

PRE-COLONIAL TRIBAL SYSTEM PRIOR TO 1793

Salem and Baramahal region lies between northern latitude $11^{\circ}14'46''$ and $120^{\circ}53'30''$ and between eastern longitude $77^{\circ}30'52''$ and $78^{\circ}53'05''$. In 1793, the total geographical area of this region was 4,092,973 acres (78.19 per cent plains and 21.81 per cent hills), of which 1,127,716 acres (27.55 per cent) was arable, 359,279 acres (8.78 per cent) was fallow, 1,559,612 acres (38.1 per cent) was cultivable waste and 1,046,366 acres (25.56 per cent) was uncultivable waste.¹ Of 6,041 villages, 435 were classified as hill villages.² There are 12 minor rivers, mostly originating from the hills and flowing for about 497 miles.³ A number of plant species and fauna were found in abundance in the region, particularly in the hills. Varieties of trees having great value like sandalwood and teak besides several medicinal plants and herbs were in plenty in the hills.⁴ For instance, in the Kolli hills, 209 species consisting of 54 trees, 34 shrubs, 80 herbs and 41 climbers were enumerated, of which 103 species comprising 36 trees, 18 shrubs, 27 herbs and 21 climbers were classified as medicinal plants.⁵ Invariably, other hills of the region also had these plants.

The hill tracts had an abundance of domestic and wild animals. Salem and Baramahal was one of the prominent cattle-breeding districts in Madras Presidency. It was home to elephants, tigers, panthers, leopards, jungle cats, civet cats, deer, wild pigs, monkeys, hyenas, wolves, red dogs, jackals, foxes and so on. Further, 48 species of snakes were found in the district.⁶

Origin of tribals

The inhabitants of the hills in this region are Malaiyalis. 'Malaiyali' means 'inhabitants of the hills'. In Tamil, *malai* means hill or mountain, and *yali* means ruler or inhabitant. There are three different theories about their origin.⁷ The first one claims that they were migrants from the North Indian hills during the Aryan invasion, who had settled down in the uninhabited hills of Tamil Nadu. According to Kanakasabhai (1979), these

people, natives of a mountainous region of north of Bengal, have chosen and occupied the hilly tracts such as the Kolli hills (in Salem district), the Western Ghats and the Nilgiris.⁸

The second theory argues that Malaiyalis were native Tamils who were there right from the ancient Sangam period (3 BC to AD 3).⁹ It is being cited that the word *Malavar* found in the Sangam classics denotes them.¹⁰ This theory claims that in the ancient Tamil country there existed three distinctive Tamil-speaking people, namely Aborigines, Dravidian Tamils and Aryan migrants.¹¹ The third theory claims that they were migrants of recent times. According to the manuals, gazetteers and government reports, they were Tamil-speaking people who had migrated from the plains in comparatively recent times.¹² They are, however, distinct from those in the plains and quite different from the Malayalam-speaking people of Kerala, although the name connotes both.¹³ They are neither a carnivorous ethnic group like some tribes in the Nilgiris, where there is discrimination among the hill inhabitants,¹⁴ nor are they treated as untouchables like the scheduled castes.¹⁵

Although there is evidence in the Sangam literature to prove that the tribals had lived in the mountains of Tamil Nadu since the ancient times, details about their socio-economic, political, administrative and judicial institutions were not available until the close of the 18th century or the advent of the British. The colonial records, while maintaining that the tribals were migrants from the plains between the 14th and 16th centuries, also admit the possibility of the hills being inhabited prior to this exodus. Malaiyalis of South Arcot, North Arcot, Salem, Dharmapuri and Tiruchirappalli districts were emigrants from Kancheepuram (Chengalpattu district) during the 16th century. However, there are different versions about their migration.¹⁶

The characteristic features of the Tamil-speaking Malaiyali tribes are different from the Todas, who still follow a pastoral economy and have a different name in each of the hill groups. In the Baramahal Records,¹⁷ they are known as 'Malaiyandi Vellallu'.¹⁸ In general, they are called Malai Vellalar, Kongu Vellalar, Kanchimandalathar, Malaikkaran, Malai Kavundan, Mala Nayakkan, Malayala, Malaiyalan, Karaikat Vellalas, Karala Vellalas, Kanchimandala Vellalas and Karalan.¹⁹ All have 'Kavundan' as the second name, which is universally used to hail their genealogy. Despite being called differently in different hills, they are not distinct from each other; apparently, they are ordinary Tamils, who, after migrating to the hills, have developed some local customs unique to them.²⁰ People of the Vellala community in the plains have also settled in the hills.

Before the arrival of the plains people, tribal communities such as Vedan and Beder had lived in the different hills of this region.²¹ Francis

(1906) says, 'The hills were inhabited by Vedans . . . the Malayalis killed the men, and wedded the women, and at marriages a gun is still fired in the air to represent the death of the Vedan husband.'²² According to Ehrenfels, 'They adopt new ideas from neighbours or invaders without realizing that by so doing their former social system gets disintegrated.'²³ The present-day tribals are neither purely hill inhabitants nor migrants from the plains but remain a mixture of both the streams with their own new system, developed in the course of time. However, they are not ethnically distinctive groups.²⁴

Tribal population

There is no authentic account of the size of the tribal population until 1792. Only in 1793 were population statistics collected for the plains as well as the hill areas. But the reliability of the data can be questioned, because the Kalrayan hills did not come under direct colonial rule till then as it continued to be an independent region. The total population of an area was estimated according to the revenue collected from there; that is it was merely a supposition. The hills, which yielded revenue, were supposed to be inhabited.²⁵ One of the major drawbacks of these estimates was that the rates of assessment were not identical among different hills and also within the same hill, as different rates were adopted for assessment. For instance, in Jawadhi hills, 125 rates had prevailed – 88 different rates for ploughs and 37 for hoes.²⁶ Hence, the population data was nothing but an apparently crude estimation. It cannot be taken as a realistic count during the pre-colonial and early colonial rule in Salem and Baramahal region.

In 1793, there were 25 taluks in Salem and Baramahal. The hills in only 12 of them were occupied – five taluks, three from the southern division and two from the northern division, had a population of more than 1,000 people. Of the remaining, five had an insignificant population density, that is 1 per cent each of the southern and central divisions and 3 per cent of the northern division. The hills in the two remaining taluks had between 200 and 1,000 persons.

The total population of Salem and Baramahal region in 1793 was about 600,000, of whom 27,713 (4.62 per cent) lived in the hills. The population density in the hills was lower than that of the plains. There were 3,159 people per square mile in the plains against 174 in the hills, which also varied from 3 to 88 people.²⁷ This shows that a large extent of land was left unoccupied at the time of colonial intervention, with the tribals having at their disposal vast tracts of forest lands.

Geographical, social, political and administrative structure

The Malaiyalis had three divisions or sub-castes recognised among them, namely Periya-Malaiyalis, Kolli-Malaiyalis and Pacha-Malaiyalis. Those in Shervaroy hills and Aranuthumalai in Salem taluk, Kalrayan hills of Attur taluk in Salem district and Chitteri hills of Harur taluk of the present Dharmapuri district were called Periya-Malaiyalis. Those of Kolli hills in Namakkal and Attur taluks in Salem district were called Kolli-Malaiyalis. And those in the Pachamalais of Salem and Tiruchirappalli districts were called Pacha-Malaiyalis.²⁸ The Periya-Malaiyalis believed that 'Karalan' was their original caste name before they split into three sub-tribes.²⁹

All the three divisions sometimes called themselves Vellalas: the North Arcot Malaiyalis were called Karaikat Vellalas, South Arcot Malaiyalis were called Karala Vellalas and some Malaiyalis called themselves Kanchimandala Vellalas.³⁰ They had different nomenclature according to their place of living.

Each division had exogamous subdivisions or kulams. The Pacha-Malaiyalis were subdivided into Tanadi, Vandayan, Semburan, Navidaya, Kalla, Kikkidayan, Neviday, Kurichidaya and others.³¹ The Kolli-Malaiyalis were divided into Kalavi, Sembolan, Selumbi, Kolappaudi, Ambalan, Valangai, Soludaiyan, Kunai-Pittan, Sakkiratti and so on. Some of the later divisions regard each other as cousins but do not enter into matrimonial alliances.³² Each Malaiyali caste group is again divided into several small groups.

Though isolated from the mainstream, Malaiyalis had a well-established social, political, administrative and economic system as in the plains. The *guru* occupied the highest rank among the Malaiyalis and played a prominent role in the tribal system.³³ His main function was to appoint the headman or *Pattakaran* in the different *nadus* and settle the disputes between the *nadus*. The office of the *guru* was hereditary; if his son was a minor, his brother would take that right. This can be understood from the statement of a *guru* made in 1841. The *guru* had said, 'As there is a God to the hill people, so am I a gooroo to them . . . the goorooship descended to me from my generation.'³⁴

Till the advent of colonial rule, the *guru* of Chitteri hills in Dharmapuri district administered the Malaiyalis of different *nadus*. For administrative purposes, each hill group was divided into *paliyaput/Jagirs*³⁵/*nadus*³⁶ or estates,³⁷ which consisted of many villages or hamlets. For instance, the Kolli hills of Namakkal was broadly classified into two estates, namely Shelloor or Moonoor estate and Soel or Gundur estate. Shelloor estate comprised three *nadus*, namely Shelloor, Tinnanoor and Devanoor, which had 14, 8 and 3 villages, respectively.³⁸

The Gundur estate consisted of four *nadus*: Gundur, Velappur or Tupoor, Ariyur and Valavandy; these comprised 22, 40, 22 and 17 villages, respectively. Invariably, all other hills – Attur-Kolli hills, Pachamalais, Shervaroy hills and Kalrayan hills – had the same type of administrative divisions except the smaller hills – Chitteri, Neyyamalai, Jarugumalai, Bodamalai, Palamalai, Jambuthumalai and Aranuthumalai.³⁹

In Madras Presidency, it was the headmen who administered the villages during the pre-colonial period. Munro has this to say about them: 'Whoever rules the province, they rule the village.'⁴⁰ And the headman acted as the *Munsiff*, the magistrate and head of the police.⁴¹ 'The settlement of disputes being left entirely to the villagers themselves and the heads of castes and clans.'⁴² The headmen played a crucial role between the people and the government. Baker said that the 'village officers had long since become intermediaries between government and the village, mediating the demands and desires of both parties and levying some sort of fee on both parties for his service'.⁴³ Thus states Graham:

It must originate in the salutary effects to that system which shall place the inhabitants of each village under one person who as their head and as the immediate agent between them and government, at the same time that he becomes responsible for their rents, as they fall due will have an intimate knowledge of the ability of each member of the community, and adopt the periods of his own demands upon them accordingly.⁴⁴

The revenue village had two principal officers, namely the headman or *Maniakaran* and the accountant or *Karnam*. Further, there were a number of assistants like watchmen, irrigation overseers, crop inspectors, runners and general dogsbodies, collectively known as village menials.⁴⁵ Till colonial intervention, the headman controlled the village economy. The same system of village administration prevailed in the hills also.

For the purpose of administration, each *nadu*⁴⁶ had a four-tier administrative set-up: *Pattakaran*⁴⁷ or headman, *Maniakaran*,⁴⁸ *Ur-Kavundan* or *Moopan*⁴⁹ and *Kangani*. The *Pattakaran*, chieftain of each *nadu*, had extensive powers and collected the contributions for the *guru* besides acting as a mediator between the tribals, while the *Maniakaran* assisted the *guru*.⁵⁰ If the *Ur-Kavundan* could not settle any dispute, it would be left to the *Pattakaran*, who was treated as the chief guest at harvest and marriage functions. Further, he controlled all the *Ur-Kavundans*.

Installation of the *Pattakaran*, a hereditary office, was held in a grand manner with a grand feast and animal sacrifice.⁵¹ In the event of his death and his son being a minor, his brother would be appointed to that post.

The decision of the *guru* would be final and binding in any dispute relating to *Pattakarship*. One among the many *Pattakarans* in the hills acted as the *Periya-Pattakaran*,⁵² who functioned as the arbitrator in any dispute involving two or more *nadus*.⁵³ He exercised diverse functions, both religious and judicial according to local laws, and enjoyed the revenue of the estate after giving a portion to the local deity. Depending on his own demand from the land, he decided the amount of tax collected from the tribals. The rate of tax was not always consistent as the assessment was adjusted according to the situation.⁵⁴

The *Pattakaran* appointed some people to protect the properties of the tribals, especially from thieves, and to check the entry of strangers into the hills.⁵⁵ Their main duties were guarding houses and crops, assisting in revenue collection, keeping an eye on strangers and thieves and recovering stolen property. In the plains, these traditional policing activities were done by the lower castes.⁵⁶ The *Pattakaran* was almost a petty *raja*, and without his knowledge nothing would happen in the hills.⁵⁷ The tribals were brought under the control of the plain rulers only during the reign of Achuthadeva Raya of the Vijayanagar Kingdom during the 16th century (1532). They, however, maintained the system of revenue collection through the *Periya-Pattakaran*.⁵⁸

The *Ur-Kavundan* administered the tribals directly with the help of the *Kanganies*, who also functioned like the police. They collected information about the incidents in the villages and passed it on to the *Ur-Kavundan*, who took necessary action. Each and every transaction, namely marriage, divorce, harvest and festivals, took place in the presence of the *Ur-Kavundan*. When disputes, like partition of property between brothers or divorce, were brought to his notice, he summoned the *panchayat*, consisting of the elected members of the clans or family groups, for consultation and pronounced the decision. Penalties were imposed in money, sheep, cow, bull or grain according to the nature of the offence or dispute.⁵⁹ For example, if a woman, whether a virgin, married or a widow, commits adultery with a man of another caste or if a man commits adultery with women of another caste, the woman is fined Rs 3-8-9 and the man Rs 7-0-0.⁶⁰ Divorce on payment of a fine of Rs 25 is allowed.⁶¹ This shows that the tribals had a well-established administrative system during the pre-colonial period.

The tribal villages, mostly located near a rivulet or a water source, were so small that they had no more than ten families each.⁶² A fence to confine the village pigs from destroying the crops surrounded each village. Instead of mud walls, the houses were built of *tatties* (mats) of split bamboo and roofed with jungle grass.⁶³ All the materials for the houses were collected from the hills. Every house had a five-foot-high deck,

used for sleeping. During winter, fire was kept under the deck to protect against the cold weather. Even though the Malaiyals celebrated *Pongal*, *Adi* and *Deepavali*, the annual festivals of their chief god, held in the different hills, were the most popular in which all congregated. The annual festival of the Arapaleeshwarar temple in Kolli hills, Kariya Ramaswamy temple in Periya-Kalrayan hills and Kariyaramar temple in the Shervaroy hills attracted a large number of devotees. For example, the presiding deity of the Kariya Ramaswamy temple in Periya-Kalrayan hills, the chief god of the Kalrayan hills, attracted a congregation of more than 10,000 people during the festival.⁶⁴

During the pre-colonial period, the tribals also lived in the *kombes*, villages in the plains adjoining the hills. The *kombes*, which also had a non-tribal population, acted as a marketing junction for both the tribals and plainsmen. In other words, these *kombes* were the place of interaction of tribal economy with that of the non-tribals and vice versa. They also helped the tribals in being informed about the movement of strangers into the hills. These *kombe* villages were under the control of the tribals – *Pattakaran/Maniagars*. Tribal headmen collected the revenue in the *kombes*. There was also an instance of a headman having mortgaged to the shroff/head farmer of a nearby town some of the *kombes* for a sum less than the quarter of the annual revenue collection.⁶⁵ Till colonial intervention the *kombes* have played a distinct role in the tribal economy besides allowing tribals to interact with the mainstream.

The tribals, to keep their social identity intact, detested entering the mainstream. They thought that strangers would disturb their culture and traditions. The propaganda that fevers and cholera were widely prevalent in the hill areas, although no such epidemic prevailed, was intended to prevent non-tribals from getting into the tribal system.⁶⁶ They disliked the plainsmen settling in the hills and avoided mixing with new settlers. Whenever they saw a group of newcomers or strangers in their surroundings, they immediately dismantled their settlements and moved farther into the hills.⁶⁷ Further, they consciously avoided any interaction with the plains people who settled in the hills, for they wanted their way of life and system to remain undisturbed. Even though the hill inhabitants were dressed in an 'uncivilised' fashion, they maintained a well-disciplined and structured administrative, judicial and cultural institution. Hence, they tried their best to retain their identity, distinct from that of the outsiders.

Tribal economy

In South India, every caste is usually associated with an occupation. Until recently, the caste of a man could very easily be known by his occupation.

Adherence to the occupation of one's caste is *kula dharma* according to religious treatises. But the inhabitants of the hills had no specific occupation.⁶⁸ They drew their subsistence from collection of forest produce and traditional methods of cultivation. Early literary works in Tamil provide a valuable account of the living conditions in the hills. In spite of the disputes regarding the periodisation of Sangam literature,⁶⁹ it remains one of the earliest sources of information about the tribes in the Tamil country. From the ancient classics, it could be discerned that the hill inhabitants had agriculture as the main source of their subsistence and also exchanged the forest produce with the plains people.⁷⁰ During the period of drought or scarcity, their wants were realised by performing folk dances in the plains besides working as soldiers to the plains kings.⁷¹

The tribals' subsistence economy was solely dependent on agriculture and forest produce. The Sangam literature says that the tribals cultivated 'ivanam paddy'⁷² in the wetlands and raised *thenai* (Foxtail millet) in the dry lands.⁷³ Pepper was grown to some extent along with banana and jackfruit.⁷⁴ Apart from this, they collected honey to a large extent.⁷⁵ They followed multiple cropping patterns,⁷⁶ practised weeding out and removed insects from the crops.⁷⁷ Animals were hunted and distributed among the villagers and groups.⁷⁸ Though revenue was paid on the basis of the extent of land cultivated, information about the share of agricultural produce is not available.⁷⁹

For their livelihood and other requirements like housing materials, agricultural implements, firewood and grazing, tribals were entirely dependent on forests, which also provided them with social and cultural identities. No restrictions were imposed on collecting forest produce, namely jackfruit, gallnut, tamarind, soap nut, lime and spices until the establishment of coffee plantations. Thus, tribal economy could not be seen in isolation without the forest.⁸⁰ Guha asserts that in the pre-British period, 'there was little or no interference with the customary use of forest and forest produce'.⁸¹

Until colonial intervention or even a little afterwards, the tribals followed both shifting⁸² and settled cultivation. On the one hand, shifting cultivation would lead to soil erosion and effect changes in the flow of water in the rivers downstream. This negative fallout on the ecology and environment would pose a threat to sustainability.⁸³ On the other hand, it would increase the area under cultivation and create more space for grazing, thereby accentuating the process of establishing permanent and semi-permanent agricultural production.⁸⁴ However, there are two major divergent views on shifting cultivation.⁸⁵ One school of thought argues that expansion of shifting cultivation has caused large-scale denudation of forest cover. The other contends that development projects of the

government and the timber lobby were mostly responsible for deforestation. The latter claimed that the effects of shifting cultivation on forest cover were overstated.⁸⁶

Further, the consequences of shifting cultivation would largely depend on the density of population and other external factors. Recent studies have proved that shifting cultivation, practised in different pockets of tribal areas over the centuries, had not affected the sustainability of forest resources.⁸⁷ However, the low density of population would not lead to any damages in the hill ecosystem. The density of population being very low and scattered in the hill ranges, this traditional type of cultivation would have neither created any ecological imbalance nor threatened the environment. The British policy of restricting shifting cultivation, in fact, was not only to bring the hills under state control to generate more revenue but also to facilitate commercialisation of forests.⁸⁸ After the Company Raj, the rule of the British crown that followed had restricted and discouraged shifting cultivation to serve the cause of the empire.⁸⁹ However, the low density of population would not lead to any damages in the hill ecosystem.⁹⁰

Shifting cultivation, called *kottukadu*⁹¹ in Tamil, was practised extensively in the hills of Salem and Baramahal region. Buchanan says that trees were cut down and burnt from a selected spot for three months commencing from April through the middle of July, and by the end of July seeds were sown using hoes and with the help of hired labour.⁹² The main crops cultivated were *kollu* or horse gram, *thenai* and *kambu* (Pearl millet). Each of the crops was either sown separately or mixed with a small quantity of cottonseed. While the season for sowing *thenai* and *kambu* continued until the middle of September, sowing of *kollu* or horse gram started and continued till the end of September.⁹³ After 25 days of sowing, the crops were weeded out. The next year, different grains were sown between the cotton crops. In the third year, new places were chosen for clearings. Generally, the tribals shifted to other places at an interval of three to six years.⁹⁴ Cropping pattern under shifting cultivation varied each year, and the area of cultivation too was changed within a short period.

Cultivation in one *kuli*⁹⁵ of *kottukadu* required one *puddy*⁹⁶ of cottonseed, five *puddies* of horse gram and eight *puddies* of *kambu* or *thenai*. In the first year, it would produce 240 *puddies* of horse gram and 260 *puddies* of *kambu* or *thenai*. In other words, the output was 48 times for horse gram and 33 times for *kambu* or *thenai*. In the second year, the output declined to 160 *puddies* for horse gram and 172 *puddies* for *thenai* or *kambu*.⁹⁷ The output of horse gram declined 18 times, while that of *thenai* and *kambu* declined 11 times. In the second year, four 'tucus' of cotton wool was

produced. One acre of land produced about six bushels of horse gram and six bushels of *kambu* or *thenai* in the first year. In the second year, four bushels of horse gram, a little more than four bushels of *kambu* or *thenai* and about 32 pounds of cotton wool were produced. Output in *kottukadu* usually decreased year after year in the hill areas.

Agricultural productivity was higher in the hill areas when compared to the plains. For example, 5 *puddies* of horse gram seeds sown in the hill areas yielded 240 *puddies* (or about 48 times the quantity of seed used). For 24 *puddies* of the same seed sown in the plain areas, the output was only 384 *puddies* or about 16 times the seed quantity. About 8 *puddies* of *kambu* or *thenai* sown in the hill areas would produce 260 *puddies* or 32-fold of the seed, while in the plains *arisikambu* gave 72-fold and *nattukambu* yielded almost the same as in the hills. Cotton output was also high in the hill areas.

At the beginning of the 19th century, mixed crops were cultivated both in the hills and in the plains. More than two to five crops were raised simultaneously in the same field.⁹⁸ Output of the fresh lands in the hill areas was higher than those in the plains. However, the yield decreased over the period due to continued cultivation on the same piece of land.

Value for land did not emerge in the hills until the introduction of coffee plantations. Land revenue was paid on the basis of the number of implements, namely ploughs and hoes used for cultivation.⁹⁹ Once they paid the land revenue, the tribals cultivated as much land as they could. Given the meagre population density and the abundance of land resources at their disposal, they were not aware of the value of land. Moreover, there was no external demand for lands in the hills until white men stepped in.

Mode of production

The debate on the mode of production in the Indian subcontinent initiated with different perceptions had concluded that there existed and do exist different modes of production: feudalism, semi-feudalism, pre-capitalism, capitalism and colonial modes besides the dual mode.¹⁰⁰ The existing modes of production among the tribals in the entire length and breadth of this country also vary from primitive communism to feudalism.¹⁰¹ The tribals of Salem and Baramahal region had followed mainly settled agriculture and to some extent shifting cultivation at the time of British intervention.

The tribal men, women and children were all engaged in agricultural activities. Clearing forests by felling jungle trees, procuring materials, building huts and grazing cattle were the different kinds of work. When the main work was over, weeding out and protecting the crops fell on

the womenfolk, while the men generally whiled away their time smoking, chatting and sleeping.¹⁰² Women thus played a major role in agricultural production.

The tribals rarely enlisted the services of others since family members and relatives met their labour requirements. Labour market was almost non-existent, and the whole population depended on themselves for their subsistence. Being self-reliant in economic transactions, their requirements too were very few and limited. Except for clothes and salt, they were not dependent on outsiders during the pre-colonial period.¹⁰³

The family members of the tribal households did the entire operations.¹⁰⁴ Only for harvests did the cultivators avail the help of the other members of the village, who were not paid for their services. They instead partook in the harvest feast.¹⁰⁵ Even at the peak season, hiring of labour was very rare. And if hired, wages were invariably paid in kind. They had a peculiar system: 'Sometimes the employer will have not only to pay out the whole of the harvest, but will also have to get something extra from home to satisfy the labourers.'¹⁰⁶ The cultivator could, in turn, earn a share of his neighbour's produce. The earlier tribal systems were more socially rooted than being economically oriented. This was the reason for the low land value in the hills than in the plains of Salem and Baramahal.¹⁰⁷ Demand for land being insignificant in the hills, land value was almost one-tenth of that in the plains.

Forest and tribals

During the pre-colonial period, vast tracts of uncultivated lands in Madras Presidency were under forest cover.¹⁰⁸ That the tribals also lived in the plains villages adjoining the hills meant that their control extended up to the slopes. Hence, it could not be concluded that they had control only over the hills. The adjoining plains people also used the forests without any restriction.

Revenue settlement

In southern India, the rulers enjoyed the right to have a share in the produce of all cultivated lands.¹⁰⁹ Land revenue practices of sharing the produce from farming continued till the early colonial period.¹¹⁰ In the pre-colonial period, particularly during the Mughal era, land revenue demand varied according to social and agrarian conditions. Half of the produce being the maximum, land revenue demand was determined according to the conditions of the peasants and depending on the different kinds of crops.¹¹¹ During the Hyder regime, different rates of land

revenue were collected from the farmers. However, there was no decline in cultivation.¹¹² Colonel Read enumerated that there was no fewer than 66 different rates on dry land varying from 2 *pagodas*¹¹³ 11 *fanams*¹¹⁴ and 20 *cash*¹¹⁵ to 2 *fanams* 65 *cash* and *pagodas* averaging 0-21-40 per acre, and no less than 51 different rates on wet lands varying from 6-18-10 *pagodas* to 0-11-20 *pagodas* besides an average of *pagodas* 2-3-8 per acre.¹¹⁶ Revenue collectors of different revenue divisions collected the different rates of land revenue for the wet and dry lands.

The headman or *Amildar*¹¹⁷ of the village played a significant role by mediating between the government and the farmers. During the pre-colonial period, the headmen determined the amount of land revenue. Graham says that

it must originate in the salutary effects to that system which shall place the inhabitants of each village under one person, who as their head and as the immediate agent between them and Government, at the same time that he becomes responsible for their rents, as they fall due will have an intimate knowledge of the ability of each member of the community and adopt the periods of his own demands upon them accordingly.¹¹⁸

However, the headmen and revenue servants informally collected more revenue from the cultivators than what was due, regardless of the economic conditions.¹¹⁹ Though the Malaiyals remained in the grips of poverty, 'they were extracted by the price (tax) often for the war compensations and the Paligars also extracted equally mistrusting the powers'.¹²⁰ There was no stable land revenue system as it was determined according to the rulers' requirements, with each successive king imposing many more additional taxes. In the absence of adequate social security, the farmers, at sometimes, fled to the high mountains fearing imposition of heavy taxes.¹²¹ The poor farmers had to dispose of their lands at throw away prices, sell their cattle at half the value or borrow money at an exorbitant rate of interest to pay the land rent.

Revenue settlement in the hills

In the tribal system, some revenue was collected for maintaining temples and organising festivals. Tax was annually collected from married couples, and for others, a certain amount at the time of marriage in a family. According to the Baramahal Records, 'Annually from each married couple one sultan fanam to the guru or patriarch. At a wedding two sultan fanams to the temple at Trinomalai [Tiruvannamalai]'.¹²² The tribals who

had never before paid any tax to the rulers from the plains were subjected to pay tax, after the hills were either conquered or brought under their control. However, tax collection continued to be carried out as usual through middlemen/headmen. Over the period, the middlemen/headmen inherited the tax-collecting rights, irrespective of whoever ruled the plains. In the pre-British era, the hills were rented out to the highest bidders, who never surveyed the land before the assessment.¹²³ Generally, the highest bidders were appointed as agents to collect the revenue from the hills, and they collected huge amounts from the tribals. For example, between 1789 and 1792, the agent of the Shervaroy hills had collected an extra amount of Rs 500 to Rs 1,000 per annum.¹²⁴ Though the agents collected more than one-fourth of the total demand in excess, they had not disturbed the tribal system.

The plainsmen also cheated the tribals while purchasing their commodities. Around the last decade of the 18th century, a tribal from the Shervaroy hills took 13 buffaloes and 10 sheep to the market in the plains areas for sale. When the buyer (a non-tribal) who accepted to pay the cess did not remit it, the market leaseholders had forced the tribal to pay for it.¹²⁵ Despite lodging a complaint with the police, he could not recover the money, which he had paid. The plainsmen's cheating at every conceivable opportunity had restricted the tribals from mingling with the mainstream. Since the earlier rulers did not have direct access either with the headman or with the tribals, the middlemen exploited them in the guise of revenue collection. Collection of land revenue in hill areas was neither based on the extent and quality of land nor on crops and water availability during the pre-colonial period. Rather, it was fixed on the basis of the number of ploughs and hoes used for cultivation. The rent for a field under shifting cultivation was one-fourth of what would be paid in the plains for a similar extent of dry field.¹²⁶ The rate of assessment was not the same in the different hills of Salem and Baramahal. In fact, the hill chieftains had collected many taxes – plough tax, hoe tax, widow tax,¹²⁷ poll tax, kavali (distressed, troubled and unsettled person) tax or tax on unmarried people. These were collected not in view of revenue but to maintain discipline in the tribal system. Apart from these regular collections, the headmen or chief took goods and services from the tribals on an *ad hoc* basis during festivals and other emergencies. Except the Shervaroy hills, no other hill had land revenue accounts for the pre-colonial period. The pre-colonial rulers neither had a constructive policy for land settlement nor controlled the exploitation by the agents. To be precise, the cultivators did not have any protection during the pre-colonial period.

Until colonial intervention, the tribals in Salem and Baramahal region were isolated from the mainstream, and their subsistence economy was

associated with the forest and forest produce without any restriction from external forces.

Notes

- 1 Board of Revenue (hereafter BOR), Vol. 151-A, 1791-94, pp. 41-42, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai (hereafter TNSA).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Colonel Alexander Read's General Report on Salem, 4 April 1800, para. 11, TNSA.
- 4 Dietrich Brandis, *Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration in the Madras Presidency*, Madras: The Government Press, 1883, pp. 173-75.
- 5 *Floristic Study of Kolli Hills-MPCA* (year of survey is not known), Forest Ranger Office, Namakkal (manuscript).
- 6 H. Le Fanu, *A Manual of the Salem District in the Presidency of Madras*, Vol. I, Madras: Government Press, 1883, p. 153; F.J. Richards, *Madras District Gazetteers, Salem District*, Vol. I, Part I, Madras: Government Press, 1918, pp. 34-39; A. Ramaswamy, *Salem District Gazetteers*, Madras: Government of Madras, 1967, pp. 26-29.
- 7 Velayutham Saravanan, 'Genesis of Hill Inhabitants in Tamil Nadu: A Review' (unpublished).
- 8 V. Kanakasabhai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, 1979, p. 48.
- 9 Even though there are controversies about the period of Sangam literature (approximately three centuries before and after the Christian era), it is one of the earliest sources of information on tribals in Tamil Nadu.
- 10 *Natrinai* (in Tamil), poem 52.
- 11 M. Srinivas Aiyangar, *Tamil Studies*, Madras: Asian Educational Service, 1986, pp. 10-12.
- 12 E. Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Caste and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. IV, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1909, p. 406.
- 13 Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vol. II, London: Directors of the East India Company, 1807, p. 197.
- 14 For example, the Kotas tribes in the Nilgiris are treated as untouchables by the Todas.
- 15 Thurston and Rangachari, *Caste and Tribes*, p. 6.
- 16 A.F. Cox, *A Manual of the North Arcot District*, Madras: Government Press, 1880, p. 212; Harold A. Sturt, *A Manual of North Arcot District*, Madras: Government Press, 1895, pp. 211-12; F.R. Hamingway, *Madras District Gazetteer, Tiruchinopoly*, Madras: Government Press, 1907, p. 124; C.D. Maclean, *Manual of the Administration of the Madras Presidency*, Madras: Government Press, 1885; Richards, *Madras District Gazetteer*, pp. 152-53; Thurston and Rangachari, *Caste and Tribes*, p. 407.
- 17 The earliest records in Salem and Baramahal districts consist of 22 sections, which give detailed information about the district during the pre-colonial period as well as early colonial period.
- 18 Baramahal Records (hereafter BR), Section III, *Inhabitants*, p. 123, TNSA.
- 19 A. Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-Economic Conditions of the Aboriginal Tribes of the Province of Madras*, Madras: Government Press, 1948, p. 140.
- 20 Census of India 1901, *Report*, Vol. XV, Part I, Madras: Government Press, p. 166.

- 21 Board Petition No. 148 of 1871, TNSA and Letter from the Conservator of Forest to the Government, 25 October 1867, TNSA.
- 22 Thurston and Rangachari, *Caste and Tribes*, Vol. IV, p. 409.
- 23 Baron O.R. Ehrenfels, 'Traces of a Matriarchal Civilization among the Kolli Malayalis', *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1943, 9(2): p. 75.
- 24 Velayutham Saravanan, 'Economic Transformation of Tribals in Tamil Nadu Since the Colonial Rule 1792-1991', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Hyderabad, 1994, chapter 2.
- 25 BR, Section XXI, *Miscellaneous*, p. 105, TNSA.
- 26 BOR, Vol. 2051, 7 December 1846, p. 15445, TNSA.
- 27 BR, Section III, *Inhabitants*, Vol. I, pp. iii-iv, TNSA.
- 28 Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-Economic Conditions*, p. 142.
- 29 Ehrenfels, 'Traces of a Matriarchal Civilization', pp. 51-52.
- 30 Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-Economic Conditions*, p. 142.
- 31 FR. Hemingway, *Madras District Gazetteers, Trichinopoly*, Madras: Government Press, 1907, p. 124.
- 32 Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-Economic Conditions*, p. 143.
- 33 In the ancient period, the tribals had their own kingdom. It was stated by Srinivasa Aiyangar, 'The hill and forest tribes had their own kings like Vali and Sugriva, the monkey chieftains of the Ramayana' (Aiyangar, *Tamil Studies*, p. 56). For example, during the Sangam period, the Kolli hills was ruled by Val Vil Ori. (See also Tamil Nadan, "Aminji" enum Collie Kod Velai Murai', paper presented at the seminar on *Socio and Cultural History of Dharmapuri District*, Salem: Institute of Kongu Studies, 1983, p. 2.)
- 34 BOR, Vol. 1769, 23 September 1841, pp. 12105-9, TNSA.
- 35 A tenure common under the Muslim government, in which the public revenue of a given tract of land was made over to a servant of the state. The Kalrayan hills were administered by the *Jagir*.
- 36 A division of the country; a division of the hills also called as a *nadu*.
- 37 The Kolli hills was divided into estates like the *Jagir* of the Kalrayan hills.
- 38 BOR (Misc.), Vol. 29, p. 28, TNSA.
- 39 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20. Le Fanu, *A Manual of the Salem District in the Presidency*, Vol. II, p. 73; Integrated Tribal Development Project Report (hereafter ITDP Report), Kalrayan hills, Salem, 1976-77, pp. 3-4.
- 40 A. Sarada Raju, *Economic Conditions in the Madras Presidency 1800-1850*, Madras: University of Madras, 1941, p. 16.
- 41 D.A. Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency 1870-1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 152.
- 42 Srinivasa S. Raghavaiyangar, *Memorandum on the Progress of the Madras Presidency*, New Delhi: Asian Education Service, 1988, p. 23.
- 43 C.J. Baker, 'Madras Headman', in K.N. Chaudhuri and Clive J. Dewey (eds), *Economy and Society: Essays in Indian Economic and Social History*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 28.
- 44 Letter from Captain Graham, Assistant Collector of Northern Division to Read, No. XX, 24 August 1797, TNSA.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
- 46 A division of the country; a division of the hills also called as a *nadu*.
- 47 The headman of the estate or hills. He is the chief administrative and judicial officer of the estates or *nadus*.

- 48 A subordinate native revenue officer employed in the collection and management of the revenue under the *Pattakaran* by whom he is appointed and to whom he is responsible. All *Moopans* were controlled by the *Pattakaran* with the help of *Maniakaran*.
- 49 The headman of the hill village.
- 50 BOR, Vol. 1769, 23 September 1841, p. 12109, TNSA.
- 51 Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-Economic Conditions*, p. 143.
- 52 The head among the *Pattakaran* in every hills.
- 53 Richards, *Madras District Gazetteer*, p. 154.
- 54 Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-Economic Conditions*, p. 143.
- 55 Their role is like the traditional police, namely the *Taliaris* and the *Kavalkars*, in South India.
- 56 David Arnold, *Police Power and Colonial Rule: Madras 1859-1947*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 17. See also Captain Alexander Read's General Report on Salem, TNSA, 1800.
- 57 BOR, Vol. 1027, 18 July 1825, pp. 6307-38, TNSA.
- 58 R. Vidyasagar, 'Debt Bondage in South Arcot District: A Case Study of Agricultural Labourers and Handloom Weavers', in Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney (eds), *Bondage and Slavery in India*, Madras: Sangam Publishers, 1985, p. 155.
- 59 Richards, *Madras District Gazetteer*, Vol. I, Part II, p. 154; Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-Economic Conditions*, p. 143.
- 60 Thurston, *Caste and Tribes*, Vol. IV, p. 425.
- 61 Richards, *Madras District Gazetteers*, Vol. I, Part I, p. 158.
- 62 BR, Section VI, *Land Rent*, 123, and Public (Sundries): Vol. 121, 1792-99, p. 157, TNSA.
- 63 Richards, *Madras District Gazetteers*, Vol. I, Part I, p. 108.
- 64 Government Order (hereafter GO) No. 996 (Misc.), Revenue, 22 September 1906, TNSA.
- 65 Permanent Settlement Records, Salem, 1800, p. 18, TNSA.
- 66 GO No. 2972, Revenue, 4 December 1867, TNSA.
- 67 BOR, Vol. 1171, 27 November 1828, p. 1234, TNSA.
- 68 Y.C. Simhadri, *Denotified Tribes*, New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1991, p. 1.
- 69 Approximately three centuries before and after the Christian era.
- 70 *Kurunthogai* (Tamil), poem 100.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 302.
- 72 *Kurunthogai* (Tamil), poem 371.
- 73 *Ibid.*, poems 133 and 198.
- 74 *Ibid.*, poem 288; *Natrinai* (Tamil), poem 222.
- 75 *Kurunthogai* (Tamil), poem 392.
- 76 *Natrinai* (Tamil), poem 108.
- 77 *Kurunthogai* (Tamil), poem 100.
- 78 *Ibid.*, poem 392.
- 79 K.A. Neelakanta Sastri, *A History of South India*, Geoffrey, Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 128.
- 80 Velayutham Saravanan, 'Commercial Crops, Alienation of Common Property Resources and Change in Tribal Economy in the Shervaroy Hills of Madras Presidency during the Colonial Period', *Review of Development and Change*, 1999, 4(2): pp. 302-4; Velayutham Saravanan, 'Commercialisation of Forest, Environmental

- Negligence and Alienation of Tribal Rights in Madras Presidency: 1792-1882', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1998, 35(3): pp. 125-46.
- 81 Quoted by Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan (eds), *Nature and the Orient*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 11.
- 82 In Tamil, it is known as *Ponakkadu*; lands cleared, cultivated for a few years and abandoned, covered with a press growth of jungle; in other words, land in the hill areas, capable of cultivation after long intervals with particular kinds of grain sown in holes dug with a spade.
- 83 C.J. Jepma, *Tropical Deforestation: A Socio-Economic Approach*, London: Earthscan Publications, 1995, pp. 3-4.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 William D. Sunderlin, 'Shifting Cultivation and Deforestation in Indonesia: Steps toward Overcoming Confusion in the Debate', *Network Paper 21b*, London: Rural Development Forestry Network, summer 1997, p. 2.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Subash Chandran, 'Shifting Cultivation, Sacred Groves and Conflicts in Colonial Forest Policy in Western Ghats', in Richard H. Grove, Satpal Sangwan and Vinita Damodaran (eds), *Nature and the Orient: Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 678-80 and 700; Dennis P. Garrify and Chun K. Lai, 'Innovation in Shifting Cultivation in Asia: Indigenous Fallow Management', <http://www.oneworld.org/ileia/newsletters>, September 2000, pp. 5-6; Eric Meyer, 'Forests, Chena Cultivation, Plantations and the Colonial State in Ceylon 1840-1940', in Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan (eds), *Nature and the Orient: Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 797.
- 88 Jacques Pouchepadass, 'British Attitudes towards Shifting Cultivation in Colonial South India: A Case Study of South Canara District 1800-1920', in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (eds), *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 135; Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, 'State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India', *Past and Present*, 1989, 122: p. 152.
- 89 Pouchepadass, 'British Attitudes towards Shifting Cultivation', p. 148; Chandran, 'Shifting Cultivation, Sacred Groves', p. 688.
- 90 Meyer, 'Forests, Chena Cultivation', p. 797; Chandran, 'Shifting Cultivation, Sacred Groves', p. 675; Jepma, *Tropical Deforestation*, p. 86.
- 91 The cultivation made with the help of stick or spade.
- 92 Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras*, Vol. II, p. 198.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Government of India, *National Commission on Agriculture*, Part IX, New Delhi: Government of India, 1976, p. 153.
- 95 A measurement of land. In Salem, it was equal to 24 square feet.
- 96 This scale was used for both dry and liquid measures. One *puddy* contained 100 cubic inches (for details, see Saravanan, 'Economic Transformation', Annexure 2.1).
- 97 Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras*, Vol. II, p. 198.
- 98 John Shortt, *The Hill Ranges of Southern India*, Madras: Higginbotham's and Co., 1870, p. 51.
- 99 BOR, Vol. 1817, pp. 10130-31, TNSA.
- 100 For details, see Alice Thorner, 'Semi-Feudalism or Capitalism? Contemporary Debate on Class and Modes of Production in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1986, VII: pp. 49, 50 and 51.

- 101 Jaganath Pathy, 'An Outline of Modes of Production in Tribal India', in Budhadhadeb Chaudhuri (ed.), *Tribal Development in India: Problems and Prospects*, Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1982, pp. 23-48.
- 102 Shortt, *The Hill Ranges of Southern India*, p. 41.
- 103 Ibid., p. 40.
- 104 GO No. 605, Revenue, 1905, p. 5, TNSA, Chennai.
- 105 Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, Vol. IV, p. 435.
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 BR, Section XXI, *Miscellaneous*, p. 106, TNSA.
- 108 Dharma Kumar, *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 2, C.1757-C.1970, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 364.
- 109 In the Dravidian period, one curious method of revenue prevailed, namely that a portion of land in every village was allotted for the chief and it was cultivated by the slaves (B.H. Baden-Powell, *Administration of Land Revenue and Tenure in British India*, New Delhi: ESS ESS Publications, 1978, p. 34). Land tax was not a constant proportion over the period under ancient Hindu rulers. During the Gavutama period, land tax rate was from one-sixth to one-tenth, whereas during the Vasista period, the proportion of land tax was one-sixth of the total produce. During the Manu period, it was eleven-fifteenth part of the cattle and gold, and one-sixth, one-eighth and one-twelfth portions of the crops (Romesh Chandra Dutt, *Famines and Land Assessment in India*, New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1985, p. 226). It might be raised to one-fourth at the time of war and other emergency periods (Baden-Powell, *Administration of Land Revenue*).
- 110 V.V. Sayana, *Sharing and Fixed Tenancy Systems*, Madras: The Business Week Press, 1949, p. 28.
- 111 N.A. Sithiqi, 'Land Revenue Demand under the Mughals', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1965, 2(4): p. 377; BOR (Misc.), Vol. 139, Salem, 1800, p. 166; Colonel Read, *Report on the Original Settlement of Salem in 1791-1796*, Salem: Collectorate Press, 1868, p. 4.
- 112 Minutes of BOR, Vol. 257-B, 5 January 1818, Para 56, TNSA.
- 113 A money measurement. One *pagoda* was equal to 45 *fanams* or 3,600 cash (for details, see Saravanan, 'Economic Transformation', Annexure 2.2).
- 114 A money measurement. Eighty cash equals 1 *fanam* or 45 *fanams* equals 1 *pagoda* (Ibid.).
- 115 This is the lowest money measurement. Eighty cash is equal to 1 *fanam* and 45 *fanams* equal 1 *Star Pagoda*. These measures were widely practised in the Salem district during the early colonial rule.
- 116 Minutes of BOR, Vol. 257-B, 5 January 1818, Para. 137, TNSA.
- 117 An officer appointed to collect the revenue of an estate or village, which was attached by the government.
- 118 Letter from Graham to Read, No. XX, 24 August 1797, TNSA.
- 119 For example, in 1789, during Tipu's regime, the revenue servants collected bribes worth 24,000 *Star Pagodas*, which formed about 20 per cent of the gross revenue and 23.5 per cent of the net revenue. The middlemen or patels had collected privately about 17,000 *Star Pagodas* for themselves, forming nearly 14 per cent of the gross revenue and 16.5 per cent of the net revenue. Of the remaining 51,000 *Star Pagodas*, only 10,000 *Star Pagodas* were the balance due from the farmers (BR, Section I, *Management*, p. 154). Prior to the colonial period, the corrupt revenue servants were responsible for the land revenue arrears. Farmers' balances were insignificant when compared to the arrears of revenue servants

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to the government. Cultivators were pressurised to pay higher rate of land rent by the recognised agents of the rulers. In short, the Tipu land administration was characterised by heavy taxation, but inadequate revenue to the state, and administrative inefficiency, leading to the misery of the cultivators (Nilmani Mukherjee, *Ryotwari System in Madras 1792-1820*, Calcutta: Firma Mukhopadhyay, 1962, p. 7).

- 120 Letter from Graham to Read, No. XX, 24 August 1797, TNSA.
- 121 Ibid.
- 122 BR, Section III, *Inhabitants*, p. 134, TNSA.
- 123 Board Proceedings (hereafter BP) No. 212, 8 June 1906, p. 3, TNSA.
- 124 BR, Section VI, *Land Rent*, p. 90, TNSA.
- 125 BR, Section VII, *Imposts*, pp. 152-53, TNSA.
- 126 Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras*, Vol. II, p. 195.
- 127 It shows that the earlier practices of widow remarriage, even before disposing of corpse, has disappeared in the hill areas of Salem district at the time of the colonial intervention.