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ASCRIBED AUSTERITY: A TRIBAL PATH TO PURITY

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Ethnographic research demonstrates that Paliyan hunter-gatherers are incorporated into the contemporary religious rituals of Hindus in ways that are paradoxical given their dietary practices. Five cases of Paliyan ritual involvement with Hindus of the Tamilnadu plain are described. The Tamil view of these peripheral south Indian people is shown to be largely a function of the apparent austerity of their forest existence. They are seen as wandering with few material possessions, and with other signs of humility and self-denial, in a harsh environment. To the Hindu onlooker, these supposed practices put Paliyan in a social and religious position analogous to that of the ascetic. Apparently, by extension of the analogy, the Paliyan can be accorded a ritual purity status which permits their participation in Hindu rituals.

A great deal is known about the acquisition and cultivation of power and purity by those in India who quest for higher rank and status. In recent scholarly literature one encounters several distinctly south Asian versions of this quest: (a) manipulation of ritual transactions within villages (see especially Marriott 1968; Mathur 1964); (b) 'Right' versus 'Left' emulation of landed and pure reference groups in Koyamuttur district (Beck 1970; 1972); (c) 'bootstrap' self-elevation of regionally numerous landowning tribes and castes (Gardner 1968; Sinha 1959; 1962; Srinivas 1952); (d) the partitioning off of elite and depressed segments from the main membership of those same landowning castes (Dumont 1957; Gardner 1968), and so on.

The processes to be considered in this article are totally different. An account is offered of a tribal people in southernmost India who appear to derive extraordinary indirect benefits from humility, simplicity and flight from power. Their participation in the ritual life of their Hindu neighbours cannot readily be explained unless one assumes that Hindus regard them as being ritually pure. It is proposed that they are so regarded, by analogy with peripheral members of Hindu society who live a life of austerity.

The people are Paliyan (sing. Paliyan), hunter-gatherers who inhabit the lower Tamil slope of the hills that form a boundary between southern Tamilnadu and Kerala. Their description as chronic 'refugees' (Gardner 1966: 391, 408-9) is intended to impart an appropriate understanding of their perennial retreat to avoid harassment. The lower slope of the hills, the tract they exploit, is inhospitable to their neighbours. Some of it is dry, stony and thorny, difficult for either herders or cultivators to expand into. Much has been declared reserved forest, which helps to perpetuate the strip as their refuge area, even today.¹ Nevertheless, religious recluses and escapers from the laws of

Tamil society also find refuge there; illegal wood cutters and professional hunters enter the area daily, and agents of forest produce contractors come periodically in search of tribal labourers. Such contract labour (for the exploitation of elk antlers, hemp, honey, medicinal plants, soapnuts) has been going on for centuries (Grierson 1903: 46).

Social relations and mobility. To understand Paliyan 'ascribed austerity,' it is necessary to examine several aspects of their social relations. Some of this information has been published previously (Gardner 1966; 1972) and will only be reviewed here briefly. Within their own bands Paliyar are peaceful and strive to respect all. Peace is upheld in several ways. (1) They use two forms of withdrawal, non-retaliation and actual geographical retreat, as the main responses to conflict or hostility. (2) They abstain totally from alcohol, because of what they see as the violence it unleashes in the Tamil plain. It interferes with self-control, they believe. (3) They utilise a tranquilliser (*sirippānippū*, 'laughing flower') to dissipate feelings of anger towards others. (4) Finally, they adhere to an ethic centred on the importance of individual autonomy; this does much to prevent difficulty because Paliyar value avoiding two kinds of 'disrespectful' intrusion into the life of others,² intrusion from above in the form of authoritarianism and interference from below in the form of dependence.

In their interaction with members of Tamil society, Paliyar behave similarly. But they combine their respect of outsiders (as individuals) with a good bit of caution and aloofness. Their posture with regard to their neighbours can be modelled plausibly in terms of a cycle segmented into a series of arbitrarily defined stages. These stages characterise individuals, families, parts of bands or whole bands, depending on circumstances.

Stage one is that during which they live just inside the margin of the forest, somewhat available to agents of forest contractors and, today, to plantation and field foremen as well. During this period of tangential contact with others, Paliyar are modest and humble and use a variety of techniques (Gardner 1972) to avoid provoking ridicule or more abusive treatment. They are as peaceful among others as among themselves.

When faced by injury, actual or threatened, physical or symbolic, they may pack immediately and leave for the deep forest. This would be defined as stage two. Sometimes the precipitating factor is physical violence against them of the magnitude of murder;³ more often it is in the order of bossy, bullying or antagonistic language that expresses a lack of respect. During the summer of 1978, in a restudy of bands which had been settled at the forest's edge in 1962-64, it was found that in response to recent harassment all but a few people had fled back into the deep forest. Other instances of such flight were documented during the earlier research.

Stage three in the cycle entails total reliance on hunting and gathering and, more importantly, mobile aloofness up to and including full nomadism. The most isolated, most nomadic⁴ bands (or segments of bands) are those which have not long previously experienced difficulty with their neighbours. They variously use rock shelters, erect very temporary huts, or sleep under trees or

in the open. Their very isolation and mobility are artefacts of culture contact; they are not indices of a pristine simplicity.

Finally, according to Paliyan social psychological theory, comes enough cooling of the hostile party to make it safe to edge back towards contact, with its economic and other rewards. This tentative re-emergence might be termed stage four. Noticeably, Paliyar restore contacts among themselves more quickly than contacts with outsiders. It can be assumed that this difference is a function of the degree and predictability of difficulty experienced in contact situations.

The dynamics of the cycle are much like those presumed by Lattimore to underlie oscillation between aloof, fully nomadic life and somewhat more settled seminomadic life of pastoralists on the inner Asian frontier of China. These pastoral tribes live just within the edge of the steppe and exploit the larger Chinese cultural system; then, when relations with the Chinese deteriorate, they pull away from contact and resort to fully nomadic existence (Lattimore 1940: 525, 529). In both instances, those of south Indian hunter-gatherers and Inner Asian herders, the economies permit either articulation with a complex neighbouring system or protracted nomadism and isolation, but the onset of retreat has to be understood in social or political terms.

Components of the plainsperson's view of Paliyar. It could be said, in an objective sense, that Paliyar do live austerely. Their natural environment is recognised by them to be a source of hardships.⁵ What is more, their use of mobility to deal with social stress reinforces whatever other factors might influence the temporary or portable nature, and hence simplicity, of their material possessions. Finally, their modest, unassuming demeanour in contact situations suggests that they are satisfied with their humble existence. In sum, if they are fairly generally acknowledged by outsiders to be living in austere simplicity, this should not surprise us. There is, however, much more to the mental picture plainspeople have of their gentle forest neighbours. Interviews with Tamil plainspeople of diverse occupational backgrounds and from three districts reveal several other components that help us to comprehend the occasional rather anomalous ritual roles accorded the Paliyar.

First, although Paliyar regard themselves as having an autonomous cultural system, discretely different from that of the great Tamil plain, the Tamils they meet tend to class them as occupationally and geographically specialised members of the larger society.⁶ This gives them a potential position or set of positions in that larger society.

Second, their characteristic livelihood is held to be the extraction of dioscorea yams, other vegetable produce and honey from the forest on the geographical margin of Hindu society. Although they may work at times for others, living off the forest is seen to be their preferred and proper pursuit. Contractors and foremen ruefully note their 'unpredictability' as wage labourers; Paliyar are deemed to be 'unreliable' when coaxed forth even to good jobs because of what is assumed to be an inherent penchant for returning to the forest. Their purported behaviour likens them to ascetics who turn to the same habitat and resources in preparing themselves for liberation.

Third, furthering the parallel with religious recluses, they are understood, somewhat inaccurately, to wander without fixed abode.

Fourth, they are known as harmless, gentle people. Though unpredictable in contact situations, they give the impression, at times, of being innocently forthright, overly trusting and lacking in guile. Some plantation owners and former rajas voice deep appreciation of these personal characteristics.

Fifth, Paḷiyar grooming is not apparent to those who meet them. Clothes are scanty, well worn and stained. Their occasionally 'frizzled' hair, with its light streaks, resembles the discoloured, matted locks of the ascetic, and so on. Aspects of physical appearance figure in most Tamil descriptions of Paḷiyar.

Sixth, they are viewed somewhat romantically as free—free in a fascinating and 'naughty' way. They appear not to suffer the usual social constraints; as a result, they are imagined to behave without inhibitions. They could be likened to ecstatic, devout followers of the path of personal devotion (*bhakti* or Tamil *pakti*). Actually, although Paḷiyar are free of much that their neighbours could recognise as external constraints and compulsions, their behaviour is the epitome of *self-restraint*. The common idea that they are uninhibited, as just described, is best and perhaps only to be interpreted as cathartic projection by the people of the plains.⁶

Hindu-Paḷiyar ritual relations. In a variety of contexts Hindus invite Paḷiyar to participate in their religious rituals. What is regular about these events is that the roles and relations take Paḷiyar ritual purity as a premiss. Five diverse cases will be described, based upon ethnographic observation in three different communities of Paḷiyar up to 90 km apart.

Government forestry officers were seen engaging an elderly Paḷiyar man to officiate at ceremonies before the extraction of sandalwood from reserved forest. They regularly accorded him the role of *pūcāri* (officiating priest, worshipper) for purposes of making placatory offerings to Sandanamāriammal, goddess of the sandal tree. The officers participated in the rite, as did several young Paḷiyar, under the leadership of the *pūcāri*. This interaction is unlike the others in that it has to do almost solely with the forest.

In a temporarily more settled Paḷiyar community, 90 km to the north, the oldest man served as watchman and caretaker of a shrine to Tādahēnācci, some 200 m from their settlement. He worked for the shrine's *pūcāri*, keeping weeds and débris away from the chief ritual areas: the central platform and shrine, the goddess's swing and images of Alagar along the south side of the sacred complex. The caretaker and others of the Paḷiyar community supplied bamboo for the image's palanquin each year, during her seven-day festival, for which they received one and a half large pots of the rice offering and one pot of *kuṟambu* (a sauce; here a mixture containing mutton from a sacrificial offering and vegetables). In this second case, Paḷiyar have peripheral yet clearly defined roles in the annual ritual cycle of a local Hindu deity.

The third is startlingly different. Nestled in the forested hills of Madurai district, between the two sites just mentioned, are two temples to Lord Siva: Mahālingamkōvil and Sundaralingamkōvil. Tradition among non-Paḷiyar informs us that a *lingam* (phallic image of Siva) was found by a *sādhu* (ascetic),

rising out of the ground. Being an itinerant, he sought someone else to be *pūcāri*, someone who could stay and conduct appropriate worship. In response to his prayer for aid, a Paliyan arrived at the spot. The *sādhu* taught him an appropriate *pūcai* (rite of offering) and the Paliyan accepted the responsibility. Other *sādhus* came up often from the plains, claiming to be overseers; they disputed the original arrangement. Centuries ago, a Raja with dominion over that range of hills mediated the dispute. He inscribed a copper plate, allegedly still extant, supporting the Paliyan's right to officiate and to choose his successor. The Paliyan *pūcāri* married and the position became hereditary.⁷

Today the site comprises two well-kept temples, a complex of shelters to house the thousands of annual pilgrims, and a large mud and thatch house with a central courtyard to house the *pūcāri's* family. In 1963, father and son were sharing the duties and they maintained the complex well. They prepared the food offerings for the Lord and conducted the worship of Siva at both temples. Following the services, high caste Hindus accepted the leftover offerings from them. Although the officiants themselves were referred to as 'Kōil Paḷiyar' (colloquially, 'temple Paḷiyar'), their immediate kin and affines were pig hunters who lived in mobile bands, culturally Paḷiyar in every way.

Members of the band described in the first case frequented spots near a path to a large Vaishnava temple in the forest. Pilgrims on their way to the temple regularly sought out Paḷiyar and asked them to guide the way, even though it would be difficult, indeed, for anyone to miss the path. If inclined, Paḷiyar guided these pious caste Hindus. Along the way, it sometimes happened that Paḷiyar were also asked to draw drinking water for them. Paḷiyar received modest recompense for their various services in the form of the cooked food offerings, abandoned cooking pots, or a small silver coin. Although similar in some regards, this interaction has a different character from reported exploitation of pilgrims by Chenchus further north. The latter possessed bows and were said to have extorted protection money and sold produce to travellers, including pilgrims, who entered their domain (Fürer-Haimendorf 1943: 308–15; Thurston 1909: II 29).

Finally, one hot quiet day, I was concluding an interview with a Paliyan youth near the path to the Vaishnava temple just mentioned, when one of the venerable, white-haired Brahmin temple priests came by. He asked the two of us to go with him the 6 km to the temple. When the priest unlocked the temple, the tribal youth and I, knowing our ritually impure condition from a Hindu standpoint, stayed in the outer precincts, playing with great bells, as the priest took out a series of keys and opened the next set of temple doors, then the next, then finally those in the *sanctum sanctorum* itself. We watched from a great distance as he prepared the offerings. Suddenly he turned and beckoned to us. We went in through one more of the immense doors. He continued to beckon. Puzzled, after conferring with one another, we went in through another door and stood just inside it. Still the priest called out, so we proceeded right to the threshold of the inner sanctum, as he insisted. Only then we realised that there were three images of the Lord and that the offerings had been separated into three equal parts. The priest asked me to stand on his right and the tribal youth on his left; he requested that we pick up the offerings and do as

he did. Stunned and trembling, we stepped with him simultaneously into the inner sanctum and concelebrated the *pūcai*.

The fruits of austerity. How have Tamil Hindus come to incorporate Paḷiyar into their ritual routines? The proffered roles are certainly not ones that Paḷiyar (or, for that matter, members of some powerful tribe) could coax or coerce from the Tamils, should they even choose to. Indeed, Paḷiyar are seen accepting the duties with bemused smiles and their customary humility.

The pattern in Hindu-Paḷiyar relations is only partially paralleled in other Hindu-tribal interaction. Kurumbas provide sorcery plus calendrical and memorial sacrifices for Badagas without being accorded ritual purity (Hockings 1980: 122–5, 200; Noble 1976: 118–22). Baḍu and Daita priests, integral to rites in the great Jagannātha temples, are linked solely by legend with no longer extant Śabara tribes (Eschmann 1978: 97, 100; Mishra 1971: 76–79; Tripathi 1978: 479). Their deity's and their own tribal origins are distant and obscure. Chenchus alone resemble Paḷiyar to any extent; though exploitative, these hunters also guide pilgrims to forest temples and are granted relatively high purity status. To explain that status, Fürer-Haimendorf cites one Hindu who interprets Chenchu 'saint-like simplicity' in moral terms (1943: 308).

The degree of ritual purity needed to officiate in clean Hindu temples or shrines of major deities and the degree of ritual impurity one would expect Hindus to impute to hunter-gatherers are totally inconsistent. Paḷiyar occasionally hunt and eat wild pig, deer, rabbit, rat, bat and monitor lizard, and regard certain types of carrion to be gifts of the gods.⁸ Yet the very label, 'hunters', used by anthropologists, betrays a one-sided, subsistence oriented perspective. Perhaps the whole paradox derives from that perspective.

If, from the viewpoint of their neighbours, the apparent austerities of Paḷiyars purify them and if their supposed behavioural freedom is taken as an outward sign of spiritual freedom, then one can begin to comprehend how it is possible for them to be approached by Hindus as spiritual guides. A foreigner moving quietly with Paḷiyar, simply dressed, sleeping on a mat in a small tent, finds himself given religious terms of address by Tamil plainsmen encountering him in that setting. People of the forest who bear yet more signs of a simple way, who are seen to have dropped unpretentiously out of the bottom of the social and ritual system, may, like ascetics (Dumont 1960: 52), be ascribed a degree of ritual purity which would place them at the apex of the very system upon which they have turned their backs.

There would be justice in this, because, although others are unaware of it, the Paḷiyar life of retreat is for them preeminently a matter of morality.

NOTES

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¹ In this connexion, it should be made clear that the situation described is an ongoing one; it is not a reconstructed portrait of the past.

² Notably, even six- to eight-year-old individuals are accorded the jural and social rights and privileges of adults, despite a measure of continuing economic dependence. Paḷiyar also provide an extreme instance of sexually egalitarian principles and behaviour.

³ Four recent instances of alleged murder by contractors' agents and forest guards and one instance of alleged rape and pillage by police were brought to my attention during the early 1960's.

⁴ This generalisation is based on work with a total of twelve bands. Members of one band in 1963 claimed to be spending no more than two to three days in one spot, except during the rains, in order to avoid arguments with offensive contractors who sought their labour. They were transporting with them all their material possessions.

⁵ While they are not complainers, they will enumerate the discomforts which keep others away.

⁶ This is not an uncommon difference of perspective between tribal and nontribal people along the internal tribal frontiers of south Asia (Gardner 1978: 295, 310).

It should be added that the preceding several components of Tamil plainspeople's images of Paḷiyar have not been elicited or analysed by formal ethnosemantic methods. They could doubtless be augmented and they deserve to be studied in terms of more inclusive Tamil classificatory schemes.

⁷ This information was graciously supplied by the Raja's direct heir and descendant, Tīru S. N. K. Naiker.

⁸ In one band, four Paḷiyar deities, Āḷattiamma, Āḷavīraccam, Cakkaḷamma and Muttataṇakka are asked to send the *viḷḷināri* (wild red dog, *Canis dukhunensis*) or *sarudani* (same as *kaduva*, a large tiger) to cut down a *kīre* ('leaf,' a figurative, polite term for meat), leaving the carcass where Paḷiyars will find it.

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