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CHAPTER I

Politics and the Province: the Justice Party

In December 1920, general elections in the provinces inaugurated a new constitution for the Government of India. It created a new all-India Legislative Assembly at Delhi and made other changes in the central Government, but it was in the provinces that it introduced the most important changes. In the Madras Presidency and in the other British provinces, the constitution laid down a scheme of 'dyarchy' or dual rule. For the next sixteen years the Governor in Council shared the responsibility for provincial government with three Indian ministers. The ministers were selected from among the members of a new Legislative Council and they were responsible to it. An electorate of over a million people selected most of the 123 members of the new legislature. In many ways, this constitution marked a big change in India's political history. Since 1861 there had been Legislative Councils in the provinces, but never one which was this large, which was directly elected, and which possessed such wide powers. There had never before been responsible Indian ministers. Although many Indian politicians loudly dismissed the new constitution as inadequate, others showed that they understood its importance. It provided opportunities for Indians to participate in the administration of the province. In particular, the new legislature provided for the first time an arena for provincial politics.

The reform of the constitution was one of the main features of a quinquennium which transformed politics in the Madras Presidency. Firstly, the Home Rule agitations of 1914–17 had thrust Madras into the forefront of all-India politics. They were more determined than previous agitations, and they attracted considerable support in the up-country areas of the province. Secondly, a new political party had emerged during the negotiations over the constitutional reforms. This Justice party was to dominate politics in the region for much of the next two decades. Thirdly, Madrassis both from the provincial capital and from the hinterland came forward to contribute to the Congress' first nation-wide agitation in 1921–2. These events, and the opportunities provided by the reforms, cast provincial politics in a new mould.

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Of course these events were not unique to Madras. The Home Rule Leagues, the agitations over reform, the Government of India Act and the Non-co-operation campaign of 1921–2 were all-India affairs. But many contemporary observers felt that the contrast between the events of these years and what had gone before was more marked in Madras than in other provinces. Previously, provincial politics in Madras had not been so lively. The Congress in Madras had not won the support that it had in the other two presidencies. The Government of Madras had not had to deal with provincial agitations or provincial political movements of any weight, and it had not had to arbitrate in political disputes of a provincial scale. Indeed Madras had become famous for its conservatism and for its political calm.

What then had made the Madras Presidency such a sleepy backwater in the later nineteenth century and why had it not remained so? What had led up to the constitutional reforms and the other changes of the years 1916–22? The answers to these questions provide the background to the development of provincial politics in the 1920s and 1930s.

TOWARDS DYARCHY: SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT IN THE SOUTH

The British had not inherited a province in south India, they had created one. In much of north India they had been able to take over the administrative units, the machinery and even the personnel of the Mughal government, and to use them as the foundations of their own rule. In the south, they did not start with such advantages. Over the centuries, south India had seen many sophisticated kingdoms, but most of them were ephemeral and all of them were small. The region had never been drawn together as a political unit. The Vijayanagar kings had brought the whole of the south under a single government, but they had concentrated their energies on building a rampart against the Muslim north rather than integrating the varied parts of their empire. The Madras Presidency, then, was an artefact of British rule, put together piece by piece over forty years, and dismembered much more rapidly once its makers had departed. Not surprisingly the British found it was an extremely diverse and disparate province which was very difficult to govern as a unit.

It was, to begin with, by far the largest of the provinces of British India. It contained half the coastline of the entire subcontinent, it

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spanned both the east and the west of the peninsula, and it stretched from Cape Cormorin to the hills of Orissa. Climate and economic conditions differed widely between the shifting deserts of the far south and the steamy rain forests of the Western Ghats, and between the rich alluvial deltas of the major rivers and the barren uplands on the fringes of the Deccan.[1] The population, which reached 41,405,404 in 1921[2] contained a maze of different peoples and cultures. Of course none of the provinces was entirely homogenous, and indeed some of the disunities which marked other provinces were absent from Madras. The vast majority of the population of the southern province was Hindu. In 1921 only 3·2 per cent was Christian and 6·7 per cent Muslim,[3] and there was rarely any conflict between faiths. The bulk of the population spoke one of two mother-tongues. Forty-one per cent spoke Tamil and lived mostly in the districts to the south of the capital, Madras City, and 38 per cent spoke Telugu and lived mostly in the districts to the north.[4]

Yet Madras lacked other characteristics which helped lend unity to other regions of the subcontinent. Large agriculturist communities inhabited the rural areas of both northern and western India and helped to knit these regions together through kin ties, shared festivals and common customs. The Ganga acted as the one important trade route across the entire north Indian plain. The temples along its banks were centres of pilgrimage and worship for a large hinterland. The towns along its banks played a large role in the commercial life of the neighbouring rural areas. In the west and the east, Bombay City and Calcutta acted as true capitals of their regions. Each handled over 90 per cent of the foreign trade of its province and each became the most important centre of education, industry and culture in its region. The commercial networks which spread out from these capitals – Bengal had extensive cash-cropping and internal trade by the early nineteenth century, Bombay developed as the centre of the Indian cotton industry soon after – gave a clear focus to the economic life of their hinterlands.

[1] For descriptions of the province and its great variety, see E. Thurston, *The Madras Presidency with Mysore, Coorg and the Associated States* (Cambridge, 1913); O. H. K. Spate and A. T. A. Learmouth, *India and Pakistan: a general and regional geography* (London, 1967), pp. 683–782; and the several volumes of the *Madras District Gazetteers*.

[2] *Census of India 1921*, vol. XIII, pt. 1, p. 9.

[3] *Census of India 1921*, vol. XIII, pt. 1, pp. 64–6.

[4] *Census of India 1921*, vol. XIII, pt. 1, pp. 139–40.

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In the south, conditions were very different. Settlement patterns and marriage customs had made the region a patchwork of different communities. In Tanjore district, for instance, at least nine different caste groups owned land. Although there was less fragmentation of this sort in the Telugu districts, the south had nothing to compare with the Kunbi, Jat and Rajput communities farther north. In northern India, exogamous marriages helped to spread family ties over a wide area. In the south, rural communities preferred endogamous marriages and confined their clans within very small circles.[5] A small group of Sengundars in Coimbatore, for instance, refused to marry their daughters outside the radius of three villages.[6] The 1891 Census in Madras set out to catalogue subcastes defined by interdining and intermarriage; it counted up to 25,000 before giving up and admitting that the list was far from complete.[7] Commerce and trade did little to help cement the villages together. Although they were hardly the self-sufficient republics beloved of the early anthropologists, the villages of the south cultivated mainly for their own consumption and sold what little surplus there was in the *sandai* or local market.

The disunity of the countryside showed up in the great variety of dress, diet and customs. Edgar Thurston's attempt to list the castes of the region and to describe their customs ran into seven vast and perplexing volumes, not only because there were so many castes, but also because the customs and habits of the different groups within any one caste were so varied.[8] In his account of local religion in the south, Bishop Whitehead noted that 'the number of different gods and goddesses worshipped all over the South is enormous and the variety of local customs almost infinite'. He added that 'often the deities worshipped in one village will be quite unknown in other villages five or six miles distant'.[9]

Towns did little to integrate the south. Indeed, the history and geography of the region had not encouraged the growth of important urban centres. The region did not produce the stuff of bulk trade, and

[5] F. J. Richards, 'Cross-cousin marriage in south India', *Man*, XCVII (1914); D. G. Mandelbaum, *Society in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1970), vol. I, pp. 156–7; L. Dumont, *Une Sous-Caste de l'Inde du Sud: organisation sociale et religion des Pramalai Kallar* (Paris and The Hague, 1957), pp. 12, 168.

[6] B. E. F. Beck, *Peasant Society in Konku: a study of right and left subcastes in South India* (Vancouver, 1972), p. 232.

[7] *Census of India 1891*, vol. XIII, pt. 1, index of castes.

[8] E. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 7 vols. (Madras, 1909).

[9] H. Whitehead, *Village Gods of South India* (Calcutta, 1921), pp. 12–13, 23.

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it did not have a natural trade route like the Ganga. There were no natural features, other than a few river crossings and one gap in the line of the Western Ghats, which encouraged settlement at crossroads for internal trade. In the case of foreign trade, the long coastline was dotted with many different harbours, none of which had outstanding merits; as shipping technology changed and as river mouths silted up, old harbours had been abandoned and new ones sought, and the coastline was littered with ancient port towns which had lapsed back into villages. In the absence of commercial impetus, towns had grown mainly as administrative and cultural centres. Yet successive kingdoms had chosen different capitals and had patronised different centres of religion and learning, and this again interrupted urban growth. By the early nineteenth century the Vijayanagar capital had been reclaimed by the jungle. The spot which the British built into the third city of the Indian empire had been nothing but a sandy strip of beach in the early seventeenth century.

The region had remained overwhelmingly agricultural, and urban growth had been slow and diffuse. As late as 1931, 86·4 per cent of the population still lived in villages. There were 350 towns but only four had populations of more than 100,000, and three-quarters of them contained less than 20,000.[10] Many of the towns possessed impressive temples but they did not serve as cultural centres for the immediate neighbourhood. The Brahmanical deities worshipped in these temples were very different from the numerous gods and goddesses of the village shrines. Villagers paid respect to the Brahmanical pantheon as well as to their local deities and often made pilgrimages to the major temple towns, but these towns attracted pilgrims from far and near and in no way acted as a focus for the shire in which they stood.[11]

Madras City did not dominate and thus to some extent unite her province in the manner of Calcutta or Bombay City. Only 40 per cent of the foreign trade of the Presidency passed through Madras City. By the early twentieth century Madras had two cotton mills, but the rest of her industry was either government works such as the mint, armoury and railway workshops, or cottage enterprises such as tanning and handloom weaving.[12] Until well into the twentieth century,

[10] *Census of India 1931*, vol. XIV, pt. 1, p. 73; pt. 2, pp. 10–16.

[11] See Whitehead, *Village Gods*; R. K. Das, *Temples of Tamilnad* (Bombay, 1964); N. Ramesan, *Temples and Legends of Andhra Pradesh* (Bombay, 1962).

[12] J. Dupuis, *Madras et le Nord du Coromandel: étude des conditions de la vie indienne dans une cadre geographique* (Paris, 1960), pp. 220–1, 493–8.

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Madras City was little more than the administrative centre of the region.

The completion of the rail network in the later nineteenth century began to impose some order on the chaos of trading patterns and on the haphazard growth of towns. A few railheads emerged as important trade entrepots. Railways and foreign trade also began to draw more goods out of the villages. New cash crops spread widely in some tracts. Cotton had been grown since the early nineteenth century; in the later part of the century tobacco and sugar were planted in the 'wet' tracts, those that were irrigated from the major rivers of the region, and in the early twentieth century the farming of groundnut increased dramatically in the 'dry' or unirrigated areas.[13] Yet only in the deltaic tracts, which were a small proportion of the province as a whole, did these developments cause significant change in urbanisation or in the relationship between countryside and town.[14] Elsewhere, the new crops were financed and marketed almost exactly as other crops were, and they were conveyed from village to town by itinerant commission agents who acted as insulation between the village and the wider economy.[15] None of the new crops had the same effect on the economic life and the economic unity of the region that cotton had had in western India. Groundnut, tobacco and most of the raw cotton were all produced for export. They did not form the staple for new industries in the region and they were taken straight from the field to the port with the minimum of processing. Industry grew very slowly. By 1921, less than 0.5 per cent of the population worked in factories.[16]

Although the British gathered the various bits of south India into one province, they could not easily make them function together as a unit. The resources at the disposal of the British at Fort St George (the site of the government offices in Madras City) were meagre indeed. The cadre of the Indian Civil Service (I.C.S.) stationed in the province numbered around 160.[17] In the early nineteenth century when they

[13] 1910–11: Net area cropped, 33,754,796 acres; cotton, 2,323,257 acres; oil-seeds, 2,414,684 acres; sugar, 94,879 acres; tobacco, 221,677 acres; *Agricultural Statistics of British India* (annual) for 1910–11, vol. I, pp. 244–55.

[14] N. G. Ranga, *Economic Organisation of Indian Villages*, vol. I (Bezwada, 1926); vol. II (Bombay, 1929).

[15] D. A. Washbrook, 'Country politics: Madras 1880–1930', *Modern Asian Studies*, VII, 3 (1973), 475–531.

[16] *Census of India 1921*, vol. XIII, pt. 1, p. 190.

[17] *Royal Commission on the Public Services in India.* Appendix vol. II *Minutes of Evidence taken in Madras*, pp. 1–10.

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were laying out the system of administration, their chief means of travel through the province were the horse and the bullock cart. Their predecessors had not left them much of a foundation on which to build a government. Faced with these disadvantages, they had little chance to overcome the fragmentary character of the region. In fact the disunity of the province overcame the British administration rather than vice versa.

The backbone of every provincial administration in the nineteenth century was its system for raising revenue from the land. The raising of revenue was the most important task of the provincial government and until the twentieth century land was the main source of revenue. As other functions of government developed, they tended to be built around the revenue system. In their first major experiment, the Madras administrators introduced the Bengal system of land settlement, in which the government dealt with zamindars or estate-holders. Government gave the zamindar a title to his estate in return for payment of a fixed sum of revenue each year. The system suited government since much of the burden of policing and administering the tracts within zamindari estates could be left to the zamindar, but the settlement worked badly in Madras and was soon abandoned as a general policy. Only a little over a quarter of the rural areas of the province, much of it in the Telugu coastal districts, remained under zamindari tenure. A small proportion of the rest was held under inam or preferential tenure. The beneficiaries of this tenure were mostly village officers, temples and charitable institutions. The rest of the province was settled under the ryotwari system.[18]

According to the theory of the ryotwari settlement, government assessed the revenue on each cultivated field. This assessment was adjusted every thirty years to take account of changes in prices, marketing opportunities, irrigation facilities and many other factors. The revenue demand was settled each year with each ryot or cultivator according to the extent of his holdings. The ryot could theoretically change the amount of land he cultivated from year to year. The system was widely heralded as a triumph for Ricardian principles since it maximised both justice for the cultivator and gain for the exchequer by cutting out all intermediaries between government and the tiller of the soil. It was also seen as a triumph of imperial administration.

[18] T. H. Beaglehole, *Thomas Munro and the Development of Administrative Policy in Madras 1792–1818: the origins of the Munro system* (Cambridge, 1966); D. Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India. Agricultural labour in the Madras Presidency during the nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 1965).

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The business of fixing and collecting the revenue in each of the twenty-four districts of the province fell to the Collector, who also acted as District Magistrate. It was a cheap and apparently successful system of governing the interior.[19]

But the theoretical nicety of the ryotwari settlement made it almost unworkable in practice. The administration of the region was in the end shaped more by the lacunae in the ryotwari system than by its Ricardian principles.[20]

The British simply did not have the resources to assess the revenue on each piece of land, taking into account the soil, rainfall, proximity of markets and many other factors. Nor did they have the facilities to check each year who held the land and how accurate the local land records were. They could not deal with each cultivator and, indeed, it was often difficult to sift the claims of many different people for various rights in a certain piece of land and to determine who the 'cultivator' was.[21] The ryotwari system had to be bent to suit different conditions in different areas of the province. Later on, this was to produce great anomalies in the system. By the early twentieth century there were eight million south Indians who rented land from the people who paid ryotwari revenue to the Madras Government; because these revenue-payers were, in theory, the actual cultivators of the soil, there was no place in law for any tenants underneath them; government and the courts stolidly refused to acknowledge that these eight million people existed.[22] The ryotwari system required in theory a wealth of information in the revenue records in order to make the settlement fair; in fact such sophistication was beyond the facilities of government, the records contained more fiction than fact, and the courts refused to accept them as evidence.[23]

Far more serious than such petty eccentricities was the way that the authority of government was undermined. For much of the nineteenth century, Fort St George seemed to have little control over the branches of its own administration in the districts. The Collector, who was the head of a district, was almost autonomous in his adminis-

[19] N. Mukherjee, *The Ryotwari System in Madras* (Calcutta, 1962).
[20] See the chapters on 'land revenue' in the several volumes of *Madras District Gazetteers.*
[21] N. Mukherjee and R. E. Frykenberg, 'The ryotwari system and social organisation in the Madras Presidency', in R. E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison, 1969), pp. 217–25.
[22] *Royal Commission on Agriculture in India.* Vol. III *Evidence taken in Madras and Coorg*, p. 292.
[23] S. Y. Krishnaswami, *Rural Problems in Madras: Monograph* (Madras, 1947), p. 65.

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tration and several Collectors behaved more like princelings than civil servants. As long as they forwarded the revenue to the capital, they were immune from too much pressure from their overlords.[24] Meanwhile, much of the real power in the district administration seeped down below the level of the Collector.

The Collector was the chief revenue officer and also the chief magistrate. If this were not enough, he was also burdened with responsibility for the police, for irrigation, for public works and for all other aspects of district administration. 'The Collector,' wrote one who had held the post, 'in fact with a jurisdiction larger in both area and population than the larger English counties, does the work undertaken in England by the Chief Constable and by the County and District Councils in addition to his revenue and magisterial work.'[25] The burden was patently too heavy and Collectors complained that they were little more than 'post offices'[26] for the vast amount of obligatory paper work. In most important matters they were utterly dependent on the information, advice and assistance furnished by their subordinates, and it was part of the folk-lore of the province that it was in these subordinate levels of the administration that the real power lay.

The Collector had a handful of Deputy and Assistant Collectors. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the rest of the administration was staffed mainly with Indians recruited in the district. Firstly, there was the staff of the Collectorate itself, and the tahsildars who were the link between the Collectorate and the countryside. Secondly, there were village officers. These were men who belonged to the villages and who stood at the point where government confronted rural society. In the early revenue surveys, the British relied heavily on information provided by the village officers. In day-to-day administration, the tahsildars and the sheristadars in the Collectorate controlled the records and the flow of information to their superiors. In the annual settlements of the revenue demand, the village officers did most of the work and the Collector or his assistants could make only a cursory check.[27]

The provincial administration housed a mosaic of little kingdoms.

[24] R. E. Frykenberg, *Guntur District 1788–1848; a history of local influence and central authority in south India* (Oxford, 1965).
[25] Sir Christopher Masterman papers SAS.
[26] G. O. 173 (Revenue) 20 Feb. 1902 MRO.
[27] For intimate descriptions of the revenue system at work see the papers of Sir Christopher Masterman SAS, and S. Wadsworth, 'Lo, the poor Indian', typescript memoir, especially pp. 120–32, 150–6 SAS.

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Yet this did not necessarily bother the rulers. The chief goals of the provincial government were to collect the revenue and to keep the peace. In these respects Madras consistently performed better than other provinces. This was largely due to the flexibility of the ryotwari administration. The tahsildars and village officers did a good job of collecting the revenue for they did not want to place in jeopardy a revenue system which allowed them great opportunities for power and profit. On the surface Madras looked calm and contented, yet this did not necessarily mean all was calm beneath. Most men of importance in the districts could gain some purchase within the loose framework of ryotwari administration, and with so much power residing at the lowest levels of government, disputes over matters of revenue and local administration were generally settled within the locality. Few bubbled up and ruffled the tranquillity on the surface.

When disputes or scandals did appear, they were generally dramatic. Occasionally Collectors began to behave exactly like Indian rajas and ignored the governmental hierarchy altogether. Then government was forced to intervene and bring them to heel. At times government was obliged to investigate the revenue service in a particular district, and with relentless certainty these investigations uncovered a tangle of conspiracy and corruption in the lower ranks of the services.[28] The new and far more efficient revenue surveys undertaken from the 1860s onwards revealed startling discrepancies in the original ones. Vast tracts of land had lain hidden and thus untaxed, and others could barely be recognised from their description in the revenue records.[29]

For the most part, however, it was the policy of the Madras Government to let sleeping dogs lie. Government rested lightly on the people

[28] The case described in R. E. Frykenberg, *Guntur District* is the most famous but far from the only one of its kind. See D. A. Washbrook, 'Political change in the Madras Presidency 1880–1921', Ph.D. thesis (Cambridge, 1973).

[29] For an example see W. Francis, *Nilgiri District Gazetteer* (Madras, 1908), vol. I, pp. 227–82; 'I say, as far as can be ascertained, for it is impossible to find out with accuracy the rates really paid for the several descriptions of land. In the first place, the areas are incorrect . . . So much dry land is entered as wet; so much wet as dry; there have been such continual adjustments and readjustments of the shist on the whole rented area; so many additions have been made to the joint-rent in the lump, which additions have afterwards been distributed on the fields, more with reference to the circumstance and position of the ryot than to the value of the fields.' Papers relating to survey and settlement of Godavari district 1870, *Selections from Madras Government Records*, vol. XXII, p. 18.

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