

# **Village Organisation in the Madras Presidency at the Time of the Introduction of the British Rule.**

***By***

***Prof. C. S. Srinivasachari, M.A.***

---

*This was originally a reprint from the Annamalai University Journal , Vol. I. No 1. Pages 20 – 28 and published by Methodist Publishing House , Madras – 1932.*

*It is being brought back to e-book format in memory of Prof.C.S.Srinivasachari by VenuGopaldaswamy Educational Trust ( VGET ) – Hosur , Tamilnadu, India in 2011*

## **Village Organisation in the Madras Presidency at the Time of the Introduction of British Rule**

By

C.S.SRINIVASACHARI,  
*Annamalai University.*

The Hindu polity of South India cherished, to a great extent, local ties and local strength. Maratha administrative ideas which were later superimposed, retained, in a number of phases, the old village unit, but helped in the replacement of the ancient indigenous officers by their own officials; and they also helped in the partial Hinduising of the administrative terms in those regions where Muhammadan influence had been strong. The village community was the vital basis of the district administration; and it comprised a number of hereditary officials. In the more democratically constituted villages, the proprietary members were all deemed to be equal and looked upon themselves as masters of the village, of all the lands attached to it and of the other inhabitants thereof, the common affairs being managed, not by a headman holding his office from government or other external authority, but by a committee of the proprietors of the village. The officials of government did not usually interfere directly in the business of administration and treated with the community "as with a body corporate." The village had a machinery of its own for distributing the burdens, both of taxation and of service.

In the larger villages of this type, there were usually several divisions of the community, each of which had some share in the *panchayat* or governing board, consisting, on an average, of perhaps half a dozen members. The members of the board had power and authority only as representatives of the general body. They wielded great personal influence; and disputes were, frequently, voluntarily referred to them. But they did not attempt to punish other proprietors; nor did they presume to offer decisions in disputes not voluntarily referred to them.

Cultivation in these villages was not, however, carried on in common. Every village was divided into a certain number of fixed portions, termed ploughs; but a plough was "rather like an algebraical symbol to express a fixed share, than a literal plough". The arable land was divided into a number of ploughs; the individual holdings were expressed in terms of ploughs; and all imposts, whether of government, or required for meeting common expenses, were assessed at so much a plough. It was the practice for lands to be redistributed annually or terminally; but, in course of time, the holdings generally came to be fixed. Common right notions survived to an extent that enabled members to claim periodical re-measurements and readjustments of holdings and payments and to rectify inequalities and boundary shiftings which might have gradually arisen. The grazing ground of each village was common to all; but the

boundaries between the pastures of adjacent villages were jealously maintained; and quarrels about them frequently resulted in bloody affrays. When new lands were brought under cultivation, they were either shared by all, the number of ploughs remaining the same; or certain members were permitted, by common consent, to create fresh shares. Grazing ground was, however, not ordinarily permitted to be broken up for cultivation.

In some of the larger villages, there were generally three or four big divisions called *pattis*<sup>1</sup>, each of which had some proportionate claim in the composition of the representative *panchayat*. Membership of the *panchayat* was usually claimed on the basis of a large stake in the village, as well as of personal fitness. The *panchayat* never presumed to act in any other than its representative capacity and consulted its constituents in many matters before it came to a decision. Its power varied, and was, in no case, defined with mechanical exactitude. The village money-lenders, traders and retail-sellers were looked upon more as allies than as servants, though they were not allowed any direct voice in the management. But the hereditary village servants, like carpenters, and smiths, were definitely treated as subordinates. "These strong village-communities permitted no encroachments; and there was generally no middleman between them and government. They paid their revenue, generally, direct to the government agent; and the latter confined himself generally to the power delegated to him and did not interfere with the community."

## II

The significance of the term *miras*<sup>2</sup> was most important in this connection; it was intensive in its working in the Jaghir District of Chingleput<sup>3</sup> and in the District of Tanjore, the greater portion of which was brought under the Company in 1799. It comprehended "a variety of rights differing in nature and degree, but all more or less connected with proprietary possession, or usufruct, of the soil and its produce". Of course, the difference between *mirasi* right in land and the *mirasi* of the village officials was well recognised. The right to hereditary possession, the *maniyams*, lands free of tax, fees at various rates received in kind from the general produce, and other privileges of the *Kaniyatchikar*, *Kavalkar*, *Karnam*, *Talayari*, *Vetti*, carpenter, iron-smith, washerman, etc. is called *mirass*."

---

1 A portion of a village, or a cluster of houses.

2 From an Arabic term (=to inherit), meaning inherited property or right: see Wilson's "Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms", pp. 342-3: and Ellis's Treatise on Mirasi Tenure, which says that the term is applied to certain hereditary privileges, like exemption from assessment, money compensation from other members of the community and the fees and perquisites of the officers and servants of the village.

3 The Poonamalle region was acquired by the Company in 1750; and the bulk of the District was granted by Nawab Walajah in 1763; while Sadras was taken from the Dutch in 1781.

The right of the permanent cultivator to the hereditary usufruct of land was also called *miras*; and so was the right to the Government's share of the produce of the land, held by special grant under various titles such as *sarvamanyam*, *ardhamanyam*, *srotriyam*, *kandikaminam*, and *mokassa*; as well as any office or privilege or emolument descending hereditarily. The word *miras* was, however, used most frequently to signify land held by absolute proprietorship, under one of three contingencies; viz., (1) either as a joint co-parcenary tenure in the lands of a village and either cultivated in common or allotted annually, or at some other stated period, among the proprietors; (2) as one of several parcels or lots into which the lands of the village were divided; or (3) as a whole estate where all the lands of the village were the property of one proprietor.

In the districts of Chingleput and North and South Arcots, landed *miras* was marked by a distinction nowhere else known, as the proprietary *mirasdars* held a certain extent of land free of all assessment and were entitled to receive fees under various headings, from the gross produce of all taxable lands in their villages and a portion of the produce from all lands cultivated by persons other than *mimsdars*. Such a right was of two kinds; viz., (1) where the entire lands of the village were held jointly and either cultivated in common, or divided yearly or periodically; or (2) where the lands were held in severalty and subject, as a consequence, to no periodical redistribution. In the district of Tanjore, the *miras* was applied and operated in a different manner. According to a memorandum prepared by Colonel William Blackburne, the Resident at Tanjore, and submitted, in 1804, to Lord William Bentinck, the Governor of Madras, the *miras* right in Tanjore possessed "all the essential qualities of property." It was held sacred by every successive government and was "in its origin probably derived from the grant of the sovereign."<sup>1</sup> A distinctive feature was the division of the village into equal shares, each made up so as to yield an equal amount of produce and giving a proportionate share of all the benefits of common property, such as the use of the village waste, mines, quarries, fisheries, forest and pasturage; while all sales, mortgages and gifts of the *mirasi* shares were recognised and enforced by courts of law, including sales of waste land to the extent of the share of the alienor.

Thus, the typical Tanjore village was essentially democratic in its constitution, and did not know any *patel* or headman, as in the \ Maratha: country, nor anyone corresponding to the Peddakapu of the Northern Sarkars and the Reddi of the Ceded Districts. Thus, it was only after the establishment of the British administration that the office of headman appointed by Government was created. It was only under the Madras Regulations of 1816, that the post of Village Munsiff was created in the district and armed with police and judicial powers. But the attempt to foist on the village a headman from above did not succeed at first. The Collectors experienced, for a time, the greatest difficulty in inducing one of the *mirasdars* of the village to undertake the task. It was only in 1836 that the village headman was also made the agent for the collection of the public revenue and given the title of *Patta Maniagar*, a name imported (according to Mr. Venkasami Rao), apparently, from Coimbatore.

The headman has since deteriorated in prestige and name; and the object with which his office was created, viz. that of commanding the respect of his brother-*mirasdars*, has not been realized.

The office of the *Karnam* was purely that of a private accountant, employed to keep the accounts of the *mirasdars* of each village or group. It was, of course, a part of the old village community's machinery. Traces of such office survived for long after the introduction of the British rule, under the designation of *Kudi Karnam* (the accountant of the villagers), as distinguished from the *Sarkar Karnam*. These double-office holders were necessary in those villages where the number of holdings was large and the villagers were comparatively ignorant and consequently required assistance. In 1799 when the Kingdom was annexed, the English Commissioners were struck by the absence of all rural agency whatever, to look after the interests of Government. The *Karnam*, as a servant of Government, began to function only from 1807. At first, his remuneration included a small grain-fee which had been allowed to the *Kudi Karnam*. In 1852, his salary became a direct charge on the revenues of Government; and the so called *Karnam's Fund* was absorbed, along with similar funds, into the state exchequer. According to the Police Regulation XI of 1816, the *Talayari* who was hitherto a private servant of the community, was declared to be part of the regular police establishment, though, for long, he did not do any regular police duties. In 1860 when the Presidency *Moffussil* Police was reorganized, all claims of the state to the services of the *Talayari*, was formally abandoned. His traditional emoluments were, like those of other village servants, derived from the percentages of the gross produce of the lands, called *swatantrams*.<sup>1</sup> A moiety of the *Talayari's swatantram* was resumed and absorbed in the government village establishment charges.

In such *mirasi* villages, the contribution of the community for *kaval* (or police) duties were not regulated on any fixed scale, but varied from area to area. Sometimes they were in the form of an assignment of the entire produce of the particular fields. In other cases, they were a percentage of the entire produce of the village. Except in the case of the perquisites of the *Karnam* and the dues of the temple and the Brahmans, Government did not control the actual disbursement, but left them to be managed entirely by the *mirasdars*. The employment and the dismissal of the village servants had always rested with the *mirasdars* themselves. Some of them, like the physician and the *pattigar*, have ceased to exist, and most of the others have become servants of the *mirasdars* themselves.

In the Chingleput District which, when its revenue management was directly assumed by the Company, was placed under the charge of the Committee of Assigned Revenue and later, under the Superintendent and a Collector, the *mirasdars* were found to be in enjoyment of certain *rasooms* (fees or customary payments) on *marahs* from the

---

1 Hereditary right or privileges, perquisites or fees. Any fee or privilege claimable by the village servants, musicians or the like is known more particularly as *swatantradittam*.

produce of other lands cultivated by the *pyacarries*<sup>1</sup> (*lit. payir-karans* or temporary cultivators, for a stipulated term and a given share of the crop). Some of these *pyacarries* had a life estate in the *mirasi* lands which they cultivated. At first, the Board of Revenue considered the right of the *mirasdars* to be a proprietary right; but Government disputed this assumption and defined that *mirasi* was only "a preference of cultivation derived from hereditary residence, but subject to the right of Government as superior lord of the soil, in what way it chooses for the cultivation of its own lands." Mr. Lionel Place, the famous Principal Collector of Chingleput, whose vigorous administration of the district from 1793 to 1798, busied itself with an investigation of the land revenue, the rights and privileges of the ryots and the discovery of abuses in connection with the revenue collection and management, declared in his final report, dated 6th June, 1799,<sup>2</sup> that the *mirasdar* had an undoubted hereditary property in the soil and that he derived this right originally from the sovereign to whom he acknowledged obedience and the rendering of a stated portion of the produce as the tenure by which he held it; that he sold, mortgaged, gave away and left his lands to posterity, which the *pyacarry* could not; that until the term *meerassee* was employed by the Muhammadans to denote the lands of a *meerasdar*, they were described by a compound word in the Malabar (Tamil) language, *caniatchy*, *cany* signifying land and *atchy* heritage." Thus his settlement was on the basis of village rents and of the produce, the parties who entered into the engagements being the principal holders of the land in the village jointly.

### III

In the Northern Sarkars, Nawab Anwaru'd-din Khan who was the *Nazim* of Chicacole under the great Nizamul-Mulk, ascertained and realised the full revenue of the districts under his rule. The well-known Rustom Khan who was in charge of Rajahmundry and the southern *Sarkars* in the years 1732-39, put down the frauds and oppressions of the *zamindars*, appointed *amins* and supervisors in their place and compiled a *jumma kaumil* (total original assessment). Under the rule of the French which was very short-lived, the *zamindars* were deprived of their official duties, and, like the French nobles of the *ancien regime*, allowed to enjoy, under *sanads*, their *rassooms* and *saverams* or conditional hereditary privileges amounting to about 10 per cent of the net revenue collected. They, however, completed a fresh survey of *hustabood* (or survey of the detailed account of the gross collections of the whole country). The *jummabandi* or annual settlement was doubled in the Rajahmundry and Chicacole *sarkars* and approximated to the *kham vasul* (gross, as distinguished from the net revenue). This survey might have been made the basis of a more adequate *jumma kaumil* which would have served as the basis of a progressive income.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Payakari*, corruptly, *Pallcarry*, was wrongly derived in early glosses from the *Pers*: *Pai* = a foot; and *kar* = to labour, or to sow.

<sup>2</sup> *Vide* Appendix No. 16 to the *Fifth Report, Vol, II* (1866 ed.)-Extracts from the Report of Mr. Place respecting the Land-Tenures in the *Jaghir*, dated 6th June, 1799.

The English conquest of the *Sarkars* took place in 1758-59. The Nizam's formal confirmation of their possession came in 1766; and it was only three years later, that the Company's servants were appointed to directly manage it. The *zamindars* kept retainers of three kinds, viz: *peons* paid in money; *mocassa peons* paid by grants of land, subject to a low quit-rent, and the *manovarti peons*, being tenants of a higher order bound to bring their adherents into the field when required. Government attributed to the *zamindars* the character of tributary chiefs at first, but soon found out the mistake and the fallacy of such an assumption. The village communities, whether in the *zamindari* or *havelli* lands, retained their old organisation of the *Patel*, the *Karnam* who kept registers and accounts of cultivation, the boundary-man, the watchers of tanks and channels, the *Talayari* and the *Toti*, all of whom enjoyed rent-free lands known as *maniyams*. Of course, both *zamindars* and the renters of revenue in the *havelli* lands, usurped rights, including *masooms* and perquisites from the cultivators; while the *zamindars* had usurped judicial and other powers formerly enjoyed by the *sarkar* officials like the *amaldars* and the *faujgars*.

#### IV

The evils of the *poligar* system of rule were very pronounced in the Ceded Districts, acquired in 1800 by treaty with the Nizam and placed under Major (afterwards Sir Thomas) Munro, their first and greatest Principal Collector. The headmen of villages were petty tyrants in themselves; and the chief cultivators, abetted by accountants, had become bandits in many cases.<sup>1</sup> At first, the Directors recommended the adoption of gentle measures towards the *poligars* so that they might be reconciled to British rule and characterised Munro's stern attitude towards them as disingenuous. And Munro had to demonstrate that they were not entitled to gentle measures on ground either of their ancient rights or of their recent conduct, and gave an account of their claims and rights, as he understood them. His first settlement of the land was made on the *mozawar* basis, each village to pay a lump assessment, the headmen being severally responsible for the assessment of their individual villages and jointly for the whole of the district. The second settlement was on the *kulwar* or *ryotwar* basis and was finished by 1805. Munro boldly condemned Government's proposal to revert to a *zamindari* settlement, the *zamindars* or proprietors to pay a fixed sum for each village for a term of years, and reiterated his arguments for a *ryotwar* arrangement with modifications to be introduced if required.<sup>2</sup> The practice of the cultivators was to change holdings annually or periodically and to occupy fallow or waste land and thus allow the previously cultivated land to have rest.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* the letter of Wm. Thackeray, Collector of the Adoni Division, dated September 8, 1807 which describes the *poligars* as always fighting with the troops of the *sarkar*, while the *patels* and *karnams* had become bandits.

<sup>2</sup> The Reports of. Munro dated November 30, 1806, of July 29, 1807, and August 15, 1807-*vide The Fifth Report* Vol. II. pp. 413-34 and Arbuthnot's *Sir Thomas Munro*, Vol. I App.6

## V

In Malabar the early British administrators asserted repeatedly that the village system did not exist; the existing *Nadualis* and *Desavalis* being commandants of the *nad* or country and the *desam* or parish - each division having to contribute its allotted quota of Nayers which it was required to bring into the field. The chieftains held their dignities as hereditary in their respective families. In 1817, Sir Thomas Munro, then Commissioner for the framing of Judicial and Police Regulations, paid a visit to Malabar to satisfy himself as to the real character of these communities. He came to the conclusion that Malabar had been, from the earliest times, divided into districts and villages, the limits of which had remained unchanged; that these were under hereditary chiefs and that the village was called the *desam* by which title it is still commonly known. The *tara*<sup>1</sup> formed a small republic as it were, represented by their *karnavar* or elders and presented a degree of resemblance to the village community of the Tamil districts. The *desam* and the *tara* were not coterminous. The *nad* or country was a congeries of *taras* or village republics. And the *kuttam* or assembly of the *nad* was a representative body possessing considerable powers which could set at naught, when occasion arose, even the authority of the Raja and his ministers.<sup>2</sup>

The *tara* organisation was attempted to be modified into the *hobali* (*Kan: hobali = division*) system, or subordinate direct establishments, under the Company's rule, the *taras* being enlarged for this purpose. It, however, only added one more link to the chain of officials between the Collector and the village officials. It was abolished later on and replaced by the existing *amsam* system. The Special Commissioner who created the new arrangement in 1822-23, was at great trouble to choose for the headship of the *amsams*, the most influential of the *desavalis* under the ancient system. The *desavalis* selected were not generally the most important of the chiefs of all the *desams* comprised in the *amsams*; and hence, the rights of the other *desavalis* had to be carefully preserved. The new scheme ignored and failed to utilise the civil organisation of the *karnavars* of the *taras*; and hence there was effected one more breach with the past. Each *amsam* came to be equipped with an *adhikari* or headman, an accountant or writer, called *menon* and two or more *kolkars* (club-men or peons) who thus became the local representatives of Government.<sup>3</sup>

## VI

In the southern districts which were under the rule of the Nayaks, of Madura, a considerable portion of the country had passed into the hands of the *poligars*; and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Munro thought that the name *tara* was applied by the officials of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan to the territorial units which they tried to keep alive as villages with hereditary heads.

<sup>2</sup> *Vide* the Tellicherry Factory Diary quoted by Logan in his *Malabar Manual*; p.90.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 35 of J. Matthai's *Village Government in British India*.



*palayam* organisation, though the most practical solution of the difficulties in the days of the Nayaks,<sup>1</sup> and extended even into the Mysore and the Carnatic regions, had come to be unworkable and to result in the most severe oppression of the people. The Report of Mr. Lushington, the Collector of the Poligar Peshkash in the Southern Districts, dated 20th August, 1799, describes the various fees and money-collections made by them, the claims of the *poligars* over lands in the *sarkar* villages which they presumed to hold rent-free and their frequent ejection of ryots from lands of which they themselves held the *inam* rights.

The Company, when it got control of the Carnatic, by treaty with the Nawab in 1792, regarded the *poligars* as usurpers of authority. A Report of the Madras Board of Revenue on this subject, made in 1797, was later supplemented by a Minute of Lord Hobart, the Governor. The Court of Directors agreed with the views and suggestions of their Governor, in their Despatch of 5<sup>th</sup>, June, 1799. The Collectors of the Southern and Western poligar Countries reported fully on their military establishments and the mode of their maintenance, as well as on their revenue and other resources and the nature and variety of their impositions on the people. The expedition of Major Bannerman against the Tinnevelly *Poligars* and the subsequent campaign which was ended in 1801, were followed by the proclamation issued by Lord Clive, the Governor, dated 1st December, 1801, which suppressed the use of all weapons of defence, and promised the *poligars* a general amnesty and a permanent assessment on the principles of the *zamindari* tenure. Dr. Caldwell, writing in 1881, congratulated the Government on the fact of the *poligar* having been changed into a *zamindar*, in "nature as well as in name"<sup>2</sup> and also on the peacefulness that has settled upon the descendants of the fierce retainers of the *poligars*. The double fees exacted by the Poligars, as district- watchers and village-watchers, for *desha kaval* and *stalam kaval* respectively, interwove them and their retainers into the establishments of the villages. The *poligars* had so encroached upon and assumed the rights of the village *talayaris* and watch-men, that more than 80 per cent of the villages in the Tinnevelly District had come under their influence and their *peons* had superseded the *talayaris* or retained them on condition of receiving from them a share of their perquisites. Thus, the older institution of the village *kaval* came to be absorbed in most cases into the *poligar* system. The comparatively newer institution of the *desa kaval* (district watching fees) originated either from a grant of the ruler or from the voluntary action of the villagers, who, being unable to protect themselves, submitted to such contributions. These came to be levied by the *poligars* from defenceless villages as the price of forbearing to plunder them.

---

<sup>1</sup> The system was the solution of Visvanatha Nayak and his Dalavai, Aryanatha, for the difficult problem of reconciling the conflicting interests of all the classes of the people; its object being to enrich and ennoble the most powerful of each class and at the same time to secure their and their descendants' allegiance. The existence of the Poligars, as a class, dates from the commencement of the Nayak rule at Madura. (cir, 1550), though some, like the Setupathi of Ramnad, went back to earlier times.

<sup>2</sup> A Political and General History of the District of Tinnevelly (p. 219).

They consisted of payments of money, grain, plough or cattle and various other articles. The fees made on account of police duties were exclusive of other assessments to which the inhabitants of the neighbouring *sarkar* villages were subject as well, under various pretexts, such as hunting, *batta*, marriage expenses and other presents.<sup>1</sup>

The effect of the introduction of British administration on village organisation in South India has been to introduce the practice of paying village servants in cash and to convert them, so far as the surviving portion was concerned, into the servants of the Government organisation and thus sever them from their connection, either with the village community or with the *zamindar* or *poligar*. The hereditary principle was accepted, in a large measure, in the selection of the chief officials of the village. The *panchayats* came to be largely dropped out of use, though Munro tried to revive them by the Madras Regulations of 1816. A large amount of matter was taken over from local initiative and direction and vested in the bureaucratic machinery. From this state of affairs, there has begun, recently, a healthy revulsion by which Government has been largely promoting schemes of decentralisation in village and local matters.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>1</sup> For details, vide The Fifth Report (Ed. of 1866) Vol, II (Madras Presidency pp.89-90),