The Mukkuvars of Kanyakumari

On the Margins of Caste Society

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"FRINGE-DWELLING": CULTURAL HIERARCHIES OF SPACE

I begin my exploration of the Mukkuvars with a consideration of the physical landscape. I have taken the landscape as the basic metaphor of their marginal and ambiguous status in caste society. The idea of physical landscapes as a poetic metaphor is an old one in Tamil literature. The Tamil land is hierarchically divided into zones or *tinais* which denote both a geographical and a cultural identity to the people who live in each tina. The identification between the Mukkuvars and their *naikal* tina or coastal zone provides the starting point of my account of these fringe-dwellers.

The close interconnections between occupational and spatial identity in a fishing community are well brought out by the two district folk-etymologies people offer for their caste name, "Mukkuvar." The first is recorded by A.K. Iyer, who writes at the turn of the century (1909) about the Mukkuvars of the Malabar coast: "The word "Mukkuvar" is connected with the Canaree "Moger"; both the words come from the same root, which means "to dive"."

Possibly this derivation points to the engagement with pearl diving, a skill more prominent on the east Coromandel coast than in Kanyakumari—but at the very least, such an etymology stresses occupational specialization in sea-based activities.

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The second derivation, told to me by a Mukkuvar villager, stresses a geographical identity. Here the derivation is from the Tamil *mukku*, which means "the tip" or "the corner". In this version, Mukkuvar denotes the people who occupy the very tip or edge of the land mass. In one sense, this geographical feeling of being at land's end is shared by the people of the district as a whole. Kanyakumari District is the smallest district of the state of Tamil Nadu, with an area of 654 square miles (approximately 1670 square kilometres). It is surrounded on three sides by ocean: the Arabian sea on the south-west, the Bay of Bengal on the south-east and the Indian Ocean on the south (see Map 11.1). The auspiciousness of this location, at the confluence of three waters, is symbolically underlined by the substantial temple of the virgin goddess, Kanyakumari, which gives the district its name. The temple brings pilgrims and tourists from all parts of India, and confirms the inhabitants' sense of occupying a territory of unique significance.

In the case of the fishing castes, this sense of extreme location is reinforced by occupational and demographic factors. Mukkuvar villages form a band of settlements on the western coastline extending from the Cape as far north as the Malabar coast of Kerala. At both ends of this band, the numbers of Mukkuvars thin out or are diluted by a mixture of other fishing castes. From Muttom south to Cape Comorin, a distance of about 19 kilometres, Mukkuvar settlements are interspersed with the settlements of the Parava fishing caste. The Parava in turn gain in numerical and social dominance as one rounds the tip of the subcontinent and continues northwards along the east coast (see Map 11.1).

This continuity of caste settlement is not merely a geographical phenomenon. Marriage exchanges occur on a strictly endogamous basis up and down the coastline. Work-related migratory trips take the men on a seasonal basis from Kanyakumari to Kerala. Religious pilgrimages to Christian shrines in other coastal communities and continuities of linguistic usage keep alive a sense of solidarity and oneness between the Mukkuvar settlements and, to a lesser extent, between Mukkuvars and other fishing castes. Such social networks cut across political divisions between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and mark out a unified cultural zone that corresponds more accurately to the pre-1956 political unit that went by the name of the kingdom of Travancore. In 1956, four administrative units known as *taluks* (Agasteeswaram, Thovala, Kalkulam, and Vilavancode) were excised from the kingdom of Travancore and incorporated into Tamil Nadu on the basis of the linguistic dominance of Tamil (see Maps 11.2 and 11.3). To Mukkuvars
The realignments have brought with them a greater absorption into the party politics of Tamil Nadu, as well as the gradual ‘Tamilization’ of the Mukkuvar dialect as Tamil becomes the language of schooling and political mobilization. However, the social, economic, and religious ties with Mukkuvars living across the state border continue to keep alive a different unit of political identification.

Within this band, stretching from Malabar to the Cape, the Mukkuvars live in one of the most densely populated areas in the world. In the 67 kilometres of coastline within Kanyakumari district there are at least 40 villages. The district itself has one of the highest population densities in India—726 per square kilometre. [...] The closely packed dwellings of the community and the poverty of much of the housing give the coastal strip an appearance more like a slum than a series of rural villages. One settlement begins almost where the other leaves off. If strong sentiments of solidarity link one village to the other, tremendous population pressures, taken with the precariousness of the economy, lead to the volatility, excitability, and propensity for violence for which the Mukkuvars are well known.

To Mukkuvars, their close identification with ocean—as people whose *thodd* or traditional occupation is *kaDal thodd* or ‘work on the sea’—is inextricably bound up with their perception of themselves as fringe-dwellers. Not only does the caste’s name get interpreted in terms of this perception, but the names given to fishing villages (such as KooDimonai, ‘tip of the end’) reflect it as well. Mukkuvars often refer to themselves as *KaDalkarai makkal*, ‘the people of the sea shore’. Other castes may be referred to by their specific names. The Nadars, for example, whatever they may think of it, are still called ShaaNaar [toddy-tappers], and their place of settlement referred to as ChaaNaakuDh. But the agricultural castes all merge into a bloc for the Mukkuvars who see a vast gulf separating them from the people of the *uli naaDh*, ‘the interior’. Communities may be referred to by direction alone. For Mukkuvars, *terkkai* (south) is north, towards the sea, and *vaDukkai* (north) is south, inland. The directions make sense only if one assumes the perspective of a people facing out to sea, taking the sea as their point of orientation. Such close identification between a people and a geographical location on the land is not confined to Mukkuvars alone. In Tamil country, one’s *uurru*, usually translated as ‘native place’, is the first thing about a stranger one wants to know. One’s *uurru* is also the first prefix attached to one’s personal name, followed only secondarily by a patronym. In Tamil literary traditions this identification takes on added dimensions of meaning. Every schoolchild attending a school where Tamil is the medium of instruction
is made aware of the ain tinai or five zones (or landscapes) that characterize Tamil country.

The full elaboration of the tinai theme is to be found in the bardic and written literary traditions which crystallized in a corpus of poetry known as the Cankam literature. While the precise dating of this literature is still a matter of debate, it covers roughly the period between the first and sixth centuries AD. The ain tinai form the allegorical basis of a highly elaborated poetic structure in which each landscape is attributed a set of stylized characteristics. Each tinai not only has its own flora and fauna, but its own poetic mood and its own devan or deity. Cankam poetry is divided by subject matter between two categories: puram (outside) and akam (interior), akam deals with inner emotions, longings, and love; puram with external affairs of war, politics, and trade. Each tinai has its own dominant motifs of akam and puram, although the bulk of Cankam poetry concentrates on akam.

An ancient literary tradition whose precise relation to the social order of its own day is a matter of some controversy may seem unlikely to directly affect the Makkavvaras of today. However, there are certain aspects of the literature which reflect and codify cultural attitudes that remain pervasive in Tamil society. In particular, the organization of physical landscapes and their associated cultures into a hierarchical schema identifies the fisherpeople as the barbarians of the coast, only just within the reach of civilizations. This attitude is still found among the agricultural peoples of the district. The coastal people refer to the agricultural hinterland as the ul nasaDu or interior landscape—also the title of a book of translations of Cankam poetry by A.K. Ramanujan. This coincidence is suggestive, since in the poetic world akam and puram are not simply distinguished. Akam is ranked above puram. In the religious bhakti cults of Tamil Nadu, the outer is inessential, secondary, and ultimately not as real or important as the inner. The privileging of the interior over the outer in religious and cultural attitudes metaphorically captures the inferior outsider status of coastal people. At the apex of the five tinai is the marutam or cultivated land, the 'centre of which is generally the society and which represents a relatively advanced civilisation'. At the bottom of the hierarchy is the palai, or wilderness, 'desolate land generally symbolising the area beyond the reach of civilisation'. Naital, or the seashore tract, is placed only just above this absolute wilderness. As the site of fishing and commerce it is within the reach of civilization, but is ranked below the other two tracts—mullai or the forested pastoral land and kurinci or hill tract.

All the five tinai are represented in Kanyakumari district. [...] However, marutam or cultivated land is the dominant tinai, not only culturally but in a geographical sense. Selvarathnam, an economist, describes the region as one of the most intensely cultivated regions of Tamil Nadu, with very little uncultivable or fallow land. The bulk of the irrigated land is under rice cultivation. Upland, non-irrigated areas are used for drier crops such as tapioca and spices, while on the lowlands the district has extensive fruit orchards, besides cashew, coconut, and rubber plantations which account for 40 per cent of the net cultivated area. Paddy and tapioca are now being rapidly displaced by the other cashcrops, but the historically dominant tinai in southern Travancore has been the rice-growing marutam, regarded by the codifiers of Tamil culture as the home of civilization itself. From the perspective of the people of the naital (naital makkal), the people of the marutam (marutam makkal) are the key category against which they define themselves as 'Other'. These two tinai are fundamental to my account of the Makkavvaras. A detailed characterization of them is to be found in Zvelebil's account of the Cankam literature.

SUPERIMPOSED HIERARCHIES

We have been referring to a hierarchy as old as the first century AD. In Iyer's account of the fishing castes of Malabar, written in 1909, a more familiar hierarchy is encountered. Makkavvaras are made to stand at a distance from the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and high-caste Shudras. They may 'adore the deities in the Brahmanic temples by standing at a distance from the outer wall'.

What is most striking in Iyer's account is the way the restrictions of caste and pollution coalesce perfectly with the geographical separation of the fishing castes, providing a structure for a segregation already in place. Tied to an occupation which places them on the outer perimeter of the land mass, the naital makkal found themselves virtually prisoners of their own tinai, according to the rules of caste society. Iyer describes this for both the Makkavvaras and another fishing caste, the Katalarayans: 'They [the Katalarayans] were in former times considered an inferior race, and, as such, precluded from travelling along the public roads, and consequently obliged to keep to the sea-coast'.

In the case of the Makkavvaras, 'Being obliged to keep to the coast, and unable to bear the social disabilities, many became Christians and converts to Islam (Puislam or puthia Islam, or new Islam), and were thus elevated in the social scale'.

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Certainly, the burdens of low status in caste society would seem a powerful incentive to such forms of escape. However, the geographical containment of the Mukkuvars is not wholly to their disadvantage. Their degraded status in caste society is counterpointed by a strong sense of independence. Not only do the fisherpeople have their own unique tinal, but their occupation does not involve them in personalized relations of dependency and servitude to the castes in agricultural society. As a group, they are ranked by caste society as, barbaric and impure, in a way similar to agricultural untouchable castes. But the agricultural untouchable castes are usually landless agricultural labourers, enmeshed within the same relations of production as the dominant castes. The Mukkuvars are able to sidestep this entire set of economic and cultural relations: the relations of production that define fishing are simply not to be equated with the relations of production in the manatam tinal.12 [...] 

TRADE-BASED RELATIONS WITH AGRARIAN SOCIETY: FISHERPEOPLE AND THE 'RIGHT-HAND/LEFT-HAND' CASTE DIVISION

How does a relatively non-stratified economically homogeneous community without any significant internal caste divisions survive within caste society? How can so sharp a dichotomy between the fishing communities and the dominant agrarian continue to exist, when fishing communities are dependent on the outside world for virtually every item they need in daily life? With the exception of fish, and a few other locally raised items such as poultry and pigs, these villages rely on agricultural markets for the supply of all items of immediate consumption and for the raw materials with which to construct the tools of production. The wood for the kalTumaram, cotton for the fishing nets, even the tamarin dye for the sails must be bought. These relations of trade inextricably involve the fishing community with the wider economy.

Fishing communities therefore are involved in two distinct areas of economic activity: the work of fishing itself, and the trading occupations which sustain contact with the caste society of the interior. This distinction is reflected in the sexual division of labour in fishing society. Fishing itself is exclusively a male domain, although women are important in ancillary tasks such as weaving nets, salting, and drying fish. In activities which require sustained contact with the outside world, however, women come into their own. Older women form a small but significant minority of fish traders. In this role they make regular trips to major agricultural markets within a vicinity of 15–20 kilometres. The purchase of rice, vegetables, firewood and other items of daily consumption falls for the most part on women. Market exchanges are conducted by women. Occasionally—although this is by no means typical—women working as fish vendors may strike up relations of direct barter with women from agricultural Nadar households, exchanging fish for rice and firewood. Trips into the interior for medical reasons are again women’s business, for they are responsible for the household’s health and welfare. For all the control exercised over their behaviour and freedom of movement, Mukkuvar women travel extensively throughout the district, both into the interior and up and down the coastal belt, consolidating the numerous credit-related transactions. In the course of their travels they are left in no doubt of the view held of them in the wider society. Distaste for aggressive and haggling ‘fishwives’ is there reinforced by caste values. Coming back from the markets after a day in the hot sun, fisherwomen who stop at a tea-house are served at the door, and must drink their tea separately, either standing outside or seated in the corner. If they use public transport to carry their baskets of fish to the market, they may be ordered off the bus at the whim of the conductor.

The question of Mukkuvar relations to caste society cannot therefore be discussed in identical terms for men and women. Among Mukkuvars, it is women who bear the brunt of their polluted status in caste society. Male work, oriented towards the sea rather than to the rest of society, enables men to escape similar pressures more readily. [...] Mukkuvar culture has the capacity to selectively appropriate and recontextualize themes taken from the dominant religious culture. Despite others’ devaluation of their occupation, Mukkuvars have in general retained a good opinion of themselves. The sources of their independence are located not only in the moral economy of fishing, but in the female-dominated sphere of exchange.

Trade relations involve not only a movement of women out into the hinterland, they also bring a range of hawkers, traders, and specialists of various kinds to the fishing villages. First, there are different categories of merchants and fish traders who come to make direct purchases on the sea front. If we discount the Mukkuvar men and women resident within the community, the fish traders fall into two categories: the ‘cycle-traders’ and the larger merchants. The cycle-traders are men who live in the interior and who carry fish to the markets on bicycles. They may be members of the two local fishing castes, the Paravas and Mukkuvars, who have resided in the interior, or they may be drawn from the Nadar or Muslim communities. The
merchants who operate on a larger scale buy only in peak seasons and then in bulk. Such merchants service more distant markets, and the produce is dried and transported in bullock carts or trucks. Their number includes the agents for seafood companies, who are part of a chain that ultimately supplies a national and even international market.

Other kinds of traders come into the fishing villages from the immediately contiguous hinterland to supply a service. They may set up small shops in Mukkuvar villages selling cigarettes, tea, soft drinks, and small grocery items, or they may visit the village on a regular basis. Hawkers come through selling sati and clothing. Others are called in for specialized purposes: carpenters for house construction; jewellers; vaidyars or medical specialists. These last-named are of different kinds and may travel from other districts of Tamil Nadu: the korai or gypsies selling feathers, charms and trinkets; the raapaadis or night-singers, credited with occult powers; mantravadais or exorcists; nadu vaidyars or herbalists.

The distinctiveness of this trade-based relationship to caste society can be usefully situated within a wider social and historical context. Tamil society has long distinguished between castes related to other castes on the basis of trade and mercantile dealings and castes related to others on the basis of agricultural dependence and interdependence and ownership of land. The traditional form of this distinction is that between 'left-hand' and 'right-hand' castes. [...] The distinction is not alive today among Tamils, it has played a shaping role in the past. The left-hand/right-hand dichotomy testifies to the relative autonomy (in some respects) of the historical traditions of Tamil Nadu. There was, in the past, a left-hand bloc of castes over whom Brahmans and the martial or kingly groups among agriculturists failed to establish a continuing ascendancy. The model may no longer obtain, but it is suggestive in at least one respect: it points to the possibility of a generalized historical basis for the cultural heterogeneity manifested in some areas of south Indian society. In the case of the fishing caste—geographically distinct as it is—differences from the norms and practices of Hindu society may not, of course, stand in need of such an explanation. But it might also be argued that certain characteristics of the Mukkuvars, their relative cultural autonomy and aspects of their kinship system and processes of household formation, are manifestations of a more general pattern.

Fishing castes were never historically designated as belonging to either bloc. Theirs is a much more ambiguous status. But at least one scholar has been struck by the affinity between fishing castes and the mercantile, and artisanal castes of the left-hand division. The distinction he draws is between 'bound' and 'unbound' castes: the latter, such as fishing, mercantile and artisanal castes, are said to enjoy a 'free-willing' relationship (in Tamil ishtTamaana to Dorpu with other castes, as compared with the 'bound' mode of ranking kaiTupaaDus to Dorpu which is observed in the rest of society, principally among the agricultural castes considered as a bloc. The distinction drawn by David is equivalent to a distinction between caste blocs adhering to two models of exchange: that of market exchange, and that of the system called fajnand by Europeans. On the former model (which echoes certain of Weber's criteria for economic rationality), trade relations are unrestricted, whether by location or by social criteria, such as those of purity and pollution. Transactions are governed by supply and demand. The relation of buyer and seller is uncontextual, unlike the uneven and hierarchically governed exchange of caste society. [...] David's model, which he himself presents merely as description of two contrasting tendencies in Tamil society, is in fact a fertile model, useful in explaining many features of the fisherpeople. The world of the market, based on ethics of fairness and mutual benefit, as well as shrewd business behaviour, has left its mark on the values espoused by the trading women in the Mukkuvar community. These women cannot be compared to the wealthy and powerful merchant castes of the Left-bloc—they are still only the humblest and least powerful group of fish traders. Nevertheless, the fact that it is as traders or else as purchasers of services that women come into contact with caste society is all-important in explaining the difference between Mukkuvar women and women in agricultural untouchable, castes, who may be called upon to provide everything from agricultural labour to domestic and sexual services for upper-caste men, David's description of 'free-willing relationships', is even more apt when it comes to describing the masculine version of Mukkuvar identity which revolves around the work of fishing.

**MASCULINITY AND THE CASTE IDENTITY OF MUKKUVAR FISHERMEN**

The self-definitions that collectively make up Mukkuvar caste identity are neither fixed nor defined exclusively by the work of fishing. The term 'identity' is being used here to incorporate several components, all of which converge to produce a sense of difference between Mukkuvars and the rest
of society. These components include geographical, economic, religious, and cultural elements.

In artisanal fishing, an ethos of individualism, freedom from unnecessary supervision, merges with a markedly male ideology of strength, virility, valour, and competitiveness. Any work that entails loss of autonomy—even wage work as labourers in a city environment—is regarded by Mukkuvar men with contempt. Mukkuvar men do not readily consider taking up agricultural labour in times of seasonal unemployment.

About eight households in Kadalkara Uru have men away in the Middle East—working for the most part as construction workers or, at best, in small mechanical and electrical stores. The men go there in the hope of something much better, however, and their real status in the overseas labour market is usually shrouded in secrecy, sometimes even from their own families. For all the glamour of the clothes, cassette tape decks, and gigantic portable radios that these men bring back to the village with them, there has been nothing resembling the enormous wave of immigration to the Middle East from neighbouring Kerala. For most Mukkuvar men, the only culturally acceptable alternatives to local fishing are working as labourers on mechanized fishing boats, or travelling with one's own artisanal equipment to other parts of the west coast. Work in the mechanized sector still presents a sharp contrast to artisanal fishing but it is a form of work incorporating the men's skills and independent decision-making, qualities highly prized by the men.

The most prestigious form of artisanal fishing has been the most rudimentary one technologically—hook and line fishing. What is valued here is the high degree of skill and knowledge called for on the part of the individual fisherman. Such work is often referred to not as *tuNDil veela* or hook and line work, but as *marum* thezil a hereditary occupation or calling in the European sense. The man engaged in such work has the much-envied opportunity of drawing in unusually large-sized single fish—the occasion of many tales and a certain individualistic pride. One man described it to me as the *thozil* where one can be the Raja of the *Kattumaram*, alone and in full command. [...] 

Pride in individual initiative comes through in other areas as well. The oral history of the community is replete with stories of men learning and adapting to new technological influences. One man claimed, rightly or wrongly, that the technique of using the sail had been unknown around the Colachel area when he moved in after marriage some fifty years ago, and that he had successfully introduced it. Others point to the gradual replacement of cotton by nylon in net-weaving, and the range of adaptations to which the introduction of nylon twine has led. [...] 

Apart from a general pride in their occupation, self-respect and pride also take a regionally specific form. Mukkuvar regard themselves as the best fishermen on the west coast, and will boast with disarming openness about the way they are specially sought after by the owners of mechanized craft as far away as eastern Tamil Nadu, northern Kerala, and even Orissa. Kerala, the region with which they are most familiar, is looked down on by Mukkuvar. Kerala fishermen, it is said, cannot manage the prestigious tuNDil fishing, or perform deeds requiring bravery and skill with the same ease as Mukkuvar men. One man recounted an incident where the nets his crew had laid out were caught in the propeller of a mechanized fishing boat. The incident led to a violent clash between the two crews. Someone had to dive underwater and free the net. I quote from John's account: 'All crew were local Kerala men. They did not know how to dive underwater and disentangle the net. So I did. It was very cold in the water and I cut my hand. They turned the boat back to shore to take me to hospital.'

Comradely relations with other crew members are shot through with competitiveness, and anxiety to prove one's strength, bravery and virility, whether out at sea or on land, in drinking, gambling, and fishing. [...] 

The propensity to violence seems rooted in men's work. Any violation of the principle of cooperation between one crew member and another, between one craft and another, or between one village and another is met with sabotage, scuttling, or burning of equipment or with physical brawls in which injury and death are possible. Violent episodes are common in the conflict between artisanal fishermen and the crews of mechanized boats.

The ideology of violence and daring blends easily with a martial Kshatriya ethos, not so much characteristic of other untouchable castes as of mercantile-cum-warrior castes of the Left-bloc. Indeed, the Mukkuvars, who have little by way of recorded history, boast of their strength in the service of indigenous rulers. 'The Battle of Colachel' (1741) is described in an official history of trade on the Malabar coast in the following terms:

A battle was fought on 10 August 1741, near the insignificant roadstead of Colachel tucked away in the far south of Malabar, between the armies of Maratha Varma [king of Travancore], and the Netherlands East India Company. The armies were not large and it was not much of a battle. But the Dutch lost it and the consequences gradually changed much that was traditional in Malabar. 15

In the oral history of the Mukkuvars, this incident has been transformed into a heroic occasion. Tales of physical bravery supplement the traditional
pride of the fisherman in trickery and cunning. One version is offered by an educated Mukkuvar with great pride in community history:

Though nothing as sophisticated as the navies of the Cholas and Pandya kings, the navy of the Travancore King did depend partly on the coastal people. In the famous battle with the Dutch, it was the coastal people who were lined up along the beach embankments with oars and poles aimed to look like guns. The Dutch drew anchor and half of them took fright and left. The other half came on land and their leader was taken prisoner to later become a martial advisor to the king. One of the cannon marks can still be seen on the amman rock [a rock shaped like a swan] near our village’s beach. Till recently, a Dutch anchor rusted near the rocks and would tear the karamadi as it was drawn.

In another version, the services rendered by the Mukkuvars to the king gives them official title to the part of the country they inhabit: ‘At the time of the Dutch arrival, there was no one to drive them off. The fishermen offered their services to the Raja. They stood together at the beach, armed with oars. The Dutch, from a distance, believed them to have guns bigger than the ones they possessed, and took fright. The king, in gratitude, offered the fishermen a reward, and they asked for the Mukku [tip].’

It is perhaps not altogether surprising that the Mukkuvars of Kanyakumari have as their caste counterpart in Sri Lanka a group of Mukkuvars who espouse an ideology of chiefly conquest and have in fact historically assumed the role of chiefs and powerful landlords. The socially powerful Mukkuvars of Sri Lanka are similar only in name to the Mukkuvars of Kanyakumari—but both groups have evolved a martial, combative ideology.

This ideology is all the more striking in the case of the Mukkuvar fishing caste of Kanyakumari, since they have neither land ownership nor military strength with which to underwrite their perception of themselves as virukaarar or brave men. The work of fishing goes some way towards providing the basis for such a self-definition.

NOTES