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‘Rights over Wastelands’ and New Narratives of the Paraiyan Past (1860–1900)*

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The rural world of nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu was highly diversified in terms of land control and ownership. Academic efforts have largely focused on the various claims to ‘privileged’ landownership. This overemphasis on the authority, rights, claims and protests of the ‘privileged’ too often negated the prospects of a serious introspection into the twin issues of agrestic servitude and landlessness. The present article is concerned with one group of rural labourers, who in nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu were essentially regarded as ‘agrestic serfs’. The Paraiyans were mostly landless labourers and depended for their livelihood on the dominant rural groups. Their existence as a depressed social category, denied of all privileges including landownership, provokes a serious investigation into the operation and mechanism of the institution of mirasi in the Tamil country. The definition of ‘waste’ was mired in terms of complexities emanating from the classification of lands, which were essentially referred to as anadu karambu or gramanattams. These complexities in course of the nineteenth century had fashioned differing sets of opinions within the conservative and reformist sections of the colonial bureaucracy. Such contradictions alongside discussions on the hidden ‘Paraiyan history’ have been explored to understand the broader issues centring around the ‘Sedentary Paraiyan’ as well as the ‘Slave Paraiyan’.

I

On 5 October 1994, the Dalits of Karanai, a small village in Chengai MGR district, installed a life-size statue of B.R. Ambedkar to reassert their rights over the Panchama lands. But the district police officials connived with the caste Hindus and razed the statue to the ground. The news of the desecration of the statue spread through the district like wildfire, triggering a series of violent incidents.1

* The terms such as ‘untouchables’, ‘Paraiyans’ and ‘lower castes’ have been used in this article not in any pejorative sense, but to narrate the social existence of oppressed marginal groups in South India. These terms have been used in a generic sense to bring out the complexities of the prevalence and implications of ‘untouchability’ in the context of historical developments. The author does not intend to hurt the sensibilities of any individual or community through the usage of such nomenclatures.

Subsequently, there were reports of violence from the far southern districts of Tamil Nadu. It was reported that upper-caste landlords had been indulging in rioting to sustain their economic and social dominance over the Dalit agricultural labourers. A section of the press interpreted these acts of violence as panic reactions on the part of the powerful rural groups to prevent Dalits from acquiring the status of independent landowning peasants. In other words, the apprehensions among the upper-caste rural elites about possible loss of their exalted status was believed to have been the potent cause behind the upsurge of rural disturbances in Tamil Nadu.²

Even in the early twentieth century, the District Collector of Chingleput in his report on the condition of the ‘untouchable’ classes in the district was able to reproduce documents in which the entire property of a labourer was mortgaged to his master. The ‘untouchable’ or ‘Panchama’ (social categories who were usually regarded as ‘untouchable’ communities and were mostly engaged as agricultural labourers) was believed to be completely at the master’s mercy. In some cases, the masters, apprehensive of the courts, refused to accept the validity of these agreements for service in exchange for loans and induced the Panchama labourers to mortgage their house sites or to provide an undertaking that these houses were not owned by them but by their masters. This problem of house sites was especially in evidence in mirasi (a privileged land tenure with proprietary rights to its holder) districts, where the dominant landowning groups claimed that every acre of land including the wastes or porambokes (lands incapable of cultivation; sterile or waste lands, which could be used for dwellings) were their own and that the field labourers totally depended on them in matters related to their residence and housing. The Special Officer’s enquiries in Tanjore and other districts brought to light that in many parts the Panchamas, whether they were labourers or small farmers, were unable to buy the ordinary necessities of life or sell their produce. This was largely because they could not enter a shop or even pass through many of the streets where the ordinary shopkeepers lived. A district official thus concluded his report by stating:

... with such disabilities and such degrading conditions of life combined too often with wages which are distinctly low, it is not surprising that the Panchama labourer frequently endeavours to forget his troubles in liquor. Nor is it to be wondered at that a large number of them, home loving though they are, seek to improve their economic and social positions by migrating to countries, where they can hope to rise for a high status.³

³ G.O. No. 559, Revenue Department, Dated 08.03.1920, Tamil Nadu Archives (hereafter TNA).
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In the recent past, non-government agencies in several parts of South India have been active in raising issues related to the landlessness of the Dalit (a term popularized by a group of radical intellectuals since the 1970s to assert the militancy on the part of social groups, which for centuries had been regarded as ‘polluted’ and had borne the brunt of upper-caste domination) communities. These organizations, with the support of civil rights activists, demanded the release of bonded labourers, implementation of minimum and equal wages and the enjoyment of basic rights for Dalit groups. In Tamil Nadu, non-government agencies have emphasized on the importance of investigating local land records, publicizing ownership details and exposing the loopholes in the land ceiling laws. However, such activities have failed to protect the Dalit communities from verbal insults and physical abuse. In course of little more than a decade, the upper-caste groups in several districts of Tamil Nadu have been involved in reasserting their claims over Panchama lands (lands which were kept reserved for ex-‘untouchable’ communities, who had for several centuries been denied the privileges of landownership), which for centuries had been used by the ‘untouchable’ agricultural labouring groups for residential purposes. In most cases, with the active connivance of police officials, they unleashed a reign of terror on the indigent Dalit communities.

Such incidents of violence have raised a number of questions relating to the rural scenario in the past. One question that arises is why the Dalits were denied the opportunities of landownership for a fairly long period of time. This article discusses the liberal as well as conservative British official perceptions to explore the links between the institution of mirasi and the issue of landlessness. It needs to be reiterated that apart from the lands classified as waste, Dalits did not have much opportunity to acquire lands superior in terms of quality as well as those enjoying the facilities of irrigation. Another question that is frequently asked is whether the debate on Panchama lands added a new significance to terms such as Paraiyan and ‘Adi Dravida’ in late nineteenth-century South India. The answers to these questions have been sought through a theoretical discussion on waste and its possible significance in the context of the rural relationships that prevailed in the region.

II

The term ‘waste’ was technically part of the classificatory system that ordered land types on the basis of productivity. Waste land was usually land which did not yield tax. Presumably, it is this usage of waste that lends credence to Baden Powell’s three-volume tract on the land systems of India. In fact, earlier researches,

* Ibid.
* Ibid. See also Brara (1992: 411).
overtly influenced by Baden Powell, have failed to interpret waste beyond ‘revenue waste’. Though, such interpretations were valid, they failed to capture the ideological richness and political potency of the term. A few more questions have been left unanswered. For instance, it is still not clear as to how the English comprehended which lands paid tax and which actually did not. W.W. Hunter’s criticism of the Permanent Settlement for ‘giving away the rights of cultivators to the waste or pasture lands attached to the village commune’ reveals that even the British distinguished ‘acceptable waste’ from ‘unacceptable waste’. This concept was rather indiscriminately applied during the Permanent Settlement. On the other hand, in the case of South India, Thomas Munro, in his instructions to the district collectors, identified at least five types of waste, including village commons, which were not to be assessed for tax and which were to remain under the common jurisdiction of the villagers.\(^8\)

This depiction of the commons as waste by a section of the rural population differed widely from the state’s legal standpoint. The colonial state often failed to locate the disjunctures between uncultivable waste and arable waste. The colonial bureaucracy felt that the concept of waste was part of a thought process linked to an ancient past, where there had been a near-total absence of ideas related to maximal land utilization and productivity. The bureaucracy was in most cases guided by a profit mentality and stressed the need to bring most of the lands under cultivation. Such ideas definitely did not fit in with the indigenous and regional notions about the importance of waste and the commons. In most parts of rural India, there were manifold arguments in favour of the necessity to preserve waste and the commons. In the first place, there was a belief that the commons provided regenerative vegetation which enabled smallholders to sustain their livelihood. Second, this vegetation appeared at critical junctures and was of some benefit to smallholders, since it solved much of their problems related to fodder supply. Finally, the produce of the commons was valued by the village inhabitants, as they collectively took decisions regarding its use and sale.\(^9\) In each village, the inhabitants had their own ways of defining the commons and in differentiating them from those of other villages. The commons had multiple uses that coexisted along with grazing. The less well-to-do inhabitants of villages utilized the natural vegetation for their timber and fuel needs, for the raw materials needed for the construction of their huts, for the supply of wild fruits and vegetables that were both consumed and sold and for curing local ailments.\(^10\)

Interestingly, any discussion on the major physical elements affecting Tamil agriculture in the early nineteenth century would reveal the variations in land use in the region. There have been attempts to explain these variations through the use of two broad and elusive categories: dry and wet agriculture. The meanings

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\(^8\) Gidwani (1992: 40–41).
\(^10\) Ibid.
and implications of these categories were also not uniform across the length and breadth of Tamil Nadu. However, these existing categories, based on geographical and ecological parameters, often blurred local variations and prove to be less relevant. Indeed, this resulted in unsatisfactory accounts of the production conditions of agriculture in Tamil Nadu, thereby leading to highly verbose models or jargons. Christopher Baker made attempts to categorize the varying use of land into a threefold division: the valley, the plain land and the Kongu (this region essentially comprised the southern taluks of Salem, Coimbatore and the Palani area of Madurai) region of Tamil Nadu. The valley was obviously the repository of high culture, and was reputed for its extensive channel irrigation. The plain land comprised mostly of dry lands, which proved to be difficult for agriculture with hunting, and there were herding and more developed forms of animal husbandry. The Kongunadu was a successful combination of the valley and the plain, in the sense that it had more promising agriculture and livestock than achieved in the plains. In terms of area, the valley included most of Tanjore and Chingleput and smaller parts of South Arcot, Trichinopoly, Madurai and Tinneveli; the Kongunadu included most of Coimbatore and a very small part of Salem and Madurai; the rest was the Tamil plains. However, these existing broad categories including the ones of the valley and the plain Kongunadu does ignore significant local variations and they prove to be invalid.

In Tamil Nadu, all lands regarded as tarasu (cultivable waste) in the early British records were not of the same type, nor were they waste for the same causes. In the first place, lands were left waste for periods ranging from one to two years to fifteen or more. Second, as in Salem and Coimbatore, considerable lands also included as waste were locally useful for grass fallow or short fallow purposes. Third, lands were left waste by mirasidars (individuals who enjoyed a privileged kind of landholding, the actual connotation of which varied from place to place in the Madras Presidency) when they themselves were unable to cultivate them and proposals from others to cultivate them were rejected because of the superior mirasi rights. Such types of waste lands were found mostly in South Arcot and Chingleput. They were generally referred to as nanjai (wet land; soil that is fit for the cultivation of rice; land capable of being irrigated) and totakkal (garden land; land appropriated to the cultivation of garden produce as various kinds of fruit, betel, edible vegetables and other articles of value were grown on them) lands.

British officials found it difficult to overrule the claims of mirasidars over the waste lands. The majority of them believed that mirasi rights did not lapse even when the land remained uncultivated. There was also an assumption that mirasi rights extended to ‘waste lands’. Arun Bandopadhyay has pointed out that

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13 Ibid., p. 141.
mirasidars had the sole right over all sheycal karambu or cultivable waste, which they held along with the ‘varapet’ or taxable lands of the village, but over anadi karambu or ‘immemorial waste’ their right was partial. In such cases, they also possessed ‘the exclusive right of cutting firewood, working quarries etc.’, though they had no right to cultivation, to break up commons used for pasturage or to cut down productive trees.

In the early nineteenth century, there were extensive ‘waste lands’ in Tamil Nadu, with the exception of deltaic Tanjore, revering Tambraparni, the Madakulam taluk of Madurai district, and to some extent the taluks of Mannargudi and Chidambaram in South Arcot. Waste lands were most common in the predominantly dry areas, as lands were often left uncultivated because of seasonal failures. However, great portions of land in Chingleput, South Arcot and Trichinopoly also remained as wastes due to the uncertainties of tank and channel irrigation.

The control over ‘wastes’ was usually exercised by the dominant landed groups of rural society. This control was sometimes buttressed by religious sanctions and a variety of customs and privileges. The Paraiyans and other depressed classes caste groups had little chance of owning land or even exercising control over waste lands. Their claims over waste lands, particularly at times of distribution, were overruled by the landed classes, who preferred the ulkudis or resident cultivators of the villages. In the case of Chingleput and South Arcot, the conflict over waste lands intensified in the 1840s, since a large amount of lands lay fallow or were being classified as waste.

In this sort of a situation, the issue of waste lands was bound to be complicated in view of the diverse claims being made as the part of ulkudis (resident cultivators), parakudis (non-resident cultivators) and ‘lower-caste’ tenants.

In Tamil districts, whenever mirasidars faced difficulties in enforcing their control over the ‘waste lands’, there was a propensity to distribute the lands among the darkhast applicants. The darkhasts (applications for land) were usually made on behalf of ulkudis and parakudis. The resident cultivators or ulkudis were favoured because they made their claim on the basis of contiguity of their landed possessions. The non-resident cultivators or parakudis usually faced difficulties on account of the combined opposition of the ulkudis and mirasidars (in some cases the distinctions between the two groups were not clear). In the nineteenth century, the Paraiyans were rarely accepted as resident villagers or pattadars in rural Tamil Nadu. Mirasidars and non-mirasi pattadars refused to comply with requests made by the Paraiyans, regarding the distribution of waste lands for housing and cultivation purposes. Thus, there was lesser scope for the ‘untouchable’ agricultural labourers to acquire lands. In Chingleput, mirasidars and other

15 Ibid., p. 203.
16 Ibid., p. 141.
17 Ibid.

dominant rural groups took recourse to ‘iniquitous’ contracts as well as threats of eviction to prevent the former ‘slave castes’ from making applications for the grant of waste lands. The Paraiyan labourers, returning to their villages following the end of their contract service in the overseas, too often were prevented from acquiring waste lands or even low-quality lands which could be used for groundnut cultivation. The government did not intend to interfere much with the rural contests over the distribution of landed resources, but tended to side more with the views expressed by the mirasidars and the ulkuds. Its opinions in this respect were guided by and large by its economic interests and the conservatives in the bureaucracy felt that by placating the dominant rural groups, there would hardly be any problems in ensuring the regular flow of revenue and other forms of financial entitlements.

III

 Nonetheless, mirasi claims over waste lands came to be hotly challenged in South Arcot and Chingleput districts. In South Arcot, there was the dominance of patta (a document given by the government to the cultivator or under-tenant, specifying the conditions on which the lands were held and the value of the proportion of the produce to be paid to the authority or person from whom the lands were held) holding agricultural labouring groups, but in Chingleput, the major labour force seemed to have been supplied from the non-patta holding group. This group could be largely associated with officially unrecognized tenancy and hired and bonded labour. The mirasidars in Chingleput exercised a considerable degree of authority in the rural areas. In districts like Chingelput, no matter what the Company’s bureaucracy did, they could not prevent the mirasidars from indulging in the cultivation of less good land and taking more and more poor land. The mirasidars probably did this in order to reduce the tax base that would be imposed on them in the future.18 They also took control of these lands for the specific purpose of keeping out outsiders. In fact, they entered into agreements or muchalkas for the purpose of excluding others from the possession of lands including those lands classified as gramanattams (common village lands). But the government was reluctant to accept this mirasi right in its entirety in these districts. In Chingleput, mirasi rights were exercised by individuals who were mere proprietary owners and were satisfied with collecting certain proprietary fees like swamibhogam from the peasants. There were also non-resident mirasidars who let out their lands on permanent varam (share) and were hardly involved with agriculture as suppliers of seed, stock and capital. This group included a considerable number of Brahmin and non-Brahmin mirasidars, who seldom carried out the tasks related with ordinary superintendence of cultivation. There were a number of big as well as small

mirasidars in Tanjore, Trichinopoly and Tinnevelly who neglected even the low-cost mararam or repair works for irrigation.\textsuperscript{19}

The real background of much of these conflicts in the rural localities needs to be analyzed in the context of the cultivable waste—which was both extensive as well as ever-increasing in these districts. In Chingleput, there were extensive waste lands in the early 1820s and the nanjai (wet land; soil that is fit for paddy cultivation) waste increased in the succeeding decades. In South Arcot, a great portion of the punjai (dry garden land) lands was laid waste between 1834–35 and 1843–44. In these conditions, occupational right was generally asserted by those who continued to ‘propose’ for cultivable waste and such claims were increasingly endorsed by officials, who opposed mirasi rights over such lands.\textsuperscript{20}

In Chingleput, a conflict occurred in 1839 when the mirasidars of Wooroor disposed of the long tract extending from a kuppam (a village of small houses and huts) and facing the seashore, and the question arose if the mirasidars had the right to sell poramboke or immemorial waste lands. The collector of the district argued that the mirasidars had no such rights over these lands. Legal confusions further complicated matters in 1840, when the collector of the district appealed to the Provincial Court Central Division for revoking the order of the Chingleput zilla court, which had denied the government the right to exercise its discretion vis-à-vis immemorial waste. In fact, the main point of the dispute was whether the waste land could not be legally given to the payakari (migratory or non-resident cultivators, who were not members of the village community and had no proprietary rights) without the consent of the mirasidars. The provincial court, however, confirmed the decree of the zilla court.

Despite the court judgments, the payakaris continued to get cultivable waste lands for cultivation when the mirasidars did not cultivate them citing the lack of adequate water supply as their reason for not doing so. Such grants were later withdrawn when the mirasidars agreed to cultivate even under the prevailing conditions. The result was that the payakari continued to cultivate not as an ‘owner’, but as an occupant, only at the discretion of the mirasidar.\textsuperscript{21}

The Board of Revenue in most cases did not recognize mirasi rights over poramboke lands in Chingleput. The Board maintained this stand as late as the 1850s.\textsuperscript{22}

In the years after 1855, following the abolition of the dittum (arrangement, agreement and estimated aggregate of the revenue of a village from investigation of each holding) system, mirasidars had to declare the amount of land they wanted to be entered in their pattas and pay tax for that amount, regardless of whether or not the land was cultivated. On the other hand, the government had the power to issue fresh pattas for land not taken up by the mirasidars to the payakaris, who

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. p. 95.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. pp. 212–13.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. pp. 213–14.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

wished to cultivate these lands and had applied for them. This resulted in the mirasidars losing not only a part of their land permanently to the payakaris, but also the tenancy right or swatantram which they used to collect from them as well. The mirasidars took recourse to various measures to prevent the payakaris from obtaining land pattas. As late as the 1890s, the collector of Chingleput, J.H.A. Tremenheere, observed:

To describe the numerous devices practised by the mirasidars in order to prevent pattas being granted to payakaris would fill volumes; land applied for by a payakari is taken up by a mirasidar, whose only intention it is to abandon it again as soon as possible; if again darkhasted for another mirasidar pursues the same course, often without even paying the assessment.23

As powerful landlords and having developed close ties with the taluk headquarters, mirasidars were able to keep large areas of waste which might have been otherwise profitably cultivated by the payakaris.24 In 1875, the Madras government redefined the rules relating to the payment of swatantram by payakaris to mirasidars, in the event of the government issuing pattas to the payakaris. Haruka Yanagisawa has argued that by introducing such a policy, the government expected that the mirasidar, assured of his fees from the land, would no longer enter into intrigues to keep all in his own hands.25 The rights of mirasidars were recognized so long as they did not harm the collection of land revenue by the government.26 Thus, prior to 1892, the government while dealing with mirasi rights never seriously considered protecting the interests of the ‘untouchable’ agricultural labouring classes.

I intend to project the diverse viewpoints of the liberal and conservative sections of British officials vis-à-vis the issue of landownership and control in South India.27 The main intention here is to focus on the debates that took place among British officials over the issue of ‘Pariah uplift’ in the region in the late nineteenth century. Such endeavours could lead to a reinterpretation of the entire debate, which was believed to have given an altogether new significance to the term Paraiyan.28 Finally, attempts would also be made to understand the official efforts towards the ‘sedentarization of the Paraiyans’ that played the most crucial part in the discussion over the distribution of waste lands to the Paraiyan farm labourers.29

23 For more details, see G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, p. 8.
24 For more details, see G.O. No. 590, Revenue Department, Dated 13.04.1875, TNA.
26 Ibid., p. 200.
27 For more details, see G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, pp. 8, 39.
28 The term ‘Paraiyan’ is considered to be highly derogatory and there have been a lot of litigations involving its usage in contemporary times. Historically, it generally meant a labouring caste in Tamil Nadu, who from time immemorial had lived in a state of agrestic servitude.
IV

In fact, official policies that attempted to sedentarize individuals actually seemed to be a part of an agenda that emphasized on the confinement of all individuals, especially the poor to a specific position in society. Such developments in the context of South India had wide implications. Eugene F. Irschik has argued that British commentators specializing on the indigence of certain social groups felt that Paraiyan bonded labourers (particularly in the different taluks of Chingleput district) could perform a more productive role, if their mobility could be restricted. Such ideas shaped the entire dialogic construction of the ‘sedentary Paraiyans’ in the last years of the nineteenth century.  

This article incorporates some of the ideas on sedentarization as propounded by Irschik in his study of the original Dravidians of southern India. However, it will attempt to bring out in more detail the changes and shifts in the understanding of the British revenue administration in nineteenth-century South India as regards issues related to mirasi, waste lands and landownership. It will bring into focus the fissures within the colonial bureaucracy over issues linked to distribution of gramanattam and samudayam lands. These debates between the reformist and the conservative bureaucracy impart an altogether new meaning to the issue of waste—in ecological, social and economic terms. It would also bring out the fact that the government’s insistence on maintaining the status quo in terms of landownership in rural localities was often dictated by the economic considerations, centring on maximum appropriation of the rural surplus. This crude economic line of approach was often covered by way of a deliberate emphasis on the antiquity and civilization of the region. In fact, revenue officials engaged in this debate made extensive use of local myths and local history to buttress their own respective points of view. Sometimes, it also led to a new reading of the Munronian position, which to a large extent had been conditioned by the interpretations of the native informants of the Company’s administration in South India since the early years of the nineteenth century.

It needs to be pointed out that the debate over the sedentarization of the Paraiyans in late nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu also resulted from an intellectual inclination of a section of the bureaucracy to present a series of narratives on the pre-colonial social standing of the marginal groups in this region. Indeed, some officials invoked

30 Ibid., p. 154. The cultural interrelations which were presumed to have existed between the virtues of a sedentary life and the state’s interest in a prosperous society were viewed as something significant. It was so because a sedentary existence represented a basic ingredient in the definition of citizenship. Catherine Gallagher has argued that social commentators like Henry Mayhew looked on ‘itinerant’ individuals as people who used up the nutriment that would ordinarily have gone into the bodies of productive workers. She observed ‘Non-productivity has for its sign “nomadic” movement, and movement has for its sign ... a strong body.’ For more details, see Gallagher (1987: 90).

history to buttress the claims of Paraiyans over land and other immovable wealth. This sort of understanding was reflected in their urge to recreate the forgotten Paraiyan history. It was argued that Paraiyans had not always been depressed communities, but in the ancient past had enjoyed a status of social pride and honour. Here, the achievements of Tiruvalluvar were highlighted to vindicate the Paraiyan’s claim of being a divine social category.\(^{32}\)

Such exercises sometimes led to an investigation into the conditions of Paraiyans over the course of several centuries. Pre-modern societies of the sub-continent were often depicted as politically fragmented, culturally decadent and economically stagnant. It was believed that the condition of the labouring groups had been pathetic and that slavery had existed in some form or the other in different parts of this geographical terrain. British rule was described as a providential blessing, which guaranteed peace and security for all irrespective of their social standing. Implicit in such assertions was an understanding that British rule promoted the liberation of underprivileged groups, who had long been subjected to extreme forms of caste discrimination and social injustice.\(^{33}\)

\[V\]

Since the 1860s, there had been a growing opinion in favour of sedentary living. Protagonists of this view argued that sedentary life not only laid the foundations of a prosperous society, but also protected the interests of the state. In a sense, it was believed that sedentary life represented a “basic ingredient in the definition of citizenships”.\(^{34}\) Irschik has pointed out that similar ideas related to sedentarization might have forced the colonial bureaucracy in the Madras Presidency to popularize the drinking habit among the lower classes. It has been argued that British ruling groups felt that such policies could lead to the creation of a stable and economically viable rural workforce.\(^{35}\)

Such arguments undoubtedly opened up the prospects of a lively discussion on the issue of sedentarization of Paraiyans by undertaking an investigation into the operations of the \textit{mirasi} system. In the 1870s, some influential colonial bureaucrats like C.S. Crole expressed the opinion that since the mid-nineteenth century, the \textit{mirasi} system in the Madras Presidency had been on the wane. In other words, it was felt that land was a free commodity that could be easily possessed by any individual wishing to undertake the labour involved in cultivation. Colonial officials like Crole made repeated pleas to the provincial government to adopt a tough stand against the \textit{mirasi} system. They felt that for creating a prosperous state, lands had to be granted to fixed individuals. But they lacked the zeal to unravel

\(^{34}\) Irschik (1994: 153).
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 154.
the real reasons behind the social and economic deprivation of the underprivileged groups in society.\textsuperscript{36}

It has been argued that prior to the last two decades of the nineteenth century, British officials were somewhat disinterested in issues related to the social emancipation of Paraiyans. British officials like Crole were believed to have displayed an interest in the Paraiyan issue simply out of a grand design to explore the historicity of outcastes or Paraiyans.\textsuperscript{37} However, members of the new school, comprising government servants, missionaries and journalists, held the opinion that though the government had initiated anti-slavery measures, slavery still needed to be eliminated from some parts of the Madras Presidency.\textsuperscript{38}

The government officials, nonetheless, adopted a safer approach by trying to secure the interests of resident villagers and \textit{pattadar}s. In doing so, it almost completely overlooked the interests of the agricultural labouring classes. The government was hesitant to support the Board’s directives that \textit{gramanattam} lands (common lands in the villages) be treated as community property of the villages. It was of the opinion that in pure \textit{mirasi} villages, \textit{mirasidars} exercised exclusive rights over \textit{gramanattam} and waste lands. The government tried to form its arguments on the basis of an official order of 7 September 1860, wherein it had been stated that the ryots of the villages would be given preferences in matters relating to the distribution of these lands. The conservative section of British officials believed that the distribution of \textit{gramanattam} lands needed to be based on the customs and traditions prevalent in the region.\textsuperscript{39}

The forcible eviction of Paraiyans from house sites influenced the colonial bureaucracy to reconsider the issues related to the distribution of \textit{gramanattam} and waste lands in the village. The Collector of Chingleput pointed out that the \textit{mirasidars} forcibly entered the \textit{cherinattams} (house sites of the Paraiyans) and threatened to impose penalties in the form of a prohibitory assessment at the time of \textit{jamabandi}. The \textit{mirasidars} claimed that the Paraiyans had been held in bondage by them since the ancient past and had been housed in the \textit{cherinattams} only by which the former enjoyed exclusive rights.\textsuperscript{40}

Both the collector and the government hesitated to take a tough stand on the \textit{mirasidars}, fearing legal battles with the privileged groups in the rural society. The government disagreed with the views of some leading revenue officials about whether the \textit{mirasidars} were entitled to make such claims over the \textit{poramboke} lying within their estates. Nevertheless, the government also tried to ascertain

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., pp. 154–55.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 156.
\textsuperscript{38} For more details, see ibid., pp. 156–57.
\textsuperscript{39} G.O. No. 1684 (Press); G.O. No. 1545, Revenue Department, Dated 07.09.1867, TNA; For more details, see Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, Revenue Department, Dated 13.02.1875, TNA.
\textsuperscript{40} Board Proceedings (B.P.) No. 1547, Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, Revenue Department, Dated 07.07.1886, TNA.
whether the common lands or the samudayams were meant for the enjoyment of all village communities or were to be exclusively enjoyed by the mirasidars.\textsuperscript{41}

The Board argued that the right of Paraiyans over house sites could not always be upheld, since they had ceased to be farm labourers under the British law. In fact, this sort of official interpretation leads us to raise two important questions: one, whether the fortunes of the mirasi were indeed declining; and two, whether the implementation of anti-slavery measures had placed agricultural labourers in a dilemma. In this context, it needs to be understood that the gramanattam issue had assumed significance, in view of the changes in the occupational roles of the Paraiyans—ryots, tenants and labourers. Barring a few Paraiyan sub-tenants, most of the members of the community were agricultural labourers.

Notwithstanding the British administration’s pronouncements that there were no legal restrictions on ‘lower-caste’ people obtaining waste lands on the same terms as the upper-caste people, the real picture was a lot different. In fact, the situation was complicated by the fact that Paraiyans were hardly believed to be resident villagers or pattadars in rural Tamil Nadu. As such, throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the mirasidars and the non-mirasi pattadars refused to comply with the requests made by the Paraiyans, regarding the distribution of waste lands for housing and cultivation purposes. There was very little chance for the ‘untouchable’ agricultural labourers to acquire lands. In districts like Chingleput, mirasidars as well as other dominant rural groups took recourse to ‘iniquitous’ contracts as well as to threats of eviction to prevent the former slave castes from making applications for the grant of waste lands.\textsuperscript{42}

British officials like Mullaly expressed the opinion that despite the attempts of the colonial bureaucracy to free the ‘lower castes’ from mirasidari dominance, the situation in the rural areas had hardly undergone much improvement.\textsuperscript{43} The Board of Revenue agreed with Mullaly that the wages earned by the agricultural classes barely met their subsistence needs. At the same time, some British officials opined that Paraiyans were forced to live in overcrowded hutments and their condition could turn worse if they had to meet rental obligations. Some members of the Board of Revenue stated that since mirasidars enjoyed a sway over the waste lands, the Paraiyans continued to be dependent on them for their survival and subsistence.\textsuperscript{44}

In the mid-1880s, the Government of India undertook a survey of the condition of the lower classes and on the relief operations in the overpopulated tracts, where the government’s efforts in this direction were largely influenced by its intentions to come to terms with the devastation caused by the recurring famines. The condition in Chingleput district naturally assumed importance for the colonial

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. see also G.O. No. 2013, Revenue Department, Dated 18.06.1884, TNA.
\textsuperscript{42} Tremenheere (1891:8) Note on the Pariahs of Chingleput, Government Press, Madras, 1891.
\textsuperscript{43} B.P. No. 617, Proceedings of Board Revenue, Dated 06.09.1889, TNA.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
bureaucracy of the Madras Presidency. In 1888, Lee Warner the collector of Chingleput district observed that ‘the labourers are kept to a miserable plot, insufficient to turn in, from which they are summarily ousted if they happen to displease their masters’. The government, however, did not agree with Lee Warner’s point of view and strongly stated that there had been an improvement in the living condition of the people of Chingleput. Citing some statistical evidences from the original fasli returns of 1291 (1889–90), the government tried to prove that Paraiyans in numerous villages held some land on patta. In fact, it was pointed out that in ryotwari villages, the aggregate number of such pattas was 6,800, with an average of 2.15 acres per holding. These figures did not include the inam (tax-free lands given to religious institutions and individuals) lands especially for the three taluks of Ponneri, Tiruvallur and Chingleput, for which information was not available. In the three other taluks, Saidapet, Madurantakam and Conjeevaram, the inam area amounted to over 3,700 acres, held by 1,378 Paraiyans.

The government also pointed out that the Sub-Assistant Director of agriculture in his report had stated that the number of Paraiyan pattadar was much higher than what had been shown in the collector’s returns of 1891. But the government did not explicate why errors that had crept in into the original returns relating to the Tiruvallur and Saidapet taluks of Chingleput district. The government reports nonetheless conveyed the view that despite the allegations against mirasidars, the ‘untouchable’ agricultural labourers faced no difficulties in acquiring lands and the problems faced by them in this regard were by no means insurmountable. Subsequently, the census operations conducted by British officials tried to establish the view that the presence of Paraiyan landholders in the Chingleput, South Arcot and Tanjore districts was by no means negligible. In fact, these districts had a very high percentage of Paraiyan population: nearly 28.3 per cent of their entire population in the whole of the Madras Presidency.

The government’s stand on the Paraiyan issue, however, suffered from several inconsistencies. It used the term ‘Pariah’ in a broader sense of the term and hardly made any effort to differentiate the Chucklers, Pallans and other ‘outcastes’. There was also no attempt to distinguish wage earners from others. The government, therefore, classified land occupants as landholders, tenants and lessees in the villages. In the case of Chingleput, the government felt that it compared favourably with Tanjore, not only because there were a larger number of Paraiyan land occupants, but also because there were a higher proportion of those who had a proprietary (denoting occupancy) right in their farms. The government also pointed out that the number of Paraiyan land occupants was higher in South Arcot because of the predominance of dry lands in the district. In other words, it opined that the lower value of dry lands gave the poorer classes greater opportunities to own them.

45 G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, p. 6.
46 B.P. No. 49, Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, Dated 22.07.1890, TNA.
The government also asserted that by taking several taluks of Chingleput as a whole, the size of the Paraiyan land occupants compared to the total Paraiyan population varied between 35.34 and 44.74 per cent.47 However, the government accepted the fact that both economic and geographical factors accounted for a lower percentage of Paraiyan pattadar in Saidapet. It was felt that the extremely low percentage of Paraiyan land occupants in Saidapet was due to its poor soil and its proximity to the Madras Presidency town.48

The government’s claim regarding landownership of the Paraiyans was backed by strong assertions that emigration had had a decisive impact on the conditions of the ‘lower-caste’ agricultural labourers in the region. It was pointed out that emigration had provided the ‘coolies’ (predominantly drawn from the ‘untouchable’ communities) with opportunities to make savings, which they later invested in the purchase of lands in their native villages. Overseas employment was also believed to have encouraged a sense of independence and freedom among the labourers.49 Government officials like S. Srinivasa Raghavaiyangar pointed out that emigration had to a great extent increased the opportunities for ‘untouchable’ labouring groups to set themselves up as landowners. In both Trichinopoly and South Arcot districts, the ‘coolies’ who had returned from their overseas stints invested their savings in the purchase of dry lands, which they wanted to utilize for ground-nut cultivation.50 These attempts by ‘untouchable’ labouring groups led to a wide range of reactions and responses from the dominant rural elites. In fact, mirasidar and other landed groups put forth the argument that emigration was unwarranted from both the legal and social standpoints and they put pressure on the labourers to enter into fresh deeds of contract. In some cases, they tried to solve the problems of labour shortage by offering several economic benefits to them.51 These measures seldom succeeded and there was an ever-increasing competition in the recruitment of agricultural labourers. It needs to be pointed out that emigration hardly acted as a catalyst in improving the prospects of the Paraiyans to emerge as proprietors of better lands, especially the productivity of those lands which could be augmented through irrigation facilities. The poor quality of assigned lands and

47 G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, p. 39.
48 Ibid., p. 38; Hon. W. Robinson did not fully agree with the views of the English officials like Banbury as to the causes of backwardness of Chingleput district. He felt that the evils which arose from the mirasi system were caused perhaps more by the unfair nature of British administration in the Madras Presidency than by the inherent factors embedded within the joint proprietary system. For more details, see P/352, Madras Revenue Collections, January to March 1875, 24 February 1875, Revenue Department, Oriental and India Office Collections (hereafter OIOC), British Library, London.
49 Thomas and Ramkrishnan (1940: 58); Yanagisawa (1997: 211).
50 Raghavaiyangar (1893: 152).
51 Board of Revenue Proceedings, No. 622 (Miscellaneous), Dated 23.01.1886, TNA.
lack of necessary finances to make them suitable for cultivation were a great hindrance for the Paraiyans to emerge as a financially secured and settled farming group.52

Indeed, throughout much of the nineteenth century, the colonial administration failed to protect the interests of the sub-tenants, many of whom belonged to the socially depressed communities. Apart from the ryotwari tenure, several other tenurial forms, namely the zamindari, mitta, shrotriem, manyam and ijara, were affected by the system of rack-renting. Thus, owning land became difficult for the lower-caste groups. The problem was compounded by the absence of clear cut distinctions between the sub-tenants and agricultural labourers. In most cases, sub-tenants had no rights of occupation and they were exploited both in ryotwari and zamindari areas.53

VI

In the late 1880s, the entire exercise relating to the obliteration of the ‘slave paraiyar’ reached a point of climax. In August 1889, Lee Warner, the Collector of Chingleput, gave a detailed report on the policies pursued by reformist officials regarding the distribution of house sites among the Paraiyan agricultural labourers in the district. He observed that officials like Sub-Collector Mullaly had invalidated the claims of the mirasidars while distributing house sites to the padiyals (daily labourers). The collector disagreed with Mullaly over derecognizing the claims of the mirasidars over the house sites granted to the Paraiyans. The collector followed the conventional bureaucratic line and felt that the people needed to decide on such matters. In other words, it was believed that such a move would allay all fears of overt governmental interference in sensitive rural issues.54

Warner favoured the reinstatement of the mirasidars as the owners of the house sites occupied by the Paraiyans. He advised Mullaly to be more careful in his official dealings, as any indiscreet move could spoil relations between the mirasidars, the parakudis (many of whom were Paraiyans) and the Paraiyan padiyals. Despite the collector’s attempts to silence Mullaly, the latter’s action brought about profound changes in the psychological world of the Paraiyans. Mullaly’s diatribes

52 As late as 1920, the Board of Revenue observed that the poor soil quality was responsible for the lack of response on the part of the ‘depressed classes’ to cultivate such lands. The shortage of proper credit facilities accounted for the lack of enthusiasm on the part of these classes to make applications before the Labour Department of the Madras Government for the grant of poramboke lands, which could be utilized for cultivation. The chances of them acquiring the tank bed lands was almost impossible, since the upper caste landed groups made extensive claims over them. For more details, see Proceeding of the Board of Revenue, B. P. No. 10, Dated 12.01.1920, TNA.
53 See G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, p. 39.

against the mirasidars encouraged the Paraiyans to seek redressal from the exploitation and poverty arising out of British rule in South India.

Subsequently, the Panchama land debate entered an interesting phase. The wide usage of Tamil expressions like puramanai innaral\textsuperscript{55} in the old revenue documents created a great deal of controversy. Mullaly dismissed such entries as ‘relics of the time when pariahs were treated as ascripti glebae or villains (villeins) attached to and transferred with Mirasi’\textsuperscript{56}. He believed that if all Paraiyans were given title deeds for the plots on which they lived, it would result in an improvement of their living conditions.\textsuperscript{57}

Mullaly’s observations failed to impress the majority of the members of the Board of Revenue. In fact, some highly placed officials criticized him for undertaking utopian exercise aimed at the mythification of the Paraiyan community in South India. Some of them openly disagreed with his views regarding the condition of non-mirasidars in the villages. S.W. White, a member of the Board of Revenue, categorically stated that Mullaly’s observations lacked veracity and that the latter had given an exaggerated version of the conditions prevailing in the rural localities of Chingleput.\textsuperscript{58}

The debate on the Paraiyan land issue reached a new height during the monsoon season of 1890–91. Chingleput was hit by scarcity and rural poverty.\textsuperscript{59} The situation was so serious that it generated lengthy discussions in the House of Commons. There were also enquiries into the reasons behind the near-famine conditions in the Ponneri taluk of Chingleput.\textsuperscript{60} But, it needs to be argued that the government’s intervention would not have come, had not the Madras Missionary Conference

\textsuperscript{55} For more details see Irschik (1994: 169); Pandian (1893: 5–6).
\textsuperscript{56} The Tamil entries, such as ‘Puramanai innaral’ in the old revenue documents meant that slaves or servile categories were considered to be the property of the men who owned the land.
\textsuperscript{57} B.P. No. 617, Dated 06.09.1889.
\textsuperscript{58} See, B.P. No. 617.
\textsuperscript{60} Samuel Smith, a member of the British Parliament, raised a series of questions before the Secretary of State for India regarding the famine conditions and the extremely poor conditions of the people living in the Sonneri (incorrect spelling for Ponneri) taluk of Chingleput district. Describing the condition of the people he observed, ‘their state is not appreciably lower than usual; a large proportion of them are always badly nourished, clad (if at all) in the vilest of rags’. The Secretary of State in his reply stated that Ponneri was serving as a relief centre for the poorest parts of Chingleput district. He quoted fortnightly telegrams sent from Madras to prove that the administration was making constant efforts to relieve the rural distress in Chingleput and more than 7,000 people had been brought under government relief operations. For more details, see R & S 999/91, Revenue Statistics and Commerce Papers, OIOC, British Library, London.
presented a memorial to the Governor of Madras. Within a short period of time Tremenheere, the collector of Chingleput, also presented a detailed report on the condition of the lower classes in the district.\textsuperscript{61} The report, entitled ‘Note on the Pariahs of Chingleput’, exercised considerable sway over the official mindset in the early 1890s. In this report, the collector argued that the situation in Chingleput resembled almost that of a famine and that the condition of the lower classes was utterly deplorable in the rural areas. The government, on the other hand, stated that the rural distress could be ameliorated by undertaking relief work from Madras with the support of the railways.\textsuperscript{62}

Subsequently, the impoverished Paraiyans of Chingleput and Tinnevelli became involved in movements for improving their social and economic status. In fact, these endeavours on the part of the Paraiyans largely resulted from the efforts of the Christian missionaries, who were deeply involved with the Panchama land issue in South India. The missionaries strongly argued that despite the government’s decision to declare slavery an illegal and punishable offence under the special provisions of the Indian Penal Code, the attitude of the official classes towards the Paraiyans had hardly undergone any significant change. They requested the government to intervene on behalf of the Paraiyans, who were living under a state of bondage. They also highlighted the oppressive nature of the mirasi system, which in their opinion had denied sub-tenants or parakudis the opportunities to establish themselves as independent landowners. The judiciary was also blamed for its failure to secure house sites for the Paraiyan sub-tenants, who had regularly met economic obligations such as the kist and the swatantram. In fact, it was also alleged that village officials such as karnams often conspired with mirasidars to gain control over vacant sites and gramanattams.\textsuperscript{63}

A section of the colonial bureaucracy extended full support to the opinions expressed by the missionaries. Tremenheere, the collector of Chingleput, argued that the government’s emancipatory policies had not led to the social and economic elevation of the Paraiyans. In this regard, he seemed to have been influenced by a report that had been published in \textit{The Hindu} on 7 August 1891. This report stated that the upper castes, whom the Paraiyans generally looked upon as their custodians, assigned them a position no higher than that of the lower-class labourers employed in degraded occupations in villages and towns.\textsuperscript{64}

Tremenheere also extensively referred to the report (1889) of his predecessor, Lee Warner. In this report, Warner had observed, ‘a large portion of the population


\textsuperscript{62} G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 13.04.1875, TNA, pp. 4, 64.

\textsuperscript{63} Goudie (1892: 137).

\textsuperscript{64} G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 13.04.1875, TNA, p. 6.

lives from hand to mouth, is badly housed, ill clothed and compelled to be satisfied with a nutriment far below the sufficiency diet agreed upon by doctors as a necessity of life'.

Tremenheere also referred to a government order that stated that mirasidars often overruled the claims of the resident parakudis during the distribution of the village sites.

In short, Tremenheere argued that the poverty of the ‘lower castes’ of Chingleput was the result of the prevalence of the mirasi system. He defined mirasi as a land system in which land was held jointly or in shares by ryots or mirasidars, who were jointly responsible to the government regarding land tax. This communal system of landholding had been replaced by a settlement between the state and individual ryots, thereby giving birth to the ryotwari system in the Madras Presidency. The collector argued that the introduction of this new system had failed to improve the condition of the agricultural labourers. In fact, it was pointed out that though the permission of the government was needed for the occupation of waste lands, pattadar, who mostly belonged to the category of settled peasants or ulkudis, continued to be favoured by the government in this respect.

The mirasi system also led to certain other developments, which often went unnoticed. The collector pointed out that the increasing pressure of population on land as well as the inclination on the part of mirasidars to exercise control over arable waste resulted in the proliferation of sub-tenants. In such a situation, the division of profits also led to poor farming and absentee landlordism. These factors were responsible for a fewer number of resident landlords and an exceptionally large group of sub-tenants and agricultural labourers.

Tremenheere relied on his own historical narrative to explicate the links between mirasi and agrestic servitude in the region. He argued that when the British began their rule in South India, the mirasi system had been in a more or less disintegrated form in most parts of the peninsula. In the subsequent decades, the mirasi disappeared ‘except in Tanjore and Chingleput’. Indeed, emphasis was laid on three causes which were believed to have given a second lease of life to the institution of mirasi in some parts of the Madras Presidency. It was pointed out that apart

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65 Ibid.
67 Ibid. p. 7.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 For more details, see ibid., p. 8
71 For more details, see ibid., p. 20.

from the conservative effects of the decisions of the Mayor’s Court in Madras in the second half of the eighteenth century, the researches of Lionel Place and writings of F.W. Ellis had provided an impetus to the *mirasi* system.  

As the Collector of Chingleput, Tremenheere also dismissed the opinion of his predecessors that *mirasi* would face a natural death. He challenged this opinion on two grounds. First, he argued that every reform affecting privilege met with strong opposition from the privileged classes; and second, the vast number of non-*mirasidar*s compared to *mirasidar*s intensified the latter’s resolve to deny the fortunate sections of the former to gain rights over land.

In fact, the government was blamed for the degraded position of the Paraiyans. Tremenheere observed:

> It is also sometimes asked why the state should do anything for the lower castes; why they should not be left alone to find their own level. The answer is that the policy of the state in the past has degraded them, and the state must retrieve its mistakes. We have permitted ancient privileges to survive until they have become anachronisms, and we have created new privileges. These at least can be confined to their minimum range of harm; and the classes who have been kept back in the race of life can be given a new start.

In other words, it was felt that the colonial state’s interest in preserving a foolproof revenue mechanism had worsened the condition of the agricultural labouring classes.

Tremenheere was consciously involved in an intellectual exercise that sought to recreate the forgotten past of Paraiyan history. He argued that the Paraiyans had not always been in their ‘present state of degradation’. He referred to the achievements of Tiruvalluvar, ‘the divine pariah’, the well-known composer of the Tamil *Kural*. In fact, through such intellectual exercises, there was an attempt to eliminate the previous ‘dishonest and inappropriate signification of the Paraiyans’. It was observed:

> Nor is the Pariah of the present day by any means destitute of sense and good qualities. He shakes of his folly with his degradation and exhibits remarkable acuteness in a European household and in the colonies. As for devotion to his master in danger or sickness, no part of our Eastern possessions, however wild or deadly, but can bear witness; while his courage has made the reputation of our finest regiment. The material in short is good enough to work upon; and it ought to be no vain hope that this race can be led at least a step or two away from the slough into which it has been dragged.

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72 Ibid.
73 For more details, see ibid., p. 23.
74 Ibid., p. 25.
75 For more details, see ibid., p. 23.
76 G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 13.04.1875, TNA, p. 19.
Tremenheere’s opinions regarding the Paraiyans found a supporter in Reverend William Goudie, a Wesleyan missionary. Reverend Goudie, who was posted near Tiruvalluvar, close to Madras, observed in 1894 that the Paraiyans were: ‘the disinherited children of the soil, and to give them again some small possession in it is only to restore them to a position which their fathers held with honour long ago when their race saw better days’. He also stated: ‘There are people who have a kindly feeling for decayed aristocracies: to such I would suggest that the Pariahs are amongst the most ancient of that class in this country and that for that reason alone should find a place in their generous sentiments.’

VII

The Board of Revenue objected to almost all the proposals submitted by the collector of Chingleput district. The Board felt that the rural scenario in the district was not as oppressive as the collector had presented in his report. It argued that the century of British domination in South India had brought about significant changes in the lives of the agricultural labouring classes. It was also stated that prior to British rule, the condition of the Paraiyans had been deplorable. They had been mostly praedial slaves who had been held in bondage by upper-caste mirasidars. The researches of English officials like Place had established the point that the Paraiyan labourers had started commanding a bit of respect in the last years of the eighteenth century. The Board cited the report of Lionel Place dated 6 October 1795, wherein he had observed:

There is a peculiarity in the mutual conduct of cultivators (denoting mirasidars) and their servants (denoting Padiyals) partaking with regard to the latter both of bondage and freedom, which deserves to be noticed. The servant engages in the service of a cultivator at the beginning of the year, on the customary terms of the village to which he is conciliated and binds himself by the acceptance of betel, unless in those cases which I before noticed as inducing one party to demand and the other to grant exorbitant terms, and his servitude expires with the year, during which it seldom happens that he is guilty of desertion if those terms are faithfully observed towards him.

Goudie, William, cited in Irschik (1994: 182); The missionaries residing in Madras and the other parts of the Madras Presidency pointed out that in the Census of 1881, the Pariahs numbered 4,439,253 or nearly four and half millions. They stood apart from the other Hindu caste peoples and performed menial occupations to meet their livelihood. The great majority of them had been connected with the land and still remained connected as labourers. Though they praised the government for making slavery illegal in accordance to the provisions of the Indian Penal Code of 1860, there was practically little respite from slavery. The mirasidars induced the Pariahs to sign documents surrendering the liberty of them and the children and they were forced into a state of servitude. For more details, see L/E/7/289, Economics Department, Revenue Statistics and Commerce Papers, 1893, OIOC, British Library, London.

G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, p. 32.

The Board therefore opined that the story of exploitation of the ‘untouchable’ agricultural labourers was essentially a piece of exaggeration. It was stated that the mirasi system did not lead to full-scale exploitation; rather, it promised some freedom as well as privileges to the former slave castes.  

Later, some parts of the Chingleput Manual compiled by Crole were also cited by the Board’s officials to negate the links between mirasi and agrestic servitude in Tamil Nadu. In this manual, it had been observed:

The above is a description of slavery under its mildest and most benignant aspect. An institution from which the mind revolts owing to the horrors and degradation incidental to it in other and modern countries, is here presented so as to contrast favourably with the state of conquered peoples, even when nominally free elsewhere. It does not astonish, therefore, that without any formal act of emancipation the British administration has been able to work out a silent revolution, which, while it has left the proper relations between the cultivating class and their farm servants undisturbed, has made the latter as free as any other class of Her Majesty’s subjects.

In a sense, it was argued that though the hierarchical mirasidar–pannaiyal relationship existed in Chingleput, such interaction remained the basis for the peaceful and benevolent transformation that had been set in motion by the British Raj.

The Board officials opposed the amendments proposed by Tremenheere regarding the land application rules. They argued that preferential rights enjoyed by the pattadars over the waste lands had been in vogue for more than half a century and that no special evil had been either alleged or proved to warrant a departure from the declared policies of the government. Mirasidars enjoyed a preference over all new comers, while in non-mirasi villages preference was accorded to those who owned lands in the villages. In fact, it was also believed that in the majority of cases, waste lands fit for cultivation were generally found in the vicinity of existing holdings and since the term pattadars included landholders and non-residents of the villages, the practical effect of the two sets of rules was almost the same. In both cases, outsiders and non-pattadars were excluded from exercising their rights over waste. Thus, the Board reached the conclusion that Paraiyan sub-tenants and labourers in Chingleput could hardly be under any great disadvantages than their co-labourers in any other district of the Madras Presidency.

The Board opined that the rights of mirasidars over waste lands in villages could never be challenged in a court of law. It argued that the rights of mirasidars

79 Ibid., pp. 32–33.
80 G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, pp. 32–33.
81 Ibid., pp. 35–36.
82 Ibid., p. 36.
83 See Ibid.
in this respect had been settled in 1883, when the government was compelled by the High Court to pay compensation to the mirasidars of Vyasarpadi village, near Perambur, for the waste lands that had been taken up for public purposes. Sir Charles Taylor in his judgment observed:

One question constantly occurring was the right of the mirasidar to waste. The better opinion appeared to be that he had a right to the waste, even though he paid no revenue for it, but that if he omitted to cultivate what was cultivable or to provide for its cultivation by paikaries, the Government might issue pattas to strangers for its cultivation.\(^{84}\)

The Board’s officials clearly stated that it had been improper on the part of Tremenheere to have questioned the judgments of the Mayor’s Court of Madras or the researches of officials like Lionel Place regarding the operations of the mirasi system. They reminded Tremenheere that the mirasi system did not enjoy sanctity simply on the basis of the interpretations that had been provided by Ellis and his native Brahmin assistant Sankariah. In fact, the Board referred to one of its orders of May 1875, wherein it had observed:

The system [mirasi] is strongly rooted in law and immemorial custom. It is there and must be regarded in many respects neither more or less than a great but necessary evil. It is of great antiquity ... and has existed with more or less vitality notwithstanding many years of persistent efforts to crush it.\(^{85}\)

The Board also clarified its position on the issue of distribution of waste lands in the villages. It argued that though the Christian missionaries had shown a great deal of interest on the ‘Pariah Question’, there had hardly been any single case warranting necessary changes in the existing rules relating to applications for acquiring waste lands.\(^{86}\) Nevertheless, it accepted the fact that the Paraiyans sometimes did not get tank bed lands for cultivation purposes because of the opposition of the mirasidars and the government’s policy to reserve such lands for public purposes. It was argued that long before the emancipation of American slaves, the Paraiyans had been freed from bondage and they could labour wherever they wished to. The Board also clarified that Tremenheere’s views regarding the

\(^{84}\) Ibid., p. 34.

\(^{85}\) G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, p. 35; Puckle, the Director of Revenue Settlement, Madras Presidency held the opinion that the payakaris had always paid swatantrams and that no interferences were warranted, since they would be considered as an interference with the traditions and customs of the past. For more details, see Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, No. 331, Dated 13.02.1875, Revenue Department, TNA; Madras Revenue Consultations, P. 1057, January to May 1876, 27 February 1876, OIOC, British Library, London.

\(^{86}\) Ibid.
difficulties faced in acquiring lands by the Paraiyans, returning with savings from Natal or from the salt factories of the coast, were largely exaggerated. It was reiterated in strong terms that contrary to the allegations made by J.H.A. Tremenheere regarding the intimidatory tactics used by *mirasidars*, no such ‘chicanery’ actually prevailed. The Board felt that it was impossible to believe that such frauds could be practised to any serious extent, especially since the colonial administration was functioning smoothly.\(^7\)

Significantly, the Board also highlighted the difficulties faced in converting the Paraiyans into independent landowners. It was felt that in districts like Chingleput, where the total extent of available waste was small and the soil poor, there could hardly be any expectations about its utilization. The Board’s officials stated that in view of the poor soil, large expenditure of money and labour could hardly prove to be profitable.\(^8\) In fact, the Board contradicted its earlier position by stating that the Paraiyans were groaning under a ‘dead weight of pauperism’ and were devoid of any sort of resources. It was also asserted that any attempt to bolster the Paraiyans on the lines proposed by Tremenheere would lead to an increase in pauper holdings.\(^9\)

The Board’s officials strongly opined that a single bad season could easily upset the Paraiyan landholders and place them at the mercy of moneylenders.\(^10\) It also did not favour the practice of making advances without any security. Moreover, it opposed the idea of granting large sums of money for the establishment of some special settlements for Paraiyans, whose material conditions was no worse than that of the other labouring classes in the district. Nonetheless, it was stated that in cases where the Paraiyans were willing to start cultivation on their own, their applications for land could be favourably considered.

In fact, the Board also did not attach much importance to the eviction of the Paraiyan agricultural labourers and sub-tenants by the *mirasidars*. It felt that such incidents occurred in cases where the relations between the *mirasidars* and Paraiyan agricultural labourers were strained.\(^11\) The Board argued that despite such incidents, the bureaucracy and the civil courts generally took a tough stand on the illegal entry of the *mirasidars* into the house sites occupied by Paraiyan agricultural labourers. The Board also pointed out that in the 1880s Galton, the collector of Chingleput, had proposed the appropriation of vacant village sites in *mirasi* as well as in non-*mirasi* villages by the state to prevent the occurrence of such incidents.\(^12\)

\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) See Ibid., p. 39.
\(^10\) See Ibid.
\(^11\) See, G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, p. 56.
\(^12\) The Board in this context was referring to one of its earlier proceedings, i.e., B.P. No. 1547, Dated 7 July 1886, Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, cited in G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Ibid.

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In the entire debate on the ‘Pariah Question’ the Board sought to create an essentialist world in which the relations between state and society had remained unchanged in a hundred years or in a millennium. In a sense, the Board tried to establish that the data on the Paraiyans was as good for the 1790s as for the 1890s. The Board frequently referred to the researches of Place, since he said what they themselves wanted to say in the present situation. Isrchik has argued that by following such an approach the Board tried to perform a task both for the present and the future. However, the meaning and requirements of the task had changed altogether. Place’s authorship itself therefore was put at risk because the historical construction had to grapple with totally different kinds of historical imperatives. Eugene Ischik has also argued that by invoking dialogically produced ideas from Place and Ellis, the Board sought to bring the Paraiyans into a larger productive community ‘whose requirements for full competence could exclude no one’.

It was also argued that although Tremenheere and the missionary Reverend Goudie invoked local ideas about the deterioration in the condition of the Paraiyans, they also attempted to be a part of the same general project. In other words, they too favoured the idea that all elements of society needed to reach physical maturity and be more productive.

The Board argued that the social project should not be the state’s responsibility, but should rely primarily on private philanthropy. The Board’s objections to Tremenheere’s suggestions found expression in one of its statements:

It is quite beside the question of Government action that, in the opinion of certain persons, [obviously referring to Tremenheere and Goudie], the caste system of the Hindus is an abomination, or that certain classes of the population have been relegated, under the custom of the country, for ages to certain professions or employments and that the result is social degradation. The British Government is pledged to abstain from direct interference with caste and custom, just as it is bound to respect the rights of private property in land. There is no question here of sympathy with poverty, or of the propriety of raising the fallen or degraded into positions of respectability. In India, as in all countries, efforts to ameliorate such unavoidable evils form the proper field of private philanthropy. The state can certainly not intervene with effect, at least not in the way of creating a social revolution and confiscating private property.

94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., p. 188.
96 G.O. No. 1010–1010A, Revenue Department, Dated 30.09.1892, TNA, p. 63.
Thus, the Board favoured a strategy of non-interference that had evolved over several decades after the Revolt of 1857. But it has been pointed out that this conservatism did not result only from the desire to preserve political stability. Rather, it was also the Board’s contention that a person’s bodily condition was no longer the responsibility of the state but of missionary and other charitable organizations.97

The Board’s opinions relating to Tremenheere’s report influenced the decisions of the revenue department. The revenue department issued a government order in 1892 in which it supported the Board’s opinions on some issues, while differing with it on some others. The government did not admit the absolute right of mirasidars to all the lands in villages and also did not endorse the Board’s opinion that this right had been established in the rulings of a high court judge. It was also declared that the state had the absolute right to appropriate ‘immemorial’ waste land in mirasi villages for its own purposes ignoring the preferential claims of mirasidars. In regard to those cases where Paraiyans tenants had been expelled from their houses by the mirasidars and left homeless, the government declared that collectors would be directed to assign housing plots from the ‘purambokku’ (waste) or through purchase of lands. In addition the revenue department also stated that cases of eviction needed to be reported to the government for legal action. It expressed the opinion that the government should be prepared to give opportunities to Paraiyans and non-mirasidars to obtain land for cultivation by allotting areas which had been freed from preferential right by purchase at sales for arrears of revenue or which were at the absolute disposal of the government.98

Nevertheless, there was hardly any fundamental change in the government policies. The government order of 1892 was a departure in the sense that it contained a directive to collectors to initiate some steps for the amelioration of the depressed classes. Such an instruction, absent before 1892, served as a foundation for developing schemes to uplift depressed classes in the twentieth century. The government order paved the way for the assignment of lands to the depressed classes. However, it would be misleading to infer from this that the government aimed at transforming the depressed classes into independent small farmers. The revenue department agreed with the Board of Revenue that Tremenheere’s views regarding the acquisition of land by the Paraiyans would lead to an increase in pauper holdings. Thus, rather than supporting a policy of direct interference vis-à-vis mirasi and other forms of revenue arrangements, the government preferred to temper the rigidities of the traditional agrarian relationship dominated by the mirasidars.99

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IX

It needs to be argued that prior to 1892 the government did not undertake any positive measure to ameliorate the condition of the ‘lower castes’, except for the abolition of slavery. The government ignored the rights of tenants working under ryots or pattadars. On the other hand, the government’s policies benefited mirasidars, as their preferential rights over waste lands were recognized. At the same time, the changes in the taxation system also favoured the landowning classes over the lower classes. The existing land application rules favoured pattadars, who already owned lands in the villages and this hampered the acquisition of waste lands by the landless classes. However, Tremenheere’s report proved to be significant, since for the first time, comprehensive and constructive proposals were made to improve the socio-economic condition of the ‘lower castes’. This report strongly emphasized that acquisition of landed property would be the main lever to improve the condition of these classes. Though the government initially rejected the major part of Tremenheere’s proposals, it realized the need for catering to the minimum requirements of these classes, such as allotting limited areas of land and guaranteeing housing plots. The land assignment policy did not aim at transforming the landless depressed castes into landholding independent farmers. The land assignment regulations were such that depressed class members would remain as labourers, despite owning house plots and small plots of land. Some scholars have pointed out that the policy of assigning small plots of land and house sites to labourers may be interpreted as a ploy to secure labour in the new socio-economic climate.100

The debate on the Panchama land issue towards the end of the nineteenth century held out several interesting issues. It proved beyond all doubt that poverty and untouchability were not the most important issues in the historical experiences of the ‘untouchable’ communities of Tamil Nadu. Irschik has argued that a section of British officials and educated Indians had involved themselves in a grand project that sought to eliminate the slave/Paraiyan signification with a new identity—the original Dravidians of South India.101 Such attempts to create a new identity were part of a deliberate intellectual exercise that aimed at establishing Paraiyans as the most fixed inhabitants of the entire population. While this myth of the Paraiyan past was being constructed, the Paraiyan community leaders skilfully articulated an Adi Dravida identity to gain special privileges from the colonial government.102

100 For more details, see Yanagisawa (1996: 220–21).
101 For more details, see Irschik (1994:190); Pandian (1893: 4–5).

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