

CHAPTER I

How It All Began

THE SEEDS of my study of Rampura, a multi-caste village in Mysore District in Mysore State (recently renamed Karnataka) in South India, were sown in 1945–46 when I was a doctoral student in social anthropology at Oxford. It was Radcliffe-Brown's last academic year at Oxford, and on more than one occasion he talked to me about the scientific importance of making a field-study of a multi-caste community in India. While there was a great body of writing on caste, most of it was based on historical and literary material, and was concerned with the institution at the all-India or provincial level. Reliance on historical and literary material had resulted in a view of the caste system which was at variance with that obtained from, for instance, folk literature. Thus, there were many proverbs in the Indian languages making fun of the Brahmin, his greed, gluttony and pusillanimity, while in the sacred literature of the Hindus, mostly written by the Brahmins themselves, he had been portrayed as the apex of the caste system and as a deity on earth.

Even more important, according to Radcliffe-Brown, was the fact that the extant studies did not give an idea of the day-to-day social relations between members of diverse castes living in a small community. That could only be done through the intensive field-study of a multi-caste village or town by a trained social anthropologist. The importance of such a study could not be overstated as caste represented a unique form of social stratification, and millions of human beings had ordered their lives according to it for over two millennia. The institution was beginning to change fundamentally, and it should be studied before it changed totally. Time was of the essence of the matter.

The 1930s were a period when social anthropology was beginning to move out of its preoccupation with the study of relatively isolated primitive communities to undertake the study of villages and towns which formed an integral part of vast political and historic societies. This new tendency showed itself in both the United States and

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England, and Radcliffe-Brown was friendly to it. This was only to be expected as he had spent the years 1930–37 in Chicago where Redfield, Sol Tax, John Embree and Horace Miner were all busy studying villages and towns in Guatemala, Japan and Canada. The Chinese anthropologist, Fei Hsiao-tung, had made a study of a Chinese village in the thirties.

Radcliffe-Brown's suggestion that I should make an intensive study of a multi-caste village appealed to me for several reasons, including of course the purely scientific one of adding to existing knowledge about the working of a uniquely hierarchical society which was on the threshold of far-reaching changes. For one thing, I felt that my previous field experience, diverse as it was, had not been sufficiently intensive. I had only made brief forays into rural areas from towns, and I had gathered information from a few individuals instead of participating intimately, over a period of time, in the day-to-day activities of the people I was observing. I had been converted during my year of studentship to Radcliffe-Brown's brand of functionalism (subsequently designated 'structural-functionalism' in the United States), and I was excited about its implications for field-work: I wanted to examine, first-hand, events and institutions in all their complex interrelationships.

I was one of Radcliffe-Brown's last students at Oxford, and after his retirement from the Chair in July 1946, I became a student of his successor, Evans-Pritchard. No two teachers were more different. I found it easy to establish contact with Evans-Pritchard. In fact, he took the initiative in establishing contact with me. His informality and charm, and his natural impulse to treat a student as an equal, made a profound impression on me. Evans-Pritchard's teaching methods were highly personal and unorthodox but effective. I found him most stimulating outside the classroom or even the formal supervision session, and when he was with a few close colleagues and students. He was generous with his time and ideas. It is possible that Evans-Pritchard may have singled me out for favoured treatment because of the good word which Radcliffe-Brown had put in for me. Evans-Pritchard's informality made it possible for me to talk to him about many other things besides anthropology.

Evans-Pritchard must have found my faith in functionalism very naive, and he proceeded, in his own way, to make me more sceptical towards it. He even tried to outrage me by saying that functionalism was nothing more than a way of organizing and presenting field

data. There was a streak of scepticism in Evans-Pritchard's thinking: he distinguished between the heuristic value of an idea and its truth-value. This facilitated experimentation with all sorts of ideas while at the same time not being tied to, or bound by, them. In the context of functionalism, it meant that the institutions of a society were related to each other, that changes in one set of institutions led to changes in other sets, and finally, that each set of institutions had a contribution to make to the whole. This idea did lead to better field-work and analysis as it made the anthropologist more sensitive to connections between different areas of social life and culture. (It became closely linked with the method of 'participant observation', first practised by Malinowski, and which is now regarded as indispensable for anthropological training and analysis.) But whether even primitive societies are really wholes in which every institution is linked to every other is a debatable question. At some point in his career Evans-Pritchard had been influenced by Vahinger's *The Philosophy of 'As if'*.

Some time in July 1947, a few days prior to my departure from Oxford, Evans-Pritchard told me that there was the likelihood of a new post being created in the Department, viz. a University Lectureship in Indian Sociology, and did I want to be considered for it? I think he mentioned this while Radcliffe-Brown was on a brief visit to Oxford. Radcliffe-Brown told me how a few years at Oxford were necessary before I could return to India to teach. (I think he put it more bluntly!) I do not think that I showed appreciation of what Evans-Pritchard was planning for me, for at that moment I was overwhelmed to find that I was thought good enough to teach at Oxford. Also while it was no doubt a dream come true I was not ready for it. I was homesick, and eagerly looking forward to going home, and the prospect of returning to England in the immediate future went against my plans.

I returned home to Mysore in August 1947. It was a crucial and exciting month in the sub-continent's history: it became independent but, in the process, was divided into two sovereign countries, India and Pakistan. The partition of the sub-continent was marked by bloody and barbarous riots which eventually culminated in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on January 30, 1948. There was considerable confusion in the country, particularly in the north.

Before leaving Oxford I had applied for a research post in the Anthropological Survey of India but I did not hear from them for

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several weeks after my return. I was aware that the convulsions caused by the partition of the country would take time to settle down and only after something like normalcy had been restored would the Government turn to a minor chore such as filling posts in a research department. It was during the latter half of October 1947, I think, that I received a letter from the Government asking me to present myself for an interview at New Delhi on the date mentioned in the letter. (It was early in November, I think.) Delhi was still gripped by partition riots in November 1947, and the trains coming in from the Punjab literally overflowed with refugees with dozens of passengers perched on the roofs of the compartments. I left Delhi soon after the interview for the calmer and more familiar Bombay, and when I reached my host's home I found a letter from Evans-Pritchard telling me that the lecturership had been instituted, and asking me whether I would be willing to take it up. He also added that I could spend the first year of my job carrying out the field study which I wanted to do. It was an extraordinarily generous offer, though still not quite formal, and I was delighted. It was characteristic of Evans-Pritchard that he added the extra gift for a year's field work in a village. I replied accepting the offer and thanking him. I did not feel any sense of guilt in accepting Evans-Pritchard's offer as the Selection Committee in New Delhi had not given me a clue to their intentions. In fact, I had had a rough time with Dr B. S. Guha, the Director, and we did not have a single point of agreement. He was surprised that I regarded the annual Brahminical *shraddha* as ancestor-propitiation. He was a physical anthropologist, and was not familiar with modern social anthropology. Working with him would not have been easy.

I started looking around for a village as soon as I had official news of my appointment. I was required to return to Oxford during the first week of January 1949, and if to this was added three weeks for the journey, I would not have more than a maximum of eleven months for my stay in the village. I had therefore to find a village as soon as I could. This great constraint was responsible for helping me to decide on the language-area in which I would work. I could have worked in a village in any language-area in south India, but I had the utmost facility in Kannada which was the language of my street and school, though not of my home. I would have no need for interpreters, and I would also be able to go to such original documents as existed and did not need anyone's help to copy and decipher

them. (However, I discovered subsequently that I needed considerable guidance and help before I was able to make use of the land records and other documents.)

If the time factor decided the language-area, sentiment decided the part of Mysore where I would select my village. Three or four generations ago my ancestors had migrated from neighbouring Tamil Nadu to settle down in rural southern Mysore. In studying a village in this region I would therefore be finding out about the kind of society which they had lived in, and obtained a living from. My study thus would enable me better to understand my personal cultural and social roots.

An important social process in Mysore, if not in South India as a whole, is the urbanization of Brahmins. This process has yet to be studied, and its many consequences and implications understood. It has gone on for a hundred years or so, and as with several other processes, its tempo has continued to accelerate since World War I. As a traditionally literary caste, whose members were frequently economically better off than many others, Brahmins were among the first to become aware of the opportunities opened up to those proficient in English. The new schools and colleges were located in the cities and those who wanted education had to migrate to them from their villages. Urbanization gradually spread to the other rural castes. I may add that this picture of urbanization is somewhat oversimplified inasmuch as, traditionally, cities in Mysore included a number of non-Brahmin trading, artisan and servicing castes. Besides, the development of Bangalore, the biggest city in the State, involved the immigration of a number of Hindu castes, Muslims, Christians and others from neighbouring linguistic areas, in particular, Tamil Nadu. But it is not necessary for me here to consider urbanization in all its complexity, and my statement that Brahmins were among the first to urbanize and that many other rural castes followed them later, remains broadly true.

My father had left his natal village and moved to Mysore before the beginning of World War I in order to be able to educate his children. It was not an easy decision for him as he was an only son, and by local standards he had a sizeable quantity of irrigated land on which he and his father had both worked hard alongside their tenants and servants. He obtained a job in the Mysore Power and Light (as the Department of Electricity was then called) but the bulk of his income continued to come from his ancestral land. Like many

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other landowning Brahmins, he visited his village every year at harvest to collect his share of the rice crop and sell the surplus to rice-millers in Mysore. Students of urbanization may be interested to note that landownership added to a person's social status even in Mysore city, and the fact that a man obtained the staple food grain of rice from his own land instead of buying it in the shops was mentioned with pride by those who owned land, and with envy by those who did not. An important symbol of landownership was the line of bullock carts, loaded with paddy, which stood before the landowner's house during the harvest month of January.

After having decided, on sentimental grounds, on the southern Mysore area, I looked about for villages which satisfied certain other criteria such as a multiplicity of castes, which grew rice as a major crop, were small enough to be studied by a single person, and finally, were not too 'progressive' or 'modern'. While the village had to be multi-caste in composition, I did not want the number to be so large that I would be unable to study inter-caste relationships in some detail and depth. It was also necessary that a sizeable proportion of the village population be Okkaligas who constituted the dominant, land-owning and cultivating caste of this region (hereafter referred to as Peasants). I also wanted Harijans, and the essential artisan and servicing castes such as Smiths, Barbers, Potters, Washermen and Priests represented in my field village.

Rice cannot be grown without irrigation from tanks (artificial lakes), wells or canals, and irrigated villages are in a minority in Mysore State. But canal and tank irrigation is widespread in southern Mysore, and I had a feeling that the growing of rice would make my village more 'Asian' than it would be without rice.

Negatively, I wanted my village to be away from a main road, and to be without electricity and piped water. In 1948, very few villages had electricity and piped water, and it was necessary to avoid them. Location on a main road opened up a village to outside influences and there were a number of such villages.

I contacted several landowners in Mysore city and talked to them about their villages and others which they knew. I then made a list of likely villages. I also took a few trips to villages within a radius of thirty miles or so from Mysore. Gradually, I discovered that the kind of village I wanted was not easy to come by. One or more essential factors were found missing in each village on my list.

As I went about my search I discovered that I had overlooked

certain mundane factors. For instance, accommodation was difficult to find. Houses were built in villages for living and not for renting. The few houses which fell vacant for one reason or another were occupied by lesser officials such as school teachers, police constables and doctors. It became clear to me that I would not be able to rent an entire house for my exclusive use. I then thought of renting at least a couple of rooms in a house but even for that I needed the patronage of a local landowner.

The availability of good drinking water was another practical consideration. After my experience in Coorg, I was keen, in fact anxious, that my field-work should not be disturbed by illness. Finally, while villages away from the main road were ideal, the problem of maintaining a constant supply of groceries and vegetables, all to be sent regularly from Mysore, meant that I could not turn down a village merely because it was on a bus road. In fact, dilapidated war-time buses, powered by charcoal gas, were so liable to break down that even a village on a bus route presented difficulties. During the period of my stay in Rampura, I did not undertake many bus journeys which were free from breakdowns.

Luck came my way after a few weeks of searching. A friend, whose brother-in-law owned land in Rampura, wrote to the headman, and I was told that they would be able to give me a place to live in. As soon as I learnt of this, I caught the first available bus and presented myself at the headman's house. The headman was away in Tirupati on his annual pilgrimage, and I met his eldest son, Rame Gowda. I asked him a few questions about the village. By way of recommending it to me, he said that unlike neighbouring villages, it was free from factional politics, and that it was also 'progressive'. As evidence, he mentioned the fact that sometime in the 1930s the Village Panchayat had ordered the inhabitants not to burn precious cowdung for fuel but to use it only for manure. And this order was being obeyed. As far as accommodation was concerned, there were two houses, both belonging to the headman, one in which he received his important guests ('office house') and the other where his bullocks were stalled ('bullock house'). I would be provided accommodation in one or the other. Could I visit the village after the headman returned from his pilgrimage?

I was excited by the prospect of being able to start my work soon, but I could not ignore the negative features of Rampura for my field-work. First, it was located on the Mysore-Hogur bus road, and

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as such was likely to be more urbanized than interior villages. Second, it had a population, as I later discovered, of 1519, and I wondered whether it was not too big to be studied by one man. Third, my ancestral village was too close to it—six miles by bus and a little over three miles by footpath. Further, Rampura's alleged factionlessness, and its 'progressive' character added to my doubts about its typicality.

I bade goodbye to Rame Gowda saying that I would return as soon as I had word from him and walked down to the brick and mortar platform built around the trunk of the huge peepul (*Ficus religiosa*) tree, to wait for the bus to Mysore. The bus took some time coming. As I sat on the platform, I could not help looking towards the east, the direction from which the bus was expected. The Mysore-Hogur road snaked its way up towards Gudda village which occupied the crest of the rise. Gudda itself was not visible—the road, after zigzagging for a while like a drunk, disappeared into a blue sky flecked with white, cottonwoolly clouds. A furlong from where I sat was the Big Tank, a stretch of shimmering silver and blue, walled in on the south by a huge stone-and-earth embankment whose flattened top was the bus road. Around the tank were orchards growing coconut, arecanut, mango, banana, and other favourite trees. The silver and blue of the tank, and the blue-flecked-with-white of the sky, the green of the orchards somehow blended with the brown of the terraced plots where paddy had been harvested only two or three weeks ago. Someone was making jaggery in a nearby field—a smell compounded of boiling sugarcane juice and of cane tops being burned for fuel reached me. It was a beautiful morning, sunny but not too warm, typical of January in this part of Mysore. I then and there decided that Rampura was the village for me. Rame Gowda appeared friendly, and he had promised me accommodation. It did not matter very much that Rampura was on a bus road. More serious was its unity and progressiveness but luckily for me they later proved to be an exaggeration.

I feel self-conscious to mention that my decision to choose Rampura was based on aesthetic rather than rational considerations. However, it was in line with my earlier decision to select the southern Mysore region on sentimental grounds. But the alternative of mentioning only the 'rational' criteria while ignoring the 'non-rational' ones would be dishonest.

Back in Mysore, I attended to a number of things which I had to

get done before moving into Rampura. I needed furniture, medical supplies, groceries, lamps, torches and many other articles. I saw the Deputy Commissioner of Mysore District to secure from him a letter which would allow me access to official documents in the village and *taluk* (the administrative division comprising a number of villages and presided over by an official called *amildar*). Such a letter was essential though not always enough. Luckily for me, I had other connections to use: the Amildar of Sangama Taluk was the father-in-law of an acquaintance of mine, and he wrote on my behalf. I later discovered that the Revenue Inspector (head of the *hobli*, an administrative unit lower than the *taluk*) of Hogur was a friend of a friend, and he was also helpful.

The Deputy Commissioner also gave me a permit for a tin of kerosene every month to keep my hurricane lanterns going—kerosene was scarce and was supplied in minuscule quantities against ration cards. It was almost unobtainable in the villages, and most villagers in Rampura in 1948 obtained such light as they could from small earthen lamps in which cotton wicks burned using sesame or groundnut oil.

I started looking around for a cook but finding one seemed extremely difficult. Not only were cooks scarce, but cooks prepared to work in a village seemed practically nonexistent. I realized to my surprise how dependent cooks were on such urban facilities as piped water and electricity. I thought of having my food supplied by the teashop in Rampura but it was far too unhygienic a place for my liking. The other alternative was to cook my own food but I feared that it would take up too much of my time. At this point one of my knowledgeable friends warned me against taking anyone who was likely to get me into trouble in the village by his amorousness, quarrelsomeness, or some other quality. An ability to withstand rural conditions and behave in such a way that no problems were created for me seemed to be even more important than cooking. After much searching, I found such a person in our domestic cook's younger brother, a young man barely out of his teens, who wanted to earn some money while waiting for a job. Everyone assured me that he was a 'good boy', and he was willing to learn how to cook. It was also pointed out to me that he was a Brahmin from an orthodox family and this was helpful as elderly villagers would expect me to behave like a Brahmin. I discovered later that the advice given to me was extremely sound—Nachcha, my cook, was a social success

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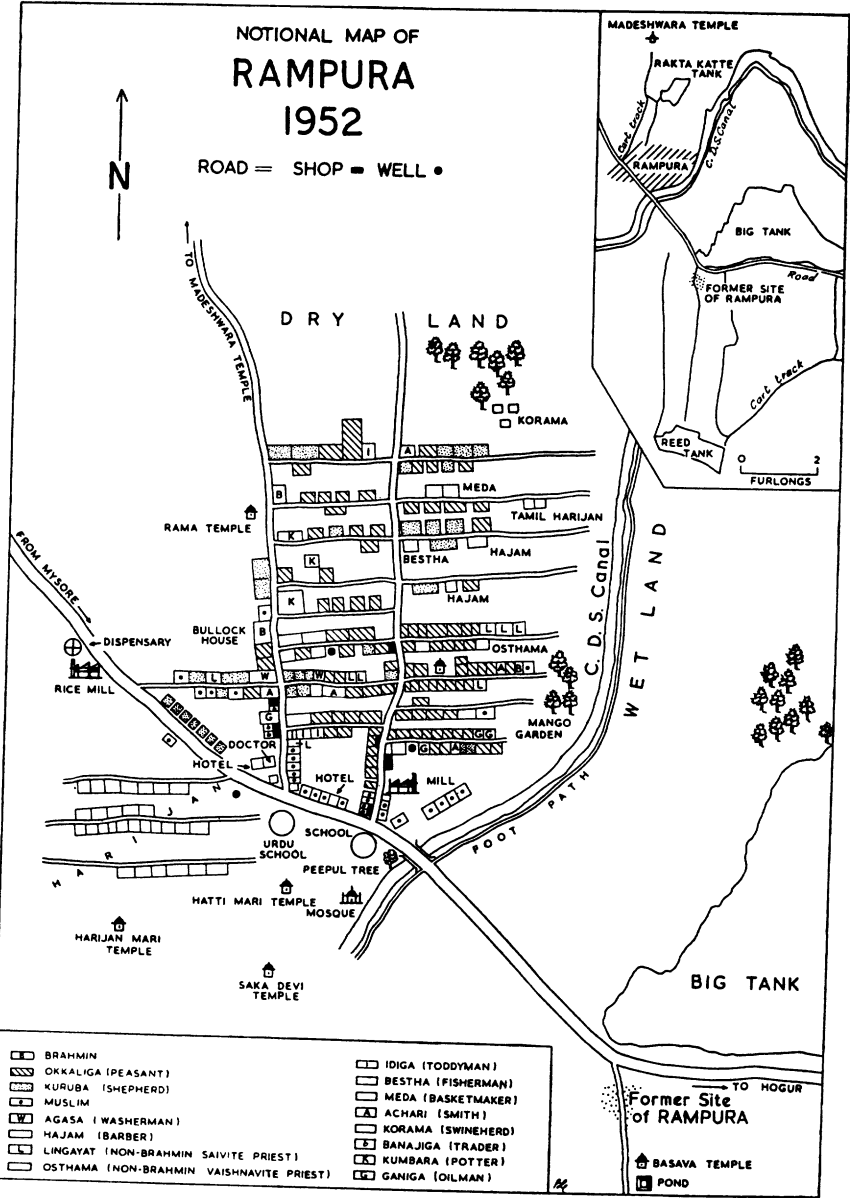
with the men who mattered, and they found even the soups he cooked to their liking. I frequently heard tributes to his conduct and abilities. Sometimes I even felt that the villagers liked him better than me, which was all to the good.

I thought I would pay another visit to the village to find out when I could move in. However, on 30 January 1948, Gandhiji was assassinated, and in common with millions of other Indians, I could not think of my own work for a few days. And when I did visit Rampura I was told to come after the mourning period of thirteen days had ended. I was slightly upset to hear this as I did not see immediately the connection between Gandhi's death and my moving into Rampura. I even wondered whether the villagers were only putting me off. But after a while I told myself that the villagers did not want me to start an auspicious piece of work (my research) during an inauspicious period just as no one would have thought of starting the construction of a house during mourning.

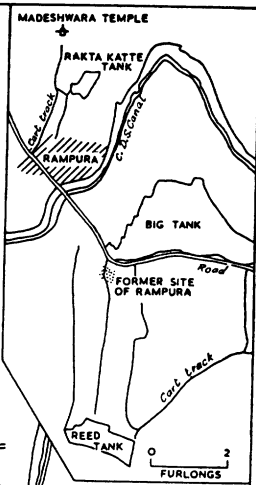
The villagers commemorated the thirteenth day of Gandhi's death with a meeting, group photograph, and snacks. At first sight it looked like a strange way of expressing their sorrow at the death, but traditionally the ending of the period of mourning was marked by a feast. Only the photograph was a new addition.

NOTIONAL MAP OF
RAMPURA
 1952

ROAD = SHOP = WELL •



- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| BRAHMIN | IDIGA (TODDYMAN) |
| OKKALIGA (PEASANT) | BESTHA (FISHERMAN) |
| KURUBA (SHEPHERD) | MEDA (BASKETMAKER) |
| MUSLIM | ACHARI (SMITH) |
| AGASA (WASHERMAN) | KORAMA (SWINEHERD) |
| HAJAM (BARBER) | BANAJIGA (TRADER) |
| LINGAYAT (NON-BRAHMIN SAIVITE PRIEST) | KUMBARA (POTTER) |
| OSTHAMA (NON-BRAHMIN VAISHNAVITE PRIEST) | GANIGA (OILMAN) |



C.D.S. Canal

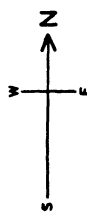
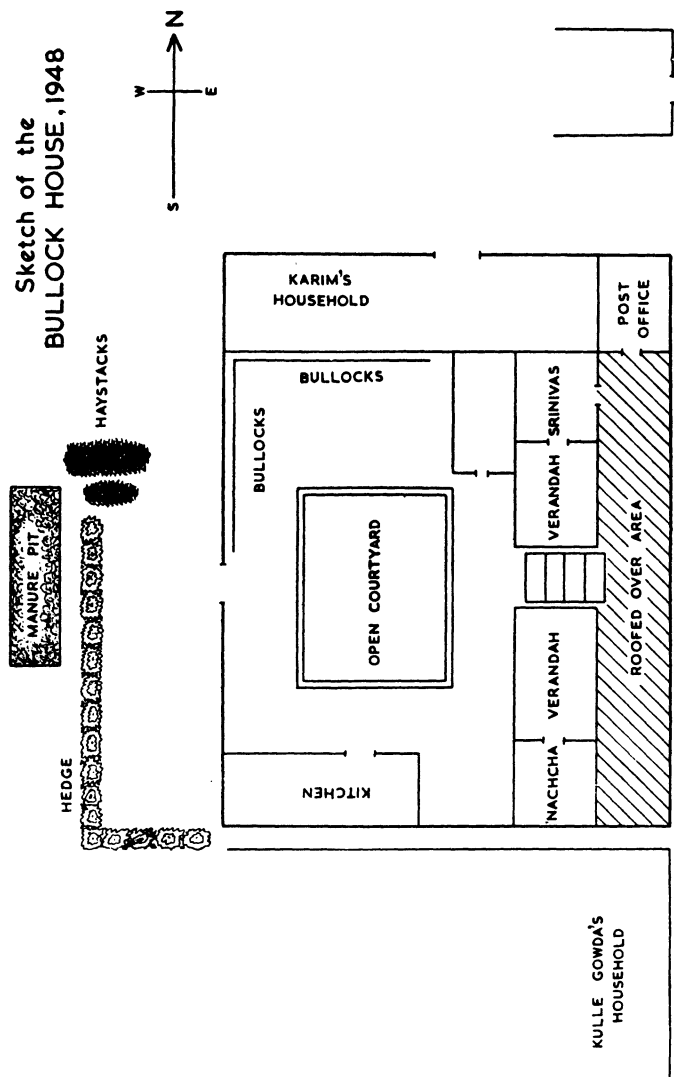
BIG TANK

TO HOGUR
 Former Site of RAMPURA

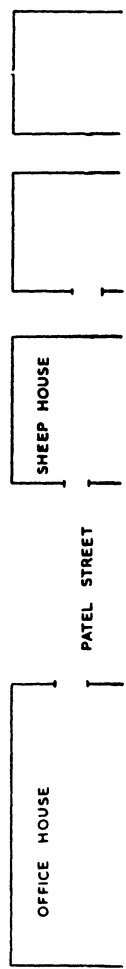
BASAVA TEMPLE
 POND

FOOT PATH

Sketch of the BULLOCK HOUSE, 1948



GUDI STREET



KULLE GOWDA'S
HOUSEHOLD

OFFICE HOUSE

PATEL STREET

SHEEP HOUSE

ROOFED OVER AREA

VERANDAH

NACHCHA

VERANDAH SRINIVAS

OPEN COURTYARD

BULLOCKS

KARIM'S
HOUSEHOLD

POST
OFFICE

HEDGE

MANURE PIT

HAYSTACKS