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**The Peasant Movement and
Dalit Rights in East Thanjavur,
Tamil Nadu**

This essay[[1]](#footnote-1) presents a comparison of the conditions in which the Dalit people of East Thanjavur lived in the 1940s and the living conditions of the Dalits after agrarian struggles were launched, up to 1991. Some of the challenges that remain to be overcome are also outlined here.

Although the Dalit people of East Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu remain income-poor, and victims of different forms of social and economic deprivation, it is nevertheless important to recognize that as a result of decades of struggle, there have been important changes in their economic and social status—especially in the forms of caste oppression against them and in the criminal practice of untouchability. The struggles of the Dalits of East Thanjavur from the 1940s were led by the Kisan Sabha, the Agricultural Workers’ Association and the Communist Party of India—and, after 1964, by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The struggles of the rural masses since 1940 in East Thanjavur are unparalleled in the history of the peasant movement in Tamil Nadu.

At the outset, I shall clarify two methodological features of this essay. First, the area that I call ‘East Thanjavur’ refers to the eastern part of the old district of Thanjavur (or Tanjore), and, more specifically, to the present-day districts of Thiruvarur and Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu. Secondly, this essay is not an attempt at a scholarly history of the movement of agricultural workers, in particular Dalit agricultural workers, of the East Thanjavur region, or of agrarian relations in the area. There is much valuable scholarly work on the area that I have not reviewed or summarized.[[2]](#footnote-2) This essay’s specific feature is that it draws extensively on two published Tamil works, by B. Srinivasa Rao (1947) and G. Veerayyan (1998), which are invaluable sources of information and analysis, and have not hitherto been available to a non-Tamil-reading public. I have supplemented these secondary sources with primary material from interviews that I have conducted with agricultural workers and tenant cultivators in the region.

Agrarian Relations in East Thanjavur before Independence

*Concentration of Land*

Historically, Thanjavur district in Tamil Nadu, called the ‘granary’ (*nel-kalanjiyam*) of Tamil Nadu, has been an area of surplus rice production. Its fertile lands are irrigated by water from the Kaveri river, released from the Grand Anicut, an advanced engineering feat of the Chola period. Agriculture was the main occupation of the people and two crops were raised every year.

In the early twentieth century, land relations in Thanjavur district, especially in its eastern part, were characterized by a huge concentration of land in the hands of a few landlords, zamindars and temple authorities. *Ryotwari* landlords—or *mirasdars*, as they were then called, owned thousands of acres of land. The holdings of an individual landlord could span many villages. Srinivasa Rao (1947: 6) wrote:

The whole of Thanjavur district was under the domination of three categories of land holdings. In the northern part of the district the land was owned by Dharmapuram Adheenam, Thiruvaaduthurai Adheenam, Thirupanandal Matam, Sankara Matam and Akobila Matam. These *matams* [*mathams*] were controlled and managed by the mutt chiefs. In the central part of the district, the land was owned by landlords like Vadapathimangalam, Nedumbalam, Kottur, Vallivalam, Kunniyur Iyer, Poondi Vandayar, Ukkadai Thevar and Kapisthalam Moopanar. In the southern part of the district, land was owned by zamindars, as in the Madhukkoor Zamin, Pappanadu Zamin, Sikkavalem Zamin and some other *zamins*. These three groups owned almost all the agricultural land in the undivided Thanjavur district.

Srinivasa Rao goes on to give an account of the landholdings of the major landlords of Thanjavur district:

Vadapathimangalam Thiagaraja Mudaliar family: 15,000 acres

Kunniyur Sambasiva Iyer: 600 acres agricultural land and 500 acres of coconut grove

Rao-Bahadur Samiyappa: 2,500 acres

K.G. Estate: 400 acres

K.M.K. Estate: 300 acres

Mannargudi Gopalakrishna Iyer: 2,000 acres

The nature of landholdings in East Thanjavur differed from the nature of landholdings in the rest of Tamil Nadu. In other districts, Dalit labourers were allotted a separate area of habitation, often called the ‘colony’. In East Thanjavur, on the other hand, Dalits were not permitted to own even a small piece of land to raise a hut, especially since the roads and all other common spaces in the village were privately controlled, either by landlords or temple authorities. There is an old saying in the region that other than landlords and caste Hindus among tenants, no person could own even ‘a needlepoint of space’.

A substantial section of the East Thanjavur population worked as tenants of the landlords and the temples, paying different forms of rent. The majority of agricultural workers—mainly Dalits, but also caste Hindus—worked on land owned by landlords. The Dalit workers were both economically and socially dependent on the landlords on whose farms and land they worked. Those among them who were not wage workers but long-term bonded labourers were called *pannaiyals*, or farm servants.

Thanjavur was annexed by the British in 1799. The colonial administration seized the opportunity to generate large revenues from the rural areas of the district. They imposed very high fixed rents, collecting the rents in cash from landlords and cultivators irrespective of the quality or quantity of the harvest. High rates of rent, forcible collection of revenue and cheap procurement prices constituted the main features of the British land revenue policy. The colonial administration also protected the backward aspects of agrarian relations in order to extract higher revenues from the landlords. The landlords, in turn, squeezed the agricultural labourers and tenant cultivators in order to generate more surplus. This led to a sharpening of contradictions, and the agricultural workers had to fight for their rights against both the landlords and the colonial rulers.

Conditions of Tenant Cultivators
and Agricultural Labourers

The living conditions of the tenant cultivators and farm servants in the 1940s, more so of the Dalit farm servants, were miserable, as opposed to that of the landlords, who lived in luxury and in palatial homes. Landlords exercised control over not just the land, but also the water bodies, even appropriating the fish from the village tanks. Many of them were moneylenders, charging high rates of interest. They controlled the village and district-level decision-making committees, and cooperative credit societies, and the colonial administration did everything possible to further their interests.

The worst forms of caste oppression in Tamil Nadu existed in the district of Thanjavur. In the 1940s, a majority of the Dalits there were farm servants, while most of the cultivating tenants and a few landless labourers were caste Hindus. All the landlords, *matham* chiefs and zamindars were caste Hindus, with most of them belonging to the ritually ‘upper’ castes. Though the landlords had different political affiliations—some directly supported British rule, others were part of the national movement led by the Congress, and yet others were supporters of the Dravidian movement—they were united in suppressing the movements of farm servants and tenant cultivators.

Forms of Landlord Oppression: Two Interviews

*V. Ramu, tenant cultivator, Thenparai village, East Thanjavur*

In a detailed interview I conducted with V. Ramu (who was about 80 years old at the time of the interview, in 2006), a Dalit and a former tenant cultivator of Thenparai village, he described to me the conditions that prevailed in his village in the 1940s. Thenparai is a place of great significance in the history of the peasant movement in Tamil Nadu for the movement of the Kisan Sabha began here.

Ramu told me that there were about 600 households in Thenparai, of which about 50 were Dalit. The rest belonged to 18 Other Castes, with the Muthuraja caste (now classified as a ‘Most Backward Caste’) claiming the largest numbers. Almost all the households in the village worked on land as tenants or farm servants. Most of the Dalits and many of the Muthuraja caste were farm servants.

All the land in Thenparai village, approximately 362 *veli* (1 *veli* = approx. 6.5 acres), was initially owned by the Rettai Rayar landlord family, who leased out land to tenants for cultivation. Later, the ownership of all the land was transferred to a Hyderabad-based *mutt* called *Uthirapathi Matham*, but the collection of rent and other forms of traditional payments continued as before. ‘The tenant paid rent either as *vaaram* (sharecropping) or *kuthagai* (fixed rent). *Vaaram* was more common at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Under this system, the tenant paid a fixed share of the yield to the landlord. The tenant’s share varied markedly in different parts of the district’ (Menon 1979a: 26-27).

While tenants had to pay the equivalent of three-fourths to four-fifths of the crop yield to the landlords in the form either of fixed rent (*kuthagai*) or share rent (*vaaram*), they could not be certain of getting the same land for cultivation the next year. In addition to the share of the yield they received as rent, the landlords managed to extract still more surplus in one form of payment or the other, and sometimes appropriated almost all of the output.

Tenants had to pay 8 *kalam* and 4 *marakkal* of paddy per *maa* (0.33 acre) as principal rent to landlords.[[3]](#footnote-3) The yield per *maa* in the 1940s was 10 *kalam* of paddy, which meant that there was little left for the tenants to take home. In addition, there were ten dues (*pathu pathu*) they had to pay:

*Kidakattuthal/Mattukidai Kattuthal*: In those days the manure used in the fields was dung, the droppings of cattle tethered on the land for the purpose. Out of every ten times that the cattle were brought to the field the tenant had to pay for five, at the rate of one *kalam* of paddy each time.

*Vandisatham*: The manure required for 1 acre of land was ten cartloads. The tenant had to pay 50 per cent of the rent for these carts.

*Neeranikkam* (irrigation work): The tenant had to pay 6 *marakkal* of paddy per year to the water supplier or irrigation worker.

*Koilpathu*: The tenant had to pay 6 *marakkal* of paddy per year towards the expenses of holding the annual village temple festival.

*Vakkalada*: For every bundle of hay he took home, the tenant had to pay one measure (a quarter of a *marakkal*) of paddy. One *maa* of land yielded ten bundles of hay.

*Verapathu* (seed rent): Six *marakkal* of paddy seeds were required to cultivate one *maa*. The landlords provided the seeds, and the tenants had to pay.

*Kaatchappadu*: For every 12 *marakkal* of paddy, the tenant had to pay one measure as *kaatchappadu* or compensation for loss of weight in the paddy.

*Marakkalihundu*: For every bag of paddy taken by the landlord as his share, the tenant had to pay 2 *marakkal* as *marakkalthundu*. This was paid on the assumption that for every bag of paddy there would be a shortfall of 2 *marakkal*.

*Koothadipathu*: During the festival in the village temple, each tenant family had to pay 3 *marakkal* of paddy to the folk art troupe engaged for entertainment.

*Tharisukooli*: If the landlord paid cash wages for transplantation, the sum had to be paid back in the form of paddy, at the rate of 6 *marakkal* per *maa*.

Punishment for non-payment of rent, in whole or in part, took several forms. If there was a shortfall in the rent paid by the tenant, the landlord made a note of it as *vasakkattu* (rent due). If the owed amount was not paid by the next year, the landlord would seize the tenant’s cattle. If the tenant did not own any cattle, he would be tied up and beaten severely, and the pulley (*vittam*) would be confiscated from the drinking-water well of his household.

Tenant cultivators were exploited in various other forms as well. They were forced to first work on lands cultivated directly by the landlord before they could work on land they leased in. For working in the landlord’s fields, they were paid wages of 3 to 4 *marakkal* of paddy. If a tenant refused to work on the landlord’s fields, his house would be locked up, and he and his family prevented from entering their home. The locks could be opened only on the intervention of the headman or *nattamai* (there was one *nattamai* for every twelve households in the village). Landlords have been known even to poison the water in wells that belonged to tenants if they refused to work on *mirasdar*-owned lands.

Tenants also had to volunteer as free labour at the 17-kilometre-long canal near Thenparai village. If they refused to do this work, they were evicted from their leased land. While tenant cultivators might receive a share of the fish caught from the village tank, *pannaiyals* were not entitled to any share.

*T. Ponnan, former farm servant, Umamaheswarapuram village, East Thanjavur*

Another interview I conducted was with T. Ponnan, a former farm servant of Umamaheswarapuram revenue village, Thiruvarur taluk. All the land in the village was owned by the landlord Vadapathimangalam Thiagaraja Mudaliar. He owned land in seventeen other villages as well. While he lived in Vadapathi village, his land in the other villages was looked after by his agents, and by village *munsiffs* and *karnams*. Other functionaries under the landlord’s command who administered the farms were *neeranikam* (irrigation worker), *vettumai*, *visarippu*, *thalaiyari* and *maniyam*. These served as the landlord’s henchmen and implemented his orders.

Although the village was a multi-caste village, only Dalits worked as farm servants there. Landless agricultural workers of Other Castes worked in the fields, drove carts and tended cattle for the landlord. Both the Dalit farm servants and the Other Caste Hindu agricultural workers were allotted small pieces of land by the landlords on which to raise huts.

The farm servants in the village, as in the entire district, worked under extremely oppressive conditions. The landlord’s agent would wake them up at 4 in the morning; the workers went to the fields and returned from work only after sunset. They were paid a pittance, three-fourths of a *marakkal* of paddy, for a whole day’s work. They were given two meals during the day at the worksite: cold rice (*palaiya sadam*) left over from the previous day in the morning, and hot rice gruel at noon—both served in mud pots. Their wages were paid once a week (5.25*marakkal*). lf a farm servant did not turn up for work he was whipped and made to drink liquid cowdung, which meant that he was forced to work even in ill health. On rare occasions, such as a marriage in the family, farm servants would be given Rs 30 and 5 *kalams* of paddy by the landlord.

There were times when farm servants sought to escape these oppressive conditions by fleeing to Singapore, Burma and Malaya, travelling by ship from the sea port of Nagapattinam. However, there would be agents of the landlord waiting at Nagapattinam, who forcibly brought back those they recognized to the village.

The families of farm servants—parents, wives and children—also had to work for the landlord. While the men worked in the fields, their wives were employed in tending cattle, and at transplantation and weeding. Women workers’ wages were two measures of paddy a day. When a child was born to a farm servant, the village *munsiff* and, more important, the landlord had to be informed immediately. If he failed to do so, he was punished. Children too were not spared from work. Boys aged 6 had to work as cowherds; at the age of 10 they had to clear cowdung from the cattle sheds; at the age of 15 they worked as cart drivers; and by the age of 18 they became bonded labourers like their fathers. Girls were put to work to gather fodder for the cattle.

The hut of a farm servant’s family typically measured 12 x 18 feet with a 3-foot-high mud wall. There were no locks and keys to these huts; in any case their occupants possessed nothing of value to protect. Even the vegetables the farm servants raised belonged to the landlord. Only pots and pans made of mud were permitted in the hut for use as cooking and eating utensils. Every aspect of family life including childbirth was confined to this small space.

A farm servant had to seek permission from the landlord when his son or daughter was to marry, often having to plead his case on the grounds that the marriage would bring another hand to work at the farm. To conduct a marriage ceremony, the farm servant was dependent on the landlord for paddy, money and the *thali* (*mangalsutra*) for the bride. The newly-wed couple had to seek the blessings of the master soon after the marriage.

The farm servant was expected to pay obeisance to the landlord as if he were god. Whenever he appeared before the landlord he had to kneel down with folded hands. The customary piece of cloth draped on his shoulder would have to be removed and tied at the waist as a sign of ‘respect’. Tending the landlord’s cattle was his responsibility, and it was often said that the cattle led better lives than the farm servant.

Dalit farm servants were subjected to far greater indignities. They were not permitted to enter the street on which caste Hindus lived. If they had something to say to the landlord, they had to go around to the back of his house and speak from a distance. They could wear only dirty clothes in the landlord’s presence; if seen in clean clothes, the landlord’s henchmen would tear the clothes off their bodies. A strip of loincloth made of cotton was the only clothing they were allowed to wear. The landlord invariably addressed the farm servants in foul language and abused them, irrespective of their seniority or age.

Dalits lacked graveyards in which to bury the dead. Even where a graveyard was available, access to it through the fields of the master was prohibited. Burials thus had often to wait for permission from the landlord. Dalit farm servants could not enter temples, were not permitted footwear, and could not touch even the clothes of caste Hindus. During feasts or on special occasions, Dalits were given food in the metal *marakkal* (volumetric measure); they were forbidden from eating food served on banana leaves as was customary. Separate glasses were set aside for them to drink from in toddy shops and tea shops. Dalits were not permitted to draw drinking water from common wells, or to ask for water even in rest houses run by charity organizations.

There was an undeclared law that Dalit farm servants’ children could not go to school since they were ‘born to serve the landlord’. The biographer of P.S. Dhanushkodi (who later became president of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural Workers’ Union and a Member of the Legislative Assembly) writes that when Dhanushkodi was sent to a Burma-returned Dalit youth to learn the Tamil alphabet, his farm servant father was summoned by the landlord, tied to a tree and whipped. The outraged landlord asked his farm servant who would look after the cattle if his son went to school (Ramakrishnan 1995). It took years of bitter struggle before Dalits in rural Thanjavur gained the right to attend school. ‘Historically, Dalits in Palakurichi [a village in East Thanjavur] have been discriminated in terms of access to educational facilities . . . Paraya and Palla children were not admitted to schools till 1937’ (Surjit 2008).

Struggles against Caste and Class Oppression:
The Beginnings

In East Thanjavur all sections of the peasantry—farm servants, tenant cultivators, small and middle peasants, and even rich peasants—were exploited and oppressed by the landlords and the colonial administration, to different degrees.

The root causes of the misery of the peasantry, which involved a complex jungle of tenancy rules, land rights, forms of work of labour, rack rents and indebtedness, was sustained by the colonial exploitation of India. In this vital aspect, the peasant movement was an integral part of the freedom movement in India. (Menon 1979b: 53)

In the early years of the twentieth century, they began to fight against the worsening living conditions and oppression through spontaneous acts of protest.

An interesting example of such struggle surfaced in the estate of the Brahmin landlord, Ganapathy Subramania Iyer of Kaliyakudi village in Nannilam Taluk, who owned 100 *veli* (1 *veli* = 6.61 acres) of land. He had *pannaiyals* working for him and paid them lower than customary wages. In March 1938, in a militant protest against inhuman treatment, they refused to work and petitioned the government. The *mirasdar* was forced to raise their wages, but, not unexpectedly, still kept the wages below the demanded level. In retaliation, the landlord organized a group of rowdies from nearby villages and in league with other influential landlords in the neighbourhood, attacked the men and molested the women labourers who had defied the traditional hierarchy on April 28, 1938. (Ibid.: 53-54)

Efforts to channelize and organize these protests of the farm servants and tenant cultivators began in the late 1930s, especially after a unit of the Kisan Sabha, the first in Tamil Nadu, was set up in Thenparai. Although the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) was established at the national level in 1936, it took a further five to eight years for it to take root in Tamil Nadu.

In 1938-39, Manalur Maniammai, a Brahmin widow, in defiance of orthodoxy, dedicated herself to organizing Dalits in Thanjavur. She learnt martial arts in order to face attacks by toughs employed by the landlords. She held a meeting of Dalit farm servants in her village and exhorted them to revolt against the landlords and against the British colonial power, and to support the slogan of *swaraj*, or self-rule. She urged them to join the kisan committees to fight for their rights. Manalur Maniammai later became a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the AIKS, and went on to become one of its leaders. She is widely believed to have been murdered while at the house of a landlord, where she had gone for negotiations on behalf of the peasants. The landlord claimed that she had been gored to death by a stag.

Struggle of Tenant Cultivators in Thenparai

The struggle of tenant cultivators began in Thenparai village, where all the lands previously owned by the Rettai Rayar family were sold to the Uthirapathi Matham in 1939. The tyrannical modes of exploitation practised by the Rettai Rayars were continued by the Matham. It asked the tenants to execute bonds (*sasananz*) and to cut tattoos on their hands. When the tenants started putting up a resistance to these and other forms of oppression, the Matham brought in *goondas* from other villages to assault them.

At the first all-India conference of the AIKS, held in Lucknow on April 11, 1936, a decision had been taken to mobilize peasants and agricultural labourers all over the country. Upon hearing of the conflict between the landlord and tenant cultivators in Thenparai, a meeting held in Madras of the state committee of the CPI resolved to send B. Srinivasa Rao, from the Kisan Sabha, to Thanjavur. (At that time Srinivasa Rao, born in the South Canara district of the then Madras Presidency, could speak, but not read or write Tamil.) He was accompanied by Amirthalingam, Venkatesa Solagar and Ramanujam, local peasant leaders from Thanjavur, and Ramachandra Nedungadi from the Kisan Sabha’s all-India centre. In 1943, Srinivasa Rao formed the first unit of the Kisan Sabha in Tamil Nadu, in Thenparai village of East Thanjavur. Thus began the organized movement of peasants and agricultural labourers in the district, a movement of which agricultural workers were the backbone.

On his way to Thenparai, Srinivasa Rao was given a rousing reception at Kalappal, a village in Mannargudi taluk, Thiruvarur district. Addressing the farm servants of the village, he said:

What is the difference between you and the landlords? Are you not also human beings, born of your mother’s wombs and with two arms and legs?

If you are hit, hit back. It is illegal to whip *pannaiyals* and to force cowdung into their mouths. If the landlords try to impose such punishment on you, retaliate, chase them down and fight back. If *goondas* come to attack you, tie them to a tree. If a single one of you is attacked, the entire village should unite against the attack and in defence of the victim.

Establishing unity and strengthening the Kisan Sabha are of the utmost importance. Hoist the red flag in every village. If you establish a Kisan Sabha everywhere, and if you begin to hit back, you can indeed instil fear in the landlords. The police too will have to reconsider their position, and they will be unable to cause the same fear that they did. Do not hold back: face this challenge boldly and move forward.

One of the first demands put forward by the Kisan Sabha unit in Thenparai on behalf of the tenant cultivators was that 33 per cent or one-third of the product be given as share rent; in other words, that tenants receive 67 per cent in place of the 18 per cent they had hitherto received as their share from Uthirapathi Matham. The retaliation was swift: Veerasamy, who had been elected secretary of the Thenparai Kisan Sabha unit and who was himself a tenant cultivating 3 acres, was evicted from his leased-in land. With the help of leaders like Srinivasa Rao, Manali Kandasamy and others, the peasants of Thenparai began an agitation. Despite the near-famine conditions in the countryside in 1943, Uthirapathi Matham, through their local agent Seetharamachari, issued orders preventing the tenants from harvesting the paddy they had cultivated. The Matham told the peasants that they would let the crop wither rather than allow the Kisan Sabha to grow in the village.

A meeting was held in which the district leaders of the Kisan Sabha participated. The peasants and workers of the village decided, for the first time ever, to defy the authority of the Matham. They harvested and threshed the paddy, leaving the landlords’ share at the threshing floor for them to collect. They had gained in confidence, and the news of their struggle spread rapidly across the district. In one village after another, peasants came to the Kisan Sabha asking for units to be established in their own villages. The landlords were furious that they were unable to stop the tenants from threshing the paddy; and their plans to burn the paddy at the threshing floor proved futile. At the instigation of the landlords, Veerasamy was attacked and his house burned down. The police filed false criminal charges against both peasants and leaders of the Kisan Sabha, following which Venkatesan and six others were sentenced to several months of imprisonment. The peasants of Thenparai, however, were undeterred.

To break the stalemate, Madhavan, Deputy Superintendent of Police, held a tripartite meeting in Kalappal village in 1944, and negotiated an agreement that provided for a wage increase for the farm servants, and gave the tenant cultivators the right to thresh the harvested paddy at their own threshing floors rather than at the threshing floors of the landlords. Amirthalingam, Kalappal Kuppusamy and Rajagopal represented the Kisan Sabha at this meeting, and V.S. Thiagaraja Mudaliar (Vadapathimangalam) and the head of the Thirukkalar Matham represented the landlords. In December that year, the district collector, Ismail, held a second meeting and drafted a new agreement, by which it was further decided that:

(i) the share of paddy due to the tenant would be given at the threshing floor and the landlords would sign receipts on receiving their share;

(ii) standard volumetric measures approved by the government would be used to measure the shares of paddy.

However, the peasants had to struggle to implement the terms of the agreement. The government and the landlords joined hands against them. Acting on a demand made by the landlords, the district administration issued an externment order to Amirthalingam and Manali Kandasamy, instructing them to leave Thanjavur district for Tiruchirapalli. The impact of the externment was felt as far away as the British Parliament, where Communist members raised their voice against it until the order was withdrawn.

Revolt of Farm Servants in Thenparai

The victory achieved by tenant cultivators in reducing the back-breaking rents in Thenparai not only enthused the tenants of the district, but also inspired farm servants working under the Kalappal and Nedumbalam landlords, and under Vadapathimangalam Mudaliar, Valivalam Desikar and Kunniyur Sambasiva Iyer. Determined to fight against the caste and class oppression to which they were subjected, Dalit farm servants joined the Kisan Sabha in large numbers, not only in and around Thenparai village but throughout East Thanjavur. About 15,000 farm servants and tenants attended the first conference of the State Kisan Sabha, held in Mannargudi in 1944. The Kisan Sabha flag soon came to be known as the flag of the Dalits, and it was hoisted wherever they lived.

The Kisan Sabha lent leadership to and fought on behalf of farm servants and Dalits on a wide range of issues, including wages, land, rents and discriminatory practices such as untouchability. On all issues that affected their livelihood and dignity, including attacks by landlords, the Dalits were asked to resist and retaliate. The Kisan Sabha called upon the farm servants to start wearing full dhotis instead of the loincloth, to speak out whenever necessary, and to physically resist if the landlords’ *goondas* tried to flog them or force them to drink cowdung-water. Dalit women were asked to wear blouses, a right they had been denied. The Kisan Sabha fought for the right of Dalits to sit together with caste Hindus in tea shops and to drink tea in common glasses. The Kisan Sabha demanded that Dalit children go to school rather than work in cattle sheds. Farm servants were told to go to work after 6 a.m. instead of at 4 a.m., and to return from work before sunset. Higher wages for farm servants were also demanded.

The landlords tried their best to stem the tide but in vain. The methods of repression attempted by them included attacks by hired *goondas*, foisting of false criminal cases and threats to the *pannaiyals* that they would be driven away from their native villages. But the Dalit upsurge could not be stopped. The government came under pressure to intervene and bring about a settlement between farm servants and landlords.

At the tripartite meeting of 1944 (mentioned above) that was held at the instance of the deputy superintendent of police, representatives of farm servants sat for the first time with landlords at a negotiating table where the two sides were treated alike. This was a victory in itself for the Dalit farm servants. The terms of the agreement that went in their favour were as follows:

(i) to stop the whipping of farm servants and forcing them to drink cowdung;

(ii) to pay farm servants 2 small measures of paddy a day as wages;

(iii) at harvest time, to pay farm servants 3 small measures of paddy per *kalam* and 4 small measures of paddy per day.

Further gains were achieved in the agreement negotiated in December that year, at the intervention of the District Collector. These included:

(i) an increase in the daily wages of agricultural labourers from 2 small measures of paddy to 3 small measures (from half a *marakkal* to three-fourths of a *marakkal*);

(ii) in addition, one-seventh of the total yield of paddy, i.e. 2 measures, were to be given to farm servants as *kalavadi*.

Caste Hindu tenants, sharecroppers and small peasants were initially suspicious of the Kisan Sabha and took some time to come under its influence in the fight for peasants’ rights. The landlords were quick to realize that if caste Hindu peasants joined hands with Dalit workers, they would be faced with a formidable opposition, and their citadel of feudal and caste oppression would come under threat. Following in the footsteps of their British colonial masters, the landlords too attempted a strategy of divide and rule. The response of the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party was to continue in their attempts to unify all sections of the peasantry, and the attempts of the landlords to split the movement along caste lines did not succeed. They were forced finally to come to an understanding with the Kisan Sabha and to participate in the tripartite meeting organized by the Thanjavur District Collector to discuss the problems faced by the peasantry. Manali Kandasamy represented the Kisan Sabha at this meeting.

The landlords, who agreed to the terms of the settlement at the official meeting, albeit reluctantly, later went back on their word and refused to implement it. But by then the Kisan Sabha movement had spread all across the district, and militant peasants rallied behind the organization. General body meetings, rallies and public meetings were held, and peasants struck work all over East Thanjavur. Once they understood the full impact of the terms of the tripartite settlement, caste Hindu tenants began to set aside their anti-Dalit prejudice and to gravitate towards the Kisan Sabha.

The district administration and the landlords were alarmed at the rapid rise of peasant militancy. The government took immediate measures to suppress the movement. Section 144, the provision in the Indian Penal Code relating to unlawful assembly, was promulgated across the entire district, and Manali Kandasamy and Amirthalingam, leaders of the Kisan Sabha, were externed. The landlords launched a rival peasant organization with the help of N.G. Ranga and one G. Narayanasamy Naidu.

Arbitration and Intervention by the Government

The 1946 Assembly election saw the Congress Party coming to power in Madras province. Immediately after the election a delegation of landlords from Thanjavur district, led by Vadapathimangalam Thiagaraja Mudaliar, met the Congress ministers to brief them about the Communists who, in their view, were instigating riots and spreading terror in Thanjavur. They demanded that the government intervene against the Communist-led peasant movement.

The government appointed the Thanjavur district sessions judge as arbitrator to look into the problems between the Kisan Sabha and the landlords in the Mannargudi revenue division, which comprised four taluks: Mannargudi, Thiruthuraipoondi, Needamangalam and Vedaranyam. The arbitrator, after holding a three-day-long meeting with Kisan Sabha leaders and landlords, gave the following verdict: that farm servants’ wages should be increased from 3 measures of paddy to 3.5 measures, and that landlords will not evict tenants from their leased-in fields or farm servants from their huts (Veerayyan 1998).

Both sides accepted the verdict, and Kunniyur Sambasiva Iyer and the other landlords as well as the Kisan Sabha leaders signed the arbitration award announced by the judge. However, some of the landlords, who had not expected the verdict to go in favour of the peasants, refused to implement it. Bashyam Iyengar, then revenue minister, heeding the complaint of these dissident landlords, went personally to East Thanjavur and convened another tripartite conference at Needamangalam.

Bashyam Iyengar said that it had been foolishness on the part of the government to appoint an arbitrator and that the government did not have the powers to implement the arbitration award. He further declared that landlords could evict any tenant from their lands and any person from huts put up on their lands, as their right to do so was absolute. The conference convened by the Revenue Minister ended without an agreement being reached between the Kisan Sabha and the landlords. Since the Minister went a step further and publicly announced that landlords could elicit help from the police, what followed was a reign of terror against the peasants. The police also fabricated false cases against members and leaders of the Kisan Sabha.

On January 3, 1947, while addressing a meeting in Kumbakonam, the state revenue minister openly declared that he would not tolerate the Communists and the Kisan Sabha. He said that the Kisan Sabha was enacting a ‘mini Noakhali’ in Mannargudi and Thiruthuraipoondi. The Kisan Sabha was responsible for arson and murder. In the name of opposing capitalism, they are destroying everything in the district, he said. He said that, in order to protect law and order, he would take stringent action against the Communists. After this, Section 144 was promulgated to ban AIKS meetings. Most taluks in East Thanjavur were brought under this section of the Indian Penal Code. Reserve Police from Tiruchi were brought into the district. (Ibid.: 15)

The declarations made by the Revenue Minister emboldened the landlords. They issued press statements demanding that the Kisan Sabha be banned in the district, which received wide publicity in all the newspapers. All this contributed to large-scale repression of the peasant movement.

Repressive Tactics of the Government after 1947

This was the situation in East Thanjavur when India gained independence in 1947. The peasants of East Thanjavur had hoped that the government of an independent nation would come to their rescue and solve their problems. Contrary to their expectations, however, the landlords, who had by then switched their loyalties from the British colonial administration to the Congress Party—used the government to once again suppress the peasant movement. The Kisan Sabha was banned, as was the Communist Party.

In many parts of Tamil Nadu, especially Thanjavur, Section 144 was enforced for four years, from 1948 to 1951. The peasant and labour movement in Thanjavur was sought to be crushed: hoisting the red flag was banned, and peasants were forbidden to wear red towels and were threatened with dire consequences if they became members of the Kisan Sabha. (Veerayyan 1998)

Kalappaal Kuppu, a farm servant who became a leader of the movement in Mannargudi, became the first peasant martyr in independent India. He was one of the Kisan Sabha leaders who had signed the settlement that abolished whipping of farm servants and forcible drinking of cowdung-water. Kuppu was arrested on false charges on April 18, 1948, at the age of 35, and interned in the central jail in Tiruchirapalli—where he was killed by poisoning.

Apart from Kuppu, several hundreds of cadres of the agrarian movement were arrested by the police on trumped-up charges of conspiracy, put behind bars without any investigation, and beaten and tortured in prison. The Nanalur conspiracy case, Nedumbalam conspiracy case, Thiruppoonthuruthy conspiracy case and Ambalapattu conspiracy case were some of the cases that were falsely brought against the leaders and cadres of the movement. In 1950, all these were merged and redesignated the Thanjavur Conspiracy Case. The accused were tried in court at Mayiladuthurai and sentenced to three years of rigorous imprisonment.

In a bid to split the Kisan Sabha, a settlement was sought to be reached in Mayiladuthurai between the rival peasant organization leader G. Narayanasamy Naidu and the landlords, called the Mayiladuthurai settlement. But the peasant movement ignored the settlement and the protests continued. Section 144 was once again promulgated in Thanjavur district and the Malabar Special Police was called in to tackle the situation. The district soon resembled a vast police camp. The huts of Dalit farm servants were destroyed in many villages, either by the police or by landlords’ *goondas*.

Peasant leaders, Sivaraman from Jambavan Odai, Iraniyan from Vattakudi, Arumugam from Ambalappattu, Raju from Kottur and Natesan from Nanalur were shot dead in the police firing. The police smashed the house of Manali Kandasamy in rage against their inability to apprehend him. The newspapers in the state colluded with the landlords’ campaign, publishing mainly what was handed out to them by the landlords and the state administration. All this did not succeed, however, in preventing the spread of the Kisan Sabha, which continued to fight for the dignity of Dalits and the livelihood of peasants in the decade 1940-50 (Ramakrishnan 2002). Dalits and other sections of the peasantry bravely faced all kinds of opposition: bullets, *goondas*, foisted conspiracy cases and false campaigns by the press. The Kisan Sabha grew in influence in East Thanjavur, as well as in the adjacent Pattukkottai and Aranthangi taluks of West Thanjavur.

The 1952 Assembly Elections

In the first Assembly elections held in Madras province after Independence, in 1952, the Congress lost its majority and Chief Minister Kumarasamy Raja was defeated. Out of 19 Assembly constituencies in Thanjavur district, the Congress lost in ten, the Communist Party of India won in six, and independent candidates supported by the CPI won in another four constituencies. Manali Kandasamy, who had been forced to remain underground throughout the election campaign, won the Mannargudi Assembly seat by a huge margin. Landlord candidates Kunniyur Iyer, Nedumbalam Mudahar and Poondi Vandayar were defeated.

The victorious CPI candidates were Manali Kandasamy and A.K. Subbiah in Mannargudi, N. Sivaraj and S. Vadivel in Nagapattinam, P. Venkatesa Solagar in Needamangalam, and S. Ramalingam in Thanjavur. E.V. Ramasami supported CPI candidates in the Thanjavur region. The CPI won 14 Assembly seats in the state, of which six were from Thanjavur district. The victory in the Assembly elections proved to be a shot in the arm for the activities of the Kisan Sabha in East Thanjavur.

The Congress did not get a majority but they formed the government nevertheless, with the help of the Commonweal Party and Toilers’ Party which had stood against the Congress in the run-up to the election. C. Rajagopalachari became chief minister of Madras State.

New Phase of the Peasant Movement

*The Pannaiyal Protection Act of 1952*

On August 20, 1952, the Kisan Sabha held a conference at Thiruthuraipoondi, attended by about 60,000 tenant cultivators and farm servants, to protest the eviction of tenants from their lands. On August 22, a day after the conference concluded, the newly elected state government passed the Pannaiyal Protection and Cultivation Ordinance, applicable only to Thanjavur district. Addressing a meeting in Thanjavur after promulgation of the ordinance, Chief Minister Rajagopalachari said: ‘The spectre of Communism is haunting the peasants and agricultural labourers of Thanjavur district. I have brought out the Act only to liberate them. Landlords should accept this Act’ (Veerayyan 1998). The ordinance ruled that:

Tenants who cultivate the lands of those who own more than 6.5 acres were not to be evicted.

Tenants were to keep a share of 40 per cent of the output of paddy; 60 per cent was to go to the landlords and they were to give receipts for their share.

The wage increase mentioned in the 1948 Mayiladuthurai settlement for farm servants was to be implemented.

If a landlord wanted to evict a farm servant from his farm, he would have to pay the farm servant Rs 150 or six months’ wages, whichever was higher, as compensation. In 1952, Rs 150 was equivalent to the price of 12.5 bags of paddy (the price of one bag was Rs 12).

The ordinance had a great impact in Thanjavur district, especially in East Thanjavur. It was seen as a victory achieved through pressures exerted on the government by struggles of the peasants and their organizations. The 5th state conference of the Kisan Sabha was held in Mannargudi in 1953. More than one lakh people participated in the rally on its closing day.

Over the next four years, the Thanjavur Pannaiyal Protection Act (the ordinance was passed) brought about a qualitative change in agrarian relations in the district, and in master-slave relations that hitherto existed between farm servants and landlords. It struck a blow at the conditions of bondage in which farm servants and their families had worked for landlords, whereby a landlord could proclaim the farm servant as ‘mine’ and the farm servant and his family had to address the landlord as master (*ejamaan*).

The Act legislated that landlords had to pay farm servants the prescribed wages if they wanted to keep them on their farms. If they did not want the farm servants to work for them, they had the option of paying the prescribed compensation and relieving them. Some landlords chose to pay Rs 150 and retain the farm servants as wage labourers, after accepting an undertaking from them that they were no longer farm servants. A landlord could now employ anybody as an agricultural worker on his farm. An erstwhile farm servant also could choose to work wherever he received better wages. The agricultural worker was becoming free in a double sense: free from ownership of the means of production, and free to sell his labour power. Thus, the Pannaiyal Protection Act of 1952 paved the way for transforming the relationship between landlords and farm servants into one between landlords and agricultural workers, although other agrarian and social conditions, such as land concentration and untouchability, continued to exist as before. ‘The system of pannaiyal has practically gone out of vogue except in the case of about five per cent of the landlords. Neither landlords nor labourers desire resuscitation of the odious system’ (Government of Tamil Nadu 1969: 6).

New Demands and New Struggles

Once the farm servants became daily wage labourers, new demands—such as assured work, higher wages and right to homesteads—came to the fore. Earlier, workers had been allowed to raise huts on the farms of the landlords for whom they worked. Now that they had the freedom to work for different landlords, they began to be evicted from their huts. Thus, in addition to wage increase and assured work, the demand had to be raised for title deeds to their homesteads.

The new situation also gave birth to a conflict of interest between tenant cultivators and small landowners, and farm servants-turned-agricultural labourers. During the years 1943-53, tenants and sharecroppers, small landowners, and farm workers of Thanjavur had come together under a single peasant organization (the Kisan Sabha), which addressed their common grievances and organized common struggles against the landlords and the state. Now, difficulties arose in continuing this form of united struggle. While joint struggles could continue for basic demands such as ‘land to the tiller’ and abolition of untouchability, issues such as wage increase and regular employment in agricultural operations strained the unity of tenants and agricultural labourers. The Pannaiyal Protection Act introduced a divide between landowning peasants (including poor peasants) and landless agricultural workers. The need was felt, therefore, to have separate organizations to represent the interests of both these classes. An agricultural workers’ conference was held in Thiruvarur in 1956, at which it was decided to establish the Tamil Nadu Agricultural Workers Association.

The years between 1956 and 1960 witnessed several militant wage struggles being launched across East Thanjavur. After the Pannaiyal Protection Act came into force, landlords began to deny jobs to local workers by bringing in agricultural labourers from other villages. The agricultural workers of East Thanjavur, under the leadership of the Communist Party of India, fought against these new tactics of the landlords by pressing three main demands: jobs for local workers; uniform wages throughout the district; and higher wages. The strike actions of agricultural labourers in some villages went on for days together—up to 45 days in some instances.

From 1966 to 1968 the struggles entered a new phase, marking a milestone in the history of the Left movement and agricultural workers’ movement in the district. In 1966 the landlords, to counter the growing militancy of agricultural workers, formed the Paddy Growers Association, functioning from Nagapattinam taluk, whose membership and leadership consisted mainly of landlords. It formed a network of *goondas* and held public meetings to incite violence against agricultural labourers; to pit caste Hindus against Dalits; and to campaign against the Left by saying that paddy growers should not engage workers belonging to the Left for agricultural operations. The police and the revenue administration supported the Paddy Growers Association, as did the Congress party. This new direction taken by the landlords led to a tense situation in the district, one of open confrontation. The district committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Agricultural Workers Association put forward the demand that a tripartite conference be held to resolve the wage dispute, in support of which a one-day strike was organized throughout the district.

The DMK Government Years: Renewed Militancy

In the 1967 Assembly elections, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came to power in the state of Tamil Nadu. As part of their election campaign the DMK leaders had exposed the anti-people policies of the Congress government, especially focusing on police firings against agricultural labourers. But after coming to power, they showed no signs of intervening to settle the wage dispute and other demands of the workers. In October 1967, at the time of the kharif harvest, CPI (M) leaders A. Balasubramaniam and N. Sankaraiah met the DMK chief minister C. Annadurai, and urged that the state government settle the wage dispute in East Thanjavur through negotiation at the earliest opportunity. But the government did not intervene. The Agricultural Workers Association resolved that workers would undertake harvesting work only for landlords who were prepared to pay 6 litres of paddy a day as wages. One landlord in Mannargudi taluk was willing to pay the stipulated wages and agricultural labourers went to work for him, while the Paddy Growers Association attacked him for compromising the stand taken by landlords.

Workers’ struggles continued in most parts of the district, as did the repressive measures against them. In Poonthalangudi village (Mannargudi taluk), when *goondas* of the landlord tried to remove the red flag from a flagpost, agricultural workers resisted them and protected it. The police came to the assistance of the *goondas* and opened fire on the workers, killing one of them on the spot. A district-wide protest movement was organized against the police action. After this incident the state government finally convened a tripartite conference to resolve the conflict, which resulted in an agreement on the following lines.

Half a litre of paddy would be added to the existing daily wage.

In places where 6 litres of paddy had been paid as wages during the previous year, the wage rate would continue as it was.

Preference would be given to employment of local workers in agricultural operations; workers from outside would be brought in only if there were not enough local workers to meet the demand.

The state government would appoint a wage commission to decide the wage rates.

The agreement would apply for a period of one year.

The agreement would be applicable only to East Thanjavur.

Revenue authorities would take the initiative to implement the agreement.

As usual, government officials and landlords were reluctant to implement the agreement, and agricultural workers had to struggle for its implementation. At this juncture there was a change in the leadership of the Paddy Growers Association. Gopalakrishna Naidu (from Irinjur village, adjacent to Kizhvenmani), a notorious anti-Communist, became its president.

During the harvesting season of 1968-69, the Agricultural Workers Association put forward the demand that the state government should once again convene a conference to discuss revision of wages, to which the government had agreed in June 1968. Even as the campaign for wage increase was under way in the entire district, the Paddy Growers Association kidnapped Chinnapillai, branch president of the Irinjur Agricultural Workers Union, and murdered him. The landlords’ message was clear: since the period of validity of the agreement of the previous year had expired, they would revert to paying the old wages, which were less than the existing wages. Once again, a situation of conflict arose between the agricultural workers and the Paddy Growers Association.

The state government, instead of trying to settle the issue through negotiation, formed a special police force called the Kisan Police to suppress the struggles of the agricultural workers and the Left movement. During the freedom struggle the Malabar Special Police had been brought in to crush the peasants’ movement; now it was the DMK government’s turn to form a special police cell to suppress the militant struggles of workers in East Thanjavur. The police openly sided with the landlords to break the agricultural workers’ strike for wage increase. The targets of attacks by the Paddy Growers Association and the police, aided by the *goonda* force of the landlords, were not only the workers who were engaged in wage struggles, but also the Left movement as a whole, which had been fighting against untouchability, caste and other forms of oppression since the 1940s.

The landlords were adamant that since the validity of the earlier agreement had expired, they would go back to giving wages at the old rates. In opposition to this, agricultural workers began renewed struggles. *Goondas* attacked Left cadres and workers in many villages. A landlord by the name of Ramachandran, of Kekkarai village, was also murdered by the *goondas* as he was seen as a supporter of the Communist movement.

There were widespread workers’ struggles in Nagapattinam, Thiruvarur, Thiruthuraipoondi, Mannargudi and Nannilam in East Thanjavur. In places where the landlords accepted the 6-litre wage formula, harvesting was completed; where it was not accepted and workers were brought in from outside, there was conflict. The repression unleashed to counter this was brutal. False cases were framed and thousands arrested—premises of the courts were filled with agricultural workers. The police and *goondas*, who were guests of the landlords’ hospitality, targeted and attacked agricultural labourers in their homes, and destroyed their property. Despite the repression, however, the agricultural workers did not succumb and continued their struggle.

‘Several heads would have rolled on the field, blood would have flowed like the Kaveri in flood, if only we had not been restrained by the higher-ups. But for that instruction from our leaders, we would have put real fear in their hearts. We would have shown them who we really are.’

Adilingam, a thin man with bright, piercing eyes, seemed to be reliving that tense September day in 1968 as he continued:

‘There were 12 police vans carrying hundreds of Madras Special Police forces. We gheraoed the vans, they couldn’t move an inch without killing several of us. We carried every bit of equipment we could get hold of, sticks, spears, sickles, kitchen knives. Twelve of their men were wounded, not a single one on our side. The superintendent of police planted several white flags on the ground and asked for peace. We said, “We will release one van if you go and bring our women, whom you arrested last night, like cowards under cover of darkness. Go, get them!” And our women were brought back in an hour’s time from Kivalur station. For the first time in the history of our village, the police took orders from the labourers. It was a great day.’

This was how a confrontation between agricultural labourers and landlords, backed by the police, was described to me by a leading participant. (Sivaraman 1970: 246)

This was in the village of Puducheri in Nagapattinam sub-division of East Thanjavur. The incident was part of a familiar pattern of struggles in the late 1960s.

‘There is no security for our cadres. We have to organize our own volunteer force to protect ourselves’—P. Ramamurti issued this statement after a visit to East Thanjavur. Chief Minister Annadurai denied that such a situation existed in the district.

A protest meeting was held at Nagapattinam on November 15, 1968, to condemn the attacks by the police and the *goondas*. Pakkiri, a movement activist, was slain on the road while returning from the meeting, at Sikkal village. The Left and the peasants’ movement organized further protests against this dreadful combined attack by the Kisan Police, the local police, officials of the administration, the Paddy Growers Association and the landlords’ *goonda* force.

The Kizhvenmani Massacre

The agricultural workers were intransigent in their resolve to not succumb to either the false assurances or the intimidatory tactics of the Paddy Growers Association and the police. The landlords tried to wean peasants and agricultural workers from the influence of the Communist Party by making promises to them of assured work and higher wages, but on condition that they bring down the red flag. Organized sections of agricultural workers declared, however, that they would not uproot the symbol of the movement that had given them dignity of life and work.

The landlords chose the village of Kizhvenmani in Nagapattinam taluk, whose agricultural workers were firmly committed to continue the struggle, as their next target of attack. On December 25, 1968, at about 8 p.m., more than a hundred *goondas* led by Gopalakrishna Naidu (president of the Paddy Growers Association), and armed with guns, choppers, petrol cans and other lethal weapons, drove into the village in a blue van. Naidu ordered the *goondas* to burn down the entire village. Forty-four people of the village who sought shelter in a nearby hut were all burnt alive.

The Venmani massacre was condemned at protest meetings organized not only in Thanjavur but in the entire state of Tamil Nadu, and also in other states where the Left movement was strong. The hut in which the 44 victims were burnt alive, which belonged to an agricultural worker named Ramayya, is today the site of the Venmani Memorial. Every year, December 25 is observed as a day to commemorate the martyrs of 1968, and as a day of pledges to eradicate untouchability and end feudal exploitation.

The Venmani massacre was not just retaliation against the workers’ wage struggles, but an attack by landlords against Dalits who were fighting against caste and feudal oppression. This fact came out clearly in an interview that Mythili Sivaraman conducted with a landlord in East Thanjavur.

Not only did the labourers deny that the wage issue was basic to the troubles, but even the landlords shrugged it off as secondary. An emaciated old man, owner of about 15 acres, lectured me on what he considered to be the source of the present problems. ‘Things used to be very peaceful here some years ago. The labourers were very hardworking and respectful. But now . . . the fellow who used to stand in the backyard of my house to talk to me comes straight to the front door wearing slippers and all . . . And at 5.30 sharp he says, “Our leader is speaking today at a public meeting. I have to leave.” His leader holds a meeting right next door to me and parades the streets with the red flag. These fellows have become arrogant and lazy, thanks to the Communists. They have no fear in them any more.’

The root of the problem was easy to locate. It was the emergence of the new fearless, politically aware [Dalit] labourer and his militant union. (Sivaraman 1970: 248)

After the Venmani massacre, the government appointed a one-man commission under a retired judge, Ganapathia Pillai, to go into the question of wages for agricultural labourers and to make recommendations. Pending the release of the final recommendations of the commission, the District Collector, in a tripartite meeting held at Thanjavur on January 16, 1969, announced that wages were to be increased, and that outside labourers were to be employed only after local labourers had been given work and only if there was a real need for such employment.

Ganapathia Pillai Commission Report

The salient features of the Ganapathia Pillai Commission’s report and its recommendations were as follows.

The judge pointed out that a special feature of the working population of the East Thanjavur area was that 90 per cent belonged to the Scheduled Castes. In the western part of Thanjavur district, not more than half of the working population belonged to the Scheduled Castes. According to the 1961 Census, of the total population of the East Thanjavur taluks of Srikali, Mayavaram, Nannilam, Nagapattinam, Mannargudi and Thiruthuraipoondi, nearly 28 per cent belonged to the Scheduled Castes. In the western part of Thanjavur district this proportion was 18 per cent.

Ganapathia Pillai believed that fixing different wage rates for different taluks would create unnecessary discontent and encourage unnecessary migration of labour from one place to another, and decided to recommend uniform rates for wages for all six taluks (the whole of East Thanjavur).

The judge further stated that the state had the ‘legal power to restrict the freedom of contract of landholders to refuse work to local labour totally and to import outside labour by enacting appropriate labour legislation’.

While the minimum wages of agricultural workers could be determined under the provisions of Central Act 11 of 1948, Ganapathia Pillai was of the opinion that the state government should bring out a special legislation designed to settle the labour problems in Thanjavur.

Wages once fixed were to be reviewed by a committee once in three years.

He recommended six local measures out of 54 measures as the harvest wage (six local measures plus 420 ml or 360 grams in weight, that is, six litres).

The judge also pointed out that while the problem of shortage of house sites was not very acute at the time, a long-term policy for solution of this problem had to be worked out. He suggested, in this regard, that all available methods of acquiring lands for house sites be utilized.

On the basis of these recommendations, the state government of Tamil Nadu legislated an Act on Fair Wages. The law was applicable only to East Thanjavur to begin with, and was to be implemented throughout the state from 1998 onwards.

Struggles for Titles to House Sites and Farm Land

In addition to struggles to end the scourge of untouchability, to liberate agricultural labourers from serfdom and to ensure minimum wages, the Left and the Agricultural Workers Union in Thanjavur began a movement centred on another important aspect of the right to life of agricultural workers: title deeds for house sites.

Once the relations of bondage between landlords and farm labour were broken, landlords began to evict agricultural workers from homes built on their employers’ land. In order to protect their homes, the workers began a movement demanding title deeds to homesteads. Given also the recommendation of the Ganapathia Pillai Commission in this regard, the state government announced legislation to grant agricultural workers title deeds to house sites on private land owned by landlords. In Thanjavur district, the office from where these title deeds were issued was located at Mannargudi, and title deeds were given to 180,000 agricultural workers in the district.

The next movement launched by peasants throughout the state and in Thanjavur was related to the Land Ceiling Act that had been enacted by the Congress government in 1961. The Act legislated a ceiling of 30 standard acres of land, but it had many loopholes that were used by the landlords to escape the ceiling—for instance, by assigning land to trusts, *mathams* and so on. The peasants demanded that the Act be amended along the lines of a law enacted in the neighbouring state of Kerala by the CPI (M)-led state government with E.M.S. Namboodiripad as chief minister. Pickets were organized throughout Tamil Nadu to press the demand. Srinivasa Rao, a leader of the peasants’ and agricultural workers’ movement, travelled across the state to help organize the pickets. The strain of this campaign took a severe toll on his health, and he fell ill and died on September 30, 1961.

The struggle for land distribution gathered momentum in the 1970s and continued for twenty years thereafter in East Thanjavur. In 1971, the DMK government amended the Land Ceiling Act and fixed the ceiling at 15 standard acres. The peasants’ struggle then pressed the state to take over surplus land and to distribute it under the provisions of the amended Act. Details of land that was finally distributed as a result of this struggle are given below, district-wise.

Thiruvarur District

Thiagaraja Mudaliar of Vadapathimangalam owned 6,000 acres of sugarcane land, all under tenant cultivation. All the land was distributed among 6,500 agricultural labourers—1,500 acres in 1971 and 4,500 acres in 1991.

Kottur Mudaliar owned 4,000 acres of land, all of which has been distributed.

Sambasiva Iyer of Kunniyur owned 900 acres of land. Of this, 700 acres were distributed to agricultural labourers between 1970 and 1990. The remaining 200 acres of land, of which 130 acres are dry land, remain with the family of the landlord.

Samiappa Mudaliar of Nedumbalam owned nearly 2,000 acres of land, of which 1,800 acres were distributed and 200 acres remain with the landlord’s family.

In Keevalur, Valivalam Desikar owned nearly 2,000 acres of land; 1,800 acres were distributed and 200 acres are with the landlord’s family.

In Tirukkottaram village, Nannilam taluk, all 150 acres of land owned by Gurusamy Pillai were distributed.

In Kodavasal block, all 1,500 acres owned by Solingapuram Iyer were distributed.

Three Brahmin families owned 500 acres of land between them in Sirukalathur village, Kodavasal taluk. They left the village and all their land, barring 10 acres, was distributed. In Adipuliyur village, all the land owned by two Brahmin families was distributed.

Of nearly 370 acres owned by four Brahmin family farms in Sithadi village, Kudavasal taluk, all but 6 acres were distributed.

Swaminatha Iyer of Melapaliyur village, Kudavasal taluk, owned 300 acres of land. At present, his family owns only 5 acres; the rest has been distributed.

Nearly 2,000 acres of land in Vikkirapandiapuram, Viswapuram and Mudikondan villages in Kodavasal taluk, and Anathandapuram in Mayavaram taluk, were distributed.

In Narthankudi, Narikkudi, Vedambur, Vadamangalam, Araiyur, Saranatham, Pulavarnatham and Manickamangalam villages in Valangaiman block, 1,500 acres were distributed to agricultural workers.

Nagapattinam District

Thannilappadi Naidu owned nearly 300 acres of land in Keelaiyur block, all of which were distributed. All temple lands in the block were brought under tenant cultivation.

In Meenambanallur, about 1,000 acres belonging to a landlord were distributed to landless labourers.

In the villages of Keelaiyur, Ottathattai and Periyathambu about 150 acres of land were distributed.

A Brahmin family at Konerirajapuram village, Kuttalam block, owned 600 acres of land; all of it has been distributed.

Brahmin landlords owned nearly 800 acres of land in Kodimangalam, Nallavur, Paruthikkudi and Kanchivoy villages in Kuttalam block; all of it has been distributed.

In Pangal, Kolappadu and Panangudi villages of Thalaignayiru block, 2,000 acres were distributed.

Trust, Temple and Matham Land

Trusts are exempted from the provisions of the Land Ceiling Act. There are 14 trusts in East Thanjavur. Nearly 1,500 acres owned by these trusts are cultivated by tenants. The following is a list of the extent of land owned by temples and cultivated by tenants in East Thanjavur:

400 acres in Thevur, Keevalur block;

400 acres in Sikkal village, Nagapattinam block;

200 acres owned by Sembianmadevi Temple in Nagapattinam block;

500 acres owned by Dharmapuram Matham at Thirukuvalai, Keelaiyur block;

600 acres in Nattirupu village, Keelaiyur block;

200 acres owned by Ettukkudi Temple in Keelaiyur block;

12,000 acres owned by Vedaranyam Temple in Vedaranyam block;

2,000 acres owned by Mannargudi Temple in Mannargudi block;

300 acres owned by Nachiarkoil Temple in Kodavasal block;

250 acres owned by Tirukkalar Temple in Kodavasal block;

400 acres in Tiruppugalur, Nannilam block; and

all the land owned by temples in Tirukkannamangai, Tiruvanchiyam, Tirukkannapuram, Tiruchankattankudi, Tirumarugal and Tirukalambur villages in Nannilam block.

A total of 39,152 acres of wet land and 28,815 acres of dry land are owned by 241 temples in Sirkali and Tarangambadi in Nagapattinam district, and Tiruvidaimarudur and Kumbakonam in Thanjavur district. The wet land is entirely under tenant cultivation; 20,000 acres of the dry land are covered by coconut and banana groves, and house sites.

There are about 600,000 acres of cultivable wet land in East Thanjavur, of which trusts and temples own 300,000 acres. Between 1970 and 1991, of these 600,000 acres of wet land, 200,000 acres were distributed to landless agricultural labourers as a result of sustained struggle by the Agricultural Workers Union and Kisan Sabha. If the exemptions given to temples and trusts are withdrawn, there is a possibility of distributing a further 300,000 acres to tenants.

Conclusion

A distinctive feature of the pre-Independence movement in East Thanjavur is that it brought together the anti-colonial, anti-landlord and social liberation demands of the working people into a single movement. From 1940 to 1991, the Left movement in East Thanjavur (comprising the present districts of Nagapattinam and Thiruvarur) struggled hard for the eradication of untouchability and the liberation of Dalits; for the liberation of farm servants from the worst forms of pre-capitalist extra-economic oppression; to ensure tenancy rights; and to secure wage increases for agricultural workers. In the years after 1970, the movement was instrumental in ensuring that large parts of the vast estates of local landlords were redistributed to erstwhile tenants.

This essay stops at 1991, when the Tamil Nadu state govern­ment, following the lead of the central government, began to implement neoliberal economic policies. A separate study needs to be undertaken to analyse the impact of these neoliberal policies on the agrarian situation in East Thanjavur, especially on the status and rights of Dalits and the peasantry.

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2. See, for example, Menon, Saraswathi (1979a, 1979b, 1983); Gough (1981, 1989); Bouton (1985); Sivaraman (1970); Menon, Parvathi (1986); Surjit (2008); and the extensive Thanjavur-centred bibliographies in each of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Both *kalam* and *marakkal* are local volumetric measures. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)