Historical differences in concepts of hygiene illustrate that changing concepts of cleanliness relate to changing images of the body and changing ideas about health and wellbeing. The ‘rationality’ of ‘hygienic’ practices is continuously redefined in line with changed insights and discourses. For example, ideas of health and hygiene have been in constant flux in Europe and North America (e.g. Illi and Steiner 1997; Vigarello 1985; Williams 1991). The French historian Georges Vigarello (1985) relates these processes to changing images of the body, its envelopes and its environment. Medieval concern with cleanliness, for example, was limited to the visible parts of the body. In the sixteenth century, cleanliness was not seen as related to washing and the body was ‘cleaned’ by rubbing it with a dry cloth. Bathing was seen as dangerous because water could enter the body and transmit diseases. However, by the end of the eighteenth century people believed that cold water would reinforce and consolidate the body’s hidden powers. Only towards the end of the nineteenth century did the concept of the microbe become accepted, and was washing seen as a defence against ill-health. Expanding urban populations, the associated growth of squalid slums, and a series of epidemics – particularly cholera and typhoid – led to sanitary reforms such as public baths for the poor, along with improvements in water supply, sewage, waste collection and the provision of public parks and playgrounds.
In today’s India, environmental squalor strikes me and other – both foreign and native – observers as a salient feature of cities and towns that stands in surprising contrast to often meticulously clean private settings. My outsider’s view is rooted in having grown up in Switzerland, where public sanitation is quite controlled, following the nineteenth century epidemic-fuelled development of waste and potable water systems and the moralisation of cleanliness into a persistent cross-class concern. In India, other historical and cultural processes have resulted in a different situation of public and private hygiene. Thus, my intention is certainly not to suggest that Indian ideas and practices have undergone a parallel development as outlined above. Nor would it be fair to see hygienic practices as the achievement of an evolutionary Western ‘civilising process’ of increasing needs and constraints (Elias 1982), with a somewhat ‘primitive’ South Asia trailing behind. To the contrary, throughout much of their history, Indians have been far more concerned with matters of purity than Europeans (Orenstein 1965, 1968; Leslie 1989). Similarly, prior to colonialism Africans had their own systems of hygiene, and cleanliness formed part of the language of ethnic rivalry (Burke 1996: 17 ff.).

Attitudes to bodily emissions and threats to the boundaries of the body may reveal much about attitudes towards social boundaries (Das 1976, 1977, 1985), as is evident in the Indian concept of caste. Im/purity concepts in relation to the morphology of caste are a long-established interest of scholars working on South Asia.1 In his highly influential and controversial structuralist approach, Louis Dumont (1966) proclaimed ritual ideas of purity and pollution to be the fundamental idea underlying the caste system, encompassing all other concepts. His theory was contested by Marriott (1976, 1989) and Marriott and Inden (1977), who proposed an equally all-embracing idea underlying a pan-Indian caste system, based on the concept of coded substances which manifest status by the extent of transactions they enable between castes. Apart from such abstract discussions on the relevance of the so-called ‘ritual’ values of purity and pollution for the caste system, there are hardly any reflections on how daily physical practices relating to ‘hygiene’ could be linked with the im/purity concepts underlying the caste system. There is a certain impression that biological dirt could play a role in ideas of impurity, but most scholars assume that hygienic concepts must differ fundamentally from ideas related to ‘ritual’ purity, though they concede that they sometimes overlap.2 My study of ordinary hygienic practices among average residents of Kottar found that hygienic and so-called ritual notions of purity and impurity are closely related. Yet, the basic concepts of purity and hygiene are closer to orthodox ideas of im/purity as formulated in the Dharmashastras, the South Asian sacred law texts that have served as a guide for behaviour rules for two thousand years (Orenstein 1965, 1968; Leslie 1989), than to germ theories of dirt. Most of the body’s waste products are considered polluting, and those of persons belonging to castes lower than one’s own are more so.

A common aspect of worldwide ideas about im/purity is that dirt is seen as deviance and danger (Douglas 1966). However, the type of danger represented by impurity in specific historical, social and cultural contexts remains open. In Kottar, the danger of dirt is that it provokes the wrath of deities, who may punish with misfortune such as poverty or disease. The basic reason for avoiding impurity is, then, its incompatibility with sacredness, as the pollution of sacred realms is not permitted. Consequently, impurities are avoided and removed from the body and from private and sacred spaces.

Reflections on the reasons for public squalor in India

A number of scholars have reflected on the reasons for public pollution in India and its social and historical dimensions. Milner (1987), for example, argued that the pollution of the Indian environment was the result of treating dirt as ‘primarily social, rather than physical’ – social cleanliness and group order being more important than physical cleanliness – and that this idea of cleanliness did not harmonise with a Western germ theory of disease. According to Milner, social purity is inexpansible, and pure persons entail impure ones. Hence, orthodox members of the upper caste reject modern public sanitation systems, because such improvement towards increased purity would raise the status of the lower castes, and thereby become a threat to their position.

Gupta (2000: 23ff.) also argues that it is the caste system that is resistant to notions of public health and hygiene. However, he sees the persistence of outside squalor in cleansing mechanisms that are socially and physically based, which tolerate impurities in public places, but not inside of bodies and private spaces. This pan-South Asian cultural concept, he argues, is grounded in the idea that people of different castes are naturally dissimilar, because they consist of different substances, and that the invasion of the body by substances produced by other castes should be avoided. Bodily emissions are seen as polluting and should be eliminated, and anything entering the body must be controlled. Likewise, impurities are not tolerated inside a house and must be removed in the same way that secretions are expelled from the body. The reason for the persistence of

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1. E.g., Burghart (1978); Dirks (1989); Dumont (1966); Hutton (1963); Moffatt (1979); Srinivas (1952); Stevenson (1954).
outside pollution in spite of a specialised Sweeper caste, he contends, is that their task is primarily to remove the dirt from the houses and neighbourhoods of dominant castes.

Rosin (2000) argues that inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent consider dust in the streets, which is used as a cleansing agent, as processed dirt and thus clean. Traffic, through its churning, is seen as inducing a purifying transformative process, which corresponds to ideas of traditional South Asian philosophy as well as ethnographic and Indological findings.

Kaviraj (1997) interprets environmental pollution as a result of lower-class protest. He claims that in Calcutta traditional habits related to the environment were guided by the orthodox dichotomies apam-par ('own'/ 'others', 'self'/ 'not self'), and ghare/baire ('home inside'/ 'street i.e. world outside'), with the inhospitable outside considered beyond control. He argues that during colonial times the Indian elites absorbed the Western idea of public space as worthy of protection, which led to the creation of 'maidans', parks and other open spaces in bigger cities, superimposing the new concept on the traditional dichotomy. The marked squalor of public spaces today is to be seen as a subtle expression of class protest by the lower orders, who have turned the parks into slums.

Conversely, Harriss-White (1998) explains outside mess as the result of a lack of coordination and inconsistency of public and private efforts dealing with the sanitary infrastructure. Moreover, she claims that the contrast of private cleanliness and public chaos is the result of space being gendered: the domestic area, dominated by females, is clean, whereas public spaces are under male control and impure.

Alley (2002) explains the pollution of the river Ganges by pointing to the dominance of the idea of the river’s sacredness and the insufficient sanitary infrastructure and other measures of waste control. Banaras Hindu residents make a distinction between ritual impurity – referring to physical uncleanness but also to the impurity of cosmos, soul and heart – and material dirtiness – referring to conditions of material uncleanness but also to the moral degeneracy of humankind. Divine power is seen as overruling profane material forces. But although dirt, gundagi, does not alter Ganga’s purity, it is understood by religious experts that dirtiness should be kept away from the sacred river and other places of worship. On the other hand Ganga, like a good mother, is seen as forgiving human dirtiness. However, the citizens recognize that wastewater is a force they must come to understand and control, even if sacred purity transcends it.

Historical research (Arnold 1993; Prashad 2001; da Silva Gracias 1994) has shown that political, conceptual and practical obstacles in India prevented the implementation of sanitary reforms, along with an insufficient adaptation of modern technology to the Indian context. For example, the necessity of improving public sanitation was discussed in South Indian medical circles as early as in the 1850s, followed by the appointment of sanitary commissioners. Yet, the army, police and railways absorbed most of the funds under the colonial regime, leaving little for other divisions. Moreover, Indian indigenous people were considered to have a special fondness for dirt’ (Prashad 2001: 115 ff.). In the end, there were a few sanitary interventions, mostly restricted to major cities and military camps, and there only in the more affluent quarters and neighbourhoods. However, where it was implemented, modern sanitation had a remarkable effect on the health of the population (Arnold 1989: 277; Crook 1989: 292). According to Prashad (2001), the continuous reluctance of the authorities in India to finance modern public sanitation systems results in the persistent occupational role of the traditional Sweepers, thought to go hand in hand with a lack of public cleanliness due to their poor performance.

My own research, based on an interest in the relationship between ordinary everyday hygiene and so-called ritual notions of purity and impurity, confirms many of these interpretations. However, in Kottar, the urban social context in which I conducted my fieldwork, concepts of hygiene, cleanliness and purity all included a physical dimension.

Kottar is a part of the South Indian town of Nagercoil, which lies in the southernmost tip of Tamil Nadu. 18 kilometres north-west of Cape Comorin and close to the Kerala border. With a population of 189,482 (1991) it is one of the nine largest urban centres in Tamil Nadu. The town is the headquarters and commercial centre of the Kanyakumari district. Nagercoil ('snake temple') in the past used to be a small temple town with a temple dedicated to the snake-god Nagaraja and was a smaller settlement than nearby Kottar. Kottar was formerly an important business centre and on old maps is indicated as an independent place with this name. Nowadays it forms an integrated administrative and structural whole with Nagercoil to its west, which has given the name to the new structure. Kottar was moreover the missionary St. Xavier's domicile with a big church, which still exists today. A narrow but very busy arterial road divides Kottar into two and connects it with Nagercoil centre via a formerly uninhabited area, now filled with school buildings, the police headquarters and the government hospital. There is the Pazhuyar river in the north-east, the Parakkai sewer as its tributary and the Anandanar channel on the western and southern side.

3. This chapter draws on the author’s PhD dissertation (Lüthi 1999). A short version of this paper was presented at the 2001 IUAES Intercongress, and a German version was published subsequently (Lüthi 2004).
In Kottar, certain defilements and purities were considered specifically strong and were distinguished clearly from ordinary everyday un/cleanliness, but all im/purities were thought to have a physical dimension. Standard public pollution was both the result of the validity of traditional concepts of cleanliness incongruent with a germ theory of impurity and danger (shared equally among high, middle and low-caste Hindus and Catholic Christians), as well as the reluctance of the educated municipality to finance the construction of modern sanitary infrastructure such as underground sewage works.

The findings of this study are based on sixteen months of fieldwork in 1995–1996, relying on the standard anthropological techniques of participant observation and unstructured interviewing, though I also conducted a household survey of the four castes with which I worked. I also mapped the neighbourhood, collected data on styles of domestic architecture, and followed the annual ritual cycle. I did my research in a mixed neighbourhood with Hindus of several different castes as well as Christians and Muslims, and with old residents as well as people who had recently moved there from elsewhere.

Bodily impurities and personal hygiene in Kottar

The normal state of both the female and male body is considered slightly impure (Tam. aukku). After bathing it is clean for no more than two hours, before it is thought to be stained again due to sweating and impure surroundings. The body is divided vertically and horizontally into pure and impure sites (cf. Malamoud 1989: 82–83; Orenstein 1968: 123; Srinivas 1976: 264). The parts above the waist are deemed purer than those below, and the right hand purer than the left. The interior of the body has neutral organs and impure cavities, for example the alimentary and respiratory tracts, which are the sites of foul saliva, phlegm and faeces. Digestion is thought to separate the food into clean blood and squalid refuse. Most products of the body are considered defiling, but breast-milk, tears and semen are clean, although the dry residue in the corner of the eyes and emitted semen are seen as impure. Head hair is considered precious, while hair on intimate parts of the body including armpits is found repellent and is therefore shaved. Owing to the presence of such impurities, all the bodily orifices are deemed impure (Tam. acinkam or avarasapattu), as are the left hand that cleanses such places, and the feet, due to their constant contact with the dirty ground. The left hand is, therefore, taboo as eating-tool and auspicious when used to hand over things. The lips, continuously stained by saliva, should not touch the cup or glass while drinking. After eating, a plate is deemed defiled by the saliva of the eater, and the person washing it becomes polluted. To avoid polluting another person, an eater often prefers to wash his or her own plate. Similarly, to lick the back of a stamp with saliva to stick it on a letter is considered unacceptably polluting to the postal clerk and the recipient. People scold the person: “How can I take the envelope from you, are you literate or illiterate?” my field assistant tried to explain.

Due to the worries about impurities produced by their bodies, people follow a careful procedure of personal hygiene. For example, in the morning they first clean their mouth to prevent the foul dry saliva that has accumulated inside the mouth during sleep from being swallowed and thereby polluting the body. For most people this is followed by the ‘morning duties’, comprising of defecation, bathing and changing into clean clothes. On the whole, bathing with water — which consists of rinsing the whole body with water from a bucket — is considered the most all-inclusive purifying activity, even without the use of soap, though the body is normally soaped. It is a precondition for temple visits or attending ritual events, as only clean bodies are tolerable to the deities (cf. Fuller 1979). Asked what would happen if one visited the temple without having bathed, it was explained to me that this was patanu (Tam. ‘sinful’, ‘poor’) and would be punished by the gods with minor ill-health or other misfortune. Orthodox people prefer to eat breakfast only after bathing, to reduce the risk of polluting the food with their own physical impurities. Food is easily defiled through physical contact — for example, during the cooking process the cook’s bodily emissions, especially saliva, is believed to fall into the food and pollute it. Raw food is considered less susceptible to defilement, as it has not been processed by any cook. Furthermore, once the food is served it becomes contaminated by the eater’s own saliva. Sharing the food on one’s plate with someone else is, therefore, unthinkable. Only inferiors find such ‘leftovers’, called ‘saliva-food’, acceptable: a wife might accept it from her husband, or a small child from its mother. Eating leftover food and thereby accepting defilement demonstrates subordination. Another central aspect is the intrinsic im/purity of food. A vegetarian diet, for example, is considered purer than a diet comprising meat or alcohol, which are both seen as defiling. Best are the products of ‘divine’ origin, such as water from

4. South Indian Catholics share many concepts and habits with the Hindus (see for example Mosse 1994).
5. My research mostly focused on four different castes, the high-caste and class Cettis, the middle-caste (and both lower middle class or poor) Vaniya Cettiar, the middle-caste but lower-class Saurashtra, and the low-caste (and wealthy, middle or lower-class) Catholic Paravar. In terms of religious affiliation, attention was mainly on Hindus, but included Catholics, whose habits tend to overlap.
holy waters, or the products of the holy cow as the embodiment of the goddess Lakshmi, such as milk, yoghurt and butter.

While under normal circumstances the purifying measure of a bath is considered sufficient for visiting a temple, attending a house ritual or a festival, or participating in a pilgrimage, this is not enough in cases of more severe pollution (called Tam. *tiltu*) during menstruation, after childbirth or upon death. This would again be *param* and annoy the gods. Whereas ‘normal’ blood is considered only slightly impure, the uterine discharge during menstruation and delivery is considered extremely defiling, and the loss of the uyir (‘breath of life’) at death makes the entire body very impure and polluting. *Tittu* bodies are incompatible with the divine, even after bathing, until the end of the physical discharge or decay.

Apart from waiting for the end of the physical process, common measures taken against *tittu* pollution are seclusion and more thorough cleansing efforts. *Tittu* persons remain separate from persons in a normal state of im/purity, and even more so from those in a particularly pure and/or sacred state, such as babies, or people who follow a religious fast, or who are possessed by a deity. At the end of a *tittu* period the clothes are not washed at home, as is normally the case, but given to the washing caste for thorough cleansing. After childbirth and death the entire house is whitewashed, and a priest sprays *pavam*, a cleansing mixture of the divine substances of the cow – milk, yoghurt, butter, cow dung and cow urine – and sometimes Ganga-water, towards all the polluted spaces as well as giving a mouthful of this to the house dwellers to drink.

Bodily wastes was considered specifically unclean by my Kottar informants if it emerged from the body of a person belonging to a caste lower than them. Apparently, people have specific innate degrees of impurity. It was explained to me that these are the outcome of present and past pollution. Where a person is sort of in a very impure state, he/she should not be allowed to touch the ground or to enter the house. This is the justification for the *tittu* period.

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Impurity and the organisation of private environments

To a certain extent, the metaphor of the body is applied to private homes in Kottar, as is common in Hindu approaches to the house, the temple and the world. In ritual concepts, for example, the perfect square represents the ideal body, and the main shrine in the temple is associated with a womb. In the house, the divine body of Shiva, or the demon Vastupurusa, are imagined as forming the ground plan (Beck 1976). Kottar residents make a division into pure and impure areas of their homes that resemble the way in which they map their bodies. They display a comparable preoccupation with the evacuation of waste and the prevention of impurities from intruding their private spaces. This is evident, for

example, in the clear differentiation of a clean front with a respectable façade, and an impure and neglected rear, where the most unclean waste of the house, such as sewage from toilets, leaves the compound.

The traditional house of a wealthy high-caste family is an almost square structure surrounding an open courtyard (see Fig. 3.1). Similar house structures were proposed by the *Mayamata*, an architectural treatise written between the ninth and twelfth century. This discourse reserved the square form with a central courtyard for the highest castes and deities (*Mayamata* 1985: xlii), whereas the lower orders were only allowed to use rectangular house shapes without interior courtyards (see Fig. 3.2). Traditional buildings for wealthy joint families were large structures with several courtyards (see Fig. 3.3). In Kottar, all three types are found, though big houses with more than one courtyard are rare.

9. Similar to the traditional Nayar house (Moore 1989: 176; Thurston 1909: 362) in the former Travancore area, which includes the south of Tamil Nadu.
10. This discourse on architecture for 'immortals or mortals' (*Mayamata* 1985: iii) represents an architectural school well known throughout South India. Monuments influenced by this school cover a period of fifteen centuries and a large part of the Indian peninsula.
Figure 3.3. Houses with several buildings and courtyards.

The Kottar house is clearly divided into a clean front and an impure backside, with doors on both sides. The front door is normally placed in the middle of the clean, official side of the house, which has an auspicious façade. The façade is made from precious wood, and the elaboration of its wood carvings indicates the house owner’s status. A decorative pattern called kolam is drawn daily with chalk onto the street in front of the entrance steps as an invitation to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. To leave the house, whether for auspicious or inauspicious missions, one should always use the propitious front door. Yet when coming home, the auspicious front entrance must only be used if one is returning from a visit with an auspicious character. This includes, for instance, visiting a woman who has given birth recently, despite its defiling aspect, but excludes a condolence call after a death. Upon returning from such a visit, which is both inauspicious and defiling, one must use the back door and bathe before entering.


Figure 3.4. Women drawing kolams in front of the house entrance.

The front door opens onto a small veranda or lobby. Next to this is the main room, which is adjacent to or includes the courtyard. The main room is considered auspicious and is the most important place for propitious functions, such as rituals connected with engagements or marriages, and even the dead bodies of house members are usually laid out there. Further inside are a puja (worship) room, a storeroom, a kitchen and a room for eating. The puja room, which must be kept clean, i.e. pure, should be separated from the kitchen by at least one room, as the representations of the deities must be protected from the impurities emanating during food preparation. The kitchen, too, is a place that should be protected from pollution, although nowadays the rules are relaxed in most non-orthodox households. While in high-caste houses menstruating women are not allowed to enter the kitchen or even the house, in almost all middle or lower-caste households the women do the cooking even during their impure days. The kitchen is normally hidden in the house interior, near or at its rear, to protect it both from pollution and the Evil Eye. According to my lower-caste informants, before hospital births became compulsory, many women even gave birth in the kitchen so as to escape the Evil Eye. The person doing the cooking should face east in the auspicious direction of the gods, hence the hearth is placed accordingly.

At the periphery of the house compound, near the back door, stands the latrine cabin (kakkil). With the exception of new houses, most toilets are outside, as people feel that their presence inside would make the whole place too polluted and stinking (cf. Searle-Chatterjee 1981: 93; Vatuk 1972). The place for bathing is deemed less problematic and is tolerated closer to the house, though it is often close to the latrine.

The more open spaces of the veranda, courtyard and backyard are a sort of transitional areas between inside and outside zones. Visitors are received on the veranda and in orthodox households are not invited inside the house. In high-caste traditional households menstruating household members are exiled there. The backyard hosts sanitary facilities, livestock, larger rubbish and the compost. Household waste is generally first swept into the courtyard before being disposed of outside.

Nowadays, most old, traditional houses have been divided up among siblings, rather than being shared as a joint family compound. As a result, long, narrow tunnels, separated by walls and consisting of a chain of connecting small rooms, extend from the front street to the backyard (Fig. 3.5). Apart from the reduced size, the arrangement of the rooms and sites is the same as in the full-sized structure. Moreover, new houses have a similar organisation of rooms, as do the houses of the poor and lower castes, which emulate, on a smaller scale, the spatial arrangements of the higher castes and the wealthier. Modern houses generally feature a small fenced garden at their entrance, and the front door opens directly onto the covered main room without courtyard. The kitchen and puja-room are almost always tucked away farther into the interior, behind the main room. Sometimes there are inside bathrooms attached to bedrooms or inside toilets, but these are tolerable because new houses often have septic tanks instead of open gutters.

Instead of a puja-room, the houses of the poor have a puja-site with shutters in the main room. The main room sometimes serves as a workplace for handicrafts such as weaving. Most poor people do not have latrines and instead frequent open gutters, public toilets or the fields at the town periphery (cf. Lynch 1969).

Dealing with waste

Ideally, the private home should be cuttam (Tam. ‘clean’), hence impure matter is disposed of or kept outside. Private spaces are cleansed regularly, and people say that a tidy house attracts the deities, who bring fortune. In particular Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is expected to visit and inspect at the twilight times of dawn or dusk (cf. Leslie 1989: 59).

Cleaning means, first of all, sweeping, which is done, mostly by female household members, at dawn, dusk, after lunch and before going to sleep. As waste should not be stored anywhere inside, there are no waste bins, and rubbish is simply dropped onto the floor to be swept later, or thrown over the compound wall. The main technique is to sweep the dust and waste from one room to the next and then move it into the courtyard, the street or the gutter. Many women use the same broom for the floor, table and counters, just as all these surfaces serve equally for preparing food, eating, sitting, sleeping and working (see Fig. 3.6). Larger pieces of garbage are either thrown outside into the open gutter or placed on a heap in front of or at the back of the house (Fig. 3.7 and Fig. 3.8). Waste must be visible rather than covered by bags, as this is interpreted by neighbours as a sign that very polluting tītī refuse had to be covered up, and that by coming close to the bag one would be seriously polluted. Consequently, the only way for women to get rid of used sanitary towels, which would be clearly visible if disposed of in the gutters or on the open heaps, is to burn them in the small hearth in the bathing-place next to many latrines. The house floors are also washed regularly by first scrubbing the floors with water or soap water, and then sweeping the fluid toward a small outlet in the wall, or towards the door, to be brushed outside. Mud floors are always cleansed with cow-dung water, a method which was very common in the past when there were no concrete floors (cf. Dubois 1985: 153; Leslie 1989: 59). In orthodox households the place where a menstruating woman has slept or where a lower-caste person has eaten is still cleansed with cow-dung water after the person leaves.
As impurities in general should not enter the house, certain habits and materials are only allowed in the peripheral spaces. It is fine, for example, to spit on the floor, dispose of nose mucus or to clean fish on the veranda, in the courtyard or in the backyard, but this is not allowed inside the house. Shoes must be left on the veranda before entering. The toilet and bathing water of the house flows through open gutters to the gutter bordering the back lane, while kitchen water flows to the gutter bordering the front lane (Fig. 3.7 and Fig. 3.8).

To a certain extent, house-cleaning is done in line with sacred timings and spaces (cf. Kaviraj 1997: 98), analogous to cleaning efforts focused on the body. The entire house is swept regularly at dusk and dawn, as this is the time when goddess Lakshmi is said to visit, especially on the sacred days Tuesday and Friday. After sweeping before sunrise the women draw a kolam in front of the entrance to please Lakshmi, and most high-caste women draw another kolam at dusk. In most households, the floors are washed once a week before sacred Friday, but many women scrub the purest rooms of the house, the kitchen and the puja room, daily. Moreover, the houses are washed on new and full moon days before the ancestors are worshipped, as well as on the first day of the Tamil month, and before festivities.

In connection with specifically severe physical pollution during a woman’s menstruation, after childbirth or after a death, parts of or the whole house are considered seriously polluted (tittu). There are additional measures against such defilement such as the seclusion of certain household members and/or the purification by a Brahmin priest. In orthodox, mostly higher-caste, households, therefore, a woman must stay apart from the rest of the house in a separate room or on the veranda. This does not work at childbirth and death, when the entire household is considered polluted for some time. This requires a certain lapse of time and the purification of the house by a Brahmin priest, who sprays pahagattam, a mixture of the products of the sacred cow, and gives the household members a sip to drink. Those who cannot afford a priest, among them many poor higher-caste families, purify the house on their own with water to which some add turmeric. Moreover, after a birth or a death, a house is generally whitewashed.

Access to homes

Access to homes is restricted in order to protect them from pollution. In particular, the puja-room or site and the kitchen must be guarded. A menstruating household member, especially if it is her first period, must not enter the puja-room, as she would defile the representations of the deities. In orthodox high-caste households, she is not even allowed to enter the house or to touch her children and must live and sleep on the veranda or in a separate room. During my fieldwork, on crossing the doorstep of a high-caste Cetti house, my assistant normally shouted loudly ‘I am clean’ to indicate that she was not in a dangerously polluting state. Persons belonging to lower castes than the household members are not normally allowed to enter the house except to do certain work. They are received on the veranda or in the entrance room.15 My high-caste Vellalar neighbours were very surprised to see that the Brahman family invited me and my low-caste assistant inside their house. In the past, our informants told us, the low castes, for example a Sweeper who came for toilet cleaning...

or a washerwoman picking up the dirty clothes, were only allowed to come as close as the rear of the house. Servants entered only as far as the entrance room and carried their own plates with them for eating.

Members of higher castes prefer not to visit the homes of lower-caste people, as such houses are thought to be ‘naturally’ unclean and thus not very welcoming. Moreover, the homes of poor people, even if they belong to high castes, are also routinely considered dirty, to the extent that their caste status is brought in doubt. Conversely, if people are known as educated and well-off, their houses are often considered automatically clean.

The tactics of handling the im/purity of private space are not only similar to practices relating to the body; they express the social meaning of im/purity. Access to the house is restricted for impure household members as well as for lower castes, and the homes of the poor tend to be considered naturally less clean. This means that in today’s Kottar context the cleanliness and im/purity concept is applied not only in the conceptualization of caste, as polluting occupations and life styles are associated with low-caste status, but in the case of class as well, as the uneducated and poor are also marked as impure.

The neighbourhood and outside world

Dichotomies similar to those applying to private space pertain to the outside world. In any Kottar town neighbourhood, entire rows of houses are divided into clean and respectable fronts and uncared-for backs. The facades face presentable mud and sometimes paved streets, lined by narrow open gutters, whereas the passages at the back are full of grimy waste, often appearing as mere extensions of the open sewers there (see Fig. 3.8). Kottar inhabitants have various concepts pertaining to outside space. For example, they distinguish between ‘good’, clean streets and neighbourhoods, which are high-lying and/or central as well as high-caste and high-class, and ‘bad’, unclean sites, which are generally low-lying, peripheral, polluted and inhabited by the lower castes and classes. In each neighbourhood there are sacred sites, such as temples, which are considered specifically pure. In fact, this perception corresponds closely to the reality of Kottar’s shared space, which is similar to what has been documented in recent ethnographies. Formerly, each Kottar caste used to share the same street or neighbourhood, a history which is still expressed today in caste-specific street and neighbourhood names, such as ‘Cetti Street’. Certain castes, such as the Cetti or Saurashtra, still dominate specific streets today, but in general strict separation is dissolving. Instead, former caste neighbourhoods are now gradually converting into representations of class. Traditional high-caste streets such as the one formerly inhabited only by Brahmin families, for example, are now dominated by wealthy middle castes, such as the Vellalar, who have gradually bought up the old houses and constructed new ones as well. In contrast, the lower castes and classes live on the urban periphery, in the most polluted neighbourhoods with hardly any public infrastructure. Impoverished middle-caste families live in slum areas near the river and in unauthorised ‘colonies’ along arterial roads, and the lowest-caste and class Kuluvan and Cakkilair live in the ‘kakkus area’ (‘latrine site’) along the Parakkattu sewer. In the past, I was told, persons belonging to low castes were forbidden to enter the streets of higher castes, or were only allowed to do so barefoot and bareheaded. Today, with the more mixed neighbourhoods, people reluctantly accept that contacts with other castes are unavoidable, and some even find it unproblematic. The low-caste Paravar fishing people now have access to Cetti Street, although they are only allowed to sell fish at the rear doors, and the low-caste Nadar boldly walk through the neighbourhood of the higher-caste Saurashistra, though these complain about this loss of respect.

People use the term ur to describe both the place they inhabit and the place of origin of their caste (cf. Daniel 1984: 63 ff.), and they use the expression grama for ‘village’ or ‘neighbourhood’. According to high-caste informants, this idea was especially evident in the past, when it manifested itself in ‘real’ gramams with a temple and high-caste streets in the centre, and the lower-caste neighbourhoods and ceris situated farther out. This reflects that the idea and practice of public space shared by members of a similar status of im/purity in a concentric fashion is old. Generally, the perception and organisation of Kottar neighbourhoods is evocative of South Asian orthodox concepts pertaining to the outside. According to Zimmermann (1987: 101), throughout Sanskrit literature the term gramma (‘domesticated’) was opposed to aranya (‘wild’). In Vedic and Brahman India the term grama described a social concentration of people, in contrast to aranya, the forest outside (Malamoud 1976: 4; Zimmermann 1987: 102). In later texts, the expression was used for the description of an artificial environment in contrast to the earth as primary site (Lewandowski 1977: 185; Mayamata 1985: viii, 26). According to old architectural treatises (Mayamata 1985), grama is divided into concentric zones (see Fig. 3.9; ibid.: xiii, 27; Kramrisch 1976: 42). A temple or an altar was installed in its centre. The street encircling the middle of the settlement was called brahmavihara and was seen as its navel (Mayamata 1985: 28). Caste (varna) as


well as economic hierarchy were incorporated into the architectural plan, with the highest and wealthiest communities near the centre, and the lowest orders at the periphery. The outskirts also featured the cremation site, and even farther outside the inferior cemetery (Mayamata 1985: 31–34). Similar town structures were promulgated in later history (Hofmeister 1980; Lewandowski 1977: 194). Moreover, the Indian landscape is perceived in a similarly concentric way (Eck 1998).

![Image of traditional town layout]

Figure 3.9. Traditional town layout.


Polluting the outside

The perception of the outside world as concentric circles, with the purest areas in the middle and the most polluted ones at the periphery, is reflected in the way Kottar residents relate to it in their practical everyday life. Outside of private and sacred zones like temples, they have no interest in cleanliness. Their interest in cleanliness stops at the doorsteps of private homes, and the habits related to the outside define it as an irrelevant rubbish dump. As noted above, people simply throw household waste outside, and when people move through the neighbourhood and town, they drop any waste as they walk, and spit and throw nasal mucus on the ground. Poor people without private latrines prefer to relieve themselves in open gutters, parks or fields, rather than using the few public toilets, which are considered too dirty. Consequently, Kottar’s streets are filled with scattered heaps of rubbish, and open areas are littered with waste that is blown around by the wind or dragged from the heaps by animals or toddlers. The open gutters are filled with a sluggish grey-brown liquid, which finds its way around plastic and other solid matter into the larger collecting sewer (see Fig. 3.10) proceeding to the Pazhayar river at the periphery. During the monsoon the sewers overflow, and people wade barefoot through this lethal sauce.

Like private homes and especially their puja-rooms, temples and other sacred sites are protected from pollution. As noted above, one is not allowed to visit a temple if one is not clean. People therefore bathe and eat vegetarian food before such a visit, and shirts and shoes, considered impure, must be left outside. Menstruating women are considered too impure for temple visits for at least three days. Once a year, before the representation of a temple deity is processed around the neighbourhood, the streets are carefully swept.

In spite of the ban on the pollution of deities, sacred waters such as certain rivers or ponds are often contaminated, as they are receptacles of untreated sewage. Similar to the view Hindus of Banaras hold on the sacred Ganga (Alley 2002), such sacred waters are seen as possessing powerful purifying, healing and other forces, irrespective of the presence of germs, and bathing in them is thus considered beneficial.

The concept of ‘public space’ signifying areas open to a wide public considered worthy of protection, and whose upkeep is thought to have an impact on physical wellbeing, was absent among my informants. In colonial India, the idea of ‘public space’, which had emerged in the West by the eighteenth century (Sennett 1974), had led to the creation of parks and other public spaces in bigger cities (Kaviraj 1997: 87; Lewandowski 1977). In Kottar, this concept was manifest in the existence of eight parks. However, these were obviously not used in the way they had been conceptualised, as all of these spaces were full of foul-smelling waste and
faecal matter. The municipal health officer was the only informant expressing a view of a different use, explaining that these parks were originally meant for 'passive recreation'.

There are organised cleansing efforts focusing on the outside represented by Sweepers. The majority of them belong to the very low Chakkiliar caste and are employed by the municipality. They occasionally turn up to sweep, clean the public toilets and pick up waste from the open gutters and heaps. Waste is transported to 90 sub-deposits, and from there on to a big disposal site outside town. Lowest-caste Kuluvan Scavengers search the waste-heaps for specific things, which they sell to retail stores.

In spite of such efforts, the Kottar public environment is constantly polluted, a fact the town authorities attribute to a shortage of Sweepers. The public sanitation system is archaic. It consists of open gutters and sewers and no treatment facilities, while the drinking-water supply consists of street corner taps that provide water only irregularly. The town authorities are not interested in any improvement, and there is no political pressure towards this goal. The only action against outside pollution during my fieldwork was a protest against a sub-deposit near a Hindu temple by nearby residents; they requested that the deposit be moved to the mosque. The municipal health officer argued that the town did not have the funds to improve the sanitary system, and that health problems could easily be treated with medication. 'It would cost twenty crores, and it would damage the entire road system', he moaned. 'Open gutters have the big advantage that they can easily be de-blocked from solid materials'.

While, then, cleanliness in connection with private homes and temples is thought to have a positive effect on the goodwill of the deities, and bathing in sacred waters is considered beneficial irrespective of the presence of microbes, most Kottar people do not perceive the pollution of the outside world as worrying because it is not considered to have an influence on personal wellbeing. Most informants did not see a connection between pollution and health hazards.

**Conclusion**

In the context of Kottar, private cleanliness and outside pollution are the result of a specific scheme of hygiene and purity which is closer to a shastric understanding of purity and the organisation of space than to a microbial theory. In this scheme, bodily exudations of lower castes are considered impure, while emissions of the cow as divine being are deemed pure and sacred. Similar to Banaras (Alley 2002), Kottar residents use different terms for 'ordinary' un-cleanliness and more serious defilement (tiltu), but in view of the frequent absence of ritual acts in connection with such states, I think that the English term of 'ritual' defilement is not justified. Rather than being an accurate translation, it seems to express the helplessness of scholars in the face of habits that do not fit in with scientific ideas of cleanliness. In Kottar, the concept of purity and impurity, similar to a scientific understanding, clearly relates to the physical qualities of the material world and not to immaterial aspects. It is thus not in itself 'social' (Milner 1987), which does not exclude a significant social 'impact' in the form of caste and class segregation, as contact with lower-caste substances is seen as more dangerous than with those of higher castes. Nor is environmental pollution the result of gendered space (Harriss-White 1998), as there is no difference in how men and women deal with impurity related to private and public space. However, in contrast to a dominant scientific understanding, in Kottar, the danger of impurities is not conceptualised in the form of health hazards caused by microbes, but in terms of provoking the gods, who might then bring misfortune in the...
form of disease and poverty. Outside of private and sacred spaces there is, therefore, no danger connected with impurity, and as a result, pollution of the outside is deemed irrelevant. Unlike in Banaras, where the residents recognised that river pollution was a force they had to understand and control, even if sacred purity transcended it (Alley 2002), Kottar citizens were thus indifferent towards environmental pollution. In combination with the reluctance of the public authorities to improve the sanitary infrastructure, from the point of view of a scientific understanding this perpetuates environmental squalor and hence danger.

References


