. Several of our local acquaintances and friends have lovable Muslim neighbours. Hindus partake in Christian festivities and Muslims in Hindu festivities and Christians in Hindu and Muslim festivities.

The Valley is truly a symbol of secularism, but politics is spoiling the cultural fabric, though. When one of us was standing at the bus stand of Rasingapuram some months ago, there was this guy riding a two-wheeler and there was a pillion rider as well, distributing some pamphlets. The material on the pamphlet upset us, as it was propaganda material of a fundamentalist Hindu organisation. Much of what was said was pure *poison* and we had the rider cornered for his unpatriotic ways. Nothing happened even as thousands of pamphlets were distributed and much of the recipients read them. We are quite convinced our folks are simple, fun loving, and secular souls. We had occasions to discuss it several times over, but every time we were given the assurance that communal amity is here to stay.

But there is this paradox, in the Valley villages. There are people who are frightened of other people. People are discriminated because they belong to certain castes and these people are often poor and dependent on the higher castes, for employment and livelihoods. Human courtesies are not shown to these people because they are not only materially dependent but also mentally dependent on the rich and the not-so-rich but land-owning. A woman we met on one of our visits to Viswasapuram hamlet of Bodi Ammapatti along the cross-country path told us quite candidly how people

of higher castes threatened her people of dire consequences, if they went ahead and built houses on some *poramboke* lands. To avoid unnecessary clashes / violence, her people stayed away from the lands but would much prefer to build houses for themselves, if it could be helped in some way. We were time and again to learn that she was not alone for there were other people who were frightened as well. They avoided confrontation because they had to go on living and for which they are dependent on those people who gave them work. When we cross checked what was heard, some youths of Maniampatti confirmed that there were '*this fear among the scheduled castes, which is difficult to overcome, overnight. It would take years before this can be overcome and the scheduled castes are treated as human beings and equals. Signs of change are there for everyone to see.*'

There are people who are depressed, and feel oppressed, because of their castes. They carry on however in the hope things would change. '*What can we do? It was, and is, this way for long and it is unlikely to go away*' is what this women from Pottipuram would say. '*We are used to it; and it hurts but it does not infuriate us*' is what several men would say when questioned closely about it. We could see and feel the way their thoughts run and their voices choke to think they are humans as much as others are; but why this injustice? That is why it is a paradox. Caste and class divide people, and rarely if ever by religion, but that don't show. Nevertheless, the folks here are practical and resigned to indifference, inegalitarianism and inequality. In fact, unless reminded, they do not even think about the injustice. Humiliation is on the decline. Youth of the villages do not discriminate as much the elders / older people did or do. There is a change of attitude, if not of heart. Politicians seem to keep alive the caste differences, for when people divided, they make *hay* and of course votes. '*Days are not far off when people would see the politicians through. And their little games, of course,*' is what Ramaiah, the retired teacher from Ammappatti would say.

Ramaiah, 65 and retired from government service, has confirmed on several occasions that the politicians were behind the cutting of the shelter belts. First they supported the cutters and even hired some people to cut and sell wood for them. They gave the cutters their shares. It was not much, however. They took most of the proceeds. The only trace of *Mangamma Salai*, a road that carried the benevolent Rani Mangamma of the local *zamindar* family and her entourage, is on the old maps.

Vairavan's (80) account of *Mangamma Salai* is this. Trees and thick undergrowth lined the *salai* and the road acted as a shelterbelt. The salai was full of banyan trees and pipal trees. The shelterbelts went all the way from Bodi to Pulikuthi, south of Sankarapuram. When we had shelterbelts we also started to grow irrigated crops in the west of Bodi Ammappatti. And there was this small hillock, *Alamalai karadu*. The *Rani Mangamma Salai* was the only road for people who lived towards the south. They used that road to get to Bodi and Rani Mangamma from Bodi used the road to visit her villages and subjects. The shelter belts prevented the high winds affecting the crops and the sand from being deposited on the agricultural lands. In the 1960s, the Government laid the road that runs through Silamalai and Rasingapuram connecting Bodi with Thevaram, Palayam and beyond. People started using this road because it was easier for them to go where they wanted. The *Mangamma Salai* was not used that much. It was after that the trees along the *Mangamma Salai* were cut down, destroyed by the local people themselves. Politicians had the major share of the cut. Why tell this sad story now. It is best forgotton rather than bandied about. Politicians are never helpful; not now, not ever.

It was then they planted the 40 shelterbelts. The Government created shelterbelts because they were concerned about what was happening. High winds and heavy sand deposition; dunes were becoming common, like the deserts elsewhere. At that time, landowners also cooperated with them. Gave the government lands to erect the shelterbelts. Even small and marginal holders gave their lands. Later, watchers were appointed and all 225 of them worked for 20 long years to raise the shelterbelts. Because the watchers were there, there was no people's contribution. They did not help the shelterbelts to grow. But the shelterbelts worked well so that wind velocities became low and deposition of sand abated. It was, alas, only for a while. When 20 years later, the shelterbelt programme came to a close, there was no more money. The watchers were retrenched. And then, the hell broke out. People cut the trees and destroyed the shelterbelts in no time. They did not realise, as they do now, it was the shelterbelts which gave them the rains, helped them grow crops, and contain the dunes while preventing the sand from drifting and encroachment.

Now, people would not come forward to make hedges, or wind breakers. They would not come forward to erect shelterbelts. They are not very cooperative. They cut down the trees. They do not understand the problem. Their own problem is that they need money for their living, daily

expenses, and for their little drinks. In order to get that money, they will do anything.

Life, these days, is very hard. There is no job. There are too many people. People are finding it difficult to make both the ends meet. Karnan of Maniampatti says that the farmers are not united. They cannot control the tree cutters. The tree cutters come in the night and cut valuable trees such as teak and neem. They cut them to make money so they can live. You know, there were people who were so indebted that they ran away in the night. Not alone, but with their families, *lock, stock and barrel*. Because they had debts they could not pay back. It was a shame and they had not other option but to disappear, with their families. Somebody up early in the morning saw their house locked and went to inspect. He found nobody in, no sound from inside. It was locked outside. He told the people about his suspicion. That is it. They never returned for several days. Then we assumed that they left because they were ashamed of not being able to pay back their debts.

Sekhar of Maniampatti adds his piece, by saying that some families indeed returned. Returned and paid the money back. They went to Kerala, for it is easy to go across the hills here. You just walk up the hills. It is hard but your life is even more harder. It is also harsh. So you walk up the hills and go over the other side. In Kerala, you can find work in construction. There is such construction going, in their towns and cities, people from here get good jobs and good money. There are families here now which go to Kerala for a while and make some good money and return. What is difficult is that you have to go away from your home and live in huts and work hard. Our people are willing to work hard, now more than ever. Agriculture is not paying as well as it should. There are no alternative employment. We need some alternatives. If we have them, we could perhaps stay back here and make a living. Until then, we have to live a life this hard, this harsh and there is no time for worrying about other things.

Years ago, we came here looking for what people were doing and how they were managing their lands, their crops, and their lives. Our aim then was to look to at land management for rural development, in the Kambam Valley. We went around and interviewed people. We found that the people of the Valley were, as they are today, very enterprising. They had developed a system of land management. They had organised farmers' associations almost in all of the villages, and federated them for the entire Valley. In some villages, as in Gudalur near the town of Kambam, they have

Paravukaval, which is literally area policing, wherein literally some families are involved in protection of paddy crops and distribution of irrigation waters to the farmers. In others, as in Chinnamanur, *Thanneer Maniam*, a water manager whose authority is never questioned in matters of water distribution from the canals to the paddy fields. The Valley villages have thus found their own, indigenous solutions for problems of land, water and crop management. Farmers' organisations here have a history of success that the Valley is known for cooperation, coordination, and participatory land and irrigation management. Yet it was here, some fifteen years ago, we found a few villages, which have had different experiences all because of some natural events (winds and desertification) and also because it was human induced (deforestation, cutting down of shelterbelts). The milieu and the value were so differently perceived by us, they deserved some serious looking into. And that we did. The book tells part of this story of what we have looked into and what we have come to realise and appreciate.

4

Our Challenge is Life

We need a dose of optimism and kick-start to proceed on the journey of life. If we found any philosophy of life amidst the people of our villages it was that a setback was but a stepping-stone for success, and indeed a green signal to '*go on*'. Amidst so much dejection, there was so much positive thinking: Did not Emerson declare that, '*Only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars*'. That's exactly what we saw among the poor and the depressed. Challenges of life only made them harder in the belief they could and should win.

Seen in the perspective of Auvaiyar (who lived before 300 CE) things did not seem to have changed for people of Tamil Nadu in the centuries that flew past: *there are still many now living, without giving one thing to others*. The poor did complain about the rich, who were, in their opinion, selfish and did not show any compassion for the poor. Altruism, one would think, was dead, especially among the middle rich and the rich in these villages.

When we were in the field we could see how strong the poor people were and how they braved poverty. Our two-year long association with them showed us a glimpse of their lives, however drab that might have been in the recent past. We were interested in the way the poor, particularly poor

women, used natural and social resources to improve their quality of life. We were interested in the bargaining and the struggles that took place between the poor and the rich over the resources. And we found a potential for building on poor people's abilities, for the strategies used by them could offer opportunities for support by outsiders who wished to end poverty in the villages.

When we did rapid and participatory appraisals and followed them up with the baseline survey, the people told us many things but what struck most was the '*feelings*' their words conveyed and the sadness we could feel deep down in their hearts when they spoke about the middle stream and the rich. Local power structures, they told us, were such that the rich diverted all resources from the poor but the poor manipulated that very structures for their own benefit and fought for resources and respect. What Tony Beck wrote of the West Bengal villages in an article in Human Organization in 1995 was truly reflected in this distant culture, with wart and all. Another insight we gained from our association was that poverty was very deep rooted, and that nearly half the population in these villages, and the entire population in some of the scheduled caste '*colonies*', suffered the pangs of hunger, day-in and day-out. And yet, they showed a determination in their ability to shape their societies by struggling with elites over resources and ideology.

Speaking of ideology, the only ideology that the Ondiveerans (there are too many Ondiveerans, which literally means '*lone warriors*', in these villages; the name is actually that of a deity who resides in a foothill temple as well as in numerous under-the-tree shrines, near here), a family of four in Rasingapuram, knew of was that *the price of living was substantial* but that no matter how much they paid for living, it was well worth it. We could only see them in positive light despite woes and tears on women's faces.

It would be good to digress a little bit on politics. For politics was the undoing of most such communities, especially their fabric of cohesiveness. From what facts told us we must put the blame squarely at the politicians' doorsteps. In the late sixties, there was a tumultuous change that occurred in the villages: for the first time, since independence, there was split in families along the party lines. The elders owed allegiance to a national party and the young and not-so-young to another, regional party. The elections saw father and son of the same family at loggerheads. For months on end, father and son went without talking to each other, because they spent their time in

different party offices. Each spoke on political platforms against the other, rather vehemently. Elections were fought between the fathers and sons in most families. Results came and the regional party won. That marked the end of an era: *tradition was literally shoved in the villages*.

Politics entered *panchayats* in the seventies. Some years later, local elections were also fought on party lines. Traditional inheritances of village public offices such as *pattamaniam* (village headman) and *karnam* (village accountant) went with it. *Panchayat* president was elected, and village accounts officers were appointed. In fact more traditions were lost: people gave up *kudimaramathu* (public works and maintenance of canals, tanks, and ponds, which carried and stored water for their crops and homes, and for recharging groundwater), temple festivals discarded. The artisans – the carpenter, the blacksmith, the goldsmith, the washermen, and the barber – left villages for small towns and cities beyond, because traditional awards and rewards for services rendered by them were withdrawn or stopped. That was not all.

The rich of the villages encroached upon the common property resources. In Rasingapuram, the foreshore of an irrigation tank by the name Goundenkulam, irrigating several hundred hectares of land, was occupied by a village politician and he was given the title for that portion of land occupied by him. He could not be evicted some years ago, while the poor who occupied smaller portions similarly were evicted before desilting in 1998. In Thanjavur district, a community occupying 18 hamlets, aggregated into three *Nadus* (villages), gave up the centuries old system of water resources management carried on by a system of water user associations. The process was thus widespread, and not just confined to this area, or this milieu.

Politicians grabbed lands, everywhere and were given all rights for the asking. The erosion of tradition, traditional values and practices took merely 30 years to end *all that was good*. The brotherhood of people was a casualty. And so was communal and religious tolerance. Some three and a half decades since regional parties came to power in the state, that is, literally now, people are torn apart. Caste, class and creed do just not divide them; they are divided also on ideologies. Regional parties do not appear to have brought about the *paradise* they promised. Only *it* is lost, forever. Corruption, greed and *kleptocracy* (a system of non-governance characterised by rampant greed and corruption) ravage the once democratic

nerve centres of the Indian federation, the villages. What is worse, there is state *kleptocracy*, where politicians and bureaucrats work hand-in-gloves: and it has rotted the moral fibre of the village and the nation, alike. The reason is that at the core of our political system today is *theft*. In Silamalai, the *panchayat* president was openly accused of corruption by a woman who participated in one of our earlier participatory appraisals. In a crowd of people who were discussing village power structures for us one day, she pointed out to him even as she was saying that he pocketed development money. In Pottipuram, the *panchayat* president built a percolation pond that would recharge his wells on his farms, using the money from the integrated rural development programme. Also he pilfered several thousand units of electricity from an electrical pole, was arrested on a complaint from the Electricity Board and bailed for Rupees 150,000. He paid the Board Rupees 300,000 as the charge including penalty for thieving. This was perhaps how the power elite of the villages also robbed our weakest citizens of the little they had, even without letting them know how, how much and from where and whom.

The main source of income in all five villages was from land. The main crops – cotton, sorghum, maize, groundnut and flowers, were grown with rains from monsoon. The monsoons failed the people, in the last three years, despite their propitiating *rain god* with great fervour and devotion. There was no rain for ten months of 1999 and 2000. The rain god showered blessings in the late monsoon of 2001. Other employment came from labouring in plantations on the hills and in numerous construction sites across in Kerala. Petty trading and shop keeping could support only a few households. The tea stalls, where they sold *sukku kappi* (ginger coffee) between 3.0 and 7.0 pm, supported quite a few households, including some child labourers.

Women of the villages always complained of the need for an alternative to agriculture, which could give their sons and husbands enough jobs so that there was no need to go across the hills and strange places. But employment away from home fetched more money, even if women had to put up with the men's long absences. Men brought home grains, money, clothes and sometimes diseases. Women feared STDs and AIDS, what with so much of talk about AIDS in all the papers, radio and television. But one had to forego, and sacrifice, some good things in life, like being together with family, for some times of the year. There was something to look forward to when men went away and then returned at the end of the season.

They came back for festivals and feasts. There was money women could spend and of course on some gold, which they liked around their necks and wrists. Also one needed to eat to live and live to eat.

It was the middle farmers, people who owned 2 or 3 acres of good land, which supported their families. They were a minority, some 20 or 30 per cent of them. They were the main power holders. Alongside the middle farmers was a large majority of poor farmers, with less than one acre of land and in 2 or 3 fragments each, scattered far and wide. Ondiveeran (did we leave the Ondiveerans in the lurch?) had to walk more than a kilometre between them, and several times over the week, if he was tending the crop. One day he saw a whole bunch of children plucking groundnut from his field and eating: cracking the pods and eating the kernels. By the time he ran to catch them, they were miles away. He let them go thinking it was worth giving them their freedom to pluck and eat. They probably would not have the luxury, if he did not allow them this privilege. After all, they were really not thieving. They were probably hungry and he would give them anything that they wanted if he had money and more land.

Even poor farmers were better off. The landless labourer households were able to provide only three months or less of their households' needs from the land they operated, and relied on their labour to produce the primary income. It was the unequal distribution of resources and power in the villages that ensured conflict between the rich and the poor. Agriculture was not a profitable enterprise for 8 per cent of the farmers. They ran a loss from mere Rupees 20 to more than Rupees 3,000. Nearly a third of them reported very small net incomes: less than Rupees 1,000. A fourth of them showed a range of Rupees 1,000 to Rupees 10,000. While 15 per cent of them, middle farmers, made anywhere between Rupees 11,000 to Rupees 20,000 per year, only 10 percent earned more than Rupees 20,000. The really rich had more income but they never revealed to anyone how much. Ondiveeran told us one day that he wanted to believe he could see the future. He secretly yearned for a life, which he could not have. '*Not now; May be never*'. But we had transplanted a twenty-first century vision in them. He had dreamed of that summer when he would be rich and when he could provide his children more than they needed; and his wife the pair of bangles she so much wanted, from the showcase of that jewellery shop in Bodi.

Distribution of resources in the villages told us only part of the story of power in these villages. The middle farmers, more than any group, had

political control over the village decision-making bodies. *Panchayats* were with them; some of them trampled them; while others took advantage of them. Some of them used their wealth to invest outside the village, in Bodi or in Uthamapalayam, south of the Valley. They made business contacts in the small towns locally. Some of them had a stake in the weekly market at Theni. Asia's largest weekly market, Theni provided connections with people in politics and businesses. The middle farmers were mobile that they had visited almost all the towns and had contacts elsewhere. They used their contacts to shore up their mutual power, in their villages and in others. Part of the wealth came from credit system in their own villages. But they had now come to expand, using the power they had garnered from all directions. In Silamalai, there were some middle farmers who had lent money to the poor in far-off villages. The middle farmers in those villages collaborated with them to tie the poor there with debt. The poor took pre-harvest credit from them and paid them back with interest, and sometimes labour. They found lending elsewhere fetched them more returns. The poor everywhere were in debt and the middle farmers enjoyed their power over the poor.

Patriarchy was a dominant societal force in our villages. Of course, it was everywhere in Tamil Nadu. It ensured the formal subordination of women to men. Our villages had defined and expressed the separation of male and female spaces; specified norms for women's behaviour, and also men's. In one's family, such separation almost never existed; but there was fear among women and girls about what men would or would not think of their everyday behaviour. Women and girls did not know how men would turn out to be, in some circumstances: loving or caring; stern or aggressive. Drunken men violated their modesty; drunken husbands had beaten their wives and children. Even sober men turned violent. They made them work many hours in the fields, while they themselves were gambling somewhere close by, in the thicket of the field crops. We had walked the fields and found men gambling, while women worked and earned the bread for the family. We had also seen men taking money away from women for a drink or two. Alcoholism was rampant. Women had to buy food on credit from local shops, mostly owned by the middle farmer households and repaid with really high interest rates. Men in many households gave trouble for women and children and made them suffer anguish. Caste and class denied them access to local resources, local markets, to government resources and to village *panchayats*. Women members were on the *panchayats* on paper, while their husbands and sons held the power. Widows were the worst hit,

for class and patriarchal structures ensured they were over represented in the category of the poorest.

Class combined with patriarchy, religion and ethnicity structured various forms of inequality in village society. Religion ensured social and economic subordination of the scheduled castes. Various forms of exploitation therefore interconnected in these villages to perpetuate systems of extraction of labour and capital from the poor. But yet, the poorest could still negotiate, bargain and struggle at everyday and ideological levels, trying to get their rights to resource honoured. True, room for the poor to manoeuvre was severely limited by the pattern of resource control in the villages, in particular their exclusion from resource ownership of land and by debt and sometimes by the violence of the middle farmers discouraging them to protest.

Let us now turn to the impressions of a Canadian graduate intern on the castes, power structures and human relationships (October 1999).

> *Any given group of people in the five villages is a caste group…People of different castes and economic classes do not seem to form any single group nor are they involved in '**common good**' activities. As most people are in agriculture, or are dependent on it for their livelihood, they have now formed Farmers' Associations and are beginning to represent their common needs, collectively, to the '**powers that be**'. There are teething troubles. But, suffering from a lack of cooperation from the non-discerning public, the Associations are not functioning effectively.*
>
> *Even farmers' associations are functioning on the caste basis. Most people in the villages often belong to one or two dominant castes (Kurumba Gowders, Kappiliya Gounder, Thevar, Pillai, Kallar, Naicker and Pallar are the castes in order of dominance in the area). Associations, whatever they are, are filled with people from the dominant castes. People of other castes and the downtrodden are not allowed to become members of associations, nor are they allowed to occupy seats of importance in the village panchayat, even if duly elected with winning votes.*
>
> *Insofar as the society is concerned, every one of them is willing to help with the community development. The only solution to the problem is through electing/selecting the leaders who are impartial and above castes. But they are a rare breed, difficult to find, and not impossible to mould.*

And we were talking to Sekar or Susai, we do not remember now what was his name, about the *Samathuvapuram, the town of equality,* the politicians were saying they were building to *house people of all castes and wipe away differences among them,* as if they could in a stroke of their hands. He reminisced:

In the summer of 1997 or 1998, or only in our minds, all the difference disappeared. I remember standing in the front yard of our house, practising on my little musical instrument, when the differences disappeared…Finally, I remember thinking, but I was 6 years old or seven; I don't know for sure how old: I was a Harijan, an untouchable. They wouldn't let me go into their homes because I was untouchable; but I was Indian just like now. How could they tell me I was an outcaste, which I was and I knew all along. Just like that, there was nothing there beyond the bottom step.

He hid the tears from us. We could not deny the truth of his story: small events and catastrophic effects. His father was drunk and stumbled off the bottom step before any of his family could stop him. He died with a gaping wound on his back. It was the reward of a rich man for a poor man's 40 years of labour in his fields.

5

Contradictions, Sacrifices, and the Poor

There are two things that should be said: there are contradictions; and there are sacrifices.

People are the contradictions, because they are *this and that*, and it is difficult to understand. For a newcomer to these places, their behaviours might look different. It would look that they are brought up with all nuances of mystic India at a first glance. Next it would look that they are such an open book, you know all about them. The fact is, you don't. They are deep. Their mind is a mystery. You look at a person, for the first time, in a tea stall. He has a smile on him and he offers you a cup of tea. You politely refuse, but he doesn't bother, gets your tea anyways. You drink it and tell him thanks, but he doesn't worry about it either. '*Thanks*' is such a strange thing. He is inquisitive; wants to know where you come from and what is the purpose of your visit. At the end, you think that you know him. The fact is, you don't.

For a girl, or woman, there is always this traditional agenda. It is actually overt, but modern women think it is covert. Work and be *dependent* on men (*we warn you: don't act on your own*), your husband or brother, get married and have children. But all this is changing. We have heard a father

speaking to his daughter that she should be independent. Boys these days are not predictable and hence '*you must hold your own*'. The girl's mother has approved of what her father has been saying, throwing the idea that '*alcoholism is on the increase and boys are getting worse, becoming lazy and want to live on poor girls' earnings. I don't know what's happening to the world*.' For us listeners the conversation has looked perfectly genuine. One of us, a girl, immediately suspects a contradiction in this message and says so clearly. The father refutes and mother agrees it happens. The mother ends up saying, '*yes, there are contradictions. That's the way everybody is: a bundle of contradictions. Men are, however, more than women*.'

All around us girls are given the same general injunctions. This is of course post-independent India. Girls and women are fighting for their rights. In the village, the fight is more severe than in the town. Education is given great importance, even where the mothers are not educated. Mothers struggle more for the education of their children. They say that they want their daughters to get the advantage they themselves lacked. There is the satisfaction that, finally, women are performing their duties adequately. But they always have. There's no doubt about it. They know the kind of upbringing they have had. Girls are taught that women should be something, they should have independence to earn them some money, not too much, because after all a woman's place is primarily in her house. If the home is neglected, the family suffers and that will never do. If there are contradictions in this message, you don't discover them until much later.

People have made sacrifices - for better or worse, good or evil - that have enabled others to attain an unbelievably high standard of living. We live so well in this community because others have died. And we live so well because others have killed. From that starting point, *there is price for everything: for living and for dying*. There is price for everything even while seeing the value of everything: the labour that went into the making of the communities, their little wants and their little comforts, whatever they are. It has been our deep suspicion, and our concern, that we take away their privileges, the poor people's, imagining them to be our natural rights. Conflicts in the past, justified or not, involved too much of their sacrifices - their labour, their lives, their tears, their girls and their women. We have seen, and we get to see, the damage we do to their bodies. Poor people have felt the real threat of communal combat. They have lost their lives in unnecessary quarrels, arson, and violence. Poor people have sacrificed

beyond the limits. And most of us have moved on with our days while some of us stopped to think what next thing we can perpetrate on them.

Did not somebody knowledgeable (Siva Vaidhyanathan, 2002: An entire semester of knowledge in one day, Feature on 'Reading in the Fractured Landscape', SPAN, January/February: 25-26) say that '*you are part of the globe, snared in the World Wide Web of humanity, whether you acknowledge it or not*.' If that's so where are the people connected to the poor, concerned with the poor? Aren't the explanatory models of the world, a connected and concerned world, whatever they are, whoever did them, dangerously wrong? Are we to force someone to see the essential interconnectedness of all human beings, not only here in these villages, but also out in the open, in India and abroad, and why in the whole world? One finds it harder to see caste differences, communal violence and clashes or oppositions as given or necessary. The world around us is suddenly and painfully in flux. One of the issues in flux in these villages, why in the country, is regionalism versus nationalism. People everywhere are not free as one would like to think they are. They are fettered. They need patriotism, patriotism of love, embedded in a sense of humanity, one that sees the villages as democratic, an articulated ideal and part of a large whole: the nation, one people. Why should somebody poor, the oppressed, make sacrifices while others perpetrate and draw innocent blood?

To continue further, from where we left off, in the last, dependency develops from unequal control over village resources and subsequent debt by the poor is ultimately dependent on violence or threats of violence perpetrated by the wealthy or their supporters. The aim is to ensure the submission of the poor to their exploitation. Village violence has an unwritten history. No one from outside knows about it. The poor and the oppressed keep it to themselves. They don't want to talk about it. But then, the poor challenge the powerful where they could and this is the strength of the poor. They have the *right* on their side. The middle farmers don't; the rich don't. The poor do.

The rich and the middle intimidate their poor neighbour. We were told by a group of middle farmer youth that they went to this temple festival, in a group, in Silamalai. They were there for fun and some gambol. They saw a group of young girls and women and '*we gave them a push*'. Hell broke lose. They told us that there were times when some drunken sorts knocked open the houses of poor women, when alone, and abused and beat them.

These things happen all the time. The poor don't talk about it, but they do not suffer it either. They fight against it, in whatever means they could. They have the *right* on their side.

For all these, Rajammal from Rasingapuram told us, the community is relatively violence-free, stress-free. The poor from Bodi Ammapatti have confirmed that it is so: violence if any occurs rarely, but it is not something that cannot be solved, amicably. *We can and should, for we want to live together, in peace*. The worst is that even the police don't support them. They don't register complaints against the middle or the rich. The government doesn't support us. They don't bother about us. If any, they live on our sake. The bureaucracy is with the middle and the rich. What is rightfully ours, like the subsidies for fertilisers and pesticides, they give away to the middle and the rich. We don't know that some subsidies ever exist at all.

Shanmuga Thevar of Ramakrishnapuram, Pottipuram told us once that the labourers were difficult to get when you wanted them. They always demanded more wages. That was why he had gone for coconut gardening, which took much less labour and he could take care of it himself. Labourers asked for more wages; women demanded that they would work only if they were given higher wages. There were only small returns from agriculture that we could not afford to pay higher wages. Sometimes, we sat with the labourers and negotiated the wages. It worked.

The poor are ethnically coherent that enables them to get what they want, most of the time. There are signs of some organisation among them in these villages. There is a large degree of solidarity among the poor and the landless in all the villages. The poor are united as a group by the commonality of their exploitation and poverty. But it is so dry here, agriculture is mostly rainfed and there is no employment for more than half the year. If there is no rain, there is no job. Therefore, the labourers and the landless seek employment elsewhere. Kerala is good and the labourers get work on the plantations. Some of them work in towns, in construction. Work in Kerala fetches good money. The people there understand the poor, even if they exploit them at work. *Where there is good money, there is no complaint*. Who doesn't exploit? Everybody who pays wages will. That's what Marx said and people after him.

Also poor people help each other. If a poor family has no food, it can borrow from the poor neighbour. If the neighbour doesn't have money to

give, they'll have some food to share. There is help for the poor among the poor. It is normally in small loans of money, rice, oil, salt, even vegetables. Every poor person has received some sort of help from his poor neighbour: small sums of money are frequently transferred between poor households. In fact, every household is in receipt of some assistance; *altruism* is the hallmark of the poor.

Life insists on small movements. Opportunities go hand in hand with problems. For many, the poor and rich alike, one numbingly unsatisfactory day opens into the next as the clouds rise above the mountains or as the increasing heat and humidity predict monsoon. Even the words spoken on such days are gloomy. There are two worlds for most people: the loud reality of their everyday life-world and the silent visionary world heavy with anticipation, insight and change. There is an apparent troublesome incongruity of the Ondiveerans' two worlds. In the middle of May, the heat becomes intolerable. Outside, birds cry continuously, sharp, clear and obstinate. Sekhar and Karnan want to be free from sufferings. They want to spend time with birds, which know what moved and who moves their little worlds. Birds in the wood are the most satisfyingly intelligent escape from the harsh realities of the world of the poor.

When in the villages, family dramas unfold around us. Shock and disbelief turn into guilt and grief. Guilt and grief wend their way through thick webs of heavy, terrifying emotions. Sweet, precocious, affectionate children swarm around women, wherever they go. But the women do not seem to give them any special treatment. Once in a while, the children betray their parents. Angry and humiliated, the parents who sacrificed so many passions to family obligations, sever all connections. Some years later, grandchildren become agents of light and incremental change in their shadowed households. When somebody in the family disappears for a very long period, each person is forced to examine his or her role in the family. Then they understand each member and relative in their full score of strengths, vulnerabilities, superstitions and tentative hopes. They forgive and forget. They welcome back the prodigal. They are as human as the humans can be.

And grandmothers tell gallant tales of heroism and cunning and wit and honour; of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (the two great epics of India) and of King Harischandra, who never uttered a lie in his life. At the end of their stories, they pick the children up and pinch their sharp little noses and

chin and say endearing words of thousand enchantments. Then tell them '*you will grow up and become like the warriors of the epics; you will conquer every obstacle*.' And the grandchildren, in their innocence, believe them and sustain a clear-eyed hopefulness born of a generous spirit and seasoned common sense. In course of time, their beliefs are shattered, and realities hit them hard. They survive. Instinct echoes in everyone's consciousness.

And the streets are awash with people. It looks disorderly, the forms and colours and shapes of the people wildly at variance with the old graceful buildings and the dilapidated. The streets now belong to the jobless, the hungry, and the smelly, who fill them with their ceaseless and needless words. Some don't belong with them; they belong elsewhere, where everything is arranged to evoke desire. The children are aware of internal struggles as well as physical sufferings. They go in the knowledge there is distant hope. *But how to catch the shining moon with fettered hands*?

6

Those Years as We Cherish Now

It all began in 1984. It was some time in August a doctoral student and one of us discussed a possible visit to Kambam Valley. He was provisionally registered for doctoral programme of the University of Madras and was intent on working in the Valley. He chose Land Management for Rural Development. We together chose the FAO two-stage approach to land evaluation as the methodology for the Valley, of course with modifications the research would permit. The idea of doing research in Kambam Valley came to us for two simple reasons. A professor of geology at the University, who hailed from a little known village here, was indeed the catalyst. Besides, we knew the people of Kambam Valley, at least a good section of them, were Kannada speakers. That was also the tongue of the doctoral student. Language affinity perhaps was the deciding point.

Kambam Valley was, and is, an agriculturally prosperous area. People, we were told, were very enterprising. We found them exactly so, two years later in June 1986. The reception was very good, we had a student of ours teaching geography at the local school in Uthamapalayam. He hosted us for two weeks. We found that the people everywhere were very hospitable and kind. We decided to cover the 54 revenue villages and 4

towns – Kambam, Uthamapalayam, Thevaram and Bodinaickanur. The geology professor's nondescript, little hamlet in the mid-1980s was accessible only half the way by bus. We had to walk a little way through the vineyards and banana plantations. The bus went once or twice a day and not quite as often as it does today.

Narrow streets, quite dirty by the cattle droppings, wastewater disposed in the open and, quite suddenly, a beautiful hill clothed in green vegetation at a distance and a temple on the hills overlooking the hamlet. People here spoke a corrupt Kannada, more Tamil words than the original Kannada. That's what happened to other south Indian languages here as well. Everybody spoke a smatter of Telugu and Malayalam as well, but not quite the way the natives do. Dialects galore, there was indeed a *babel of voices*. Almost all of the ancestors of the people of the villages came from the hills, the Western Ghats and the hills far away, like the Thimbam hills of Erode. The Kannadigas came from the Mysore plateau through the Thimbam hills and into the Valley some 700 hundred years ago. The Malayalis of Kerala came earlier or much later, but they were in those parts of southern India known as the Chera country, abutting the Pandya country.

Gowdars, who in Mysore and Bangalore regions go by the caste suffix *Gowda*, are an agricultural labour and small land owning community, hard working and honest, too. They are an accommodating community as well. We have friends among them for the last 25 years. These people live amicably with other people, including the native Tamils. The Valley is known for the communal harmony it fosters for centuries. The people strike us the most. An average person is dark, has a disarmingly gleaming smile on the face, quite tall and the physique is built for hard work, in the sun and rains. When they see a newcomer, they have suspicion writ large on their faces but, with introduction from a friend or a fellow from the village, it quickly disappears. A broad smile and welcome break out in their faces, obviously pleased with the visit of the newcomer. The visitor is then treated to a hospitality that has no parallel, anywhere. When in their midst, food and beverages aren't a problem. The problem is how to say 'no' to their offerings, which keep coming in a continuous chain.

In the next 15 years, we became so fascinated with their lives and living and their culture that we have now become one of them, only more concerned about their lives and achievements than most of them in the Valley. In June 1986, we arrived at the sleepy town of Uthamapalayam, at

the early hours, by bus. Met by the geography teacher, we were quickly introduced to a score of college students who were to help us with the field work. It is still the largest town in the south of the Valley and people call it '*Palayam*', which means simply town. With its prefix '*Uthama*', it becomes the town of good, honest people. The fieldwork in 1986 lasted almost a month. Some 8 of the college students worked for us, literally day and night. They all became immersed in work and every night we had animated discussions.

Every evening, the two of us from the University, took a walk to the villages nearby. We went north, east, west and south, getting into dialogues with whomsoever we met on our way, gathering information. One day, right in the middle of our intense fieldwork, we were by the foothills, somewhere west of Kambam town, but more in the wilderness, walking towards a distant farmstead, the buildings and the haystack we could see even from a distance. The most prominent was the 7-foot fence around the fields. At this distance, it was like a fortress but we knew it to be the protection against the heavy monsoon winds of the summer months. We took to cross country, walking through the fields. Suddenly, we came upon a perfectly circular mount of sand. It was definitely nature's work, not of human beings, for it had the markings of a natural deposition. Later we found several more and everything in perfect order and circular. We investigated all of them, some 15 or 20 of them, in an area of 4 square kilometres, about 4 km away from the foothills yet.

Wondering and discussing different possibilities, we quickly made our way to the farmhouse and were greeted by the usual suspicion and then the broad smile. Seelayan Gounder told us that they were deposits from dying sandstorms. Such deposits abounded in the area, although removed 30 or more kilometres from the sand dunes we were later to discover and study. Sandstorms were quite normal, one saw the spirals almost everyday, in May and sometimes also in June, when the temperatures shot up in the afternoon, causing little whirlwinds, gathering dust. These sandstorms were larger and travelled quite a distance, from the north, from somewhere near Bodinaickanur, at the foothills where sand dunes of greater heights could be seen for miles on end. Early next morning, we were at the dunes, west of the village of Rasingapuram. We had an address of some big man in the hamlet of Kariappagoundanpatti. We met him and he took us, literally all over the dunes. It was there, in the midst of the dunes and under an Italian acacia, we made the decision that it would be our area of research for the next few

years. Not even in our wildest dreams, we thought that the area would become an obsession with us for a decade or more.

> *The ashes of our fathers are sacred. The hills they walked and their graves among these hills and even the dunes are holy ground. These trees, this portion of the earth, the people are consecrated to us*. Also to us.

The society, the polarisation between the rich and poor has always been in flux. It's unfortunate that the poor are struggling to make both ends meet. Much more than their economic / physical poverty, their social and psychological poverty has been steadily increasing.

It was sometime in August 2000. Vellaisamy had a nick name: *Sony* (the weakling). For he looked very puny, (also little beard and unkempt hair), for his age, which all of us believed to be 60 or 70. More or less, when in fact he was only 40 years. We were in fact talking to a group of people at the tea stall, by the bus stand in Rasingapuram. Unexpectedly, Vellaisamy of the hamlet Kamiagoundanpatti, south of the village, asked himself a question and answered it as well.

> *How much do we remember of what hurts us most? I have been thinking about pain, how each of us constructs our past to justify what we feel now. Each successive pain distorts the preceding. Let's say I remember untouchability as a measurement of this hurt, how it changed the shape of relationships between people and the family portrait…What's most hurting is to live in little hutments a distance away from the main village, shunned by a people whose blood is not quite as red as mine, or worse. I can't remember what I was thinking when somebody from the village hit my father, when all he did was to raise his arms above his head in salute and nothing else. May be his skin was so black it collected all available light and that the man who hit my father wanted it for himself.*

And there were a few little girls, on top of the world. They were all singing something. It sounded more like the blues though. The song was made up by the school teacher who was the Tamil teacher in the primary school. The song was the story by which the *colony people* (the harijans, god's children, in Gandhi's words) measured heartbreaks. All of a sudden, everyone thought the subject of discourse was the milieu and culture, call it

tradition if you like. Everyone spoke almost in a chorus, only to stop abruptly as if it was too much even for them to go on. They turned to reflections.

Speaking of reflections, reflections of the people on how they view life, their religion, politics, the past, the present and world around them give us insights into their mind and working. For a sample, Thiruvenkatasamy of Pottipuram, in his late 50s, told us:

> *Thirty years ago they had hundreds of cattle. There was enough manure to cultivate, or as much as we needed. But what happened to the cattle now? There are just about a few cows, buffaloes, and oxen. The oxen are almost gone. All the able bodied cattle are in use but the old and the weak ones are taken to Kerala, for slaughtering and canning of meat to the gulf. You see herds of them being driven everyday and through the Lower Camp onto the hills and into Kerala. We are losing all our cattle to the greed of some businessmen in meat packing industry. Then how can we have enough manure to the fields? No way! We have used so much of fertilisers, we have lost soil fertility. We have used so much of these pesticides, the insects and pests refuse to die. Besides, you have depots where the pesticides and the fertilisers you get are substandard, often duplicates of good brands. You only end up paying a lot of money. I am sure cattle manure is the best. Neem cakes (residue from extracting neem oil) are the best for controlling the best. I prefer of* ***maattuchanam****, cow dung to fertilisers and neem extracts to pesticides. But who will listen to me? All they do is waste money and spoil their health.* ***English marundhu vendamnaa yaar kekkuran?*** *(who listens to you when you say that English fertiliser is unnecessary?)*

Selladurai, who is a member of the newly organised Farmers' Association and is in his 30s, joins in:

> *The soil is totally ruined. Chemical fertilisers are doing it to us. Pesticides are yet another perennial problem now. There is no good taste in the food we eat. Our cholam (corn) has become tasteless. Pearl millet is also the same. What we used to get years ago were good, but not any more. My grandfather tells me that he doesn't find the food tasting good and he'd rather like his food made of ragi or cumbu (pearl millet). But where am I to go for good crops? I have no*

way to put the history back on its wheels again. I don't want to go backward in time but I like good food. If my grandfather says that his food isn't tasting good, I agree with him. I understand also that it is my duty to give him good food, in his old age. What use is a grandson, if he can't give his grandfather a little good food? It is definitely very painful.

Muthusamy of Pottipuram is quite old but he doesn't remember his age. He's perhaps 75. He told us one evening while we were chatting up about the village life:

For me, my village is enough and what I get is enough. People tell me about distant places in India and abroad as being very nice. They may be. For me, my village has been, and is, nice. What use is money, if it can't give you peace and a few little moments when you can be your own, not bother about this or that, but just be yourself and with your family. Everything is slipping away, I can't hold them tight in my hands, my hands are giving up too…

As we walked to Thimminaickenpatti, a hamlet of Pottipuram, southeast of Ramakrishnapuram, we came upon a group of women. It was almost dark, late in the evening. The '*chimney lamp*' (oil lamp of olden days) set aglow the faces of women at the threshold, and we saw how the women glanced at one another as if by mistake, as if indifferently, who was the most beautiful of all. That woman with a heavily wrinkled face? Or the other young woman without the '*jacket*' (blouse)? This was actually Chinna Pottipuram hamlet, where women were forbidden by the community not to cover their chests except by their *sarees*. Young women who protested and wore *jacket* were reprimanded by the elder women as to why they shouldn't violate the village codes. When we spoke to a woman who defied the codes, her name was Kamala, 32 years, she was in a rage and spoke street language, ridiculing the practice and the elder women who valued oppressive ideas. She told us without mincing her words that part of the problem was women themselves. She could never get them to accept *the notion of shame* when not wearing a *jacket* and had to walk to the main village to get some home needs, while hawkish men sneered at her, accepted, not now and not in several years. They were all backward, not wanting to go forward in time and hide one's own shame.

When I get angry with people, the only thing I can do is to stroll down the footpath behind our house, breathing out and breathing in on counts of seven, which is… I don't know why I should use seven and not ten. In a while, my anger is gone and I get back home to work, cursing why I, of all people, was born here as a woman who can't even wear what she thinks fit for a woman.

We moved away from there, to where we could rest a little bit, relieved from the pain that the visit to the village had caused us. But the thoughts were coming back in a flood. Stopping it was difficult. Stop we had to, right there in the track.

7

How the Poor Get at Resources and Gain Respect

Even as recent as 50 years ago, there were some good things in life that the people could now look back and say: that was a golden period, difficult to recreate with so much of change, for better or worse, and almost everybody, every class of people is racing against. Elders of the village remember with nostalgia. The common property resources, Easwaram Pillai of Silamalai told us, were a crucial resource for several of them. Because there were a large number of economic trees in the *kuduval* (community forests), people, especially the poor, had access to fruits, wild birds for food, neem seeds which could sold at the market or preserved for use and also for fuelwood. They used to pick dry wood and twigs that many families did not need to buy wood at all. As the *kuduval* was, and is, common property, people who needed fuel for a wedding or a feast in their families were allowed to cut dead wood – and there were many dead trees or even branches – but the greedy people cut one dead tree and also cut another live tree on the sly, to make some money. People knew that this was being done, but shut their eyes. When such acts were reported to the panchayat, all it would do was to warn the culprit and impose a small fine. So what stands you find today in the *kuduval* are the acacia and a few neem trees. This is the result of a callousness of a community and ineffectiveness of a panchayat. People were let off lightly because the offenders were this relative or that of an influential.

Natarajan, a small boy 14 years, in the local school accompanied us on a transect walk through the *kuduval* of Sulapuram, a hamlet of Silamalai,

and his father was the forest watcher. He told us that at that time, during May 1999, there were 118 dead trees in the kuduval and he helped his father to number them. As well, he told us that the wood if auctioned would fetch a million rupees. He said that was what his father told him. But they would not auction them but allow people to cut and lose in the process many other live trees as well. Young as he was, he was very perceptive and commented: *There were trees for their need but not for their greed*.

A meeting with some panchayat members on return from the transect walk confirmed not only how *kuduval* was thinned but also the worth of wood from the standing dead trees that could be auctioned. Mohan Kumar, the President of Forest Committee under the Joint Management Programme being implemented in the area said that such wood was auctioned from time to time and the money went to the village panchayat for developmental activities. This was where Perumal of the newly constituted Farmers' Association (formally registered in July 1999) intervened to say that no development activities were taken even as the money from auctions was with the local *panchayat* unspent.

He spoke about this family of eight, who were all handicapped, and how the family was allowed to collect minor forest produce, also fruits and other edible produce, and twigs and dead wood from the *kuduval* worth 50 rupees a day. He said how the panchayat has decided to give the family the use of a bullock cart and a pair of oxen from the village resources to drive to the town to sell the wood. The family grazed the oxen in the community forests too, so that life was a little easy on the poor family. Some months later, our graduate return would assist this very family to apply for old age pension, which four of the family members received subsequently besides noon meals at the local school for the family members, too. While the *panchayat* was generous in helping the poor, the government officials were considerate in sympathetically considering the application for old age pension and processing it in record time, so to speak, of a few weeks. Several applications were submitted in the subsequent months from the old and deserving people of the five villages and 56 of them received the pension within a year of their application.

Yet for several of the poor families, access to the common property resources were not clearly defined legally, as some of the poor women who sought permission from the panchayat to graze their goats were asked to keep their goats away. The forest watcher told us that it was because once

goats and sheep were allowed to graze, nothing would be left of the undergrowth and besides nothing would grow well after that. There was no indication of any customary rights being exercised by the community, although there were many negotiations and conflicts between the rich and the poor.

A politically inclined youth from Silamalai, Markandan recounted how the opposition political parties warned the Government of Tamil Nadu with organising a rally against the highhandedness of the taluk officials in obstructing the sand being taken out of the river and streambeds for use by the public and for purposes of governmental programmes in the villages hereabout. Graffiti questioning the *right of the corrupt government officials* appeared on the walls of the public buildings, all over the region on December 4, 1999. A bicycle rally was arranged the following month, just after the New Year 2000. But the Government officials stood firm by their stand even though the people collected sand from the riverbeds, without any trouble afterwards. '*The officials just let it go and the panchayat did not bother us, either*' was all Markandan would say on the event.

Muthamma turned us entirely to a new dimension - access to collecting dung and gleaning grains and grams:

> *Collection of dung from the fields and grazing areas is an unrestricted right. My children go in different directions and pick chanam wherever they find the droppings. They collect fallen fruits, but do not climb trees to pick them. I collect the neem fruits in the kuduval, and there are others who do it with me. I join with my friends in the village to glean grains after harvest. Now they spread the harvest on roads and let the vehicle run over them. In the evenings, the farmers collect the grains – ragi, cumbu, grams. There is much left after they are gone. It is late in the evening, but we spend some time to glean them and also take the stubble away for our cattle. Sometimes we ask them to allow us to glean. It is not begging but sort of a request. They do allow us to glean after them. We get more or less enough to tide over difficult times, like when we don't have any job to do.*

The poor households gained access to many common property resources. They had the right to fish if there was water in the tanks. Fish took time to grow. Most often, the tank dried up before they could go fishing. That was indeed rare. Years ago, some of them used to go to

Errammal tank (in Sulapuram *kuduval*) or to Kamaraja Boopala Samudram (in the *kuduval* of T. Pudukottai) with an *aruval* (sor of a machete) and a torch at night. We stunned the fish at the water's edge by the light and cut them. It was fun for many of them, to go collecting fish at night. At the end of it, they all shared the collection. The womenfolk waited for them to bring fish and cook. They cooked late into the night sometime, for the next day. Men and children were working hard and needed good food. The family enjoyed the rare treat, as well. So nobody stopped them from fishing, once in a while.

And the people here ate various kinds of wild yams, potatoes, gourds, *kovaikkai* (poly plums), *kodukkapuli* (kirk), *nellikkai* (goose berries), *naval pazham* (blue apple), watermelon, watercress, horseradish, spinaches, and '*Oh, so many of them*'. The poorest households here gathered fuel – twigs picked by the children of the villages from Rani Mangamma Salai left gaping holes in the wall of shrub vegetation that allowed sand to drift through them onto the roads and then beyond. Women met all their seasonal fuel needs from leaves, cow dung – which they rolled into a ball of certain size, with a little bit of straw and then made them into an almost circular *varattis* – and crop residues. The poorest households grazed their sheep, goats, and cattle in fallowed fields and on the narrow *bunds* dividing the fields. They collected fruits of the acacia for their goats, for they relished them. Livestock were more important to the village economies and as such much of the infertile lands and sand dunes – because reed grass grew well on them – was used for grazing. There was little restriction, although some times a quarrel erupted because the livestock of the poor destroying crops of the rich. There were instances when cattle were driven out to the town '*pound*' and the poor people had to pay a fine to release their livestock. This was not taken seriously at all, as the poor and the rich understood their rights.

Every poor family was engaged in gathering and collecting whatever they could. There was no quarrel among them. They all had right, right to live and let others live. Poor caste people were involved in it. The scheduled castes were engaged in it. None trespassed, for in fact there was no trespassing at all. The middle class sympathised with the poor and supported them. Rarely anybody complained, not even the rich. This was one area where the intra-village dynamics functioned rather vibrantly. As everybody understood the need of the poor to access these, even respected their ways of coping, there was no objection to what they were engaged in. The fact of the

matter was there was no stealth or conceit on the part of the poor. There was no arrogance on the part of the rich and the middle. This was not something where the poor had taken their rights away. They had dignity and the villages accommodated them. It was strength. They had the local knowledge of which common property resources to gather and where to find them. The benefits were short term. Because of these resources, the poor were that much less dependent on the rich and the middle. The poor allowed the resource to rejuvenate, rebuild, reconstruct, and resilient. A customary system of common property resources access had been established long time ago with the implicit acceptance of rich and poor. So nobody had any quarrel; in fact everybody was happy and content, on this count.

The collection from the common property resources amounted to a good bit of money, but nobody counted them as to how much they made. It was, well, upwards of 1,000 rupees. '*It doesn't matter how much it is in money terms. Its value is far greater than its worth in money*' is Reeta's observation. It was often the equivalent of many months' wages, but the common property resources were neglected in development planning. There was this complaint about all government and panchayat programmes. '*They don't take care of the maintenance of common property and nothing gets allocated for such vital resources as these… And, what troubles me most is that society has the resources to end hunger in the villages but doesn't have the will to do so.*'

Then there was this introductory planning workshop on September 3, 1999. Some 64 women gathered at the project field office and were listening to the team. Women of the villages knew what was traditional or local knowledge.

> '*It is the knowledge we gather from our household, from our lifestyles and our parents, That is traditional knowledge for us*', was what Shanthi (from Mallingapuram) thought as traditional knowledge.
>
> '*Things we learn from generation to generation and often things that are learned visually, by watching other people do them*', was Reeta's (Kariappagoundenpatti) understanding.
>
> And Petchiyamma, 75 from Maniampatti, told the gathering from her profound wisdom

My father and the old people used to talk about the importance of preserving our culture. For me these were only words. I am surprised how so many of you are willing to listen to our words, our stories, our music and watch our dancing. I realise the importance of sharing and the death of it in the villages. We have always taken it for granted, or not bothered about it at all. It is painful to think the people are losing their sense of community and the sense of sharing. Things will slip away if we don't hold on to them. Bu who will stop them?

There was again this time when the team visited the hamlets of Silamalai, North and South Sulapuram for disseminating the results of the women PRA. At the end of the discussion, the team veered around to asking women to grow trees to improve rains that failed the community for the last year and the one before, too. Maniyamma requested the team for help, on behalf of the village women:

*Give us trees and we will plant them in our hamlet (*Sulapuram*). We will grow them on the common lands, through our sangam* (association). *We will take care of them, water them and grow them as we do our own children. But get us free seedlings, as we can't afford them. Will you, please?*

The team encouraged them to write a petition to the panchayat to allow them grow trees on common land and told them not to complain about the government. Two weeks later, the permission was granted and the seedlings arrived from Periakulam and the team helped women to plant them. Some months later, there was a small stand of the plants and Manjula 35 was happy about her own backyard where she had seven trees coming up. When spoken to, at length, she rambled on this muse:

There is need to take hold of your own. There are new differences emerging. Years ago, every family in the village was more or less the same. Now if I decide to bring my children up traditionally, I know in my mind that it's the best decision. But my neighbour sends his child for computer classes. What chance have my children got with farming and tradition-bound in today's world? When my son grows up, won't he curse me for not sending him to the same school as done by my neighbour? I am doing therefore what I think is right, in the circumstances. I don't want my sons to blame me, daughters to weep. I want them to be happy, if I can make it possible. But, I like my

culture and tradition. I value it. It is worth holding to. How I wish my children will hold the same value, no matter how changed they will be, in future…

This was like listening to clarified voices of one people, who remembered to be glad that they woke up in their right mind. They were glad for the little gifts, glad for the roof not blown off by the fierce winds, glad for breath, glad for little food and glad for the little birds that still came to nest. How simple it was - the conversion from a constant whine to the bass note of gratitude? They were the descendants of a people who chose to survive. They would, no matter whatever happened.

8

Opening the Gates of Hope

We were talking to the old man from Bodi Ammapatti. He was, and is, a wise man. Although not poor, did suffer much in his struggle for making a living, with just about 2 acres of land, all by himself. There was not much he could produce, for he had dry land. When it rained good, it was easy to get a crop harvested. Otherwise, it was much difficult. He had to work as a labourer, but that was years ago. He paid for his son's education and made him an engineer, who now works for the government. The son lives in Madurai, but he visits with the family. With his son making enough money for the family, he said, '*the choke hold is broken*'. But many people hereabout teetered on the edge of survival. He was with them, full of sympathy and compassion.

He did not have an education. He could not read. When he had to do something, he just followed common wisdom or it was '*best to do what we normally do*'. There was a teacher in the village. He spoke to us in sensible, just-folks tone and seemed the sort of voice all of them wished and could use but he didn't. He often panicked in life, but he made it. Now that he had his son, he felt secure and every needs of his was taken care of, even while the son was away. There was this long distance relationship and he was soothed by it. He fell silent for a while, thinking about his '*good old days*'.

Suddenly he said in very clear tone and conviction that the sense of community could be restored, by detaching the familiar meanings of life from the relationship in which they were embodied, and re-establishing them

independently of it. What he was saying was complicated enough for us to understand any meaning at all. He looked at the question on our face and explained.

> *'It's simple. Detach yourself from the life around you; this life of difference, discrimination and pain of relationships. Go somewhere and start afresh. Or be here and do the same: start afresh. You see, this is what happens in the working out of grief. Somebody dies and the family bereaves. Someone leaves the community, like this family that disappeared one night. Then people grieve for them. They grieve their loss to the community. If it ever comes back, then there is such reception. Community is back on its wheels. The sense comes back when shocks happen.'*

He had already lost us and we fell silent, not comprehending the profound wisdom from the old man. Then he said that one had to shock another to get the reaction one wanted. If wanted all of them to unite and cooperate, give them a shock. It was like an old man's fantasies. What he said hit us hard. We understood that he wanted a calamity to shake the people into action: or grief for action. It was unacceptable. So we turned to others.

We walked to T. Pudukottai, a long way from here. We met with a man, who was not even somebody from Pottipuram. He came from one of the hamlets, far south in the area. He was after all from there, from one of these villages. He was much experienced. He told us that there were '*four things and all are wrong*. *There's one more thing.*' He counted on his fingers. The things he said, in our translation, were: *discrimination, state capture, bureaucratic harassment, and lost opportunity*. The last thing was: *microfinance*. Here was a sane person, who could synthesise. He said that some groups received lower wages than other groups with the same experience and skills.

> *Say, women have the same experience and skills, but they get lower wages than men. There's discrimination in the market place. One might give an outsider higher wage than an insider. It happens and that's it.*

He said that people were corrupt. No one was beyond doubt, because '*I don't trust you and you don't trust me*.' Why?

Because, there are a few people who get things done their way. Take our politicians. Do they do what they want to do? No. They do what some people want them to do. Companies and powerful people and it's what's called state capture. These people and companies influence government actions. This results in special favours for somebody. Everybody else suffers. This happens in the villages too. Believe me.

He waited for us to react, ask a question. But because what he was saying was sensible, we listened and he said further.

You go to see a government official. What do you get? What kind of treatment you get? Whatever it is, you don't get what you want to get. That's it. Period. This is a harassment everybody is going through. You go to an office to get a paper moving and you end up waiting too long. You meet somebody through somebody and that somebody tells you to give the official some money, bribe. If you don't pay or you don't have it at all to give anything, you get bad treatment. You can't get what you want get done. Harassment!

He explained that it simply meant that one didn't have an opportunity to get something because there was nobody who would give one an opportunity. Poor did not have material opportunities coming their way, because investments and technological innovations were not their cup of tea.

Poor are not in picture where investments are or where innovations are the main drivers of growth.

He said that 'the one more thing' was microfinance.

Savings is the only way the poor can get something done. And also be independent. Microfinance, if properly managed, can get them far, for there's some sound economic principles. Don't the people say: it's drops that make an ocean. You need a fund, call it by whatever name you want to. If you can create a fund which could empower the poor and the women, then there is something the disadvantaged can fall back to. That's where everything rests. It's simple logic too: where there's money, there's the way. Don't tell me money is not everything. It is everything in today's world. So get it.

You know, money is the story by which we measure the success of all our lives. Money is why we hold each other tight; and it is why our fear refuses naming. It's the fancy dancer: money is the king maker. You need it whether you like it or not. I don't like it, but I need it.