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VILLAGE INDIA AND ITS POLITICAL ECONOMY

By

K.N.Raj

Centre for Development Studies
Ulloor, Trivandrum 695011

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Iruvelipattu is a village in the South Arcot district of Tamil Nadu. It is situated between the Pennar River, which runs north of it about a mile and a half away, and a branch of the same river flowing by the side of it in the south. Some imaginative mind in the obscure past saw these two rivers as two fences, iru veli, protecting and cutting off the village from the world beyond, and so it came to be called Iruvelipattu, the name by which it has come to be known ever since.

This was the village that Professor Gilbert Slater chose to visit first, in February 1916, soon after he took charge of the new Department of Economics of the University of Madras. The visit had an objective and it was simple in conception. He wanted students of Economics in the university to look upon the subject, not as "a series of unintelligible theories to be learnt parrot fashion from Marshall's *Principles*" as they were inclined to, but as one which had "as its central object of study the causes of and remedies for Indian poverty". This, he believed, could be achieved if the attention of students could be directed towards the study of particular villages. To decide what questions to focus attention on in such studies, Professor Slater felt the need to visit a few villages himself, and Iruvelipattu came his way only because one of his students was a native of this village.

Though the selection of Iruvelipattu was no more random than of the students associated with Professor Slater's project, it was evidently

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as good a choice as one could have made for a study of the kind visualized. Some of his observations about the village at the time are of relevance even now.

For instance, Professor Slater noted that about 400 acres of the 656 acres of cultivated land in the village was owned by one man (who had also another 200 acres in adjoining villages). Half of this land in the village was directly cultivated drawing on the labour of 40 "padiyals" (i.e. bonded labourers who had fallen into hereditary dependance on him through debt), and the rest, about 200 acres, leased out to tenants who were reported to be generally small holders cultivating the land with their own labour. A padiyal was in effect a serf and was generally required to work from dawn to dusk; but he enjoyed one important privilege, namely the right to receive from his master a regular amount of paddy (or other grain) all the year round, whether or not he was fully employed. This guaranteed wage, tied to what could perhaps be described as rather over-full employment, was in itself quite meagre: it was just over 1 kg of paddy per day, a quantity which, as Professor Slater observed, a man would be "probably able and willing to eat himself without assistance from his wife and family", in fact about the same as the prevailing ration at the time for a prisoner doing hard labour in jail. However, a tenant cultivator, who lived on one acre of leased-in land, could not have been very much better off, since the average yield of wet land was probably not more than about 900 kgs of paddy per acre and even the fixed rents payable in money (which were generally lower than the share rents payable in kind) seem to have been equal in value to over 350 kgs of paddy per acre. Compared to the residual income of about 550 kgs of paddy from such a small tenant holding, the annual guaranteed wage of a padial at the time — a little over 410 kgs of paddy — does not sppear excessively low.

The inferences that Professor Slater himself drew from his observations in Iruvelipattu are interesting. English arable land, he noted for instance, would bear a crop of wheat only once in foud years, while paddy land in the Carnatic region of South India could produce one, two and sometimes three crops of rice a year (not to mention other profitable crops). Nevertheless, he pointed out, "the Indian worker earns very low wages, has a very low standard of expenditure, and attains a very low level of efficiency, and these three characteristics of Indian life are so inter-connected, that it is impossible to say which is cause rather than effect. Indian employers do not believe in the Economy of High Wages; and as yet only faint beginnings of trade unionism are to be found among Indian manual workers". The obvious implication of this observation was that the weak bargaining power of labour was in part responsible for the inefficient use of the available land.

Twenty years later Iruvelipattu received academic attention once again when it was decided to resurvey the villages investigated by Professor Slater and his students. The resurvey, guided by Professor P.J.Thomas and a colleague in the Department of Economics, was somewhat more systematic and detailed, and provided additional information on certain matters that had been only briefly touched upon earlier.

In the two decades between 1916 and 1936, several changes had taken place. The population of Iruvelipattu had slightly declined by about 3½ per cent. Following the Great Depression of the 'thirties, the price of paddy had fallen to nearly one-half of what it used to be. Apparently

in response to these developments, but perhaps also in part due to shortage of water, there was some decline in the area cultivated in the village, particularly of paddy land that was being earlier double-cropped. The gross area sown with paddy (i.e. including the area double-cropped) was reported to have fallen by nearly one-fourth
1920-21 and 1935-36, and the gross area sown with other cr
two-fifths. The total output, employment and income in th
must have therefore declined significantly during the period.

There is however no way of determining how precisely the incidence of such decline was distributed within the village society. We can gather from the resurvey that well over a half, in fact nearly three-fifth, of the net cultivated area in the village was under tenancy in 1936; and that the rent on such land was in the range of 310 to 490 kgs per acre (depending on the fertility of the land and on whether the rent payable was on a fixed or share-cropping basis). Tenants whose rents were fixed in terms of money were probably affected very adversely. There appears to have been also some deterioration in the terms and conditions of work of the padiyals, but, apart from seasonal migration to adjacent regions, no agricultural labourers are reported to have left the village permanently. We are altogether in the dark about the fate of the landlord who had 400 acres of land in the village in 1916, as there is no reference at all to him in the study.

Such loss of a promising trail of enquiry is indeed frustrating but, thanks to a fortuitous circumstance, some of the threads can be picked up again for a later period. The two surveys conducted in 1916 and 1936 had stimulated enough interest for a scholar from the Agricultural Economics Research Institute at Oxford, Miss Margaret Haswell, to undertake still another investigation of Iruvelipattu in 1961. Though the published findings of Miss Haswell are much too fragmentary, and no study of the village seems to have been attempted since then, they help to fill a few significant gaps in our knowledge, more particularly of its fortunes after India won political independence and embarked on planned programmes of development.

The first decade of planned development brought Iruvelipattu at least two sources of great potential benefit. One was electricity which came to the village in 1958; the other was in the form of land legislation passed in the State in 1960, fixing a ceiling of holdings (pegged at no more than 12 standard acres for a family of not more than five members). The full story of how the two together, electricity plus land reform, affected Iruvelipattu cannot be told yet, at any rate not until someone is stimulated enough to study it over again. Miss Haswell's findings give us however some glimpses of what was changing and what was not, of the direction of change, and above all of the difference between the form and content of the changes that were taking place within this village between the "two fences".

The population of Iruvelipattu in 1961 was about 10 per cent higher than in 1916, but the total cultivable area had risen only very marginally. More significantly, there had taken place a sharp decline in the net sown area because the dry land in the village (i.e. land dependant solely on rainfall), which accounted for about a fifth of the total cultivable area, was not being cultivated at all in 1961. Judging from the earlier assessments of land revenue, it is of course clear that the net product from an acre of dry land in the village was perhaps only as much as one-quarter of that from an acre of irrigated (wet) land. Nevertheless, when the pressure of population on land was still high, and a large segment of the villagers could hardly secure their minimum, subsistence needs, one would normally expect an increase rather than a decrease in the cultivated area.

The explanation for the apparently perverse trend is to be found mainly in the use of the newly-available electricity for installation of pump-sets, 17 of which were in operation in 1961 and made possible double-cropping of about two-fifths of the net sown area. Those who commanded enough finance to be able to apply more fertilizers along with irrigation could secure more than 1400 kgs per acre of wet land. Presumably, in this way, the new technology made so much difference to returns at the margin that it was no longer worth their while to get cultivated with hired labour any of the dry land in their possession. Leasing it out to tenants was perhaps not attractive enough, in view of the lower rent obtainable from dry land and the risks associated with such leasing out.

When these effects of the change in technology ushered in by electricity are considered along with the impact of the land reform legislation the probable direction of the changes in the village economy since then becomes easier to visualize. For, according to Miss Haswell's findings, the direct descendant of the landlord who owned about 400 acres in Iruvelipattu in 1916 was not only very much there but had increased his holding to 500 acres by 1961 and was in the process of "further increasing his estate" by purchasing land from small cultivators in debt. Since a standard acre had been defined in the ceiling legislation as an acre assessed to land revenue at the rate of Rs.10 to 15 per annum, this holding of 500 acres was the equivalent of only 123 standard acres. Still it was more than 10 times as high as the ceiling fixed. "His method of evasion", Miss Haswell explains, "was to register his 'surplus' land in the names of others".

Half of this large holding was under lease to tenants as before. The average yield on tenant-cultivated holdings was only about 100 kgs of paddy on the average, but the rent payable was no less than 400 kgs per acre. Landless agricultural labourers were receiving a wage equivalent to about 3 1/3 kgs of paddy per day; but they were estimated to have on the average only a little over 130 days of work, and could therefore secure no more than about 440 kgs of paddy, which was only marginally higher than the annual income of just over 410 kgs of paddy for a padiyal reported in 1916. It would therefore appear that, even if a labourer was no longer a padiyal, freedom from bondage implied no significant increase in income for the landless except in the form of leisure (whether preferred or enforced) and that, as in 1916, the tenants with small holdings could not have been very much better off than the landless. On the other hand, one may safely surmise that, of the total paddy output of possibly around 540 tonnes from the village in 1961, the equivalent of at least 200 tonnes accrued to one land-owner in the form of rent and profits.

What happened in Iruvelipattu over the period 1916 to 1961 cannot of course be regarded as typical of trends in other villages, either in India as a whole or in Tamil Nadu. In fact, the information available for the rest of the villages covered by the three surveys shows that it was clearly not. On the other hand, Iruvelipattu cannot be dismissed as wholly a freak either. There are several land-owners even now in this region who have in effect holdings of irrigated land of a hundred acres and more in size, nominally registered in different names in order to escape the ceiling legislation, receiving a disproportionately large share of the benefits bestowed by rural development programmes.

For instance, one such programme, currently in the process of being implemented on a high priority basis since early this year, is reported to be in Kapistalam in Thanjavur district where one family is known to have owned several thousand acres some time ago and still has substantial holdings in different names (including some in the names of temples and trusts managed by the same family). Not only does the political and administrative apparatus of the government overlook the evasions of the law in respect of ceilings, particularly when the persons concerned are loyal supporters of the regime, but it is at present actively engaged here in getting the drainage and irrigation network in this area re-done in an integrated manner covering several blocks of fields and villages, making new tractorable roads into the fields, and experimenting with soils, paddy varieties, fertilizers, etc. for raising substantially the productivity of this land. Presumably all this is being done as part of the Fifth Five Year Plan and the Twenty Point Programme.

The rationale of development programmes based on such gross inequality in the distribution of wealth and income is of course well known. Apart from the possibility of a higher rate of saving being realized, the marketed surpluses of foodgrain would be certainly much larger than if ownership of land and the income from it were more equally distributed. In the case of Iruvelipattu itself, as much as one-half of its total paddy output was probably being marketed in 1961, and this would have been adequate to meet the grain requirements of a population of almost equal size in the towns. The rural poor may continue to remain poor, or even be reduced to greater destitution, but the more articulate and politically explosive sections of the urban population can be kept content if large enough foodgrain supplies are ensured to them at stable prices.

There are however considerable differences in the social and economic structure of villages and one cannot be sure whether, even if one were to brush aside more basic questions such as of equity, and whom development is for, what appears an easy option in Iruvelipattu would be equally so elsewhere. For, if the ownership of land were less unequal, and if the pattern and intensity of use of resources is found to vary a great deal with other institutional dimensions such as the terms and conditions on which land is leased out and hired labour is available, other alternatives may be open which could appear no less practical and attractive.

This range of issues cannot of course be explored very far with the material available from the few village studies initiated by Professor Slater and followed up by others. The villages covered by all the surveys and resurveys conducted in 1916, 1936 and 1961, while unique in that the information collected cover nearly half a century, are only five in number. The method and scope of the investigations vary also so much that the data available are to a large extent not comparable. These studies are however very useful in helping us to see some of the differences in the social structure of villages and how conventional economic analysis may fail to capture important consequences arising therefrom.

In fact, there is an important set of issues that economic theory has not squarely faced but which one cannot escape from when dealing with Indian village economies. It concerns the role of power and social values in determining what choices are open to whom and how far they can go in exercising them. In the days when it was common to describe the subject as Political Economy, the power exercised by different classes of society and their social values were recognized explicitly as important factors governing both resource utilization and income distribution (as is to some extent reflected even in the observations of Professor Slater on Iruvelipattu). But such non-quantifiable and otherwise inconvenient dimensions have not received similar attention since then and, as more rigour and scientific respectability were sought to be given to it under the new nomenclature of Economics, they have come to be treated merely as exogenous elements more or less on a par with climate and culture.

The method of analysis now generally adopted is therefore to take into account the resource endowments of each category of owners, try to specify in some general form what options are available within the given technical constraints as well as the characteristics of the market for each of the relevant products and factors of production and, by using one or the other of the usual maximization criteria, derive the implicit returns to the respective owners and the probable pattern of resource utilization. This kind of analysis has been used even to explain some features of agrarian economies, such as tenancy, share-cropping, and rural under-employment.

In one such recent exercise, attempting to explain variations in the extent and forms of agricultural tenancy in India, a number of interesting hypotheses have been advanced and declared as consistent with the available empirical evidence. One hypothesis is that "the percentage of area under tenancy will be higher in areas where the land improvement factor is larger (i.e. soil fertility, rainfall, irrigation etc. is better)"; another is that "the larger is the extent of unemployment facing the landless households the higher is the extent of tenancy". Similarly, it has been suggested that the percentage of area under share-cropping will be higher in the case of more labour-intensive crops, higher in areas with larger unemployment facing the landless families, but lower the higher the differential interest rate that the landless share-cropper has to pay over that paid by those with land of their own, and so on.

Let us consider briefly how far some of these propositions are consistent with the information available to us through the village surveys stimulated by Professor Slater. Compare, for instance, the land-man ratio, area irrigated, the productivity of land, etc. with the extent of tenancy in the village of Dusi in North Arcot district and in Palakkurichi village in Thanjavur district in 1936.

Dusi, inhabited by 294 families (and a total population of 1316), had 485 acres of wet (i.e. irrigated) land and 231 acres of dry land under cultivation; while Palakkurichi, with only 208 families (and a total population of 869), had under cultivation 977 acres of wet land and only 73 acres of dry land. The land revenue assessments of the time indicate that the net product per acre of wet land in Dusi was nearly twice as high as in Palakkurichi, while that of dry land in the former was only about half as much as in the latter. Allowing for these differences in productivity, per capita availability of land appears to have been still nearly one-sixth higher in Palakkurichi than in Dusi. Thus, while both were extensively irrigated villages, the advantage of "the land improvement factor" was evidently greater in the former.

There was apparently no great difference in the crops grown in the two villages, with paddy dominant on wet land and groundnut and inferior cereals like ragi on dry land. Data on the extent of unemployment among landless households are not available, but there is one important piece of evidence which suggests that they are likely to have been very much more in number in Palakkurichi than in Dusi. For there were no padiyals at all in Dusi, while there were 95 families of padiyals in Palakkurichi forming nearly one-half of the total number of families in the village.

If one were to go by the hypotheses stated earlier one would expect the tenancy to be more widespread in Palakkurichi than in Dusi, or, even if it were not quite the case, the difference to be not very large; one would also expect the incidence of share-cropping to be greater in that village. Yet the available evidence is quite to the contrary.

In Dusi the entire cultivated area was under tenancy in 1916; and three-fourth of it was on share-cropping basis, with the share of the land-owner as high as five-sixth of the gross produce when all inputs other than labour were provided by the owners. The extent of tenancy had fallen by 1936, and the fixed rent system had become the dominant form of tenancy because many of the land-owning families had migrated out of the village and they preferred the fixed rent system which did not call for direct supervision; but the area under tenancy was still nearly three-fourths of the total cultivated area, and even the fixed rents were reported to be more than 1000 kgs per acre (presumably on double-cropped land which accounted for well over 80 per cent of the wet land in the village).

In Palakkurichi, on the other hand, all except 5 of the landowners are reported to have been directly engaged in cultivation in 1916, and less than a quarter of the total cultivated area was under tenancy. The extent of tenancy appears to have fallen still further to about 10 per cent of the cultivated area by 1936. Moreover, land was being leased out mainly on fixed rent basis. The report on the 1936 survey points out also that, while fixed rents (which ranged from 500 to 650 kgs of paddy per acre) was meant "to give the tenants an opportunity to improve the land and profit by the increased yield", the reverse was the case in practice because they had generally no capital to meet the initial costs of cultivation and the short period of the lease (usually for one year) acted as a disincentive.

The explanation for the sharp contrast between what one might expect on the basis of the theoretical hypotheses and the actual facts as reported from these two villages lies perhaps mainly in the difference in their social structure. In Dusi, all the land was reported in 1916 to be owned by Brahmin families, who formed about a fourth of the total population of the village; though about one-third of them had migrated from the village by 1936, there is no report of any large sales of land by them, only of changes in the form of tenancy from share-cropping to fixed rent basis (as noticed earlier). The report based on the 1936 survey makes it also clear that over 60 per cent of all the families in the village were Naickers who, as a community, are known for their willingness to be directly involved in cultivation. This, along with the absence of a plentiful supply of padiyals, was in all probability responsible for tenancy being so extensive.

In Palakkurichi, however, most of the land was owned by Nayudus, wh formed about one-sixth of all the families in the village. The report on the 1916 survey stated that "their individual holdings are fairly large"; that they were not only agriculturists "by custom and instinct" but "pride themselves upon the thought that agriculture is the noblest, the least harmful and the most independent of all professions"; but that they were extremely conservative, clinged to the security offered by the joint family system, lacked individual initiative and enterprise, and therefore remained economically backward. At the same time there was the vast reserve army of padiyals in the village, for whom the daily wage in 1916 was stated to be less than 1 kg of paddy (though there were also some extra payments for them over the year) compared to the prevailing rate of 2 kgs per day for the free labourer. It was not therefore surprising that direct cultivation with hired labour was preferred to tenancy. But, for the reasons already indicated, the extent of involvement of the owners in raising productivity does not appear to have been very great. The report on the 1916 survey points out that "about half the land can yield two crops per annum but many cultivators are too indolent to grow two crops"; and that "the whole village was for generations in the hands of large landlords who did not take any interest in maintaining the full productivity of the soil, and who consequently did not manure adequately".

A related aspect of resource utilization, one which goes beyond questions of tenancy, becomes evident when one studies the findings from another village, Vadamalaipuram in Ramnad district, which appears to be very different in characteristics from all the other three villages referred to so far. The wet land in this village was but a small proportion (about 6 per cent) of the total cultivated area of 91[illegible] acres in 1936, but it had no less than 166 families (with a total population of 668). To judge from the land revenue assessments of the time, the net product per acre of dry land was itself only about as high as in Dusi and Iruvelipattu and less than one-third as high as in Palakurichi. When reduced to a standard acre basis, the per capita availability of land in the village, it is therefore clear, was very much lower in Vadamalaipuram than in the other villages surveyed.

The land-owners in the village consisted however largely of Naick a community (as noted earlier) with no inhibitions about being directly involved in cultivation. Not surprisingly, therefore, the report on the 1916 survey points out that "all the owners of the land are cultivating landowners"; that "it is no uncommon sight to see even the richest landowner shouldering a plough and walking to his field in the early morning followed by his workmen, or the owner of the land driving the bullocks round and round on the threshing ground threshing the grain, whilst his paid workmen attend to other business"; and that there was no sub-letting of land at all in the village. Moreover, not only did most of the villagers own some land, but those who did not and worked as "permanent labourers" would appear to have been much better off than their counterparts in the more well-endowed villages referred to earlier; these labourers got three meals a day in their master's houses and, in addition, were paid wages equivalent (at the prevailing prices) to about 450 to 540 kgs of paddy per annum.

Another remarkable feature of this village, which partly explains its achievements, is that a cooperative society had been formed as early as 1909. According to the report based on the 1916 survey, the society had come to be accepted as "a model by the other societies surrounding it"; loans were being extended by it to members on personal security at a rate of interest of no more than 9 per cent per annum; and a number of improvements had also been made in the village by construction of a road, drains, and sinking of wells and tubewells. The society had however to be liquidated in 1932 for a number of reasons (including mismanagement); this, together with failure of seasonal rains for four years continuously, had serious consequences on agriculture in the village, and the total cultivated area in 1936 was as a result only about half of what it was in 1916. The report based on the 1936 survey mentioned nevertheless three interesting facts about the village: (i) there was not only an elementary school in the village but a resolution had been passed by the panchayat to enforce compulsory primary education and a land cess (of 1 to 3 pies in the rupee) had been levied to finance it; (ii) there had been a progressive fall in the birth rate in the village "due perhaps to the later age — even 20 — at which girls in this village have been married"; and (iii) "it must be said to the credit of the villagers that in spite of all difficulties, they have the same zeal and enthusiasm for common improvement of the village and for reviving the activities which they were forced to give up".

It is not therefore surprising that, by the time Miss Haswell came to the village in 1961, the village had succeeded in having an electric pumping station installed on the river Arjuna flowing by its side (whose irrigation potential had been brought to the notice of the government by the villagers even as early as 1923). In addition, 45 wells had also been equipped with electric pump-sets. All this, taken together, made it possible for the entire land under the control of the owners in 1916 to be brought under cultivation once again.

Some of the further observations of Miss Haswell, reproduced by her after the 1961 resurvey, are perhaps better quoted than summarised. For instance:

> "The 1958 pilot scheme which provided electricity for a river pumping station, and the equipping of wells with electric motor pump-sets, has greatly increased the range of choice of product and the time pattern of crop production. 'Dry' lands provided work for only 2-3 months of the year, but irrigation has given a physical production advantage. The availability of water throughout the year has resulted in more intensive practices, and a fairly constant demand for labour; 10 per cent of the net sown area was double-cropped in 1961 compared with only 4 per cent in 1936. Landless poor families now have some bargaining power and have secured a 25 per cent increase in the daily wage rate from 2.7 kg (6 lb) grain to 3.4 kg (7.5 lb) grain".

"Attendance (in the elementary school) is compulsory between the ages of five and ten, and in 1961 15 per cent of its total intake were Harijan untouchables".

"The Panchayat is fairly representative of the village community — which we have noted has a long history of absence of rigid caste structure — and includes a Harijan untouchable among its members."

"Acceptance by the community of direct taxation, and the relative absence of caste, permits considerable flexibility in the economy, and clearly demonstrates that it is in the historical perspective over the span of at least a generation that the development planner should seek for criteria which will promote rapid economic response in low-income rural areas".

These and other findings from the various villages whose study was initially promoted by Professor Gilbert Slater lend support to a view put forward by some economists, namely that several crucial assumptions underlying general equilibrium analysis are simply not valid within the framework of traditional agrarian economies and that the use of such analysis for interpreting the functioning of these economies could be misleading. The theoretical limitations of this kind of analysis when applied to village societies have been clearly pointed out by Professor Krishna Bharadwaj. Not only are market and social power in these societies generally exercised by a very small minority but the members belonging to this minority often occupy dominant positions in a number of factors and product markets simultaneously, with the result that these markets are inter-locked by price as well as non-price links. Thus, when a land-owner is both leasing out land and engaged in trade in the produce of such land, the terms of lease may not only be more stringent than otherwise but have specific stipulations as to what crops the tenants can grow and the mode as well as terms of repayment; these conditions would naturally restrict considerably the choices open to his tenants. Similarly, if a landlord possesses land "under personal cultivation", it is not unusual to extract under-paid or unpaid services from agricultural labourers as well as tenants. Transactions in the market for credit offer similar scope for manipulation in other markets.

The main point is that, when markets are inter-locked in this way through price or non-price links, the differential bargaining positions of the participants in any particular market cannot be fitted into the conventional models of monopoly of monopsony and absorbed into the framework of general equilibrium analysis. At the same time, as Professor Bharadwaj has observed, "such interlocking of markets increases the exploitative power of the stronger sections because, while there could be limits to exploitation in any one market — due to traditions or conventions — or due to economic factors, the interpenetration of markets allows them to disperse exploitation over the different markets and to phase out exploitation over time". What is therefore missed out is something very important, indeed crucial to the understanding of agrarian economies.

There is another aspect of the problem, noticed by many others, to which again Professor Bharadwaj has drawn pointed attention in this connection. It is that the objectives of production themselves depend on the economic status of the individuals and groups concerned, and that they cannot be defined a priori. It is not certain in the first place that members of village communities are maximizing anything in particular; even if they are, it is not clear whether it is gross output, or 'farm business income' (i.e. gross revenue net of actually paid out cost), gross profits, or something else that is sought to be maximized. The very small operators living in perpetual indebtedness might choose to raise as much gross value of output as possible per acre of land in their possession, and operate land intensively even to a point where the additional input costs are more than the value of additional output and they are obliged to incur more debt on this account; on the other hand, "the big cultivators, while aiming to produce a surplus, may yet prefer not to cultivate the land intensively for a number of reasons including the existence of opportunities for making profits or for wielding social power through non-farming activities".

Despite weighty considerationf of this kind, it is not clear how much impact they have had on the profession and its work in this area. One has the impression that the majority still find it easier to play the game by the conventional ground rules laid down and approved of by those who invented the game. The alternative, of course, is to follow the much harder path of first studying empirically in depth the complex structures and inter-relationships characteristic of traditional agrarian economics, before attempting to advance general theories and explanations relying on the methods of conventional economic analysis. As Professor Bharadwaj has concluded in her study of Indian agriculture, "detailed information in historical, specific context about the agrarian economy under study would be required to describe the particular characteristics of its markets, the nature and extent of the involvement of the different sections of its peasantry and the implications thereof"; and consequently, a meaningful analysis of a changing agrarian economy can be carried out only by such painstaking investigation covering a multitude of villages in different stages of commercialization under diverse conditions.

This was no doubt the direction Professor Gilbert Slater was trying to give to the thinking of his students through the village studies he initiated. He was at that time going by some hunches, and the surveys he initiated were not as comprehensive and systematic as would be devised if one were to embark on a similar venture now. The village studies stimulated by him, including the resurveys undertaken in 1936 and 1961, provide however some very interesting and valuable insights into the political economy of agrarian communities. They are a part of the rich heritage of the Department of Economics of the University of Madras, and it is one on which greater things can be built if only the study and development of economic theory are closely linked with the study of the environment to which we belong. Theories are now learnt parrot-fashion, repeated, and applied without an adequate sense of relevance even by scholars in the profession. That such theories are associated with great names in the literature on the subject does not justify either the habit or the tradition that is so built up. We must try and revert once again to the less spectacular but more rewarding path that Professor Slater was beckoning his students to follow.

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K.N.Raj

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