

# Chapter 1

---

## We Don't Talk Anymore

As soon as we hear of human groups which separate themselves, distinguish themselves, isolate themselves fiercely from one another, we believe we know what we have to deal with: very well, we think, we know about this, it is rather like what we do as individuals, these castes resemble our precious modern persons, they are just so many little societies shut in on themselves and juxtaposed as we are juxtaposed to our fellow men in modern society. Well, nothing is more false. The caste isolates by submission to the whole, like an arm which does not wish to marry its cells to those of the stomach.

—Louis Dumont 1980:40–41

When I returned to Somatur around 5 p.m. yesterday bunches of neem leaves were hanging upside down above the doorway of all the houses, including mine. Additional bunches were tucked under shingles or, if the roof was thatched, between layers of palm leaves. Ordinarily quiet, the village's main street resounded with loud agitation. No one paid attention to me, which was unusual, for at this early phase of my fieldwork my comings and goings were always a source of curiosity. My next door neighbor, Ranjini, greeted me and before I could ask her the cause of the general commotion, she launched into the following explanation. "Last night," she said speaking very fast, "the conductor of the bus going to Mēl Malaiyanūr [a temple town located 12 kms from Somatur] realized

that he was short a fare. He asked the driver to stop and proceeded to check every passenger's ticket. [The full halt of this bus is common practice; the route to Mēl Malaiyanūr is invariably crowded and the conductor needs extra time to collect all the fares]. The conductor realized that a woman veiled like a Muslim had cheated. She did not respond when he ordered her to buy a ticket. Losing patience, he removed her veil and saw that her face was covered with smallpox pustules. The sight of her cheeks so swollen and putrescent frightened him so much that he fell unconscious. Alerted by the ensuing tumult, the driver fended his way to the scene. He too saw the woman's pustules and fainted. No one else beside these two men saw the woman's face but she was heard to say in an angry voice: "I have been insulted. I'll come to the houses of those who do not hang neem leaves above their threshold." Then she disappeared. At this point Ranjini instructed me that it was the goddess Māriamma herself who had spoken like this, which did not surprise me for I knew that in Tamilnadu this goddess is said to personify what we call "smallpox."<sup>1</sup> Now I understood why bunches of neem leaves were hanging everywhere: no one wanted to defy Māriamma's warning. Somatur, November 17, 1991

The rumor continued to spread and thirteen days later on December 1, the following article appeared in the Indian Express of the Union Territory of Pondicherry about 85 km away from Gingee:

Rumours of "Māriamma's wrath" scare villagers  
Pondicherry, Dec. 1: (UNI):

The people of Tirukkenur, Villiainur and surrounding villages in the Union Territory are in the grip of a fear of divine wrath falling on them, following a wild rumour that goddess 'Mariamma' was seen around.

It all started on the morning of November 16 when someone claimed that a woman with "eyes all over her face" was seen wandering in these villages. The rumour spread like wildfire.

Meanwhile, there was another rumour that a priest near Vilupuram had a dream of the goddess saying that "one thousand eyes" (another name for the goddess) would be coming to the earth.

Soon there was a rush for neem [margosa] leaves (said to be a favourite of the goddess). Villagers started putting neem leaves at

the door steps of their houses. Shops and vehicles are now displaying the leaves while school children keep bunches in their pockets. People are frightened to come out during the night and cinema theatres get very thin attendance.

For a good two weeks afterward, many of the four thousand villagers that make up Somatur were pondering these rumors. Who was the priest who had the dream? Did anybody else in the bus see the woman's pustules? Where did she go? Has she come back? Not everybody, however, was "in the grip of a fear of divine wrath." Many of the big shots—the local leaders and high-caste landlords—suspected that the rumors had been planted by political parties in order to divert attention from the tumult that followed the fall of the Prime Minister V. P. Singh's government.

In trying to decide whether this incident was genuine or not, the people of Somatur came to form something as close to a community as I ever saw in this village. Of course, if we define this word community, as anthropologists Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing do, "in terms of (i) common interests between people; or (ii) a common ecology and locality; or (iii) a common social system or structure" (2000:61) Somatur had it. After all, for all intents and purposes the villagers needed one another to produce food, they dwelt in the same habitat and interacted according to socially sanctioned codes of behavior. But if we define community instead as a society of fellowship, an association based on feelings of solidarity and mutual responsibility, Somatur did not have it. At least for the remaining eleven months of my stay there, I never again heard the villagers talk about the need for collective cooperation and social support.

I did not immediately realize that I had landed in a divisive society. On the contrary, the moment I arrived I felt I had moved into a rural idyll. Somatur seemed to have the same sense of neighborhood that supposedly exists in many villages around the world. The back alleys provided countless opportunities to meet residents and chat with them on the threshold of their houses. I had found a haven. The idea of fieldwork I brought with me added to the illusion. Life among Tamil villagers was to be my opportunity to know a South Indian people, descendants from an old civilization no less, and to do so over conversations about Friday pujas, marriage feasts, rice plantings, village dramas, new year celebrations, burials, folk tales, exorcisms and so on. I did not assume that the people who made a point of gathering almost everyday in my house for coffee, correcting my Tamil pronunciation and filling me in on local news, were as eager as I was to meet and talk. But I did not imagine either that had I not put my guests in

that situation, they would not have socialized together. I do not think I fully appreciated then that all the mixing of castes (or *jātis*) in my residence went against the grain of local custom.

Overtime some cracks began to appear. One day I came home to find that my next door neighbor (Ranjini, who happened to be closely related to my landlord) had built a cement wall in the back courtyard so that it blocked access to a vacant lot that apparently she alone owned. There was quite a lot of shouting while the angry landlord inspected the wall but his threat of petitions and legal papers and further impending acts of hostility did not bring it down. Nor did it take me too long to get the hint that no one in the village (*ṁ*) liked me to host, even less feed, low castes and untouchables. The criticism got worse gradually; then I received a direct forbidding. I also began to understand that most of my visitors, even my favorite visitors, had enemies, in fact worse enemies and that the category friendship was a precarious one. At least as far as I could tell, the daily gatherings in my household produced no long relationships. At the beginning two young men did seem to hit off. One joined the DMK party to be like the other one. The two were best friends. But by the time I left 14 months later it was unclear that they still kept company. In fact, by that time I was mostly alone. My visitors did not seem to have time to drop by anymore.

Just as telling as my memories of the relationships that unraveled in my household are my notes on Somatur's main castes. I say "main" because I did not get to know everyone in this village. I did not have the chance, for instance, to engage, with the seven Muslim families who lived at the far end of the main road. I had little contact with the local castes of shepherds, potters, and carpenters. The Nāyūṭus, who spoke among themselves a dialect of Telugu that was unintelligible to the other villagers, never made themselves available to me. Nor did I manage to befriend the swineherds, a poor, marginal group that resided in its own cluster of huts and sold pig manure to the farmers as fertilizer. For the most part, I socialized with those individuals who had something—information (historical, social, ritual, and so on) or domestic services or both—to sell me. Thus it was the Singhs, Ceṭṭiyārs, Gounders, washermen, barbers, Dalits, and tribal-like folks that I mostly got to know.

In one main respect the information I have on these castes, which roughly made up 80 percent to 85 percent of Somatur's population, confirms Dumont's model of caste hierarchy (1980). These castes were divided and ranked on the basis of known (or at least imputed) purity levels, with so-called clean castes ranking higher than unclean castes. But my notes also suggest that the society of Somatur was (and probably always

had been, as I also suggest in this chapter) less obsessed with hierarchy in the Dumontian sense of being high on the scale of purity than with precedence (*mutalmei*). The goal in Somatur was to come first and get first respect (*mutal mariyātai*).

In Tamilnadu, the prototypical occasion for the receipt of first respect is the local festival which is when *prasāda*—or the substances (such ash, flowers, milk, ceremonial rice, fruit, and so on) given to worshippers only after the deity has touched, worn or consumed them—is produced (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976; Appadurai 1981; Dumont 1986; Mines 2005). According to Eveline Masilamani-Meyer, the person who is first to receive *prasāda*, “stands closest to the deity, can worship the deity first and receives the blessing of the deity first” (2004:176). “Receiving [this] first respect,” she states further, “translates into a blessing or acknowledgement from the deity of that person’s power” (2004:177).

The person so honored is often a “big person” (*periya āl*), or in Masilamani-Meyer’s words, “the most important person” (2004:176). She points out, however, that the qualifications for importance are seldom agreed upon so that those who have wealth, political power or superiority in the hierarchy of purity and pollution often contend for the prime and coveted right to receive first respect. Masilamani-Meyer’s further observation that “the fight for first respect can lead to a physical fight; many festivals are cancelled because of the rivalry for first respect” (2004:177) is consistent with my own notes, which describe how Somatur’s villagers ferociously struggled to receive first respect at virtually every step of festivals. They fought not merely over the privilege to receive first *prasāda* but over the right to first carry the ceremonial pot, first sacrifice a goat, first fulfill a vow, and so on. As I have documented elsewhere, even funerals became opportunities for men, including untouchable men, to compete for respect (Clark-Decès 2005) so that it is fair to say that in Somatur of the 1990s, standing and prestige was more importantly determined by one’s capacity to command “firstness” (*mutalmei*) than by anything else, including one’s position in the hierarchy of purity and pollution (see also Dirks 1987:290).

I am not merely talking, however, of ceremonial *mutalmei*. During my fieldwork (and I suspect for quite some time before), most castes in Somatur actively pursued firstness not only before temple deities but before the state and before just about anything and anyone for that matter. Castes struggled to come first in those government census categories that come with entitlements and benefits, in courts, in electoral politics, and in everyday life. The competition for administrative, legal and social precedence produced complex, variegated and deeply ironic discourses of caste

ranking. But whether they upheld caste divisions or dismissed purity rankings, all these discourses inhibited the formation of fellowship between persons of different (and even same) caste status. The Tamil village in which I lived in the 1990s was a splintered, disassembled society, one that was ominously divided.

### THE MAJOR CASTES OF SOMATUR

My guess is that 75–85 percent of the population of Somatur then made a living as cultivators. 3–7 percent kept livestock. 3–6 percent worked as carpenters, blacksmiths, barbers, washermen, potters, goldsmiths and priests. There were two grocery stores, two teashops, a cottage industry of pop rice, a bicycle repair shop, three tailors, one doctor, and one schoolteacher.

To say that agriculture was the principal economic activity does not mean that everyone made the same living. Some people owned nothing and their entire subsistence derived from working for others for very meager daily wages. Those who owned parcels of land as large as 50 acres supervised farm work on their estates without tilling the land themselves. The majority of people occupied an intermediate position, owning on average 1–7 acres per household, in which case the quality of their land determined their livelihood. If they possessed “wet” (*nañcai*) or “garden” (*tōṭṭam*) land (land irrigated by watercourses or wells), they operated a three-crop system. Throughout the year they grew the most prized cereal crop or paddy, varieties of millet and/or cash crops like onions, chilies, plantains or groundnuts, pulses of various kinds. If they owned rain-watered or dry land (*puñcai*), they produced much less as their crops depended directly on rainfall most of which falls during the northeast monsoon between October and December. The rest of the year these less fortunate farmers cultivated for the big landlords so that Anthony Good’s observation that in the Southern part of Tamilnadu “the distinction between ‘landowners’ and ‘labourers’ is by-and-large temporary and reversible” also applies to the area around Gingee (1991:24).

One hundred years ago, caste membership and status in Tamilnadu roughly correlated with land ownership: the Brahmins who number only 2.5 per cent of the state population were the largest landowners and the great majority of the untouchable castes were the landless laborers (Kapadia 1995:8). The correlation was not exact, for all castes have members that are poorer or richer than the caste average, but in general, Tamil Brahmins enjoyed a social and economic superiority over people of other castes

unmatched in most other regions of India (Fuller 1999:31). This was especially the case in the fertile river valleys and rice-growing regions of the state where many Brahmins were once great and powerful landlords.

Today the picture is very different. The long lasting and powerful anti-Brahmin campaign launched by the Dravidian movement in the beginning of the twentieth century has effectively destroyed the Brahmins' social and political dominance.<sup>2</sup> Their assets in the rural areas considerably diminished when the Fixation of Ceiling on Land Act of 1961 "limited land ownership in normal circumstances to 30 standard acres for a family of up to five members, five more standard acres being added for each additional member" (Kapadia 1995:188, citing Gough 1989:22). Those Brahmins who did not have enough kin to whom they could nominate their land, or who could not apply for partial or total exemptions from this Act, were forced to break up their estates. Many Brahmin landlords sold out altogether and migrated from the country to the towns (Fuller 1999:33).

The Brahmins of Somatur were never great landlords, so the Land Ceiling Act did not affect them. They lost whatever estates they once had in 1970 when the government opted to regulate tax-free land (*inam*) that precolonial kings and other local rulers used to grant Brahmin families (and in some parts of Tamilnadu village officers) as recompense for religious (and administrative) services. Thus in exchange for conducting regular and festive worship in one of the most important Viṣṇu temples in the area—also the most striking architecturally—the Brahmins of Somatur had enjoyed hereditary possession of agricultural fields since 1700. For all intents and purposes this land was theirs except that they did not formally own it. By the time the regulation of 1970 gave them the opportunity to register it as private property, the numerically dominant caste of Gounders protested, arguing that the *inam* granted to the Brahmins circa 1700 was formally their land. This was a time of considerable social unrest in Tamilnadu, especially in South Arcot, and the Brahmins did not press their case. Settling with the Gounders out of court, they left the area for good. By the time I arrived 20 years later there was not a single Brahmin family residing in Somatur.

## The Singhs

In the absence of Brahmins, the highest-ranking villagers in Somatur were the descendants of Raja Desing, the region's last precolonial ruler, who died in battle on October 3, 1714, fighting the superior military force of

the Nawab of Arcot, to whom he had refused tribute. Because I initially intended to understand local modes of historical production, the Singhs, with their direct connection to a medieval heroic king and his fortress visible from any location in Somatur, greatly interested me. The closest I ever came to a spontaneous and genuine interpretation of this legendary past, however, was when I requested an old widow, herself a descendant of the illustrious Singh lineage to show me a small monument (*tī pantal*) on the outskirts of Somatur. According to the villagers, it commemorated the sati or self-immolation of the wife (or for some the mistress) of Raja Desing's uncle. Perhaps anxious that I would not understand the significance of this historical structure (at the time my language skills were limited), this woman proceeded to reenact the death of her ancestress. Stepping in the footprints molded in cement, which presumably retraced the path that her relative once had taken to the burning pyre, she leaped and fell as if dead. But she had staged this historical and dramatic event as a farce, laughing at that woman who in previous times had sacrificed her life.

The more recent past was no laughing matter for the Singhs, particularly the elderly Singhs, who talked with great energy and enthusiasm about the days when they were the center and power of their village. As a Singh man born in 1939 evoked these days:

When I was a young boy, seventy to eighty Singh families resided in Somatur. We were so many that there were at least two or three streets called 'Singh.' We were so powerful that the [untouchable] village watchman (*tōṭṭi*) would kneel down before my father and address him as 'Maharaja.' To be Singh was to be "king." Now to be Singh is to be nothing. The Government has robbed us of the revenue land (*māṇiyam*) given to us by our ancestor Raja Desing, and this has forced many of my relatives to move to Madras. There are just a few of us still living in Somatur and we are all struggling.

It is possible that land reform legislation had forced the Singhs to relocate in large numbers in the cities. But if the possession of televisions and motorcycles was an indicator of economic advantage in the 1990s, the six Singh families then still living in Somatur were still better off than many other villagers. Perhaps because they had Aryan pedigrees (their ancestors had come to Tamilnadu from North India in the later part of the seventeenth century) they also ranked the highest on the local caste hierarchy. To be clear, though, the Singhs were not Brahmins but Rajputs, that is descendants from a Hindu warrior elite caste (or Kṣatriya) that in North



India fills out the social ranks between the Brahmins on top and the Vaiśyas, Śūdras and Harijans who comprise the mass of the population.<sup>3</sup> By the time I met them, however, the Singhs had long ago adopted key features of the Brahmin lifestyle, for example, strict vegetarianism and the taboo on widow remarriage. Like the Brahmins, they did not accept food from other castes, avoiding all contacts with untouchables, and so on.

They were not alone. To my surprise, all castes in Somatur had Sanskritized themselves to various degrees, to use the term coined by M. N. Srinivas (1956) to describe non-Brahmins' emulation of the various observances linked to ritual purity. I say "to my surprise" because, after all, Tamil non-Brahmins have spent most of the twentieth century challenging the Brahmins' disproportional representation in positions of power and authority. While the worst manifestations of this opposition had abated by the 1990s, anti-Brahmin sentiment remained deeply entrenched in Tamil cultural discourse (Fuller 1999). In Somatur at least everyone I knew was always ready to ridicule and revile and rebuke the Brahmins for their pretensions to purity and superior status. The ever-feisty Gounders were especially quick to mimic the stereotypical Brahmin persona and its prejudices. And whenever the conversation turned to the subject of the Brahmins, they never failed to ask me in a joking way: "If you meet a Brahmin [*pāppu*] and a snake [*pāmpu*], which should you kill first?"

Anthropologists who have also heard this pleasantry<sup>4</sup> know full well that while the Tamils joke and rally against the Brahmins, they continue to practice Sanskritic culture in the same way perhaps that non-Americans (even anti-Americans) consume American popular culture. As Christopher Fuller notably observes, "Brahminical cultural values have not been comprehensively displaced by non-Brahminical ones, and they retain a supremacy in the ideological domain that Brahmins themselves have largely lost in the social and political domains" (1999:35). That may be true, but my notes on the Singhs and other castes of Somatur suggest that in the early 1990, "respect for Brahminical values" (Fuller 1999:37) no longer guaranteed social precedence.

That year the Tamil government of the chief minister, Kalaingnar M. Karunanithi, had increased the quotas in educational institutions and government offices for members of so-called backward or lower castes to 50 percent.<sup>5</sup> This new reservations policy de facto limited the Singhs' and other such forward castes' venues for education and employment. The Singhs' reaction was shocking. They disclaimed the particular attribute that qualified them as a forward caste: namely their illustrious martial ancestry. Arguing that the prestigious title of Rajput was merely colloquial, they

petitioned the state for the right to be reclassified as Bondil, after the place from which their ancestors came from, Bundelkhand in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The Singhs of Tamilnadu reasoned that since the Bondil community of Bundelkhand was classified as backward, the Bondil appellation would entitle them to the same census category along with the services and places in professional colleges that came with it. To further their claims, the Singhs formed the Bondil Association of Tamilnadu, which, according to the secretary of the then called South Arcot district branch, included approximately 5 thousand life members. As far as I know, however, this association did not succeed in redefining the Singhs as a backward community in the government census. But the example does throw interesting light on the flexibility, even volatility, of supposedly immutable caste identities in the charged context of contemporary political-economic systems.

### The Ceṭṭiyārs

In the 1990s, the Singhs were not the only forward or upper caste to compete for the backward status in order to profit by the reservation. At the time of my fieldwork, the Vellāḷars, Mutaliyārs, and Nāyūṭus of Somatur were engaged in what a major Indian newspaper called “the rat race . . . for the backward tag” (Indian Express 9/19/1987). Not that these castes were poor. As their names suggest—Vellāḷars means “those in control,” Mutaliyārs “those who have capital”—they wielded effective power in village economics and politics. But they wanted the same privileges as those reserved for the backward castes. Only the prosperous Ceṭṭiyārs seemed the least resentful, and least concerned, by the reservations.

Like other Tamil members of their caste, the Ceṭṭiyārs of Somatur patronized a cultural and social order that put high value on devotion to Sanskritized deities such as Śiva and Viṣṇu and the ritual powers of the few Brahmins still servicing local temples (Nishimura 1998; Rudner 1994). They donated money for temple renovations, village festivals, and gave good food to the poor on the autumnal festivities of Deepavali. Some of the Ceṭṭiyār families also continued to honor the old structures of redistribution that were once part of the day-to-day moral economy. For these reasons the Ceṭṭiyārs, more so than any other forward castes, commanded deference and respect. Such loyalty, in turn, secured their election to the key administrative positions of Somatur.

For all practical purposes then the Ceṭṭiyārs were the wealthiest both in terms of land and cash, and they controlled the village Panchayat. But

there was a virtual quality to their form of dominance (Srinivas 1955:18). For one thing, save for ceremonial occasions and harvest times, when they returned to collect their share of the crop, the Ceṭṭiyārs were less visible than the other castes. The men left the village for long periods of time in order to manage their businesses or for money lending activities. The women spent many weeks visiting relatives in towns both near and far where their children studied. When in Somatur they would only leave the open central courtyards of their large houses for worship at local temples, especially on Fridays.

Moreover, the Ceṭṭiyārs remained somewhat aloof and disconnected from the real-politics of the village as Yuko Nishimura also noted of the Nagarattars of Çhettinadu (1998:32). They did not intervene in cases of intercaste conflicts. They did not seek to arbitrate the endless disputes regarding land tenure, agricultural labor and wages. Nor did they seem to manipulate the local political parties catering to caste interests. It was as if the Ceṭṭiyārs had a very particular conception of power, one that put a higher premium on making money, keeping in touch with close kin, and worshipping the gods than on legislating or dominating the village. In fact, at the time of my fieldwork they had entrusted the least responsible of their kinsmen—a drunk who was inebriated from morning to night—to lead the village Panchayat (municipal assembly). This man, who also happened to be quite young, was so base that the Ceṭṭiyārs lost the subsequent political election to the Gounders. But the loss of the local electoral vote did not seem to fret them. Very little about village politics actually seemed to concern them. The issues that rallied them were the management of temples' treasuries and the procurement of first respect at festivals.

## The Gounders

The caste with the highest political profile in Somatur was not very rich, but it was the most numerous. The Gounders, who were ever ready to turn their numerical superiority into political dominance, accounted for 40–45 percent of the total village population. Agricultural laborers or small farmers, the Gounders were not as well off as the Singhs and Ceṭṭiyārs described above.<sup>6</sup> They were also lower, ranking in the middle rather than first level of caste hierarchy. At the time of my fieldwork the Gounders did not seem to care about their relative inferiority to the Singhs and Ceṭṭiyārs. But colonial records suggest that throughout much of the nineteenth century they had fought for a higher social status.

British censuses registered the Gounders—known then as Paḷḷis—as Śūdras or low caste agricultural laborers. The Gounders must have resented this classification for as early as 1833 they asked to be given the more prestigious title of Kṣatriya (or Rajput), which, as stated above, was used for warriors like the Singhs. To support their historical claims to martial, and therefore higher caste, origins, the Gounders argued that under the Pallava dynasty they had served soldiers (Thurston vol. 6 1987:12). They also asserted mythic traditions that had them born of fire, a symbol of war (also see Hildebeitel 1988:34). Then, in the late nineteenth century, they adopted both the name Vanniyaṛ (which derives from the Sanskrit word “fire”) and a flag symbolizing the blazing pot of their birth. Finally, they Sanskritized their behaviors, forbidding, for example, their widows to remarry.

The Gounders’ petition for the Kṣatriya title was never granted, so that in the latter part of the twentieth century they became entitled to all the benefits that come with the census category of backward caste. In respect to these benefits the Gounders were then in a more advantageous position than that of the higher Brahmins, Singhs, and Ceṭṭiyārs who received none. They were not, however, the first caste to get seats in professional colleges and government jobs. More backward, especially the scheduled (or untouchable) castes preceded them. Around 1970, therefore, the Gounders began clamoring for fixed separate quotas in reservations for themselves. To this end they formed an association, the *Vanniyaṛ Caṅkam*, that grew to be so visible, vocal and aggressive that eventually the government of Karunanithi allocated them 20 percent of the 50 percent reservation system. The association was not content to leave it at that. In 1980, its new leader, Dr. Ramadass, contended that the percentage of reservation for each caste ought to be in direct proportion to its percentage in the backward population. Since the Gounders made up 30 percent of the total backward population in Tamilnadu, Ramadass argued that 30 percent of education and employment opportunities ought to be reserved for his people. When the government ignored his demands, Ramadass organized *bandhs* (literally stand-still, closure) that blocked the transport communications systems, some of which ended badly, as in the fall of 1988 when 36 Gounders died in a clash with the police in the South Arcot town of Viluppuram.

Three years later when I arrived in South Arcot the Gounders were still organizing weeklong road blocks, assailing police stations, and damaging public properties. Such violence never erupted in Somatur itself but it was the stuff of daily conversations at the village tea stall. The other topic was the Gounders’ resentment against the impoverished Paṛaiyaṛs, or untouchables, whom they depicted as the real beneficiaries of the reservation

system. The competitiveness between these two castes created conflicts on a regular basis. Not that the Gounders of Somatur ever attacked the Paraiyars or set their huts on fire as was reported from elsewhere in newspapers. But often they did try to block the Paraiyars from getting the educational benefits and jobs reserved to them by the government. Or they would remind the Paraiyars of their inferiority, denying them for example the right to walk in the village, and this despite the fact that by 1990 it was illegal to discriminate against untouchables. In short, the Gounders did everything they could to remain above the one caste that most threatened their relative dominance in the village.

## The Service Castes

In the past, Tamil landowning and agriculturist castes were connected to service castes through economic and ritual exchanges. The men, for example, would have their hair cut, beard shaved and fingernails trimmed by a barber. Families would have their pots made by a potter, furniture built by a carpenter, tools provided by a blacksmith, clothes washed by a washerman and so on. Then at harvest time members of service castes would get a stipulated amount of grain (*mērai*) from their patrons, receiving their respective fixed shares right after the grains were threshed and winnowed.<sup>7</sup> Payments would also entail a little food each day and obligatory presents (often of money and cloth) on ceremonial occasions.<sup>8</sup>

Service castes were ranked according to the nature of their work. The purer the work, the higher the status. Thus, the Brahmin priests who serviced the local Sanskritized temples came first and the barbers and washermen who handled impure bodily substances (hair, nails, soiled cloths, and so on) last. Since in the Hindu world there is often a correlation between status and income, the higher the caste ranked, the better it was remunerated.

To a wealthy member of a land-owning caste this so-called *mērai* economy was, “a way of providing work and an income to people who did not have land.” This man was not alone in invoking notions of philanthropy. Describing the customary remuneration of the barber and the washerman, a Ceṭṭiyār told me, “Everyday we used to give food to these people, it was a way to help them, a form of charity (*utavi*).” This man acknowledged that such charity was not entirely altruistic. Keeping service relations, he went on to explain, was of crucial importance in determining membership and high status in the village. The practice of giving alms on a daily basis also conferred benefits in the other world: “the families who fed their servants went

to heaven after death.” Yet this Ceṭṭiyār emphasized that such worldly and otherworldly benefits were costly, even burdensome. This was because relationships with service castes entailed responsibilities and obligations of clientship that had to be met in both good and bad times.

When I arrived in Somatur the *mērai* economy had collapsed and it had practically disappeared by the time I returned to the area ten years later. In the villages surrounding the town of Gingee very few landowning families continued to employ service castes in exchange for a share of the harvest. This was partly due to the introduction of new goods and technology. When villagers can use safety razors to shave, buy imported plastic dishware and use electric pumps to obtain water, they become less dependent on barbers, potters, and washermen. But other and deeper factors were also at stake.

Service castes were leaving the villages to market their skills in nearby small towns such as Gingee. It was not difficult to find out the causes of their departure. As a washerman told me in 1999:

I left my village ten years ago because *mērai* was not enough. For a whole year of service they [the families that contracted his labor] would give me two measures (*marakkāl*) (about 8 kg) of paddy. In the morning they would give me a scoop of porridge and at night a scoop of rice. Do you think I could feed my family on that little? I have three girls, one of whom is not yet married. I need more than that. Not only these people didn't compensate us well but they also treated us poorly. They weren't home when we showed up or they made us wait, we had to beg to get them to loan us a rupee or two. We were at their command and that was demeaning. This is why my brother and I opened a laundry shop in Gingee. Here we work as we like. And we work for cash. It is better for us. We do not have to go to people's houses; they come to us. And no one can scold us if we are late; people just have to wait. In town we are free and we make more money. We are in a position to demand respect, and we can insist on it. We are happy here.

A barber also based in Gingee gave me a similar explanation:

Our family stopped working on a *mērai* basis about twenty years ago. At first my father was reluctant to leave the village and open this barber-shop. He kept telling us, ‘The services provided in exchange

of *mērai* give us a kind of prestige that money can't.' My father was also proud of the fact that we, barbers, are in charge of funerals. He used to tell us, 'we are like sons (*kuṭipillai*) to the villagers, we carry out last rites the way sons perform their parents' funerals.' But my father could not make a living from *mērai*. He used to get three measures (*marakkāls*) (about 12 kg) of rice a year from every patron. It was not enough to live on. Now that we work for wages (*kūli*) we earn more. We are no longer slaves, working in fear of our bosses. We are free, no one bothers us, and we make more money.

Not all service castes were able to market their skills in the new cash economy. The washerman of Somatur, for example, ended up joining the ranks of the very poor in the city of Chennai. But the landowning and farming castes generally insisted that all *kuṭimakkal* (these family children, who had once been dependent and subordinated) were now prospering at their expenses. The Gounders, in particular, saw it as entirely unfair that they had to labor in the fields when barbers and washermen were "getting fat in their shops." They also resented the high fees these two castes commanded for their old caste-based ritual services. Nor did they understand why an increasing number of washermen and barbers were not willing to help out at funerals anymore, and this "no matter," as one man put it, "how much you pay them." But when I asked one barber to explain why he stayed home when Gounders called on him in times of death, the response was immediate: "Why should I do this kind of disgusting (*aciṅkam*) work; I am not lower than them."

## The Dalits

Finally, the caste that all others ranked as beneath themselves was the untouchables or Paraiyars, also known during my research as Harijans, or "S. C.," for "Scheduled Caste." Residing in their own separate compound (*cēri*) on the outskirts of Somatur, where no one from the village (*ūr*) ever went, the Paraiyars had lived like serfs in the past (also see Delière 1997:146). In 1990, they still formed the main agricultural labor force of the village but by then they were not attached to landowning families through hereditary relationships, they earned their living as daily salaried workers. Some Paraiyar families owned some land (or some livestock) but of small acreage and of poor quality. Others had benefited from the reservations to Scheduled Castes (a category below that of Backward Castes) in

education and public employment, and one household at least had replaced its old thatch-roofed hut with a nice brick house. But on the whole Paraiyars, who made up roughly 12–15 percent of the population—a statistic that made them the most numerous caste after the Gounders—were struggling and very few of their children even finished primary school.

Like the barbers and washermen described above, in 1990 the younger Paraiyars of South Arcot villages were beginning to demur from the impure tasks that were once incumbent on their caste. They did not want to skin (and remove) animal carcasses, tan leather and make shoes, drum at festivals, dig graves or cremate the dead. They also protested the persisting discrimination against their caste, increasingly asserting their newly won constitutional rights to walk, travel, eat, worship wherever they wish, and attend schools (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998:39–40). By 1999, when I came back to South Arcot [which had then become the Viluppuram district], some of these young Dalits, as untouchables then preferred calling themselves, were not merely assertive but aggressive.<sup>9</sup> Refusing to be called by their old caste name “Paraiyar,” they sometimes retaliated against those who did not show them respect.

For their part, caste-Hindus resented the Paraiyars’ change in status from ex-untouchables to scheduled castes. They were also adamant in their feelings that the Dalits were becoming too arrogant. “What is wrong with these people these days?” a sixty-year-old Gounder man asked me, “Why do they all seem to think that they are equal to us?” Such feelings periodically erupted into confrontations, as when the Gounders reminded the Dalits that unless they had work there, they were not welcome in the *ūr*. The Paraiyars of Somatur resented the rude way in which they were treated, sometimes punishing the villagers by not showing up to work on the agricultural fields. But they could not strike for too long for they were poor and needed their wages. With respect to these dynamics Somatur was not an exception. In many South Arcot villages, relative superiority mattered very much when it came to the Dalits.

### THE URGE TO COME FIRST

Now, the easy reaction to all this talk of castes, their aspirations, manipulations, and their rivalries is that it has to do with a specific moment in history, a time when the world of South Indian villages was modernizing and everything was changing. The past was long gone; the modernizing democratic state and the global economy had destroyed the institution



of caste at the village level. As a result, what I was documenting in Somatur was not a social world as it could have been, and indeed was once in the past, when the world was premodern and everything was clearer or at least more fixed. I was merely recording how the village of Somatur was coping, or rather not coping very well, with disruptive, disintegrative, and psychologically disturbing changes: the rise of anti-Brahmanism, the reservation system, the emergence of class consciousness, the recent legislated eradication of untouchability and so on. In many ways this is what my informants themselves were telling me. As the headman of a nearby village put it, "The people in Tamilnadu feel that they live in a time of big change." And he was not alone in lamenting that, "We do not think that traditions should change, but there is nothing we can do about it. The government is against tradition."

Yet, though all this is true enough, it is also not so simple as that. It may be that something called modernity, for the lack of a better word, has a shape, trajectory, and force of its own. It may also be that modernity's main institution (the secularized democratic state) and capitalist economy (the market) have reshuffled the organization of caste and, by implication, the terms of intercaste engagement in the Tamil world. But I cannot concede that caste in Somatur as I recorded it in the early 1990s was a dramatically changed, and in effect new, institution. The historical perspective that I have on this village shows that much of what is going on now was already going on before.<sup>10</sup>

Recall my reason for hurling myself into this village in the first place. Originally I set out to explore how the people of Somatur narrated, interpreted—in short, made sense of—the past. In all honesty I should say that this inquiry did not go very well. Ordinary folks did not seem to have ever given much thought to any category inclusive of the history of the village. They also had vague and fuzzy notions of when and where their ancestors came from. As for the big shots of the village, their understandings of the past derived from books of dubious sources, many of which were so infected by the plots and chronological conventions of old-fashioned Western historiography that I did not see the point of recording them.

My research was more successful when it touched on the annals of the old hereditary village titles and positions. Perhaps because here history was enmeshed with narratives of first respect, the records had not slipped out of memory. One of my frequent guests, for example, an elderly Gounder man, had occupied the office of treasurer or tax collector (*māṇiyakkāran*) from 1949 till 1980 when the Tamil government abolished all hereditary posts so as to stop castes from monopolizing the same administrative

functions. According to this man, however, the modern state was not the first entity to contest his and his lineage's right to collect taxes in Somatur and another village located one kilometer away. He showed me legal papers that documented how, in 1907, the Brahmins of Somatur petitioned for the right to collect taxes in these two villages. Since my friend's grandfather was able to prove that his forefathers had exercised the position of local *māṇiyakkār* from generation to generation for the past three hundred years, the court judged in his favor.

I collected more evidence suggestive of the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century the villagers of Somatur manipulated the Anglo-judicial system and its alien legal language to appropriate coveted titles and offices. They used the colonial court for other purposes as well: to change caste categories in the British census, acquire a neighbor's land, contest a particular caste's (or lineage's) honorific right to subsidy a certain rite in a temple or a particular festival day and so on (also see Appadurai 1981). To me such evidence indicates that by 1900 the society of Somatur was operating on the same logic as it did when I lived on its main street 90 years later. Whether in colonial or ethnographic times villagers of Somatur exploited all available venues—the British court system, the post-Independence land and administration reforms, the government's reservation policies, modern democratic politics and so on—to come first and have more privileges than others. Call it hierarchy, call it dominance or simply precedence, but the yearning to outrank everybody else was surely one of the most remarkable manifestations of Somatur society, then as now.

The urge to come first led my village friends to operate within a particular logic of comparisons and contrasts. They were constantly appraising you and what you had—and their evaluation brought out predictable forms of social and emotional engagement. If you had less (status, relatives, land, work, power, money, reserved seats, health) than they did, they might pity or commiserate with you. But if you had more of the things that makes one feel especially good in rural Tamilnadu—wet land, well-married daughters, educated sons, stocks of rice, nice clothes, and of course first respect at festivals—they felt the emotions (*kurai; aṅkalāyppu*) that fuel the Tamil language of funeral laments (Clark-Decès 2005). They felt slighted, shortchanged, inadequate or disappointed or they despaired that others were doing better. They felt so bad, as one man put it that, “they did not like you and they wanted what you had.” They felt so bad, he added, that they would rather destroy their possessions than have you benefit from them.

In this world of appraisal nothing seemed more pleasurable than to put down or slander those who had a special advantage over someone else, such as the anthropologist. I would be talking to one woman, for example, but then right after she left, someone warned me that she could not be trusted. Or I would enjoy talking to a man about something, to be told immediately afterward that it was not right of him to steal wood from the village's common grounds, or that he was a womanizer. I did not systematically record these behaviors, which I did not always identify as data, but my headnotes are filled with memories of neighbors vilifying each other. They would warn me not to leave any belongings in my room when such and such a person came, since he or she was sure to steal them. But the visitors themselves always reminded me to lock everything I had in my big metallic bureau "because you could not trust anyone around here."

### WE HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON

The antagonism, the defamation and the endless other ways in which the villagers of Somatur competed against each other are only one aspect of Somatur society. Another side, very likely resulting from the inveterate competition, was the way in which they created not just differences but walls between themselves.

The most extreme example of such behavior involves a social group in Somatur that was not incorporated at all in village life. I am referring to a tribe-like caste, known as Tēnpaḷḷi, which resided far from any main road, on the edge of the forest, near the southern boundary of the village of Somatur. No one knew where the Tēnpaḷḷis came from, not even the Tēnpaḷḷis themselves, but colonial records suggest that these people are related to the Irulas of the Nilgiri Hills and that they have resided in South Arcot for at least a century (Thurston 1987 vol. 2:382). This is how the British Superintendent of this District described them in 1906. "The Irulas of South Arcot," Mr. Francis wrote, "are chiefly found about the Gingee hills, talk a corrupt Tamil, are very dark skinned, have very curly hair, never shave their heads, and never wear turbans or sandals. They dwell in scattered huts—never more than two or three in one place—which are little, round, thatched hovels, with a low doorway through which one can just crawl, built among the fields. They subsist by watching crops, baling water from wells, and when times are hard, by crime of a mild kind. . . . They are perhaps the poorest and most miserable community in the district. Only

one or two of them own any land, and that is only dry land” (in Thurston 1987 vol. 2:389). A century later the Tēnpall̥is of Somatur were not much better off. Not welcome in the village, where they had the reputation of being dishonest, dirty, and overly fond of liquor, they foraged for forest products such as bark, roots, wild fruits, beeswax, tamarind seeds, gum, firewood, and especially honey (*tēn*), after which their caste is named. They sold their products in the weekly markets around the town of Gingee.

My main contact with the Tēnpall̥is living near Somatur was with a healer named Suresh. Close to fifty years old when I met him, he was a handsome man with blue dot tattoos on his forehead and long hair that he tied in a knot that hung low down his neck. After experiencing a powerful vision of a goddess, named Kāṇṇiyamma (Virgin Lady), he had been able to convince the village Panchayat to let him construct a small sanctuary roofed with palm leaves on the village commons located next to the field where he first saw “Ammā.” When I met him, he had presided in this homemade shrine for more than 15 years over the worship of this goddess, entering states of trance whenever clients arrived for consultation.

Suresh’s initiatory experience was similar to that of some seven other Tamil village men and women who told me that they had been instructed in their new calling by various visions of the South Indian goddess during moments of personal crisis or severe illness (Nabokov 2000). But Suresh’s style of séance was very particular. Whereas these other practitioners began by embodying their goddess, dressing up like her, for example, or touching one of her emblems and waiting for her essence to suffuse them, Suresh never tried to personify Kāṇṇiyamma, and his style allowed for minimal dialogue with clients. His seance instead consisted of asking Kāṇṇiyamma to see what was written, and such request left little to discuss. Since personal fortune was inscribed and therefore determined, bargaining for a lesser fate was out of the question. Once Suresh reported somewhat mechanically, word for word, what his goddess had read, there was nothing left to say.

There is reason to suspect that Suresh’s style of trance is a caste trademark. In 1909, Edgar Thurston noted that in the South Arcot district the “[Tēnpall̥i] . . . indulge in soothsaying . . . (and) in case of sickness, people of all classes come to consult the [Tēnpall̥i] fortune-teller” (1987 vol. 2:390). Thurston also observed that, “The Tēnpall̥i . . . will only tell fortunes close to his hut, or near the hut where his gods are kept” (1987 vol. 2:390). This sense of localization seemed the same in 1991, for Suresh would not invite his consultants inside the little thatched hut that sheltered his deity. Instead he motioned them to sit opposite him on freshly

swept ground outside this shrine. Then he would fasten a bell anklet to his own right foot and light sandalwood and neem twigs brought by his wife. When the fire was hot and steady he grabbed his drum and tightened its membrane of male goatskin over it before commencing a steady beat. Soon he was singing so rapidly that he had to gasp for air between the words. Meanwhile his wife kept feeding the fire to keep Suresh shrouded in smoke. Edgar Thurston noted the same marital collaboration. As he wrote, "Closing his eyes, the [Tēnpaḷḷi] beats the drum, and shakes his head about while his wife, who stands near him, sprinkles turmeric water over him . . . unties his kudumi (tuft of hair) [and] . . . praises Kāṇṇiamma . . ." (1987 vol. 2:391).

The point of this discussion is not merely to suggest that Suresh's archaic style of séance had its roots in an old caste tradition. My point is that his séance was also symbolic of his caste's relation, or rather lack of relation, with the other castes. I am not only talking of social ostracism. While the Singhs, Gounders, and even the untouchables kept the Tēnpaḷḷis out of their world, Suresh himself was exclusive. From his own accord he was reluctant to socialize and identify with the new class of religious entrepreneurs that, like him, claimed direct empowerment by the goddess in the professing of divining speech (Nabokov 2000). He had no interest, he assured me, in witnessing how twice a week (generally Tuesdays and Fridays), these practitioners, who came from all castes, personified their goddess in order to solve their petitioners' problems or extricate them from troubled, personal bonds. "Why should I care what these people do?" he would ask and then answer, "I don't know them. We have nothing in common."

Of course, it is unfair to read too much into this statement. After all, Suresh is a holy man, who is more at ease communicating with the goddess than with human beings. And to the degree that this Tēnpaḷḷi man has never participated in the exchanges and ritual relationships of the old *mērai* economy, he is not exactly representative of caste society. But Suresh's attitude ("Why should I care what these people do? We have nothing in common") was nevertheless typical of the castes I interacted with in Somatur. The six Singh families still living in Somatur saw themselves as having a social identity that was separate from that of other castes. The Ceṭṭiyārs living on the main street were a self-contained group. When in town, their daily social intercourse was with immediate neighbors and close kin. Consequently, they had little to do on a daily basis with the Gounders who were centered on the streets that lay to the north to the village. As for these Gounders, they often spoke very disparagingly of the Dalits and the seven Muslim families residing in the village as dirty, and

“of bad habits.” I want to emphasize, however, that the divisions were not merely between castes. Partitions and factions also existed among members of the same caste, as the Gounders on the north side of the village did not speak to the Gounders living on the eastern edge of the village. Once, when I asked a teacher residing in the nearby town of Gingee why so many people in Somatur did not seem to get along with each other, he told me: “People are very touchy around here. It is in their blood. They are very touchy about very small things, which is why they overreact and get emotional.” By “emotional,” this teacher did not mean a big explosion of anger, although he did not exclude that either. He said: “When there is a problem between us [people around here], we won’t talk (*pēcumarton*) anymore. The relationship is finished. You are dead to me.”

In the end, it is this attitude of “nothing in common,” “we won’t talk anymore,” and “you are dead to me” that leads me to suggest that Somatur was no more a mere totality than a community. Instead of an “encompassing” (one of Dumont’s favorite words) or integrated social whole, Somatur was a loose hodge-podge of social groups that either acted as if they were unrelated to one another, or defected whenever they could not come first, as perhaps the Brahmins had done some 20 years before. The only sense of community or entity I experienced there occurred during the two weeks that villagers of Somatur debated the risks of a smallpox epidemic. But no sooner had the smallpox rumors disappeared than the walls of caste resurfaced. The competition for reservations resumed and the Gounders returned to their relentless bullying of the Dalits.