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பன்னாட்டுத் தமிழாய்வு மின்னஞ்சல்

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# Aran

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# வநலநாயு

## Socio - Economic impact on Agriculture along the Coromandel Coast Since Colonial Period

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the evolution of agrarian society and economy on the Coromandel Coast, with particular attention to the Cauvery delta, a region historically recognized for its agricultural abundance and maritime connectivity. Drawing on authoritative works—F.R.

Hemingway's *Thanjavur District Gazetteer*, V. Vriddhagirisan's *The Nayaks of Tanjore*, P. J. Jayaseela Stephen's studies on Indo-Portuguese networks, and recent scholarship on Tamil coastal towns—the study reconstructs the region's socio-economic landscape from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. The pre-colonial agrarian structure was marked by sophisticated irrigation systems, temple-centred redistribution, mirasdari rights, caste-based occupational hierarchies, and vibrant inland-coastal trade circuits. These features enabled both resilience and stratification within rural society.

The colonial period introduced decisive interventions: land revenue reforms, commercialization of agriculture, expansion of cash crop cultivation, and altered trade routes. These changes eroded traditional rights, weakened local institutions, and restructured relationships between cultivators, intermediaries, and markets. The paper analyzes how British administrative rationalities reshaped agrarian production, labour relations, and coastal marketplaces, creating patterns of inequality that persisted into the postcolonial era.

In linking historical dynamics with the contemporary globalized economy, the study identifies parallels such as market dependency, volatility in commodity prices, fragmentation of landholdings, rural indebtedness, and intensifying climate stress in the delta region. At the same time, new opportunities—global supply chains, digital access, remittance economies, and agri-technological innovations—are reshaping the prospects of agrarian households. By comparing structural continuities and disruptions across centuries, the paper highlights the enduring tension between vulnerability and adaptation, offering insights into policy and sustainability debates concerning agrarian futures on the Coromandel Coast.

**Key words:** Coromandal Coast, Agrarian Economy, Kauvery Delta, Mirasdari System, Colonial, Agrarian Transformation.

## Introduction

The Coromandel Coast, particularly the fertile stretches of the Cauvery delta, has long been a vital agrarian and commercial region in South India. Its historical landscape was shaped by intricate irrigation networks, temple-based resource management, caste-organized labour systems, and thriving maritime trade that connected inland production zones to global markets. Recent historians of Tamil coastal towns have highlighted the region's dynamic interaction between rural agrarian structures and coastal urban centres from the sixteenth century onward. The arrival of European trading powers, followed by British colonial administrative systems, initiated major transformations in land revenue, agricultural practices, and market linkages. These changes not only disrupted older institutions but also generated new forms of inequality and dependency. In the contemporary globalized economy, similar pressures—market volatility, climate change, labour migration, and technological shifts—continue to influence agrarian livelihoods. This paper situates the historical evolution of the Coromandel agrarian economy within a long-term framework, comparing past patterns with present challenges to illuminate enduring structural continuities and emerging opportunities.

## The Coromandel Agrarian World Before Colonial Intervention

The Coromandel Coast possessed a sophisticated agrarian economy long before European political dominance. The medieval Chola period had established extensive irrigation networks, temple-centered endowments, and institutional mechanisms for local administration. V. Vriddhagirisan, in *The Nayaks of Tanjore*, notes that the Thanjavur delta retained the engineering genius of the Cholas—especially the Grand Anicut—which enabled multi-crop agriculture, high population density, and the emergence of wealthy agricultural communities such as the Vellalars. By the sixteenth century, as P. J. Jayaseela Stephen demonstrates, the region was integrated into the Indo-Portuguese commercial system. Ports like Nagapattinam, Porto Novo, and Pulicat served as entrepôts for textiles, spices, rice, and horses. The hinterlands were vital in sustaining these port towns. The study *Towns of the Tamil Coast and Hinterland: The Changing Forms and Functions, 1506–1801* emphasizes that urbanization along the coast depended heavily on agricultural surplus, weaving clusters, and rural supply lines. The agrarian society was characterized by the dominance of temple institutions, Brahman settlements, and landed elites. Land was not simply an economic resource; it was tied to ritual authority, social prestige, and political legitimacy. Landholding patterns were complex, involving Mirasi rights, Inam grants, and communal ownership, which created overlapping systems of control rather than absolute private property. This pre-colonial system, however, was not static. Frequent wars, the rise of the Nayak kingdoms, and shifts in trade routes generated both instability and adaptation. Remote villages depended on surplus extraction to fund local elites, while powerful commercial castes like the Komatis and Chettis mediated rural-urban exchanges. The entry of the Dutch and English in the seventeenth century added new layers of competition and revenue needs, which would deeply affect the agrarian structure in the eighteenth century.

## The Colonial Transformation of Land and Revenue

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mark a profound transformation of the agrarian economy. The British, after acquiring revenue administration in various parts of the Coromandel region, imposed new systems of land assessment and taxation. Traditional rights of peasants, temple trustees, and village institutions weakened. The Ryotwari system required cultivators to pay revenue

directly to the state, turning farmers into individual proprietors in principle but often into indebted subjects in practice. Colonial revenue extraction introduced several new challenges:

1. **Monetization of agriculture:** Peasants were forced to sell produce to pay taxes in cash, making them dependent on market fluctuations.
2. **Growth of moneylenders:** With rigid tax demands, farmers borrowed heavily, leading to chronic debt.
3. **Reduction of irrigation maintenance:** The colonial focus on revenue rather than agricultural investment led to the slow deterioration of tanks and canals, especially outside the deltaic regions.
4. **Shift to commercial crops:** Indigo, cotton, and groundnut cultivation increased as colonial markets demanded raw materials, altering local food security patterns.

Hemingway records that even in the fertile Thanjavur delta, political conflicts, cyclone damage, and variations in monsoon rains caused severe distress at various points in the nineteenth century. The colonial emphasis on extraction, rather than reinvestment, left the agricultural system vulnerable to famine and economic stagnation.

### Social Hierarchies and Rural Power Structures

The agrarian economy of the Coromandel Coast rested on a deeply stratified social order. Caste determined occupational roles, ownership rights, and access to irrigation. Brahmans, Vellalars, and wealthy non-Brahman elites dominated land ownership, while Pallar, Paraiyar, and Arunthathiyar labourers formed the bulk of the agricultural workforce. British rule did not dismantle these structures; instead, it **institutionalized and bureaucratized** them. Settlement surveys, revenue registers, and legal titles froze inequalities that had earlier been negotiable within a customary system. Peasant communities that had shared control over irrigation found their authority weakened, while individual landowners gained prominence. Temple lands, which had supported education, charity, and local employment, were brought under colonial scrutiny. The decline of temple-based economic activity had a significant impact on artisanal castes. Handloom weavers, traditionally connected with temple markets and coastal trade, suffered greatly under British import of machine-made textiles. The result was a rural society marked by:

- increased tenancy,
- rise of absentee landlords,
- reduction in customary labour entitlements,
- increased dependence on markets for survival,
- and a weakening of collective village institutions.

The rigidification of caste and land relations created long-term challenges that still echo in rural Tamil Nadu, especially in land disputes, labour mobility, and socio-economic stratification.

## Agrarian–Maritime Linkages: The Coast and Its Towns

The Coromandel Coast has historically been a region where agriculture and maritime commerce coexist in a mutually sustaining relationship. The deltaic richness of Thanjavur supported large-scale rice cultivation, which became an important commodity for both domestic and export markets. Maritime towns such as Nagapattinam, Karaikal, Porto Novo, and Tranquebar functioned as nodes connecting inland produce with overseas traders. Rice, textiles, betel leaf, areca nut, and oil-seeds circulated through complex networks involving boatmen, merchants, temple institutions, and foreign trading companies.

Agriculture along the Coromandel was never isolated. It operated within a larger Indian Ocean commercial world. Colonial disruption of port towns—shifting trade to Madras, curbing local merchants, and dismantling indigenous trading guilds—produced ripple effects in the countryside.

## Irrigation, Monsoon, and Land Use

The ecological foundations of the Coromandel agrarian system were always delicate. The monsoon-dependent dry tracts of Cuddalore, Villupuram, and Ramanathapuram relied heavily on tanks, while the Kaveri delta benefited from perennial river waters. British engineers, though impressed by ancient waterworks, often failed to maintain them effectively. Hemingway notes repeated instances of tank neglect and reduced maintenance budgets.

Changing crop patterns—such as the spread of groundnut in dry districts and indigo in certain pockets—contributed to soil exhaustion. Deforestation in the hinterland for shipbuilding, firewood, and commercial agriculture further altered the ecological balance.

Environmental vulnerability played a severe role in agrarian crises. Droughts, cyclones, and floods affected both rural incomes and urban markets. This pattern continues today, though in a globalized context where climate change compounds older risks.

## Agrarian Distress and Famine Under Colonial Rule

One of the most significant consequences of colonial agrarian restructuring was the emergence of large-scale famine conditions in the Coromandel region. While famines had occurred earlier in South Indian history, the colonial period amplified their frequency and intensity due to rigid revenue policies and reduced local resilience. The famine of 1876–78 was particularly devastating in the Tamil districts, and despite the relative fertility of the Thanjavur delta, even these areas were not insulated from economic shock. By enforcing a cash-based revenue system without providing adequate irrigation investment or market support, the colonial state created a situation where a poor monsoon could immediately trigger agrarian collapse.

F. R. Hemingway, in his *Thanjavur Gazetteer*, acknowledges the severity of agrarian vulnerability during such periods. He describes how cultivators were often compelled to sell their land, cattle, and even household utensils to meet tax demands. Consequently, the number of landless agricultural labourers increased substantially during the nineteenth century, and certain castes became almost entirely dependent on wage labour for survival. This shift from a multi-layered agrarian society with diverse rights to a stratified labourdependent population was one of the most enduring legacies of colonial rule.

The reduction in communal support systems exacerbated rural distress. Temples, which once served as centers for charity and redistribution, lost their revenue base due to colonial land surveys and state control. Similarly, caste-based guilds and village sabhas that formerly moderated economic

shocks weakened under British legal restructuring. Thus, the colonial agrarian economy produced a paradox: increased commercialization coexisted with reduced local resilience.

## Post-Colonial Continuities and Changes in Agrarian Structure

The decades after independence brought legal reforms aimed at correcting historical inequalities. The abolition of zamindari and inam systems, land ceilings, and tenancy regulations were intended to redistribute land and protect cultivators. While these reforms had significant impact in certain regions, the Coromandel Coast—particularly the Thanjavur delta—continued to experience concentration of land ownership among dominant communities.

The Green Revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s marked a major technological shift in the region. High-yielding rice varieties, chemical fertilizers, and pump-set irrigation dramatically increased output in the deltaic districts. Rural incomes rose in some areas, leading to the growth of a new rural middle class. Yet, these gains were uneven. Dry zones along the Coromandel Coast lagged behind due to limited irrigation facilities, reinforcing regional disparities.

Mechanization also changed labour relationships. While older forms of labour bondage had weakened with legal reforms, new forms of economic dependency emerged. Small farmers often lacked capital to adopt new technologies and became vulnerable to borrowing. Labourers, once assured of seasonal work under large landowners, now faced uncertainty as machines replaced manual labour.

Social transformations accompanied these economic changes. Education expanded dramatically, as did rural-urban migration. Many younger members of agrarian families sought employment in Gulf countries, cities like Chennai and Bengaluru, or new industrial hubs. Remittances then became an important source of rural income, altering consumption patterns and household aspirations.

Despite these changes, the structural challenges identified in colonial records—debt, dependence on monsoon, caste-linked inequalities, and market vulnerability—have persisted into the post-colonial era, though in altered forms.

## Globalization and the Contemporary Agrarian Economy

The arrival of a globalized economic order in the 1990s introduced new opportunities and challenges for the Coromandel agrarian landscape. Liberalization opened markets for agricultural exports, encouraged agro-processing industries, and created new avenues for investment. However, it also subjected rural households to global price fluctuations, increasing their exposure to international demand cycles.

## Market Volatility and Farmers

Farmers producing staples like rice continue to face unpredictable procurement policies.

Global rice prices influence the willingness of private traders to buy, while government mechanisms like the minimum support price (MSP) are unevenly implemented across districts. This replicates colonial-era patterns where cultivators were forced to respond to external market forces without sufficient institutional protection.

## Commercial Crop Expansion

In some coastal districts, farmers have shifted towards:

- sugarcane,
- coconut and areca nut,
- jasmine and cut-flower cultivation,
- banana plantations,
- and aquaculture (especially shrimp farming).

While profitable, these activities require high capital investment and depend on export markets. Shrimp aquaculture, for instance, has periodically suffered from global price crashes and disease outbreaks, reflecting the risks of monoculture systems in a globalized economy.

## Technological Integration

Mobile phones, digital payment platforms, and government portals have created new efficiencies. Farmers can access weather forecasts, market prices, and veterinary guidance. Yet, digital literacy gaps prevent uniform adoption. Younger farmers adapt quickly, while older cultivators often rely on intermediaries, replicating older patron-client systems in a new technological form.

## Corporate Influence

Large corporate buyers increasingly influence cropping patterns. While contract farming brings assured markets, it also exposes farmers to contract asymmetry. Similar forms of producer dependency existed during colonial indigo cultivation and Company procurement of rice, demonstrating a structural continuity: rural producers remain subordinate to external commercial interests.

## Continuities Between Colonial and Globalized Agrarian Realities

Despite the vast chronological distance between the colonial era and the globalized present, several parallels become visible.

### Dependence on External Markets

Under colonial rule, peasant livelihoods were shaped by demand for indigo, cotton, and rice in Europe and Southeast Asia. Today, global commodities markets dictate prices for sugar, shrimp, turmeric, and flowers. Farmers remain vulnerable to price swings beyond their control.

### Vulnerability to Environmental Shocks

Both colonial and present-day agrarian societies suffer from monsoon failure, soil depletion, floods, and droughts. While technology has reduced some risks, climate change intensifies them, creating new uncertainties.

## Inequalities in Land Ownership

Colonial surveys formalized unequal land distribution. Post-independence reforms did not fully address this. Today, small and marginal farmers continue to struggle for viable incomes, while large landholders benefit disproportionately from market integration.

## Labour Displacement

Where colonial commercialization disrupted artisanal and weaving communities, modern mechanization and migration have reshaped rural labour markets. Many of the most marginalized castes remain confined to insecure wage labour.

## State Revenue Dependence

The colonial revenue system prioritized extraction over reinvestment. Contemporary agricultural taxation is minimal, but the state indirectly relies on rural consumption taxes, fuel taxes, and policy instruments that influence rural life without necessarily reinvesting adequately in irrigation or market stabilization.

These continuities suggest that the agrarian economy of the Coromandel Coast, while transformed in many respects, remains structurally fragile.

## Emerging Opportunities in the Present Agrarian Landscape

Despite historical challenges, new opportunities are emerging for agrarian revitalization in the region. These include:

### Agro-Processing and Value Addition

Entrepreneurship in rice milling, cold-storage, coconut-based products, and herbal industries allows farmers to capture more value. Such industries mirror the older weaving and oilpressing networks that supported port towns, suggesting a revival of agro-commercial linkages.

### Digital Platforms and E-Commerce

Platforms such as Uzhavan App, e-NAM, and private online marketplaces allow farmers to access broader markets. For the first time, small cultivators can bypass middlemen to some degree, though infrastructural barriers remain.

### Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)

Collective bargaining through FPOs echoes pre-colonial merchant guilds (nagaram, nanadesi) that dominated trade. Through group formation, farmers gain better negotiating power with buyers, lenders, and suppliers.

### Organic and Niche Agriculture

The rise in demand for organic rice, traditional millets, native vegetables, and heritage seeds is creating a parallel market. Farmers who adopt alternative agricultural models often benefit from premium pricing.

## Climate-Resilient Farming

Government and NGO initiatives now support climate-resilient agriculture: drip irrigation, micro-irrigation, rainwater harvesting, and mixed cropping systems. These efforts revive ancient practices that had previously been overshadowed by colonial land policies and Green Revolution models.

## Conclusion

The agrarian history of the Coromandel Coast reveals a long continuum of adaptation, negotiation, and transformation shaped by ecological rhythms, socio-cultural institutions, and shifting political economies. From the highly organized irrigation networks and templecentred redistributive systems of the pre-colonial era to the disruptive revenue structures and commercialization introduced under British rule, the region's agrarian society has repeatedly responded to external pressures while retaining elements of internal continuity.

The comparison with the contemporary globalized economy underscores both striking parallels and significant departures. Market dependence, price instability, rural indebtedness, ecological stress, and labour mobility continue to challenge agrarian households, echoing earlier periods of uncertainty. Yet new factors—international supply chains, technological diffusion, digital platforms, and policy-driven welfare mechanisms—introduce opportunities that earlier communities could not access. Recognizing these continuities and shifts is essential for developing sustainable agrarian strategies that honour historical experience while responding to present-day realities. Ultimately, the history of the Coromandel Coast is one of resilience amid structural vulnerability, offering valuable insights for shaping equitable and future-ready agrarian systems.

## End Notes

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