The rise of an ordinary peasant community from an ambiguous position to the level of preponderance and dominance in medieval south India suggests two important features—an intrinsic dynamism of the social group that dares to wriggle out of its imposed limitations and a definite space for social change in medieval agrarian order.

It is believed that in ancient and early medieval periods, agriculture was not considered as a very noble occupation, and the class of agriculturalists was ritually placed in the fourth varna by the Dharamsastras. Obviously, the entire multitude of cultivators was categorized as Śūdras and consigned to a socially deplorable position far below the artisans, traders, merchants and other skilled craftsmen. Therefore, considering the fact that the Veḷḷāḷas of Tamil country belonged to the class of agriculturists, it was quite reasonable that they would share the Śūdra status with all other existing farming communities. However, during the medieval period and more particularly from the establishment of the Chōla rule in South India, the events and factors of great historical significance, unleashed new forces of change which contributed to reshuffling and restructuring of economy and society. From the swarming Śūdra category, various classes of agriculturists responded to the new situation, took advantage of the changes and determined their course of life and activities. The Veḷḷāḷas were one of these people who evolved out of the obscure and unknown masses, exploited the existing opportunities, marshaled their resources and brought about remarkable changes in their lives.
This section deals with the process of ‘change’ that occurred during the Chōla period particularly in the Koṅgu region and Chōlamandalam or the Kāvēri region. In the Koṅgu region, the Veḷḷālar appeared to have sown the seeds of change that had wide implication both for them as well as the region they inhabited. S. Gunasekharan attributed economic change in southern uplands to the immigrant Veḷḷālar who introduced there agriculture and irrigation which gradually subordinated cattle-rearing economy of the indigenous tribe, Vettuvar.¹ According to B. Rajanna, ‘The dominance of the Vettuvar waned between the 7th and 9th centuries while a new culture introduced by the Veḷḷālar took root and spread in what was once an exclusively Vettuvar territory.’² Therefore, during the pre-Chōla period, the Veḷḷālas are seen as a farming community fairly widespread in Koṅgu and possessing specialized knowledge in flood-control and water management. However, on the ritual scale they occupied a relatively low position which is emphasized by the repeated references to them as Śūdras by certain texts and scholars. Here, an attempt is made to investigate the patterns of change in the social position of the Veḷḷālas and identify the nature of transformation of this peasant community. A good deal of epigraphic evidence pertaining to the Chōla period is available which helps us to ascertain the nature of changes that were taking place during this period.

The rise of the Veḷḷāla community in the caste hierarchy of Tamil society was not an isolated event. The process of social change was a result of variety of factors and forces that were released and set into motion during the Chōla period. Tamil peasantry,

¹ S Gunasekharan, ‘Cattle Raiding and Heroic Tradition: Sedentary Pastoralism in Upland Tamil Nādu (Sixth to Tenth Century CE), The Indian Historical Review, vol. 34, no. 1 (Jan 2007), pp. 91-124.
existing in restricted and closed agrarian units, was not immune to these changes that were taking place in contemporary polity, economy and religion. The emergence of the Veḷḷāḷa community in the later half of the Chōla period has strong linkages with the changes that characterized the Chōla period from the ninth to the thirteenth century. The study of the Veḷḷāḷas needs to be considered in light of this broad framework that holds the key to understand the nature of change and mobility during this period.

Before beginning a discussion on the nature of changes, it is pertinent to look at larger historical perspective that would help us to delineate the process of change. The period from ninth to thirteenth centuries that roughly corresponds to the Imperial Chōla period marked the transitional stage in South Indian history when traditional social system was gradually yielding to varnasrama system. This stage has special significance in South Indian history on account of far-reaching changes in the realms of polity, economy and religion, and the contemporary social order received the ramification of these changes. During this period, we can identify certain changes occurring in agrarian organization, nature of landholdings, function of corporate organization, trade and urbanization, and temple organization which yielded a cumulative impact on society and existing social groups. To understand the social change and the evolution of communities, it’s important to comprehend the linkages between society, economy and religion, and the reciprocal influence of one aspect over another.

It may be seen that a strong material and ideological basis had already been established long before the ascendancy of the Chōlas. By the seventh century CE, the

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1 KR Hanumanthan, 'The Valangai and Idangai Factions of the Imperial Chōla Period,' Pr.IHC. 37th session, Calcutta, 1976, pp. 107-111.
changes in peasant agriculture had inaugurated the emergence of a new agrarian order of peasant societies. The period witnessed the consolidation of new state system under the political domination of the Pallavas in Kanchipuram and the Pandyas in Madurai. It was accompanied by significant changes, particularly the expansion and integration of existing agricultural regions. By the ninth century, this region was characterized by the evolution of a new polity through a process where the elements of north Indian brahmanical kingdoms were gradually adapted to the predominantly agrarian south Indian conditions. The Pallavas introduced a system of land grants to brahmadeyas and temples which streamlined and integrated the contemporary economy and society and unleashed a process of greater participation of temple in the following centuries. The irrigation ventures launched by the Pallavas and the Pandyas and the agricultural support extended by the Brahmins and the Veḷḷāḷas further contributed to the expansion and intensification of agriculture and transformed subsistence agricultural tracts into surplus generating units. All these factors contributed to the evolution of nādu into a peasant micro-region, its integration and the emergence of a new agrarian order. The composition of the nādu and its assembly, i.e. nattar, saw a process of transformation over a period of time on account of its linkages with brahmadeya, temple and nagaram. The eleventh century saw the existence of a large number of nādu in the Tamil region, particularly in the Kāvēri region, and the figure further rises up to 550 by the thirteenth century. The expansion of the nādu had close linkages with the creation of brahmadeyas and irrigation works. The number of land grants also reached over one thousand in the Chōla

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5 Champakalakshmi, op. cit. pp. 269-70.
6 Gurukal, 'Forms of Production;' pp. 159-60.
7 Hall, op. cit., p. 81.
period. From the tenth century, the conversion of the brahmadeyas into *taniyurs* or independent revenue units by the Chōlas brought about great changes in economy and provided basis for fresh resources. Apart from brahmadeya, the nagaram also contributed to the integration of the *nāṇus*. From the ninth century, the temple had emerged as an agent of integration and by the twelfth century, it contributed to the notion of territorial sovereignty. In this way, we can ascertain a series of prolonged processes in form of centralization of state power, development of trade and economy, the evolution of Tamil macro region and flowering of the regional culture, which ultimately set the stage for change and mobility.

**RISE OF NEW LANDHOLDING CLASS**

To ascertain the position of the Velḷāḷa peasant community in the social hierarchy it’s essential to examine the nature of their access to land. It is important to know whether these people worked merely as a cultivating group or they exercised some kind of control over their fields. The study of the nature and degrees of such control over land may indicate the extent of their contribution to agricultural production. But socially, the focal point of consideration is to investigate the nature of their holdings so as to know how and to what extent they possessed rights and control over the lands of their localities. The knowledge of the nature of their landholdings would help us to determine their economic strength and social status. This is mainly because in the agrarian society land is considered as the most important agent of change and development. Land is a symbol of wealth, power and prestige. The possession of land by a particular peasant group reflects not just the weight of its resources and material base, but also present clear indications as
to the social status and prestige wielded by the members of the community. It is obvious that in a medieval hierarchical society, the various cultivating classes would exhibit perceptible tendency to scramble for more and more land in order to accrue social and economic advantages associated with its possession. The Veḷḷālas who were regarded as one of the basic agricultural communities in south India show unmistakable interest and ambition in the possession of land. A considerable amount of epigraphic evidence reveals the patterns of the Veḷḷālas' control, rights and holdings over the agricultural land.

Several inscriptions are available that deal with the gifts of land made by the Veḷḷālas to the temples. These land donations help us to understand the nature of their holdings and the process of the formation of this community as a landed class during the Chōla period. The Sivapuri inscription⁸ (823 CE) from Ramnathpuram registers a gift of land by Tuvarapati-Velan for the kitchen expenses of the Svayamprakasa temple during the reign of Pandya king, Jatavarman Srivallabha. Another record,⁹ dated 988 CE, inscribed during the period of Chōla king Rajarajadeva I, records a gift of land for two lamps in Uttarapatisvara temple at Tiruchchengattangudi in Taṅjavūr district by a certain Veḷḷālan Ulagan Sirriyan alias Tappila Muvendavelan. A fragmentary inscription from Marudhur in Coimbatore refers to a gift of land and a name Kommai Kamindar who appears to be a Veḷḷāla and possibly the donor of land.¹⁰ Kamindar is one of the many terms such as goundar, gamindar etc which refers to the Veḷḷālas. These inscriptions clearly indicate that the Veḷḷāla agriculturists were in possession of lands during the ninth and tenth centuries. This evidence also throws good deal of light on the spatial existence

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⁸ SHI, xiv, 218; [ARE, 1929, 66].
⁹ ARE, 1913, 56.
of the Velḷāḷa community in the Koṅgu region, Chōlamandalam and Pondyamandalam. Though the size of donated lands is not specified, yet the names of the Velḷāḷa donors suggest that individual landholding was a marked feature of this community during the early Chōla period. A 13th century inscription from Kadattur in Coimbatore, belonging to the reign of King Vira Narayana, registers a gift of land by Kovaraiaraiyan who belonged to the Velḷāḷa caste. This proves beyond doubt that the Velḷāḷas continued to donate lands to the temples in their individual capacity from the early to late Chōla period.

Apart from individual donations, gifts of land were also made by the Velḷāḷas in their joint capacity. The inscription from Taramangalam in Salem district, dated 1274 CE, reports that during the reign of Hoysala king, Vira-Ramnathdeva, a gift of land was made by several Mudalis, among whom was a certain Ilaman. However, the title Mudali is generally used by the Velḷāḷas in the northern districts and in this context, it possibly refers to the Velḷāḷas. In an interesting case from Taramangalam in Salem, a gift of land was said to have been made to the father of a certain Srikanthadeva as gurudakshina by the six Velḷāḷas, of whom Nalla-Udai-yappar was one. This piece of evidence has great historical significance as here, unlike above cases, the donation of land is not oriented to the deity or a temple but to a living individual who happened to be the teacher of the six Velḷāḷa students. This is a unique example of voluntary transfer of land from the Velḷāḷa students to the teaching community. This also throws abundant light on the growing

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12 ARE, 1900, 29.
13 Thurston, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 84. By some Velḷāḷas, Mudali is considered discourteous, as it is also the title of weavers.
14 ARE, 1900, 31.
capacity of the Veḷḷālas to make liberal donations of land both in the spiritual and secular areas.

Land donations were also made by the Veḷḷālas at the organizational level. Several inscriptions deal with the land donations made by the Ur and Chittirameli, the assemblies of the non-brahmins and Veḷḷāla agriculturists. Ur was the village assembly of the non-brahmadeya villages. It has been argued that non-brahmadeya villages constituted the basic social sub-structure and that they originated prior to the brahmaḍeya villages. If the village was one of Vellan landlords with the necessary families of farmers, artisans, barbers, potters, washer men, doctors etc, it had the assembly of the ur, the members of which body were Vellan landlords. On the other hand, Chittirameli, meaning 'a beautiful plough', was a supra-local organization of the peasants, particularly Veḷḷālas and often cooperated with the organizations of merchants and artisans. An inscription from Tirukkalakkudi in Ramnad district, whose date and king are unknown, states that the tank and fields to the north of Tirukkalakkudi-Nayanar form the devadana Sittirameli nallur. This evidence shows the tendency of Chittirameli assembly to donate substantial agricultural land to the temples. The reference to the donation of tank along with fields has special significance as it indicates the nature of irrigation and methods of utilization of water in this period. Though tanks were also used for drinking and ritual bathing, this particular reference to tank (along with fields) denotes irrigation tank.

15 N Karashima, South Indian History and Society, Delhi, 1984, p.1.
16 Epigraphia Indica, 1939-40, 11, vol. XXV.
seems to be a water tank for the purpose of harvesting rain water. Since south Indian irrigation system demanded manpower and cooperation, the donation of tank further emphasizes the extent of support the peasant organization provides to the temples. This is also reminiscent of the traditional role of the Veḷḷāḷas as 'flood-controllers' and 'cloud-controllers' and their expertise in water-harvesting and water management. The reference to the term 'devadana' highlights the exact nature of this donation, i.e. the land was gifted to the temple for its maintenance. An inscription from Anaimalai in Coimbatore states that during the period of Koṅgu Pandya, the Ur assembly of Vadakkilur confirmed the gift of land and accepted to measure 30 kalams of paddy for each year towards food offering. Here, the assembly is not gifting the land but rather putting its stamp of confirmation on some previous donation. This inscription demonstrates the authority and power of the non-brahmadeya assembly as a final decision-making body regarding important decisions such as land donations. The term 'kalam' denotes the standard of measurement of paddy and highlights how the assessment rate was expressed by the amount of paddy in kalam. At the same place, a gift of land was made by Sabha and Ur assembly for burning a perpetual lamp in the temple. The joint donation of land by sabha and Ur assemblies is noteworthy as it indicates the degrees of coordination between the Veḷḷāḷa landlords of non-brahmin assembly and the Brahmin landlords of the assembly of brahmadeya villages. This evidence has high social significance as it reveals the patterns of communication, exchange, alliance as well as degrees of social acceptability between the Brahmin and non-brahmin peasants during the Chōla period.

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Some of the inscriptions illustrate variations in the form of land donations to the temples. It appears that *devadana* was not the only kind of land donation because certain gifts of land were made to the temples for the execution of specific activities such as arrangement of festivals, rituals and worship, and feeding of Brahmins. At Sevur in Coimbatore, a 13th century inscription states that during the period of Vira Pandya, a gift of land was made by the assemblies of Vallanãdu and Puluwanãdu of Vadaparicaranãdu from Marudur for the festival during the month of *cittirai*.²¹ From the same place, a 14th century inscription records the gift of a village (name lost) by the nãdu assemblies of Velãlas and Puluvas from Vadaparicaranãdu to the Kapilesvara temple for conducting a festival (*Cittirai*) by the Periyanattar.²² Again another 14th century record, reported Sevur registers the gift of land by the nãdu assembly of Vadaparicaranãdu for the gopura of the temple at Thiruvarangam during worship.²³ A 15th century inscription from Koduvay in Coimbatore refers to the gift of a reclaimed village by Ur assembly to the temple for feeding Brahmins.²⁴

A Sanskrit-Tamil inscription²⁵ from Nellore (1197 CE) which belonged to the reign of Kulottunga III, records that the *periyavishayam* met at the *chittiramelivinagaram* (Viñchu temple) at Nellore and contributed some land in each village in the area as *tiruvidaiyattam* to the temple. The writer was a *chittirameli-velan* (Veñã). However, *periyavishayam* is the synonym of *periyanãdu* because *vishayam* is the Sanskrit

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²¹ *CDI*, 2003, 860.
²² *CDI*, 2003, 876.
²³ *CDI*, 2003, 856.
²⁴ *CDI*, 2003, 212.
equivalent of nādu, the basic local unit for agricultural production. It may be noted that from the eleventh century, the term periyanādu appears in the inscriptions, meaning 'big nādu' to denote a supra-local assembly. The Vellālas, who were the basic agricultural community during the early Chōla period, were responsible for the formation of periyanādu during the eleventh century. From the same period, Chittirameli also undergoes certain changes in its character and begins to find reference as Chittirameli-periyanādu which is indicative of the enlargement of its size and activities. In the period of Rajaraja III, an inscription, dated 1235 CE from Anbil in Tiruchirappalli (1235 CE) registers that Chittirameli-periyanādu and ainnurruvar of the thousand directions and others met in a large assembly and decided to make a tax-free gift of a village to a Buddhist temple called Amumoli-perumpalli. Ainnurruvar was a merchant guild which started in tenth century and was composed of Chettis, Chetti-putras, Kavarais, Vaniyars, Seniyars, Saliyars etc. This record suggests a massive collective social action through an agreement between the peasants' and merchants' organization and the state of social harmony between the Veellālas and merchants. The most significant point in this evidence is the fact that the joint declaration of gift of village was in favour of a Buddhist temple. This endowment seems to be a radical departure from earlier practice of donating lands to Brahminical temples. This is a strong indication of ideological shifts in the minds of the Veellālas and merchants during the 13th century.

27 Ibid., p. 87.
28 Ibid., p. 89.
29 Ibid., p. 87.
30 Ibid., p. 93; SII, viii, p. 198.
The Kalpalayam inscription\textsuperscript{32} (1242 CE) from Tiruchirappalli, belonging to the period of Rajaraja III, reports that \textit{Chittirameli-periyanādu} resettled a ruined temple-village (\textit{devadana}) in Tiruppidavur-\textit{nādu} and donated it as tax-free \textit{kudininga-tiruvidaiyattam} to a Viṣṇu temple at Kuruvatti in Poysala-rajya. The land tax \textit{makkalam} and other taxes were remitted for the village. Three important points emerge from this evidence— the possession of a ruined temple-village, the process of resettlement and the act of donation. This is an enlightening example of acquisition of rights in land by reclamation of wasteland or resettlement of ruined lands by \textit{Veḷḷāla} assembly. The fact that even \textit{devadana} village tend to fall into the category of wasteland is quite significant here. This inscription is quite informative regarding the nature of land revenue and the authority of \textit{Chittirameli-periyanādu} regarding remission of taxes and declaration of tax free villages. Evidence of acquisition of land rights by the \textit{Veḷḷāla}s through land reclamation has also been reported from the \textit{Koṅgu} region. A 13th century inscription from Kadattur in Coimbatore states that a gift of land was made by a \textit{Veḷḷāla} Kovaraiaiyan which was reclaimed by the same person.\textsuperscript{33} The process of acquiring rights in land by reclamation of wasteland was well established both in \textit{Koṅgumandalam} and Chōlamandalam and such rights were claimed by this community both at the individual and organizational levels. A later inscription of 15th century from Koduvay in Coimbatore furthers strengthens this tendency when it refers to the reclaiming of a village

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., pp. 93-94; \textit{Avanam}, 2, pp. 58-60.
\textsuperscript{33} CDI. 2004. 17.
by the Ur assembly of Koduvayil which was then gifted to the temple for feeding Brahmins. 34

The social position of Veḷḷālas’ landholding can also be ascertained by the nature of sale and purchase of lands, registered in inscriptions. During the period of King Vijay-Gandagopaldeva a village assembly sold in equal shares the village Nayakkankuppam to a merchant of Kanchipuram and seven men of the Veḷḷāla caste for 380 panam each at the place Tenneri in Chingleput district 35 ‘Panam’ was a gold coin during Pandya and subsequent periods which replaced the Chōla gold coin ‘kasu.’ 36 This inscription clearly points out the purchasing power of the Veḷḷāla peasants vis-à-vis merchants to strike a deal for possession of ownership rights in land. This may be considered as an outstanding evidence of the monetary strength of the Veḷḷālas which resulted from the accumulation of wealth and resources. An inscription from Kanchipuram, dated 1365 CE and belonging to the period of King Kambana-Udaiyar, records that the authorities of Raja-simhavarmesvara temple sold some houses to certain Mudalis at the price of 150 panas. 37

It may be inferred from the evidence cited above that the Veḷḷālas had emerged as potential buyers of land and landed property by the end of the Chōla period.

The Veḷḷālas or their assembly are also said to have sold land quite oftenly as reported by inscriptions. In 1287, two members of the Veḷḷāla caste are reported to have sold land to an individual Arunagiripperuma in Salaipundi in North Arcot during the

34 CDI, 2003, 212.
35 ARE, 1921-22, 230.
36 Karashima, 1984, p. 130.
37 SII, 1890, 87.
period of King Konnerinmaikondan of Pandya dynasty.\textsuperscript{38} A 13th century inscription from Perumanallur in Coimbatore refers to the sale of land by Ur assembly to a merchant, Ciriyan Pillai of Kadaiyur who then gifted this land to a temple for flower-gardening.\textsuperscript{39} A fourteenth century inscription from Sevur in Coimbatore records a sale of land by a Vellāla of Sevur to some merchants of this place. It also mentions a land measuring rod and \textit{pullikuligai panam} (money).\textsuperscript{40} This is quite informative in terms of tools of land measurement and status of prevailing currency. At the same place, another 14th century inscription reports the sale of land (grove) by a Vellāla, Siruvan Andan to the Alagapperumal temple for 300 \textit{pullikuligai panam}.\textsuperscript{41} The status of the Vellālas as substantial landlords is clearly reflected in the evidence cited above. The selling of a grove to a temple is an interesting revelation as it exhibits the nature of investment in land and the commercial sense of the Vellālas. At Perur in Coimbatore, an inscription records the sale of land by Ur assembly of the Perur and army men to the Ur assembly of Kumilai in Vayaraikka nāḍu in the 14th century.\textsuperscript{42} The land was gifted to the Nagiswara Mudaiyar temple at Kumilai by Ur assembly of the same village. The sale of land by one assembly to another is indicative of the economic viability of the non-brahmadesya peasantry, which was predominantly Vellālas. The involvement of the army men of Perur in this transaction is also quite significant. During the 14th century, another inscription from Perur records the sale of land by the Ur assembly to the Adipuriswara temple at

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{38}{\textit{ARE}, 1945-46, 67.}
\footnotetext{39}{\textit{CDI}, 2003, 962.}
\footnotetext{40}{\textit{CDI}, 2003, 849.}
\footnotetext{41}{\textit{CDI}, 2003, 851.}
\footnotetext{42}{\textit{CDI}, 2004, 103.}
\end{footnotes}
Kalandai in Vayaraikanādu with sowing capacity of 40 kalam. Here, the explicit reference to the sowing capacity of the sold land suggests that possibly the price of land was determined by its fertility which was computed by existing standards of measurement. This evidence also helps us to detect a discernible trend in land transactions of the Veḷḷāḷas that they are tempted to sell off highly productive lands to the temples whereas unproductive or reclaimed lands constituted the donations to the temples. Be that as it may, the nature of sale of land by the Veḷḷāḷas shows that the community had developed into a class of rich peasant proprietors with a distinct commercial consciousness which they expressed by selling and buying land at will.

Epigraphic evidence regarding enjoyment and grants of certain rights by the Veḷḷāḷas has also been reported. The Aduturai inscription (date unknown), registers an agreement among the Valangai 98 classes and Idangai 98 classes against the Brahmans and the Veḷḷāḷas, who held proprietary rights (kani) over the lands of Trichinappalli district. A later inscription, dated 1478 CE, reported by District Judge, Tañjavur records the grant of Kaniyatchi rights over lands in Nagarmangalam to four classes of Tantrimar by the Karukatta-Veḷḷāḷar. These inscriptions yield valuable information regarding landholding rights and social status of the Veḷḷāḷas. The terms ‘kani’ and ‘kaniyatchi’ have received attention of many scholars. Kani generally denotes hereditary right of

\[^{43}C\) DI, 2004, 108.\]
\[^{44}A R E, 1913, 34.\]
\[^{45}A R E, 1945-46, 12.\]
\[^{46}\) Ramaswamy, Textiles. p. 50 [The term kani appears to have been a generic term derived from the root kan meaning ‘to see’ or ‘to mark,’ which, in association with other terms, meant different things in different contexts. Kani in modern terminology means an area of land measuring 100 kuli (0.33 acres).]
possession to land and other things, including position or office\textsuperscript{47} while \textit{kaniyatchi} refers to the grant of the right to possession of land or village.\textsuperscript{48} The grant of \textit{kaniyatchi} rights by a Ve\textl{ll\aa}la throws light on the degrees of their ownership of land and their privilege in carrying out transfer of land and rights in land. The emergence of the Ve\textl{ll\aa}las with \textit{kani} rights along with the Brahmins proves beyond doubt the elevation of this community to the rank of substantial landlords. It is a point of great social significance that the Ve\textl{ll\aa}las appear above the right-hand Valangai and left-hand Idangai divisions, who had entered into a mutual agreement against the proprietary rights of the Ve\textl{ll\aa}las and Brahmins. The Ve\textl{ll\aa}las had apparently accumulated tremendous landed power and authority which aroused the envy and misgivings of the dual divisions who were forced into a collective understanding to guard their interests.

It has been argued that the Ve\textl{ll\aa}las demonstrated considerable advancement in their power and position at the expense of the Brahmins in the K\textv{\text{"a}}v\textv{\text{"e}}ri valley.\textsuperscript{49} The Ve\textl{ll\aa}lar attempt to social progression vis-\textendash;vis Brahmins can be ascertained from the two thirteenth-century inscriptions, found in two temples of Mannargudi, in Ta\textv{j}\textv{\text{"a}}v\textv{\text{"u}}r district in 1288 CE. These inscriptions state that the \textit{nattavar} (\textit{nattar}) of five \textit{perilamai-n\textad{\text{"a}}dus} held a gathering along with the \textit{sabhaiyar} and \textit{maha-sabhaiyar} of Rajdhiraja-chaturvedimangalam (a Brahmin village) for the purpose of settlement regarding the payment of taxes in their villages to the government.\textsuperscript{50} The content of the two inscriptions from Mannargudi appears to be a regulation of the relations of the Ve\textl{ll\aa}la tenant-
cultivators and Brahmin landlords. Apparently, these inscriptions suggest Brahminical supremacy over the Veḷḷāḷa tenant-cultivators, but the necessity of this exercise and these resolutions indicate a social crisis confronted by Brahmin landlords in retaining their superiority vis-à-vis Veḷḷāḷa tenant-cultivators in this particular region. 51

Karashima also throws light on an interesting phenomenon in the late Chōla period when the private landholding receives momentum and a spate of land transfers takes place between individuals or between individuals and temples. 52 However, the Brahmins were found to be under severe constraints—either selling some of their holdings or taking measures to protect their lands from the encroachments of the newly rising landed communities. 53 In terms of land acquisition, the Veḷḷāḷas appear to be one of the chief beneficiaries of the newly emerging agrarian order in the thirteenth century.

The acquisition of landed property by the Veḷḷāḷas suggests variations in the existing peasant society. According to R.S. Sharma, differentiation in South Indian peasantry and villages is amply proved by two perceptible facts, i.e. the presence of the Veḷḷāḷas as substantial farmers, and the frequent occurrence of the term ‘Vetti’ (bonded labour) in Chōla 54 and Pandya land charters which may signify the lowest agricultural stratum engaged in ploughing for a meagre living. 55 The existence of these two classes reveal a range of graded intermediaries such as assignee, occupant, sub-occupant and

51 Ibid.
52 Karashima, 1984, p. 31.
cultivating tenant$^{56}$ in a landed hierarchy, created by a system of land grants. Burton Stein has also talked about 'dominant peasantry' and 'dependent peasantry' in medieval southern society, which also indicates differentiation in terms of power and status within the agrarian structure.$^{57}$

**CHITTIRAMELI-PERIYANĀDU: FORMATION OF CORPORATE IDENTITY**

*Chittirameli* was an organization of the peasants, particularly non-Brahmana Vellāla cultivators and landowners. *Chittirameli* was derived from Tamil 'meli' meaning ploughshare and its members were called Citrameli-periyanattar. However, M.D. Sampath has pointed out that earlier the word 'meli' or 'meti' meant 'a pillar in the middle of the threshing floor to which oxen are bound.$^{58}$' The members of *Chittirameli* were also called bhumiputtirar and nattumakkal on account of their association and dependence on land. *Chittirameli* originated in Tamil Nādu and later extended its activities to other parts of South India. The spatial and chronological distribution of *Chittirameli* inscriptions ascribe the origins of this organization to deliberate efforts of Tondainādu agriculturists, who later spread to other parts of Tamil country, and even into South Karnataka and Andhra.

From the latter half of the eleventh century, the inscriptions repeatedly refer to periyanādu which was generally prefixed by the term *Chittirameli*, indicating the transformation in the composition and functions of the *Chittirameli* assembly. The emergence of *chittirameli-periyanādu* was an event of considerable significance as it

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$^{57}$ Stein, op. cit., 1985, p. 67.
reflects the changes in eleventh century situation as well as in the social position of the Veḷḷālas. It has been argued by Karashima and Subbarayalu that it was the peasant community of the Veḷḷālas who started the formation of the supra-local assembly, periyanādu (big nādu) during eleventh century under the inspiration of the supra-local guilds of the merchants.\textsuperscript{59} Inscriptional evidence throws abundant light on the growing activities and decision-making power of Chittirameli-periyanādu. Tamarapakkam inscription (1057 CE) from North Arcot, belonging to the reign of Rajendra II, refers to the intervention of periyanādu against misappropriation of temple land (devadan) by the officials in the form of janma-kani and tirumuga-kani and remedial measures for restoration of devadanas to the temples.\textsuperscript{60} From the same place, another inscription, dated 1062, states that the nattar of a large area took a unanimous decision regarding the nattanmai (the ruling of the nādu) function, and fixing the land tax (melvaram) to be paid to the government at 50 kalam of paddy per veli of wet land, 40 kalam per veli during the kar crop, and 3 kasu per veli of dry land.\textsuperscript{61} These inscriptions are an important source of information regarding the nature of power and influence exercised by the Veḷḷāla assembly vis-à-vis government and officials. The evidence reflects the enlarging social role of the peasant assembly to put checks and restraints on the encroachment of the officials as well as their growing authority in determining the land tax to be paid to the government. During the period of Rajdhiraṇa II, an inscription (1167 CE) from Tittagudi in South Arcot, states that Chittirameli-periyanādu and ainnurruvar of the thousand directions of the 18-bhumi put up a plough arch as a charity of both nādu and nagaram.

\textsuperscript{59} Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004, p. 87, 89.
\textsuperscript{60} ARE, 1973, 179.
\textsuperscript{61} ARE, 1973-74, 188; Cited in Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004, p. 91.
and decided to contribute a quantity of paddy and money annually for the worship and renovation expenses of the temple.\textsuperscript{62} The practice of issuing joint declaration by the Chittirameli-periyanādu and ainnurruvar, the merchant guild for certain common activities can be viewed as the attempt of the Veḷḷāḷa peasantry to transcend the agrarian boundaries and reach out to the larger society for the purpose of effective social control. By coordinating with the powerful merchant guild, Chittirameli-periyanādu apparently strengthened its social position in terms of wider social acceptability. Another inscription from Uttattur in Tiruchirappalli (1199 CE), belonging to the reign of Kulottunga III, says that the nāḍu and nagaram, otherwise called 79-nāḍu, met at the temple of Urrattur and decided to convert the village Venmanippadi into a nagaram, and named it Tayilunallapuram after the chief Kulottungachola-vanakovaraiyan.\textsuperscript{63} This evidence is valuable for the study of social and economic conditions of the Chōlas at the end of the twelfth century. The conversion of a village into a nagaram through joint deliberate action of the peasant-merchant bodies gives a new dimension to the process of urbanization. The involvement of the peasant body in the transformation of an agricultural unit into a commercial township has special importance as it reveals the nature of economic change and the contribution of medieval peasantry in bringing about this transition. The emergence of the Veḷḷāḷas as instrument of change illustrates the status and social dynamism of this community.

A remarkable information can be gleaned from a 12th century inscription (1170 CE) from Ambakkam in Tiruchirappalli, stating that the Veḷḷāḷas, who were engaged in

\textsuperscript{62} SII, vii, 291; Cited in Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{63} ARE, 1912, 521
cultivation and who were living in the brahmadeya village Madhurantaka-chaturvedimangalam and its hamlets decided to contribute some grain (4 nali of oil per ma of land) to the local temple. It also warns to treat the violators of agreement as opponents of king’s order and periyanādu. The fact that the Veḷḷāḷa peasants resided in the brahmadeyas is a point of high social significance as it indicates the dignified social existence and independent activities of the Veḷḷāḷas in Brahminical strongholds. The warning issued to the violators of agreement suggests a tendency of social resistance to such declarations. Interestingly, the decision of the periyanādu is expected to be considered as equivalent to royal order. However, it may be noted that periyanādu differed from perilamai-nādu which is also referred to in the inscriptions. Periyanādu were formed by the Veḷḷāḷas for their protection against state oppression whereas perilamai-nādu was organized by the Veḷḷāḷa tenant-cultivators in brahmadeya against Brahmin and official oppression.

The Tirukkoyilur inscription (1200 CE) of Chittirameli-periyanādu from South Arcot deals with their decision regarding the restoration of a charity which was lost due to some disturbances. But the most noteworthy point of this evidence is the eulogy of the inscription which refers to the Chittirameli-periyanādu as the sons of the Earth goddess, as adepts in both Tamil and Sanskrit, as followers of niti works, and as those who venerated the plough as their favourite deity. The references to Earth goddess and plough as favourite deity emphasize the peasant foundation of the periyanādu, and are reminiscent of the association of the Veḷḷāḷas with fertility, plough and cultivation. The

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64 SII, xxvi, 780.
66 SII, vii, 129.
reference to them as followers of nitti works (possibly dharamshastras) and proficient of Tamil and Sanskrit help us to ascertain the fact that the development of periyanâdu and Veḻḷāḷas is possibly in close conformity to Brahminical traditions.

The Valikandapuram inscription (1227 CE)⁶⁷ from Tiruchirappalli refers to a solidarity pact of the idarīgai-98 communities including the Brahmans, Ariyar, Nattamakal, Malaiyamangal, Andanar of Kayangudi, Pannattar, Vaniya-nagaram of 18-vishayam, and the Kaikkolar of the golden palace. It is mentioned that they took an oath to stand united and share the good and bad fortunes of each member. However, the Nattamakkal and Malaiyamangal are mentioned as the Chittirameli-periyanâdu. Periyavishayam is the same as periyanâdu because vishayam is the Sanskrit version of nādu.⁶⁸ Here, the mutual pact between the peasant, artisans and other communities suggest collective action to protect their common interests. The Veḻḷāḷas can be viewed as one of the principal beneficiaries of this joint exercise towards social consolidation.

At Valikandapuram in Tiruchirappalli, an inscription (1233 CE)⁶⁹ says that the 78-nādu and 18-vishayam decided together to share proportionately the entire expenses of a festival instituted in the name of the nādu in the Siva temple. It further states that if anybody dared to damage the temple in collusion with government officials (parralar), he would be treated as a traitor to the nādu. The financial capacity of the periyanâdu to bear the expenditure incurred in a festival is quite noticeable. The warning against collusion with government official is of considerable attention as it indicates growing

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⁶⁷ ARE, 1943-44, 276.
⁶⁹ ARE, 1943-44, 268.
autonomous character of the *periyanādu* and demonstrates its power to deal with resistance from government officials and their sympathizers.

Anbil inscription (1235 CE) from Tiruchirappalli refers to a tax-free gift of a village to a Buddhist temple by *Chittirameli-periyanādu* and ainnurruvar. The patronage to non-brahminical sect by *Chittirameli-periyanādu* is quite significant as it strongly indicates departure from the practice of donations exclusively to Brahmanical temples and suggests ideological shifts in the contemporary peasant consciousness.

The Kalpalayam inscription (1242 CE) from Tiruchirappalli highlights the involvement of *chittirameli-periyanādu* in reclamation of ruined temple-village and its authority to remit and regulate land tax and other taxes in the village. An inscription (1295 CE), reported from Tiruppangili in Tiruchirappalli states that *Chittirameli-periyanādu* contributed a quantity of paddy both from wet and dry lands towards renovation work on the circumambulation corridor called *periyanattan-tirumalikai* and a gateway tower called *periyanattan-gopuram* in the Siva temple. The Vadakurangaduturai inscription (1307 CE) from Tañjāvūr belonging to the period of King Virpandya refers to *chittirameli-periyanādu* donating a quantity of paddy or each plough, person and artisan and also for different kinds of merchandise like cloth bundles, pepper, gold, rice and paddy for renovation work on the circumambulation corridor of the Siva temple.

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70 *SH*, viii, 198.
72 *ARE*, 1938-39, 189.
73 *Avanam*, 10, pp. 59-60; Karashima & Subbrayalu, op. cit., p. 94.
It is evident that in Tamaraiikkam, the nattar of several kottams gathered together to discuss common problems of the Veḷḷāḷa community. Yet, the prasasti of this organization emphasizes that its members belonged to all the varnas and that it was not a caste organization. Chittirameli prasasti also refers to the members of organization as bhumiputtras (sons of the earth goddess or sons of the soil) whose prosperity is attributed to cow’s milk and whose profession was feeding the people of the country. It seems to be the first reference to the pastoral cum agricultural origins of the Chittirameli, which traded in agricultural commodities. The available evidence suggests that the need for Chittirameli was created more by the growing consumption of food grains and pulses in urban areas and the corresponding efforts of Veḷḷāḷa agriculturists to mobilize and control the movements of the same for an incessant supply to the itinerant traders. It is also being argued that it was an agriculturist guild, which developed commercial links with the Five Hundred by the 12th century. This view draws support from the close interaction between these organizations, indicated by the presence of the Tisai Ayirattu Ainnurruvar or Nanadesi in centres where the Chittirameli inscriptions are found either mentioned separately as in Tamaraiikkam (North Arcot) or as jointly making donations. It has often been described as the Periyananāṭu (larger nāḍu) assembly formed by the nattar (Veḷḷāḷas) to resist the centralizing efforts of the Colas.

A striking feature of the medieval South Indian society was the growing alliance between agriculturists and traders, reflected in the joint inscriptions of the Chittirameli and Ainnurruvar which clearly mention the cess levied on a good number of agricultural commodities. This trend is visible as early as 12th century but becomes a marked feature
in the second half of the 12th century and in early 13th century in both Tamil and Kannada country. From the late 12th to 14th century *Chittirameli-periyanādu* may be seen appearing jointly with ‘the Five Hundred’ in the prasastis of the inscriptions recording joint donations of tolls and cesses on merchandise. It may be noted that in these records, the pride of place is given to *Chittirameli*, whereas ‘the Five Hundred’ was relegated to the secondary position.

In its relationship with other merchant bodies, particularly in the decision making, *Chittirameli* organization seems to have occupied a position of pre-eminence. In the joint prasastis issued to commemorate such occasions *Chittirameli* is always mentioned at the head of the prasatis. *Chittirameli* organization of agriculturists dates from the middle Cola times but is scarcely mentioned along with other organizations till 13th century. All these organizations, including *Chittirameli* enjoyed an independent status and worked only in their independent capacity. However, it was only on certain common issues such as the right of fixing the tolls, commission, share of the town etc when they chose to work in a joint capacity. This tendency for joint action increased towards the close of the Cola period when royal authority started weakening in regions beyond the core area. The institutionalization of these organizations through their joint donations to various temples is a striking feature of the 13th and 14th century marking the decline of Cola power.

The agricultural surplus was mobilized and shifted from rural areas to urban settlements through nagaram members. It may be presumed that the situation was favourable for the *Chittirameli* to exercise control over this movement of surplus, as they were the grain dealers at the centres where merchant bodies met. The development of
such centres from the 12th century shows how mobilization of agricultural surplus greatly contributed to the expansion of urban activities.

The economic strength and the degrees of patronage in its hands determined the social significance and status of an organization. Like any other organization, Chittirameli operated in its specific cultural zone in its independent capacity, enacting roles of patronage due to its economic importance. However, Chittirameli was destined to play a higher role in local affairs and relations of dominance. Here, Chittirameli was expected to perform as the dispenser of justice and arbitrator for settling land disputes etc. But towards the end of the Cola period, Chittirameli shared the platform for a joint venture with the Five Hundred, in order to address certain important issues of public welfare such as cess and toll fixation. Chittirameli assembly of Vellāḷa agriculturists addressed to the problems of social integration and played an integrative role by extending cooperation to the organizations of merchants and artisans. Its importance also lies in the fact that it founded brahmadeya, pattanam and built temples, and also participated in consecrating images and dedicating temple servants and dancing girls. It seems probable that the Chittirameli organization had considerable control over the production and distribution of the produce from land. It was also patronized by the rulers of the time.

The agriculturist-trader alliance and the monopoly of power and control over the production, movement and distribution of agricultural surplus in the hands of Chittirameli had far-reaching consequences as this process contributed to the emergence of Vellāḷa
landlords as a highly privileged, exclusively eminent and absolutely dominant community in the medieval South Indian society.

TEMPLE PROMOTION: PATTERNS OF CHANGE

The newly-acquired economic power of the Veḷḷāḷas is clearly reflected in their donations to the temples. A good number of inscriptions are available which throw abundant light on the contribution of the Veḷḷāḷas as active donors to the temples. These donations were made by the Veḷḷāḷa men, women and their community organization, Chittirameli. The nature and the volume of these donations indicate the financial capacity as well as the social standing of the Veḷḷāḷa community in the existing social order. The type of donations is quite diverse, ranging from gifts of land to the offerings in form of money, gold, cattle, grain and services.\(^7^4\)

Three Tamil inscriptions record the gifts of gold by three Veḷḷāḷa individuals in Coimbatore and Trichinopoly districts. During the reign of Kōṅgu-Chōla king Vira Rajendra Deva, Pillandevan, a Veḷḷāḷa of Sattandai sect of Kōṅgur in Coimbatore made a gift of gold for a twilight lamp to the god in the temple of Pasupatisvaraswamin.\(^7^5\) In the thirteenth century, a gift of gold was made by a member of the Veḷḷāḷa caste for the lamps to the gods in the Vaduganathswami temple at Kundalam in Coimbatore district during the reign of King Vira Pandya of Kōṅgu Pandya dynasty.\(^7^6\) Another inscription registers a gift of gold for offering crushed rice (aval) on the day of Ardra in the month of Margali to Ganepati by Kendala Veḷḷāḷa Pillaiyar of Kumballumbur (Omya-nādu) in the

\(^{7^4}\) Ramaswamy, 1985, p. 41.
\(^{7^5}\) ARE, 167 of 1920.
\(^{7^6}\) ARE, 127 of 1920.
Vaidyanath temple of Tirumalavadi in Trichinopoly during the reign of Chōla King, Rajkesarivarman.\(^{77}\) These inscriptions reflect the height of economic prosperity and affluence enjoyed by the Veļḷāḷa peasants. Though the size of the gifts of gold is not specified, these appear to be very luxurious and noticeable contributions, particularly when judged from the standards of the medieval Indian peasantry. Considering the fact that the gifts of gold were made by the Veļḷāḷas in their individual capacity and the donations constituted only a fragment of their holdings, it can be argued that the material base of this peasantry had substantially enlarged and some of the Veļḷāḷa households had accumulated enormous wealth in their coffers. These inscriptions have high social significance as they indicate the degrees of social prestige and influence wielded by the members of this community through their generous and lavish display of wealth and resources.

Gifts of land constituted an important part of the temple donations made by the Veļḷāḷas. An inscription\(^{78}\) dated 988 CE, engraved during the reign of Chōla king Rajarajadeva I, records a gift of land for two lamps in Uttarapatisvara temple at Tiruchchengattangudi in Taņjāvūr district by a certain Veļḷāḷan Ulagan Sirriyan alias Tappila Muvendavelan. The Sivapuri inscription\(^{79}\) (823 CE) registers a gift of land by Danadan Pagaivenra-kandan alias Tuvarapativelan for the kitchen expenses of the Svayamprakasa temple at Sivapuri in Ramnathpuram district during the reign of Pandya king, Jatavarman Srivallabha. In another inscription\(^{80}\) of 1274 CE, belonging to the reign

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\(^{77}\) ARE, 98 of 1920.

\(^{78}\) ARE, 56 of 1913.

\(^{79}\) SII, no. 218, vol. 14, p. 124 [ARE, 66 of 1929].

\(^{80}\) ARE, 29 of 1900.
of Hoysala king, Vira-Ramlathdeva, a gift of land is said to have been made by several Mudalis, among whom was a certain Illaman. However, the title Mudali is generally taken by the Vellālas in the northern districts.\(^81\)

Many inscriptions, some of which are already mentioned, refer to land donations made by Chittirameli-periyanādu. An inscription\(^82\) from Tirukkalakkudi in Ramnad district, whose date and king are unknown, states that the tank and fields to the north of Tirukkalakkudi-Nayanar form the devadana Chittirameli nallur. This is an evidence of land donation by Chittirameli. A Sanskrit-Tamil inscription\(^83\) from Nellore (1197 CE), written during the reign of Kulottunga III, records that the periyavishayam met at the chittirameli-vinnagar (Viṣṇu temple) at Nellore and contributed some land in each village in the area as tiravidaiyattam to the temple. Here, periyavishayam means periyanādu.\(^84\) It is significant that the writer of this inscription was chittirameli-velan, a Vellāla and even the Brahmin villages and soldiers’ villages (sevaga-parru) were to join in the contribution. In the period of Rajaraja III, an inscription\(^85\) (1235 CE) registers that Chittirameli-periyanādu and ainnurruvar of the thousand directions and others met in a large assembly at Anbil in Tiruchirappalli and decided to make a tax-free gift of a village to a Buddhist temple called Amutamoli-perumpalli. However, the donation of a village to a Buddhist temple marks a new trend in terms of religious ideology and patronage to Hindu temples. The Kalpalayam inscription\(^86\) (1242 CE) from Tiruchirappalli, belonging

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\(^{81}\) Thurston, op. cit., vol. v, p. 84. By some Vellālas, Mudali is considered discourteous, as it is also the title of weavers.

\(^{82}\) ARE, 116 of 1916.

\(^{83}\) SII, V, 496; Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004, p. 92.

\(^{84}\) Karashima & Subbarayalu, p. 92.

\(^{85}\) SII, VIII, 198; Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004 p. 93.

\(^{86}\) Avanam, 2, pp. 58-60; Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004, pp. 93-94.
to the period of Rajaraja III, reports that Chittirameli-periyanādu resettled a ruined temple-village (devadana) in Tiruppidavur-nādu and donated it as tax-free village to a Viṣṇu temple. The donations of land and village to the temples indicate the massive landed property of the Veḻḷāḷa assembly.

In an interesting case, a gift of land was made to the father of a certain Srikanthadeva as gurudakshina by the six Veḻḷāḷas of Taramangalam in Salem, of whom Nalla-Udai-yappar was one.⁸⁷ Here, the donation was not religious but educational, it points to economic viability of the individual Veḻḷāḷa households.

The monetary contributions by the Veḻḷāḷas and Chittirameli are quite plentiful. Tittagudi inscription⁸⁸ (1167 CE) from South Arcot, belonging to the reign of Rajadhiraja II, records that the Chittirameli-periyanādu and ainnurruvār put up a plough arch as a charity of both nādu and nagaram and decided to contribute a quantity of paddy and money annually for the worship and renovation expenses of the Viṣṇu temple, as follows: a padakku of paddy on each plough, a kuruni of paddy on each person, 5 kasu on each of the garland sellers, 2 kasu on each of a lower class of servants (kil-panimakkal), and 4 nali of oil on each family (kudi) of cowherds. This inscription is quite revealing regarding the collective efforts of the peasants and merchants in accumulating substantial contributions, and helps us to ascertain the nature of standards of measurements and currency.

In the Villisvara temple of Idigarai in Coimbatore district, three separate gifts of 10 varahan each for twilight lamps, and a gift of 20 varahan for two lamps for morning

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⁸⁷ ARE, 1900, 31
and midday services were made by four Veḷḷāḷa individuals, i.e. the Veḷḷāḷa of Korramangalam, a member of Veḷḷāḷan-Malaiyar community, a member of Veḷḷāḷan-Karundoli community and a member of Veḷḷāḷan-Paiyar community respectively during the reign of Koṅgu-Chōla king Vikrama Chōladeva and Koṅgu-Pandya king Vir Pandyadeva. Also, at Annur in Coimbatore, a Veḷḷāḷa of Dharapuram contributed money for a lamp in Mannisvara temple. Money was also donated by the Veḷḷāḷas for other purposes as well. An inscription records a gift of gold for offering crushed rice (aval) in Vaidyanath temple of Tirumalavadi in Trichinopoly district, made by Kendala Veḷḷāḷa Pillaiyar of Kumballumbur in Omya-nādu, a district of Tondai-nādu. In the Idigarai inscription in Coimbatore, a gift of 40 panam is reportedly made by a member of the Veḷḷāḷan-Korrandai community for feeding pilgrims from various places on daily basis. However, the donors were not exclusively men, as two Veḷḷāḷa women are also reported to have made gifts of money at Kulsekharswamin temple at Solamdevi in Coimbatore district during the reign of King Vira Chōladeva. In another inscription (818 CE), a gift of money was made by Puvandi, the wife of Appi puvan, a Veḷḷāḷa of Angutta-nallur for a lamp in the temple of Somnathdeva at Arrur in Tirunelveli district in the reign of Jatvarman Srivallabha. These two records throw considerable light on

89 ARE, 13 of 1922–23.
90 ARE, 18 of 1922–23.
91 ARE, 14 of 1922–23.
92 ARE, 23 of 1922–23.
93 ARE, 621 of 1922-23.
94 ARE, 98 of 1920.
95 ARE, 36 of 1922-23.
96 ARE, 226 of 1910.
participation of women in religious affairs as well as on degrees of economic independence of Veḷḷāḷa women.

Donations to the temples were also made in form of taxes. An inscription (1265-66 CE) from Tirumullaivayal in Chingleput records the gift of the proceeds from certain taxes like ur-kadamai, ayam, perasadavari etc by the inhabitants (nattavar) of Pular-kottam and Ikkattu-kottam for repairs and unguents in the temple.  

Another marked feature of temple donations is the gift of cattle and sheep for maintaining a perpetual lamp in the temple. An inscription, dated 1225 CE, records the gift of 32 cows by Ninraurnattu-velan for burning a perpetual lamp in Vatisvara temple at Ramgiri in Chingleput district. In 835 CE, during the period of Sri Vallabhadeva, a Veḷḷāḷa of Kurralur in Kerelasinga-valanāḍu donated 25 cows and a bull in the temple of Tiruttalisvara at Tiruppattur in Ramnathpuram district. Elsewhere, at Madam (995 CE) in North Arcot district, a Veḷḷāḷa, Sendamaraik-kannan Solakan, made a gift of cows for a lamp in Tatakapurisvara temple during the reign of King Rajarajadeva. During the reign of Parantaka I, two inscriptions register the gifts of 90 sheep each by the same Vellalli, Sattan Malli in 928 and 938 CE respectively for burning a perpetual lamp in the same Veda-ranyesvara temple at Vedaranyam in Taṅjavūr district. This is an example of a massive donation by a Veḷḷāḷa woman and speaks of the economic status of Veḷḷāḷa women as well the nature of their participation in temple promotion activities. A Veḷḷāḷa is also reported to have made a gift of sheep for burning a lamp in Tiruvaludisvara temple.

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98 SII, XVII, 723; ARE, 666 of 1904 (?).
99 SII, no. 694, vol. 17, p. 332 [ARE, 638 of 1904].
100 SII, no. 246, vol. 14, p. 152 [ARE, 108 of 1908].
101 ARE, 256 of 1919.
102 SII, no. 518, vol. 17, p. 213 [ARE, 476 of 1904]; SII, no. 528, vol. 17, p. 216 [ARE, 486 of 1904].
at Perungulam in Tirunelveli district. Incidentally, 90 sheep was the normal size of
donation for burning of one perpetual lamp and 32 cows for half a lamp. It has been
argued that these figures symbolize standard exchange value and did not imply actual
donation of animals since estimate of donated figures enormously exceeds the actual
livestock distribution of a particular region. But the significant point that emerges from
these donations is that the Vellāla peasants possessed considerable cattle wealth which
emphasizes the strong agrarian foundation of the community.

Paddy also constituted an important object of donation by the Vellāla agriculturists. Recorded during Rajadhiraja II’s reign, the Alambakkam inscription (1170 CE) from Tiruchirappalli informs that the Vellālas, living in the brahma-deya village, contributed some grain (4 nali of oil per ma of land) to the local temple. The inscription specifically mentions that the violators of this agreement would be treated as opponents of the King and periyanādu. According to Tirumala inscription (1235 CE) from Chittor, the periyanattavar contributed some paddy on each patti of land to their favourite deity Tirumangaiyalvar at Tirupati. Another inscription from Tiruppangili in Tiruchirappalli records that Chittirameli-periyanādu and nammakal met in a large gathering and decided to contribute a quantity of paddy both from wet and dry lands towards renovation work on the circumambulation corridor and a gateway tower in the Siva temple. The contribution of paddy and other food grains is indicative of the status of

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103 SII, no. 131, vol. 14, p. 68 [ARE, 213 of 1932–33].
104 V. Ramaswamy, op. cit., Textiles, p. 43.
107 TDI, I, 40; Karashima & Subbrayalu, op. cit., p. 93.
108 ARE, 189 of 1938-39; Karashima & Subbrayalu, p. 94.
the Vellālas in the process of cultivation and food production. The inscriptions also help us to understand the crop patterns both in wet and dry lands and the nature of measurement and assessment of agricultural yield. The Vadakurangaduturai inscription\textsuperscript{109} (1307 CE) from Taṅjāvūr which belongs to the period of King Virpandya tells us that \textit{Chittirameli-periyanādu} donated a quantity of paddy for each plough, person and artisan and also for different kinds of merchandise like cloth bundles, pepper, gold, rice and paddy for renovation work on the circumambulation corridor of the Siva temple. Apart from yielding information on the range of articles of ritual donation, the evidence shed good deal of light on the industrial and agricultural production of the time. Tittagudi inscription (1167 CE) from South Arcot district reports gift of paddy and money by the inhabitants of Sittirameli-

\textit{periyanādu}.\textsuperscript{110} Another inscription records that the agriculturists of \textit{Chittirameli-periyanādu} agreed to give annually one \textit{padakku} of paddy for each plough and one \textit{kuruni} for each man, to meet the requirements of the temple at Tirukoilur in South Arcot district.\textsuperscript{111} However, in one particular case, a gift of corn (\textit{kanbu}) was reportedly made by the people of Sittirameli-

\textit{periyanādu} and Puluvanādu at Tirumuruganpundi in Coimbatore district. The gift of corn might suggest a period of constraint, i.e. famine, which probably resulted in crop failure and non-availability of surplus paddy.

The Vellālas also offered temple donations in form of temple services and setting up of deities. In South Arcot district, an inscription from Melsevur records the setting up of the image of Uma–Bhattaraki for god Adavattur by Chittirayali, a member of the corps

\textsuperscript{109} Avanam, 10, pp 59-60; Karashima & Subbrayalu, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{110} ARE, 21 of 1903.
\textsuperscript{111} ARE, 117 of 1900.
called Jananathal-terinja-valan groundbreaking Velaikkaran, in the army of Sri Rajarajadeva, and a Veḷḷāḷa resident in Ravikulamanikkapuram.112 A fourteenth century inscription records that it was covenanted by the inhabitants of Vallanāḍu that the Veḷḷāḷa tenants of the three villages Palaikkudi, Kalangudi and Kilinallur should pay their obligations and render service to the temple of Arangulanathar in Tiruvarangulam in Pudukkottai district.113 These records highlight the range of participation of the Veḷḷāḷas in temple affairs, particularly in terms of manpower and resources. The growing tendency of this community, both at the individual and corporate level, to share the ritual burden can be considered as an indicator of their recognition as potential patrons in the ritual world.

The construction of mandapa and gifts of pillars, door-pots, beams, stones etc constituted a considerable part of temple donations by the Veḷḷāḷas. In the reign of Vikrama Chōla, a pillar was gifted by a Veḷḷāḷa to the Kalakalishvara temple at Koyilpala in Coimbatore district.114 At the same place, during the reign of Virarajendradeva, a gift of pillar was made by a Veḷḷāḷa of Kavaiyan-puttur.115 At Nattakkaraiyur in Coimbatore district, a pillar was donated by Alagan Uttamsola Gamindan Kariyan of the Veḷḷāḷa caste.116 In another record, reported from Kunnamalai in Trichinappalli, the name of a gaminda (i.e. gaundan), who was one of the Veḷḷāḷas, is also registered.117 In the same place, a pillar was donated by Koṅguveladarsiyar Iraksha-perumal, a Veḷḷāḷa payirar of Karaiyur.118 A record of Akhilandapuram (Coimbatore) says that a gift of two door-posts

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112 SII, no. 238, vol. 17.
113 ARE, 271 of 1915.
114 ARE, 641 of 1922-23.
115 ARE, 642 of 1922-23.
116 ARE, 233 of 1920.
117 ARE, 43 of 1913.
118 ARE, 235 of 1920.
in the Ardha-mandapa of Agastyesvarasvamin temple was made by a Veḷḷāla of the Andai sub-section.\textsuperscript{119} At Konapuram (Coimbatore), in the period of Vikram Chōla, a gift of beam was made by a Veḷḷāla, Udayamanikkasila–Setti.\textsuperscript{120} The title of Setti to a Veḷḷāla is noticeable as it denotes probably the Veḷḷāla–Setti sect.\textsuperscript{121} The charity of a stone Nirmalya-trough by a Veḷḷāla of Kangayam is also evident in an inscription at Akhilandapuram in Coimbatore.\textsuperscript{122} The inscription from Pariyur (Coimbatore) records the building of the mandapa by certain Veḷḷāla–gavundan of Nanjegavundanpalaiyam.\textsuperscript{123} An inscription from Nandivanam in Chingleput records a gift of a perpetual lamp by a certain Sekkilan Kuttera.\textsuperscript{124} A gift of perpetual lamp is also reported from Perungulam in Tirunelveli by the son-in law of Tayanjattan, a Veḷḷāla of Pallip-Perumbulingavu. The active financial support yielded by the Veḷḷālas in the construction, repair and maintenance of certain portions of the temple suggest the status of a peasant group in terms of social and ritual acceptance.

Donation in cash or kind was also made in form of crime expiation (udirapattī). In twelfth century, a relative of a Veḷḷāla accidentally stabbed a man for which he had to make a gift of 32 cows for burning a lamp in the temple.

The existence of the Veḷḷālas as a respectable and affluent community is clearly reflected in the inscriptions. It has been observed that out of 1800 individual donors mentioned in the Chōla inscriptions, only Brahmins and about twenty other persons are

\textsuperscript{119} ARE, 244 of 1920.
\textsuperscript{120} ARE, 140 of 1920.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} ARE, 242 of 1920.
\textsuperscript{123} ARE, 192 of 1911.
identified by caste, and of these, eighteen are either Veləlas or Settis, meaning ‘agriculturists’ and ‘merchants’ of respectable standing.\textsuperscript{125} In this context, it is significant to note that in terms of temple donations, only two social groups, the Veləlas and the Ayyavole merchant guilds were able to match or surpass the size of the donation by the weaver organization.\textsuperscript{126}

The actual status and influence of this landed community can also be gleaned from their participation and relationship in/with the temple management. From the 10th to 12th century, the Veləlas are said to have shared a part of the control over temple lands and administration with the Brahmins.\textsuperscript{127} In the temple of Chidambaram, the Veləlas are seen as prominent sponsors of and participants in temple festivals, as co-administrators of two smaller temples, one dedicated to Kali (12th–13th cent.) and a second to Patancali (11th cent.), and as managers and residents of local ascetic communities (matam).\textsuperscript{128} The relative position of the Veləlas in the ritual hierarchy can also be ascertained from the fourteenth century inscriptive records of the Rajagopal and Dharmisvara temples in Manimangalam that mention the order of ritual precedence of the tirupalli eluchchi (waking-up ceremony of idol) which is as follows—the State officials, the Sthanathar (temple managers), the assembly heads, the Veləlar, the Kaikkolar, the Devradiyar, Malaiyantangal (?), Talaikariyan (secretary!), Ennaivaniyar (oil merchants),


\textsuperscript{127} Champakalakshmi, ‘From Devotion & Dissent,’ p. 154.

Agambadiyar (shepherds) and Navidra (barbers). It is important to note that the dominant agricultural caste of the Veḷḷāḷar seem to have possessed a ritually higher status than the Kaikkolar and other professional groups. The degrees of participation of the Veḷḷāḷas in the temple promotion activities contributed to the formation of a distinct identity characterized by self assertion and social recognition.

In medieval south Indian society, the temples had tremendous social significance. Temples exercised immense power and influence in terms of political, social and ritual legitimacy the agrarian order during the Chōla period. The common people as well as the social and political leadership looked at the temples as a centre of power and prestige and harboured aspirations to derive strength and prestige by associating with temple affairs. The temple donations of the Veḷḷāḷas must be considered in light of the existing notions that temple is a major source of social acceptability and ritual legitimacy. It can be argued that the Veḷḷāḷas made their contributions to the temples in form of land, gold, money, paddy and services with an eye on accruing social and ritual advantages from such activities.

On the other hand, the contribution of the Veḷḷāḷas in spiritual pursuits is also well-recognized in unequivocal terms. It is strikingly noticeable that of the sixty three Saiva bhaktas of South India in early medieval times, only twenty-seven were Brahmins and Ksatriyas (crown chiefs), while most of them belonged to the Vaisya and Śūdra orders, the largest number being the Veḷḷāḷas from Karnataka. According to Veḷḷāḷa traditions, Nammalvar, who existed between early Alvars (5th-6th cent.) and later Alvars

130 R.S. Sharma, op. cit., p. 258.
(8th-9th cent.), is said to have belonged to the Veḷḷāḷa community. Likewise, Cekkilār, the author of the Periya Puranam, was a Veḷḷāḷa and a minister in the court of Kulottunga II. In this context, it is pertinent to quote from Purananuru which says, "Of the four divisions based upon differences, if one of the lower classes is learned those of the upper classes shall also be subject to him." However, the participation of the Veḷḷāḷas in intellectual and spiritual pursuits brought considerable respect and goodwill to the members of the community.

The cultural traits of the Veḷḷāḷas also speak of their relative position in the caste hierarchy. It is believed that even to this day the Veḷḷāḷa does not take meals at the hands of a Padaiyadchi, who claims to be a Kṣatriya, or a merchant who calls himself Vaisya. The Jesuit sources also concede that the Veḷḷāḷas occupied the highest place among the Śūdras. Adhering to vegetarianism and devout way of life, the Veḷḷāḷas vied with the Brahmins in temporal and spiritual pursuits, and strictly opposed the concept that they were created for servitude. They spread their choicest doctrines of Saiva Siddhanta through their own mathas and educational centres and lived apart to maintain their purity and integrity. It may be noted that the Saivas established powerful non-Brahmin lineages as custodians of the Saiva Siddhanta canon, based on the support from the

133 N. Subrahmanian, op. cit., p. 270.
134 Ibid.
135 P. Subramanian, op. cit., p. 38.
136 Martin, Letter of 1626. Cited in P. Subramanian, op. cit., p. 38. Also see Champakalakshmi, 'From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance: The Bhakti of the Tamil Alvars and Nayanar' in Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal (ed.) Tradition, Dissent and Ideology (Delhi, 1996), p. 152.
Veḻḷālas, the merchants and Kaikkola groups. On the other hand, the Veḻḷālas also showed some distinct cultural characteristics. In this respect, the Taramangalam inscription from Salem has great cultural relevance. It indicates the participation of the Veḻḷālas in learning and throws light on their educational standard. It shows that they are conscious of the traditional values of guru-shishya parampara and conforms to the established norms of society. It shows the degrees of respect yielded by the peasant Veḻḷālas to the teachers and gurus. It may serve as an indicator of cultural mobility through accumulation of Brahmin cal knowledge and learning.

It is interesting to note that social differentiation in South India has also been explained through linguistic framework. The language of the Saiva scriptures (Tamil) and of the Vaisnava scriptures (Tamil, Sanskrit and Manipravala) had some linkages with the caste orientation as the Saivas became predominantly Veḻḷāla and the Vaisnavas predominantly Brahmins.

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PRIVILEGES:

The social position of the Veḻḷālas may also be seen in light of certain kinds of privileges enjoyed by the members of the community. The status of the Veḻḷālas is reflected in the caste and ritual ranking around the temple which was a major factor of social differentiation. The Pallar and the Paraiyar, who were outcastes and whose entry was barred in the temple, are said to have worked as agricultural labourers for the temple, Brahmins and Veḻḷālas. It is noteworthy that the Veḻḷālas are seen as a coercive

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137 Champakalakshmi, *Trade*, p. 71.
139 Champakalakshmi, *State & Economy*, p. 283.
authority over the free labour and shared the hitherto exclusive privileges of the temple and the Brahmins.

The increased ability of the Veḷḷālas to stabilize their financial position and power differentiation of the local peasantry is reflected in a set of inscriptions\(^{140}\) (1239 CE) from Mannargudi which record a joint regulation in which it is stated that the Veḷḷāla peasants had complained that they could no longer maintain themselves since their income, i.e. cash and paddy, was already put to too many purposes. Therefore it was declared that obligations of the Veḷḷālas for the repair of the river bunds should be in proportion to their taxable land; that for other obligations, payments were to be based upon a strict levy per unit (ma) of cultivated land; and that no additional payments were to be demanded on various pretexts; and the additional demand on Veḷḷāla households of a special tax to support Brahmins (brahmanar-perkkadamaɪ) was abolished.\(^{141}\) This regulation is obviously an attempt to strike a balance between the Brahmins and the Veḷḷālas by conceding some favours to the latter.

It has been observed that the landed community of the Veḷḷālas also performed administrative and military functions; and the nattar, leading men of nāḍu, belonged to this caste.\(^{142}\) The strength of this community can also be surmised from the fact that a large portion of the army of Rajaraja Chōla was raised and commanded by the dominant peasantry of the Veḷḷālas.\(^{143}\) Owing to their recognition as dominant landed elites, the Veḷḷālas enjoyed a considerable share in administrative positions and access to State

\(^{140}\) ARE, 1897, 96, 98, 104; \(S\text{II}, v. 6, 48, 50, 58\). Cited Stein, op. cit., 1985, p. 223.
\(^{141}\) Stein, op. cit., 1985, p. 224.
\(^{142}\) Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 67.
\(^{143}\) Stein, 1985, op. cit., p.
power. Kenneth Hall mentions that the powerful Chōla kings such as Rajaraja I, Rajendra I and Kulottunga I tried to centralize state administration by recruiting officers from among Brahmins and Veḷḷāḷa landholders, the latter of whom might be called ‘patrimonial’ bureaucrats.144 This evidence may be construed to show that the Brahmins and the Veḷḷāḷa received some kind of parity of esteem and parity of position as far as employment in State offices was concerned. This picture is further heightened by the observation that the grants of villages and titles to Brahmins and Veḷḷāḷas by middle Chōla kings probably created a crisis in the state’s existence.145 Karashima states that the title ‘muvendavelan,’ which was given to the officers of Veḷḷāḷa caste, indicates close relation between the Chōla kings and the title-holders, and underline their importance in Chōla administration.146

The Veḷḷāḷas exercised substantial influence in matters pertaining to social control and self-governance. Two stone inscriptions of Tinnevelly district record an ostracism voted by the Veḷḷāḷas against the Vellai-nadar community.147 The form of punishment for the crimes committed by the Veḷḷāḷas or against the Veḷḷāḷas is also suggestive of their social weight and prestige in society. It is reported that when a Veḷḷāḷa was tried by an officer of the king’s government for accidentally killing a man, it was decided, on the advice of the Bhattas that the death sentence could not be meted out to him since he was a Veḷḷāḷa.148 A ninth or tenth century record from Kilappalur in Tiruchirappalli refers to a

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144 Hall, op. cit., p. 53.
145 Ibid.
146 Karashima (1984) op. cit. p. 58.
147 ARE, 325 of 1916–17.
fight between a Kaikkola and a Veḷḷāḷa kilavan (landowner/village elder) in which the Veḷḷāḷa was killed and the Kaikkola had to make expiation by donating ninety sheep for a perpetual lamp to the local temple. ¹⁴⁹ In one case of twelfth century, a Veḷḷāḷa and another man were comparing their skill in arms when a third man, who was a relative of the former, also tried his strength, but he stabbed the second man. ¹⁵⁰ The relatives of the deceased were consulted and it was decided that the third man should donate thirty two cows for burning a lamp in the temple. In another case, a Śūdra went out hunting, missed his aim and shot a Veḷḷāḷa, over which the agriculturists of the seventy nine districts assembled and declared the Śūdra guilty who was directed to present sixty four cows for burning two lamps in the temple. ¹⁵¹ Here, the terms Veḷḷāḷa and Śūdra are mentioned separately which shows that Veḷḷāḷas are not ordinary Śūdras but enjoy a relatively higher status and distinct identity. Secondly, it is obvious that the degrees of punishment are always higher for the crime against the Veḷḷāḷa than for those by the Veḷḷāḷas, i.e. a Veḷḷāḷa or his relative donates only thirty two cows for killing a man, but a double amount of sixty four cows (or ninety sheep) was extracted from the killer of Veḷḷāḷa. The immunity from death sentence to the Veḷḷāḷas is also reminiscent of Manu’s regulation regarding the Brahmins. In other words, remission of retribution appears to be an exclusive privilege of this community. Therefore, discrimination in the rule of law in favour of the Veḷḷāḷas signifies a ritually high status of the Veḷḷāḷas vis-à-vis general mass of society.

¹⁵⁰ K.V.S. Aiyar, op. cit., p. 326.
¹⁵¹ Ibid.
SOCIAL MOBILITY OF THE VELLAVALAS: EMERGING TRENDS

From the above discussion, it is obvious that the Vellaals were a highly conscious and dynamic community of peasants who were dissatisfied with their traditional ranking among the lower caste cultivating groups of south India. The spatial spread of this community was quite extensive as suggested by their existence in almost all the territories controlled by the Cholas. On the ritual scale, the Vellaals had been considered as a low caste Sudra people. The Sudra status, shared by the Vellaals with various other peasant communities and artisan groups, was regarded as a mark of inferiority and served as a social barrier against their social advancement. The process of economic progression and acquisition of new resources by the Vellaals was not immediately accompanied by any restructuring of ritual order or conferment of higher ritual rank to the newly rising classes, particularly landholders. The power of money, land and temple presented a new opening to the Vellaala people to traverse the lower rungs of the society and articulate their inner urge for a respectable position in society.

In the eleventh century, the Vellaals' attempts to take control of the lands they used to cultivate can be seen as a first major step in the direction of mobility. They increased their efforts to establish control over land in the Koṅgu region and the Kāvēri valley where a substantial population of the Vellaala peasants existed. During the pre-Chōla period, the Vellaals were considered as one of the several cultivating groups, though they also appear as landowners and land donors. From the latter half of the eleventh century, we see an impressive process of change in their conditions when they shift from the status of cultivator to that of substantial landlords.
**Veḷḷālas** can be regarded as a progressive and ambitious social group that harboured perceptible intentions for acquiring a dominant position in the nāḍus, and high and esteemed social status in the eyes of the common people. Being a peasant community, they drew considerable economic strength from their control over their lands and the surplus produce of their fields. The newly acquired economic power aggravated their desire for higher ritual status and higher degrees of social command and control.

The fresh opportunities arising out of urbanization and diversification of economy as well as the opening of the maritime trade contributed to the economic prosperity of many castes. This aggravated their desire to possess more and more resources available to them. The Veḷḷālas desired to join the ranks of landholders which could establish their control over land and bring immense power and prestige associated with the status of landowners. The economic changes in 12th and 13th centuries transformed the agrarian order by diminishing or demolishing the power of old landlords and replacing them by new landholders who were previously working as tenant-cultivators. It has been argued by Karashima and Subbarayalu that this trend also contributed to the emergence of sub-infeudatories and consequently the growth of feudalism in the medieval society at the end of the Chōla period.

It is necessary to locate the Veḷḷālas in the social map of south India. Although the inscriptional evidence is quite asymmetrical, some significant points nevertheless do emerge in relation to the status of this social group. First, the Veḷḷālas strikingly stand out as a highly-respected and predominant community of wealthy peasant proprietors. Among the non-Brahmins, there is none who can match the cumulative strength of this
community in terms of land-ownership, control over agricultural production, administration and temple donors. Seen from the angle of its association with the centres of power, the Veḷḷāḷas are found to be considerably close to the priestly class of the Brahmins and the ruling class of kings and chiefs which further strengthened their position among the non-Brahmins. But in terms of ritual status, the Veḷḷāḷas were not considered as a high caste.

As we know, Chōla period was a period of great transition in form of structural changes in the social, economic and ideological realms of Tamil country. But the process of change had started long before in the pre-Chōla period particularly in the north and south of Tamil country. The Pallava rule in the north of river Kāvēri, and the Pandya rule in the region of Madurai marked a major shift in agrarian organization through the introduction of brahmdeya and temple. The system of land grants to Brahmins was certainly begun by the Pallavas and Pandyas but in due course of time, the Veḷḷāḷas too adopted the royal practice. The fact that the Velallas appeared as land donors indicates the degrees of their landholding capacity as without becoming peasant-proprietors they couldn’t have performed the function of a donor. The system of land grants to the Brahmins led to expansion of cultivable land and extension of agriculture in new areas. In terms of social prestige, the Veḷḷāḷa peasantry emerged stronger as important landowners, land donors and top promoters of agriculture. Chōla Empire also witnessed the emergence of the Brahmins and Varnasrama Dharma which resulted into restructuring of Tamil society and realignment of social classes. The Brahmins were the chief

\[152\] Champakalakshmi, *Trade*, p. 206.
\[153\] Ibid.
beneficiaries of these changes as the Chōla rulers patronised them through liberal land grants and even village grants. However, it may be noted that the supremacy of the Brahminism resulted into reshuffling of social order in accordance to the Varna model with due emphasis on social hegemony of the Brahmins and Kṣatriyas, and social exclusion of the others. It is noteworthy that the model of four-fold Varna, as vigorously found in northern India, was not precisely valid or applicable to southern society wherein the identification and classification of the middle orders, i.e. ‘Kṣatriya’ and ‘Vaisya’ had always been rather vague and uncertain. Nevertheless, the Brahmins tried to consolidate their position by appeasing and aligning with the two powerful sections—the Chōla kings and the Veḷḷāla landlords. They provided legitimacy to the kingliness of the Chōlas by inventing genealogies and conferring on them titles such as Surya-Kula Kṣatriyas. Besides, they elevated the social status of the Veḷḷālas by labelling them with a new term—Sat-Śūdra. The social impact of the change in the Veḷḷālas’ position from ‘Śūdra’ to ‘Sat-Śūdra’ was tremendous as it significantly altered the social rank of the Veḷḷālas among the multitudes of other social groups. It was a remarkable step in social progression of this community as the Brahmins had conferred Sat-Śūdras exclusively to the Veḷḷālas. It was a mark of special honour to a particular community who were hitherto considered as one of the several Śūdra groups. However, it must be emphasized that the grant of Sat-Śūdra to the Veḷḷālas by the Brahmins was neither a gesture of cordiality nor an act of generosity. It is not without significance that new labels arrived at a time when the Veḷḷāla community had obtained substantial agrarian wealth and landed property, and

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155 Hanuman, p. 107.
strengthened their economic foundations. The economic mobility had enormously enlarged their resource base, transformed their living, and pushed them into landed aristocracy. The economic transformation of the Veḷḷāḷas had already consolidated their position and made them so indispensable that they could not have been ignored either by their imperial masters or by the contemporary religious heads. The grant of Sat-Śūdra was only a ritual legitimization or social acknowledgement of the occurring changes and economic upliftment of an influential peasant group. In other words, it was a rationalization of the material transformation of a dynamic peasant community that had tremendously gained power and influence to such an extent that in face of any further denial of its genuine worth or actual social standing, it could have carved out appropriate space in the social map of the times.

Therefore, by the end of the Chōla period, they emerge as sat-Sutras, though the Śūdra tag continued to haunt them. This is because Tamil society failed to organize in accordance to the classical varna model and in the process evolved its own region-specific variant of varna—Brahmins and non-Brahmins. In the absence of clear-cut middle varnas, the entire mass of non-Brahmins was branded as Śūdra and the Veḷḷāḷas became one of the victims of this development. Yet, the transformation from Śūdras to Sat-Śūdras was remarkable.

Another factor that contributed to the social progress of the Veḷḷāḷas was the role of Chittirameli-periyanaḍu. The existence of a full-fledged agrarian guild, widely spread in an extensive geographical area suggests deliberate and prolonged efforts of a highly organized peasant community. It demonstrates the social urge of a specific social group
to protect its professional and materialistic interests and strengthen its socio-economic position in a highly competitive milieu. An association or a guild cannot come into existence unless it appeals to the collective consciousness of a homogeneous group and caters to its common needs and aspirations. The constitution and management of such an organization involves an unusually high degree of collective superhuman endeavour, which is possible only in a complex society characterized by specialization and social differentiation. Though the formation of a corporate organization is governed by its basic professional and commercial interests, the advantages of this exercise go far beyond that when such an organization tends to assume the role of a cohesive caste group and attempts to bring lasting benefits to its members by addressing higher issues of socio-economic significance. In this context, Chittirameli-periyakanadu was a kind of movement, as suggested by Karashima and Subbarayalu, which contributed to the ascendancy of the Veñälas in the society. Through its collective strength, economic power and authority in local decision-making, it led to the emergence of the Veñälas in a socially advantageous position vis-à-vis other communities. This phenomenon was one of the decisive factors that pushed the Veñälas on the social ladder of the local hierarchy.

It may be argued that the social conditions were ripe for change, and mobility was in air during the latter half of the Chola period. The Veñälas were not the exclusive beneficiaries of this process of change as many other communities also received the advantages in terms of social and economic mobility. According to Karashima and Subbarayalu, during the 12th and 13th centuries, newly emerged peasant communities, other than Veñälas, increased their power and assumed leadership of the movement
started by the Veḷḷāḷas. Some inscriptions clearly point out that certain people like Pallis and Surudimans followed the same mobility patterns which were adopted by the Veḷḷāḷas at the end of the Chōla period.

It is evident that on account of their economic mobility, the Veḷḷāḷas were able to hold a special position in the social hierarchy. To some extent, they transcended the existing social divisions, i.e. Valangai and Idangai. The bifurcation of the lower orders of the Tamil society into Valangai and Idangai—the right-hand and left-hand castes—was an exclusive feature of South Indian society. The social significance of the right and left hand groups lies in the fact that to a considerable extent, these divisions determined the social relationship between the artisans, cultivating classes and other working groups particularly from the eleventh century onwards. Though the term Valangai occurred in tenth century in Rajaraja I’s armies, valaṅgai-velaikkara-padaigal, but it was mainly in early eleventh century that individuals making endowments to temples are specifically mentioned as belonging to Valangai division. Likewise, earliest reference to Idangai dates from late eleventh century when during ‘the second regnal year of the king (Kulottunga I) there was a clash between the right-hand and left-hand communities’. It is believed that broadly Idangai division included traders, artisans, and labourers while the sections that dealt with agricultural activities constituted the Valangai. However, the social status of the two divisions was not alike as Valangai groups were considered superior or privileged class vis-à-vis left-hand Idangai groups who were consigned to a relatively low position. The social and occupational distance between the two divisions

157 *IMP.*, v. 2, p. 1287, 341 of 1907, dt. 1014 CE
158 *ARE*, 1936-37, para. 27. Also cited in Stein, op. cit., p. 174.
generated sharp social divisions and animosity which often resulted into serious clashes and revolts. The formation of these dual divisions was not an independent phenomenon as it had certain linkage with the ongoing process of change, particularly with the economic and social upliftment of the Vellālas. An inscription, found at Aduturai, in Trichinopoly district, throws revealing light on the exclusion of the Vellālas from the right and left-hand divisions. It records an agreement among themselves, by the Valangai 98 classes, and the Idangai 98 classes of Valudalamattuussavadi as against the Brahmins and the Vellālans, who held proprietary rights (kani) over the lands of that district. In many inscriptions, the Vellālas appear outside the fold of the twin categories. Burton Stein has tried to show that in this process, the superior landed class of the Vellālas attained a sat-Śūdra (superior among Śūdras) status whereas other agricultural groups like the actual cultivators and labourers were consigned to an inferior place among the dual divisions. Therefore, the economic transition of the Vellālas helped them to consolidate their social position and attain a relatively higher and privileged position above the existing right-hand and left-hand divisions.

The increase in frequency and size of temple donations by the Vellālas expressed the tendency of social assertion. Recognizing the advantages in terms of social prestige and acceptance, the Vellālas emerged as one of the largest donors. They were also conscious of the social significance of the registration of their names, caste, village and organization in the temple inscriptions. In a way, this tendency demonstrates an assertion of social identity of a newly-rising community. The increase in the rise of their

159 ARE, 34 of 1913.
160 Ibid., pp. 84-85.
contributions to the temples also indicate their social elevation vis-à-vis Brahmins. The emergence of the Vellālas as the managers of the temple and their role in temple-building suggest the intrusion into the Brahmin monopoly in temple-building. These activities helped to create a nexus between the Vellālas and the temple and contributed to their access to the sacred centre and gave them proximity to the centre of social control. This increased interest in temple affairs can be marked as an important stage in the process of mobility as it prepared the grounds for higher ritual rank and benefits accruing from this esteemed position. The association of the Vellāla community in a joint capacity in temple affairs suggests massive mobilization and a collective ideological orientation. This can be regarded as corporate mobility drive and the patterns of their preferences in temple affairs can be ascertained.

During the Chōla period, we also see a considerable increase in the intellectual activities of the Vellālas. The poets and saints belonging to the Vellāla community and enjoying support of the masses are also found in this period. The greater participation of the Vellāla scholars in contemporary literary activities and writings also contributed to their acceptability in the intellectual classes of the times. The social relevance of this aspect lies in the degrees of patronage which Vellāla poets and saints received in the Tamil region.

It has to be seen how far the Vellālas’ interests in particular deities, temples and religious activities were inspired by the classical, mythological and contemporary religious themes. This also throws light on the evolution of their ideological basis. Are they resisting Brahminical innovations or accepting classical-sanskritic forms of
worship? Are they abandoning some old forms and trying to establish new patterns such as folk forms in temple-building and worship? But we fail to find any substantial change in this direction which could be construed as an attempt to replace the existing forms by alternative models. Except few slight deviations such as the patronage to Buddhist temple, no major religious shift is visible in case of the Veḷḷālas. Whatever change is found, it is restricted within the fold of Brahmanism and conventional norms of worship. This can be interpreted merely as an expression of social and spiritual urges of an ambitious and influential mobile group.

However, these changes had other dimensions too. In light of their modes of worship and patronage, it can be argued that the patterns of their preference have strong linkages with those of the upper castes, i.e. Brahmins. In this regard, the Veḷḷālas are found on the path of Sanskritization. The decisive efforts of the Veḷḷālas in terms of ritualistic participation can be better understood only in terms of Sankritization. Moreover, their efforts or refinement and sophistication also suggest that they are interested in enhancing and polishing their social image without disturbing the existing religious order. Yet, we need to further investigate if Veḷḷālas followed any independent course of action.

The degrees of mobility also depended on the attitude of the upper castes towards these changes and the newly-risen community. In this case, we need to ask whether Brahmins recognized the new claims of the Veḷḷālas? Yes! The Brahmins did recognize the Veḷḷālas by conferring them with the title of Sat-Śūdras. The Brahmins welcome their social mobility despite the fact that the Veḷḷālas encroached upon the land rights and
other exclusive privileges of the Brahmins. Considering that this change occurred in a medieval agrarian society, it was certainly a very substantial change that had high social significance in social history. But we would like to emphasize that the change had neither altered the caste system nor had uprooted the existing cultural values or system. Being in tune with the principles of Sankritization, the story of the Vellālas can be regarded as an upward mobility movement of a so-called lower caste within the existing social structure.

This movement was a linked process in which various historical forces contributed and helped the Vellālas to climb the social ladder. This indicates that the caste system has intrinsic capacity to respond to the historical conditions as well to accommodate the ramifications of those changes within its ambit. In other words, it reveals the inner strength of the social order to correct the previous abnormalities of society and adapt itself to the new situation. This was a unique example of social dynamism of Indian society, i.e. co-existence of social change with continuity of the caste system.

The mobility of the Vellālas from the tenant-cultivators to the rank of landholders and aristocrats can be viewed as intra-occupation mobility. The change in occupation is usually considered as the principal factor for social mobility, but the study of the Vellālas presents a new and interesting dimension to the notion of social change within existing social categories. The pattern of change that transformed the regular Vellāla cultivators or tenant-farmers into peasant proprietors, and the Śūdra cultivators to the Sat-Śūdra status demonstrates that the notions of social stagnation of caste society do not stand the test of
validity and the southern medieval agrarian order has enormous space for mobility and change. The modes of mobility seen in the case of the Veḷḷāḷas also reveal the fact that the south Indian peasant society is not uniform and homogeneous and variations are quite perceptible in the actual position of the social classes. The movement of the Veḷḷāḷas from commonplace cultivating class to the rank of the dominant landholders reveals the range and nature of social differentiation in the peasant society of the Tamil region. Hence, the patterns of mobility shows that the social change has not disturbed the existing structure and appears to be in close conformity with existing caste rules and social order. The transformation of the Veḷḷāḷas from Śūdra to Sat-Śūdra status is a mammoth stride in terms of social change, particularly in a medieval agrarian hierarchical society, characterized by the notions of rigidity and changelessness. But in reality, important alterations had taken place in the socio-economic position of the Veḷḷāḷas and as a result, they had risen to a new social stratum. Judged from the medieval Indian standards, even this amount of social and economic changes were amazing and outstanding. This is obviously an example of internal change that occurred on account of external factors but to great extent determined by the consistent efforts of an aspiring peasant community. It reveals the inner dynamism of the Indian caste system and demolishes the notion of stagnation and changelessness of caste system.
SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AMONG SOME MEDIEVAL PEASANT COMMUNITIES: BROAD CONCLUSIONS

In the foregoing chapters I have examined case studies of three medieval peasant communities and discussed the nature of changes that eventually led to their social transformation. The choice of three vigorous peasant groups belonging to three distinct cultural and geographical zones—the Jâts of Gangetic Doâb, the Meos of Mewât (Râjasthân) and the Vejâlas of Tamilnâdu—is representative of cultural and regional variations of social change in medieval India. The chronological span of this study ranges from the 9th to 16th century which was coincidentally a period of great transition in middle ages, characterized by renewed interest in land, surplus, trade and territory. In north India, this period was marked by the establishment of new agrarian order and revenue system, spate of migrations and colonization of villages, imperial wars and ethnic consolidation, under the successive regimes of the Turks, Afghans and the Mughals. Likewise, Tamil country also witnessed important changes during this period such as upsurge in agriculture, trade and urbanization, corporal conflict and social cohesion, temple promotion and the rise of Brahmanism. Two political events can be considered here as major external factors that accelerated the process of ‘change’—the ascendancy of the Chôlas in the south, and the foundation of the Mughal power in the north.

In South India, the process of change had started long before in the pre-Chôla period during the reign of the Pallavas which marked a major shift in agrarian
organization through the introduction of *brahmadeya* and temple.\(^1\) This, along with the irrigation ventures, and support of the Brahmins and the Veḷḷāḷa agriculturists had transformed subsistent agriculture into surplus economy. During the pre-Chōla period, the Veḷḷāḷas were considered as one of the several cultivating groups, but from the latter half of the eleventh century, they shifted from the status of cultivators to that of substantial landholders.

The establishment of the Chōla rule in South India unleashed forces of change that led to the restructuring of Tamil economy and realignment of social groups. The process of urbanization and opportunities of maritime trade contributed to the economic prosperity of many castes and aggravated their desire to possess more and more landed resources. During this period, i.e. from ninth to thirteenth centuries, the traditional social order was paving way to *varnasrama* system.\(^2\) However, on the ritual scale, the Veḷḷāḷas were considered as a low caste Śūdra people. Nevertheless, the power of surplus, land and temple enabled the Veḷḷāḷa people to articulate their urge for a higher and respectable status in society.

The newly-acquired economic power of the Veḷḷāḷas is clearly reflected in their donations to the temples. Several inscriptions throw light on gifts of land to the temples made by the Veḷḷāḷas or their assembly, *Chittirameli Periyanādu*. Some records regarding enjoyment and grants of *kani* and *kaniyatchi* rights by the Veḷḷāḷas reveal degrees of their ownership of land and their privileges. Significantly, the Veḷḷāḷas now appeared above

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\(^1\) Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization – South India 300 B.C to 1300 A.D.*, Delhi, 1996, p. 206.

the right-hand Valangai and left-hand Idangai divisions. They also demonstrated considerable advancement in their power and position at the expense of the Brahmins in the Kāvērī valley.\(^3\) The Veḷḷālas now appeared as a coercive authority over the free labour and shared the hitherto exclusive privileges of the temple and the Brahmins. The Pallar and the Paraiyar, who were outcastes and whose entry was barred in the temple, are said to have worked as agricultural labourers for the temple, Brahmins and Veḷḷālas.\(^4\) The Veḷḷālas also performed administrative and military functions; and a large portion of the army of Rajaraja Chōla was raised and commanded by the dominant peasantry of the Veḷḷālas.\(^5\) The economic changes in 12th and 13th centuries transformed the agrarian order by demolishing the power of old landlords and replacing them by new landholders. Karashima and Subbarayalu postulated that this trend contributed to the emergence of feudalism in the Tamil society at the end of the Chōla period.

The Brahmins now tried to consolidate their position by aligning with the two powerful sections—the Chōla kings and the Veḷḷāla landlords. They invented genealogies for the Chōla rulers, and elevated the social status of the Veḷḷālas by labelling them with a new term—Sat-Śūdras. The social impact of the change in the Veḷḷālas’ position from ‘Śūdra’ to ‘Sat-Śūdra’ was tremendous as it altered the social rank of the Veḷḷāla agriculturists among other social groups. In other words, The grant of Sat-Śūdra was only a social acknowledgement of the economic upliftment of an influential peasant group.

For the Jāts, the ninth and tenth centuries were a period of transition during which they began to spread out from Sindh into northern Panjāb, and gradually shifted from a

\(^3\) Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004, p. ...
\(^4\) Champakalakshmi, ‘State & Economy’, p. 283.
pastoral to agricultural economy. In the eleventh century, several Persian chroniclers attested the presence of the Jāts in Panjab, and the subsequent enlargement of their manpower and resources. The eleventh century was a watershed in the evolution of the Jāts in terms of their spatial expansion into Panjab and peasantification of the community. Their conversion to plough agriculture transformed their economic base and augmented their manpower and resources. This period also saw a consistent growth in their warriorhood which found expression in their mounted and naval confrontation with Mahmud Ghazni.

The breakdown of law and order in wake of foreign invasions and political instability of the Delhi Sultanate had contributed to this process, leading to a chain of push and pull factors that displaced several communities including the Jāts. From the twelfth century onwards we see another phase of migrations of the Jāts from Panjab to the south-east and further west which continued till the early sixteenth century.6

The peasantification of the Jāts was accompanied by the process of colonization and resettlement. One important technological factor that contributed to the above phenomenon was the introduction of the Persian wheel. With the adoption of the Persian wheel, and the expansion of their village settlements in Panjab, the Jāts came to be recognized as substantial farmers. The Jāts were so deeply associated with cultivation that in Panjab, the term ‘Jāt’ became synonymous with agriculture.

The Jāts soon spread out into the entire Upper Gangā-Jamunā Doāb and mobilized their resources through their khāp network. The second phase of the Jāt migration was a

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high watermark in terms of their socio-economic identity. The new territorial shift transformed the previous Jäṭ cultivator into a substantial landlord or zamīndār. The Ā‘īn-i Akbarz delineates a prolific account of the distribution of the Jäṭ zamīndārs in the Upper Jamunā-Gangā Doāb and elsewhere in the heyday of the Mughal empire.

It is noteworthy that Dabistān-i Mazāhib described the Jäts as “villagers and rustics.”7 With the expansion of their population and their transformation to agriculture, a process that took about three to four centuries, the Jäts began to show more cohesion in their socio-economic and cultural demeanour, and by the sixteenth century, emerged as a distinct peasant community.

The establishment of the Turkish rule in northern India in the thirteenth century had great social significance for the Meos. The most striking feature regarding the Meos is that they came into historical sight as hill men, herdsmen, highwaymen and Hindu rebels. The establishment of the Sultanate in the vicinity of Mewāt brought the cattle-rearing Mewātīs into direct collision with an imperial structure. Persian sources throw light on the modes of their subsistence, the nature of their settlements, extent of their marauding activities in the vicinity of Delhi and the remedial actions by the Delhi Sultans against them.

By the 13th century, the Meo menace was causing a great deal of economic loss to trade, commerce and agriculture of the Sultanate. Consequently, the Meos were treated with utmost cruelty by the Delhi Sultans, particularly by Balban. The impact of their

persecution was that the hordes of Mewātis were forced into down-hill migration—from the high ranges of the Arāvallis into the plains of Mewāt. The formation of Khānzāda state (1389-1527 CE) in Mewat was an important phenomenon as during this period process of peasantification of Meos took place.

Re-organization of agriculture and revenue, along with clearing of the jungles, reclamation of land, and colonization of villages promoted agricultural activity. It provided the material basis for the ultimate evolution of a herding society into a peasant society. The role of the Meo Pals in their conversion to agriculture and colonization of villages was quite significant. The Tuglaq period marks the beginning of the process of urbanization in Mewāt.

In the early 16th century, Babur Nama refers to the Meo villages with their strength and wealth increased. By the end of the sixteenth century, the process of economic transformation reached its culmination point when the Meo peasantry enormously increased its strength and emerged as Zamīndārs under the reign of Akbar. Revenue records of Ā’in-i-Akbarī shows that along with the Khānzādas and Chauhans, the Meos emerge as one of the pre-dominant landed groups in the Sarkar of Alwar.

This study has tried to delineate the pattern of mobility and change among the three separate cultivating groups, and the emerging trends clearly indicate some common elements that characterized all the three communities. The most striking results of this enquiry are—that an unmistakable process of social mobility and change was underway during the medieval period, and that the material base of this social transformation was provided by economic mobility. In other words, the changes in occupational structure and
economic upliftment of the three peasant castes prepared the grounds for social change and transformation. In this respect, economic change provided the central basis upon which social aspirations of the farming communities found expression and social fulfillment. As long as these former herding groups lived in scarcities, subsistence and economic stagnation, no meaningful changes occurred in their social position, and for centuries they continued to exist as marginalized groups. But once they were struck with alternate modes of subsistence, i.e. crop cultivation, accompanied by notions of surplus, and fresh opportunities unleashed by new State systems, a remarkable economic transition occurred resulting into social transformation of the peasant classes.

The study clearly indicates that the break-down of the pastoral order was the turning point in the process of social change. The subsequent changes in their modes of subsistence and occupation resulted in the most remarkable phenomenon of far-reaching consequence—the conversion of the pastoral way of life into a complex agricultural economy. This process made two important departures from the previous state, firstly, it uplifted the people from the scarcities of subsistence economy to the ‘surplus’ economy; and secondly, it converted the multitude of cattle-herders into plough-wielding cultivators. The shift from the nomadic way of life to sedentary life was also a significant step in terms of mobility. The second stage was marked by elaborate changes in their status with respect to their rights and ownership of land. The pattern of the landholdings of the Jats, Meos and Vellalas shows that some sections from among the cultivators were able to possess rights in land and therefore became peasant proprietors. The third stage saw the emergence of some of these sections into Mughal Zamīndārs. Ā’in-i-Akbarī
outlines the size and extent of Zamīndāris of the Jāt and the Meos in their respective Subas. The emergence of the Jāts and Meos as Mughal Zamīndārs represent a great social and economic transformation.

Land is a symbol of wealth, power and prestige. The possession of land by a particular peasant group reflects not just the weight of its resources and material base, but also present clear indications as to the social status and prestige wielded by the members of the community. It is obvious that in a medieval hierarchical society, the various cultivating classes would exhibit perceptible tendency to scramble for more and more land in order to accrue social and economic advantages associated with its possession. The Vellālas who were regarded as one of the basic agricultural communities in south India show unmistakable interest and ambition in the possession of land.

In the pre-Sultanate and pre-Chōla periods, the Jāts, Meos and Vellālas lived on subsistence economy characterized by cattle-herding and looting and plundering in their respective regions. The economic constraints and the acts of vengeance by imperial powers pushed these social groups from their habitats into the plains of northern Panjāb, Mewāt and Königumandalam respectively. Consequently, waves of migration ensued leading to resettlement and colonization of new settlements or villages. Therefore, the first perceptible change was the geographical shift from the original habitat to the plains of their respective regions. But the most important change was their transition from the pastoral and herding society into an agricultural economy which had far-reaching consequences in the process of their transformation. Their conversion from cattle-herders to a food-producing cultivators was accompanied by a series of corresponding changes in
other domains of their lives. The transition from food insecurity to food stability, from nomadism to sedentarianism, from food collection to food production transformed the basic characteristics and pushed the community to a life of peace, prosperity and progress.

The arrival of Islam in India can be considered as a watershed in community history as the Islamic state broke the power of the indigenous regimes and liberated a large number of communities from subjugation and subordination. Secondly, the Sultanate and the Mughals restructured the agrarian order which accelerated the process of consolidation of the peasant communities. Therefore, the story of social mobility and transformation of the Jāts, Meos and Vellālas rotates around the process of peasantification of these communities, and the multiple role of land in enhancing their socio-economic position.

The social aspirations of these peasant communities were restricted to an upward mobility in form of a dignified and respectable status in local caste hierarchy. It implied a higher social and ritual status which must not be inconsistent to their newly acquired wealth and power. In terms of ritual rank and caste mobility, the change was apparently modest as it did not push these groups into higher varnas. The upward mobility of the Vellālas enhanced their ritual position merely from ‘Śūdra’ to ‘Sat-Śūdra.’ The Jāts also climbed the social ladder to become ‘Vaiśyas’. But when judged from the standards of orthodox Brahmanical traditions, the social transition to ‘Sat-Śūdra’ and ‘Vaiśya’ statuses was a remarkable step in the process of upward mobility. Considering the fact that process of social change is slow and steady, and apparently much slower in pastoral and
peasant societies, the degrees of social mobility delineated among the Jäts, Meos and Vellālas were quite substantial and meaningful.

Another important point that emerges from the study is that the process of social change and mobility that occurred in medieval India never aimed at uprooting the existing social structure or substituting it with alternate model. Interestingly, the social transformation of these farming groups occurred within the ambit of traditional Brahmanical social order, and the peasant communities unpretentiously climbed the social ladder within the Varna framework. The process of change in medieval India was marked by social compatibility of continuity and change, wherein the Jät, Meos and Vellālas were able to transform their social position without disturbing the established social balance.