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978-1-107-64472-4 - Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in the Madras
Presidency During the Nineteenth Century

Dharma Kumar

Excerpt

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PART I

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1961 there were 31½ million agricultural workers in India, that is to say, around one-fourth of the agricultural working force.¹ Some of these labourers may own some land themselves, but these minute holdings cannot afford even bare subsistence for a family, and the major part of the labourer's income is derived from working on land owned by others. In this sense these labourers are 'landless'. The exact definition of the term 'agricultural labourer' has been much debated in recent years, and what is more, has varied from one official enquiry to another, with the result that estimates of agricultural labourers in the same year, 1951, range from 18 per cent of the total agricultural population (the Census of 1951) to 38 per cent (the First Agricultural Labour Enquiry).² But for our purpose these differences of definition are not important. It is clear enough that there has been a large group of landless labourers throughout the twentieth century, and that they are among the poorest and most depressed sections of Indian society; what is not clear is how long this group has existed and how it came into being. But these are problems of significance and not merely for Indian history.

The fortunes of this group are a good index of changes in the entire agrarian economy; movements in the numbers of agricultural labourers and in their wages reflect the growth of population, the extension of cultivation, the rate of industrialization, and the effects of integration in the world economy. And changes in the size and nature of the agricultural labour group may also throw light on the wider question of the effect of imperialist rule on subject societies. Did British rule shatter the structure of Indian society? Did it destroy the balance of the agrarian economy and create a new rural proletariat? Or did Indian social institutions possess

¹ *Paper No. 1 of 1962, Census of India, 1961.*

² The Census figures are likely to be a considerable underestimate, because some of the agricultural labour families owning small plots of land may have returned themselves as cultivators (50 per cent of the agricultural labour families in the First Agricultural Labour Enquiry owned land). On the other hand, the First Agricultural Labour Enquiry may exaggerate the numbers of agricultural labourers for various reasons; that it is an overestimate is supported to some extent by the fact that in the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry for 1956-7, where agricultural labour families are those deriving the major part of their *income* from agricultural labour, such families form 24.47 per cent of the total rural families, as against 30.39 per cent in the First Agricultural Labour Enquiry; Government of India, *Report on the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry* (New Delhi, 1960), vol. 1, p. 47.

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enough resilience and vitality to absorb the changes brought about by foreign rule?

The study of agricultural labour attempted here covers a limited period and area. The period is the nineteenth century, during which British rule was consolidated, and one of the main tasks of the work is to estimate the size of the agricultural labour group at the beginning of the period. This estimate would gain greatly in firmness and interest if it could be compared with pre-British conditions, but for the earlier period almost no information on the numbers of agricultural labourers is available. From literature and inscriptions it is known that agricultural labourers did exist in ancient and medieval India, often in conditions of slavery or serfdom, but the data are not precise enough to permit inferences about the numbers involved. In spite of this early evidence about the existence of agrestic serfdom, many writers have contended that the class of landless labourers was created during the British period, and one reason why they have disregarded the earlier records may be the paucity of quantitative information which can be gleaned from them.

This study is also limited to the old Madras Presidency (for convenience, the administrative unit of Madras Presidency has been selected rather than the whole of South India). Madras is of special importance for several reasons. It was here that the *raiayatwari* system of collecting land revenue from the individual cultivator—a system said to be directly destructive of the old village community—was introduced in its full rigour. Also, the rates of revenue collected by the British were much higher in Madras than in any other part of India. In the third place, South India today has the highest proportion of landless labourers to total population in India.¹ *A priori* it may be expected that the processes by which this class has been created will have been most manifest here. And finally, it is in South India that the caste system was peculiarly rigid; so that the role of indigenous societies in resisting changes projected from outside is best seen here. In fact, the strength of the caste system provides one method of estimating the number of agricultural labourers.

Of the two parts of this work, the first deals with the agrarian situation in South India at the outset of British rule, and some of the institutional changes brought about by the new administration. First, the actual agrarian structure in the early years of the nineteenth century is analysed; from this analysis alone the presumption arises that even as early as 1800

¹ In both 1950–1 and 1956–7, the Southern Zone, consisting of Madras, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, had the highest proportion of agricultural labour to total rural households of all the five zones of India; *Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Report*, vol. 1, p. 47.

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there must have been a demand for a labour force outside the family of the cultivator. The traditional institutional forms of this labour are next described, as well as the connection of these institutions with the caste structure. On the basis of this connection, the number of agricultural workers in 1800 has been deduced from the caste structure at the end of the nineteenth century as shown by the censuses. This is done in Chapter IV. Chapters V and VI contain an account of the various changes made by the British, including their changes in the land revenue and land tenure systems, and their attempts to abolish slavery and serfdom.

The second part of the work is concerned with the main economic factors which may have contributed to the growth of landlessness during the nineteenth century. The central issue is of course the pressure of population on land, and the figures of growth of population as well as of land under cultivation are examined in detail in Chapter VII. The role played by emigration in lessening the pressure on land is analysed in Chapter VIII. The evidence about the changes in the land-labour ratio is incomplete, so that movements in wage rates have also been examined in Chapter IX; the wages data also throw some light on the question of the monetization of the agrarian economy. Finally, in Chapter X the occupational figures of the census data are examined in order to determine the numbers and proportions of landless labourers at the end of the nineteenth century. This brings us to the concluding chapter where the growth of landless labour over the century has been put into historical perspective.

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II. THE AGRARIAN BACKGROUND

South India is differentiated from the rest of India both by the importance of pre-Aryan elements in its social structure and by the fact that Muslim invasions came much later than in the North and did not leave so deep an impact. Mahmud of Ghazni invaded the Punjab early in the eleventh century, and there had been Arab invasions of Sind even earlier, but it was not till the end of the thirteenth century that a Muslim army invaded the South.

The Aryanaization of the South may have started around 1000 B.C.;¹ little is known about the Dravidian society that existed before that date. The degree of contact between North and South India fluctuated; at some periods North Indian empires such as the Maurya spread to South India; at times South Indian rulers such as the Andhra dynasty, the Satavahanas, encroached into the North, but for large expanses of time there was little contact between the two areas. The Satavahanas, whose rule lasted for four and a half centuries till around 230 B.C., were followed by many warring dynasties, including the Cheras, the Chalukyas, the Pallavas, the Pandyas, the Rashtrakutas and the Cholas, who ruled from A.D. 850 to 1200, and traces of whose achievements in the fields of administration and irrigation still remain.

The decline of the Chola empire was followed by a century of warfare, which culminated in the first Khalji expedition to the Deccan in 1296. Many other Muslim incursions from Delhi followed, and at one stage in the early fourteenth century, Muslim historians claimed, the whole of South India was part of the empire of Delhi. Yet the Sultan's power in the South was almost everywhere weak, and it was overthrown by the rise in the fourteenth century of the Hindu empire of Vijaynagar which grew to cover almost the whole of South India. Throughout its history the Vijaynagar empire was threatened by a hostile power nearer at hand, the Bahmani Sultanate of the Deccan, and after the decisive victory of the Bahmanis in 1565, the empire disintegrated. In the anarchy that followed small chieftains called *naiks* or *poligars* seized local authority, but few of these established permanent rule, and in most of South India power gradually passed into the hands of the Sultans of Bijapur and Golkonda. The gradual breakdown of Mughal rule again changed the political balance in South India. On the one hand, with the growth of Mahratta

¹ Up to the end of the Vijaynagar empire, this description follows K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India* (Madras, 1955).

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power, Tanjore became a Mahratta principality; on the other, the Muslim subordinates of the Mughal Emperor carved out kingdoms of their own. Hence by the middle of the eighteenth century the ruling powers consisted of the Nizam of the Deccan, whose chief subordinate in the south was the Nawab of the Carnatic (otherwise called the Nawab of Arcot); Haider Ali, the ruler of Mysore; and the Mahrattas.

But several European powers had already started to fish in the troubled waters of South India. The Portuguese were the first to form a settlement, followed by the French, the Dutch and the Danes. The British founded their first settlements in 1611 at Vizagapatam and Masulipatam, and in 1639 obtained the land on which Fort St George in Madras now stands. Further, the Europeans took opposite sides in the wars between the Nizam, the Mahrattas and the Muslim rulers of Mysore, which racked South India during the eighteenth century. In this struggle French power was destroyed, and the British then turned against Tipu, Sultan of Mysore. In 1792 Tipu was forced to cede one half of his territories; seven years later he was killed and a representative of the old Hindu dynasty was placed upon the throne in Mysore. The rest of the territories were divided among the British and their allies, the British getting Canara, Coimbatore and the Wynaad. In the same year the Mahratta ruler of Tanjore sold his kingdom to the Company, and in 1800 the Nizam ceded to it large portions of his territory, including the present districts of Bellary, Anantapur, Cuddapah and part of Kurnool, known as the Ceded Districts. Thus, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Company had won the whole of the modern Madras Presidency, except for a part of Kurnool district, a small Danish settlement at Tranquebar, the French settlements at Pondicherry and elsewhere, and the territories of five small satellite states. In 1839 the remainder of Kurnool was annexed; Tranquebar was purchased from the Danes in 1845, and in 1862 the district of North Canara was transferred to Bombay Presidency.

After it had been rounded off by conquest and cession, and excluding North Canara, the Madras Presidency covered about 140,000 square miles of southern India, between 8° and 16° N., with an outlying spur (the districts of Godavari, Kistna, Vizagapatam and Ganjam) stretching to the north-east. The bulk of the Presidency fell into three physical groups: the strip of land between the Indian Ocean and the Western Ghats (the districts of South Canara and Malabar); the strip between the Bay of Bengal and the Eastern Ghats (the districts of Tinnevely, Tanjore, South Arcot, Madura, Chinglepet and Nellore); and the territory between these two coastal belts (the districts of Coimbatore, the Nilgiris, Salem, North Arcot, Trichinopoly, Cuddapah, Kurnool, Anantapur and Bellary). Be-

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tween these twenty-one districts there were important differences. On the West Coast the monsoon rainfall is so lavish that double and treble cropping are common in Malabar and the low lands of South Canara. But on the East Coast, only Tanjore has abundant rain, while in the centre it is both scanty and capricious. Far and away the most abundant crops grown in the Presidency were cereals (rice, *cholam*, *cambu*, and *ragi*) although there were vegetable gardens everywhere, and during the course of the nineteenth century there were to be experiments with such cash crops as cotton, indigo and cinchona. The great range of rainfall and the qualities of soils produced great disparities of productivity between the West Coast and Tanjore on the one hand, and the poor lands of the interior on the other, and these disparities affected the agrarian structure of the various districts.

For our purpose, however, it is more convenient to follow linguistic, rather than geographical, grouping, particularly since the two overlap to some extent. The division of the Presidency into the Telugu districts (Ganjam, Vizagapatam, Godavari, Kistna, Nellore, Kurnool, Cuddapah, Anantapur and Bellary), the Tamil areas (Chinglepet, North and South Arcot, Salem, Trichinopoly, Tanjore, Coimbatore, Madura and Tinnevely) and Malabar and South Canara, coincides more or less exactly with social and historical lines of differentiation, though, of course, none of the lines of demarcation is sharp.¹

Two centuries of war had preceded the establishment of British rule, and during the eighteenth century in particular there had been much dislocation while Hyder Ali and Tipu were struggling against resources which the British drew from world-wide trade. The first British administrator of Canara remarked of the rule of Mysore over the West Coast:

‘Hyder ruined Canara, a highly improved country, filled with industrious inhabitants . . . more comfortable than those of any province under any native power in India . . . he regarded it as a fund from which he might draw without limit . . . The same demands and worse management increased . . . at the beginning of Tippoo’s reign . . . the amount of land left unoccupied, from the flight or death of its cultivators, became at last so great, [that] the collections before the end of his reign fell short of the assessment from ten to sixty per cent.’²

In Malabar, Hyder and Tipu had raised the tax rates so high that ‘it is impossible to believe that they were rigorously exacted’;³ in Coimbatore the officials of Mysore had taxed at rates ‘only endurable by the fraud

¹ The small polyglot Nilgiri district has been omitted.

² Munro, ‘The condition and assessment of Canara 31 May 1800’; A. J. Arbuthnot, *Major General Sir Thomas Munro . . . Selections from his Minutes and other official Writings* (London, 1881), vol. 1, pp. 68–9 (hereafter *Minutes of Sir Thomas Munro*); *Manual of South Canara District* (ed. 1894), pp. 95–6.

³ *Gazetteer of the Malabar and Anjengo Districts* (ed. 1908), vol. 1, p. 310.

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practised';¹ at Chinglepet and Nellore on the east coast, benevolences and forced loans had been screwed out of the cultivators, in addition to the land taxes, and here again, only bribery and mismanagement had made the system bearable;² while in Godavari, part of the north-eastern spur, there were heavy rents, arbitrary assessments and much oppression.³ Again, in this time of troubles when much of the land was fought over, villages were frequently abandoned and reoccupied, village registers and records of rights destroyed and falsified, and any adventurer who could guarantee some security could usurp old established rights to land or land revenue. These changes brought to the top new landholders who usurped both the rights and the titles of the old.

It was little wonder that in coping with the aftermath of this chaos the British administrators were so confused about the rights they had to confirm and administer. To make matters worse, the information available on earlier tenures was very scanty (as indeed it is today). They had to choose between several claimants to rights in tenure systems largely unknown to them and described in a multiplicity of terms in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Canarese. Added to these were Persian and Arabic terms introduced by Muslim rulers, which often were only substitutes for local words. And the British added their own element of confusion in their natural tendency to look at 'everything from an English law, or "Lord-of-the-manor" point of view'.⁴

This tendency was sharpened by their primary need to identify the landholder responsible for payment of land revenue, and indeed, they classified tenures according to the method of settling the revenue. Under the *zamindari* system, the land revenue was fixed in perpetuity and the *zamindar* had all the residuary rights to wasteland and the like which were not held by the cultivator. In the *inamdari* system also, the landowner was granted relatively favourable rates of land revenue. Finally, under the *raiyatwari* system, the State collected the land revenue in full, the rate of revenue being adjusted periodically, supposedly from the *raiyat* or actual cultivator. The term *raiyatwari* thus conjures up pictures of small holdings cultivated by peasant proprietors, each of whom paid land revenue directly to the Government. But this was far from the case. In most districts there were holders of 'inferior' and 'superior' rights in land, and controversy over the rights of the various types of landholders was to con-

¹ *Manual of the Coimbatore District* (ed. 1887), pp. 124–5.

² *Manuel of the Chingleput District* (ed. 1879), pp. 229–32; *Manual of Nellore District* (ed. 1873), pp. 479–84.

³ *Gazetteer of the Godavari District* (ed. 1907), vol. 1, pp. 161–2.

⁴ B. H. Baden-Powell, *The Land Systems of British India* (Oxford, 1892), vol. III, p. 153.

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tinue, in Government correspondence and in the courts, throughout the nineteenth century. Here only the briefest description of the 'superior' landholders—*zamindars* and *inamdars*, then the *mirasdars*, *janmis* and *mulawargadars* of the *raiyatwari* areas—and of the main types of landholders under them, need be given.

The Zamindari System

Under the Mughals, the term *zamindar* (literally, 'landholder') connoted a chieftain whose claim to a share of the produce was already recognized by local custom or law; while recognizing his rights, the Mughals also claimed land revenue from him. The Mughals claimed as well the right to confiscate, create and grant *zamindaris*, a power used most frequently by Aurangzeb, in whose reign the term came increasingly to signify a revenue collector, a functionary created and supported by the State.¹ As far as the administration of land revenue was concerned, there was probably little difference between the two, in that both types of *zamindar* had to collect the land revenue for the State, keeping a certain share (generally 10 per cent) for themselves. Both types were found in the South; some *zamindars*, particularly in the hills where Muslim rule was difficult to establish, were the old rajas or chieftains whose claims were at least partially recognized; others were revenue officials rewarded by the Muslim rulers with *zamindaris*. And during the wars *zamindars* came to assume various new rights of revenue collection or of land ownership. As the British found when they took over the government of the country, the origins of the *zamindars* and the rights they claimed reflected the political instability of the preceding years. 'It is wonderful how much, in times such as the last century, the robber, the raja and the *zamindar* run into one another.'² Moreover the British themselves virtually created some *zamindaris* by auctioning lands and conferring tenurial rights.³

By 1829–39 there were some 49,607 square miles under *zamindari*,

¹ W. H. Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India* (Cambridge, 1929), and Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (Bombay, 1963), ch. V.

² Sir George Campbell, 'Tenures of Land in India' in *Systems of Land Tenures in Various Countries*, published by the Cobden Club (London, 1870), p. 141. The preceding sentence reads: 'To our ideas there is a wide gulf between a robber and a landlord but not so in native view.' Munro describes the hostility of the chief *raiyats* (cultivators) to the petty shopkeepers, public servants out of a job and adventurers who became *zamindars*. They regarded the *zamindar* as their social inferior and banded together against him, and he in return extracted as much revenue as he could. (Minute of 31.12.1824); Arbuthnot, *Minutes of Sir Thomas Munro*, vol. 1, p. 255.

³ Government of Madras, *Guide to the Salem Records*, pp. 3–4; Government policy towards *zamindars* is discussed in Chapter VI, *infra*.