

Ariyapalayam: A Rapid Ethnographic Assessment

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Summary

Usually, villages and villagers are thought to be subsistence producers with a low level of education. In Ariyapalayam, we found a village in which "secondary" or "sideline" income from milk production and wage labor provide the bulk of non-landowner family subsistence. Furthermore, we found a village in which nearly ten percent of the adult population has some university education. We discovered that small shop (petit shop) owners save what small profit they earn (and it is small). We also found that television-cable television and satellite television-are universally accessible in the village. Television is not used for education, but for entertainment, particularly Tamil movies like "Whistle" or the soap operas that seem to hold everyone's attention in Tamil Land.

Left, a view of a colony street with chalk *kolom* drawings marking the entrance to houses; below, the village telephone exchange.



The key characteristic that remains from earlier Indian village literature is the tenuous hold people have on subsistence. Day workers, who represent more than half of Ariyapalayam, may earn a few thousand rupees each month (One-thousand Rs is 23\$US)--a very small income, indeed. The nutritional and health consequences of extreme poverty make village life very difficult, despite the fact that this village has better educational and public health facilities than most.

Landless people do not want their children to stay in Ariyapalayam. Those with land plan to stay. One reason they can do so is that a more or less steady supply of electricity makes it possible to pump ground water for irrigation. Several years of drought have dried the old village well and emptied what used to be the village irrigation reservoir, or tank. The future of this village is not much different than many villages struggling with regional drought in a political and economic environment that does not provide enough resources for more than bare-bones survival.



A view of Temple Street.

It is quite clear that an Internet kiosk would be at the bottom of anyone's list as a development tool or community resource. In fact, we doubt it would appear on the list at all. Better schools, better health care, and a secure source of agricultural production are far more important. Computers, however, will be part of the future, whether introduced in Ariyapalayam or in neighboring villages. Children learn about them (but not with or on them because there are none) in the village schools. Yet it is clear that the price of a computer can be born neither by the schools, nor by any individuals, aside from a few relatively secure landowners. And in both cases, the economic value of the computer in Ariyapalayam presents only questions and not yet answers for the future.

That said, technological change always has cultural consequences, whether direct or indirect. Awareness of computers is part of the ideology that surrounds educational advancement in India just as elsewhere in the world. Computers are

often offered as symbols of an advanced education. Their symbolic value and their value as instructional tools may not be quite the same thing. No matter how they are actually used in schools, and no matter what their educational consequences, the computer and the Internet are important elements in people's consciousness about the wider world, about life in Salem or Bangalore or Mumbai or London or Seattle. Of course, computers are part of the wider economic and social world that surrounds the village.



The elementary school entrance.

Our view of this village is too narrow, our geographic focus too fine and small, and our time in the field far too short for us to fully explore all the ways in which communication technology makes a difference in the lives of people in Ariyapalayam. While people would not look for computers to solve the village's problems, there may be real possibilities for computer-assisted communication among those who interact with and through the villages-

-tradesmen, government officials, agricultural development officials, representatives of NGOs and the like. The daily importance of television in the village--more than a window on the world, but a connection to wider Tamil Nadu and its representations of aspirations that plays in creative ways with Tamil ideas of the world--suggests that this village snapshot may be too limited to see the possibilities that might be just down the road.

Our Indian field staff feels that semi-urban villages, with different educational, business, and even entertainment needs and interests, offer an important comparative view-point from which to better understand the range of village contexts in Tamil Nadu.

Seeing down that road may require some comparative work--a visit not only to Ariyapalayam but also to nearby, semi-urban villages. It will certainly require



additional time in Ariyapalayam--time to answer some additional questions raised by this preliminary study. But until then, this report is a picture of part of life and lives in the village of Ariyapalayam, Attur Taluk, Salem District, Tamil Nadu, in Our India.

-Ramanathan H. and Ken Erickson
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