CHAPTER 3

COLONIAL GOVERNMENT’S ATTITUDE TO SLAVERY
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East India company being a commercial establishment was interested in enhancing its profits through trade and commerce in the early parts of its career. Acquisition of political power was not in its agenda. Madras, which Francis Day obtained from the Governor of Chandragiri Daumala Venkata in 1639 was its first territorial acquisition. Though a fort (with an army to protect it) was erected there in 1641, it was only intended to be a commercial head quarters. However, chaotic political conditions of the day forced English to involve themselves in the struggle of native princes for supremacy. In the Carnatic wars the English supported Mohammed Ali. With the help of the English, Mohammed Ali sat on his throne safely as Nawab of Carnatic. As a mark of gratitude, he granted to them in 1763 the territory around Madras as a Jaghir. As English armies continued to win victories even against powerful potentates like Hyder and Tipu of Mysore new territories were added to the British Empire. At the end of the third Mysore war in 1792, the English got Salem and Dindigul. Coimbatore was added to the company’s territory in 1799 after the close of the Fourth Mysore war. In the same year sovereign rights over Tanjore was acquired by the English. Then in 1801, the Nawab of Carnatic was forced to cede them the districts of North Arcot, South Arcot, Trichinopoly, Madura and Tinnevelly. In the southern districts of Tamilnadu the English faced stiff resistance.
from the poligars. By effectively suppressing them, the English established themselves as political masters of the whole of Tamilnadu by the turn of the Nineteenth century. Thus traders were transformed suddenly into administrators.

As administrators, the English were confronted with several problems. Wars and invasions had left the economy of the state in bad shape. Money was urgently needed not only to run the administration but also to meet war expenses. Land revenue being the chief source of Government income, Madras Government gave top priority to effect revenue settlements in all districts. Inadequate knowledge about pre-colonial regulations, conflicting claims put forward by villagers on ownership rights on lands and destruction caused by invasion of Hyder Ali rendered the task of implementing a revenue policy difficult for the English officials. From 1763 onwards several experiments were made by the Madras Government to put into practice a satisfactory land revenue system. Finally, three tenural systems came into operation.

Zamindari:

Under Muslim rule, there were chieftains who were recognised by custom or law to claim a share of the produce from the cultivators of the area under their control. The supreme Government was entitled to collect revenue from them. Again Zamindaries were created for the purpose of tax collection. The English administrators confirmed those who were already Zamindars in their own right and created a few new ones in 1802. Under Zamindari regulations, Zamindari system
came in to operation in places where polygari system prevailed. The land of each poligar was converted into an estate and the poligar was made Zamindar of the estate. Not all the erstwhile poligars were made Zamindars. Poligars who were hostile to the English lost their palayams. Even among the friendly poligars only those who were able to command respect were made Zamindars. \(^1\) In regions like Chingleput, the administrators carved out mittas or small estates and sold them to highest bidders between 1802 and 1805. \(^2\) In each of the three districts of North Arcot, Salem and Madura, there were well over a million acres under Zamindari. In Tirunevelly too, the Zamindars held large areas of land and all the other Tamil districts excluding Nilgiris had some Zamindari lands. \(^3\) By this system, the Zamindars were declared as proprietors of lands, both waste and arable, within their estates and the land revenue was fixed in perpetuity. \(^4\)

**The Inamdhari System:**

Inam in Persian means gift. Inamdar is a person receiving a gift usually of land from rulers or villagers. These land grants were made to individuals or institutions during medieval times. \(^5\) These were granted either for life or in perpetuity. Although Inams carried ownership rights, their main feature was alienation of land revenue. In majority of the cases, Inamdhars were owners of small pieces of lands. But institutions like temples and mutts were exceptions to this practice. They were in possession of bigger estates. For examples, the Theageswar temple of Thiruvarur was owning lands to the extent of six thousand acres. The
Thiruvaduthurai Mutt at Tanjore owned 25000 acres of land in Tinnevelly district, one hundred acres in Madurai district and 3000 acres in Tanjore proper. Similarly the Dharmapuram Mutt and Thirupananthal Mutt were owners of vast areas of land. The lands of these institutions were cultivated by village tenants with the help of the serfs. Inamdhars usually collected full revenue from the cultivators but paid land revenue at a favourable rate to the Government.

**Ryotwari:**

Having found Zamindari and village lease systems defective in many ways, the court of Directors under Munro’s influence decided in 1817 in favour of introducing Ryotwari system wherever practicable. Since 1820, when Munro became Governor of Madras, Ryotwari system was extended all over Tamilnadu. But there was a problem in implementing this system universally. Under Ryotwari scheme, individual ryot was recognised as the proprietor of land and he was expected to pay tax directly to the Government. English officials in their survey found out that in many villages lands were held in common. In Chingleput district this joint village tenure was known as Mirasi system. This system according to tradition had its origin during the rule of Adondai Chakravarthi. It was called as "Kaniyatchi" in Tamil. Subsequently during the Muslim rule, the persian term Mirasi gained currency. Dharma Kumar thinks that Mirasi system underwent several changes during the course of its long history. Accordingly, in the initial stages the form of land tenure being in practice was known as ‘pasankarei’ or ‘samudhayam’. Under this system
lands were not only cultivated but also held jointly. Co-sharers divided the produce on the threshing floor in proportion to their shares. Government revenue otherwise called Melwaram was paid jointly. The second type of joint ownership was called by the term Kareiyedu. Under this system, lands were temporarily cultivated in separate shares by co-sharers being subject to periodical redistribution so as to give good and bad lands to each one in turn. Each shareholder had his share of slaves to work on his plot of land. The third form of communal ownership was known as Arudikarei. Under this system lands came to be held separately and in perpetuity.

Under the joint ownership, landholdings continued to be expressed in terms of ‘shares’ and shareholders had certain rights in common; they had claims on village waste lands and they sometimes claimed pre-emption rights. In the Mirasi villages there were permanent tenants known as "ulkudis". Sometimes men from outside villages were employed as tenants for temporary periods. Such tenants were known as ‘purakudis’. Mirasi villages were self-contained little republics. Service communities and servile communities were inseparable entities of these villages. Economic and social positions were determined by the rank awarded to each caste in the social hierarchy. Joint villages are reported to have existed in several districts in Tamilnadu. Sometimes all lands in a village belonged to a single individual. Such village was called as ‘Ekabhoga’ or ‘Ejamana Grama’.

The British administration imposed the Ryotwari system over the existing Mirasi system with slight modification. As far as Chingleput district was concerned,
certain features of Mirasi tenure were accommodated. Accordingly available land was divided into shares in proportion to the shares already held under the Mirasi system and each mirasidhar then became a ryot, holding a patta for those lands. Mirasidhars were given certain concessions. A certain area of waste was left out unassessed. The Mirasidhar had the right to receive ‘Swatantram’ from non-Mirasi Cultivators.  

By ryotwari system the colonial authorities wanted to create a vast mass of small landholders directly in touch with the Government. However in practice, big landholders also came under this system. Thus in the district of Tanjore there were ryots worth 6000 acres of land as well as petty land holders owning $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres or even less. From reports of district Collectors it is known that there were big landlords employing 400 to 500 slaves to work on their lands.  The ryotwari right holder was recognised as a tenant of the state, enjoying a tenant right which can be inherited, sold or burdened for debt in precisely the same manner as proprietary right, subject always to payment of revenue due to the state. 

Colonial Government’s Pro-master Policy

In introducing revenue reforms, colonial administrators were not worried about injecting egalitarian ideas in Indian society. They were interested only in collecting more revenue. Ameliorating the conditions of the labouring classes, therefore, did not form a part of revenue policy. In fact early colonial officials were keen on preserving the traditional social order in which landless labourers were in a
state of bondage. Any attempt to disturb this order was considered to be against the interests of East India Company. Hence colonial Government was always ready to render a helping hand to the landowners whenever they had a score to settle with the labourers.

Like the other European powers, the English also were engaging themselves in slave trade for some time. Early company officials had no feelings of moral guilt in sustaining the institution of slavery. Records of the company at Madras provide sufficient evidences on the attitude of company officials towards slavery. On January 5th, 1641 an English boat named Michael arrived at Bantam with fourteen slaves from the coast of Malabar. By an agreement between the agent of Fort St. George and the Portuguese Governor of nearby San Thome, it was recognised that the master had the right to secure possession of the slave who had fled from him. Slave was considered as a part of his master's property. Slaves were licensed and registered at Madras. The company itself purchased slaves to work as boatmen. Slave trade in spite of stringent laws since 1682 continued to be in practice till 1790. Slaves were also clandestinely exported to the islands of Jawa and Sumatra from Tamilnadu in the 17th and 18th Centuries. In the year 1798, the 'Bombay Government commenced a plantation at Anjaracandy (North Malabar) with a view to raising pepper, coffee, cinnamon, and other articles on account of the company and they appointed Mr. Brown overseer of the plantation at a certain salary'.

Mr. Brown was developing the plantation with the help of pulaya slaves
purchased by him from Travancore and Mahe. It was found out that he was purchasing boys of non-slave castes also from his agents who on their part indulged in kidnapping them to be sold for a high price. He was doing this business with the blessings of the Bombay Government under whose jurisdiction Malabar was placed at that time. An order from the commissioner of Malabar dated 20th October, 1798 to the Company’s assistant at Choughaut directing him to grant necessary legal aid to the darogha at that place, in transferring any number of those persons required by Brown to the company’s plantation, provided it be done agreeably to the known laws and customs of Malabar relating to them. Under this questionable policy a large number of these unfortunate persons were placed upon the company’s plantation in the years between 1799 and 1800.  

18 Mr. Brown continued to employ slave labour in the plantation. Only after 1811 when Malabar was brought under the control of Madras Government steps were taken to check the obnoxious activities of Mr. Brown.  

19 Revenue conscious English administrators were careful in maintaining the caste hierarchy in which the agrestic serfs were placed on the lowest level. Without the labour of the pariah slaves, ‘no inhabitant could carry on cultivation but with great impediment and loss’. Hence the question of liberating them into a free people did not bother the English. In fact they always supported the claims of landholders whenever representation was made regarding the restoration of runaway slaves.

When, the military department asked Mr. John Clerk, the Collector of Northern District of Jaghir in 1971 to procure some house keepers and grass cutters for the...
company's cavalry, he impressed several Pariahs for this service. But these men were found not only unwilling to serve in the cavalry camp but also threatening to stop agricultural operations at the instigation of landowners who were not willing to lose the services of their workers. Clerk had to yield to pressure because if the threat by the serfs were carried out the English would lose their revenue. 20

In 1800, the question whether the slaves could assert their freedom by running away from their master or they should be restored to their former masters as their property came before the Board of Revenue. Petitions by the master as well as slaves were submitted to the Board of Revenue urging justice. One Venkatachala Mudaliar holding lands in Errocoonum and Ullapollum complained that one of his slaves, who and whose family had served him and his ancestors for four generations as agricultural labour withdrew himself and entered as cook into the service of Europeans, seducing other members of his family to follow his example. On representation, Mr. Place the Collector caused the Paraiahs to be seized and placed in the custody of the poligars of Trivatore till the head Paraiahs of Madras decided on the question of freedom or otherwise of run away slaves. The head Paraiahs after looking into the documents submitted by the Mudaliar ordered the runaway slaves to work under their master as slaves in perpetuity. This happened in 1796. The said agreement reads as follows.

"As our ancestors were slaves of Venkatachala Mudaliar and from that time to this being three generations and we being the descendants of those generations now living, confess ourselves all to be slaves to him the aforesaid Venkatachala Mudaliar. But whilst performing our slavery

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duties to him, we have disputed and stayed away, which we acknowledge
to be a great fault and you being heads of our caste, correcting us and
requiring us to do our duty we bind ourselves and our descendants as
slaves to perform our duty accordingly"  

The arbitrators came to know that a lady by name Taunee, the ancestor of the
run away slaves, had executed a bond of slavery to Venkatachalam Mudaliar binding
herself and her descendants as slaves in perpetuity four generations ago. The
arbitrators, therefore, ordered the recusant labourers to return to their master in view
of this bond. The slaves were ordered to perform their duties of slavery to
Venkatachalam from generation to generation" as long as the sun and moon shall
endure" The slaves again absconded.

In the petition submitted by the slaves named Ponnappan and Venkatesan, who
were descenents of Taunee, it was alleged that Venkatachalam illtreated them
which they could no longer endure and therefore they complained, to Mr. Lewis,
then "Justice of Peace." Mr. Lewis forbade Venkatachalam from claiming them as
his slaves. But Venkatachalam using his influences captured them and brought them
to Trivatore in fetters and referred the question to the head Paraiahs at Madras. They
decided the case in favour of the master. The native revenue officer acting under the
orders of the Board of Revenue who stated that the petition of the slaves was
groundless and urged the Board of Revenue to compel them to return "according to
the practice of slavery". The Board of Revenue acted on the basis of this report. In
this case Taunee came under the category of one ‘self sold’ and Slaves of this type
were under hereditary and perpetual bondage.  

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Trichinopoly Collectorate records reveal that in 1803 when there was a proposal to recruit pallas as policemen according to the new regulation, there was stiff opposition from all quarters. The Collector of the district was quite unhappy with the idea of pallas being inducted into the police force. In one of his letters sent to the Madras Government dated 25-6-1807 he suggested that a clause be inserted in the regulation, "Vesting the Collectors as superintendents of police, authority to compel the attendance of the Pallas (slaves of the soil) in the usual manner to the business of cultivation and maramut". District officials knew that cultivation would be seriously hampered if pallas and Paraiahs were allowed to move away from their servile status.

Madras Government takes note of the Problem of Agrestic Servitude

However, the problem of agrestic servitude was brought to the limelight in India chiefly due to the activities of Anti Slavery Movement picking up momentum since 1787 in England. Its first victory was gained in 1807 when slave trade was abolished in the British empire. In England evangelicals like Charles Grant and radicals like James Mill influenced the Directors to inject humanitarian ideas into the administration of India. Humanitarianism as a philosophy expounded by Bentham had its supporters in Howard, Wilber force, Pitt and Grey. In India men like Bentinck, Baber, Cotton and C.M. Lushington were enthusiastic supporters of the humanitarian philosophy. Abolition of slavery was the most important programme in their agenda.
The third Judge on circuit in a letter observed that in Malabar the practice of
distraining and selling slaves of the revenue defaulters was in vogue. This was
brought to the notice of the Madras Government by the Faujdari Adalat. This
Communication forced the Government to take a serious note of the problem. The
Faujdari Adalat’s communication dated 28th June 1819 brought to the notice of the
Governor in council "the observations submitted by the Third Judge on a subject so
intimately connected with the welfare of a large portion of the subjects of the state
and so nearly allied to the highest interests of humanity." The Board of Revenue
immediately swung into action and sent an order to Collectors of all the districts in
Tamilnadu to send a full report on the subject of slavery. The order reads as follows.

"The Right Honourable the Governor in council desired that having
made without delay such enquiry as you may judge require for the
purpose, you will submit a full report respecting the facts and circum­
stances connected with the subject and at the same time state your
opinion whether the practice which actually prevails in this respect
should be permitted to continue as at present or whether it ought either
to be laid under such restrictions as in your judgment would render it
unobjectionable or to be altogether abolished as productive of evils for
which no adequate remedy can be devised."

A minute of the Board of Revenue dated January 1818 speaks of the inferior
labourers in South India. It states that in Tamilnadu land, in most cases, was owned
by the community and as such slaves were attached to the soil rather than individuals
and were seldom sold or mortgaged, except along with the land to which they were
attached. The minute, quoted Mr. F.W. Ellis, to prove that sometimes slaves claimed
Miras or hereditary private property in the "incidents of their villainage" and it is generally allowed to them and their descendants on proving their former residence in the village, however long they may have been absent from it. The minute went on to state that in the Tamil country the slaves were better than their counterparts in Malabar because they were attached to the soil where they were born and they were depending on a community than an individual. Moreover as per the Minute the fact that the spirit of the British Government was inimical to bondage, made the masters in Tamilnadu to be less harsh towards the slaves. The Board of Revenue was not for the continuance of slavery even if it was prevailing in a mild form. The minute of the Board of Revenue expressed the sentiments of the members as follows:

... and when we reflect on those evils that are inseparable from even the mildest state of slavery and consider how large a portion of our most industrious subjects are at present totally deprived of a free market for their labour restricted by inheritance to a mere subsistence and sold and transferred with the land which they till, policy no less than humanity would appear to dictate the propriety of gradually relieving them from these restrictions, which have reduced them and must otherwise continue to confirm them to a condition scarcely superior to that of the cattle they follow at the plough.

The report of the district Collectors on the subject form part of the proceedings of the Board of Revenue dated 25th November 1819.

The Collector of Salem, Hardgave, reported. "I can safely state in the manner referred to in these communications, there is no vestige of whatever of slavery in this Collectorate, nor has any such practice obtained from the time the country came
into possession of the Honourable company". 32 He further stated that in the previous regime there existed a few slaves belonging to certain Nanjah lands in the vicinity of the Cauvery and now their descendants were as free as any other inhabitants.”

The report of Mr. Sullivan, Collector of Coimbatore contained informations of a conflicting nature. He stated that slavery existed in a few villages. He added that the master could sell his slave even without land. The highest price of a good slave was Rupees fifty. But a detached slave was rare. The master according to Mr. Sullivan’s report was vested with despotic powers over his slaves. He had also a power over the property of the slave, might make use of the cattle reared by the slave for agricultural purposes. He concluded his report by saying that there was reason to believe that slaves on the whole were better treated by their masters than the common class of free labourers. Slaves were given 1/8 of the produce for their subsistence. Sometimes they were allowed to cultivate for their support 33 Mr. Sullivan seems to have been under the impression that it was only the presence of the British Government that made the institution of slavery acquire a humanitarian tinge.

The Collector of Tanjore Mr. Hepburn in his report stated that in Tanjore slavery existed to a certain degree. In Tanjore slaves were attached with land and slavery was founded upon a voluntary contract between the parties. He stated that the pallas and Paraiahs were the only two slave castes in Tanjore. Brahmans generally got the bonds drawn out in the name of their Sudra dependents. Once a bond of slavery was given by a man, it did not cease with his life but bound all his
descendants also. Slaves lived in a separate place where each member was provided a house to which a backyard of eighty 'goontals' of rent free land was attached. The master had the power to sell his slaves but could not sell him to anyone who would carry him to a distant part of the country without his own consent. In case the master through poverty became unable to subsist and protect his bondsman and his family the slave was at liberty to seek employment elsewhere but had to return to his master when he was in a condition to fulfill his part of the agreement. He stated that no one was sold for arrears of revenue and the slaves in Tanjore were treated by their masters mildly. Slaves according to Mr. Hepburn were provided by their masters even during times of difficulty.

Mr. Lushington, the Collector of Trichinopoly reported that there were 10,600 palla slaves in his district. They were chiefly connected with paddy cultivation. The quantity of land to be cultivated by a slave was an extent capable of yielding 150 kalam of paddy. Besides doing work connected with agriculture, they were engaged in erecting a wall or pandal for which they did not receive any additional emoluments. They were usually sold with land. However female Pallas were occasionally mortgaged. They were entirely supported by their masters in sickness and in health. On festival occasions, the masters gave their slaves small presents.

On enquiry Mr. Lushington came to know that the pallas if illtreated used to prefer other masters. He adds, "The right of the pallas is so distinctly defined by custom and the interest of the Mirasidars so substantially affected by the good
conduct and health of the palla, that it is hardly possible to suppose the Mirasidars would be so blind to their own interests, as to cause their pallas to abscond, or by harsh treatment reduce them to sickness. In contrast to slaves in Malabar, "where human form has even changed its wonted appearance and that the slaves are distinguished by their diminutiveness" Lushington remarked that "there is no class of people so athletic or tall in stature as the Pallas".

Mr. Cotton, Collector of Tinnevelly stated that slavery existed there and slaves were sold either with land or separately 'as the proprietor pleases or his wants require'. There was no rule or custom to regulate the relation between the master and his slave. The master commanded the slaves’ labour at all times. The masters provided them with a subsistence only when they were employed on their business and at other times their slaves were obliged to seek employment elsewhere. But they were bound to return to their masters when agricultural season again commenced. Besides two measures of paddy a day, slaves were entitled to get a share from the gross produce during harvest. This was called as 'paroo' which generally amounted to $2\frac{3}{8}$%. The Collector stated that there was no case of ill treatment of slaves because 'proprietors find it their interest to protect and treat them well'.

According to Mr. Cooke, the Collector of Chingleput district, Paraiahs were adimai or slaves. They were held by Vellalas, Reddys and Commavas and other sudras and they were in a state of villenage. They became slaves by selling themselves for money or some other consideration. They not only bound themselves
but also their posterity for ever. Their purchasers had the power either to re sell, mortgage or gift them. Slaves here were not attached to the soil. Owners of slaves had the right to compel them to do any work. The master had no right over the children of his slave if he married a slave of another proprietor. The condition of slaves in Chingleput district was not bad. Every slave and the members of his family were provided with subsistence allowances, were housed and clothed and during festivals they were presented with small gifts. 41

The Collector of South Arcot Mr. Hyde reported that pallas and Paraiah constitut ed the slave castes in his district and they numbered over 17,000. These agricultural labourers were looked upon as ‘natural slaves’, the property of any person who contributed to defray their marriage expenses. Hence slaves could not “contract marriage without their owners’ consent, who as they defray the expense, virtually revive the contract of hereditary bondage, the offsprings are always regarded as the property of the father’s owner” 42 Slaves here were not attached to the soil and could be sold to anyone and to an alien village. The Collector stated that food provided was sufficient for subsistence but the clothing was scanty. Mr. Hyde adds: “although the state of servitude is ever repugnant to nature and humanity, yet I do not hesitate to express my opinion, that the state of bondage, as it prevails in India, is free from many objections that exist against the West Indian Slavery.” 43

Mr. Hutt, the acting Collector of North Arcot reported that slavery in his district was not extensive. Only 688 slaves existed in North Arcot as per his report. Slaves
of this district did not belong to any particular caste but were persons who exchanged liberty for subsistence. Children of slaves were also slaves but ownership of them varied from place to place. In some places these belonged to the owner of their father and some other places mother's owners. Here the condition of slaves was pathetic. Master exercised unlimited powers over them. The food provided to them was 'raggi', their clothing was a common 'cumly'. Their aspect is wretched.  

Mr. Peter, Collector in Madura and Dindigul stated that the 'custom of slavery was less common than in the adjoining Zillahs'. Here when a pallar or a Pariah was unable to gain a livelihood offered himself or his relatives as slaves to the cultivating inhabitants for a sum of money, varying from one to ten cully chuckrams when a bond of slavery was drawn and signed. Slaves were not sold with land. The Collector reported that slavery was on the wane since the Company's assumption of the country and some pallars even cultivated their own lands.

When the Board of Revenue ordered the Collectors to enquire into the conditions of slavery, its intention was to bring out a legislation to effect some amelioration on the condition of slaves. But the Board felt that the reports of the Collectors were not adequate for the purpose. Majority of the reports agreed that slavery existed in Tamilnadu and that it was in a mild form. The Cambridge Economic History of India also alludes to a milder form of slavery in Tamilnadu.

But in Travancore slavery in its abominable, form was in practice. Slaves there were absolutely the properties of their masters. As such the master had full rights
to dispose of slaves as he liked. Buchanan speaks of three modes of transferring the usufruct of slaves. The first was Jennum or sale where the full value was given and the property was entirely transferred to a new master, who since that time, was bound to look after the slaves in the same manner as done by the former master. The second method was by Canum or mortgage. The procedure of Canum was that the proprietor would get two thirds of the value of the slaves, besides he was entitled to get a small quantity of rice yearly as a token of continuance of his partial claim over the slaves. He could reclaim and recover the slaves on repayment of money borrowed for which he was not liable to pay any interest. If a slave died while he was in the custody of the new master, he was responsible for returning a slave of equal value. The money lender remained satisfied with the labour of the slave which was regarded as a compensation for the interest of his money as well as the slaves' feeding cost. The third way of employing slaves was letting them for Pattam or rent. In this case for a prescribed sum the master gave the slaves to another man and the borrower commanded their labour and provided them with maintenance. The annual hire was 8 panams Rs 1\frac{1}{7} for man and 4 for a woman.

Slave castes were put to humiliating treatment. "Their name is connected with everything revolting, shunned as if inflicted with plague: the higher classes view their presence with a mixture of alarm and indignation and even towns and markets would be considered as defiled by their approach." If any slave happened to come near a Nair the latter would strike him immediately. If the Nair failed to punish
him and news came to the notice of the king, the Nair was put to death.\textsuperscript{50} Value of slaves was calculated in terms of certain domestic animals. Hamilton speaking about slaves states, "They are generally but not always sold with land, two slaves being reckoned equal to four buffaloes, they are also let out and pledged.\textsuperscript{51} Slaves in Tamilnadu were definitely better than their counterparts in Travancore. Yet their condition was not as good as was described by the officials of the British Government. All the Collectors in their reports abhorred slavery. At the same time they felt that slavery in Tamilnadu was a necessary evil and any attempt to disturb it all of a sudden would result in economic disorder and social disharmony.

The reports of the Collectors suffered from many defects and contradictions. First of all, those reports were hastily prepared documents. Some of the Collectors were not sincere in gathering facts. They simply delegated their work to their subordinates, many of whom being prejudicial to the lower castes and slave owners, themselves, preferred not to incorporate unpalatable facts about slaves in their reports. To quote B. Hejijle, "It is obvious that the Collectors had made no personal inquiries among the labour castes but had passed on the questions to the Indian subordinates. A great many of these were slave owners themselves and had no desire to provide their British master with any reliable information on a question as thorny as this. None of the Collectors had received any complaints from slaves or heard any case before the courts."\textsuperscript{52}

\textit{Some of the reports of the Collectors contained glaring factual errors. To cite}
an example the report of the Collector of North Arcot stated that the total number of slaves in that district was only 688. But the fact was however, different from the statement of the Collector. Dr. Buchanan who visited North Arcot in 1800 found that in the lands of many Brahmans who were employed in the Company’s services, slaves were employed for cultivation. Contrary to the reports that the number of slaves were meagre in number in Madura, census of 1841 showed that slave communities constituted 16% of the total population. In Tinnevelly as per the census report of 1821-22, the number of slaves formed 16% of the total population. Again the figure given by the Collector of Trichinopoly was contrary to the fact, for as per the census by 1830, the pallas and Paraiyahs constituted 20.8% of the total population. In Salem also the slave population in the year 1830 was 12.8%. With regard to Tanjore District the Collector’s report of 1819 was contradicted by the select committee report by 1831-32. According to this report the slave population in the district was very numerous. Dharmakumar has ably proved with the help of census figures that serfs constituted a sizeable proportion of the total population of many of the districts in Tamilnadu in the beginning of 19th Century.

In matters related to the condition and treatment meted out to the slaves, the datas provided by the reports of Collectors do not again tally with facts derived from other sources which are more reliable than the former. Abbe Dubios, a catholic missionary lived in India for 31 years (1792-1823). His accounts about the condition of slave castes amidst whom he lived for many years are highly authentic. He states that the slaves formed 1/7 of the total population of the Madras presidency. Speaking
about the slave castes Abbe Dubios says, "the Pariahs are looked upon as slaves by other castes and are treated with harshness. Hardly anywhere are they allowed to cultivate the soil for their own benefit, but are obliged to hire themselves to the other castes, who in turn for a minimum wage exact the hardest task from them. Furthermore their masters may beat them at pleasure, the poor wretches having no right either to complain or to obtain redress for that or any other illtreatment their master may impose on them. In fact these pariahs are the born slaves of India and had I to choose between the two sad fates of being a slave in one of our colonies or a pariah here I should unhesitatingly prefer the former". The missionary further states, "They live in hopeless poverty and the greater number lacks sufficient means to procure even the coarsest clothing. They go about almost naked. They live from hand to mouth for the whole year round." In a few districts they were allowed to cultivate the soil on their own account but in such cases they are almost always the poorest of that class. Pariahs were forbidden to cross a street where Brahmans were living. A Paraiah who had the audacity to enter a Brahman’s house might possibly be murdered on the spot. A great many of these unfortunate people bind themselves for life with their wives and children to the ryots or agricultural classes who set them to the hardest labour and treat them with greatest harshness.

On the condition of agricultural labourers in Dharapuram, Dr. Buchanan writes:

"The servants employed here in agriculture are hired in the beginning of the year for twelve months. They may change their service when their term expires if they be not in their master’s debt; but as he generally advances money for their marriages and other ceremonies, they are not
at liberty to go away. They got twenty bullas of rough rice a month with four fanams and one siliga of rough rice yearly, and their master pays their house rents. The whole is about 31 bushels of rough rice of which one-half is husk, with two shillings in money besides the house-rent which will not exceed one or two shilling a year. These servants generally have one wife, who at seed time and harvest, work for the master for daily wages. A woman's daily wages are four puddies of grain worth about nine-tenths of a penny. A man gets six puddies of grain. A servant with these wages can once or twice a month procure a little animal food. Milk is too expensive. His common diet consists of some boiled grain, with a little salt and capsicum, and perhaps some pickles. His drink is the water in which grain was boiled. He has very little clothing, and that little is extremely dirty, his house is a hovel, and he is commonly overrun with vermin and cutaneous disorders”.

Reports of the Collectors uniformly denied instances of illtreatment of slaves and they attributed this to the fact that people in general were aware of the antislavery attitude adopted by British administration in Tamilnadu. But there is again evidence to prove that illtreatment of slaves was authorised by the British Government by regulation XI of 1816 by which village officers were allowed to beat the slaves with "Kuttai" (basket). Moreover, crimes committed against slaves went unreported for fear of reprisals from high castes. Even if reported there was no guarantee for penal action. As A.D. Campbell observes correctly, "the civil magistrate has no sufficient summary power to interfere for their due protection”.

The Board of Revenue after careful consideration of the reports of the Collectors expressed the view that 'an immediate interference on the part of
Government is not particularly called for and that no alteration in the existing state of slavery should be made except by degrees, and after mature and attentive consideration. However, the Board of Revenue suggested several measures for the gradual emancipation of slaves. They accordingly suggested:

- that the further purchase of free persons as slaves should be declared invalid and illegal and all children hereafter born slaves should be pronounced free; that however, any person might contract in writing to labour for a term of years or for life, such contract should be binding only upon the individual who executes it; that slaves should be held competent to possess property and to dispose of it without the master's interference; that the purchase of female children to be educated as prostitutes should be prohibited; that owners of slaves should be bound to provide wholesome food as well as clothing and not to neglect them in sickness, age or infirmity; that they should be deprived of the power of corporal punishment; that slaves illtreated by their master, should be allowed to change owners, that a breach of law should enfranchise the slave; that slaves should be allowed to purchase their liberty at the price paid for it; and that slaves attached to the lands which may escheat to the Government should be liberated.

An act incorporating the suggestions of the Board of Revenue was contemplated. But it was never passed.

The Court of Directors after having looked into these documents on slavery, advised the Madras Government through its communication dated 28th April 1824 that "you will be extremely cautious in making any regulation for defining the relations of master and slave". They further added that "it is our wish to improve the condition of the slaves to the utmost extent and we fear that in defining the power
of the masters, acts of compulsion might be legalized, which by custom are not now
tolerated and the slaves might be placed in a worse condition than before ...

The Governor in Council of Madras, on 3rd Feb. 1826 declared that the views and
opinions of the Board of Directors coincided entirely with their own. The Madras
Government's anxiety to solve the problems of slaves ended for the time being with
an expression of pious sentiments. There was reason for the English to be cautious
in enacting laws regulating social relations. Here it is not out of place to give the
opinion of Abbe J - A Dubios about the character of the Indian Society. He observes,

The force of prejudice is known to all and every one knows, also that no
people in the earth were ever such slaves to education and customs as
they are. It is well known also that the introduction of any new usages
and regulations, either religious or civil among them has at all times
baffled the utmost endeavours of all their fierce conquerors, their attach­
ment to their own institutions has always been invincible and their horror
of every novelty insurmountable.

Colonial officials recognised that forms of agrestic and domestic servitude
were widespread throughout the subcontinent but there were many reasons why they
might have been hesitant to intervene in such matters. First, there were economic
considerations. The large class of landless labourers, held in varying degrees of
economic subordination of ritual inferiority, was essential to existing systems of
agricultural production. Since servitude organised the performance of both agrestic
and domestic tasks, its interruption might threaten levels of productivity, and hence
the revenue on which the company depended. Moreover colonial administration
relied heavily on the cooperation of land holding classes who benefited from agricultural servitude and frequently regarded domestic slaves as an essential emblem of social status. Many forms of servitude seemed inextricably linked to well established ‘usages and customs’ which the British were hesitant to interrupt. While investigating the question of slavery in both ‘Hindoo’ and ‘Mohammedan’ classical texts, Colebrook found ample evidences for the recognition of slavery in both of them.

In the meantime, in line with the company’s policy of saving the South Indian society from sudden change and sparing the land revenue the "risks of instantaneous emancipation", slavery was allowed to exist. In fact the company officials helped the landlords to recover their runaway slaves. In the year 1828, the Collector of Trichinopoly wrote a letter to his counterpart in Coimbatore requesting him to send back one Mullien claimed to be a slave of Muthusami Iyer of Vetticuty. It seems that the said pallan absconded to the village of "Pullapollam" of Karur Taluk coming under his jurisdiction. Mullien was bound by a deed executed before the Tashildar of his village to work as a slave to Venkkaiyan, the grandfather of Muthusamy Iyer in 1812’. The practice of buying slaves by Vellala cultivators in the district of Madura is attested to by another source. In 1824 the Karkatha Vellalas purchased and kept praedial slaves of the Pariah caste giving 30 fanams for a male and fifty for a female. The female slave was held to be the more valuable as being likely to produce children for the benefit of her owner. Throught Tamilnadu this might have been the accepted practice. The Collector of Trichinopoly in a letter written to the
Collector of Salem in October 1830 stated that

the ten pallans mentioned in the accompanying memorandum, having absconded and concealed themselves in certain villages in your district, I have the honour to request your best exertions in seizing them and returning them to their owners. They are the slaves of the soil and as such are not at liberty to leave the estate to which they belong. The owner of the estate, a brahman quite unable to cultivate the land without their help and if he not be assisted in recovering his right over them the land may lay waste and the Government be the losers.\textsuperscript{73}

It becomes therefore clear that the British administration in Tamilnadu continued to support the system of slavery as they found it. Anti-slavery sentiments were conspicuous by their absence here. But in England the situation was different. Evangelists and Humanitarians were carrying a relentless struggle against slavery. Due to pressures exerted by Humanitarians both inside and outside parliament, the select committee which inquired into the ‘Present State of Affairs of the East India Company’ elicited informations on slavery in India from important officials connected with Indian affairs through a questionnaire containing 17 questions. Among many respondents the answers of A.D. Campbell who served most of the part of 22 years of his service in Tamilnadu were not only revealing but also informative.

Campbell stated that agricultural labourers of Pallar and Paraiah castes were in a state of bondage in Tamilnadu. Although they were entitled to remuneration for their work, it was not sufficient for them. Perhaps it was the reason that they ate the flesh of dead animals as well as snakes and reptiles. Their clothing was always scanty.
Female agrestic slaves were usually engaged in transplanting operations. Campbell stated that he found (in Tanjore) that "these women left the whole body waist upwards naked, the bosom being invariably exposed." In Tamilnadu agrestic slaves were employed by their masters in every department of husbandry, the men ploughing in land and sowing the seed and in all the laborious works necessary for the irrigation of the land upon which rice is grown; the women in transplanting the rice plants and both sexes in reaping the crop. They usually worked from sunrise to sunset with the intermission of a couple of hours for their meal during the day. Except on certain festival days they were to work all days. Forced labour was exacted from them.

Campbell reports that they were called occasionally, "by the requisition of the Collector Magistrate issued to their masters, to aid in stopping any sudden breach in the great works of irrigation conducted at the expense of Government or in dragging the enormous cars of the idols round the villages or temples to move which immense cables dragged by many thousands are necessary; in Tanjore in particular from the great number of temples and frequency of festivals this is a very onerous duty". Though it was not necessary that slaves should be transferred with land as far as Tamil country was concerned, it was the general practice. Campbell recorded that he never knew of any instances of manumission of agrestic slaves in India. Campbell’s observation about Government’s policy towards slavery is significant. He stated that there was no enactment of the British Government under the Madras presidency either to hinder or promote the manumission of slaves. He further stated
"During the 2.2 years that I resided in India or since 1808, no material changes have taken place in the condition of the slaves in the territories subject to Madras". 77 It is not surprising because the Government's policy was not to bring about changes in the lives of slaves.

Campbell further suggested that the "British policy ought to be directed, not only to the immediate practical amelioration of the East India Slavery, but its ultimate though gradual abolition". 78 He expressed the opinion that slavery would be abolished when it received energetic support from the home Government.

Bowing to popular pressure, the British parliament passed in 1833 a law abolishing slavery throughout the British expire except in India. Indian slavery did not receive any attention from the court of directors. However, when the Charter of the company came for renewal in 1833, at the instance of Grant, the Younger and Macaulay, a clause was inserted in the bill introduced for that purpose. It read as follows, "all rights over any person by reason of such person's being in a state of slavery cease". 79 The court of directors were pretty alarmed by this clause. Some of the officials were still trying to find one or other trivial cause for the continuation of slavery. They even argued that oriental slavery was different from slavery in other countries, and Indian slavery was not at all slavery. "Unlike in the plantations of Carribean it was not a simple system of immigrant gangs by whip and cane, growing cash crops for white men. Far from that it was deeply rooted in Indian society and its sanctions were largely accepted by the serfs themselves. If these institutions were
destroyed the roots of Indian society would be disturbed." Hence they tried to shelve this clause. British Parliament now passed on the responsibility to Indian Government.

In the charter Act of 1833 a provision was included requiring the Governor General in Council to "take in to consideration the means of extinguishing slavery so soon as such extinction shall be practicable and safe". Agitation against slavery was continuing in England led by Evangelists. In their attack the question of slavery in India figured most. In 1837 the Humanitarians urged the House of Commons Committee to oppose all kinds of oppressions in British territories. They even forced the British Government to extinguish slavery at once. It was this pressure in England that compelled the British Government in India to contemplate some measure of legislation. Accordingly the newly constituted Law Commission was asked to submit a report on this question.
# Notes and References


2. Ibid, pp. 22-33.


4. Idem.


14 Ibid, pp 127, 130, 545.


18 Ibid, p. 672.

19 Ibid, p. 673.


22 Asiatric Journal lists 15 types of slaves in India.

   1. One born of a female slave in the household of her master.

   2. One by purchase.

   3. One received by donation.

   4. One inherited from ancestors.

   5. One maintained in famine.

   6. One pledged by former master.

   7. One made captive in war.

   8. One relieved from a great debt.

   9. One won in a stake.
10. One who had offered himself, thus, "I am thine".
11. One become an apostate from religious mendicity,
12. One being a slave for a stipulated time.
13. One maintained in consideration of service.
14. One serving for the sake of his bride.
15. One self-sold.


27 D. Hill. Secretary to the Government's letter addressed to the President and Members of the Board of Revenue, 28th April, 1819.


30 Asiatic Journal, December, 1829, p. 21.

31 Ibid, p. 22.


33 Ibid, Coimbatore District, p. 10649.
34 Ibid, Tanjore District, pp. 10652 - 10654.
36 Ibid, Trichinoploy District, p. 10666.
38 Ibid, p. 60.
39 Idem.
41 Ibid, Chinglepet District, pp. 10660 - 10661.
43 Asiatic Journal, January, 1829, p. 29.
44 Ibid, p. 29.
45 Idem.
| 54 | Dharamakumar, | opt. cit., pp. 52 - 53. |
| 55 | Ibid, | p. 52. |
| 57 | Dharmakumar, | opt. cit., p. 55. |
| 58 | Abbe J.A. Dubois, | Hindu Manners Customs and Ceremonies, (Tra), Henry K. Beauchamp, N. Delhi, reprint.1986, p. 49. |
| 59 | Ibid, | p. 50. |
| 60 | Idem, |  |
| 61 | Ibid, | p. 51. |
| 62 | Ibid, | p. 54. |

64 Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India. Madras, Vol. VI, p. 373.

65 On the Affairs of the East India Company Appendix K - Question on slavery in EAST Indies - Answers of A.D. Cambell, 4th November, 1832. p. 575.


67 Idem.

68 Ibid, p. 31

69 Ibid, p. 33


72 J.H. Nelson, Madura Country A. Manual, Madras, 1868, p. 34.

73 Salem District Records, Vol. 1263 - Letter of Salem Collector to the Board of revenue transmitting a copy of the letter from the collector of Trichinopoly, pp. 130 - 138.

74 On the Affairs of the East India Company, opt. cit., p. 574.
75 Ibid, p. 575.
76 Idem.
78 Idem.
79 Benedicte Hjejle, opt. cit., p. 67.
80 Dharmakumar, opt. cit., p. 64.