

**Colonial Policy and Seeds of Resistance: Agrarian Commercialisation
and Nationalist Politics in Colonial Madras**

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Abstract: *This paper explores the complex interplay between agrarian commercialisation and the rise of nationalist politics in the Madras Presidency during British colonial rule. The introduction of cash crops, expansion of railways, and integration of the rural economy into global capitalist markets during the late 19th and early 20th centuries significantly transformed agrarian structures in South India. While these changes led to the growth of rural indebtedness, land alienation, and class differentiation, they also created new forms of political consciousness among peasants, landlords, and emerging rural elites. Drawing on archival records, official colonial reports, and nationalist writings, this study examines how economic discontent under colonial agrarian policies catalysed the formation of peasant movements and contributed to the broader nationalist struggle. Special attention is given to the role of the Congress and non-Congress formations, such as the Justice Party and regional peasant organisations, in mobilising rural populations. By situating agrarian commercialisation within the political economy of colonialism, the paper reveals how the countryside became a site of both exploitation and resistance, laying the groundwork for anti-colonial mobilisation in Madras.*

Keywords: *Nationalism, Commercialisation, Peasants, Agrarian Policies & Colonialism.*

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Introduction

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed profound transformations in the agrarian landscape of colonial South India. In the Madras Presidency, British colonial policies accelerated the commercialisation of agriculture, prioritising the cultivation of export-oriented cash crops such as cotton, indigo, and groundnuts over subsistence farming. This shift was driven by the demands of global markets and facilitated by infrastructural developments such as railways, roads, and irrigation networks initiatives deeply embedded in

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the colonial logic of extraction and revenue maximisation. However, the impact of this agrarian transition was uneven. While certain sections of the rural elite landowners, moneylenders, and traders benefited from the expanding colonial economy, the vast majority of cultivators, tenants, and agricultural labourers faced growing indebtedness, declining food security, and loss of customary rights over land and resources. The disruption of traditional agrarian relations under colonial rule created new forms of socio-economic distress that were both structural and systemic. Yet, it is within this very terrain of agrarian exploitation that the seeds of political resistance were sown. Economic grievances began to converge with emerging political consciousness, giving rise to rural mobilisation that found expression in both moderate and radical strands of nationalist thought. While the Indian National Congress increasingly sought to integrate peasant concerns into its larger anti-colonial platform, alternative movements including the Justice Party, regional zamindari alliances, and nascent peasant unions also played critical roles in articulating rural discontent. This paper examines the dialectical relationship between agrarian commercialisation and the growth of nationalist politics in the Madras Presidency. It interrogates how the colonial restructuring of the countryside inadvertently produced a space for resistance, protest, and the formation of political identities that challenged the very legitimacy of British rule. By foregrounding rural South India often marginal in pan-Indian nationalist narratives this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how economic transformation under colonialism shaped the contours of anti-colonial nationalism.

Colonial Agrarian Policies and the Commercialisation of Agriculture

The colonial transformation of agriculture in the Madras Presidency began in earnest during the mid-nineteenth century, shaped by a complex interplay of administrative policy, market expansion, and imperial interests. Central to this shift was the implementation of the Ryotwari settlement, introduced by Thomas Munro in the early 1820s. Unlike the Zamindari system prevalent in Bengal, Ryotwari classified individual cultivators (ryots) as landholders, responsible for paying land revenue directly to the colonial state. While ostensibly egalitarian, the system intensified fiscal pressure on small cultivators and established a rigid tax regime that was indifferent to fluctuations in agricultural productivity (Baden-Powell, 1892).¹ The emergence of a commercial agricultural economy was further accelerated by the colonial push toward cash crop cultivation. Crops such as cotton, indigo, groundnut, and

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sugarcane began to replace food grains as the primary focus of agricultural production. The American Civil War (1861–65) gave a major boost to cotton exports from India, particularly from the southern districts of Madras such as Coimbatore and Salem, as British mills sought alternatives to U.S. cotton. This boom, however, proved to be temporary and exacerbated rural inequality by making peasant livelihoods dependent on volatile global markets.²

Infrastructural development was a crucial facilitator of commercialisation. The expansion of railways, canals, and roads connected interior regions to ports such as Madras and Tuticorin, enabling easier movement of goods but also deepening colonial economic penetration. The Madras Irrigation and Canal Company, established in the mid-19th century, aimed to improve productivity through water management, but its benefits were unevenly distributed and often aligned with the interests of commercial elites.³ Another key dimension of commercialisation was the growth of rural credit networks, which increasingly came under the control of moneylenders, many of whom were urban-based and upper-caste. Peasants were often forced to borrow at high interest rates to pay land revenue, buy seeds, or survive crop failures. This process led to land alienation, as defaulting ryots lost their land to creditors. Colonial land laws did little to protect smallholders and often enabled the transfer of land into fewer hands, fostering both agrarian differentiation and the consolidation of rural elites.⁴ Colonial officials often viewed these developments as signs of progress and modernisation. However, Indian nationalists and vernacular critics saw them as mechanisms of dispossession. Writers in Tamil and Telugu periodicals documented the decline of village autonomy and lamented the transformation of self-sufficient agrarian communities into nodes of imperial commerce.⁵ Thus, the commercialisation of agriculture in the Madras Presidency was not merely an economic phenomenon. It was a deeply political transformation that disrupted older modes of rural life and laid the structural foundation for emerging forms of resistance. As rural society absorbed the shocks of colonial modernity through rising debt, loss of land, and declining food security it also began to gestate new forms of political awareness that would later energise nationalist movements.

Agrarian Distress and the Restructuring of Rural Society

The agrarian economy of the Madras Presidency underwent a fundamental transformation under colonial rule, as commercialisation increasingly subordinated local rural practices to imperial demands. While certain segments of society particularly upper-caste landlords, traders, and urban elites gained from the cash crop economy, the rural majority suffered from

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intensified exploitation and structural distress. This distress was neither uniform nor merely economic; it brought about deep social, cultural, and political reconfigurations in the countryside. A primary symptom of this crisis was the rise in peasant indebtedness, which stemmed largely from colonial land revenue policies and global market volatility. The Ryotwari settlement, though touted as more individualistic and equitable than the Zamindari system, imposed an inflexible revenue demand based on assessments that did not accommodate climatic failures or price crashes. According to the 1901 Madras Census, nearly 65% of peasant households were estimated to be in debt, and many had mortgaged land to urban moneylenders.⁶ These debts were often contracted at usurious rates, trapping cultivators in cycles of dependency and pushing them into land alienation.

The consequence was the emergence of a new agrarian class structure. Smallholders and traditional cultivating castes such as the Vellalars, Kallars, and Maravars were increasingly displaced or reduced to tenancy, while merchant castes such as the Chettiers and some Brahmin subcastes accumulated land as a form of speculative investment.⁷ At the bottom of the hierarchy, Dalits and indigenous communities faced increased reliance on wage labour, deteriorating working conditions, and a growing distance from any form of landownership. The breakdown of customary systems such as kudimaramat and mirasidari (hereditary rights of cultivation) further dislocated rural social stability.

These shifts occurred alongside ecological shocks that made the effects of economic restructuring even more acute. The Great Famine of 1876–78, which affected vast stretches of the Madras Presidency, resulted in over five million deaths. British famine policies, driven by laissez-faire ideology and prioritisation of grain exports, revealed the contradictions of a colonial economy that linked food security to imperial interests rather than local needs. Reports from the Famine Commission of 1880 and nationalist critiques in vernacular press widely condemned British administrative apathy. The famine not only decimated populations but eroded the trust of rural people in colonial governance. The colonial economy also contributed to the decline of rural industries and crafts. Handloom weavers, potters, and blacksmiths were pushed to the margins as British imports flooded the markets, leading many into agricultural labour.⁸ This shift led to an overcrowded agrarian labour market, which suppressed wages and increased rural inequality. These social transformations also had cultural consequences: caste-based occupational roles were weakened, customary reciprocity eroded, and caste conflict intensified, particularly over land and temple access. Amid this

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crisis, new forms of political consciousness began to emerge. Tamil and Telugu newspapers, such as *The Hindu*, *Swadesamitran*, and regional newsletters, became vehicles for rural grievances. Peasant petitions, temple-based protest gatherings, and caste conferences signalled a vernacularisation of political discourse, even before the formal entry of peasants into nationalist politics.⁹ These articulations though often localised and caste-based nonetheless marked the formation of a proto-political peasant subjectivity, which would later evolve into organised resistance during the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements.

Peasant Discontent and Early Resistance Movements

As colonial agrarian transformation deepened rural inequalities and dispossession, it also fostered the growth of peasant discontent across the Madras Presidency. Although fragmented and shaped by local conditions, these early expressions of agrarian resistance laid the groundwork for political mobilisation in the twentieth century. One of the earliest and most significant manifestations of rural unrest came in the form of anti-landlord agitations. In districts such as Tanjore, Ramnad, and Tirunelveli, tenants and labourers resisted high rents, illegal exactions, and bonded labour conditions imposed by landlords. In particular, the rise of absentee landlordism created exploitative intermediaries who intensified extra-economic coercion. The Pannaiyal system a form of hereditary bonded labour in Tamil agrarian society was increasingly challenged by Dalit agricultural workers, often leading to village-level confrontations.¹⁰

Forest-based tribal communities in the hill tracts of Salem, Nilgiris, and South Arcot also resisted new restrictions imposed by the colonial forest laws. These laws criminalised shifting cultivation, restricted access to forest produce, and pushed tribal populations into the agrarian labour market. Scholars have identified such resistance as "everyday forms of peasant resistance," including evasion, foot-dragging, and sabotage.¹¹ These acts, though rarely large-scale or explicitly political, revealed a growing disconnect between colonial policies and peasant life-worlds. The emergence of vernacular nationalist consciousness further catalysed agrarian unrest. Tamil newspapers such as *Swadesamitran*, founded in 1882, played a critical role in reporting rural exploitation and mobilising opinion. Petitions, letters, and debates on agrarian questions filled the vernacular press, creating a feedback loop between elite nationalist politics and grassroots discontent. Local leaders often lawyers, school teachers, or caste headmen emerged as intermediaries who channelled peasant

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grievances into the emerging public sphere.¹² By the early twentieth century, peasant resistance began to take more organised and ideological forms. The Non-Brahmin Movement, while largely led by educated elites, often engaged with rural questions and advocated land reforms. Similarly, the Home Rule Movement led by Annie Besant in Madras attracted substantial support from small landholders and rural notables. Peasant involvement in nationalist movements became more visible during the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) and the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34), when Congress-affiliated volunteers mobilised against revenue collection and promoted boycotts of British. It is important to note that peasant resistance was not monolithic. It was mediated by caste, region, gender, and landholding status. While dominant peasant castes, such as the Vellalars and Thevars, played leadership roles, marginalised groups such as Dalits and women often faced structural barriers to political participation. However, localised struggles such as those over temple entry, access to tanks, or wages revealed a layered and complex landscape of rural protest. These early resistance movements were crucial not only for their immediate demands but also for their role in reshaping rural political consciousness. They helped redefine the peasant not as a passive subject of empire but as an agent capable of contesting both colonial and indigenous hierarchies.

The Indian National Congress and Rural Mobilisation

As the Indian National Congress evolved from a forum of elite political expression into a mass nationalist movement, rural mobilisation emerged as a key site of anti-colonial activity, particularly in the Madras Presidency. The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a strategic and ideological shift within the Congress, especially during the Gandhian era, where the countryside and its peasant masses became crucial constituencies in the struggle against colonial rule. Under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, the Congress began to position agrarian grievances such as high land revenue, evictions, indebtedness, and labour exploitation as integral to nationalist politics. Gandhi's emphasis on swaraj, khadi, and rural self-reliance resonated with the concerns of smallholders and marginal farmers, especially in Tamil and Telugu-speaking regions. Though Gandhi himself had limited direct engagement in South Indian villages, his ideas were popularised by local Congress workers and volunteers through the formation of village sabhas and khadi centres.¹³

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) marked a critical moment when rural participation in Congress-led protests dramatically increased. In districts like Tanjore,

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Chingleput, and North Arcot, villagers boycotted foreign cloth, withdrew children from government schools, and resisted tax payments. The Congress encouraged the formation of panchayats and sabhas to mediate disputes and spread nationalist ideology.¹⁴ Rural notables, especially small zamindars and dominant caste leaders, provided leadership in these initiatives while maintaining their local influence. During the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34), Congress karyakarthas intensified efforts to organise rural masses. Volunteers marched through villages distributing nationalist pamphlets and promoting salt satyagrahas in interior Madras districts. Though large-scale agrarian revolts were less frequent in Madras than in the north, symbolic acts such as the refusal to pay chowkidari taxes or the defiance of forest guards revealed a growing alignment between rural dissent and national politics.¹⁵

The 1937 provincial elections, which brought the Congress to power in the Madras Presidency, significantly deepened its involvement in rural governance. The party implemented several pro-peasant reforms, including the Madras Agriculturists Relief Act (1938), which attempted to address peasant indebtedness by limiting the rights of creditors and regulating interest rates.¹⁶ Though limited in impact due to bureaucratic resistance and World War II disruptions, the legislation symbolised Congress's commitment to agrarian questions. Importantly, the Congress's rural outreach was shaped by caste and class dynamics. Dominant peasant castes like the Vellalars and Reddis often occupied leadership positions within the Congress's district-level committees, while Dalits and landless labourers remained underrepresented. Moreover, intra-party tensions sometimes arose between radical youth factions advocating land reform and conservative leaders allied with landed interests.¹⁷ Despite these limitations, the Congress played a pivotal role in nationalising rural discontent. Through its mobilisation campaigns, it provided a political vocabulary that linked local grievances to the broader anti-colonial struggle. The Congress helped transform the peasant from a subject of colonial extraction to a participant if not always equally represented in India's fight for independence.

Agrarian Nationalism and the Legacy of Resistance

The history of agrarian commercialisation and nationalist mobilisations in colonial Madras reveals a complex legacy of resistance shaped by the intersection of economic transformation, caste politics, and anti-colonial struggle. The various strands of rural activism from early peasant protests to Congress mobilisation and the rise of non-Congress agrarian

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politics produced a distinctive form of agrarian nationalism rooted in the socio-economic fabric of South Indian rural society. The legacy of this nationalism was not merely the decolonisation of land and governance, but also the politicisation of rural society. Land revenue struggles, resistance to cash crop exploitation, and tenant agitations all contributed to the emergence of the peasantry as a political actor, albeit unevenly shaped by region, caste, and class.¹⁸ Though rural Madras never experienced mass-scale militant uprisings like Telangana or Bengal, its history of resistance was marked by everyday forms of non-compliance, symbolic protest, and politicised negotiation with the state.¹⁹

The Congress's emphasis on rural reform and social welfare particularly after the 1937 elections left a lasting imprint on agrarian administration in post-colonial Tamil Nadu. Initiatives such as the Madras Agriculturists Debt Relief Act laid the groundwork for later land ceiling laws and tenancy reforms in the 1950s and 60s.²⁰ The Justice Party's contributions, especially in institutionalising non-Brahmin access to education and bureaucracy, altered the composition of rural leadership and paved the way for the Dravidian movement's ascendancy in post-independence Tamil Nadu. Furthermore, the influence of radical politics such as the Kisan Sabhas and Marxist peasant organisations contributed to a left-oriented agrarian discourse that continued well into the 20th century. Though these movements were often marginalised electorally, they shaped trade union activity among rural labourers, influenced land reform debates, and added to the repertoire of collective resistance in Tamil and Telugu-speaking districts.²¹ In sum, the legacy of agrarian nationalism in colonial Madras lies not only in the overthrow of British rule, but in the broader transformation of rural subjectivity from passive cultivators to political stakeholders in the shaping of modern India. These movements laid the ideological and structural foundations for a more egalitarian vision of rural development, even as post-independence India continued to grapple with the contradictions of caste, land inequality, and capitalist agriculture.

Conclusion

The trajectory of agrarian change in colonial Madras highlights the close links between economic policy, social transformation, and political mobilisation. Commercialisation was not a neutral expansion of markets; it generated new inequalities while also enabling forms of rural agency. Colonial land, revenue, and credit policies disrupted older patterns of

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landholding, labour, and indebtedness, but they also opened political spaces for mobilisation by peasants, non-Brahmin groups, and leftist organisations. Movements associated with the Congress, the Justice Party, and Marxist formations reveal that nationalism in the Madras Presidency was heterogeneous and deeply shaped by contests over land, caste, and representation. This agrarian nationalism challenges pan-Indian narratives that foreground elite or urban politics. Rural struggles though less visible than major rebellions played a crucial role in reshaping colonial power and imagining fairer futures. Their legacy lies in a dual critique of imperial exploitation and internal social oppression, laying important foundations for postcolonial aspirations toward land reform, caste equality, and rural justice

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