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978-0-521-04777-7 - The Devs of Cincvad: A Lineage and the State in Maharashtra

Laurence W. Preston

Excerpt

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Introduction: an inamdar lineage in Indian history

The opportunity afforded me of visiting the city of Poona, with the embassy of 1800, I eagerly embraced, to obtain information respecting an extraordinary family, which enjoys the distinction of an hereditary incarnation of the divinity, from father to son; and the following is the result of my researches.¹

So Captain Edward Moor begins the first English account of the Devs of Cincvad, a brahman lineage of Maharashtra that is the subject of this book. By any standard the Devs were unique and visit to Cincvad, a village some 15 kilometers north-west of the Maratha capital Pune (see Figure 1), was considered worthwhile. They were descended from Moroba Gosavi, a seventeenth-century saint famed in Maharashtra for his devotions to Ganesh, that ubiquitous elephant-headed deity so popular in western India. Like a hereditary office or dignity, the senior descendant of the saint was considered a manifestation of the deity; he was *the* Dev of Cincvad (the surname Dev meaning ‘god’.) The lineage was wealthy, having rights over many *inām* (‘rent-free’) villages near Pune, which encompassed some of the best lands in upland Maharashtra. In addition, the Devs coined their own rupees, collected duties from trade in and out of Pune, and received a variety of state allowances. Moreover, the political elite of the Maratha state – starting with the kings, descendants of Shivaji, and continuing under their powerful hereditary ministers, the Peshvas – held the Dev and his kin in great esteem.

With his orientalist and antiquarian inclinations, Captain Moor produced an insightful description of the Devs as they flourished under the Marathas.² Several other British travelers followed his lead in the

¹ Edward Moor, ‘Account of an Hereditary Living Deity, To Whom Devotion is Paid by the Bramins of Poona and its Neighbourhood,’ *Asiatick Researches*, 7 (1801), 383. This is the Calcutta edition, which is cited throughout this study. The London edition, under the title *Asiatic Researches* (same volume and date), has Moor’s article on pp. 381–95 with slight variations of pagination, punctuation and printing. The London edition of this journal has recently been reprinted.

² Moor (1771–1848) authored such forgotten works as *Hindu Pantheon* (1810) and *Suffolk Words and Phrases* (1823) among others. For his life see *Dictionary of National Biography*, XIII, 781–82.

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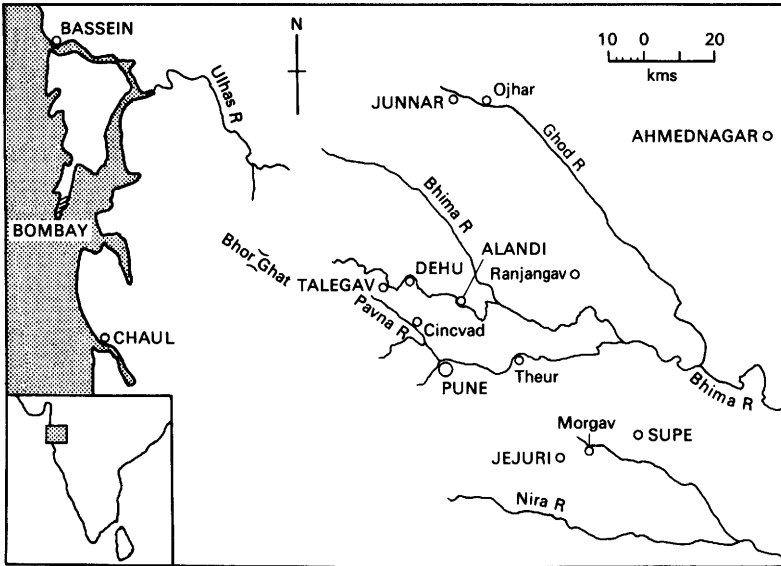
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Figure 1. Pune region

first quarter of the nineteenth century. In fact, Cincvad was second only to the nearby Karle Buddhist caves as an *en route* tourist attraction for those who ascended the Bhor *ghāt* (pass), from Bombay to catch a glimpse of the last Peshva. The popular travel writer Lord Valentia made his observations on the ‘reigning deity’ at Cincvad.³ Maria Graham (later Callcott), world traveler and very much a Regency lady of letters, passed by Cincvad and left her incisive impressions.⁴ Her London acquaintance Sir James Mackintosh – jurist, philosopher, savant, friend of Malthus and many other luminaries, rival of Coleridge – similarly found the Devs of sufficient note to deserve a visit.⁵ William Henry Sykes, known for his statistical and descriptive accounts of the Deccan

³ *Voyages and Travels to India*, 3 vols. (London, 1809), pp. 151–9. For biographical details on George Annesley Mountnorris, Lord Valentia (1770–1844) see C. E. Buckland, *Dictionary of Indian Biography* (London, 1906), pp. 433–44.

⁴ *Journal of a Residence in India* (Edinburgh, 1813), pp. 70–3. For Maria Graham (1785–1842) see *Dictionary of National Biography*, iii, 710 (listed under Callcott). She was the author of the enduring children’s classic *Little Arthur’s History of England* (1835).

⁵ See his diary entries quoted in Robert James Mackintosh, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir James Mackintosh*, 2 vols. (London, 1835), I, 275–6, 456–7, 465. For a slightly less sanctifying biography of Mackintosh (1765–1832) see *Dictionary of National Biography*, xii, 617–21.

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and later a director and chairman of the East India Company, made inquiries into the lineage's semi-mythological origins.⁶

After a cursory inspection of Cincvad's main temple, with its shrines to the *samādhis* ('death and sanctification') of Moroba Gosavi and subsequent Devs of Cincvad, most visitors sought out the then current Dev of Cincvad for an interview.⁷ Somewhat hidden in a maze of streets was the Dev's *vādā* (mansion). Moor describes this building as 'an extensive walled enclosure' with 'a fortified gateway.'⁸ Maria Graham saw it as simply 'an enormous pile of buildings, without any kind of elegance,' furthermore, it was 'dirty, and every window was crowded with sleek well-fed Bramins, who doubtless take great care of the Deo's revenues.'⁹ With its tall, blank, brick walls, the military-like descriptions of the vada are particularly apt. So also is Maria Graham's impression of the vada as a center of administration. The mansion was the Devs' headquarters; from there they administered their extensive landed estates and other revenues. The great vadas of Maharashtra are still today a conspicuous feature of the country's villages and towns. Interesting as a form of domestic architecture, the vada also vividly and concretely expresses the importance of the landed lineage in Maharashtrian society. Although the early nineteenth-century British travelers visited the Dev because he was a religious curiosity, in effect they were encountering a powerful representative of the landholding elite in preconquest Indian society.¹⁰

All the early British tourists made their visits to Cincvad in the last phase of independent Maratha rule. The two- or three-day journey from Bombay to Pune, followed by a pleasurable stay with the British resident to the Peshva's court, would be rewarded with some exciting tales of a formerly great empire. Since at least 1803 and the Treaty of Bassein the Peshva had been a helpless ally of the British. A dynasty that had rivaled the imperialists for the empire of India then slid into a 15-year decadence, characterized by unceasing political intrigue, that ended in military débâcle in 1817–18.¹¹ With the conquest of the Marathas,

⁶ 'An Account of the Origin of the Living God at the Village of Chinchore, near Poona,' *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay*, 3 (1823, rpt. 1877), 69–78. For the life of Sykes (1790–1872) see *Dictionary of National Biography*, ix, 258. His observations on Cincvad date between 1817 and 1818.

⁷ Graham, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 72 for a description of the temple and its ceremonies.

⁸ Moor, 'Hereditary Living Deity', p. 394.

⁹ Graham, *Journal of a Residence*, p. 71.

¹⁰ See also the comments of Frank Perlin, 'Of White Whale and Countrymen in the Eighteenth-century Maratha Deccan,' *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 5 (1978), 183.

¹¹ The most reliable history of the Marathas is Govind Sakharam Sardesai, *New History of the Marathas*, 3 vols. (Bombay, 1946–8), which is written from published Marathi

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British control of India was at last undisputed, and their rule entered a new era where imperial administration largely replaced imperial conquest.

Mundane matters of administration, the work of the new government, also replaced the orientalist fascination for the traditional society.¹² Being just one of the many landed lineages now subject to the British, and not one that was a political or military threat, the Devs were left to adapt to the changed circumstances as best they could. At first they were almost ignored, even by the tourists. Slowly, however, the British became very much involved with their privileged subjects at Cincvad, though less for the supposed divinity of the Dev than for his immunity to government's revenue demands. This culminated in the 1850s when the Inam Commission was established to determine the validity of all rent-free tenures. This detailed scrutiny was short-lived. It ended with the demise of the East India Company following the Indian Mutiny (1857–9) when the British became convinced they should not further test the loyalty of what was considered India's 'native aristocracy.'

The Inam Commission, which became the focus of a sustained criticism during and after the Mutiny, was accused of renegeing on guarantees of security given at the conquest to the landholders of western India. Thus, or so the arguments went, the British had antagonized and threatened those within Indian society who were most likely to have acceded wholeheartedly to the new security of Company rule. Such critics of the Inam Commission and the East India Company pointed to the views of several past luminaries of the Company's administration, notably Sir John Malcolm, to prove that the Inam Commission's policies were simultaneously destroying the fabric of Indian society and the basis of British conquest in India.¹³

Within the general British self-criticism on the nature of their rule in

documents though without citation. This work does not completely replace the dry elegance of James Grant Duff, *A History of the Mahrattas*, 3 vols. (London, 1826), which has the strength of being written by a contemporary participant in the overthrow of the Peshva. For a competent narrative of British penetration of the Marathas, see R. D. Choksey, *A History of British Diplomacy at the Court of the Peshwas* (Pune, 1951).

¹² For the Bombay Presidency, 1817–60, see Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Social Policy and Social Change in Western India, 1817–30* (London, 1957); Ravinder Kumar, *Western India in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1972); for certain aspects of the latter part of the pre-Mutiny period see Christine Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India* (London, 1972). Perhaps surprisingly, no satisfactory history of the Bombay Presidency's civil administration has yet been written.

¹³ See, for example, Robert Knight, *The Inam Commission Unmasked* (London, 1859). Knight was the crusading editor of the *Bombay Times*. Typical views of Sir John Malcolm can be found in John Malcolm, *Government of India* (London, 1833).

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India in the aftermath of the Mutiny, a lively pamphlet and newspaper debate arose that either tried to link the Inam Commission with the Mutiny or, conversely, show that there was no connection whatsoever. This 'paper war' ranged wide and furious in both India and England; eventually, debates about the activities of the commission, especially the alleged resurrections of 'freehold' property, reached even Parliament.¹⁴ These after-the-fact controversies, though important as indicative of the changing ideologies of foreign rule in India, do rather less to explain the impact of British pre-Mutiny policies on the *ināmdārs* of the Deccan. While occasionally noting the accusations of the Inam Commission's later critics, this study therefore concentrates on the effect of British alienated revenue policy as it impinged on those people who were the object of East India Company legislation.

The years between the conquest of the Deccan and the end of the Company's administration can be characterized as a time when imperial rule gradually replaced a more traditional and Indian style of government. Throughout this period the British sought to understand the nature and authority of preconquest dynasties. Even in the 1850s the Company's officers grappled with the facts of the old order as they attempted to comprehend the rights and immunities held by lineages such as the Devs. The last generation of Company officers instituted, through the Inam Commission, a social and economic policy that perhaps paradoxically attempted to derive its justification from the traditional Indian state's paramount authority over its landed feudatories.¹⁵ Reversing their initial policy of noninterference in the affairs of landed lineages, the British then sought to control the social, economic and legal lives of India's privileged landholding elite. Very soon, however, the policy of the new rulers became arbitrary and high-handed. When exercising the state's authority within the Indian cultural milieu, the British were under fewer, and different, social and political restraints than their Indian predecessors. But this could not last, and it is no coincidence that the transitional period of British rule in India ended climactically: violent revolt and murmurs of rebellion produced the first political movements directed against the presumptions of the imperialists.

It was a time of great change, and the overriding theme of this book is to see how one Indian lineage fared in the transition from indigenous to

¹⁴ Especially in the 'Reports of the Select Committee . . . Colonisation and Settlement of India,' *Parliamentary Papers* 1857–8. vii (pt. 1); vii (pt. 2).

¹⁵ Laurence W. Preston, 'The Authority of the State in Western India, 1818–1857,' in *City, Countryside and Society in Maharashtra*, ed. D. W. Attwood, Milton Israel and N. K. Wagle (Toronto, 1987).

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foreign rule. To develop this theme the following chapters are organized around the conquest. Part One concerns the Devs under the Marathas; Part Two describes their dealings with the new government. It is not my intention merely to assess the influence of the British on the traditional world. Nor is the Maratha period used simply as an introductory backdrop for the doings of the British. Here I want to explore the issues that most concerned the lineage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and further, how these issues affected its relations with both the old and new governments.

From such a perspective many of what have been considered the important historical themes of the period are passed over. The politics and wars of the Marathas are only peripherally mentioned. Politics were never far from the affairs and interests of the Devs; but clearly the lineage was not a major actor in the convoluted political history of the Marathas. British land policies, to cite a postconquest example, are perhaps given surprisingly little attention. The Devs had their own system for obtaining the land revenue of their inam villages that was quite independent of British modes of revenue assessment and collection. Consider an even more direct postconquest case. The Bombay–Pune railway, the first through-line in western India, was opened in 1858 during the height of the inam inquiries. This was surely one of the most significant events of the time; what is more, the railway ran right through Cincvad village. Apart from the possibility of negotiations for right of way, a tantalizing topic for which I have no sources, the new technology had little impact on the Devs. Perhaps they could go more quickly to Pune or Bombay to argue with the Inam Commissioners. But notwithstanding the effect of improved communications on state decision making, the issues that were being fought over in Pune and Bombay were not new.

It is my contention that within the lineage there existed certain constant considerations and problems that ordered its social and economic activities. This ‘internal history’ of the Devs – primarily involving questions of inheritance and status – necessitated strategies to deal with any governing power that sought to exert influence over the lineage’s affairs. Of course, political change required adaptation to many differing circumstances. This the Devs successfully did. New solutions and strategies were produced for often old problems. Therefore, I seek to explore the continuities of Indian society that adapt to and transcend periods of political change. Perhaps, too, the present work starts to explore the roots of Indian social conservatism. There can be few better examples of the conservative ethos in India than a brahman, rural-based lineage whose social renown and economic status derived

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from its religiosity. But such a conservatism is squarely based on what is constant, yet manifoldly adaptive in Indian history: the family and the lineage.

Such essential social structures remain relatively neglected topics in the historiography of early modern and modern India. Recently, one caste has been examined in terms of the bilateral kinship relations of its constituent families with a view to exploring the interrelations between caste and social change.¹⁶ A history of one village in the British period has been written largely from the perspective of its landholding lineages.¹⁷ A landed and political caste grouping, the Rajputs, has been analyzed in a broad kind of evolutionist historicism.¹⁸ Even with the lead of these varied and valuable studies, few if any major works on individual Indian lineages have been produced. Moreover, examples are completely wanting in Indian history where one lineage is used as a vehicle to explore aspects of its contemporary history. Thus, a history of the Devs of Cincvad not only points to the importance of lineage as an institution, but a new perspective on little-examined areas of the Indian past necessarily follows.

Outside of South Asia many useful histories have been written that use one family or one lineage as an instrument for a deeper understanding of a past society. Economic history especially has been concerned with the all pervading institution of the family. Thus, the study of the great landed families of England has emerged from a purely antiquarian interest in manorial records and such to produce economic histories of much worth. Characteristically, these are attended with much diligent and original work in difficult primary sources.¹⁹ In a completely different context, though with many similarities of approach, method and sources, one Mexican family and its estate has been convincingly used to study the transition from colonial rule to independence.²⁰ Chinese history, to cite an Asian example, has been enriched with a monograph detailing two centuries of one lineage's economic and cultural activities on the frontier of Chinese civilization, in Taiwan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²¹ The present work seeks to contribute to the growing literature that sees family and lineage as fundamental institutions of the past.

¹⁶ Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Social History of an Indian Caste* (Berkeley, 1978).

¹⁷ Tom G. Kessinger, *Vilyatpur, 1848–1968* (Berkeley, 1974).

¹⁸ Richard G. Fox, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule* (Berkeley, 1974).

¹⁹ For example, J. M. W. Bean, *The Estates of the Percy Family, 1416–1537* (London, 1958); and Eric Richards, *The Leviathan of Wealth* (London, 1973) for a nineteenth-century case.

²⁰ Charles H. Harris, *A Mexican Family Empire* (Austin, 1975).

²¹ Johanna Menzel Meskill, *A Chinese Pioneer Family* (Princeton, 1977).

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This assumption on the worth of lineage history has, however, not been without its critics. Writing of Leonard's *Social History of an Indian Caste*, one reviewer has questioned the fusion of the a-historical 'structural-functionalism' of social anthropology with historical research of high empirical content but far too restricted a focus. In consequence, 'the family study may not be the best place from which to develop an understanding [of the general social process]. While it may indeed provide a valuable testing ground for existing theories of change, it is difficult to see how it can generate new hypotheses.'²² In short, the social history of India should not, and cannot, be written from methodologically questionable case studies.

Such an argument would be persuasive if Indian social history were not so sorely lacking in detailed studies that use vernacular sources together with the more well-known imperial documentation. As will become clear in the following chapters, the organization and subject matter of much of the neglected archival material in India concerns place and person (whether individual, lineage or caste). The land, revenue, rights and inheritance – these were the things that occupied Indians and their rulers. These can be traced through much of the archival material, especially the vernacular but also to an extent in the English sources, by simply concentrating on selected places and people. Indian social history, unlike European or American history, does not have a corpus of local and case studies on the basic concerns of the people and the state upon which to draw for comparative and analytic purposes.²³ The underlying themes of Indian history are to be found in studying essential units of Indian society; the virgin sources for such an undertaking dictate the use of the case study. We need not further debate whether theory or empiricism comes first in social history. But surely one cannot be had without the other.

One further reservation about imposing any theory of 'social process' on early modern India needs to be voiced. Far too often, theory has been distilled from the observations, sometimes brilliant and sometimes misplaced, of British civil servants. The latter were, in the main, practical men. Often, therefore, observations and theory became mixed with and part of official policy. By relying overly much on imperial sources, Indian social history can become a history of nineteenth-century ideas on how to rule India. The historian who tackles Indian social institutions often lives in the shadows of the British administra-

²² David Washbrook, *Pacific Affairs*, 52 (1979–80), 736.

²³ A fundamental work of social history, such as George C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941), could not be written for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India so limited is the work in the relevant primary sources.

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tion; however, efforts must be made to understand the indigenous categories of social organization.²⁴

I therefore base this study squarely on the belief that Indian society itself recognizes the enduring social significance of the lineage. This has been particularly so in Maratha society. The great political families of Maharashtra were the subject of traditional biographies and histories. These *kaiphiyats* were further developed after the conquest when the British desired information on their landed feudatories.²⁵ Apparently, these narrative accounts, which often cover more than a century and are accompanied by genealogies, were compiled from both oral tradition and documentary sources. However done, the British had no difficulty in obtaining the information. The great families of Maharashtra knew their own history. Similarly, in this century certain brahman lineages (or at least those who share the same surname) have produced family histories, *kulvrttānta*, which are notable for their extreme detail on divisions within the lineage, connections between lines of descent (real or imagined), and the identity and personal details of all known kin.²⁶ These modern products, meant for the lineages' own self-congratulation, have been seen as deriving from the Maratha historical tradition and also as caste response to contemporary socio-economic threats.²⁷ While such explanations are not without relevance, unilineal descent, the means by which lineages are structured, ensures a strong sense of genealogy. The *kulvrttānta* form is a reflection of the corporate unity of the kin; for the lineage no other motivation is needed to record its pedigree.

Several important topics in Indian history emerge from exploring the history of the Devs of Cincvad. Perhaps the most prominent, developed

²⁴ Cf. Burton Stein, 'Idiom and Ideology in Early Nineteenth Century South India,' in *Rural India: Land, Power and Society Under British Rule*, ed. Peter Robb (London, 1983), pp. 23–58.

²⁵ For the Maratha historical tradition see Shankar Gopal Tulpule, *Classical Marathi Literature* (Wiesbaden, 1979), pp. 442–8. For examples of *kaiphiyats* produced in the early British period see Ganesh Chimmaji Vad, Purshotam Vishram Mawjee and D. B. Parasins, *Kaiphiyats, Yadis, & c.* (Pune, 1908); and Khanderav Anandrav Gaykvad, ed., *Karvir sardaramcya kaiphiyati (Kolhapur, 1971)*. G. S. Sardesai, *Historical Genealogies* (Bombay, 1957) contains details (in Marathi) of most of the important lineages of Maharashtra plus references to published documentary sources that are often produced in the form of collections from family archives.

²⁶ Maureen L. P. Patterson, 'Chitpavan Brahman Family Histories: Sources for a Study of Social Structure and Social Change in Maharashtra,' in *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, ed. Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn (Chicago, 1968), pp. 397–411. A more scholarly type of family history also exists in contemporary Maharashtra: see, for example, Vasudev Vaman Khare, *Himmatbahadhar Cavhan gharanyaca itihās* (Kolhapur, 1967).

²⁷ Patterson 'Family Histories', pp. 401–2, 409–10.

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in varying ways in the following chapters, is an analysis of alienated – that is, ‘rent-free’ – tenures. Such Anglicisms are used to gloss the vernacular term inam. Coming into Indian languages from Arabic through Persian, this word can have many varying technical usages. However, the basic concept is straightforward: any right could be held in inam, that is, the state alienated an item of potential revenue to the holder of a right. Land, of course, was the most common right held in inam.²⁸ A field in a village could be granted to a cultivator or anyone else and thereafter its revenue and produce were not subject to the state’s fiscal demands. Generally, such ‘village land inams’ (as I refer to them) were deducted from the total assessment before the net revenue of a village was forwarded to government. An entire village could also be held in inam (here called a ‘whole village inam’). In such instances the inamdar (holder of inam), simply took the place of the state and collected village revenues for his own purposes. Although land was the most coveted rent-free grant, nearly any state revenues could be similarly alienated. The Devs of Cincvad, for example, held in inam the internal transit duties of the region encompassing their villages.

While inam was most usually a way of characterising the conditions upon which a land tenure was held, it was also used to designate a specific type of tenure. In this technical sense inam was a personal grant made through the favor of the state and without any obvious, contractual conditions placed upon the holding of the revenue so alienated. Various village tenures were considered to be subcategories of inam.²⁹ Perhaps the most notable in the lives of the Devs was *devasthān*, that is, inam granted to a deity (in a juridical sense) and used for the support of a temple and its proprietors. Whatever the technical designation and character of an alienated tenure – and these were subjects of near-constant litigation – the effect of a grant in inam was the same. Village lands or whole villages were held outside the state’s central revenue administration and thus largely, though never wholly outside of government control.

²⁸ Recent scholarship on alienated tenures includes Eric Stokes, ‘Privileged Land Tenure in Village India in the Early Nineteenth Century,’ in his *The Peasant and the Raj* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 46–62 concerning village land inams throughout India; for South India see Robert Eric Frykenberg, ‘The Silent Settlement in South India, 1793–1853: An Analysis of the Role of Inams in the Rise of the Indian Imperial System,’ in *Land Tenure and Peasant in South Asia* (New Delhi, 1977), pp. 37–53; Burton Stein, “‘Privileged Landholding’: The Concept Stretched to Cover the Case,” in *ibid.*, pp. 67–77. All three articles concentrate almost solely on the technical aspects of inam as recorded in British sources.

²⁹ H. H. Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms* (1855, rpt. Delhi, 1968), pp. 217–18 for a partial list of village inam tenures.