The Past as known from Tamil Inscriptions:

Village Community and Challenge to the Caste System

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Abstract

Inscriptions on stones or copper-plates, which occur in substantial numbers, are the basic source-material for the ancient and medieval history of India, as much of India lacks history books compiled in these periods. It is particularly so in the case of Tamil Nadu, as there remain in Tamil Nadu the largest number of inscriptions from the past. First I will explain this situation by showing the language-wise and chronological distributions of inscriptions.

What sort of information can we obtain from those inscriptions and how can it be used for study? In order to elucidate these points, I will take up, as examples, two issues that I had studied earlier, namely, (1) the notion of the village community and (2) the challenge to the caste system in the past, made through the examination of Tamil inscriptions of the Chola period (10th to 13th centuries).

First, the view expressed by Metcalfe, "The Indian Village Communities are little Republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves", produced later the theory of the 'Stagnant Orient' or 'Oriental Despotism'. There is a volume of inscriptional data on the nature of villages in the Chola period to question this understanding. Second, many people believe that the caste system has been well maintained in South India without much challenge since it was introduced from the North during the Pallava period until the beginning of the last century. An analysis of the imprecations in Chola and Pandyan inscriptions throws new light on this issue.

For such studies, the importance of *statistical* analysis of inscriptional data, the method of which I introduced into this field of study, needs to be emphasized.

1. INSCRIPTIONS AS HISTORICAL SOURCE MATERIAL

It is well known that India lacks history books compiled in the ancient and medieval periods on Hindu dynasties, other than a few like *Rājataraṅgiṇī*. In compensation, however, there remain a large number of inscriptions from the remote past that enable us to reconstruct the history of ancient and medieval Hindu dynasties. In this talk, I wish to show you what sort of information on the past can be obtained from inscriptions and how we can use it for our study of the past.

First, let us look at the distribution of the inscriptions by language and period. The distribution by language is as follows:

Table 1: *Distribution of inscriptions, by language*

Language	Number
Sanskrit	7,800
Other Aryan languages	5,000
Tamil (Dravidian)	28,000
Kannada (Dravidian)	11,000
Telugu (Dravidian)	5,000
Others (Persian, Arabic, etc.)	3,000
Total	59,800

Source: From Garbini (1993) and Subbarayalu (2001).

Table 1 shows that the Dravidian-language inscriptions remaining in the south far surpass, in number, the Aryan-language inscriptions which survive largely in the north, including the northern part of the Deccan.[1] Inscriptions are mostly engraved on the stone walls of Hindu temples, and the fact that a far larger number of ancient and medieval Hindu temples remain in the south than in the north explains this difference. To some extent, the same reason may explain the difference in the distribution of inscriptions between the three Dravidian languages.

The chronological distribution of inscriptions, if we take up Tamil inscriptions for example, is as follows.

Table 2: *Distribution of inscriptions, by period*

Period	Number
3rd century BCE to 5th century CE	100
6th century to 9th century	900

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[1] A good number of Sanskrit inscriptions also remain in south India.

Period	Number
10th century to 13th century	19,000
14th century to 16th century	6,000
17th century to 19th century	2,000
Total	28,000

Source: From Garbini (1993) and Subbarayalu (2001).

Table 2 shows that we have a large number of Tamil inscriptions from the 10th century to the 16th century, within which fall the periods of the Chola, Pandya and Vijayanagara states. More or less the same tendency will be found in the chronological distribution of inscriptions in other languages too.

2. VILLAGE STUDIES BASED ON INSCRIPTIONS

The past village studies

Inscriptions usually refer to the reigning king with his regnal year or the year of an era, such as the Saka era, on the basis of which we can reconstruct the political history of the period to a certain extent. Moreover, as the contents of inscriptions, especially of Tamil inscriptions, are various, with many different matters being recorded, we can also learn about the socio-economic conditions of the period from them. Inscriptions engraved on temple walls mostly record grants of money, cows, land, state revenue as tax, etc., made to that temple for conducting daily worship, festivals and repairs therein. Matters are often recorded in full length; if we consider, for example, land grants, the inscriptions often go into such detail as to inform us how the grantor acquired the land, who should cultivate the land, what should be cultivated, what sort of taxes the temple should pay or be exempted from, etc., in addition to the extent and location of the land as defined by four boundaries.

Inscriptions also record other matters, such as government orders to the locality; decisions made by local assemblies such as an *ūr* (assembly of an ordinary village called by that name), *sabhā* (that of a Brahmana village called *brahmadēya* or *chaturvēdimaṅgalam*), *nagaram* (that of a town) and *nāḍu* (that of a local unit called by that name); the solidarity pact of a particular community; revolt resolutions by some oppressed social groups; disputes among people and villages; and political compacts between local chiefs. Therefore, with regard to the Tamil country, we can also undertake village studies based on inscriptions for the period from the 10th to the 16th centuries – as I have done.[2]

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[2] See Karashima (2009) and also Karashima (1996a).

In past studies, efforts have been made to elucidate the conditions of ancient and medieval villages by examining Tamil inscriptions. The best example of this is NilakantaSastri's *Studies in Cōḷa History and Administration*,[3] in which he clarified the functioning of the *sabhā* formed by Brahmana landholders in Brahmana village. The *sabhā* managed village affairs, including cultivation, through various committees (*vāriyam*) formed under it, including those for garden land (*tōṭṭam*), tanks (*ēri*), wet fields (*kaḻani*), taxation (*pañchavāram*) and accounts (*kaṇakku*). The method of electing members to the *sabhā* and *vāriyam* was also clarified by Sastri. About the same time as Sastri conducted these studies, A. Appadorai studied the agrarian society of medieval south India by examining inscriptions in Tamil and other languages, in his *Economic Conditions in Southern India (1000–1500 AD)*.[4] Landholdings in villages were also discussed in this book.

Although these studies are excellent pioneer works, they have their own problems. One problem concerns their nationalistic bias, related to the national movement of the 1930s. Sastri and others tried to prove the existence of democratic local government in ancient and medieval India, and gave much emphasis to the democratic way of electing *sabhā* members in Brahmana villages. Other aspects of village study were, therefore, left out unexamined.

Another problem concerns the way the studies treat inscriptions. In most cases, Appadorai picked up only one or two inscriptions to support his argument although there were many relevant inscriptions to be analysed, including ones that suggested contrary arguments. Moreover, Appadorai depended, for his argument, not on the original inscriptional texts, but in many instances, on the brief gist of the inscriptions published in English in the *Annual Report on Epigraphy*. In the case of general works such as his, especially in a pioneer work that is not based on more specific work conducted previously, this deficiency may be permitted to some extent. Unfortunately, however, this attitude is still prevalent in recent works. That is why I introduced the statistical method in the study of inscriptions -- dealing with a related corpus of inscriptions in place of single inscriptions, in order to avoid the arbitrariness that is conspicuous in previous studies. This method is quite useful for knowing the situation or general tendency of the matters to be examined, and these days many scholars employ this method in their studies. If you are interested, please see my paper "Whispering of Inscriptions".[5]

Village communities revealed from Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram inscriptions[6]

Now, let us look at village studies based on inscriptions taking up as an example my past study of the village community in the Cholatimes. Here, I will take up for examination the inscriptions

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[3] Sastri (1932).
[4] Appadorai (1936).
[5] Karashima (2001b)
[6] More detailed study of this subject is found in Karashima (1984), pp, 40-55.

of Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram temples to refute the notion of the Indian village community expressed by Sir Charles T. Metcalfe who was a member of the Governor General's Council when he wrote the following note in 1830:

> The Indian Village Communities are little Republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else last. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down: revolution to revolution: … but the Village Community remain the same.[7]

This statement influenced later scholars and produced the notion of the 'Stagnant Orient' expressed by Henry Main and Karl Marx and the theory of 'Oriental Despotism' by K. A. Wittfogel. The view expressed by Main and Marx and adopted by many scholars for a long time has the following two points as its central ideas: 1) communal ownership of land in a village lacking its private ownership, and 2) the economic and social independence or self-sufficiency of a village, which was made possible by the incorporation of many occupational groups besides agricultural ones into a village, and by the division of labour among them. I shall now examine the second point, namely the economic and social independence or self-sufficiency of villages, by analysing the data obtainable from the Chola inscriptions, leaving the examination of the first point for some other occasion.[8]

There are three long and continuous inscriptions in the Brihadisvara temple in Thanjavur (*SII*, ii, 4, 5 and 92, hereafter TI), which record revenue grants from more than 56 villages in south India and Sri Lanka. The inscriptions start with a preamble that runs as follows:

> Hail! Prosperity! There was engraved on stone, as orally settled, the revenue in paddy, – which has to be measured by the measure (*marakkāl*) called (after) Adavallan, which is equal to a *rājakēsari* measure, – and the gold and money, which has to be paid from the land paying taxes; and there was also engraved on stone the non-taxable land   – including the village-site, the sacred temples, the ponds (*kulam*), the channels (*vāykkāl*) passing through the villages, the quarter for Paraiyas, the quarter for Kammalas, and the burning ground, – in the villages, which the lord Sri Rajarajadeva had given in the Chola country (*maṇḍalam*)[9], and in other countries as divine gifts for the expenses required by the supreme lord of the sacred stone-temple, called Sri Rajarajesvara, – which the lord Sri Rajarajadeva has caused to be built at Tanjavur….

After this preamble, full details are enumerated for 40 villages in Chola-mandalam and abridged records for 16 villages in other *maṇḍalam*s, including Sri Lanka. Therefore, for each of the 40

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[7] C. T. Metcalfe, "Minute on the Settlement in the Western Province" dated on 7th November 1830.
[8] For the first point, see Chapter 1 of Karashima (1984).
[9] *Maṇḍalam*, meaning a 'country', was the biggest administrative division of the Chola kingdom.

Chola-mandalam villages (actually only 33 villages, owing to the damage to the inscription), we are able to know 1) the total extent of the village, 2) the extent of taxable and non-taxable land, 3) the amount of tax imposed on the taxable land, 4) the categories of tax-free land including residential quarters, temples, etc. From the description of actual villages, however, we also learn about the existence of threshing grounds and granaries as tax-free land, and of residential quarters for the Ilavar too, though they are not mentioned in the preamble.

The Gangaikondacholapuram inscription (*SII*, iv, 524, hereafter GI) records similar grant of villages by Virarajendra and his predecessors to the Brihadesvara temple of Gangaikondacholapuram, the new capital built by Rajendra I, son and successor of Rajaraja I, but we do not know how many villages were granted, as the stone is badly damaged. The information obtainable is more than that of Thanjavur inscriptions, as it differentiates taxable lands according to the crops raised on them.We shall, however, examine here the information of the same categories obtainable for TI by taking up seven villages which can afford full information. Thus, Chart 1 gives us the information on the 33 villages of TI and the 7 villages of GI.

Chart 1: *Some results from village-level analysis of Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram inscriptions*

		T I																					
VILLAGE NUMBER		RO	1	2	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
EXTENT OF VILLAGE			134	111	7	6	24	34	7	6	52	39	31	6	?	81	46	42	19	5	16	13	50
EXTENT OF TAX FREE LAND			9	4	0.1	0.2	0.3	5	0.4	0.2	2	2	1	?	?	5	3	2	0.2	0.2	1	1	2
RATE OF REVENUE ASSESSMENT			100	100	99	95	100	10	95	99	98	100	99	?	100	8	77	100	100	100	100	99	99
RESIDENTIAL AREA	ŪRNATTAM	○	○	○			○	○	○	○	◎	○		○	○		○	○	○	○		○	○
	ŪRIRUKKAI					○							○			○		○			○		
	KUḌIYIRUKKAI																					○	◎
	PARAICHCHĒRI	○	○	○				○					○			○	○	○	○	○	○	◎	◎
	KAMMĀṆA CHCHĒRI	○	○																		○		○
	Ī ACHCHĒRI																○		○		○		
	OTHERS							○															
WATER TANK		○	○	◎	◎	○	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎		○		○		○				◎	○
BUND						○								○		◎		○				○	○
WATER CHANNEL		○	◎			○	○					◎				◎		○	○		○	◎	○
TEMPLE		○		◎			○		◎	◎		◎	◎	◎				○	◎				
CREMATION GROUND		○	○			○	○	○				○	○	○	○	Δ	Δ	Δ					Δ
THRESHING GROUND																◎					○	○	○
GRANARY																		○		○			
OTHERS										○			◎	○		○							◎

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Chart 1 (Continued)

		T I													G I								
VILLAGE NUMBER		29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	T	101	134	197	200	202	208	212	T	GT
EXTENT OF VILLAGE		24	7	153	11	21	26	3	3	7	11	53	28		?	54	53	24	37	47	67		
EXTENT OF TAX FREE LAND		0.5	0.5	3	0.4	4	0.7	0.2		0.1	3	3	8		0.7	1	5	2	4	4	7		
RATE OF REVENUE ASSESSMENT		100	100	99	98	5.3	9.8	8.5	10	9.7	9.9	100	8.2		51	48	16	16	28	29	?		
RESIDENTIAL AREA	ŪRNATTAM			○	○		○	○		○	○	○		23	○		○	○	○	○	○	6	29
	ŪRIRUKKAI	○	○			○							○	9		○						1	10
	KUḌIYIRUKKAI			○										3									3
	PAṞAICHCHĒRI	○	○	○	○	○	○						○	19		○						1	20
	KAMMĀṆA CHCHĒRI		○	○	○								○	7									7
	Ī ACHCHĒRI	○		○	○									6									6
	OTHERS			○							○	○		4									4
WATER TANK				○		◎	○				○	○	◎	22	◎	○	○	○	◎	◎	○	7	29
BUND				○		◎	○				○		○	11			○	○			○	3	14
WATER CHANNEL		○	○	○										13			◎	◎	◎	◎	◎	5	18
TEMPLE		○		◎	◎	◎					○	○	◎	16			○	◎	◎	◎	◎	5	21
CREMATION GROUND		Δ	Δ	Δ	Δ	○	○						○	19	○	○	○			○	○	5	24
THRESHING GROUND		○			○									6									6
GRANARY			○	◎										4									4
OTHERS		○	○	○		○							◎	10									10

Notes: ○   It indicates the existence of the specified item in the village in singular.

◎   It indicates the existence of the specified item in the village in plural.

Δ   It indicates the existence of the cremation ground of the Paraiyas separately from that of the Vellalas in the village.

G I   Gangaikondacholapuram inscription

T I   The row marked "Village Number" refers, in the Thanjavur Inscription (TI) to the village number as given in the inscription, and in the case of the Gangaikondacholapuram Inscription (GI), to the line number in the inscription. Damage to the latter inscription is such to not allow us to assign a number to the village.

Source: Karashima (1984), pp. 44-5.

Among these 40 villages, there is no *brahmadēya* village granted to Brahmanas, but there are three *nagaram*s (towns, nos.12, 33 & 40 of TI) and five villages (nos. 34-38) incorporated into a *nagaram* (no.33). In these *nagaram*s and incorporated villages, the tax is assessed in gold (*kalañju*) and not in paddy (*kalam* in *nel*) as in other ordinary villages (*ūr*).[10] However, the assessment in gold was made on the basis of land extent. As for the extent of village, we can know it for the 37 villages. Though it varies from 3 to 153 *vēli*s, the majority (32) was less than 60 *vēli*s. There are 9 villages which were less than 10 *vēli*s, while the average extent of these 37 villages is 35.17*vēli*s.

As for the residential areas, we can know from the description of the actual villages the existence of *kuḍiyirukkai* (for the *kuḍi*s who were probably tenant cultivators), *īḷachchēri* (for toddy drawers), *tīṇḍāchchēri* (for the untouchables), *talaivāychchēri* (for the people who control the main sluice), *taḷichchēri*(for the people connected to a temple?), though in the preamble of the edict are given only *ūrnattam*(for the *ūrār*, namely Vellala landholders), *paṟaichchēri*(for the Paraiyas who were engaged mostly in cultivation), and *kammāṇachchēri*(for the Kammalas, namely artisans including carpenters, smiths and masons). *Ūrirukkai* which appears only in the description of the actual villages seems to be synonymous with *ūrnattam*(for the *ūrār*) in the edict, as they appear complementarily except in one village.

The most important thing noticeable from Chart 1 is the fact that except the *ūrnattam/ūrirukkai* which appears in almost all the villages except two small villages, other residential quarters do not necessarily appear in all the villages. Though *paṟaichchēri* (Paraiyas' quarter) appears in 20 villages, *kammāṇachchēri* (artisans' quarter) appears only in 7 villages, *īḷachchēri* (toddy drawers' quarter) in 6 villages and *tīṇḍāchchēri* (for the untouchables) in 2 villages. Though *vaṇṇārachchēri* (for washermen) appears in a village excluded from Chart 1 owing to the damage, it does not appear in the remaining 39 villages of Chart 1. This fact itself is the negative evidence for the economic and social independence or self-sufficiency of a village emphasized by Metcalf. During the Chola period many villages had to depend on some other villages for the works of artisans, toddy drawers, and other servicing communities, or for the performance of some duties including the regulation of the main sluice. It will be clear from the following facts too that the village was not self-sufficient in medieval South India.

Temples (*śrīkōyil/kōyil*) and cremation ground (*chuḍukāḍu*) also cannot be found in all the villages. As for the temples, there were variety of deities enshrined therein including Mahadevar, Pidari, Aiyan and Durga. In case of cremation ground, in eight out of the 24 villages where the ground existed, those of Vellalas and those of Paraiyas are mentioned separately, and not all the

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[10] In village 21, tax is assessed in money, though it is not stated as *nagaram*.

villages where Paraiyas' quarter existed had necessarily the cremation ground for Paraiyas. Cooperation in the area beyond a village would have been necessary to conduct funerals in cremation ground and to organize festivals for various deities in temples.

If we check pond or water tank in Chart 1, it is found in 29 villages, but if we check it more closely, some of them are the pond for drinking and some others for purification or Paraiyas. and not for cultivation. Water channels are found only in 18 villages. This indicates that water facility for irrigation was not sufficient in each village and these villages had to cooperate with nearby villages for cultivation of their land. Agrarian production was organized in an area larger than a village. It needed the cooperation of many villages. Metcalf's assertion is not applicable to the Chola villages.

The study of Chola inscription reveals the importance of the area called *nāḍu* in agrarian production and for people's social life. A *nāḍu* comprised usually several villages[11]sometime including one or two *bramadēya*s and *nagaram*s too. It functioned also as an administrative unit and the royal orders were usually addressed first to *nāṭṭār*, the representatives of a *nāḍu*, who were mostly Vellala landholders during the Chola period. The study of *nāḍu* is also very important for our understanding of South India's past, but I shall reserve its discussion for some other occasion.[12]

3. A CHALLENGE TO THE CASTE SOCIETY: CHANGE OF IMPRECATIONS IN TAMIL INSCRIPTIONS[13]

Imprecations in inscriptions

Now we shall examine the imprecations found in inscriptions. Inscriptions which record some charity deed such as land grant to a Brahmana usually have an imprecation to the people who might give harm to that charity. An examplefrom the Gupta dynasty is as follows:

> A Damodarpur inscription of Budhaguptaof the 5th century (*EI*, xv, 7-3,), recording a villager's land purchase for settling Brahmanas, states the following as the saying of the great *rishi*s: Whoever confiscates land given by himself or by another becomes a worm in ordure and rots with his forefathers, and the confiscator and he who approves resides for sixty thousand years in hell.

This practice of putting an imprecation to inscription was followed by various dynasties after the Guptas in many regions. The Vakataka dynasty in the Deccan affords the following example:

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[11] Subbarayalu (2011), p.129.
[12] Karashima (1996b).
[13] More detailed study of this topic is found in Chapter 5 of Karashima (2009).

Siwani inscription of Pravarasena II of the 5th century (*CII*, v, 7), recording village grant by the king to a Brahmana, gives the following verse sung by Vyasa: Those who give harm to the grant shall live in hell for sixty thousand years, and those who take away the land given by themselves or by others shall incur the sin of killing ten thousand cows.

Killing a cow is counted as one of the offences next to the five mortal sins (*mahāpātaka*) in the *Manu-smriti* (XI, 60).

The practice was also followed by the Pallavas in the Tamil country and the following is an example:

The Kasakkudi plates of Nandivarman II of the 8th century (*TPCP*, pp.155-69) have an imprecation, which runs:Whoever takes back a property gifted by himself or by others, he shall become a worm in the dung for sixty thousand years.

Strangely, however, none of the royal land-grant inscriptions of the Cholas, who succeeded the Pallavas in the Tamil country in the ninth century, has imprecations, though there remain many copper-plate charters recording Chola kings' land grants to Brahmanas. However, we do find imprecations in some of the Chola inscriptions that record charities made by common people, not by kings, including land grants to Brahmanas. The phrase most frequently seen in these imprecations appears, for example, in a Tirumalpuram inscription of Rajaraja I (*SII*, xiii-29: NA), which records that the villagers (*ūrār*), having received money, agreed to supply oil to a lamp in a temple and to give a meal to the collector of oil. The imprecation against the violator of this agreement runs as follows, reflecting the geographical situation of the peninsular India:

The person who would give harm to the charity shall incur all the sins committed in the land between the Ganges and Kanyakumari.

Though there were some other imprecatory phrases, most of the Chola inscriptions of the early period had this phrase for imprecation and this situation continued for a few centuries under Chola rule from the middle of the 9th century. In the latter half of the twelfth century, however, there occurred changes in the imprecatory expressions in inscriptions, which become more conspicuous in the thirteenth century. A particular change is noticed in the employment of the term *drōhi* (traitor). The word *drōhi* appears in combination with such terms as *rāja* (king), *nāḍu* (locality), *iṉa* (community), Siva (god), *guru* (religious preceptor), *grāma* or *ūr* (village), and *mātru* (mother), specifying against whom or what the person will be a traitor, if he gives harm to the charity or violate the agreement. Three examples are as follows:

1) An Arpakkam inscription (*SII*, vi-456: Cg, 1168), recording the grant of a village by a chief to Arpakkam temple praying that the Sri Lankan army which had invaded the Pandyan

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country would not come into the Chola country, gives the imprecation that the person who gives harm to this grant will fall into the sin of killing parents and Brahmanas and will be a traitor to the god (Siva-*drōhi*). The Sri Lankan army who damaged Ramesvaram temple is also condemned as Siva-*drōhi*.

2) A Kudumiyamalai inscription (*IPS*-285: Pd, 1229), which records the decision made by various communities in their assembly to share the money for the repair of a temple, gives the imprecation treating people who would violate their decision as traitors(*drōhi*) to the god (Siva), locality(*nāḍu*), and community (*iṉa*).

3) A Chengama inscription (*SII*, vii-118: NA, 1258), recording a feud between a local chief and the three sons of his brother involving whole communities in the locality, states that the three brothers who joined the enemy of the chief are traitors tothe ruler (*rāja*) and locality (*nāḍu*).

It is clear from these examples that the matters for the protection of which the imprecation is given are not just confined to such charities as land grants to Brahmanas or lamp burning in temples, but also include agreements made between two hostile parties or resolutions made in an assembly of various groups of a locality.

In Brahmanical ideology charity has great meritorious value,[14] and as stated above, its hindrance was thought to be the sins prescribed in the *Manu-smriti*. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, however, sins in inscriptions proliferated, and, therefore, it became necessary to specify against whom or against what they were committed. This change towards the proliferation or specification of sin seems to have been caused by an increase in the number of inscriptions that record various matters other than grants, including agreements or decisions made by various groups of people.

Accordingly, this proliferation and specification of sins brought about the emergence of various new imprecatory expressions in inscriptions, along with the employment of the term *drōhi* in inscriptions, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There continued to be a standard or stereotyped expression of imprecation in inscriptions, but the expression itself changed from the earlier "receiving of the sin committed between the Ganges and Kanyakumari" to the new one which runs as follows:

The person will fall into the sin of killing a tawny cow on the bank of the Ganges and on the shore of Kanniyakumari.

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[14] There are often benedictory verses also in the inscriptions recording grants, especially land grants to Brahmanas. For example, the Damodarpur inscription of Budhagupta quoted above gives the benedictory phrases "the grantor of land enjoys pleasure in heaven for sixty thousand years" (*EI*, xv, p. 136).

The most remarkable change, however, is to be recognized in the emergence of various free, more vivid, and often vulgar expressions of imprecation. In contrast to the stereotyped phrase quoted above, which still lies within the frame of Brahmanism,[15] these new coarse expressions show in many cases deviation from Brahmanical ideology or at least something new within the orbit of Brahmanism. Seven examples are as follows:

1) A Tirumaiyam inscription (*IPS*, 340: AD 1223, Pd), recording reconciliation reached by two long-hostile temples in a large assembly of the locality, states that people who violate the agreement will die young without issue, being traitors to the ruler (*rāja*), mother (*mātru*), and locality (*naḍu*).

2) A Valikandapuram inscription (*AR*.1943/44-276: AD 1227, Tp), recording a solidarity pact of the *iḍaṅgai 98* groups[16] composed of Nattamakkal, Malaiyamangal, and others, stipulates that everybody will share the good and bad fortune of the members and that if any one goes against this pact, he/she will be degraded lower than other and low *jāti*s.

3) Another Valikandapuram inscription (*AR*.1943/44-268: AD 1233, Tp), recording an agreement concerning contributions by local people to a temple festival, states that the person who goes against this agreement will be dismissed from the village as a *Siva-drōhi* and *naṭṭu-drōhi*.

4) A Tiruvannamalai inscription (*SII*, viii, 80: AD 1233, NA), recording a village grant by a chief, warns the person who gives harm to this charity by stating that his beard and breasts will grow,[17] and he will be treated as not born to legitimate parents, eat beef (as lowly persons do), and incur the sin of killing a tawny cow on the bank of the Ganges and on the shore of Kanniyakumari.

5) Yet anotherValikandapuram inscription (*AR*.1943/44-279: AD1240?,Tp), recording tax remission of four villages by military leaders, states that the wife of the person who gives harm to this charity will be given to a Pulaiyar[18] who cuts grass for his horses.

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[15] As stated earlier, killing a cow is counted as one of the offences in the *Manu-smriti*(XI, 60).

[16] *Iḍaṅgai* means 'left-hand'. *Valaṅgai*,meaning 'right-hand', also appears in inscriptions. These two groups, often combined with the numbers 98, 79, etc., are the large assemblies of various lower *jāti*s, mostly of artisans, merchants and hill-tribe soldiers. For these, see Chapter 8 of Karashima 1992 and Karashima and Subbarayalu 2004.

[17] The expression "his beard and breasts will grow" means that he will be a hermaphrodite.

[18] Pulaiyars were one of the outcastes in Tamil Nadu during the British period.

6) A Chengama inscription (*SII*, vii, 118: AD 1258, NA), already referred to, recording a feud between a local chief and the three sons of his brother involving whole communities in the locality, states that the three brothers are traitors to the ruler (*rāja*) and locality (*naḍu*), and that people who help them will be killed and thrown away, being treated as lower than the pig and dog, and the nose and breasts of their wives will be cut off.

7) A Ratnagiri inscription (*AR*.1914-153: date lost, probably thirteenth century, Tp), recording an agreement made between the *nāḍu* (local assembly), *girāmam* (village assembly), and *nagaram* (town assembly), gives the imprecation that if the person who violates this agreement is a Brahmana, his eyes will be taken out and his nose will be cut… he will be regarded as a pig … he will be killed by soldiers … if the persons who violate the agreement die, their bodies will be treated as those of pigs and dogs …   The inscription is so badly damaged that we cannot determine the proper content of the agreement or full meaning of the imprecation.

Some of these vivid expressions may even be considered to refer to the actual punishment to be given or revenge to be made, exceeding the psychological inhibition intended by imprecation. What caused this change in imprecations in twelfth- and thirteenth-century inscriptions? As stated above, it seems to have been caused by the proliferation of sins, which resulted from an increase of inscriptions recording decisions made in an assembly of various local groups, in and after the latter half of the twelfth century.

Politico-economic Conditions in the Background of the Social Change

These changes seem to have been related to the emergence of new *jati*s or the acquisition of power by the communities until then oppressed under the hegemony held by Brahmanas and Vellalas who composed the ruling class as landowners in agrarian society. Owing to the decline of state power towards the end of the Chola rule, it became necessary for the local people themselves to defend the locality.[19] New *jāti*s which were gaining power in and after the twelfth century formed the so-called supra-local and supra-community organizations, such as *chittiramēḻi-periyanāḍu* (peasant organization formed beyond a *nāḍu*), *idangai* (left hand) and *valaṅgai* (right hand) groups (supra-community organization, often headed by ex-hill-tribes and suffixed with the numeral 98 or 79 indicating that it was an assembly of many *jāti*s), and *aiñūṟṟuvar* (a large organization of itinerant merchants having soldiers under them as guards) to resist the oppression given by Brahmanas and Vellalas.

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[19] This situation may be well illustrated by a Tirukkachchur inscription to be referred to below, which records the local people's decision taken on the atrocities of five Brahmana brothers. According to this inscription some chiefs caught the brothers at the request of the local people, but soon the trouble started again and another chief sent soldiers to catch them. Though they caught two of them, the remaining three brothers continued to fight in the forest and killed even the soldiers sent by the Pandyan king.

Till the middle of Chola rule, society was stable under the hegemony of Brahmanas and Vellalas. In the thirteenth century, however, aTirukkachchur inscription (*SII*, xxvi-333), which recordsthe atrocities of five Brahmana brothers, such as stealing, raping and murdering, deplores the fact that these brothers ceased to observe the normally good behaviour of Brahmanas and Vellalas and instead began to behave badly in the manner of lower *jāti*s.

The above situation is certainly a reflection of the increase of power among some new social groups other than Brahmanas and Vellalas. They were either ex-hill-tribes, who had been recruited into the Chola army, subsequently becoming landholders on the plain by acquiring land by purchase or coercion,[20] or merchants and artisans, who increased their strength being favoured by the development of maritime foreign trade from the eleventh century onwards. They formed such supra-local, supra-community organizations as mentioned above and recorded in inscriptions the various agreements or resolutions they made in the large assembly (*peruniravi*). A large number of *jāti*s joined the assembly.[21]

For example, the Valikandapuram inscription of AD 1227, quoted above, makes mention of caste-like groups,[22] namely, Yadavar, Nattamakkal, Malaiyamangal, Andanar, and Pannattar, as components of *chittiramēḻi-periyanāḍu*, and Vaniya-nagaram and Kaikkolar, as components of a merchant guild (*padineṇ-vishayam*[23]). The Chengama inscription of AD 1258, quoted above, enumerates some twenty-eight groups and refers to them as "all the *jāti*s, Andanan (Brahmana) at the top to Arippan (Paraiya?) at the end". The rough and vulgar imprecatory expressions appearing in twelfth- and thirteenth-century inscriptions are a reflection of the strength of some of these caste-like groups, who increased their power greatly and formed supra-local and supra-community organizations in and after the twelfth century.

A Challenge against Hierarchical System of Castes?

In the Tamil country the formation of *jāti*s and consequent rearrangement of the hierarchy had been progressing during the period of political instability and social disorder around the thirteenth century. The struggle for hegemony between the new and old groups or among new groups caused the reshuffle of caste hierarchy. Tirukachchur inscription referred to above records the lamentation of Brahmanas and Vellalas, who were losing power at that time. In sharp

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[20] Karashima (1984), pp. 21-31.
[21] Karashima and Subbarayalu (2004).
[22] As it is extremely difficult to define these groups appearing in the 12th- and 13th-century inscriptions, I here use this vague expression deliberately. A technical term for them may be *jāti*, as it is often used in inscriptions to indicate these groups, but we have to refrain from using this term also to avoid confusion with its present-day usage as employed by sociologists.
[23] *Padineṇ-vishayam*is synonymous with *aiñūṟṟuvar*. Karashima (ed.) 2009, pp. 217-8.

contrast to this, the Ratnagiri inscription examined above, which commands to take out the eyes and cut the noses of Brahmanas, expresses the lower people's antagonism or hate against Brahmanas, and probably against Brahmanical ideology, too. Behind the formation of *iḍaṅgai/valaṅgai* groups in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we may perceive the challenging idea, that the people conceived of, namely, changing the caste system which was made hierarchically based on the Brahmanical ideology, by bifurcating the *jati* groups horizontally into *iḍaṅgai* (left hand) and *valaṅgai* (right hand).

However, we have to notice in this process also the working of Brahmanical ideology regulating the caste (*jāti*) hierarchy as prescribed in the *Manu-smriti*. New imprecations in inscriptions also make mention of the *jāti* hierarchy by inserting a phrase such as "all *jāti*s, Andanan (Brahmana) at the top to Arippan (Paraiya?) at the end" (Chengama, AD 1258), or by saying that if anyone goes against the pact, he will be degraded lower than other and low *jāti*s (Valikandapuram, AD 1227), and that the wife of the person who gives harm to the charity will be given to a Pulaiyar (untouchable) who cuts grass for his horse (Valikandapuram, AD 1240).

New *jāti*s, which increased power politically and economically, challenged against the Brahmanical social order, and there seems to have been an aspiration among the people who founded *iḍaṅgai/valaṅgai* organizations towards an egalitarian society. Though this challenge did not destroy the caste system based on the Brhmanical ideology, it seems to have brought in something new to South Indian medieval society, which emerged under the *nāyaka* rule of the Vijayanagar kingdom towards the end of the fifteenth century. The new imprecations appearing in Tamil inscriptions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were the precursor of this medieval South Indian society.

The inscriptions are calling us from the past and whispering many things.

ABBREVIATIONS

Epigraphical publications:
AR=Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy, CII=Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, EI=Epigraphia Indica, IPS=Inscriptions of the Pudukottai State, SII=South Indian Inscriptions, TPCP=Thirty Pallava Copper Plates

Districts (old) in Madras State:
Cg=Chingleput, NA=North Arcot, Pd=Pudukottai, Tp=Tiruchirapalli

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