

Agricultural Development and Demographic Change in Tamil Nadu since the late 18th Century

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This paper aims to illustrate agricultural development path in Tamil Nadu from the late pre-colonial period. Pre-colonial India maintained considerable proportion of world population, even though she was vested with limited resources under pulse-like climatic and environmental conditions with excesses and destitute. The key to understand the contradictions lay in the prevalence of a production system in which everyone was entitled to some share in the whole produce of the society to survive, even though the distribution of shares was not necessarily equal among recipients.

However, such production system was destroyed by the colonial land system based upon individual land ownership and the production carried upon it. The change destructed, at the same time, the management system of local resources, separated land from the rest of the local resources, and freed land development from local control. The colonial government pushed land development to maximize revenue, too. While the class vested with land ownership tried to maximize social control by excluding others in the locality, those deprived their base from share distribution system and excluded from the new land system started eagerly obtain land ownership. These complex movements propelled agricultural development in the formerly untouched area and extended agricultural production to the very periphery. The process, however, made agricultural production in the late nineteenth century unstable and fragile, resulting in frequent famines. Population remained stagnated from the first Census of 1871 till 1910s.

Utilization of underground water for irrigation emerged as one of the choices to cope with the situation from the late 19th century. The shift of irrigational source from stored surface water in reservoirs to underground water in wells gradually strengthened the stability of agricultural production. India got away from famines and started rapid population growth from the 1920s after experiencing heavy casualties of influenza in the late 1910s.

The post-independent period observed faster growth supported by more intensive agriculture, which was enhanced by the Green Revolution starting from the mid-1960s. With ample quantity of grain export and with decreasing birth-rate in recent decades, India has definitely entered new phase of development now.