

## THE LOGICS AND REALMS OF SMALL TOWN TERRITORIES

### THE STORY OF TIRUCHENGODE

Bhuvanewari Raman

Urban studies view city territories in general and small town ones in particular as projections of either the master plan or the market; territories that do not fit these logics are read through the lens of informality and illegality. Such readings eventually pose urban territories as problems to be fixed through better plans and strict implementation. Small towns are further assumed to be inward-looking enclaves of locally bound economy and politics, their growth shaped by metro city market logic.

This reasoning has influenced recent rhetoric of making city plans transparent, and has catalysed the production of digital plans and databases. By contrast, this essay, through its focus on a small town – Tiruchengode in western Tamil Nadu – shows that territory is an assemblage of multiple forces and fields, irreducible to the singular logic of master plans and metro dynamics (Benjamin, 2008, 2012). Further, it shows the incompleteness of the information on which urban projections are developed – not owing to issues of data collection or management, but because of the difficulty of capturing urban territorial dynamism. This paper points to the importance of reading cities from the ground, rather than fixing them within linear projections.

The essay has two sections. The first traces the variety of forces and fields that shaped Tiruchengode through mapping settlement histories and claiming practices in a social context whose fluid politics in place and time make predicting the trajectory of territoriality difficult.<sup>1</sup> The second section engages with the nature of the information underpinning urban planning, and discusses projections of the transparent city and their demand for incessant information production.<sup>2</sup>

## I

**Practices of Territoriality:****Property among the Early Settlers**

Tiruchengode's history can be traced back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>3</sup> The Ardhanareswarar temple that is its landmark is of even greater antiquity, finding mention in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Tamil epic, *Silapathgaram*. Local oral histories suggest that the town's first settlers were predominantly from the Senguntha Mudaliar weaver caste, said to have arrived here after their previous locality – a historic urban settlement called Morur – was destroyed by fire. Other caste groups – Gounders, Vanniyars and various Scheduled Castes<sup>4</sup> – joined them over time. Descendants of 70 of the town's first households reside here still; only 100 of the community's *gothras*, clans, are recognised as native to Tiruchengode, as per the Mudaliar caste association, the *pavadi panchayat*, which keeps the community's records.

The term *pavadi* (from the word *paavu*, meaning warp) denotes the open space where warps are stretched for drying, and indicates how weaving, the artisan merchant Mudaliars' chief occupation, shaped their lives, territory and property. The Mudaliar locality can be distinguished by its architecture – low, white walls, narrow lanes and closely constructed housing units. While each household would maintain one or two looms at home, the warping and starching of thread was done in the *pavadi* common space. Each *paavu* requires a 20 x 200 sq ft space; *pavadis* could accommodate from 20 to 60 such.

Until recently, the exchange of individually held work/living units in the Mudaliar quarter was largely effected within the community, although investments in Mudaliar settlements by other castes in textile production, particularly the Gounders, also occurred.<sup>5</sup> Today, with many Mudaliars shifting to power looms or moving to other professions, changes in land use have also come about. Of the three *pavadis* Tiruchengode once had, one was allotted via the state to a small economic cluster and is no longer exclusive to the Mudaliars. The

others are still under the joint control of the *pavadi* council and a Mudaliar sub-group. Part of one has been leased to the municipality for a weekly market, a community centre has been constructed on another part. The other *pavadi* remains undeveloped and is used for community festivals.

Since 2000, *pavadi* land has been much sought after by developers prospecting for real estate opportunities. Besides the town *pavadis*, there are one or two in each surrounding village, wherever Mudaliars are settled. Some have been sold, and residential layouts raised in their place. The recent climb in real estate prices has eroded, though not erased, Mudaliar control over their territory, both urban and rural.

**Supra-Local Caste Organisations and Territorial Claims**

Perceptions about the claims and practices of property, economy and politics are influenced by Tiruchengode's being embedded in supra-local organisation, far pre-dating the administrative systems of modern India. The *Naadu* system is significant here, with its network of caste-exclusive organisations formed to address their members' concerns across towns and villages. Tiruchengode's two dominant castes, the Mudaliars and the Gounders, for example, each have their distinctive *Naadus*, the *Ezhukarai Naadu* and the *Kongu Naadu* respectively. While there are territorial overlaps, the two are distinct in their administration and supra-locality linkages (Mines 1984; Beck 1972).

The *Ezhukarai Naadu* is a hierarchy of the caste councils of seven towns, each town including seven villages. Formed to facilitate and safeguard the Mudaliars' international trade interests, with links extending as far east as China and, in the west, to Greece and Rome,<sup>6</sup> the *Ezhukarai Naadu* also maintained armies for protecting textile centres (Mines 1984). It is headquartered today at the Tiruchengode *pavadi* council, which therefore occupies a high position in the inter-locality hierarchy. Until recently, the *Ezhukarai Naadu* adjudicated disputes between Mudaliar households; some

councils have now restricted themselves solely to non-property related, intra-familial disputes and the promotion of caste interests.

The Gounders' *Naadu* system, parallel to that of the Mudaliars, is constituted of 24 *Naadus*. The Gounders arrived in Tiruchengode at a fairly late stage. They owned agricultural land and settled in 82 villages around the town; they still straddle both town and rural hinterland, thus rendering the *Kongu Naadu's* boundary fluid. The Gounders first moved to Tiruchengode as financiers for home-based textile looms and the mill economy; today they control several economic activities including finance, power looms, lorry re-engineering and oil rig assembly units. While *pavadi* councils administer Mudaliar caste issues across localities, *Kongu Naadu* records are maintained by a single priest who also has knowledge of the clans' properties. (The Gounder priests deem themselves to be above brahmins on the caste hierarchy.) The *Kongu Naadu* council manages individual Gounder property disputes and locality-specific issues.

The Ardhanareeswarar temple forms the focal point for mobilising the caste communities across the *Naadu* territories. Although it is the headquarters for the *Ezhukarai Naadu*, it does not belong to any one caste. It is claimed/controlled by all communities. Their collective participation in its affairs, and foremost in its 14-day annual festival, has an important materiality as it influences perceptions of claims to the town's territory and its economic and political spaces. Although the temple administration was transferred to the state after Independence, elections to its board are the arena where politics to control the town play out.

Both the *Kongu Naadu* and the *Ezhukarai Naadu* connect localities where their respective caste members have settled. These organisations are relevant today as they provide a platform for mobilising the respective castes for negotiations with the state. In the context of Tiruchengode, these networks have facilitated land transactions with outsiders and the flow of investments into the town.

### Colonial Politics and Territoriality

The development of Tiruchengode's modern-day economic clusters was catalysed during colonial times. A key infrastructural investment was a roughly 48-km transport corridor connecting Tiruchengode with both Namakkal (today the district headquarters, less than 40 km away) and the train station of another neighbouring town, Sangagiri. The opening of the Namakkal-Tiruchengode-Sangagiri highway led to the consolidation of territory by the town's Mudaliars, influential members of whom are said to have captured 50 ft on either side of the road, according to members of the *pavadi panchayat*. This, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, catalysed the evolution of Tiruchengode's lorry re-engineering services.<sup>7</sup> Over the years, Mudaliar properties were sold to Gounders, who set up lorry repair workshops; migrants from the Kollar Asari<sup>8</sup> craftsman caste also moved in to set up workshops along the main road.

During the Second World War, the British commissioned the flag printing and the production of soldiers' uniforms in India. Contracts for both were secured by Mudaliars. Their textile looms in Tiruchengode expanded; the community also diversified into the rice trade and into printing, clusters for which developed on open land bordering the *pavadi* to one side and the main temple road on the other. These developments attracted Marvari financiers from Calcutta, who settled in the neighbouring town of Erode and funded looms.<sup>9</sup>

Tiruchengode was also a locus of the Independence movement. It was the birthplace of C. Rajagopalachariar and of Dr P. Subbarayan, both freedom fighters and members of the Indian National Congress. A Gandhi ashram was established near the town, which served as a site for the Independence struggle. Subsequently, the regional mobilisation of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) also thrived here. These political mobilisations facilitated the coalescing of the town's caste networks with regional- and national-level political parties, connections critical for

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bringing in investments, crafting regulation and negotiating land sale with outsiders, mediated at different geographical and political scales of government and party terrain.

**Post-Independence Party Politics,  
Economic Expansion and Land Tenure**

*1. The Mill Economy*

Textile mills and rice-processing entrepreneurs entered this town via caste and party political networks. The party terrain and the shared experience of the Independence struggle mediated relationships across castes, particularly between Mudaliar entrepreneurs and Gounder land owners. Land in Tiruchengode and the villages to its east was held under the *zamindari* system. The first rice-processing mill – the Raja Rice Mill – was opened in the early 1970s by an entrepreneur from Tanjore on land controlled by a *zamindar* family of the Kumaramangalam clan. Land owners here were predominantly from the Gounder or Chettiar castes. Political accommodation between the Gounder *zamindars* and the Mudaliars included selling land to Mudaliar entrepreneurs from outside Tiruchengode and granting land for low-income Mudaliar housing. The development of the mill economy catalysed the growth of residential real estate and finance businesses around the mills.

The mills were the centre of regional political activity in the late 60s and early 70s, particularly for the DMK, which came into conflict with the Congress party ruling at the Centre. An important site of their activity is the now defunct Pulikara Mill, started by Mudaliar investors from the adjoining town of Salem. The entrepreneurs also owned Modern Theatres, the film studio where former Tamil Nadu chief minister and DMK leader M. Karunanidhi started as a script writer. The mills provided a space for mobilising cadres as well as finance to fund party activities. The DMK's ascendancy in the town and the town's continuing domination in the party hierarchy are traced to this history. These histories and connections are

significant for explaining the evolution and rapid development of lorry re-engineering and rig well enterprise clusters in the town. For example, the entry of Tiruchengode entrepreneurs into the oil rig business was facilitated by a minister from this party during his tenure as chairman of the Tamil Nadu Water Supply and Sewerage Board. Further, the DMK had, in its initial years, invested in supporting small entrepreneurs as part of its strategy for breaking brahmin economic and political dominance (Subramanian 1999). Allocation of land for small economic activities and putting in place regulation favourable to their growth were part of this agenda.

*2. Lorry Re-Engineering and Rig Well Assembly Clusters*

As mentioned earlier, the Namakkal-Tiruchengode-Sangagiri road catalysed the evolution of small re-engineering services, attracting Kollar Asari migrants, who set up makeshift repair workshops along the highway. The second generation of these families benefitted from the expansion of the lorry transport business in the national market; some among the third generation now control the town's export-oriented borewell rig mounting business, supplying to Africa and the Gulf. Today, Tiruchengode is recognised as a specialised centre for re-engineering Ashok Leyland lorries; it is also India's preferred place for borewell rig assembly. Both enterprises attract labour to Tiruchengode from across India.

The Mudaliars and the Gounders took to these trades following the arrival of the Kollar Asari workshops. Many Gounders moved from surrounding villages to Tiruchengode to enter lorry re-engineering. Land was then held jointly by several brothers in a family, one of whom would remain in the village to farm while the others moved out to work as lorry drivers or in borewell mounting workshops, accumulate a surplus, often through chit funds, and set up small workshops: a pattern of employment followed till today.

The expansion of lorry re-engineering and borewell business units provided a fillip to real estate markets. Mudaliars took to subdividing their holdings along the

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highway, selling them to Gounders and other castes, who have predominantly rented the land out to lorry re-engineering units or allied trades. The Gounders, seeking new arenas, would turn part of their surplus into property investment, both in Tiruchengode and in their villages – farm land nowadays is increasingly converted into plotted development, for rent or sale. This practice of circulating investment between land and economy is common to other Tiruchengode entrepreneurs. Further, the surplus from the lorry re-engineering or borewell unit is invested into land, while any agricultural surplus goes into financing textile looms, lorry businesses or setting up new borewell related units.

The flourishing of small enterprises and associated real estate in Tiruchengode can thus not be limited to an explanatory frame of either a plan or a city-driven market demand alone. A unique feature of Tiruchengode's party politics is the town's embeddedness in different geographical and temporal scales. Their negotiations for infrastructure extension are at the local, municipality level; policies related to taxation and support for small economic clusters are negotiated at the regional scale. In all these, Central, regional and local party connections and dynamics have shaped the accommodation between communities since the 70s. For example, it was a Mudaliar MLA elected on a DMK ticket who allocated one of the *pavadi* lands to the lorry re-engineering cluster. Many of these workshops were owned by Gounders. The MLA's position as president of the *pavadi* council also embedded in the lorry and textile business is key to this negotiation with the Mudaliar community and the transfer of the land to the local government – which is how one of the Mudaliars' three *pavadis* was allotted to the clusters via the municipality.

### *3. The Jaggery State and Vanniyar Claims to Territory*

The Vanniyars are located lower down in the town's social and economic hierarchy. In recent times, they have carved for themselves a distinctive political and economic territory.

They work as labourers and small traders, and are in rental real estate. They leverage the municipal institution, particularly their connections in the lower- and middle-level bureaucracy and local party politics to negotiate their claims. The Tiruchengode Vanniyars attribute their voice in the town to the election of their caste representative as an MLA, who later served as a minister. Very often, their politics is not easily visible. My key informant is an influential leader of the community with extensive links to the bureaucracy at different levels. The derelict jaggery shop he operates from is easily written off for its appearance, but he is one of the largest land- and built-property owners in the town, and the shop is the setting for his political and economic activities, from: chit funds to real estate deals to *bhajan* clubs. The chit fund business involves a retired revenue officer, a surveyor and the village headman. The head of the Mudaliar community is a close ally, yet not close because of his caste. Within the main street, he has rented a property to the multi-national HDFC bank that fetches him a rent of more than Rs 1.5 lakhs a month. The politics of claiming territories in this town are thus fused with everyday interactions, muscle power and the spiritual component of temple and *bhajan* committees. All is not rosy here, but critical to it is the way spaces are used by different communities in a variety of colliding and overlapping forces to claim territories; much of this dynamics is invisible.

### *4. College Real Estate*

Education-centred real estate activity has been a key factor driving the town's real estate market since the mid-90s. Many of these professional colleges, polytechnics and residential schools are located in the town's outlying areas, predominantly to the east and south. The pattern of land development along these peripheries is in stark contrast to the Western periphery, dotted by small workshop clusters.

The educational economy of Tiruchengode is intermeshed with local and transnational flows of people and finance, with students enrolling from across India and

also from Korea and Zimbabwe. Rental housing clusters for students have emerged not only in Tiruchengode, but in villages and towns within an over-20 km radius. Like various other economies, the evolution and development of colleges is incremental, and one can find parallels in the history of the lorry re-engineering and borewell assembly clusters.

Many of these institutions are organised as partnership enterprises with entrepreneurs from diverse class and caste backgrounds. The first in Tiruchengode to enter this business was a group of retired school teachers who invested their pension fund in it. The town's Vidya Vikas School (VVS), with branches across Tamil Nadu and in Malaysia and Singapore, is one of the first-generation schools. Established in the mid-90s with the claim that its students would be assured of admission to professional colleges, the VVS has expanded from a modest thatched structure to a campus of around 45 acres that includes a nursery-to-higher-secondary boarding school and an engineering college. Nearly 22,000 students reside here.

Another group of entrepreneurs comprises large capitalists from Tiruchengode and the neighbouring districts of Erode and Coimbatore who have converted mill lands into institutional campuses. Another real estate practice draws on profits from textile mills. Small-scale businessmen form a third entrepreneurial tier. This group is a fairly recent entrant and invests in the institutional hierarchy depending on its members' status and networks. A key informant of mine here runs a tea stall in a lorry re-engineering cluster, and also holds shares in a polytechnic college. According to him, given the present high land price, investing in education infrastructure was his best option. A college investment is also attractive because of the relatively lower demand it makes on its investors' time.

The fourth group of promoters are the caste associations, of which there are several in the town. Each invests in a college or a polytechnic, seen as a necessary condition for the mobility of their community. Besides being

a revenue generator, these institutions keep a certain percentage of seats for their community members, who may also avail of fee relaxations.

For a small town of 83,000 population, Tiruchengode's real estate value matches that in some of the rapidly urbanising larger towns of India. Even in the peripheral parts, the going rate for undeveloped land is between Rs 2,000-4,000/sq ft. What drives the land dynamics of this town? I posed this question time and again to Tiruchengode entrepreneurs; some of their responses are as follows:

... *This place is like a mini-Mumbai...*<sup>10</sup>

... *cannot give any logical explanation... all we know is that bore well enterprises generate a large surplus... quantum of profit generated is so huge that you have to sink it into land even if it may not pay in future.*<sup>11</sup>

With the rise in real estate activities, a hierarchy has developed among the town's real estate developers. First come the 'wholesale land assemblers', who assemble 100 acres or more and prefer to sell to college entrepreneurs directly. The land assembly is facilitated through a network of local political activists or land owners. The second are those who deal with land development of between one and 30 acres. The third are those who plot land and transact in sites for which they have developed various schemes. Further down the hierarchy are the retail traders of plots. Almost every small entrepreneur doubles as a retail trader for a developer. The various agents in this hierarchy transact through their networks. They do not advertise, nor are there any real estate agents' shops to be found in the bazaar. Those who operate from a shop are retail traders who transact through brokers in each village or locality. My initial attempts to research the real estate of this town were frustrated due to the invisibility of land developers and their network transactions.

A more recent trend, according to a high-end real estate developer, is of real estate surplus going into agribusiness, and not in Tiruchengode alone, but with investments being

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made as far as Arakonam, Coimbatore, Palani and the state's Chevrayan hills. The developer confirmed that the 2008 financial crisis and the present inflation do not affect real estate markets here as they are driven by the different logic of the rig well and lorry re-engineering economy.

The above section illustrates the various fields and forces influencing the constitution of Tiruchengode's territories. As mentioned in the introduction, city territories and specifically those of small towns are interpreted as projections of the urban master plan or as the spill-over of metro economic dynamics. Neither of these projections completely describes the Tiruchengode dynamics. The fallacy of reducing the town to a master plan or a singular logic has been argued by Benjamin (2012). In this part of the essay, I focus on another assumption – that of the perfection and completeness of the plan, and the notion that it is built on accurate and complete information about the city.

## II Projections of the Transparent Plan

The history of cities, at whatever scale, shows that much of the city often develops outside or prior to the preparation of a master plan. The story of Tiruchengode is no different. While Tiruchengode is supposed to have a plan, the practices described above were influenced by a variety of other institutional processes. The town's municipality was constituted in 1978, and the task of preparing a master plan was vested with the district headquarters, then located in Salem. The municipality's jurisdiction is limited to the town; its periphery is governed by several village *panchayats*. Besides the master plan, infrastructure investments, which have a bearing on territoriality, are shaped by Central government funding or multilateral funding routed via financing institutions. Their projections for the city are detailed in the City Development Plans (CDPs), which are dominantly drafted by consultants. A consultant group was commissioned to

prepare a CDP for Tiruchengode in 2002, but the plan is yet to materialise.

The plan, Srivatsan (2012) argues, is “state speak”, far disconnected from practices on the ground. Tracing the history of planning for Chennai city, he shows that although attempts had been made since 1919 to prepare a first master plan for the city, it was actually prepared in the 70s. By 1970, barring a few interventions for specific neighbourhoods, most parts of the city had developed – before the plan was prepared. The city's second master plan, intended to develop an IT corridor, also underwent a similar trajectory. Though work on it started in the mid-90s, it was mired in a court case and was not approved until 2005. As a retired chief planner of Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) involved in the plan quipped,

*Planning does not begin and end with the preparation of the master plan. It happens all the time... [In] a city, people are engaged in the process of planning how to put their land to use, how to develop it – some of it, far ahead of the master plan... The plan or the survey information does not tell us about all this. When we do the master plan, we make a judgement based on our knowledge of the city... [but] the city is dynamic – always changing. My point is, how can you produce accurate information about the city?... The master plan represents a layer of information – but the city develops irrespective of it...*

A more concerning language is the reduction of city practices to a singular institutional process and document, viz., the master plan. As the planner's narrative indicates, the various projections are often built on imperfect and incomplete information. The master plan, in his view, is to be seen as a directive, not a blue print. While experienced planners recognise this, the plan is used in practice as a reference point in drawing the boundaries of legality and illegality.

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Another variation of this attempt to generate perfect information is in the taking of numerous surveys of people and the places they occupy. Tiruchengode witnessed the first post-Independence survey of all its *poramboke*, or common land, in 2011, aiming to build complete and perfect information about the town. However, to date, land projections were based on data archived in the cadastral map of 1956. Each regime adopts its own registers for recording land details. There is often a margin of variation in the information recorded, and it invariably does not perfectly match the situation on the ground, as the case below indicates.

*Survey [is] a very difficult exercise... The survey numbers and block numbers, under which information about a plot is recorded, are revised regularly... The measurements of a plot recorded in the cadastral map are a negotiated boundary, and this is something you cannot fix accurately on the ground... The land you are sitting on once belonged to Adyar zamin, which at one time controlled the entire village of Kottur... My grandfather invested all his earnings from Burma in land here and was one of the biggest land owners. When the British annexed Madras Presidency, Adyar zamin transferred all the land under their jurisdiction to the British administration. The sales of our land as well as what we retained are recorded in the zamin register. In parallel, the British put in place their own register. Subsequently, soon after the settlement survey, the British earmarked it for acquisition... We were paying land tax to the zamin, which was recorded in a separate tax register. The British did not follow this register. Their records were based on the Madras Presidency settlement survey. When the British surveyed our land, they had allotted a new block number (which is B) and then a village number, 120. Although the British system allowed for an error in the chain survey, their boundaries did not match with the measurements on the zamin tax*

*register. The administration of the territory now came under the Madras Municipal Corporation of the Madras Presidency. When the corporation prepared a town planning map in the adjoining area, another number was given to it – which is the town scheme number. So for this place, you have block B, village no. 120 and TS 136. Besides, there is a number allotted to each plot at the time of survey, which is recorded in the field measurement book maintained by the tehasildar of the revenue department. With every subdivision of a plot, new numbers get added, usually as a /x... when there is a change in land tenure – due to sale, family partition – the subdivisions are to be updated in the Field measurement book. Occasionally, the revenue department may re-allot survey numbers, and you will find in some cases the new and the old numbers. Information in these various records often does not match. This mismatch is not a simple issue of human errors, but differences arising with the changes in the system of recording, including conversion of measurement, categories recorded...*

Interview with R,  
ex-Chief Planner, Permit Division, CMDA

The complexity of settling plot boundaries is not specific to the metros alone, but is also found in small towns like Tiruchengode. Transactions in the town were not recorded until the 2000s, when, according to a local land revenue officer, influential occupiers got land under their control recorded in the government registers or changed names in existing records. In this town, where loans are given either on land or jewellery, lenders have got records changed with the connivance of higher officials.

In Tiruchengode, the 2011 survey was driven by government exigency to leverage land for generating finance. The exercise was meant to regularise property demarcations on an as-is-where-is basis, in order to levy tax on occupiers



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and use the remaining land for other purposes. As much as it benefited socio-economically weaker groups in regularising their occupancy, it has also been used by financiers to transfer records to their names. The projections of the plan or legal title can also be viewed as part of strategies to open spaces for some groups over others to settle their claims to land.

The resolution of property-related conflicts and the generation of perfect information about a city are sought in the production of more plans, surveys and, recently, through GIS-enabled documents. The production of these archives is undertaken by almost all agencies in a city, both within and outside the state, but although maps are produced in multiple domains, they are neither easily accessible nor visible. The use to which these are put remains a black box.

A concerning trend in recent times is the legitimisation of the projections of the plan via technology and visibility. The moral value attached to the rhetoric of transparency and the legitimacy accorded to digital documents are issues to grapple with in contemporary politics. 'Transparency' by itself is assumed to be an intrinsically benign and progressive ideal. A critical take on the idiom of transparency is often met with resistance in both academia and progressive politics. That which is visible and audible is assumed to be progressive and, conversely, opacity connotes a regressive position

Can transparency lead to resolution of conflict? Perhaps yes and no. The substantive issue is, can the invisibility of the city be captured? If so, it raises the question of what is being made transparent. Who is made visible and for whose benefit?

### **Conclusion: Practices of Territory and Projections**

This essay illustrated the disconnections between practices of constituting territories in a small town in Tamil Nadu and the projections of such places. The history of occupancies, explored in the first section, illustrated the multiplicity of logics, forces and realms influencing the configuration of small town

territories. The territorial logic of this town is closely shaped by a juxtaposition of different histories operating at various geographical scales. It also showed the invisibility of city practices. The territory story of Tiruchengode is crafted in different geographical and political realms of state and party politics. It is infused as much with the logics of economy and politics as with those of spirituality and caste networking. To explain Tiruchengode's territorial story within an economic logic or a master plan logic would be reductionistic.

Further, the narratives of planners discussed in the second section reinforced the dynamism of cities and the incomplete information based on which projections are made. The gap is sought to be closed through better planning, strict enforcement and people's participation – among other slogans. The project of generating accurate information about the city for better planning has led to a spiralling array of surveys, digital plans and digital cadastres. These efforts seek to galvanise a logic of legitimacy and reality around the language of technology and visibility. But do these projections of a transparent city hide as much as they reveal?

The fluidity of the city and its invisibility raises two issues about the manner in which cities are projected. One relates to the need for a new vocabulary to read and write about cities. The focus on city practices and the lens of the force field is useful in this context. Two, is the acceptance of incompleteness and incoherence in the text. How complete can information on a city be at a particular time? The import of this is that information is often imperfect and open to contestations. How do we acknowledge this in our representation of the city? This calls for a different style of writing that would allow for incompleteness, contradictions and disjunctures. ■

## Notes

- 1 This way of reading city territories as a fluid, dynamic and unpredictable politics builds on several on-going and previous research collaborations and discussions with Solomon Benjamin.
- 2 This observation draws on the findings of an on-going research on the production and use of digital spatial information in Chennai. A co-authored article, Raman and Denis (forthcoming), "Digital Tools for Planning Chennai Metropolitan Region: The (mis) Matching Virtual GIS Generated City and Ground Realities", is under review.
- 3 Interview with descendant of the first settler community, 23 June 2011.
- 4 I have referred to the Mudaliars and the Gounders as caste categories in this essay. However, it is useful to note that there is a disagreement as to whether these categories refer to caste communities or to titles assigned to local chieftains. One view among the town settlers is that terms such as 'gounder' and 'mudaliar' are titles conferred on their ancestors by the king under whom they served as chieftains, but later categorised by the British as castes. The nomenclature of sub-castes within these groups – such as Vellala Gounder (agricultural caste), Vanniya Gounder (labourers, often with limited control over the land), Vettuva Gounder (also in agriculture but holding themselves to be of a different lineage from the Vellars) – suggests that Gounder caste members were in diverse occupations and trace their lineage to different histories. Mudaliars, in contrast, were predominantly in agriculture and weaving (see also Mines 1984).
- 5 The other weaving castes of the region are the Devanga Chettiars, itinerant traders specialising in silk. Today most have moved into retail trade or finance, and can be found in the villages adjoining Tiruchengode.
- 6 Numerous caches of Roman and Greek coins have been found in Tamil Nadu, dating from the first to the third century CE, and there are early Tamil references to the Greeks.
- 7 This, according to the president of Tiruchengode's Gounder caste council and lorry owners' association, was a sector formerly controlled by the Muslim entrepreneurs of Namakkal,

who in British times were the region's only transport carriers. At present, they are predominantly in metal repair or retail trade of leather and electronic goods in both towns.

- 8 The Asaris are craftspeople who worked with different materials – wood, iron, brass, bronze and gold. Kollar Asaris specialised in metal work.
- 9 The Marvari community today dominates the wholesale textile trade at the national level; they are also in the turmeric trade, the surplus from which is channelled into textile and real estate across Tamil Nadu.
- 10 Interview with a Tiruchengode spare parts shop owner, 31 July 2012.
- 11 Interview with a financier-cum-rig well business partner, Mudaliar quarters, 7 April 2012.

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