

## Culture

**Kathleen GOUGH, *Rural Society in Southeast India*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1981, 458 pages, U.S. \$44.50 (Cloth)**

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is a “facade” (p. 159), or “puffery”, serving to disguise the “true” nature of ritual (and here they verge on ethology), dismisses an entire dimension of human endeavor with a single stroke. What is missing is an acknowledgement that shared symbols and beliefs are also cultural material, meaningful resources which, like yams or pigs, can be manipulated for political ends. How else could these rituals achieve, even partially, the goals which the authors propose for them? However novel and stimulating their approach, the fact that ritual may be political is neither new nor surprising; but that it should be only political, is.

This controversial book adds fuel to a number of existing debates, on gender and politics, materialist and non-materialist concepts of culture, ritual and social organization. Despite my reservations it is a welcome addition, not to be ignored.

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This is the first volume of what will be a two volume study on socio-economic change in Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu. As Gough (p. 407) points out, the book is primarily a descriptive account interspersed with theoretical insights. Indeed, this book is very informative with highly readable and candid accounts of village life in rural India. Unfortunately, the theoretical insights are at times confusing, perhaps because Gough uses Marxist terminology without showing how her definitions of social classes were constructed from analysis of the relations of production which are described in Chapters 3, 4, 11 and 20.

The book is divided into three sections and covers developments in the region up to the mid 1950's. It is based on field work carried out during 1951-53 in two villages of Thanjavur—Kumbapettai and Kirippur—and represents over thirty years of anthropological work and experience in India.

Part I analyzes the political economy and background of Thanjavur as a whole. It includes a detailed description of the transformation of pre-capitalist relations under colonialism, the resulting changes in the class structure and organization of production, and an account of the roots and activities of the post-Independence political parties.

Gough attributes to pre-British Thanjavur an Asiatic mode of production, characterized by self-sufficient villages jointly held by kinship communities of land managers, who governed the village peasants

and slaves; and cities that were primarily religious, royal and military encampments. Gough maintains that even in the absence of private property in land, classes did exist. “The main classes appear to have been the state class, the state servants, the commodity producers and merchants, the peasants and the slaves” (p. 408).

The author provides a general profile of the changes which occurred in the district between 1771 and 1860 — the introduction of bourgeois property relations, the destruction of traditional crafts, the development of a cash/market economy based on the export of rice—while surplus was siphoned off for primitive accumulation at the centre. The village community began to break up as land passed into the hands of non-traditional owners. Tenancy became individual and contractual rather than communal and hereditary. As absentee landownership increased, sharecropping declined and was replaced by fixed-rent tenancy. After slavery was abolished in 1861, indentured and later ‘free’ labour migrated to British plantations in Ceylon, Burma, etc. Thanjavur developed a virtual monocrop economy with 77% of the workforce engaged in rice production, and there was a marked increase in the number of casual day labourers. It would have been helpful to have had more information on the organization of labour on the large temple and monastic estates and to know how they were incorporated into Gough's data, since, together with the private estates, they comprise about one-half of the district land.

Part II turns to the micro level and describes Kumbapettai, a village in northwest Thanjavur traditionally owned and governed by Brahmans. The focus is on the political economy of the village, particularly changes in the caste and class structure.

As in Beteille's work (Beteille, A., *Caste Class and Power. Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), Gough effectively shows how new sources of wealth brought about a non-alignment of caste and class, e.g. the emergence of a new group of Non-Brahman commodity producers and traders who owned land independent of the traditional Brahman landlords. The Brahmans' dominance began to decline as a result of: the growth of absentee landownership; fragmentation of landholdings; family bankruptcies; the departure of Brahmans for the cities; and the replacement of hereditary relations between master and servant by modern labour relations which were short-term and contractual.

Gough gives a good description of the growth of political parties and voting patterns, but one is left wondering how the event of Independence, and particularly universal adult suffrage, affected social relations in the village. The new values introduced by the anti-Brahman D.K. party and the Communist

movement strengthened the Non-Brahman's resistance to the traditional caste/class hierarchy. Nevertheless, the Brahman landlords continued to dominate the village in the 1950's even though their economic and political control was no longer as extensive as it used to be. They still managed over 60% of the land and Gough tells us that the landlord's power "rested ultimately on their ownership of private property and on the armed might of the state that upheld it" (p. 337).

Chapter 17 describes fourteen cases of the punishment of crimes through village 'justice'—vivid accounts which make Kumbapettai and its inhabitants come alive—illustrating the continuing ability of landlords to exercise power and the struggle of Non-Brahmans to throw off Brahman control.

In Part III Gough explores the conditions under which traditional authority is maintained or broken down. She is particularly interested in factors which give rise to agricultural labour unions, and gives a general account of the Communist movement in East Thanjavur. She highlights similarities and differences between Kumbapettai and Kirippur, a village in east Thanjavur. Kirippur was a Non-Brahman village without a single dominant caste of landowners in the 1950's. In contrast to Kumbapettai, Kirippur's Adi Dravidas organized themselves, joined the Communist movement and an agricultural labour union and struck for higher wages. Although the poorer of the two villages, Kirippur's class structure was less polarized, having a greater percentage of landowners, less tenants and more migrant labourers and non-agricultural wage earners than Kumbapettai.

In Chapter 18, Gough takes an observation made by Beteille on the relationship between labour force composition and class action and tests it on material from Thanjavur in 1951, 1961 and 1971. Beteille felt that the Communist movement in Thanjavur district was strongest in areas where the landless or near-landless agricultural work force was most numerous and homogeneous with respect to caste (Beteille, A., *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974). Gough's material supports Beteille's observations, and she tells us that the prominence of agricultural labourers who were Adi Dravidas was probably the central factor contributing to the strength of the Communist movement in East Thanjavur (p. 341).

In her final conclusions, we find a good example of the type of statement which has caused difficulty for this reader throughout the book. In taking up the question of why Kirippur's Adi Dravidas were organized into a labour union while Kumbapettai's were not Gough says that:

In some respects Kirippur... did not conform to the caste/class profile noted by Beteille... Only 36% of the

villagers were Adi Dravidas as against 43% in Kumbapettai. Only 61% of the villagers were semi proletarians, compared with 73% in Kumbapettai. (p. 418).

This reader finds the above statement confusing for two reasons. Firstly, there is no apparent relation between Gough's statistics and Beteille's observation. What we need to know is whether the landless or near-landless agricultural work force was more numerous and homogeneous with respect to caste. An attentive reader can extract this information from Tables 20.2, 20.13 and 20.14. We see that 40% of the villagers in Kirippur lived exclusively by selling their labour power as annual or casual agricultural labourers as compared with 35% in Kumbapettai. In Kirippur 83% of these landless labourers were Adi Dravidas as compared to 76% in Kumbapettai. This information tends to support Beteille's class/caste profile. Secondly, confusion arises from Gough's use of the term "semi proletarian" which is defined several different ways in the book (for example see pages 65-66 and 260), none of which have anything to do with the concept as originally developed by Arrighi and Saul (Arrighi, G. and Saul, J.S., *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973).

Gough says in her introduction that she hopes the book "will have practical value for labour organizers in South India" (p. viii), yet her unclear and inconsistent use of Marxist terminology could lead to confusion for labour organizers. Nevertheless, Gough does provide useful information and it is unfortunate that the price of this book will keep it out of the hands of Third World students, researchers and labour organizers. Perhaps it could eventually be published in India itself in a more accessible format.