

# MEMORANDUMS, REPORTS AND OBSERVATIONS OF BRITISH OFFICIALS OVER THE RELATIONS OF LAND LORDS AND AGRARIAN SLAVES IN THE FIRST HALF OF NINETEENTH CENTURY TAMIL COUNTRY

**D. Victoria**

Assistant Professor in History Department of History  
Loyola College(Autonomous) Chennai

**Abstract:** Memorandums, reports and observations of the British officials throw much light on the condition, position and status of the slaves of serfs in the agrarian sector of Tamil Country in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. They also highlight the existing relations between the Native Land Lords and Zamindars and the Serfs of the soil, and the humanitarian measures of the British Government for the abolition of the slavery. Generally the British administrative reports pointed out the Land Lords were wealthy and were in influence and affluence. The position of the serfs were low, they were not suffered in economic sense. To some extent, they were in par with free labourers. The slaves were much attached to the land of the Land Lords and worked hard to the improvement of the land and produce of the soil. There was cordial relations between the Land Lords and slaves. The slaves received all the privileges, allowances and benefits on the important occasions. In some times, they were sold with the land form one Land Lord to another. The Memorandum Of Srinivasa Raghava Iyengar, the observation of Sesha Iyengar, the Mirasi Papers of F.W. Ellis, inquiry of the Board of Rvenue of 1819, Francis Buchanan, Journey Account of Francis Buchanan from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar, A.D. Campbell remarks before the Selection Committee on 1832, Remarks of Charles Hayes the Collector of South Arcot before the select Committee of the House of Lords in 1830, Places's Report on the Jahire, 6 June 1799, Various proceedings of the Board of Revenue, Report on Slavery, 1890, and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1843 throw much information on the subject of serfdom in Tamil Country.

**Keyword:** Land Lords, Zamindars, Mirasidars, Inamdars, Serfs, Slaves, Labourers, Ryotwari, Mirasi, Slavery.

## INTRODUCTION: RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LAND LORDS AND BRITISH

The landlords in the Tamil country were variously known as Kaniyatcikars, Mirasidars, Mittatars, Zamindars and Inamdars. They possessed extensive lands which they either cultivated directly with the aid of their own labourers or leased them out to tenants who in turn cultivated them on their behalf. The Government of Madras, especially after the advent of Lord Cornwallis wanted to introduce permanent land revenue settlement with a view to encouraging the ancient Zamindars, Mittadars, Poligars and their landlords. They were either due to their sluggishness or inefficiency always in arrears to the Government. Between 1802 and 1805 the failure of the permanent settlement became more noticeable and the Government in order to realise the large arrears due to them had to put them up for sale. By 1815 many of them were auctioned and for want of proper bidders, many were purchased by Government themselves. In these an in many other tracts, the ryotwari system was introduced. The other wealthy and efficient mittas were retained.

Memorandum of Srinivasa Raghava Iyengar

Many among the Land Lords were so wealthy and

they excelled even Englishmen in their extravagance and way of life. Dewan Bahdur Srinivasa Raghava Iyengar, Inspector-General of Registration, Madras, was asked by Lord Cannemera (1886-90), the then Governr of Madras to examine whether the economic conditions of the Madras Presidency had improved during the last fifty year. In his Memorandum he has clearly brought out the progress made during the last fifty years of the Nineteenth Century. There were the wealthiest landlords like Raja of Rarnnad, Sivaganga, and Ettiyapuram. The next class of landowners was the Inamdars, who numbered 4,38,659 and held around 8.2 millions of acres, 19 acres each on an average. There were middling agriculturists who also did not suffer much during the time of famines. Just below them were ryotwari proprietors who also did not suffer much owing to little affluence. Taking such a Pattadar having 8 acres of dryland, for example his income would be Rs. 136 per year. Srinivasa Raghava Iyengar ascertained that, one acre of ordinary dryland, which was assessed at Rs. 1-12-0 gave an outturn of Rs. 17 taking good and bad seasons together and 8 acres of such land would give Rs. 136. Deducting Rs. 14 as the Government tax, which was little more than 10 per cent of the gross outturn, there was left about Rs. 122 for the subsistence

of the family of the ryot and for defraying the cultivation expenses, which are estimated at Rs.5 per acre. Out of this, wages of labour amounted to Rs. 3 and what the ryot would have to expend in cash or grain was Rs. 2 per acre or Rs. 16 for 8 acres, when he cultivated the land himself and did not employ hired labour. There was, therefore, left for subsistence about Rs. 106 or Rs. 9 a month. In addition to this, the family would make also something by growing vegetables, keeping a cow for raising dairy produce for consumption etc. all which would leave a margin about the cost of subsistence. The same was the condition throughout the period under review. In short, the conditions of the lower classes who possessed an acre or two together with the landless labourers were far from satisfactory. As Bourdillon rightly pointed out, they never knew their hunger fully appeased. As for the condition of the rich, there was great improvement as they shared the spoils with the English. Regarding the middle class ryot there was slight improvement.

### CHANGING POSITION OF RYOTS

The substantial ryots enjoyed more comforts and freedom in the Twentieth Century. In the Eighteenth and in the beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries, it was known from the accounts of Munro, Buchanan and Heyne, the plight of the people was nothing but a tale of misery, oppression and poverty. The introduction of railways, the spread of Western education, improved means of transport and communication and irrigation have definitely have enhanced the means and security of the people. As Srinivasa Raghava Iyengar pointed out tiled and terraced houses were superseding the old thatched cottages.<sup>1</sup>

### OBSERVATION OF SESHAIYENGAR

Better clothing, especially of elegant and costly kinds for women, had come into ordinary use among the higher classes in most of the districts. Sessa Iyengar, Professor of Kumbakonam College observed thus: "Women of the present-day will not even look at the coarse clothing which their grandmothers wore. Much larger quantities of gold and silver jewels are worn. Everywhere even in village, brass pots, plates and bronze cups have taken and are taking the place of earthen vessels. Even for cooking purposes they use the metallic vessels."<sup>2</sup>

### SUBSTANTIAL RYOTS

The substantial ryots had become more considerable. There were several landlords who vied with their foreign masters in wealth and intellectual attainment. It was just a contrast to their position portrayed in 1797 - "a long series of oppressive Governments, and particularly under Tipu, had reduced the Country, when delivered over to the Company, to such a state that a rich farmer was nowhere to be found; not one among them perhaps was worth 100 pagodas (Rs. 350) exclusive of his farming stock."<sup>3</sup>

### EARLY REFERENCES TO SLAVERY

Slavery was a very ancient institution in the Tamil Country. Scholars like V. Kanakasabhai Pillai disclaimed the existence of such an institution in the ancient Tamil Country. Kanakasabhai pointed out thus "slavery was never known

amongst the Tamils and this is a strong evidence of their superior civilization in this early period."<sup>4</sup> However, Tamil literature and epigraphy often refer to the existence of slavery. There are frequent references to urimaiccurram atimaittiral, i.e., group of slaves in Silappatikaram. In ancient Tamil society they were known as aturai. Kalittokai refers to such atimai. It says they were branded on the chest.<sup>5</sup> In the early and later medieval period, the prevalence of slavery is attested by literary and inscriptional evidences. The British records are full of such references. Francis Buchanan during his official tour at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century had taken note of slavery.<sup>6</sup> There were two kinds of slaves or serfs - pataiyal and the pankal. They mostly belonged to Pariah, Palli and Pallan castes who were the traditional agricultural labourers whose pitiable lot had elicited the sympathy and support of many. They were attached to the soil and usually transferred along with it.<sup>7</sup>

### SALVES AS PROPERTY OF MIRASIDARS

They were owned either by individual masters or village community as a whole. If they were under private owners, they were given food and shelter. In case of joint village, they belonged to the community as a whole. Ellis, an authority on Mirasi System says, they were a part of the village system and were the backbone of the rural economy. In his famous Miraisi papers, he deals extensively with Mirasi System and says, it was common among Mirasidars to have a group of slaves or serfs to till their soil. They were even sold, apart from the land.<sup>8</sup> In some places like Tanjore they had even proprietary rights like other ryots. Trevelyan has confirmed this before the Select Committee in 1840. He says: "serfs are as much owners as the person we call the landlord himself for they generally have rights in the soil in common with landlords".<sup>9</sup> Though they had the hereditary proprietary rights over the lands, they seldom claimed them. Usually they were treated as the property of the Mirasidar and were mortgaged and redeemed with the land.<sup>10</sup>

### NATURE OF SERFDOM

There are enough sources to assess the nature of serfdom in the Tamil Country thanks to the keen interest shown by the British Collectors on serfdom. F. W. Ellis after a careful and detailed inquiry into this problem observed thus: "The villains possess established rights and privileges of which they cannot be deprived, of which constitute their mirasi and which are prized by them as much and maintained as tenaciously as the more valuable privileges of the higher orders. First, the paraceri, the site of their huts wherever placed and the backyards attached to them are held like the houses and homesteads of the Mirasidars rent free, and they are exempted universally from all taxes and impost whatever. Secondly, they are entitled to a share in the produce of every crop which they receive at various rates and in various modes under the denomination of kalavacam cutantiram etc. Thirdly, they hold the inferior offices of the villages as Taliyari, Vettiyan, Totti etc., for which they are allowed maniyams and cuttantirams distinct from those above-mentioned. The villains work for the Mirasidars in rotation or murai and for the proportion of the share held by each. What is in addition to the produce of the privileges

above-mentioned is supplied jointly by village, and they receive presents of cloth and money at stated period at festivals, marriages etc. Sometimes their subsistence is secured to them by assignment of land which they cultivate like Bayaccharies; but rendering a large share to their masters in return for seed, cattle and implements of husbandry."<sup>11</sup>

### CONDITION IN COLONIAL RULE

Since the slaves formed the basis of village economy, they were deemed to be inevitable. They were nowhere inferior to free labourers, though in some places their wages were little less than that of them. Though not very well off, they were well protected and maintained during sickness and old age during the colonial rule.<sup>12</sup> Inquiry of the Board of Revenue of 1819 gives a clear picture about them from which it is evident that they were given huts, allowances of grain, two cloths a year, sometimes a blanket and a pair of sandals, and the usual presents on the occasions of ceremonies and festivals.<sup>13</sup>

### PURCHASE AND PRICE OF SLAVES

Generally they were provided with huts and a yard. They were either bought or obtained along with the land. In case if the Miraisidar had to buy, the price for a family of slaves ranged from 2 to 3 pagodas. It was a kind of collective bondage. If the family had no senior male member, then the right to sell it vested with the senior most maternal uncle of the family. He was known as Nallamaman (good uncle) and had the first claim on his niece to marry if he liked. In case if they did not have a nallamaman to dispose them of, they were called as parateci kuttu (Destitute family), then they were disposed of by the village community in which they were working. The headman of the village had the right to dispose them of for bondage. Such slaves were usually attached to the soil and transferred along with it.

Regarding the price of a slave or serf, interesting evidences can be cited. Proceedings of the Board of Revenue and Reports submitted by the official throw a flood of light on the slavery. In 1800 when Buchanan toured the country, the price of a serf and his wife was between 200 and 300 fanams (15 to 23 rupees). The price of a pallar slave in Trichinopoly District was between 5 and 10 pagodas.<sup>14</sup> 166 In South Arcot it was approximately between 10 and 50 pagodas. Slaves once slaves were always slaves. According to the report on slavery, 1840, manumission of slaves were very rare. But they had their own way of ascertaining their rights or privileges. In case of any grievance to be tackled, they used to assemble in large numbers out the villages and so remained until their masters with promise of good treatment, presentation of betel leaves and nuts and by other means induced them to return. They complained of various grievances and threatened a general strike. But they never carried it into action."<sup>15</sup>

### NATURE AND TREATMENT OF SLAVES

A number of reports ascertained the nature and treatment of slaves in the colonial period, we have. In 1819, the Collector of Coimbatore reported thus: "Slaves are on the whole better treated by their masters than the common class of free labourers." Charles Hydes, the Collector of South

Arcot District in 1830 before the Select Committee of the House of Lords, pointed out thus "They are scarcely considered as slaves, so well protected are they of their masters".<sup>16</sup> They were so attached to their masters that they refused to desert them even during the time of adversity and famines. In Tirunelveli, one landlord who became impoverished received half a measure of grain daily from each of his 500 slaves.<sup>17</sup>

They had their own routine of work. Before the Select Committee in 1832 A.D. Campbell said: "They worked in groups relieving the tedium of labour by cherry chorus songs." They were not personally overpowered by anyone, nor placed under any slave driver. They usually worked from dawn till dusk, with a couple of hours off for midday meal. They had no weekly holidays, but obtained holiday on all important festive occasions, particularly connected with agricultural operations, consecrating implements, Pongal, New Year, etc. No particular task was assigned to the serf daily and they were liable to be employed in every department of husbandry. The serf of each master executed the works connected with the cultivation and irrigation of his lands. Any cultivation by the serf in dry lands was generally in the capacity of free labourers for others, or on their own independent account. The serfs were also occasionally employed in duties of a public nature, such as erecting pantals for feasts, stopping breaches and pulling huge cars of gods and goddess during festivities. In the District of Tanjore, particularly, the pulling of Temple Car was an onerous duty".<sup>18</sup> In this way, the serfs did their work sincerely without any intervention.

### POOR AGRICULTURAL CLASSES

Poor quality of food was served to the Serfs. The food was coarse. Though lacked in quality, they were regularly fed and what was lacking in quality was compensated by quantity. In most of the districts, they were noted for their athletic body and well-built appearance.<sup>19</sup> Apart from food, they were entitled for grain allowances like kalavacam and purakalam which were customary payments in grain on the threshing floor. In spite of all these allowances, they were the poorest of all the agricultural classes.<sup>20</sup>

### SLAVERY IN TAMIL DISTRICTS

An inquiry which was made in 1819 to assess the conditions of agricultural slaves revealed that slavery was in practice in Trichinopoly, Tanjore, South Arcot and Tirunelveli.<sup>21</sup> According to Place's Report, slavery was widely prevalent in the Chingleput District.<sup>22</sup> It was also reported that no such slavery existed in Salem and Madurai Districts.<sup>23</sup> In Coimbatore District, it was in vogue in some places.<sup>24</sup> The inquiry of 1819 furnishes information regarding their yearly emoluments. A Pallan and Pallachi got nearly about 30 kalams and Rs. 9 per year.<sup>25</sup> It was just enough for their survival.

### GRADUAL DECLINE OF SLAVERY

The decline of slavery was gradual due to certain historical circumstances and forces. The British Government

was against the slavery system and by a number of laws and regulations curbed its growth. Above all, the ryotwari system introduced by the British Government gave a death blow to the system.

In the Madras Presidency, the ryotwari system encouraged individual ownership. As a sequence, many small land owners sprang up. Due to heavy assessment, they were not in a position to have agricultural serfs whose wages they could not pay. They were forced to rely on the labour of their own families. Improved means of transport and communication, and Western system of education encouraged the mobility of labour. In the later part of the Nineteenth century, many large industries were started. Rapid urbanisation on western model was not conducive to nurture the traditional slavery. Public Works Department offered higher wage to the serfs. It enabled the slaves to brake the shackles of slavery. No doubt, the Slavery Abolition Act of 1843 was one of the major benefits conferred by the British on India.<sup>26</sup>

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Srinivasa Ragava Iyengar, Memorandum on the Progress of the Madras Presidency for the Last Forty Years, Madras, 1893, p. 164.
2. Ibid., Appendix, p. ccix.
3. Thomas Munro, letter, to Captain Read, 5 September 1797.
4. Kanakasabai Pillai, V., The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago, Madras, 1956, p. 114.
5. Kalittokai, 247.
6. Francis Buchanan, Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar, Vol. II, London, 1807, p. 320.
7. Board of Revenue Proceedings, 5 January 1818.
8. Miraci Papers, Appendix, pp. lxxix-lxxx.
9. Report of the Select Committee, 1840, pp. 91-92.
10. Place, Report on the Jaghire, 6 June 1799.
11. Crole, C.S., The Chingleput, late Madras District, Madras, 1879, p. 212.
12. Francis Buchanan, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 370-72; Report on Slavery, 1840, p. 250.
13. Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, 25 November 1819.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 5 January 1818.
16. Ibid., p. 112.
17. Report on Slavery, 1890, p. 203.
18. Evidence of A.D. Compbell Before the Select Committee of 1832, Appendix Public.
19. General Reports, Vols. 27 and 28, pp. 372-381.
20. Sarada Raju, A., Economic Conditions in the Madras Presidency, University of Madras, Madras, 1941, pp. 270-276.
21. Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, 25 November 1819.
22. Places's Report on the Jahire, 6 June 1799.
23. Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, 25 November 1819.
24. Ibid. Sarada Raju, A., op. cit., p. 213.
25. General Reports of the Board, 3 January 1820.

26. Suseela, T.N., Slavery and Bonded Labour in Tamil Nadu, 1800-1976, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Madras, Chennai, 2009, p. 103