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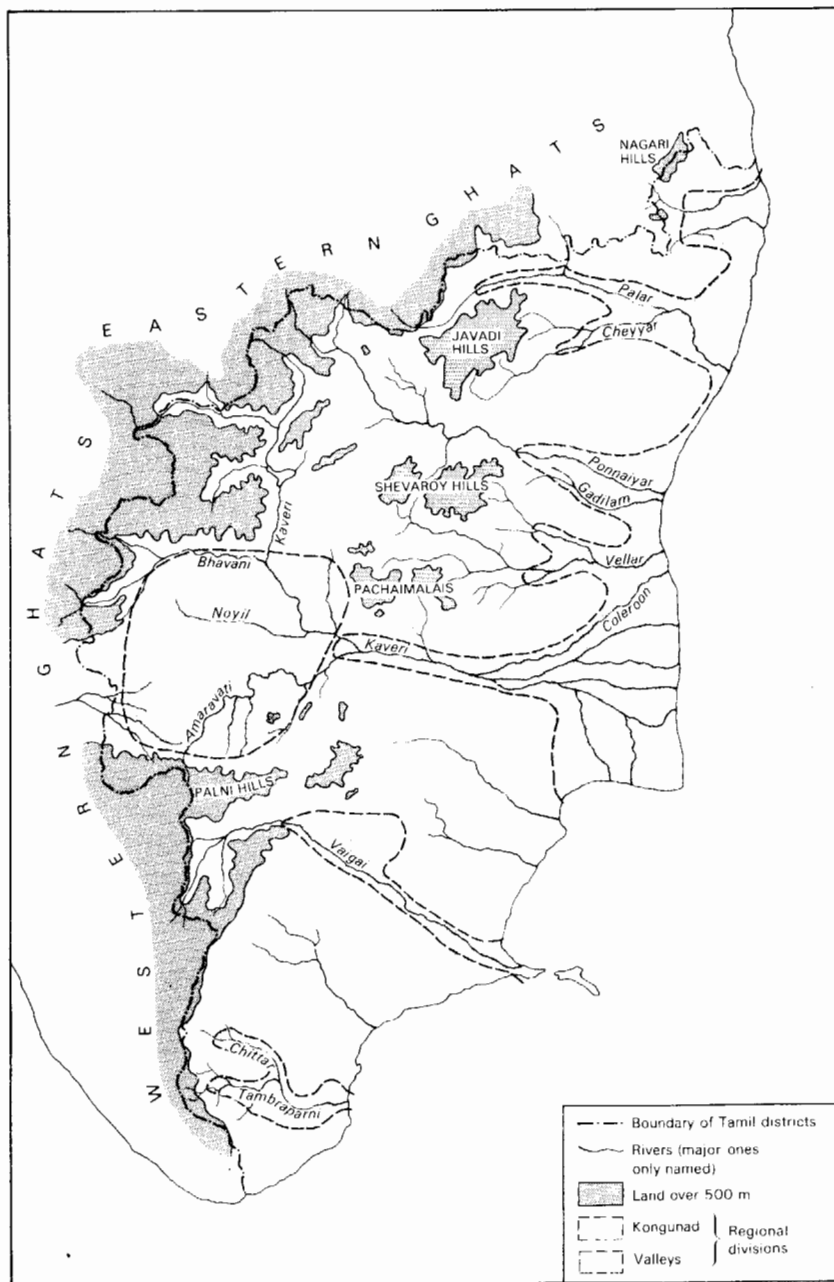
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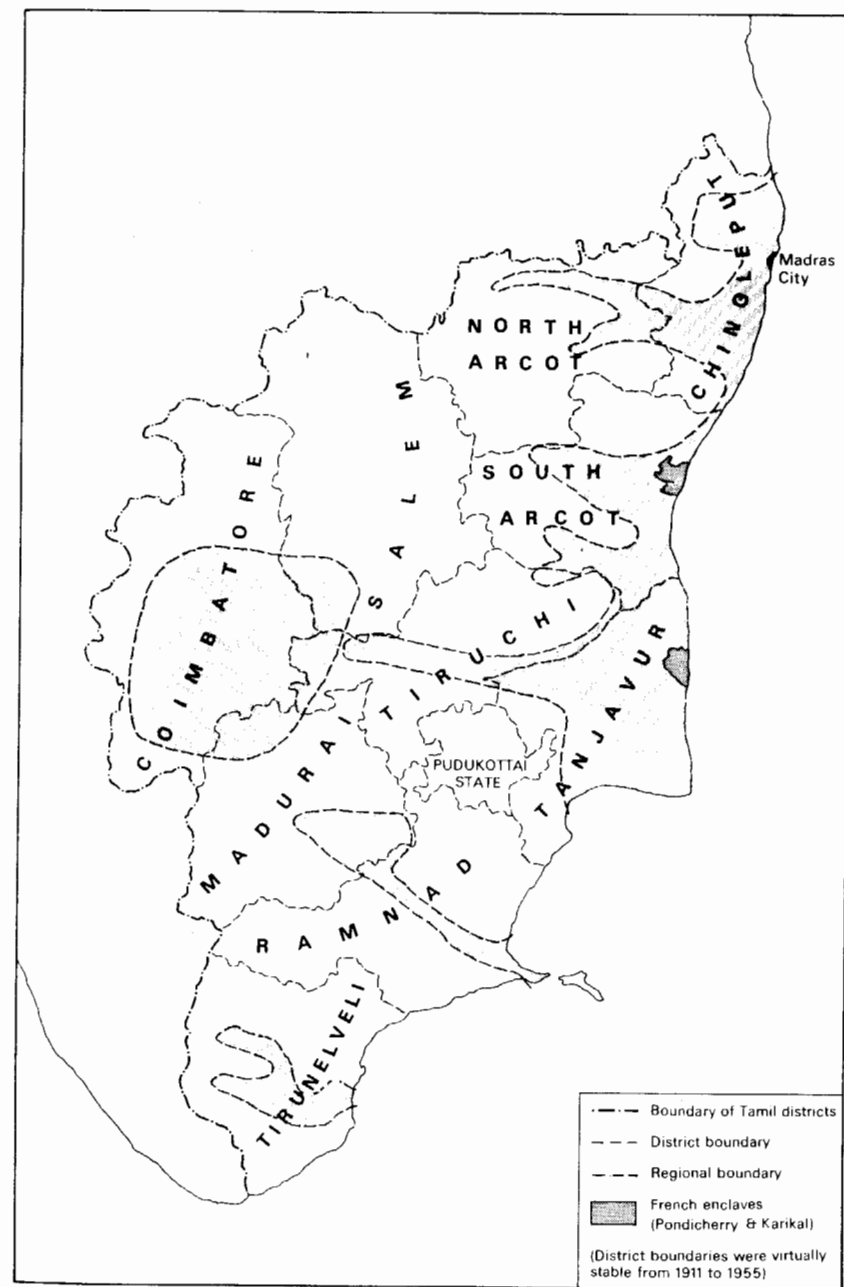
Prologue: the history of rural Tamilnad

This book is about the south Indian countryside in the twentieth century. In this chapter the aim is to introduce the region under study. In order to understand the development of agriculture and of rural society in the twentieth century, we need to know something about the geographical setting, about the population, and about the principal social institutions. It would be possible to mount such an account through simple geographical description with some additional anthropological details. However, such a method tends, either implicitly or explicitly, to present a picture of a rather static 'baseline' from which the rest of the study must proceed. And such a suggestion would redound against one of the points which this chapter hopes to make: that south Indian rural society was not an unchanging 'traditional' thing. Therefore this introduction uses history as the framework of description. It traces how the peoples of south India have made a certain sort of society within the south Indian landscape.

The chapter does not set out to be a potted history of Tamilnad. It is highly selective in the subjects with which it deals. It takes the view that the rural society of the region has been shaped by the geographical constraints on agricultural and other production, by the process of population settlement, and by the development of certain institutions mounted on and interested in the production of agricultural and other goods—communal organization, state formation, warfare, religion and trade. Moreover, because of the absence of sources which deal very directly with the history of the



Map 1 Tamilnad: relief, rivers, and regions



Map 2 Tamilnad: regions and British districts

rural economy and society, such a survey as this has to look instead at political and religious sources from which inferences about social organization and economic trends can be made. This makes the exposition a little odd, and perhaps a little dangerous, but no other technique is possible.

The chapter introduces not only the region but also a number of themes which will be important for the rest of the book. The first is the point made above; the history of Tamilnad is quite short and somewhat breathless. While there had been settlements in the region for at least three times as long, the history of Tamilnad at the time of the British conquest stretched back about a millennium, or something like forty to fifty generations, and as we shall see below the rate of internal change was rapid, particularly towards the end of the period. The changes under colonialism must be set into this dynamic background. The second is that Tamilnad contains markedly different regions with markedly different populations, ecologies, and histories. These regions continued to develop differently in the colonial period and to influence one another's development in peculiarly important ways. The third point is that the relationship of the state to Tamil rural society was complex and idiosyncratic and we need some introduction to this by way of background to the changes of the modern period.

THE DOMINANCE OF THE VALLEYS

Tamilnad is reasonably well defined as a geographical unit,—a rhomboid shape demarcated on two sides by the sea and on the other two by mountains—and by the first century A.D. it had been roughly marked off as a cultural unit, the land of the Tamil speakers.¹ For some centuries before that, this tropical and sub-tropical region had been sparsely populated by herdsmen and hunters, but the first movement towards a more settled population came with the development of rice cultivation around the third or fourth century B.C. From then until the sixteenth century, the backbone of Tamil civilization lay in the development of irrigated rice agriculture in the river valleys. Around this agriculture grew up specific forms of social organization, religious practice and state formation. Thus the valleys nurtured one of the two important strains in Tamil society and culture.

Tamilnad's climate is dictated by its location, straddling the tropic of cancer and sitting in the path of the monsoons. In such a hot latitude, plant growth is spectacular if there are supplies of water, and virtually impossible if there are not. This has always made the pattern of the monsoons peculiarly important.

The south Indian monsoon arrives from the south-west in early June, meets the line of the Western Ghats (the hills which divide Tamilnad from Kerala), and drops most of its load into the jungles. It reaches the Tamil plain as a spent force, and deposits only some five to twenty inches as it passes over between mid-June and early September. This rain is very erratic and unreliable, and places only a few miles apart may be treated very differently. Around the end of September the monsoon curls back over the Bay of Bengal and approaches the Tamil country from the north-east. This time it is usually more abundant and reliable, and deposits between thirty and sixty inches over the north-eastern corner of the country. As it continues, however, it rapidly slackens, and the rainfall decreases steadily towards the south and towards the interior. Thus the pattern of rainfall over Tamilnad should be seen as a fan-shape, with the apex in the north-east corner, around the present site of Madras City, and the blades stretching out towards the south and the centre. On the more northerly part of the Tamil coast, annual rainfall is between forty and sixty inches, and it is moderately reliable: in only about one year in ten is there a serious deficit, and one year in twenty a damaging abundance. Moreover, this is the most temperate region, being (comparatively) northerly and maritime. Further down the coast, the rainfall is less heavy—thirty to forty inches being the usual range—and slightly less reliable: one year in every seven or eight is deficient, although there is rarely any embarrassment of water. It is rather hotter, but it still has the moderating influence of the sea. Towards the interior, however, the climate rapidly deteriorates. Within a hundred miles of Madras City, the annual delivery is reduced by about a third, and in the centre of the peninsula the annual average is in the range of fifteen to thirty inches. Here too it is much less reliable and one or two years in every five are expected to yield insufficient rainfall for even the most basic agriculture, and here too the continental effects create a hotter and drier atmosphere.²

Over most of the region, any serious agriculture depends on

storing rain water, both in order to concentrate its benefits and also to extend the season in which it is available. In parts of the coastal strip, the rainfall is enough and the geology suitable to enable the direct collection of run-off in 'tanks', small (and occasionally big) reservoirs formed by the natural lie of the land and some small-scale earth-works. A much better method, however, is to tap the rainfall that falls heavily on the Western Ghats and is carried by rivers across the south-easterly slopes of the Tamilnad plain towards the Bay of Bengal.³

Naturally enough it was the river valleys which were the sites of the earliest agricultural settlements, but even within the valleys the locations were limited. The Tamil plain is crossed by many rivers but few of them are of any great use for irrigation. Many of them crash off the Ghats with considerable power, cutting deep gorges in the rock and thus putting themselves out of the reach of the farmer or irrigation engineer. When they reach the gentler slopes, they slow up, meander, spread out, and evaporate with speed. These lower reaches are dry for most of the year, and provide facilities for irrigation only for a few months and only from those middle reaches between the gorge and delta.

There are however three more substantial river systems, and two rather lesser ones which are associated with these major systems. The least of these is situated in the north of the region, on the river Palar (and its tributary, the Cheyyar), and includes the tract falling under the rivers Ponnaiyar and Gadilam to the south. These rivers have a substantial catchment area on the Eastern Ghats and the southern 'steps' of the Deccan. The second, and largest, is found on the delta of the Kaveri which cuts across the centre of Tamilnad. Its main catchment stretches far up into the southern Deccan, and is supplemented by innumerable streams and rivers running off three hundred miles of the Western Ghats, between Coorg and the Palni hills. The third is the valley of the river Tambraparni (and its tributary, the Chittar), just thirty miles from the tip of India at Cape Comorin. The valley is short but extremely fertile, for the river collects rain from both the Western and Eastern Ghats, and washes down tons of alluvium. Historically the Tambraparni has been associated with the upper reaches of the river Vaigai, a smaller and more seasonal river, which drains much of the Ghats between the Kaveri and Tambraparni.

It was soon found that the most favoured parts of these three valley regions could support a remarkably productive agricultural regime. They could grow two crops of rice, one in each phase of the monsoon, and sometimes even three or, alternatively, a long-period crop which needed a reasonably assured supply of water for most of the year. Such favoured areas were situated in the upper Vaigai, the middle reaches of the Tambraparni, and at the neck of the Kaveri delta. Elsewhere in these valleys the water-supply would generally support one crop of rice in most years, while on the fringes there were areas where agriculture depended on a combination of seasonal fortune and some investment in local water-storage.

The favoured reliable parts of the valleys were the sites of the early agrarian settlements. The movement into the valleys seems to have been associated, chronologically at least, with two other important developments—the gradual immigration of Aryan peoples from the north, and the development of sea-borne trade. The Aryans brought some of the ideals of the urban society of the north. The merchants of the classical Mediterranean, who discovered the direct route across the Arabian Sea in the first century A.D., sought the precious stones and the fine cloths of southern India and were happy to set up a lucrative trade in luxury goods. Abundant agriculture, urbane ideas and luxury trade helped to shape a civilization which saw its first remarkable climax in the Sangam period, roughly the first three centuries A.D.⁴

The poetry which survives from that age and gives it its name (from the 'sangams' or literary schools) has often been studied for its sheer elegance or for clues to dynastic and cultural history. What is less often noticed is that the effusive enthusiasm of the poetry expressed the delight of a fairly new civilization in its own material culture. Three things stand out in this enthusiasm. The first is a celebration of the agricultural economy on which the civilization was founded; one theme of the poems is a classification of ecological regions—mountain, forest, pasture, arable, littoral—with a firm stress on the superiority of the arable. The second is a celebration of the warriors whose personal bravery defended the valley civilizations against outside predators.⁵ The poems are divided into two genres, *akam* (romantic) and *puram* (martial), and the latter is about the heroic deeds of kings, chiefs, and soldiers. One poem deploys an agrestic metaphor which graphically joins the bloodiness of warfare to the fecundity of valley agriculture:

Like [the farmer] reaping the ears of grain with his scythe, heaping them in stacks, spreading them on the floor and threshing them by driving the bulls to trample them on the floor and offering oblation to gods and giving away a portion to needy beggars and then enjoying the ceremonial meal with the kinsfolk, so the king mows down the enemy forces, piles up dead bodies on the battlefield, uses elephants instead of oxen to trample the corpses, gets this 'minced' corpses and carcass cooked by a virgin, who stirs it in a huge pot containing blood and fat. The thick gruel is offered as libation to the gods.⁶

The third is that the combination of fertile agriculture and martial prowess laid the basis for a proudly aristocratic culture. The society was strictly divided into two sections. On the one hand were those who had landed wealth and 'good stock' (*viluttinai*), who were thus fitted to win glory by military service, and who deserved thereafter to live at leisure and be celebrated in poetry. On the other hand were the *hoi polloi* of slaves, servants, and errandmen who clearly were not so privileged.⁷

One way in which this noble stratum could mark itself off culturally from the rest was by adopting some of the urbane notions of the immigrant Aryans. The immigrants brought with them a collection of philosophical ideas and rules of social conduct, and the noble southerners eagerly took over those ideas and rules which flattered their pretensions and buttressed their authority. In particular they welcomed the Aryan interdictions against alcohol and meat, for abstention clearly marked them off from the rude dwellers in the plains where the staple food was game and where the toddy-yielding palm grew wild. The immigrants who brought these useful notions formed the core of a new social group—the Brahmins—who gradually established themselves as the ritual overseers of valley society. The valley nobles adopted many of the Brahmins' gods, rules about marriage and conviviality, death rites, and age ceremonies.⁸

Eventually this noble stratum became known as the Vellala, a term which in its most probable derivation merely means the lord of the land. Certainly the twin props of the Vellalas' dominance were the control of the fecund valley lands, and the alliance with the ritually distinguished Brahmins.⁹ At the centre of this noble culture of Brahmin and Vellala was the king. From the beginning there were separate societies and separate kingdoms in the different valley centres, and thus the kingdoms were quite small. In the earliest period there seem to have been two: the Pandya

kingdom on the Vaigai and Tambraparni rivers in the south, the Chola kingdom in the Kaveri delta. The main task of the king was to protect the prosperity of the valleys both by organizing defence, and by leading the nobility in sacrificial ceremonies which aimed to secure victory in war and abundance at the harvest.¹⁰ The king also had a responsibility to extend the economic base of valley civilization. In this respect, the Chola kings were the most active. They pursued two strategies. First they built massive irrigation works, particularly the *Kallanai* or Grand Anicut at the neck of the Kaveri delta which helped to protect the lowland against flooding. This made possible a great expansion of agriculture in the lower delta, and also facilitated the second tactic, greater involvement in foreign trade.¹¹ The Cholas extended colonies into the lower delta, and also for a time moved their capital to a port on the coast. By the seventh century the delta was criss-crossed with irrigation canals. Secondly the Cholas sought to extend their culture by colonizing valleys outside the Kaveri. By defeating and domesticating the upland dwellers around the basin of the Palar river, and encouraging settlement by noble Kaveri Vellalas (and by migrants from the west coast) they transported the rice-based civilization into what later became known as Tondaimandalam, meaning possibly the country of the Chola colonizer, Adondai. Another, perhaps less credible story, talks of a similar movement of colonization back from Tondai region to the Tambraparni and other valleys of the far south.¹²

These early settlements and migrations helped to define the Vellala aristocracy. The myths and titles of the oldest and most prestigious Vellala groups to this day carry the memory of these early movements. In the northern valleys, for example, there are the Tondaimandalam Tuluva Vellalas who clearly appeal back to the original population of the valleys with settlers from Tulunad in the west coast; Kondaikottai Vellalas who may (at a guess) hark back to the indigenous people of the area; and a few Choliya Vellalas who clearly see their origin in the early settlers from the Kaveri (most of whom returned because, as they said and as is true, the region was nowhere near so fertile as the Kaveri—hence the relative fewness of Choliya Vellalas currently in Tondaimandalam). In the Vaigai area, there are still Pandya Vellalas and also some Choliyas—denoting the extraordinary enterprise of the Kaveri peoples in this important period—and also some settle-

ments of Tondaimandala Vellalas who came south much later on because of civil disorder in the northern parts of the region.¹³

Thus by the third or fourth century A.D. there had emerged three centres of valley civilization marked by rice agriculture, a Vellala aristocracy, foreign trading, and sacrificial kingship. After this early climax, however, the development of valley civilization was seriously disrupted. Between the fifth and the seventh centuries there is a mysterious gap in the record. The disruption was probably caused by an invasion by uncouth uplands peoples—sometimes referred to as the 'kalabhras'—and a possibly associated upsurge of the Jain religion.¹⁴ Whatever the exact nature of this disruption, by the eighth century valley civilization had revived and it moved into a new and climactic phase between the eighth and thirteenth centuries.

In this new phase, valley civilization was still founded upon its rich rice agriculture. However, rural society in this period seems to have become significantly more complex.¹⁵ There is voluminous evidence of complex corporate management of agriculture, trade, and other aspects of village society. This complex institutionalization was almost certainly related to the demands of irrigated agriculture. Irrigation sources had to be maintained, disputes over water arbitrated, the organization of labour rationalized for mutual benefit, the product of agriculture distributed both for internal consumption and for foreign trade with the minimum of social disruption. Valley society was still dominated by the Vellalas, and the valley tracts were divided into *nads* which, as one analysis of the Kaveri in this period has suggested, were territories each focused on a specific irrigation source and each populated by a separate kin group.¹⁶ There were assemblies to administer the affairs of the *nad*, but much more important were the institutions to manage individual villages. These assemblies transacted in land, invested in irrigation, raised taxes, provided social welfare, and helped to settle disputes. They also contributed to the management of religious places, and to the governance of trading centres where the exchange between local goods and imported goods could be controlled in such a way that it did not disrupt the local economy and society. These assemblies, in other words, were testament to the wealth, organizing ability and conscious independence of rural society.¹⁷

The natural corollary of the wealth, power, and ritual pretensions of the Brahman-Vellala elite was the poverty, subordination, and

ritual degradation of their client labourers. Possibly from the Sangam period and certainly from medieval times, the elite of the valleys managed to distance themselves from cultivation. Those local residents and immigrants whom the elites managed to exclude from control of land were still attracted to live in the valleys where the fertility of the fields guaranteed a fairly secure food supply (the alternative was to risk an independent existence in the harsh climate of the plains). The Brahmans and Vellalas could thus delegate the work of cultivation to others while they themselves concentrated on more cultural pursuits. They also managed to emphasize the enormous social and cultural difference between those who controlled the land and those who worked it. As David Ludden notes in his study of Tirunelveli, 'labour itself became associated with low status in the economic subculture of the wet zone: the physical lowness (*pallam*) of irrigated lands and irrigation channels (*pallak-kal*) became identified with the physical labour of ritually low cultivators (*pallakudi*).'¹⁸ In much of the valleys, the specialist labourers in the wet-rice cultivation were the Pallans.

While the local organization of valley society thus became even stronger in this second phase of its growth, there were two important changes in politics and religion. Both most probably originated as a reaction to the disorderly 'kalabhra' period. Firstly, there was increasing attention to the question of defence against the outsiders. Secondly, there was a revival of Hinduism which resulted in a conclusive triumph over Jainism.

If the Sangam works give a proper impression, before the kalabhra interregnum the defence of the valleys required little more than heroic endeavour on the part of individual warriors and small groups.¹⁹ After the kalabhra period, however, there appear more elaborate militia organizations. There was nothing like a centralized standing army, but village and *nad* assemblies, mercantile organizations and other corporate groups now raised and supported militia troops. These militias provided their own arms which were mostly sticks, swords and, especially, the long lance.²⁰ However there was a further factor encouraging changes in military organization. There was a continued attempt to expand the area of settled, cultivated territory and in this second phase of valley culture this entailed a move into the outskirts of the valleys. These were areas where agriculture was less secure; one crop of rice was the norm and in bad years even that would be threatened. The expansion often

entailed considerable investment in irrigation, often in 'tanks' to store rain and river water outside the monsoon season. Moreover these colonising movements elongated the frontiers of the valley civilizations and brought them much closer to the less civilized peoples of the uplands and mountains. Thus as they pushed out into these areas, the valley-dwellers took new measures for defence. They built rings of forts along the new frontiers of the valleys, and tried to build up diplomatic alliances with some of the chiefs and chieftains so that the latter might not attack the valleys and, in certain cases, so that they might act as 'marcher lords' and help to defend the valleys. The requirements of irrigation and defence in these newly colonized areas affected their social and political structure. The colonizing movement was often undertaken by a noble who thus emerged as something of a power in his own right within the domain which he contrived to irrigate and defend.²¹

We should notice at this point that the largest of these defensive-cum-expansive movements of colonization helped to create a new and distinctive tract which we will consider as separate region throughout this book. This was Kongunad, which lay right in the centre of the southern peninsula and had long acted as a buffer between the Cholas, Pandyas, and Tondai rulers in Tamilnad and also the Chera rulers on the west coast. Kongunad's unique position, straddling north-south trade routes and also one of the few east-west routes over the Ghats, had made it important in trade and warfare from the earliest times. Its soil was especially fertile but irrigation from rivers and tanks meagre, and by the Sangam period only a few settlers had founded an arable cultivation based on wells. In the ninth and tenth centuries it remained a flattish plain, surrounded on nearly all sides by hills, mostly covered with forest, and with only a few islands of cultivation. It had been regularly raided by the valley kings, and had several local chiefs, but had until this time remained outside the mainstream of valley civilization. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Chola kings tried to draw these chiefs into closer tributary and military relations and also encouraged colonists from the Chola domain to settle in Kongunad. These Brahman and Vellala settlers spread into the Kongu region along the upper reaches of the Kaveri river, fanning out along the tributary streams of the Noyil, Amaravati, and Bhavani. Most of the settlements were in fortified, 'camp' or *palaiyam* villages.²²

The revival of Hinduism was the work of the *bhakti* saints. These

itinerant poets, singers and teachers, known as Alvars and Nayanmars, trekked through the Tamil valleys preaching a warm, democratic, and spiritual form of religion which had considerably more popular appeal than the architectonic metaphysics of priestly Brahmanism or Jainism. The *bhakti* preachers argued for a direct relationship of man to god and a direct role of god in the world. Through hymns, poems and stories written in the vernacular rather than sanskrit, the *bhakti* saints created a mythology and a religious literature which was accessible to a wide section of the population.²³ The followers of the original *bhakti* saints soon founded monasteries and schools of learning which gave institutional solidity to the movement and perpetuated the strategy of popular preaching.²⁴

This new form of Hinduism was potentially quite damaging for some of the important institutions of the earlier phase of valley culture, namely kingship and the Brahmanical sense of hierarchy which underlined the social superiority of the noble Vellalas. Indeed in the early phase of *bhakti* expansion such sects as the Saivite Pasupatas and the 'southern' sect of Sri Vaishnavas opposed most forms of social and political hierarchy and suggested the abolition of Brahmanism.²⁵ But the levelling tendencies of these ideologies were soon brought under control, and in the end the force of *bhakti* revivalism was harnessed for the benefit of kingship and hierarchy.

It is probable, as we noted above, that in the Sangam period the Vellalas adopted some of the urbanity of the immigrant Brahmans to emphasize their status as the upper stratum of society in the valleys. In this medieval period, as Burton Stein has argued,²⁶ the alliance of Brahman and peasant was consolidated and extended. Indeed the roles of Brahman priest and Vellala landed gentleman became gradually interpenetrated. The Brahmans came to control tracts of land; the Vellalas adopted a Brahmanically 'clean' life-style and occasionally joined the privileged ranks of the literati, studied the sacred texts, and officiated as priests. Meanwhile in this period of agricultural expansion, probably accompanied by the immigration of new peoples and by religious ferment marked by strong levelling tendencies, the Vellalas found a particular use for the priestly Brahman. Since the latter stood marginally apart from valley society and claimed spiritual superiority over it, he had the distance and authority to give ritual confirmation to the Vellalas' wish to be distinguished from the common herd. In this medieval period, the

Hindu temple emerged as a vital local institution through which the Brahmans and Vellalas could enact this drama of superiority. To make the process easier, many of the local gods and goddesses were carefully and elegantly absorbed into the Brahmanical pantheon. Most notably, the favoured Tamil god, Murugan, was identified with the Brahmanical Subrahmanya. Thus paradoxically the wave of religious enthusiasms which began with the levelling *bhakti* cults ended with the building of temples which confirmed the rigid stratification of valley society between priests and gentlemen on one side, and all the rest on the other.

Temples were also the principal means whereby royalty took charge of the *bhakti* movement. In this medieval period, the development of masonry techniques made possible the construction of massive and permanent temples. The kings of the medieval period built such massive temples as striking visual metaphors of their claims to power and, by covering their walls with inscriptions and icons, made them into the hoardings of an ambitious royal culture. This temple-building helped to harness the force of *bhakti* spirituality for the glorification of monarchy. The major temples also served as the focus for the more widespread movement of temple construction in the villages and thus acted as a link between monarchy and the proud alliance of priest and country gentleman. Around these massive temples there grew up new royal and religious centres. Here were held ostentatious festivals which dramatized kingly power and at the same time replicated the village temples' role in confirming the political pre-eminence and social exclusiveness of the upper strata of valley society. Thus the central and village temples became the organizing points of a complex structure of ritual and material exchange. Through the hierarchy of temples the king channelled resources of men, money and livestock which could be used to assist and expand the agricultural base of the society. The king was no longer just the warrior-leader and sacrificial priest of the Sangam period, but a protector and a distributor—of both material and spiritual resources.²⁷

Thus in the medieval period the role of the king in valley society significantly changed. He was no longer merely the protector, that is the leading warrior, of the whole region but he was also the protector of many of the individual temples, and that meant taking actions to provide for the upkeep of temples and to resolve their internal disputes. The king settled groups of Brahmans in villages

known usually as *brahmadeyas*, and endowed other villages for temple upkeep. He affixed his royal imprimatur to the actions of others who similarly endowed and managed temples. He redistributed war-booty by giving it to the temples so that it would pass into village society.

Although this was a considerable change in the level of royal interference, it is important to keep it in perspective. The rural settlements were still largely and proudly autonomous. They managed their own affairs and, it seems, passed little in the way of tax on to the royal treasury. They called on the king to assist in their prosperity, back up their own authority, and arbitrate certain disputes, but there was no trend towards any properly centralized control. The power of the king was balanced by the independence of the village assemblies in the valley centres, and of the frontier chieftains at the fringes. The pre-eminence of the king lay in the way in which he underwrote the authority of these secondary levels of political power. He helped them by redistributing through them the material resources which he commanded and the political authority which he won by right of divinely-descended royalty. This political system has been described as a 'segmentary state'.²⁸

But as a system it was inherently unstable. The vital redistributive role of the king depended on his ability to amass material as well as spiritual resources, and since he had little ability to levy revenue from his own population this presented considerable difficulties. The medieval kings appear to have attempted to solve this dilemma by foreign trade and by military plunder, and by actions which contained a little of both. Duties and monopolies in foreign trade provided one source of revenue which did not interfere with local society. Kings patronized merchant groups and often brought merchants in from foreign regions rather than taking the risk of showing special favours to merchants from the local society. The Cholas of the Kaveri were particularly enthusiastic about this strategy. They followed up foreign trade with foreign conquest, plunder and even colonization in Ceylon and parts of southeast Asia.²⁹ They also sought booty closer to hand and this meant that through the medieval period the three Tamil valley kingdoms—the Pandyas in the south, Cholas in the Kaveri, Pallavas in Tondaimandalam to the north—and the Cheras on the west coast, were regularly at war. To prosecute these wars, they all recruited help from the chieftains of the plains. At the end of the thirteenth

century this pattern of constant warfare resulted in a total collapse. Ambitious plains chieftains, rebellious frontier guards and vengeful Sinhalese forces ganged up to overthrow the Chola kingdom and usher in a period of political confusion.³⁰

This military débâcle brought to an end the period of valley dominance. The society of Brahman and Vellala remained but it would also change, and if we are to understand the origins of these changes, and to trace the subsequent history of society, state, and commerce in Tamilnad, we must turn away from the valleys and look to the plains and to the curious military history of the south from the fourteenth century onwards.

INVADERS AND PLAINSMEN

The history of Tamilnad is often written as though it were simply the history of the valleys, but in fact the valleys contribute only one of the two major strains of the region's past. The plains contain over half the land area, and have sheltered a very different population, culture, and social structure. For much of the past, however, this society has left little in the way of literary or archaeological record and thus its history is somewhat obscure. But it is nevertheless important all the way through and, from the fourteenth century onwards, it becomes increasingly dominant and increasingly influential in the history of Tamilnad as a whole.

The Tamilnad plains are divided into eastern and western parts by a broken line of hills (the Varushanad, Andipatti, Palni, Kollamalai, Pachamalai, Shevaroy, Kalrayan, Javadi and Nagari ranges) and rough country (the saline, infertile soils of Pudukottai and southern Tiruchi). To the west of this line there is a series of small upland plateaux divided from one another by spurs of broken hill ranges straggling away from the Eastern and Western Ghats. The largest of these plains is that of Kongunad, which we have mentioned already. To the north of this, there are the tracts loosely known as the Baramahal, and to the south the Dindigul country. To the east of the line, are the slightly lower plains lying between the three main valley systems—the Arcot plain lying between Tondaimandalam and the Kaveri, and the dry south-east, lying between the Kaveri and Tambraparni. There is also a small tract between the Tambraparni and Cape Comorin. These areas to the east are flat,

open expanses, broken by the occasional stark outcrop of rock.

With low rainfall, high temperatures and, for the most part, only thin and sandy red soils, the plains were hardly attractive to early agricultural settlers. Certainly millets have been grown in the plains as far back as archaeological memory but it is doubtful whether this was the region's major form of economic enterprise until very late in its history. Large parts of the plains were covered with scrub and dense forest and the sparse population depended for its livelihood on herding and hunting. Cattle seem to have been especially important within this economy. The early inhabitants of the plains were almost certainly immune to the Vedic interdictions against eating the cow. Certainly they regularly replenished their supplies by raiding one another's herds and pilfering other stock from the valleys; the fringes of the valleys were littered with 'hero-stones' which marked the spots where noble warriors had died in the attempt to stave off cattle-rustlers, and the ritualized way to start a war between plains peoples was by seizure of the opponents' cattle. The favourite sport of the plains, which also had some of the character of an age-ceremony, was a form of bull-fight.³¹ This *jallikattu* is preserved to this day, as are many other remnants of the plains dwellers' involvement in a herding economy.

We know little else of this society. We know that the valley settlers were impressed by the plainsmen's primitive ferocity, that the two regions were intermittently at war, and that the more astute valley kings tried to draw the plains chieftains into diplomatic alliance. We know too that the plainsmen worshipped gods which were mostly animistic images of local agents of misfortune—snakes, smallpox, fire—and which had nothing to do with Aryan mythology.³² In the medieval period, there are glimpses of powerful plains chiefs. As the medieval period entered on its military spiral, these chiefs were drawn into closer alliance with the valley kings. As the fighting became more desperate there were even attempts to solidify these alliances by techniques of ritual incorporation and marriage alliance which had been unthinkable in previous centuries.³³ But the plains do not make their definite appearance in the historical record until the pressure of Muslim invasions began to make significant differences to the demographic, military, and political development of Tamilnad.

The effects of the Muslim invasions on Tamilnad were nearly all indirect, and to understand this we need to look at the peculiar

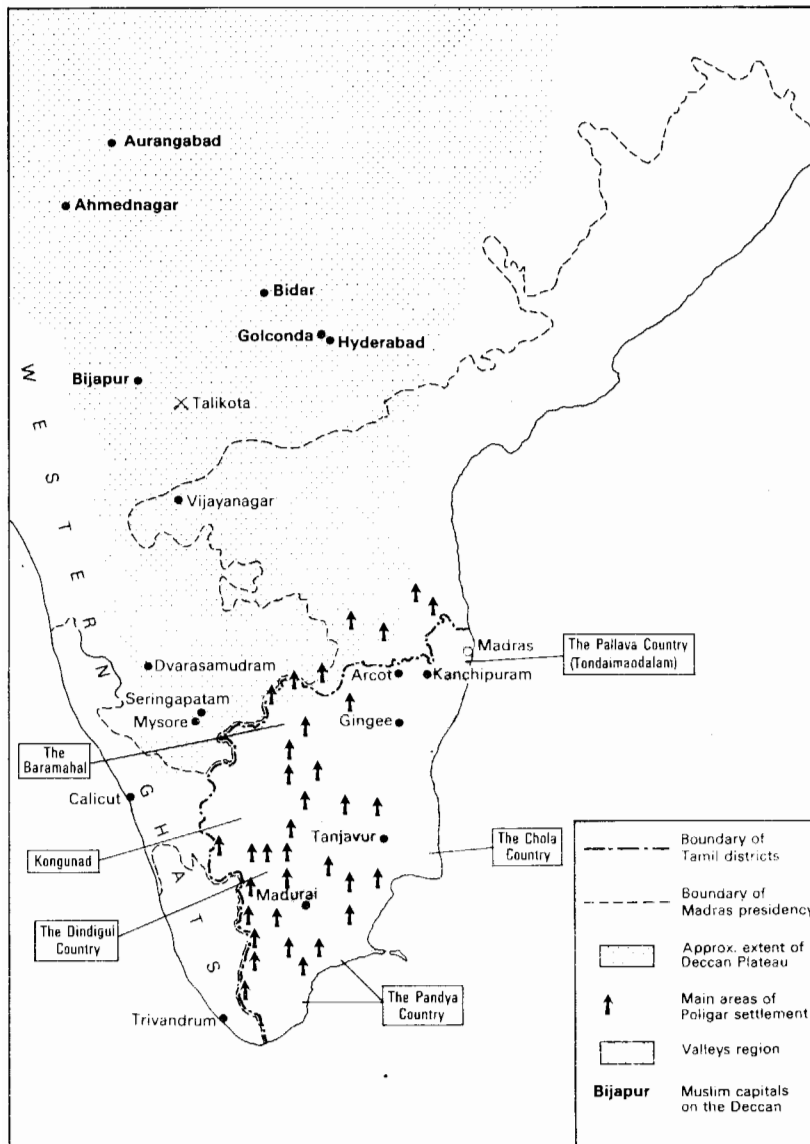
military geography of medieval south India. In the early fourteenth century, the Delhi Sultanate conceived plans to expand into south India. The Muslim invaders possessed new resources which enabled them to overcome that hitherto effective political boundary—the Deccan—though their difficulties showed how effective a frontier it had been; the leader of an early expedition to the south, which had penetrated nowhere near as far as the Tamil country, noted on his return that the journey was like crossing the ‘razor-bridge of hell’.³⁴ The most important part of these new resources seems to have been camels, which were quicker and more durable than elephants for long-distance travel over harsh terrain, and also more useful in battle.

The early expeditions onto the Deccan contented themselves with carrying off gold, jewels, and elephants to enrich and empower the Sultanate. On the return from one journey, ‘a thousand camels groaned under the weight of treasure extracted’.³⁵ By the time the Delhi leaders considered the possibility of establishing more settled control and more efficient tributary relations, their empire had been stretched too widely over the north Indian plain and was falling apart at the seams. A Delhi envoy for the first time reached through to the Tamil country and established a viceroyalty at Madurai in the 1310s, but very soon after the Delhi empire fell apart and the viceroy was left without a roy. A contingent of Muslim soldiers and nobles remained in nominal command of Madurai for half a century, but spent most of that time intriguing against, and murdering one another, and thus had very little effect on the general politics of the region. Meanwhile the Islamic spearhead across central India splintered into a series of Muslim states on the Deccan—Ahmednagar, Bijapur and Golconda—north of the Tungabhadra river. This division of strength, and the mutual jealousies of the three states, eased the pressure on south India.

Between the Muslims and the Tamils lay the Telugu and Kannada peoples on the southern Deccan. For almost 300 years, this remained an effective barrier. For the first 200, three lines of Kannada chiefs managed with considerable difficulty to organize a coalition of Kannada and Telugu nobles on the Deccan to keep the Muslims out. The first line of chiefs became known as the Hoysala kings; the latter two have been dignified by history as the emperors of Vijayanagar. These warrior-states protected the south of the peninsula but did not try to rule it. The Vijayanagar emperors

looked on the Tamil districts as a source of troops and military supplies and while these demands had repercussions which we shall consider below, they in no way amounted to direct imperial rule. In the middle of the sixteenth century, the three Muslim states on the Deccan finally came together and then quickly disposed of the fragile rampart that the Vijayanagar empire offered as the defence of the south. The battle of Talikota in 1565 reduced the Vijayanagar emperor to a fugitive prince, and brought the Muslim frontier down to the southern edges of the Deccan. Yet once again the Tamil region was reprieved. The two remaining Deccan Muslim states, Bijapur and Golconda, now had the south at their mercy but a new threat from the north prevented them from moving in for the kill. The next generation of Muslim invaders, the Mughals, was following closely in their predatory footsteps.³⁶

In the next few decades, the Bijapur and Golconda rulers looted the south for resources to use in warfare against the Mughals, but made no attempt to occupy the region. The irony was that by the time the Mughals got round to prosecuting their designs on the south at the end of the seventeenth and start of the eighteenth centuries, they too found themselves just as overstretched, just as much prey to centrifugal tendencies, and just as hampered by rival dynasts, as the Delhi sultans had been before them. The rise of Sivaji's Marathas and the growing power of Mysore, meant that the submission of the far south of the peninsula would not be a simple matter. No single one, or small combination, of the various forces drawn up in the southern reaches of the Deccan—Bijapur, Mughal, Golconda, Mysore, Maratha—was going to be allowed to seize the rich rice-lands of the far south without arousing the jealousy of the others; and soon the advanced fighting forces of British and French trading companies added an extra dimension to an already complicated picture. Although the major rivalry over the fate of the south took place 300 miles to the south of the rivalry of Vijayanagar times, it was still on the Deccan. It did not flow into the Tamilian area, and then only the northern fringes, until the middle of the eighteenth century, and by then of course the British had become an interested party. Even then it was the British successes in northern and western India and in the centre of the Deccan that finally decided the fate of the Tamil region. For 500 years, the political fate of Tamilnad was effectively decided by battles and rivalries taking place beyond its northern border. The Tamil region, as we shall see



Map 3 Southern India: historical

below, was often a source of supply, of loot, of recruitment, but it was almost never directly involved in the rivalry. This fact is of immense importance in understanding the evolution of state-systems in Tamilnad, the shifts in the control of land and the relations of different communities.

The first important reaction to the pressure, however remote, of Muslim invasion came in the sphere of military organization. Changes had begun during the military disorders of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but were rapidly accelerated once it was found that Muslim armies, so long as they were not inhibited by internal rivalries, made short work of the southern militias. The Muslims introduced camels, relegated elephants to the baggage train, made far greater use of cavalry, and trained platoons of expert bowmen. Moreover, the Muslim armies consisted of professional soldiers. The southern militias of the medieval period were part-timers equipped with sword and lance and accustomed to overwhelming any opponent by sheer weight of numbers rather than by tactics or military technology. The medieval Cholas started to transform these militias, principally by investing heavily in the expensive business of importing horses. This innovation proved so important that the Chola kings placed contracts in which they agreed to pay even for the horses which died on the journey from Arabia, and the importers of the west coast became very rich men indeed.³⁷ However it was the Hoysalas, the thirteenth-century Deccani Hindu kingdom which controlled parts of Tamilnad after the Chola collapse and which carried the defence of the Hindu south in the period before the rise of Vijayanagar, which made the first significant responses to Muslim military might. They made careful arrangements to import horses, hired cohorts of Muslim mercenaries, and trained platoons of elephant-borne bowmen. They also started a move towards standing armies, by providing state pensions for the families of slaughtered veterans, and began a trend towards enormous armies; one estimate of the Hoysala forces reckoned 120,000 men. Eventually the Hoysalas became a virtual military state, with the king constantly on horseback, and military governors for each of the kingdom's provinces.³⁸

The Vijayanagar dynasts started out as officers in the Hoysala armies and naturally they adopted a similar pattern. For much of the fourteenth century Muslim pressure was mitigated by the mutual jealousies of the three Deccani Muslim states and there was

little incentive for further military reform. But by the fifteenth century, pressure was renewed, and the introduction of gunpowder brought yet another new dimension to warfare. Thus the great Vijayanagar emperor, Krishnadevaraja, not only imported horses and trained bowmen but also built forts and cast cannons. Even with this new technology, the Vijayanagar forces still relied mostly on sheer size. The forces of Krishnadevaraja were simply enormous and estimates range between a hundred thousand and a million.³⁹

To achieve this military build-up Vijayanagar required unprecedented supplies of men, food and other forms of tribute. Naturally enough, the Vijayanagar emperors looked to the southern lands, which they were protecting from Muslim intrusion, to help provide these supplies. In two important ways, these demands on Tamilnad tended to increase the importance of the plain tracts. Firstly, the peoples of these regions were suitable material for recruitment. Secondly, this relatively unoccupied tract provided a frontier for expanding agriculture to produce the supplies demanded in the north.

The mobilization of the plains was achieved partly by the immigration and settlement of Telugu warrior chiefs and clans, and partly through the medium of the existing plains chieftains. The latter were either lured into co-operation by the grant of titles and other favours by the Vijayanagar emperor, or battered into co-operation by a Vijayanagar army. The Telugu warriors and clans either filtered into the Tamil country in flight from the disorders on the Deccan, or arrived with the Vijayanagar envoys who came down to organize the resources of the south and who soon supplanted the remnants of the old valley dynasties. They set up as Nayaks or Viceroys in the major valley centres. These Nayaks set about mobilizing the plains through a set of slightly varying systems that were variously known as *amaram*, *candashara*, *kattubadi* or *palaiyam*. Under these systems, a warrior chief was settled on a portion of plains territory. These settlements were mostly ringed around the valley centres and were designed firstly to provide a much firmer defence of the valleys than had been possible hitherto, and secondly to send armed recruits to the Vijayanagar armies. These levies were sent initially to the Nayak who in turn was supposed to send his contingent to help the emperor when demanded. In order to support the system the grantee—*amaranayak* or *palaiyagar*—was required to remit little or no tribute in return for

his grant of territory, but was encouraged to build forts, organize levies, and push forward cultivation by constructing irrigation works and forcing cultivation. The grantee in turn settled clans and families on the land on the stipulation that they would push forward cultivation and would provide recruits when necessary. The basic unit for measuring land in these settlements was the *al jivitam*, which meant the extent sufficient to support one (fighting) man.⁴⁰

The *amaranayaks* and *palaiyagars* introduced two new techniques to enforce the expansion of production. The first was the village headman. In each locality, the grantee appointed a headman who, in return for privileges which guaranteed the prosperity of his family, organized the other inhabitants for production and military service.⁴¹ The second also entailed a much greater degree of intervention by the state (via its dependants such as the *palaiyagars*) in the business of agriculture than had been seen before. The state took a considerable role in organizing within the village basic services necessary to sustain village production. It appointed various ancillary workers in the villages—irrigation overseers, guards, priests, washermen, blacksmiths, carpenters, potters and so on—and provided them with special grants of land or doles of paddy for their support. Under the pressure of this new and rigorous system, large parts of the harsh and unpromising plains were opened up for cultivation.⁴²

In roughly half of the plains, the grantees were immigrant Telugu warriors. They settled with their followers in the outskirts of Madurai district, western parts of Tirunelveli, and on the outskirts of Tondaimandalam in North Arcot and the northern part of Salem. They tended to settle on the tracts of black soil. These were generally much harder to work than the thin red soils, because they quickly became heavy and waterlogged in the monsoon, and tended to dry out and tessellate in a drought. They had therefore attracted almost no settlement by the Tamil plainsmen, but the Telugus were accustomed to such soils in their homeland, knew that they rewarded the extra toil and expense needed with a gratifyingly favourable yield, and were experienced in the particular techniques of their cultivation. Elsewhere on the plains this military settlement incorporated the local chiefs—in much of South Arcot, north Tiruchi and contiguous areas of Salem, the southern outskirts of the Kaveri through south-west Tanjavur, Pudukkottai, and parts of Ramnad.

The Vijayanagar period saw a dramatic change in the balance of power between valleys and plains. The main centres of political control still lay in the valleys—the Nayak viceroys had their headquarters at Madurai in the Pandya country, Tanjavur in the Kaveri, and Gingee in Tondaimandalam—but the military power which now underwrote the political status of the region clearly lay on the plains. This was even more noticeable after the Vijayanagar rampart was swept away in the mid-sixteenth century and the warrior-chiefs of the plains became the only defence of the valley principalities against the depredations of Muslim, Maratha and Kannada forces from the north. The civilization of the valleys was thus obliged to show a greater respect for the peoples of the plains and consequently made efforts to incorporate them into valley culture, or at least to bring the culture of valleys and plains into some form of alliance.

This was most noticeable in changes in religion and temple worship. From the fourteenth century, the enthusiasm of *bhakti* worship was directed into cults centred around the more martial aspects of some of the Vedic gods, particularly Vishnu. These cults attracted the warrior chieftains. Next, the temples which in the medieval period had emerged as crucial institutions for advertising gradations of social status, could now be used to smooth the alliance between the proud valley-dwellers and the warriors they had hitherto despised. In return for the protection which the warriors afforded to the temples and to the valleys as a whole, the temple priests accorded to the warriors a high social status within the pecking order of the valleys.⁴³ While this strategy helped to incorporate the leaders of the plains society, there was other evidence that this process of accommodation extended to commoners as well. In the Vijayanagar period, the practice of the temple-building, hitherto a part of valley culture, spread widely on the plains. In this process there were dramatic attempts to bring the gods and goddesses of the plains people into some form of correspondence with the Vedic pantheon. Some of these plains deities were accorded kin or marital ties with Vedic gods. In the case of some of the plains' folk goddesses this was found impossible or undesirable, but still it was possible to incorporate a shrine to these goddesses (*amman*) in the major Vedic temples.⁴⁴ Major festivals were restructured in a similar way. The most famous example was the Chitrai festival in Madurai which was completely re-orchestrated

by Tirumala Nayak in the mid-seventeenth century. Lord Alagar, the personal god of the Kallar people of the plains outside Madurai, was dubbed not only a incarnation of Vishnu but also a brother-in-law of Siva. He was thus invited to the annual Chitrai festival to celebrate the marriage of his sister Minakshi with Siva but, in a ceremony which spectacularly dramatized the wish of the valleys to incorporate the plains people but still keep them slightly apart, he regularly turned up late and never got further than the outskirts of the city before returning home.⁴⁵

In the Vijayanagar period the temples were extraordinarily active. The immigration of new peoples (for masses of artisans, merchants and other service groups accompanied the Telugu warriors, and other migrants came as refugees from the disorders of the Deccan) and the rapid changes in the local balance of power, inflated the temples' role as a social arbiter. This period thus saw the final hardening of the *bhakti* movement into a hierarchically-minded temple-oriented ritual system, and made the Brahmans peculiarly important as the arbiters of social standing. They had to bow to the new political facts of life, but somehow keep the cultural dominance of the valleys intact. They thus had to admit the warrior chiefs to some form of ritual pre-eminence, and make an adjustment for the other plains people which drew them into close alliance but also kept them just beyond the pale. As a result the temple, both in the capital towns and in the localities, became the focus of a subtle and enormously varied system of social gradation.⁴⁶

Thus the pressure of the Muslim presence on the Deccan caused changes in military organization and social adjustment further south. The main points of these changes, and the crucial role of the state in pushing them through, were summed up by the Vijayanagar Emperor, Krishnadevaraja in his work of political theorizing known as the *Amuktamalyada*: 'The expenditure of money which is utilised in buying elephants and horses, in feeding them, in maintaining soldiers, in the worship of Gods and Brahmans and in one's own enjoyment, can never be called a waste.'⁴⁷

The period had an enormous effect on the society of the plains. The exact processes are obscure but they can at least be guessed. Through the period a rather fluid society of hunters, herdsmen and marauders 'precipitated out' into something which looked more like a society of lineages and castes. There is evidence of some tribal or tribal-like divisions of the plains people before this period, but it

is not clear how strong it was.⁴⁸ The Vijayanagar period and after, however, saw three important pressures on the plains peoples.⁴⁹ First there was a large amount of migration around the Tamil country, presumably as a reaction to Telugu immigrations and warrior raids, and these are graphically recorded in the mythologies of some plains settlements. This probably entailed a considerable reorganization of whatever social bonds had existed beforehand. Secondly, there was large scale recruitment into the Nayak and Vijayanagar armies. One commentator estimated that the Tamil Nayaks had to supply 600,000 foot soldiers and 24,000 cavalry⁵⁰ and this must have constituted a significant portion of the able-bodied population of the plains. The process of recruitment probably gave some new shape to the population of the plains and there is some evidence that the three main divisions of the plains peoples (Padaiyichi, Kallar, Maravar) originated from the division into three Nayak armies (Gingee, Tanjavur, Madurai). Thirdly, the *palaiyagari-amaram* settlement shifted the emphasis of the plains economy away from animal husbandry towards arable agriculture and in the process forced more people to settle on and work the land. Those peoples who evaded this settlement seem to have been gradually confined to the diminishing area of forest and mountain where they continued as primitive hunters and herdsman. Those who did settle elaborated new forms of social organization to suit their new calling as farmers-cum-soldiers. The crucial unit of this new social system seems to have been a lineage or a group of kin and affinal relations. The land was probably distributed on the basis of clans and then re-distributed within the clan on the basis of kinship. There is evidence that the word for a lineage, *karai*, was used to denote a share in a clan landholding.⁵¹ Modern anthropologists have noticed that despite the obscuring effect of time it is still possible to trace the congruence between clans and land settlements in certain parts of the plains.⁵² Within the clan, social and political organization probably depended on kinship. Again there is still evidence of plains peoples using marriage alliances among exogamous lineages within the clan to construct an intricate pattern of political relationships around a graded hierarchy of lineages. Each lineage or each family was obliged to supply a certain number of recruits for the military subvention but was left to do this in its own way; families probably divided up the duties so some served on the land while others went to the army.⁵³

All of this, however, was subsumed under a political structure which, in its emphasis on state intervention and military duty, tended to be organized on the bases of merit and power rather than on kinship. There was indeed a hierarchy which stretched from the Vijayanagar court, through the Nayaks, to the poligars and so to the village headmen, and however imperfectly this structure of command may have been realized it was nevertheless important. Men were appointed to positions in this hierarchy because they achieved the upwards flow of resources which the system demanded. Thus political power in the plains came to depend not so much on ancestry or lineage as on the backing of superior authority. Most of the chiefly families of the plains trace their pre-eminence back to some form of grant from the Nayaks or from Vijayanagar. This was equally true for Telugu immigrants and local chieftains, even if the latter had obviously been significantly powerful previously, and it was also true to some extent for the village headman families in the villages.⁵⁴ Of course the two systems—the local one based on kin, and the over-arching one based on merit and power—inter-penetrated one another to some extent, particularly in the middle levels. *Palaiyagars* would sometimes select lineage heads as village headmen in order to draw on their authority to get things done in the village, and clans would sometimes promote their military talents to local headship or invent fictive kinship ties to underline a relationship between clan and *palaiyagar*.⁵⁵

The demands of warfare and production had gathered scattered groups of herders and huntsmen together into armies and then separated them out again as agricultural settlers. The muddling effects of this process can be glimpsed in the confusion of names and titles among the plains peoples, and in the variety of their myths of origin. The caste names and titles which have persisted on the plains show up the different stages of their history: Valaiyan, Vedan, Urali and Vettuvan clearly denoted hunting; Idaiyan referred to herding; Kallar, Maravar, Vanniyan and Padaiyichi had associations with soldiery and plunder; Ambalagar, Muttiriyar, Muttrachi, Palli, Agamudaiyan, Udaiyan and Nattaiman betrayed claims of village dominance in an agricultural society. Many of these castes they are now defined were probably cobbled together from a number of different groups. Among the Udaiyans, for example, there are some who have historical memories of descent from huntsmen, and others who claim descent from the

Arcot chieftain. Moreover among the sub-groups of the Udaiyans, there is a definite record of their historical development; some call themselves Malaiman (hill-dweller), others Sudarman (hero or warrior), and others Nattaiman (settler). As already noted, the three major plains castes of Padaiyichi, Kallar and Maravar were probably the result of the aggregation of separate groups into the three armies of the Tondai, Chola and Pandya kingdoms respectively. The extent to which pre-existing groups were muddled up and re-divided in this process of recruitment and settlement can be seen in the confusion of sub-caste names. A member of one of these castes, and of many others in the above list of plains castes, is liable to carry the name of a different caste as his sub-caste name.⁵⁶

With the establishment of firm chieftaincies, forts, and considerable organization of local militia in the fighting of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these new settlements agglutinated into something like local communities—'commonwealths of contiguous tribes' was the description of one nineteenth-century historian.⁵⁷ Most of those north of the Kaveri fell into a related group of Palli, Vanniyan and Padaiyichi; most of those to the south into the related group of Kallar, Ambalagar and Agamudaiyan; and most of those even farther south into the category of Maravar. It was hardly surprising that the early British anthropologists found it difficult to understand the organization of these groups and to trace from them trees of descent leading back to common ancestors. Nor was it surprising that they found significant traces of 'tribal' customs. Among many of them, for instance, it was still common for youths to compete for wives through shows of physical prowess, generally associated with the local form of bullfight, the *jallikattu*. Nor was it surprising that they found immense variety among the family customs, marriage ceremonies and alliances, personal appearance, deities and religious ceremonials of the various settlements of these 'castes'. Finally, the plains people had made some adjustment to the Brahmanism of their new allies in the valleys but this was uneven and imperfect. They still kept their local rites and ceremonies and most of their social customs. They often grafted onto these a readiness to acknowledge the Brahman's role and a respect for Vedic temples.⁵⁸

While the most important developments of the Vijayanagar period came in the expansion on the plains, there were also

significant repercussions in the valleys. The defenders of the Deccan and the chieftains of the Tamil plains demanded agricultural supplies in return for their protective services. They secured these either by trade, by raiding for tribute, or, increasingly as time went on, by devising more settled systems for extracting a surplus from valley agriculture. These demands quickly breached the proud autonomy of the valley villages and buckled the structure of corporate localities.

From the end of the medieval period, the inscriptions relating to village corporations tail off and the last of these from the early Vijayanagar period find these institutions in a state of financial crisis; temples had suffered from the looting of Muslims and mercenaries, and beleaguered corporations were selling villages into private hands.⁵⁹ Undoubtedly the decline of these corporations was a result of the attempts of the new outside political forces to break down the relative autonomy of the village political system in order to be able to extract its surplus resources. It is probable that this period saw a diversion of many of the corporations' village taxes into state coffers. The period also saw a subtle but significant change in the relationship between state, village, and temple. Whereas the medieval rulers had assumed the duties of 'protectors' of local temples and had gone on to offer the temples endowments and to arbitrate in temple disputes when so requested by the locality, the Nayak and Vijayanagar overlords transformed this role of protector into a much greater degree of central control over the vital material and ritual resources of the valley's local temples. As the villages came under financial pressure, so the considerable resources of the temple became even more important for local survival. In this situation the rulers' willingness to donate to the temples was a way both to sustain the local economy and to exert a much greater degree of control over it.⁶⁰

The Nayaks also placed state officials in the valley countryside to oversee the business of production and to ensure a steady rate of surplus extraction. The duties of some of these officers whose role survived into the eighteenth century were to supervise the irrigation sources, encourage the villagers to extend cultivation, and keep the upper levels of the state administration informed about local affairs; in return they were awarded a share of the grain-heap. Sometimes these officials were military outsiders, and sometimes they were leading local families who were elevated by state authority to a

position of *primus inter pares*. The Nayaks also began to build up the notion that all valley land was somehow under the control of the state.⁶¹

Yet all these trends were softened by the very strength of valley traditions and by the readiness of the overlords to adjust their innovations to local circumstances in order to achieve their overall goal. Although the corporations dwindled away there was little attempt to disrupt the power of the land-controlling elite of Brahmans and Vellalas. Their control of village resources was still recognized. The heirs of the corporate controllers were known as the *kaniyatchikarans*, land-controllers, or in the more usual Persian form, *mirasidars*. These terms defined those elite families who held a share (*pangu*) of the rights to control the village. These rights were jealously guarded, even though in this period they almost certainly became more individualized and also more easily transferable.

WAR AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The events which followed the collapse of Vijayanagar accentuated the pressure on the valleys. After the battle of Talikota in 1565 wiped Vijayanagar off the map, there was a steady decentralization and disintegration of political control. The Tamil country was finally wide open to the invading armies and by the mid-seventeenth century the north of the region was little more than a highway for foreign soldiery—Golconda forces in the 1640s and '50s, Maratha chiefs in the 1660s and '70s, and Mughal generals in the 1690s and 1700s.⁶²

The residual power of the valley kingdoms which had survived in the guise of the Nayak viceroys because the Vijayanagar emperors persuaded the local chieftains to uphold them, now fell away and political power became extremely localized. The Nayakship of Madurai survived longer than most because the local chiefs of Kannivadi, and Ramnad endeavoured to uphold it. These chiefs could mobilize remarkable guerrilla armies in the plains countryside and harass the invading armies. But by the 1730s the local chiefs could no longer see any point in maintaining this residual centre of authority at Madurai and were more interested in their own independent power.⁶³

Power drifted to the local chieftains of the plains and the late

seventeenth and early eighteenth century saw a continuous, debilitating struggle of local potentates. There were definite attempts to arrest this process and find a means of settlement. These attempts showed in the remarkable, unprecedented rate of temple-construction, which had now become the time-honoured tactic in Tamilnad for translating military authority into political legitimacy.⁶⁴ But the dispersal of military power and the pressure of the invaders made settlement impossible. The Maratha, Muslim and Kannada forces to the north found the Tamil south so disorderly that they made only limited and rather ineffectual attempts to establish control over the region and contented themselves instead with lightning raids to raise tribute to fuel the real conflict in the Deccan and the north. These raids set off domino wars within the south as the aggrieved parties attempted to recoup their losses.

In this period the interior of Tamilnad became an exceptionally perilous place. Few of the European travellers who visited south India at this time set foot in the interior, and those who did reported mainly that it was disorderly and dangerous.⁶⁵ The problems of invasion were compounded by the problems of dearth which inevitably followed. Throughout the late eighteenth century there were reports of major famines,⁶⁶ and clearly many of the invading armies declined to stay and consolidate their gains because their arrival so easily precipitated famines. But it is important not to overdo the picture of 'anarchy', as the British conquerors tended to do in their attempt to draw a contrast between *pax Britannica* and the era that had preceded it. The warfare took place mostly on the plains and seems, except for occasional tribute raids, to have avoided the valleys. Even on the plains, wars and famines were intermittent and sporadic, and for long periods powerful local chieftains or invading generals were able by sheer military might to carve out havens of peace. Nevertheless, the expansion of plains settlement was decisively halted and may even have gone into reverse, particularly in the north-west which acted as the gateway for invading armies.⁶⁷

The troubles flowed into the valleys because the valley peoples now relied so utterly on the plains chiefs for protection. They were obliged to call on the unruly plains chiefs to extend their guardianship, *kaval*, over the valley villages and in return to pay them a fee. Increasingly this system of *kaval* came to resemble an extortion racket as much as a policing system. And as the disorders of the

plains increased, remnants of the plains armies strayed into the fringes of the valley settlements. *Kaval* duties grew into effective political control and eventually resulted in settlement and often displacement of the old valley population.⁶⁸ In parts of the valleys in the eighteenth century this resulted in a considerable shift of population and of rural control. It accelerated in the second half of the century when the Mysore forces led by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan began to raid into the valleys with more deliberation. The Mysore rulers had geared up their forces to face the full might of the Mughal and Maratha armies and against such forces the consequences of Tamilnad's insulation from the rapid advances in military technology in the north were only too apparent. Moreover, Tipu was carving out his empire with single-minded intent. The raids into Tondaimandalam and the Kaveri valley caused considerable havoc.⁶⁹ The scale of bloodshed clearly surprised the local population, besides, in the case of the 1780 raids, forming the basis for Burke's oration in the House of Commons. Large numbers of people fled from the Mysore forces and in the wake of the raids certain areas were taken over by new populations in which the remnants of the poligar armies figured quite prominently. Padaiyichis from Salem and the Arcots moved across into the outer reaches of the Tondai country, and down into the north and east of the Kaveri delta. The Kallars in the woods of Pudukkottai moved north into the fringes of the Kaveri delta, and south into the edges of the Vaigai basin. The Maravars of the Ramnad forests moved into some of the richer lands in Tirunelveli. These movements were often complex. The oral history of a Kallar village studied by Louis Dumont recorded five changes of local mastery in what (with the usual chronological distortion and elongation of such memories) was clearly a short period.⁷⁰

Thus these final years before the arrival of British rule had quite dramatic effects on the demographic pattern and the reproductive potential of the Tamil countryside. They also had repercussions for the political establishment of the region and for the relationship of the state with the countryside.

Over a long period the increasing demands of defence and the increasing specialization of military talents had tended to transform the state structure into a markedly military affair and to set it apart from the countryside, particularly the valley countryside. At the same time it had increased the demands which the state placed upon

the countryside for supplies. There was, in fact, a growing antagonism between the state and rural society.⁷¹ Meanwhile the state had had to seek out new sources on material support and increasingly it had come to rely on the profits of trade. In the medieval period, as we have seen, the rulers had taken care to organize, police and profit from overseas trade. From the sixteenth century onwards, the irruption of the Europeans into Asian trade contrived both to increase the volume of trade on the Tamilnad coast and also to improve the balance of trade as well.⁷² Tamilnad exported both raw materials and manufactured goods (mostly cloth) to Arabia and southeast Asia and the favourable balance of trade created an inflow of specie and jewels which the political authorities soon saw the advantage of taxing and controlling. The rulers preferred this foreign trade to be in the hands of foreigners rather than local inhabitants. Thus it was north Indians, Arabs and, increasingly, European trading companies who were encouraged to settle in the Tamilnad ports and conduct a trade from which the ruler could extract a tribute.⁷³ In the end of course, the competition of foreign trading companies reacted with the competition of local political authorities and encouraged the foreigners to play a role in local politics. Meanwhile, the prosperity of the enormous city of Vijayanagar helped to create a considerable flow of internal trade which continued after the fall of Vijayanagar though it was constantly being re-oriented along new routes.⁷⁴ In the seventeenth century the intermittent European control or blockade of west-coast ports created a sizeable flow of trade from the east-coast ports over the Ghats and down into the kingdoms of Kerala.⁷⁵ In the eighteenth century, the rising power and prosperity of Mysore created a lucrative trade up from Tamilnad to the north-west.⁷⁶ Local rulers were quick to levy tolls on this inland trade. In the seventeenth century the Tanjore ruler was said to raise a toll on every conceivable type of goods transported, 'even on the very cow dung'.⁷⁷

The warfare and disorder of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seriously threatened this source of prosperity and revenue. The marauding activities of rival chieftains, plains armies or just simple robbers made internal trade difficult, and caused the political authorities who aspired to rise above petty military hegemony to concentrate their best attentions on policing the frontiers and highways in order to keep up a decent flow of trade. There were three such authorities—Tipu Sultan of Mysore, the Mughal emis-

sary who as the Mughals crumbled became the independent Nawab of Arcot, and the British East India Company. All three paid significant attention to trade and all three became fixated with the question of internal policing. The Nawab's police system in the north of Tamilnad was one of the few successes of his rule.⁷⁸ Tipu wanted to build up a navy to assist foreign trading, and set up a system which combined the functions of forwarding contractors, customs officers and espionage agents to ensure the flow of internal trade.⁷⁹ The British company's concern with trade hardly needs describing.

Thus the state systems which were emerging in the eighteenth century were very different from those which had developed up to the medieval period. They had become enormously distanced from agriculture and from the populations of the countryside. They were concerned with trade, policing, taxation, and military might. They looked on the agricultural society of the valleys chiefly as a source of revenue and supplies and as a result centralized taxation increased enormously in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They looked on the chieftains of the plains as disorderly intruders. By the middle of the eighteenth century Tipu was committed to abolishing or at least controlling the *palaiyagars* in the north-west of Tamilnad⁸⁰, and the East India Company with the Nawab in tow were starting the long business of reducing the *palaiyagars* in the south.⁸¹ From the *kaval* system of the *palaiyagars* themselves, to the red-coated sepoys of the company, the efforts of political authorities were bent on the construction of systems of political control. In the countryside this meant a strengthening of those devices by which political overlords attempted to enforce their control over the villages—the post of village officer in the plains villages and the post of local overseer in the valleys.⁸²

Two periods of early south Indian history had seen the emergence of two different social systems in two geographically different areas. The first, in the valleys, was based on settled rice agriculture. Here the social structure reflected the dominant importance of the 'control of land', and was characterized by a marked dual stratification underwritten by Brahmanical ideas of deep ritual division. The second, in the plains, was moulded more by animal husbandry and warfare than by agriculture, and led to a society marked by a military-style hierarchy which was buttressed not so much by ritual exclusiveness (although this was of course not absent) but by

kinship rules and pyramidal systems of patronage and redistribution. These systems were far from static. Early on they spawned a hybrid version in Kongunad and as the region became steadily more integrated so the systems clashed and influenced one another on the margins. Within each region there was an enormous amount of local variation. This trend of mutual adjustment accelerated remarkably in the disorder of the eighteenth century, yet however much the two systems had been thrown together, they were still separate and distinctive. The distribution of different communities in the late nineteenth century (see map 4) still showed the separateness of the two systems; the valleys were still largely populated by Brahmans and Vellalas, while the plains were shared by immigrant Telugu communities and Tamil herder-warriors. Meanwhile the map also shows the evidence of change. The plains communities had nibbled into the fringes of the valleys, as had other communities like Chettys, Nadars, and Muslims whose vocation lay mostly in commerce.

This was certainly not an insulated, egalitarian, unchanging, traditional peasant society. Change was rapid and accelerating. Warfare, the state, and commerce penetrated far into the countryside. Strategies of ritual and social exclusiveness, military bravura and political favouritism had created enormous inequalities of wealth and status.

In the early modern period, from Vijayanagar onwards, warfare and commerce had become peculiarly important as agents of social and economic change. Warfare had encouraged social mobility, redistributed population, and distanced the state system from the countryside. Commerce had been the natural ally of warfare. Army camps and political headquarters created pools of commercial demand. States cultivated overseas trading as a way to earn revenue as well as a way to secure vital military supplies. The increased tempo of warfare from the late seventeenth century onwards accentuated all these trends. States became more ambitious, taxes multiplied, and with the multiplication of taxes went the development of systems of banking and trading necessary to convert revenue in kind into expenditure in warfare. The natural corollary of these developments were attempts by states to extend their tentacles more directly into the villages, and to push forward the frontiers of the agricultural economy in order to produce more supplies and to provide support for more men. New systems of

Table 1: Caste types as percentage of the population of each district

	Madras	Chingleput	South Arcot	Salem	Coimbatore	Tanjayur	Tiruchi	Madurai	Tirunelveli	Tamil Districts
Priest	4	4	3	2	2	6	6	2	4	3.09
Vellala	12	7	7	16	31	10	8	9	9	12.42
Militiaman and Immigrant	13	25	36	29	10	24	31	23	18	24.61
Field Labourer	12	26	24	13	9	22	21	13	16	17.59
Hunter and Herder	4	7	7	7	3	9	6	11	5	7.02
Artisan, Weaver and Service	9	14	10	18	26	10	9	16	28	16.32
Merchant	28	5	7	7	8	10	4	12	8	9.64
Total in categories shown	82	88	94	92	89	91	85	86	88	90.69

Note: This table groups the castes shown in the 1891 Census into some rough occupational types, as denoted by their caste-name and their current status. Castes were aggregated as follows:

Priest = Brahman, Pandaram, Valluva

Vellala = Vellala

Militiaman and Immigrant = Agamudaiyan, Ambalakkaran, Kallan, Kshatriya, Maravar, Palayakkaran, Kamma, Reddi, Nattaiman, Tottiyar, Vokkaliga, Malaiman, Udaiyan, Kappiliyan, Lingayat, Palli, Vannian.

Field Labourer = Vettuvan, Urali, Paraiyan, Mala, Pallan, Holey, Muppan.

Hunter and Herder = Idaiyan, Yadava, Golla, Kurumban, Malaiyalan, Vedan, Villiyan, Karalan, Valaiyan.

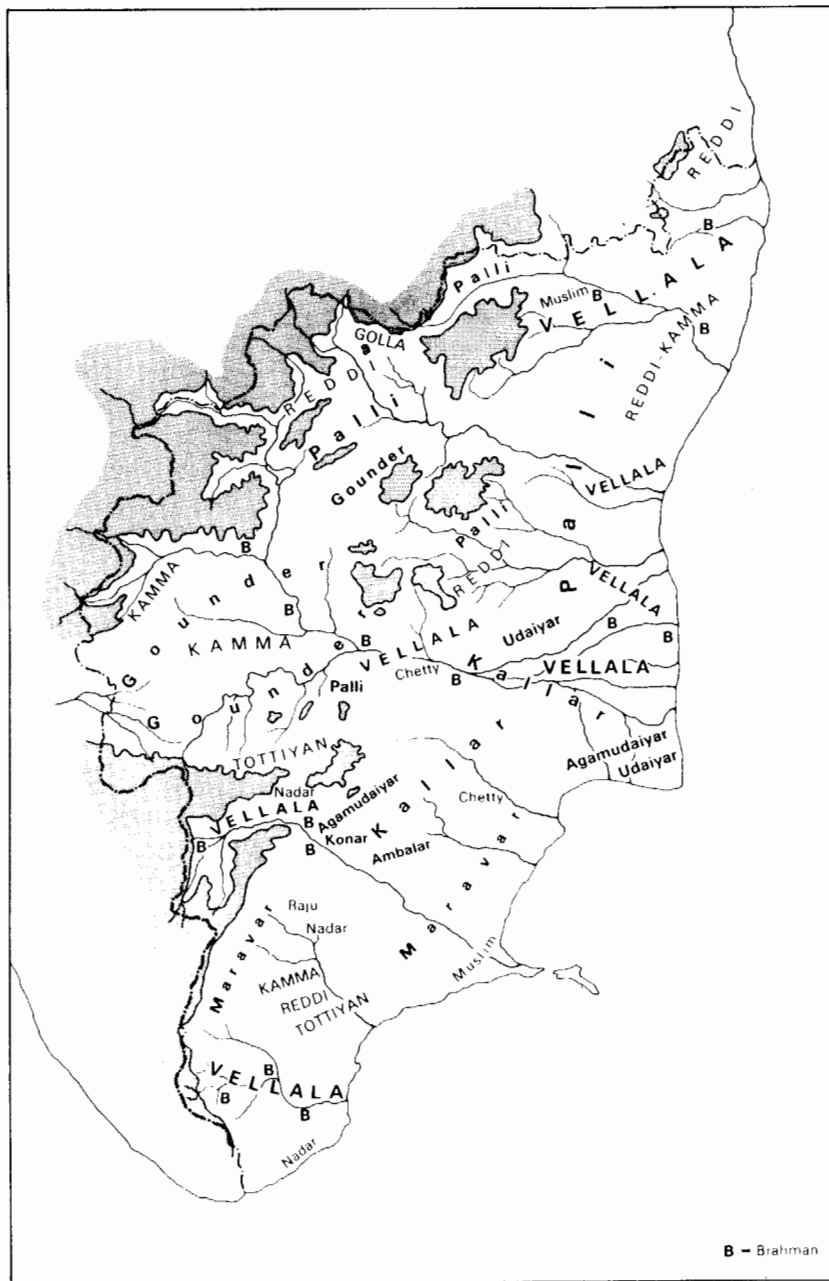
Artisan, Weaver and Service = Kammalan, Ambattan, Vannan, Vaniyan, Kusavan, Uppiliyan, Uppara, Shanar, Chakkiliyan, Odde, Izhuvar, Devanga, Sedan, Kaikolan, Patnol.

Merchant = Balija, Chetty, Kavarai, Sheik, Labbai, Pathan, Saiyid, Vadugan.

Source: *Census of India 1891*, Volume XIV, Pt. ii, 358-77.

state-appointed village officers, revenue farmers, revenue agents and ancillary workers were set up to help expand the agrarian base, by coercion where necessary, and to extract the state's portion of the surplus. More resources were dragged out of the villages, but with some reaction in terms of local resentment. At the turn of the nineteenth century Buchanan talked of a local incident on the borders of Kongunad when

Eight chiefs of villages went to the insurgent Dindia and procured from him an order to plunder the country. Having returned with this commission they



Map 4 Tamilnad: settlements of main agrarian castes

collected about five hundred ruffians and plundered Sati-mangala...Had not very vigorous measures been taken to repress their barbarity, every farmer in the district was ready to have joined them, in order to share in the plunder of the towns.⁸³

It was hardly a great break with recent tradition when at the very end of the century Tamilnad was finally taken over by a commercial company with an inflated army and an idea of setting up a centralized and supremely elevated state system on the returns from an expanding agricultural base.

THE COLONIAL SETTLEMENT

Yet the establishment of British rule promised to bring many changes. The long period of intermittent but debilitating warfare gave way to a long period of internal peace. The foreigners were committed to replacing Tamilnad's fragmented framework of political authority with a more centralized and efficient government. They reckoned, moreover, to use the centralized state structure to pursue the goals of utilitarian political economy. They believed that through legal, educational, and financial innovations they could create an environment in which the agrarian economy could grow at the behest of the market. These notions were laid out explicitly in the writings of the man who played the single largest part in the design of the early colonial settlement in Tamilnad, Thomas Munro.⁸⁴ Moreover from the start of the British period, and more especially in the later part of the nineteenth century when the steamship began to shrink the globe, Tamilnad's farmers began to find their new niche in the international division of labour. They started to buy more of their *veshties* from the stocks made in Lancashire, and to sell more of their crops to the agent of the export house.

The next chapter is devoted to the history of Tamilnad's international trade. The last two sections of this introductory chapter carry forward into the colonial period the history of the development of government and its relationship to the agrarian economy. This section deals with the British attempts to devise a system for taxing and governing rural Tamilnad, while the final section traces the consequences for the development of the region's agriculture.

The Madras Presidency, the East India Company's southern province, was largely put together between 1792 and 1801 as a collection of those bits of peninsula India which had not been left in the hands of the native rulers of Hyderabad, Mysore, Cochin, Travancore, and a handful of smaller states. It consisted of a small Malayalam-speaking portion on the west coast, a large Telugu portion on the southern Deccan with a spur stretching up the east coast towards Orissa, and the Tamil districts with which we are concerned. The core of the Tamil portion—and indeed the core of the province—was Fort St George which the Company had occupied (with intervals) since 1638, the city of Madras which now surrounded it, and the Jaghir of Chingleput which the Company had held, officially as a subordinate of the Nawab of Arcot, since 1765. In 1792, the first defeat of Tipu Sultan had given the Company Salem and Dindigul, and in 1799 the second defeat added Coimbatore. These districts covered the Kongunad region, and most of the plains to the west of the line of Tamilnad hills. Also in 1799, the Company took over the Kaveri deltaic district of Tanjavur from its Maratha prince, and in 1801, with the collapse of the Nawab of Arcot, added the rest of the eastern districts. The southern portion of these districts had not been under the effective control of the Nawab, but rather in the hands of the poligar (*palaityagar*) chieftains. These had been reduced slowly and painfully since the 1760s, and were finally subdued after a war of attrition between 1799 and 1801.⁸⁵

The British thus inherited the remains of several different ruling systems. The Nawab, a Mughal viceroy, had introduced some but not much of the Mughal style of bureaucracy, and some but not much of the Mughal system of land-tax. Along with the other rulers and pretenders of the period, his concern had been to keep an army in the field rather than to establish a system of administration. His treasury had never functioned well (which had resulted in the debts to the Company on which their claims to cession were mounted) and he had tended to raise taxes casually but cruelly when they were needed. He established few courts, and did little for irrigation or other public works, but managed in 1744 to bring the Hindu temples of the region under a greater degree of central control than they had ever experienced before.⁸⁶ Tipu had been somewhat more single-minded, if only slightly more efficient. He was intent upon raising the wealth of the country that he commanded in order to be able to

cream as much of it off as he could. He encouraged trade (which led to a large trade over the Ghats between Tamilnad and the Mysore Deccan), and tried to extend the area of cultivation, particularly in cash-crops that might be useful for commerce. He also tried to establish a firm system of land revenue, based on land assessment, and to collect these revenues through a bureaucracy rather than tax-farmers. This was never as regular or successful as it might have been. There was a reasonably sophisticated and complete scheme of land-assessment and of other tax-assessments, notably *moturpha* (professional) and *sayer* (transit) dues, but the demand was pitched enormously high and only the irregularity of collection allowed the system to survive.⁸⁷ Meanwhile the poligars of the south, particularly once they were under pressure from the British. Tipu and others, abandoned any pretence of settled administration in favour of a sort of guerrilla state.⁸⁸

This was not very hopeful material but it was not entirely unpromising. Indeed, in the opening years of the nineteenth century, Fort St George's governors adopted the better bits of each of their inheritances and seemed set fair to establish a state structure that was stronger than anything previously seen in the region. From Arcot, they adopted the Mughal system of courts and seemed ready to improve and strengthen it with elements from the more advanced Mughal system of the north. Also from the Nawab, they inherited the important care of religious institutions. As the East India Company, they already had a virtual monopoly of the region's external trade. By adopting Tipu's *sayer* and *moturpha* taxes they took a strong grip on internal commerce, while in the south of the peninsula they had taken over the grain trade as a safe method to supply the troops fighting the poligars. As for revenue, the Company's officers, Read and Munro, found the remnants of Tipu's sophisticated, strict and bureaucratic system in Salem, dubbed it 'ryotwari' and argued that it was the proper system for the whole region.⁸⁹

But very soon, Fort St George drew back from the possibilities of oriental despotism. Largely this was a decision dictated by resources. It would almost certainly have been expensive to establish such a system, and the East India Company was suffering financially from two decades of intermittent warfare. Bombay and Bengal had already emerged as the most important centres of the commercial and political empire, and begun to overshadow Madras. Further,

there was not the manpower. Tipu and the Nawab did not leave behind many officials or official institutions that could be drawn into the framework of Company Raj, and the poligars had left absolutely none. Finally there was a growing ideological objection: India, it was thought by many in Calcutta and London, should be ruled lightly and by and large conservatively. Within twenty years the Company's commercial monopoly was gone, the judicial system had been allowed to languish, most of the troops had been withdrawn to the north, every effort had been made to free the government from any involvement in the grain trade, the idea of perfecting Tipu's revenue system had been abandoned, and plans were afoot to extricate the Company from the administration and care of the temples. The Raj, in the south at least, was in retreat.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, then, Madras enjoyed a fairly minimal form of government. Imperial rule amounted to raising enough revenue to support the army and the Company's central administration, to send a slender bureaucratic and judicial presence into the districts and to provide a small surplus for public works.

The Government of Madras's first attempt to create a systematic revenue system reflected this desire to leave well alone. No sooner had they fought the poligars into submission than they set about resurrecting them as the agents of imperial control in the countryside, and even extending the poligari system to parts of the region which had never experienced it before. The idea was that poligars would act as a combination of estate owners and revenue farmers and would thus provide government with a flow of revenue without the need for government itself to interfere too deeply in the affairs of rural society. Thus when the Government of Madras sat down to make its treaty with the poligars at the end of the war in 1801, it borrowed from Bengal the Permanent Settlement regulation, which had guaranteed the Moghul-appointed zamindars possession of their territories in return for a fixed annual tribute, and applied it to all the remaining Madras poligars, except those whose part in the war had been especially flagrant. Then they began carving up parts of Chingleput, Salem and Dindigul into blocks known as mittas, and offered them at auction as estates under the same Permanent Settlement system.⁹⁰

The policy had a mixed success. Most of the old poligari estates survived through into the twentieth century. It proved difficult for

the warlords of the eighteenth century to transform themselves into the revenue-managers of the nineteenth but it did not prove impossible. Their authority over men, which was bestowed by lineage, tradition, and terror, and which had once been used to raise troops, could be harnessed to collect the revenue, and by and large government left them to do it in their own fashion. For the newly-created mittas, however, the matter was far less simple. The auction-purchasers of the new mittas included old officials, merchants, and local cultivators. They did not have sufficient authority to mobilize men and resources in the manner of the established poligars. Given the harsh conditions of the plains, it was necessary to have some special authority to push cultivation forward, create a surplus, and draw a revenue from it even in the best of times. And the early nineteenth century was not the best of times. Much of the plains had not recovered from the era of intermittent warfare; the population was sparse and irrigation works in bad repair. The government did not give the newly created mittadars much time or leeway to build up their estates, but insisted on an immediate flow of tribute. As a result, the people who took on the mittas looked on them as a short-term speculation rather than a long-term investment. The demand for mittas was so low that they could be secured at auction for ridiculously low sums; it was possible to recoup this and make a reasonable profit by taxing the peasantry; and there was little obligation to pass much of the proceeds on to government. When the mittadar reneged on his obligation to remit revenue, there was little the government could do but take back the estate and put the mittadar in jail; many of the speculators found a short spell in jail a reasonable price to pay for a quick profit; and thus the turnover of mittadars was astoundingly high. By 1818, there were only a few mittas which had acquired any sort of permanence, and they were mostly ones which had been taken over by local chiefs and lineage heads who were functionally equivalent to the poligars proper. Meanwhile the Madras jails were packed with the men whom the British were trying to mould into a new landed gentry.⁹¹

By and large the geographical distribution of estates (poligari and mittadari) followed a clear pattern (see map 9). They were all on the plains, scattered around the edges of the old valley territories. The old Pandya country, where the Madurai Nayaks had used a poligari settlement to the greatest extent and where the invaders had least successfully penetrated, was almost completely ringed by estates,

while there were broken rings around the Kaveri and Tondai territories. There were none in the valleys, and very few in those areas of the plain that had been recently ruled by Tipu or the Nawab. In other words, the estate system worked in those areas which had long been under the control of local military chieftains. These estates covered roughly a quarter of the Tamil country.⁹²

By the time the failure of the Permanent Settlement was apparent, the Madras Government was already experimenting with other revenue systems. Indeed the problem of devising a suitable form of revenue system for Madras had quickly become a matter for considerable dispute. While this dispute was conducted mainly in the realm of ideological argument (thereby creating the source material for countless studies of policy-making), the actual evolution of the revenue system on the ground depended on practical experimentation rather than on theoretical nicety. Between 1800 and 1820, the Madras government tried out a host of revenue systems. Moreover, each 'system' was *not* systematically applied, but was passed out to the Collectors of the various districts as a set of guidelines which the Collectors were required to interpret and implement according to local conditions.⁹³ The result was an enormous variety of local practice. Different systems worked in different areas largely, as in the case of the Permanent Settlement, according to the dispensation of local society to accept or reject; and every system was modified slightly to suit the contours of the local landscape. The process was rather like the craft of batik. Fort St George poured numerous variously coloured revenue systems over rural Madras and each adhered in a different area, according to the way the local material had been prepared by its own social history.

There was some experimentation with watered-down versions of the Permanent Settlement in which villages were leased out singly rather than in estate-size aggregations, and for fixed terms of three or ten years rather than 'permanently', but the experiment had all the disadvantages and none of the merits of the Permanent Settlement and was soon condemned to failure. At the ideological level, the victory in the dispute over the most suitable revenue system was won by the advocates of 'ryotwari' which was, in theory at least, a form of collection direct from the cultivating peasant without the intervention of any feudatory chief, tax-farmer, co-sharing brotherhood, or village lessee. It was, in other words, a system of direct settlement between government and the farmer.

The system originated from the settlement work done by two officers, Read and Munro, in the Baramahal and Ceded Districts in the 1790s, and was destined to become the characteristic revenue system for Madras after Munro became Governor of the Presidency in the 1820s. Read and Munro argued that they found in operation, in the Baramahal and Telugu Ceded Districts, a system in which each peasant paid revenue for his own holding, that this revenue was calculated according to the extent and productivity of his land and reckoned as a percentage of the yield, and that this holding and revenue demand might alter from year to year according to the decision of the cultivator. Most important was the idea that the system was based on accurate village records, which showed individual plots and their revenue liability, and that these records provided both the charter of the individual peasant's freedom and the means by which the state might collect the revenue regularly, fairly and without assistance of intermediaries.⁹⁴

Munro and Read argued that ryotwari was the indigenous revenue system of rural Madras. But it is important to realize that their evidence for this claim stemmed from one particular sort of region with certain very special local characteristics. Firstly, both the Baramahal and the Ceded Districts were plains areas; land was relatively freely available and there were none of the co-operative *kaniyatchikaran* village elites or tied labourers of the valleys. From such an environment Munro and Read could derive a system centred on the model of an individual peasant farmer who could vary his landholding from year to year. Secondly both the Baramahal and the Ceded Districts had been ruled by Tipu Sultan who had dismantled the poligari superstructure which had stood over these villages and often humbled local lineage heads as well. It was thus possible to derive a system in which there were no political intermediaries in the revenue system. Finally Tipu had also tried to perfect the system of village office and improve local records, which meant that there were village registers which Read and Munro could present as the lynch-pin of the relationship between government and cultivator. It was noticeable that in their arguments about the 'traditional' character of the ryotwari system, Munro and Read brought forward hardly any evidence which predated Mysore rule.

In other words, the ryotwari system, as Read and Munro found it, was the product of the recent local history of a specific part of the plains. But Munro argued that it was traditional, and characteristic

of the south as a whole. He also argued that, in its elimination of wasteful intermediaries and its reliance on records of actual cultivation, it was a beautiful example of the principles of Ricardian economics. It was thus both conservative and utilitarian. This was an irresistible combination of arguments.⁹⁵

From 1822 onwards, the ryotwari system was applied to all the areas of the province which were not happily marshalled under the Permanent Settlement. However, few of these areas resembled Read and Munro's description of the Baramahal and Ceded Districts. There were co-sharing villages, gentleman farmers, village chiefs, systems of revenue payment in kind, and a host of other characteristics which found no place in the theory of ryotwari tenure. Yet ryotwari was applied; not because it successfully submerged all theoretically embarrassing local practices, but rather because it was bent to local circumstance. This flexibility was achieved by two devices. Firstly government did not bother too much with the survey of land and the establishment of proper land records, and was quite happy to allow individual Collectors to implement the ryotwari principle according to their own interpretations. Looking back from 1855, Fort St George confessed that the early ryotwari settlement had been a rather slipshod affair:

In some districts attempts were made in the years immediately succeeding the British assumption to establish something like a register of lands, and fixed rates of assessment, founded on actual measurement and valuation. But these measures were in every case carried out in haste, with imperfect agency, and in many respects in a very defective manner. The surveyors, so called, were wholly ignorant of any correct methods of measuring, and were under no effective control; there were no maps, either field, village or talook, and no permanent boundaries; and even the records of the surveys have been imperfectly preserved.... But these defective and imperfect surveys extended to only a few Districts; and there are many even at the present day wherein the land revenue demand is based merely on the unchecked statement of the Curnum, who thus has vast opportunity both of making exaction on the Ryots, and in collusion with them of defrauding the government.⁹⁶

Secondly, despite the fact that the point of the ryotwari system was that government should deal only with the ryot or actual cultivator of the soil, the government made absolutely no attempt to define exactly who the cultivator was or to identify him among the complex ranks of rural Madras.

It was necessary to ignore this latter problem because it simply

was so vexed. In both the plains and valley villages there were several different sorts of people who had some hand in the management of land. In the plains there were the local chieftain and the village officer whose role stemmed from the political settlement of the area, the lineage head and family head whose role stemmed from the kin-based organization of the clan territory, and finally the man who stood behind the plough.⁹⁷ In the valleys, there were the government agents often known as *nattars* or *pattackdars* who had been appointed by the post-Vijayanagar political authorities to organize production on behalf of the state. Then there were the *kaniyatchikarans*, better known to the British by the Persian title of *mirasidars*, who might have either individual, joint or rotating claims in the management of a certain piece of land, and who played absolutely no part in the labour of cultivation. Next there was the Pallan labourer, who might or might not have a hereditary right to work on the land and be supported by a share in the produce. Finally there might also be *kavalgar* who had established himself as the guardian of the land.⁹⁸ Who was the 'cultivator' in either of these cases? The answer of course was he who could claim the title without fear of contradiction within the locality, and could amass the revenue which the government demanded. In other words, it was the political elite of the village.

This meant that in neither plains nor valleys did the practical operation of the ryotwari settlement match the theoretical pattern very closely. In both cases the application of ryotwari evoked local protests and the settlement then had to be modified to suit local taste. In the plains this was reasonably straightforward. As we have noted above, the people of the plains did not place a high social value on the control of individual plots of land. The territory of the village fell under the management of the lineage head and state-appointed village officers, who maintained their authority through control over men rather than over land. This political elite was however worried that with the ryotwari settlement government would interfere with their management of land, undermine their own privileges, and contrive a much more fixed pattern of land distribution within the village than was usual. They were worried about the consequences of issuing *pattas* (land deeds) to each 'ryot'. They soon found however that they had little to fear. The government agreed to issue *pattas* each year, which meant that there was no trouble about changing the pattern of land occupation within the

village from year to year because of lineage reorganization or shifting cultivation.⁹⁹ It also left the business of keeping the records, issuing *pattas*, and collecting the revenue up to the village officers. In practice the ryotwari system in the plains meant a settlement with the village headmen. They were left in much the same position of control which they had occupied in pre-British times, and they were also rewarded for their co-operation with government in much the same way as before. Previous states had rewarded village headmen and other village officers and artisans by granting them pieces of land and discounting their revenue liability. These lands were known as *inams*. In the first half of the nineteenth century the British by and large left these *inam* lands alone, even though they suspected that village officers had successfully inflated their holdings during the troubles of the eighteenth century and during the confusion of the early British rule, up to a point where in some villages over forty per cent of the land was held by village officials as *inam*.¹⁰⁰

In the valleys, the administration of ryotwari was much more difficult. Here control over land was greatly valued; indeed it did in itself define the political elite of the village. The ryotwari settlement aimed to assign each plot of cultivated land to each individual 'cultivator', but the *mirasidari* (*kaniyatchikaran*) elite of the village claimed to control all the village land, not just that part which was cultivated; they sometimes managed the land jointly or by some form of rotation, and they took little part in the business of 'cultivation'. Nor was there any strong tradition of village office. The *mirasidars* had in the past managed to forestall government attempts to place in the village its own officials who would inevitably compromise their own claims to absolute control. Finally the ryotwari settlement prescribed revenue payments in cash whereas the *mirasidars* preferred to pay in kind as a share of the harvest and thus oblige government to bear some of the brunt of the fluctuations of the season.¹⁰¹

Throughout the valleys there were sporadic protests against the implementation of ryotwari. Attempts to collect revenue in cash were constantly frustrated by the *mirasidars'* refusal to comply. A Collector in South Arcot who tried to break up the *mirasidars'* control of the uncultivated land of some villages provoked such a riot that he had to be quickly transferred out of the district.¹⁰² An attempt to conduct a field-by-field survey of land in the Tambraparni valley faced such local opposition that it ground to a halt

after only fifteen villages had been completed.¹⁰³ In Mannargudi taluk in the Kaveri delta government officials did, with great difficulty and much expense, compile a survey which showed in detail each field, each boundary and each 'owner'. Some years later when they wanted to refer to this survey, they found that the several copies, which had been lodged in government offices in the taluk and district headquarters, had all been systematically destroyed. A survey of South Arcot district suffered much the same fate.¹⁰⁴

For the British, as much as for previous governments, the importance of drawing the revenue out of the rich valley areas dictated a careful settlement with the mirasidars. Rather vaguely in law, and rather more openly in administrative practice, they recognized the mirasidars' claim to manage the whole lands of the village. Government officials indulged in a constant and massively irrelevant debate about the exact nature of the mirasi right, particularly about the remnants of its corporate aspects, and the ways in which these might be accommodated with British-based land laws;¹⁰⁵ meanwhile in practice the government allowed joint systems to continue in the villages by not enforcing a distribution of pattas. Sometimes the mirasidars took the village on one 'joint patta', sometimes a head mirasidar merely took up the whole village on a single patta and then organized internal affairs without reference to the government's ryotwari rules, and sometimes the government simply allowed the village to be assessed as a whole as though the ryotwari principle did not exist. In Tanjavur, where the mirasidar protests were strongest, most of the villages remained under *mottamfaisal* or lump-sum assessments until the 1890s and those few conversions to a ryotwari approximation were achieved by negotiation with the mirasidars and 'made largely in accordance with their wishes'.¹⁰⁶ Government also gave way substantially on the question of cash assessments and until the 1830s was still assessing and collecting rents in kind in large tracts of the valleys.¹⁰⁷ In the Tambraparni, for instance, the government gave way to such an extent that for some time the mirasidars were allowed the best of both worlds: the annual demand was collected each year as a share of the harvest, which enabled the mirasidars to pass on the effects of seasonal misfortune to the government, and the grain thus collected was then handed back to the mirasidars who acted as contractors for converting the grain into cash. Eventually by the 1820s the villages where the

annual yield was fairly steady and predictable agreed to accept a cash demand based on an average rather than an annually adjusted share of the harvest, but because prices were dropping government had to agree to index-link this cash demand to current grain prices. The less secure villages resisted such transformation until the 1830s and then only capitulated after the government promised to be very liberal with remissions in bad years.¹⁰⁸

The executive arm of the government was not apparently very anxious to foist a new tenurial system on rural Tamilnad. Nor were the British courts going, in this period at least, to act as agents of social reformation. The British created very few law-courts in the rural areas, indeed far fewer than were wanted. Every time a new type of court was instituted, it quickly became jammed with business, and there was a constant stream of petitions demanding more facilities for legal dispute. Furthermore, Munro insisted on keeping the revenue and judicial parts of the administration together. While this suited his image of an all-powerful, paternal administration, it also ensured that the higher courts would be managed by people with no special knowledge of or training in law. It became a standing joke that decisions in the Madras courts, even the Supreme Presidency court, were more a matter of luck than judgment, and the overall effect was to confine most matters of dispute settlement to the locality.¹⁰⁹

From about mid-century, however, the government began moves to tighten up the administration.¹¹⁰ In the early part of the century, when the air had echoed to the sound of utilitarian argument and reformist fervour, the administration had in fact accommodated itself to local circumstance. Ideology had been a surrogate for implementation. After mid-century, when the utilitarian ardour was spent, and the officers of the new Imperial Raj were informed merely by an ideal of 'good administration', governmental measures began to bite, though not always exactly as intended. The pressure for change came initially from individuals who were disgruntled or outraged about the conduct of imperial rule. Later the pressure became more clearly financial; revenue administration would have to be more efficient if the precarious finances of the Raj were to survive the cost of the Mutiny, Afghan wars and the like. Finally there was also a humanitarian motive for reform; the Indian Empire should be made as upright and warm-hearted as its Queen-Empress.

These early pressures for change came from many sources. The prospect of the revision of the East India Company's charter in the mid-1850s occasioned widespread reflection on the state of the Empire. A number of European lawyers practising in Madras wrote humorous and outraged pamphlets about the farcical state of British justice in India.¹¹¹ A number of departmental investigations revealed the extent to which the fragmentation of the revenue system allowed those at the lower levels—powerful payees, village officers, and subordinate officials—to divert a considerable slice of government dues into their own pockets.¹¹² Administrative experience showed that zamindars tended to be steely rack-renters or incompetent bankrupts, and that the lack of any proper tenurial law was probably the reason.¹¹³ A rather half-hearted attempt to control the scandals of inam tenures created a bitter agitation.¹¹⁴ Collectors' reported that the boundary stones laid to record the facts of early field surveys had often been systematically destroyed, rendering the rest of the survey material absolutely meaningless.¹¹⁵ The summary conclusion was that the early settlement of the region had been achieved under pressures of time, poor resources and insistent revenue demands, and that its shortcomings were now too obvious. So, the Raj started again.

Between 1855 and 1870 there was a flurry of new administrative initiatives. The foundations were laid for a new pyramid of law courts.¹¹⁶ A new central police force was established.¹¹⁷ Judicial activity began to involve government again in the business of temple management.¹¹⁸ The Inams Commission investigated every claim to a preferential tenure, abolished all those that were suspect or which had been invented illegally since the British arrival, and regularized those remaining.¹¹⁹ The Revenue Recovery Act of 1865 laid down, for the first time, a strict legal picture of the rights of the zamindar in levying rent from his tenants, and the rights of the tenant to resist eviction.¹²⁰ Most significantly of all, 1865 saw a decision to submit the entire 'ryotwari' area to a precise survey, and on the basis of this survey to mount a new ryotwari settlement with standard rules and practices for the whole province.¹²¹

None of these moves was an unqualified success. There were more courts available, but it was still reckoned that Madras justice was little better than a roulette wheel and litigants approached the courts with a studied callousness which was neatly captured by the observations of a cheerful Irish official, J.T. Gwynn, in 1908:

Just been having a most interesting interview with a sub-magistrate who was explaining to me why so many more witnesses are cited in cases in this town [Tiruchi] than elsewhere. It appears that there is in this town a recognised establishment known as the Witness Depot. You do not here bribe your witness yourself. You send a note through your lawyer to the Depot specifying the grade of witness you want and the facts to be proved. The lowest grade is a 5 rupee man. Grades run from that upwards. Rs 5 for a cooly (of course a trained man warranted to stand cross-examination), Rs 10 for a varam [crop-share] cultivator or petty shop-keeper or a Christian, Rs 20 for a ryot paying kist [land-tax] to government, a railway employee or Eurasian out of work and so on up to Rs 50 which is the price of an income tax payer. Trichy is a very advanced town.¹²²

The revised police force was too small to patrol the entire province. It was hoped that it would be able to supervise the village watchmen and use them to provide more effective police control in the countryside, but this proved a pious hope and the police remained an urban force which was useful in the rural areas only in an emergency and even then with mixed results. This was illustrated by an incident in Ramnad in the early twentieth century. The head of the district police found out that trouble was brewing in the countryside only when a remote missionary sent a message to tell him that his girl converts were unaccountably reluctant to come to school. He immediately swung the forces of law and order into action: that is he sent thirty-six constables down to the station to wait for the next train while he sought around the town for a car to replace his own (which was out of order) and spent some time haggling over a suitable rental fee. By the time the police arrived in the affected area on the following day, they found that the half-mile length of main street in the market town had been completely burnt out, that there had been riots and looting in nearby villages, and that an area of twenty or thirty villages had been in uproar for the last three or four days. The head of police was a little surprised by his ignorance of these goings-on, but admitted that it was a good thing he had not turned up earlier since the hundred troops sent from the neighbouring district to help turned out to belong to the same caste (Maravar) as those on the rampage and might well have added to the disorder rather than quelling it.¹²³ The might of the Empire was rather obscured in the countryside.

The Inams Commission was not able to uncover as many fraudulent titles as government supposed to exist. In advance of the Commission's investigation, Fort St George had reckoned that

some hundred lakhs of rupees of revenue had been alienated under inam and that much of that could be recovered, but the commission only managed to increase the revenue by eight lakhs.¹²⁴ After looking at the variety in the customary relations between zamindar and tenant in different parts of the province, government shied away from a strict charter of rights and obligations and merely passed an Act stating that all contracts for rent 'express or implied' should be respected. It took only a handful of contradictory High Court decisions to put the state of the law back into exactly the same mess it had been in before the Act.¹²⁵

Government might not be gaining a much greater grip on rural society, but was at least trying. The sum total of these measures brought government more firmly into the countryside than before. The new courts broadened the scope of governmental arbitration. The Inams Commission's enquiry went far beyond any previous governmental investigation in both width and depth. The Revenue Recovery Act at least meant that the courts and government would henceforth be almost constantly involved in the technicalities of zamindari law, and that a series of further enactments would follow around the turn of the century. The police did occasionally enter the villages and bring the heavy hand of government to bear in a local dispute; the angry reaction which such an action often evoked from the villagers showed how novel and significant such intervention was. Much the same mixture of failure-but-change marked the imposition of the new survey and settlement.

Between 1862 and 1890, Fort St George compiled an accurate survey of all the ryotwari land in each of the Tamil districts, and recorded the results in a variety of maps, registers, and accounts. Henceforward, each 'ryot' was to hold a patta deed for the lands he occupied (the old pattas had been little more than receipts for revenue paid at the end of the season); each strip of land was assessed for revenue at a rate of (usually) thirty per cent of the net yield of the land, calculated according to a complex formula which theoretically took account of the productivity of the soil, the expenses of cultivation, the level of prices, the facilities for marketing, and other similar factors. These assessments were to be revised every thirty years. The thirty per cent net rate was lower than previous rates, and it was decreed now that remissions would only be available when the climate was unusually harsh.¹²⁶ Fort St George now knew what the land was (the surveys revealed enor-

mous extents concealed from view) and knew who the 'cultivators' were. Munro's dream of a peasant society could now be realized.

Or could it? The Madras administration remained sensitive to its own weaknesses, and anxious not to prejudice the collection of revenue by dogmatic innovation. What is most remarkable about all the discussions surrounding the introduction of the new surveys and the 'late-ryotwari' settlement, was that there was still absolutely no discussion of who the 'ryot' was. It was simply assumed that the earlier settlements had fixed this satisfactorily. Moreover, there were still strenuous attempts to satisfy those elements, chiefly the deltaic mirasidars, who disliked the notion of a ryotwari settlement. Thus government accepted the idea that villages could still be held jointly, even if to some extent this position had to be fictionalised in the records. The rules for *darkhast*—that is for the assignment of newly occupied land—were framed so that the right of assignment rested in theory with government, but in practice with leading men of the village.¹²⁷ And finally the settlement of the most truculent mirasidari area, Tanjavur district, was left as late as possible. It was not completed until the 1890s, and still provoked such an effective protest that some villages were left out of the ryotwari settlement.¹²⁸

Thus throughout the century the British settlement of rural Tamilnad depended on an accommodation with the political elites of the countryside. In a way that was not very different from previous regimes, the British left the mirasidars in reasonably untrammelled control of the valley villages, while putting their weight firmly behind the chiefly families and village headmen of the plains. Indeed, as the century progressed and the British administration of rural Madras became marginally more deliberate, this pattern of connection between state and rural elite was strengthened rather than weakened. In the valleys, where previous states had underwritten the dual stratification of society by confirming the ritual division between the mirasidari elite and the rest of the village, the British achieved much the same result by granting effective recognition of mirasi claims and by issuing pattas only to mirasidars and not to other members of the village. In the early settlements they accorded preferential rights to some local Brahman and Vellala notables who based their claims on caste privilege, and towards the end of the century they began to give greater acknowledgement to the entire structure of caste which emphasized the stratification of the village into high-caste land-controllers and outcasted subordi-

nates.¹²⁹ In the plains, they confirmed the chiefs in the Permanent Settlement and gradually added to the powers of the village officer.¹³⁰ They thereby extended the tendency of previous rulers to build up the hierarchical structure of plains society by political grant.

There were two consequences of this pattern of governmental accommodation which require special emphasis. The first is the simple point that the nineteenth century did not see a wholesale reconstruction of Tamil rural society along 'colonial lines'. Indeed in this period Tamil rural society looked very much as it had done in previous centuries. There were of course adjustments and portents of the future, but these were for the moment relatively unimportant. In the valleys the mirasidars were firmly in control. In the plains government recognized (by implication) that it was only possible to extract revenue by the use of an authority which was derived from some combination of past military glory and present political force. The zamindars were allowed to run their own police and judicial systems and government did not interfere too closely even when zamindari officials wielded the baton a little too wildly. When certain estates got into trouble and the government was forced to take over the administration for a short time, the government officers often found that cultivation contracted and revenue fell.¹³¹ In other words it still required a heavy hand to keep much of the rough plains territory under cultivation.¹³² In those parts where the old chiefs had been removed, the government's own local officer, the tahsildar, often assumed the role of coercive chief. The Torture Commission Report of 1855 revealed that tahsildars and village officers in the plains were often just as brutal as any military chief in their attempts to raise revenue.¹³³

The second point is that the uncertainties of the ryotwari settlement combined with the chaos of legal procedure to thwart any notion that the colonial state was introducing anything like a western, capitalist concept of property. When the government gave up its attempt to mould society to the ryotwari system and effectively allowed the ryotwari system to be moulded by the contours of local society, it thereby assured that local notions of rights in land would not be immediately superseded by notions of 'ownership' and 'title' which the ryotwari settlement envisaged. Government expected that the detailed survey and the issue of pattas to each 'ryot' in the post-1850s revenue resettlements would

not only facilitate revenue collection but would also provide cultivators with a secure title in land. But in fact the pattas failed to acquire a legal status.¹³⁴ As we have already seen, the allocation of pattas in the first place only bore a tangential relationship to the locally-recognized distribution of control over land. There was no way in which this single deed could cope with the various layers of rights in land, and the various subdivisions of these rights according to the complex Hindu law of the family. Moreover, if in the first place these deeds made only a very rough attempt to describe and to guarantee local rights, with the passage of time the position became worse rather than better. The main trouble was that the procedure for transfer of patta deeds operated through the taluk office and, as a government committee noted in 1915: 'Disposals in the Taluk Offices mean the intervention of greedy, unintelligent or jaded Taluk subordinates'¹³⁵ and thus most ryots found it simpler not to bother about the patta at all: 'Very few pattas are granted nowadays and very few ryots come to the jamanbandi camp to receive patta. Why should they? How does it improve their position?'¹³⁶ The result was that the patta registry contained the names of many who had long since lost any interest in the land. It also became more and more difficult to match the piece of paper to the land to which it referred. It was reported that a large amount of the government's work in launching legal process for recovering arrears of unpaid revenue arose because individuals who acquired land deeds by inheritance or settlement of debt found that one of the few reliable ways to discover what land the deed referred to was simply to neglect paying the revenue and allow the government to undertake the work of identification.¹³⁷

But control of land was important, particularly in the valleys and, as we shall see below, increasingly in Kongunad and the plains as well. Since the patta offered no evidence of title, it was necessary to resort to the courts. Here the position was only marginally better. There were few civil courts set up and, since the imported legal procedure allowed virtually limitless resort to adjournment and appeal, they were always crammed with business and decisions could not be achieved promptly. In the lower courts the judges were legal amateurs, there was little attention to laws of evidence, the mixture of English property law and Hindu family law created innumerable contradictions, and the lack of written evidence of title placed a premium on oral evidence which was notoriously open to

corruption.¹³⁸ It was thus difficult to predict the court's decision. Finally, the procedure for enforcing court decrees was notoriously unreliable. Here the agency was the court amins, who were few in number, ill-paid, and famous for their venality. 'At their hands', wrote one exasperated litigant, 'the Decrees even of the High Court become waste paper.'¹³⁹

There were a large number of cases over land ownership submitted to the Madras courts and of course many were successful. Indeed, they helped to make the patta registry even more inaccurate:

Another cause of divergence between the revenue registry and the facts is furnished by proceedings of Civil Courts, which necessarily take place behind the back of the Revenue Department. Private suits affecting boundaries or rights to ryotwari land and therefore affecting the entries in the revenue registry constitute a substantial part of the litigations of the Presidency. In disposing of such suits, the Judge is not bound to take cognizance of the revenue registers or to communicate his findings to the Revenue Department.¹⁴⁰

But resort to the courts was an expensive, lengthy, and unreliable business. It was certainly not secure enough to constitute an effective guarantee of rights in land. 'As things stand at present', noted a Tamil banker and lawyer in 1930, 'it cannot definitely be said who is the owner of a particular bit of land.'¹⁴¹ As a result of this confusion in the courts and in the administration of ryotwari, it was not so much the state which acted as the guarantor of property, but the local community. The government itself had to admit that this was so. 'The system is ryotwari,' noted one Collector, 'but no officer of Government knows who the ryot is, in about fifty per cent of the cases or more, except the village officers. I have never asked a village officer how he knew from whom to collect. I do not allow collection to be impeded.'¹⁴² Village officers kept private notebooks, and of course never showed them to higher officials. When the Collector made his annual tour of the district to close the accounts, he frequently came up against disputes which could only be decided by recourse to the true record of affairs in the village officers' private records. At this point the representative of the Queen-Empress had to stand embarrassedly to one side while the village officers got out their own records and settled the matter.¹⁴³ One official put the ratio of 'government-settled' villages to 'village-officer-settled' villages at about two to three.¹⁴⁴

In some cases, the dominance of local law over state law created special difficulties for government. The inhabitants of plains village occasionally hit on a brilliantly simple way to reduce their revenue demand; they simply omitted to pay revenue, the government moved in and sold up the land for arrears, at auction the land was knocked down for a trivial sum which was much less than the original revenue demand (and which in some cases was raised by public subscription in the village).¹⁴⁵ The result was that land titles circulated around the village, but, to the government's dismay, this seemed to make little difference to the actual disposition or usage of land in the village.¹⁴⁶ There was also a constant trickle of reports of civil court decrees which had been unceremoniously overturned by a local panchayat. The government was constantly puzzled by the fact that the courts (and executive officers) were constantly being requested to adjudicate in seemingly petty disputes over, for instance, minute pieces of property. It was clear in such cases that the plaintiff could not make an economic gain from such a case and British officials simply concluded that such people were 'litigious' by nature.¹⁴⁷ But this conclusion simply misunderstood the way in which people were using the courts. They were often pursuing litigation in order to achieve a political advantage. Local political elites had in the past looked upwards to the state or overlord to underwrite claims to local political pre-eminence. The executive arm of the British state was notoriously unwilling to perform this sort of service in a systematic fashion, but victory in the courts seems to have come to act as a form of surrogate. A court victory, however pyrrhic, represented a governmental endorsement of local domination. It was ironic but entirely logical that this curious form of endorsement remained important precisely because government failed to replace local systems of law with effective systems of its own. There was a concept of property in nineteenth-century rural Madras but it was one which was operated by the political system of the locality and only occasionally modified by the larger political system of the colonial state.

In sum, the style of rural administration in colonial Tamilnad was decided more by the constraints of local circumstance than by the reforming ideologies of nineteenth-century Britain. The state system settled down gently over the varied contours of local Madras. In the second half of the century there were some attempts

to tighten up the systems of governance which led on to a considerable process of reorganization, centralization and professionalization of the upper levels of government in the last quarter of the century. But this process of administrative reorganization for the moment stopped short of the village. Government continued to deal with rural Madras through the agency of the local political elites, and as the superstructure of government became more powerful, this merely tended to strengthen the position of these local elites and to give added emphasis to the local pattern of political control—the stratification of the valleys, the pyramidal hierarchy of the plains.

It was not however that nothing changed in nineteenth-century rural Tamilnad. The rapid pace of social change in previous centuries had not suddenly ground to a halt, though it is possible that with the virtual elimination of one of the major agencies of social change—warfare—there was some slowing of the pace. But these developments within the political framework of rural Madras did not take place in isolation. We must now look at the agricultural economy.

AGRICULTURAL GROWTH

Tamilnad's agriculture expanded through the nineteenth century. The expansion was far from steady for it was punctuated by a price slump in the 1830s and by bad bouts of famine in the 1860s, 1870s and 1890s. Nor can the expansion be quantified; there are simply no reliable figures. Yet there was a succession of favourable influences. British rule did bring to an end the tendency of foreign warriors to use the plains as a battleground and the valleys as an informal commissariat. The high level of land revenue demand probably impeded expansion for much of the first half of the century but from the 1840s onwards prices were slowly but steadily improving and British land revenue officers were becoming marginally more sensible. Then the 1840s saw a noticeable change in British government expenditure. From that decade onwards, small but nonetheless significant sums were spent on major irrigation works and on roads and other forms of communication. From the 1860s on, Tamilnad began to feel the pull of increased international demand for agricultural raw materials.

In the valleys this expansion meant a return to settled conditions and a gradual but definite expansion of the region's habitual regime of paddy cultivation. The crucial decade was the 1840s. By then the government's assault on the mirasidars had petered away, and it had begun to realize its responsibility for irrigation. District Collectors had all along been organizing the repair of existing irrigation works in a piecemeal fashion, but in the 1840s Arthur Cotton and his associates among the Madras engineers began to turn irrigation into a Victorian crusade:

So long as one drop of water is allowed to run waste into the sea, we must take blame to ourselves for not exerting our best efforts to obviate the evils of poverty or the dreadful effects of famine.¹⁴⁸

Cotton and his colleagues concentrated on large-scale works on the major river-systems of the region. Some were constructions of considerable technical bravura, others merely repairs and extensions to old irrigation systems. The most important in Tamilnad fell on the Kaveri and Tambraparni rivers. At the same time, government attempted to oblige local landowners to honour their presumed responsibilities, known as *kudimaramat*, to maintain smaller irrigation works.

The response of the valley mirasidars was enthusiastic. They magnified the government's efforts by contributing their own funds to assist the major government projects and raising further sums for totally private projects. The mirasidars were also happy to act as labour contractors and to offer their tied labourers to work on government irrigation repair schemes at a price. Finally they were ready, at the deliberately low water rates fixed by government, to take up every cusec of water provided.¹⁴⁹ As a result the irrigated area expanded significantly in the second half of the century. Srinivasa Raghavaiyengar estimated that the acreage under government works in Madras Presidency grew from 2.3 million to 3.4 million between 1852 and 1890 while the acreage under private irrigation grew from 0.4 million to 1 million.¹⁵⁰ While these figures are government's own records as interpreted by its most enthusiastic local employee, and must therefore be treated with some care, there are others who corroborate the general pattern. In his study of Tirunelveli district in the nineteenth century, David Ludden has estimated that the irrigated acreage under the Tambraparni river system was growing at something like 1 – 1½ per cent per annum

through the middle of the nineteenth century.

David Ludden's study points out two other important features of this expansion. Firstly, it was concentrated in the heartlands of the valley regions, where cultivation was already at its most secure. Government concentrated on such regions because the water supply was comparatively reliable and the technical problems were by and large minimized so that projects would achieve the greatest expansion of cultivation (and thus also the greatest return in water dues) for the least outlay. Government devised a quasi-commercial system for assessing irrigation projects and this pattern of location was the inevitable result. Secondly, the lion's share of the expansion of irrigated cultivation under these new works was achieved not by the incorporation of new lands but by double-cropping on existing irrigated fields. These valley heartlands were already densely settled and thus the chief avenue for expansion was inevitably intensification of cultivation practices rather than extension of area. The expansion of valley agriculture in the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, did little to disturb the existing pattern of society. Government irrigation works merely added to the prosperity of those who were already in control of the most secure and fertile tracts in the region. Indeed, for the valley mirasidars the nineteenth century was something of a golden age. The Government junked its own utilitarian principles to give them the revenue settlement they wanted, supplied them with better irrigation, employed them first as grain contractors then as irrigation contractors and later as servants in the expanding bureaucracy, built roads and railways which took their surplus paddy to markets in Madras City, Ceylon and south-east Asia, provided courts which were thankfully inaccessible to their dependents and which thus could – with skill – be used to confirm mirasidari privileges, and finally flattered their social pretensions by honouring the notions of the Sastraic caste system which had long underwritten the stratification of valley society.

In the plains, the expansion of agriculture was greater both in its extent and in its social impact. Here government assisted the expansion not through irrigation but through communications. Indeed it did little or nothing to assist irrigation outside the valley centres except for some rather half-hearted attempts to repair tanks and to encourage landowners to fulfill their *kudimaramat* obligations.¹⁵² Communications, however, were especially important

for the plains. Their economy, as we have already seen, had always depended on a considerable volume of trade round the periodic marketing circles which passed through the *kottai-pettai* settlements and the temporary local markets or *shandies* (*sandais*). The plains were a poor place for producing food, but were a good place for growing certain other crops such as spices, oilseeds, cotton and pulses, for producing building materials such as bricks, tiles, stone, and timber, and for breeding cattle. The expansion of the plains economy depended crucially on the ability to import food to supplement local production of poor millets, and on the ability to export the range of local produce.

In the eighteenth century, local trade was hampered by warfare, by the attempts of local rulers to raise tolls, by the predations of disorderly militias and other highway robbers, and by the state of the roads; in 1800, 'there was not one complete road throughout the whole Presidency on which it would have been possible to employ wheeled carriages' and one of the main roads down to the south was said to be difficult going 'owing to the frequent intervention of paddy fields'.¹⁵³ The chief means of internal transport were the pack-bullock and the ass. These were slow, had a limited capacity, and were expensive. It was estimated early in the nineteenth century that the cost of carrying grain just eight miles added one third to the price. Under these conditions, most of the trade was in the hands of people who were very close to being robbers themselves—the gypsy-like Brinjaras and Lambadies—and the only articles carried over any distance in any considerable quantities were salt, which was a necessity, various luxury items which commanded a good price, and cattle, which transported themselves. The only exceptions to this pattern were the extraordinary pockets of demand created by mobile armies, or by the resplendent courts of successful rulers, such as Tipu in Mysore and Martanda Varma in Travancore.¹⁵⁴

From the beginning of its rule, Fort St George repaired certain roads for military use, but the major change came in the 1840s when the government set about turning the straggling mule tracks into passable roads. Some, like the 'cotton road' built down through Madurai and Tirunelveli to the port of Tuticorin, were designed to encourage exports, but others were built merely to assist the passage of government officials, soldiers, and traders through the interior of the country. At the start of the nineteenth century,

government reckoned, carts were used for local transport but were 'never used for distant journeys'. By 1850 there were an estimated 90,000 carts in the province, and by 1877-8 the figure had risen to 284,000.¹⁵⁵

Cart freight was still expensive, and it made no sense to carry grain, particularly the coarse cheap millets of the plains, more than a few miles. Carting did however encourage the production and trade of articles with a better value-to-weight ratio, such as vegetables, spices, fruit, betel; and produce for local and export trade like sugar, indigo, tobacco and cotton. And as carts became more common, so they became cheaper, and one estimate reckoned that the cost halved between the 1840s and the 1880s.¹⁵⁶ Some of this reduction may have been caused by competition with the railways, for in the 1880s rail transport cost on average a quarter of the rate for carts per ton mile. But the railways did not wipe out carts; indeed they encouraged them since the railway network was skeletal and carts had to be used to carry from the interior to the rail-head. In the decade after 1877-8, the estimated number of carts in the province rose from 284,000 to 436,000.¹⁵⁷

Railways did make it economic to carry bulky goods like paddy and oilseed over considerable distances. The early network, built between 1860 and 1880, merely linked together the three valley centres, Kongunad and Madras City, connected them to routes to the north and west, and in so doing joined the cotton and rice-growing areas to the main ports. Between 1880 and 1900 there were just two lines built across the groundnut-producing area; and after 1900 there were several small lines added, mainly in the Kaveri and Tambraparni deltas. By 1920, the network covered the main cities and ports, and the rice and cotton areas in some detail, but there was only a handful of lines branching into the plain.

Peace and roads were the conditions necessary for expansion. It is not possible to give a statistical account of this expansion because the government's surveillance of the dry cultivation of the plains was nowhere near as good as the monitoring of irrigated areas in the valleys. However, a number of reports by travellers between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries indicate that at this time considerable areas of the plains were still either scrub, forest, or wasteland. In the mid-seventeenth century, Tavernier found the western fringe of the Tondai country covered in impenetrable forest infested with monkeys. The south-eastern coastal region was still

covered in jungle and inhabited by tigers, and the black-cotton soil in the north of Tirunelveli was still covered with forest in the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁵⁸ The British troops had enormous difficulties in penetrating stretches of forest in the Arcots plain and in Ramnad during the fighting of the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁵⁹ Buchanan found traces of past cultivation but little current agriculture during his traverse of north and north-western Tamilnad around 1801.¹⁶⁰ Elija Hoole passed through jungle continuously except in the immediate vicinity of the rivers in his journey down the coast southwards from Madras in 1820, and found much of southern Salem covered by jungle and inhabited by the ever-threatening tiger.¹⁶¹ There is piecemeal evidence that these areas were being cleared very rapidly in the early nineteenth century. Much of the expansion was no doubt the recouping of lands lost in recent fighting, but some represented new clearances. In the 1790s, Read abandoned the idea of a permanent settlement of the revenue and moved towards the idea of the more flexible ryotwari system when he discovered just how fast cultivation was expanding in Salem and realized that a permanent settlement would deny government the benefits of a similarly expanding revenue.¹⁶² Arrowsmith's map of Tamilnad in 1822 suggests that forests in the Arcots and Ramnad, which the troops had had to hack their way through half a century earlier, had already been rapidly cleared.¹⁶³ The resettlement party in Salem in 1861 reckoned that cultivation had grown twelve per cent in ten years, and another estimate of 'dry' cultivation in Salem in the late 1860s reckoned that acreage had grown from 6½ to 10¾ lakh acres in under twenty years.¹⁶⁴ By the time of the surveys of the 'late ryotwari' settlement, all the areas mentioned as forest in the travellers' accounts cited above had been largely cleared and submitted to the plough.

For most of the century, the plains seem to have acted as an internal frontier. Land was relatively freely available and had almost no market price.¹⁶⁵ Cultivation was still to some extent operated on a shifting system. In 1855 in South Arcot government reckoned that the area under cultivation shifted by about ten to fifteen per cent a year.¹⁶⁶ Times of adversity would produce massive movements of population. According to one report some 150,000 persons, or half the population, quit Ramnad after a series of bad rainfalls, and both government and zamindars found that cultivators would protest with their feet if the revenue demand was too

high.¹⁶⁷ In these conditions, the expansion of acreage seems to have run ahead of the population. The Collector of Tirunelveli reported that the barrier to increased cultivation of cotton was not the availability of land but the provision of labour.¹⁶⁸ The number of pattas or land deeds issued by the revenue administration increased steadily in the second half of the century.¹⁶⁹

Commercial activity expanded in parallel. Settlement reports regularly spoke of the increasing number of shandies—the number in Tirunelveli rose from thirty-five in 1823 to seventy-six in 1880—¹⁷⁰ and although some of the expansion can be attributed to the greater watchfulness of the enumerators, much of it was undoubtedly real. Meanwhile the first of the all-India censuses taken in 1871 and 1881 showed that plains Tamilnad was scattered with burgeoning small-towns. The 1881 Census found eighty-two towns in Tamilnad with populations between five and fifteen thousand; many of these were old *kottai-pettai* settlements, perhaps now swollen by the location of a railway station, road junction or government sub-office. The commerce of these local markets and small towns consisted in local exchange, reciprocal trade with the valley regions, and, increasingly as the second half of the century wore on, supply of commodities for overseas trade. The communities who handled this trade were two sorts.¹⁷¹ Firstly there were the 'immigrant' merchants, mostly Telugus and Kannadas, who had come south with the warrior expansion of post-medieval times and had established themselves in the business of periodic marketing as part and parcel of the process of settlement on the plains. The Devangas and Balijas dominated the markets in Salem and Kongunad; the Komatis and Beri Chetties who had long dominated the peddling markets on the Arcots plain now also moved into the channels of long-distance trading and some of them settled in Madras and the other ports of Tamilnad's east coast. Secondly, there were local communities who expanded the other way from the ports to the interior on the impetus of expanding overseas trade. The Labbai Muslims moved inwards along the routes of the hides and skins trade and took a considerable role in the markets of the Arcots and Madurai.¹⁷² The Shanars, who were branded as toddy-tappers but who had long since diversified into landholding and local trade in the far south, expanded northwards into the growing cotton-marketing towns of Tirunelveli and Madurai.¹⁷³ A number of fishing communities from the littoral, notably the Paravas in

Tuticorin, also built on a long history of activity in the colonial ports and moved into commerce in the immediate hinterland.¹⁷⁴

While there is (albeit circumstantial) evidence to suggest that the plains economy expanded quite freely and easily for much of the century, there is (equally circumstantial) evidence that the expansion had begun to reach some sort of ceiling by the last quarter. Clearly peace and economic expansion resulted in a considerable growth of population, although the exact statistical outlines of this growth cannot easily be made out. Government took censuses of Tamilnad's population regularly from 1823 onwards, and according to these estimates the population of 1823 had doubled by 1866-7 and almost tripled by 1901. It is certain that the earlier censuses under-enumerated and thus tended to accentuate the rate of increase. It is noticeable that the recorded increase in districts which the British knew well early in the century is much less than that in those which they hardly knew at all. In Salem, which had been Read and Munro's stamping ground and which remained of interest to British officials throughout the period of the early settlements, the census reckoned that the population had just doubled between 1823 and 1901, whereas in South Arcot, which remained a blank on most British administrative maps until mid-century, the recorded increase was five times. The Salem figure is probably nearer the truth. Anyway, this was still a considerable increase and the censuses suggest that much of it was concentrated on the plains.¹⁷⁵

In Salem, where officials had commented on the rate of agricultural expansion since the 1790s, a revenue officer noted in 1870 that 'almost every inch of cultivable land is now taken up'.¹⁷⁶ Between then and the end of the century, many other officials reported on the declining availability of new land in the plains.¹⁷⁷ Certainly the expansion was not punctuated quite so neatly or so conclusively, but it is still probable that whereas land had been expanding faster than population until the 1860s or 1870s, thereafter the roles were reversed. Dharma Kumar calculates that over Madras Presidency as a whole, land and population were moving roughly in parallel between 1884-5 and the end of the century.¹⁷⁸ Meanwhile on the plains the surest signs of the closing of the frontier were the gradual disappearance of shifting cultivation and the increasing saleability of land. In the early part of the nineteenth century there were numerous reports that dry land had no pecuniary value.¹⁷⁹ As the Tiruchi Collector reported in 1826, 'the ryots

are poor, cultivate a small extent of land each, and are not considered to have any proprietary right in it'. By the 1890s figures of around ten to fifty rupees an acre were beginning to be mentioned.¹⁸⁰

These were just the outward signs of a major shift in the foundations of plains society, away from the flexible, militaristic society of old to one which depended on agriculture. This was not of course just a sudden switch. Agricultural expansion had from the very beginning formed part of the military colonization of the plains. But the nineteenth century still saw a major change of emphasis. The profits of warfare had declined, while those of agriculture had increased, and by the end of the century the dependence on agriculture was such that the scarcity of land had become noticeable. In this period, there were many signs of the strains of transition. The military character of the plains had not been immediately submerged by pax Britannica at the start of the nineteenth century. Because the British made virtually no attempt to provide for the policing of the rural areas, there was still a call on militia services. The zamindars continued to use their military peons to keep peace, encourage cultivation and drag out the revenue in their estates, and other villages were still ready to hire *kavalgars* to protect their crops and cattle; indeed the partial demobilization of the poligar armies after 1801 initially increased the threat to law and order and raised the premium on *kaval* services.¹⁸¹ As the century wore on, however, the demand for military services declined. The zamindars relied more on the assistance of the British administration to coerce recalcitrant tenants, and allowed their private armies to decay. Except in the more remote regions, villagers came to rely more and more on the ability of the roads and railways to bring the government's police into the countryside when necessary. The 1870s, 80s and 90s were clearly years of transition, for in the period there were many of the signs of local militias being carelessly demobbed. These were the great years for 'dacoity' in the south, and the police force spent much of its energy capturing militiamen who had taken to marauding.¹⁸² There were also reports of villages rejecting the services of their *kavalgars*,¹⁸³ and more and more reports of the institution known as *tuppukuli*, a mixture of rustling and protection racket which was clearly the last resort of unemployed *kavalgars*. The disorders of this period lingered on until, with the help of the

obtuseness of the police department, large sections of the *Kallars* and the *Padaiyichis* were labelled as 'Criminal Tribes'.¹⁸⁴ Among all these ructions, the most eloquent evidence of the social transition of this period was offered by the violent clashes in the southern districts between *Shanars* and *Maravars*. The *Shanars* belonged to a community which was considered low in status because of its association with toddy-tapping, but which was rapidly growing richer on the expanding commerce of the plains towns. The *Maravars* looked back to a high status as warriors, but looked forward to a more equivocal future in an increasingly cramped agriculture, and they bitterly resented any attempts on the part of the *Shanars* to convert new wealth into new status. This see-saw movement in the prospects and self-images of the two communities provided the background for a series of communal incidents and communal riots in the last quarter of the century.¹⁸⁵

CONCLUSION: THE THREE REGIONS

The history of Tamilnad passed through three distinct phases. The first was dominated by the agricultural civilization of the river valleys, and saw the elaboration of a material culture centred on rice and irrigation, and a political culture structured around temples and Brahmanical codes of social status. The second was dominated by the military talents of the plains and saw new forms of social organization formed in the process of military colonization, and a new political culture which emphasized the importance of military power. This new material and social culture was laid over and reacted with that of the valleys; the social organization of the plains was influenced by some of the notions of status so important in the valleys, and the valleys in turn had to find some form of accommodation with the military and political systems of the plains. The third period brought the two societies even closer together. The inroads of foreign invaders broke down the land and sea boundaries which had kept Tamilnad in relative isolation, and set off internal movements of military mobilization and demographic resettlement which blurred the boundaries between valleys and plains. Moreover while in the short-term this period saw a fragmentation of political authority and a drive towards local autonomy, in the long term it encouraged the growth of a centralized political authority.

Yet despite these rapprochements and overlays, at the time of the British conquest there were still marked differences between valleys and plains, while Kongunad had emerged as a third region with distinctive characteristics of its own. The local variety of the region's history has meant, as many have observed, that each Tamil village is somehow different from every other one, yet it is still possible to describe two very different cultures which the British found in the valleys and plains at the outset of the colonial period, and a third variant in Kongunad which is in many ways a hybrid of the other two. Given the local variety, and given the tendency of the regions to merge fairly gradually into one another at the frontiers, any description of these separate regions must deal only in archetypes and must admit that there is an infinite number of variations which combine different features of the two systems in a different distinctive mix. Yet deep in the valleys, way out on the plains, and far off in Kongunad there were societies which were modelled by their distinctive geographical setting and their particular historical experience.

Valleys

The rivers made possible a relatively secure agriculture based on rice and permanent irrigation works. Over the years the valleys had become prosperous and relatively densely populated. The ability to dominate the region and to benefit from its fertility had long depended on control over the one resource which was in finite supply, land, and the ability to use the one resource which required careful, co-operative organization, irrigation water.¹⁸⁶

The settlements of population in the valleys were distributed along the water-course in a close stipple of small hamlets. These settlements were dominated by the Vellalas and Brahmans who had been the earliest settlers and who had first devised forms of co-operative management to control the land and organize the flow of irrigation water. The social organization of the valley villages still contained elements of these systems of management. The organizing notion was *kaniyatchi*, literally control of land. The leaders of the village still expressed their privileged rights in terms of a share (*pangu*) in this control (*kaniyatchi*), as heirs, literal or metaphorical, of the original settlers. Although the resources of the village may once have been managed completely communally by the

association of *kaniyatchikarans*, the *pangu* had generally speaking been divided into individual units. However the remnants of corporateness often remained in the form of some village council of *kaniyatchikarans* and, more particularly, in the idea that *kaniyatchi* entailed not only a claim on a cultivated plot but also a share in the control of the entire territory of the village including waste-lands, roads, house-sites, and grazing grounds.¹⁸⁷

This claim to total, exclusive control of the village on the part of the *kaniyatchi* elite had to be buttressed by ritual exclusiveness as well. The fecundity of irrigated rice agriculture attracted many people to the valleys and made it possible for the *kaniyatchikarans* to distance themselves from cultivation. The land was worked by non-*kaniyatchikarans* who accepted a serf-like status in return for a share (however meagre) in the valleys' reliable harvests. With the help of the state authorities, which underwrote *kaniyatchi*, and with the help of Sastraic sociology and its emphasis on hierarchy, the *kaniyatchikarans* could not only keep the labourers outside the village by forcing them to dwell in separate hamlets, but also keep them outside Hindu society, by labelling them as 'outcaste' or 'untouchable'.

The valley villages were thus divided into two exclusive sections—the privileged corporation of Brahman and Vellala *kaniyatchikarans*, and the outcaste labourers who were usually Pallan or Paraiyan. The maintenance of exclusive land control also dictated a series of different social and political strategies. The first line of defence was created by rules for marriage and inheritance which confined the right to privilege within narrow limits. Cross-cousin marriage was favoured by the valley elite, and marriage circles were relatively small.¹⁸⁸ But varna rules and tight marriage patterns could not cope with the strains imposed by the expansion of the valleys through the extension of irrigation or the swelling of the valley population with the irruption of military adventurers. In response, the concept of Vellala developed into a flexible status-category which could admit acceptable or irresistible newcomers without causing any damage to the notion of stratification which buttressed the valley's system of agricultural production.¹⁸⁹ Over the years the ranks of the Vellala swelled to include many who had no connection with the early settlers. The early inhabitants merely retained sub-caste names which reflected their claims to noble ancestry—Choliya, Tondaimandalam, Tuluva, Pandya, Karaikatha, Kondai-

kottai. Meanwhile most of the immigrants readily adapted themselves to the norms of valley culture. Even those who were originally just land-grabbing plains soldiery or upstart recipients of royal grants, often grew into Vellala-hood by changing their gods, their food habits, their funeral rites and other distinctive customs. Some of the later waves of settlers, particularly those who moved into the valleys in the disorder of the eighteenth century, still had their original names and titles, but had so changed their social habits that they had nothing in common with their erstwhile kinsmen who still lived on the plains. This was most noticeable among the various settlements of the Kallar. Others who had moved into the valleys somewhat earlier had even adopted a new title which stressed that they were separate from their cousins remaining on the plains; generally this title was one which had denoted a noble rank in their old community (Agamudaiyan, Udaiyan) or one which meant village lord or village head (Pillai, Mudaliar, Nattaiman, Nattar).¹⁹⁰ Finally some had made the full transition to Vellala with the result that the British census in its attempt to count 'sub-castes' found over 900 units among the Vellala.¹⁹¹ These niceties of nomenclature meant that the route through which a rough plainsman could find his way into valley society had become proverbial: 'A Kallar may come to be a Maravar, turn into an Agamudaiyan, by slow degrees attain the title of Vellala, and then set out to be a Mudaliar.'¹⁹²

Thus by the end of the eighteenth century the exclusive land-control of the Brahman-Vellala nobility had been considerably dented. Newcomers had been able to buy, seize or be granted a place in the hierarchy of valley society. Merchants had bought their way in; rulers had settled warriors, revenue farmers or other intermediaries; and plains militiamen had moved from providing kaval guardianship to exerting firmer and more permanent political control.

The prosperity of the valleys also made them fairly cosmopolitan in outlook. There was considerable commitment to foreign trading. The valleys exported rice to Ceylon and the east, and imported metals, precious stones and all sorts of luxury goods. The ends of the various river deltas were scattered with seaports. Besides these port towns, there were also a number of inland towns which grew up as administrative and religious centres. The country-dwellers maintained close links with these towns through their participation in the external trading economy, through their commitment to temple-

based religion, and through their association with state authorities. The latter had developed in the early period because the complex society and economy of the valley countryside demanded the services of powerful outside arbitrators to settle potentially debilitating disputes over matters like irrigation and social status. It changed somewhat in the later period when the state wanted to extract a greater flow of surplus out of the delta economy. The growing military power of the state meant that it could impose closer control over the valley countryside, but the threat of withholding vital supplies of food remained as a declining yet residually effective bargaining counter which mitigated the move towards centralization. Except in difficult circumstances, the state generally got its way most effectively by cajoling the support of the *kaniyatchi* elite, and the proverb admitted that 'the Vellala's goad is the ruler's sceptre'. Thus just as much as the state came to impose greater central control over the valley countryside, so the elite of the valley villages penetrated into the ranks of state personnel. It was mostly members of the Brahman-Vellala elite who came to act as state agents in the valley villages and who filled the places in the growing central administrations in the capital towns. Moreover state systems (and trading systems) were inherently and, as times went by increasingly, unstable. The sites of the administrative capitals in the valleys shifted rapidly with the rise and fall of dynasties, and the location of ports was only a little more stable since there were lots of potential harbours though none with particularly outstanding advantages, and the patterns of overseas trade shifted rapidly, particularly from the sixteenth century onwards. In the valleys, the urban centres had none of the fixity and cultural ferocity of the countryside.

Plains

While the productive base of the valleys rested firmly on irrigated rice agriculture, the economy of the plains was very different and somewhat varied. The combination of the harsh climate and (generally) poor soils meant that arable agriculture was not the original, and never the sole support of the population. Rather there was hunting and herding and later more developed forms of animal husbandry. Then there was some inferior cropping of millets which, in the early days, was almost certainly conducted in a shifting,

slash-and-burn system. The expansion of settlement from the Vijayanagar period on expanded and stabilized agricultural practices but there were still elements of long-fallow cultivation in the plains agriculture of the nineteenth century. Finally there was the provision of specialist goods and services which could be exchanged with the surplus food of the valleys. These goods and services fell into three categories. Firstly, there were livestock. Cattle were bred on the plains and on the edges of the hills and annually taken along drove-roads which led down through a series of markets in the valleys where they were sold for use in valley agriculture. Sheep and goats were also kept for penning on valley fields to provide manure, and mules and horses were raised for transportation. Secondly, there was protection. From the late medieval period the plainsmen acted as mercenaries for the valley lords in times of war and, under the *kaval* system, gradually came to work as their policemen and defendants in time of peace as well. Thirdly, there was a whole range of ancillary services. The principal of these concerned construction. The plainsmen quarried stone, felled timber and later manufactured bricks and tiles and smelted iron. They sold these and other manufactured products in the valleys.

The importance of agriculture in the valleys made control of land the crucial feature of social organization. By contrast the crucial feature in the plains was control of men. Land was poor and abundantly available to anyone who would clear the scrub, and thus had little or no social or pecuniary value. The importance of military service and, to a lesser extent, the production of goods and services, laid great stress on the control of men and their ability to work or fight. Even agriculture depended to some extent on the ability of controllers of men to force their subordinates to work the rather hopeless soil.

In contrast to the close stipple of agrarian settlements along the valleys, the plains were settled in compact, isolated and fortified villages. Francis Hamilton Buchanan who toured the Tamil districts (and beyond) immediately after the imposition of British authority, left a graphic description of this pattern of settlement:

The country is exceedingly bare and population scanty. All the houses are collected in villages; and the smallest village, of five or six houses, is fortified. The defence of such a village consists of a round stone wall, perhaps forty feet in diameter and six feet high. On the top of this is a parapet of mud, with a door in it, to which the only access is by ladder. In

case a plundering party comes near the village, the people ascend into this tower with their families, and most valuable effects, and having drawn up the ladder, defend themselves with stones which even the women throw with great force and dexterity. Larger villages have square forts with round towers at the angles. In those still larger, or in towns, the defences are more numerous, and the fort serves as a citadel; while the village, or Pettah, is surrounded by a weaker defence of mud.¹⁹³

These latter were the fort-mart (*kottai-pettai*) towns which usually marked the headquarters of a local chief or *palaiyagar*.¹⁹⁴

The social structure of these villages revolved not so much around the management of land as the organization of people. This was achieved through two interlocking systems, one based on kinship and the other on military hierarchy. By the time anthropologists came to study them in the mid-twentieth century, certain of the plains communities had only a skeletal organization at the local level. But in parts of the region there were remnants of an organization based on lineage, lineage heads and clans. Often in such cases, the ambitious families and lineages did not limit themselves to the narrow pattern of marriage which was common in the valleys, but rather sought further afield for alliances which helped to raise or substantiate the status of the individual family and lineage, and which also helped to knit the clan together as a unit.¹⁹⁵ While this system based on kinship grew up from the base, the other system based on military merit and political achievement grew down from above. At the top were chiefs and *palaiyagars* whose families had originally gained their status by military might or royal appointment. In the middle levels of the society, the two systems met and accommodated one another. It was not uncommon, for instance, for the overlord to raise up individuals or whole lineages, because of their talents and services, and endow them with functions and privileges which they did not qualify for on grounds of kinship. Equally, the lower levels of society often invented fictional kinship ties to explain the dominance of political leaders.

The authority created in this hierarchical system was used, not to hold on to land, but to exercise forms of jurisdiction over people and to some extent to control the distribution of food and other scarce resources among the whole population. Leaders at all levels of this society acted as judges over matters concerning the personal conduct of their subordinates. They also operated systems of redistribution. The *palaiyagari* town invariably contained a market which was under strict political control. The village heads operated

redistributive systems which closely resembled the jajmani systems of northern India.¹⁹⁶ The surplus of local agriculture, dues from trade and ancillary services, and profits from *kaval* fees were centralized under the control of the village heads and redistributed to labourers, artisans and other subordinates in customary amounts. The chief members of the village would also store any excess produce from a good year, in order to sustain the village through the bad years which, predictably in this region, would follow. The system of economic redistribution was likely to be buttressed by a series of ritual performances which emphasized the centralized character of the village.

The relationship of the countryside to the state and to commerce also differed between valleys and plains. While the valleys sported a small number of large religious and administrative capitals, the plains had numerous small towns, mostly the *kottai-pettai* settlements described above. While the valleys were firmly oriented towards external trade, the plains participated mainly in local trading. The highly dispersed and nucleated pattern of settlement encouraged the growth of a structure of periodic markets. Merchants and artisans trekked round circuits of *kottai-pettai* towns. Moreover, these merchants and artisans rarely belonged to the local rural community. Many of them had entered the country as migrants from the Telugu and Kannada regions, either as refugees from warfare or as camp-followers of the northern armies, while others had probably used the opportunities provided in times of political disorder to quit a lowly calling, enter commerce and thus clamber slightly up the social scale.

As we have already seen, the state-system in the plains from the Vijayanagar period on interfered considerably in the internal organization of the plains countryside in order to achieve its aim of expanding production and creating the basis of a military supply and recruitment system. This meant placing officials, artisans and other ancillary personnel in the villages. Thus besides the groups of Telugus, Padaiyichis, Kallars and Maravars who formed the 'dominant castes' of the plains villages, there was a varied population of outsiders. In many parts, the emphasis on the importance of *men* meant that village leaders provided incentives to attract immigrants to the locality; often, for instance, *parakudi* or outsider-tenants were allowed considerable discounts on local rents and dues against the sums paid by *ulkudis* or insider-tenants. Plains villages thus often

include immigrant *parakudis*, 'foreign' merchants who lived and transacted with the locally dominant population but clearly did not belong to it, and state-appointed officials and artisans. The population of the plains countryside was thus often split ritually and socially into two distinct parts, which were often described as left-hand and right-hand. On one side was the dominant warrior community with assorted labouring, artisans, and service personnel who had been part of the original or early settlement, and who were part of the jajmani-style redistributive system centred on the dominant lineage. On the other side was a rather more casual organization of the disparate peoples who were late-comers to the society and who often owed their status and wealth to the state, commerce or some other system beyond the village.¹⁹⁷

Kongunad

The history and the settlements of Kongunad contain features of both the valley and plains type, but the region is sufficiently distinctive to demand a short treatment on its own. Its physical geography resembled the other regions of the western plains, but with important differences. It was much larger and better defined than the Baramahal or Dindigul country, being a large upland plain almost entirely surrounded by small hills. Its rainfall was lower and even less reliable than the rest of the plain, but it was traversed by some of the important tributaries of the Kaveri, had considerable patches of good black soil and also of good red soil washed down from the Ghats. It also had good reserves of subsoil water and when these could be tapped, the one barrier to a considerable fertility disappeared.

Thus it was a much more promising area than other parts of the plain. It was also more susceptible to invasion. The main east-west route of the southern peninsula passed through the Kongu country in order to cross the Western Ghats through the Palghat gap. Routes from the western Deccan to the Pandya country and parts of the Kaveri crossed it from north to south. For much of its history it had been marched across by traders and armies. Moreover, standing right in between the Kaveri, the Pandya country, the Chera country of the west coast and the Mysore country on the southern Deccan, it had spent most of its history acting either as battleground or a buffer state.¹⁹⁸

Its society and culture were thus a unique combination of elements of the plains and valley models. Although geographically Kongunad belonged to the plains, its historical role brought it into close contact with the valleys, particularly the Kaveri. The Chola kings made a deliberate attempt to settle and rule the region and the combination of Chola-induced immigration and incorporation of the local population created a majority community which laid claim to Vellala status. These Kongu Vellala, often known as the Gounder, adopted many of the Brahmanical customs and social pretensions of the valley Vellalas. But unlike the latter they also had a history as warriors. They thus had the plains-style social structure based on patrilineage and a hierarchy of supra-lineage political chiefs, known as pattagars, who traced their political status back to military service under the Nayak rulers and political grants which came by way of reward.¹⁹⁹

As in the plains, the local economy had clearly once been involved chiefly with livestock. The subordinate castes in Kongunad carried names which revealed their early vocations; the most numerous were Valaiyans, which meant hunters, and Chakkiliyans, which meant leather workers. Moreover some of the most important and richest of the Kongu Vellala had become, not big arable farmers, but cattle-ranchers breeding specialist animals for sale both inside and outside the region. But unlike the rest of the plains, Kongunad had also developed a successful agricultural economy. Because rainfall was exceptionally low, and the area which could be watered by local rivers exceptionally limited, cultivation depended on the development of irrigation from wells. Well-building seems to have begun from the time of the early Chola settlements in the medieval period, and to have grown slowly but gradually despite the difficulties of sinking wells in the region and despite the disruptions of intermittent warfare. Wells were a capital investment which made agriculture profitable and thus gave the land they watered a degree of attractiveness and value that was unusual in the rest of the plains. Thus as in the valleys, land-control had become important.²⁰⁰ Feuds over land were common and had led to the growth of a local customary law over land and land transfer. Thus a history of purchase and seizure had tended to obscure, though not completely destroy, the relationship between kinship and territory which marked most of the plains.

The patterns of trade and of settlement reflected this inter-

mediate position between the valleys and the plains. Kongunad had, like the plains, a number of local chiefly towns connected by circuits of periodic marketing, but it was also crossed by long-distance routes conveying trade from north to south and east to west. As on the plains the settlements were isolated, compact, fortified. But rather in imitation of the valleys peoples who lived close to their fields rather than on a nucleated pattern, the Gounder often deserted his village in the busy agricultural season and went to live in a field-hut on his plot. Similarly as in the valleys the cultivation was rich and intense enough to merit the employment of hired labourers; but unlike the valley mirasidar the Gounder himself was not distanced from cultivation—he proudly stood behind the plough—and unlike the valley pannaiyal the Kongunad labourer was virtually adopted as another member of the Gounder's family rather than being condemned to a separate, low, outcaste, and serf status.

There was an equally complex mix of ritual attachments. The Gounders venerated household gods, the local deity Murugan who was generally popular among Vellalas in the valleys, and the Vedic deities on top of that. The villages were often divided on the left-right pattern noticed on the plains, but with one curious difference; the Brahmans stood outside and above this division and appeared to function rather like the Brahman of the valley village who stood above the rest in order to be able to confirm the supremacy of the Vellala and give ritual endorsement to their *kaniyatchi* style of land control.²⁰¹ The pyramidal hierarchy of the plains was buttressed by the dual stratification of the valleys. The Gounder enjoyed control over both land and men. They were exceptionally powerful.

Until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, so far as the European traders were concerned southern India was merely a rather useful factory for muslins, chintzes, and calicoes. Once the East India Company had fought and bargained its way into governmental control of the region, there was a tendency for the Company's policy-makers to think of it as something of a *tabula rasa*, a convenient laboratory for experiments in colonial government. Yet those who had to implement the Company's policies found that they were dealing with a complex and ancient society whose history had an impetus of its own. As many historians of colonial India have

pointed out, the colonial transformation was tardy and inconclusive. The East India Company was able to centralize control over its south Indian possessions only slowly and tentatively. It was able to build on the efforts of the military state-builders of the last three centuries, but it found it difficult to acclimatize imported ideas and institutions. The notion of achieving a social and commercial revolution through legal and political innovation 'from above' faded gently into the footnotes of intellectual history. There was no sense in which a new rule of law, concept of property, or framework of capitalist relations was thrust down upon south India's rural society.

The agrarian economy did indeed expand, but on a rhythm that reached back at least into the region's medieval history. The pressure of an aggressive state system with expansive military aims continued to push out the frontiers of cultivation just as it had since the time of the Hoysala and the Vijayanagar warriors. Like its predecessors, the company based its power in the valleys and spent money on irrigation to encourage more intensive exploitation of the valleys' remarkable natural endowment. Similarly the Company completed the efforts of its predecessors in finally incorporating the plains and encouraging the extension of arable agriculture into the remaining reserves of forest, waste and pasture.

The Tamilnad countryside responded well to these demands partly because it was a flexible society which had grown accustomed to rapid change, but partly because it forced the colonial rulers to meet it half way. After a brief initial period of aggrandizement, the colonial state was obliged to accommodate itself to the contours of local society. Authority was allowed to fragment, and power was allowed to devolve onto the leaders of local society. Through its hit-and-miss efforts to find methods of taxation and policing *which worked*, the colonial state became a remarkably conservative force. It succeeded in pushing forward the agrarian economy by identifying the leaders of local society and then abetting their influence. The valley mirasidars in the nineteenth century were generally speaking well off, socially as powerful as ever and, by the latter part of the century, politically ambitious as well. The chiefs and militarized clansmen of the plains faced pacification, domestication, and settlement, and this made the transition less smooth and peaceful; but once they realized that the British posed no threat to established local notions of privilege and hierarchy, they generally

both co-operated and profited. The accommodation struck with local leaders, and the expansion of the agrarian economy along well-rutted tracks, meant that there was no dramatic reorganization of production. Society was not turned upside down. The century saw the further multiplication of the number of small farmers who used various combinations of family, tied, and paid labour and who grew variously for subsistence, for the state, and for the market.

The last third of the century witnessed a new complex of changes. Firstly, the colonial government set about a new round of centralization and integration. Secondly, the pace of agrarian expansion slowed. In the earlier part of the century, expansion had been particularly rapid as there was room to take up the slack caused by the disorders of recent decades. But the steady erosion of reserves of good land turned the path of expansion metaphorically uphill; the tortoise of demography started to overhaul the hare of cultivation. Thirdly, the ports of the coromandel coast began to welcome more of the new steamships on the rapid run through the Suez canal from Europe. Before going on to consider the history of rural Tamilnad in the twentieth century we must inspect the accounts of colonial trade.