

Impact of Money Economy and Adult Suffrage on a Mysore Village

Scarlett Trent

Irrigation has brought sugarcane cultivation to Manhalli and superimposed a cash sector on its subsistence and barter economy. But though the villagers now have more money, in-village indebtedness has increased. Manhalli's intra-village system of money lending is an integral part of its social structure.

Legislation has had something less than the expected impact on the village power structure. The first elections were held last year in Manhalli also, under universal adult suffrage, but the hereditary council continues to function and is the de facto authority in the village. The Untouchable members never dare to enter the place where council meetings are held.

INDIA is undergoing a revolution in all spheres of her social life, a peaceful revolution sanctioned by consent rather than force. Central, State and Local authorities introduce the most revolutionary measure" by means of democratic legislation. It is indeed a novel enterprise to attempt a social and economic revolution within a democratic framework in a state burdened with heavy liabilities for the welfare of a large and rapidly growing population.

Some of the new legislation assaults the very roots of traditional social, political and economic institutions. Yet the actual change in the villages, where the vast majority of India's population still lives, is far less startling than recent legislation would lead us to expect.

Progress in the villages seems to be much more of an evolutionary than a revolutionary nature. The deviation between legally planned development and the actual change may be partly due to administrative difficulties—but its major cause is the resilience of the indigenous village culture.

Development planning is a very big task in India, made more difficult by the lack of reliable statistics on available economic resources. Yet even if all essential quantitative data could be made available, the planner would still need knowledge and understanding of the cultures of the people for whom he designs development. Such basic qualitative data can emerge only from a series of intensive sociological and anthropological studies.

My own research in a Mysore village may help to shed at least some little light on the Impact of external agencies of change on the social, political and economic system of a village community. I have completed one full year's research in Manhalli, a village situated in the Mysore plains,

about four miles from Bella, a rapidly growing town with a sugar factory. Manhalli is a multicasite village, consisting of ten castes excluding the Untouchables who live a little apart. The Okkaliga, or Cultivator's caste, is dominant both in economic and political power. Altogether there are 947 inhabitants living in 192 households. Every separate cooking-unit represents one household.

Stable Social Positions

There has always been some change going on in Manhalli. Some people died, new ones were born, men and women married within their caste, either within the village or taking partners from outside. Every marriage created a new link or reinforced existing ties between families, lineages, even villages; each death severed a bond.

Individuals, personalities changed through time, but the social positions they filled remained stable. By birth every villager was allocated a certain place in society. His caste, lineage, family and economic inheritance determined his place within the village community. For instance, the eldest son of a particular family was assigned fixed ritual functions; he had certain political rights and duties and he carried responsibilities for some members of his own and also other castes. These rights and duties were attached to his hereditary status, independent of his individual personality.

External Stimuli

In the absence of external stimuli—importation of new crops and productive techniques or political legislation directly affecting village life—the economic and political system of Manhalli changed very little. The political system was based on heredity. The village council consisted of the eldest men of the chief families belonging to the major

Okkaliga lineages. Legislative, executive and judiciary power was vested in the village council. The office of village headman and accountant was, and still is, hereditary. Every sphere of social life was regulated to a large extent by stable positions manned on a hereditary principle. There is evidence of deviations from this fixed pattern, but the pattern always remained the ideal to which society tried to conform as nearly as possible.

Irrigation from a widespread system of canals reached Manhalli sixteen years ago and administered the first major shock to the customary village economy. Irrigation brought new economic opportunities. Both the area of cultivable land and productivity per acre could be considerably increased. With irrigation a sugar factory was started in Bella, which enabled Manhalli farmers to grow sugarcane as a cash crop—their first. Sugarcane was a new crop to them which required new techniques, different timing of operations and considerably more investment and working capital than were necessary for the traditional dry crops.

Partial Monetisation of the Economy

Before the advent of irrigation, Manhalli was mainly a subsistence and barter economy. Cultivation of sugarcane as a major cash crop began to monetise the economy, but this monetisation is prominent only in activities concerned with growing sugarcane. Agricultural labourers working during the time of ragi (Elousine Corocana) and paddy harvest are still paid in paddy and not in money. Okkaligas continue their traditional payments in paddy to the priest, guru and the servicing castes, such as the barber and washerman. Okkaligas also still continue to give annual paddy payments to the Untouchables who

work for them and with whom they have a hereditary relationship. Most farmers grow sufficient paddy and ragi, their staple foods, to meet their own consumption requirements. Thus there is still a large subsistence and barter sector in Manhalli's economy upon which the cash sector is superimposed.

Relations between master and servant are not merely economic but are interlocked by important -social, ritual and political ties as well. For instance, each Okkaliga householder has one or more Untouchable families whom he regards as his "old children-" ('hale makkalu'), to whom he gives annual paddy gifts, whose wedding and funeral rites he subsidises and for whom he acts as the source of social insurance. The 'dependent' Untouchable households not only work as labourers for their Okkaliga 'master' family, but also perform for them certain ritual functions during weddings or funeral ceremonies. Barbers and washermen too not only give economic -services to the other castes, but perform ritual functions during wedding ceremonies. The Washerman carries "God's box" ('devara pettige') which contains all the puja articles, during the bridegroom's procession to and from the village temple prior to the actual wedding ceremony.

Social relations in Manhalli are many-sided and it is just this multiplicity which makes them durable and resilient even against the impact of a rapidly expanding economy. As long as economic, social, ritual and political relations are so closely interlinked, it is of no avail to legislate measures which deal only with the economic aspects of these complex relations. For instance, it is useless to try and introduce a minimum wage for agricultural labourers in Manhalli as long as the economy has such a large subsistence sector and as long as the State cannot offer the labourers a system of social security.

More Income, No Less Debt

There is a widespread assumption that high indebtedness reflects a shortage of capital and that reduced indebtedness is a corollary of increased income. This assumption is not borne out by events in Manhalli.

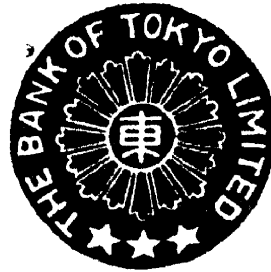
Irrigation practically doubled per capita income in Manhalli. In spite of the fact that the villagers now have more money and that Bella's sugar factory gives cultivation advances at a 6 per cent rate of interest to sugarcane growery, in-village indebtedness has increased since irrigation. Increased creditworthiness

has led to increased Indebtedness,

It should be noted that now, as before, the majority of debts are incurred for other than productive purposes, mostly for marriage expenditure. Critics usually describe high marriage expenditure as irrational behaviour, but this is not quite true if the expenditure is viewed in its proper setting. Since the advent of irrigation Manhalli's economy is expanding rapidly. With economic change, rigid status relationships have become more pliable. Each household tries, if at all possible, to emerge as an important unit. The

established wealthier families must re-emphasise their dominant position and the 'nouveaux riches' make every attempt to match economic gains with a higher social status through stricter observation of rituals and conspicuous consumption. What could be a better way to gain or retain prestige than to spend lavishly at such joyous and crucial occasions as a wedding? As the wealthier villagers spend more, poorer relatives and friends follow suit as far as they possibly can. Manhalli villagers are by no means unique in this aspect of their behaviour;

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imitating the "better classes" as a means of raising one's own status is a well known phenomenon in all societies.

Intra-village Money lending

Manhalli's indebtedness is financed largely by an indigenous, intra-village system of moneylending which is an integral part of the whole social structure. This internal finance system provides both short term small loans and long term large loans. Women are the chief lenders of small amounts (no more than ten rupees). They lend these small amounts out of income derived from selling milk and butter or from interest on previous loans. Short term loans are meant to carry the debtor over an immediate emergency only. The rate of interest on these small loans is high, one anna per rupee per month. These small debts are usually repaid after a few months and no document covers the transaction.

Side by side with small scale financing exists a structure of larger scale lending which runs through the whole economy. Every such loan is recorded on a stamped paper. At the top there are five households (3% of the total number of households) who have no debts and are lenders only. At the base of the structure are 75 households (39%) who cannot give loans and are debtors only. The remaining 112 households (58%) are both debtors and lenders. Each of the 112 debtor-creditor families belongs to a group of 6 to 8 families who all are indebted to one particular household. Each, in turn, has about 6 households indebted to them. Each of these families has also obligations outside the economic sphere towards their creditors and in turn they have a group of 'dependent' households who do occasional work without reward, who help in preparations for weddings and other ceremonies and who can generally be relied upon to offer help to their creditors whenever and wherever required.

Long Term Investment

The creditors in Manhalli do not want repayment of the initial loan. They are content to receive interest payments. Most of the debtor-creditor ties are inherited. The creditor looks at a loan as a long term investment from which he gets 12% interest per annum. The only alternative investment is land and land is now very difficult to obtain. It is a risky investment and the far

mers usually do not want to cultivate more than a certain acreage which they can supervise during cultivation. Moneylending at 12% interest is not only profitable, it also yields status and many other non-monetary advantages.

Any disputes over the repayment of debts or the settlement of interest are usually settled in the village by the village council or by some popular arbitrator. If a debtor cannot pay interest he may have to lease out his land for a number of years to his creditor at an uneconomic rent, in order to settle arrears in his interest payments. During recent years only one case occurred, where both creditor and debtor came from Manhalli, in which the creditor sued the debtor in Bella's court for default in interest payments. But a number of cases have been recorded where outsiders lent money to Manhalli villagers and then used them for repayment of the loan or overdue interest payments. Villagers do not like to be sued in the town courts. This is costly and unpleasant. They prefer to borrow within the village, if at all possible, where there is little danger of a court case arising from default in debt settlement.

A Factor in Cohesion

Indebtedness in Manhalli represents an entire network of relations which constitute an essential factor in the cohesion of the village society. It is doubtful whether, under the existing social and economic organization in Manhalli, an external credit agency could possibly displace the internal moneylending system. In practice, the moneylending structure provides a system of channels through which loans received by the wealthier villagers from external agencies trickle down to the final borrowers, who do not have sufficient securities to borrow directly from co-operative or other credit institutions.

Impact of Legislation

In the political fields as well, external legislation has had something less than the expected impact on the village power structure. The first democratic elections were held last year under the Mysore Panchayat and District Board Act, 1952, which introduced universal adult suffrage in council elections, a direct assault on the hereditary village council.

According to the act, Manhalli with a population of less than 1,000 had to vote by show of hands and not by secret ballot. This ruled

out any frank choice by the villagers. Who would dare to vote openly for any other man than the one to whose influence group he belonged? Also, while the new legislation in itself is highly democratic, it retained the hereditary principle for the important offices of headman and accountant in the village.

There was no political agitation before the election. The headman, not keen to have an elected council which might challenge his position, had a vested interest in keeping the villagers oblivious of the election. The actual date and time of the election was announced no earlier than 11 p.m. on the night before the election, (when most villagers were asleep). Consequently, most of the villagers had gone unknowing to their fields by the time the election was due to start. Not a single woman and only about 15% of the enfranchised male population attended the election. In accordance with requirements of the law, two of the twelve council seats had to be reserved for Untouchables. But except for the two Untouchable town criers (obliged to be present during the visit of the election officials) no other Untouchables had come for the election. No one wanted to spend time or effort over electing Untouchables- so the two town criers were made council members in spite of their own strong protests.

Some of the village elders refused to be elected to the new council, although they had been council members under the hereditary principle (continued under the system of nominating council members which preceded the recent democratic legislation). Their reluctance was at first

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surprising. But it soon became obvious that they regarded the new council merely as a "paper", de jure authority. The hereditary council continues to function and is the de facto authority in the village. Every issue that arose since the election has been deliberated and decided upon by the hereditary council which consists of the elders belonging to the chief lineages of the Okkaliga caste. The Untouchable members never dare to enter the place where council meetings are held.

The new council, elected in theory by universal adult franchise, did in no way introduce democracy into Manhalli's political system. Political democracy remains a fiction unless it is accompanied by better and more equal economic opportunities. In fact, if political democracy is superimposed on the prevalent economic organization in Manhalli and surrounding villages, this may produce the opposite of the desired result and lead to more distress among the poorer sections of the community.

Political Power and Economic Status

In Lokapura, a village about two miles from Manhalli, economic, political and social power was vested in the Lingayats prior to the recent election, although the Untouchables were in the majority. As a result of the new legislation, Untouchables gained a majority in the village council elections and consequently elected an Untouchable as village chairman. Untouchables gained political power in Lokapura, but nothing changed in their economic dependence on the Lingayats

This divergence between political power on the one hand and economic and social status on the other has led to serious friction in Lokapura. The Lingayat headman refuses to have anything to do with the newly-elected Untouchable council members or chairman, and the Lingayats, as employers, have discarded responsibilities they formerly carried for their dependent Untouchable

families. The newly gained political power offers small compensation to the Untouchables for the loss incurred when the Lingayats severed traditional bonds. The position of the Untouchables is worse now than it was before the democratic election and before their access to political power.

Growing Pains

These events may be regarded as part of the growing pains of a young democracy, but the pains could be minimized if political change were made to harmonize with economic change and both adapted to indigenous culture.

Until such a harmonious development can be introduced, by a proper strategy of planning, the legislated change will remain a fiction far removed from facts. In the meantime we should realize the importance and the benefits of village social systems which by their resilience reduce the hardships of rapid political and economic change.

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