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BRITISH AGRARIAN REVENUE POLICY: LANDLESS AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS AND CAPITALIST LAND LORDS- A TRINGLE RELATIONS IN THANJAVUR DISTRICT

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Abstract: After the assumption of power in Tamil Country in the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, the British introduced many revenue settlements either with intermediaries like Zamindars and Mirasdars or directly with the ryots. Their interest changed from trade activities to the agrarian activities which they began to realize that it would give a fixed revenue to the Government. The Land revenue became the prime motive of the British Government. The suppression of the rebellious Poligars provided a loyal Zamindars to the Government. The Zamindars came forward to accept new revenue settlements which allowed to collect excess revenue from the peasants but fixed payment to the Government. Mostly the Zamindars were Land-holding communities which constituted castes belonged to the higher ranks in the social and economic ladder. In case of Thanjavur District, mostly the Zamindars belonged to the Brahmin and Vellalar Castes. In the second half of the Nineteenth Century, the western education and liberal ideas made the higher caste land holding communities to move to cities in seeking new professions like law , medicine and teaching. They left their lands to the control of Middle classes for Kuthagai (fixed rent). They cultivated the lands with the help of landless labourers. The condition of the labourers was continuous economic suffering . As the motive of the Government was increasing revenue, it did not bother about the welfare of the landless labourers who were indebted to capitalist land lords in many ways. Agrestic slavery continued till the end of Colonial rule in Thanjavur. Thus the paper attempts to highlight the triangle agrarian relation among the Government, Capitalist Land Lords and the landless agricultural labourers.

Keyword: Land Lords, Kuthagai, Varam, Slavery, Mirasdars, Pannaiyals, Tenants

INTRODUCTION:

The British Agrarian Policy brought about changes in the life of the agrestic serfs . The serfs were mostly belonged to the castes of Pallar and Parayar. They were denied freedom from the beginning. They were suffered ill-treatment in the hands of the landlords and remained in bondage. They were considered to be the personal properties of their masters. Hence , some of the serfs attempted to run away, but their attempts were thwarted for, the landlords with the support of the district administration made all efforts, They were in the bottom-line of the social ladder and their living quarters, known as cheris were segregated from the main settlements of the people.¹ The Charter Act of 1833 was against the practice of slavery in the Indian Society. On the other hand the Government failed to take measures to remove the most inhuman social evil. The Law Commission, constituted in accordance with the spirit of the Charter Act, had done nothing in this direction. In the meantime, the Humanitarian Movement gathered momentum in England. The force of public opinion gathered by the humanitarians in England was so strong .Due to the agitation on the floor of the Parliament for abolition of slavery in the colonies, the Slavery Abolition Act, the Act V of 1843, was passed. This Act was a half-hearted measure and this was not extended fully for the abolition of slavery which prevailed in India.² By the Act, it was provided that no public officer of court should sell any person or claim right to his compulsory labour , on the ground that he was a slave, nor enforce 'any

rights arising out of an alleged property in the person or services of another as a slave'. It further provided that anything which would be a penal offence, if done to a free man, should equally be so, if done to a slave.³

The Native Government officials who belonged to higher castes did not bother to implement law. The Government sought to regulate the slave system by permitting two outlets, namely, the personal type slavery, and emigration. The personal type slavery was based on a contract or agreement between a landlord and a labourer, by which the latter pledged his labour in return for money. The contract was in the form of a sale deed. The Government passed the Contract Act in 1859, according to which, any breach of agreement by a labourer could be punished. The courts treated such cases as 'debt slavery'.⁴ Alternatively, the serfs could exercise the option of migrating as coolies to overseas plantations in Malaysia and Sri Lanka. This emigration was under contract and those who went under it were called 'indentured labourer'. In Tanjore District, it was known as opanda coolly (contract labour) system. A considerable number of serfs in the District opted to emigrate and thus escape from bondage at home.⁵ The chances of earning more income also drove them to opt for emigration. Large-scale emigration resulted in the contraction of the available labour potential in the District The landlords were worried not only about the loss of slave-power, but also about .the demand for increased wages by agricultural labourers who chose to remain in the village.

The Christian missionary activities led to mass conversions. Their activities had a great influence on the socially downtrodden and economically backward depressed classes of the Pallars and Parayars. The missionaries established schools in cheris and taught them the ways of improving their living conditions. A number of Parayars joined the army as sepoy, while some others found employment in the domestic establishments of Europeans as cooks, caretakers, horse-keepers and gardeners. The new avenues of employment fetched them a reasonably high income. They were able to secure for themselves small plots of house sites as well as agricultural lands. For the first time in their long history, they entered into the category of peasants, i.e., small land owners. In due course, a number of people belonging to these castes possessed lands.

Agrestic Slavery

The Government took keen interest only on increasing land revenue. It did not want to antagonize the high caste landlords by increasing or defending the rights of the serfs and it consciously abstained from interfering in matters of caste and custom of the people. The landlords remained powerful in countryside and attempted all kinds of activities to perpetuate the existing system of agrestic servitude. This policy of the British Government served the interests of the affluent landlords, trustees of the temples and Heads of mutts and charitable institutions.⁶

Indebtedness of Agricultural Labourers

The improvement of the toiling cultivators was not cared. There was a growing material comfort of the landlords. The wages of the agricultural labourers who constituted the lowest strata was not in proportion to the rise of cost of living. This contributed to growing poverty and strengthened the position of the money-lenders and the landlords in rural areas. The small peasants often had to pledge or sell their jewels and even lands to meet the Government's revenue demand. The affluent land lords readily utilized the situation and bought these lands sold in distress. This trend further increased the already existing inequality in land ownership.

Kuthagai System

The British opened the gates of Government services to the natives towards the end of the Nineteenth Century. A large number of young men belonging to the rich land holding communities of Tamil Country joined the schools and colleges and benefitted from the spread of modern education and liberal western thoughts and ideas. They constituted the educated elite of the period, joined Government services and also entered into modern professions such as law, medicine and teaching. These developments introduced new elements in the agrarian relations in Thanjavur District. A number of land owners belonging to the Brahmin and other high castes became migrant salary workers or professionals. Lands belonging to them were leased to tenants, under a different mode of tenancy, called kuthagai or fixed rent system.

Tenancy was meant the share-cropping method till the end of the Nineteenth century. Share-cropping

necessitated constant supervision by the land lord. As the salaried class landlords had no time for management, they left the lands to the tenants under the kuthagai system. This arrangement became widespread soon. Absentee-landlordism gained momentum. These landlords were mostly absent from their villages. They neither directly supervised nor took much interest in the cultivation of their lands. They had to be content to receive a fixed rent from the tenants. The kuthagaidars paid a fixed rent to their landlords either in cash or kind which usually amounted from three fourths to four fifths of the produce after the payment of charges to harvest-labour and village servants. The tenants managed the whole process of cultivation by engaging pannaiyals or casual labourers to work in the fields.

Absentee-landlordism and Emergence of Petty Peasants

Absentee-landlordism and kuthagai system gave rise to a new group of petty peasants in the district. The tenants, who had taken on lease a few acres of land and had remained at the lower rungs of the economic ladder, could improve their status and become more well placed than the agricultural labourers in due course. A considerable number of such tenants were able to buy small plots of land out of the surplus earned through kuthagai. An increase in the number of petty peasants and medium size land owners was noticeable in the early decades of the Twentieth Century. During the period of 1875-1876, there were 804% of petty land owners and 8.4% of medium size land owners and during the period of 1901-1911, their number increase to 85.8% and 12.1% respectively.⁷

Rural Credit System

The dawn of the Twentieth Century brought with it some fundamental changes and new trends in the agrarian relations in Thanjavur district. It was mainly through the rural credit system, that the landlords were able to hold their subordinate sections in the agrarian society under their clutches. In any type of organization of the labour process, namely, pannai, varam and kuthagai, the system of advances of money capital to meet the costs of cultivation constituted the form in which the labour was subordinated. The landlords who had assumed the role of moneylenders, made advances to farm servants or other dependants in order to keep them under their control. The pannaiyals constituted an important source of cheap labour. They were exploited as much as possible level. Earlier, the status of the pannaiyals was slavery. Landholders bought and sold them to each other as they did their cattle. They were sold at the price of 20 chakrams, equal to Rs.31 each. Slavery system remained to function well. Under the new system, the landlords were able to get the Pannaiyals through the advancement of money for the cultivation process. Thus the system had changed, but the content of slavery remained the same for the landless labourers.

Merchant Capitalists

As regards the peasants and tenants, whether under varam or kuthagai, the landlords advanced money capital at the time of the beginning of agricultural operations in a year, mostly under the stipulation that they should sell their

produce at certain fixed rates, or at the rate prevailing at the time of repayment, or at the lowest rate at which grain was sold after harvest.⁸ As long as regularity was maintained in the repayment of the advance, there was a continuity in the supply of credit every year. If there was a failure in repayment, a bond or mortgage was signed for the recovery of the amount at a later date. The fact that the peasants and tenants who took the advances ran into debts showed that the produce left for their own consumption was inadequate. The perennial subordination to the money-lending big land owners was continued. Merchant-capital was ensured in economic sense. During periods of crises like depression, these landlord merchants, who were in urgent need of money, resorted to taking over the lands of the peasants and selling them to recover their dues.⁹

Indifferent Attitude of British Government

Under untoward circumstances, the policy of the British Government was to keep away from the developments in the agrarian relations in the Thanjavur district. The concerns of the Government were different. Land revenue no more continued to constitute the primary source of income for the Government and hence it did not care much for the developments on the agrarian front. Unless its hands were forced, the Government remained a silent spectator of the inequitable conditions in the agrarian relations in Thanjavur district.

On the question of landless labourers, the Government was unworried and it observed in 1906 that "everywhere the hours of labour have decreased and in most places wages have been most liberal".¹⁰ Again in 1933, the Government viewed that the wage rates had not decreased even during 1931, "a year of great economic depression" and that "there has been an all round increase in wages".¹¹ The only aspect in the policy of the Government that went to the benefit of the landless labourers was the Government's continued its measures to settle them on house sites of their own in the Government and poromboke lands.¹²

Concerning the peasants and the tenants, the Government observed that the evolving agrarian economy had reduced many of the small peasants to the level of tenants and the tenants continued to be disproportionately appropriated of their resources by the landlords, who had taken the incarnation of money lending merchant capitalists. In 1883, when the land revenue system was oppressive, the tenants used to get about 18 to 33% of the produce under the varam system. In 1906, when the land revenue was not so oppressive, the share of the tenant varied from 25 to 35%. It was the lowest in the richer parts of the delta land near Thiruthurai and highest in the worst delta land.¹³

Complaint of Mirasdars

The mirasdars, criticized about decreasing gains in agriculture, especially after the resettlement of the district in 1920. Referring to the report of Jackson, the Resettlement Officer, S.Muthiah Mudaliar said in one of the debates in the Madras Legislative Council in 1923 that with the high costs of assessment, the profit had been considerably reduced. The mirasdars submitted memorandum to the Government pleading for the reduction of the rates of assessment. But the

Government did not consider the request and declared that it was the land that paid the assessment and not the cultivator. The Government's system of resettlement did not contemplate the fall in prices at all. The assessment rate fixed on the basis of the prices prevailing at the time of resettlement was applicable to a subsequent period of thirty years.¹⁴

Hike in Rent and Land Prices

The Government had no concern for the economic condition of the ryots. As was natural with any colonial state, it thought that it was entitled to extract a certain sum of money as rent, out of land. More and more mirasdars left their lands in the care of the tenants as direct cultivation of lands with the help of pannaiyals involved more work and less profit. The scramble for such lands among the tenants and wage labourers was so intense that the mirasdars could hike the rents. With the increase in land prices in early 1940s, rents also increased. The tenants were finding it increasingly difficult to meet the rent demanded by the mirasdars, in spite of their using high yielding varieties of seeds and improved methods of cultivation.

In Thanjavur District, by 1940-1941, almost 50% of the area was under high yielding varieties. The demand for fertilizers was such that by 1950-1951, the scarcity of manure was acute. By 1944, the number of iron ploughs was 9198, oil engines with pumps 85, electric pumps in tube wells 82 and the number and the number of tractors in the district was 25.¹⁵ As Thanjavur district was a delta zone irrigated naturally by the river Kaveri, the need for wells was minimal. Agricultural activities were naturally brisk and the agrarian relations counted much and was static which always difavoured the interest of the toiling and moiling agricultural labourers in this economically most important fertile district of the Madras Presidency in general and Tamil Country in particular in the colonial rule.

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