Chapter IV

Land Pattern and Farming Scenario
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LAND PATTERN AND FARMING SCENARIO

The principal classification of lands is between wet and dry lands in the jurisdiction of Periyakottai Panchayat. This twofold classification is very relevant in connection with revenue administration since the demand on wet lands is greater than on dry lands. The wet lands are popularly known as nancei \(^1\) while the dry lands are called puncel\(^2\). The other names for wet lands are nirnilam, nanninilam and nanpulam\(^3\). Nirnilam was contrasted with nirilinilam\(^4\) – lands which are starved of water. Punpulam and Vanpulam \(^5\) are other names for dry lands. The basis of this classification was mainly availability of water source for irrigation. The two subsequently came to benefit by irrigation of water from tanks or canals newly created. Conversely, if the wet lands came to lose the benefits of irrigation water which they once enjoyed, for reasons such as the permanent destruction of the sources, they would have to be downgraded. Given the fact that the rainfall in this region was rather meager, the total extent of lands classified as wet have been comparatively small owing to the non availability of canal irrigation. The expressions, vayal, \(^6\) vantal nilam – open fields, thottam, \(^7\) manal nilam, kollai\(^8\) and thoppu\(^9\) are very common.

1. *Inscription in the Pudukkottai State*, 36, 38, 97, 100.
5. *Ibid*
6. *IPS.*, 26
7. *IPS.*, 290
8. *IPS.*, 549
9. *IPS.*, 266
Agricultural seasons

The Pudukkottai State Manual speaks of two seasons of cultivation, namely, the *kodai* and the *kaalam*. It says, “The *kodai Velanmai* or summer cultivation commences in the months of February – March and ends in the months of July – August. The *kaalam velanmai*, which is more extensive, begins under normal conditions in the months of July – August and extends over five to six months”\(^{10}\). It is worth noting that the *kodai* or summer cultivation starts some three months earlier than the onset of the south – west monsoon, which is normally mid – June. There are some considerations behind this earlier start. One of the reasons is the prospect of taking advantage of the storage still left in the tanks after the *kaala velanmai* was completed\(^{11}\). Generally during February and March, the soil and the air are comparatively moist and humid. The concept of two types of cultivation seasons spread over the months as specified in the Pudukkottai State Manual is not of modern origin. On the contrary, the idea was centuries old. This is shown by the use of expressions such as *kodai bhogam* and *kaala bhogam* in the medieval inscriptions of the State\(^{12}\). *Bhogam* here means agricultural season. The cultivation seasons are also referred to in the inscriptions as *kuruvai bhogam* or *kuruvai perumpu* and *pasana bhogam* or *pasana perumpu*\(^{13}\). *Pasanam* was the prime season of cultivation in the Pudukkottai region. *Kuruvai* season is secondary. The natural phenomena like seasons make or

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12. IPS., 254.
mar their material wellbeing. This sensitivity induces them to equate the farming season with the calendar year itself in the inscription.

Cultivation Techniques

The important operations involved in the cultivation of crops are ploughing the fields, sowing the seeds, raising nurseries, transplanting the seedlings, wetting and weeding the fields and harvesting the crops. Advanced mechanization of agricultural operations is a very recent phenomenon\(^{14}\). The traditional method of using animal power and human labour is declining. Besides the plough and the pickaxe, simple implements like the spade (for digging the ground) and the sickle (for cutting the grass, plants, etc.) slowly lose their relevance.

The popular method of ploughing, namely, the *Er* or the plough is mentioned in the inscriptions\(^{15}\). It has many parts, made up of wood and iron, of which the most important is the *Kolu* or the ploughshare, which causes the earth to be furrowed. The thickness of the *kolu* varies according to the land to be ploughed. The plough is a simple device which is made locally by the village carpenter and blacksmith. The other devices like *ethumaram*, *the pickaxe* and the *arrival* or the sickle, are also mentioned in the inscriptions\(^{16}\). The *ethu* is a simple wooden device by operating on whose lever the water in the well is being lifted up through a bucket for irrigating the fields. The *manvetti* or the spade is widely used by the farmer.

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(horsegram), *Thuvarai*\(^{26}\) (Red Gram) and *Payaru*\(^{27}\) (Green Gram, Black Gram). Cash crops such as *Karumbu*\(^{28}\) (Sugarcane) and *Vaalai*\(^{29}\) (Plantain) and vegetables like *Koththaranka* (clusterbeans), *Venttakka* (lady’s finger), *Awaraka* (saberbean), *Pusani*\(^{30}\) (gourd), *Mullanki* (radish), and *Murunkaka* are being cultivated. Trees like *Maa* (Mango), *Pala* (Jack Fruit), *Thennai* (Coconut palm), *Panai* (Palmyrah), *Puli* (Tamarind) *Vembu* (Neem) and *Karuvai* are also being planted.

**Tharisu or Unused Land**

*Tharisu* means lands lying waste for a long time. Many other words are also used in the inscriptions to refer to lands of this type. *Udumboodi Aamai Thavalntha Nilam* means lands infested with monitor lizards and over which tortoises crawled\(^{31}\). *Kadai Nilam* refers to lands of the lowest grade in point of fertility and *Vilaya Nilam* denotes lands uncultivable\(^{32}\). In a different context, it refers to cultivated lands at the tail end of the Ayacut.

**Animal Wealth**

The importance of the role played by livestock in the rural economy is obvious. It was more so in the medieval agronomy. The cows met the home demand for milk and milk products. The bullocks are useful to the farmers in ploughing the soil. They are also used in carting inputs to the fields and outputs from the fields.

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27. *IPS.*, 430.
Their services in this respect are valuable because mechanized means of transportation are still unheard of in rural area. The droppings of cattle and sheep are valuable manures for the soil. The utility of the livestock in this respect comes into bold relief when it is realized that the cost of chemical fertilizers now accounts for a considerable part of the cultivation budget of the modern farmer.\textsuperscript{33}

**Tank Irrigation**

Irrigation is the backbone of the agrarian economy. Rivers, rivulets and lakes are the major water sources which provide irrigation facilities to the lands.\textsuperscript{34} In the Periyakottai Panchayat, the irrigation sources are grouped under three classes according to the number of months they afford irrigation to the Ayacuts. They are Nachanavayal Eri, Mankkulam, and Pudukkulam.

The Periyakottai Panchayat area is prone to water scarcity and hence irrigation tanks have a vital role in cultivation. Apart from receiving the rain water directly, they collect the water from the feeder channels and from catchment area. By collecting the water while available and storing it, they release it for irrigation when it is needed most by the crops. When the tank water percolates, the water table in the surrounding areas goes up. When this happens, the level of water in the irrigation wells nearby also goes up. In other words, they are thus indirectly contributing to the irrigation of crops served by wells also. They are the chief source of inland fishing. They also serve some other human needs. They are therefore described as the linchpin of the irrigation system in the Periyakottai Panchayat.

\textsuperscript{34} Gopalakrishna Ganthi, *op.cit.*, p. 172.
The Tamil language has many names for the tank. They are *kulam, eri, pereri, samuthiram, embal, eenthal, thangal*, etc. Of these, *pereri* and *samuthiram* are reserved for tanks of relatively big size. *Uruni* generally refers to tanks whose water is potable\(^{35}\). However, only references to *eri, pereri, kulam* and *embal* are found in the inscriptions of the Pudukkottai State in connection with irrigation matters.

The term used in the inscriptions to refer to the construction of an irrigation tank is *kalli*. This is seen in the expressions *Kulamum Kalli, Vayalum Thiruthi*\(^{36}\) and *Kalamum Kalli, Kadum Vetti, Kattiyum Parithu, Pallamum medum Odukkiddu*\(^{37}\). In informal language, the term *vetti* is also used in the same sense as *kalli*. But the term *kalli* also has a restricted sense given to it, as when it is used to refer to the paving of stones at appropriate places in the tank and removing of stones that obstructs the flow of water at other places.

The structure and functions of irrigation tanks and their physical features do not differ much from place to place in the Tamil country. What marks out an irrigation tank from the rest of the rural scene are its bunds or *karai* or *kulakarai*\(^{38}\) as it is called. A tank has usually three bunds. The three bunds sometimes give the tank the crescent shape spoken of in a *Purananurru* verse\(^{39}\). The tank bed, *kulapparappu or kulappadugai*\(^{40}\) stands on a ground which is elevated a little above the fields, the Ayacut, which the tank is intended to serve.

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36. *IPS.*, 140.
38. *IPS.*, 302, 304.
40. *IPS., op.cit*, 559.
Every tank is provided with a vent or madai\textsuperscript{41} through which water is released for irrigation. It is also provided with a sluice called kumili\textsuperscript{42} to control and regulate the flow of water through the vent. Every tank has a main distribution channel that takes off irrigation water from the outer side of the vent called pura madai. Every tank is provided with an opening on one of its banks called kalingu\textsuperscript{43} through which the tank overflows are diverted during times of floods.

**Well Irrigation**

Well irrigation is extensively used. The wells sometimes constitute one of the boundaries to the plot of land under sale\textsuperscript{44}. When a land is sold, its right to draw water from the well also stands sold. But if the land in question is entitled to only a share of the total supply from the well, care is taken to specify that share in terms of fractions. The irrigation water supply by the well is sold along with the transfer of the lands. It is common that some areas of lands along with wells are being auctioned for sale\textsuperscript{45}. It is noted from an inscription that a well sold along with a tadi (piece) of land stood on an area of one Ma\textsuperscript{46}. Well irrigation has been largely relied upon for crops cultivated in gardens. One inscription speaks of *Vayalkalil Kinaru, Malaikalil Kinaru* which means wells on the fields as well as on the hills\textsuperscript{47}. Water is being lifted out of the wells by a simple wooden device.

\textsuperscript{41} *IPS.*, 85.
\textsuperscript{42} *IPS.*, 11.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} *IPS.*, 603.
\textsuperscript{46} *IPS.*, 489.
\textsuperscript{47} *IPS.*, 56.
called ethu maram. The equitable distribution of tank water is regulated by the local bodies. The role of wells in irrigation is no less important, for it is the wells with their unfailing supply through the year that imparted an element of stability to the agricultural system.

Ownership

Land in its pristine state is a gift of Nature but it is unfit for cultivation of crops because it is thickly covered with wild vegetation. It is only after the land is cleared of overgrowth that cultivation begins. The supply of virgin lands was so abundant in the beginning that anyone who wanted to reclaim them could do so without let or hindrance. The only limiting factor was one’s own physical ability to do it. This meant that those who carried out the reclamation in the first instance also began to possess the reclaimed land. In other words, reclamation and possession went together. This seems to be the way the institution of property in land in its very crude form originated. It is wrong to suppose that with it there also arose simultaneously various accompanying notions such as ownership, sale, gift and mortgage. The reason is that social and economic conditions were still primitive and the scope for the free play of the instinct of self interest was very limited. It took time for all the related aspects of private ownership to evolve. Until that stage was reached, lands were held communally.

The term ownership is meant as kaani. Originally this term meant only land but came to be used as a synonym for ownership of

48. IPS., 305.
51. IPS., 415,447.
anything including land. Another term used is kaniyaatchi which signifies title and possession. En Kaani stands for my lands, while kaani Parru stands for “number or extent of lands held by us”. The term kaaniyaalan is used with reference to the tax – paying land holder. The deed witnessing the sale of kaani is referred to as Kaani Vilai Piramaanam, while the deed witnessing the grant of kaani goes by the name of kaaniyaatchi pidipaadu or kaniaanmai piramaanam. These various terms are the verbal manifestations of the reality of private ownership in land.

Communal Ownership

The term communal ownership is self explanatory. It refers to ownership of lands by the local community, as distinct from individuals or the state. Scholars are unanimous in their assertion that communal ownership of lands existed in India right from very ancient times. As the centuries rolled on, it had progressively yielded place to individual ownership. According to Stoke, vestiges of this form of ownership were discernible in certain parts of Thanjavur area even as late as nineteenth century. Communal ownership implies that when it comes to the question of alienating the property under communal ownership, it calls for the consensus

52. IPS, 867.
53. IPS, 456, 460.
54. IPS, 429, 447.
55. IPS, 207,251.
56. IPS, 490.
57. IPS, 262, 293.
58. IPS, 345,386.
of the people constituting the community. There are particularly two types of property which invariably fell under common ownership – 
(a) the *uur Podhu* (the village common) which consisted of essentially the *tharisu* or waste land, the *natham* or unoccupied house sites, etc., in the immediate vicinity of the village. Expropriated lands of tax defaulters were also brought under *uur podhu* 60. The *uur podhu* normally went in favour of the temple61, with the buyers reclaiming the lands and granting them to the temple in many cases. The reclamation of the waste lands of the village was a boost to the agrarian economy. In the Periyakottai Panchayat, the *uur Podhu Nilam* was utilised for village common purposes.

The *uur, naadu* and *nagaram, sabhaa*, are references to local bodies which also held lands in common as a result of the grants made as *brahmadeya*. This second type covers hamlets held in common by a particular group of people under communal ownership62. Thus *aharaparru* stands for a hamlet jointly occupied by the Brahmanas, *kallapparru* by the Kallars, *vellaalan Parru* by the Vellalas, *vanniapparru* by the Vannias and *Ilammakkal Parru* by the Ilaiyars63. Thus communal ownership of lands existed side by side with private ownership of lands. Communal ownership of both kinds began to fade from the fifteenth century onwards64.

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60. *IPS.*, 490.
Trade

Traditionally more people were engaged in farming. By and large, those who took to trading emerged out of the peasant community in the first instance. The terms *kadai, angadi* and *santhai* are being used to refer to places where sale of goods or exchange took place. *Kadai* and *Angadi* are shops and rows of shops respectively, doing business from a covered structure. On the other hand, *santhai* is the term for fairs held in an open centre on a particular day of the week. In these regular and periodical markets, locally produced agricultural goods are being exchanged with locally produced goods like edible oil, cloth, etc., as well as with products like species, etc. brought from outside. These transactions thus effected in the local village markets are on a small scale and partake of the nature of retail business.

Salt, paddy, rice, green gram, beans, dhal, castor seed, areca nuts, pepper, turmeric, dry ginger, onion, mustard, *cummin* seeds, *kadukka* (cherabul), *nelly* (embellic myrobalan), *tendri* (Bedric Myrobalan), iron, cotton, yarn, thick cloth, thin cloth, wax, honey, sesame, gunny, sandal, silk, rose water, *savary mayir*, camphor oil, perfumes like *santhu* and *punuhu* and other notable commercial items were brought to the *santhai*. The articles are subjected to the levy of tolls. The list includes essential as well as luxury items.

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