The Dominant Caste in Rampura[1]

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I

THE concept of the dominant caste is crucial to the understanding of rural social life in most parts of India. Whether analysis is to be made of the hierarchy of a multi-caste village, the settlement of a dispute at the level of village or caste, or the pattern of Sanskritization among the several castes of an area, a study of the locally dominant caste and the kind of dominance it enjoys is essential. Occasionally a caste is dominant in a group of neighboring villages if not over a district or two, and in such cases, local dominance is linked with regional dominance. Such linkage also exists when the caste which is locally dominant is different from the caste which is regionally dominant.

I stumbled on the importance of the idea of dominant caste only in 1953, after I had made two field trips to Rampura, a multi-caste village about 22 miles southeast of Mysore City in South India, and the present analysis is based on material which was collected previously. A full understanding of the dominance which a caste such as the Peasants (*Okkaligas*) enjoy needs a study of the entire region over which they are dominant, and over a period of time. I regret that I do not have the data for such an analysis. My analysis would have been even sketchier but for the fact that in 1952 the headman of the Peasants in the neighboring village of Kere loaned me several documents which related to the settlement of disputes in the Kere area over a period of forty years. These documents referred to villages in Kere *hobli* (an administrative division referring to a group of 20–50 villages) which is different from the hobli to which Rampura belongs. But as Peasants are dominant in both the areas, and as culturally the two areas are quite close to each other, I have made use of the Kere documents in order to clarify the concept of the dominant caste.

I have elsewhere defined a dominant caste in the following words:

> A caste may be said to be "dominant" when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can be more easily dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low [Srinivas 1955:18].

However, the above definition omits an element of dominance which is becoming increasingly important in rural India, namely, the number of educated persons in a caste and the occupations they pursue. I have called this criterion "Western" (Srinivas 1955:26), since Western and non-traditional education is the means by which such dominance is acquired. Villagers are aware of the importance of this criterion. They would like their young men to be educated and to be officers in the Government. As officers they are expected to help their kinsfolk, castefolk and co-villagers.

When a caste enjoys all the elements of dominance, it may be said to be dominant in a decisive way. But decisive dominance is not common; more frequently the different elements of dominance are distributed among the castes in a village. Thus a caste which is ritually high may be poor and lacking strength in numbers, while a populous caste may be poor and ritually low.

The Peasants in Rampura enjoy more than one element of dominance. Numerically they are the biggest caste with a membership of 735, while the next biggest is the Shepherd with 235, followed by the Muslim, 179, and the Untouchable, 125. The biggest landowners are among the Peasants, and the Peasants together own more land than all the other castes put together. There are also more literates and educated men among Peasants than among the others. In 1948 there were three Peasant graduates and a single Lingayat lawyer employed by the Government. The three most important patrons in the village were also Peasants.[2] All of them owned land and loaned money. The official Headman of the village was one of these; he was the biggest landowner, owned two buses, and had built a few rental houses in a nearby town. The second was Nadu Gowda,[3] who had kept two shops and a small rice mill. The third was Nadu Gowda's agnatic cousin Millayya, who owned a big rice-mill.

The ritual rank of Peasants is not very high. While they do rank above the Untouchables and such low castes as the Swineherd, they are well below Brahmins and Lingayats. In terms of *Varna* they are Shudras, the fourth category in the all-India hierarchy. But this does not mean much in Rampura, as there are no "genuine" Kshatriyas or Vaishyas. (The local trading caste of Banajigas are not accorded the status of the "twice-born" Vaishya.)

While it is true that Peasants are not ritually high, they command respect from everyone in the village including the priestly castes of Brahmins and Lingayats. The members of the latter castes consult one or another of the Peasant patrons on important occasions. Even on ceremonial occasions, outside pollution contexts, Peasants are shown respect by Lingayats and Brahmins. Everyone is aware of the dominant position which Peasants occupy in Rampura.

Over the last fifty years or more, the dominance of Peasants has increased in Rampura. The available evidence indicates that in the early years of this century Brahmins owned a considerable quantity of irrigated land in the village. The Brahmins were the first to sense the new economic opportunities opened to them through Western education, and they gradually moved to the towns to enter the new white-collar professions. Urban living, the cost of educating children, and the high dowries which the new education and economic opportunities had brought about, gradually caused the Brahmins to part with their land. Much of this land passed to non-Brahmins, especially the Peasants, during the years 1900–1948.

In the different parts of South India shortly after World War I there began what may be called the Non-Brahmin Movement. At the end of World War I, most of the important posts in the Government of Mysore were held by

Brahmins, and Non-Brahmin leaders realized that they must get Western education if they wanted position and power. Agitation was started for the institution of scholarships to help non-Brahmin youths study in schools and colleges, for reservation of seats for non-Brahmins in medical and technological colleges, and for preference in appointments to government posts. The non-Brahmin agitation succeeded, and gradually a number of rules discriminating against the Brahmins were evolved by the Government of Mysore. As a result of these measures there has come into existence since the late thirties a Western-educated non-Brahmin intelligentsia (see Srinivas 1957).

This non-Brahmin movement is relevant to the understanding of the situation in Rampura. It was in the thirties that the leaders among Peasants in Rampura and the neighboring villages began to think of higher education for their sons. Contact between the Peasants in Rampura and Peasant politicians and officials outside increased in the forties; furthermore, contact with the towns increased generally, and a few Peasants and Lingayats frequently went to Mysore and Bangalore to secure permits and to buy machinery and other goods.

The Brahmins and Lingayats in Rampura provide an instance of ritual dominance existing by itself, unaccompanied by the other forms of dominance. Neither caste is numerically strong nor is it wealthy. But some families in these two castes, namely, the Brahmin priest of the Rama temple and the Lingayat priests of the Madeshwara and Basava temples, are quite well off by village standards. The main source of income for these families is from the land with which the temples have been endowed, while a subsidiary but not unimportant source is the gifts in cash or kind which the devotees make to the priests whenever they visit the temples or during harvest. The eldest son of the Rama priest is employed in the Integral Coach Factory in Perambur (Madras) while, as mentioned earlier, one of the Lingayat priests practices as a lawyer in a neighboring town.

But when a caste enjoys one form of dominance, it is frequently able to acquire the other forms as well in course of time. Thus a caste which is numerically strong and wealthy will be able to move up in the ritual hierarchy if it Sanskritizes its ritual and way of life, and also loudly and persistently proclaims itself to be what it wants to be. It is hardly necessary to add that the more forms of dominance which a caste enjoys, the easier it is for it to acquire the rest.

What I have said above applies only to caste Hindus; Untouchability constitutes a serious obstacle to group mobility. Untouchables in Rampura are either landless laborers, tenants, or very small landowners. They started going to school only in the thirties. In 1948, Untouchable leaders from outside were going around asking Untouchables in the Rampura area to try to shake off the symbols of Untouchability. In the neighboring village of Bihalli, for instance, Untouchables decided to give up performing services such as removing the carcasses of dead cattle from the houses of the higher castes, beating the tom-tom at the festivals of village deities, and removing the leaves on which the

high castes had dined during festivals and weddings. The Bihalli Peasants became annoyed at this and beat up the Untouchables and set fire to their huts. A similar attempt by the Kere Untouchables was nipped in the bud by the local Peasants.

The dominant caste of Peasants in Rampura is plainly opposed to the emancipation of Untouchables. Government efforts to improve the position of Untouchables are often frustrated by the leaders of the locally dominant caste. Thus, in 1948, the Government of Mysore sanctioned a sum of money to enable Untouchables in Rampura to have tiled roofs instead of thatch. The grant was administered through the Headman. The Untouchables later complained that the Headman did not readily give the money, and then only a small part of what he should have given. The Peasants, on the other hand, said that the Untouchables had spent the money given to them on toddy, and that this showed that Untouchables could not be improved.

Thus, while the Governments of India and Mysore want to abolish Untouchability, and the Untouchables themselves want to improve their position, the locally dominant caste stands in the way; its members want the Untouchables to supply them with cheap labor and perform degrading tasks. They also resent the idea that Untouchables should use their wells and tanks, and worship in their temples. They have the twin sanctions of physical force and boycott at their disposal. It is true that the Untouchables can enforce their rights with the aid of the Police and Law Courts, but there are many considerations which come in the way of taking such a drastic step.

II

The numerical strength of a caste influences the kind of relations which it has with the other castes, and this is one of the reasons why each multi-caste village to some extent constitutes a unique hierarchy. No two villages are identical either in the number of castes represented or in the numerical strength and the wealth of each resident caste. In fact, the same caste may occupy different positions in neighboring villages. For instance, in Kere, Fishermen are not allowed to take their wedding and other processions into streets in which Brahmins and Peasants live, whereas in those villages in Malavalli Taluk where Fishermen are in the majority, no such disabilities affect them. There are other instances where the position of a caste is influenced by considerations such as the amount of land owned by its members and the degree to which its way of life is Sanskritized and Westernized. When the same caste occupies different positions in different villages, the segment of the caste which is occupying the lower position will be stimulated to move up in the local hierarchy. Members of the minority castes in Rampura occasionally told me with pride that in a particular village their castefolk were numerous and wealthy. They were trying to identify themselves with people whom they regarded as having a higher position than themselves.

Where a caste is numerically strong, its members have the assurance that the other castes in the village will not be able to subject them to any insult or

exploitation. (The Untouchables are to some extent an exception to this.) The capacity to "field" a number of able-bodied men for a fight and a reputation for aggressiveness are relevant factors in determining the position of a caste vis-à-vis the other castes. Considerations of power do prevail; the system adjusts to the situation that obtains in any single village.

I visited Kere a few times during the summer of 1952 and found that the Brahmins there were suffering from a sense of insecurity. In the General Elections held a few months previous to my visit, the members of the family of the Brahmin accountant had actively canvassed for a candidate who was not residing in Kere. This enraged the local candidate, a very powerful Peasant. The outsider won and the defeated candidate freely expressed his dislike of Brahmins in general and the accountant's family in particular. He even said that he wanted the Brahmins to leave Kere. A Brahmin doctor in Kere told me that where they are few in number, Brahmins had no future in the village. He thought that Brahmins ought to migrate to villages and towns in which they were represented in some strength.

Two incidents which occurred in Rampura in the summer of 1952 further drove home to me the sense of insecurity prevalent among members of minority castes. One was a dispute between a Potter and a Lingayat Priest in which the latter told an influential Peasant friend that the Lingayats were in a minority in Rampura and that it was up to the Peasants to see that they were not humiliated. The implication was that had there been enough Lingayats, they need not have depended upon the Peasants to secure them justice.

During the summer of 1952, a Rampura Shepherd sold all his land in the village and his share of the ancestral house in the village. It was stated in the sale deed that he was leaving Rampura because only a few Shepherds (actually 175) were living there, unlike his affinal village in thich they were preponderant. His action was unpopular, and it was widely rumored that the real reasons for his leaving the village were his inability to get along with his brothers and his friendliness with his wife's kin. But it is significant that those who drafted the document regarded moving into a village where his caste was represented in strength as a proper and sufficient reason for selling his land and house in his natal village.

Statements are often made by members of minority castes that they have no protection against bullying and exploitation on the part of men of the dominant caste. The members of the nondominant castes may be abused, beaten, grossly underpaid for work done, or their women required to gratify the sexual desires of the powerful men in the dominant caste.

It is not unlikely that the concentration of the members of a caste into a ward (a feature of village life all over India) adds to their sense of security. While this practice is related to ideas of pollution and purity, this is not the whole story. A man feels safer in the *keri* (ward) of his caste.

A patron's following can be made to yield him economic and other benefits. Patrons from the dominant caste can secure a larger number of followers than patrons from nondominant castes. The rural patrons are "vote banks" for the

politicians, and during elections they are approached for votes. In return, patrons expect favors—licenses for buses and rice-mills, and seats in medical and technological colleges for their kinsfolk. The existence of such links between patrons and politicians establishes a continuum between rural and urban forces, making each responsive to the other.

III

Disputes are referred to patrons for settlement, and where there is a decisively dominant caste in a village, the biggest patrons usually come from that caste.

The word "panchayat" has been used to include all judicial and executive bodies in rural areas. I shall here restrict the use of the term to the official panchayat only, i.e., the assembly of village elders constituted according to an Act of the Provincial or State Government. It is the official panchayat which is entitled to levy a tax on every house, house-site, and shop in the village. The money which the official panchayat collects is to be used to provide the village with drains and street lights, to improve the village well, tank, or temple, and for other similar purposes. Generally, the State Government lays down the procedure by which the official panchayat should be constituted. There was an elected official panchayat in Rampura in 1948 constituted under the Mysore Government's Village Panchayat Act of 1926, under which every village was required to have a panchayat with a minimum of twelve members, not less than half being elected. The Chairman was usually nominated, but the Deputy Commissioner, the official in charge of a District, was given the discretionary power to allow a village to elect the chairman annually. He did this only when he thought a particular panchayat deserved the honor. In 1947, Rampura was given that honor, and the immediate result was a keen contest for the chairmanship. The Headman was nearly unseated in the struggle. The Headman became Chairman again in 1948, but this was because no election was held—even though the official report stated that an election had been held at which the Headman was elected Chairman.

In 1948 the official panchayat included leaders from every numerically significant caste, including Muslims and Untouchables. It also included the Brahmin village accountant. The panchayat minute book reported the holding of a meeting once a month, but this was an exaggeration. The members even reported one absentee at every meeting to give verisimilitude to their minutes. During my entire stay in Rampura (in all, about 13 months), the official panchayat met only once. The Chairman of the panchayat either made all the decisions by himself or in consultation with his great friend, fellow-castemen, and relative, Nadu Gowda.

The official panchayat is usually dormant and becomes active only on certain occasions. It is the traditional and unofficial panchayat—here called council—which is active in the settlement of disputes. The membership of the council varies from village to village and from context to context. It may on occasion include all the leaders of the numerically significant castes, or it may

include only the disputants concerned and a patron like the Headman or Nadu Gowda. A patron usually acts on a complaint received from someone, except when he himself is the aggrieved party. He may feel that it is not necessary to call anyone else or he may ask the disputants to request a few other patrons to come together. Thus when a Peasant brought a complaint before Nadu Gowda against a Smith woman, saying that her dog had eaten his lamb, he did not feel it necessary to invite anyone else to "sit on the bench" with him. Village councils are informal and flexible, and there is no hard and fast rule about who should sit on them. A great deal is left to the discretion of the patrons.

Traditional councils may be divided into caste councils and village councils, depending on the kind of issue before the patrons. This distinction is not absolute; there is occasional overlapping of jurisdiction. Village councils have jurisdiction in matters such as: Who stole grass from X's field?; Who set fire to Y's straw-rick?; and, Is Z speaking the truth when he says that P owes him a hundred rupees and not fifty? Caste councils decide such questions as: Should R be thrown out of caste for having sex relations with an Untouchable woman?; and, Should J be granted a divorce from M?

A caste council usually has jurisdiction over disputes among members of a single caste. In a dispute in which members of different castes are involved, patrons from the concerned castes and a few patrons from the dominant caste form the council. The patrons of the dominant caste have jurisdiction over all the castes living in the area. Such jurisdiction is invoked through the preexisting bonds of patron-and-client, kinship, or friendship.

It is necessary here to comment briefly on the role of the Headman and Nadu Gowda in the settlement of disputes in Rampura. Both are members of the dominant caste, heads of large lineages, landowners, money-lenders, and patrons. The Headman is also the holder of an hereditary government post which gives him power and influence in the village. His joint family has considerable prestige in the area, and his father is still mentioned for the power which he wielded and for his many acts of impulsive generosity. In 1948 the Headman was the biggest landowner in Rampura, and it was rumored that he had lent more than Rs. 150,000 to people in at least 30 neighboring villages. But the lineage of which the Headman was leader was smaller than the lineage of which Nadu Gowda enjoyed undisputed leadership in 1948. Nadu Gowda was also more accessible than the Headman, but he was much less wealthy; even Millayya, a member of the same lineage, was wealthier. The Headman and Nadu Gowda were good friends and there was a great deal of understanding between them. Their friendship was partly responsible for Rampura's stability, a fact which was recognized by villagers who prophesied anarchy in the village "after the two heads fall." Between 1900 and 1920 the village was sharply divided into a few factions, with the present Headman's father and Nadu Gowda's father leading the two most important factions. Friendship between the present Headman and Nadu Gowda was formed in the teeth of their fathers' opposition.

During my stay in Rampura, I did not witness any dispute among Brahmins and therefore cannot say to whom they would have gone for settlement. However, I do know that during a crisis Brahmins went to one or other of the Peasant patrons for advice and help. When a caste is decisively dominant, its dominance extends over all the castes including castes ritually higher. The caste-headman of Peasants in the neighboring village of Kere told me that he once disciplined an arrogant Brahmin priest by imposing boycott on him. The high ritual position which the Brahmin occupies does not free him from the secular control of the dominant caste. This is also true with regard to the Lingayats. During the partition of the property of one segment of the Lingayat lineage which provides priests to the Madeshwara temple, the Headman and his sons were consulted by the head of the joint family, and the partition finally took place before Peasant arbitrators. In a dispute between the priests of the Madeshwara and Basava temples, the Headman's advice was sought. This case is interesting in showing the kind of issues on which the intervention of the dominant caste is sought. Soon after the harvest in 1948, the Basava priest, a widower, had gone east and brought back two loose women with him. This was criticized by everyone in the village. During the summer, at the annual feast in honor of Basava (*Basavana para*), it is customary for the women of the priestly Lingayat families to join together and cook for all Lingayats. These women began cooking and were joined by the mistresses of the Basava priest. The Lingayat women became annoyed and asked these women to keep away, as they were loose women and no one knew their caste. One of the Madeshwara priests later went to the Headman and requested him to see that henceforth the two priestly lineages cooked separately on such occasions. The Headman agreed. In 1952, in a case in which a Lingayat youth had a liaison with a Peasant widow and also insulted a few Peasant youths, the council consisted of the Headman, a few other Peasants and a Lingayat priest. A fine was imposed on both the parties to the liaison and it was decreed that the widow should soon marry. The girl went to her sister's affinal village and got married a few months later.

Even a group like the Muslims, with customs and traditions which are quite different from those of the Hindus, take intimate disputes among close kindred to the Headman for settlement. In 1948 I witnessed three such disputes between kinsfolk being taken to the Headman. It is the boast of Peasants in Rampura that the Muslims are unable to settle a dispute among themselves and have to take it to the Peasants. The Kere documents reveal a similar situation in Kere hobli.

I was told more than once that an effort was usually made to settle a dispute within the caste and to take it to the Peasants only when internal efforts failed. It took me some time to realize that this rule was more honored in the breach than in the observance. I witnessed several castes taking their disputes, even intimate domestic disputes, to the Peasant patrons for settlement.

The Untouchables were the only caste to make an effort to settle their disputes among themselves. They even succeeded in recovering from a caste

elder a fee which he failed to pay to the caste at the wedding of a daughter. I am unable to say whether the Untouchables took care of their own disputes because of new-found self-awareness as a group, or because they thought the higher castes would not be interested in their affairs.

Disputes between Untouchables and high caste men are taken to Peasants for settlement. Thus, in 1952, a dispute between a Lingayat landowner and his Untouchable agricultural servant was taken before the Headman. Inter-caste disputes are usually taken to the Peasants for settlement.

There is a marked tendency for disputes to be settled within the village. The local elders know the disputants intimately and they are more likely to take a sympathetic view than are outsiders. Justice within the village is also cheaper, swifter, and more effective. The local elders either have direct power over the disputants themselves or have influence with those who have such power. This is why disputes tend to be referred to local patrons even across the caste lines. The power wielded by the local patrons is considerable, and even outsiders seek their intervention. Thus a Shepherd from a different village requested Nadu Gowda to use his influence with his wife's father in Rampura, to see that she joined him.

A man who takes a dispute that does not refer to caste matters outside the village is guilty of slighting the local patrons. His action is, in effect, a declaration of "no confidence" in them, and he will soon be made to realize that he has incurred their wrath. Nemesis is swift in an Indian village where people are bound to each other by a multitude of ties. The outside elders, on their part, would not like to offend local elders. They know full well the power wielded by the local elders, who would be able to withhold true evidence and even produce false evidence, if annoyed. Their help would be necessary in arranging a match, in securing a loan, and in a dozen other ways.

In some cases, however, the local elders may not be likely to intervene. They may think that the particular question has to be decided by the elders of the caste concerned and not by themselves. In the summer of 1946, a caste dispute among Washermen from several villages in Mandya and Mysore Districts was settled in Rampura. None of the important Peasant patrons attended the meeting. Sometimes the Peasant patrons may be indifferent because none of the disputants is a client or a kinsman. When a client is involved in a dispute, the patron steps in either because he must, or because the client urges him to do so. Thus Nadu Gowda was actively advising a Shepherd client who was making efforts to get his daughter's marriage dissolved. The husband was living in Sathnur and the case had gone up before the Shepherds in that village.

Where the local patrons have power, and factions are not deep, disputes go before them for settlement. If they are taken to a government court or to elders living outside the village, it means that the matter is beyond the local patrons. Thus in Rampura, though people submitted their disputes to one or other of the Peasant patrons, there were a few who were known for wanting to take every dispute to the official courts. These people were not respected in the

village. The Rampura patrons were rich and influential and it was their boast that their disputes were always settled locally. In this respect Rampura was unlike some neighboring villages.

While there is usually a tendency to settle a dispute within the village, there is "leap frogging" when the caste which is dominant in the higher village is the same as the one which is dominant in the lower village. Thus, if Peasants are dominant in both the higher and lower villages, the Peasants living in the lower village show a tendency to take every dispute, including trivial ones, to Peasant patrons in the higher village. This occurs even though it is the policy of the council of the higher village to support the authority of caste and village councils within its jurisdiction.

IV

A brief description of the structure of village and caste councils is necessary here. This is complicated, as a part of the picture has to be reconstructed from the little that is now open to observation. Elderly villagers are frequently heard to say that things have changed a great deal and that many of the customs and conventions which were being observed even 20 or 30 years ago are being dropped nowadays. The Kere documents help a little in reconstructing the structure as it was a few decades ago, but it is not correct to argue that what was true of Kere was true of all hoblis. Moreover, elderly informants are fond of making neat statements about the social organization of their caste and area, and it is difficult to fit them to the behavior seen today. Thus, for instance, a Potter will mention that at a wedding ceremony in his caste, 70 sets of betel leaves and arecanuts are kept apart for distribution to representatives from the 70 villages forming part of Potter's caste circle. Another Potter will say that 48 or 60 sets ought to be kept and not 70; neither is able to list the villages. If one goes to a Potter wedding, one does not see the specified number of sets of betel leaves and arecanuts kept apart. One is told that the custom has been discontinued only in the last four or five years. The data are sometimes more reliable, especially when they relate to disputes which actually occurred and were witnessed by informants. With these strictures, I will endeavor to reconstruct the organization of village and caste councils.

The village council is the lowest unit in the settlement of disputes. In this connection it is necessary to define what is meant by a village. Where villages are nucleated it is not difficult to identify and distinguish a village, but every nucleated settlement is not regarded as a village by the government. Thus Kere consists of three distinct nucleated settlements, one of which is Kere proper; the other two, which have distinct names, are called *dākhale grāmagalu* or "satellite villages." For official purposes, the two satellite villages are one with Kere, and the hereditary Kere officials look after all the three settlements. But for social and religious purposes, Kere is three separate villages. A small village is occasionally tacked onto a nearby larger one for reasons of administrative economy. In the settlement of disputes, however, it is the social and religious unit which is important, not the administrative unit.

For purposes of administration again, villages are grouped into hoblis, hoblis into taluks or sub-taluks, and taluks into districts, and finally, districts into the State of Mysore. Rampura is not only socially but also administratively a village, and it lies in Hogur hobli, Sangama Taluk, Mysore District. (Until August, 1938, Mandya and Mysore formed a single District.)

The division into hoblis is an old division, and a hobli may contain from 20 to 50 villages. This division corresponded to some extent with the social organization. Thus the council of the capital (*kasba*) of the hobli was regarded as a *kattemane* or "house of law." A kattemane is a place where disputes are settled. The headman of the kattemane is called *Nadu Gowda*, and in the Rampura area he is usually from the dominant caste of Peasants. The area over which a kattemane has jurisdiction (identical with a hobli) is called *Mahanadu* (big country), and in letters, the headman of the kattemane is addressed as Chief of the Mahanadu (*Mahanadu Gowda*). It may be mentioned here that a basic dichotomy existed between the agricultural castes which constituted *Nadu*, and the artisan and trading castes which constituted *Desha*. (These castes are represented on the brass ladle carried by the *kulavadi*, the Untouchable servant of the Hindu castes.) The agricultural castes are entitled to the honorific suffix of *Gowda* and the trading and artisan castes to *Shetti*. The Chief of the Shetti group is usually a leading trader in the hobli-capital and is called *Desha Shetti*. The Chief of the Nadu group of castes and the Desha Shetti are both respected figures, and sets of betel leaves and arecanuts are set apart for them at any wedding.

Peasants are dominant in Kere, and more than 50 years ago, they shared this dominance with Brahmins. But the Brahmins do not seem to have played a very prominent part in the settlement of disputes. The Kere documents show that the council of Peasants wielded effective power not only in Kere village but over the entire hobli. I am not able to say what the situation was like in Hogur, the hobli to which Rampura belongs, but Rampura itself had powerful Peasant leaders, as we have seen.

A variety of disputes were referred to the council of Peasant elders in Kere. One document referred to the punishment of a Fisherman who falsely alleged that his father's classificatory younger brother's wife, i.e., his classificatory mother, was his mistress. If the allegation was true, both were guilty of incest. The Peasant elders of Kere were angered by the false allegation and felt much sympathy for the wronged woman; they imposed two fines on the man, one of 40 rupees to be paid to the Peasant council, and another of 15 rupees to be paid to the Fisherman council. The Peasant caste council threatened the culprit with expulsion from his own Fisherman caste if he repeated the allegation. This incident shows the extraordinary power possessed by the council of the dominant caste, being able even to threaten a member of a different caste with outcasting.

In another document the Peasant elders defined the conditions under which a Muslim priest resident in Ganjam village was to serve the Muslims of Kere. He was asked to recognize three Muslims in Kere as leaders of the local

Muslims, and to serve only those whom these three approved, but told that if he were dissatisfied with the Muslim leaders, he was to take his complaint to the Peasant leaders. In the same document, the Muslims in Kere and another village agreed to obey the three Muslim leaders, and added that, in case of dissatisfaction with the leaders' decisions, they would appeal to the Peasant elders in Kere.

A year after this document was signed, Kere Muslims informed the Peasant elders that they would bring them their disputes, as some had refused to obey the Muslim leaders. This highlights a feature of rural social organization in this area: the council of the dominant caste tries to create a structure of authority within each group it has to deal with, though its efforts frequently fail. In one case the Peasant headman of a village in Kere hobli complained to the Kere council that his villagers did not respect him at all, but took every trivial dispute to the elders in Kere. He requested the elders to support his authority in the village. When the caste which is dominant in a village is also dominant in the hobli-capital, the many ties between the two groups seem to militate against settling disputes locally.

The word kattemane evokes respect in the minds of Peasants in this area. All castes resident in a hobli-capital claim that they have kattemane status. Thus Oilmen, Fishermen, and Muslims resident in Hogur claim that their councils are higher than their respective caste councils in the other villages of the hobli. An Oilman from Hogur, at a wedding in his caste in any other village in his hobli, demands that he be given a set of betel leaves and arecanuts (*veelya*) before any other Oilman from that hobli , and creates a furore if he is not given such priority.

Ceremonial precedence is a different matter from referring village disputes to the council of the particular caste in the hobli-capital. If the particular caste is numerically strong and wealthy in the hobli-capital, disputes may be taken to its council. If one or more elders are also well-known for their wisdom and skill in settling disputes, more people use their caste council. In the course of a generation or two, such a place is likely to acquire renown for settling disputes. I am inclined to think that the reputation of the Peasant councils in villages such as Keragodu and Nelamane was built up in this way. It is also probable that over a period of time the reputation of a council rises and falls, though people seem to regard it as immutable.

The council of the hobli-capital is sensitive about the position it enjoys. At the annual festival of Madeshwara in Gudi in 1947, a fight occurred between Kere and Bihalli, and in the month of February 1948 the elders of Bihalli began working toward a settlement. They approached the Peasant elders of Hogur and Rampura, and it was decided to call a meeting of the elders of Kere, Bihalli, Hogur, and Rampura on a particular day. The Kere elders were informed accordingly, but no one from Kere turned up. Lame excuses were given for their nonappearance, but everyone knew that the real reason was that Kere people felt they were being ordered about by Hogur. On the next

date that was decided, the Hogur elders failed to turn up. They wanted to pay Kere leaders tit for tat. The pride of both villages having been satisfied, everyone attended on the third day and the dispute was settled.

In actual discussions with villagers, they frequently mentioned a particular village as constituting the highest council (*andalu gadi*) for a particular caste. Thus Peasants stated that the Peasant council in Nelamane was their highest court, while Shepherds mentioned Chennapatna, Basketmakers designated Malavalli, and Potters, Keragodu. Informants always mentioned the existence of documents and copper-plate deeds which defined the rights and privileges of their caste. Of course, no one had seen those documents, but all had heard about their existence.

It seems likely that a particular caste dominant in a village gradually acquired a reputation for settling disputes; it is also probable that the elders at one time sought and obtained the support of the local chieftain, or ruler or the head of a monastery for their decisions. When the village is a hobli-capital, it is easier for it to establish and enhance such authority.

Evidence that the reputation of a council was not constant over a period of time is found on occasions when there is an open challenge to a dominant position. Thus, several years ago, Potters from Mysore City claimed precedence over Potters from Keragodu. The former argued that they represented the place where H. H. the Maharajah of Mysore lived, the capital of the State, and as such they had to be given priority over Keragodu. The Keragodu Potters replied that priority to Seringapatam had not been conceded when Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan were ruling there (in the 18th century), and there was no reason why they should give precedence to Mysore now. Thereupon Mysore Potters refused to attend weddings in Keragodu area. However, the Mysoreans' claim was conceded in Tagadur area in the east. Refusal to acknowledge changes in relative status is the source of much confusion in regard to the organization of councils. The great increase in communications between members of the same caste living in different areas makes for more debate regarding mutual position, and there is yet another complicating factor: some young men in every caste regard all this as antiquated.

V

As already mentioned, the patron-client tie is of crucial importance in the settlement of disputes. It is so powerful that disputes are always referred upward from clients to patrons.[4] As the patrons and clients frequently belong to different castes, there is no strong sentiment that a dispute should be settled within the caste. Disputes are more easily settled locally if the patrons are powerful and come from a caste which is decisively dominant. Where a caste is dominant in a group of neighboring villages, the influence of a patron extends far beyond his own village. Where a village is split into factions, each faction administers justice within it, and interfactional relations resemble international relations.

In Rampura the biggest and most important patrons are from the Peasant caste, and the patrons from the other high castes are aware of the power wielded by the Peasant patrons.

In 1948, Rampura was not factionalized, though a few isolated groups disliked the Headman and everyone associated with him. They were not numerous enough to challenge his authority and that of Nadu Gowda. Elderly villagers frequently remarked that Rampura was more prosperous and unified than in the first two decades of this century, when even the large landowners were indebted to money-lenders in Mysore and Tadagavadi, and when, during the harvest, grain was measured out to the creditors as interest on these loans. That earlier period was characterized by deep factionalism; the several patrons were at loggerheads with each other. Elderly informants asserted that the villagers went more to the law courts then than in the later period. Particularly Narase Gowda, a faction leader, went to the law courts a great deal and acquired an intimate knowledge of law and legal procedure which he put to excellent use harassing his enemies, including the present Headman's father. The two often supported rival candidates in law suits. Elderly villagers say that the factions in the village began to disappear sometime after the end of World War I when one of the leading villagers was involved in a murder case and the village closed ranks and rallied behind the suspected man.

I have heard it said in Rampura that respectable people ought not to frequent the law courts. In 1948 the few who did so were unpopular and had a reputation for being very unscrupulous. This does not mean that a respectable man should never go to a law court, but that he should go only after he has exhausted all other remedies. It is generally felt that it is better to settle a dispute in the village than take it to a government court. When in a moralizing mood, villagers are able to reel off the names of those who liquidated substantial fortunes in taking disputes from one law court to another. It may be mentioned that a good deal of what goes on in a law court does not make sense to villagers; they know that a clever lawyer has to be hired, and that when a man loses in a lower court he can appeal to a higher. When a man loses in a government law court it does not mean that he has done wrong or that he loses face with his fellow villagers, but only that his lawyer is not clever enough or that he is not lucky. Villagers know that a man who has a right to a thing may lose it in a law court and the man who has no right may win it. This contrasts with the decisions of a village court, which have an ethical connotation. For instance, I found in the village panchayat book a note to the effect that a Smith had been fined one pie (1/192 of a rupee). I asked some people about the meaning of fining an absurd sum like a pie. They explained to me that it was levied only on a man who was found to be a persistent wrong-doer over trifles. The fine meant that an eye had always to be kept on the wrong-doer. The more serious punishments such as imposing a heavy fine, temporary boycott, and outcasting also have an ethical implication. I do not mean to imply here that the decisions of village councils are always right and that village arbitra-

tors are incorruptible, but only that the decisions have a moral implication which the decisions of the government civil courts usually lack.

I have mentioned earlier that the patrons of the dominant caste tend to support, if not to create, local structures of authority. In consonance with this principle, they apply to the disputants the customs and rules which the latter recognize as binding, even when they are different from the customs and rules which are binding on the dominant caste. This respect for the moral code of every caste is one of the reasons why the decisions of the council of the dominant caste still continue to be respected. It is indeed a matter of surprise that village councils continue to function in spite of more than 100 years of British law administered through the powerful official law courts. The Kere documents included two cases which had been pending before the Government law courts but which had subsequently been withdrawn to be submitted to the council of the dominant caste in Kere.

SUMMARY

A study of the locally dominant caste and the kind of dominance it enjoys, is essential to the understanding of rural society in India. Numerical strength, economic and political power, ritual status, and Western education and occupations, are the most important elements of dominance. Usually the different elements of dominance are distributed among different castes in a village. When a caste enjoys all or most of the elements of dominance, it may be said to have decisive dominance.

The Peasants in Rampura enjoy decisive dominance. They command respect not only from several lower castes, but also from the priestly castes, Brahmins and Lingayats, who have a higher ritual rank but who are not free from the secular control of the dominant caste.

The numerical strength of a caste influences its relations with the other castes. The capacity to muster a number of able-bodied men for a fight, and reputation for aggressiveness, are relevant factors. Considerations of power do prevail. The members of the nondominant castes may be abused, beaten, grossly underpaid, or their women required to gratify the sexual desires of the powerful men in the dominant caste. The patrons from the dominant caste are "vote banks" for the politicians.

The dominant caste plays a very important role in the settlement of disputes, which are settled by the traditional village and caste councils and not by the modern statutory panchayats. A caste council usually has jurisdiction over only the members of a single caste, but the dominant caste has jursidiction over all the castes living in a village. The leaders of the dominant caste not only settle disputes between members of different castes but are also frequently approached by nondominant castes for the settlement of their internal, even domestic, disputes. In the settlement of disputes, the patron-client tie is extremely important.

A feature of the administrative system of Mysore, handed down from pre-

British days, is the grouping of villages into hoblis. The council of the dominant caste in the hobli-capital is called a kattemane (house of law), and it settles disputes not only occurring within the capital, but also entertains appeals from councils of every village in the hobli. It normally tries to uphold the authority of local elders. The working of caste and village councils and their relation to the council of the hobli-capital is extremely complicated and perhaps varies from hobli to hobli. The study of the working of these councils is essential to the understanding of the dominant caste.

NOTES

[1] This paper was read before a Department of Anthropology Seminar at the University of Chicago in the last week of May, 1957. I thank the Rockefeller Foundation for a generous fellowship which enabled me to devote the greater part of the academic year 1956–1957 to the analysis and writing up of my Rampura material. A full acknowledgement will be made when my book on Rampura is published.

[2] For an elaboration of the concept of patron, see my 1955 essay.

[3] Here Nadu Gowda is the name of a Peasant; it is usually the name of the hereditary headman of the Peasant caste in a hobli-capital.

[4] This tendency is probably a universal feature of rural India. See, for example, Gough.

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