

## **Agrarian Slavery in Tamil Country during the Colonial Period**

**Dr. S. Kanagammal, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., M.TM.  
V. Regina, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Part-time Research Scholar**

---

### **Abstract**

An attempt is made here to trace out the existence of slavery with special reference to Agrarian slaves in Tamil country during the colonial rule. For writing this research paper we collected sources, both primary and secondary, from the State archives and District libraries. We also referred to the proceedings of the Board of Revenue, Reports of the Collectors of nine districts in the Madras Presidency and the Newspaper reports as well as relevant books like *Tanjore District Handbook* (B.S. Baliga), *History of Tinnevely* (R. Caldwell) and *Bonded Labour in India* (Kamble N.D.) The main aim of this paper is to describe the practice of slavery in agriculture in Tamilnadu during the British Colonial Period.

**Keywords:** Agrarian slavery, bonded labour in India, Madras Presidency, District Collectors, landlords, Tamil country.

### **Agrarian Slavery Prominent in Tamilnadu**

In Tamilnadu, the slavery was prevalent in a more pronounced manner in the agricultural sector, till the beginning years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were incidents of District Collectors exchanging correspondence with the Revenue Board and between themselves in regard to the restoration of the agrarian slaves who had fled from one land-lord to another. In course of time the British administrators looked at the suffering sympathetically and saw how this heinous practice made the depressed classes suffer and put an end to the slavery by enacting Slavery Abolition Act in 1843 and by the Indian Penal code XLV in 1861. By law, the agrarian slave, mostly belonging to depressed classes, got some relief, but their enslavement continued in practice.

### **Additional Factors which Contributed to Agrarian Slavery**

In addition to direct slavery, some other factors were also responsible for the enslavement of agricultural labour. Agricultural methods were extremely defective and were based largely on traditions and superstition. The implements used for cultivation were crude and inefficient. The plough was a crooked stick which only scratched the surface of the soil. Their cattle were miserable, unhealthy creatures that could hardly draw the plough. The application of manure was defective and irrigation was insufficient. As for rotation of crops, the principle was little known and imperfectly practiced, while seed selection was seldom or never attempted.

### **Two Classes and Widespread Slavery**

The people of Tamilnadu were divided into two classes, the well-to-do who represented just about a fourth of the population and the poor who made up the remaining three fourths. The latter section of the people was economically very poor.

### **Slavery in Madras Presidency**

Slavery became a common feature in almost all the districts of this province. Agricultural slaves were sold in different ways. They were sold with land or free of land by execution of mortgage bonds or contract. The value of slaves was fixed in terms of money, goods and labour, the reasons of their sale being, usually, finance to meet expenses connected with marriages, ceremonies, festivals, to pay capital interest and such other items of expenditure. In 1819, the Revenue Secretary to the Government of Madras, with a view to improve the lot of the slaves, wrote to the Collectors of Tamil districts calling for their reports relating to the state of slavery. The Collectors of nine districts in the Madras Presidency, especially Tamil speaking areas, reported testifying to the existence of slavery.

### **Madurai District**

W. Peter, Collector of Madurai district, reported that slavery did exist in his district during the period of the Nawab rule and the slaves were sold at the pleasure of the master, independent of the land to which they were attached. If the slave got married, his children were also considered the property of the owner and were employed in the cultivation of land. The master granted them some allowances. Even if the master happened to sell his land, he was still in possession of his slaves and could sell them

at his will. He would let them to work for another master in case he failed to provide them with work, but they were subject to recall at his command.

### **Coimbatore District**

In Coimbatore also, slavery existed. The master had the right to sell his slave independently of the land and was sold at the rate of Rs.50 per person. The children born of slave parents became slaves. If a female slave gave birth to a child, the master was required to pay money to the parents of the child. Though the masters had the right to punish their slaves, they seldom exercised it for fear of Governmental action. The slaves received better treatment from their masters than the free labourers. The slaves received 1/8 of the total produce. In certain cases, Pallar community workers received land for their cultivation where slavery did not exist. The master executed bonds for the marriage expenses of the Pallar families on condition that they would serve him for life.

### **Tinnevelly (Tirunelveli) District**

Cotton, the Collector of Tinnelvely, reported that in his district in the early part of the nineteenth century, slaves were sold either with the land or independently. But in 1819 they were sold along with land and were eligible to be mortgaged. In 1820, two members of the Paraiyar community seemed to have borrowed Rs.10 and Rs.11 from a master and executed a bond binding themselves to him to do agricultural work throughout their life-time at specific wages. In another case, at Nanguneri in the district of Tinnevelly a member of the Paraiyar community had bound himself to perform throughout his life-time any agricultural labour imposed on him in lieu of a loan of Rs.15 and a daily wage of two seers of paddy. The slave labour got subsistence allowance at the lowest scale which was not more than two measures of paddy a day. They could seek employment elsewhere during the off season, but they must return to their old masters at the commencement of the season of cultivation. At the time of harvest they got a small quantity of grain called *paroo* from the gross produce measuring  $27\frac{3}{8}$  percent of the total produce.

The masters gave money to their slaves to meet funeral expenses and also offered them presents during marriages, child birth and festivals. But all these were purely voluntary and the slaves started claiming more.

## **Tanjore (Thanjavur) District**

In Tanjore, as pointed out by J. Hopburn, the Collector, a voluntary form of slavery existed and the slaves were neither captured nor sold for arrears of revenue.

## **Pallars, Paraiyars and Workers from Other Communities**

While the members of the Pallar and Paraiyar communities executed bonds with their masters who provided them with subsistence, the Brahmin land lords engaged Sudra intermediaries without executing bonds to complete the work along with the members of the Pallar and Paraiyar communities. The bond of slavery had binding on both the parties to implement the terms agreed upon. The master was bound to support his slaves and in turn the slaves and their descendants were bound to be loyal to their masters. The bond was executed before a superintendent in the Accountant General's office. A few cases are cited below.

## **Some Cases of Agrarian Bondage in Government Records**

In 1885, three brothers executed a bond for a sum of Rs.25/-. The third one was required to work as agricultural labourer, getting four *marakkaals* of paddy as his monthly wage in Tinnevely. If he did not work, his other brothers were required to compensate it by paying two annas per day. In 1886 another bond was executed by the other two brothers for Rs.25.75 for a period of 10 years. In case of default they were required to repay the principal amount with two annas per day as interest. A father executed a bond for Rs.23 to the effect that his son would do agricultural work for ten years and in case of default, he agreed to repay the amount with interest. In 1889 a father executed a bond for Rs.40.25 mortgaging his two sons to work for an indefinite period and in the event of default he agreed to repay the loan and compensate the loss.

It may be noted that in Tanjore the bonded labourer did not stay with his master nor did he form part of his master's family. He lived with his caste people in his Paraiyar caste colony or street in a hut. If the master failed to provide his slave with subsistence, he was allowed to seek employment elsewhere. The bonded man had certain rights such as getting subsistence, protection for himself, his family and community from being sold to distant places. He was given equal treatment with other labourers and was not liable to be punished. In case of ill-treatment by his master, he could complain to the legal authorities.

## **Mortgaging Oneself to a Master**

As in Tanjore, the bonded labourers, while mortgaging themselves to the masters, executed bonds for the money they borrowed. The following references attest to this fact: On August 23, 1863 a bond was executed for Rs.31 by two brothers. One of the brothers gave the undertaking that his brother would work as an agricultural labourer for the clearance of the interest. On July 17, 1872 a bond was executed for a sum of Rs. 28 ¼. One of the executees was to do agricultural work for the clearance of interest. In case of default he was liable for prosecution under Act no. XIII of 1859. \*

The Collector of Trichinopoly reported that there were 10,600 slaves belonged to Pallar caste, and were sold along with the land, or independently. The price of a Pallar man varied from 5 to 10 pagodas. Slaves were occasionally mortgaged. A female slave was never sold. The area of land to be cultivated by a slave was one capable of yielding 150 *cullams* of paddy. The Collector also gave a statement to the Board of Revenue relating to the wages of slaves in this district.

However J. Hutt reported that the hereditary slaves engaged in agrarian activities were sold or mortgaged. Each slave was sold at 20 pagodas and the sale was executed while buying and selling.

Until the early years of the nineteenth century the attitude of the British Government seemed to be non-interventionist. By the effective action of the Collectors of the nine districts listed above, the slavery/bonded labour system was for the first time banned by the British rule in India. The British India government passed Regulation Act of 1806 to restrict the slave system.

According to Act XIII of 1859, the bonded labourers after clearing their dues to their masters could change over to other masters or remain independent without the bonded provisions preventing them not to do so.

Unfortunately section VI of the Madras Compulsory Labour Act of 1858 even legalized forced labour system. This ban on agrestic (rural) slavery was not wholesome, because the claim of the masters took precedence over the claims of the slaves in the court of law. The Act restricted the clearance of debt. When the Company's charter was renewed in 1833, members of the British Parliament favoured the need to abolish the status of slavery as soon as it might become practicable. In 1837 they induced the

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:10 October 2015

Dr. S. Kanagammal and V. Regina, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Part-time Research Scholar  
Agrarian Slavery in Tamil Country during the Colonial Period

House of Commons Committee to condemn all oppression in British territories and in the following year they forced the Government to scrap the whole apprenticeship system to declare total and immediate emancipation of the former slaves. The Commission which reported on Indian slavery recommended a restricted scale of punishments for Indian slaves. Moreover, the Government of India itself was constrained to take viable action against the institution of slavery. Hence the Act of 1843 was attacked in many ways. However, according to the missionary reports, the status of members of the Pallar community began to show marked improvements after the abolition of slavery in 1843 by the East Indian Company and they began to convert to Christianity in large numbers.

The Act V of 1852 had made bonded system a punishable offense. In 1884 the Revenue Department declared that slavery had been abolished in British India. It was decided that acceptance of slavery in official correspondence was objectionable and was likely to cause misapprehension. Towards the end of the century a few experiments were made by Collectors and Missionary Societies to go to the root of the problem by settling the members of the Paraiyar community on the land of their own. The ill-treatment from which the Paraiyar community suffered at the hands of their debtors for their uncleared debts, and the oppression of landlords, forced them to think in terms of providing the helpless agricultural population with certain ameliorative measures of permanent nature. The Government of India by setting up the Famine Commissions in 1880, 1890, 1900 and 1901 had tried to improve the condition of this section of society. The Christian Missionaries had also made some efforts to help them. But all seemed to be insufficient, falling short of any permanent solution.

=====  
Dr. S. Kanagammal  
Associate Professor in History  
Sri Parasakthi College for Women  
Courtallam 627 802  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[kanaga28a@gmail.com](mailto:kanaga28a@gmail.com)

V. Regina, M.A., M.Phil.  
Research Scholar (Part time)  
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University  
Tirunelveli 627 012  
Tamilnadu, India  
[reginavijay68@gmail.com](mailto:reginavijay68@gmail.com)

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:10 October 2015

Dr. S. Kanagammal and V. Regina, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Part-time Research Scholar  
Agrarian Slavery in Tamil Country during the Colonial Period