

## From ‘Untouchable’ Scavengers to Dignified ‘Tribals’\*

On the making of a new Kattunayakkar Identity

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‘We are not SC, we are ST,’ the young woman said with emphasis, pointing to a calendar on the wall with a portrait of the great Independence-era ‘untouchable’ leader B. R. Ambedkar and the Latin letters S and T standing out against the Tamil text. ‘ST: Scheduled Tribes,’ she explained. I was visiting the community commonly known as Thotis in the small town of Porayar close to Tranquebar. Being one of the formerly so-called ‘untouchable’ castes, the Thoti<sup>1</sup> community is included on the list of Scheduled Castes (SC) in the state of Tamil Nadu. In Porayar and Tranquebar, however, the members of the community do not accept this identity. They call themselves Kattunayakkars<sup>2</sup> and claim to be the descendants of a forest tribe of bird hunters and honey gatherers who immigrated

\*The chapter is based on empirical data from two-and-a-half months of ethnographic fieldwork among the ‘untouchable’ communities in Tranquebar in connection with the collection project ‘The Low Castes of Tranquebar’ which I conducted for the National Museum of Denmark in Tranquebar in 2006–07. The Danish foundation Bikubenfonden generously provided the grant. I also owe my thanks to my interpreter and field assistant S. Balakrishnan. Without his competent help and advice, this study would have been impossible.

from Andhra Pradesh and therefore rightly belong to the category of Scheduled Tribes (ST).

The calendar that the young woman pointed to during our conversation was issued by the local branch of the ‘Tamil Nadu Scheduled Tribes Kattunayakkan Samuga Seerthirutha Sangam’,<sup>3</sup> which is the state association of the Kattunayakkar community in Tamil Nadu. The Kattunayakkar association uses the iconic picture of B. R. Ambedkar as its emblem but insists that its members, despite the imposed ‘untouchable’ identity, are actually misclassified tribals. The association works to persuade the state government to issue community certificates in the name of ‘Kattunayakkar ST’ to its members but the authorities in Tamil Nadu are not willing to recognise the community as Kattunayakkars. They maintain that the self-identified Kattunayakkars are rightly Thotis and therefore belong to the SC category.

The identity of Thoti is extremely stigmatised in Tamil Nadu, where it is closely associated with the occupations of sweeping and manual scavenging. Manual scavenging is a collective designation for occupations involving the removal of human excreta from dry (non-flush) latrines, the emptying of septic tanks, and the cleaning of sewage and drainage lines to clear blocks.<sup>4</sup> Because of the close association with filth and human excrement, Thotis are considered inherently polluting to other communities and rank lower than any other ‘untouchable’ caste in the local status hierarchy. The tribal identity of Kattunayakkar, on the other hand, is unaffected by the stigma of pollution. In Porayar and Tranquebar, the Kattunayakkars have worked as sweepers and manual scavengers for generations and, like all other communities of manual scavengers, they suffer stigmatisation and discrimination from all parts of society. Even so, they seem more determined to struggle collectively for recognition of their alleged tribal identity than to leave their present occupations as manual scavengers, street sweepers and garbage collectors.

This chapter examines the identity claims of the Kattunayakkars in relation to the identity ascribed to them by others and asks why it is so important for them to become officially recognised as a tribal community. My fieldwork in Porayar and Tranquebar points to the existence of a profound schism between the complex and dynamic self-identifications of the Kattunayakkars and the rigid, one-dimensional identity they are assigned by others as an ‘untouchable’ community of mainly sweepers and manual scavengers. Comparing

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the case of the Kattunayakkars to that of other 'untouchable' castes in the Tranquebar area, I argue that the Kattunayakkars' effort to reappropriate a tribal identity constitutes an attempt to free themselves from their imposed low and subordinate status by alienating themselves culturally and historically from the social hierarchy of the local society. In doing so, the Kattunayakkars insist on being subjects in their own right, with an independent history and a dignified cultural identity.

The Kattunayakkars' struggle for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe is an example of an 'untouchable' community that challenges the stigmatised identity that it has been assigned by others. In Tamil Nadu, as in most other parts of India, the borders of identity constituted by caste, tribe and religious belief significantly frame the relations between people. For people belonging to the 'untouchable' castes at the bottom of the social hierarchy, everyday encounters with people from other communities are often related to humiliation and shame, since these encounters frequently end up cementing their low and subordinate status. For them, the question of identity is often painful and laden with ambiguity and ambivalence because the cultural uniqueness of their individual castes is usually eclipsed by their ascribed status as inferior and polluted. People from the 'untouchable' castes therefore have a strong motivation to change their collective identities and, since colonial times, many have taken other caste names or changed their religion and cultural traditions in an attempt to heighten their social status and shed the stigma of pollution (see, Mosse 1999). It is, however, unusual for the members of an 'untouchable' caste to claim a tribal 'ST' identity.

The case of the Kattunayakkars raises the question of who has the right to decide and define the identity of a specific group, and on which basis identity is decided. In India, this question is of particular consequence to the communities classified as either Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes, since these classifications serve to identify groups and individuals entitled to particular affirmative action benefits and social welfare programmes. In order to benefit from quotas reserved for SC/ST candidates in public sector employment and higher education, eligible applicants must produce a valid caste or community certificate, issued by the local authorities, to prove that they actually belong to a community classified as either a Scheduled Caste or a Scheduled Tribe. The authorities' demand for identification, however, presents a significant dilemma to people from

‘untouchable’ castes, since they have to acknowledge an inherently stigmatised identity in order to attain the benefits of the affirmative action programmes. The state governments in India are thus playing a decisive role in effectively regulating the identity claims of the lower sections of society, and measures intended to help the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to be on a par with the rest of society may actually reinforce their low status.

The identities of castes and tribal communities in South India are generally far more complex and ambiguous than appears from the administrative distinction between Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and this may explain how it is possible for an ‘untouchable’ caste to claim a tribal identity. Before turning to a discussion of the actual identity claims of the Kattunayakkar community in Porayar and Tranquebar, I will briefly account for the historicity of the categories of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the complexity of the identities of Thoti and Kattunayakkar.

## SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND ADMINISTRATIVE CLASSIFICATIONS

The social categories of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes came into being, with the drafting of the Indian Constitution in 1950—as administrative classifications of the communities which, before Independence, had become known as ‘untouchables’ and ‘tribals’, respectively. However, the basis for distinguishing between castes and tribes was—as pointed out by numerous scholars—relatively arbitrary, and did not take historical developments such as migration, social advancement or cultural change into consideration (see, Skaria 1997; Xaxa 1999). In practice, the new social classifications of the postcolonial state were based on descriptions and distinctions made by colonial ethnographers and census commissioners, which ranked the ‘native’ Indian population on an evolutionary scale, with castes being more ‘civilised’ and sophisticated than the ‘primitive’, ‘wild’, ‘hill and forest tribes’ (Skaria 1997). The new categories of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were thus rooted in a static and essentialist understanding of Indian society, even though the categories were intended to facilitate the economic and social advancement of the included communities. To achieve reservation benefits, people from historically disadvantaged and subordinate communities—whether now classified as SC or ST—were required

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to identify themselves unambiguously with one of the appellations in the lists, even though many of the listed identities were not mutually exclusive. The Constitution thereby contributed further to the process of differentiation and reification of communal identities, which had taken place during colonial rule (Dirks 2002). Contemporary documents, statistics and ethnographic data, however, show that community identities in South India continue to be considerably more complex and fluid than suggested by the administrative schedules.

The Kattunayakkar community in Tamil Nadu provides an example of a collective identity that is far more heterogeneous than would appear from its official classification. With 45,227 persons reporting themselves as Kattunayakkars in the 2001 census, the Kattunayakkar community is the third largest tribal community in Tamil Nadu and one of six communities classified as 'Primitive Tribal Groups' (Office of the Registrar General 2001; Planning Commission 2004). The name Kattunayakkar derives from the words *kattu* (forest) and *nayaka* (leader) and literally means 'Lord of the Forest'. In the forests of the Nilgiri-Wayanad hills on either side of the border between Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the Kattunayakkars are known as a small community of wild-honey gatherers, hunters and labourers in plantations, factories and agricultural fields. They live in small, rather isolated settlements and speak an independent South Dravidian language related to Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam (see, Thekaekara 2009; Zvelebil 1988). The Kattunayakkars in this area are also known as Jenu Kurumbas (literally, 'Honey Kurumbas') even though the Kattunayakkars themselves use only the name 'Naiken' as a common designation (Bird 1987). Living on the margins of society, these dispersed bands of forest dwellers perfectly conform to the official portrayal of the Scheduled Tribes as 'primitive', isolated and culturally distinct from the 'mainstream' caste society.

However, only a very small proportion of the Kattunayakkars in Tamil Nadu lives in the hills and forests. The majority of them—62 per cent in 2001—lives in urban areas (Office of the Registrar General 2001). Despite their numbers, Kattunayakkars outside the Nilgiri-Wayanad hills have been much less prone to attract the attention of scholars, journalists and government agencies. They do, however, occasionally figure in NGO documents, court judgments and newspaper reports available on the internet; and, from these sources emerges a picture of a community which, for the most part, comprises rag pickers, sweepers and manual scavengers (see,

l'Association KEO 2002; *The Hindu* 2007). In a number of districts, Kattunayakkar communities are thus engaged in occupations usually taken care of by communities classified as Scheduled Castes, notably Thotis. In other words, there is an apparent contradiction between the official classification of the Kattunayakkars as a Primitive Tribal Group and the actual lifestyles of the predominantly urban Kattunayakkar community, while there seem to be significant similarities and overlaps between the occupational identities of the 'tribal' Kattunayakkars and the 'untouchable' Thotis.

The local authorities in a large number of districts are currently refusing to issue community certificates in the name of Kattunayakkar and in the name of a number of other communities classified as Scheduled Tribes, allegedly for fear of fraud. Because of the reservation policy favouring scheduled communities, the identities of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe may be attractive to non-Scheduled Castes as a means of securing a job in the public sector or a seat in university. Over the years, there have been numerous cases of identity fraud in different parts of India, where people from non-scheduled communities have falsely claimed either SC or ST identity (see, Gatade 2005). However, there can be no question of such type of identity fraud in the case of the Kattunayakkars in Porayar and Tranquebar, since they would be entitled to exactly the same rights if they accepted the identity of Thoti. The authorities' reluctance to issue ST certificates to the Kattunayakkars thus seems to stem more from a general uncertainty as to what actually constitutes tribal identity.

The identity of Thoti is no less complex than that of Kattunayakkar, but considerably less contested. In the census of 2001, only 3896 persons in Tamil Nadu identified themselves as Thotis (Bhatt and Bhargava 2006: 95). This makes the Thoti community one of the smallest Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu, despite being an identity that—contrary to that of Kattunayakkar community—is described in numerous ethnographic village studies from all over the region. In many studies, however, 'Thoti' does not denote a particular caste or subcaste but a service occupation taken care of by people from various 'untouchable' castes, depending on local traditions and power structures. In other words, the identity of Thoti does not refer to a coherent, culturally homogenous community but may denote sweepers and drummers (Mosse 1999), cremators and gravediggers (Arun 2007), as well as manual scavengers (Béteille 2002). In the

popular imagination, however, 'Thoti' is today synonymous with the occupational identity of 'manual scavenger' and generally thought of as a separate caste.

The occupations of street sweeping and manual scavenging began to spread in South India in the late nineteenth century, when municipalities constructed public toilets and engaged manual scavengers and street sweepers to heighten the hygiene among the citizens in pace with the growing urbanisation. The growing demand for sweepers and scavengers led to a substantial migration of people across the region who took up the jobs that local 'untouchable' communities refused to do (Ramaswamy 2005: 6). The Kattunayakkars in Porayar and Tranquebar may therefore well be the descendants of an immigrant tribal group who—sometime in the past—were employed as sweepers and scavengers, and later became integrated as an 'untouchable' caste in the local society, where they were ascribed the identity of Thoti in accordance with their new occupational identity. However, it is not the purpose of my investigation to decide the 'real' identity of the Kattunayakkars in Porayar and Tranquebar, but to address the ways that the Kattunayakkars are challenging the 'untouchable' identity imposed on them. When I, in the following, argue that the Kattunayakkars are pursuing a tribal identity in an attempt to achieve a higher and more dignified status in the local hierarchy, it is thus not to suggest that they are not 'real' Kattunayakkars or 'real' tribals. I merely wish to point out how the invocation of a tribal identity is being used by the Kattunayakkars to challenge the 'untouchable' SC identity imposed on them.

## THE KATTUNAYAKKARS IN PORAYAR AND TRANQUEBAR

The Kattunayakkar community in Porayar and Tranquebar counts thirty-three families, of which thirty-two live in Porayar and one in Tranquebar. In Porayar, the Kattunayakkars live in a single street on the eastern edge of the town, some distance from the non-SC/ST communities in the neighbouring streets. Most of the houses in the Kattunayakkars' street are solid, thatched *pucca* houses built of bricks, while a single house in the middle of the street stands out as a typical contemporary middle-class house, made of concrete and with a large rooftop terrace. In their backyards, a number of families have

small pigsties where they rear black ‘country’ pigs. At the entrance to the street stands a small, brightly-painted Hindu temple which was built by the community a few years ago and financed collectively by its members. Compared to the neighbourhoods of the other ‘untouchable’ communities in the area, the houses in Kattunayakkar Street are generally of a better quality and better maintained. This indicates that, overall, the Kattunayakkar community is relatively better off economically than the other ‘untouchable’ communities in the area, and that few families suffer abject poverty. In Tranquebar, the single Kattunayakkar family lives in a house on the western side of the town, close to the ‘untouchable’ Paraiyar caste. Like most of the other Kattunayakkars, the husband and wife of this family are working as a garbage collector and a manual scavenger respectively.

Like the other ‘untouchable’ communities in the area,<sup>5</sup> the Kattunayakkars have experienced a relative relaxation of the direct abuse and discrimination that was previously directed against them. Hence, they are no longer directly addressed as ‘Thotis’ nor openly discriminated against in schools and public places. Disrespect and contempt are always lurking beneath the surface, however, and in situations of crises, as in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami that hit Tranquebar in 2004, caste feelings and old patterns of discrimination are promptly reactivated (see, Lillelund 2009).

In contrast to the situation of the other ‘untouchable’ communities in the area, unemployment and underemployment are not pressing issues for the Kattunayakkars—since their main occupations as sweepers and scavengers constitute an occupational niche for which there is a constant demand. Most of the men from the Kattunayakkar community are self-employed manual scavengers, who empty septic tanks and clean manholes in Porayar and Tranquebar, while most of the working women are employed as manual scavengers in private houses, where they clean the outdoor latrines and carry the human excrement away, every day. The men usually carry out the work in teams of two or three. One man immerses himself in the tank and the other(s) carry the full buckets to a large barrel on the three-wheeled bicycles, which they use to take the human sludge to the dumpsite. Emptying one septic tank typically takes a day and fetches the workers up to Rs 1500 to split between them. This amount is fairly high, compared to the average wage paid for agricultural and casual labour in the area—which is around Rs 100–120 per day for men. The wages of the women working as manual scavengers are,

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however, much lower. They work individually and get Rs 30–50 per latrine per month, amounting to a monthly salary of Rs 300–500. Still, most Kattunayakkar families depending on manual scavenging probably earn more than most families from the other 'untouchable' communities who are typically dependent on seasonal casual and agricultural labour.

Twelve men and women from the Kattunayakkar community are employed as municipal workers, collecting garbage and sweeping the streets of Porayar and Tranquebar. Compared to manual scavenging, garbage collection is an attractive occupation since municipal workers are entitled to pension, holidays, sick leave and a monthly salary of Rs 3700–5500.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the work does not involve contact with human faeces, and is thus not nearly as hazardous to health as manual scavenging is and is far less stigmatised. Because of the job security, reasonable working conditions and comparatively good salary, municipal employment is in great demand, and some of the men admitted to having paid up to Rs 1,00,000 in bribes to get a job.

The hereditary occupations of the Kattunayakkars as sweepers and manual scavengers mean that many of the Kattunayakkar families earn relatively good money compared to other untouchable communities and have a greater degree of economic security because of the constant demand for their services. On the other hand, occupations as sweepers and manual scavengers also imply that most of the Kattunayakkars are subjected to extremely unhealthy, degrading working conditions, and to contempt and abuse because of the polluting and degrading nature of their work. In other words, the traditional occupations of the Kattunayakkars mean that they are better off economically than the other 'untouchable' communities in the area but at the same time suffer physically and socially because of the nature of their work.

A few people from the Kattunayakkar community have jobs that are not associated with handling garbage and human waste, and many of the Kattunayakkar youth dream of landing decent, well-paid jobs in the future. At the time of this study, six people from the community had completed twelve years of education and three others were studying for undergraduate degrees. However, their ascribed identity as Thotis means that even people who have 'clean' and dignified occupations are considered low and polluting by others. This reality may indeed be one of the main reasons for the Kattunayakkars' insistence on becoming officially recognised as a

Scheduled Tribe. For, even though the Kattunayakkars are probably the most upwardly mobile of all the 'untouchable' communities in the Tranquebar area in terms of education and economic status, they seem to remain locked in their social position at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The collective identity of 'Thoti' that is ascribed to the Kattunayakkars by others and the related occupation of manual scavenging thus overshadows all other aspects of the Kattunayakkars' collective and individual identities, and even the fact that they are generally doing better than any of the other 'untouchable' communities does not significantly affect their social standing.

## OCCUPATION AND CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION

My initial gatekeeper to the Kattunayakkar community was a young woman, Rani,<sup>7</sup> who had been newly employed as a 'fieldworker' by the national NGO Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA),<sup>8</sup> which works to eradicate the practice of manual scavenging. It was Rani's job to assess and document the extent of manual scavenging in different parts of Nagapattinam district, and to raise awareness among the scavengers and motivate them to seek other forms of employment. Rani's parents and older brother were themselves working as manual scavengers, but she had completed twelve years of education and dreamed of becoming a police officer. From training courses in her new job, Rani had learnt that manual scavengers did not have much 'awareness' and that this was the principal reason for them continuing the work even though they were, in principle, free to quit and take up any other job available. 'We tell the people that if they stay in this job they will not develop and encourage them to think of ways to change the situation,' she explained.

However, not many of the manual scavengers from the Kattunayakkar community in Porayar and Tranquebar seemed to be attracted to the suggestion of leaving their present occupations. When I asked people why they continued their contaminating and stigmatised occupations they invariably answered that they did not have any alternative. Giving up the occupation of scavenging, they would have to compete with the other 'untouchable' and low-caste communities for scarce jobs as casual labourers; and, with no knowledge of agriculture or fishing, and no former feudal relations to any of the higher castes in the area, this competition would be most

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unfavourable to the Kattunayakkars. Yet, most of the families were very conscious of the need to educate their children and hoped that this, along with future access to reservation benefits for STs in public employment, would help the community leave manual scavenging and garbage collection. Many of the scavengers, if not all, knew the law prohibiting manual scavenging in India, and some even kept a copy of it in their house. When the manual scavengers from the Kattunayakkar community chose to continue their occupation despite its legal prohibition and its harmful social and physical consequences, it was therefore not because of a lack of awareness or because they believed that scavenging was the inexorable fate of their community—as has been suggested by the leaders of the SKA (see, Wilson 2005). Quite the contrary, the alternatives to scavenging just seemed worse.

The Kattunayakkars thus experience a persisting conflict between their wish for economic security and their aspiration for dignity and social status. Seen in this perspective, the Kattunayakkars' struggle for recognition may be interpreted as an attempt to restore their dignity and cultural self-esteem, without immediately giving up their contemporary occupations. They are thereby making a distinction between cultural identity and occupational identity, which is unusual in rural South India, where most castes are directly identified with their hereditary occupation as—e.g. cobblers, fishers, potters or barbers—even if the majority of the caste members have other occupations. While SKA as an organisation was urging the manual scavengers to leave their jobs, even Rani seemed more engaged in the struggle for ST status than in convincing her family and neighbours to leave their present occupations although, as she explained about the scavengers, 'from an outsider's point of view, they are very dirty'.

## PORK-LOVING, TRIBAL AMBEDKARITES

While the Kattunayakkars are identified as 'untouchable' Thotis by the surrounding society, the younger members of the community in particular present themselves as tribal 'Ambedkarites' and devout Hindus. The tear-off calendars with the portrait of B. R. Ambedkar hang on the walls of many of the houses in Kattunayakkar Street, symbolising the community's struggle for official recognition and ST certificates. They had also previously had a large signboard with

the picture of Ambedkar at the entrance to the street, but it had collapsed some time ago due to heavy rain. The Kattunayakkars' strong identification with Ambedkar, the unifying, pan-Indian symbol of the social movements of the 'untouchable' castes, indicates that the Kattunayakkars' struggle for recognition should be interpreted as part of the broader struggle of the 'untouchable' castes against caste-based subordination and discrimination. In fact, some of the young men from the Kattunayakkar community participated in the local branch of Dalit Panthers of India (DPI), a Tamil organisation and political party which mobilises the Scheduled Castes in the name of *Dalits* ('broken' or 'downtrodden'). The Kattunayakkars' self-professed identity as Scheduled Tribe in other words did not preclude them from seeking political alliances with 'untouchable' communities classified as Scheduled Castes. The leading political activists in DPI, who for the most part belonged to the Paraiyar caste, also counted the Kattunayakkars—or Thotis, as they called them—as part of the Dalit constituency, and they mostly seemed to consider the Kattunayakkars' insistence on ST identity as the result of a fixed idea.

However, most of the Kattunayakkars that I spoke to had a clear understanding of being culturally different from the other 'untouchable' castes in the area. Contrary to the Tamil-speaking Paraiyars and Pallars, who constitute the majority of the Scheduled Castes in Tranquebar and Porayar, the Kattunayakkars speak Telugu as their mother tongue and many of them interpreted this as proof that the community had actually emigrated to Tamil Nadu from the forests of Andhra Pradesh. The tradition of rearing pigs and the shared love of pork were other cultural traits that singled out the Kattunayakkars as culturally distinct. Many of the Kattunayakkars believed that they actually belonged to the same community as the Tamil-speaking Kuravars living in the town of Karaikal, twenty kilometres south of Tranquebar. The Kuravars also rear pigs, and though their main profession is basketry, some of them also empty septic tanks and do manual scavenging. The Kuravars were also a Scheduled Tribe, I was told, but are currently classified as a Scheduled Caste in Tamil Nadu, although they are struggling for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe (see, *The Hindu* 2005). In that respect, the situations of the two communities seem to resemble each other and this suggests that the ambiguous identity of the Kattunayakkar community is not an isolated case.

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When talking about the current situation of the Kattunayakkar community, many of the younger Kattunayakkars complained that they did not have ST certificates and therefore did not have access to reservation in education and public employment. 'Now we are in a very bad condition,' one of the young women said, 'it is not possible for us to get any benefits'. She had completed twelve years of education, and wanted to continue her studies, but she could not get a seat outside the reserved quota. Seven members of the Kattunayakkar community had obtained ST certificates many years ago, but the forty members who had applied for community certificates in the name of Kattunayakkar ST over the past decade had still not been able to persuade the authorities to issue the certificates. About ten people from the community held caste certificates in the name of Thoti SC—which they had acquired some time back in the 1980s—and it would probably not be a problem for any of the younger Kattunayakkars to obtain a SC certificate. Yet, it did not seem to be an option for any of them to acknowledge the identity of Thoti, which would give them access to reservations in the name of Scheduled Castes.

The young Kattunayakkars felt cheated and unjustly treated by the local authorities, who were not willing to recognise what they believed to be their legitimate right. They were Kattunayakkars and wanted the government to recognise them as such. However, the Tamil authorities were not the only ones who did not recognise the Kattunayakkars' self-professed identity. Actually, it seemed that there was none in the local society who did not think of the Kattunayakkars as Thotis. On the other hand, nobody seemed to directly oppose the Kattunayakkars' attempt to change their collective identity either; people from other castes simply did not care much about the Kattunayakkars' identity claims. In their everyday encounters with people from other communities, the Kattunayakkars thus continue to be identified as Thotis, despite their insistence on being Kattunayakkars.

It was the views of the younger people, in particular, that I came to hear during my informal visits to Kattunayakkar Street, since they were the ones who spontaneously gathered around my field assistant and me whenever we arrived in the street. When I spoke one day to some of the middle-aged women the topic of conversation changed as they were less interested in talking about identity, and instead complained about their filthy, strenuous work as manual scavengers, their drunken husbands and the difficulties of making ends meet.

For people from their community, life was hard and full of worries, they explained. It thus appeared as though the younger generation was more interested in resuscitating a tribal identity than the older ones, and also more hopeful of the future. The older people were not in a position to make any use of community certificates and reservation benefits, and many of them probably identified more with the identity of manual scavengers—and maybe, also with the ascribed identity of Thoti. The difference in attitude towards work and identity was even visible: while the young Kattunayakkar men usually wore a *lungi* and a t-shirt (the typical ‘working clothes’ of south Indian labourers) for work, most of the older men wore the traditional ‘uniform’ of khaki shirts and shorts as a direct sign of their occupation as manual scavengers. The issues of Kattunayakkar identity and the struggle for official recognition were thus not equally important to everybody in the community, but were particularly the priority of the young and the better educated.

## BUILDING A FUTURE ON THE GLORY OF A FORGOTTEN PAST

The efforts of the Kattunayakkars in Porayar and Tranquebar (and in mid-eastern Tamil Nadu generally) to gain social and legal recognition as a Scheduled Tribe seem to have begun sometime during the 1970s. This was around the time of the removal of the area restrictions on the scheduled communities, which formerly restricted ST status to tribals living in certain specified areas. Nobody I spoke to knew exactly when it all started or when the Kattunayakkar association was formed. However, it was my clear impression that an awareness of Kattunayakkar identity had increased over the course of the past 10 to 15 years, probably coinciding with the local authorities’ freeze on issuing caste certificates. The ‘town organiser’ of the DPI even thought that it was within the past six years that the Kattunayakkars had first started to proclaim ST identity.

It was the informal leader of the Kattunayakkars in Porayar, Subramania—a middle-aged former police officer, who now owned a mini bus and worked as a driver—who seemed to be the moving spirit behind the community’s efforts to claim ST identity. He was himself one of the few people in the community who had obtained a community certificate in the name of Kattunayakkar ST before the authorities stopped issuing certificates to members of

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the Kattunayakkar community. Subramania was capable of telling elaborate stories of the primitive tribal past of the community; how their ancestors had caught small birds in traps and collected wild honey in the woods of Andhra Pradesh before migrating to Tamil Nadu some hundred years ago. The free, independent life as self-sufficient tribals in tune with nature was in fact the real identity of the Kattunayakkar community, Subramania explained. However, neither Subramania nor any of the other Kattunayakkars knew how their ancestors had ended up in Tamil Nadu as sweepers and manual scavengers. They just knew that these occupations were not part of their original identity.

Nobody from the Kattunayakkar community seemed to yearn for the imagined, simple and unspoilt existence in the forests and the Kattunayakkars were making no attempts to 'tribalise' their contemporary lifestyle or their cultural and religious traditions. They simply wanted recognition and rights to reservation benefits in what they believed was their real name. The struggle of the Kattunayakkar community and their association should therefore not be interpreted as part of the contemporary *Adivasi*<sup>9</sup> movement of 'tribal' communities in south India, which characterises the Scheduled Tribes as the 'indigenous' people of India and struggles to reclaim rights over land and forests. In the opinion of the Kattunayakkars, being a tribe is not a question of the contemporary lifestyle of their community, rather of being able to trace and define a forgotten 'primitive' past that distinguishes them from the other communities in the local society. The romanticised stories of their tribal past are thus first and foremost used by the Kattunayakkars to distance themselves from the imposed identity of Thoti and to mark their 'otherness' from the other 'untouchable' communities in the area. In that perspective, the Kattunayakkars' resuscitation of a tribal identity constitutes a way of resenting and challenging the lowly, undignified and polluting identity that others have ascribed them. In reaching back to a nobler and more dignified past in which the Kattunayakkar community's existence was not marked by subordination and humiliation, they are thus carving out an independent history and identity for themselves that is not primarily characterised by its subordinate relation to the higher castes in the social hierarchy. The attempt to discard the name 'Thoti' is thus not only a way for the Kattunayakkars to create a more dignified identity for themselves; it is also a way of symbolically breaking

free from their dependent, subordinate position in society, which has largely been defined by the higher castes.

However, not everybody from the Kattunayakkar community was unequivocally embracing the Kattunayakkar identity. Kumar, a man of about forty years of age who had been employed as a municipal worker for the past three years expressed ambiguity about the community's identity when I interviewed him about his life and work. Kumar himself had obtained a caste certificate in the name of 'SC, Hindu Thoti' in 1985 and he had chosen to register his three children in the same name when they enrolled in school, so they could be sure of benefiting from reservation in their future education. He had chosen so because of the longstanding refusal of the authorities to issue ST certificates to the Kattunayakkars.

'The actual name of our community is Kattunayakkar ST,' Kumar stated. 'Outsiders call us Thotis, but we have never ourselves used the name Thoti.' Elaborating on the subject of identity, Kumar compared the Kattunayakkars to the itinerant community of Nari-Kuravars, whom he believed were 'real Kattunayakkars'. 'They are a hunting community. Kattu means forest,' he explained. 'We are not fully Kattunayakkars, we are Thoti SC,' he said and then clarified 'we are also Kattunayakkars; we are eating the same things [as Kattunayakkars]. We also eat birds and pigs. The only difference is that they are not doing this kind of work. The only difference is the profession.' Kumar thus made a distinction between the cultural and the professional identity of his community, with 'Kattunayakkar' designating the cultural identity, e.g. food habits and 'Thoti' designating their professional identity as sweepers and manual scavengers. Following this line of reasoning, it is not relevant to ask whether the Kattunayakkars are really 'tribal' Kattunayakkars or 'untouchable' Thotis; they are both. As Kumar finally ended up concluding, 'Only in relation to profession, we are Thotis; otherwise we like to call ourselves Kattunayakkars.'

The ambiguity expressed by Kumar as to the actual identity of his community indicates that the self-ascribed, historically-defined 'tribal' identity of the Kattunayakkars is in practice inseparable from the imposed, 'untouchable' identity of Thoti by which the Kattunayakkar community is commonly known. It moreover indicates that the identity of Thoti is not only imposed but also appropriated and, to some extent, internalised by many—and maybe particularly the older—Kattunayakkars. In fact, Kumar said, not everybody in the

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community called themselves Kattunayakkars. When Subramania and many of the younger people identified themselves unambiguously as Kattunayakkars and completely rejected the identity of Thoti, they were therefore not representative of the entire community. This suggests that the contemporary struggle for recognition of Kattunayakkar identity is socially motivated and that the question of identity is actually contested within the community, despite the long struggle of the Kattunayakkar association and the leaders of the community for recognition of Kattunayakkar identity.

## PURSUING EQUALITY IN HINDUISM

While many of the young Kattunayakkars were very enthusiastic about their self-professed identity as a Scheduled Tribe, most of them identified even more as being Hindu. In December 2006, when I first visited the Kattunayakkar community, many of the young men and a couple of children were preparing for the annual pilgrimage to the Aiyappan temple in Sabarimala in Kerala, where millions of pilgrims from South and Central India go every year in January. Over the past few years, a growing number of Kattunayakkar youths have participated in the yearly pilgrimage and this year 18 people were taking the trip. It was Subramania, the informal leader of the community, who was leading the preparations for the pilgrimage. He had taken the trip to Sabarimala for many years and now held the status of guru to the other pilgrims from the community, being responsible for the zealous observation of the detailed rituals prescribed for the pilgrimage.

The Kattunayakkar pilgrims all appeared proud and dedicated to the many customs and rituals involved in the preparations for the pilgrimage, and there was a certain solemnity about them, all wearing the prescribed black or saffron dress and addressing each other as *swami* (literally, lord). As part of the preparations, the pilgrims fasted partially for three weeks, skipping lunch and dinner every day, and in the same period abstained completely from drinking alcohol, eating meat, and having sexual relations. Every evening, the entire community assembled in front of the temple to watch the elaborate rituals of the pilgrims and hear them sing *bhajans* (devotional songs) in honour of Lord Aiyappan. Obviously, the whole community was very proud of the dignity and the devotion of the Kattunayakkar

pilgrims, and regarded participation in the Aiyappan pilgrimage as a very admirable undertaking.

The elevated, ascetic swami identity of the Aiyappan pilgrims, pursued by many of the young Kattunayakkar men, starkly contrasts with the polluted, scavenging Thoti identity ascribed to them by others. Through their participation in the Aiyappan pilgrimage, the Kattunayakkar men become part of an imagined brotherhood of swamis from all castes and classes, unified by religious devotion (see, Osella and Osella 2003). In the pilgrimage, it is thus possible for even the most marginalised scavenger, who usually works drenched in dirt and sludge, to symbolically transgress the hierarchical boundaries of caste and become one among equals with pilgrims from completely different social backgrounds.

Like other *bhakti* (devotional) cults, the Aiyappan cult is known for its strong egalitarian principles; and, therefore, attracts many devotees from low and ‘untouchable’ castes from all over South and Central India (Kjærholm n.d.: 1). However, the equality of the Aiyappan cult rests on the low castes’ acceptance of the purity ideals of the higher castes, e.g. vegetarianism and asceticism—ideals which sharply conflict with the cultural practices of the Kattunayakkars and other ‘tribal’ and low caste communities. In this sense, the Aiyappan pilgrimage marks the low castes’ subordination to the higher castes. As Kjærholm points out, the temporary equality between high and low castes ‘takes place on the terms of the high castes’ which ‘really means a universal acceptance of the hierarchical principles of ritual purity and ritual impurity on which caste hierarchy largely rests in Tamil Nadu.’ (ibid.: 15) Put differently, the sanskritised Hindu identity pursued by the Kattunayakkar youths and other low-caste pilgrims in the Aiyappan cult symbolically reinforces the hierarchical relations between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ castes, since the latter must acknowledge the moral and religious supremacy of the former. Seen from this perspective, the Kattunayakkar men’s yearly participation in the Aiyappan pilgrimage does not fundamentally challenge the subordinate or polluted status of the Kattunayakkar community, particularly not as long as many of them continue to work as scavengers.

The Kattunayakkars in Porayar and Tranquebar did not, however, perceive any contradiction between their endorsement of the purity ideals of the higher castes and their struggle for an independent, self-defined ‘tribal’ identity. Evidently, these two simultaneous efforts

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to change the identity of the Kattunayakkars and restore their lost dignity went hand in hand in the views of those Kattunayakkars engaged in the struggle for recognition. Even the Kattunayakkars who were not particularly enthusiastic about the struggle for ST status seemed wholeheartedly supportive of the young men's participation in the Aiyappan pilgrimage and the overall attempts to seek acceptance and inclusion into the broader Hindu community. The Kattunayakkars' unreserved embracement of the Hindu ideals of ritual purity thus underscores that the community's struggle to change and redefine its collective identity is not an attempt to resuscitate a lost 'indigenous' tribal culture or religion. Rather, the 'untouchable' Kattunayakkar community's pursuit of a tribal identity should be understood as an attempt to restore a sense of cultural pride and self-confidence and to circumvent the stigma associated with Thoti identity and manual scavenging.

## NEGOTIATING PURITY AND POLLUTION

In Tranquebar and Porayar, the two large 'untouchable' communities of Paraiyars and Pallars have long attempted to forge new and dignified identities through a combination of religious conversion, change of caste name, and refusal to carry out their traditional, polluting service occupations, in addition to more general attempts to emulate the sanskritised lifestyles of the higher castes. However, the cases of the Paraiyars and Pallars show that it is indeed very difficult for an 'untouchable' community to change its social identity.

Since the nineteenth century, large sections of the Paraiyars and Pallars have converted to Christianity—in part as an attempt to distance themselves from the ritual pollution that, according to Hindu belief, adheres to their respective identities. And today, these converted Paraiyars and Pallars constitute a major part of both the Catholic and the Protestant congregations in the area. Even though Christians are generally believed to not form part of the caste hierarchy, Christian converts have not succeeded in profoundly changing their social identities. Christianity has thus become an additional and not a substitute identity for the Christian converts, who continue to be identified as Paraiyars and Pallars despite their change of religion. While conversion to Christianity has not profoundly changed the hierarchical status of the Christian Paraiyars

and Pallars, it has nevertheless contributed to a sense of dignity and self-respect and alleviated the stigma of pollution. It is thus common for Christian Paraiyars in Tranquebar to claim that, as Christians, they are ‘cleaner’ and more ‘civilised’ than their Hindu caste fellows.

This enhanced sense of dignity and self-respect also seems to be the primary outcome of the Pallars’ claim to the identity of Devendra Kula Vellalar, which indicates an original high-caste status and suggests that the current degraded status of the Pallars is in fact erroneous.

While the identity of Devendra Kula Vellalar is recognised by the state government and included in the list of Scheduled Castes in the form Devendrakulathan, the self-identified Devendra Kula Vellalars are still known as Pallars by all other communities in Tranquebar and Porayar. The identity of Devendra Kula Vellalar does, however—according to Pallars in Porayar—distinguish them from other ‘untouchable’ communities in the area and is commonly used to explain why they as a community should be considered superior to the Paraiyars.

Despite their sustained attempts to create new and dignified identities for themselves, the Pallars and Paraiyars continue to rank at the bottom of the local social hierarchy, just above the Kattunayakkar manual scavengers and garbage collectors. Unlike the Kattunayakkars, however, the Paraiyars and Pallars have almost completely quit their hereditary ‘polluting’ service occupations—as village servants, death messengers, and drummers to the higher castes—and now primarily make a living as agricultural labourers and casuals on building sites and in small-scale industries. While this seems to have eased the stigma of pollution in their day-to-day interaction with people from other castes, however, it has not profoundly changed the identities of the ‘untouchable’ communities in the eyes of the higher castes (see, Lillelund 2009).

As the examples of the Paraiyars and Pallars show, it is highly common for people from ‘untouchable’ communities to claim alternative, dignified identities in order to counter stigmatisation and discrimination. What makes the case of the Kattunayakkars in Porayar and Tranquebar special is that they claim an immigrant tribal identity that does not easily fit into the local status hierarchy of castes, and that they do not immediately intend to give up their polluting occupations as sweepers, garbage collectors and manual scavengers. By insisting on a complex identity as both tribals and

manual scavengers, the Kattunayakkars are thus claiming a unique, historical identity that challenges the established connections between occupation, identity and social status.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that the Kattunayakkars' struggle for official recognition as a Scheduled Tribe should be interpreted as an effort to carve out a dignified cultural identity for themselves without giving up their occupations as sweepers and manual scavengers. In claiming a tribal identity, the Kattunayakkars are attempting to circumvent the established connotations of pollution and lowliness attributed their traditional occupation. The insistence on a tribal identity is, in other words, used to mediate between the Kattunayakkars' desire for economic security and their aspiration for dignity and social status. In claiming to be an immigrant tribal community, the Kattunayakkars claim an identity which is not locally embedded and which cannot easily be graded in relation to the local hierarchy of castes.

While it is indeed possible that the Kattunayakkars in Porayar and Tranquebar are descended from tribal hunters and wild-honey gatherers, I find that the Kattunayakkars' actual struggle for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe is primarily a reaction and response to the humiliation and degradation they experience in their daily encounters with people from higher castes. In their encounters with people from the surrounding society, the Kattunayakkars are invariably identified as Thotis, i.e. 'untouchable' manual scavengers. Even the NGO which aims to help them seems to identify the Kattunayakkars mainly as manual scavengers who must be encouraged to leave their undignified and unhealthy occupation. Only in the yearly Aiyappan pilgrimage, can the Kattunayakkars experience being treated with respect and as equals, even by the higher castes. Their efforts to gain recognition as a Scheduled Tribe thus go hand in hand with their efforts to become fully accepted and included in the broader Hindu community.

However, this analysis also shows that the identity of Kattunayakkar is highly ambiguous and that at least some of the Kattunayakkars actually feel that they are neither fully Thotis nor fully Kattunayakkars but something betwixt and between. In practice, however, they

have to identify themselves unambiguously as either Thotis or Kattunayakkars in order to avail themselves of reservation benefits and social welfare programmes. More than just a protest against their degraded 'untouchable' status, the Kattunayakkars claim for official recognition and ST status may thus be interpreted as a struggle for the right of a community to define its own cultural identity.

One may ask what difference it would make if the Kattunayakkars in Porayar and Tranquebar actually succeeded in becoming officially recognised as a tribal community. The cases of the Pallars and Paraiyars show that it is generally very difficult for an 'untouchable' caste to change its social identity and status through sanskritisation or the appropriation of a new name or religion.<sup>10</sup> Even if it obtains official recognition as a tribal community, it seems unlikely that the Kattunayakkar community in Porayar and Tranquebar will succeed in changing the social identity and status it is ascribed locally, as long as the majority of the Kattunayakkars continue to work as sweepers and manual scavengers. However, the collective efforts to create a new and supposedly more dignified identity may boost the self-confidence and internal strength of the community. And, for individuals who pursue higher education and move away from the place, the official recognition as ST Kattunayakkars may indeed facilitate a higher status and new possibilities.

## NOTES

1. The name is also transcribed 'Toti', 'Totti' and 'Thotti'.

2. Other transcriptions of the name include 'Kattunaicker', 'Kattunaikan' and 'Kattunayakkan'. The latter is used in the list of Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu.

3. The name of the organisation can be translated as 'The Tamil Nadu Scheduled Tribes Kattunayakkan Social Reform Organisation'.

4. In the strict sense of the word, manual scavenging only denotes the cleaning of dry latrines. This occupation has been prohibited in India since 1993—when it was made a punishable offence to employ manual scavengers and to construct dry latrines (Singh and Ziyauddin 2009). After the law was introduced, the municipality of Tranquebar and Porayar stopped employing manual scavengers but it did not crack down on private individuals who continued to employ manual scavengers to empty their dry latrines despite the law. In Porayar, thirty to forty houses (including a private school) have dry toilets and avail themselves of

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manual scavenging services, while seven houses in Tranquebar make use of a manual scavenger.

5. In the area of Porayar and Tranquebar, there are three other 'untouchable' castes in addition to the Kattunayakkars—the Paraiyars, the Pallars and the Chakkiliyars—of which the Paraiyars constitute by far the largest and most socially-differentiated caste.

6. In comparison, the average monthly wages for unskilled men—working as, for example, watchmen, cooks or in small private factories—were only Rs 2000 in 2007.

7. All names are pseudonyms.

8. The name of the organisation can be translated as the 'Campaign against Manual Scavenging'.

9. *Adivasi*, literally 'inhabitant from the earliest times,' is a popular umbrella term for tribal communities in India that denotes indigeneity and autochthony.

10. For a general discussion of 'untouchable' communities' attempts at identity change, see Mosse (1999).

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