

THE SOUTH INDIAN VILLAGE

The general impression one gets from reading descriptions of an Indian village in Western journals is of a mass of squalid tumble down huts, arranged without any order and evidencing the bitterest poverty on the part of its inhabitants. There are, no doubt, villages of this type but the majority of them have their own charm and the people inhabiting them are among the most friendly and hospitable in the world. The number of free meals I have had in village houses is very large and the food I found quite palatable.

Near the entrance one usually finds a small earthen mound surrounded by stone slabs. On the mound has been planted that striking sacred tree, the Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) quite commonly associated with another tree equally sacred, the Neem (*Melia azadirachta*), the two representing the female and male principles respectively. In their shade are found, in a row, three stones shaped much as the simple headstones in a country cemetery. These have carved on them in relief the figures of cobras with expanded hoods. The outer two bear two single cobras, the male on one side, the female on the other. The centre stone bears the two intertwined much as on the wand of Mercury, ^{the} ~~the~~ caduceus, now used as a medical symbol. Trees and snakes together are relics of a native ^{vye} ~~ive~~ worship coming down through thousands of years and still tinging the religious feeling of the people, although now largely displaced by Hinduism in its cruder form.

From the mound leads away the main village street hemmed in on either side by tightly packed houses. The roadway is bordered by V-shaped open drains, usually lined with granite slabs. The houses are commonly on a stone foundation with thick sun baked mud walls, plastered and white washed. They have a narrow raised verandah and a central door opening into the courtyard.

If one enters this door one finds oneself in a small court in the centre of which in a large pot stands a tulsi plant (the sacred basil). The court is usually surrounded on all four sides by a verandah with the actual living quarters at the rear.

The roof consists of bamboo rafters and crosspieces held in place by rope and covered with **pot tiles** or with thatching. The floor, raised a foot or two from the street and courtyard level, is of tamped earth which has ^{been} washed over innumerable times with liquid cow dung. As shoes or sandals are not worn in the house, this covering polished by the soles of many feet has assumed somewhat the appearance of black marble. It offers, of course, no obstruction to the entrance of ^r ~~goats~~ which abound in the Indian village and which are the carriers of the plague bacillus.

The front inside verandah was formerly used as a stable for cattle, but this ^{is,} ~~is~~ no longer, [^] a general custom. It now commonly gives shelter to the farmer's tools and implements. The actual living quarters consist of two or three rooms at the rear, a kitchen, a dining-sleeping room and a small bath room. There are, of course, no sanitary arrangements of any kind inside or outside the house. The furnishing ^s ~~g~~ could not be simpler, - a few mats of woven split bamboo, and the inevitable

cradle, a simple box suspended by four cords from a cross beam, are usually all.

If the village is lucky it has a village well from which water for domestic purposes can be obtained. Otherwise, water is obtained from the rain fed tank which provides the irrigation water for the village.

The most serious menaces to the health of the village are (1) the tank which serves as a breeding ground for malarial mosquitoes and (2) the lack of any sanitary arrangements in the way of latrines. Thus the organisms which cause amoebic dysentery, and hookworm and cholera are likely to be scattered about the village and more especially near sources of water supply.

Health authorities in India have, for many years, been attempting to combat malaria by destroying mosquito larvae with poisonous sprays. The more recent introduction of D.D.T. has simplified the campaign and allowed for its great extension.

As far as I am aware no similar progress has been made in the control of dysentery and hookworm disease, together almost as serious a menace to health as malaria. When I was undergoing treatment for dysentery at the School of Tropical Medicine in Calcutta in 1924, Major Knowles, the leading authority on diseases caused by Protozoa, expressed the opinion that more than 80% of the cases of amoebic dysentery in India were never diagnosed, let alone treated. Some attempt has been made to induce the villagers to install latrines but without much success. I need hardly point out that in a country where organic fertilizers are so sorely needed the waste of human excrement is a serious matter. As is well

known the success of agriculture in both China and Japan rests to a large extent on the careful conservation and use of human excreta.

What I have so far described refers to the village proper which is inhabited by the caste Hindus, and also by any Mohammedans and Christians that may be present. The few Christians found away from larger centres of population, ~~however~~ usually inhabit villages of their own. This leaves out of account the pariahs or outcasts to be found as laborers and village servants in almost all villages. These are not allowed to live in the village proper, being forced to live in miserable huts in a special quarter (holagere) set aside for them. They cannot draw water from the village well and must get their supply from the tank if present, or from any water hole they may find. Kindly caste women will on occasion, draw water for the outcasts from the well. The strictness with which this water taboo is exercised is shown by the fact that, at least, sometimes, it is carried over to the Christians. I once visited a very well known all Christian village in Mysore. The priest in showing me around indicated the part where the caste Christians lived and that inhabited by the outcast Christians. In the village church, an imposing structure, a line drawn separates the area for caste Christians from that far behind where the outcast Christians must sit. In this village the state government had recently constructed a very fine well, properly *vetted* and with an apron of stone slabs. This, for some reason, had been placed in that part of the village where the outcast Christians lived. The result was that the caste Christians would not draw water

from it. They got their supply from the river about a quarter of a mile distant. As is well known the present Indian government is attempting to break down this caste prejudice. Temple entry, previously forbidden to outcasts is now (theoretically, at least) allowed to them. Reports indicate that the recent elections in which caste Hindus and outcasts mingled at the polls has done something, at least, to break down these distinctions.

It can be readily understood that as Christianity tends to raise outcasts in the social scale, while it does the opposite to caste Hindus, the overwhelming majority of converts come from the outcast classes. At the same time mission schools give them an opportunity for education, otherwise practically denied them. Primary education is theoretically free to all but, in practice, village prejudice is so strong as to shut out these unfortunates almost completely. I need hardly point out that the so-called outcasts (a word no longer used in India) do not represent those who have been cast out of higher castes. They are descendants of the people who were in India long before the invaders (Aryans and others) from outside had arrived.

If we turn to the question of religion, while Hinduism is almost universal in the villages, there are, as already pointed out, remains of nature worship. A common village goddess is Mari who really represents Kali, the bloodthirsty spouse of ^{va,} Sing, the creator and destroyer. There are commonly shrines to this cruel deity. In addition there is ^{larger} in the/villages a temple sacred to Vishnu or Siva with a brahmin priest or *pujari*. The position of the brahmins in the village is peculiar. The teacher in the primary

school is almost universally a brahmin; he with the priest and the village clerk or Shanbogue are the only brahmins in the village. In some areas, however, brahmins form the majority of the population. As a rule brahmins, although landholders, will not personally cultivate the land. If, in a village, one sees fields very badly cultivated with poor crops, and makes enquiries, one will be told with a tone of contempt, "Oh, those are the fields of the brahmin." They are cultivated by the ⁿϕyots on lease only after their own land has been attended to. However in some areas brahmin subcastes see to the cultivation of their own land with great intelligence and skill. Most of the *arecanut* *gagardens* in Mysore State are owned and cultivated by brahmins and they resent any attempt of the lower castes to intrude. I remember visiting one village where a lingayat (to be discussed later) had foreclosed on an *arecanut* garden owned by a brahmin and in a village the gardens of which were exclusively owned by men of this caste. The garden looked as if a tornado had swept through it. All the plantains (bananas) with which the garden had been underplanted had been cut down. All the pepper and *betel* vines had been stripped from the palm trees. The trees alone remained. This gave the new owner due notice that he would not be allowed to intrude. It was clear that he would have to return it to its former owner for cultivation, or sell it to another brahmin.

There are, in addition, extensive areas where the villages

are inhabited almost exclusively by lingayats. These form a separate group outside the brahmin hierarchy. Founded in the 11th or 12th century by the reformer Basava, a brahmin who broke away to advocate freedom from caste distinctions, they are recognized by their wearing the phallic emblem or lingam, in silver or copper contained in a silver box suspended by a cord around their neck or contained in a knotted cloth tied around their right arm. They have, of course, their own priests and in many of their observances are quite as strict as the most orthodox of brahmins. This applies especially to the taking of life. Early in my career in India, I was faced with a severe outbreak of grasshoppers in an area inhabited almost exclusively by lingayats. The only feasible control measure was the sweeping up of the young hoppers in bags specially designed for the purpose, before they had been able to do much damage. They were then smothered in cans containing water with a layer of kerosene on top.

One day my chief assistant brought in word that the lingayat ~~patel~~ or headman of an important village had informed him that it would be a sin to kill the grasshoppers and that he therefore could not co-operate. Realizing that, without his help, the campaign would fail, I went at once to his village. I asked him if he had any daughters. He assured me that he had three and that one was of the age for marriage. I pointed out to him that if the grasshoppers destroyed his crops he would not be able to obtain the considerable sum required for the marriage of a daughter and asked him which was the greater sin, to kill grasshoppers or to leave his daughter unmarried. He replied, "Sir, it is

a sin to kill these insects but it is a much greater one to leave my daughter unmarried." His opposition disappeared and the campaign was a success. I was later informed that the village priest was really responsible for raising the question but thought it better to make no enquiries in this connection. I certainly had no desire to antagonize the priest who undoubtedly wielded considerable power. It was experiences such as this which made me realize that I should have to study village customs and prejudices carefully if I were to gain the confidence of the **vyots**.

There remains to be discussed the questions of village government and village schools. Each village has a headman or patel who inherits his post from his father. It has come down from father to son over many generations and certainly long before the British took over the administration of the country. The patel is a non-brahmin except in those comparatively rare cases where brahmins form the bulk of the village population. If the patel is a mature man, he wields great influence. If he has had to **assume** the office while very young he rarely has any effective control over village matters, the influence passing to the shanbogue or village clerk who, of course, must be literate and who is almost always a brahmin. The minor village officials are the ^{nirgunte} ~~toti~~ who regulates the supply of irrigation water, and the village watchman or **talaxi** and his deputy, the **toti**. All these posts are hereditary. The pay is usually in the form of rent from ^{an} ~~an~~ land, but the shanbogue gets fees from the **vyots** as well, for work he does for them.

In addition to the regular officials there is a sort of village council, ~~or panchayat~~, ^{the panchayat}. This was originally formed mainly to try minor offences but in addition to advise the patel on village affairs in general. Before ^{when} the British administration/the central governments were much less well organized the village panchayats exercised considerable power. with the greater centralization and efficiency of the provincial governments under the British this power was largely lost. It has been only during the past 40 or 50 years that an attempt has been made to restore local self government. The panchayat now controls definite funds to be spent on the improvement of the village.

From the above it must not be supposed that the village is generally free from internal dissensions. There are almost always two factions, one the patels, the other, an opposition. An agricultural officer whose success must be measured by his ability to persuade, as he cannot order, must be fully aware of these factions. when visiting a village I attempted, as far as possible, to call on the leader of each faction and of course to accept hospitality from each. In this way I hoped to avoid any suspicion that the department was favoring any particular faction.

A word should be said about village educational facilities. Theoretically primary education is free and universal. Actually the number of primary schools is much too small to provide universal education. The teachers, usually brahmins, are miserably paid and have to eke out their livelihood by serving as letter and petition writers for the villagers.

Such as it is, primary education rarely extends over more than five years. As there is very little opportunity for reading in the village, many of the pupils have, in a few years, lost all ability to read. They commonly retain, as the one relic of their years in school, the ability to write their own name. I have frequently heard educational officers speak of a 50% lapse to illiteracy as a matter of course.

Attempts have been made to introduce adult education to the villages. A fairly recent article in a leading South Indian daily tells of a well meaning attempt to this end in a village. At the close of the course a government dignitary was asked to distribute diplomas. One of the illiterate ryots who had not attended the classes told with some glee how the dignitary who was distributing the diplomas asked one of the recipients to read what was printed on it. The newly educated man could not read a word of it.

This attempt to picture some aspects of Indian village life may leave a rather dismal impression in the minds of readers. Let me say that during the past 45 years there has been a distinct improvement in village life. Tiled roofs have largely replaced thatch. On the whole the villages are cleaner though of course they are still extremely unsanitary. The campaign for mosquito control has led to health improvement. The omnipresent motorbus has immensely increased and speeded travel facilities so that the villager who knows nothing about the world outside a radius of ten miles from his home has become a great rarity. There are a large number of religious festivals every year which the villagers, men,

women and children, attend in large numbers. They usually combine business with pleasure for many, if not most, of these festivals are accompanied by large fairs at which much buying and selling of cattle takes place. If the villagers' life is not a universally happy one it has many compensations and there is always the hope that the next incarnation will bring a happier more carefree existence.

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN MYSORE.

I. The facts may be correct as far as they go, but they are so one-sided that they give an unbalanced picture.

II. The communal persecutions belong to the ~~pre~~ pre-National or pre-Independence days and are rapidly passing under the new Indian Constitution.

Adult or social education too is much better organised and more earnestly propagated.

III. Re religion, it is not merely ~~the~~ "Hinduism" in its cruder form" (referred to on p. 1, last line) that functions in the villages but also the higher ethical religion of the epics, musical recitals (hari kathas), etc. Nor is there a blind trust in the next incarnation

2.

being automatically better
(as stated on p. 11, last line) but
a fault in Karma, the law
of right effort and result.

IV. It is true that illiteracy is
still great, public health
measures are very poor,
agricultural methods are ~~still~~
generally not modern, etc.

p. 2. last line: - "a few mats of woven split reeds"
instead of "split bamboo".

The Village life in S. India has been depicted in this article with such accuracy and intimate knowledge of its Customs and prejudices of the Villagers that one begins to think that the author was living in the Village.

The refreshing frankness with which the Caste prejudice of an all Christian Village is described makes one extend the greatest respect to the author for his unbiassed view of Indian Village life; for, this aspect will not be readily agreed ^{to} by the Missionary in India.

Perjavasintan