

THE ROLE OF ZAMINDARS IN TAMILNADU – THE HISTORICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The term zamindar means ‘land holder’ in Persian. This term was applied to some tributaries. It was in use under the Delhi Sultans and had gained popularity by the Lodies. It came into more frequent use under the Mughals.¹ The zamindar was only a collector of land revenue. In 1793 Lord Cornwallis introduced the permanent settlement in Bengal by modifying the existing land revenue system. When the British found the working of this system in Bengal successful, they wanted to introduce it in the Madras Presidency also in 1802 and 1805 the British effectively introduced the system as far as possible.² In the Madurai District the existing poligars numbering 26 were transformed into zamindars. These estates were called unsettled *palayams* because their annual tax payable to the government was not permanently settled. The remaining land was divided into estates and sold out in public auction.³ Thus there were two kinds of zamindars. The poligar turned zamindars formed the first group. They lost their original judicial and police power which they enjoyed as poligars.

Keywords: The poligars major role in Social contribution of TamilNadu.

INTRODUCTION

The zamindars of the second group created by the permanent settlement regulation of 1802 were transitory in many cases. They could not hold their zamindaris for a long time continuously. So the first group of zamindars on the other hand took active role in the social life of the zamin.⁴ Out of those 26 unsettled *palayams* one was ruled over by Veduva Naicker and one by Kappiliyan gounder, five by Anuppa goundar and the remaining by Thottiya Naicker. The Naicker spoke Telugu while the goundar spoke Kannada. While the Thottiya Naicker employed Thottiya Chakkiliyan⁵ as their menials the Anuppan employed Anuppa Chakkiliyan. The zamindar occupied the highest position in the society. All the communities living in the zamin area gave him a place of honor. In all the social functions he was consulted and his ruling was preferred. Before any domestic functions were celebrated people belonging to the zamin area visited the zamindar and received his blessings.

This was called *kantu kollutal*.⁶ This ceremony varies from community to community. In Siruvalai the Anuppa Chakkiliyan⁷ before celebrating a marriage visited the zamindar and obtained his blessings. In the case of Karunchathi marriage the bride and the bridegroom had to pay quarter rupee and a hen each with betel nuts. In the case of remarriage after divorce they had to pay each one rupee and marriage visited the zamindar. Other community people also visited the zamindar for his blessings before celebrating their domestic functions. In most of the zamins this *kantu kollutal* ceremony was followed.

In case of death in the servant's family the zamindar sent the *Pachai*. It was a basketful of paddy with sari or dhoti, flower garland, oil, soap nut powder and tender coconut. When the zamindar died the people came with drums and tumbrels; brought paddy and dhoti. They placed them before the corpse of the zamindar and paid homage. During the coronation of the zamindar the people offered *Patakanikkai* i.e. offering money and other articles at the foot of the zamindar. Moreover the people from the village used to visit every year with drums and tumbrels and offered a sheep to the zamindar. The zamindar met them in person and enquired about their grievances. The villagers were provided meals in the palace.⁸

The zamindar was the highest court of appeal in caste disputes. He used to visit the villages of the zamin to enquire the disputes. That was called as *cavari potal*.⁹ The zamindar was accompanied by his bodyguards and other servants during his *cavari*. The villagers decorated the village to welcome the zamindar. The zamindar on reaching the village limits blew the horn to announce his arrival. The village went on a procession to welcome him. They killed a sheep and sprinkled its blood on the cart of the zamindar. Then the zamindar gave audience to the people. They took him in procession to the village.¹⁰ Generally a zamindar had jurisdiction only within his zamin area. But the Anuppan zamindar had jurisdiction over the Anuppan community living even beyond his zamin area. He went on routine visits to these villages. He also visited the villages of Anuppa Chakkiliyan on the way. But he would not enter the village. He conducted the caste *panchayats* outside the village limits. The Anuppan village was divided into territorial groups called *Medus*. Over each of these was a headman called *Periathanakkaran* or *Thinnaipethan*. The zamindar appointed a *Kampli* as his representative.¹¹ A conducting the proceedings of the caste *panchayats* rested mainly upon these people. The zamindar collected family taxes from the Anuppan and the Chakkiliyan. It was the responsibility of Thinnaipethan and the *Kampli* to collect these taxes.¹²

The caste *panchayats* were held on a blanket on which a pot containing margosa leaves was placed to symbolize the sacred nature of the meeting.¹³ The zamindar with the help of the *Thinnaipethan* and *Kampli* conducted the caste *panchayats*. In these *panchayats* civil cases such as partition of properties and criminal cases such as deduction, rape, adultery and theft were

disposed off. Trial by witness and trial by omen were followed in disposing the cases.¹⁴ Zamindar also granted divorce in eligible cases. The quilt would be fined of ex-communicated from the caste. Of the fines collected the zamindar received two third and particular and the particular community got the rest.¹⁵

In the caste *panchayats* of Anuppa Chakkiliyan¹⁶ fines were levied according to the nature of the offence. In the case of seducing virgin the offender had to pay a fine of 24 rupees to the zamindar and 12 rupees to the community besides marrying the girl. In the case of seducing a widow the offender had to pay a fine of 12 rupees to the zamindar and 6 rupees to the community and marry the widow. In the case of seducing the wife of another man the offender had to pay a fine of 12 rupees to the zamindar and 6 rupees to the community, the husband received 18 rupees as divorce amount.

This would be distributed among the zamindar, community and the husband at the rate of Rs. 6, 3 and 9 respectively. If fine was levied for other offences, 2/3 would go to the zamindar as his share and the remaining 1/3 would be divided by the *Periathanakaran* and the community. The zamindar also heard appeals from the caste *panchayats* of other communities within the zamin area. The zamindar shared the flines collected with those communities. *Kampli* was in charge of collecting the share of zamindar and he was entitled to 1/5 of amount collected.¹⁷

In the religious festivals the zamindar was given an important place. Brahmins were not engaged as priests either by the Naicker or Anuppan in their domestic functions. They were not engaged as priests in the village temple at Siruvalai. All the communities except Brahims received temple honour. The zamindar was taken in a procession to celebrate the religious festivals. Flower umbrella would be spread over the head of the zamindar during this ceremonies.¹⁸ Group of people considered the zamindars as the representatives of God. They would prostrate before the zamindar and received sacred ash. During failure of rains the villagers offered sheep to the zamindar in the hope of getting rains. Only the *poligar* turned zamindars¹⁹ had such a social influence. Because of their long association with the local people they were able to create myths. Moreover as *poligars* they enjoyed great powers. They were the rulers of the *palayams* they enjoyed the judicial and police power.²⁰ They had the right to collect revenue only.

CONCLUSION

The new zamindars were outsiders. They did not have any heritage. Most of the new zamindars proved themselves as misfit to the office. They could not hold their zamindaris continuously for a long time. Because of all these reasons they could not make any influence upon the society. Even after the abolition of zamindari system by the TamilNadu Estates (Abolition and conversion into Ryotwary) Act of 1948. The zamindars wield social and religious influence. Till

date people believe the myths and receive blessings from the zamindar. The zamindars perform their coronation even today. The villagers pay *pathakanikkai*. The latest coronation in Madurai district was held on May 1982 at Kilakottai.

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