



SWARNRUDRA: An International Multidisciplinary Journal of Academic Research

<https://swarnrudrajournal.com/>

e-ISSN: 3140-0108

Publisher: Swarnrudra Publication

Vol. 1, Issue 2, August-September 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23465913>



SWARNRUDRA

An International Multidisciplinary Journal of Academic Research

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Agrarian Society and Agricultural Development in Colonial Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

Tamil Nadu experienced British rule and the resulting change of land revenue settlements, state-run irrigation and an increasing export economy. Not everyone benefited from these changes. This article examines the impact of the Ryotwari and Zamindari systems, fixed cash assessments, state-sponsored irrigation works on the Kaveri and Tamiraparani, and the lure of commercial crops on landholders, tenants and agricultural labor in the Madras Presidency. It examines rural indebtedness and famine and addresses the condition of women in agricultural work. The article argues that colonial agricultural development was double-edged: canals, anicuts and railways enlarged the cultivated and marketed surface of the economy, while rigid revenue demands, dependence on moneylenders and caste-based inequality left the majority of cultivators exposed to risk.

KEYWORDS :

Colonial Tamil Nadu, agrarian society, Ryotwari, Zamindari, land revenue, irrigation, commercialisation, rural indebtedness, famine, women labour.

ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received: 25.08.2026

Revised: 05.09.2026

Accepted: 15.09.2026

Published Online: 25.09.2026

CITATION

Deepthi, V., (2026). Agrarian Society and Agricultural Development in Colonial Tamil Nadu. *SWARNRUDRA: An International Multidisciplinary Journal of Academic Research*, 1(2), 123-127. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23465913>

Introduction

For most people in the Tamil country during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, land and water decided how they lived. The village was the working unit of this economy, and cattle, labour and the seasonal supply of water bound its members together. When Company rule was consolidated in the south between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, administrators set out to replace older and looser arrangements of tribute and share-cropping with a regular, cash-based relationship between the state and the cultivator (Kumar 1965; Baker 1984). The settlement most closely linked to the Madras Presidency was the Ryotwari system, associated with Thomas Munro and Alexander Read. Instead of a zamindar standing between government and peasant, revenue was fixed on the holding of each individual ryot. Large tracts, however, remained under Zamindari and polygar estates, so the Presidency never had a single agrarian regime (Stein 1992). The effects also varied from region to region. Thanjavur's deltaic villages, the dry cotton lands of Tirunelveli, the uplands of Coimbatore and Salem, and the tank-fed plains of Madurai each had their own ecology, caste composition and pattern of landholding. A study of colonial agriculture therefore has to look beyond output and prices to the social relations that governed access to land, water and labour.

This article follows that approach. It moves from the pre-colonial village to the revenue settlements, then to irrigation and farming practice, commercialisation, debt and famine, and finally to the position of women, before offering a short assessment of what these changes meant for rural society. Earlier writing tended to see colonial rule either as a force of modernisation or as a cause of impoverishment. More recent work on the Tamil country, by Dharma Kumar, David Ludden and Christopher Baker among others, stresses instead the interplay between colonial institutions and existing caste and class structures (Kumar 1965; Ludden 1985; Baker 1984). This article follows that later approach. Its central argument is that colonial agricultural development enlarged the economy but strengthened, rather than loosened, inequalities in access to land, water and credit. The discussion rests on published secondary scholarship and on the official record as quoted in it, namely settlement and Board of Revenue proceedings, Famine Commission reports and district manuals.

The Pre-Colonial Agrarian and Village Order

Before Company rule, the Tamil village combined farming, craft and ritual life in one local order. Its population included landholders, tenant cultivators, landless agricultural workers, and artisans such as carpenters, smiths and potters, who were commonly paid in grain at harvest. Paddy was grown wherever water was dependable, while millets, pulses and cotton occupied the drier soils. The great rivers, above all the Kaveri and the Tamiraparani, sustained the most prosperous farming zones. Maintenance of water was a collective duty. Under the custom of *kudimaramathu*, cultivating families contributed labour to desilt tanks and repair bunds and channels before the rains. Temples and *mathas* held large endowed lands, employed tenants and acted as local landlords and creditors, so religious institutions were also economic ones. Access to this system was far from equal. Landholding was concentrated among dominant castes, while Dalit labourers worked as bonded or semi-bonded farmhands and were often kept away from the best-irrigated fields and from village decision-making (Kumar 1965). These inherited hierarchies were the ground on which colonial revenue policy would later operate.

Land Revenue Settlements: Zamindari, Ryotwari and the Village Alternative

The Permanent Settlement introduced by Cornwallis in 1793 created hereditary zamindars in Bengal who owed the state a fixed sum. A comparable arrangement was extended in the early 1800s to the Northern Circars and to former polygar territories in the south, which is why large estates such as those of Ramnad, Sivaganga and Ettayapuram stayed outside the Ryotwari net. In such areas the peasant dealt with a landlord, not directly with the government.

Ryotwari took shape through the experiments of Alexander Read and Thomas Munro in the Baramahal and the Ceded Districts. Its premise was that the actual cultivator should hold the land from the state, pay an assessment on each field, and be free to give up land he could not afford to till. Munro regarded a demand of about one-third of gross produce as the highest that landed property could bear (Stein 1992). In practice, assessments were often set above what poor soils could pay. Officials tried to get ryots to keep land that they would have given up. Officially, the bad season's burden was on the household.

The design of the settlement was contested. In 1818 the Board of Revenue in Madras argued for village settlements, under which the village community as a whole would answer for the revenue. The Board feared that dealing with each ryot would weaken local institutions and increase the power of subordinate revenue officials. Munro's view prevailed, and when he became Governor in 1820 Ryotwari was extended across the unsettled districts. Historians since have noted a further problem. Munro and early administrators spoke of assessments that would be stable and moderate, yet later nineteenth-century settlements revised rates periodically, usually upwards, so cultivators could not rely on a fixed demand (Kumar 1965; Ludden 1985). Because the state was always the final claimant, its demand stood first in line before the farmer's own subsistence.

The two main systems compare as follows.

Feature	Zamindari / polygar estates	Ryotwari
Who pays the state	Zamindar or estate holder	Individual cultivator

Intermediary	Landlord between state and peasant	None
Assessment	Fixed sum on the estate	Rate per field, revised at resettlement
Main risk for the peasant	Rent and eviction pressure from the landlord	Rigid cash demand from the state
Southern examples	Ramnad, Sivaganga, Ettayapuram	Most of the Tamil plains, including much of Tirunelveli

Irrigation, Implements and Cultivation

In most of the Madras Presidency the monsoon alone could not be trusted, so artificial irrigation decided what could be grown. Only the western coastal tracts of Malabar and South Kanara and parts of the Northern Circars enjoyed rainfall reliable enough to farm without it. Elsewhere the options were river-fed channels led off from anicuts, storage tanks, and wells. Delta districts gained most from the perennial rivers, whereas the interior depended on thousands of small tanks whose bunds, sluices and channels had been built over many centuries. Colonial engineers did add to this inheritance. The best-known intervention was the repair and extension of the ancient Grand Anicut on the Kaveri, followed by new works on the Kollidam (Coleroon) in the 1830s under Arthur Cotton, which stabilised water supply to the Thanjavur delta and raised its paddy output. The Periyar project, completed in 1895, diverted west-flowing water through a tunnel to the dry Vaigai basin of Madurai and Ramnad. Later, the Mettur dam on the Kaveri, opened in 1934, extended the controlled canal system. Meanwhile, the village tank system lost ground. As the state took charge of major works, the habit of community upkeep under *kudimaramathu* weakened, and many tanks silted up, to the detriment of tank-dependent districts (Baker 1984).

Tirunelveli and the Tamiraparani. The Tamiraparani, the only perennial river of the southern districts, fed a chain of old anicuts and channels, including the Marudur and Srivaikuntam works. These supported double-crop paddy and banana on the river's wet lands. The black soils away from the river told a different story. Dry-farmed cotton was the staple there, and Tinnevely became one of the Presidency's principal cotton districts. The district therefore combined an irrigated rice belt with a rain-dependent cotton belt, and the two groups of cultivators faced very different risks.

Tools and methods. Farming equipment was simple and cheap. The wooden plough, pulled by a pair of bullocks and shod with a small iron point, did most of the work, and the village carpenter usually made and repaired it for an annual customary payment. Sickles, hoes, harrows, levellers and seed drills completed the kit, though the northern districts were better equipped than the south. Colonial officials often condemned this equipment as backward, but ryots replied that it matched their poor capital and small plots. Fields were ploughed repeatedly after the first rains, manured as far as means allowed, and then either sown directly or planted out from nursery beds that were ploughed and manured several times. Water was then admitted at intervals and weeding repeated until the crop matured. Official reports also stressed how little the pattern of crops changed: rice stayed on wet land and dry grains on dry land, with only minor shifts at the margin.

Commercialisation, Indebtedness and Famine

During the second half of the nineteenth century transport and communications developments combined with the dismantling of restrictive colonial trade policies. These integrated India with the global economy. Cash crops replaced subsistence crops. The coastal region of what is now Tamil Nadu was well situated to develop an export crop trade. As world demand for cotton increased, export, and therefore cash, crops flowed through Tuticorin. Cash replaced barter for the payment of rents, wages and professional services. Most of the wealth created by this export trade enriched European and large landholding and moneylending interest at the expense of small landholding and trading producers (Ludden 1985; Baker 1984).

The cash demands of the state for the payment of taxes, rents and land revenue created a cash debt cycle for small farmers, which often began with cash advances from moneylenders. Since land revenue and taxes were payable soon after the harvest, small farmers often borrowed to meet cash expenses for the purchase of seed and bullocks, and to pay for a marriage or other cash

expenses. Moneylending traders and landlords charged high interest to secure title to the crop. In conjunction with natural disasters and a fall in prices for cash crops, moneylending debt enhanced a farmer's loss of land title. The debt cycle ensured a large landless and agricultural dependent population. Many observers described small landholding peasant farmers as being in debt since birth (Pinch 1977; McAlpin 1989; Sivaram 1977).

Commercialization transformed the nature of famines. Cultivating more cash crops like cotton and groundnut and less food crops like millets and pulses left households vulnerable to market prices and their ability to purchase food. The Great Famine of 1876 to 1878 severely affected large parts of the Madras Presidency and scarcity returned in 1896 to 1897. The Famine Commissions of that time concluded that there was adequate food production across the country to meet the demand and critics remarked on the irony of food exports during times of food scarcity. Recently, scholars have accepted the Failure of Food Entitlements as the main cause of the famines of that period. This means poor artisans and labourers, who already lost their means of subsistence and employment, were not able to purchase food because of soaring prices and adequate relief was not provided in a timely manner (Davis 2001). During the period environmental conditions of the Indian subcontinent, especially the monsoon rains, made it difficult to grow enough food, but the fault of the colonial economy was that people were unable to cope with these conditions.

Peasant Responses and Adaptation

Diverse methods were utilized by cultivators to meet the pressure brought by the transforming economy. First was adjustment within the agricultural economy. This took the form of the household farming part of the land and focusing on commercial crops, seeking better watered land to farm, and combining agriculture with other activities like palmyra tapping, petty trading, and transportation. Risk management in credit was achieved by moving from moneylenders to other moneylenders and delaying payment. Other members of the family and social group were vital in providing support during the period of crisis. A second defense strategy was migration. Starting from the last quarter of the 19th century, many small holders and landless Tamil cultivators migrated to plantations in Ceylon, Malaya and Burma to escape poverty. Many of them migrated as bonded labor. Although some migrants sent money to the village, the labor market links weakened the rural economy. Finally, people made requests to the British to roll back taxes during years of crop failures, and demonstrated against the British for increasing taxation. Some people took up arms against the British to protest British policies. Like above mentioned cases of migration and pleas to British, violent responses to British shows the British policies deeply influenced local people.

Women in Agrarian Production and Rural Society

Women performed a multitude of tasks required for Tamil agriculture. They assisted in planting and cultivation, harvesting, and threshing. Women maintained the livestock and processed the grains. Women also worked as agricultural laborers. Because of their smaller stature, women typically earned lower wages than men, and women were usually paid in kind (grain) as opposed to cash. As women did not own land, they were never listed in the land records. Women were viewed as servants or laborers in the household even if they were the main farmer of the household.

Caste also determined the condition of women. Dalit women also worked seasonally and were not given a share of the means of production. Dalit women were more susceptible to the hardships of famine and high prices. The seasonal migration of men also increased women's agricultural work, particularly if the migrating men were the male household heads. The female household heads had no control over this migration and would not be able to acquire greater control over the means of production. The period between the mid-18th century to the early 20th century is not well documented in regard to women's agricultural work. Thus, the information presented here should be viewed as preliminary (Baker 1984).

Village Society and Historical Significance

The colonial state transformed the old village structures rather than replacing them. Previous power structures remained but

shifted to work within the framework of the state. Castes that previously controlled land ownership gained even more power with the legal right to own and transfer land. Cultivators who once owned the land, along with the customary right to use the land, became tenants at the will of the land owners. Reproduction of old social structures created new, more strict and formal, hierarchies (Washbrook 1981).

There are three important aspects of the recent agrarian history of the region for historians. Firstly, land revenue structure created new class divisions and deepened existing caste hierarchy. Secondly, it shows how the integration of a region into the global economy, especially through improvements in irrigation and transportation, made the region more prosperous. Yet new divisions based on class, caste and gender arose among the village households. And finally, it gives us the reasons for growth of class and political consciousness among different social groups of the region, particularly during the first three decades of the 20th century.

Conclusion

Agrarian change in colonial Tamil Nadu was a combination of both continuity and change. Cultivation continued to be the primary occupation of the people. However, a monetized economy, modern systems of revenue collection, and the role of the state in the management of irrigation and water resources changed the context within which agriculture was practiced. Rapidly increasing production, backed by modern means of communication and transport, new export markets and an international division of labour, altered the nature of demand. While on the one hand, modern means of production and the cash economy resulted in an increase in the intensity of cultivation and the quantum of produce, on the other hand, they brought about widespread distress through increased and inequitable assessments, indebtedness and unequal ownership of land, combined with the social and economic degradation of the lower orders, and the continued incidence of famines.

The colonial state, however, is to be credited for certain indirect improvements in agricultural productivity and farming. While combining the many dimensions of the agrarian economy of the period and the variance in the degrees of benefit derived from improvements as a result of the policies of the colonial state, it is important to bear in mind that the principal beneficiaries of these 'improvements' were the large land-owning classes and money-lenders at the cost of small- and landless-cultivators, agricultural laborers, and women.

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