Chapter - I

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DALITS IN TRADITIONAL TAMIL SOCIETY

TAXONOMY OF DALITS

The most socially and politically acceptable name for the most disadvantaged members of the Indian society has changed over the years. Outcastes and untouchables have become unacceptable.¹ The last two hundred years have seen the emergence of a new identity among the 200 million people who have been considered “Outcastes” or “Untouchables”. In the Indian context, ‘the Dalits’ (Sanskrit word literally means “broken, split, torn asunder”) of today are the ‘Depressed Classes’ of the yester-years. Nowadays, the term ‘Dalits’ is a popular term used to denote the untouchables of India. This new name they have taken for themselves, and are demanding aggressively their share in the shaping of the destiny of the nation. It is not a mere name or title, in fact it has became an expression of hope and identity. The term “Dalit” has been derived from the Sanskrit root “Dal” which means to crack, open, split and so on. When used as a noun or an adjective, it means burst, split, broken, downtrodden, scattered, crushed or destroyed. However, the present usage of the term goes back to the Nineteenth Century when Jothirao Phule, the Marathi social reformer and revolutionary used it to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and broken victims of the Indian caste-ridden society.

At the same time, it is believed that this usage was first coined by B.R. Ambedkar to denote the Scheduled Castes. This term became applicable only to the members of the Mahar Community in Maharashtra but later it included all the

¹ Alan Marriott, ‘Dalit or Harijan?’ in Economic and Political Weekly, 6 September 2003, Vol.XXXVIII, No.36, Bombay, pp.3751-3752
Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, landless labourers and those economically exploited.²

The term “depressed Classes” was used in the British circles and also by various reform movements to refer to all kinds of depressed people including “Untouchables”, without differentiating on the basis of religion.³

The Dalit community is basically a self-sustaining society. The Dalit community Class has a special history. For more than 3500 years, the Hindu religion has treated the Dalits as low and untouchable, and has perpetrated atrocity on them. The Brahmin Manu has codified the philosophy of this religion and the law to oppress the Dalits.

NUMERICAL STRENGTH

The dalits comprised of a number of distinct groups, and were condemned as untouchables by the caste- Hindus through centuries. The dalit classes were divided into three categories – untouchables, unapproachables and unseeables. They numbered about sixty million out of three hundred million Hindus. That is to say, very nearly twenty percent of Hindustan was dalits.⁴ They formed one fifth of the total population of the Madras Presidency. They inhabited in all the districts of the Tamil Country. Among them, the Pallas and Paraihans were notable labourers residing in every village. The Pallas constituted 21 percent of the Dalit population in Tamil Country, while the other groups such as the Paraihans and Chakkiliyas accounted for 59 per cent and 16 per cent respectively.⁵

DIFFERENT NAMES

Till the Nineteenth Century, the dalits were called by different names in different parts of the country. They were called ‘depressed’, ‘oppressed’, ‘suppressed’, ‘submerged’, ‘unregenerate’, ‘underprivileged’ ‘outcaste’, ‘untouchables’, ‘low caste’, ‘Pariah’, ‘Panchama’, ‘Adi-Sudra’, ‘Avanna’, ‘Antyaja’, ‘Exterior caste’, ‘Excluded caste’, ‘Neglected section of the Hindus’ and Namashudras. These names speak of their ignominious status in Tamil society. As long as the dalits are identified with these names, their status will remain unchanged. Psychologically viewing, these names will leave an unerasable imprint on the minds of these people who will hardly think in terms of relieving themselves from the clutches of exploitation. The best known amongst Tamil Dalits were the Paraihans, settled in the northern districts of Tamil Country and the Pallas,settled in the southern districts including Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli. Their social disabilities were specific and severe and numerous. Their touch, shadow and even voice were deemed by the caste-Hindus to be polluting. So they had to clear the way at the approach of a caste -Hindu. Even their shadow to cross the path of the Brahmins called for ritual ablution. They were forbidden to keep certain domestic animals, to use certain metals for ornaments; were obliged to wear a particular type of dress, to eat a particular type of food, to use a particular type of footwear made of wood, and were forced to occupy the dirty, dingy and unhygienic outskirts of village and towns for

8 Gowthaman, G., Historiising Dalit Organisational Movement in Late Colonial Tamil Nadu, Sectional President Address of Political and Administrative History, Twenty-First Annual Session of Tamil Nadu History Congress, Cuddalore, 2014, p.3.
9 Lalitha, P.M., Palayagars As Feudatories under the Nayaks of Madurai, Chennai, 2009, p.42.
habitation where they lived in dark, unsanitary and miserable smoky shanties or cottages. The dress of the male consisted of a turban, a staff in the hand, a rough blanket on the shoulder and a piece of loin cloth. The women wore bodices and rough sarees barely reaching the knees.11

DALITS - CONCEPT

The ‘Dalit’ in Marathi means the poor and the downtrodden. It is appropriate to denote the untouchables who are not included in the Chaturvarna System of the Hindu society. The ‘Adi-Dravidas’ of Tamil Nadu who were once called Panchamas, Paraiyas, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, Harijans, etc. 12

The Dalits, otherwise known as the number of distinguished groups which formed the lowest strata of the Hindu society were condemned as untouchable, unapproachable and unseeable people by the Caste Hindus through centuries. They were about one fifth of the total population of India and it is more or less the same in Tamil Nadu.

The untouchables had different names in different parts of the country. They were generally called Paraiyas, Panchamas, Adi-Sudhras Avamas, Antyajas, Ammana Sudhras and in Tamil Nadu, they were called Panchamas, Pariayas, Adi-Dravidas etc., but sometimes by the common term Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Harijans. Their Social disabilities throughout the country were unique.

ORIGIN OF DALITS AND UNTOUCHABILITY IN TAMIL COUNTRY

From time immemorial, the society in India has been divided into numerous hereditary groups called castes. The word ‘Caste’ is derived from the Latin term

11 Dhananjay Keer, op.cit., p.2.
‘Castes’, meaning ‘pure’. The Portuguese were the first to use this term to describe the social stratification in India.

Caste is an artificial division of society in India. A caste is an endogamous group or a collection of similar groups. Such a group has a common name, believes in common origin, follows a hereditary occupation, possesses common rituals, ceremonies and forms of worship and regards itself as distinct and separate from other groups.

The compilers of the Census of 1881 who made a thorough investigation into the ramifications of the caste have noted the incredible figure of 19,044 denominations of sub-castes in the Madras Presidency alone.\textsuperscript{13}

An individual’s fate in life and the status in society were wholly determined by the caste to which he belonged. Though, originally, caste distinctions appeared on the basis of vocations, in course of time the rigours imposed by these distinctions increased and consequently some benefited, while others were instrumental in deciding the social taboos ushering in segregation of men into Touchables and Untouchables. By and large, nearly one fifth of the total population was segregated from the rest of the society as untouchables.

The ancient Tamil society did not contain any Dalits and consequently the practice of untouchability was absent. The emergence of the Dalits was mainly due to the process of Aryanization which introduced the notion of imaginary purity and impurity supposed to be attainable by the avoidance of certain taboos and the observance of certain rites prescribed by the \textit{Dharmasastras}. It should also be noted

\textsuperscript{13} Saraswathi, S., \textit{Minorities in Madras State - Group Interests in Modern Politics}, Irupex India, Delhi, 1974, p.6.
that the practice of untouchability was not uniform throughout India. There were differences in the degree of untouchability.

The phenomenon of untouchability is closely related to the condition of the Dalits. Untouchability is an Indian concept and could be understood in the Indian context only. The term ‘Untouchability’ is the English equivalent of expression ‘asprasya’ in Sanskrit, ‘theetu’ in Tamil, and ‘pula’ in both Kannada and Malayalam which means pollution. According to B.R. Ambedkar, Untouchability underlines “the notion of defilement, pollution and contamination and the ways and means of getting rid of that defilement”.14

In the opinion of Aiyappan, it is “the socio-religious practice by which Hindus keep large numbers of the lower castes from touching or coming near their persons, houses, temples, tanks and sometimes even public roads”.15 He calls it ‘contact taboo” by which “persons, by reason of their birth or physiological or ritual state act as carriers of pollution and induce temporarily a similar state in others by their contact, either direct or within a prescribed distance, which impurity has to be removed by ritual means to restore those polluted to their original condition.”16

The Untouchables numbering several millions have been isolated from the rest of the society and forced to live in the outskirts of the Caste Hindu habitations.17 Untouchability has been practised in its worst form only with regard to the lowest caste such as Pallas, Pariahs, and Chacklians who have been at the bottom of the society. The British Administrators were the first to coin the words “Untouchable”

16 Ibid., p.38.
and “Untouchability” to denote the Dalits and their social conditions.\(^{18}\) Census of India (1911), says that prior to the advent of the British, the phenomenon of Untouchablity did not exist too much and even the Untouchables did not feel that any injustice was being done to them by their castes. The British were the pioneers in distinguishing the untouchables from the rest of the Hindu society making them conscious of their disabilities.

Until the end of the Nineteenth Century, the untouchables were considered one among the Hindu groups. Till that time the Indian population was divided on the basis of religion namely Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The Muslims in 1904 addressed Lord Minto and specified the Indian population as (1) Hindu, (2) Animist Tribals (3) the Untouchables.\(^{19}\) Then the Census Commissioner of India distinguished Caste Hindus and Untouchables applying the following criteria:

1. Deny the supremacy of the Brahmins;
2. Do not receive the mantra from a Brahmin or other recognized guru;
3. Deny the authority of the Vedas;
4. Do not worship the Hindu Gods;
5. Are not served by good Brahmins as family priests;
6. Have no Brahmin Priests at all;
7. Are denied access to the interior of the Hindu temple;
8. Cause pollution: a) by touch, or b) within a short distance
9. Bury their dead, and
10. Eat beef and do not show reverence to the cow.

\(^{19}\) *Ibid.*
These items sum up the content and meaning of untouchability. Further, this yardstick was circulated by the Commissioner of Census of India.  

**SUB-DIVISIONS OF DALITS IN THE TAMIL COUNTRY**

The practice of collecting data on caste in the Census was in vogue till 1931. The Census Reports of the year’s 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941 listed forty major Hindu castes. In the year 1964, the Government recognized 120 castes as eligible for special treatment. Of these, six castes, Chakkiliyans, Kuravans, Nayadi, Pallan, Paraiyan and Valluvan receive special treatment since these six castes are found in all parts of Tamil Nadu and hence they have been considered.

**PARAIHAHS**

In general, the term ‘Paraiah’ means an outcaste and it has been coined and added to the English language. But in Tamil the word ‘Paraiah’ is derived from the root word ‘Parai’ which means a kind of drum. The Paraiahs are considered traditional drum beaters and cultivators. In Kannada also the word ‘Parai’ means drums but the Dalits in Karnataka are not called Paraiahs but ‘Holeyas’. In Tamil Nadu, barbers also beat drums on festival occasions. In certain areas of Tamil Nadu there is a separate caste called ‘Melakaran’ whose profession is beating a drum called ‘Melam’. Lord Siva, God of Tamils is said to beat a kind of drum called ‘Utukkai’. His devotee ‘Nanthi’ is an expert beater of a type of drum called ‘mathalam’ but all these are not regarded as Paraiahs.

The word ‘Paraiah’ occurs only once in Sangam Classics. The Sangam poet Mankudi Marutanar in *Purananooru* speaks about the soldiers’ clans of Tamil Nadu.

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They are mentioned as Tutians, Panans, Paraians and Kadambans and they are the four *Kudis* who participated in the war fields as ancillary forces.\(^{22}\) In Ancient Tamil Literature, the beaters of battle drums are called Valluvans and Palayans. The word Paraiahs is found often in the inscriptions of the Cholas of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries A.D. According to some scholars the word, ‘Paraiah’ is derived from the word ‘Paaraiyar’ which denoted a line of Chera Kings.\(^{23}\) Another root for the word ‘Paraiah’ is the word ‘Paarai’ which means rock.\(^{24}\) Here, the term ‘Paraiyas’ denotes a hill people. The contention is that originally the Paraiahs inhabited the hill tracts and later on came to the plains. This is an unconvincing argument because in the ancient Sangam literature of the Tamils the Paraiahs of Tamil Nadu are described as one of the tribes inhabiting the Mullai region,\(^{25}\) which is situated between the hills and the plains and they are mentioned as weavers and cultivators and not as mountain people.

According to M.C. Rajah, the leader of the Dalits of Tamil Nadu, the Paraiah is also designated as the original owner of the land.\(^{26}\) In this text, the word ‘Paar’ which means earth or land is taken as the root. The argument is that the Paraiahs were the original owners and rulers of the Tamil region and that when they were conquered, their lands were confiscated from them and they were subjected to slavery.

The term ‘Paraiah’ is derived by some from the Sanskrit word ‘*para*’ which means ‘foreign’. Those who were foreign to their culture were denoted as Paraiah by the Brahmins.\(^{27}\) The term ‘paraiyar’ indicated those who spoke ill of the Brahmins.\(^{28}\) It

\(^{22}\) Puram, Verse 335.
\(^{24}\) Gustav Oppert, *On the Original inhabitants of Bharatavarsa or India*, Madras, 1893, p.60.
\(^{25}\) Puram, Verse 335.
\(^{27}\) *Collected Papers by Dr. G. Thangavelu*, Vol.III, Chennai, no year, p.17.
\(^{28}\) *Ibid.*
is said that those who ridiculed the Brahmins were condemned and oppressed and segregated by the Brahmins when they became predominant in the Tamil society.  

**VALLUVAS**

Valluvas are actually a section of the Paraihas. In the ancient Tamil society they enjoyed the status of priests. This is attested by literary and inscptional evidences. In the Census Report of 1891, A.J. Stuart says, that the Valluvas were priests to the Pallava kings before the coming of the Brahmins and continued to be so for sometime even after their coming. Even today Valluvas act as priests at the ceremonies of Paraihas, Chakkilias and other Dalits. They are erudite scholars in Tamil Literature and are noted for their skill in surgery and act as rural doctors. Tiruvalluvar, the author of *Tirukkural*, is considered a Valluva by caste. The legend that Tiruvalluvar was born of a Brahmin father and a Paraiya or pulaiya mother was concocted by the Brahmins. In the earlier editions of *Tirukkural* this story does not find place. But it is found in later editions published under the patronage of Brahmins and Mudaliars. The Valluvas occupied the pride of place in the ancient Tamil Society. ‘*Tivakara Nikantu*’ a dictionary of the Eleventh Century mentions the Valluvas as royal priests who performed funeral duties in the king’s household.

When the Brahmin priests replaced them, the status of the Valluvas began to deteriorate. Their efforts to regain their lost position were the warred by the Brahmins who had the patronage of the king. It was in anger that the Valluvas set adrift the rumour that it is an ill-omen to see a single Brahmin on one’s way. The Valluva and their Paraia followers began to shun the presence of Brahmins in their villages. It

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29 *Ibid*
32 *Tivakara Nikantu*, 2, p.29.
became usual, by chance, a Brahmin entered a Paraicheri, the Paraiah women sprinkled cow dung water on the spot touched by the feet of Brahmin to cleanse it.\textsuperscript{33}

**CHAKKILIARS**

The Chakkiliars found in Tamil Nadu are not natives of the soil. It seems that they migrated to the Tamil region from Andhra Desa and Mysore State. This is deduced from the fact that they speak either Telugu or Kannada. It is not known as to when this migration took place.\textsuperscript{34} Madigas, the counter parts of the Chakkliyars in Karnataka claim that they are the children of Matangi.\textsuperscript{35}

The Chakkilias of Tamil Nadu are not sure of their origin. The Chakkilias seem to be one of the ancient inhabitants of the Dravida country. They are as ancient as the Paraiyas. It is known that the Chakkilias similar to the Paraiyas were ancient tribes who were subjugated as Untouchables by Brahmins and Caste Hindus because of their beef eating habits. The Chakkilias worked as agricultural labourers, leather workers and scavengers.

**PALLARS**

The degree of untouchability of the Pallas is next to that of the Paraiahs. The Pallas formed an important segment of the village society because they constituted the bulk of agricultural labour. They are good at cultivating paddy. Their women folk are good at planting and weeding paddy. They seem to have been at this work even from the Sangam Age. In support of this view there are many references to women of the ‘last class’, namely Kataiciyar.\textsuperscript{36} The Pallas is also denoted by their title Kataiyar.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{33} Edgar Thruston, *op.cit.*, Vol.VI, p.88.
\textsuperscript{36} Kandiah Pillai, N.C., *Tennintiya Kulankalam Kudigalum*, (Tamil), Madras, 1958, p.15.
\textsuperscript{37} *Ibid.*
The ancient heroic tribes called Mallas described in Sangam classics were probably the ancestors of the Pallas.38

The word ‘Pallam’ in Tamil means pit or low lying region. It is suggested that since paddy fields are found in low lying areas and since the Pallas are usually engaged in the cultivation of paddy, the name ‘Pallan’ could have been derived from the word ‘Pallam’.39 This explanation is not satisfactory. The Pallas and Pallis (Padaiyatchi or Vanniya Kula Kshatriyas) considered themselves as descendents of Pallavas who once ruled over Andhra and Tamil Regions. They assume the title of Muppan (elderly person) Kutumpan and Mannati. The latter may be a corruption of the word Manradi, a title borne by Pallava (Kurumba) people. From this it is surmised that the Pallas are the descendent of the old Pallas.40 In Tamil lexicons the Pallas are classified as outcastes.41

In the beginning of the Tenth Century A.D. the Cholas subdued the Pallavas. The higher class Pallavas who accepted Cholas’ sovereignty and joined the Chola Army were called Pallis or Padaiyatchis. The low class Pallas who were reduced to slavery came to be known as Pallas.

Gustava Oppert is of the opinion that the Pallas and Pallis represent the ancient inhabitants of the mountains of South India. Those who continued to live in the mountains were called Mallas, Malas and Mahars, and those who came down to the plains came to be known as Pailas, Pahiavas, Bhillas, Bhils and Ballalas.42 The Pallas calls themselves Deventra Kula Vellalar (descendants of Indra, Lord of Devas).

38 Gustva Oppert, op.cit., p.98.
40 Ibid., p.486.
Since they belonged to the ancient land of the Tamil Country, the Pallas are the ancient social group.\textsuperscript{43}

A medieval inscription connects the Kutumpans, a branch of Pallas with the Pandyan kings.\textsuperscript{44} The Pallas were mostly agricultural labourers. They also worked as rice pounders and shepherds. They are a well organized community in the Southern districts of Tamil Nadu. They are also subdivided into a number of sub castes.

**DEPRESSED CLASSES**

The term ‘Depressed Classes’ which denoted the Panchamas, sprang out of administrative Convenience. A perusal of the official records shows that this term was in currency between 1920 and 1935. In the Census Report of 1921, over six million people covering nine castes were listed Depressed Classes, such as Adi-Dravida, Chakkiliya, Cheruman, Holey, Madiga, Mala, Palla, Paraiah and Semman. The figures given in this report could only be regarded as an approximation because no effort had yet been made till then to define the term ‘Depressed’. But in 1931, based on the stigma of untouchability, the Depressed Classes were identified and enumerated and 15.5 percent of the population of the Madras Presidency was found to belong to this category.\textsuperscript{45} The Census Report states: “Viewed primarily regarding the existence of social disabilities, the figure is a minimum, considered strictly as personal polluting power, the figure is a maximum.”\textsuperscript{46}

**SCHEDULED CASTES**

Changes which took place in the terminology of the Depressed Classes did not end with the change to “Adi-Dravidas”. An order- in-council issued under the


\textsuperscript{44} A.R.E., No. 588 of 1926.


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, p.339.
Government of India Act of 1935 listed all the hereditary Untouchable Communities in the different provinces in a special schedule. Thereafter these castes came to be designated as ‘Scheduled Castes’. In the list concerning Madras Presidency, eighty six communities came under the category of ‘Scheduled Castes’.

In 1941, the population of Madras Presidency, including the Princely States of Pudukottai, Banganapile, and Sandur was 49,840,564. Out of this, 8,152,226 belonged to the Scheduled Castes, the breakup of males and females was 4,064,233 and 4,087,993 respectively. In the Census of 1941, population enumeration was done according to religions such as, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jain, Parsis, Buddhists and Jews. The Scheduled Castes were not included under any of these heads and their enumeration was separate.

HARIJANS

The Scheduled Castes and Tribes were christened as ‘Harijans’ by Mahatma Gandhi. The literal meaning of the term ‘Harijan’ is ‘Children of God’. The first to use the word ‘Harijan’ to denote the Untouchables was Narashima Mehta, a great saint who belonged to the Nagar Brahmana community. Mahatma Gandhi used the term ‘Harijan’ to mean ‘Men of God’. The Government recognized the term ‘Harijan’ and issued an order in 1947. The order stated thus: “the Government have directed that the term ‘Harijans’ should be used to denote persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes in all public records except in proceedings under statutory enactments until the statute is amended”.

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47 Joint Committee on Constitutional Reform, 1933-1934, Delhi, 1934, p.70.
49 G.O.No.850, Public (Elections) Department, 18 March 1947.
M.C. Rajah raised strong objection to Gandhi’s calling the Depressed Classes as Harijans. Rajah’s contention was that the term ‘Harijan’ meaning ‘Children of God’ denoted all Hindus and hence inappropriate for the Depressed Classes. He regarded names like ‘Adi-Dravida’, ‘Adi-Andhra’ and ‘Adi-Karnataka’ as appropriate. Rajah asserted that the castes concerned could very well adopt a name for themselves and that no one else had the right to give them a name. Though Gandhi popularized the term ‘Harijan’, instead, the terms ‘Scheduled Castes’ and ‘Schedules Tribes’ have been incorporated in the Constitution. The term ‘Harijan’ has not been found in the Constitution of India. Moreover the term ‘Harijan’ is not found in Government records.

ADI-DRAVIDAS

The term Adi-Dravidas was not in use before 1921. The Untouchables of Tamil Nadu were called Panchamas, Paraih and similar names. M.C. Rajah moved a resolution in 1922 in the Madras Legislative Council stating that in the place in terms like Paraiah, Panchamas etc., Adi-Dravida is to be used in the Tamil region, Adi-Andhra in Telugu Region, Adi-Kamataka in the Kannada region. And the resolution was that in Government records the terms Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra, Adi-Karnataka should be used.

DISTRIBUTIONS

Apart from the four important Dalits of Tamil region, there were others like Holeyas, Cherumans, Madigas, Malas, and Semmans in the other regions of erstwhile Madras Presidency. Each caste has its own denomination. In the Tamil region the Paraiah (Adi-Dravidas), Pallas, Chakkiliyas and Valluvan sparingly spread out. The

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50 G.O.No.849, Development Department, April 1939.
51 G.O.No.817, Law (General) Department, 25 March 1922.
Malas, and Madigas were predominant Dalits in Andhra and Kannada Desa, Holeyas and Nayadis in Malabar and South Canada. The 1921 Census Report listed nine communities as Depressed Classes and the total population was given as 6,372,074. From 1922 onwards the Untouchables of Tamil region were entered in the Census report as Adi-Dravida, and of Andhra, Adi-Andhra and of the Karnataka, as Adi-Karnataka by a Government Order passed in the Madras Legislative Council.\footnote{Ibid.}

**Table 1.1**

Variations in the Strength of the Depressed Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Name of Caste</th>
<th>Strength in 1921</th>
<th>Variation 1911-1921</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Adi-Dravida</td>
<td>50,015</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Chakkiliya</td>
<td>549,809</td>
<td>+ 4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Cheruman</td>
<td>248,397</td>
<td>- 2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Holeya</td>
<td>91,558</td>
<td>-32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Madiga</td>
<td>737,427</td>
<td>- 8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Mala</td>
<td>1,493,129</td>
<td>- 1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Palla</td>
<td>862,685</td>
<td>- 1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Paraiah</td>
<td>2,337,036</td>
<td>+ 1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6,372,074</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+: Increase; - : Decrease


**CONDITION IN THE PAST**

The dalits were denied the use of public wells, and were condemned to drink any filthy water they could find. Their children were not admitted to schools attended by the caste-Hindu children. Though they worshipped the gods of Hindus, observed
the same festivals, the Hindu temples were closed to them, barbers and washermen refused to render them service. The caste- Hindus, who fondly threw sugar to ants and reared dogs and other domestic pets and welcomed persons of other religions to their houses, refused to give a drop of water to the untouchables or to show them an iota of sympathy. These untouchable Hindus were treated by the caste- Hindus as sub-humans, less than men, worse than beasts. This picture was still true of villages and small towns. Cities have now mostly overcome this prejudice.

They were compelled to serve in the farms of their masters, and engaged in the domestic works of land lords. 53. The man power needed for the cultivation of the lands in the country-side was mainly supplied by the Dalits and in fact agricultural work during the centuries past devolved chiefly on them. An Assistant Judge of Tinnevely stated: “When the dalit slaves are employed in the fields, they labour with alacrity, they require to be constantly watched and the cane is in constant use”. 54

The life of dalits was one of ignorance, misery and servitude. The daily life and living conditions of the dalits were extremely pathetic. 55 Their sufferings did not end with prejudices. As they were illiterate, ill-treated and treated as untouchables for ages, all public services including police and military forces were closed to them. Naturally they followed hereditary occupations. Some of them were street sweepers, scavengers and shoemakers. While some skinned car casses, tanned hides and skins, worked in bamboos and cane and mowed grass, others tilled the land as tenants, worked as labourers in fields, and a great number of them subsisted on food or grain given to them as village servants. Thus being deprived of social, religious and civic

rights, they had no chance of bettering their conditions; and so these untouchable Hindus lived the life of a bygone and dead age, dragging on their miserable existence in insufficient accommodation, unsanitary surroundings and social segregation. In short, they were born in debt and perished in debt. They were born untouchables, they lived as untouchables and they died as untouchables.\textsuperscript{56}

**TOUCH OF THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES**

The credit of initiating the movement for the elevation of the scheduled castes during the modern times goes indeed to the Christian missionaries who came to India. While proseltization was their chief aim, the Indian social conditions gave them full scope for using humanitarian work and education among the backward masses as the tools to spread Christianity. However their yeoman services resulted in arousing Indians to the need for social reform. The missionaries thus became pioneers in eradicating many a social evil. One such evil was untouchability.\textsuperscript{57}

As they believed in the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, they had no faith in untouchability. They mixed freely with the Dalits and tried to improve their lot socially as well as economically. Education being the most effective method, they started imparting it to the Dalits and tried to make them conscious of their rights and position in society. By starting schools for boys as well as girls, they took the first effective action for their social elevation. It was only in schools established and maintained by them that the Dalits could get admission and a chance to get education. In fact, they tried to open schools wherever possible for the benefit of the Depressed Classes. They were also pioneers in starting schools for girls and establishing teacher training institutions. Further they were the first agency who tried to provide education\textsuperscript{56,57}

\textsuperscript{56} Dhananjay Keer, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 2-3.
to the Depressed Classes in their settlements and developed them as organized communities.\footnote{Omalley, L.S.S., \textit{Modern India and the West}, Oxford, 1941, p.332} The Christian settlements emerged in some of the orthodox Hindu quarters of the past. Missionary work had begun as early as the seventeenth century and with the close of the eighteenth century it had made great progress in South India primarily due to the work of the protestant missionaries from Denmark and Germany, supported by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) funds from England.

Missionary work in the Madras Presidency was started as early as 1715. Their work covered almost all the regions of the presidency, particularly North Arcot, South Arcot, Coimbatore, South Canara, Tiruchirappalli, Ramnad, Guntur and Vizagapatnam. There were three missionary schools in 1717 exclusively for the Dalits.\footnote{Majumdar, B.B., \textit{Indian Political Associations and Reform Legislation in 1818-1917}, Calcutta, 1965, p.17}

In the last decade of the Nineteenth Century, the missionaries forced the Government to look into the affairs of the Depressed Classes. The Government in the Government Order No.68, Education Department, dated 1\textsuperscript{st} February, 1893 granted an additional stipend of Rs.2 per month.

The elevation of the Dalits was not the work of one, but several organizations belonging to all shades of opinion worked at. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were an era of social and religious reforms. So, all reform movements were aimed at the elevation of the dalits.
The British take-over of the Tamil speaking areas of Madras Presidency was complete by the early years of the Nineteenth Century. The British hegemony over this region introduced a new phase of agrarian integration, as well as one of overall homogenization of the entire Tamilnadu. While the earlier Vijayanagara–Nayaka-Palayakara period had witnessed a diversification of economy through trade, war, craft and agriculture, the British dominance found expression through homogenization in terms of agriculture. In fact, the Vijayanagara- Nayaka period had witnessed a decline of Brahminism. But, the British rule ushered in conditions conducive to the return of a revitalized Brahminism and its hierarchical ideology. Incidentally, while the Nayakas and Poligars increased the socio-economic opportunities and expanded the space for the ‘lower castes’, the British ruling groups preferred to stall this development by undercutting the emerging opportunities and regionalizing the landed aristocracy.  

This resulted in a horizontal divide between the labouring and the privileged communities.

The British dominance over the Tamil Country since the mid decades of the Eighteenth Century had important economic, as well as political implications. The warrior elite of Nawabs, Rajas, Nayakars and Poligars, under whom the economy had earlier diversified, passed into oblivion. The only elites still left with a corporate form, interests and traditions—the Brahmins and Vellalas of the valleys—gained opportunities to present themselves as indispensable intermediaries between the people and the new rulers. Though the British introduced the Ryotwari system over a large part of the Tamil Country the new revenue regulations legitimized the

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dominance of the village headmen of the plains and the *kaniyatchikarans* (*mirasidars*) of the valleys.\(^{61}\)

The changes in the agrarian economy influenced the conditions of the labouring castes. The dominance of the upper castes over the dalits was strengthened and they were forced to accept stricter conditions of agrestic servitude.\(^{62}\) While agrestic servitude was by no means the creation of the colonial era, the changes during early colonial period had left the dalits greatly exposed to the whims of the Brahmin-Vellala landowners.\(^{63}\)

British officials like F.W. Ellis in the early Nineteenth Century were convinced that the various forms of agrarian bondage were intimately connected with the *mirasi* tenure.\(^{64}\) In his opinion, the dalits, who lived in the villages where *mirasi* right was said to have existed, toiled under a state of bondage, which resembled a form of villeinage. It was also argued that in Tondaimandalam, the lower caste bonded labourers could not be sold separately from the land, which they cultivated, and neither could the land be sold separately from them. Thus, they were believed to have been held in joint property by the villages, and among the privileges attached to the *mirasi* was a share in the labour of these people.\(^{65}\)

However, the British officials in the early Nineteenth Century found it difficult to define the forms of agrarian servitude that were widely prevalent throughout the

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\(^{62}\) Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Caste in South India*, New Jersey, 1979, p. 44.


Tamil Country. Dharma Kumar had argued that this sort of confusion took place as the European experience did not fit with the Indian conditions perfectly. He argued that the most striking and important feature of the Indian form of servitude had been its close connections with the caste system.\(^{66}\)

In the last years of the Eighteenth Century, the British officials had displayed an interest in exploring the mechanism of agrarian bondage that was widely prevalent in South India. The English officials like Lionel Place in their reports relating to Chingleput district stated that “Kalavasam was paid to the labouring dalit servants of the husbandsman”\(^{67}\) He also observed that some of these slaves were attached to the soil and transferable with it. But he had no time to conduct further enquiries. Subsequently, Stephen Rumbold Lushington as the Collector of Ramnad and Tirunelveli also noticed the distinctions between the ‘lower caste’ Pallans and the other groups in the rural Society.\(^{68}\) In 1805, the Collector of Tanjore reported that the proprietors generally cultivated their lands by means of hired labourers or Pallans who were considered to be slaves of the soil.\(^{69}\)

Thus by the early years of the Nineteenth Century, the British officials believed that the dalits had been reduced to the status of an agricultural serf and villain. British officials like F.W. Ellis and their native assistants like Ramaswami Naidoo in their reports stated that the ‘Panchamas’ (dalits) had fallen a prey to ‘personal’ as well as ‘praedial’ slavery.\(^{70}\) However, confusions prevailed in the British

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\(^{67}\) *Kalavasam* was the regular fee or percentage of the harvest. (Benedicte Hjejle, *loc.cit.*, p. 81.)

\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 82.

\(^{69}\) Bayley and Hudleston, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

official circles, as terms such as ‘agricultural serf’, ‘villein’ or ascrptus glebae hardly fitted with the Tamilian conditions.

The first enquiry, carried out in 1819, revealed interesting information on the institution of slavery prevalent in the Tamil districts. The collectors of several districts sent reports on slavery prevailing in the areas under their jurisdiction. The Collector of Tanjore, J. Hepburn observed thus: “The slaves here are of two castes only, the Puller and Pariah; and as before said, the origin of their bondage arises in a voluntary agreement on their part to become the slave of some men more powerful than themselves. The Brahmins in consideration of their caste do not receive directly in their own name, but have them generally drawn out in that of some of their Soodra dependants. When a bond of slavery has been given, it ceases not with the life of the party, but it is binding upon the descendants of the original giver, who is continued to be bound by the condition of it, likewise. In return, the owner is obliged to find subsistence at all times and under all circumstances, for the family of his bondsman, whom he can employ in a manner he pleases, although it is generally as a labourer in the fields.71

Information on the institution of slavery was also available from some of the districts watered by the river Cauvery. The Collector of Trichinopoly, C.M. Lushington in his report to the Board of Revenue in 1819 explained the condition and origin of “Pullers or Agricultural Slavery”. The collector stated that since the mirasidars in Trichinopoly were Brahmins there was little doubt that agricultural slavery was prevalent in an undiminished form, as it had been in the past. Although, he did not distinguish the various forms of bondage, the Pallans were described as slaves who were sold with the land, as well as, independently from it. At the same

time, he also argued that any move for the abolition of the ‘puller system’ would have a ruinous impact on the rural economy. In his opinion, Since the Brahmin mirasidars were prevented by the laws of their caste from taking part in agricultural work, the revenue flow would be diminished if the Pallans were freed from this state of servitude.\(^72\)

Such investigations into the mechanism of slavery also popularized terms such as *pannaiyal* for permanent farm servants receiving wages in kind.\(^73\) The British officials also came to be familiar with Tamil words such as *adimai*, meaning a slave. The term *pannaiyal* was, however, used more frequently than *adimai*. But the British administrators preferred to use the generic nomenclatures of the agricultural labouring castes, such as Palli, Pallan and Paraiyan.\(^74\)

In the midst of this debate on the origins of agrestic slavery, the British officials realized that in some Tamil speaking areas, the *pannaiyals* were toiling under conditions of servitude. They were believed to have been born into servitude and virtually had no escape from it until their death. The officials in their reports pointed out that the slaves were expected to perform all the hard work and functions that were generally regarded as degrading and defiling. The impurity of work and lack of freedom were the two outstanding characteristics of this type of slavery. The British officials in their reports on slavery presented a wealth of evidence to prove that *pannaiyals* were sold or mortgaged in all the Tamil districts. Dharma Kumar, relying exclusively on such evidence, highlighted the practice of selling and

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\(^73\) The word *pannai* denotes farm and the term *pannaiyal* covered all unfree labourers in the Tamil districts. The word *padaiyal* is derived from the Tamil word *padi* denoting a fixed daily allowance of food.

\(^74\) Dharma Kumar, *op.cit.*, p. 41.
buying of slaves.\textsuperscript{75} It was pointed out that in 1819, a male labourer in Tirunelveli fetched upto Rs.32 and in South Arcot, a slave family might have cost between Rs.35 and Rs.175. In Coimbatore, the highest price for a good slave was said to have been around Rs.50, though prices seldom reached that level. Dharma Kumar also tried to prove on the basis of some empirical surveys that in some cases, slaves had been included in mortgages of land.

There prevailed wide variations, in regard to, actual cases of sale of slaves. In fact, it has been emphasized that the sale of bonded labourers was not a distinctive attribute of bondage. It was opined that even when official reports, as well as later studies referred to the sale of bonded labourers, they hardly attempted to estimate their frequency and magnitude. There was rarely any attempt to establish a necessary co-relationship between bondage and chattel slavery. The number of sales was small even when slaves were sold along with the land they tilled, because of the infrequency of land sales in the pre-colonial times.\textsuperscript{76} The landowners interested in securing supplies of cheap labour avoided sale of labourers, except under financial distress. Such cases were rare, where the bonded labourers sold themselves as slaves to their masters. It was only in Madurai and Dindigul that such trends were noticed. A study of agrarian serfdom based on the findings of the official enquiry in 1819 emphasized wide regional variations, in respect of sale of bonded labourers in the Tamil districts. The study observed: “During the period under survey (1792-1827), slavery, in general, appears as a slowly dying institution.”\textsuperscript{77}

In all probability, despite the prevalence of agrestic servitude, the practice of selling and buying of slaves was extremely rare. Indeed, this practice varied from

\textsuperscript{75} Parliamentary Papers (1828), Vol. XXIV p. 841; Dharma Kumar, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{76} Chaudhuri, B.B., \textit{loc.cit.}, pp. 88-89.
\textsuperscript{77} Nilmani Mukherjee, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 89.
district to district in the early decades of the Nineteenth Century. A number of British Collectors reported that the sale of *pannayals* was rare. In 1819, the Collector of Tanjore in his report stated that though Paraiyan and other ‘lower castes’ had entered into contracts of slavery, their sales were rare. The District Collectors of Madurai and Chingleput also believed that the system of slavery had started losing much of its earlier rigour.\(^{78}\)

In the official reports, there were also attempts to discern the connections between serfdom and communal holding.\(^{79}\) In 1819, the Collector of South Arcot reported that *mirasidars* “advanced pretensions to possess equal property of the slaves with their share of the village”. It was also argued that Brahmins employed Pallis or villeins and the non-Brahmins employed Pallans and Paraiyans as slaves. These distinctions were more theoretical, rather than real.\(^{80}\)

Incidentally, this entire issue of recruitment and sale of labour was often decided by the power of the *mirasidars*. Labourers, who were held in joint property by the village, could not be sold separately from the land. Their duty was to work for each *mirasidar* in turn, during a period proportionate to his share in the village lands. But where a labourer was held individually by a *mirasidar*, he could be sold without reference to the land.\(^{81}\)

However, whatever status the agricultural labourers might have enjoyed, they did not enjoy much liberty. The Collector of Tanjore stated that a major part of the labourer’s income was derived from working on land owned by the others. The majority of them worked throughout the day, but was paid very little in return. The

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\(^{78}\) Parliamentary Papers (1828), Vol. XXIV, p. 838.
\(^{79}\) Parliamentary Papers (1841), Vol. XXVIII, pp. 455-460 and Appendix IX.
\(^{80}\) Dharma Kumar, *op.cit.*, p.45.
\(^{81}\) Parliamentary Papers (1828), Vol. XXIV, pp. 871-872.
collector, providing an interesting description of the employment of agrestic slaves, observed: “The agrestic or field slaves in the Tamil Country are employed by their masters in every department of husbandry: the men in ploughing the land and sowing the seed, and in all the various laborious works necessary for the irrigation of the land upon which rice is grown; the women in transplanting the rice plants; and both sexes in reaping the crop. The agrestic slaves work in bodies together, the village accountant registering the work executed by them, which he inspects; but they are not personally superintended by any one, nor placed under any driver; they generally work from about sunrise to sunset, with the intermission of a couple of hours for their meal during the middle of the day. They are not exempted from work on any particular day of the week, but obtain holidays for all the great native festivals; such as those fixed for consecrating implements, the new year, and other great days. No particular task work is assigned to them daily; it is sufficient that the slaves of each master execute the work necessary for the cultivation and irrigation of his lands. These slaves are also often employed in erecting temporary rooms, or pundals, used by their master in marriages or other festivals, and occasionally are called on by requisition of the collector or magistrate, issued to their masters, to aid in stopping any sudden breach in the great works of irrigation conducted at the expense of government, or in dragging the enormous cars of the idols round the villages or temples, to move which, immense cables, dragged by many thousands, are necessary; in Tanjore, in particular, from the great number of the temples and the frequency of the festivals, this is a very onerous duty.”  

In the majority of the Tamil districts, the dalit padiyals and pannaiyals remained perpetually in debt. As there were hereditary relationships between masters

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and men, the descendants of labourers often claimed work as a right from the
descendants of their former employers. However, there were certain advantages of
servitude. Incidentally, the obligation to work had been construed as a right to
employment. But, since the agrarian structure in Tamil Nadu was in a state of
transition, the connections between occupational status and caste greatly influenced
the minds of the British official classes.

The local forms of servitude were sometimes given official blessing. The
collectors in some cases assisted the masters in bringing back the runaway slaves.\(^83\) The Company’s officials also opined that slavery in India was different from the types
of slavery practised in the West Indies and Brazil. They were convinced that bonded
labour was an integral part of the Indian society, and agriculture would suffer much, if
agrarian servitude was eliminated. This possibly explains their abhorrence of bringing
India within the scope of the anti-slavery movement that had been gaining popularity
in the early Nineteenth Century Europe.\(^84\)

**PATTERNS OF LAND CONTROL AND THE ISSUE OF AGRESTIC
SERVITUDE OF DALITS**

In the last years of the Eighteenth Century, the colonial regime displayed a
commitment to replace the Tamil Country fragmented framework of political
authority through a more centralized and efficient governmental structure. In their role
as new rulers of the region, the British officials felt that legal, educational and
financial innovations could all work towards the creation of an environment in which
the agrarian economy could function in accordance to the principle of the market.\(^85\)
The ground realities, however, proved to be far more complex than what had been

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\(^83\) Dharma Kumar, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

\(^84\) *Ibid.*, p.64.

anticipated by the British officials. The complications resulted out of the inheritance of different ruling systems by the British.

The British official machinery for a fairly long period of time desisted from undertaking drastic changes, as well as innovations. In the early years of the Nineteenth Century, the British officials were inclined in placating the regional potentates, be it the poligars or the zamindars.\(^8^6\) It was viewed that large parts of Chingleput, Salem and Dindigul were carved out as *mittas*, which were later auctioned as estates under the Permanent Settlement.\(^8^7\) But, this experiment did not fulfil the expectations of the Company’s bosses in Madras. Faced with a reversal of their economic fortunes, the British administration thought of experimenting with other systems of revenue collection. Subsequently, the collectors of various districts provided detailed information about the systems of land control and ownership. Such reports forced the British administration to accept the view that various systems of land ownership and revenue management existed, which too often were guided by the traditions and local practices of the regions. Despite these understandings, the systems advocated by Munro and Read proved to be somewhat different. Both of them opined that the ryotwari system could be interpreted as the indigenous revenue system of rural Madras. Their opinions on the subject were framed in accordance to a set of evidence relating to a particular region, which supposedly had certain well-marked local characteristics and features.\(^8^8\)

The introduction of the ryotwari system failed to eliminate the different layers of land ownership and revenue management prevailing in various parts of Tamil Counry. In fact, there were very few areas, which resembled Read and Munro’s

\(^{8^8}\) *Ibid.*
description of the Baramahal and Ceded Districts. There were co-sharing villages, gentleman farmers, village chiefs, systems of revenue payment in kind, and a host of other characteristics which found no place in the logic of ryotwari tenure. Thus, neither in the plains nor in the valleys, the introduction of the ryotwari system could eliminate the local systems of land ownership and control. In both the plains and the valleys, the application of the ryotwari evoked local protests and the settlement had to be modified to placate the local sentiments.  

In the plains, the British officials even after the introduction of the ryotwari system favoured an understanding with the village headman. It was viewed that he village intermediaries were left with the same type of control, which they had enjoyed in the pre-British period. At the same time, they were also rewarded for their cooperation with the government as before. In the first half of the Nineteenth Century, the British officials hardly made any attempts to interfere with the inam lands that had been awarded to the village headmen by the previous regimes, in lieu, of their loyalty and services.

In the valleys, the introduction of the ryotwari tenure posed greater problems for the British officials. Over large parts of the valleys, there were sporadic protests by the mirasidars against the implementation of the ryotwari system. They claimed control over all the village lands, which they managed jointly or through some form of rotation. As individuals vested with the rights and privileges of landlords, mirasidars also demanded tunduvaram (a certain portion of the kudivaram or cultivator’s share of the produce) and swamibhogam (rent paid for the land held in farm) from all the lands cultivated by the payakaris or persons, not mirasidars. In Chingleput, mirasidars enjoyed both swamibhogam and kaniyatchimanyam (rights

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89 Ibid., p. 64.
90 Ibid., p. 65.
relating to enjoyment of certain lands free of all assessment as well as enjoyment of privileges such as those relating to the receipt of various fees like cuppatam, canimerei, calpadi and calbasam from the gross produce of all taxable land). But in certain other areas, like Tanjore, all lands except the official maniyam were regarded as varapet or taxable and the mirasi privilege was limited to the enjoyment of swamibhogam.91

The British officials made little attempts to subvert the rights and privileges enjoyed by the mirasidars. In spite of the ryotwari prescriptions regarding payment of revenue in cash, the mirasidars were allowed to pay in kind and the British administration agreed to bear the brunt of the fluctuations of the agricultural season.92 The early years of the Nineteenth Century also did not witness any attempts to replace the rural intermediaries. The rights of the intermediaries were never fully challenged. It was pointed out that there was hardly any large-scale violation of well established land rights during the ryotwari experiments.93 By all means, land ownership remained far too complex an issue for the British officials. The concept of ownership in the sense of private property was still to emerge, since the market value of land remained abnormally low and also because social restrictions on ownership seldom facilitated the full legality needed for such purposes. The ownership rights came to be claimed and contested by various groups. The dominant sections of the rural society tried to exercise their control by exploiting the economic deprivation and low ritual status of the indigent rural groups, particularly the dalits.94

91 Arun Bandopadhyay, op.cit., pp. 203-204.
94 Dharma Kumar, op.cit., pp. 32-34.
The complexities of land ownership and control have assumed special significance in all discussions relating to agrestic servitude of dalits in the early Nineteenth Century Tamil Nadu. It was viewed that though the caste system confirmed the social and economic disadvantages of the dalit agricultural labourers, they were by no means landless. It was also observed that though the non-mirasidar villagers who were caste Hindus could obtain lands in the event of disputes among the mirasidars in the villages, the Paraiyans, as a rule, were rigidly excluded. The dominant rural groups did not want their under-tenants and slaves to become landowners, as they felt that it would weaken their authority and hold over the rural society.\(^95\)

However, such opinions and ideas do not really convey the true picture of the rural scenario in the early Nineteenth Century Tamil Nadu. It needs to be stressed that the patterns of land ownership and control, as well as the conditions of the ‘dalit’ agricultural labouring classes varied according to geographical locations. Baker has pointed out that in the valley regions, land ownership rights were essentially exercised by Vellala and Brahmin mirasidars, who claimed to be the earliest settlers in the region. The mirasidars, it has been argued, also claimed that they had been the first to devise forms of cooperative management to control the land and organize the flow of irrigation water. Thus, for all purposes, kaniyatchi (mirasi) assumed significance, as it literally meant control over land.\(^96\)

In the valleys, the leaders of the village expressed their privileged rights in terms of a share (pangu) in this control (kaniyatchi), as descendants of the original settlers. Though the resources of the village may have been managed completely

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communally by the association of the kaniyatchikarans, the pangus were generally divided into individual units. The remnants of corporateness often remained in the form of some village council of kaniyatchikarans, and, more particularly, in the idea that kaniyatchi not only guaranteed a claim on a cultivated plot, but also a share in the control of the entire territory of the village comprising of waste lands, roads, house-sites and grazing grounds.  

In most cases, such claims to total exclusive control of the village on the part of the kaniyatchi elite was buttressed by ritual exclusiveness as well. It was viewed that the fertility of irrigated rice cultivation attracted many people to the valleys and kaniyatchikarans utilized this rising influx to distance themselves from cultivation. Thus the lands came to be cultivated by non-kaniyatchikarans, who accepted an almost serf like status, in return for a share of the harvest. The kaniyatchikarans used their economic, political and social connections not only to keep the labourers outside the village by forcing them to dwell in separate hamlets, but also by assigning them a place outside the Hindu society and by categorizing them as ‘untouchables’.

In areas other than the riverine and valley regions, such supreme predominance of the kaniyatchikarans was also noticed in parts of the Tondaimandalam. In these regions, the exercise of their total authority prevented the ‘dalit’ agricultural labourers from living a life of dignity. In such situations, the ‘dalit’ agricultural labouring classes could neither set themselves up as independent patta holding peasants, nor could they free themselves from the fear of being evicted from the paracheris (residential quarters of the dalit agricultural labourers usually built on lands provided by the mirasidars). 

97 Arun Bandopadhyay, op.cit., pp. 204-205.  
99 Arun Bandopadhyay, op.cit., p. 204.
However, the situation was a bit different in the plain regions of Tamil Country. In these regions, besides the groups of Telugus, Padaiyachis, Kallars and Maravars who formed the dominant castes in the villages, there was also a varied population of outsiders. In most cases, the dominant groups provided a lot of incentives to attract immigrants to the localities. The *parakudis* or non-resident tenants were allowed discounts on local rents and dues against the sums paid by the *ulkudis* or resident tenants. The social structure in these villages revolved more around the organization of the people than that of the management of the land. The two interlocking systems, one based on kinship and the other on military hierarchy played important roles. The population of the plain’s countryside was ritually and socially split into two distinct parts, which were often described as left hand and right hand.\(^{100}\) But the pattern of land control and ownership was a lot more interesting in those areas, where *mirasi* right was not sufficiently strong. In these areas, various categories of rural intermediaries sought to exercise their dominance. The ‘dalit’ agricultural labouring classes found it easy to set themselves up as *parakudis* entrusted with the task of cultivation of a portion of poramboke or waste lands. The lower caste *parakudis* acquired some portions of the waste lands in several Tamil speaking dry zones, especially when *mirasidars* refused to cultivate them complaining of inadequate irrigation facilities. In South Arcot, *mirasi* claims over waste lands met with serious opposition from different sections of the rural society. The revenue documents since the 1820s clearly indicate that ‘dalit’ agricultural labourers or *padiyals* (a farm servant) had been trying to secure *pattas*. Despite these efforts, the dominant groups placed obstacles to prevent them from acquiring lands.\(^{101}\) Such opposition weakened in the later decades and, by the late Nineteenth Century,

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\(^{100}\) Baker, C.J., *op.cit.*, p. 93.

\(^{101}\) Arun Bandopadhyay, *op.cit.*, p. 91.
roughly 12 per cent of the Paraiyar population in South Arcot came to possess lands.\textsuperscript{102}

David Ludden has pointed out that in the dry zones located to the north and south of the River Tambraparni (Tirunelveli-Thoothukudi region), no single caste could exercise its absolute authority over land. The dominant caste elites remained landowners, and even the richest non-cultivating landowner had poor peasant relatives close by. As land owning, work in the fields and dominance went together, taking part in cultivation conferred a relatively high status in this dry zone cultural economy. Thus the “biggest landowner and the landless labourers in a village could be of the same caste”.\textsuperscript{103} In such situations, very low caste families, such as the ‘dalit’ Pallas and Paraiyars could set themselves up as “relatively independent peasant households”.\textsuperscript{104}

In districts like Coimbatore, North Arcot and Salem, \textit{mirasi} privileges did not determine the pattern of land ownership. The dalit agricultural labouring classes in these districts sometimes acquired pattas and also made attempts to free themselves from \textit{mirasi} control. In both the \textit{mirasi} and non-\textit{mirasi} villages of these districts, the Paraiyans, apart from setting themselves up as \textit{parakudis}, also entered into \textit{varam} (share) agreements with the landlords.\textsuperscript{105} In districts like Madurai, the slackening of \textit{mirasi} control enabled the servile groups in the rural society to establish themselves up as \textit{yarwadis} (non-resident cultivators) and also, as \textit{ulkudis} (resident cultivators).\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{102} Srinivasa Raghavaiyangar, S., \textit{Memorandum on the Progress of Madras Presidency During the Past Forty Years of British Administration}, Madras, 1893, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{103} David Ludden, \textit{Peasant History of South India, op.cit.}, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{105} Arun Bandopadhyay, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 92-93.
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 93.
Despite such trends, mere enjoyment of a status of an under-tenant or tenant did not essentially ensure total freedom and independence of socially ostracized communities in the rural areas. The *parakudis* belonging to the ‘dalit’ communities remained indebted to the landlords for monetary advances, as well as for seeds and agricultural implements. It was also viewed that a *parakudi* or tenant at will was generally a share cropper, who could hardly be distinguished from an agricultural labourer. It has also been pointed out that since the major part of the capital was provided by the landlords, there was very little scope for the *parakudis* to take independent decisions over matters related to crop selection, as well as the techniques to be adopted. Moreover, since the landowner’s share of the crop was large, they might have supervised the activities of a co-sharer in almost the same manner as they did in the case of their agricultural labourers. It was also observed that the incomes of the poorest co-sharer and the agricultural labourer were frequently the same and that there was no great difference in their economic functions.\(^{107}\)

But, compared to the ryotwari villages and those where *mirasi* was well entrenched, the dalits seemed to enjoy a much favourable situation in the zamindari areas. By the end of the Nineteenth Century, the British officials such as Tremenheere opined that though the Paraiyans could not gain the ownership rights in government villages, they did not face the same difficulty in the zamindari areas, where the *mirasidars*’s claims were more cavalierly treated. In these areas, the dalits could easily become tenants.\(^{108}\)

Thus, it is clear that over a vast portion of the Tondaimandalam, the valley regions of Tanjore and in the wet areas of Tirunelvelli, Brahmin and Vellala *mirasidars* utilized their *kaniyatchimanyam* to exercise control over land, labour and

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\(^{107}\) Dharma Kumar, *op.cit.*, p. 29.
water. In these regions, the preponderance of the *mirasidars* prevented the ‘dalit’ agricultural labouring classes from gaining an exalted status, as compared to that of the sharecroppers or fixed rent tenants. Lacking the security of both food and capital, the ‘dalite’ agricultural labourers became perpetually bonded to *mirasidari* families or to whole *mirasidar* villages. It was observed that in these regions landowning became more and more detached from agricultural labour and independent landowners increasingly looked for support from labouring client cultivators. The labouring client cultivators entered the caste system at the very lowest stratum and the majority of them accepted their status as ‘dalits’. In a sense, their lowness found expression in the public behaviour directed towards them. Thus, labour itself became low in the cultural economy of irrigated agriculture.\(^{109}\)

The early decades of the Nineteenth Century, it has been argued, witnessed a large population of lower caste men entering into various types of agrarian servitude under the Brahmin-Vellala landowners of the valleys and the new dominant communities of the plains. The result of all these multiple macro-processes found expression through that of “peasantisation”. It was also stated, this process of peasantisation needs to be understood in the context of “the imposition of the stratified valley-model agrarian social structure, along with its Brahminal cultural values”.\(^{110}\)

Such economic and social developments closely linked to the changing agrarian structure profoundly impacted on the lives of the Dalits. The growing empowerment of the Brahmins and other upper caste landed groups, with the equally discernible impoverishment and degradation of the ‘lower’ labouring and service castes was not limited to the realms of political economy, but also reshaped the

\(^{109}\) David Ludden, *Peasant History of South India*, *op.cit.*, p.91.

\(^{110}\) Aloysius, G., *op.cit.*, p.38.
contours of colonial ideology. In other words, the complexities of the agrarian structure and that of revenue collection prompted the British rulers to develop a body of knowledge concerning the nature of society, culture and history of the subjugated peoples. In this entire project, the notions of super-ordination/subordination within the native society gained a great deal of prominence, alongside the caste system and varna ideology.

In the early decades of the Nineteenth Century, Brahmins and other literary castes assisted the British administration to develop knowledge about the subcontinent’s society. The enormous power that this colonial knowledge came to wield rested largely on two foundations, one foreign and the other native. Subsequently, this overt reliance on the Brahmins and the other privileged social groups, forced the British ruling groups to grant legitimacy to the Brahmical views of varna/caste. The colonial construction of caste thus took the Chaturvarna ideology as universally operative throughout the sub-continent.

In the context of the agrarian integration of Tamil Nadu, these constructed ideas of native super-ordination and subordination paved the way for the promotion of the valley model throughout the region. The British officials, right up to the mid decades of the Nineteenth Century, by adopting a policy of non-interference in matters of culture, tradition and religion strengthened the ideology of those, who were seeking to extend this model to the other regions. Brahminism, with its a scriptive-hierarchical values, notions of purity and pollution also penetrated deep into the dry areas of interior Tamil Nadu, hierarchically fixing peoples and groups. The impoverished labouring groups, including the Paraiyans, were left with little or no

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111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., pp. 38-39.
114 Baker, C.J., op.cit, p. 78.
bargaining power. These exploited subordinate groups not only lost out in terms of economy, but also had to bear the brunt of cultural inferorization and came to be socially ostracized throughout the region.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{115} Aioysius, G., \textit{op.cit.}, p. 39.