CHAPTER 2

AGRESTIC SERVITUDE - A PRE-COLONIAL LEGACY
Chapter II

Agrestic Servitude - A pre-Colonial Legacy

Both Nationalist and Marxist historians of India are unanimous in their opinion, that the class of landless labourers in India was largely a creation of capitalism which was so designed as to confer maximum benefits to the English which inevitably resulted in the general increase in the strength of landless class in India. British revenue policies reduced many petty land holders to the position of labourers. It was this situation that made many historians to conclude that landless labourers as a class, was non existent in pre nineteenth century India. S. J. Patel for instance observes, "In pre-nineteenth century India there were domestic and menial servants but their numbers were small and they did not form a definite group that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in India".¹

On the other hand, Dharma kumar holds a different view. In her work 'Land and Caste' she has adduced strong evidences to prove that "slaves and serfs were already a sizeable proportion of the total population in many areas at the beginning of the nineteenth century".² Kathleen Gough states that "Village slaves who lived in a condition called 'adimai' had been present in Thanjavur from at least the third or fourth centuries A.D. during the period of the first Chola Kingdom."³ A survey of the pre-colonial history of Tamilnadu leads us to the same conclusion.
The problem of agricrestic servitude in India has to be viewed from two angles - economic and social. Economic difficulties of the landless classes were perpetuated by social regulations imposed on them by the elite land owning classes by virtue of their wealth and power. As such this study on agricrestic servitude proceeds on a socio-economic perspective from early Medieval Tamilnadu.

The early Tamil Society, as depicted by the Sangam literature, was living in tune with nature. Tolkappiar was the first to describe the importance of geophysical aspects, economic activities and behavioural patterns peculiar to each region of the land. The land itself was classified into five Tinais viz, Kurinchi, Mullai, Neithal, Marudham and Palai. Each zone was pursuing its distinct economic activity. The following table explains the different economic activities of the regions in early Tamil Society.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Economic Activity</th>
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<td>1. Kurinchi (hills)</td>
<td>Hunting, Foodgathering, Honey, Corns of Millet as food.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Mullai (Pasture land)</td>
<td>Cattle rearing, shifting agriculture milk, varagu and samai as food</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Marudham (Riverine areas)</td>
<td>Fertile region, ploughing transplanting, weeding, harvesting, rice as food.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Palai (desert)</td>
<td>Robbery was the occupation</td>
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Among the five regions, development potentialities were very poor in the regions of Kurinchi and Neithal. The geographical nature of these lands were not conducive enough to make any increase in production during this period. The economy of Kurunchi region at this stage was food gathering and in Neithal, people had to get their food by exchange of fish and salt.

Comparatively, the geographical nature of land in Mullai was better because source for a minimal amount of water was available. Naturally, this would facilitate the productive activities. Here with cattle rearing, people engaged themselves in agriculture also. Yet agriculture could not be successful in this region because hydraulic technology had not developed enough at this stage to bring more lands into cultivation. Of the regions, major productive activities could be possible only in Marudham (riverine areas) where nature provides facilities for agricultural development. There was abundance of riverine water. The land was plain and irrigation became easy. As a result there was surplus production of rice. There are pointed references in Sangam literature to abundance of crop production owing to the high fertility of the land. A poet affirms that the small space in which an elephant can lie down produced enough rice to feed seven elephants.

Tolkapiam speaks of Kuravar, Kanavar and Vettuvar (Kurunji), Ayar, and Vettuvar (Mullai), Uzhavar, Kadaiyar and Kazhanar (Marudam), Nuzhaiyar and paradavar (Neithal) and Eiynar and Maravar (Palai) as the inhabitants of the five Tinais. Besides the above kulams or castes, other classes of people such as Umanar,
Eyirriyar, Kadambar, Kadaisiyar, Kurumbar, Kammiyar, Kuyavar, Kallar, Tachar, Koothar, Panar, Paraiyar, Tudiyar, Pulayar, Valaignar etc. are also mentioned in the sangam anthologies. Class distinction seems to have appeared in the sangam age itself. This is made clear from terms used in Tolkappiam such as Uyarnthor, Melor, Kizhor etc., denoting thereby a high and low rank in society.

Class distinction was more prominent in Marudam than in the other Tinais because only in Marudam, situated in the riverine regions, facilities were abundantly present to found permanent agricultural settlements. It attracted settlers and facilitated private ownership in land. A class society based on wealth emerged in the three important river basins of Kaveri, Vaigai and Periyar paving the way for formations of states. Pattinappalai speaks about the rural life in the Chola country studded with innumerable small villages.

Sangam villages where landholding rights were chiefly vested in the hands of Vellalas came to be called as ‘Vellan Vagai villages’. K.A.N. Sastri says ‘Vellan’ means cultivator and ‘Vagai’ refers to the nature of ownership. Rural life in the Sangam period was characterised by disparities in wealth and status between different sections of the inhabitants. This is evident from the statement of Nachinarkiniyar, a well-known commentator of the Medieval period. It is he who makes a subtle distinction between ‘Uluvithunpor’ and ‘Uluthunpor’. ‘Uluvithunpor’ were those who caused the cultivation of the soil by labourers and belonged to the higher category of agrarian society. They were the land owning non-cultivating vellalas.
who enjoyed esteemed social status. Some of them filled covetable posts in the bureaucratic set up. ‘Uluthunpor’ were a poor class of landowners, engaged in tilling their own soil. Though they belonged to the category of productive forces, they would not serve as hired labourers in the estates of others. The second category of productive forces were the tenants (share croppers), who cultivated other’s lands and shared the Produce.

The last in rank among the Producing classes were the agricultural labourers. All the three categories of producing classes earned their livelihood by toiling on the lands. Among them the condition of agricultural labourers such as Ilicinar, Vinaivalar, Ulatihr etc. was deplorable. In the Sangam period they, formed the lowest class known as Kadaisiyar. It was they who had to do all agricultural operations. Most of these people held the status of either of serfs or slaves.

Sangam literature describes of the condition of these people as being miserable. There are also references which tell that they lived on the outskirts of the villages. They lived on the meagre earnings and bare necessities which they could get. There were also cases of starvation among these people at times of drought. There are references which say that the rulers and wealthy appropriated the labour of the working people and did not leave them enough to keep the body and soul together. Speaking about the condition of labourers K.A.N. Sastri says that there is no clear evidence of praedial slavery during this period, though it is possible that most of the labourers of the last classes did not differ much from slaves.
in their status.  

But there is ample evidence in the sangam poems themselves and particularly in the Tolkappiyam to substantiate the fact that aristocrats and noble men held a high status in society and they alone were considered fit for poetic treatment. Tolkappiyam specifically states that, slaves, servants, errand-men etc. are not entitled to be portrayed as heroes in poems treating the five divisions of mutual love”. Kanakasabai’s view that "slavery was however unknown amongst the Tamils and this is strong evidence of their superior civilization in this early period" is far from the real situation.

With the emergence of kingdoms in the closing years of the sangam epoch, ideological changes in polity and society became inevitable. Thus we find Koothar, Panar, Parayar, Tudiyar and Kadambar who held position of respect as bards in the heroic period descending to low levels because they ceased to have any utility in the changed situation when Brahmanical ideas began to assume overwhelming dominance.

Though Brahmans were present in small numbers even in the early period of the sangam age, only in the closing years they became an influential minority paving the way for political, economic and social dominance in the subsequent periods. Sangam literature contains ample evidence to prove that Brahmans were held in veneration not only by the people but also by reigning monarchs. Mullai-pattu, Malaipadukadam, Kurunthokai, Tolkappiyam, Pattinappalai, Pathittuppathu
etc. have references to Brahmans holding a honourable status in society. Monarchs showered them with gifts of jewels and lands. Brahmans gradually succeeded in getting closer to kings. Pandya king Peruvazhuti obtained the title of Palyagasalai Mudukudumi Peruvazhuti by performing several sacrifices on the advice of Brahmans. This is known from Purananooru. Likewise the Chola King Killi came to be called as Rajasuyam Vetta Narkilli. One of the Sangam poets by name Palai Gautamanar wished to perform nine yagnas so that he and his wife might attain eternal bliss. Palyanai-Selkelu Kuttuvan, the Chera provided the poet with all the necessary materials for the sacrifices. The King even proceeded to the forest denouncing kingship on being advised to do so by Gautamanar. For this act, the poet praised the king as one who "is subservient to none other than the Brahman".

Brahmans grafted the Varna ideology to the existing caste system and made it permanent by giving each caste a social rank and a heritable occupation. From the closing years of the Sangam period Brahmans and Vellalas formed an alliance by which they appropriated the wealth and power in Tamilnadu. Brahmans provided these peasant cultivators with a ranking ideology that defined the peasants as next only to Brahmans in moral standing. They were accorded the status of Satvik or men of respectable way of life and thus distinguished from the lower orders of the population. Vellala claim to a higher status however was against sastric injunctions. As Paffenberger observes, "claiming as they do a rank and set of privileges that lacks scriptural foundations, Vellalas and other South Indian sudra cultivating castes
would appear to be engaged in what can only be described as a wily subversion of tradition, relying on their wealth, the coercive force that they possess and their stronghold on the land to guarantee their seemingly inflated status claims. This Peasant - Brahman alliance system was further strengthened and extended as new areas were brought under cultivation in the subsequent period.

Hydraulic society witnessed a steady expansion since the days of Karikala, the famous monarch of the Sangam age. This ancient Chola king is said to have tamed river Kaveri by building the flood banks, cutting the inundation channels and strengthening the earthen embankments. In building durable embankment for the river Kaveri, Karikala utilised the services of prisoners of war brought from Ceylon. It was again Karikala who was responsible for clearing the forests in Tondaimandalam and settling it with people brought from Thanjavur. The original inhabitants of Todaimandalam thus became serfs or slaves to the new settlers.

The pace of agrarian expansion suffered a set back during the Kalabhra inroads which upset the political stability in Tamilnadu. It picked up momentum by sixth century A.D. when the pallava and Pandya powers gained political dominance.

Epigraphic evidences throw light on efforts taken by medieaval Tamil kings to bring more lands under the plough by reclamation and also by extending irrigation facilities to new areas. Dry zones were brought under cultivation. In this respect the Vaigai bed inscription of Sendan (or) Jayantavarman (Crica A.D 645 - 670) is significant because it mentions the construction of a madagu (sluice) and the
Another Pandya king Srimara Srivallabha (Circa A.D 811 - 857) is said to have extended irrigation facilities to dry areas which was hitherto considered impossible. Under his instruction, one Etti Sattan, the kilavan of Irunjolanadu created history by initiating a number of irrigation projects and renovating existing tanks, canals and sluices with building materials like brick and granite blocks. Hydraulic technology also was improving as years passed by. Dalavaypuram plates of Parantaka Viranarayana (Circa A.D 862 - 907) states that the king created many ‘Tatagangal’. Mahendravarman I (A.D 600 - 663) called Vichitrachita is associated with the creation of Mahendra Tataka at Mahendravadi. Dantivarman (Circa 796 - 847) is said to have been responsible for the creation of two reservoirs and a well - Vairamegha Tataka, Marpidugu Eri and Marpidugu Perum Kinaru. The great tank at Kaveripakkam was dug during the reign of Nandivarman III (AD 846 - 869). Parantaka I was the founder of Viranarayana Chaturvedimangalam. The famous Viranam Eri near that place was also his creation.

This agrarian expansion created new socio-economic problems. Burtonstein analyses these problems as follows: “Spreading out from the core centres of irrigated agriculture, the agrarian social formation of early South India encountered areas still inhabited by fierce tribal folk of the dry plains and hills. Not only was it necessary to subdue these folk but the conquered tribes had to be assimilated into the agrarian order - ever voracious for labour at the lowest status of the original
peasant cultivators." This was done effectively by the power wielding peasant community of the time with the support of the brahmans who determined the duty of each caste according to sastras. Once the duty of a caste was decided, it was considered against Dharma to aspire to do the duty of another. Bhagavatgita emphasizes this point as follows; "Better it is one's own caste, though imperfectly carried out, than the Dharma of another even if carried out perfectly." Manu states that "Better is death in the fulfillment of one's duty, for to follow another Dharma is perilous".

In this integration process some adventurous among the frontiemen might have become either land holders or tenants but a vast majority helped swell the already existing labouring classes with the stigma of pollution attached to them. Those who resisted the aggressive expansion of agrarian civilization withdrew further deep into the forests and hills and continued the life of tribals like the Kanikarans, Todas, Malayalis etc.

There is one instance of resistance to Vellala domination recorded by Edgar Thurston in "Castes and Tribes of Southern India." According to this story, "Melur Nadu was originally inhabited by the Vellalas. At certain period, some Kallas belonging to the Vellala nadu in Conjiaram District proceeded thence on a hunting excursion... They settled there permanently as servants of the Vellalas. They were serving them faithfully and obediently to the entire satisfaction of the Vellalas and were rewarded for their labour. Some time afterwards the Vellalas began to inflict
condign punishments on the Kallas for offences and misdemeanours committed in their service. This stirred up the wrath of the Kallas, who acquired the superiority over their masters and by coercive measure impelled them to a strict observance of the following rules.

1. That if a Kallar was struck by his master in such a manner as to deprive him of a tooth, he was to pay a fine of ten cally chukrums for the offence.

2. That if a Kallar happens to have one of his ear lobes torn the Vellalar was to pay a fine of six chukrams.

3. That if a Kallar had his skull fractured, the Vellalar was to pay thirty chukrums unless he preferred to have his skull fractured in return.

4. That if a Kallar had his arm or leg broken, he was then to be considered but half a man. In such case the offender was required to grant the Kallar one cullum of nanjah seed land and two koorkums of punjah to be held and enjoyed in perpetuity, exclusive of which the Vellalar was required to give the kallar a doopettah and a cloth for his wife, twenty cullums of paddy or any other grain and twenty chukrums in money for expenses.

5. That if the Kallar was killed the offender was required to pay either a fine of hundred chukrums or be subject to the vengeance of the injured party until either of these alternatives was agreed to and satisfaction afforded the party injured was at liberty to plunder the offender’s party, never to be restored.
By this hostile mode of conduct imposed on their masters together with their extravagant demands the Vellalas were reduced to the dread of the kallas as to court their favour and became submissive to their will and pleasure so that in process of time the Kallas not only reduced them to poverty but also induced them to abandon their villages and hereditary possession and to emigrate to foreign countries. Many were even murdered in total disregard of their former solemn promises of fidelity and attachment. Having thus implacably so rid of their original masters and expelled them from their nadu, they became the rulers of it and dominated it by the singular appellation of "Tun Arrasa Nadu" signifying a forest only known to its possessors. In short, these Kallas became so formidable at length as to evince a considerable ambition and to set the then government at defiance.31

With the ascendancy of the Pallavas, Brahmans began to acquire economic power in Tamilnadu. Land grants to Brahmans initially given by the Pallava kings became an obligation of kings of different dynasties ruling over Tamilnadu since then. Earliest reference to a land granted to a Brahman called Korkai Kilan Narkorran by the Pandya king of the sangam age Palyaga Salai Mudukudumi Pervaludi is found in the Velvikkudi grant issued by Parantaka Nedunjadayan in 767 A.D. 32 Attainment of religious merit was the reason for giving lands to Brahmans. According to Manu, "Whatever sin is committed by an individual, knowingly or unknowingly is cleared by the gift of land even of the extent of a cow's hide".33
Manu states further as follows: "Let every man according to his ability give wealth to Brahmans detached from the world and learned in scriptures, such a giver shall attain Heaven after life."  

In ancient times a mistaken belief in the sanctity of law as an instrument of political control was inculcated among the people by the rulers with the help of priests, patronized by them through the myth of divine origin. Laws of Manu were said to have been handed down by the gods although in reality they merely tried to legitimize the absolute power of the kings and the wealth and power of the privileged classes. Medieaval rulers brought about drastic changes in the agrarian set up by liberally granting gifts of land to Brahmans. Brahmadeya villages located in each Nadu of the Cholamandalam and Jayamgonda Cholamandalam roughly comprising the present districts of Chingleput, North Arcot, South Arcot, Tiruchirappalli, Thanjavur and Pudukkottai played an important role in the local administration of the state for social integration.

Brahmadeya villages sometimes were created by displacing the original inhabitants from them. Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I (1251 - 1274/83) founded a new village called Vikrama Pandya Chaturvedimangalam for the benefit of 108 Brahman families. The rights and privileges of the old tenants and title holders were completely bought up. According to Kasakudi plates, Nandivarman Pallavamalla gave Udayendiram village to Brahmans having expropriated others (Jaina heretics) whose observances were not in accordance with law. The Large Leyden Grant
states that Gandaraditya Varman, the second son of Parantaka I "founded for the sake (of bliss) in another world, a large village called by his own name in the country on the Northern bank of Kaveri river".  

As David Ludden points out, Vellalas, from kings to peasants, supported Brahmadeyas and by doing so raised themselves from a disparate set of locally dominant peasants into a high status category, a non-Brahman stratum above all others.

Social inequality was rather encouraged by Medieval Tamil kings because many of them were very keen in practising the rules laid down by Manu. King Adhi Rajendra, son of Vira Rajendra (1063 - 1070) is said to have "continuously increased his great fame by following the Laws of Manu". Another inscription issued a century later states that "the rules of Manu flourished" in the Chola country. Pandyas were second to none in "enforcing the laws of Manu", Brahmans by becoming interpreters of law, not only succeeded in regulating society in accordance with the laws of Manu but also made their position invincible. An inscription belonging to the reign of Kulottunga II records that an officer of the king after consulting the Bhattas decided a case in which a Vellala was accused of killing the wife of an archer. The Bhattas stated that death sentence should not be meted out to a Vellala. The accused was ordered to maintain twilight lamp in the temple. From an inscription issued in the 48th year of Tribhuvana Cakaravartin, it becomes clear that Brahmans alone could fix the occupation of castes. Here the caste involved was the Rathakara. It is
also interesting that Brahmans decided the occupation of castes and caste disputes on the strength of previous authorities such as Yajnavalkya, Gautama, Kautilya, Budhayana and others. Duties of each caste were so defined that thoughts of equality never disturbed the minds of different sections of the society based on hierarchy.

Coinciding with the emergence of Brahmadeya system of land tenures there appeared another form of land holding called Devadana resulting from gifts made to temples. Temple building on a large scale was a corollary of the Bhakti movement in Tamilnadu. The Tamil Bhakti movement represents a religious phenomenon with valuable social content - a new wave of Aryan or Hindu influence among the Tamil people. Elements of dissent, protest and reform were indeed discernible in the movement. But all these aspects remained subordinated to the overall pattern of a greater movement - the consolidation and extension of classical Hindu society in the early Medieval India. One inscription dated 1495 A.D. found at Marungur of Kanyakumari District prohibits lower castes of valangai and Idangai divisions from making gifts to temples.

As Dr. Manickam states, "In a highly stratified and feudalized medieval society bhakti had a few social functions to perform. The personal loyalty and devotion the devotee had for the deities in the spiritual realm provided a model to be emulated in the terrestrial plane. The andan, adimai (master - slave) relationship, modelled after the deity - devotee relationship of the bhakti tradition nicely fitted
into the feudal frame work. The agrestic slaves were expected to remain loyal, obedient and attached to their masters as the Nayanmars and Alwars remained faithful and devoted to Lord Siva and Vishnu respectively.48

Prolific temple building activities are attested to by hundreds of inscriptions from A.D. seventh to the tenth century. Huge temples adorned the landscape of the Chola empire starting from the reign of Rajaraja. Consequently Brahmanism with its institutional base in the temple centred agrarian settlements had emerged as the most dynamic progressive force. Brahmana leaders had succeeded in organizing the indigenous people as tenants and temple servants grading them into castes and subcastes with infinite variation of economic and ritual status.

Endowments to temples and Mathas became the order of the day. Raja Raja I for instance endowed the Tanjore temple with lands in 35 villages. Five of them contained lands over 1000 acres. 3 of them 200 to 300 and six of them above 50 and below 100.49 Temples became land lords par excellence. Vanamalalai thinks that transfer of lands to temples affected the interests of the community at large. He cites examples of cultivable waste lands around the temples being transferred to temples. Large extent of lands which once belonged to the community passed onto temples. There was another form of land transfer known as ‘Kudineekki. Tenants were evicted by this method of land transfer. Though they were given compensation elsewhere, the lands which they got were usually of inferior quality. Naturally tenants met with losses due to poor crop production.50
Generally temple administration remained in the hands of Brahmans. Feudal lords of Vellanvagai villages acquired extensive lands under the system of Karatchi (tenancy right) where the Meyatchi (proprietary right) remained with the temple. These land lords cultivated their lands with the help of subtenants and serfs.

Another form of land tenure which was vogue in the Medieval period resulted from gifts of land given to public servants in lieu of money payment. This type of tenure came to be called as ‘Jeevitham’ because land assigned to the beneficiaries was only for their life time. Lands granted for the purpose of feeding Brahmans was called ‘Salabogam’. Brahman scholars who expounded scriptures were given land known as ‘Bhattavirithi’. Families of soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the service of the king were assigned land known as ‘Veerabogam’ or ‘Uthirakkani’.

Thus in the Medieval agrarian set up the villages in Tamilnadu had to come under any one of the above tenures. In spite of royal patronage to Brahmans and temples by way of granting large land grants, the non-Brahman villages (Vellan Vagai) formed an overall majority. These villages were corporate in nature, land ownership being communal in form. This means that lands in the villages were owned by particular kinship group of landlords jointly. Accordingly, the kinship group of landlords in the Vellanvagai was Vellalas and in Brahmadeyas, Brahmans. In Jeevitham, the civil and military officials formed this class in which Brahmans and Vellalas were also included. In Devadana, though the lands were owned by temples, they were under the control of Brahmans and Vellalas in order of priority.
In 'Eka Boga' a single Brahman was the land lord.  

In this pattern of land ownership there also developed some modifications in certain areas of Tamilnadu, especially in the lower Kaveri during the period of the Imperial Cholas. N. Karashima opines that these changes had occurred in these areas because of new economic development leading to the emergence of individual ownership. Imperialistic expansion during the reign of Raja Raja I and Rajendra I paved the way for the flow of wealth by way of booty and tributes from outside the Tamil country. This wealth was distributed among the people. Large scale land transfers among individuals or between institutions and temples are noticed. Karashima cites many inscriptive evidences from Trichinopoly and Tanjore Districts. There is enough evidence to infer that martial communities like Kallars and Pallis had opportunities of becoming land owners with the wealth which they had obtained during wars. This new economic climate not only created individual land ownership but also included a few among the martial communities as landowners in the socio-economic corpus along with Vellalas and Brahmans. Thus private ownership along with communal ownership had come into vogue towards the close of the Imperial Chola rule.

Thus a feudal social order came into existence in Medieval Tamilnadu. Whatever may be the type of land ownership, the lower strata of society like the tillers of the soil had to depend on the landlords for their survival. In corporate villages serfs were dependent on kinship groups and in villages where landownership
was vested with individuals serfs were dependent on individuals.

**Slavery in Medieval Tamilnadu**

Inscriptional evidence for the prevalence of slavery in Tamilnadu is available though not in abundant quantity. Pallacheris and Paracheris are referred to in inscriptions as separate residential areas of agricultural serfs. These Cheris are called by some inscriptions as Tindacheris. One inscription speaks about two paracherris: the eastern quarters where ‘Urapparaiyar’ (menials) and the western quarters where ‘Ulaparayar’ (Cultivators) lived. Agrestic serfs were isolated from the higher castes is attested to by many inscriptions. Separate burning grounds and ponds and wells (Paraikkulakkuri) for Paraiahs existed in villages. Power and wealth were commanded by the agricultural elite of Brahmans and Vellalas. The natural corollary of the wealth, power and ritual pretensions of the Brahmana and Vellala elite was the poverty, subordination and ritual degradation of their client labourers. As C.J.Baker observes, "Possibly from the Sangam period and certainly from the Medieval times, the elites of the valleys managed to distance themselves from cultivation. Those local residents and immigrants whom the elite managed to exclude from control of land were still attracted to live in the valleys where the fertility of the field guaranteed a fairly secure food supply. The Brahmans and Vellalas could thus delegate the work of cultivation to others while they themselves concentrated on more cultural pursuits".

To understand the nature of slavery, an idea about the working of the Mirasi
system is essential. F.W. Ellis, collector of the Madras collectorate submitted a report on Mirasi right in 1816. Charles Stewart Crole, the editor of The Chingelput District Manual and B.H. Baden-Powell, the author of The land Systems of British India efficiently bring about the intricacies of the Mirasi System. 59

Three distinct bodies are connected with the Mirasi tenure: they are proprietors or Kaniyatchikarars who in later times came to be called as mirasidars, the under-tenants and free labourers (ulkudi and purakkudi) and the slaves. Mirasi system was in vogue not only in Tondaimandalam but also in all wet districts of Tamilnadu.

According to Bundla Ramaswamy Naidu, whose Memoirs of the Internal Revenue system of Madras Presidency was published in the 1820, Mirasi system had its origin in Tondaimandalam when Audondai Chakravarti conquered it from the Kurumbas. It is believed that he cleared the forests with the help of 48,000 Vellalas imported from Thanjavur and finally settled them permanently by conferring them with Kaniyatchi rights. On the whole one thousand and nine hundred Nattams or villages were formed. Each village was provided with service communities. ‘Mauniems’ of different types were assigned to servants of the villages. A separate spot was reserved for the paracherry in each village.

The memoir states, "Thus the forty eight thousand vellalas having become kaniyachikarars to cultivate their lands, as they found the temporary ones were of little service to them in a place where there was prosperity in the land for generations, for a labourer not permanently fixed might work sometime with one and sometime
with another at pleasure and in order to prevent this they had recourse to Adooma or vassalage of labourers ... Accordingly, the vellalas were allowed to exercise the right of buying, selling, pledging and giving in free gift of Paraiah and certain other caste slaves." 60

Ramaswamy Naidoo further elaborates the methods by which slaves were procured by the land lords.

When a person purchases a woman with her children, it is called 'Cottoo adooma', i.e. figuratively by a cluster of vassals or slaves, the price of it was formerly no more than two or three pagodas; no one can sell her but her Anda or master, but if she has no master, Nellumman, mother's brother, has the power to dispose of her; she is called Paredasy Cotto. When she has neither master nor Nellumman in which case, the purchaser generally contracts her through the means of the Nattamacar or head Paraiah of the paracherry and the price then becomes higher; the title deed of the above purchase is always written on a bunch of palmyra leaves to show that it is a Cottoo Adooma. 61

Slave who executed deeds was not "at liberty to marry her daughter to anyone without the consent of her master and when such marriage takes place the lord of the slave usually defrays the charges. All children that she brings forth belong to the master who undergoes the expenses, of birth and death among them". But "when a mother slave wishes to get her son married, her lord supplies her with the marriage contract money, coora, tali etc but at all times the children he begets go to the master or his wife and not to his". 62 The purchase money of a male slave is no more than half a pagoda, that of a female, one that has not attained her age is no more than a pagoda.
The mode of feeding these people is this: "the master of a slave pays him batta, for the six months in a year, that is from the month of Audy or July to Margaly or December and Calavasam and Pooracallam for the remaining six months or during the time of threshing the crops." This account of Ramaswamy Naidoo was based on both tradition and custom and not on any record. Charles Stewart Crole, the author of Chingleput District Manual states that slaves were attached to the Kaniyatchi shares to which they belonged; they could not be sold without it. He further says that Paraiah and pallas were slaves under Sudras and Pallis were under Brahmans. Brahmans preferred Pallis because they were not untouchables.

Inscriptions speak about Paraiah as hereditary slaves of the villages and they were attached with land and sold along with land whether communal or private. Agricultural slaves are described as the properties of their masters. In this connection information provided by the inscriptions found at Tirukkarugur and Achalapuram are significant. They include slaves with lands and others as properties inherited by a woman from her deceased husband.

Ellis was convinced that the paraiah in Chingleput were not slaves in the actual sense of the term. He states that they had several privileges. In the paracherri, each member had his own hut with a backyard exempted universally from all taxes. They were entitled to a share in the produce of every crop which they received at various rates and in various modes under the denomination of Kalavasam, Swatantrum etc. Further they held the inferior offices of the village as Talayari.
(village police) vettiyan (boundary man) cambucatu (distributor of water) toti (watchman) etc for which they were allowed maniyams and Swatantrum distinct from those above mentioned. On festival occasions the village gave them presents of cloths and money. Sometimes they were allowed to cultivate small pieces of land. In fact, the paraiahs considered themselves as the real proprietors of the soil. Mirasi rights changed hands from Vellalas to Nadars and to Brahmans but paraiahs continued to cultivate the lands for generations. The picture which the English administrators present gives an impression that agricultural labourers under land lords lived a quiet and contented life. The real picture was however different.

Agricultural labourers had to undergo several hardships which were imposed on them by the immutable laws of the caste system. They were kept away from village affairs. One inscription specifically states that degraded castes of the Valankai and Idankai classes should not make any grant to temples. Their mobility was strictly curtailed. One inscription issued by Kulottunga in the 43rd year of his reign states that village servants should not engage themselves in service beyond their village. Breach of this custom was considered as transgression of law. Any one violating this was regarded as to have committed a fault against the great assembly and to have ruined the village. Vetti or compulsory labour was exacted from the labourers in Medieval times. Proper maintenance of irrigation systems was a pre-requisite for the survival and growth of an agrarian economy. During the
Medieval period village assemblies took up the responsibility of keeping the irrigation works in order. One of the very common methods of arranging for the maintenance of irrigation works was the provision of servants and the villagers, particularly the tenants, were often expected to provide free labour required for such activities. In corporate villages only pallas and parayas provide this free labour. According to Srinivasan, "The free labour employed for the purpose were severally called amanji or amji, vetti, vettiyal and so on. The unpaid labourers who were engaged to keep the channel issuing from the river in good repair were called arkkal amanjj, so also the provision of free labour for digging drinking water channels was known as sennir - amanji or sennir - vetti. " According to T.V. Mahalingam, Kadamai Uliyar mentioned in inscriptions might be serfs doing forced labour.

Slaves and perhaps ordinary peasants were coerced by the state to build and repair irrigation works in the dry season and to quarry and transport stone for palaces and temples, make roads, and drag heavy palanquins of royalty, priestly authorities and temple deities.

There are several evidences for the prevalence of chattel slavery also during the Medieval Period. But most of these slaves were confined to domestic duties or service in palaces or temples. Temples and Mathas owned large number of slaves. An inscription of 1235 A.D. gives a list of slaves with male and female numbering more than 100 persons owned by the temple of Virattaneswara. These slaves were
made over to the temple after having been purchased from several people on orders by Kulottunga III (1187 - 1188). The same record says that these slaves were branded with sula or some symbol to mark them off from other slaves. 73

From the story of Nandanar narrated by Sekkilar in Periyapuranam, an idea about the economic and social life of the untouchable labourers could be gleaned. As per his story Adanur, the birth place of Nandanar was a place of rich vellalas living in mansion like buildings. But the pulapadi, the residential quarters of labourers presented a contrasting picture of poverty. This is brought out in the following passage.

"In the outskirts of that town is a small hamlet of pulaiyas studded with small huts under old thatches overspread by surai creepers and inhabited by agrarian labourers engaged in menial occupations. In the thresholds of the huts covered with strips of leather, little chicks were seen moving about in groups; dark children who wore bracelets of black iron were prancing about, carrying little puppies whose yelps were drowned by the tinkling bells which gridled their waist. In the space of the marudam trees, a female labourer Ulatti sent her baby to sleep on a sheet of leather; there were mango trees from whose branches drums were seen hanging. Under the coconut palms in little hollows on the ground, tiny headed bitches were found lying quiet after pupping. The red crested cocks crowed before the dawn calling the brawny pulayar to their days’ work; and by day under the shade of the kanchi trees spread the voice of the wavy haired pulaiya women singing as they were husking paddy. By the side of the tanks full of warbling birds, the music of many instruments accompanied the drumming of pulaya women who wore on their heads fragrant flowers and ears of paddy corn and who staggered in their dance as the result of increasing intoxication.
In this abode of the people of the lowest caste (Kadainar) there arose a man with a feeling of true devotion to the feet of Siva.

In the fields of the rich, all the agricultural operations such as ploughing, sowing, transplanting, the seedling, watering, manuring, weeding, scaring away the menacing birds, harvesting, threshing, tending the cattle etc were done by the serfs of Adanur. The ideology of caste and karma made the slave communities to endure all hardships patiently. Nandanar was taught by religion that it was the will of the gods that he should be an untouchable and a purattondan; the doctrine of karma whispered into his ears that it was his past misdeeds that had made him suffer all the ignominy that attended an untouchable and that only death would bring him redemption. At last Nandanar in his quest to see Lord Siva at Chidambaram achieved his missions by a fire bath. Puranas served as vehicles to carry the sastric ideas even to the lowest of the low in the Hindu society. By the story of Nandanar the idea that only those who could attain the status of a Brahman was entitled to receive the blessings of God was emphasised. Nandanar is depicted as one coming out of the fire in the form of a Brahman.

With the fall of the great Cholas, Tamil Nadu experienced political chaos for a long time. The later Pandyas who replaced Cholas as an imperial power held their sway only for a short period (1219-1311). The Madurai Sultanate that replaced Pandya supremacy in 1311 was overthrown in 1368 by Kumarakampanna, the Southern Viceroy of the Vijayanagar empire. There was political stability and
economic progress during the time when Tamilnadu was under Vijayanagar emperors. But with the fall of the empire at Talakotta in 1565, once again confusion and chaos prevailed in the Tamil Country. Among the Nayakdoms of Gingee, Tanjore and Madurai only the last could prolong its life till 1736. Tanjore under Marathas was often under attack from different directions and suffered great loss.

Political changes of this troubled age brought with them far reaching economic and social changes. It was during this period Europeans penetrated into India. Europeans concentrated on trade and religious conversion. Both these phenomena had their impact in shaping the future course of events in Tamil Nadu.

One important result of the rule of Vijayanagar empire was that the hitherto neglected dry plains in Tamilnadu assumed importance. As Susan Bayly states, most of the territories outside the favoured deltas and river valleys remained an unsettled world inhabited largely by martial predators, forest and hill dwelling hunter-gatherers and predatory cattle keeping plainsmen such as the Kallars, Maravars and Akamudaiyas of the Southern Tamil Country. The Vadugas or northerners - mostly Telugu speakers from the southern reaches of the Deccan transformed the political organization of South India and greatly enhanced the power and importance of the dry zone warrior groups. By the early 17th century these new comers who were known as Nayakas had consolidated dynamic new states around Madurai, Trichy, Tanjore and the other old wet-zone dynastic centres. Nayaka rule brought
about a much greater degree of contact between the settled people of the rice belt and the unsettled incomers and martial predators of the dry plains.\textsuperscript{78}

In order to finance their armies these new rulers out of necessity started a process of rapid commercialization. All these were done with the support of immigrant Telugu people and the literate men from the Valley region. They were successful in reviving the ancient textile trade by establishing specialist weaving centres populated by kaikolas and other local specialists and by emigrants such as the Kanada and Telugu speaking Devangas and Seniyans and the Gujarati speaking patunulkaran silk weavers from Saurashtra.\textsuperscript{79}

The dry zone was converted into a valuable crop producing area. This was made possible by the immigrants from beyond the northern borders of Tamilnadu. In addition to the great bands of soldiers and military retainers who had followed from the Andhra plains and the Deccan, the nayaks brought in specialist agricultural groups to expand the frontier of cultivation in the Tamil country. The Nadars with their skill in digging wells converted the red soil area into blooming gardens. The Kammas and Reddis concentrated on the rich but difficult black soil. Within a short period, luxuriant crops of cotton and tobacco as well as chillies and coriander were produced in abundance.\textsuperscript{80}

The next step was to establish a cultural link with the valley region. South Indian religious landscape changed very rapidly in the later 17th and 18th centuries. Brahmans emigrated in large numbers to the new court centres and there was a great
proliferation of temples in both wet and dry south. As a result the poligar country’s crude plain dwellers would naturally wish to embrace the scriptural ‘high’ Hinduism of the river valleys once they acquired the necessary power and resources. One of the inscriptions of king Tirumala records the establishment of hundred villages for the Brahmans - both Vaishnava and others and apportionment of shares of land for their living.

Sethupathis of Ramanad and Tondaimans of Pudukkottai were great patrons of Brahmans and temples. Even the most ferocious of the region’s lesser poligars sought to become pious patrons. These rulers did not disturb the traditional social order. In the Nayak kingdom the Brahman enjoyed special privileges and was highly venerated... Generally Nayaks were very conservative in social policy. The caste system was considered sacrosanct and there were occasions of royal interference to check breaches of its rule. The lower classes were further marginalized in society. In the newly sanskritized ‘little kingdoms’ the treatment meted out to the pariyas and pallas was gruesome. Kilavan Sethupathi of Ramanad is supposed to have sacrificed two Paraiahs on the occasion of the dedication of his renovated fortress at Thirumeiyam situated on the northern limits of his kingdom.

Sethupathis gave quite a large number of land grants to Brahmans. In all these grants ‘pallu’ and ‘parai’ are included as inseparable objects of lands or villages to which Brahmans were given all rights of ownership. Robert Caldwell beautifully describes the nature of these little kingdoms as follows:
Their reigns record little more than disgraceful catalogue of debaucheries, treacheries, plunderings, oppressions, murders and civil commotions relieved only by the facitious splendour of gifts to temples, idols and priests by means of which they apparently succeeded in getting the Brahmans and poets to speak well of them and thus in keeping the mass of the people under their rule.\textsuperscript{86}

The changed political and economic conditions in Tamilnadu during the 17th and 18th centuries did bring about some changes in the lives of the lower strata of society. David Washbrook believes that pallas and parayas were better off during this period. The reasons attributed to such a change in the economic life of the depressed classes are many. Since the 17th century, the expansion of the textile industry had drawn in labour from the lower levels of the agrarian economy.\textsuperscript{87} East India company could process huge quantity of coarse cloths at lower returns with the help of Paraiah weavers. Lower caste men in dry areas became proprietors of lands and in the wetzones many of them were accepted as tenants due to scarcity of labour. Wars and natural calamities of this period took a heavy toll of human lives. Hyder Ali's invasion of Tanjore and Tondaimandalam caused heavy destructions to life and property. It is believed that HyderAli carried thousands of slaves with him. Agricultural operation in several villages came to a standstill. These factors might have helped agricultural labourers to acquire some bargaining power as well as mobility.

Again the Company's Madras Army recruited an exceptionally large number of members of the Paraiah castes. Pallas and Parayas could also find opportunities
as unskilled labourers in industries during this period. Washbrook calls the late 18th Century as the Golden Age of the Paraiah. This is an exaggerated statement. While some among the low caste men found opportunities to elevate their position economically for a vast majority of them, life was wretched. Socially everyone was carrying the stigma of pollution.

Since the coming of the Europeans lower castes were enjoying some occupational mobility. They were trying to elevate their social position by becoming christians in large numbers. Frequent famines took a heavy toll of life in the 17th and 18th centuries creating labour scarcity. These new factors threatened the feudal order. The status quoists devised new methods to keep the feudal order in tact. The pallu literature of this period reflects the social ethos of this period.

Pallu is one of the ninety six Prabandha categories of poetry. Palluppattu as a literary form had its origin in the second half of the 17th Century. There is no unanimity among scholars with regard to the actual number of Pallus. The number varies from 54 to 96 according to works on prosody. There is a saying that one can count paddy but not pallu. However, Mukkudal pallu (1670) Thiruvarur Pallu (1650) Mannar Mohanappallu (1680) Kurugur Pallu (1700) Vadagarai Pallu (1723) Thirumalai Murugan pallu (1730) Sirkalipallu (1745) and Vaiyapuri pallu (1770) are important among them. From these works an idea about the then existing feudal order and the life of the agricultural labourers could be obtained.

The age subsequent to the fall of the Chola empire did not produce any work
of epic proportions. Absence of an all embracing empire and the emergence of little kingdoms was the characteristic of this age. Dr. Kesavan feels that incessant wars among the feudal chieftains of this period resulting in economic stagnation was the reason for such a state of affairs. 91 This period is known for the production of literature of a different genre which confines its interest to minor theme and specific localities.

The common characteristic of the pallu works is that they revolve on a uniform theme. Major portions of each pallu are devoted to eulogizing the hero of the work. Either these heroes are gods or landlords. The pallan called ‘kudumban’ has two wives, one of them a devotee of Lord Siva and the other a vaishnavite. Initially both of them are described as quarrelling over the superiority of their gods. Finally they come to a compromise and accept that both are one, though different in form.

Dr. Kesavan thinks that pallu literature has a purpose. Through the medium of pallupattu the feudal order intended to achieve the following things.

An attempt to establish unity between Saivism and Vaishnavism was made. Likewise efforts were made to integrate the little Tradition with the Great Tradition. By a united Hindu religious front it was felt that Christianity could be effectively confronted. 92

By giving the pallas a literary status, it was hoped that pallas would remain within the feudal system as loyal servants.
From the pallu works we know that pallas were serfs working for the land lords. There was a leader to each group of pallas. He was known as kudumban. Pallas were given a share of the produce known as kudi swatantiram. Pannai visarippan (estate supervisor) usually punished the negligent pallas. Whipping, caning and beating with basket were the common punishments meted out to the pallas. 93 Women of the palla caste seem to have been sexually exploited by the land lords. There is no reference about the quantity of palla's share. Beyond a subsistence allowance agricultural workers did not receive anything more. With the passage of time more and more restrictions were imposed on the downtrodden.

As J. Pandian suggests, social hardships imposed on untouchable labourers were intended to identify them as there was little or no physically distinguishable differences between various groups. 94 Thus rules were framed to segregate them in villages. They were not allowed to dress like the high caste people. In some places women were not allowed to wear anything above their waist. 95

The above account makes it clear that class and caste difference were already there in the Sangam Period. Brahmanic ideology of caste helped the rich power wielding high caste peasants to keep the lower castes under effective control. The institution of slavery got strengthened in the Medieval period. The English found this socio-economic order conducive to further their own interests. Hence exploitation of the slave communities continued under the British government.
### Notes and References

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
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