

# Social Mobility in Kerala:

## Modernity and Identity in Conflict

Review >  
India



'Caste is what caste does. When the insistence on touch taboos, and eating taboos, and on endogamy becomes less rigid, as it is now, the fundamentals of caste become correspondingly shaky, and then it is only a question of time for the superstructure to totter'.

By Janaki Abraham

With these words, A. Aiyappan ended his *Iravas and Culture Change* (1942), in which he reflected on rapid social change in the early part of the twentieth century and its effects on the Izhava community in Kerala. The book was based on his thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics. Aiyappan, himself an Izhava, was a prominent social anthropologist. Fillipo and Caroline Osella tell us that their book is an attempt to look at Aiyappan's predictions and expectations for the future of his community. Focusing on lives lived in the twentieth century, the book argues that the Izhavas, a numerically large 'low' caste concentrated in Kerala, have an 'ethos of mobili-

ty, and identity through detailed case studies and the exploration of areas such as migration to the Gulf, women, men and work, the search for marriage alliances, marriage ceremonies and styles of consumption, associations between the traditional Izhava occupation of toddy tapping and caste identity, 'passing', religion, and politics to name just a few.

The recurring theme through these discussions is caste; has the superstructure tottered and fallen away? What happens to the category 'Izhava'? What are the ways in which it reconstitutes itself? Contrary then to Aiyappan's expectations, the Osellas show that caste runs deep and is embodied and reproduced in a variety of ways. Further, in sharp contrast to Aiyappan's argument that 'caste is what caste does', the Osellas argue that caste is cognitively grounded so that while the

is fixed and resistance not at all possible. More generally, what disturbed me as I read the book was that social life studied through the lens of social mobility often conjures up images of lives lived like a game of snakes and ladders in which the sole intention of people is seen to be mobility - whether through marriage, devotion, or consumption. The possibilities of alternate meanings or motivations seem to get ironed out.

The above in fact bears on the Osellas' understanding of Sri Narayana Guru whose philosophy and reform they understand as a move towards prestige and status rather than as a critique of caste. For example, the motivation towards sanskritisation through the adoption of upper caste rituals and customs could be seen as a means of challenging upper caste hegemony over certain ritual practices and not merely as a means of upward mobility within the caste hierarchy. This is most forcefully illustrated in the well-known story related by the Osellas of how Sri Narayana Guru, when installing a Shiva in a temple (a stone he took out of the river), was asked what right he had as an Izhava to consecrate a Shiva idol in a temple. Sri Narayana Guru is believed to have replied, 'It is an Izhava Shiva!' not only denying the exclusive right to install a Shiva to lie with Brahmins, but also making fun of the perceived Brahmanical 'ownership' of Shiva. Once again, in overemphasizing mobility, the Osellas underplay the strength of Sri Narayana Guru's critique of caste.

These criticisms in no way take from the rich ethnography of the book, which is written in a style that will be accessible to a wide audience, both academic and non-academic. It is an important contribution to the anthropology of social mobility, as well as to the understanding of processes of social change among Backward Classes in India generally and to Kerala Studies in particular. ◀

- Osella, Fillipo and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*, London: Pluto Press (2000), pp. 336, ISBN 074531693X (pb).

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*'the lens of social mobility often conjures up images of lives lived like a game of snakes and ladders'*

ty', and attempts to explore this modern search for upward social mobility - the processes which it involves, the ideologies which support or thwart it and what happens to the people involved in it.

The book is based on three years of fieldwork done during three visits between 1989 and 1996 in a multi-community village in Southern Kerala. The Osellas tell us that people articulate the drive for mobility in terms of progressu vendi (for the sake of progress); the word progress is now lexicalised into Malayalam. According to the Osellas, it is in fact the structural middle position that the Izhavas occupy that enables them to this 'drive for mobility'. Theirs is a middle position that carries with it flexibility, willingness to negotiate, and allows for people to make the most of opportunities. The book then focuses on this 'drive for mobility', moder-

nature and content of the caste, as a category of people, may alter it does not effect the principle of hierarchy (p.254).

The book ends with brief discussions of both of their own family histories, which is an attempt to counter the long anthropological tradition of 'othering'. What is disturbing though, is the final point they make, pulling together the argument of the book.

'The big difference, the thing that makes the experience of our particular - white - families and the Izhava families we know ultimately almost incommensurable is that membership of a negatively evaluated community remains for Izhavas and others like them [...] for the moment apparently inescapable' (p.262).

We then seem to be trapped within an all too familiar picture of an unchanging caste hierarchy in which meaning