

Land Tenorial System of Travancore: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Initiatives undertaken by the state due to the necessity of land tenures during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries increased agriculture and, as a result, enhanced the state's economy. By the end of the 18th century, Travancore had become the largest Jenmi due to the confiscation of rebellious chieftains' holdings in and around the state with the support of colonial armies; these lands were turned to Sirkar land, and the state now possessed half of all cultivable land. By the early nineteenth century, British imperialism in Travancore had reduced rulers' freedom. Even though Travancore had its land policy, the status of princely state compelled them to oppose its actions. The British have always enjoyed forcing Travancore kings to implement strategies. The servitude was unavoidable because the colonial power backed the rulers passionately against the emerging problems.

INTRODUCTION

The former Princely State of Travancore is located in the southernmost region, which is protected by natural boundaries. The southern and western sides are flanked by the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, respectively, while the east is bounded by the high ghats hills, and the northern regions are primarily covered in backwaters, rivers, and lagoons. Thus, Travancore's adverse situation for the march of horses and elephants, which were an essential part of the army at the time, safeguarded it from foreign invaders. Travancore was perhaps the only monarchy in India to retain its own caste, religion, customs,



manners, and institutions. Travancore was predominantly an agricultural country, with the majority of the population relying on the land for a living. The proprietors and tenants of the land lived and slept on the same parcel of land, which was unique to Travancore's agrarian arrangement.¹

In terms of geography, Travancore was a long and narrow strip of land - 144 miles in length - with a middling breadth inland of around 40 miles. This land was believed to have been reclaimed from the sea. It spans from south to north, bounded by the Arabian Sea and a steep mountain wall known as the Western Ghats. Despite its short size, this parcel of land was well-known for its extensive stretches of paddy fields, lush woods, and mineral sands. Geographically, Travancore has preserved a distinct history and culture. The mountain heights that surround the state on the country's eastern border undulate to the west over densely vegetated hills until they reach the agricultural plains that fringe the backwaters and the Arabian Sea. The various streams and rivers that flowed through the area made the soil rich.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Travancore was open to maritime interaction with foreigners such as Phoenicians, Arabs, Chinese, and Europeans. As a result, the majority of large towns arose on the coast around the mouths of navigable rivers. Village communities were established from fertile soil along the coast. The fertile soil and abundant rains made it ideal for growing rice, spices, coconut, palms, and other crops. The region's numerous harvests, particularly spices, drew traders from beyond the region. Commercial contact with distant nations influenced people's political and social lives as well. The economic contacts led to the spread of Christianity and Islam in the region. Christianity maintained a strong presence in the region as early as the first century A.D., while Islam arrived long before the first Muslim Empire was built in North India. Hinduism was definitely the predominant religion in the area.

The native rulers who were primarily Hindu, welcomed the traders from all religious backgrounds, making multiple land concessions and conferring trading rights on them, allowing for a thriving trade. The State of Travancore arose in the ninth century A.D. from the small kingdom Venad, which was located to the south of modern Kollam and stretched to Kanyakumari. The monarchs of this kingdom, from whom the reigning line of Travancore originated, claimed descent from ancient Chera kings. The civilization was feudal in nature, designed for warfare and administration. In principle, the king was all-powerful, but in practice, he was restrained by his feudal nobility on the one hand, and the

people or subjects on the other. The ruler adopted a procedure in which citizens may approach the king personally with their desires and grievances.²

Tenurial System in Travancore

A fuller understanding of Travancore's land tenure system requires comprehensive examination into its origins and growth. Travancore's land tenure system was similar in some ways to those of the bordering areas of Madurai and Thirunelveli on the east coast, as well as those of the neighbouring states of Cochin and British Malabar to the north. Land holdings in Malabar, Cochin, and Travancore must have had a shared origin and growth in ancient times, before Kerala was separated into different kingdoms ruled by autonomous rulers.³

Travancore rulers shaped the region's tenurial structure. Many of the early kings attempted to establish an effective administrative structure in the region. Marthanda Varma, known as the "founder of modern Travancore," was a prominent monarch in Travancore during its early history. Marthanda Varma (1729-1758) assumed authority during a period of adversity in the state. The state's financial position was extremely weak as a result of the feudatory chiefs' longstanding refractory behavior. There was no effective administrative apparatus for conducting government operations. The king's or ruler's authority was generally not acknowledged. The pillamar and madampimar wielded excessive influence over the land, establishing themselves as formidable figures in the state's public life. The feudal forces that had the support of the priestly class had the upper hand in governmental matters.⁴ Marthanda Varma boldly faced the situation with valour and sagacity with laudable firmness. He wanted to suppress the feudal polity which was controlled by the Nair chieftains. Through his policies of good governance, he could revive the tradition of the ancient mother kingdom of the Cheras.

Marthanda Varma was a remarkable administrator, well-known for his shrewd political moves and his stern measures for consolidating his authority. His act of dedication of the state to the deity of the great temple in Thiruvananthapuram, Sree Padmanabha in 1750 was popularly known as Thrippadidanam. This dedication is viewed as a method used by which the ruler declared to be only a trustee of the lands of Sree Padmanabha, the deity. He surrendered his sword to the deity and received it back from Him in trust. He also transferred all his lands to the deity and declared that the State is not the possession of the ruler, but the ruler is heading it as a regent of Sree Padmanabha and used the title Sree Padmanabha Dasa. This event was one of supreme significance. It meant the collection of revenue from the land in the name of God and the expenditure of the same in the interests of the people. This measure

of Marthanda Varma helped him to have complete control over the territory of Travancore and to start his policy of administrative reforms including land relations. This is viewed as a clear expression of the theocratic rule in Travancore. By a series of administrative measures Marthanda Varma gave undue privilege to the Brahmins in the State. These measures of the ruler made the position of the Brahmins in the society more powerful.⁵ Later rulers of Travancore followed suit, using a title in addition to their given name. This commitment of the state to the god, as well as governing the state on behalf of the deity, assisted the ruler in avoiding threats of unrest from Sree Padmanabha followers. As a servant of the deity, the ruler's word was considered infallible, leading to significant alterations in land tenure relations.

Marthanda Varma made a substantial adjustment after taking office by reorganizing the land revenue agency. The land tax, which had not been collected for a long time, was reinstated in 1739. He prioritized land revenue administration, conducting surveys of cultivated land to ensure effective tax collection and establishing direct relations with cultivators.⁶ The survey provided the state with a clear image of the land and the area under cultivation. Marthanda Varma implemented a number of novel agricultural practices as part of his efforts to improve agriculture. Great irrigation, road, and communication canal projects were undertaken and completed. During the reference period, no such modernization operations were carried out in other parts of Kerala.⁷

Marthanda Varma also attempted to exert influence over the region's formidable chieftains, the pillamar and madampimar. Marthanda Varma's land income reforms laid the groundwork for the state's subsequent tenure adjustments. Marthanda Varma's immediate successors were not quite successful in maintaining the pace established by the emperor. Instead, monarchs such as Karthika Tirunal Rama Varma (1758–1798) formed an alliance with the English East India Company. The rulers' weaknesses always had an impact on the smooth operation of the administration and the formation of ministries in the state. The subsequent ruler, Balarama Varma (1798-1810), relied heavily on his ministers and Dewan for administration. The ministers were antagonistic to the people as a result of the capital shift and the imposition of more revenue collection from them. People like Veluthampi, Thalakkulam's karyakkar, expressed their dissatisfaction against this additional tax collecting. Finally, the situation reached a point where the Dewan was suspended, and Veluthampi, who led the opposition, was appointed as the new Dewan in 1801. During the Dewanship of Veluthampi, there was an uprising in the barracks, forcing Travancore to negotiate a pact with the English East India Company and become a subsidiary ally.⁸ The treaty required Travancore to pay an annual tribute of Rs. 80,000/-

to the Company. It is clear that this amount must be raised from the land. The British's rising power in Travancore naturally led to administrative changes, notably alterations in land relations. Despite its weak economic position, Travancore swiftly paid the cash, but the Company's alleged intervention in the internal affairs of the state upset Dewan Veluthampi. Veluthampi went so far as to issue a proclamation imploring people to band together against the British, known as the Kundara Proclamation. The British quashed the uprising, which resulted to Veluthampi's suicide in 1809. With Veluthampi's death, Travancore effectively lost its independence. From this point on, the British focused more on Travancore administration. Rani Gauri Lakshmi Bhai, Balarama Varma's successor, signed an arrangement with the English East India Company that named Colonel Munroe as the British Resident in India. Colonel Munroe was soon selected as the Dewan as well. He reformed the state's government and adopted a centralized administrative system similar to that used in the Madras Presidency.⁹

Colonel Munroe established courts for the first time in Travancore in 1811, marking a significant turning point in the state's legislative history. Colonel Munroe's reforms influenced later political life in Travancore, especially land relations. The reign of Gaury Parvathy Bhai (1815-1829) and that of the following monarch Rama Varma Swathi Tirunal brought about significant reforms in the administrative fields. Significant modifications to Travancore's land tenure systems occurred during the later monarchs Ayilliam Tirunal (1860-1880) and Visakam Tirunal (1880-1885). Encouragement was also given for the development of education in the state by establishing the English educational system, which introduced new norms into Travancore culture. Cultivators were also granted additional privileges. The reign of Sree Moolam Tirunal (1885-1924) saw the rise of political consciousness in the region. The establishment of the Legislative Council, Sree Moolam Popular Assembly, in 1904, which served as a forum for administrative changes in the state, provides proof of this. Later, during the Regency of Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bhai (for Chithira Tirunal 1924 - 31) and the reign of Sree Chithira Tirunal Bala Rama Varma I (1931-1948), Travancore experienced progressive, constitutional, administrative, and social changes.

In terms of land relations, Travancore's political considerations ran counter to one another. Travancore's government attempted to limit the influence of the chieftains who had controlled the province for several decades. As a result, a considerable portion of the farmed land became directly state-owned. By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, state-owned lands accounted for almost half of all cultivated land in Travancore, and their share had risen to 80% by the middle of the century as a result of various policies implemented during the preceding era.¹⁰ The remaining 20% of

the cultivated land was owned by a few jenmies, who enjoyed it either freehold or with a small assessment known as rajabhogam. These jenmies were mostly Brahmins, Brahmin temples, and madampis, who were descended from some of the previous chiefs.

Travancore's overall population in 1854 was estimated to be 1.26 million, with the vast majority relying on land for a living.¹¹ According to the 1901 census, roughly two-thirds of the total population (about 0.8 million) depended on land.¹² By the middle of the nineteenth century, Travancore's agricultural population was dominated by renters. The rights of the tenants cultivating the sircar and other lands followed various tenurial systems. The sircar lands were known as pandaravaka lands, with sub-divisions named pandaravaka pattom and pandaravaka otti. Those who owned pandaravaka otti lands had greater rights than pandaravaka pattom landholders. Half of the state's cultivated property belonged to the pandaravaka pattom category, and the holders of these properties lacked ownership rights or the ability to transfer occupancy rights. The state was regarded as the jenmie, and tenants of pandaravaka pattom lands were required to pay tax or rent to the government.

The lands other than pandaravaka were commonly referred to as jenmom lands. The holders of jenmom lands were in no better situation than the holders of pandaravaka lands. The jenmies of the jenmom lands harassed the tenants in various ways.¹³ The constant possibility of eviction loomed. The state was vigilant regarding the concerns of cultivators, and as early as 1829, a royal decree was issued instructing that “in all cases of this nature (pertaining to eviction) that are resolved, filed, or may be subsequently submitted, the courts shall uphold the customary practices in the country, namely, that the tenant must remit to the jenmie his regular, ordinary, and extraordinary dues, and that the jenmie shall accept these payments, allowing the tenants to retain possession and enjoyment of the property.”¹⁴ This decree was a significant initiative by the sovereign to safeguard the rights of the tenant farming the land. This decree was an initial advancement towards the notion of state-sponsored social welfare. The tenants primarily comprised poorer castes, and the rule safeguarding their land rights served as a significant moral uplift for them. Although the 1829 ordinance did not resolve the issues encountered by the tenants, it represented an effort by the authorities to incentivize them in land cultivation. The agrarian conditions in Travancore were significantly superior to those of neighboring states and were further enhanced by other progressive measures implemented following this regulation. Enterprising groups, formerly disadvantaged due to their lower caste rank, capitalized on the chances presented by these favorable circumstances to ascend the socio-economic ladder. As previously mentioned, there were both common characteristics and significant disparities in the land tenure regimes across the former territorial

divisions of Kerala. Consequently, it is important to highlight the characteristics and conditions of land tenure systems in both Cochin and Malabar in comparison to those of Travancore.

CONCLUSION

The jenmie system of land ownership in the region was marked by a significant concentration of property ownership rights. The caste structure began to erode due to population growth and the influence of Western culture. The deterioration of the caste system impacted land ownership patterns as well. The conventional land structure and tenure patterns in the region indicate that private ownership rights to land were acknowledged. In the early period, the native states adhered to a policy of non-interference in the matters of the jenmies and tenants. The growers found themselves in a dire predicament. Land revenue has been collected from land since ancient times. The arrival of the English East India Company exacerbated the situation, as the kings increased land taxes to meet the demands of the English. The indigenous leaders of Travancore implemented a progressive land relations program. They endeavored to achieve an amicable resolution between the landlords and the renters through various initiatives they implemented. The Proclamations exemplified this. A significant advancement in this regard was their policy of affirming the ownership rights of tenant cultivators over the land.

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