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## **Dynamics of Economic Changes in the Agrarian System of South India between 8<sup>th</sup> to 13 Centuries CE**

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**Abstract:**

*Pre colonial agrarian dynamics of southern India between 8<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries is a rich ground historical enquiry which has generated many models in Indian history. This paper attempts at presenting an outline of the different viewpoints that dominated the study of the economic history of early medieval South India. The scope and methodology of this paper therefore essentially concentrates on historiography focusing on patterns of land tenures, taxation, social hierarchy, differential access to resources, resource mobilizations and hydraulic implements with a focus on continuity and change in the economic processes and their larger ramifications. Issues like emergence of temple economy and consequent urban development, strategies of legitimization, debate on the bureaucratic control of the Chola state etc are tried to be addressed adequately.*

**Keywords:** *Brahmadeya, Nadu, Chola, Nagaram, Kani, Devadana*

### **1. Dynamics of economic changes in the agrarian system of South India between 8<sup>th</sup> to 13 centuries CE**

While dealing with the economic dynamism of a pre-industrial economic scenario there is every possibility of getting confused amidst stereotypes and ethnocentric generalizations. A caution should be taken regarding the fact that many of our post modern and post industrial categorizations and economic variables cannot be applicable in conceptualizing a pre modern economic situation. Historians like R Champakalakshmi have pointed out the futility of comprehending the economic dynamics of early southern India by the 'superimposition of highly abstracted theories and models'. Avoiding theorizations a holistic methodology building a thread between relations of production, politics, culture and ideology would be welcomed.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest available literary corpus of South India known as the Sangam texts provide a picture of multiplicity of material culture and economic strongholds reflected from the concept of 'Tinna' or eco zones. The ecological and topographical approach depicts the heterogeneous economic pattern of the ancient Tamilakam. The systematic study of the economic and political history of South India begins with the ascendancy of Pandyas and Pallavas. In the field of methodological approach a shift and fresh insight towards the conceptualization of South Indian history provided by a number of scholars like Burton Stein, R Champakalakshmi, Rajan Gurukul and James Heitzman gave rise to various new perspectives for example- the expansion of agricultural tracts, implication of technology, traits of continuity, change and the integration of pre-existing agrarian regions within new production relations and institutional framework. Tax free land donations like *Brahmadeya* (given to a Brahmana), *Devadana* (land donated to a temple or religious establishment) and the role of '*Nadu*' these are the three key concepts to understand the agrarian dynamics of southern India.

Historian Burton Stein in his book *Peasant, State and Society* has put forward the thesis of 'segmentary state' by viewing the *nadus* as the basic superstructure with a strong 'autonomous, insular and unchanging character'. The *nadus* are classified in three different sections distributed in three geo-political zones --- i) Central or core region i.e Cholamandalam heartland ii) intermediate region known as Tondaimandalam and Naduvilnadu area iii) peripheral tracts of Kongumandalam and Gangavadi. Stein defined it as a 'peasant micro region' and stressed on the 'ethnic coherence' of such ecotypes. Deviating from the model of highly centralized state under the Chola rule advocated by Nilakantha Sastri Stein proposed an arrangement of 'ritual sovereignty' where the affective control of the Chola dynasty was only confined to the Kaveri delta or the core area of their political domain. The Chola imperial authority tolerated the autonomous units of local administration in the absence of effective bureaucratic apparatus and instead tried to substitute actual sovereignty with 'ritual sovereignty'. Construction of impressive temples under royal patronage and naming the deity enshrined with the reigning Chola monarch reflects this urge for creating an alternative ritual legitimization in place of an actual political one.

The role played by the temples and the Brahmadeya land holdings in the agrarian milieu needs to be probed in greater detail. Tax free land donation to Brahmanas became widely practiced from the post Gupta period as a mechanism of royal legitimization and a method of expanding agrarian zone to the hitherto uncultivated areas by the introduction of irrigational facilities and efficient

resource mobilization. Sabha was the assembly of the Brahmadeya villages where as Ur was the name of the assembly of the non-Brahmadeya villages. Epigraphic records of the period suggest an intricate network of reservoirs and canals building up a complex irrigational system which implied some institutional control to supervise the running of hydraulic technology.<sup>2</sup> Scholars like Rajan Gurukkal have indicated that local village assemblies of Sabha and Ur played a significant role in maintaining the hydraulic technology of the irrigation projects. In a study of medieval land rights and property relations Gurukkal remarks, 'It is the idea of a consecrated monarchy gaining power from the Brahman headed agrarian cooperations that we derive from the very first records of Kerala.'<sup>3</sup> According to him Brahmadeya villages assumed a major role in paddy cultivation in the 'temple nucleated settlements'. Noboru Karashima on the basis of detail inscriptional survey has demonstrated the interesting fact that a contradiction existed in the sphere of land ownership between a brahmadeya like Isanamangalam and a non brahmadeya such as Allur as individual ownership of land was much more prevalent in the brahmadeya villages in comparison to non brahmadeya ones where majority of landownership was community based.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand Burton Stein in his model of 'Segmentary Statae' has placed a special importance on the Vellala-Brahman alliance in the agricultural organization of a Brahmadeya village. The Brahmanas in return used to bestow ritual sanction to the dominance of the Nattar or Vellala.<sup>5</sup> But Stein's argument was challenged by a number of scholars who thought that Stein what Stein thought as a peaceful collaboration was hardly so and the expansion of the brahmadeya mode of agrarian production implies an imposition on the traditional prevalent mode of agricultural production as well as social relations. Referring to the epigraphic evidence of the Dalavayapuram plates, Gurukkal, for example, cites the seizure of an ekbhoga brahmadeya by the Sudras and its subsequent conversion into a Sudra settlement. The frequent reference of the king as the redeemer of brahmadeyas bears a clear testimony of this anxiety and tension within the agrarian structure. So there is enough scope to rethink and relationship between the Brahmanas and other communities in the agrarian milieu of early south India.<sup>6</sup> The systematic statistical study of Chola sale deeds have unearthed a gradual tendency from community based to personal land holdings and demonstrate not only Brahmanas but merchants, craftsmen and peasants as owners of land. Temples amassed huge land estates through donation and purchase.<sup>7</sup> At the saturation point where land became scarce a tendency of alienation of certain prerogatives regarding a piece of land rather than the land itself was also visible along with the usual custom of land donation.<sup>8</sup>

The reference of crown land or 'Rajakiyabhumi' also figures in epigraphic records. Some historians have noted a system of part rotation, part periodical recycling of land for equal appropriation of benefits.<sup>9</sup> There are two categories of land tenures – for individual enjoyment (Ekabhogam) and for the enjoyment of a group (Ganabhogam). The criterion of ownership was determined by eightfold rights (Ashtabhogam) of possession viz- nidhi, niksepa, jala, pasana, aksini, agami, siddha and sadhya.<sup>10</sup>

Temples have played a crucial role in the economy of pre modern south India. Temples have been conceptualized as 'super ordinate instrument of integration' from the middle Chola period of 9<sup>th</sup> century CE functioning in the local level resource mobilization and distribution network.<sup>11</sup> Temples have also been held as 'hinterland headquarter' of agrarian control supervising different functions.<sup>12</sup> The rural and urban division of economy is being denounced by a number of historians who preferred to view the two segments as integral part of a whole economic structure.<sup>13</sup> Temples attracted a concentration of population and specialist craft groups around the temples although scholars like James Heitzman found little differentiation between town and village in terms of settlement patterns of the Chola period.<sup>14</sup>

Burton Stein's argument regarding 'Nadu' as an ethnically coherent unit lost its validity as it is known now that within a Nadu, numerous caste and jati groups have existed conforming to divergent and conflicting mythological descent.<sup>15</sup> The extra territorial marital links of the inhabitants of Nadu studied by scholars like Y. Subbarayalu also challenges the image of ethnic coherence associated this territorial unit. Nagaram which sometimes constitutes part of a Nadu, breaks from the boundary of it because of its trading interactions. Thus the administrative coherence and integrity of the Nadu can be questioned as it is comprised of multiple elements such as –Brahmadeyas, Vellanvagai, Devadana and Nagaram. Moreover from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards many of the Brahmadeyas were converted into the status of Tan-Kurus or independent revenue units and this special feature of the Chola administration separated Brahmadeyas from Nadus.<sup>16</sup> The rise of 'Nagaranattar' as a mercantile community from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards enthused a new dimension into this dynamics. Nagaranattar started playing a decisive role in the Nadu administration. So

Stein's assumption of a 'Nattar-Vellala symbiosis' is not corroborated by empirical evidence and Nattars were not always the dominant peasant groups in all the regions of southern India.

The corpus of Chola inscriptions throws a new terminology called 'Kani'. Etymologically the word 'Kani' means a right of possession or proprietorship essentially hereditary. The equivalent Persian term could be 'Mirasi' also used in the British administrative records of colonial India. The very usage of the word implies something beyond the right of cultivation, a sense of alienable property transferrable through inheritance, gift or purchase.<sup>17</sup> The owner of a Kani land is called Kaniyalar who enjoys the authority of 'Kaniyatei' over his holding. The occurrence of a number of honorific titles like Udaiyan, Kilavan, Araiyan, Velan etc in the land transaction records is been explained by historians like Karashima and Heitzman as indicative of the involvement of the political elites in the agricultural circles. Inscriptional reference of the term 'Kanikadan' implies duties or obligations attached to Kani holding. A Kani right could also be enjoyed by a temple deity although it does not automatically become tax free unless certain arrangements were made to make it so.<sup>18</sup> The greatest concentration of 'Kani' lands was around the riverine tract of the fertile Kaveri basin in the Chola period. A number of land types occurred in the inscriptions of the period which illustrates various usages and broader scope of the applicability of 'Kani'. The southern part of the Kaveri river was more fertile than the northern part and thus the north-south rivalry of resource mobilization and investments had caused enough turbulence on the social plain.<sup>19</sup> From the middle Chola period onwards most of the Kani rights of the lower Kaveri basin were acquired by the Kshatriyas (Irasukulavar). Historians like Karashima explain this shift in the land holding of the lower Kaveri valley as a result of the political design of the Chola kingship of Rajaraja I and Rajendra when hilly communities like Churutiman and Palli came to the plain serve in the military and eventually settled down in the southern tracts of the Kaveri river.<sup>20</sup> Due to different types of land holdings and conflicting interests the clash of the Kani or Perru landowners with tenant farmers (Ulukudi) and Adimai peasants who are bound to a land became frequent in the late Chola period.<sup>21</sup> The agrarian production was managed mainly within the kinship network where irrigation facility was not available. The question of labour mobilization becomes important in the context of two types of Devadana grants, firstly Kudinikki (Kudi or peasants being evicted) and secondly Kudininga (peasants not being evicted). Naturally here comes the question of the recognition of the inherent right, a social convention rather than a legal convention which has been explained as 'Haq' (intrinsic right) in the context of the Zamindari system of Mughal India by Prof. Nurul Hasan. James Heitzman posed a fundamental question of why these land rights never transcended the boundaries of 'social matrix' and did not create a 'free market' for property. The answer lies in the ecological patterns of the landholdings and the involvement of the religious communities who carefully guarded Kani rights. Moreover accumulation of capital through market forces was probably not an incentive on the part of the Vellala cultivators as they were more oriented towards strengthening their kinship position.<sup>22</sup>

A close interlink is stressed between the urban development, agrarian interest and temple management. In the context of the Rajarajesvara temple of Tanjavur a model diagram portraying the complex transactional networks surrounding the temple is been shown by James Heitzman. Four types of land rights are known from the early medieval Kerala. They are --- Kanam (complete ownership), Itayitu (intermediary ownership), Karanmai (tenancy rights) and Kutimai (occupancy rights) granted to temples which were again redistributed with modifications.<sup>23</sup> This varied mosaic of land holding necessarily projects a much nuanced picture of proprietorship and contradicts the once simplified assumption that in Oriental context all lands belong to the king of the realm. In southern India temples actually acted as an agency through which royal control penetrated into diverse localities through the posting of the royal officials. Officers of the central governments like Muvendavelar and Koyirramar were appointed in the temple administration functioning within in the web of local elites and local temples. In fact imperial temples of Tanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram serve as illustrious examples of this diversification of institutional links. According to Champakalakshmi, 'ceremonial complexes' provided a crucial impetus for urbanization in pre modern south India.<sup>24</sup> Settlements of Nagaram emerged in 9<sup>th</sup> Century facilitating an exchange base for Nadus and thus gradually built up a network of market centres. The emergence of non Brahmana spiritual movement known as the Bhakti movement particularly Saivism and the institutionalization of it in the form of mathas, monasteries and Bhakti cults gained a strong ground among the common people and boosted the participation of non-Brahmana cultivators in the agrarian economy. Temple administrations were also profoundly influenced by the currents of the Bhakti movement.<sup>25</sup>

It is interesting to note that women figured actively involved in the religious endowments to the temples, especially women from royal families. Inscriptional data shows that apart from landholdings by *Tevaratiyal* i.e in lieu of their service to a temple, there exists the typical example of *Mancal Kani* tenures giving property right to women as part of Stridhanam (literally the wealth for a lady).<sup>26</sup>

Supra local organizations like Periya-Nadu incorporated a number of Nadus from the 12<sup>th</sup> century but they were active in the peripheral areas rather than the core areas. Some historians have identified a close interaction and mutual dependence between the guilds of agriculturists and the organizations of pastoral communities in the Tondaimandalam areas. On the other hand guilds of Rathakara craftsmen (chariot maker) located in different Valanadus of the Cholamandalam were also in contact with such agro-pastoral groups. Thus the intricate connection between village and Nagaram, Nagaram and Mahanagaram also goes against the belief of the insular character of the Nadus. Burton Stein identified a general trend in the South Indian history from 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE which he categorized as transitional phase where Brahmadeyas lost their importance and Devadanam or land donated to temple deities became the predominant form of land holding and regional temples becoming the gravitation point of emerging urban centres.<sup>27</sup> Administrative decisions also accelerated changes in the composition of a Brahmadeya as they were outside the sphere of Nadu administration and maintained a direct association with the central authority. The Brahmanas in fact continued to perform their function as tax collectors, administrative staffs and ritual performers under the temple infrastructure rather than functioning as independent land lords. They also organized themselves as 'landed intermediary between the temple corporation and the tenants' as they 'had an inherent corporate character and communitarian unity' which contributed to their economic supremacy and social prestige.<sup>28</sup> In Karnataka for example, Brahmanas enthusiastically participated in the mercantile activity as borne out by their supervisory participation in lieu of a share of revenue.

Temples thus assumed the focal point of economy with its massive resource mobilizing potential and hence became a versatile institution taking part in both agrarian and mercantile pursuits. In a way temples as religious establishments became the controlling centre of collection and distribution of resources well equipped with granaries and archives of records. The huge accumulated capital in temples were channelized to propagate rice cultivation and construction of irrigational projects and to reclaim uncultivated tracts into agrarian production. Chola imperial authority took a great interest in the agrarian sector by sanctioning of tax relief and adopting different administrative and fiscal policies. Tax collection and revenue assessment are two vital components of agrarian economy. Chola administrative records reveal two distinct terms 'Puravavaritinaikkalam' and 'Varippottagam' which are interpreted as the land revenue department and records of land rights and taxes respectively. Although numerous taxes are found in Chola records but broadly they can be classified as land revenue, labour or service tax, non agricultural taxes, tolls on merchandise and judicial fines.<sup>29</sup> Irai and Kudamai were two major land taxes, among which the later was levied on the owner of the land. Revenue assessment mechanism was called Taramidu. Though the basic land unit was called Veli, it varies according to the differential size of the measuring rod. Agricultural levies were collected in kind where as in the case of craftsmen monetary taxes (Ayam and Pattam) were taken. This dual mode of taxation gathered momentum during the last phase of the Chola rule.<sup>30</sup>

Subbarayalu has pointed out that a number of associated dues of Kudimai land tax shows close resemblance to labour service almost comparable to the French labour tax Corvee of the eighteenth century. These were rendered to procure cheap labour for the irrigational works. With time the increase in the rate of the Kudimai indicates shifts and changes within the socio-economic order and also to the intensification of the process of hierarchization.<sup>31</sup> Individual land ownership was significant in the land holding pattern of the Chola period responsible for the stratification in the agrarian order creating land lords and immediate cultivators. Land owning cultivators (Kadi/Kudimakkal), ploughmen (Ulavu-ceyvarkal) and agricultural labourers (Panicey makkal) constituted a professional hierarchy hard to ignore. In the sphere of revenue collection and decision of revenue exemption both central and local authorities enjoyed considerable autonomy in their respective spheres.<sup>32</sup> It is precisely on this ground that Noboru Karashima critiques Stein's opinion of absolute absence of bureaucracy in the Chola period.

#### Conclusion

Any discussion regarding the land tenure system of early medieval South India necessarily brings the issue of feudalism in Indian context with its stereotypical components like the decline of trade and the ruralization of economy, demonetization of economy transforming it into an economy of no outlet, decline and desertion of urban centres, The agro-based gift oriented socio-economic relation and sub-ifeudation of landed properties and responsibilities attached to it – an obvious transplantation of 'Pierre thesis' into oriental context. In this essay, with my humble efforts, the multidimensionality of land tenures and related economic dynamics of pre colonial South India is glimpsed. This is just an overview where many details are intentionally bypassed. But even such an outline would automatically direct a student of history to question the utility of applying certain Eurocentric yardsticks to understand the nuances of pre-colonial economy of India.

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