
PESANT REVOLT IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY

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Peasant may be defined as a person who lives in a rural area, works predominantly agriculture wholly or in part, on other's lands for his livelihood, as agriculture labourer, share-cropper, tenant and marginal and small owner-farmer. The peasants or the rural poor composed of diverse social and economic groups. The one common factor among them was their dependence upon the rural elites for land and work. As a matter of fact, they constituted the majority of the rural population. According to the estimate of the number of rural poor, 36 percent of rural households in India as a whole in 1960-61 did not cultivate any land of cultivated less than half an acre each. In addition the households cultivating land house holds.

Classification of Peasants

Based on the Semi-feudal characteristics still lingering on the agricultural sector and the extent general land-owning patterns identified in the post-independence period in India, the peasants are classified into the following categories.¹

- i) Semi-feudal landlords
- ii) Big landlords
- iii) Rich peasants
- iv) Middle peasants
- v) Poor peasants and
- vi) Peasant workers

i) Semi-Feudal Landlords

The non-cultivating community mostly the lease holders of the land designated as semi-feudal landlords. Neither they cultivated nor had any direct link with cultivation. They derived income primarily from property rights in the soil and whose common interest was to keep the level of rents up while keeping the wage-level down. They predominantly exploited tenants, sub-tenants and share-croppers by way of collecting either higher share or rents from them.

ii) Big Landlords

The holding rights over large tracts of land extending over several village termed as big landlords. They were the larger landowners owning more than above thirty acres and engaging more than about a dozen workers. The biggest of the landlords owned thousands of acres of land ranked in wealth along with the semi-feudal landlords.² They were also absentee owners and renters with absolutely no interest in land management or improvement.

iii) Rich Peasants

The classes of rich peasants were the proprietors of land holdings. They were non-cultivating landlords having less than about 30 acres of land. They owned lands usually in the same village. Moreover, they performed field work, mostly supervise the cultivation, engaging personal interest in the management and also in the improvement of land if necessary. On the one hand, they cultivated part of lands by employing peasant workers and leased out remaining lands to the tenants on the other. They earned considerable source of income by leasing out lands and money lending.

iv) Middle Peasants

This category of peasants possessed less than five acres of land. They engaged in personal cultivation in their own lands. Besides, they were also tenants cultivating in the lands of rich peasants and big landlords as lessees. They mostly cultivated land with family labour and did not either employ outside labour except in harvest or to receive rent. This class possessed 30 per cent of the total land and constituted 19 per cent of the population.³ They depend wholly or mainly on their own work. In general, they did not exploit others. Most of them suffered exploitation in the form of land rent and loan interest. Usually, they did not sell their labour. The men of the family worked harder and more regularly than the rich peasants. In some cases, the women also engaged in occasional light agricultural work such as weeding or gram harvesting.

v) Poor Peasants

This class possessed tenancy rights with least security. In general, they used to rent the land they farm. They usually suffered exploitation in the form of rent and interest and they must occasionally hired themselves out. In addition, the selling of labour for limited periods was the basic feature of this class. In some cases, the poor peasants possessed a part of marginal quantity of the land they farmed and an incomplete set of agricultural implements. In other cases, the peasants possessed no land at all, but only an incomplete set of implements. In short, they had to rent land for cultivation and exploited by others. They in fact, paid land rent and interest on loans and hired out a small part of their labour.⁴

vi) Peasant Workers

The category of this class was agricultural labourers. In general, they did not possess any land or implements.⁵ In some cases they possessed a very small amount of land-

about less than one acre and a few implements. The peasant worker, in fact, made his living wholly or mainly by selling his labour power. Most of them belonged to the Scheduled Castes ranking markedly below the rest to the other categories of people. Usually they lived in separate hamlets in the outskirts of villages. Among the Scheduled Caste agricultural workers, in contrast to owner cultivators or even tenant farmers, women worked in the fields in all seasons along with men. In comparison to the first five categories, the peasant workers were presumably demanded by others for cultivation.

The Peasant Revolt in Colonial Madras Presidency

The nightmarish poverty, humiliation and oppression inflicted upon the lower caste peasantry by a minority of rich landlords and moneylenders culminated in the establishment of peasant organizations in different parts of India. The first peasant risings against the foreign oppression came in the wake of plunder and tyranny of the British in Bengal. In the Great Bengal famine of 1770, thirty five per cent of the total and fifty per cent of the agricultural population died of starvation. The subsequent series of famines that broke out in 1784, 1787 and 1790 drove the peasantry against the landlords, planters, moneylenders and the British rulers.⁶

Between 1770 and 1790, the peasants rarely obtained full crops in Madras Presidency. The severity of succeeding drought, in fact, ruined the conditions of peasantry.⁷ In spite of that, the peasants were hit hard by intolerable revenue settlement. In this connection, many cultivators were left impoverished. The tenants as such suffered from rack rent. The high rents not only impoverished the cultivator but also destroyed all his incentive for agricultural improvements.⁸ In 1802, the peasants of Madras Presidency in general, North Arcot and South Arcot districts in particular revolted against the Company's revenue policy. Moreover, in the villages of Dankanicottah and Ottoor near Baramahal about 1,500 peasants resisted Cockburn, the District Collector of North Arcot against the excessive revenue collection.⁹ On the other hand, the Governor-in-Council of Madras Presidency ordered the march of cavalry from North Arcot and suppressed the peasants with an iron hand. In the pre-mutiny period, the original assessments in Madras was roughly 4/5 of the estimated net produce. The Land Revenue in Madras Presidency, in fact, was higher than Bengal and Bombay. In 1810, the peasants of Dankanicottah resisted against high revenue assessment and atrocious behavior of the revenue officials. Furthermore, they put forward specific demands in a vigorous manner.

Their demands were:¹⁰

1. Refund of money collected for lands not cultivated during the Jamabandby (the Annual settlement of revenue accounts in an estate, village or district) of 1209 (1810 A.D.)
2. Punishment of village officials who received Takkavi¹¹ loans but failed to advance them to the peasants.

3. Repayment of money in excess of the fixed Teerva (Revenue assessment)
4. Revenue dues to be collected only on the cultivated areas.
5. Full Teerva should not be collected on dry grains cultivated in wet areas.

The peasants who launched this type of protest had demanded repeal of the excessive payment of land revenue. In consequence, the Revenue Board in Madras ordered the Collector to look into the just grievances of the ryots. However, the administrators resorted to outright ruthless coercion in dealing with the peasants. In the event, complaints went unheeded and the peasants immediately decided to migrate en masse to some other region.¹² In 1819, Thackrey, the District Collector of Tanjore pointed out the pathetic condition of poor peasants owing to higher and inequitable assessment. In 1803, the introduction of a system that required the payment of tax/rent in cash in Tirunelveli district deteriorated the conditions of peasants. In this regard, the Revenue Board put pressure upon the districts to collect rent in money. The district of Tanjore, Chingleput, Tiruchirapalli, Madurai, Salem and North Arcot were asked to fall in line with the system. The peasants of Madras Presidency in general, and Tanjore in particular resisted the money assessment.

Between 1807 and 1810, the price of paddy fell heavily in Tanjore district. However, the Government used coercive measures upon the peasants in collecting the money rent. The revenue record of Tanjore in 1816 revealed that the peasants of about one hundred and fifty villages protested against the introduction of money assessment at a time when prices fell sharply. In 1822, Sir Thomas Munro, the Governor of Madras sanctioned the reduction of assessment. However, his measures did little to improve the condition of peasants. Sir Thomas Munro calculated that out of Rs. 100/- the Government's assessment over the value of gross produce represented by Rs. 45-12-0 and the expenses of cultivation by Rs. 40/- leaving a profit to the peasant as low as Rs. 14-4-0. The profit as a matter of fact, turned into loss not only in bad seasons but also in good seasons. In a span of 24 years, four famines occurred in 1799, 1804-1807, 1811-12 and 1824 which drastically ruined the peasants of Madras Presidency.¹³ Among others, the cause of the famines was attributed to the failure of harvests in succession resulting from erratic rainfall. The Government, nevertheless took little care to ameliorate the condition of peasants.¹⁴

In 1832, about three hundred and ninety-two villages of Tanjore district severely affected due to shortage of rain. In consequence, the peasants of the villages reacted against the Government for the reduction of assessment on the basis of the actual produce of the crops. On the other hand, the Government turned down the demands of the peasants and forced them to stop harvesting crops.¹⁵

In 1845, the Collector of South Arcot observed that two-thirds of lands laid waste owing to heavy and unequal assessments. The Collector of Chingleput in 1854 reported that the land revenue in the district was excessive and unequal.

The peasants of Chingleput district petitioned to the Government about their inability to meet the over burdened taxes, the neglect of construction of canals and the imposition of 12 per cent interest on the arrears of kist and tax on salt.¹⁶ The prevalence of torture administered by the revenue officials upon the poor peasants for the failure to pay the revenue demands continued to be horrifying. In 1854, the Governor-General-in-council instructed the Government of Madras to constitute a Commission of Enquiry to investigate all the torture related cases. Some of the tortures were as follows.

“Keeping a man in the sun preventing his going to meals or other calls of nature, confinement, preventing cattle from going to pasture by shutting them in the house, quartering a peon on the defaulter who is obliged to pay his daily wages, pinches on thighs slaps, blows with fist or whip, twisting the ears, tying the hair of the head to a donkey or a buffalo’s tail and placing the necklace of bones or other degrading or disgusting materials round the neck.¹⁷”

The victims of torture, in fact, were poor and medium sized land owners on the recommendation of the Torture Commission, Departments of Revenue, Police and Judiciary were separated with provisions for my legal proceedings against any citizen only through the “Court of Law” and for the dismissal of Government servants who dared to employ torture either in Revenue or Police case. The functioning of Law courts hardly secured the peasants on the grounds of certain unscrupulous lawyers, the connivance of the court officials and the laxity of the Native Judge resulting a massive loss of peasants land ownership.¹⁸

In 1857-58, the land revenue collection in the Madras presidency was about Rs. 361.81 lakhs. In 1865-66, seven years later, the land revenue collection rose to Rs. 429.17 lakhs. This period witnessed a great famine in which about six million people died of starvation. Furthermore, in 1867-68, the revenue collection was raised to about Rs. 423.97 lakhs. In 1875-76, eight years later about four million people in the Presidency died of starvation. The large increases in land revenue collection caused several violent uprisings of the peasantry against the Government in many parts of the Madras Presidency.¹⁹

The Madras Mahajana Sabha in 1886 put pressure upon Lord Dufferin to improve the conditions of peasants. It also pointed out the peasants position of irrecoverable burdens due to heavy assessment. The increase in the price of salt and heavy, numerous and harassing penalties imposed under the Cattle Trespass Act aggravated the condition of peasants. However the representation of the Sabha was not seriously attended to by the Government.²⁰

The famine of 1876-78 drastically affected Indian economy in general, and the Madras Presidency in particular. During the calamitous situation the area suffered in the Madras Presidency was 74,000 square miles containing a population of 16 millions.²¹ The famine owing to drought was the severest since the beginning of the century. It is due

to this calamity, the progress of agricultural classes especially, the lowers strata of peasants received a severe setback and the landless agricultural labour had no employment. Moreover, the tenants could not pay rents to the landlords. The prices of food grains rose to exorbitant levels. The poor peasants who had no stores of grain became pauperised. The calamity, however, spared the big peasants and grain merchants. They hoarded food grains which resulted in the rapid rise of prices. The Government on the other hand, adopted coercive methods to collect arrears from the peasants. The revenue authorities seized the properties of the defaulters.²² In the district of Coimbatore, the total value of land transfer amounted to Rs. 6.3 crores in the year 1882-83. In the Madras Presidency, for the year 1891-92, the total value of documents registered were to the tune of Rs. 15.66 crores. The marginal farmers were presumably driven into debt-trap. They resorted to borrow from landlords and moneylenders. Nearly 80 per cent of the money-lending business was in the hands of the big landowners. The terms and conditions of money loans varied in different district. A 12 per cent was the usual rate of interest for loans amounting between Rs. 100/- and Rs. 500/-. For the loan amount between Rs. 500/- and Rs. 1000/-, the interest rate varied from 9 to 12 per cent. In case of the loan amount exceeding Rs. 1000/- the rate of interest decreased between 9 and 6 per cent. If the amount of loan below Rs. 100/-, a high rate of interest was charged between 12 and 18 per cent. On the contrary, the poor peasants obtained small sums of money from moneylenders at the interest varied from 25 to 50 per cent as usual rate.²³

During the Governorship of Lord Curzon, he was forced to adopt the Land Revenue policy that was meant to protect the tenants at the cruel hands of zamindar. Romesh Chandra Dutt, the former President of the Indian National Congress challenged the Government demanding more protection to the tenants. On the contrary, the land revenue in the Madras Presidency increased from Rs. 637.01 lakhs in 1908-09 to Rs. 708.17 lakhs in 1917-18. The increase by 11 per cent in the land revenue was vehemently protested by the peasants of Madras Presidency.²⁴

During Non-Co-operation Movement of 1920, the peasants seemed to have gained some political consciousness. The Indian National Congress raised a slogan of non-payment of land revenue which had a great effect. The peasants in other words, interpreted the political struggle for Swaraj in terms of a struggle against heavy land tax and sections of them sympathized with, supported and participated in the movement. As a matter of fact, it was the first participation of a section of Indian peasants who made it an organized political movement. The peasants of Madras Presidency also rose under the banner of Non-Co-operation Movement. The peasants refused to pay tax to the Government. On the contrary, the Government levied fresh taxes in order to compensate for the loss of revenue owing to non-payment of taxes. In this regard, the Government passed Rent Recovery (Amendment) Act (1922) a special legislation and compelled the peasants to pay land revenue with penalty or were threatened with

confiscation of their lands. Hundreds of rural folks in the Presidency who refused to pay taxes were arrested by the Government.²⁵

In August 1922, the Government of Madras Presidency announced the enhancement of land revenue rates in the Tanjore and Tiruchirapalli districts by as much as 18 per cent on dry lands and 25 per cent on wet lands. The peasants as well as mirasdars threatened to launch civil disobedience if the new rates were not modified. As a consequence, the Government had to scale down the highest rates in August 1924.²⁶

In 1930, the economic depression in the Madras Presidency aggravated the condition of landlords in general and poor peasants in particular. It forced down the market price of agricultural products. The landlords as such could no longer sell their agricultural produce profitably. Nor did they have anything to grant credit to the tenants and poor peasants.²⁷ Between 1901 and 1931, the number of cultivating owners per thousand persons supported by agriculture declined from 512 to 390. On top of all, the depression badly hit the agricultural sector.²⁸

The independent organization of the peasants as a class gathered momentum after the end of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The peasant movement began to gather strength in 1930s. In 1932, the tenants of the zamindar of Udayarpalaym in Tiruchi district put pressure upon the Government by placing the following demands:

- i) The zamindars to look after the welfare of ryots and lessen the collection of tax from Rs. 3,00,000/- to the original collection of Rs. 27,000/-
- ii) Make survey or settlement and fix rent
- iii) Classify lands and not to collect rent in the uncultivated lands.
- iv) Exempt tax on petty cultivation such as green, roots and other minor produce
- v) Repair tanks and other water sources and
- vi) Grant remission of tax on failure of crops.²⁹

The Government of Madras hardly considered the above demands of peasants. The civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-33 further radicalized the peasants. The excessive tax burden hit hard the poor peasants. According to the survey of rural credit and debt situation in Madras in 1934 and 1935, those paying a tax between Re.1/- and Rs. 100/- fared very much worse than those who paid more than Rs. 100. The cultivators who paid a tax were only in debt to the extent of Rs. 8/- per hundred or more tax they paid. Above all, the calculations made by the Madras Banking Enquiry Committee in 1930 put the entire rural debt of the agrarian population of the Madras Presidency at Rs. 1,500,000,000/- In other words, by 1939, the debt had increased to Rs. 2,719,000,000/- which amounted to an increase of about 100 per cent in the decade.³⁰

In 1934, the mirasdars of Shiyali taluk in Tanjore district withheld payment of kist to the Government. On the other hand, the Government took coercive action against the defaulters.³¹ In Mangalam village of the Sivaganga zamin, the peasants who failed to pay rent were attacked by the police in May 1934. Moreover, the police also

indulged in firing. In the firing, one peasant was killed and two were injured.³² The peasants of Salem district reacted against the Government for the enhanced rate of kist. They observed 'Ryots Day' on 17 March, 1935 and launched a no-tax campaign.³³ In April 1935, the South Indian Federation of Peasants and agricultural Labourers decided to organize peasants of Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka.³⁴ The first All India Kisan Congress which met at Lucknow in 1935 decided that the Congress should be established as the supreme kisan organization in the country. Jawaharalal Nehru extended his support to this Congress. The All India Kisan Sabha carried on wide educative and propaganda work among the Indian Kisans. The Sabha asked for collective affiliation to the Indian National Congress. On the contrary, the Congress did not agree the suggestion of the All India Kisan Sabha.³⁵

In 1930s, the Madras Government received a number of complains about the recalcitrant attitude of the Harijan labourers. Moreover, the caste assemblies in Tanjore lent their support to the pannaiyals. In view of this, the agricultural labourers were ready to show their collective strength against landlordism. As a consequence, an independent Vivasaya Tholilalar Sangam (Association of Landless Agricultural Labourers) was formed in 1939. This union comprising of militant Harijan elements was waiting for an opportunity to launch a mass movement. In 1940, the pallar tenants³⁶ of Ialgudi in Tiruchi district were encouraged by the justice Party to rise against the atrocities of Brahmin landlords. However, this agitation came to an abrupt end with the arrest of important leaders including M.K. Gopta.³⁷

The forces especially the Communist Party instrumental in organizing peasant movement in Tamil Nadu. The Communists were responsible for the formation of Kisan Sabha at Thenparai in Mannargudi area towards the close of 1942 and chose Tanjore district as the base for the movement. Subsequently, Kisan Sabhas were formed in some other places like Ramapuram near Kaveripattinam of Salem district. With the formation of a regional level peasant organization in a broader way, Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangham (Tamil Nadu Agricultural Association) was formed on 14 June, 1943.³⁸ The share-croppers and small peasants who were organized by the Communist Party brought qualitative change in the peasant movement. The first organized peasant movement took place in Thenparai Village of Mannargudi Taluk against the mutt authorities of Uthrapathi demanding one-third as tenant's share as against the existing 20 per cent. On the other hand, the mutt authorities turned a deaf ear to the demands of peasant organization resulting into a clash between the two.³⁹ Without intimating the mutt authorities, the peasants harvested paddy crop and took out their share of produce. In the mean time, the District Collector of Tanjore intervened in this matter and assured slight enhancement of tenant's share.

The tenants of Ramapuram and the surrounding villages of Salem district revolted against the landlords demanding higher waram. Similarly, the tenants of Kattanur village in Ramnad district for higher warams. Realising the gravity of the tense situation,

the revenue officials temporarily settled the problem. However, in order to wreak vengeance on the peasants, mirasdars, inamdars and zamindars of Tamil Nadu left vast tracts of land fallow. In alampatti and Thenparai villages of Tanjore district about 1000 acres of land were left fallow.

In 1944, Kuppu of Kalappal organized peasants in the surrounding villages of Mannargudi in Tanjore district.⁴⁰ The peasant revolted against the mirasdars for wage increase in waram payment and the abolition of corporal punishments. The peasants of Watrap region in Ramnad district and Kalakkadu and the neighbouring villages of thirunelveli district resisted against landlords demanding higher wages and waram. The share-croppers demanded 50 per cent of the produce as waram. In zamindari areas of Papanad, Mathukur, Athivetti of Tanjore district, Kannivadi, Neikkarapatti and Bodinayakannur of Madurai district. Tirupathur and Manamadurai of Ramnad district the peasants strongly revolted against the atrocities of zamindars in an organized manner.⁴¹ In 1945 the Imperial Government banned all Kisan sabhas in the country and the axe fell on Tamil Nadu also under section 56 of the Defence on India rules. However, the repressive measures of the Government could not continue for long. In spite of the ban, the widespread peasant revolts were prevalent across the country in 1946. In the same year, the peasants revolted against mirasdars demanding 50 per cent of waram as against their usual demand of 33.5 per cent of waram in Nannilam, Mayavaram and Kumbakonam taluks of Tanjore district.⁴² Consequently, a clash between peasants and the servants of mirasdar took place. In this connection, two servants of the latter were murdered resulting into ban on kisan and Communist meetings in the Mannargudi division of the Tanjore district.⁴³ In the meantime, the Government evolved a temporary settlement to lessen the tension between the two sides. The mirasdars, as a matter of fact, did not concede to the demands of peasants. As a result of this, Madras Presidency had to witness a series of peasant movement since 1947 and they challenged the authority of Government on the one hand and the landlords on the other.

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