CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
Chapter I
Introduction

Through out the colonial period, landless labourers belonging to the palla and Paraiah communities remained under conditions of servitude in Tamilnadu. Neither the laws of the Colonial Government, nor economic changes generated by capitalistic mode of production nor the efforts of the Christian Missionaries could significantly improve the condition of these labouring classes. Even after the end of the colonial era, labourers constituting the lowest order in the caste hierarchy found themselves exploited by the landowning classes.

Agrestic slaves in Tamilnadu could not be equated with the New World plantation slaves. They were not slaves in the real sense of the term because they were not chattel slaves to be bought and sold in the market. In certain respects the Pallas and Paraiahs in Tamilnadu resembled the serfs of Medieval Europe because both could not change the place of employment. Servitude in Tamilnadu was chiefly a creation of the Indian caste system. As Manickam says, "By slavery in the Indian context we mean only a, system of interpersonal and contractual 'relationship' whose chief characteristics are close links with caste, lack of personal freedom, dependence on others to an undesirable extent and obligation to perform services for others under conditions of social inferiority and restrictions".
The problem of agrestic servitude has received the attention of scholars in recent years. They have substantially contributed to the growth of historical literature on the topic.

1. Dharma Kumar’s ‘Land and Caste in South India’, first published in 1965 is a pioneering study on Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century. She has effectively proved with statistical data that agricultural labourers belonging to the Palli, Palla and Paraiah castes existed in Tamil Nadu in considerable proportion at a time when the English took over the administration of the Madras Presidency. The insight provided by Dharmakumar to the understanding of the post-emancipation history of landless labourers who either became padiyals or indentured labourers is commendable. But as the author herself acknowledges, 'Land and Caste', is a work chiefly based on official records. On enquiry the author of this thesis came across sources other than official records such as Missionary records, Native literature etc which contradict certain facts incorporated in the Land and Caste in South India. Hence ‘Land and Caste’ needs modification in certain areas.

2. Manickam’s ‘Slavery in the Tamil Country, A Historical Over-View’ is not a specialized study on praedial slavery. Though the author has given attention to this problem, it is not adequate.
3. T.K. Sundari’s ‘Caste and Agrarian Structure’ is limited in its scope because it is confined to Chengleput Taluk, in Chingleput District of Tamilnadu. This work fails to bring to light the factors which made the ‘Paraiah question’ attract public attention.

4. K.K. Kusuman’s ‘Slavery in Travancore’ is relevant only in the sense that it helps us to compare the system of slavery in Tamilnadu with the system of slavery which was being practised in Travancore.

5. ‘A Century of Change, Caste and Irrigated Land in Tamilnadu 1860s - 1970s’ by Karuka Yanagisawa, brings to light the fact that the Colonial Government practically did nothing to ameliorate the condition of the slave communities. The main concern of the author, however, is to study the changes in the pattern of landownership especially in the Trichinopoly District. Hence the problems of the landless labourers have not received a comprehensive treatment from the author.

6. Oddie’s ‘Social Protest in India’ deals with the problems faced by the servile castes in Chingleput District in the last quarter of the 19th Century. He discusses how through missionary efforts a mute section of the society earned confidence to organise themselves into a forum to protest against social exploitation.

7. Graham Houghton’s ‘The Improvement of Dependency - The History of the
Protestant Church in Madras, 1870 - 1920 like Oddie's work is limited in its scope. It studies the condition of servile communities in Chingleput District from a religious angle.

8. A.K. Kalimuthu's 'Colonial Economy and the Lower Strata of Agrarian Society in Tamilnadu (A.D. 1801 - 1947)' is a Post - Doctoral Fellowship project submitted to the ICHR, New Delhi. This scholar deals with the Lower Strata of Agrarian Society composed of three segments viz., Small peasants, Tenants and Labourers. He maintains that all the three sections were adversely affected by the Colonial economic policies. However, his treatment of the landless labourers can not be considered comprehensive because he has not taken into account the crucial role played by the missionaries not only in bringing the problem of the depressed classes to limelight but also in ameliorating their conditions.

9. Benedicte Hjejle's scholarly article entitled 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India in the 19th Century' analyses all aspects of South Indian Slavery. Hjejle ably proves that colonial administrators introduced only half hearted measurers to emancipate slaves. However, Hjejle's work fails to examine the factors helping the oppressed labourers to acquire courage and conviction to protest against social injustice heaped on them by the high caste land owning communities.

10. Kathleen Gough in her 'Modes of Production in Southern India' and other
works tries to study agrarian problems with the aid of Marx’s formulation of
modes of production and of related concepts by other writers. In Kathleen
Gough’s works, agrestic servitude forms but a part of a general agrarian study.
Moreover her works concentrate only on Thanjavur region.

11. Hugh Tinker’s ‘A New System of Slavery’ is another important work which is very
useful in understanding the intricacies of the indentured labour system.

Each of the above works deals with the problem of agrestic servitude in a
limited angle. Hence a comprehensive study on the subject is attempted.

1. Agrestic servitude existed in the Sangam epoch.

2. It became strengthened during the medieval period.


4. The factors that were responsible for the origin, continuation and exploitation
   of agrestic servitude form the problem for the analysis.

The study, therefore, requires an overview of the conditions that prevailed in
the Pre-Colonial Society. So the study proceeds with the hypothesis that the
continuation of agrestic servitude in Tamilnadu was due to the dominance of the
landowning classes with the help of sastric injunctions. The Colonial Government
found it useful to further its self interest. The study leads us to the conclusion that in
the pre-colonial period the dominant classes utilized the sastric injunctions to fetter
the labouring classes by fitting them into the lowest order of the caste system to
further their economic interests. The Colonial Government inspite of its
occasional humanitarian approach, perpetuated the system in the garb of non-interference in the existing social order. Madras Government was forced to usher in amelioratory measures only due to pressure exerted by missionaries and the depressed classes themselves.

To test the hypothesis the study proceeds to analyse the factors responsible for the perpetuation of agrestic servitude till the close of the 19th century. Factors that helped the progress of the depressed classes are also analysed, using historical methodology.

The scope of this study is limited to a specific segment of the agrarian society in Tamilnadu and the period is also limited to 100 years from 1801 to 1900. This period commences with the taking of administrative control over Tamilnadu by the English and closes with the consolidation of forces which made the depressed classes to launch an organised protest against social inequalities. Accordingly, the study is made under the following chapters.

Chapterisation

This thesis consists of six chapters inclusive of introduction and conclusion. Chapter I - Introduction, discusses the objective, hypothesis, methodology and limitation of the study. Works published by eminent scholars on this topic have been evaluated. An appraisal of the sources used for writing this thesis is also made.

Chapter II - Agrestic Servitude, A Pre-Colonial Legacy, deals with the formation of an agrarian society from earliest times. Historical development
of different types of land tenures is examined. Agrarian expansion and its consequences also form a part of this chapter. The institution of slavery - its origin, growth and factors making its continuation, is examined.

Chapter III - Colonial Attitude to Slavery, deals with the attitude of the English Government to the problem of slavery. The constraints which forced the Government to follow a pro-landlord policy are examined. The role of evangelists and humanitarians in bringing the slavery question to focus is discussed. The immediate cause which made the Government to order the collectors for an inquiry about the nature of slavery in each district and the consequences of the enquiries are analysed.

Chapter IV - Slavery Abolition Act V of 1843 and its Impact, deals with the forces responsible for the enactment of a law emancipating slaves and its impact. The pressures exerted by humanitarians in England, the failure on the part of the English Parliament to solve the problem and the examination of the question of slavery by the Law Commission are discussed. Act V of 1843 is critically analysed. The condition of labourers in the post-emancipation period is also discussed. Colonial Government’s role in strengthening the chains of servitude on labourers is analysed. Obstacles placed on the path of depressed classes’ to progress by the high caste landowners are examined.

Chapter V - Towards Actual Emancipation, examines the history of protests against caste discrimination. Social equality had been stressed by poets from the days of the Sangam Period. The role of Tamil Siddhas and the work of great reformers
of the 19th century are evaluated. The circumstances which ultimately resulted in an organised protest by the depressed classes themselves are examined.

Chapter VI - Conclusion, gives a summary of the findings of the study. The reasons for the continuation of agricultural bondage even in the 20th century are discussed.

Sources

Sources for this study are available abundantly in varied forms. They may be classified into the following categories.

1. Literary
2. Epigraphical
3. Archival
4. Missionary Records
5. Secondary

Given below is only a brief account of the nature and value of sources utilized.

Sangam anthologies provide us with valuable data regarding the formation of an agrarian social hierarchy in early Tamilnadu. Medieval literature provides us with sufficient data to prove that the institution of slavery got strengthened in that period. Folk lore being an unembellished form of literature is closer to reality. Pallupattu, Nandanar Caritira Kirtanai and Folk songs supply enough data to prove that agrestic
slavery was exploited during the Colonial Period.

Archival sources are varied in form and content. Proceedings of the Board of Revenue are a source of valuable information. Volume No. 840 dated 25th November 1819 of the Board of Revenue in particular, contains plenty of data on slavery in the Madras presidency. However, this record has to be used only after a critical examination.

Select committee Report of the House of Commons, dated 4-12-1832 and Law Commission Report of 1841 are valuable for this study.

Besides these, District Gazetteers, Manuals and Official Reports provide us with additional information on the topic of inquiry. On some aspects, official reports are far removed from truth. Commenting on the nature of official knowledge about the depressed classes, Rev. A. Andrew makes the following observation:

"The Board's affirmation in dealing with the material condition of the Pariahs seem to be but the creation of stay-at-home doctrinaires who have no real contact with the classes concerned. How can a higher official really know the Pariahs in their haunts and ways? A European revenue officer with the increase in his indoor official duties and his frequent changes from one district to another, has no time to look into the numerous details of village life on the many villages which crowd his district. Nor can he get near the people, clothed as he is with authority derived from the state, and viewed as a superior being by the ignorant
villagers, and acquire an intimate personal knowledge of them either at first or second hand".  

Among works published by eminent scholars the following deserve special mention.

Dharma Kumar's 'Land and Caste', Benedicte Hjejle's 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India in the 19th Century', Kathleen Gough's 'Modes of Production in Southern India', S. Manickam's 'Slavery in the Tamil Country', A.K. Kalimuthu's 'Colonial Economy and the Lower Strata of Agrarian Society in Tamilnadu (A.D. 1801-1947)' and Hugh Tinker's 'A New System of Slavery' are some serious research works which the present scholar found to be very useful.
**Notes and References**


Rural Society in South East India. Cambridge, 1981.