

THE EMERGENCE OF PEASANT ORGANIZATIONS UNDER COLONIAL RULE IN TAMILNADU, 1943-1947

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Even during the British period, although, the colonial rulers undertook certain measures affecting peasantry, the peasants protest by and large remained unarticulated. Yet their agitations against the rulers and other local exploiters were spasmodic besides being sporadic and spontaneous. These struggles were essentially launched against feudal estates and imperialists. During the early twentieth century, the agrarian classes were mobilised politically for the national movement. The peasantry hoped that the culmination of British rule would pave the way for their prosperity and solve their problems. As against these expectations the dawn of independence effected change in agrarian structure, owing to imbalanced development, technological transformation in agriculture created restlessness amongst the landed and landless peasantry. For the first time, in India, a big divide has taken place amongst agriculturists since introduction of programmes of agricultural modernisation. The problems of landed peasantry were conscientised by the leaders which paved the way for their organisation. Moreover, the problems felt by the landed peasantry, especially in Tamilnadu were not taken into consideration by any political party and this warranted some important and knowledgeable people of farming community to spearhead and, organise the peasants into Agriculturists Association. The present research work is undertaken against this background of circumstances leading to emergence of peasant organisations in Tamilnadu, issues highlighted, pressure courses of action pursued, organisational strength and weakness of being nonpolitical and political party organisation of peasantry interface with certain political developments at the governmental level in Tamilnadu.

Kuthagai Vivasayigal Sangham

In Thenparai, Uthirapathy *mutt* possessed 2000 acres of land mostly cultivated by tenants. Sitaramachari, an agent of the *mutt* badly treated the tenants. The tenants were given low *waram*. The mis-management of the *mutt* and the ill-treatment of the tenants and labourers by the *mutt* authorities created a crisis. Thenparai tenant's struggle considered as the first peasant movement in the history of Tamil Nadu to fight for a higher share of produce and higher wages in 1943. Furthermore, most of the tenants and labourers of the village responded to the call of the leaders of the Communist Party of India. In consequence, about 200 tenants signed their names expressing willingness to form an association. In this connection, the first *Kuthagai Vivasayigal Sangham* (Share-Croppers Association) was formed at Thenparai in January 1943. The Association put forward following demands towards the *mutt* authorities.¹

1. abolition of existing slavery in *pannai* lands;
2. to increase the wages of agricultural labourers; and
3. to increase tenant's share of produce.

Tamil Nadu Agricultural Labourers Organization

The *mutt* authorities employed thugs intimidating the members of Association. However, the Association continued the demand of one third of tenant's share (33.5 per cent) as against the existing 20 per cent and resorted to strike. A rally was led by Nedungadi Ramachandran, Amirthalingam, Venkatesan and Ramanujam pressurizing the demands of the Association. This was the first ever rally conducted by peasants and labourers in Tanjore district. On the other hand, the *mutt* made deliberate attempt to break the strike by evicting tenants and threatening to leave the lands fallow. Defying the *mutt* authorities, the tenants harvested the crop and then kept the grains under guard for seven months in the threshing floors. In the mean time, prominent leaders namely A.K.Gopalan, B.Srinivasa Rao, Manali Kandasami and P.Ramamurthy played a considerable role to organize the peasants.² Subsequently, the peasant organizations sprang up elsewhere in the villages of Tanjore district. The name of Share-croppers Association was changed to *Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangham* (Tamil Nadu Agricultural Labourers Organization) on 14 June 1943. The peasant consciousness, however, became vibrant. District level *Kisan Sabhas* affiliated to the *Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangham* was established all over Tamil Nadu. In this connection, a series of peasant movements were organized between 1943 and 1952 in Tamil Nadu in general and Tanjore in particular. The peasant organizations under *Vivasayigal Sangham* struggled against landlords of Tanjore for three important issues relating to increase in the share of sharecroppers, wages of *pannaiyals* and end to physical assault on the latter. The landlords as usual resorted to violence. In addition to this, their muscleman beat up leaders and the militant elements among the struggling people. On the other hand, the struggling peasants under *Vivasayigal Sangham* demonstrated massively before the District Collector resulting the outcome of Mannargudi agreement of 1944. The agreement entitled sharecroppers to retain 33.5 per cent of the total produce. East Tanjore, the rice-bowl of the state needed much more labour supply than the dry areas. The drudgery involved in the cultivation of the rice fields was much greater. The landlords often maintained armies of agrestic slaves whose wages were very low. The minor lapses on the part of *pannaiyals* would attract severe punishment. The impact of the Second World War causing food crisis, and price hike further ruined the conditions of the peasants. Moreover, *zamindars*, *inamdars* and *mirasdars* forcibly collected poor stock of the food grains in anticipation of price rise further aggravated the tenants. The small farmers and labourers found it very difficult to manage the situation owing to fall in production and rise in price. In consequence, a large scale of lands was transferred from the peasants. The neo-rich class of men like hoarders, war time profiteers, moneylenders and traders ventured to invest on land. The value of land, in fact, was recorded as high. Medium and small landholders owning 25 acres painstakingly offered their lands for sale.³

South Arcot District Vivasayigal Sangham

In the mean time, one Kuppu of Kalappal, a Harijan peasant leader of the Communist Party struggled against the *mirasdars* of villages around Mannargudi in Tanjore district in 1944 resulting in the abolition of corporal punishments upon peasants such as *Savukkadi* and *Sanippal*. B.Srinivasa Rao was instrumental in organizing the peasants of Madras State under *Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangham*. On 26 February 1944, a branch of *Vivasayigal Sangham* was established in North Arcot district. Similarly, on 10, 17, 25 and 27 May 1944, the branches of Sangham were formed in Madurai, Ramnad, Tirunelveli and Tiruchi districts respectively. On 25 June 1944, *South Arcot District Vivasayigal Sangham* was formed.⁴ The demand for higher wages became a common feature everywhere. Share-croppers in the area of Kalakkadu and its neighbouring villages of Tirunelveli district, Ramapuram and surrounding villages in Salem district and Watrap area of Ramnad district fought for higher *waram*. The share-croppers in association with *Vivasayigal Sangham* demanded 50 per cent of the produce as *waram*.⁵ On the other hand; landlords sought police help to dilute the peasant organization everywhere in the villages of Tamil Nadu. However, the peasant movement spread to the *zamindari* areas of Papanad, Mathukur, Athivetti of Tanjore district, Kannivadi, Aiykudi, Neikkarapatti, Bodinayakanur of Madurai district, Tirupathur and Manamadurai of Ramnad district. The peasants in these areas fought not only against exploitation but also atrocities committed by the *zamindars* against the peasants.⁶

Vivasayigal Sangham

The Madras territory witnessed acute shortage of food grains in 1947. Tens and hundreds of peasants unable to consume even eight ounces of food grains a day were reported to be starved. Black marketers such as rice millers, middle-men, merchants and corrupt officials failed to carry out the Governmental orders in preventing food crisis in the state. In addition to this, the landlords hoarded grains in anticipation of price hike and failed to handover surplus stocks of food grains to the Government. The prices of essential consumer goods increased suddenly. The peasants as a matter of fact, hardly had single square meal a day. In 1952, landlords were legally obliged to sell their surplus paddy at the Government price of Rs.9/- to Rs.12/- depending on quality per bag of two *kalams* or twenty-four *marakkals*.⁷ The landlords were allowed to keep nine *marakkals* per adult and six per child per month for each member of his own family. However, six weeks after each harvest, the black market price of paddy per bag rose to Rs.18/-. Between *Vaigasi* and *Purattasi* (May and September) it was Rs.24/-. The richer landlords and merchants could afford to hoard surplus paddy until they could sell at an optimum price. In other words, the poor peasants either ate their paddy or sold it immediately after the harvest in order to pay the dues to the landlord. On the other hand, the landlords owning more than about fifteen acres could often sell seedling paddy for Rs.30/- a bag.⁸ The richer landlords, in fact, made profits over and above those normally accruing from owning more land by way of engaging

pannaiyals instead of *coolies*, by selling paddy in the black market and by lending money. Moreover, the landlords mostly Brahmins and non-Brahmin caste-Hindus with more than ten acres of land used to offer Rs.1,000/- to Rs.2,000/- as loans to their tenants, *pannaiyals* and other neighbours and drew anything from 6 per cent to 33 per cent interest.⁹ In these ways, the poor tenants and *pannaiyals* were enslaved and were put in a state of bondage. The landlords often employed *pannaiyals* in lieu of casual labour. A well-to-do landowner instead of paying Re.1/- to casual labour a day, preferred *pannai* cultivation. On the other hand, *pannaiyals* lacking any economic assets agreed to work sixteen hours a day permanently as serfs. On the occasion of calendar festivals and ceremonies, the *pannaiyals* received gifts of grain, coconut, plantain, oil etc. It was not uncommon for him to receive some assistance from the landlord on occasions of difficulty, such as periods of unemployment or sickness. Moreover, he was hardly paid two litres of paddy a day lower than the market rate.¹⁰

Whenever there was a demand for labour or ceremonies like marriage at the master's house *pannaiyal* and other members of his household had to render free service. The erring *pannaiyals* were punished in a form of *Kokku Pidithal* (catching the crane). This total dependency of the *pannaiyals* was equated with slavery. In cultivation, tenants received between one-fourth and one-fifth of share as produce. In addition, the tenants had to bear the costs of seed, half his manure, the village servant's crop shares and extra labour for transplanting and harvest. Moreover, the tenants should give one-third of straw per year to the landlord.¹¹ Tenancy agreement between landlords and tenants were never mentioned in a written form. The oral agreements should be revived every year subject to the clearance of the said share to the landowner. Most of the tenants perpetually owed Rs.300/- to Rs.1,000/- to their own or some other landlord at the rate of 12 per cent to 33 per cent interest per annum. Thus the tenants' large part of earnings, in fact, went to repay debts and interest.¹²

In *kuthagai* system of cultivation it carried a fixed rent on land tenure. The lessee was known as the *kuthagaidar* who had to pay a fixed quantity of grain for the land on lease. The landlords who lacked kinsfolk in the village began to give their land regularly on *kuthagai* to non-Brahmin cultivating tenants with minimal supervision. The *kuthagaidar's* contributed both labour and capital in the form of seeds, manure and plough cattle. The landlords contribution or share of grain varied between 65 and 70 per cent of the total produce. *Kuthagai* tenures were exploitative. However, *kuthagaidars* were little better off than the *pannaiyals*. Most absentee Brahmin landlords preferred to give their land on *ul-kuttagai* (inside tenure) for a lower rent to a relative within the village in order to retain the goodwill of their community.¹³

In *kuthagai* system, the lessee was given only oral order for the period of one year cultivation. The tenants were never assured to retain lease beyond one year. In case of drought, flood, poor harvest and crop failure, the landlord hardly reduced the fixed share of produce. In case of defaulting tenants, household utensils and cattle were confiscated including cancellation of lease system by the landlord. The agricultural labourers were expected to be respectful to their masters. In other words, the former were generally

addressed in third person pronouns by the latter. Untouchability was severely observed in the society. The labourers from lower castes particularly the Scheduled Castes were not allowed to enter the houses of caste-Hindus and food given as a part of the wage was served only outside the house. They were required to wash the dish and sprinkle water over the place they sat.¹⁴ The *pannaiyals*, *waramdars* and *kuthagaidars* were often exploited by the landlords of Madras Presidency in general and Tanjore in particular. In the mean time, the Communist Party of India focused on the issues of peasants in 1947 and organized them under *Vivasayigal Sangham*. Moreover, the *Sangham* established branches all over the district of Tanjore, such as Mannargudi, Tiruthuraipoondi, Nagapattinam, Mayiladuthurai, Papanasam, Kumbakonam, Nannilam, Sirkali, Pattukkottai and Aranthangi. Comparing to other districts of Madras State, the *pannaiyals* and tenants were badly treated and exploited by *mirasdars* of Tanjore. Within a short period of time by 1947, about 40,000 peasants including caste-Hindus enrolled in the *Sangham*. The peasants of Tirunelveli, Ramnad, Madurai, Tanjore and Chingleput joined the *Sangham* and revolted against landlords to get 50 per cent *waram*. The activities of peasants heightened a tension among the landlords. They framed false charges and approached the Government to dilute the peasant organization in Tamil Nadu. In the mean time, the leaders of the *sangham* were under target. Manali Kandasami, Serangulam Amirthalingam and Kalappal Kuppu were asked by the Government to vacate the district or to go underground. Subsequently, Kalappal Kuppu was framed under false charges and arrested by the police in 1947. On 18 April 1948, Kuppu on account of his ill-health died in Tiruchi prison. However, the leaders of *Vivasayigal Sangham* suspected the hand of the police in this mysterious death.¹⁵

Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangham

In 1948 witnessed a period of intense class struggle between landlords on the one hand and cultivating tenants and agricultural labourers on the other in Madras State. Following independence, four years after, Tamil Nadu recorded bad harvests and acute food shortages resulting sprang up of peasant movements in a path of extremism. In this connection, the Government passed Section 144 Cr.P.C. (Criminal Procedure Code) in Tanjore and banned the activities of Tamil Nadu *Vivasayigal Sangham* between 1948 and 1951. The *mirasdars* made use of this opportunity and tried to suppress the peasant organizations at the embryonic stage. In November 1948, J.C.Kumarappa, the Chairman of the Congress Party's Agrarian Reform Committee recorded brutal attack on peasants by *mirasdars* at Mayawaram in Tanjore district.¹⁶ The drought conditions forced a section of peasants to indulge in the activities of stealing paddy and robbery. In the mean time, the Socialist Party of Madras unit supported the peasants demand for daily wage as Re.1-8-0 was categorically rejected by the landlords. About 51 per cent of peasants having less than two acres of land led to miserable lives. Similarly, 31 per cent of peasants owning between two and five acres of land suffered at the hands of landlords to pay interest for long standing debts and a high share from the produce.¹⁷ On the other hand, the landlords who leased out temple and *mutt* lands earned considerable profit and never paid land tax to the

Government. The net income of temples and *mutt* lands providing Rs.3.5 crore a year filled the pockets of landlords who also squandered the Governmental source of income as well.¹⁸

Agriculturists Sangham

The Socialist Party pointed out the grievances of peasants and organized Agriculturists Sangham in Chengalput, Tanjore, Tiruchirapalli and Tirunelveli districts of Tamil Nadu. K.G.Sivasamy, a leading Socialist leader took up for the cause of the peasants. The party recommended two-third share of produce to the tenants, Rs.1-8-0 daily wage to agricultural labourer and a remission of land tax. In the first general election held in 1952, the Communist Party captured six seats in the State Legislative Assembly from Tanjore district. It emerged as a second largest party next to Indian National Congress. The Communist victory in the district prompted the Congress Government to adopt certain measures to improve the conditions of the tenants and agricultural labourers through the Tanjore Tenants and *Pannaiyal* Protection Act of 1952. The Act mitigated the problems of tenants and *pannaiyals* to some extent. In other words, *mirasdars* owning more than 6.66 acre (one *veli*) transformed their lands into *benami* names. A large number of tenants and *pannaiyals* were evicted on the grounds of either delay in paying rent due or causing damage and injury to cultivating crops. In addition to this, the landowners dismissed a number of *pannaiyals* who failed to toe their line by giving six months wages or Rs.150 towards compensation. The *pannaiyals* retaining the lands were asked to sign in the unwritten plain sheet or forced to maintain a record as *non-pannaiyal*. On the other hand, a large set of *pannaiyals* left *pannai* lands by transforming themselves as casual labourers wherever higher wages offered. The Tanjore legislation of 1952 provided *mirasdar-pannaiyal* relation into a class of *mirasdars* and casual labourers. The emergence of casual labourers from the attached labourers faced a new kind of problem against landowners such as job security, daily wage and housing sites. The annual wage of twenty-six *kalam*s of paddy and harvest bonus to a family about sixteen *kalam*s was indeed a loss to *pannaiyals* who as a result of this condition, were pushed down the position of causal labourers.¹⁹

The peasants of Chidambaram taluk in South Arcot district demanded the extension of the Tanjore Tenants and *Pannaiyal* Protection Act. They also filed a petition to the Conciliatory Court on the grounds of eviction and denial of 40 per cent share of produce. Moreover, the landlords in connivance with the police harassed the tenants and *pannaiyals*. In this connection, tens and hundreds of cultivators were evicted by *mirasdars*. In 1953, the *mirasdars* of Allur in Tiruchi taluk increased tenurial rent from 20 *kalam*s to 35 *kalam*s for one acre of land. The tenants unable to bear the brunt of increased rent were forced to eject even after completion of ploughing and manuring works.²⁰ The famine and drought conditions further aggravated the starving peasants. In addition to this, the peasants of Anaipatti, Dindigul taluk in Madurai district, Sivagiri and Sankarankoil taluks in Tirunelveli district, Meenjur, Vellavayal, Mettucheri, Ammankulam, Ammanthangal, Perungavar, Mullavayal and Vellangulam villages of North Arcot district fed on seedlings, green leaves and groundnut oil-cakes which were sprinkled at paddy fields. As a matter of fact, the starving

peasants died of cholera and other epidemic diseases. In view of this, the peasant organizations demanded penning of gruel centres in the affected parts of Tamil Nadu.²¹

Mathur Peasant Organization

Waramdars and daily labourers of Mathur village in Sriperumbudur taluk in Chingleput district revolted against *mirasdars* for long pending demands in 1955. *Padiyal* (permanent farm servant) demanded seven *marakkals* of paddy a month, one meal a day and two bags of paddy per crop. The cattle boys demanded three *marakkals* of paddy per month, free food, 2 dhothies and one rupee a year. The male casual labourers demanded 2.5 *Madras Measure* of paddy and females demanded two *Madras Measure* of paddy per day. On the contrary, the *mirasdars* failed to concede the demands of the *padiyals*, cattle boys and casual labourers. In other words, the *mirasdars* employed outside labourers provoking tension between the former and the local peasants in Seemavaram, Madukkaloor, Kodangi, Venkatamangalam, Alamadhi, Tiruppair, Mathur and Athur.²²

The settlement officers failed to fulfil the maximum requirements of Mathur peasant organization. The settlement, in fact, was highly criticized by the *mirasdars* of Mathur on the grounds that the increased wages and *warams* proposed in the settlement were detrimental to their interests. The Madras Cultivating Tenants Protection Act of 1955 secured cultivating tenants the right from eviction. However, the landlords fabricated charges and a large number of cultivating tenants were evicted on the grounds of damaging crop, denial to recognize landlord's title, usage of agricultural land for other purposes and failure to settle rent within the stipulated period of time. The Madras Cultivating and failure to settlement within the stipulated period of time. The Madras cultivating Tenants (Payment of Fair Rent) Act, 1956 was often misused by the landowners. In the event of adverse seasonal conditions, the landowners refused to repair pumpsets resulting into low yield of cultivation. On the contrary, the landowners approached the Rent courts to enhance the rent owing to the improvement of land effected by them at a cost.²³

The post-independence Tamil Nadu had brought in several hardships to the peasants. The *mirasdars* quiet often amassed wealth by exploiting the poor and marginal peasants elsewhere in the districts of Tamil Nadu. The needful demands of peasants such as adequate daily wage, affordable share of produce, tenancy right against eviction and fixation of working hours, in fact, were deliberately rejected by *mirasdars*. *Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangham* filled this gap by organizing the affected peasants in the prone areas of *mirasdar's* exploitation. The peasant organization invariably struggled against the feudal set up of society, class structure and social inequality.

End Notes

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