

# The Making and Proliferation of *Jāti*: A Historical Inquiry

Studies in History  
31(1) 30–50  
© 2015 Jawaharlal Nehru University  
SAGE Publications  
sagepub.in/home.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0257643014558461  
<http://sih.sagepub.com>



Rajan Gurukkal<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The article seeks to argue that the making of *jāti* was homologous with the opening up of deltas for agriculture, involving integration of agro-pastoral descent groups into hereditary specialists of occupational identity, and formation of stratified relations of production transcending kin labour. It emphasises that productive relations in the deltas had preconditions such as hereditary occupations, asymmetrical social relations, amenability to differential allocation of status, and the dominant presence of the Brāhmaṇa-s with tacitly recognized ritual supremacy, resource potential, social control, political influence and cultural pre-eminence for the emergence of *jāti* hierarchy. A related argument is that the emergence of hereditary occupation groups and promulgation of sāstraic norms must have been processes of mutuality and concurrence. It has been understood the context of the *Jāti* institution of coercive control and seigniorial jurisdiction over the labouring body was crucial. As regards proliferation of *jāti*-s, the argument is that it had been an ongoing process ever since *jāti* became the dominant paradigm of identity construction for occupational groups and service personnel claiming socio-cultural distinction on the basis of their association with the seigniorial power. Rewarded under land-tenure, the personnel in service to the king and the local chieftains became hereditary for stability of service as well as permanence of family landholding. Illustrating the historical experience of the Tamil South in general and the Kerala region in particular, the argument found feasible is that the proliferation of *jāti*-s happened as a land tenure based phenomenon under the three seigniorial streams represented by the king, the chieftain and the temple – *brahmadēya* combine, as realized in terms of the sāstraic norms.

## Keywords

kin-labour, descent-groups, productive relations, hereditary occupation, seigniorial power, *jāti*

---

<sup>1</sup> Visiting Professor, Center for Contemporary Studies, IISC, Bangalore, India.

---

## Corresponding author:

Rajan Gurukkal, Visiting Professor, Center for Contemporary Studies, IISC, Sir. C.V. Raman Avenue, Bangalore 560 012, India. E-mail: [rgurukkal@gmail.com](mailto:rgurukkal@gmail.com)

It is a bit outlandish to go about inquiring into the origins of institutions of long continuity, such as *jāti* in the postmodern context of knowledge production, which offers no special immunity to historians' teleological exercise. Although an attempt to discuss the historical process of the formation of *jāti* is sure to be a tenuous exercise yielding no new knowledge, it is fruitful to contextualize the incidence and proliferation of *jāti* practice by conceptualizing what the institution meant and how it functioned in the socio-economic past of southern India. This article, therefore, seeks to contextualize the incidence of the institution of *jāti* against the historical background of the rise of wet-rice agriculture in the deltas involving integration of agro-pastoral artisans, craftsmen and tillers; the coming into being of a new system of ownership and control; the formation of a class-structured society; the institutional manifestation of the *jāti* as a strong fetter of productive relations; and the socio-economic process of the proliferation of *jāti*.

## Meaning and Context

The etymology of the Sanskrit word, *jāti*, gives the meaning, 'that which one is born in' (*jāyatē asmin iti*). It denotes a trans-familial identity of relative status commonly shared by many families. Extensive use of the English word caste adapted from the Portuguese 'casta', meaning breed has not only made the meaning of *jāti* simple and its historical process overlooked, but also internationalized the misconception that the institution is best exemplified in India even to the extent of its being unique there.<sup>2</sup>

Analytically, the notion of the self and the other is perhaps the property, most archaic and fundamental, to *jāti*, which comes from pre-*jāti* descent communities with the habit of distinguishing each as the pure from the impure other. So long as every descent group had autonomy to sustain the notion, it was mutually exclusive, horizontal and fluid. What happened in the historical process of the constitution of *jāti* as a system of social organization across descent groups was imposition of the dominant other's notion of the pure and impure, upon all,

<sup>2</sup> Most studies in caste vouch for this, despite their original contribution to knowledge in the subject matter. To cite some of the major studies, C. Bougle, *Essays on the Caste System* (first published in 1908, republished Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); E.A.H. Blunt, *The Caste System of North India*, first edition in 1931 by Oxford University Press, London, new edition by S. Chand Publishers, Delhi, 1969; G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1932); J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946); F.G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier: A Village in Highland Orissa* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1958). A. Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village* (California: University of California Press, 1965, rev. edn, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010); E. Leach, 'Caste, Class and Slavery: The Taxonomic Problem', *Caste and Race* eds., A. De Reuck and J. Knight (London: J & A. Churchill Publishers, 1967); L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). J. Wilson, *Indian Caste*, 1 (Delhi: K.K. Book Distributors, 1985); G. Harold, *The Hindu Caste System. Vol. 1, The Sacralization of a Social Order* (Delhi: Chanakya Publishers, 1987); also D. Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

and the fallout, was a structure inevitably vertical, hierarchical and rigid. Thus structurally, the *jāti* consisted of two sets of binaries as its constituents—the pure >< impure and the higher >< lower. Each *jāti* sustained its historically contingent notion of pure and impure but to be applied solely in relation to the lower in the hierarchy. It is this zeal of each *jāti* to brag about its status as far above the lower though just below the higher, which has been ensuring solidarity across the unequal in the hierarchy.

It is this significant factor of the pure and impure as well as the high and low, which persists all along the course of the formation, consolidation and proliferation of the *jāti*, irrespective of the causal and contextual differences of each. The formation of the *jāti* had its causal and contextual links with the spread of plough agriculture into the delta; while its institutional consolidation was linked to the productive relations' systematization into a hierarchical social structure; and the proliferation linked to the expansion of deltaic agriculture. The pure >< impure and the high >< low binaries do simply map on to one another at all the three phases despite the steady development of a series of complex intersections.

*Jāti* is rooted in the institution of *kulattoḷil* or the system of *kulam* (descent group)-based division of specialized occupations (*toḷil*), which gave rise to descent groups of occupational identity.<sup>3</sup> The most crucial factor about *jāti* was the institution of labour realization and the entailing form of servitude that it embodied. As an institution it ensured permanence of labour to contemporary productive relations by fettering the descent group in specific crafts, which although provided occupational stability to them, denied the natural right to adopt the livelihood of their choice. It was reproduction and perpetuation of productive relations with all allied instituted means of subordination, subjugation, alienation and *de facto* control over labour that the *jāti* ensured as its fundamental service. Hence, the context of *jāti* formation is that of the disintegration of descent groups, which happens in the process of their integration for wetland agriculture of wheat, rice and sugarcane requiring the technology of plough with its auxiliary arts and crafts of full-time specialization. The spread of agriculture along the fertile landscape ecosystems of the river valleys, first in the Gangetic region and subsequently along the deltas of various other rivers all over the northern, central and eastern regions was the historical context of the productive integration of agro-pastoral descent groups in the subcontinent. That the relations of production and reproduction would define social groups in the historical social process constitutes the explanatory framework enabling us to contextualize the *jāti* phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the origins of *jāti* in the light of literary references, see S. Jaiswal, *Caste: Origin, Function, and Dimensions of Change* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> In fact, historical materialism constitutes the central framework of explanation for the present study. Marx discussed caste in the context of the institutional as well as ideological aspects of the form of exploitation of labour in the relations of production. See, *German Ideology*, original publication 1845–46, Moscow edition, Part I, 63. Also see *Capital*, vol. I, Moscow Publishers, 1974, 321. For a creative response to the concept in the context of Indian history, see D.D. Kosambi, *Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1975), 99–101. He related the formation of

At no point in history did the *jāti*-based social organization encompass all, leaving no residues. It was an organization with its own spatiality, distinguished as the *veḷḷānvakai* (non-*Brāhmaṇa*) the *brahmadēya*, the *nādu* (non-*Brāhmaṇa* agrarian locality) and the *nagara* (the marketing centre) as opposed to the *kāṭu* (forest).<sup>5</sup> Those accommodated as the menial as well as hard manual labourers who constituted the main workforce in agriculture were in clusters of *jāti* exclusiveness with their space in the *cēris*. Purity >> pollution observances in their extreme form manifested in the institution of untouchability make the spatial dimension of *jāti* explicit. Nonetheless, it operated only within the outskirts, but integral to the space, of productive relations. People, normally settled in the forest or along the seashore, who had nothing to do with the space of relations of production, were outside the *jāti* system.

## Antecedents

Cultivation in the alluvial deltas of the Ganga, which goes back to the mid-first millennium BCE, was a slow but significant process involving integration of functionaries and occupation groups who were, by and large, part of agro-pastoral descent groups.<sup>6</sup> This is not to mean that there was already an evolved division of labour in the agro-pastoral settlements, presupposing the existence of hereditary specialization of arts and crafts in any institutionalized form. It would not have been more than a kin-based system of productive relations with a relative specialization of arts and crafts with or without the hereditary system but within the clan ties, precluding hierarchy. Integration of arts and crafts people as part of the

---

the Sudra farmers to the rise of new forces (iron plough) and relations of production in the Gangetic plains, which led to the emergence of endogamous caste groups. This has been dealt at length in K. Roy, 'Kosambi on Questions of Caste', *Economic and Political Weekly* XLIII, no. 30 (July 2008): 78–84. For a theoretical reflection relevant to the context, see I. Habib, 'Castes in Indian History', in *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Interpretation*, ed. I. Habib (New Delhi: Tulika Publication, 1995), 161–79. Also his 'Note towards a Marxist Perception of Indian History', *The Marxist* XXVI, no. 4 (October–December 2010): 46.

<sup>5</sup> See arguments relating to homology between socio-spatial relations in the introduction of D. Harvey, *Explanation in Geography* (New York: St. Martin's, 1969). More insights are available in D. Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (London: Macmillan, 1984); D. Gregory and J. Urry, *Social Relations and Spatial Structures* (London: Macmillan, 1985); and H. Lefebvre, *The Social Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> An exhaustive review of the archaeology and socio-economic processes of the region is given in R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2004), 195–99. He argued that around first millennium BCE the Gangetic plain began to be deforested, thanks to the knowledge of iron technology, and expanded agriculture leading to the formation of class and state with a steady growth of specialization and subjection of the Sudras. See pp. 236–40. With little differentiation between the primordial and advanced, there is an attempt to link the caste system with agriculture in M. Klass, *Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System* (Philadelphia: Institute for Human Issues, 1980), 62–65. Klass presumes the transformation of the tribe into caste, but without any clarity about the historical process thereof.

making of productive relations meant their incorporation into the Sudra *varṇa*. This process gave rise to three social groups in competition for dominance, namely, the ruling aristocracy (Kshatriyas), the priestly group (Brāhmaṇas) and the traders (Vaisyas), each with its own service personnel of the *dāsa-bhrutaka* category under servitude close to that of slavery.<sup>7</sup> Competitions and conflicts, mainly between the Kshatriyas and Brāhmaṇas, had acquired greater philosophical and institutional dimensions as exemplified by the constitution of heterodox religious orders. This long history has been discussed extensively by eminent historians as part of the early history of socio-economic development with special reference to the formation of the *jāti* and State in the region.<sup>8</sup> Large-scale expansion of agriculture in the deltas using the Sudra labour began only in the third century BCE, the constitution of which was the result of the dissolution of many agro-pastoral descent groups into artisans, craftsmen and tillers with occupational identity of hereditary nature.

In the process of the long-protracted competition and conflicts, the Brāhmaṇas acquired the highest ritual status that acted as the cultural capital for ideological control over political power through the prescriptive knowledge generated and codified by them into *sāstras*.<sup>9</sup> Kshatriyas accepted the dominance of the Brāhmaṇas over others and sought to follow *sastraic* knowledge, which was, in fact, a power-knowledge combine capable of turning the Brāhmaṇas themselves into its discursive subjects first and subsequently powerful enough for ordering of the society as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Formation of the *jāti* system as a hierarchy with the four *varṇas* as its rudimentary constituents accommodating artisans and craftsmen within the fourth *varṇa*, namely, the Sudra, and keeping the *dāsa-bhrutakas* outside it was a discursive consequence of Brahman domination involving production of explanatory as well as prescriptive knowledge about the origins and proliferation of the *jāti*.

The old time patron-client ties between the Kshatriyas and Brāhmaṇas continued as transformed into a symbiotic relationship in which the former resorting to the latter for ritual status and political legitimacy, thanks to their authority over rites, monopolistic custodianship over textual accounts and the rich heritage of

<sup>7</sup> See the process conceptualized in C. Meillassoux, 'Are There Castes in India?', *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1973): 89–111.

<sup>8</sup> To cite the two major studies: R. Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formations of the Mid-First Millennium BC in the Ganga Valley* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991); and R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Reference here is to the concept of cultural capital enunciated in P. Bourdieu, 'The Forms of capital', in J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58. In fact, it is the combination of the embedded, objectified and institutionalized forms of cultural capital that the Brāhmaṇas inherited, a rare historical legacy that enabled them command social capital. Also see his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> It is the concept of discourse, enunciated by M. Foucault who defined the term as the power-knowledge combine establishing orders of truth in multiple ways to be accepted as 'reality' in a given society. For details see his *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M.S. Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 21–39.

traditional wisdom. Having no such ritual strategies, institutional devices and textual knowledge as source of cultural capital to share political power, Vaisyas or the traders got subordinated to the other two and remained the third in the race for domination. Cultural resources, particularly the explanatory and prescriptive wisdom being overwhelming in the case of Brāhmaṇas, organization and imposition of a hierarchy of status with themselves on the top was easy for them. Heterodox religions had an ideology, but that was against the notion of hierarchy and pertained to a parallel politico-cultural domain. With the result Brahmanical values and passions became hegemonic soon in matters pertaining to every aspect of human existence. This accounts for the feasibility of subsequent social ordering in areas of structured productive relations, exactly as construed by the Brāhmaṇas. The notion of hierarchy in the relations of production though implied in the nature of entitlements to means of production and the produce, the status implications thereof were decided according to the prescriptions in the Brahmanical texts. In other words, Brāhmaṇas decided the status of functions/occupations and ordered them hierarchically with the repressive institutional means called *jāti*.<sup>11</sup> As wet-ribe agriculture expanded to areas beyond the deltas through the spread of irrigation technology, the same system of productive relations and status hierarchy got replicated there as well. Ordering of society into a hierarchy according to the *jāti* status as superimposed on productive relations was a gradual process over several centuries across the agrarian tracts.

## The Deccan and Beyond

Regions of the Deccan and further south were not *varṇa*-structured till the opening up of the deltas, which seems to have begun not earlier than the mid-first millennium AD, unlike often made out. Archaeological remains on the surface and out of excavations show a continuous history of human settlements in different parts of the region from the turn of first millennium BC, onwards, as adapted to the multiple landscape ecosystems through an array of unevenly evolving techno-economic strategies of subsistence and survival.<sup>12</sup> It was an ensemble structured by the dominance of the agro-pastoral culture that had a long continuity, of course with certain changes. Agriculture included both shifting as well as sedentary, with the latter mostly centred on arid highland crops such as millets and

<sup>11</sup> It was the fallout of a historical process rather than a pre-planned scheme. Perhaps the earliest characterization of caste as a practice 'born and grew from the concurrence of spontaneous and collective tendencies', rather than out of Brāhmaṇa conspiracy, is made in C. Bougle, *Essays on the Caste System*, first published in 1908, republished by Cambridge University Press, 1971, 59–61.

<sup>12</sup> See, H.D. Sankalia and S.B. Deo, *Report on the Excavations at Nasik and Jorwe 1950–1951* (Poona: Deccan College, 1955). H.D. Sankalia, B. Subbarao and S.B. Deo, *Excavations at Maheshwar and Navdatoli, 1952–53* (Pune: Deccan College, 1958). Dhavalikar, *First Farmers of the Deccan* (Pune: Ravish Publishers, 1988). Also V.V.K. Sastry, *The Proto and Early Historical Culture of Andhra Pradesh*, AP Archaeological Series 58, Government of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, 1983. S.R.K. Pisipaty, *Andhra Culture: An Obscure Phase in the Early Historical Archaeology of Andhra Pradesh* (Delhi: Agama Kala Prakashan, 2010).

limitedly on fertile lowland crops, such as, rice, wheat and sugarcane. The socio-economic processes of the region during the immediate post-Mauryan period (first century BCE) were primarily of the continuation of interactive coexistence amongst these unevenly evolved forms of subsistence based on the technology of iron and high-tin bronze. There was specialization in craft production and exchange, but largely within the clan–kin nexus.<sup>13</sup> Most population in the region must have belonged to the settlements along the black-soil tracts of the Ghats and upper reaches of the rivers, suitable for agro-pastoral means of subsistence and it consisted of descent groups and their chiefs of clan–kin ties. Some of them were inhabitants of small fertile pockets of fields around watersheds, living on wet-rice agriculture, but the basis of productive relations remained kinship as in the case of other descent groups. Networking across these settlements of the hill tracts rich in forest goods, mineral resources, crafts production, dry-land crops such as millet, pastoral goods and rice, there were trade routes from the north, north-west and east frequented by long-distance itinerant merchants.

Trade and trade routes had enabled circuit of merchants, monks, mendicants and others, while their convergence at areas of settlements in turn led to the rise of monasteries and growth of urban centres. There has always been exaggeration about the agrarian expansion, social stratification and productive surplus in the settlements and over-generalization about its connection to trade, monastic establishments, urban development and state formation with differences in the precedence of one or the other over the rest.<sup>14</sup> In fact, these Buddhist monuments were in the upper reaches of the Godavari–Krishna rivers, the landscape of agro-pastoral settlements.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, numismatic material, both local and non-local in plenty indicates the importance of the area as a township of merchants and monetized exchanges.<sup>16</sup> The population in these strategic areas of trade

<sup>13</sup> For the standard characterization, see A. Parasher-Sen, *Social and Economic History of Early Deccan: Some Interpretations* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> For an exaggeration of the material culture, nature and surplus potential of local settlements as well as for a criticism against generalizations about the connections amongst the various phenomena, see the discussion in K.D. Morrison, 'Trade, Urbanism, and Agricultural Expansion: Buddhist Monastic Institutions and the State in Early Historic Western Deccan', *World Archaeology* 27, no. 2 (1995): 203–21. Also P.K. Reddy, 'God, Trade and Worship: A Glimpse into the Region of Early Andhradesa', *East and West* 48 (1998): 291–311.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Burgess, *Report on the Buddhist Cave Temples and Their Inscriptions*, Archaeological Survey of India, New Series, 4, New Delhi, 1883. For a comprehensive account of sites, see O.C. Kail, *Buddhist Cave Temples of India* (Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala, 1975). Also, I.K. Sarma, *Studies in Early Buddhist Monuments and Brahmi Inscriptions of Andhradesa* (Nagpur: Dattsons Publishers, 1988). D. Mitra, *Buddhist Monuments* (Calcutta: Sahitya Samsad, reprint 1980), 155–57. For Andhra an exhaustive chronological list of Buddhist and other religious sites, see R. Prasad, 'Cultural Map of Andhradesa from Earliest Times to AD 300', in *Comprehensive History and Culture of Andhra Pradesh*, Vol. II: *Early Historic Andhra Pradesh*, ed. I.K. Sarma (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2008), 287–308.

<sup>16</sup> See P.L. Gupta, 'The Coinage of the Sātavāhanas: Types and their Regional Distribution', in *Coinage of the Sātavāhanas and Coins from excavations*, ed. A.M. Shastri (Nagpur: Nagpur University Press, 1972), 41–62; V.V. Mirashi, 'Wategaon Hoard of Sātavāhana Coins', *JNSI*, 1972, pt-ii, 205–12; M.R. Rao, *Sātavāhana Coins in the Andhra Pradesh Govt. Museum*, A.P. Govt. Series no. 2,

and markets was largely made up of a few prominent households of big merchants and chiefly personages such as the *Raṭhikas*, *Bhōjas* and *Peṭṇikas*, their warriors and the *dāsa-bhrutakas* besides some Brahāmaṇas as *Vēdic* priests and preceptors. Specialized merchants, such as, *dhānikas* (corn dealers), *gandhikas* (perfume dealers), *mālakaras* (florists), *suvarṇakaras* (gold dealers), *odayantrikas* (irrigation device dealers) and so on, organized into *niḡamam* too were there as the cave inscriptions would have us believe. Chiefly households seem to have had no systematic relations of appropriation with, rather than predatory control over, the settlements of descent groups. Other prominent households do not seem to have any intermediaries in land placed below them, presupposing that their land control was hardly beyond what could be cultivated by their *dāsa-bhrutaka* workforce. Being itinerants of brief sojourn at points of exchange, the traders were not integral to the local society. In short, the system of social relations, though differentiated was yet to be clearly *varṇa*-structured. This is a situation evidently that of the pre-*jāti*, pre-state, best represented universally by the tribal chiefdoms of unilineal descent with patterns of power relations varying across tribes, clans and lineages.<sup>17</sup>

Sātavāhanas appear to have been a chiefly lineage with Brāhmanic pretensions in the central Deccan, wielding control over the southern trade route as its lord (*Dakṣhiṇāpatha-pati*) but without any consolidated political authority, probably till the ascendancy of Gautamiputra Sātakarṇi who could transcend the *gōtra* nexus and assert himself as a king.<sup>18</sup> There are inscriptional references to Sātakarṇi and his successors paying attention to the maintenance of the *varṇa* system, probably a need in the wake of *varṇasamkara* and the emergence of *sankirṇajātī*. It appears to be a phase witnessing dissolution of the clan/kin base of productive relations into *varṇa* base. Nonetheless, there is no indication of

---

Hyderabad, 1961; D.R. Reddy and P. Suryanarayana, *Coins of the Satraps of the Sātavāhana Era* (Hyderabad: Numismatic Society of Hyderabad, 1983), 70–77; also their *Coins of the Mēghavāhana Dynasty of Coastal Andhra* (Hyderabad, 1985); S.J. Mangalam, ‘Coins of the Feudatories and Contemporaries of the Sātavāhanas’, in *The Age of the Sātavāhanas*, 2 vols., ed. A.M. Shastri (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 1999), 360–90. A general appreciation of the situation is given in H.P. Ray, *Monastery and Guild: Commerce Under the Satavahanas* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987). For a discussion of the nature of urban settlements, see A.P. Sen, ‘Urban Settlements in the Deccan and Sātavāhana History’, in *The Age of the Sātavāhanas*, vol. I, ed. A.M. Shastri (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 1999), 159–89.

<sup>17</sup> See discussion in M.H. Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society* (New York: Random House, 1967), 236–41. Also, E.R. Service, *Origins of the State and Civilization*, 14–16. For details of the tribal polity, see M.D. Sahlins, *Tribesmen* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968), 22–25. See variations in tribal polity discussed in the introduction to J. Middleton and D. Tait (eds.), *Tribes without Rulers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., rpt. 1970), 1–32.

<sup>18</sup> See the brief but clinching discussion in B.D. Chattopadhyaya, ‘Transition to the Early Historical Phase in the Deccan: A Note’, in *Archaeology and History: Essays in Memory of Shri A. Ghosh*, ed. B.M. Pande and B.D. Chattopadhyaya (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1987), 727–35. This has been reproduced in his *Studying Early India: Archaeology, Texts, and Historical Issues* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 39–47. For a view almost the same but arrived at differently to this, see Y. Subbarayalu, ‘Contacts between the North and the South: An Epigraphical Perspective’, Foundation Day Lecture, ICHR, New Delhi, 2012.

the expansion of agriculture into the alluvial deltas of the major rivers in the region. The situation in the Kalinga region was more or less the same, with agro-pastoral settlements of the arid highlands having precedence over those in the plains engaged in wet-rice agriculture. It was predominantly tribal despite its long tradition of cultural sharing with the Gangetic region and subsequent large-scale marches of people from there with the Mauryan techno-economic culture of agriculture and trade after Asoka's conquest of the region. Socio-economic processes of the region were the same as those of the upper reaches of the Godavari with little scope for large-scale transformation of descent groups into class-structured society and state formation that corresponded to organized agrarian expansion after three centuries. Integration of the agro-pastoral artisans and craftsmen became necessary in the Andhra–Kalinga regions only around fifth to sixth centuries CE, when the deltas were being converted into fields of paddy, wheat and sugarcane, providing the context for the *sāstraic* ordering of them into the *jāti*.

## The Tamil Region

In the Tamil south it is evident from both archaeology and the heroic poems that the people were of descent communities, predominantly agro-pastoral, headed by small and big chieftains, such as, the *Kiḷār* (Ur chieftain), *Vēḷir* (hill chieftain) and *Vēntar* (regional chieftains, namely, the Pāṇḍya, Cēra and Cōḷa) from the turn of the CE to the third or fourth century.<sup>19</sup> The principal social mode of labour realization was familial and cooperative with little scope for specialization. However, a few crafts such as metal-working and pottery were full-time trades of specialists and hence probably hereditary.<sup>20</sup> As the most extensively used metal, iron had a central place among metals as the base of weapons whose significance in a society of predatory operations is explicit. Moreover, the practice of burying iron objects along with the dead had pushed a great deal of iron out of circulation, presupposing continuous iron working as a full-time occupation of hereditary specialization. Similarly, production of earthen pots, a characteristically brittle artefact, was obviously a continuous full-time activity too, for their use was extensive both for the living as well as the dead. Moreover, the fabric, polish, glazing, slips, paintings, texture and decorative designs of pottery suggest that it was a full-time technology of specialized expertise. Nonetheless, these crafts people by and large belonged to the clan–kin ties.

The number of such full-time artisans and craftsmen of hereditary occupations must have been more in the headquarters of bigger chieftains of the *Vēḷir*

<sup>19</sup> For details, see R. Gurukkal, 'Forms of Production and Forces of Change in Ancient Tamil Society', *Studies in History*, vol. 2 ns, New Delhi (1989), 159–75.

<sup>20</sup> This has been discussed at length in R. Gurukkal, 'From Clan and Lineage to Hereditary Occupations and *Jāti* in South India', *Indian Historical Review*, XXII, nos. 1–2 (1993–94): 22–33. It has been reprinted in his *Social Formations in Early South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 255–71.

and *Vēntar* levels.<sup>21</sup> As the major redistributive pools of resources, the chieftains' settlements could support more full-time crafts. Another full-time function of a hereditary nature was that of the warriors, who had existed as a clan. Every settlement (*Ūr*) needed full-time warriors since the main mode of political appropriation of resources was predatory. In association with the chiefly households, there were three other full-time hereditary functionaries: the *pānar* (bards), *paṛaiyar* (who play a kind of raid drum called *paṛa*) and *tuṭiyar* (who play a small drum called *tuṭi*). None of these was represented in terms of *varṇa* in the source material of their times.

*Tolkāpīam* mentions *Antaṇar* (Brāhmaṇas), *Aracar* (rulers) and *Vaṇikar* (traders), but not on a par with the *trivarnīkar* unlike as often made out by historians.<sup>22</sup> Specialized dealers in arts, crafts and other products, probably as organized into corporation (*nigamam*) were present in marketing centres, coastal towns and ports, but being mostly part of the long distance itinerant merchant community, they were not integral to the local society. However, it is likely that the overseas and inland merchants had required servile people (*vilainjar*) at the place of sojourn for various menial jobs. Such people at service under conditions of coercion were workers representing a system of relations of labour transcending kinship, but more or less as the Tamil counterpart of the *dāsa-bhrutaka* workforce in the Deccan and northern India. In the process of predatory operations and redistribution, some kind of differential allocation of new position, status, roles and prestige within the complex redistributive relationships was likely in the agro-pastoral settlements. Differential allocation of positions and roles at the instance of the *Vēntar* level chiefly authority had a tendency towards formation of a hierarchy. In fact, functions or occupations, although not in any elaborate form, were already there as organized around chieftains in the case of certain functions/occupations and in the case of certain others, especially traders, artisans and craftsmen, they themselves were organized into the *nikamam*. However, the poems do not contain any clues to the existence of a stratified society.<sup>23</sup> They show social differentiation of a simple kind confined to the binary between *uyarntōr* (the highborn) that comprised Brāhmaṇas and *ilipiṛappālar* (the lowborn) that comprised all people. This suggests that contemporary social division was too fluid even to be *varṇa*-structured.

## Opening Up of the Deltas

A perceptible feature of the opening of the deltas, which began during the sixth to seventh centuries CE, was the founding of *brahmadēya* villages through royal land grants along the fertile tracts of river valleys. We cannot say that these gift

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Tolkāpīam, porul* (Chennai: Saratha Pathippagam, 2010), 625–26. For details, see N. Subrahmanian, *Snagam Polity* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, rpt 1966), 258–60.

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion, see R. Gurukkal, *Social Formations of Early South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 224–41.

lands were entirely uncultivated, but it is reasonable to presume that there were a lot of fallow lands waiting to be brought under the plough. This is an indication of the absence of productive relations appropriate for maximizing agrarian land use. There must have existed a specialized workforce in the form of descent groups but not integrated into a system of relations involving protection from above and obligation from below. Expansion of agrarian settlements through the creation of *brahmadēyas* often involved superimposition of the superior rights of the Brāhmaṇas over communal holdings and clan families of the locality. It must have been indeed a coercive process of transformation of clan settlements into farmer settlements of wet-rice agriculture necessitating stratified relations of production, which is implicit in the foundation of agrarian villages under royal initiative. The rise of a new political formation represented by the Simhavarman line of the Pallavas and the Kdungōn line of the Pāṇdyas, with genealogies celebrated in the *prasastis* of copper-plate charters registering the foundation of *brahmadēyas* coincided with the process of agrarian expansion along the deltas. Local chieftains and prominent households also must have functioned as the source of coercive power behind the process of integration of agro-pastoral artisans, crafts people and farmers.<sup>24</sup>

It appears that Veḷḷāḷas emerged from the farmers of agro-pastoral settlements and were descent groups with lands communally owned and controlled. Most *brahmadēyas* were founded in the neighbourhood of the Veḷḷāḷa settlements, after the latter were taken into confidence. Agricultural expansion must have naturally led to the formation of huge agrarian localities called *nādus*, which had involved integration of settlements (*Ūr*) originally bound by kinship and cultivated by Veḷḷāḷas. It accomplished a uniform structure of productive relations in agrarian villages irrespective of whether they were *brahmadēyas* or *vēḷāṇvakais*. It was a hierarchical structure with landholders (*brahmadēya-kiḷavar* in the case of *brahmadēyas* and *ūrār/nāṭṭār* in the case of *vēḷāṇvakai* settlements) at the apex and leaseholders (*kārāḷar*) consisting mainly of artisans and craftsmen in the middle as placed over the primary producers (*aṭiyāḷar*) at the bottom. Almost parallel to the leaseholders there were many who held small strips of land as hereditary holdings (*kāṇi*). Agricultural produce in given shares moved up following a system of appropriation under extra-economic coercion along the structured path from the tillers through categories of different levels of entitlement in the ascending order. As part of the social mechanisms of ensuring goods and services to the landholders through the notion of obligation, all artisans and craftsmen were subjected to immobility. In this hierarchy of productive relations involving *de facto* control over human body from above, the institutional role of the *jāti* was crucial. In the process of the proliferation of *brahmadēyas* and the spread of stratified productive relations, the Veḷḷāḷas seem to have emerged as a landed *jāti* of significance due to their kinship with local chieftains on the one

<sup>24</sup> It was not altogether without any protest. See certain instances discussed in R. Gurukkal, 'Non-brahmana Resistance to the Expansion of *Brahmadēyas*: The Early Pāṇḍya Experience', *Indian History Congress Proceedings*, Delhi, 1984.

side, and the absence of a similar situation for the rise of traders into a powerful group of hereditary occupation, on the other.

In Kerala the opening up of the deltas was somewhat different. Absence of royal land grants for the founding of *brahmadēyas* is perhaps the most striking among them. However, Brāhmaṇa households had sprung up on their own as independent production units adjacent to agro-pastoral clan settlements in the early centuries of CE.<sup>25</sup> Formation of Brāhmaṇa settlements along the fertile river valleys of the region was the result of organized migration of select families from previous settlements rather than an enterprise under royal initiative as the legend of Parasurama would have us believe.<sup>26</sup> Another remarkable difference was the region's waterlogged and marshy landscape ecosystem in the delta, which necessitated extensive mobilization of hard labour for the reclamation of agrarian fields. Labour mobilization for reclaiming productive lands out of the relatively inhospitable landscape ecosystem, must have been a long-term activity. Agro-pastoral clan families living along the hilly fringes of the marshy wetlands and engaged in the cultivation of millet and highland paddy must have been the main source of workforce. Occupational groups of arts and crafts must have been attached to the Brāhmaṇa land on a permanent basis under the institution of bonded labour as enabled by the high ritual status, scholarship and charisma of the Brāhmaṇas. This was the context of the beginnings of social stratification in the region.

## Social Stratification

With the steady expansion of rice agriculture across the wetlands during the sixth to seventh centuries CE, social relations began to be structured along the line of productive relations. What began taking shape in the Brāhmaṇa households was crucial for the beginnings of a hierarchy of status. It was natural for the service personnel attached to the Brāhmaṇa household as a new unit of production with stratified relations to be conceived in the form of a status hierarchy in accordance with the *sāstraic* prescriptions of social differentiation. In fact, notion of hierarchy was implicit in the system of productive relations in which the land owning Brāhmaṇas and the landless tillers constituted the two objectively antagonistic classes with an intermediary of relative differentiation in economic as well as social status. Hence, the period, a temporal juncture that witnessed the expansion of a technology of production and social strategies of labour realization leading to the proliferation of hereditary occupations, was a turning point in terms of stratification and hierarchical ordering, which took more than two centuries to

<sup>25</sup> See discussions in M.G.S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala* (Thrissur: Current Books, 2013), 271. For a detailed study of the Brāhmaṇa settlements see V. Kesavan, *Brahmin Settlements in Kerala* (Thrissur: Current Books, rev. edn., 2013), 43–59.

<sup>26</sup> The legend forms an integral part of the traditional chronicle *Keralōlpatti*. For the full text see, H. Gundert, *Keralōlpatti*, originally published in 1843, a later edition by Balan Publications, Trivandrum, 1961.

characterize the social aggregate, for the domination of the social aggregate by relations in plough agriculture, proliferation of hereditary occupational groups and their ordering into a hierarchy, was a long process.

The integration of descent groups with the identity of hereditary occupations into the system of stratified productive relations consequent on Brāhmaṇa-headed agrarian expansion under royal initiative was the ongoing process inevitably leading to the constitution of a stratified society. Agrarian expansion in the deltas and the emergence of stratified productive relations accomplished a hierarchy of land rights and entitlements. It eventually changed the structure of the ruling authority represented by the Kshatriyas in symbiotic alliance with the Brāhmaṇas, into the state. Through this alliance of mutual benefits, the Kshatriya got higher status and ranking at the instance of the *sāstraic* concept of kingship as ordained by the Brāhmaṇas, who in turn got land and gold as reward for it. Both shared repressive power, the former through the politico-military source and the latter through the religio-intellectual source. It helped the Brāhmaṇas to become the cultural and eternal power, the power of conventions, ethics and morality, sufficient to take precedence over physical power. The Brāhmaṇa thus became the ideal and ideally the highest and could decide hierarchy with the self-acquired top. State, the main repressive institution, delegated its coercive power to the landed along with proprietary control over villages, which led to their integration as ensembles of settlers with hereditary occupations with attached entitlements.

Land grants to the Brāhmaṇas were responsible for bringing the deltas of the major rivers extensively under plough by integrating agro-pastoral settlements, enhancing surplus and developing a differentiated economy as the foundation of the state in peninsular India. It was at the instance of the Brahmanas that the creation and imposition of the hierarchy of *varṇa* happened there too. In that sense the Brāhmaṇas were instrumental in organizing the constituents of stratified society into a hierarchy of status and ranking. Their *Vēdic*, *itihāsic*, *Purāṇic* and *sāstraic* ideas and institutions were effective devices of social control and domination. It is reasonable to presume that the instituted relations of labour realization by the Brāhmaṇa laid the foundation of a stratified society based on an objective antagonism between landlords and tillers. In fact, this process involved a series of transitions: transition from kin labour to non-kin labour in productive relations, from the primacy of arid crops to the dominance of wetland crops in agriculture, from itinerant to immobile and obligatory services, from uncertainty to certainty in occupational rewards, from the fluidity of general functions of choice to the rigidity of specialized functions of hereditary occupation, from clans to *jātis*, from the horizontally structured descent group settlements to the vertically structured agrarian villages, and from chiefdom to the state.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For details, see R. Gurukkal, *Social Formations of Early South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 242–54.

## The Temple Society

Proliferation of *brahmadēyas* corresponded to the emergence of temples in South India, for each of them got organized as temple-centred with the temple acting as its agrarian headquarters. In due course, the temple itself became a landed magnate through royal land grants, private land endowments and gifts of gold that enabled purchase of productive lands. Other forms of resources donated by devotees also made the temple a fabulously rich institution.<sup>28</sup> With a stratified social order made up of tenants in the temple land, functionaries in its service and artisans and craftsmen of obligatory responsibilities of their trades, the temple commanded a large part of the local people as its dependents. All of them were rewarded in the form of one kind of land right or the other or an entitlement to land use or a share of the crop. It brought forth a system of service tenure as attached to most of the services and functions to the temple. A hierarchy was already implicit in the nature and size of the rewards of the temple servants, but the order of status implications thereof was decided by the Brāhmaṇas, who were the custodians of the temple wealth.

The structure and composition of the temple society is best illustrated in the temple epigraphs of Kerala. What emerges from them is a set of data enabling us to visualize it as a hierarchical structure of entitlements to varied rights over land institutionalized by service tenements. At the apex was the king's seigniorial jurisdiction (*koīma*), the highest right tacitly recognized by all. Recognized and exempted from taxes by the king, the Brāhmaṇa land (*brahmasvam*) and temple land (*dēvasvam*) enjoyed autonomous rights of the landlord as granted by the royal authority. Local rulers (*nāṭuvālis*) and probably other non-Brāhmaṇa landlords had proprietary control over their hereditary lands. Below the ownership of landlords was the leaseholder's right (*kārāṇma*). Artisans and craftspeople were entitled to occupy the land (*kuṭiyāyama*) by way of reward for their service to the settlement. At the base were the tillers attached to land, a people of bonded servitude and immobility. These varied entitlements in the hierarchy superimposed in the ascending order were tightly bound by ties of dependence and protection besides relations of exploitation and subjection. People in every stratum were locked up in a system of hereditary service obligation and land-related reward.

Rewards of the following personnel in the temple service such as the *Potuvāl* (the temple secretary), the *Vārier* (the personnel of supplementary services in the sanctum), the *Bhaṭṭas* (*Vēdic, itihāsic, purāṇic* teachers), the *Caṭṭas* (the Brāhmaṇa pupils of Vedic *itihāsic, puranic* studies), the *Cākyār* (the performers of *kūttu*), the *Naññyār* (female of the *Cākyār* family), the *Uvaccakal* (musicians),

<sup>28</sup> For details, see Burton Stein, 'The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple', *Journal of Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1960): 163–76. Also *The South Indian Temples: An Analytical Consideration* (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1977). The economic position of the temple is well brought out in N. Karashima, 1896, 'Land Donations to Hindu Temples in Medieval South India', *Journal of Asia and Africa Studies*, 2, Tokyo (1987): 3–31. Also, D.N. Jha, 'Temples as Landed Magnates in South India, c. ad 700–1300', in *Indian Society: Historical Probing*s, ed. R.S. Sharma and V. Jha (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1974), 202–16.

the *Naṭṭuvar* (dancers), the *Kāṇḍarppikar* (dance teachers), etc., were in the form of land tenures (tenancy).<sup>29</sup> For each of the above services, the specific tenure called *virutti* or *jīvitam* (life expenditure) was instituted under contemporary land system, which kept at the disposal of the service personnel certain plots of the temple land on lease. The *Potuvāl* and *Vāriyar* are the two most important functional categories in the non-Brāhmaṇa order, of which the first literally meant the common man (*madhyastha*) between the custodians of the temple and the devotees for all their transactions with the temple, and hence acted as the secretary of the temple. As a functionary shouldering managerial and executive responsibility, the *Potuvāl* was relatively close to the Brāhmaṇas and received *virutti* land as reward for his service to the temple. Anyone who was a member in any of the temple committees (*vāriyams*), could be called a *Vāriyar*. However, there is a specific functional group referred to in the temple inscriptions as *Vāriyar* by profession and not by virtue of membership in any *vāriyam*. Members of this group were also given *virutti* land as a reward for their services in the temple. Both the *Potuvāl* and the *Vāriyar*, two functionally specific groups attached to the temple, are now the names of two endogamous *jātis* in Kerala.<sup>30</sup> Evidently the process was that of the turning of the service into hereditary occupation for retaining its reward in the form of land tenure. Then, as groups of hereditary professions with economic stability, ritual status as the temple secretary and ranking due to close interaction with the Brāhmaṇas, they could distance themselves from others through rules of inter-marriage and inter-dining in order to constitute themselves into two endogamous *jātis*.

Similarly, the drummers, dancers and musicians of the temple, paid through service tenure constituted themselves into separate *jātis* through the same process of becoming hereditary professionals first. Drummers of the temple are addressed in the inscriptions as *Koṭṭikaḷ* or *Uvaccakaḷ*, which as such have not survived as *jāti* names. Temple dancers, mentioned in the epigraphs as *Cākkaimār* (male dancers) and *Naññaimār* (dancing girls) became a *jāti*, namely *Cākkiyār* with the female members addressed by the old name, *Naññiyar*.<sup>31</sup> These *jātis* are generally called the temple *jātis* (*ampalavāsis*) or the *antarāḷa-jātis*, the *jātis* between the Brāhmaṇas and the non-Brāhmaṇas just below. It was convenient for the temple to make the services hereditary, for it ensured stability of service. Likewise, it was an added incentive for the family of the service personnel, for it brought stability of landed property through service tenure. Thus, service tenure was responsible for turning the above service personnel families into hereditary occupational groups and endogamous *jātis*. A higher service tenement meant a better economic sta-

<sup>29</sup> See discussions in M.G.S. Narayanan, *Perumals*, 272–73. Also R. Gurukkal, ‘The Socio-economic Milieu of the Kerala Temple: A Functional Analysis, c. AD 800–1200’, *Studies in History* II, no. 1., New Delhi (1980): 159–175.

<sup>30</sup> See discussion in R. Gurukkal, ‘Formation of Caste Society in Kerala: Historical Antecedents,’ in *Social Formations of Early South India* (Oxford University Press, 2010) 312–13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* Also see ‘Proliferation and Consolidation of the Temple Centred Social Hierarchy in the Cēra Period’, *Journal of Kerala Studies* VI, nos. III and IV, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram (1979): 333–46.

tus and proximity to the managers of the temple-centred village, the Brāhmaṇas, implying a higher ritual status. Such a system of status differentiation in terms of economic as well as ritual values was instrumental to the naming of the hereditary occupational groups with the occupational name as a means of distinction. Subsequently, the occupational name became the name of an endogamous *jāti* integrated to social hierarchy.

The same principle of service stability, material incentives and status holds good in the case of others such as the merchants (*Vāṇiyar*), craftsmen/artisan groups (*Kammālar*) too whose trades became hereditary and the name of the trade, the *jāti*-name. Inscriptions refer to groups such as *Taccar* (carpenters), *Kollar* (blacksmiths), *Kalavāṇiyar* (potters), *Vāṇiyar* (oil mongers) and *Vaṇṇār* (washermen) as the main occupational groups of hereditary identity. In fact, they were brought and settled along the fringes of the villages with the obligation to render services to the temple as well as the landlords. Their reward was in the form of a land tenure (*kuṭiyāimai*), providing the entitlement to settle down in a plot of land for their unfailing services and at the pleasure of the landed. These people were caught up in an inescapable trap of immobility and functional obligations. At the slum of the bottom, were the servile group (*aṭiyālar*) of varying names, such as, *Īlavas*, *Pulayas* and *Cerumas*. Removed from the mainstream as untouchables, they formed the actual tillers, the most exploited group fated to be in perpetual servitude (*aṭiyāima*). Attached to agricultural lands, they were transacted along with land as goods or livestock.<sup>32</sup>

With the primary producers at the base, the temple signified a gamut of social relations into which the principles of *jāti* were introduced for the first time in a full-fledged form. Formation of a hierarchy was a natural consequence of the system of social differentiation, based as it was on varying levels of ritual status positions in the orbits around the Brāhmaṇas. Those enjoying these varied entitlements in the hierarchical order seem to have begun the practice of undertaking their vocations on a hereditary basis primarily for retaining the land rights as their family property. As people of hereditary occupations, they began to be addressed with the name of their occupations. These occupational names subsequently became *jāti* names, a process indicating their transformation into endogamous *jātis*. Relations with the upper-class categories determined the material status of the service personnel concerned; these relations depended on the nature and form of reward that varied from service tenure to kind. Similarly, the nature of reward might also have mattered in the determination of status. Same occupation or function thus got differentiated rewards and in such cases of status differentiation the name was changed that subsequently marked them a different *jāti*. Kindred descendants of the upper-class categories formed themselves into closed groups of *jāti* and status exclusiveness, zealously guarded through judiciously arranged marriage alliances and rigorously observed relationships of inter-dining.

A higher service tenement meant a better economic status and proximity to the Brāhmaṇas, implying a higher ritual status. Such a system of status differ-

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

entiation in terms of economic as well as ritual values was instrumental in the transformation of hereditary functionaries into an endogamous *jāti* hierarchy. The system of service tenure under the king and the local rulers also gave rise to hereditary offices, generating *jātis* and sub-*jātis* with economy and royalty as determinants of status hierarchy. Its extension into non-Brāhmaṇa villages, and even to market towns, is attested by records. In short, *jāti* appeared as an institutional manifestation in the hierarchically structured agrarian society in which services were paid for in the form of land rights. Other institutional formations such as service tenements both in the domains of the temple and the king, crystallized hereditary occupations into *jāti* hierarchy.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Jāti* Hierarchy**

Productive relations in the deltas had preconditions such as hereditary occupations, asymmetrical social relations, differential allocation of status and dominant presence of Brāhmaṇas for the emergence of *jāti* hierarchy. The dominant position of the Brāhmaṇas proved to be crucial in the process. Brāhmaṇas' domination was based on materially, socio-culturally and historically contingent authority. Tacitly recognized ritual supremacy, resource potential, social control, political influence and cultural pre-eminence of the Brāhmaṇas accounted for their dominance. Status as custodians of higher wisdom about the universe and calendar of seasons, enabling prediction of natural changes, had added to their charisma. They embodied the collective norms, controlled all cultural channels of communication and commanded ideological structures of legitimization. These made them a determinant force of political authority enabling to take precedence over the ruling power. All this explains how the Brāhmaṇas succeeded in being hegemonic to prescribe socio-economic and politico-cultural normative for ordering the society.

Generating knowledge about *Dakṣiṇāpatha*, its peoples and cultures; spreading a new pattern of thinking and transforming the local modes of social existence constituted the historical context. Brahmanism became the dominant discourse in peninsular India towards the end of the first millennium CE. Hegemony of the Brāhmaṇas was a discursively engendered outcome and *Jāti* hierarchy its direct fallout, rendered plausible by the *sāstraic* mode of social representation. Brāhmaṇas, the primary subjects of the discourse, were directly under the control of the *Vēdic-sāstraic-itihāsic-purāṇic* knowledge-power combine, which decided their perception and appreciation of societal relations. They could not have conceived the society of functionally specific families attached to their households except in accordance with the *sāstraic* prescriptions about the order

<sup>33</sup> C. Bogle had shown hereditarily determined occupation, hierarchy and distancing strategy fundamental to the caste system in his *Essay on the Caste System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 60–61. For an elaboration of the same perspective see L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). An expansion of Bogle's views is best represented in S.V. Ketkar, *History of Caste in India*, Vol. I (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1979).

of occupations and social statuses expressed in terms of the *jāti* hierarchy. Hence, it was more of historically and culturally contingent fallout although articulations of Brāhmaṇas as a hegemonic community were decisive in the process of ordering the differential relations of production into a hierarchy of *jātis*.

It is too simplistic to reduce the whole process into a conspiracy of Brāhmaṇas, for the society owed formation and proliferation of *jātis* to the material conditions that gave rise to stratified productive relations. Nonetheless, the discursive role of the *sāstraic* organization of status and ranking along categories of economic differentiation depended solely on the decision of the Brāhmaṇas. What remains to be causally linked to the Brāhmaṇas is the imposition of their notion of purity and pollution upon all with themselves as the purest and hence the infallible point of reference for determining the relative status of each *jāti*. Initially, status and economy converged but status soon decided the economic privileges as well. In short, it is not *jāti* but its status hierarchy, which history owes to the Brāhmaṇas. Even hierarchy as such, was not their notional construct, for it related to the objective conditions of differential relations of production, technology of agriculture and mode of labour realization. It is true that these necessitated institutional or structural devices of social stratification for stabilizing productive relations through fetters. However, there is no doubt about the fact that Brāhmaṇas' ideological coercion was a key factor of leavening influence.

### **Proliferation of *Jātis***

Proliferation of *jātis* had been an ongoing process ever since *jāti* became the dominant paradigm of identity construction for occupational groups and service personnel claiming socio-cultural distinction. There was a perceptible increase in the proliferation of *jātis* during the early decades of second millennium CE. It was a process at work among the occupational groups and service personnel attached under land tenure to the three lines of seigniorial jurisdiction, namely, the king, the chieftains and the Brāhmaṇas. The seigniorial line of the Brahmanas, which consisted of two service sectors—one of the *brahmadēya* (*brahmasvam*) and the other of the temple (*dēvasvam*)—managed by the Brāhmaṇas, seems to have set the paradigm for the unilineally integrated occupational groups and service personnel in the other two lines to constitute as well as proliferate *jātis*. It was natural because the Brāhmaṇas signified both the source and authority of *sastraic* norms according to which the occupational and service people were accommodated into the *jāti* hierarchy. However, the unilineal status ordering among them with degrees of purity based on a set of weird criteria, mimetically borrowed from the seigniorial domain of the Brāhmaṇas and adapted by independently negotiating with *sastraic* norms, was a gradual process.<sup>34</sup> The ritual status of the service personnel within the seigniorial sphere of the Brāhmaṇas was higher for obvious reasons. Similarly, the political status of the service personnel of the king and

<sup>34</sup> C. Meillassoux takes it as an opportunistic strategy. See 'Are There Castes in India', 105.

chieftains was higher too. A very significant point to be noted here is that the proliferation of caste was not solely a service-tenure driven social phenomenon, because there was the dynamic of caste exclusiveness preventing accommodation of those pursuing occupations other than the ones traditionally given by the caste. This resistance as an extraneous pressure must have been at work encouraging hereditary occupational groups to form themselves into endogamous castes.

Rewarded under land tenure, the personnel in service to the king and the local chieftains became hereditary for stability of service as well as permanence of family landholding. Exactly as in the case of the temple service, the names of hereditary offices in the royal and chiefly services became *jāti*-names of varying status as determined by their socio-economic and politico-cultural importance as several instances from the Kerala region demonstrate. Most significant offices in the royal and chiefly services, such as that of the warrior-chief (*Paṭai-nair* or subsequently Kuṟup and Paṅikkar) and of the supervisory accountant (*Mēnon*). *Nair* was a generic term for headship, but the Nair who signified the office of the warrior-chief was of great importance not only politically, but also economically, since the Nair signified the largest leaseholder (*kārālar*) group. Most of the temple lands (*dēvasvam*), the individual Brāhmaṇa holdings (*brahmasvam*), royal lands, and chiefly holdings were leased out to the Nair families. Largest among intermediaries in land, with the entailing privileges of the nobility, the Nair matrilineal families provided women for the Nampūtiri-Brāhmaṇas under the *sambandham* system of marriage, which helped them acquire better status, although, were considered part of the Sudra-*varṇa*.<sup>35</sup> Some of the personnel in royal service, who eventually became local chieftains, distinguished themselves from the rest of the Nairs by adopting Kshatriya titles such as '*varma*'. Likewise, the warrior-heads called Paṅikkar in the royal service acquiring land control through service tenure distinguished themselves from the Nair and became an endogamous *jāti*. In the same way, the office of the supervisory accountant, Mēnon in the service of the ruling aristocracy as well as Nampūtiri landlords who distinguished from the Nair became an endogamous *jāti* of land control, socio-political power and ritual status. This process of proliferation of *jāti* was continuing even to the late medieval and early modern times under conditions of service tenure.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Sambandham* was a system of keeping concubines by the Brahmins with the Nair women mentioned in the inscriptions as *kaṭṭilerutal*. But it acquired the status of a loose marriage since among the Kerala Brahmins (*nampūtiris*), only the eldest male son was entitled to marry from the same community. Thus, all the junior members of the family were forced to have *sambandham* alliance with the Nairs. See M.G.S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, 270.

<sup>36</sup> For a study on a later instance see, F.F. Conlon, 'The Birth of a Jāti', in *Caste in India*, ed. I.B. Dube (Oxford University Press, 2008), 79–92. There are several instances of service positions under British colonialism turning into names of endogamous *jātis*. One instance from Kerala is that of a junior personnel in the army of Malabar addressed as 'boy' (*kiṭāvu*) became a hereditary occupation and subsequently a *jāti* with the name *Kiṭāvu* (literally child in Malayalam). Proliferation of *jātis* continued as a consequence of the colonial practices of classification and grouping as an official activity under the census administration.

Proliferation of *jāti*s within the Brāhmaṇa varṇa was extensive all over the subcontinent. An interesting feature in the case of the Kerala region was internal divisiveness within the Namputiri caste under the Brāhmaṇa varṇa. Namputiris of Vēdic tradition and land control distinguished themselves *ādhyā* with all notions of purity and pollution, from the rest separated as *āsya* almost to the extent of constituting them a separate *jāti* within the *jāti*.

## Arguments

The central argument is that the historical context of the incidence of *jāti* was that of the opening up of deltas for agriculture, integration of agro-pastoral descent groups into hereditary specialists of occupational identity and formation of stratified relations of production transcending kin labour. It appears that the historically evolved coercive power of the seigniorial control had enabled integration of the agro-pastoral descent groups into full-time specialized labourers of hereditary identity as required by the technology of iron plough inevitable for agriculture in the deltas. Emergence of hereditary occupation groups and promulgation of *sāstraic* norms must have been processes of mutuality and concurrence. This was the context of the *Jāti* institution of coercive control and seigniorial jurisdiction over the labouring body for ideologically turning it into the impure and hence inferior in terms of the *sāstraic* norms or as ordained by the Brāhmaṇas in terms of purity >< pollution. Organizational constituents of the *jāti* institution, already present in the varṇa-structured community, seem to have gradually started acting as fetters on artisans, crafts folk and tillers whose control was becoming inevitable in the wake of expansion of agriculture into the deltas.

Other arguments relate to antecedents of the *jāti* hierarchy, discursive dimension of hegemonic Brāhmaṇism, organization of status hierarchy through *sāstraic* prescriptions and service tenure-based proliferation of *jāti*s. A connected argument is that productive relations in the deltas had preconditions such as hereditary occupations, asymmetrical social relations, amenability to differential allocation of status and the dominant presence of the Brāhmaṇas with tacitly recognized ritual supremacy, resource potential, social control, political influence and cultural pre-eminence for the emergence of *jāti* hierarchy. As regards antecedents of *jāti* formation, the argument is that the service personnel under the three streams of juridico-political power streams—the king, local chieftains and the Brāhmaṇas—had laid the foundation of the varṇa-structured society. In the case of the Deccan and further south, it has been argued that even in the age of Sātakaṛṇi and his successors, who took efforts to maintain the varṇa system, the dissolution of the clan/kin base of productive relations into varṇa base had not been advancing, for efforts to cultivate the deltas of the major rivers in the region began only by the mid-first millennium CE. Regarding the situation in the further south, the argument is that the society was not varṇa-structured till the foundation of *brahmadēyas*, which coincided with the process of agrarian expansion along the deltas. A further argument is that the Brāhmaṇas had total hegemony

to prescribe socio-cultural conditions of status and organize its hierarchy with themselves on the top, and Brahmanism had become the dominant discourse in peninsular India towards the end of the first millennium CE. What has been argued in this context is that *Jāti* hierarchy was the discursively engendered outcome, the major fallout rendered plausible by the *sāstraic* mode of social representation and knowledge production. An argument relating to the process of the formation of *jāti* in the wake of the proliferation of *brahmadēyas* is that the Vellālas might have emerged as a landed *jāti* due to their close relation with local chieftains.

As regards proliferation of *jātis*, the argument is that it had been an ongoing process ever since *jāti* became the dominant paradigm of identity construction for occupational groups and service personnel claiming socio-cultural distinction on the basis of their association with the three streams of seigniorial power. Rewarded under land tenure, the personnel in service to the king and the local chieftains became hereditary for stability of service as well as permanence of family landholding. Illustrating the historical experience of the Tamil south in general and the Kerala region in particular, the argument found feasible is that the proliferation of *jātis* happened as a land tenure-based phenomenon under the three seigniorial streams represented by the king, the chieftain and the temple—*brahmadēya* combine, as realized in terms of the *sāstraic* norms. This would not mean that proliferation of caste was solely a service-tenure driven social phenomenon but there was the dynamic of caste exclusiveness too that precluded an easy accommodation of new hereditary occupational groups into the system. It must also have been a compulsion for hereditary occupation groups to be endogamous castes.