

AGRICULTURE AS A SACRAMENT: A NEW APPROACH TO THE  
CYCLE OF RICE IN SOUTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the nature of Indian agriculture and the role of the farmer beyond the obvious and immediate economic concerns. Drawing homologies between human bodies and the Earth as a divine body, the article suggests that agriculture in India has the characteristics of bodily sacraments (samskāra) and that the farmer operates as a priest and custodian of the Earth's potential for reproduction.

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Attempts to understand Indian agriculture in purely economic or environmental terms, or in terms of any other single category of analysis, are not likely to be successful. The reason for it is that agriculture in India is the kind of phenomenon Mauss used to call "total social fact" (Mauss, 1954), that special domain of life where all social and cultural concerns coalesce together. How do these concerns coalesce together in Indian agriculture? Perhaps an examination of the understanding the Indian farmer has of the agricultural cycle may provide some answers.

When an Indian farmer, a Tamil in this case, is asked what is an agricultural cycle, the most common reply is that it is a period of time required to bring a seed to its completion or fulness, so that it is suitable to be used as food. In the farmer's ideas, as well as in his actions, an agricultural cycle entails a process of transformation through various stages of growth toward maturation and wholesomeness. The most common Tamil term for "agricultural cycle" is pōkam (from Skt. bhoga), which variously means "enjoyment," "happiness," "satisfaction," "experience of karma or past actions," and the "produce of the season" or "crop" (Madras Tamil Dictionary). All these meanings seem to apply when the word is used in agricultural contexts, as the following, more popular gloss of pōkam indicates: "Pōkam is going through a process that brings enjoyment." Here a thoughtful farmer informant derived the term from the Tamil verb pō/pōka, "to go."

It is important to emphasize the processual aspects of the agricultural cycle, as south Indian farmers do, highlighting its likeness with reproductive processes in human life. As it is well known, Indian farmers often draw comparisons between agricultural and human reproductive processes, as when they compare a fertile soil with a womb, the seed with semen, sowing with copulation, harvesting with the severance of birth and the happiness it brings, and the fallow lands with the post-partum period or, at times, with female widowhood. According to this reproductive metaphor, an agricultural cycle is viewed as a period of gestation, the growing of a seed in the Earth's womb to its full term.

While this reproductive view of agriculture is not unique to India, but is found elsewhere in human societies, an agricultural cycle in India could perhaps be more genuinely conceived as a ritualized process, a sacramental rite of passage or samskara effected on the divine body of the Earth. Like human samskara (Pandey 1969) performed in human bodies in the life cycle of persons, an agricultural cycle could be also viewed as a progressive series of actions intended to remove hindrances, or negative substances and conditions from the soil (such as hardness, dryness, useless seeds, insects, and the like), and other actions directed to add generative or re-generative energy to the soil (such as seeds, water, fertilizers, and work in general), all in an effort to bring forward the Earth's potential for general "prosperity" (sri, palan) and "enjoyment" (cantosam). It is perhaps in this sacramental perspective where all social and cultural concerns coalesce together in Indian agriculture.

To be sure, such sacramental view is seldom verbalized by farmers, nor should one expect them to do so. It is too evident, too "matter-of-fact" to be rendered by them in brahminical jargon. One should think, however, that the actions the farmer undertakes during the agricultural cycle reveal this likeness with human samskaras or bodily sacraments, the actions being in this case more explicitly eloquent than oral statements. This sacramental view of agriculture is congruent and compatible with that which many Indologists have adopted regarding the nature of Hindu society in India (Biardeau 1976; Gonda 1966; Heesterman 1985; Inden 1978; Renou 1959, among others), basically a society of worshippers. This view is also specifically perceptible in Tamil understandings of "culture" as the conquest or control of "nature" in its wild state (Hart 1975); (Pfaffenberger 1982). In this cultural endeavor, the cultivation of lands stands on a par in Tamil traditional thought with the building of temples as the two most outstanding achievements. In all of this, the farmer emerges not only as the conqueror of wilderness by clearing lands and subduing their dangerous creatures, but first and

formemost as a "custodian" of the Earth's fertility. No wonder then that the major socio-political achievements of Medieval South India were the result on an alliance of Priest and Farmer (Stein 1980).

Priestly and farming activities have many features in common, the most salient being that of articulating--that is, putting together what should be together and separating what should be separated, so that both "cosmic order" (ṛta) and "social order" (oruṅku) may prevail. The farmer, as the only one who naturally knows how to articulate seeds, soils and seasons, operates like a priest of the Earth's reproductive capacity. In the Tamil-speaking areas of South India, this specialized knowledge is known as sāstiram (Good 1982), and in connection with seeds, soils and seasons, this knowledge resides by birth-right in the Vellalar caste, as one of the foremost constituents of its being. I shall then turn to Vellalar informants to detail the salient stages of the agricultural cycle in the Palanitaluk of the Madurai district in Tamilnadu, where I conducted research for two years (1979-81). Since this locale is a rice growing area, the focus will be on the cycle of rice cultivation.

The nature of Palani soil (mostly of the red variety) and a poor annual rainfall (24 in.) make this locality hardly suited to rice cultivation. Nevertheless rice seems to be the preferred staple (48% of the total meals) and its cultivation uses a large percentage (55%) of the total arable lands. With such constraints, Palani farmers are able to raise only one crop of rice a year, traditionally known as Palani Campa (Nelson 1868). Occasionally, a second crop may be raised in the more fertile blacksoil lands if water is available. Despite this, local farmers always speak of a double rice cycle within a solar year, highlighting in this manner the penetration of astrology in the agricultural domain. The first cycle, the Campa pōkam, corresponds very closely to the astrological division known as dakṣinayāna, the dark and cold semester from summer solstice to winter solstice, when the Sun is said to travel south and the Moon is said to release the "saps" (rasam) of the Earth in the form of rain (Zimmerman 1980). This cycle extends from the middle of Ati month (July/August) until the month of Tai (January/February). This is the period when fields benefit from seasonal rains, reservoirs are filled, water-table levels go up, and electrical supplies are abundant. Hence, this is the only crop most farmers in this area are able to raise.

The second only potential crop, is known as Navarai or Kuravai pōkam. It also closely corresponds to the complementary division of the solar year, the uttārayāna, the bright and hot semester from winter solstice to summer

solstice when the Sun is said to travel north and to capture with its rays the "saps" of the Earth. Due to the general desiccation of the Earth, only few farmers can raise a crop then through the modern technology of deep tubewells. It is important then to realize that, despite the contingencies of experience, agriculture is integrated in the cosmic cycle.

The agricultural procedures followed in these two cycles, when both are present, have many similarities, but naturally the first cycle, Campa pōkam, is the most important both economically and ritually. I shall then focus on this cycle. In doing so, it is again important to emphasize the processual nature of the cycle, which unravels its holistic and sacramental dimensions. As a process, it integrates a series of procedures, the most salient being (1) the preparation of nursery beds and main fields by watering, fertilizing, and plowing; (2) the transplantation of saplings; (3) weeding; (4) harvesting and associated activities such as threshing, winnowing, measuring, storing and/or selling. A rice cycle would be considered incomplete without the inclusion of other features, such as (5) the distribution of human shares due to servicemen and specialists traditionally attached to the landowner; and (6) the giving of divine shares due to the powerful beings of the local pantheon. It is only then that the seed has reached its wholesomeness and has the assured potential of bringing enjoyment and prosperity, indeed, life, as food. It is in the articulation of these procedures that the sacramental dimension of the agricultural cycle is revealed as the farmer fulfills his functions of being custodian of the Earth's reproductive capacity.

As understood by Hindu life sciences (ayurveda), in human bodily growth, either in the process of metabolism or in the marked stages of life (birth, puberty, marriage, death), every transformation brings forward a more refined state of being, but at the same time leaves behind residuals. These residuals must be properly disposed of due to the negative and harmful character. The term samṣkāra indicates this double action, "carving out" or "polishing away" harmful residuals of growth and infusing life-giving energy, generative substances. As in human growth, without proper disposal of these negative residuals, a crop is not considered fit for human consumption. Under the farmer's supervision, these residues that accumulate at every stage of the cycle are put away in appropriate receptacles, which usually are his servicemen and his gods.

The procedures followed in the Campa pōkam are very complex and the following attempts only to summarize them. The flooding festival in the month of Ati (Āṭi perukku) marks the start of this cycle with the coming of the first rains. The preparation of the main fields and nursery beds

is carried out simultaneously, and techniques vary depending on whether the crop is to be raised under the "dry" or the "puddle" system. The dry system is followed when the summer monsoon has been extremely bad, and the required amount of water to inundate the fields is not available. To carry out these operations (described in detail in Ponnuramalingam 1976), farmers in this area would prefer the use of a rural cooperative tractor rather than the country plow with bullock power. The economic advantage of a tractor is well known to all farmers. In 1980 prices, the cost of puddling an acre of land by tractor was found to be about Rs 20/ as against Rs 45/ when done by traditional plow. The most cumbersome operation at this preparatory stage is the control of wetness. A farmer's expertise (sāstiram) is said to be proven by his ability to successfully give the proper amounts of wetness and heat to the saplings.

These preparatory operations are conducted entirely by men, preferably of the Pallar caste, who, despite their Untouchable status, are considered to be experts in wet land work. These operations are, however, always directed by the landlord himself, the cultivator proper who knows all the complexities of the process. Women's contributions at this stage are of a ritual nature, as pacifiers of the Seven Virgins (Kaṇṇimār), said to rule over the wilderness. Women make an image of these Virgins with mud from the nursery, and worship them with offerings of coconuts and plantain. These offerings, once transvalued by the Virgins' contact, are consumed by women, imbibing in themselves the negative residuals at this stage of the cycle.

The transplantation of saplings takes place around the month of Purattaci (October), and is typically women's work. The complexity of this stage lies on spacing the saplings adequately, and in following the proper spatial orientation of the grovers, from north to south. To ensure the establishment of saplings in the main field, another offering is given to the Seven Virgins also by women, this time including sweetened rice. Again, the transvalued offerings are consumed by these women laborers. Twenty days after transplantation weeding is done, always by women. It is repeated at intervals of 15 days until the flowers come out of the stalks. The grains mature in about 30-35 days after flowering, but with present high yield varieties the leaves may still look greenish. This is one of the main problems of improved seeds which puzzles the farmer who has to learn not to trust in color, as he traditionally has done, but in the careful examination of the stalks. Very often, however, the farmer sticks to the traditional calendar of harvesting some 10 days prior to Tai poṅkal--the traditional Tamil winter solstice festival.

Prior to harvesting, an offering is given to the goddess, Bhumi, the divinized Earth, or to one of the many "forest goddesses" (vanna turkai), whose open shrines are situated in the proximity of the cultivated fields, marking the boundary with forest lands. These goddesses are also propitiated when a tract of "wild land" (kāṭu) is brought into cultivation either for the first time or after many years of fallow. The central offering is the blood of a male goat, whose head is severed and the blood let run freely on the ground. The sacrifice is conducted by a priest of the Pallar caste, a serviceman of the landlord, and the transvalued carcass, which contains the negative residuals, is later eaten by the priest and his family. Farmers say that this sacrifice is directed to remove the hindrances of harvesting, to repair the damage inflicted upon the Earth by cutting her fruits. They also say that the sacrifice is done so that the fields may yield larger crops in the future.

Most villages have a communal threshing floor to the west of the main settlement. These places are always endowed of a sacral character, like the domestic kitchen or the temple, and are always approached with the utmost reverence. Every threshing floor has a Guardian God (Melantar), embodied in a stone or a heap of cowdung, usually placed on the north side of the area. Before threshing operations start, a worship is performed to this Guardian God by his human counterpart, the paruvakāran, the most trusted laborer of the landowner, a sort of general manager of the threshing operations and night watchman. Similarly, the transvalued offerings, containing the negative residues of the process, are imbibed by this serviceman.

Threshing, twining the straw and winnowing are always done by men; women only briefly step on the threshing ground to receive their day's share for harvesting. When the winnowing has ended with the day's work, the heaps of cleaned rice are marked with the landowner's household "seal" (mūṭṭirai), thus conferring identity to them, the mark of belonging.

Prior to sealing the cleaned grain, the daily shares are distributed to laborers, every day during the harvest season. Payments on the threshing floor are given on two accounts, (1) to reward "work" (vēlai) and (2) to reward "expertise" (sāstiram) of a traditional occupation, even when this has not crystallized in actual work during the season. The reward for work is always in kind during the harvest season, and is locally called cooli or sampalam ("wages" or "salary for work"). This is always higher than the reward for expertise, which is known as maniyam ("honor," "respect") (for important implications of this

distinction, (see Good 1982). Laborers and specialists (blacksmith, barber, washerman, and priest) receive at this time one of the two payments or both. The similarities of these payments with the "fees" (dakṣina) offered to the performers of life cycle rituals or saṃskāras is too great to escape attention. Both are "inducements" to engage in actions of a dangerous nature, that is, to becoming receptacles of negative residuals, the left-overs of growth.

At harvest time the landowner is obliged by a code of "generosity" (sattvika perumai). This generosity is part of his sāstiram, his code of conduct as lord of the land. This generosity is expressed by the extra amount the landlord throws to the measured quantities given as payment. This action is directed to create mutual "satisfaction" (cantōsam) between the landlord and his servicemen, the token of good will to ensure that the pōkam, the produce of the season, will really be a source of enjoyment to all.

When the shares have been duly distributed, the grain is weighed and packeted in sacks. A part of the crop is sold to the Government, at procurement price, and the remainder may be sold in the open market unhusked or taken to the rice mill to be husked and parboiled and then sold at a higher price.

Grain from the fresh crop is never husked and cooked at home before the festival of Tai poṅkal, the three-day celebration of the Tamil winter solstice. This festival has usually been described as an occasion for popular rejoicing more than a purely "religious" observance. It has, however, a very important ritual purpose whose intent is a final purification of any remaining negative residuals in the new crop. This celebration includes three major observances--offering of new rice to the Sun, about to begin its northerly course; the cleansing of cattle and agricultural tools; and the eating of the new rice by the farmer's household with great rejoicement. These observances are usually surrounded by divinatory practices, in which the general well-being of the family in the coming year is ascertained.

Two other offerings of the new rice in the months to come will complete the cycle--to the local goddess Mariyamman during her festival in the month of Maci (February/March), and to the god Murugan in the first day of the month of Cittiral (April/May), the Tamil New Year. These final procedures are obviously "thanksgiving" actions, but are also intended to free completely the crop from its residual negatives, liberating its karma, and making its produce wholesome for enjoyment and prosperity.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the major function of the Indian farmer is that of "provider," an economic agent in the production of food. But he becomes a provider by virtue of being a "custodian" of the Earth's fertility. To properly discharge this function, he must articulate the Earth's growth, thus becoming its Priest. An understanding of Indian agriculture as a "total social fact" cannot fail to recognize this sacramental dimension.

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