



## MAPPING OF THE SOURCES ON THE AGRARIAN ECONOMY OF EARLY AND MEDIEVAL TAMIL NADU

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### ABSTRACT :

*There was a sea change in the historian's craft of Twentieth Century, drawing attention of a number of scholars and historians to the analyse and write the agrarian issues of the early and medieval Tamil Nadu. This new trend has helped to deviate from narrating the deeds of dynasties and individuals to expose the dynamic role played by the voiceless people such as the peasants. 'History from below' and 'Voice of the Voiceless People' and History of the Subaltern People' became the new trends in the historical writings ever since the last quarter of the Twentieth Century. The agrarian sector received attention when Marxists and Annal School historians began to evince keen interest in their historical writings. Marxists have been maintaining the position that in a hierarchical society, it was the peasant who carried all the burdens of society. Annal School speaks of the subject of peasantry.*



**KEYWORDS :** Agrarian Economy, Medieval ,Peasants, Royts, Brahmadeyas and Devadanas,Serfs.

### INTRODUCTION

In India agrarian problems received attention from scholars like Dadabai Naoroji (*Poverty and unBritish Rule in India*, 1901), R.C. Dutt (*Economic history of India* in two volumes , 1906) and Lajpat Rai (*India's Debt to England* ,1917). However a systematic analysis of the problem of agrarian sector in India began only in 1960s when Marc Bloch's works of English translation became available freely in India. In this endeavour, scholars and historians began to deal the agrarian problems prevailed in the ancient and medieval periods. R.S.Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* (1965), Irfan Habib's *Agrarian Society in Mughal India* (1963) and D.N.Jha's sectional presidential address on 'Early Feudalism' (1979) have thrown new lights on the condition and role of peasants in society during the pre-colonial period. Extensive studies on peasants have been carried on in India since the publication of Ranajit Guha's *Subaltern Studies* (1982).

The studies on agrarian issues have inspired scholars like Burton Stein (*Peasant State and Medieval South India* (1980), Karashimna (*South Indian History and Society 850 A.D.-1800* (1984) and *Studies on Peasantry of Tamil Nadu in Ancient and Medieval Periods*, K.Gough (Modes of Production in Southern India (1980) by applying themes such as pre-capitalism and capitalism in agrarian history of Tamil Nadu and C.J.Baker ( *An Indian Rural Economy 1880- 1955- The Tamil Nadu Country Side* (1984) while giving though provoking information on colonial rural economy of Tamil Nadu reveal the ground reality of the pre colonial agrarian economy of Tamil Nadu. To understand the changes that had widely taken place in the agrarian economic sector of Tamil Nadu during colonial period , it is essential to have a thorough study on the pre-

colonial economy of Tamil Nadu. For an analysis, the paper attempts to focus the historical writings on early period, early Medieval period and later Medieval period.

### WRITINGS ON EARLY PERIOD

As regards the early period of Tamil Nadu, quite a number of works give information on agriculture and agrarian relations. But contributions made by scholars like K.K.Pillay (*Social History of Tamils*, Vol. I. (1975), K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (*The Colas*, 1975) and K. Sivathambi (*The Early South Indian Society and Economy* (1974) are significant. K.K.Pillay by citing references from Sangam literature elaborately deal with all sorts of agrarian activities such as transplantation, crop rotation, manuring, hydraulic technology like the use of shutters and sluices all resulting in abundance of production. M.G.S. Narayanan in his article 'The Role of Peasants in the Early History of Tamilakam in South India' revealed that the peasants known as Ulavar or Vellalar had already emerged from the primitive nomadic tribal stage and started producing agricultural surplus in the *Marutam* regions of Tamilagam where stratification was also clearly noticeable. The richer peasants had to take up military functions for the sake of the defence. The warriors from the Marava tribal groups in *Kurinji* region also looked for good lands to settle down as peasants when they returned from the field of battle. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri depicts the salient features of Vellanvagai tenure where there existed *Uluvithunpor* and *Uluthunpor*, landless tenants and agricultural labourers. Scholars like Sivathambi find the Sangam society a one consisting of various grades such as big land owners, small peasants and labourers akin to slaves. Chernpakalakshmi in his address on 'Urbanisation in South India-The Role of Ideology and Polity' in *Sectional President Address* (1986) citing Pulankurichi records states that agrarian expansion took place in non-*Marudham* areas in subsequent times.

### WRITINGS ON EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The Pallava and Pandya periods which experienced large scale agrarian expansions thanks to the introduction of hydraulic technology such as construction of tanks and sluices and also reclamation of large tracts of waste lands are well documented by quite a number of scholars such as K.K.Pillay, K.A.Nilakanta Sastri, Rajamanickanar, Burton Stein and Y.Subbarayalu. C.Meenakshi's *Administration and Social life under the Pallavas* (1932) gives a sketch on taxation, irrigation, famines and economic life during Pallava period. This period witnessed the creation of hundreds of Brahmadeyas, Devadanas and Jivitham tenures. In this process according to Burton Stein tribal population and non-peasantry folk were integrated mostly in subordinate position such as tenants and serfs. K.A.Nilakanta Sastri viewed that increasing royal patronage to these tenures were common during the Chola period. According to A. Krishnasamy (*The Tamil Country under Vijayanagar* (1964) the fact that as many as 244 inscriptions out of 646 relating to the work of Brahmadeya sabhas during the time of Raja Raja-I are found in Cholamandalam is a clear indication of the expansion of Brahmadeyas under Cholas. The prominent feature of this period according to A. Appadurai (*Economic Conditions in Southern India 1000-1500 A.D.*, (1936) and K.A.Nilakanta Sastri was the prevalence of communal ownership of land. In places where common ownership prevailed, lands were owned by kinship group of land lords jointly - Vellalas in Vellanvagai, Brahmins in Brahmadeyas and temples in Devadanas. Below them, there were free peasants, share croppers and serfs.

During the days of the Imperial Cholas according to N.Karashima (*South Indian History and Society - Studies from inscriptions A.D.850-1800* (1984) a few individuals who as important functionaries of the Chola armies acquired personal properties in the Cauveri region. This was made possible for them by the distribution of booties taken away from foreign lands by the Chola Kings and Kallars emerged as land owners in this period.

All these changes, at anyhow, did not bring about any improvement on the condition of the producing classes. The condition of the slaves was deplorable and pathetic. They were attached with land and sold with land as bonded labourers and became perennial slaves. They were also forced to live in separate quarters. Tenants too suffered like slaves according to D.N .Jha. A Tamil folk researcher, N.Vanamamalai in a research paper speak about eviction of peasants at times of transfer of land to

Brahmadeyas and Devadanas, D.N.Jha's work, *Economy and Society in Early India* (1993) states that there was harassment of peasants from temple authorities who were authorized by rulers to collect not only heavy taxes but also contributions for maintenance of temples from the peasants. R. Tirumalai's work, *Land Grants and Agrarian Reactions in Cola and Pandya Times* highlights the incidents on non-payment of land tax and the harshest proceedings that followed and peasant opposition to excessive taxation rampant both during the Chola and later Pandya times. B.S. Chandrababu's Presidential address on the *Economic History of Medieval Tamil Nadu - An Historiographical Survey*, throws light on the agrarian issues, the condition of the peasants, the attitude of the landlords and the relations between the peasants and landlords.

The result was that there were cases of strong outbursts by the subaltern peasants especially at the time of weak and unstable government. According to Vanmamalai the outbursts were in the form of suicide, refusal to pay taxes and in few cases riots. For instance to establish the right to till the land in *Jivitham* one dancing girl threw herself from temple tower and on another occasion, temple guards committed suicide by leaping into fire for the same cause. Riots took place during the time of Rajaraja-III on the question of land rights. There were also cases of peasants pulling down temple walls and looting of treasury during the time of Kulotunga- III. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri in his work, *The Pandiya Kingdom* (1929) highlights the resistance of villagers against oppressive taxes collected by the local chieftains during the period of Maravarra Kulesekarana and Maravarman Sundra Pandya. The period subsequent to the decline of Pandyas was marked by political instability and chaotic economic conditions.

#### WRITINGS ON LATER MEDIEVAL PERIOD

In the later Medieval period in which the Vijayanagar Empire and the Nayaks played a prominent role. There were considerable economic activities. Large scale migration of Kannada and Telugu people into the black soil regions and dry areas resulted in the cultivation of cotton and oil seeds. In this process a large number of Naidus and Reddiars became land owners. T.V. Mahalingam's *Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagar* (1968) and C.J. Baker's *An Indian Rural Economy 1880-1955- The Tamilnadu Country Side*. (1984) deal elaborately with this new phenomenon. A. Krishnaswamy in his work, *The Tamil Country under Vijayanagar*, says that in the Vijayanagar period, Amara nayakkars received lands in lieu of their military services. Military tenures came into being.

In this period also, the condition of lower strata of agrarian society was far away from satisfactory, T.V. Mahalingam says that the tenants had to live with 1/4 of the share. N. Karashima reveals that the Nayaks enjoyed major produce of the temple land leaving only a little to the cultivators. Harivardhana Rao informs that the taxation was seven times higher than the British. Y. Subbarayalu in his paper 'The Peasantry of Tiruchirappalli District from 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries' (1980) argues that there appear to have been a co-operation between Pradhans, Vanniar military officers, Nayankaras and landlords belonging to Reddi, Vellala and Brahmin castes in extracting the small peasants much.

The result was that according to both T.V. Mahalingam and Y. Subbarayalu, the Tamil Country witnessed a series of peasant movements. Their movements were created by the gathering together of the lower peasantry belonging to Right and Left Hand Castes against the Pradhans and Jivithakarars and also against the domination of Vellalas and Brahmins in places like Aduthurai and Kilapaluvor of Tiruchirappalli District, Thirukkarugavoor and Korukkai of Tanjore District, Pennadam and Viruddhachalam of South Arcot District. There were also cases of peasants moving from one place to another. All these events attest that although the country experienced a substantial economy during the period, the economic products and prosperity went to the higher strata of society and there was no scope for better life for the lower strata of the society.

The subsequent period was marked by political instability and economic disorder. Srinivasa Raghava Ayyngar's *Memorandum on the progress of Madras presidency during the Last Forty Years of British Administration* says that the Naiks and Poligars allowed the existing irrigation works to disintegration. Missionary records speak about shortage of food grains and famines. Baden Powell, (*The Land System of British Rule* Vol. III (1892) and Mukerjee (Ryotwari System in Madras (1962) say that these conditions were

utilized by the landlords to exploit the poor ryots. In Southern and Western districts, according to Baden Powell, poor ryots were exploited by the Poligars. K.Gough in a research paper, 'Modes of Production in Southern India' speaks about the usurpation of lands of the poor by intermediary revenue farmers like Pathakdhars by fraudulent means in Thanjavur District and some of them are the present day estate owners. Mukerjee informs the exploitation of village headmen like Patels in Baramahal, Gours in Coimbatore, Moniagars in Arcot Districts and the Sowcars over the poor peasants.

*The Fifth Report of the East India Company* speaks much about oppressive methods taken by local rulers and renters. This led to migration of poor people from one place to another resulting in shortage of labour. The landlords even imposed restrictions on movement of slaves. Deep studies have been made on slavery by scholars like S.Manickam (Slavery in Tamil Country) and Dharmakumar (The Land and Caste in South India). Regarding the pre-colonial agrarian society in Tamil Nadu, A.K. Kalimuthu, concentrated much in his work '*Colonial Economy and Lower Peasantry –Tamilnadu Scene 1801-1947*'.

As these works give much information based on important sources like inscriptions, colonial archival records and Fifth Report on the Affairs of the East India Company on agrarian issues, the paper throws much light on the agrarian economic history of early and medieval Tamil Nadu.

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