Peasants in India formed an essential part of the self-governing village systems in the past. Traditional India respected the peasants though they occupied a subordinate position in the social hierarchy. The traditional India subscribed to the principle of EQUAL BUT SEPARATE and no wonder the *ryots* of pre-British India enjoyed enormous prestige in the space allotted to them by the social engineers of the Vedic Period.

5.1. Growth of Agrarian Movement

The Pre-British period expressed itself mostly in the vast population of the peasants because it was essentially an agrarian economy. But the Britisher changed this social equation and subjected the *ryots* to ineffable misery. In the place of social control, the British-appointed *zamindars* ruled over the peasants. The social control, rooted in commonly accepted conventions, was easy on the peasant population. But the *zamindars* were motivated by the economic need to pay the dues to the British government and retain some for their own private pleasures and no wonder they were harsh on the *ryots*. The peasants were physically assaulted by the *zamindars* and they derived some solace from the fatalistic pontifications of the spiritual gurus in their neighbourhood.¹

The Britishers destroyed the native industries and imposed the capitalistic mode of production on the self-sufficient economy of the villages. The village artisans were deprived of their traditional sources of livelihood and they were compelled to depend upon the land. This created additional pressure on land and this in turn led to fragmentation of landholdings. The revenue officials tyrannized the *ryots* in the process of collecting tax and many peasants left their lands fallow rather than face the consequences of over assessment of land and

unfair taxes. Large number of ryots preferred to work in British colonies abroad rather than face the famine condition in their villages.\textsuperscript{2} The repressive British regime and the cruel treatment of the ryots triggered many peasant revolts like the MOPLAH revolt, Indigo riots etc. These micro uprisings were ruthlessly put down and they were not permitted to culminate in a general movement of the peasants against the government.\textsuperscript{3}

In 1854, a few years before the historic War of Independence, the people of Chingleput submitted a petition to the Government of Madras to highlight the misery unleashed on account of oppressive taxes like Loom Tax etc and demand withdrawal of these anti-people impositions. The ryots and artisans suffered mostly on account of these vexatious taxations. The artisans pointed out that the native manufacturers were ruined by the export of raw cotton and the import of machine-made cheap textile products into India. Incidentally, the native manufacturers produced coarse cloth and it was no threat to the cheap and superior finish of machine-made British cloth. Moreover, the ryotwari system wiped out the affluent section of aristocratic patrons and they were at the point of extinction.\textsuperscript{4} They also pointed out the cancellation of certain taxes by the Bengal government to help the dying, rural manufacturers. They also drew the attention of the Government to the fact that the continued indifference of the Government to the growing immiseration of the people under the Raj would tarnish the glorious image of the British Empire.\textsuperscript{5}

The Chingleput Memorandum also highlighted the tragedy of Indian agriculture after the introduction of the British Raj. They maintained that the ryots in the Pre-British period lived happily under the control of ancient ways. But it was an irony that an advanced industrialized British nation, known for education and refinement, should be so callous and cruel towards the Indian

\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Ibid.}, p.211
\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Idem}
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ibid.}, pp.2488 - 2502
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Idem.}
ryots who were burdened with inhuman impositions like the cruel 12% interest on Kist arrears, tax on salt at a time when they were starving and hardly able to walk around. Hence they requested the Government to sympathise with their miserable position and initiate remedial measures.

The petition had the desired impact on the Government of Madras and they constituted a COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY to go into the complaints of torture employed as a weapon by the Revenue Department to extract taxes and by the Police Department to induce confessions. This Commission, popularly known as the TORTURE COMMISSION, commenced their investigative operations under the direction of the Governor-General – in - Council on 9th September, 1854. The Commission clearly established that personal violence may be the rule and certainly not the exception. This Commission clearly documented the prevalence of torture in various districts.⁶

The recommendations of the Torture Commission were accepted by the Government. The Government initiated certain crucial reforms like separation of the departments of Revenue, Police and Judiciary. The Government also recommended that proceedings may be launched against any citizen only by the court of law. The Government also came down heavily on police and revenue officials who were found guilty of abusing their official position and perpetrating atrocities on innocent citizens. An independent Police Force was also organized on the basis of the recommendations of the Torture Commission.⁷

The next important stage in the Peasant Movement was reached when associations like MADRAS MAHAJANA SABHA took up the cause of the ryots in the Madras Province (1886 to 1921). The Madras Mahajana sabha presented a welcome address to Lord Dufferin in 1886.⁸ The welcome address

---

7. Ibid. p. 4.
8. G.O.No. 2499, (Public), dated on 1st December 1886.
referred to the plight of the agricultural segment of the Indian population. As a result of several petitions of this kind, the Government decided to study the standard of living of the people of Madras. On the basis of the findings of the study, the Government concluded that poverty in India is not comparable to the poverty in England. The reason for this difference lies in the fact that the poor in Indian Village are taken care of by the social system. But the poor in Britain did not enjoy this facility.

The third stage was reached when the Nationalist Congress Party created the Kisan sabhas (1921-1942). The reason for the intervention of the congress party was general disappointment with the government-sponsored reforms which failed to ameliorate the miserable condition of the peasants in India. Moreover, the 1917 Russian Revolution also provided an impetus to the formation of Kisan sabhas by the Congress party. In 1921, Nehru motivated the ryots to organize themselves into Kisan sabhas and sustain the peasants movement in India. But Nehru was very particular that these Kisan sabhas should not be employed for engineering riots or other objectionable acts. He explained the repressive policies of the Raj against Kisan sabhas in Oudh as an act of the government to prevent the sabha from aligning themselves with the nationalist movement for Swaraj. Nehru advised the Kisan sabhas to follow the five golden rules laid down by Gandhi. First principle is that members of Kisan sabha should also be members of Congress. Secondly, the members of sabha must maintain spinning yarn sessions at home. Thirdly, members of Kisan sabha should not seek to settle their disputes in the British-designed law courts. Instead they must make use of Village Panchayat for resolving differences between members. Fourthly, they should donate liberally to the Swaraj Fund. Finally, all communities should

9. Ibid.
10. G.O.No.711, (Revenue), dated on 11th August 1902.
enlist themselves in the *Kisan sabha* and maintain their unity among themselves.\textsuperscript{12}

Motilal Nehru appealed to the *Kisan sabhas* to stay in the course of righteousness and abjure violence. He also encouraged them to suffer pain, even if it meant incarceration because that is the only way to realize Swaraj. He also explained that to be put in jail is to be considered as honour because great men like Tilak, Gandhi have been inside the same jail.\textsuperscript{13}

The Peasant Movement took roots in the *zamindari* as well as *ryotwari* tracts of Madras Presidency. In 1932, the farmers under the *zamindar* of Udayarpalayam presented the following demands to the Government. They reminded the Government that the *zamindars* were vested with the tax collecting authority on condition that they would look after the welfare of the *ryots* in their jurisdiction. But this condition was never fulfilled by any *zamindar*. The *zamindar* increased the original tax of Rs. 27,000/- to Rs. 3,00,000 without any fear of being challenged by the Government. Secondly, the survey of the land was not undertaken to fix taxes on rational and acceptable grounds.\textsuperscript{14}

Thirdly, landholdings were not scientifically classified and taxes were often collected from lands uncultivated. Fourthly, the rent collected was sometimes five times more than what was collected from government-controlled lands. Fifthly, the *ryots* could claim ownership rights to trees raised by them through their initiative. Sixthly, taxes were imposed even on minor produce like roots etc. Seventhly, water resources like tanks were not maintained properly for agricultural purposes. Eighthly, even using the manure from the dry beds of tank or grazing in them was not permitted. Ninthly, rents were arbitrarily imposed based on the false reports of *karnams*.\textsuperscript{*} Tenthly, remission of rent was not

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item Ibid.
  \item Ibid.
  \item G.O.No.97, (Public), dated on 16\textsuperscript{th} January 1932.
  \item Karnams-Village Accountant
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
considered for crop failure. Eleventhly, land was sold without proper notice and zamindars bought land worth Rs. 500/- for a mere five annas. Twelfth, farmers were compelled to pay unlawful levies beyond the revenue dues. Thirteenthly, Jamabandhis were not open to the ryots for filing their complaints. Fourteenthly, revenue collection alone was the concern of the system which did not care for the welfare of the ryots. Fifteenthly, taxes were collected even during the September – December period when the ryots did not have any income at all. Finally, any forceful representation was construed as agitation and they were met with harsh police measures like the imposition of section 144 on the ryots.15

The next stage in the Peasant Movement was reached when District Associations and Ryot Protection Societies sprouted all over the Andhra Desa in 1934 to impress upon the Government the need for governmental intervention to redress their grievances. The ryots refused to pay the arbitrarily enhanced land tax. They also objected to the arbitrarily levied tax on salt, sugar and match boxes.16

N.G.Ranga voiced the demands of the peasants and stoutly opposed the zamindari system. Ranga mobilized the ryots to resist the collection of kist arrears. He demanded reduction of rate of interest to 8 anas per hundred rupees. Ranga demanded Debt Settlement Committee to be set up by the Government. He also appealed to the Government to take up the Tungabhadra project to enhance the irrigation facilities. He demanded statutory protection to the Ryots Associations. He also urged the peasants to work against the Raja of Bobbila in the selection to the Legislative Council. By 1935, the agitations by ryots increased. In fact, N.G. Ranga strongly believed that only ryots of India could realize the swaraj rather than the urban middle class.17 The agitation of 1938 questioned basically the land and water tax. He cited the example of Russia of 1917, which had abolished the land tax and appealed to the peasants to sacrifice

15. G.O.No.97, (Public), dated on 16th January 1932.
17. Ibid.
their life in their fight against the unjust British government. The major peasant agitation in the ryotwari areas of Thanjavur took place in Palayur village in Nannilam Taluk in 1937-38. This set the trend for agitations throughout the district. It also attracted government attention to the rural unrest which was slowly engulfing many areas of Thanjavur district. The tenants and agricultural labourers of this village were oppressed by the mirasdars for a long time.

Of course this war was common in many mirasdar-dominated areas and the immediate cause of the revolt by the tenants and agricultural labourers was the refusal of the mirasdars to pay the tenants' share of the produce well in advance of the normal time. The tenants had demanded their share in advance as a result of the floods during that year, which affected them very badly. When the mirasdars made an attempt to take the entire produce by using outside labour, the tenants resisted it. However, the mirasdars took the paddy without the knowledge of the tenants when they happened to be away from the village for a festival in the neighbouring village. Infuriated by the action of the mirasdars, the tenants openly revolted against them and struck work. The low caste agricultural labourers also refused to work as one of their labourers was not paid his share of the produce by a mirasdar. The mirasdar tried unsuccessfully to put down the revolt by bringing labourers from outside. It was finally put down by the mirasdars with the help of the police. Out of the 80 share tenants, 60 left the mirasdars' employment and out of 18 labourers, 16 left. Even though the police and the official machinery supported the mirasdars' action, the sub-divisional magistrate in his report to the district magistrate, highlighted the mirasdars exploitation of the tenants and agricultural labourers over a long period of time.

18. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
Position of Agricultural Labourers

In 1940, Pallar, Parayar and Chakkiliar and Arunthathiar were working as wage labourers under the control of landlords and they were living in a separate place called cheri. Entire family members were working as bonded labourers till their life time under the control of pannaiyal.  

The labourer did the work in farm and his wife worked in cowshed. She was also involved in sowing, weeding, harvesting etc., Male child had to take care of the animals and the female child had to bring grass and they had to do house hold work for low wages.  

Majority of agricultural labourers were living in huts in the size of 12’ x 18’ feet and 3 feet height. They took such food as rat, fish and snail on the side of the farms. They did not get education, they were not permitted to enter the temple, school, pond and touch bronze vessels and they were not permitted to eat on banana leaf. In wine shop and tea shop, they practised separate glasses and they were separated from society. The women labourers did not wear saree below the knee and the men labourers did not wear dhoti and towel but just only “komanam” (loinscloth). If agricultural labourers were to fall ill, due to excessive workload, they could not take rest. They had to send a substitute to do that work which they could not do due to sickness. Suppose they did not inform Andai (Landlord), they would be punished by him. “Agricultural labourers had eyes but they were blind, they had mouth, but they were dumb, they had ear but they were deaf”. A labourer’s son’s marriage was fixed by Andai (landlord) because he had to denote Tali and wedding saree. This was practised for a long time.

N.G.Ranga, Swami Sahajanand Saraswathi of Bihar and Jayaprakash Narayan formed the “All India Kisan sabha” (AIKS) in 1936, which held its first
meeting simultaneously with the annual Congress session at Lucknow. It was for all categories of peasants from rich peasants to landless labourers. Soon a rift developed between AIKS and the Congress and it culminated in the Haripure session in 1938. The AIKS was controlled by the communists and in October 1942, the founder Ranga himself resigned and acknowledged that he had lost control of the Kisan Movement.25

*Kisan sabha* was the only organization for all kinds of peasants — landowners, tenants, and agricultural labourers in its early period. But later on, the communists captured the sabha and they were interested only in tenants and agricultural labourers and demanded land to the tiller and higher wages to labourers. The upper section of the peasantry was left alone and there was no organization for them at the time of independence. Though agricultural labourers are similar in all parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, their organizations developed only in a few select pockets, namely Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu and Alleppy and Palghat in Kerala.26 The initiative for organizing the lower sections of the peasantry and the tenants was taken by the communist party.27 In the thirties, its workers made efforts to organise the tenants and labourers in different parts of Tamil Nadu such as Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli, Madurai, Tirunelveli and Salem.

In Tamil Nadu, though the communists attempted to mobilize the tenants and agricultural labourers for over half a century and their efforts are spread throughout the State, they have succeeded only in Thanjavur.

In Thanjavur, they succeeded in forming an organization of tenants and agricultural labourers called “Share-Croppers Movement” (Tillers Association)


in Thenparai Village, Mannargudi Taluk. Twenty-eight marches were organized in twenty one districts of Madras Presidency during November 22 to December 7 of 1935. They demanded the abolition of the *zamindari* system.

Associations and organisations are considered the backbone of every agitation. Therefore in Tamil Nadu, various peasants’ associations were formed. The main goal of these associations was to abolish the *zamindari* system. N.G. Ranga was the architect, life, spirit and thinker of the Modern Peasants’ Movements. He led many peasant movements and he was arrested many times for his provocative speeches and anti *zamindari* activities.

In order to propagate the anti *zamindari* system and organise various peasant movements, N.G. Ranga undertook extensive tours in Tamil Nadu. In 1935, he visited Thanjavur. There he organized thirty peasants to meet the collector. N.G. Ranga went to Vellore on 21st April 1937 and formed a North Arcot *Kisan* Society. Many peasants’ marches were organized in different parts of the province. The peasant marches from various parts of the Madras Presidency submitted a memorandum to C. Rajagopalachari, the premier of Madras, on 27th August 1938.

In 1940, Justice Party also chipped in and took up the cause of the oppressed peasants who were mostly members of the Pallar community. Though the Justice party promoted basically the anti-brahmin ideology, they also championed the cause of the peasants because it was one way of embarrassing the affluent Brahmin mirasdar by inciting the pallar *ryots*. M.K. Gupta was prominent in this struggle against the Brahmin landlords. But these agitations did

30. The Fortnightly Reports for the First half of February, 1941, p.3.
32. *Ibid*.
not take off to the level of a mass movement. M.K. Gupta was arrested few times for his fiery speeches. But Justice party did not choose to go beyond agitation for supporting the cause of the *ryots*.

In 1945-1947, the communists entered the fray and took up the cause of the peasants. They planned a provincial conference in March, 1945 at Tenali but it did not materialize. However communist - sponsored agitation broke out in various parts of the Madras Presidency. In Madurai, Ramnad and Salem, *Kisan* Sangams were created. In Chittoor, they organized the struggle with the objective of neutralizing the growing influence of N.G. Ranga.

### 5.2. Organization of Agricultural Labour

As regards the organization of agricultural labourers, there were some inherent handicaps. The labourers were scattered and it was difficult for the Union officials to bring them together easily because non-membership did not carry the same penalties as it did in industries or factories. Subscription means a comparatively greater inroad into the slender resources of the agricultural labourers. But in spite of these handicaps, there is no doubt, in our view that the formation of union of agricultural labourers is essential and should be encouraged to ensure a proper atmosphere for the implementation of the policy of fair wages and proper conditions of work.

The Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee suggested that agricultural labour and factory labour should be under the same organization. But Agricultural Unions were unable to agree with them. One of the reasons urged by the committee is that factory workers are recruited from the peasantry. But that cannot constitute an essential link between them. The types of problems arising in agricultural employment and industrial employment have very little in common and may even be conflicting.  

---

Another argument for common platform is that a strike in a factory could be broken by importing blacklegs from the countryside, and an agricultural strike could similarly be broken by employing the unemployed labour from the factories. We consider that it is not correct to think of the problem of labour organization mainly in terms of strikes. The formation of union should be determined by the similarity or identity of interests, and the lumping together of two dissimilar groups merely on the grounds of eliminating potential blacklegging would be definitely incongruous. Therefore the Agricultural Unions insisted, that agricultural labour should be organized separately from urban labour.

We would like to draw your attention to the following passage in the dissenting minute to the report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee.35

'It is the imperative duty of the state to so reorganize the social and economic relations between cultivators and agricultural workers as to make it unnecessary for either of them to contemplate lock-out or strikes and to proceed to assure cultivators remunerative prices and workers decent wages'.

**All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)**

This organisation was formed with a view “to co-ordinate the activities of all labour organisations in all trades and in all the provinces of India, and generally to further the interests of Indian Labour in matters economic, social and political”. At the initial stage, the A.I.T.U.C had 64 affiliated unions with a membership of 1,40,854. The largest number of members hailed from Punjab (70,253), followed by Bombay (46,881). Soon within this organization two groups appeared. The first believed in developing the movement along constitutional lines for the protection and advancement of the economic interests of workers. The other group, mainly consisting of communists, believed in

35. *Ibid*
transforming it into a revolutionary movement. They stood for the abolition of capitalism and establishment of socialism.\(^{36}\)

Thanjavur district is predominantly wet and mainly irrigated by canals. Cropping and irrigation industries are high. Thanjavur is mostly a mono-culture region, with paddy being the dominant crop. It can be considered a surplus economy as it exports paddy and rice to other districts and at one time exported to other regions of erstwhile Madras Presidency and Ceylon.\(^{37}\)

**Formation of Labour Union in East Thanjavur**

Communist organization in East Thanjavur, provoked by the miserable living conditions of the *pannaiyals*, played an important role. The communist party made several attempts in many parts of the Presidency such as Malabar, Coimbatore, Salem, Tiruchirappalli and Thanjavur to organise the tenants and agricultural labourers.\(^{38}\) In Thanjavur the activities of the Congress and Dravida Kazhagam played a vital role for the upliftment of schedule castes. These activities created awakening among the tenants and labourers to realize their legitimate rights. Under these circumstances, the communist party workers entered with a radical message under the leadership of A.K. Gopalan whom B. Srinivasa Rao and Manali Kandasamy supported.\(^{39}\) It is significant that the Thenparai village in Mannargudi Taluk was the first to respond to their call for forming an organization of tenants and agricultural labourers. In Thenparai all the land were owned by Thenparai and Panchetur Mutts (Temples) and were cultivated by share croppers who received 20 percent of the produce. The ill treatment meted out to the tenants and the agricultural labourers by the temple authorities, compelled Nattanikar Govindan, a political worker, to welcome the


\(^{37}\) K. Muni Ratna Naidu (ed.), “Peasant Movement in India”, *op.cit.*, pp.128-137.

\(^{38}\) Willem Van Schendel, *op.cit.*, p.201.

The leaders canvassed their ideology among the peasants and exhorted them to fight for higher share of the produce and a higher wage. Most of the tenants and labourers in the village responded to this call and about 200 of them signed their names in a register and pledged their willingness to form an association. Accordingly an association was formed in Thenparai in 1939.

This association was called Share Croppers Association for achieving higher wages and higher share of the produce. In 1943, the name of the association was changed into Tamil Nadu Vyvasaigal Sangam (Tamil Nadu Cultivators Association). In 1944, the association formulated a charter of demands, particularly abolition of bonded labour and liquidation of indebtedness.

**Woman Reformer**

In 1940, a caste Hindu woman by name Maniammai of a village in Thanjavur was involved in the National Movement. Later she joined the Congress Party but disliked the principles of Congress. She quit congress and joined as a member of Agricultural Labour Union in 1945. Though a woman, her outlook was that of a man. She wore dhoti, shirt with half sleeves, a towel and boy cut. It was a surprise to note that though she belonged to Brahmin Community, she tried to eradicate the superstitious belief in Brahmin culture. She treated the Harijan people as her family members. She created awareness among the Dalit women about the daily wage of 2 litres of paddy. Manniammai fought consistently against the landlords and zamindars to increase the wages of women whom the landlords exploited during 1942-43.

---


42. M.Kathamuthu, *India Vivasaya Thoillalar Sangam*, (Tamil), 50th Andu Ponvila Malar, Thanjai, 1975, p.34.
Another woman personality known as Rajammal belonged to scheduled caste. Even though she worked for the upliftment of women, she did not achieve much in the society. In 1948, confusion and chaos spread in most of the villages of Thanjavur district. The Harijan streets were filled with fear, because any time the police could enter into the streets. They would impose unknown charges and torture them. Dalit men and women were humiliated by the police as well as by the landlords. In most of the places, men had to kneel down on the sand, and walk for long distance. If they disobeyed the police, they would be beaten until blood came out of their body. The men and women were captured as hostages and brutally assaulted by the police. Dalit labourers worked for the whole day but they did not get their due wage, food, clothing, and protection. In most of the places, women's position was neither recognized nor respected. Some workers who were employed in landlords' houses were not exempted from exploitation or ill treatment by them.

The Tamil Nadu *Kisan sabha* held its Conference in Madras in February 1944 and attacked the zamindari system. *Kisan sabha* gave much encouragement to the agitating peasants. In Thanjavur the *Kisan* conference was presided over by Parlaker, a M.L.A. from Bombay. It was attended by five thousand peasants.

After the expulsion of the communists from the Congress in 1945, they organized industrial and agrarian strikes, demonstrations, made anti-government speeches, disseminated inflammatory literature, terrorised their opponents and incited the people to all sorts of violent acts against the state, against the mill and factory owners, against the zamindars, against the landholders etc.

---

45. Fortnightly Report for the First half of the February 1944, p.2.
46. Fortnightly Report for the first half of May 1944, p.2.
47. Fortnightly Reports, (Confidential Report), dated 5th April 1946.
The communist party in Thanjavur district experienced immense scope for inciting the agricultural labourers who were mostly Harijans, against the mirasdars who were mostly Brahmmins and Mudaliars. Therefore they allied themselves with Kisan organizations under the guidance of proper leaders in every taluk and in every village.  

In April 1946, mirasdars complained to Congress about the CPI in Thanjavur and the government appointed a Thanjavur District Judge to go into this nagging problem. The Judge announced an Award according to which the paddy wage of 3 measures was raised to 3 1/2 measures. The mirasdars did not accept this judgement. As a result, Finance Minister Bashyam cancelled that judgement. The Congress government passed 144 section of the criminal procedure code because anti-brahmin feelings were stirred up by preaching before the Harijans the wrongs done by the Brahmmins and the Congress. In 1947, it attempted to build an organisation of Congress sabhas, particularly in Mayavaram taluk to wean the working people away from the communists. According to collector’s reports, they were successful only among the caste Hindu peasantry, while the untouchable labourers continued to support the communist. The Government passed the order (Act 1 of 1947) to control communist party and maintain peace among public. But communist ideology easily spread among the society. Communists established their headquarters in parts of the district, began to pull down national flags hoisted on schools and municipal buildings and carried on the anti-Hindi agitation.

The Fourth Tamil Nadu Kisan Conference was held at Uttamapalayam in Madurai district on the 10th March 1947. The principal speaker was Benkin

48. G.O. No. 628, (Public), dated 26th February 1947,
49. Ibid.
52. G.O. No. 1481, (Public), dated 8th June 1948.
Mukherji of Calcutta and the conference demanded that the actual cultivator of the soil should receive as his share half of the produce of wet lands and two thirds of the dry lands. The Kisan Movements had rapidly spread in Thanjavur district, especially in Thiruthuraipoondi and Mannargudi taluks. Act 1 of 1947 was enforced after 1948. The Sangam demanded the abolition of bonded labour (Adimai sasanam) and the writing off the debts (Sugantha kadam) of agricultural labourers. However, mirasdars stoutly opposed these demands and many of them harassed labourers for making such demands. The Sangam also demanded that the inhuman forms of punishment like labourers being whipped and made to drink cow dung solution should be stopped. It also demanded that tenants should be entitled to a higher share of the produce and they should have the right to set threshing grounds at places convenient to them.

The Sangam conducted several agitations to press for the above demands and this led to the signing of two agreements by the representatives of the farmers. Agreement was signed in the presence of the Assistant District Superintendent of Police, Mahadevan, and the Sangam members were Kalappal Kuppu, Serangulam R. Amirthalingam, Valiodai T. Rajagopal. mirasdars were represented by Vadapathi Mangalam V.S. Thyagaraja Mudaliar, Thirukalar Madathipathi and Karuvakkudi Nayudu. The Agreement called Mannargudi Agreement was signed in 1944. According to this agreement, the land owner should give receipt to the tenant on the threshing floor itself after receiving the rent.

Even though there was a ban on CPI and its labour union, the labourers conducted agitations in 1948 demanding higher wages. It was an evidence of the

54. G.O. M.S. No. 628, Public (General) Department, 26th February, 1947.
55. G.O. No. 199, (Legal), dated 29th December, 1948.
strength of the movement that its agitations compelled the landlords to come to an agreement with the labourers on 28th October, 1948 on the following terms.

1. *pannaiyals* would be paid daily wages at one *Marakkal* and women labourers at \( \frac{3}{4} \) of a *Marakkal*.

2. For various harvesting operations, *pannaiyals* would be paid one seventh of the gross produce of the fields in which they worked.

3. Where outside labourers have harvested certain areas and the *pannaiyals* certain other areas, the latter would get \( 1\frac{1}{2} \) *Marakkals* out of a produce of 14 *Marakkals* as their share (Kalavadi) irrespective of the wage paid to outside labourers.

4. To prevent the *pannaiyals* from working elsewhere and claiming their share, a penalty of two *Marakkals* for each day of deliberate absence during the harvest season would be deducted out of their entitlements.

5. Each pannaiyal would get as his share, the yield of not more than one veli (6-2/3 acres of land).

6. For *Poradi*, *pannaiyals* would be paid only daily wages at one *Marakkal* and they should finish the *Poradi* work at this rate.

7. *pannaiyals* would be given *Maniams* according to custom.

The tenants in Thanjavur district demanded 40% of the produce. But the *mirasdars* did not concede it. Finding that it was impossible to get any concessions\(^{58}\) from the *mirasdars*, they harvested the entire crop and took away 50% as their share from the threshing floor and leaving the rest on the floor. The *mirasdars* got very panicky and submitted petitions and telegrams to the Government. Under Act XXIII of 1949, many communist leaders were arrested. The magistrates of Thanjavur often made use of their powers under section 144 of the criminal procedure code to prohibit meetings, processions, demonstrations and assembly of five or more persons at the time of agricultural operations.\(^{59}\)

---


In Tamil Nadu, the Tillers’ Association played an important role in the enactment of tenurial legislations. The first major tenurial legislation in Tamil Nadu, the Thanjavur Tenants and pannaiyal Protection Act of 1952, was passed under pressure from Tamil Nadu Tillers Association. This was followed by a series of legislations which further improved the condition of the tenants by writing off rent arrears and reducing the size of holdings and by bringing about changes in the conditions of tenants. This legislative initiative led the CPI to form a separate union of agricultural labourers, leaving the tillers association to concentrate on the problem of tenants and small farmers.  

The Sixth Session of the Land Revenue Reforms Committee on 21st Sep 1950. The following were present with Sri. M.V.Subramanian I.C.S, as the Chairman. Sri. V.I. Muniswami Pillai (M.L.A.), B.Ramachandra Reddy, Sri.K.M.Desigar, (M.L.C), N.Ranga Reddy(M.L.C.), Sri.S.R.Kaiwar, I.C.S.Secretary, Sri.P.Venkatarama Ayyar, M.L.A. representing the Kumbakonam taluk were members and mirasdars’ Association examined as witness. In answer to a question by the Chairman, Sri.P.Venkatarama Ayyar stated that it was an ad hoc conference summoned at Kumbakonam to consider the questionnaire issued by the Committee and the members of the conference consist mostly of the mirasdars of the Kumbakonam taluk. As a result of their deliberations a Memorandum was submitted to the Land Revenue Reform Committee. In addition, the witnesses themselves prepared another memorandum for perusal by the Committee. The mirasdars of Kumbakonam stated that there was no need for periodical settlement of land revenue in the event of prices of the agricultural products rising well above the value adopted for commuting the share of the state into a cash assessment.  

---

produce left to the tenant after his cultivation expenses have been met. N.R. Samiappa Mudaliar stated that before the communist agitation in the district, there was no trouble. But after the agitation started, there had been good deal of trouble in the district. In their view, the origin of the trouble was over the Harijan seat in Mannargudi division and there was widespread propaganda in connection with the election of the Harijan representative.

In the first general election, communist party won 13 seats in the State Legislative Assembly and out of which they secured six seats from Thanjavur alone. The communist victory prompted the Congress Government to adopt certain measures to improve the conditions of the tenants and agricultural labourers. The Rajaji’s ministry passed the Thanjavur Tenants and *pannaiyals* Protection Act of 1952 which provided the tenants possession of their land for a period of five years from 1952-53. Mirasdars criticized the *pannaiyal* Protection Act of 1952 and evicted “*pannaiyals*” on a large scale in the name of self cultivation. This hastened the transformation of the attached labourers into casual labourers who lost their privilege in relation to the farmers. In 1954, All India *Kisan sabha* decided that agricultural labourers should be organized separately, independent of the peasant organizations because their demands were separate and most of them belonged to “untouchable” (Harijan) castes. This thinking led to the formation of a separate organisation of agricultural labourers called the Thanjavur Agricultural Labour Union in 1956.

During the General election in Thanjavur district, associations were started by East Thanjavur farmers in Nagapattinam and another by farmers of Kumbakonam area. The foundation of these two associations was to protect the farmers against tenancy and land ceiling laws and communist threats to land owners.

mirsadors criticized the 1952 Act vehemently and evicted "pannaiyals" on a large scale in the name of self cultivation. This hastened the transformation of the traditional pannaiyals into padiyals (free labourers) — almost the opposite of the result expected of the Act.

In such a situation, their status was somewhere between that of casual labourers and share — croppers. However, neither the leaders of Vyvasayigal Sangam nor Government were concerned with the protection of these rights. As a result, the pannaiyals were lumped with the free labourers and without getting adequate compensation, they lost the small privileges that they enjoyed in their relation with the farmers. So far as the share-croppers were concerned, there was no such loss resulting from the Act.64

The mitigation of their problems seems to have reduced the interest of the tenants in the Vyvasayigal Sangam. It seems to be the reason for the division of the Sangam in 1956 into Vyvasayigal Sangam Cultivators’ Association) and Vyvasaya Thozilalar Sangam (Agricultural Labourers’ Association). Despite the division, both the associations continued to work under CPI leadership and in many places under the same leader. This facilitated their continued cooperation and also prevented the drifting of the labourers and cultivators into two antagonistic groups.65

The act of 1955 and 1956 met the demands of the Tillers’ Association to a great extent. But they still conducted agitations, demanding that ceilings on landholdings be further reduced and that the surplus land be distributed among landless. Another demand was that land held by temples and trusts be brought under the provisions of the ceiling and tenancy legislation. The association also demanded the cancellation of all outstanding arrears of rent and the Government passed legislation in 1966 writing off all the outstanding arrears of rent. In 1970, the Tamil Nadu Act 17 was passed to reduce the ceiling on land-holding from 30

65. Ibid., p. 36.
standard acres to 15 standard acres. Rent remissions ordinances were issued in 1967, 1971 and 1972. The demands were thus quite lengthy and attractive, but it appeared that with the achievement of security of tenancy and low rents, there was a dampening of enthusiasm of tenants for participating in the activities of the association.66 (Appendix – V)

5.3. Land Owners’ Association

The Thanjavur District Farmers’ (mirasdars) Welfare Association was formed in 1926 under the leadership of Dhiwan Bahadur P. Subbiah and a few other leading landowners of Mayavaram. Their objectives at that time were to obtain remission of land revenue and other levies and to get improvements carried out on the drainage and irrigation facilities. The strategy followed by the Association was to pass resolutions on their problems, organize deputations to the Government, and appeal to the members of the provincial legislature to enact laws for protecting the interests of the landowners.

The Association was not formally associated with any political party, but its leaders maintained cordial relations with and supported the leaders of the Congress party. It also maintained good relations with government officials through whom it could gain police support whenever labourers and tenants created ‘disturbances’. The Association opposed communists and their activities. In 1970, it merged with the Thanjavur District Landowning Farmers’ Association, Kumbakonam, which itself merged with Thanjavur District Farmers’ Association in 1973.

Thanjavur District Farmers Association

The insurrection of the CPI in Thanjavur in 1948 led local farmers to organize themselves to defend their interest and carry on agricultural activities. The initiative for this was provided by a leading farmer, S. Rajagopala Naidu

66. Ibid., p.37.
who formed the Thanjavur District Farmers Association in 1949. Organized mainly for fighting communist insurrectionary activities, the Association gradually died out after the suppression of CPI and the establishment of peaceful conditions which removed much of the stimulus for its sustained activities.\(^{67}\)

The Thanjavur District Agricultural Association met the Committee with the following representatives - N.R.Samiappa Mudaliar - President, C.Maruthuvan Pillai - Vice President, N.Subramanya Ayyar - Joint Secretary, Thirugnampillai - Secretary. In answer to V.I. Munisami Pillai, N.R.Samiappa Mudaliar, acting as the spokesman of the delegation, stated that they did not have the exact figures of the acreage cultivation in the district. According to the constitution, all the Pattadars can become members of the Association. All the Taluk Associations are affiliated to this District Association and the District Association represents the whole district. To a further question by G.Sankaran Nair on this issue, N.R.Samiappa Mudaliar stated that only those who have Pattas can join this Association.

A lessee or a tenant or an agricultural labourer can also join this association only if he has a Patta in his name irrespective of the size of holding in the Patta. The Association had 600 members on its role who had paid the subscription. The delegation made it clear that they represent only the interests of the landholders and not the interests of the tenants or agricultural labouring classes.\(^{68}\)

The Association was resurrected in 1964 under the title of Food Procedures Association. The main stimulus for organizing farmers this time, again, was the activities of the communist party and the agitations of agricultural labourers and tenants. Soon after its formation, the name of the organization

---


was changed to “Paddy Producers Association” Gopala Krishna Naidu, a large landowner of Nagapattinam taluk, was elected its president.

During this time, he was also the secretary of Thanjavur District Congress Committee, thus creating an indirect relation between the Association and the Congress party which was in power in Tamil Nadu at the time. The objectives of the Association, as given in its constitution, were

- to protect the rights of the land owners.
- to get benefit from government for developing agriculture.
- to oppose the atrocities of the communists as and when necessary.
- to achieve increased agricultural production and
- to work for the welfare of landowners and the country by increasing agricultural production.

Even though the list of objectives was rather long, the main problem that the association had to tackle was the “strikes” periodically conducted by agricultural labourers for obtaining higher wages. Realizing that the cultivators rely on labourers for the performance of various agricultural operations, the Association also organized local farmers in areas where labourers conducted strikes. They also sometimes sent volunteers to villages where strikes were conducted. But such moves were opposed by the labourers and the resulting actions and reactions of the two groups led to the eruption of various kinds of unrest. The Poonthazhakudi incident and the Kizhvenmani tragedy occurred during the course of a strike in 1968.

Two of the leaders of the Association were Brahmins with large landholdings in East Thanjavur. The general belief among the cultivators about the Association was that it represented the interests of large landowners and it was dominated by Brahmins. The conflict between Brahmin and Non-Brahmin leaders of the Association led to a split in 1970 and some Non-Brahmin leaders

organised the East Thanjavur Farmers (mirasdars) Association. This considerably weakened the activities of the landowning farmers association, and led to its merger with the Thanjavur District Farmers Association in 1973.

Following the Kizhvenmani incident, the leaders of the Association were arrested, and its activities were suppressed. Since the leadership of the Association was in the hands of a few land owners, mostly related through blood and marriage, others were not able to rise to the occasion and carry on its activities. No wonder soon it became extinct.

Early in 1973, the Madras High Court exonerated the leaders of the paddy producers association from their involvement in the Kizhavenmani atrocity. This favourable judgement prompted the creation of a new organisation called the Thanjavur District Farmers Association, with more or less the same leaders as the paddy producers association.  

Objectives of the Associations were

- To achieve freedom for farmers to cultivate their fields by adopting improved methods of cultivation.
- To oppose the enactment of further legislations which affect landowners only and safeguard farmers right to property.
- To get the procurement price of food-grains settled in consultation with farmers so that farmers are assured of a reasonable price for their produce.
- To obtain for farmers economic and educational benefits provided for the members of backward castes.
- To establish liaison with the extension agencies of the Government and arrange training for farmers in improved agricultural techniques available in India and abroad.
- To make representation before government officials on the problems of farmers.

70. Criminal appeals Nos.1208 of 1970 and 593 of 1971, High Court Judgement, op.cit., p.4
To sponsor candidates for election to Panchayat unions, State Legislature and National Parliament.

The association was affiliated to the Tamil Nadu Farmers Association, Coimbatore and worked as its district unit.\textsuperscript{71}

The Association conducted regular public meetings, conferences, processions, and other activities to propagate its ideas and demands. It addressed its propaganda against tenurial legislation, reduction of land ceilings, and remission of rent, compulsory procurement of paddy from farmers and debt relief measures, and non-payment of rent by tenants. Another issue that is generally stressed was the problem posed by agricultural labourers, particularly the recalcitrant attitude of the labourers towards work. The practice of labourers resorting to strike to obtain higher wages was severely criticized.

The leaders of the Association were anxious to build up a state-level organization of farmers capable of influencing government policy towards agriculture. As a part of this strategy, it aligned itself with the Tamil Nadu State Farmers Association. In Thanjavur, it was endeavouring to bring about a minimum level of cooperation among the numerous formal associations.

5.4. The Political Parties

The Political parties were prominent in Thanjavur at the time of the first general elections in 1952. The Indian National Congress (INC), the Dravida Kazhakam (DK), and the Communist Party of India (CPI). The Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK), led by C.N. Annadurai, had already broken from the Dravida Kazhakam in 1949. In 1952 the DMK was not significant in Thanjavur. It became so in the late 1950's and early 1960's, eclipsing and largely replacing the DK. In 1967 the DMK, a regional party largely confined to Tamil Nadu, won the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections, replacing the INC as the dominant party in the state and district. DMK Government governed Tamil

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p.9.
Nadu from 1967 to 1976, winning the state assembly elections of 1971 with an even greater majority.

During the 1960’s and early 1970’s, each of the three dominant parties was divided into two. In 1964, the CPI was split into the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M). In 1969, the INC was split into the Congress (R) or the Indira Congress or Congress-I and the Organization Congress or Congress (O). The DMK was split into the DMK and Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (ADMK) in 1972.\(^72\)

Table No. 5.1

**Legislative Assembly Election Results in Thanjavur District 1952-1971**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No. of seats</td>
<td>% of votes</td>
<td>No. of seats</td>
<td>% of votes</td>
<td>No. of seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of India</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of India (Marxist)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADMK</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMK</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INC</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INC(I)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INC(O)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The table indicates that the congress party, which had enrolled majority of the traditional landowning families and championed their interest, lost its influence in Thanjavur, since the congress followed the policy of pro-landlordism, labourers were attracted towards DMK and communists.

---

Communist Party in the district consisted of people from both dalits and caste Hindus. In the 1952 assembly elections, the communist party won six Assembly seats out of 19 seats in Thanjavur district. It is pertinent to note here that the undivided CPI won 14 seats in the entire state out of which six were from Thanjavur District.\textsuperscript{73}

Agricultural labourers in Thanjavur are at present organized into a number of unions, working under the leadership of the CPI, CPM and the DMK. Of these, the Thanjavur district agricultural labourers union working under the leadership of the CPI is the dominant union. This union has an organizational structure parallel to the organizational structure of the CPI in the district and the leaders of the CPI at different levels play important roles in union activities. The union is stronger in Mannargudi than in Mayavaram.\textsuperscript{74}

On August 20, 1952, the \textit{Kisan sabha} held a conference against the evictions of tenants from the lands at Thiruthurai Poondi and about 60,000 tenants and \textit{pannaiyals} attended the conference. Newly elected congress state government brought out an ordinance to abolish the abolishing \textit{pannaiyal} system and also to protect tenants from eviction. After the promulgation of Pannaiyal protection Act (1952), the relationship between the landlords and \textit{pannaiyals} changed.

\textit{Kisan sabha} in 1961 demanded amendments to the land reforms legislation bill introduced by the state congress government. Around 20,000 \textit{Kisan sabha} volunteer courted arrest to press for this demand.\textsuperscript{75}

"The main force behind the transformation of the caste society in Thanjavur into a class society seems to be the activities of the communist party. It has organized the agricultural labourers in East Thanjavur. A number of

\textsuperscript{73} People’s Democracy, Weekly Organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Vo. XX, No.16, April 22, 2007.

\textsuperscript{74} K.C. Alexander, “Agrarian Tension in Thanjavur”, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 57-58.

\textsuperscript{75} People’s Democracy, \textit{loc.cit.}

189
struggles under the union leadership increased the wage rates from less than two marakkals of paddy and two annas in 1944 to six marakkals of paddy and Rs.1.50 in 1972. Labourers were also able to achieve fixation in working hours and dignified treatment from their employers” 76

After the split in the communist party of India in 1966, the leadership of the agricultural labourers in most of the eastern taluks such as Thiruthuraipoondi, Mannargudi, continued to be in the CPI hands. However, in Nagappattinam taluk, the CPM became more powerful. It was noticed that both CPI and the CPM were actively trying to spread their influence among the labourers in all the taluks. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), of late, has also been trying to organize the agricultural labourers. The emergence of politically affiliated trade unions has divided the labourers to some extent along political party lines. Among the 41 unions 21 were affiliated with the CPI, 13 with CPM, six with DMK and the rest with the congress. Thus, the CPI-affiliated Thanjavur Vyvasaya Thozhilalar sangham dominated the scene. 77

Indeed, farm labourers participating in gheraos shouted the standard Marxist slogans of “land belongs to labour”, “Land ownership should go” etc. Moreover, after the police failed to offer adequate protection to victims of gheroes in 1967, the landlords concluded that they would get no help from the DMK. Government as long as it was in alliance with the Marxists. The landlords responded to this growing sense of physical insecurity by forming the East Thanjavur Mirasdars (Land owners) Association, both to pressure the government for adequate protection and to organize their own security forces drawn mainly from non-harijan farm workers. Subsequently, attempts were made to dissuade harijan farm workers from joining Marxist-led unions, and these efforts were reported to include strong-臂 methods such as abductions, beatings and arson.

77. Ibid., pp.37-38.
By 1967, even the DMK., which had unexpectedly won an absolute majority in the state Assembly and did not need Marxist support in order to govern, became increasingly alarmed by the success of Marxist-led unions, and the alienation of the landowning middle class. As a result, the police were no longer restrained from taking action against trespassing farm workers. On the contrary, local Marxist leaders denounced them for “Unspeakable brutalities” against Harijan labourers in cooperation with landlords’ goondas" or thugs.78

The 1967 agitations proved to be only the first round of a prolonged and increasingly violent confrontation between the labourers and landowners of East Thanjavur. The next two years saw the steady acceleration of labour demands, and a growing attitude of intransigence on the part of the landowners. Actually, from the beginning, the large landowners believed that the labour agitations involved much more serious issues than mere demand for higher wages.79

The political, as well as economic, importance of the landless labourers cannot be overlooked. Over the last few years, there has been a continuing tension in the eastern region of the district between the landless labourers and cultivators of land over the issues of wage rates and the bringing in of labourers from outside the area during periods of high labour demand. This erupted in a bitter clash in December 1968 and resulted in 43 people being killed. It would appear that the two groups (landless labourers and cultivators) are becoming politically polarized at least in some areas of the district. While the higher socio-economic levels cling to the more traditional political leadership, there is evidence that landless labourers respond to more radical leadership via India’s several communist factions.

79. Ibid., p.116.