

**LAND REFORMS IN TAMIL NADU (1947-1969) -A STUDY****Dr. N. Neela***Associate Prof. (History), Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College for Women (A), Madurai-2***Abstract**

*Peasants were often browbeaten and exploited by Mirasdars, rich landowners of the Madras presidency. Mirasudari's denial of wages in kind and failure of north east monsoon questioned the survival and employment of the peasants. The interesting phenomena is that the cultivators belong mostly to the caste Hindus sector wherein the landless, most probably and all in the category of untouchables.<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** *Landowners, Mirasdars, ration, paddy, cultivators, Mayavaram Agreement*

On the issue of exploitation of the peasants all over ryotwari region the communist activists instigated them to agitate against the mirasdars. The mirasdars' denial of wages in kind and the failure of North-East Monsoon questioned the survival and employment of peasants. Moreover, the peasants put pressure upon the government to enact tenancy rights, food rationing, compulsory procurement of paddy, etc., resulting widespread unrest in Zamindari areas of the state. The mirasdars managed to escape from the levy on food grains somehow or the other and the entire burden fell on the poor peasants.<sup>2</sup> The prices of essential consumer goods increased steadily. These factors severely affected the poor peasants and forced them not to have single square meal a day. In addition to this, the mirasdars enhanced the rent rate and forcibly evicted the tenants of ryotwari areas. In view of these oppressive measures peasant agitations spread in the districts of Tanjore, Ramnad and Madurai districts.<sup>3</sup>

In this regard both the Madras Government and the central Government enacted a number of Agrarian Acts which gave relief to the peasants. The Government wanted to relieve the peasants from the cruel clutches of land holders and inter mediators who exploited the agricultural labourers and poor agriculturists by all possible means through the ages. The political parties particularly the Congress and Communist parties, made a number of proposals in their election manifestoes for attracting the workers. In this spheres, they paid much attention on the agriculturists who constituted 75% of the vote bank and wanted to get their votes. In order to attract them placed before a number of agricultural relief measures.

Based on the discussions of the members in the Assembly and in the Council the Congress government brought out a number of acts for relieving the burdens of the peasants. When the Congress assumed power in 1946, the first step in the direction of land reforms was the elimination of the Zamindari System. After Independence, the Congress government gave immediate relief to the riots by passing Madras Estate Land Reduction Bill

of 1947. The Act approximately fixed the rent of the Zamindari tracks to that of the Ryotwari areas.<sup>4</sup> After giving temporary relief in 1947, the Zamindari Abolition Bill was passed in the Madras Legislature in 1948 and it became the law in 1949 which eliminated the zamindaris by compensation. The Act empowered the government to take over all estates subject to the payment of reasonable compensation<sup>5</sup>. Provisions were made in this Act for the grant of Ryotwaripatta to the peasants of the estates after the estates were surveyed and settled on Ryotwari principles. With the introduction of this reform, the last vestige of feudalism was wiped off ushering in area of contentment and self-reliance in the former estates which constituted one-fifth of the entire Tamilnadu<sup>6</sup>. The exploitative intermediaries were taken over by the government and the compensation paid to them was Rs.435 crores<sup>7</sup>.

The land reforms introduced by the Congress to abolish Zamindari system created fear in the minds of other land lords in the Tanjore Delta region. Tanjore, the granary of the state, leasing of land was common. The anticipatory land reform, the relationship between the Mirasdars and the tenants and the customary farm labourers or panniyal on the other hand became strained. Several mirasdars in the district refused to renew lease agreement with their usual tenants and displaced them.<sup>8</sup> Agrarian relation became disturbed in Tanjore in 1951-1952. It resulted in the displacement of tenants and dismissal of farm labourers and it ultimately culminated in agrarian crimes and disturbances. The situation threatened to cause law and order problem, besides fall in agricultural production. The enhancement of coolly for farm labours and improvement of their condition of their work were the demands of the farm servants which took political overturn. A meeting of both sides was held under the Revenue Minister KalavenkataRao and a settlement was arrived known as 'Mayavaram Agreement'. The Government promulgated the Tanjore Tenants and Panniyal Protection Ordinance in 1952 employing the provisions of the Agreement.<sup>9</sup> The ordinance was replaced by the Tanjore tenants and Panniyal Protection Act of 1952. This Act provides the regulation of wages payable to the peasants in Tanjore district and taking remedial measures to the conciliation officer appointed under the Act<sup>10</sup>. The Act gave security of tenure for five years to the cultivating tenants and also fixed the maximum rent which they should pay. The Act also provides fir a machinery to settle disputes between the cultivating tenants and the land owners and also between them and the pannaiyal.<sup>11</sup>

With the passing of the Tanjore Act, the owners of other districts also evicted their tenants with the view to bringing the land under their personal cultivation. The provisions relating to cultivating tenants in the Act replaced with the passing of a general Act covering the whole state. The members emphasized in the Assembly to protect the tenants from unjust eviction<sup>12</sup>. As a result Madras Cultivating Tenants Protection Act 1955 was enacted.

The Act gave protection from eviction to cultivating tenants and provided for security of tenancy without time limit and compulsory execution of fresh lease deeds. Revenue Divisional Officer or Special Duty Collectors appointed for the purpose were competent to deal the cases. The tenants were aware of several safeguards to them through legislative measures<sup>13</sup>. The forcibly evicted tenants could apply for restoration. Every cultivating tenant desirous of depositing rent could deposit the same with the Court of Revenue Divisional Officer in person or through his agent.<sup>14</sup> The tenant could apply for restoration of possession if he was unjustly dispossessed of. They could apply to Revenue Divisional Office for the restoration. The cultivating tenants could be evicted only by the Revenue Court, if the tenants continue to default in payment of rent, causing willful damage or injury to lands<sup>15</sup>. The Rent Court had the power to enter upon any land and inspect and carry out the function entrusted upon, which included the power to cut and trash the crop on any land and weigh or the produce with the view to estimating the capabilities of the soil.<sup>16</sup>

The Madras Cultivating Tenants Protection Act 1955 was amended by the Act XIV of 1956. Accordingly, the Madras Cultivating Tenants (Payment of Fair Rent) Act was enacted. The prescribed rate of fair rent payable by tenants was at 40 per cent of the gross produce for wet land or its money value. Land irrigated by lifting water, the land owners entitled to receive only 35 per cent of the normal gross produce was fixed as rent payable to the owner. The produce was required to be shared at the thrashing floor.<sup>17</sup> Land owners also entitled to receive 1/5 of the straw as their share. Tahsildar and District Munsif were constituted under the Act as Rent Court and Rent Tribunal for fixing fair tribunals. The orders of the tribunals were liable to revision by the High Court.<sup>18</sup>

The welfare state was the goal of the reformers. In order to prevent excessive concentration of land in the hands of few and distribution of lands to the poor. *Saraswathy Pandurangan*, MLC<sup>19</sup> and *Ponnammaland Dr.Soundaram*,<sup>20</sup> MLAs pressurized the govt. to pass the Land Ceiling Act. The congress government under K. Kamaraj introduced the Land Ceiling Act. Though Zamindari system was eliminated in 1948, they possessed private lands. As a measure to prevent the accumulation of land further reform was made. The government decided to impose ceiling on agricultural holdings.<sup>21</sup> The Madras Land Reform Act (fixation of ceiling on land) 1961 was published as Madras Act 58 of 1961 on 2 May 1962. The ceiling was calculated in terms of standard acres. One acre of wet land was assessed at Rs.10 and above but not exceeding Rs.15 per acre, 0.8 acre would equal to one standard acre. Different proportion and for the dry lands. In regard to the lowest category of dry land assessed below Rs.1.25 acre, four acres of such land would equal to one standard acre. The ceiling acre for a person and for a family consisting of not more than five members was 30 standard acres. For bigger families consisting of more than five subjected to the maximum of 60 standard acres was allowed to each members in excess of five subjected to

the maximum of 60 standard acres for a family. The land of religious trust of a public was kept outside the scope of the Act. Land in the hill areas, trust, fuel lands was exempted.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequently the Government decided that the ceiling area fixed under the Act should be reduced further. By the Tamilnadu Land Reform (Reduction of Ceiling on land) Amendment Act 1970, the ceiling was reduced to 15 standard acres with effect from 1970. After lowering the limit of land ceiling 1.10 lakhs acres of land were assigned to over 38,817 landless persons up to 31 Oct. 1975. The exemption given to sugarcane growing, grazing and dairy farms in the original Act were scrapped. Restrictions were placed to charitable lands.<sup>23</sup> These land reforms gradually introduced by the Government changed the economic structure of the Tamil society. Despite the drawback of the implementation of the 'Land Ceiling Act', land reform transformed the impoverished country into a socialist pattern of society. Blood and tears of the agricultural population were replaced by toil and sweat which transformed the land towards prosperity.<sup>24</sup>

The governments' efforts to relieve the burden of the agricultural community through legislation and Judiciary could solve the problems to a certain extent. A series of land reforms Act enacted during the Congress ministry saved the tenants and agricultural labourers in the eye of the government but their struggle for livelihood and existence is a continuing one. Till then communal riots and conflicts are going on in Madurai, Tanjore, South Arcot, North Arcot and Ramanathapuram districts in the name of caste.

The land Acts to some extent gave a relief to the peasants and improved their condition. In the society their position is uplifted and they became a challenging one to a possible extent to the landlords. They became aware of the trends of the society and started to work to improve their standard of living in all the fields.

The agrarian reforms brought profound changes in the economic condition of the agriculturists. The erstwhile zamindars lost their predominant control over land. With their declining control over land they lost their superior social position. Family discords and property disputes drastically affected their capacity for corporate action against the aspirations of the tenant-labourers. Ownership of land became dispersed and it had saying impact on the caste, class and power nexus.

When ownership of land became dispersed the productive organization came out of the caste structure. The increasing instances of land transfers and new production relations created with the existing social institutions. Occupational mobility induced changes in the traditional roles and status between castes. New types of social relations based on greater social equality emerged out. Independent India witnessed the peasant upliftment in a new phase.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Notes on Paraiyahs of Chenglepet, Madras, 1891, p.5.
- <sup>2</sup> Madras legislative Council Debates, 25 February 1948, Vol.XVI, No.6, Madras, Government Press, 1948, p.183.
- <sup>3</sup> Fortnightly Report, Second half of January, 1948.
- <sup>4</sup> G.O.No.36. Legal Department, 6 February 1948.
- <sup>5</sup> G.O.No.211. Legal Department, 18 November 1949.
- <sup>6</sup> Madras Information, January 1956, p.75.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, September 1960, p.15.
- <sup>8</sup> Madras Information, March 1961, pp.25-26.
- <sup>9</sup> History of land Revenue Settlement and Abolition of intermediary Tenure in Tamilnadu, Madras, 1976, p.2250.
- <sup>10</sup> Act. XIV of 1952
- <sup>11</sup> Madras Information, Jan.1956, p.76.
- <sup>12</sup> Madras Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol.XVI, 1954, p.210.
- <sup>13</sup> Madras Information, Mar.1961, p.25.
- <sup>14</sup> G.O.No.3089, Revenue Department, 7<sup>th</sup> Oct.1955.
- <sup>15</sup> G.O.No.3510, Revenue Department, 12<sup>th</sup> Nov.1955.
- <sup>16</sup> Madras Act, XXIV of 1956.
- <sup>17</sup> G.O. No.3510, Revenue Department, 12 November 1955.
- <sup>18</sup> Madras Information, April 1963, p.28.
- <sup>19</sup> Proceedings of the Legislative Council, Govt. of Madras, Vol.XXII, 1959, pp.341-343.
- <sup>20</sup> MLAD, Govt. of Madras, Vol.XXVI, 1959, pp.145-149.
- <sup>21</sup> K.Rajayyan, *History of Tamilnadu 1565-1982*, pp.385-386.
- <sup>22</sup> Madras Information, April 1963, pp.25-27.
- <sup>23</sup> Tamilnadu Legislative Assembly Quadrennial Review: 1967-1979, Madras, 1981, p.11.
- <sup>24</sup> Madras Information, January 1956, p.76.