

# Introduction

## *Individuality in South India*

The material available to a story writer in India is limitless. Within a broad climate of inherited culture there are endless variations: every individual differs from every other individual, not only economically, but in outlook, habits and day-to-day philosophy. . . . Under such conditions the writer has only to look out of the window to pick up a character (and thereby a story).

R. K. Narayan, *Malgudi Days*

One of the things that has always impressed me about Indians is how many people they keep tabs on. The news magazine *India Today* is written to appeal to this appetite for knowledge about people. The magazine, which is India's *Newsweek* or *Time*, can be purchased at nearly any urban newsstand nationwide in India, a distinction that indicates its place in national popular culture.

When my American students read the magazine, they tell me what impresses them is that coverage consists overwhelmingly of finely detailed reporting about an amazing number of local-level public figures. In fact, reporting is so highly personalized, it is hard for the outsider—anyone unfamiliar with who these people are and what they do—to make sense of the news. It seems Indians who read the magazine know something about a large number of relatively minor public figures. This same fascination with specific individuals is also apparent when, as an outsider, you listen to a political discussion among Indians. To me, this knowing about large numbers of people—their names, what they do, how important and powerful they are, something about their leadership style—is a defining feature of public life in India.

But knowing about large numbers of people is not restricted to the political sphere. It is typical of public life generally. In the old, crowded neighborhoods of Madras City, long-term residents know who lives in their locality and can tell you detailed histories of the rise and fall of individuals and their families. The pattern is equally apparent among kin.

A middle-class, middle-aged merchant in Madras City, for example, can trace a genealogy that includes several hundred members, and he can describe who these people are (or were): what they do, where they live, when they were married, their level of education, which affines are related to whom, and so on. I believe this kind of detailed knowing about people reveals something important: individuality, in the sense of the aggregate of traits that distinguish who a person is, has great significance in Indian social life and is central to how Indians conceive of their society. Indians know their society in terms of who people are. This may seem an ordinary enough conclusion to draw from what for an American would be knowledge of an extraordinary number of people, but there is a problem.

A key tenet of Western social science lore about India is that individuality lacks importance in its social life. Indians are said to value collective identities, the identities of caste and family, *not* the identities of individuals (Dumont 1970a). And outside modern law (cf. B eteille 1986), it has been argued, Indians in ordinary life lack a ready abstract sense of the individual as an integrated whole (Marriott 1976; 1989).

I write this book to counter these commonplace views and to offer a theory of Tamil individuality. The Tamil people who are my concern live in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Although this book is particular to them, the role that individuality plays and its expressions in Tamil society call into question the validity of these commonplace views elsewhere in India as well. Specifically, I shall demonstrate that Tamils *do* recognize individuality as an essential feature of ordinary life; that individuality lies at the very crux of a Tamil's sense of self, as well as his or her sense of others; and that individuality plays a vital role in civic life. Nonetheless, Tamil individuality is distinct in several respects from Western notions of the individual.

Certainly the epigraph above, written by a contemporary south Indian writer, expresses a keen awareness of individuals. It suggests that no one meeting and knowing Indians would believe that they *weren't* individuals nor that they lacked awareness of their own or other's individuality. So how is it that there is a *position* in anthropology that contradicts experience and common sense? There are, I believe, two main reasons: The first is founded in the nature of Hindu culture itself; the second is the manner in which scholars have conceived of the person. Let us consider these reasons separately.

First, the Tamil Hindu does appear to conceive of the person differently from the way Westerners do. For example, the Western notion of

individualism—the idea that the person has an identity separate from others and has a right, nay, an obligation to act as an autonomous person—is considered selfish by most Indians even today. Instead, in the Indian view, a person ought to comply with the collective interests of family and caste. An adult son should acquiesce to the interests of his father and mother. In south India, for example, out of deference, an adult son will avoid smoking in front of his father and many sons will remain their father's dependent until the day their father dies. Adult women are supposed to be dutiful wives and daughters-in-law. One of my former graduate students, a south Indian woman who lives with her husband in his parents' house as befits the south Indian ideal, would never think of going out without first asking her mother-in-law's permission. The individual lacks autonomy, therefore, and indeed, is perceived as sharing the collective identity of his or her family and caste. Given this perspective, it is easy to see why a person's actions reflect upon and represent such collective identities. An Indian's personal identity—who he or she is and how he or she is perceived to act—is commingled with and inseparable from these groups.

But there is much more to Indian inattention to an overarching notion of the individual than the above examples suggest. In the West, our fascination with individuality is elaborated in many ways: novels, biographies and autobiographies, personal diaries like that of Samuel Pepys, travelogues, which are a form of personal journal or diary, and the personal-interest stories of newspapers and magazines are examples taken from the media of the printed word. Portraiture, drama, even interior design are also strongly concerned with representations of individuals and are expressive of individuality. All of these various forms are also representations of self: expressions of idiosyncrasy and verbal or visual portraits of individuals that cause us to reflect on the interior person. Further, our interest in these many expressions stems from our own self-reflexive sense of who we are and how we act. Reflecting on others, each thinks about himself or herself.

Yet it is well known, if puzzling, that most of these expressions of individualism and individuality are missing from India's Hindu cultural assemblage prior to the nineteenth century and the advent of photography.<sup>1</sup> In fact, with the striking exception of photographic representations of individuals, many of these artifacts of individuality are still largely unrepresented in Hindu folk ideas and behavior. Take as an exception that proves the rule Kakar's characterization of Indian autobiographies (1982:7):

Even today, in the essentially Western-inspired genre of autobiography, Indian writings often tend to have a curiously flat quality as far as the scrutiny of the life in terms of a ruthless examination of motives and feelings are concerned. . . . With rare exceptions, Indian autobiographies are evocations of places and accounts of careers, records of events from which the self has been excised.

It would seem, then, these Indian autobiographies portray individuals who lack the introspection central to a Western understanding of the individual. In much the same manner, Kakar also contends that the characters portrayed in Indian novels and movies are created less to explore the individual than to “represent their societies in miniature” (Kakar 1989:4).

What is revealed by these examples is that, in comparison with the West, attention to individuality is noticeably understated in the Indian cultural assemblage that accompanies expressions of identity. If the Western artifacts of individualism mentioned above are understood as expressions of how persons are perceived and valued, then their near absence in India means Hindu conceptualizations of the person must be strikingly different. Awareness of this difference has colored scholarly attempts to define the ideology, behavior, and social patterns that surround Hindu Indian notions of personhood. This brings me to the second reason why the importance of individuality has gone unrecognized in Hindu society.

Stated simply, anthropologists have not been interested in the *empirical* encounter described in the epigraph because they see the “empirical” individual as a universal feature of being, and so have presumed it unproblematic—empty of interpretive meaning. The French anthropologist Louis Dumont (1970a) has led the way with this type of thinking.

Although Dumont’s ideas about the Indian person build on those of others (e.g., Mauss 1985; Weber 1958),<sup>2</sup> it was his view that initiated the debate on individualism among South Asianists and has held center stage over the last twenty years (e.g., Dumont 1970a,b; Marriott 1969; Tambiah 1972; Barnett 1976; Shweder and Bourne 1984; B eteille 1986). Dumont distinguishes two meanings in the term “individual”: first, “the empirical individual, present in every society,” by which he means the self-conscious physical entity, and, second, the idea of the individual as a cultural value. In his view, anthropologists should use the term “individual” only when the idea of the individual is valued in a society. “One will thereby avoid inadvertently attributing the presence of the individ-

ual to societies in which he is not recognized, and also avoid making him a universal unit of comparison” (Dumont 1970a:9).

This understood, Dumont contends: “It is immediately obvious that there are two mutually opposed notions of the person: one is characteristic of traditional societies and the other of modern society.” In modern society, the individual is valued, and the life of each person is its own end. In traditional societies, such as India, “the stress is placed on the society as a whole, as collective Man.” Each “particular man in his place must contribute to the global order [of society]” (1970a:9). It is the order of society that is valued, *not* individual affairs. In other words, each lives for the interest of society, *not* for himself or herself.

According to Dumont, at the heart of Indian society is the hierarchical Hindu caste system, which represents a kind of caste-based division of labor that creates interdependence and ultimately India’s collective solidarity as a society (1970a:105–8). The Indian’s identity is that of groups, collectivities such as family, caste, village, and society itself. Actions are guided by what benefits and maintains these groups and their interdependence rather than by the person’s own motivations and self-interests. If, in theory, Western society is based on the freedom and free will of the individual, then Indian society is based notionally on holistic identities and collective interests, just the opposite of the Western situation. In fact, Dumont goes so far as to argue that any approach to Indian society that focuses on the individual is misconceived (1970b).

The Dumontian view of the relationship between the person and society in India has been very influential and in fact continues to spread. But his view has also provoked disagreement among Indianists from the first (e.g., Marriott 1969; Tambiah 1972:835; Morris 1978; Bétéille 1986, 1987; Jaer 1987; Dirks 1987; Raheja 1988a; Mines 1988; Mines and Gourishankar 1990, 1992). But here I am not interested in reviewing Dumont’s many critics; much of what they have had to say is well-trodden ground. My aim is to explain briefly how it is that many scholars have come to think that individuality plays no role in Indian society and to indicate why this is a mistake.

For my purposes, let me simply point out that Dumont’s conceptualization of the individual presumes that the idea of the individual can have only one valued manifestation—that of Western individualism. He implies that unless the idea of the individual is valued as it is in the West—Dumont refers to liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness as the values that support the idea of the individual—we should not use the term “individual.” But what if Indians recognize individuality, but do

not value individualism? I think no one would deny that Indians recognize personal uniqueness, value achievement, and assess personal motivation and reputation—all features of individuality—and regard these observations as crucial to the way they negotiate life. And what of other attributes of who a person is, of a distinctively Indian individuality? By denying the individuality of the Indian subject, Dumont has also denied agency to the Indian person and has created a myth of the Indian as Other, the radical antithesis of the Western individual (cf. Obeyesekere 1992:15–17).

Juxtaposed to Dumont's interpretation is that of McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden (Marriott and Inden 1977; Marriott 1976). They agree with Dumont that the Indian is misrepresented if depicted as an individual, but less because the person has a holistic-collectivist identity than because, according to Indian ways of thinking and explaining, each person is a composite of transferable particles that form his or her personal substance. A person is a "dividual" rather than an individual. According to Marriott's view, the Indian is unlike the American because, while the American conceives the individual as an independent, indivisible, skin-bound entity,<sup>3</sup> Indian "ethnosociology" explains the person as a dependent, divisible being with indefinite margins (Marriott 1989).<sup>4</sup> Thus, when an Indian cooks for another, some of the cook's personal substance is transferred into the food and so into the consumer. Giving and receiving, touching, eating—the Indian's very substance is transformed—sometimes adversely, sometimes beneficially—by these transactions. For example, a Tamil woman believes her blood gradually takes on the same qualities as her husband's, transformed as she absorbs his substance during sexual intercourse, when she eats the food of his house, sleeps with him, and engages in a myriad of other transactions with him. In the same fashion, she affects her husband's substance. Like Dumont, then, but for different reasons, Marriott and his followers contend that it is inappropriate to refer to Indians as individuals. To do so, they feel, is to be guilty of ethnocentrism because the very notion of the individual is alien to Indian senses of the person. So, like Dumont, Marriott and Inden too create a notion of the Indian subject that is the antithesis of the Western individual. Indian and Western subjects exhibit *no* similarities.

Marriott and Inden offer a theory of the Indian dividual, based largely on their interpretations of classical Hindu texts, but they offer no ethnographic defense of their arguments. Marriott has relied on his students to provide this (e.g., Barnett 1976; Raheja 1988a,b; cf. Marriott 1989). Among the efforts of these disciples, E. Valentine Daniel's book, *Fluid*

*Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (1984), stands out as a crystalline semiotic analysis of Tamil beliefs supporting the dividualist idea. According to Daniel's depiction, the Tamil's central issue of being, given his or her dividual nature, is the search for an elusive state of equilibrium. Daniel states in the introduction (1984:2–3):

My interest focuses on certain . . . properties of substances, namely, their ability to mix and separate, to transform and be transformed, to establish inter-substantial relationships of compatibility and incompatibility, to be in states of equilibrium and disequilibrium, and to possess variable degrees of fluidity and combinability.

I intend to trace these properties of substances . . . by looking at certain phenomena in the cultural world of the Tamil villager, phenomena that are part of daily, ordinary, routine life. These phenomena are a Tamil's attempt to cope with the substance of his village . . . his house . . . his sexual partner, and his own body under conditions of sickness and health, and finally, to search for *the* substance from which all these various substances derive.

There is no question in my mind that Tamils are concerned with such things as Daniel describes. I have encountered just these concerns in my daily interactions with them when doing fieldwork in Tamil Nadu. Take the habit of one of my Tamil assistants. He would never eat foods that in Tamil thinking are classified as cool, because he himself had a cool body. He believed that should he eat cool foods—lime rice, for example, which although served hot is classified as cool—they would accentuate his own coolness, and he would catch a cold. But do Tamil conceptions of the person consist solely of these concerns and is personal motivation guided only by efforts to achieve the substance-mind balance Daniel describes as the Tamils' goal?

In his review of *Fluid Signs*, Arjun Appadurai (1986:757), who is sympathetic to Daniel's purposes, nonetheless indicates that "one finishes *Fluid Signs* with a nagging sense of unease. . . . [T]his is not an account that suggests that self-making is anything but a relatively harmonious process" (Appadurai 1986:756). He then goes on to wonder whether there are not other conflicting views and issues that when studied would fill in other dimensions of Tamil personhood. Clearly, Daniel's interest is not with inner voices, or with individuation, or even with the broad range of expressions that constitute the politics of identity in civil society. Daniel's semiotic view offers us important insights into how Tamils interpret themselves and understand their world, but it has not provided a full sense of Tamil individuality, of how Tamils think about themselves and the way their lives have gone, nor has it revealed anything about how the individual tries to project his or her identity in public life.

There is, however, one recent author, Margaret Trawick (see 1990; 1991), who offers a fuller, more person-centered sense of being Tamil. In her beautifully written book *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (1990), Trawick concentrates on the members of a single family. She describes how she returned to Tamil Nadu to see how the Tamil literary themes of love and ambiguity were expressed in an ordinary middle-class family, the family of her Tamil teacher. In her interpretation of her life with her teacher's family, the individual members come vividly to life. Her depictions of her subjects include an awareness of sex and gender, aspects of the person that are missing from Dumont's, Marriott's, and Inden's consideration and largely unexplored by Daniel as well. Her concern is particular persons in the flow of ordinary daily life, as subjects who describe their own feelings and motivations—their own inner sense of things. In many ways I feel that her book and this book of mine complement one another. Her concern is with Tamils in the context of the family—a slice in time; mine is with Tamil individuality in social history, in the public arena of business and civic life, but in domestic contexts, too, and in personal tellings about individuation, which are also histories, self-histories.

But in important ways I consider Trawick too to be a mystifier. In fact, mystification is her style (see Trawick 1991), and, while I agree with her intent, which I believe is to express the ambiguity and incompleteness of her subject's presentations and to represent the unbounded richness of Tamil culture and perspective, a richness that exceeds Western imagining and expectation, I disagree with the myth of the Other that she creates.<sup>5</sup> Here too, then, the Indian is depicted as the radical antithesis of the Western individual. Her subjects are presented intentionally as mysterious, unmaterialized, and sometimes bizarre (Trawick 1991; 1990:23, 42).

Ambiguity, incompleteness, love, desire, marriage, emotions, life as art, her own story, these are Trawick's interests. But these Tamils of her creation are not individuals; as she describes them, their consciousnesses lack boundaries and flow into one another. It's hard to tell where one person leaves off and another begins. This ambiguity is also represented forcefully in Trawick's compelling article, "Wandering Lost" (1991), which draws a parallel between a folk song and the life of its singer. Preserved as a recording on tape and removed from context, only part of what Trawick's disembodied informant sings and describes is intelligible.

Are Tamils really this insubstantial and confusing? What of a less artistic interpretation of aspects of social being that considers, for ex-



ample, the individual in civic society, the person who is known to others, the politician of daily affairs, the striver for economic ends, the fool, the notorious, the enemy, the strong, the morally lax? These we barely glimpse if at all. The Tamil as an agent in the fullness of social life is still missing. Trawick, alas, is not an antidote to Dumont, Marriott, Inden, and Daniel. She too is a merchant of the exotic.

Despite their differences, therefore, it would appear, at least among these influential scholars, that there is agreement that the Indian person is ill conceived if depicted as an individual. The Indian is the antithesis of the Western subject. In fact, these scholars' views seem to fit well with Indian ideals that subordinate persons to groups—in Trawick's case, of women to men, children to adults, family members to the family, members of low castes to high. Yet, ideals and concepts aside, the reality of everyday Indian life and interaction in many of its features suggests that these views are overdrawn. I would argue, for example, that Marriott's view of the individual overemphasizes physical notions of the Indian person, obscuring the importance Indians give to persons as unique social actors. Similarly, the Indian sociologist André Béteille criticizes Dumont's view precisely because he feels it exaggerates "the subordination of the individual to the collectivity" (Béteille 1987:191). After all, Béteille notes, for the greater part, the Indian Constitution is founded on the concept of the individual rather than groups. Then again, Trawick seems to me to exaggerate the strangeness of Tamil life, its shadowy and mysterious character, the insubstantiality of her Tamil subjects. I must ask again, are Tamils really so radically different from Western understandings?

Take perceptions of persons in daily life. Anyone familiar with Indian matrimonial ads is aware that individual achievements and attributes are central to descriptions of hopeful brides and grooms. These concerns about traits that distinguish individuals are readily understandable to the Western mind. This is true even while Indian matrimonial ads also seem impersonal to an American eye because they make no mention of personal likes and dislikes. Indians clearly conceptualize individuality differently from Americans, but in these ads Indians *do* conceptualize and value specific features of individuality.<sup>6</sup> In south India, a son with an engineering or other professional degree, for example, commands an extra dowry premium, in large part because his achievement of the degree implies individual ability and the high probability of a prestigious and successful future, independent of the achievements of other family members. It is my own awareness of this kind of valuing of the person sepa-

rate from others that has led me elsewhere (Mines 1988, 1992; Mines and Gourishankar 1990) to criticize idealistic views of the Indian person that give little significance to individual achievement, self-interest, or responsibility, attributes of the self that distinguish persons as unique agents.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Marriott's collaborator in the development of the idea of the individual, Ronald Inden (1986, 1990), has now himself disavowed aspects of his earlier interpretations of India, which gave primary emphasis to the caste basis of that society and little credence to the Indian person as the agent of history. Today, he prefers instead interpretations of Indian history that emphasize human agency (Inden 1990).

What I shall argue, then, stands in contrast to the views of Dumont, Marriott, Inden, Daniel, and Trawick—that in India persons conceive of neither themselves nor others as individuals. Instead, I shall argue that a sense of self and of individuality are absolutely central to how south Indian Tamils explain who they are, understand others, and conceive of their society. It behooves me, therefore, to explain here my sense of how Tamils understand their own individuality and recognize that of others. Doing so, my purpose is also to describe the framework of this book.

## THE NATURE OF TAMIL INDIVIDUALITY

While residing as an anthropologist in Tamil Nadu State, south India, I found private and public expressions valuing individuality always close at hand. In houses, businesses, and community marriage halls, for example, portrait photographs are hung and honored with incense, flowers, sandalwood paste, and kumkum (red powder). Honored pictures of this sort commemorate specific kin, benefactors, political leaders, gurus, and deceased loved ones. These portraits and their uses reflect and symbolize the significance of a uniqueness defined by relationships: "This is *my* benefactor, mentor, wife, friend." Indeed, the individual always exists in relation to others and derives distinctiveness from these relationships. Although the Tamil word for "individuality," *tanittuvam*, connotes the individual separate from others, it also implies all that makes the person unique, including his or her relationships.<sup>8</sup>

These portraits also symbolize what a person has done. Tamils recognize individuals as responsible actors, whatever the forces that may ultimately impel their actions. People are individualized by their actions and acquire importance depending on the significance of what they have done. I once saw an unusually large photo portrait prominently displayed in a small handloom textile shop in Madras. The owner told me the miracu-



Figure 1. The giver of Rs. 60,000 and his beneficiary's widow (center), daughter, and grandson. George Town, 1992.

lous story of how the old man of the photo had befriended him when he was young and years later had given him Rs. (rupees) 60,000 to start the shop (see fig. 1). The gift had rescued the shopkeeper from a lifetime of poverty and his gratitude was beyond simple expression.

Generosity (*vallanmai*) is an important feature of south Indian public life and acts of public philanthropy are common and widely evident. Generosity is an individual attribute that establishes and maintains relationships and is highly valued in politicians and leaders of all sorts. Just as

photographs preserve identities, the inscribed names of donors and their donations on the walls of public buildings and temples preserve identities; donor names are engraved on the stairs leading to hilltop temples, on plaques attached to houses and buildings given as charity to temples, on public *choultries* (covered rest halls), schools, community libraries, production cooperatives, and occasionally on the wall of a medical dispensary. The ubiquitous leaflets and posters that announce political, social, and ritual events also list by name the sponsors, officers, and important guests of public functions. Why hang photos and list names but to announce who is responsible for what; to call attention to individuality; to give homage to particular persons?

But what kind of individuality is represented in these expressions and in the many others that I have observed over the years in south India? The main aim of this book is, of course, to explore at least a partial answer to this question. My informants are primarily urban Tamils, although many grew up in villages, and most are merchants and artisans, although many are not. My concern is with the nature of individuality as it emerges from daily lives: How have people explained themselves and their motivations to me, and how do they describe others around them? I am also concerned with the role that individuality plays in the organization of south Indian society and with the characteristics of its “civic” or public and sometimes corporate expressions.

Individuality, as Tamils conceive it, has both exterior and interior dimensions. In Tamil culture, this juxtaposed classifying of what is exterior (*puram*) with what is interior (*akam*) expresses a highly developed perception of societal and ultimately cosmic order (cf. Hart 1975). The exterior or public dimension of individuality involves what others “know” (experientially or by reputation) about an individual’s appearance, achievements, roles, statuses, connections, and agency, and include the narrations of these others who participate in the construction of identity by telling stories about an individual’s life. Others identify a person’s individuality in part by what they know about his or her actions and by his or her reputation, which is an evaluation of the person’s actions.

The Tamil’s interior or private sense of individuality is revealed in the manner in which people represent themselves in personal narratives. These representations may express self-awareness, self-interest, contextualized motivations, agency, goals and choices, a sense of life-course, and a reflexive sense of both separation from and involvement with others, as well as a person’s sense of mediating this polarity. Self-representations may also reveal personal struggles, contradictions, and

strategies of presentation that reflect understandings of context and self that are dynamic and changing.

The book examines Indian individuality from these two main perspectives, exterior or public lives and interior or private lives, aspects of being that intertwine. To avoid confusion, let me here emphasize this point: public lives and private lives are intermixed. There is no clear separation of the two. Yet Tamils—like us—see some features of who they are as appropriately public, and these they present to others as their public face. Other aspects they reserve for their own inner thoughts and their closest associates. These constitute their private voice. Yet the dual dimensions of personhood, their public faces and their private voices, being inseparable, are often mixed together in peoples' interpretations of themselves and of others. What are private senses of success, failure, and shame but products of this public-private interaction? I have taken as my task the unraveling of these strands in order to understand better what Tamil individuality may be in its wholeness. My first concern in the book, then, shall be with expressions of individuality in public life, the exterior expression (chapters 2 through 6).

The central emphasis on individuality in public life is recognition of individual eminence within groups. This is true at all levels of organization from the family to the state. Preeminence defines the leader as a unique individual, and south Indians stress the leader's inequality of status when they value his or her individuality.

When I first meet older persons of accomplishment in Tamil Nadu— not persons who would be widely known, but those who have had some success in life—commonly they will begin describing themselves by listing the offices they hold in community institutions. Perhaps a man has played a role in a school building fund, or a woman is an officer in a small charitable organization, or a devotional society. Another more eminent person may list a more impressive series of offices, including, for example, that he is a trustee, or even the head trustee of a temple, that he is a sponsor of a major temple festival, that he is the president of the leather merchants' association, his caste association, and founder and head of a small local lending society—such offices are always occupied by men. What the person is describing is his or her “civic individuality.” In effect, they are saying, “This is my public identity.” When a Tamil thinks well of a successful acquaintance, he characterizes him with a similar list. If, however, he does not think much of the fellow, he might comment that the man's organizations are of no account, sarcastically adding that the man likes the look of his name on letterhead. What is being

described is the individuality of leaders, defined by the eminence that men and, much more rarely, women achieve within groups. It is an individuality of inequality, but it is also a civic individuality that is associated with a tradition of service to constituents.

A number of Tamil leadership terms convey this sense of preeminence and prestige: headman (*talaivar*), village headman (*naatṭānmaikaarar*), big-man (*periyar*), big-gift-giver (*periyadanakaarar*), the premier landlord or wealthiest person of a locale, eminent man among men (*nambi*). Many urban Indians also use the English terms “bigshot” and “boss” to express a similar sense of individuality defined by rank and responsibility, although men addressed by these latter terms are typically seen as being out for themselves rather than others. The ideal is to serve others altruistically; the reality is that the appearance of altruism often masks the self-interest of leaders.

Reflecting the civic importance of an individuality of inequality, at public functions leaders and their guests, both men and women, are often honored with speeches of appreciation and symbolic gifts that distinguish them as eminent and call attention to what they have done (see Caplan 1985:188–90). I myself have attended meetings where I have been singled out in this manner, being given flower garlands, a special piece of cloth, and other small gifts appreciating me as the ethnographer of the community. When gifts of this sort are given on important occasions and by important persons, they are highly prized, and because the presentations are public, they can suffuse identity with honor and prestige. The civic individual is made the center of attention.

Tamils generally believe that those who serve others will be rewarded; not only will people appreciate them generally, but they will fare well in life. The Tamil way for leaders to serve others is through institutions that they found or head, and each will have his or her own galaxy of institutions. This is another reason why a successful man, for example, will list the institutions in which he plays a leadership role. He is saying that the importance of his individuality is defined by his social responsibilities, and he is indicating who his constituents are. Each institution has its own constituency, although memberships overlap. Leadership in a locality, then, is composed of a field of leaders, their institutions, and their overlapping constituencies. In every urban community there are a myriad of institutions. Charities, temples, libraries, school building funds, scholarship funds, school hostel societies, school lunch programs, music societies, lending societies, marriage halls, medical dispensaries, caste associations, merchant associations, cooperatives, unions, and political

parties are only several of the institutions in which leadership roles may be exercised. Important local leaders will head a number of these, while lesser leaders may participate in the management of only a few, their main role being primarily that of lieutenant to others. This institutional structure of leadership is a concomitant feature of civic individuality (Mines and Gourishankar 1990; Dickey 1993). Institutions and their constituents are important contexts of a leader's individuality.

Reflecting the preeminence of their leaders, institutions are highly personalized in India, much more so than in the West, where corporate bureaucracy mutes the roles of specific individuals. Individuality is actually more critical to the viability of Indian institutions than Western ones. People believe they should be able to approach the head of an institution directly because they see the head as a human being, open to appeals for assistance and able to circumvent bureaucratic red tape (Kakar 1981:40–41). I remember, for example, learning that one of south India's leading religious leaders, the Kanchi Sankaraacharya, is often approached by members of his following to assist them in obtaining private ends, such as gaining admission into a school or university for a child (Mines and Gourishankar 1990).

A good leader looks after his or her followers. It is no surprise, therefore, that an institution is epitomized by its head and that its popularity depends largely on the head's character and idiosyncratic style, features of charisma. Each leader also has a unique style of management that is well known to followers, and is yet another feature of the leader's civic individuality.

Women as well as men are leaders in Tamil society. Once early in my fieldwork career—this was back in 1968—I was asked by the head of Public Health in Tamil Nadu State, a woman by the name of Dr. Marakayar, why there seemed to be so few prominent leading women in the U.S., where women were supposed to be equal to men. By contrast, she felt, eminent women in Indian public life were numerous at both state and national levels, this despite the fact that Indian culture subordinates women to men.

There is more to Dr. Marakayar's paradox than her observation suggests. While women leaders are highly visible in India at state and national levels, there are very few eminent women at local levels, at the level of community and neighborhood. How is it that there are so few women leaders at grassroots levels?

I have found that a woman of local fame is known within her own neighborhood or community not because she is a leader, but more com-

monly because people say she is the first woman to have taken a university degree, or sometimes because she is believed to have special religious powers, or because she has chosen a religious life instead of marriage and family, or because as a childless widow she has endowed local temples or charitable institutions. Except within the field of social work and women's charitable organizations (Caplan 1985), women lack offices of local prominence.<sup>9</sup>

But why this disparity between local and state and national levels? My guess is that both gender and India's class structure play roles. At state and national levels, women leaders gain entree to positions of political leadership through men who are or were themselves leaders: these female politicians are the wives, daughters, widows, and—rarely—consorts of these men (Dickey 1993:347). Under the mentorship of their husbands, fathers, or lovers, these prominent women learned the skills of leadership, and often, even after they become leaders in their own right, they legitimate their role with their mentor's charisma, claiming to carry on in his name. At the local level, wives and daughters lack these opportunities of apprenticeship because, under the scrutiny of their families, husbands, in-laws, and neighbors, honor requires women to be good wives and dutiful daughters and daughters-in-law, roles that constrain the freedom that political and business aspirations require. Here at the local level, etiquette separates men and woman, so that it is difficult for women to mix outside their own gender. As a result, they are marginalized; they can lead among women but not among men.<sup>10</sup> A woman can transcend this limiting scrutiny only when, as a member of an elite family, her identity in politics, business, or similar activities extends beyond her neighborhood.

At these higher levels of organization, women leaders describe, organize, and display their public identities very much as men do (cf. Caplan 1985:190; Dickey 1993:348). When I interviewed her, Dr. Marakayar certainly did. This even though her personal life was in some ways different from that of most prominent men. For example, she never married because of the difficulty of finding a husband who would accept so accomplished a woman. A man with her education would have been considered a highly desirable mate. At a time when women doctors were rare, it was her father who had supported her in her ambition to become a doctor.

One finds, then, that both men and women are leaders in Tamil society and both sexes carry out their leadership in much the same personalized manner, but eminent women are rare at local levels of leadership. There were none in the business section of Madras City where I con-