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0521570425 - The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India 1720–1800

Prasannan Parthasarathi

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The Transition to a Colonial Economy

According to popular belief, poverty and low standards of living have been characteristic of India for centuries. In a challenge to this view, Prasannan Parthasarathi demonstrates that, until the late eighteenth century, laboring groups in South India, those at the bottom of the social order, were actually in a powerful position, receiving incomes well above subsistence. The subsequent decline in their economic fortunes, the author asserts, was a process initiated towards the end of that century, with the rise of British colonial rule. Building on recent scholarly reinterpretations of eighteenth-century India, he examines the transformation of Indian society and its economy under British rule through the prism of the laboring classes, arguing that their treatment during this transition had no precedent in the pre-colonial past and that poverty and low wages were a direct product of colonial rule. This represents a powerful revisionist statement on the role of Britain in India which will be of interest not only to students of the region, but also to economic and colonial historians.

Prasannan Parthasarathi is Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Boston College.

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To my parents

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Note on Indian words and place names

In general I have used the fairly accurate transliteration of words and place names found in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century district manuals and gazetteers. I have endeavored to avoid both corrupt eighteenth-century forms, except in quotations of original passages, and more modern transliterations with diacritical marks in order to simplify presentation in the text. Some eighteenth-century forms of Indian words and names have been retained in cases where it is unclear what the original may have been. Much of South India was renamed and administratively reorganized from the late eighteenth century as the area came under British rule. I have in general avoided the use of British district names prior to the establishment of British authority, but in some cases have relied upon them for ease of historical exposition.

At the end of the book there is a glossary of Indian and Anglo-Indian words used in the text, together with other words that may require explanation. These terms appear in *italic* at their first occurrence in the text.

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Note on money

South Indian coinage consisted of gold, silver and copper, respectively *pagodas*, *fanams* and *cash*. In the Northern Sarkars, there was also another copper coin, *dub*. Through much of the century, 1 pagoda exchanged for 8 or 9 British shillings and 3 to 3.25 silver rupees. Although there was great local variation and many varieties of coins, in 1790 the following exchanges prevailed between the different South Indian currency units:

In the Northern Sarkars: 2,880 cash = 36 fanams = 1 pagoda

In Cuddalore: 3,520 cash = 44 fanams = 1 pagoda.

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Abbreviations

APSA	Andhra Pradesh State Archives, Hyderabad
CEHI	<i>Cambridge Economic History of India</i>
FSDC	English East India Company, <i>Fort St. David Consultations</i>
FSGDC	English East India Company, <i>Fort St. George Diary and Consultation Book</i>
IESHR	<i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i>
JIH	<i>Journal of Indian History</i>
MAS	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>
MPP	Madras Public Proceedings
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library, London
TNA	Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai