

The agraharam:

The transformation of social space and Brahman status in
Tamilnadu during the colonial and postcolonial periods¹

In Madras in 1917, the non-Brahman Justice Party's newspaper compared the Brahman-dominated Indian National Congress to an 'agraharam' (Skt. *agrahāra*, Tam. *akkirakāram*), an exclusively Brahman residential quarter.² Moreover, according to Pandian, 'agraharam' was the commonly used metonym for Brahmin power in colonial Tamil Nadu,³ but how much can be read into this is unclear; maybe critics just wanted a good simile for Brahman monopolistic cliques. Certainly, the rich and powerful Brahmans dominating politics and the nationalist movement at the time were not living in agraharams, but in new houses in Madras, such as the splendid mansions built in prime locations like Luz Church Road in Mylapore.⁴ Admittedly, Mylapore was and is a distinctively Brahman part of the city; nevertheless, Luz Church Road was never an agraharam and we doubt if anyone thought it was.

On the other hand, the journalist who complained about Congress probably thought that many of his non-Brahman readers would have personally experienced abasement in an agraharam and would easily grasp his point. According to Geetha and Rajadurai, who discuss disputes over access to Brahman streets in Madras and an agraharam in a village outside the city,⁵ non-Brahmans in the early 1900s "were angered and irritated beyond measure by such open avowals of superiority".⁶ Indeed, it seems likely that non-Brahmans' day-to-day experience in agraharams may have been a real cause of widespread visceral anti-Brahman feeling, even though other authors – despite some comments about Brahman

¹ Research was carried out among Eighteen-Village Vattima Brahmans in Tippiirajapuram in September 2005–March 2006, in the US in September 2006, and in Chennai and other Indian cities in January–April 2007, August 2007, and January–March 2008; Haripriya Narasimhan did most of the research, although Chris Fuller accompanied her for part of the time. This article was written by Fuller, although we have discussed it together extensively and it represents our joint views. We thank the Economic and Social Research Council, which has supported all the research.

² Pandian 2007: 93–94.

³ Pandian 2007: 101.

⁴ Pandian 2007: 68–69.

⁵ Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: 57–59.

⁶ Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: 61.

'arrogance' –⁷ do not mention it in histories of the non-Brahman movement, which mainly focus on inequalities in education, employment and political representation. By 1917, though, the agraharam as a bastion of traditional Brahman status and power was beginning to be undermined by modern change and by the end of the twentieth century, agraharams inhabited predominantly by Brahmans, let alone exclusively by them, were rare. But they have not entirely disappeared and even today the agraharam is a significant institution in some parts of contemporary Tamilnadu.

The agraharam

The multiple meanings of 'agraharam' and allied terms partly express the complicated history of Brahmans in the Tamil countryside since medieval times.⁸ At least by the nineteenth century, though, the primary meaning of 'agraharam' was an exclusively Brahman residential street or quarter. Moreover, it is probably (though not certainly) the case that in all Tamil 'wet-zone' villages in the river valleys where Brahmans were dominant – 'Brahman villages', for short – Brahmans, both landlords and others, invariably lived in agraharams. An agraharam was spatially demarcated from the *ūr*, the main village settlement area occupied by non-Brahmans; the untouchable Adi Dravidars (Tam. *ātitirāviṭar*) – today's Dalits or Scheduled Castes – lived in separate 'colonies', *cēri*, at the exterior of the village. Agraharams were also found in older urban areas; in Chennai, for instance, mostly rather decrepit agraharams still exist in localities such as Mylapore, Triplicane and Georgetown.

By the early twentieth century, the rural agraharam was an institution starting to decline, as more and more Brahmans were migrating from villages to towns and cities. The scale of Brahman emigration varied among regions; in the Kaveri delta, where Brahman landlords were most numerous and prosperous, emigration was generally slower and later than in the Palar, Vaigai and Tambraparni river valleys, but within any one region there was probably considerable variation from place to place. For nine Brahman villages, there is a significant amount of published evidence; in addition, we have recently collected material on Tippirajapuram and other Kaveri delta villages inhabited by the Eighteen-Village Vattimas (Tam. *vāttimar*), a Smarta or Aiyar subcaste. The information about Brahman emigration in these studies is summarised elsewhere.⁹

⁷ Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: 61–62; Baker 1976: 28; Barnett 1976: 22.

⁸ Stein 1980: 145.

⁹ Fuller and Narasimhan 2008a: 173–176.

The first detailed ethnography of an agraharam, by Gough, is based on fieldwork carried out in Kumbapettai, near Thanjavur, in 1951–1952 and 1976. Not far from Kumbapettai is Sripuram, which Bêteille studied in 1961–1962. These two authors' publications tell us most about what life was like in a still exclusively Brahman agraharam in the mid-twentieth century. Thyagasamuthiram, near Kumbakonam, whose agraharam was in decline, was studied in less detail in 1957–1958 by Sivertsen. There is no detailed ethnography from the pre-Independence period.

In Kumbapettai between 1952 and 1976, Brahman household numbers fell from 36 to 33. The net Brahman decline was therefore small, but there was considerable movement in and out. In 1952, the agraharam was exclusively Brahman but, by 1976, it also contained eight non-Brahman families;¹⁰ in 2005, when we visited Kumbapettai briefly, the agraharam housed only six Brahman families, who were outnumbered by non-Brahmans. In Sripuram, whose Brahman landlords were mostly richer than Kumbapettai's, the agraharam contained 92 Brahman households and had no non-Brahman residents in 1961–1962,¹¹ although many Brahmans were leaving the village. Emigration has continued, but the agraharam has not declined as much as might have been predicted, so that in 2005, Brahmans still occupied more than half its houses. Thyagasamuthiram's agraharam was still exclusively Brahman in 1957–1958, but it contained only 13 households; 30–40 households had left since around 1900, and the "greater part of the [agraharam] is now in ruins".¹² By 2007, only two poor Brahman households remained in Thyagasamuthiram and much of the agraharam was still more or less ruined, as were its Vishnu and Siva temples.

Gough¹³ wrote a compact description of the Kumbapettai agraharam and its restrictions in the early 1950s that we summarise here. Non-Brahman and Adi Dravidar labourers came to the back door of a Brahman house to collect their wages, and Adi Dravidars did not enter the agraharam street – nor of course its temples – at all. Brahmans conversely did not enter the untouchables' *cēri*, not only to avoid pollution but also because Adi Dravidars believed that if they did, the whole of their street would suffer serious misfortune. Brahmans could enter non-Brahman houses and some men did so to have sex with non-Brahman women, but they could not eat in them and had to bathe before re-entering their own homes. Non-Brahmans had earlier been excluded from Brahman houses, but by the 1950s they worked in them as servants, but did not enter the

¹⁰ Gough 1989: 240–245.

¹¹ Bêteille 1965: 26.

¹² Sivertsen 1963: 28, 33, 66.

¹³ Gough 1955: 49–50.

kitchen. Non-Brahmans had also been forbidden to wear footwear in the agraharam or while standing before a Brahman, but at the time of Gough's fieldwork two assertive non-Brahman schoolboys deliberately walked through the agraharam in shoes. Here we may also mention that in Thyagasamuthiram in the late 1950s, similar restrictions applied: untouchable Paraiyars (Tam. *paraiyar*) were debarred from the agraharam street, whereas non-Brahmans could walk along it, but only in bare feet and without carrying umbrellas.¹⁴

By the 1970s, the rules about pollution and caste interaction in Kumbapettai "had become much more attenuated".¹⁵ Thus, for instance, almost all older Brahmans still avoided the *cēri*, but younger men were much less bothered about it. In 1952, house sales to non-Brahmans "would have been strenuously resisted",¹⁶ but in 1976, some non-Brahmans lived in the agraharam and they could all freely move through it; moreover, in the context of a political dispute, the Kallars (Tam. *kaḷḷar*) actually displayed their contempt for the Brahmans by driving their own cattle through the agraharam.¹⁷ By this time, too, children of all castes attended the village school in the agraharam, even though the presence of Adi Dravidar children, who were formerly banned from it, still offended both the Brahmans and non-Brahmans.¹⁸ Thus inter-caste relations were far from harmonious, but, crucially, Brahmans had lost a lot of their former power, so that they could no longer control the other castes' access to their once exclusive agraharam and merely complained. In 2005, as far as we could tell on a brief visit, relations between Brahmans and non-Brahmans in the agraharam were fairly relaxed, but there was antipathy towards allegedly aggressive, disrespectful Dalits; in Kumbapettai, like most if not all villages, Dalits still live in their own colonies and never move into agraharams.

In Sripuram, too, by the early 1960s, the Brahmans had lost many of their former prerogatives. Nonetheless, as Béteille was often told, he was the only non-Brahman who had ever had access to their houses and had eaten in them,¹⁹ and the Brahmans strongly objected to the very idea of non-Brahmans living in the agraharam, usually on the grounds that they eat meat and fish.²⁰ Non-Brahmans never went to worship in the Vishnu temple located within the agraharam.²¹ The village school at one end of

¹⁴ Sivertsen 1963: 35.

¹⁵ Gough 1989: 357.

¹⁶ Gough 1981: 159.

¹⁷ Gough 1989: 325.

¹⁸ Gough 1989: 248.

¹⁹ Béteille 1965: 9.

²⁰ Béteille 1965: 29.

²¹ Béteille 1965: 39.

the agraharam was, however, attended by non-Brahman and Adi Dravidar pupils.²² Brahmins hardly ever entered the Adi Dravidars' *cēri*, and the idea that they could cause misfortune also prevailed in Sripuram.²³ Yet the old order had been sharply challenged. Thus on 26 January 1950, when India became a republic, a local non-Brahman politician took a group of non-Brahmans and Adi Dravidars on a march through the agraharam to the Vishnu temple entrance. It was unprecedented, and the Adi Dravidars' participation "was not only ritually polluting, but it also brought social humiliation on the Brahmins. A decade before the event an Adi Dravida could be tied to a tree and beaten by any Brahmin for a similar offence". On this occasion, though, the Brahmins realised that times had changed and did nothing.²⁴

In 2005, when we visited Sripuram, we met an elderly Brahman widow who was unusually conservative. She had come to live in Sripuram after her marriage in 1946 and had never once been to the non-Brahman central area of the village. Although non-Brahmans first bought or rented houses in the agraharam around 1980, she still disapproved of them, saying that they have dirty habits and that the agraharam's character had disappeared. Her views echoed that of another old lady in Yanaimangalam, near Tirunelveli, where the agraharam now contains only a minority of mainly poor Brahmins, who flatly declared that "this village is now ruined".²⁵ Our informant in Sripuram also reported that the Brahmins have now decided not to sell or rent any more houses to non-Brahmans; we have been told about identical agreements in other agraharams, such as nearby Kalyanapuram, locally renowned as an agraharam that has not declined, where we were told that about 90 houses were still owned by Brahmins (though some are unoccupied) and only about six belong to non-Brahmans. Whether such agreements will hold is uncertain, however, because – as sceptical Brahmins said – many urban residents no longer care about agraharams and sell or rent their empty houses to the highest bidders. Nonetheless, the very existence of the agreements shows how some Brahmins today are belatedly trying to reassert control over agraharams where they retain a significant presence.

Our evidence about the agraharams of the Eighteen-Village Vattima subcaste is consistent with that from elsewhere, for example, in the restrictions on low-caste access and their relaxation during recent decades. As their name indicates, this endogamous subcaste is presumptively defined by the 18 villages in which its members have mainly lived

²² Bêteille 1965: 43.

²³ Bêteille 1965: 35.

²⁴ Bêteille 1965: 152.

²⁵ Mines 2005: 2.

as the dominant group; in fact, almost everyone agrees about 16 villages, but the list is completed by picking from several more.²⁶ In addition to Tippirajapuram, which has been studied in detail, we collected basic data on visits to 16 villages and have some information on a few more. Five or six villages – or more precisely their agraharams – are regarded as the most important owing to the size of their Vattima population and the landed wealth of their leading families. Konerirajapuram was the largest Vattima settlement and it has a famous, ancient Siva temple; Mudikondan has been the richest, at least during most of the twentieth century; the other important agraharams are Anandatandavapuram, Sengalipuram, Tippirajapuram and, less certainly, Vishnupuram. Each of these agraharams used to contain between about 55 and 120 Vattima households; today, the numbers have roughly halved in all of them, although the numbers of non-Vattima Brahmans and non-Brahmans vary considerably. In Tippirajapuram, Brahmans collectively form a large majority of the population, mainly because so many non-Vattima Brahmans live there, whereas Brahmans (mostly Vattimas) are only about half the population in the other important agraharams. In the Vattimas' less important agraharams, their numbers were always lower – between 20 and 50 households – although Tediur was an exception, with around 120 households. In all these agraharams, Vattima numbers have now fallen to 15 or less, sometimes only two or three, and other Brahman households are similarly few in number. Moreover, most Vattima villagers are old; some elderly men have always been agriculturalists and some have retired from urban employment, but almost all middle-aged and younger people are living and working in towns and cities, either in India or overseas. In most agraharams, a lot of old Brahman houses are empty or even ruined. In most agraharams, too, there are not many non-Brahman families, but a very unusual case is Tediur, where nearly 100 Vattima houses have been sold to Muslims, regarded by the majority of Tamil Brahmans as unacceptable residents of an agraharam (in contrast with Christians, who are generally tolerated). In Tediur, though, as the Brahmans and Muslims we met were keen to emphasise, each group attends the other's ceremonies, and relationships between them do indeed appear cordial.

Tippirajapuram

Tippirajapuram is about seven kilometres from the town of Kumbakonam. As already implied, Tippirajapuram is an unusual agraharam because its inhabitants are still mostly Brahmans. The agraharam is a

²⁶ Fuller and Narasimhan 2008b: 736.

square formed of North, South, East and West Streets; a short extension of South Street, Sannidhi Street, leads to the Vishnu temple in the south-west corner. Behind North Street runs the River Tirumalairajanar, a distributary of the Kaveri. The agraharam contains 129 houses occupied by 95 households – the rest being empty – of which 82 (86 per cent) are Brahman, 11 (12 per cent) are non-Brahman and two are of unknown caste. Of the 82 Brahman households, 34 are Eighteen-Village Vattimas and the remainder belong to other Brahman subcastes, mostly Aiyar. Among the Brahmans, the Vattimas are the dominant group, especially the six ‘big families’ (*periya kutumpam*), each with its ancestral house; one was the first Vattima family to settle in the village, but the others have also been there for a long time. Each of the six families used to have large landholdings, although a couple of them lost a lot a generation or two ago owing to extravagant spending. Even today, though, all these old landed families retain much of their ancestral status and respect for them has not faded away. The six families’ ancestral houses are on South Street, whose 31 households include 20 Vattimas, 10 other Brahmans (some actually on Sannidhi Street near the temple) and one non-Brahman. South Street (together with the adjacent ends of East and West Streets) is the pre-eminent section of the agraharam and a key feature of Tippirajapuram is the opposition between it and North Street, where the four Vattima households are outnumbered by 27 other Brahman and five non-Brahman households. Comparable internal status divisions are fairly common in large agraharams.

In Tippirajapuram, South Street’s pre-eminence is reinforced by the location of the Vishnu temple. Tippirajapuram’s Siva temple is in the opposite corner of the agraharam; its side entrance is at the eastern end of North Street, but its front entrance is on the main road running parallel to East Street. In Tippirajapuram, unlike most agraharams, the two temples’ positions actually correspond to an ideal Hindu norm, whereby Siva is in the north-east and Vishnu in the south-west. More typically, though, they also exemplify a distinction found in many agraharams, for Vishnu’s temple can only be approached by walking right through the agraharam, whereas Siva’s is easily accessible from outside it and has therefore always been open to non-Brahman devotees, including those who live in Tippirajapuram’s non-Brahman area on the other side of the main road from the agraharam. This distinction in turn constitutes Vishnu as purer and more Brahmanically orthodox than Siva, who is more closely linked in Tamil popular Hinduism to non-Sanskritic, village deities,²⁷ even though both gods are served by Brahman priests responsible for their Sanskrit liturgy and vegetarian worship. In Tippirajapuram today, the

²⁷ Fuller 1992: 43, 48.

caste composition of worshippers at the two temples is still different, because very few non-Brahmans (and no Dalits) go to Vishnu's temple, whereas many non-Brahmans (and possibly some Dalits) go to Siva's. Incidentally, in a fairly typical asymmetry, for the Brahmans the agraharam alone is synonymous with Tippirajapuram, whereas the other side of the main road is just the nameless non-Brahman streets, but for the non-Brahmans Tippirajapuram comprises the settlements on both sides of the road.

One reason why so few non-Brahmans go to Vishnu's temple is because they have to walk along South Street to reach it. Local people correctly assume that many Brahmans living on this street would prefer non-Brahmans to avoid it, even though they cannot openly object, and most non-Brahmans do not want to be discomfited by disapproving Brahmans watching them from the front of their houses. As far as most Vattimas are concerned, South Street is their street and because they are the dominant group in the agraharam, it is right and proper that this street should be kept as traditionally Brahmanical as possible. The non-Vattima Brahmans on North Street harbour considerable resentment against the South Street Vattimas and have mixed feelings about whether North Street is a better or worse place to live. Some people prefer it because it has a more mixed population and they can be more relaxed about purity and pollution rules, whereas others dislike it for those same reasons. One Brahman woman living on North Street even described it as 'adulterated' by non-Brahmans.

The difference between the two streets is symbolised by their surfaces, for South Street is made of sand and North Street is a metalled road. Partly because it is a through route, North Street was surfaced with tar several years ago, but then the local panchayat decided to surface the other streets as well. The late chairman of the City Union Bank (which was founded and is still mainly controlled by Vattimas), who was then the most powerful man in the village, lived in South Street and successfully objected to the plan to surface it. In 2007, the panchayat actually started to tar West Street from its northern end, but when the road workers neared the southern end, where several Vattima houses stand, including the home of one of Tippirajapuram's richest landlords, the Vattimas got the work stopped. Thus the tarred surface covers only part of West Street and none of South Street (or East Street) has been altered. Sand is preferred partly because it is just traditional, but also because it deters outsiders' vehicles and supposedly encourages people to walk respectfully through the agraharam.

Because it is a through road, all sorts of people use North Street, but the incidents that have caused outrage among both Brahmans and non-Brah-

mans are when Dalit funeral processions have moved along it accompanied by the sound of drums. Many years ago, such a procession would have gone along the riverside path behind the houses on North Street, but it is now blocked with rubbish. It is, however, the drumming, which apparently started in the 1990s, rather than the procession itself, that is regarded as most outrageous. A non-Vattima Brahman living in North Street was discussing the matter with a non-Brahman who is influential in Tippirajapuram; the latter said that surely no Dalit would play a drum in an agraharam, but the Brahman retorted that he had heard someone in the procession shout out for the drums to be played, which he assumed – probably correctly – to be deliberately provocative. When asked by another Brahman why he had said nothing, he replied: “Those days are over. Times have changed. I have no power to say anything.” The crucial feature of these incidents is that both Brahmans and non-Brahmans are equally hostile to Dalits, who are accused of behaving aggressively, and that they also believe that they can do nothing about it. On the other hand, though this is speculation, given that North Street is a metalled thoroughfare with a fairly mixed population, the Dalits themselves may not regard it as a proper agraharam street.

On some land close to the Siva temple at the end of North Street, which a non-Vattima Brahman had sold to a non-Brahman, a developer planned to build a ‘marriage hall’ (*kalyāṇa maṇṭapam*). Vattimas, led by the rich landlord mentioned above, successfully took legal and other action to block this plan, so that in 2007 a shopping complex was under construction instead. The main objection was that crowds of non-Brahmans, with their ‘dirty’ habits, would come to the hall and cook meat there for wedding feasts (although in fact they normally serve vegetarian food on these occasions). The state of South Street, however, concerns the Vattimas much more and – following an initiative by the late bank chairman – they have ostensibly agreed (as in Sripuram and Kalyanapuram) not to sell any of its houses to non-Brahmans. The chairman’s son, now a leading figure in Tippirajapuram, said that even though Vattimas in the agraharam are selling land, they are not selling their houses, preferring to keep them closed, although at least one elderly Vattima expressed scepticism about whether an agreement to refuse to sell to non-Brahmans could last. On the other hand, a non-Brahman on West Street did say that his attempt to buy a Brahman’s house on Sannidhi Street had been thwarted by the owner’s mother, who flatly declared that they would not sell to non-Brahmans, even if they were vegetarians. Sometimes, to mollify Brahmans, non-Brahmans who buy agraharam houses claim that they will not cook meat in them so that they

remain pure; in Tediur, even some Muslims are said to observe this restriction.

Although many houses in Tippirajapuram are unoccupied, none have fallen down and the agraharam is unusual in having no ruined buildings. Many houses largely retain their original design, although some have had internal modifications. A traditional Tamil house is typically long and narrow; it has a relatively small frontage on the street, but behind the front door it extends a long way. At the front is a veranda (*tiṅṅai*); the door at the back of the veranda opens on to a courtyard (*mittam / muttam / muṟram*) partly open to the sky, surrounded on three sides by a hall (*kūṭam*). At the back of the hall in a corner is a cupboard – the domestic shrine or ‘puja shelf’ – containing small images or pictures of the deities. Behind the hall is the kitchen and behind that is the ‘second portion’ (*reṅṅām / iraṅṅām kaṭṭu*), a storeroom for food known as the ‘daughter-in-law’s room’. At the rear of the house is a yard with a well, bathrooms, and an area used for cooking large festive meals. Behind the rear section are a cowshed and a garden, extending to the far end of the site, where there is a back door. In a large house, there may also be extra rooms off the hall, a separate shrine room, a separate granary, and so on; the biggest houses have an upper storey as well.²⁸

In the past, the space of a Brahman house was clearly graded according to its relative purity, as well as markedly gendered. The veranda, outside the front door, was the least pure area, where visitors, including non-Brahmans, were received. In Vattima houses in Tippirajapuram until fairly recently, men mainly stayed on the veranda and in the hall, and only went into the kitchen to eat. Women remained in the kitchen, the storeroom (especially daughters-in-law) and the back half of the house. The kitchen was also the pure centre of the house, which was closed to anyone of lower status, including members of the family suffering pollution, especially menstruating women who were secluded in the back yard. As women did not go to the front of the house, they had to use the back door, like low-caste servants visiting their Brahman masters.

Today, the rules about access to Vattima houses, and about male and female space within them, are much less strictly observed than they were. For example, women as well as men now frequent the hall and courtyard, and sit on the verandas chatting and watching people go by, but, as older women recall, this never happened a generation or so ago. Menstruating women are no longer confined to the rear of the house and can sit in the courtyard, although they do not cross the threshold into the street. Most women regard their increased freedom of movement as a definite improvement on the past. Many Vattimas today also have non-Brahman

²⁸ Narasimhan n. d.; cf. Reiniche 1981.

servants who enter the kitchen, which they formerly did not, and non-Brahman visitors are no longer restricted to the veranda. As a foreigner, Fuller was initially surprised to be invited to look round many Vattima houses, sometimes including the kitchen; in a few houses, he has even eaten in the kitchen. In contrast, he was rarely invited into the homes of Brahman temple priests in Madurai in the 1970s or 1980s, although this altered in the 1990s, at more or less the same time as among the Vattimas.²⁹ Another notable change is that people now rarely use the back doors and the lanes running behind the houses, except for menstruating women and girls, who may go to work or school by leaving at the back. Mostly, though, the lanes have become overgrown and filthy, unlike the streets that are kept clean.

Notwithstanding the significant changes that have occurred, today's visitor to Tippirajapuram, especially South Street, enters an agraharam that is more visibly 'traditional' than most because it is still predominantly occupied by Brahmans who want to keep it that way. Quite a lot of non-Vattima Brahmans in Tippirajapuram used to live in agraharams now taken over by non-Brahmans. They moved to Tippirajapuram because they want to live in a place where Brahmans are the majority; Brahmans, they say, are peaceful, intelligent, well-educated, clean in their habits and devout, and they care for their temples. Some non-Brahmans in Tippirajapuram also prefer to live there for the same reasons; thus a Chettiyar (Tam. *ceṭṭiyār*) widow living on East Street said she liked the 'peace' and 'spirituality' of the agraharam, and another Chettiyar couple on North Street praised Tippirajapuram as "calm" and "good for the children's future", although they added that the Brahmans "still hate us", even if they pretend otherwise. The Chettiyar widow's daughter and her husband are the only non-Brahmans on South Street, where they manage the primary school in a house there. They have adopted a Brahmanical outlook themselves, so that the wife, unlike other non-Brahman women in Tippirajapuram, observes menstrual pollution strictly, insisting that it would be wrong not to do so, because a menstruating woman should not walk on the agraharam streets.

Not everyone in Tippirajapuram accepts all this at face value, however. The village is full of gossip and many critics of the Vattimas, both Brahmans and non-Brahmans, castigate them as hypocrites keeping up appearances, claiming that a lot of men on South Street drink alcohol inside their houses. Stories about Vattima men (and even occasionally women) having affairs with non-Brahmans also circulate. It is impossible to tell how much of this gossip is well-founded. Perhaps more significantly, some people in Tippirajapuram blame the Brahmans, especially

²⁹ Fuller 2003: 67 f.

Vattimas, for breaking their own purity rules – for example, by letting non-Brahman servants into their kitchens – and thereby allowing the *agraharam* to decay. Some of these conservative critics are actually non-Brahmans, who say that Brahmans should know the importance of adhering to their own rules in order to preserve the *agraharam*'s way of life.

As Vattimas all acknowledge, however, the greatest threat to Tippirajapuram's survival is not broken purity rules, but emigration by Brahmans who are selling land and giving up agriculture, and instead pursuing educational and employment opportunities in urban areas. Among the 85 Vattimas resident in Tippirajapuram in 2005–2006, there were only three children under 16, whereas 51 men and women were aged 60 or over. Among the 155 other Brahmans, however, there were 29 children and 34 people over 60, so that the demographic position is more balanced. In their other villages, the Vattimas' situation is generally worse and prognoses for the future correspondingly more pessimistic; as one woman in Anandatandavapuram put it, her *agraharam* has no daughters-in-law, so that it will be extinct in the next generation. The economically active children and grandchildren of elderly villagers are almost all living and working in Chennai, other towns in Tamilnadu, other cities across India or overseas, especially America. In this respect, Tippirajapuram is distinctive only because, in the rest of the Vattima villages, emigration occurred earlier and on a greater scale, though Tippirajapuram has also seen more immigration from non-Vattima Brahmans, mainly because it is conveniently close to Kumbakonam. Yet Vattimas as a whole do retain stronger village roots than many, if not most, Tamil Brahmans. The Eighteen-Village Vattima subcaste is small and still overwhelmingly endogamous,³⁰ which contributes to its survival as a distinct group, but many Vattimas assume that because their subcaste is defined by its villages, its viability would be seriously threatened if all their villages – especially the most important ones, including Tippirajapuram – ceased to be Vattima settlements entirely. But not all Vattimas agree or care; many living in urban areas, especially outside Tamilnadu, are not particularly concerned about subcaste endogamy and have no interest in village life. Younger urban women especially tend to dislike villages, which they see as too conservative and restrictive. Among the Eighteen-Village Vattimas, there is therefore a lot of debate about the value of their *agraharams* and rural life, but those still living in villages are particularly preoccupied by the issue.

³⁰ Fuller and Narasimhan 2008b.

Temple renovation rituals in Tippirajapuram

One important consideration is that even urbanised Vattimas living far away normally retain familial links with their ancestral village's Vishnu and Siva temples. As is common throughout Tamilnadu, the costs of temple rituals are met by dividing them into a series of shares, typically defined by days of the month or within a festival (for example, daily worship on the first day of every month, or all rituals on the second day of a particular festival). Sponsorship of a ritual share (known as a *maṅṅa-pappaṅi*) is a right belonging to a particular individual or family and is inheritable. In Tippirajapuram's temples, there are no shares without sponsors (and hence none available for newcomers) and all Vattimas guard their shares jealously, as they also do in other villages, including those where hardly any Vattimas now live. Hence numerous Vattima emigrants send money to relatives or temple priests to pay for rituals in their ancestral villages, so that links to temples survive even when land and houses have been sold. The practice in other agraharams varies; for example, in Thyagasamuthiram in 2007, one of the resident Brahmans was still receiving money for rituals in the decrepit Siva temple, whereas in Kumbapettai by the 1970s, some festivals in the Vishnu and Siva temples were no longer celebrated because emigrant Brahman sponsors sent no money for them.³¹

The significance of temples is prominently displayed in renovation rituals (*kumbhābhiṣeka* / *kumpāpiṣēkam*). Especially since the early 1990s, these grand and expensive rituals have been celebrated in numerous temples, large and small, throughout Tamilnadu.³² Ideally, renovation rituals should be held every twelve years, though the interval is often longer. In Tippirajapuram, they were held for both temples on one weekend in February 2008: Vishnu's on Friday and Siva's on Sunday. (Previous renovation rituals had been held for Vishnu's temple in 1978 and 1995, and for Siva's in 1891, 1919, 1940, 1952, 1973 and 1996.) There are minor differences between renovation rituals in Vaishnava and Shaiva temples, and in small temples the rituals are shorter and simpler than in major ones like the Minakshi temple in Madurai.³³ The fundamental structure, however, is always the same: the divine power (*śakti*) within the temple's images is transferred into water-pots; a series of oblations (*homa*) into sacrificial fires is made in order to generate power that is conducted into the water; at the end of the ritual – the *kumbhābhiṣeka* itself – the pots are emptied over the temple's towers

³¹ Gough 1989: 355.

³² Fuller 2003: 120–125.

³³ Fuller 2003: 7–18; Fuller 2004.

and pinnacles, and the images inside it, so that the enhanced power in the water flows back into those images.

For this article, the participants in the renovation rituals, rather than the rituals themselves, are most germane. First of all, money is important, because this must be raised to pay for the repair and redecoration work, as well as the rituals, in advance. An elderly, well-respected Brahman who is not a Vattima is president of the Vishnu temple committee in Tippirajapuram and he was one of the first people to donate a large amount of money; a few other non-Vattima Brahmans and a handful of non-Brahmans in Tippirajapuram gave smaller sums. All Tippirajapuram Vattima family members, wherever they now live, were asked for large donations and they gave freely, especially the younger people living in America, so that the amount raised was around 25 lakhs (Rs 2.5 million), considerably more than the total cost of around 18 lakhs. Publicly, Vattimas said that they were glad to receive donations from anyone, but at least some non-Vattimas claimed that actually they were not, because they wanted complete control over the renovation rituals. The Vishnu temple, it should be mentioned, is a private temple owned by Vattimas. The Siva temple is a public temple controlled by the Tamilnadu government's Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, but as far as the Vattimas are concerned, they are still in charge; in practice, the HR&CE Department did nothing for the renovation except give formal permission for it.

The committee in charge of the money and renovation contracts was chaired by a Vattima, but the most prominent figures at the rituals themselves were three other Tippirajapuram Vattimas: the rich landlord who has already been referred to, an engineer and company director who has recently retired and alternates his residence between a house on South Street and another near Tiruchchirappalli, and the younger son of the late bank chairman who is himself a bank executive residing in Kumbakonam, although he visits Tippirajapuram regularly where his mother still lives on South Street. At each key ritual, these three men – or sometimes the late chairman's elder son, whose seniority afforded him precedence over his younger brother – took the primary roles as patrons of the fire-sacrifices or leaders of the processions carrying the water-pots; after the water had been poured to complete each renovation ritual, they went in procession with some of the water to their houses. In other words, according to a template that is standard in Tamil temple rituals, these Vattima men assumed the 'royal' role of ritual patron, the classical *yajamāna*, and also received the 'honours' (*mariyātai*) that are a patron's due.

The three men's prominence relegated other Vattimas to a secondary place, which not all of them were happy about, but for the Vattimas as a whole, the conduct of both renovation rituals manifested their complete, well-organised control of events, as well as their pre-eminence in the agraharam. All this was reinforced by the presence of at least 130 Vattimas, mostly relatives of Tippirajapuram residents, who travelled from Chennai and elsewhere to attend the rituals, as well as by the free meals that were provided every day to demonstrate Vattima generosity. At the celebrations of Radha and Krishna's marriage, the Radhakalyanam, at which men danced in the Vishnu temple on the Saturday morning, and of Parvati and Siva's marriage, for which women brought her wedding presents on the Sunday evening, Vattimas also took the leading roles. Of course, Vattima pre-eminence displeased many other people in Tippirajapuram, especially North Street's non-Vattima Brahmans, very few of whom ate the free meals amid complaints that they were never properly invited and were not really welcome anyway. Significantly, too, the non-Brahmans who attended the rituals, in greater numbers in Siva's temple than Vishnu's, always sat or stood behind the Brahmans, and in this context their lower-caste status was unmistakably displayed. It was particularly plain at the ritual performed by Brahman women only, mostly Vattimas, to protect Parvati and Siva from the evil eye by throwing rice over their images, which they did before giving their wedding presents; many non-Brahman women watched this ritual, but none could take part, even though a few gave presents. All in all, by the end of three days of renovation and marriage rituals, Vattima control over the two temples and Vattima dominance over the agraharam, as well as the 'big man' status of the three leading figures, had been publicly displayed and reasserted. As we have seen, this did not please all Eighteen-Village Vattimas, let alone all other Brahmans in Tippirajapuram, although all of them, even if vicariously, were parties to a collective assertion of Brahman prerogative in an agraharam that has not declined like so many others have.

Conclusion

Until the early twentieth century, when the 'great exodus' of Tamil Brahmans that "transformed a rural class into an urban class"³⁴ was under way, the majority of Brahmans – especially high-status, wealthy landlords – lived in rural agraharams. In Brahman villages in Tamilnadu, social space was hierarchically segmented into three parts – Brahman

³⁴ Dupuis 1960: 51.

agraharam, non-Brahman *ūr* and Adi Dravidar *cēri* – with a sharpness hardly found anywhere else in India, except in parts of coastal Andhra Pradesh. Moreover, Brahmans were in many respects above and apart from the society constituted by the non-Brahman bulk of the population, so that in key respects Brahman superiority was formed not by unequal relationships with inferiors, but precisely by their independence from inferiors.³⁵ In a different way, of course, untouchables were below and apart from the rest of society. As Bêteille's monograph³⁶ most plainly showed, caste – or more precisely these three caste groupings and the relationships or non-relationships between them – were mapped on to and constituted by the space of the village with a firmness and clarity that could have escaped nobody living there.

Rural Dalits still live in their own colonies, but agraharams, as exclusively Brahman spaces, have disappeared, so that one fundamental dimension of a rural social structure that had probably lasted a millennium practically collapsed during the twentieth century. Heated arguments between the caste groups about the 'making of public space' had been going on in Tamilnadu since the early twentieth century, especially in urban contexts.³⁷ In villages, though, change was most marked after Independence. Then a semi-private Brahman space became an increasingly public multi-caste space, as non-Brahmans started to walk along agraharam streets freely, with or without footwear; Dalits followed suit and began to go to the front doors of Brahman houses, although for many years older Dalits in particular remained reluctant to walk through agraharams. Non-Brahmans also gained access to Vishnu temples inside agraharams, although many still do not worship there, and Dalits hardly ever do. (In some agraharams, Brahmans reportedly closed the Vishnu temples, rather than open them to non-Brahmans.) Sooner or later, non-Brahmans (but not Dalits) started to live in agraharams; all agraharams now have some non-Brahman residents and in many they outnumber the Brahmans. Brahmans have also progressively relaxed restrictions on non-Brahman access to their homes, so that private domestic space has become relatively more open, following the conversion of the agraharam's streets into public space.

The primary cause of this social transformation in villages has been urban migration, as more and more Brahmans have been 'pulled' to the towns and cities by new opportunities in education and salaried employment, and 'pushed' by indebtedness and land sales, exacerbated after Independence by land reforms, as well as by their self-proclaimed

³⁵ Cf. Fuller 1992: 18.

³⁶ Bêteille 1965.

³⁷ Geetha and Rajadurai 1998: 51–62.

inability to turn themselves into modern, efficient farmers. After Independence, too, Brahman political power in rural areas was undermined by the rise of the non-Brahman movement. Nonetheless, the post-Independence pressure on Brahmans came after many of them had already left the villages, so that their own falling numbers were a critical factor in their loss of power. Also salient, of course, is the general process of 'secularisation', whereby Brahmans and others have become less and less preoccupied with ritualistic caste and purity rules, not only in towns and cities but also, though rather later, in villages as well. Overall, though, in the history of Brahman villages since the beginning of the twentieth century, the most striking feature is not lower-caste resistance to inequality and exploitation, but the way in which Brahmans themselves overwhelmingly brought about the decline of their agraharams. In so doing, they dissolved the spatial segregation that was so vitally constitutive of their hierarchical superiority within rural society.³⁸

Tamil Brahmans as a whole are now a predominantly urban and indeed urbanised community, and many of them retain little if any connection with their ancestral villages, so that the Eighteen-Village Vattimas are unusual in doing so. Furthermore, outside the Kaveri delta region, only a few villages with a sizeable number of Brahmans probably exist today, although the available evidence is too scanty to be sure. Even within this region, Tippirajapuram is an unusual agraharam because its Brahman population is still so large, although this may remain the case owing to Tippirajapuram's proximity to Kumbakonam, which attracts Brahmans working in the town who find it a convenient place to buy or rent accommodation. Among the Eighteen-Village Vattimas' agraharams, Tippirajapuram is exceptional, too, because it is still clearly dominated by the subcaste, but even the most optimistic Vattimas, like the young bank executive, do not expect their dominance to survive for longer than one more generation. The more numerous pessimists think it may end sooner, as hardly anybody will come back to replace the old people now living there, although a few urban Vattimas might conceivably retain their houses as country homes, a possibility now being discussed by some urban, middle-class Brahmans.

In a few other Vattima agraharams without large Vattima populations (e. g., Kundalur, Maratturai, Molaiyur, Puliur), temple renovations have been undertaken recently, sponsored by city-dwellers originally from those places. Throughout Tamilnadu, it is now common for temples in agraharams (e. g., Kalyanapuram), as well as in non-Brahman villages, to be renovated at the expense of migrants from the villages or by the latter's descendants, who may never have spent any time at all in their

³⁸ Fuller and Narasimhan 2008a: 176.

own 'native places'.³⁹ In Tippirajapuram, though, the renovation rituals in February 2008 were in part an assertive demonstration of continuing Vattima and Brahman status and power in the agraharam today. This assertiveness has to be understood in relation to the Brahmans' position within Tamilnadu, which has generally been enhanced since around 1990, partly because for a variety of reasons anti-Brahmanism has been declining as a political force, but also because economic liberalisation and globalisation have benefited the urban middle class amongst whom Brahmans, including Vattimas, are very well represented. It is in this broader context that Tippirajapuram's Vattimas, easily able to raise money for the renovations, could try to show that they are there to stay, committed to the two temples and unwilling to sell any more houses to non-Brahmans, at least in 'traditional' South Street. If the pessimists among them are correct, these manifestations of Vattima assertiveness in Tippirajapuram, which are paralleled in some other agraharams like Sripuram, should probably be seen as a last gasp of the old regime, but they nevertheless show that – despite the Tamil Brahmans' transformation into a migratory, urbanised population, as well as all the other changes associated with modernity – the agraharam as the grounded, physical expression of age-old Brahman claims to caste superiority is not yet extinct.

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³⁹ Gough 1989: 249 f.; Mines 2005: 128–129.

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