



TEMPLE ECONOMY: LAND OWNERSHIP AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN TAMILNADU

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Abstract

Temples have had a central place as economic institutions than religious institutions in colonial era. It controlled huge endowment of lands, gold and money to maintain specified rituals in the name of donor of land, cost was incurred from the land which yielded income. It also provided a productive place to invest funds granted to the temple for the performance of services in the name of the donor of the money. The religious rituals sanction the land and economic rights. The land tenure system had been as follows: (1) crown lands (bhanddravada) for government (2) military service tenure(amaram) land held by local chieftains and tributary rulers (nayakas). (3) Brahmaddya lands were eleemosynary tenure owned by Brahmans; temples (devadana), and traditional educational institutions, or mathas (mathapura) and peasant proprietor tenure. There were religious privileged Zamindars, Inamdar, and mirasis who had right on land while the rest served as agricultural managers, tenants, cultivators and labouring class. The land alienation and transfer of agrarian land from privileged landmirasis to labours and subordinate groups in colonial era was due to law of rent and unpaid rent to revenue department. However, the depressed class had limited access to the preferential claim of land policy.

Keywords

Temple economy, social stratification, caste and rural economy, land rights.

Introduction

Temples have had central place in the dominantly agrarian economy of South India prior to the extension of British control in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.¹ The temples have been most powerful economic institutions than religious institutions. They have controlled huge endowment of lands, gold and money. It was not only sustained by means of the generous and continuous endowments from the society, but enabled the other member of the society to turn to it in times of need for economic support². Temples were granted more than hundred villages and large sums of money as endowments whose monetary endowments were used for irrigation development. Two functions of temple land grants were to maintain specified rituals in the name of donor of land, cost was incurred from land which yielded income. It also provided a productive place to invest funds granted to the temple for the performance of services in the name of the donor of the money. There were four forms of land tenure at this time: (1) crown lands (bhanddravada) were direct revenue administration of the imperial government and received an important part of its revenues from this land; (2) military service tenure (amaram) land held by local chieftains and tributary rulers (nayakas) who spent part of yielded income for imperial treasury and retained part to defray the costs of maintaining a body of soldiers. (3) Brahmaddya lands were eleemosynary tenure owned by Brahmins; temples (devadana), and traditional educational institutions, or mathas (mathapura). The matha manager and chief teacher was considered owner of property and temple lands were held in trust by the temple managers in the name of the deity to whom the lands had been granted. (4) Peasant proprietor tenure means that villages granted to the temple could have been held on this form of tenure.³ This pre-colonial land tenure system existed in colonial period. The land was transferred from privileged agricultural managers to non-privileged tenants due to non-payment of rent and tax to the state. However, the preferential claim to exclusive control over land have been taken by Mirasidari society and subordinate group. The subordinate and labouring groups were quite active in the land market and land rental market in 1920.⁴. This paper attempts to look at temple land, its ownership and social

¹ Burton Stein , The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple, *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 19, No. 2, 1960

² K. A. Nilakanta Sastri: A history of South India from prehistoric times to the fall of Vijayanagar. Second edition. Oxford University Press, 1958.

³ Burton Stein 1960; CJ Baker *An Indian Rural Economy, 1880–1955: The Tamilnad Countryside..* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

⁴ Göran Djurfeldt, Staffan Lindberg , Behind Poverty: the social formation in a Tamil Village, Curzon Press, Lund, London, 1975

stratification in Tamil Nadu during the British colonial period. It examines the land revenue reforms affecting temple land system. It will also investigate the land control pattern and colonial supremacy over the temple land. The role of temple trusts and institutions in land control and the various ways in which the Brahmin and non-Brahmin movements worked against Dalit access to land and ritual rights will be explored. The Dalit response to all these restrictive apparatuses and practices form an important segment of this paper.

Colonial Invasion: Functional Impact in Colonial Tamil Nadu

The new imperial authority favoured the privileged castes (Brahmins, Vellalas, Mudhaliyars, Dhubasis) by giving them lands with tax-free concession; only to those individuals and institutions who had the highest claims to social and ritual status and influence.⁵ The pre-British period was known to give lands to Brahmins, temples, mutts and caste Hindus, who served villages as gift or *inam*. The Muslim rulers also gave land to *waqf* as gift.⁶ During the British period, land grants were given to those privileged; whoever received land in pre-colonial period became land owners, in the name of *inams* like *Gramam inam*, for Muslim *waqf*, for Hindu *agraharams*, *shrotyiams*, *yatra-che-kathis*, *devasthana inams* for the purpose of maintaining temple and shrines, *dharma daya inams* for eleemosynary institutions and alms or charities administered by religious persons, *devadasi inams*, *devadana inams* for gift to god, *dehangi inams* for the dancing girls, musicians, and temple servants or ritual artisans.⁷ These were sanctioned by the Hindu ritual law *shastras* and other *inams*, *watandari inams* and *kattubadi inams* for village officers and village watch man, Not only temple institutions but also different *mutts*, established by three headships such as *Smartha*, *Sri Vaishnava*, and *Madhwa*, offered *inams*.⁸ The Brahmin and non-Brahmin *mutts* were dominant land holders in Madras presidency. In the name of religion, land was donated and gifted as *inam* to priest for instance the *lingayat* non-Brahmin community of priests from Karnataka holding *jangams*, *pandaram*, ascetic mendicants of lower caste bairagis or *vairagis* and also the Islamic and Christian institutions were practising giving lands as *inam*.⁹ Particularly important here is the fact that most of the individual land holders and priest classes were socially and religiously upper caste. For example in the year 1869, the title of *inam* land was 254,473², further

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Frykenberg, Robert. E “Introduction” in Frykenberg edited *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, The University of Wisconsin Press, and Madison. 1969

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Chandra Mudaliar , “State and Religious Endowments in Madras,” University of Madras, Madras, 1975

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Nicholas B. Dirks, “The hallow crown: ethno history of Indian kingdom,” Cambridge University Press, 1987

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Sivakumar, Chitra and Sivakumar SS, (1993), “Peasants and Nabobs: Agrarian radicalism in late eighteenth century Tamil country”, Hindusthan Publishing Corporation, Delhi.

9

Nirmala Kumari.K, “History of the Hindu religious endowments in Andhra Pradesh,” Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 1998

the *inam* commission of Madras enumerated 426 *inam* tenures covering 2.7 million acre of ryotwari land, and it was measured into 17.5 million acre in 1855. To the British, the local social system was the backbone of the ritual institutions and the nature of agrarian organisation was a major hindrance to their administration.¹⁰

Not mending too much with the existing order at rural areas, the colonial rulers inclined towards caste landholders who claimed superiority, and through them controlled local affairs. Such relationship between the British rulers and the local caste landholders benefited them mutually, in socio-economic and political spheres. The British could implement land reforms conveniently. The Dhubasis¹¹ caste, a dominant caste of the time worked closely with the British. The ‘Board of Revenue’ was established in the year 1789 at Madras presidency.¹² It was to collect revenue and maintain religious institutions. The religious institutions possessed occupied properties yielding huge revenues. Some persons of dominant castes have used such lands for their own interests. For instance, Mirasis used temple lands to further their own interest (for example, Thiruvallur temple was mortgaged by the priest (Brahmin) and was later fined by Dighton, the superintendent of the jagir⁵. In Kumbakonam, Varadharaja Perumal temple property was sold for repaying priests’ debts and also for the temple ceremony in Paumony village, which was prevented by the collector of Kumbakonam) The temple administration was under the purview of the board of revenue, which was in turn a subordinate body to the East India Company till 1858.¹³ The first enactment relating to Religious and Charitable Endowment Act was initiated under the Madras Regulation Act of VII of 1817.¹⁴ Its main objective was to support the Hindu temples, to support colleges and public works. Colonial officers were not able to effect a one-time change in the prevalent land system to make land an ‘*absolute, saleable and heritable private property*’. The Mirasi caste had a strong hold in the rural areas. Thus, the British made Mirasi their ally.

The Vellala landholding castes in Tondaimandalam took up the occupation of Dhubasis, who performed various duties as interpreters, translators, secretaries, supervisors, and mediators between Indians and company officials. They had working experience as officials under indigenous regimes. Certainly, education was already valued by this caste, which often posed challenges against Brahmins in its support of temples, religious orthodoxy, and patronage of Tamil and Sanskrit. In some cases, certain departments or positions apparently became the private and inherited preserve of particular families of Vellalars.¹⁵

Further, in the late eighteenth-century, the Dhubasi came to be identified with four castes such as Vellalars from Tondaimandalam, surrounding Madras city; Brahmins, primarily from Telugu; Kanakkapillais the village accountants, and Yadavas (more commonly known during that period as Idaiyars) from pastoral

¹⁰

Eugene F. Irschick, “Order and disorder in colonial south India”, Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1989), pp. 459-492, Cambridge University Press

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Note. Dhubasis are two language-speaking men and translators to British officers

¹²

Baden-Powell, ”Land System in British India,” Vol.III, First Indian Reprint, Crown Publication,1988

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Board of Revenue consultations,12th January 1789,Vol.24, P.70)

¹⁴

Board of Revenue consultations, 30th November, 1815,Vol.700,P14139

¹⁵

Irschick, Eugene “*Dialogue and History*”, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994

caste. They combined, for the most part, land holding with an interest in education, involvement with religious institutions, and administrative service under indigenous rulers.¹⁶

The Dhubasis-Mirasdar economic status was rising through their receiving customary dues from tenants and their share of the produce from the villages' taxable lands. Wealth provided them necessary means to purchase land as well as to acquire additional Mirasi shares from impecunious shareholders in their native villages, thereby expanding their local economic clout and control. Through their endowments of land or money for the support of religious activities, many were able to acquire or purchase the meritorious and socially valued position of Dharmakarta or temple manager in Tamil Country.¹⁷ For example, in Pondamali, Dubasi Kesava Mudaliyar enhanced economic and social standing of his family, securing prestigious jobs as headmen. Many Dhubasis were also able to expand their rural authority and economic power far beyond what was implied by their inherited mirasdar status. Most of the Dhubasis had the title of Dharmakarta.¹⁸ They were managing the larger temples of the city, other ones they had built or renovated outside Madras. While this gave them a major voice in temple affairs and considerable influence over cultural and social activities in the city, much of the cost of temple maintenance and festivals had to be borne by these Dharmakartas. Charges of embezzlement by managers from temple funds became common. These and internal temple conflicts over festivities and rituals, often reflecting larger political and social rivalries, consumed the energies and resources of many Dhubasi families and ritually privileged caste in the colonial period.

The British ensured proper conduct of religious ceremonies, they also provided protection to the temples and idols and funded temple ceremonies through revenue department. The British had to renovate the tanks and the irrigation system to facilitate proper irrigation to ensure cultivation. The establishment of British as the regional power came by affirming the local dominance of Brahmin and Vellala castes, and using the traditional headmen of local society to settle disputes.¹⁹

However, the colonial government did not change the social structure of the caste hierarchy or super structure of the locals. They made changes only in the revenue administration based on their European model.¹⁶ The British established new revenue policy in favour of all sections of the people to attain socio-economic betterment in the colonial state. The colonial state introduced and regularised the revenue system under village lease system, like a Zamindari settlement. The colonial government leased the land to village headman who was responsible to pay revenue to state. The colonial state was clear in its intention and 'the assessment was to be so fixed that the inhabitants might be compelled with justice to adhere to terms of settlement for at least five years'.¹⁷

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Irschick, Eugene "Dialogue and History", Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994

¹⁷

Pamila G.Price, "Kingship and political practice in colonial India," Cambridge University Press, New York, 1996

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C.J.Backer & Washbrook, David A, "South India : Political institutions and political change 1880-1940,"The Macmillan Company of India Limited, Madras, 1975

¹⁹

Irschick, Eugene "Dialogue and History", Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994

Further, the village lands were divided for sale by the British called as ‘muttahs.’ Those who acquired *muttahs* were called *muttahdars* and were permanent settlement holders. The Zamindari regulation act No. XXV was passed in 1802, and up to 1805, the system was implemented in the presidency as far as possible. In less than a decade, this system lost its effect in the Madras presidency except northern Sirkars and most lands came back into the hands of the government owing to failure and defaults of revenue.²⁰

Simultaneously, the religious institutions and their properties came under the zamindars and the local ritually privileged caste. They were trustee members of many temples. The board of revenue was constituted in 1789 and this was in-charge of the temple management to collect revenue and conduct temple-related affairs. The religious institution management came under the board of revenue.²¹

The collectors were agents of the board of revenue and they were not only responsible for tax collection but also maintenance of law and order, being the magistrate. The board of revenue established law and order department to protect the properties of the religious institutions from being mortgaged and alienated. Mr. Dighton, superintendent of the *jagir* found out that in the Thiruvallur temple, Brahmins had mortgaged a part of the property for their own private use and the local Amildar had given security for them.²² Often these measures were adopted not only to consolidate their rule but also to increase their revenues. The board of revenue resolved that 15,000 temples be appropriated to the repairs of the principal temples of the *jagir* and the board was positive that the repairs of these temples would bring in a lot of income to the *jagirs*.²³ The trustees, managers or superintendents, in charge of the actual management of the institution, were entrusted with the settlement, collection and appropriation of land revenue or land rents belonging to the endowed institutions. They had to collect, disburse or appropriate as per rules of institution as they were responsible for the properties of the institutions, and embezzlement of funds was punishable by law of the land.²⁴

In eighteenth and till mid-nineteenth centuries, the local land lords, who were hereditary tenants had gained temple lands and subleased it in Thanjavur district and the British officials relinquished connection with the administrative affairs of the temples. Panchayat committees of the locally prominent and privileged castes were appointed to manage temple affairs. This was extended to the privileged caste of locally powerful land lords who controlled the temple properties with exemption of rent free²⁵ and the actual cultivators did not enjoy any rights on this temple agrarian land.²⁶ A local committee of three or more persons was to take

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Baker, Christopher John, “An Indian rural economy 1880-1955: The Tamilnadu country side,” Oxford University Press, Delhi ,1979.

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Nicholas B. Dirks, “The hallow crown: Ethno history of Indian Kingdom,” Cambridge University Press,1987

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Board of Revenue consultation, Vol.311, 26th February, 1802

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Board of Revenue consultation, Vol.112, 13th October, 1794.

²⁴

Board of Revenue consultation, Vol.112, 13th October, 1794.

²⁵

Standing order of the Board of Revenue, Madras,No142, Dated 17th April,1837

²⁶

Ibid

over and exercise the power of board of revenue, under the regulation VII of 1817.²⁷ The members of the committee were to be appointed from the privileged caste Hindus. Therefore, the ritually privileged community had gained in the temple economy of landholding and Dalits were restrained from being part of the management of the temple institutions and land.

In 1841, the following methods were adopted to hand over the religious institutions to the local people, by the British. The small village temple was under the *poojaris* (local priests), a single functionary entitled to mere fees and the larger temples with more considerable endowments were delegated to a committee or panchayat consisting of two or more influential persons of the locality, including official head of the village or village *curnam* and the *poojari*. The endowments belonging to mutts were left to the party concerned and the temples in which the whole Hindu community was interested like Thirupathi, Thiruvannamalai, Srirangam were handed over to *mahants*, Dharmakartas, trustees or committee of influential local people.²⁸ The trustees who were under the district committee actually managed the temples and this central and district committee had the power to control the temple institution and mutts, but not the power of dismissing the *madathipathis* and this bill was introduced in the Act of XX of 1863.²⁹

The temples, *mutts* and sacred Cauvery came under the ritually prestigious caste of Brahmin and dominant castes who exercised their political influence to control the temple properties under their cultivation. After implementation of Act of XX of 1863, the British withdrew their intervention and supervision in the temple institution which was transferred from them to individuals and committees. The *pandara sannithis* of mutts and the members of temple committees were elected or appointed for lifetime and once they were established in office, they could not be removed and it was even difficult to force them submit the records for public scrutiny and later, this land became private property of *madathipathies*.³⁰

Further, the *madathipathis* of Thiruvaduthurai Adheenam and Dharmapuram Adheenam were non-Brahmin ritual feudals and Sankaracharya Brahmin mutts controlled vast tracts of agrarian land in several villages in the colonial period and most of the congress and dominant caste politicians controlled several acres of land in the name of Trustee and members of committee. Even, when election was conducted to this temple trust, the dominant castes of Brahmin, Vellala and Vandaiyar, and mirasidars manipulated to win the election. In case of failure to elect the trustee, the District judge was appointed to administrate the temple lands. Particularly Kumbakonam land lord T.S. Sivaswami Odayar was member in the temple committee of Kumbakonam, Tanjore, and Nagapattinam. Further, the prominent Mirasi Mr. Saminatha Iyer also dominated in three district temple committees and Poondi Vandaiyar represented in the temple committee in Kumbakonam from 1880 to 1920. Most of the temples were under the privileged caste groups and only a few

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Board of Revenue consultation, Vol.876, 8th February, 1821

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Board of Revenue consultation, Vol.2026, 15th June, 1841.

²⁹

Ibid

³⁰

G.O1624 (LSG), 17th April, 1926; G.O.1337 (LSG) 9th April, 1927, Madras Record Office.

members belonged to the low castes, such as Kallar, Odayar, Nadar, Agamudaiyar, Mararavar, and Nattukottai Chetty.³¹

In 1817, the control of public endowments was entrusted to the board of revenue. It was opposed by Hindus. After 1839, the supervision by the government was withdrawn. On 10th March 1863, self-government was introduced and direct election was conducted to religious institutions, where it was felt that the local people ought to have a direct control of management while the lifetime members controlled the temple and its property.³² In 1841, the provincial government instructed the board of revenue to allow the individuals to manage the affairs and funds of the temples. There was no supervision during the period from 1842 to 1863 over the management of Hindu temples, through the regulation Act of 1817. This resulted in maladministration and misappropriation of temple funds and the British enacted a law to rectify and the Act XX of 1863 came into force. Provision was made for changing over the properties to trustees or committee of management.³³ This Act did not specify the terms and conditions of the trustees. So, after 1863, appointment of these trustees became hereditary. To plug the loopholes in the Act of 1863, a committee was appointed under the presidency of Sir William Robinson to make a fresh Bill. Another committee was appointed in 1884 under Sullivan. Major changes in the land revenue policies, such as the abolition of *Dhittum* system and the introduction of *Darkhast* scheme, abolition of separate *pattas*, and the conditional assignment of lands to the depressed classes, were all brought about by constant efforts of lower sections of the society.³⁴

In the beginning of colonial state rule, the lowest position of local power structure in Hindu social ladder - the ‘untouchable’ castes - never had the socio-political space to come in direct dialogue with colonial rulers. The ‘untouchables’ were never considered to be independent cultivators. However, in the middle of the nineteenth century, with the colonial rule and the Christian missionaries, the British authorities in England, and the reformatory colonial revenue officers in India were engaged to talk about ameliorating the living conditions of the depressed castes in Tamil country. Therefore, the agrarian land was freed from the clutches of Mirasidars, and the colonial officers discovered the need to directly connect the ‘depressed’ castes to land and the ways in which this can be materialised.³⁵

On 17th March, 1891, the Madras government passed an order, GO No 212, Revenue, collector’s report as to the easy means of amelioration of the condition of the Pariahs and forwarded to appeal of Memorial of the Madras Missionary Conference dated May 1891 and copies of questions and answers in the House of Commons, both concerning the depressed conditions of the lower castes in the Chingleput district

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G.O1624 (LSG), 17th April, 1926; G.O.1337 (LSG) 9th April, 1927, Madras Record Office.

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Board of Revenue consultation, Vol.1787-1865

³³

Ibid

³⁴

Report of the Hindu Religious Endowments Commission, Ministry of Law, New Delhi, 1962

³⁵

Hans-Jorg Hinze “Christian missionaries and their perceptions of Hinduism: Intercultural encounters”, in *Halle and the Beginning of Protestant Christianity in India, Vol. II: Christian Mission in the Indian Context*, Edited by Andreas Gross, Y. Vincent , Kumaradoss, Heike Liebau, Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle, 2006

and their inability to obtain land for occupation even when waste land may be available.³⁶ There were several classes known as designation of Chachadis (Tsachadis), Chakkilis (Cobblers), Chamaris, Chandalas, Godaris, Holayas, Madigas, Malas, Mochis, Paidis, Pallas, Pallis (in Nellore), Panus, Pariahs, Polayas, Rellis, Totis and Valluvars are almost same to each other, and these groups of people were treated in the departmental records as constituting one general class under the category of “Pariahs and kindred races”.³⁷

The Christian missionaries made many efforts to ameliorate the living conditions of pariahs, and came to rescue these lowest sections of Dalits.³⁸ They had represented many grievances to colonial officers in Madras presidency and to higher authorities in England. It resulted in a report prepared by J.H.A. Tremenheere., Esq., Collector of the Chingleput district, entitled ‘Notes on Pariahs of Chingleput’, as a reply to the orders desiring to have the collector’s report as to the easy means of amelioration of the condition of the Pariahs, passed in GO No 212.³⁹ This report discussed degradation of Pariahs in the Chingleput district, and the mirasi system as a precursor for understanding the socio-economic status of Pariahs.⁴⁰ The pre colonial *kaniyatchikarar* became a mirasidars in Mohammaden rule. These mirasis controlled the entire village land, arable and uncultivable waste land. The Brahmins and Vellalas had this mirasi rights. The *Tondaimandalam* mirasi had some exclusive privilege on land and labour. They were exempted to pay tax to state and were known as *Kaniyatchi Maniyam*. Those mirasis had rights to receive fees called *swatantrams* or *merahs* on the gross produce of all the yielding revenue. They had the rights to collect *tunduvaram* or short assessment from non mirasidars on the produce of all cultivable land. The *nattam* land was under the mirasis for their house building.⁴¹ The *paraicheri* of *Parayars* hamlets were under them. The mirasi can assign the waste land to anyone of his interest to receive fees on the land. They could use or lease to rent the cultivable waste of *Seykal carambu* land to others and at the same time, they had not right on *Anadi carambu* or immemorial waste, but enjoyed on it exclusive rights of cutting firewood and working quarries and also had the rights on the tank, river and lake. The mirasi had rights of $\frac{1}{2}$ share in the total production and also gained $\frac{1}{64}$ in fisheries, mines or quarries in the *Perumboc* and also collected share of $\frac{1}{64}$ in the total out of tarisu land (waste land) as mirasi maniyam .

The mirasis system was not only a system of land control but also controlled the temple and tank. They have maintained the customary system of caste and the traditional services of village artisans and officers were supported. The temple festival was celebrated to upgrade this system. further, the mirasi collected 13 per cent of share in the total production, and 34.8 per cent of share was shared among the labouring cultivators

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GO Nos. 1010, 1010 A, Revenue, 30th September, 1892

³⁷

Proceedings of the Board of Revenue (Land Revenue), No 96 dated 1st March, 1893.

³⁸

Rev. William Goudie, “The disabilities of the Pariahs,” The Hindu, 1st October, 1891.

³⁹

GO No 875, Revenue (Confidential) dated 19th April, 1916; GO Nos. 1010, 1010 A, Revenue, 30th September, 1892

⁴⁰

Proceedings of the Board of Revenue No: 1547 dated 7th July, 1886.

⁴¹

Bailey and Huddleston, Paper on Mirasi Rights.1892

class of Parayars as *calavasam*, *kaniseemai* and fee to mirasi, village officials, allocation made for public worship, religious ceremonies and tank repairs. Thus, the religious consciousness was maintained and the supreme authority was mirasi on land and production unit. Therefore, the religion was the symbol of monopoly of power and maintained the production share to mirasi, temple and state.⁴² The Parayars of cultivating class was not gained to posses the agrarian land till British intervention in the revenue system of Tamils in the colonial period. Further, Mr. Tremenheere understood the requirement of the higher authorities quite appropriately, and suggested ameliorating the condition of the Pariahs without disturbing the hierarchical traditional caste feudal system and Mirasi system in 1891.⁴³ He suggested to partially connect the Pariahs to the soil by opening up waste lands that does not form part of the preferential claim of the mirasidars, so that the mirasi remains undisturbed. He further analyses the Pariah becoming a ryot under a Zamindari, and Pariah becoming a land holder under a ryot and the role of Pariah as an agricultural labourer.⁴⁴ The Mirasidars not only controlled productive resources of village and irrigational resources, but also villages, house sites and the residential quarters of ‘untouchable’ labourers.⁴⁵

Further, the collector of Chengalpattu J.H.A Tremenhere (maintain uniform spelling), extends his view connecting Pariahs with land to note that even *darkhast* scheme was not fruitful for them, because *darkhast* scheme entertains preferential claim of mirasidars and *pattadars*; hence, land will be assigned only to a person who has earlier been a *pattadar*. Therefore, if a cultivator from an ‘untouchable’ caste applied for a particular land under the *darkhast* scheme, the village officials would assign it to him only in the absence of an application from the mirasidars and the *payirkarars*.⁴⁶ There was gross inequality in land holdings between Pariahs and mirasis. One-third of the population belonged to mirasidars and the remaining population was Pariahs, which was around 25 percent. Pariahs owned only 2 percent of agrarian land in Chengalpattu (maintain uniform spelling) district that is out of total agrarian land of 6, 17,000 acres, merely 14, 500 acres of land were under the Pariahs in Chengalpattu(maintain uniform spelling) district.⁴⁷ The Pariahs applied for 10 acres of *darkhast* land. The village *karnam* did not assign land to Pariahs giving an invalid reason i.e. that land was near to Dam or Lake. But earlier, this land was under possession of mirasis and this agrarian land was registered in *darkhast* scheme. Therefore, mirasis and land administrative officers refused the appeal of the Pariahs. Missionary Rev. Wiliam Gowdie then suggested to remove the preferential claim, and abolish the mirasi system to enable Pariahs to become land holders and further the *porambokku* land should be allocated

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Sundari.T.K., Caste and The Agrarian Structure, Centre for Development Studies, Trivendram, Kerala.1991

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Tremenheere,J.H.A, Note on Paraiah of the Chengalpattu, in GO Nos. 1010, 1010 A, Revenue, 30th September, 1892

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Tremenheere,J.H.A, Note on Paraiah of the Chengalpattu, in GO Nos. 1010, 1010 A, Revenue, 30th September, 1892

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Proceedings of the Board of Revenue No: 1547 dated 7th July, 1886

⁴⁶

Bailey and Huddleston , Papers on Mirasi Rights, 1892

⁴⁷

Ibid

to Pariahs, who appealed to assign *nattam* land to Pariahs, regulate the *kuthakai* (tenurial) system, and human mortgage.⁴⁸

The fact was that the mirasi castes had not accepted Pariahs becoming independent landholders. Therefore, whenever a Pariah applied for a particular piece of land, the Mirasi castes and the *Payirkarars* also applied for the same land, to prevent Pariah from getting the land assigned to his name.⁴⁹ There were many difficulties faced by the depressed castes to access agrarian land, whenever the colonial authorities moved to assign waste land to them. Therefore, colonial state planned to conditionally assign waste lands to the depressed castes. The ‘Special Form D’ ‘order for assignments of lands to Scheduled Castes consists of nine conditions, in which ninth is directly connected to issue of alienation.⁵⁰

The conditions were, i) the land once assigned to a member of the Scheduled Castes, cannot be allocated by way of sale, gift, mortgage or lease of any kind to another person within the period of 10 years from the date of assignment. ii) Even after a period of 10 years, it cannot be allocated to any person who is not a member of the Scheduled Castes. iii) If the land ceases to be owned by the original grantee or his legal heirs or other members of the Dalits (after 10 years) owing to sale by process of law or otherwise, or owing to default made in the payment of the Government revenue on dates prescribed the grant will be liable to be resumed by the Government who will be entitled to re-enter and take possession of the land without payment of any compensation or refund of the purchase money.⁵¹ The fact that the whole of wet lands and cultivable dry lands was under the possession of Mirasi castes, after introduction of *darkhast* scheme, *payirkarar* acquired cultivable waste lands. However, there were precisely no lands assigned to the depressed castes in Madras presidency.⁵² Therefore, the colonial state removed waste lands from the Mirasi dominance, by compulsion of tax payment to State, when these lands were not cultivated. The waste lands were insufficient to assign to panchamas, therefore, new lands were brought under cultivation by clearing forests and shrubs.⁵³ However, the privileged shudras did not allow the Dalits to access the irrigation facilities from the village tank and lake. Further, their crops were damaged by the caste Hindus, when the crop was ready to harvest. When the Pariahs progressed economically with the aid of a few acres of agrarian land, the caste Hindus charged Pariahs with some flimsy and baseless offences to punish them, and forced them pay penalties in the dominant caste council. Because of this, even their minimum holdings of agrarian land were lost by the Pariahs in Chengalpattu and other parts of Madras presidency.⁵⁴ Government Order 1010, and 1010 A, dealt with

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Hendry Steel Olcott, Poor Pariah, The Theosophical Society, Adyar, 1902

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William Goudie, “The disabilities of the Pariah,” The Hindu, 1st October, 1891.

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Go. No. 2435 Revenue Department, 26th June, 1918, GO.No.180 (a) Revenue (Ordinary Series)
3rd February, 1926, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai.

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Ibid

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Go. No. 2435 Revenue Department, 26th June, 1918, GO.No.180 (a) Revenue (Ordinary Series)
3rd February, 1926, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai.

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Mc.Raja, “The oppressed Hindu,” Speeches in Madras Assembly, 13th November, 1922

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Iyyothidasap Pandither, “Vinnapam Sollum Viduthalai”, *Iyyothidasar Aaivu Manavar Vattam*,

numerous debates which took place among the officers of the revenue department for implementation of ameliorative measures.⁵⁵ This is evident from numerous government orders pertaining to the subject of nature of assignment, quality of land to be assigned and whom to prefer in case of applications from more than one person, etc. However, even one acre of waste land was not reserved, for Panchama cultivators and at the same time very poor attention was paid by orthodox caste Hindu officials who tacitly refused to implement this order and killed.⁵⁶

Upward Mobility of Dalits and Their Assertion in the Colonial Period

The depressed caste leaders and their associations started to voice their grievances from the last decade of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. There were a huge number of depressed caste associations across several districts of Madras presidency.⁵⁷ These associations organised regular meetings to eradicate their social and economic disabilities and numerous resolutions were passed and to communicate the colonial authorities, relating to assignment of waste lands and free house sites for the depressed castes, and needs of educational institutions for Panchamas and scholarships, employment opportunities in the government, representation in the local board, civil rights to use public place, removal of law of Jails Act of 1894, Social justice, and Agrarian land. However, most of the ritually dominant castes of Brahmins and Sat-shudhras were opposed to the Dalits receiving worship rights in the Temple and at the same time Dalit Leader Pandit Iyyothi Dhass replied to them in the Chennai Maha Sabha in 1892, stating “We do not want God and temple, we need education, agrarian *Dharkast land*.⁵⁸ Further, these conferences also addressed issues like the right to use public roads for procession, curtailing the number of toddy and liquor shops in the vicinity of their settlements, calling for a similar Act as that of Indian industries Act in order to free the labourers.⁵⁹

These meetings were part of a public discourse that widely articulated the grievances of the depressed classes, which apart from communicating their grievances to the colonial government were aimed at creating awareness among their own people not only about their poor social condition but also about the ameliorative measures provided by the government for their betterment. Alongside the depressed castes associations,

⁵⁵ Chennai-2008

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Baker C.J & Washbrook D.A, “South India: Political institutions and political change 1880-1940,” Macmillan Company of India Limited,,Madras,

⁵⁸ **Notes:** Resolutions passed and forwarded to Colonial Officers by Adi Dravida Mahajana Sangam and which are recorded in a number of Government Orders, i) “Memorial of the third session of depressed class conference”, held at Shiyali, Tanjore district, resolutions submitted to the government by Depressed Class Elevation Society, GO No 1739, Revenue, dated 11th June, 1913. ii) Fifth Chidambaram Taluk “Adi Dravida Conference” held at Pinnathur on 27th March, 1921, GO No: 560 Law (General) dated 13th June, 1921. iii) “Adi Dravida Mahajana Sangam Conference” held at Veeravanallur, Ambasamudram, resolutions recorded, GO No 817 Law (General) dated 12th July, 1921. GO No: 18, Revenue (Miscellaneous Series) dated 1st May, 1926.

Pandit Iyoothidass: 1891, 1892, *Srinivasan, P Adi Dravidar Punar Vazhvum, Thavathiru Swami.*
A.S. Sagajanandavum,Mangai Pathipagam,2001

⁵⁹ Siva Shanmugam Pillai, "The life, select writings and speeches of Rao Bahadur M.C. Raja, M.L.C.," Indian Publishing House Ltd, 1930;

members of the legislative council (MLCs) also convinced the British, which resulted in government ordering enquiry into the ameliorative measures drawn and implemented by government and the respective departments.⁶⁰ For instance, M.C. Raja, MLC in colonial government, had raised questions about land alienation to landless panchamas in the assembly, which asked ‘how many hectares of lands were deforested to be assigned to panchamas?’⁶¹ The Dalit Leader L.C. Guruswami, MLC during the colonial government, questioned as to ‘how much land has been set for distribution among landless panchamas?’⁶² ‘How much of it was allotted during the last two years and how many new holdings were thus created?’ Based on these questions of this leader, the colonial government assigned lands and gave the details of the land.⁶³

Table : 1 Deforested Land Assigned to the Landless Dalits in 1922

District	1920-21	1921-22
Kancham	0	238
Guntoor	663	6,631
West Karnool	1187	37
East Karnool	0	257
West Kadappa	3	83
Vellore – North	123	3,398
Vellore – South	1036	50
Nellore	676	52
Madurai	3	0
Nilgiris	3000	2658
Pellari	0	149
Chengalpattu	2178	441
Chittoor	0	9209
Salem-East	0	1394
Salem-South	0	0
Coimbatore North	169	
Palakkad	0	5775
Total	9,038	30, 382

Source: Fourth Legislative Assembly Debate, Volume VI, 1932, 7th November to 28th November, Government of India Press, Simla, 1933

Dalit Land Entitlement

The colonial government started assigning lands to the depressed classes in the 1920s. These lands are called Depressed-Class lands, which are also called as Panchama lands as these were assignments made to

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Sivashunmugam, T.J. , “The history of the Adi Dravidas,” Methodist Publishing House, Madras, 1923

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Mr. M.C. Raja, Fourth Legislative Assembly Debate, Volume VI, 1932, 7th November to 28th November, Government India Press, Simla.

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Mr. L.C. Guruswami, MLC, “Assembly speeches in 1932,” Madras Presidency. Tamil Nadu Archives, Egmore, Chennai

⁶³

Fourth Legislative Assembly Debate, Volume VI, 1932, 7th November to 28th November, Government of India Press, Simla, 1933

Panchamas.⁶⁴ The extent of land reserved for assignment to Adi Dravidas and extent assigned to them up to 31st March 1928 and up to 31st March 1931 are given below.

Table: 2 The Agrarian land Assigned to Adi Dravidas in 1928 and 1931 in

Madras Presidency

District	Extent Reserved in 1928	Per cent	Extent Assigned in 1928	Per cent	Extent Reserved in 1931	Per cent	Extent Assigned in 1931
Anantapur	129510	20.68	18784	7.92	138693.00	19.45	56173.00
North Arcot	48342	7.72	38696	16.31	65976.85	9.25	56569.64
South Arcot	45564	7.27	15202	6.41	50572.51	7.09	22968.96
Bellary	57628	9.20	34096	14.37	73198.02	10.27	46326.74
Chengalpattu	7030	1.12	3575	1.51	8735.27	1.23	5683.07
Chittoor	12991	2.07	5271	2.22	14224.00	2.00	6338.59
Coimbatore	10755	1.72	6473	2.73	13511.17	1.90	9003.26
Cuddappah	40301	6.43	13657	5.76	42559.52	5.97	17547.71
Ganjam	9172	1.46	4035	1.70	17653.15	2.48	3065.24
East Godavari	4657	0.74	1567	0.66	5202.10	0.73	1632.05
West Godavari	16195	2.59	5472	2.31	11309.26	1.59	4233.63
Guntur	51016	8.15	26455	11.15	50326.85	7.06	34046.14
Kistna	7502	1.20	6295	2.65	12119.78	1.70	8470.60
Kurnool	48834	7.80	20556	8.67	60583.49	8.50	25562.60
Madura	18743	2.99	8226	3.47	17736.38	2.49	6748.84
Nellore	19444	3.10	10027	4.23	19292.40	2.71	11497.05
Nilgiris	162	0.03	46	0.02	765.49	0.11	27.29
Ramnad	706	0.11	476	0.20	780.07	0.11	573.34
Salem	27812	4.44	7115	3.00	29526.39	4.14	9456.77
South Kanara	25048	4.00	1987	0.84	29922.04	4.20	3228.78
Tanjore	9552	1.53	965	0.41	9771.00	1.37	980.00
Tinnevelly	6404	1.02	3224	1.36	9196.57	1.29	4389.83
Trichinopoly	27227	4.35	4096	1.73	29370.16	4.12	6882.31
Vizagappatnam	1745	0.28	931	0.39	1875.93	0.26	1215.05
Total	626340	100.00	237227	100.00	712901.40	100.00	342620.49

Non-Brahmin Movement of Justice Party and Dalits

In the beginning of the twentieth century, an upper caste anti Brahmin political movement emerged in the name of Justice Party. Socially vertical castes of bankers, landlords, the village officials, leadership of a socially heterogeneous clientage group were dominant members in this movement. The dominant caste national Congress leaders also understood the supra local structure to exploit the temple land and its economy.⁶⁵ However, fewer members of non-Brahmins gained from the temple economy, though, this

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GO No 2778L, Public Works and Labour Department, dated 5th November, 1928; GO No 3218L, Public Works and Labour Department dated 21st December, 1931, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai

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movement played a pivotal role to intervene in the temple administration and its landed tenant rights were captured by this non-Brahmin movement.

The Government of India Act 1919, known as *Montagu Chelmsford Reforms*, which provided for elected provincial council with jurisdiction over specified areas. In 1926, it led to the formation of Hindu religious and charitable endowments department (HRCE) and at the same time, the Justice party was in power and the HRCE of Madras Act II of 1927 was passed by the MLC. The Act was promulgated for tightening state control over temples and supervision under the central board of commissioners appointed by the government and this committee also appointed area committees to govern the temple economy.⁶⁶

At the same time, these representations had made a significant success in terms of abolition of slavery and the bringing of the conditional assignment of lands.⁶⁷ When the Justice party emerged victorious in the elections in 1920 and formed its ministry in 1920-23, this party of non-Brahmin upper caste Shudras of Nairs, Naidus, Mudaliyars and Pillais dominated the possession of temple lands. Though Dalit leader MC Raja was a prominent leader then, he could not win ritual rights and economic rights of land. However, the Justice minister Panagal Raja was in charge of the religious endowments committee and his relatives dominated and took control of the temples and its property.⁶⁸

During this period, the self-respect movement of E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar), organised many conferences from 1928 to 1931. He carried out socio-political action programmes to condemn the theory of superiority, inferiority, abolish untouchability, make members of all communities as priests, remove caste suffix from personal names and oppose holy texts of Hinduism. At the same time, Periyar, who led temple entry movement in Kerala, however did not do the same in Tamil Nadu, because most of the temple trustees were non-Brahmin upper strata Shudhras, of Nattukottai Chettiyars (bankers of Tamil Nadu) and landlord Mudaliyars, who supported his party financially in Tamil Nadu.⁶⁹ Further, the relatives of the trustees benefitted in temple land lease, but Dalits were not included as tenants, they were only cultivators in this temple land. Dalits migrated from Tamil country to Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Dutch East Indies to work in companies and paddy fields of colonial settlers.⁷⁰

The Dalits earned income and came to their home country, purchased agrarian land; however, these lands were usurped from them by caste Hindus. Further, Dalits were non-cooperative with Justice Party as there was no tangible justice to downtrodden Dalits. Therefore, Dalits representatives demanded to remove the justice party leader Sir P.T. Thiagaraya Chettiar. At the same time, Dalits were non-cooperative with

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The Hindu, 10th July, 1924

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C.J.Baker, Article on temples and political development, entitled books, "South India: Political Institutions and Political Change 1880-1940"

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Nirmala Devi.K, "History of Hindu religious endowments in Andhra Pradesh," Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 1998.

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Eugene F. Irschick, "Order and disorder in colonial south India," Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1989), pp. 459-492, Cambridge University Press.

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D. Kumar, "Caste and landlessness in south India: Comparative studies in society and history, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Apr., 1962), pp. 337-363, Cambridge University Press

Congress movement, because the Congress was under the semi-feudal leaders, who did not support to redress Dalits' socio-economic problems. Mr. Swamy Sagajananda and MC Raja were advocating strongly that just as Congress viewed the importance of promoting khadi cloth as a means to achieve Swaraj, it should also focus on eradicating untouchability.⁷¹ Further, the Hindu religious endowment Act 1927, passed with 10 amendments, tried to free the temple institutions from corrupt trustees and appoint executive officers to manage the temples; however, the temples properties were continuously controlled by the hereditary trustees of privileged caste, and Dalits were tillers of the land, not tenants of the temple.⁷²

Conclusion

The right to own land, which had hitherto been determined by birth, now came to be determined by one's ability to pay tax in colonial Tamil Nadu. The Brahmins, Vellalas and Mudalis who inherited land based on their tag of privileged castes, continued to dominate. The British colonial government chose not to involve with the Indian village system too much. However, the intention of the British was to establish their supremacy asserting their power. They started ruling India, introduced revenue system under the board of revenue, and administered the temple and its properties through the locally dominant and ritually privileged castes. The pre-colonial period *kaniyatchi* holder became *Zamindar*, *Jagirdar Mirasi*, and *Muttadars*, thus recognising the birth of the new land-holders caste.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the colonial government did not focus on temple administration; however, they received revenue through the Zamindars and Mirasis. Later, the Britishers introduced many changes in the revenue policies such as village lease system, *dittum*, *Dharkast* (assignment of newly occupied land) system. The share in production was divided between the state, and mirasi. *melvaram* (upper share) and *kudivaram* was *share cropping tenancy* to be shared between mirasi and cultivator. The state share was swatantram. In the colonial period, land holders from Brahmin and Satshudra Vellala castes became Dubhasis to Britishers and they continued to possess the same traditional caste and economic rights. The non-privileged Shudras regained economic rights of land ownership within the British revenue system. They had played a vital role in temple politics to attain the ritual and economic rights. But, Dalits were denied ownership to land and they remained as workers in the temple fields, besides working in the caste landlords' fields as well as at their homes. The works of the Christian missionaries to rehabilitate the Dalits through land ownership and their forceful arguments at London, and a handful of Indian political leaders arguing in favour of assigning land to the Dalits along with the J.H.A Tremenhere Commission report were instrumental in getting the Panchama land for the Dalits. However, their lands were infertile waste lands; therefore, the Dalits though were literally land owners did not attain prosperity in life in an unchanged traditional society.

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Prof.P Srinivasan, "Adi Dravidar Punar vazhvum, Thavathiru Swami. A.S.Sagajanandavum", *Mangai Pathipagam*, 2001

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Prof.P Srinivasan, "Adi Dravidar Punar vazhvum, Thavathiru Swami. A.S.Sagajanandavum", *Mangai Pathipagam*, 2001