INTRODUCTION

Right from the days when human beings had taken to agriculture for their subsistence and also to meet some of their needs from the agriculture related vocations till date, it has been the mainstay of large and popular countries like India. The Tamil country right from the historical times is no exception to this phenomena.

The pattern of land ownership, and the mode of agricultural operations have not been static through the ages. Different modes of production and changes brought in production relations had transformed land ownership pattern from time to time experiencing changes under different systems of governance. From ancient times beginning with primitive form of community ownership, the governance of the land had passed on to feudal lords, the land lords and capitalists. The change in land ownership patterns had perpetuated the system of slavery and bonded labour during Medieval Times and during Colonial Period in India.

The understanding of the agrarian society in the past reveals that the peasantry seems to have been included those who actually involved in the agricultural operation. They were either small land holders or landless agricultural labourers or slaves or bonded labourers attached to the monarch, feudal landlords and the temple. The peasantry in the Indian context in general and the Tamil country during the Medieval Times in particular seemed to have played a pivotal role in agricultural production and determined the economy of the state. However that did not help them
achieve economic independence or enjoying sound economic status because the system of society was such during the period which kept them continuously as dispossessed, exploited and discriminated at the hands of the monarchs and landocracy in the name of religion and caste as well.

Who is a Peasant?

A peasant is one who is actually tilling soil and one who is attached to land for subsistence and livelihood as owner, as hired labour, as a forced labour and a slave.

Since agriculture is the mainstay of population in the Indian society in general, the peasantry are the community of people who are actually involved in agricultural operations.

According to the Webster's Dictionary of English language, “peasant is a hired farm labourer or owner or tenant of a small farm or holding, in a country where the mass of farm workers and small farms are very poor peasantry.”

According to the New Oxford Encyclopedia Dictionary the peasant has been defines as, “countryman, rustic especially one working on land as small farmer or labourer”. The Grolier Academic Encyclopedia defines:

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"Peasant in its broad sense has been described as a rural dweller, who lives by working in the soil." According to the New Encyclopaedia Britannica, peasant has been defined as “any member of a class of persons who till the soil as small land owners or as agricultural labourers.”

The term "peasant" originally was referred to small scale agriculturists in Europe in Historic times, but many other societies, both past and present, have had a peasant class.

A number of scholars have defined the meaning of the peasant in the Indian context. A leading scholar Irfan Habib, the father of peasant history in India, says: “the peasant to mean a person who undertakes agriculture on his own, working with his own implements and using the labour of his family.” David Ludden and Kathleen Gough, the foreign experts on Indian studies has also understood the peasants based on their South Indian experience.

David Ludden avers: “Farmers villagers, folk, and masses all these define a peasantry, but none does so alone. Peasant family farmers work the land in small scale communities where recurring chores, constant worries, and ritual routines suggest miniscule worlds sealed out of time. Despite these appearances, however, peasant villages have never existed in isolation,

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6 Irfan Habib, “Peasantry in Indian History”, General President’s Address, 43rd Session of the Indian History Congress, Kurushetra, 1982, p.42.
for peasants, farm their land also in large-scale, complex societies.\textsuperscript{7} Kathlean Gough saw “Peasants as people who involved agricultural or related production with primitive means and who surrender part of their produce to land lords to the agents of state.”\textsuperscript{8}

**What is Peasantry?**

According to 21st century universal Encyclopaedia, “Peasantry, a term applied to rustics or countrymen, including agricultural labourers and peasant proprietors, i.e., persons owning their own cottage and a small amount of lands”.\textsuperscript{9} Also it refers to the agricultural populations of pre-industrial civilizations and rural cultivators practicing traditional forms of agriculture within partly industrialized civilizations. Specific peasantries, particularly European have long been studied by historians, rural sociologists and others.\textsuperscript{10}

According to a Russian version, "peasantry means a social class whose members by their labour produce agricultural products, using privately owned or co-operation means of production".\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{7} David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989, p.8.
\textsuperscript{8} Kathleen Gough, “Modes of Production in Southern India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, February 1980, p.93
The Oxford English Dictionary quotes Lenin "as saying that peasantry as last capitalist class. Because of the two main classes of which our society is composed, the peasantry is a class whose economy is based on private property and small community production. Because the peasantry, as long as it remains a peasantry, living by small commodity production will throw up capitalists from its name."  

A.R.Desai describes "a peasantry which is indebted and bonded and which in the context of pauperization and politicization in Colonial countries provides extremely cheap labour, and is subjected to super-exploitation, in forms reminiscent of descriptions provided by Karl Marx in Capital".  

Having been ideologically influenced by Engels, D.N.Dhanagare too viewed the peasantry "as internally split unorganised and politically important unless mobilised by organised working class".  

While concurring with the views of Eric R.Wolf in his Peasant Wars of the 20th Century observes that peasants are “populations that are essentially involved in cultivation and make autonomous decision regarding the process of cultivation”.  

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K.K.N.Kurup while interpreting the observation of Eric R.Wolf says: “They consists of tenants and share croppers as well as owner-operators as long as they are in a position to make decisions on their crops and cultivation. The definition of Eric R. Wolf does not include landless agricultural labourers”.\textsuperscript{16}

**Condition of the Peasantry in the Tamil Country Before 9\textsuperscript{th} c.A.D.**

The Pallava rulers in the Tamil Country were generally tall, healthy, pious and intelligent and these traits would have justified the people’s veneration for their rulers. It was during the rule of the Pallavas from 6\textsuperscript{th} to 9\textsuperscript{th} Century A.D., the Sangam language, culture and religion was Indianised with a marked difference”.\textsuperscript{17} The kings were assisted by a cabinet of ministers who were men of higher learning and experience in the state craft and in the governance of the country. The king was the ultimate owner of the land. Land tax was the principal source of revenue to the state. Therefore, lands were measured and the title deeds made and issued to the owners. In addition to **brahmadeya** land, large tracts of lands were granted to big and small temples by kings, royal family members and other rich landlords. They were called as **devadanams** which were either partly or fully exempted from taxes. The state had monopoly in a few ventures like salt manufacture. The whole country under the Pallava rule was broadly

\textsuperscript{16} K.K.N.Kurup, “Agrarian Reforms and Social Change in South India: An Analysis of Major Trends Since Independence” Presidential Address, The South Indian History Congress, 6\textsuperscript{th} Session, Osmania University, Hyderabad, 1986, p.5.

\textsuperscript{17} B.S.Chandrababu, *The Land and People of Tamil Nadu – An Historical Overview*, Kalam Veliyeedu, Madurai, 2003, p.22.
divided into three divisions, namely *Kottam, Nadu, and Ur* for administrative convenience. The *Ur* or the village was the lowest unit of administration. The Pallava Kings had contributed significantly for the development of agriculture. Mahendravarman I built a very big lake at Mahendravadi and smaller ones at Mamandur and Uttiramerur. A lake that was built by Nandivarman Pallava at Kaveripakkam was 27 square mile in area. Both for drinking water and for the purposes of irrigation many small and big wells were dug in various parts of the Pallava territory. A big well in 37 square feet area called “Marpidugu Bigwell” was dug at Thiruvallarai in Tiruchirapalli district.

The landlord feudalism that developed during the Pallava rule in the Tamil country had left behind a large chunk of the Sudra and lower caste population landless.

The agricultural production began to increase in the Tamil country from 500 A.D. onwards. Forests were cleared, the lands were reclaimed, irrigation facilities were developed. Handicrafts industries were also promoted. The landlords tried to establish a powerful government. They opposed the kings. The landlords patronized Jainism and Buddhism. They tried to strengthen the government who supported agriculture.

From the 500 A.D to 900 A.D. the Pallava kings ruled the Tamil country. In southern Tamil Nadu the Pandyan kingdom continued in power. Mutharaiyars ruled Cauvery delta region as strong chieftains. Their capital was Tanjore. During the Pallava reign the agricultural production increased.
The trade also developed and several traders were asked to pay professional taxes. The rule of Pallava was also strengthened by the strong army. It assisted the kings in the administration. Besides the army, the establishment of religious structures and endowments made the Kings power absolute and unquestionable. During the period the Brahmadeyas were created as the gift of land to the Brahmins. The lands gifted to the temples increased. For the welfare of the landlords, Ur, Sabha and Nadu were established. For the safety and prosperity of the traders Nagaram was established keeping the king as its patron. Nadus and Nagaras continued to be units of state. The landlords and Brahmins registered their dominance in the society. However, the Pallava Kings took efforts for the development of agriculture and secured the support of the agriculturists.

The process of development found during the Pallava period is documented in the form of hundreds of temples and temple inscriptions and large corpus of bhakti literature, coins, artifacts and foreign notices to complete the picture with the establishment of Brahminised Pallava dynasty of the Andhra origin at Kanchi in the north east corner of Tamil country (c.600 A.D.). There were greater waves of immigration and settlement, the Brahmin section of which took the shape of agraharas which may be described as agrarian corporations of huge size. Eventually they became temple-centered and propagated the ideology of Bhakti which was congenial to the developing feudal social structure. With immigrant Brahmins, non-cultivating proprietors of soil patronized with the rulers establishing themselves in large fertile river valleys, the old real producers, the rich and poor peasants of Tamilagam were either pushed out or forced to accept a
subordinate position acknowledging the Brahmin or the temple of landlord and surrendering a part of their produce. This is illustrated by the ‘kudi ningi karanmai’, kudi ninga karanmai’, the first type evacuating the old peasants and the second permitting to continue.

Tillers of the Soil

The actual tillers or cultivators of the soil were the group of people like the Pallars, Paraiyars, Pallis and Vanniyars. Some Vellalas were involved in the tilling. They were popularly known as *Uluvor*. They worked in the field from dawn to dusk.

The Vellalas dominated the other non-Brahmin communities in the medieval Tamil Country. They were mostly land owners in the Vellanvagai villages. The Pallas and Paraiyas and were mostly landless, they were called agrarian slaves. They were employed by the landlords. The men of this community ploughed the land sowed the seeds and attended to other related works. The womenfolk of this community involved themselves in transplanting work and reaping the crops. Many of them were landless, who were mostly treated as slaves. Few of them were forced and bonded labourers of the landlords. The cultivating labourers or tenants were called *Ulukudi*. From the casual references in the inscriptions, one can finally perceive the existence of hired labourers who assisted in agricultural operations on the estates of the other people and received a daily wage, usually in grain. There was no labourer and the small peasant hiring himself out in spare time.
The land taxes were paid by the Vellalas of the Vellanvagai villages. There were temples and Brahmadeyas which were not exempted from the taxes also.

**Tilling the Soil Individually or Collectively**

The tilling of the soil or cultivation of the land was done by individually or collectively. During the medieval times the cultivation carried out by broadly, three systems: (i) where the owner himself cultivated the land with the help his family (ii) where the owner cultivated the land with the help the day labourers and farm servants (iii) where the owner led the land to tenants on lease.

The peasantry consists of small agricultural producers, who with the help of simple equipment and the consumer of their families produce mainly for the consumption and for the fulfillment of obligations to holders of political and economic power.

The wooden plough was mostly used in tilling. The Kambar’s *Errelupathu* which belongs to 12th centuries in praises of plough and describes the function of each plough and incidentally the process of cultivation. The farmers used bulls for ploughing the land. The bulls were yoked to plough. Water lift (*ettram*) was used for pulling out water. Water lifts appear to have been used in well irrigation. Manure were used for increasing the fertility of the soil. The operation of peasantry used had
piccotas and baskets. The usages of hand piccotas and baskets lifting water from wells and tanks seem to have been widely prevalent.

**The Operation of Peasantry**

The peasantry of different cultivating castes, were either small land owners or landless agricultural labourers working for wages in others’ farms. And the tenants were at the mercy of the land owners. The land owning peasantry had to pay tax to the village assembly and the state besides, meeting permissible expenses towards service castes in the villages. In the interpersonal relations among the peasantry the class solidarity outweighed the caste solidarity. Bounded by the dictates of the village assembly and the state, the peasantry carrying on monsoon-based agriculture seemed to have lived a life of hand to mouth during the period prior to 9th century A.D. in the Tamil Country.

**Caste of the Peasantry in the Indian or Tamil Nadu Context**

The peasantry under study belonged to different castes and communities, namely the Vellalas, Pallas, Paraiyas, Pulaiyas, Kallars, Pallis, Maravas and other untouchables.
A Poor Class Exploited and Discriminated

The poor were ill-treated in the medieval Tamil society. In fact, they did all sorts of work in and out of seasons. But the wages did pay to them were not equal to their labour. The meager amount of grain they received as wages was not enough for a daily meal for family members. They actually lived from hand to mouth.

Scope of Study

There are no specific studies on this topic attempted so far. Therefore an attempt has been made to bring to light the role work and socio-economic condition of peasantry during 9th to 14th century A.D. It will be a significant contribution to the history of Tamil country.

Universe of Study

Tamil country is situated at the south-east of the Indian sub-continent. Its geographical location in the world map stretches 8.5° latitude in the south, 13.8° latitude in the north and 76.15° longitude in the west to 8°20 longitude in the east.

On the north of Tamil Nadu is Andhra Pradesh, on the north west Karnataka and on the west it is bordered with Kerala. The Bay of Bengal in the east and the Indian Ocean on the south are the water boundaries of the region.
The Tamil country that was ruled by the Imperial Cholas and Second
Pandyas or Latter Pandyas during this period of study from 9th to 14th
century A.D. and the present Tamil Nadu of the medieval Tamil country
forms the universe of study.

Review of Literature

A number of historical studies have been undertaken on the Chola
dynasty and latter Pandyan Empire. However, in many of those works only
passing references have been made about peasantry, during medieval times.
The pioneering work of K.A.N Sastri, *The Cholas* (Madras, 1975) gives a
neat chronological and political account of the times. His other works
*Pandyan Kingdom* (Madras, 1972) provides a lot of information about the
Pandyan rulers. K.V.Raman in his *Pandyar Varalaru* (Tamil) gives an
elaborate account of the society under the Pandyas. Burton Stein's *Peasant
State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi, 1999) deals with the
agrarian society of south India. He has given attention to only one aspect i.e.
the life of the peasants. A.Appodorai's *Economic Conditions of South
India, 1000-1500 A.D.* (University of Madras, 1980) in two volumes give
an encyclopedic survey of economic activity based on the study of South
Indian inscriptions.

Devakunjari's *Madurai through the Ages* (Madras, 1957) gives a
political, social and also cultural account starting from the earliest times to
1801.
K.R.Hanumanthan's *Untouchability - A Historical Study upto 1500 A.D. (with special reference to Tamilnadu)* (Madurai, 1979) gives authentic information on social condition of the Pallas, Parayas, and Pulayas at the grassroots level.

K.K.Pillai's *Studies of Indian History: (with special reference to Tamilnadu)* (Madras, 1979) has given plenty of information about the rise and growth of Caste System in Tamilnadu.


B.S.Chandrababu's *The Land and People of Tamilnadu - An Ethnographical Study* (Madras, 1996) traces the ethnicity of Tamils against the backdrop of their land, religion and culture. Another notable work of B.S.Chandrababu is *Subaltern Revolts in Tamilnadu* (2001), which among others identifies peasant revolts of the medieval Tamil country.

P.Shanmugam’s *Revenue System of the Cholas (c.A.D.850-1279)* gives elaborate account of the revenue system under the Imperial Cholas.

S. Manickam’s *Slavery in Tamil country: A Historical Overview* (Madras, 1982), brings to light the socio-economic conditions of the various slaves of the Tamil country.


The contribution made by these scholars in Tamil Nadu is invaluable. However, at the micro-level, a specific study about the medieval Tamil peasantry, has not found favour with the above scholars, hence the study.

**Period of Study**

In the history of the Tamil country the period from 9th to 14th century is a remarkable one because monarchical form of Government with the emergence of two imperialistic powers such as the Imperial Cholas and the second Pandyas, seemed to have been feudal in character and marked with new economic and social and cultural evolution. From the 9th to 14th century more lands were brought under cultivation. During this period the extension of territories were done by the Imperial Cholas as well as the second or latter Pandyas. There were lot of changes taking place in land owning patterns, development of irrigation facilities and raising of different crops, etc. The land owning patterns under the Cholas and Pandyas were almost the same.
The rise of Imperial Cholas of the line of Vijayalaya may be dated from the middle of the 9th century A.D. As they emerged from their obscurity, period 1, from Vijayalaya to Uttama (A.D.546-985), period 2, from Rajaraja I to Adirajendra (A.D.985 to 1070), period 3 from Kulottunga I to Rajathiraja II (A.D. 1070 to 1179) and period 4, from Kulottunga III to Rajendra III (A.D. 1179-1279).

The end of the Chola sovereignty also marked with the end of the Pandyan civil war. The Pandyas began to recover rapidly and a number of rulers ruled over Madurai and what may be termed as the second Pandyan empire (roughly 12th to 14th C.A.D.) During this period the Pandyan kingdom reached its widest extent.

**Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this study is to bring to light the Characteristic features of the monarchy and the pattern of land ownership in the context of life and condition of the peasantry which represented majority of the agricultural population during the period under study.

The study makes an attempt to know the agricultural crop patterns, mode of production and price structure of products. This apart the principal objective of the study is to throw much light on the socio-economic condition of the peasantry during medieval period. In the process the characteristic features of the medieval agrarian economy would get focused.

**Methodology and Source Materials**
A simple Methodology to narrate and critically analyse the social and economic condition of peasantry in the medieval times is attempted in this study.

An extensive use of epigraphical sources like, South Indian Inscriptions, Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy, Foreign Notices and perusal of available literary materials have been tapped in this attempt. A number of published scholarly works supplement the information culled out from primary sources.

**Chapterization**

The entire work is divided into small chapters under relevant sub-headings for the clear understanding of the study. There are four chapters in this study which exclude Introduction and Conclusion.

The Introduction gives a brief account about Peasantry in the Tamil Country during the period prior to 9th Century A.D. Further the Scope of the Study, Universe of the Study, Period of Study (9th - 14th c. A.D.), Review of Literature, Objectives of the Study, Methodology and Source Materials are dealt with towards the fulfillment of methodological requirements.

The first chapter throws light on "The Role of Monarchy and Pattern of Land Ownership." It also deals with various types of land owning pattern like *devadana, brahmadeya, vellavagai, jivita*, service tenures and other minor tenures.
"State of agricultural crop pattern, production and price structure of products of the Tamil country" forms the second chapter in which an extensive account is given about the different types of crop patterns, produce, value of lands, classification of lands and price of crops.

"The Social condition of the Peasantry" is the third chapter. The chapter analyses the role of caste and as how the caste determined the class character of the society.

The fourth chapter is on “Economic condition of the Peasantry”. This chapter deals with the earnings, wages, land share, life with their land and general economic condition of these agrarian class.

On the basis of analysis that has been made on the land owning pattern, crops and products and prices of the medieval period in addition to the socio-economic condition of the peasantry in the Tamil country from 9th to 14th century A.D. concluding remarks have been arrived at in the end.