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Caste, Climate, Conversion: Pariah Labour and Mobility in Late-Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Colonial Madras

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Abstract

This paper analyses the intertwined nature of caste and bondage in Madras and changes therein that emerged with the consolidation of Company rule in the region. The emergence of colonial rule brought about changes in land tenure, which critically altered local social dynamics based on caste and servile labour in the hinterlands of Madras, severely restricting the social and physical mobility of lower-caste pariah labour. At the same time, the introduction of abolitionist rhetoric in nineteenth-century public discourse saw the colonial state denying the existence of lower-caste servitude for much of the nineteenth century. However, late-nineteenth-century missionary interventions and some official outrage forced a revision of how the colonial state viewed the condition of pariah labour. Meanwhile, the eighteenth century was a period of major climatic fluctuations which exacerbated the social and economic hardships of the pariah in a regime where mobility was restricted. This paper thus studies the social, political, and legal discourse on agrestic servitude in late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Madras and reads it alongside changes in climate and other natural factors.

Introduction

This paper examines a form of agrestic servitude against the backdrop of the changing land regime, the emergence of new ideas of community, the abolitionist movement, and increased missionary presence in late-eighteenth-nineteenth-century Madras in South India. It shows that there was a degradation of the situation of these agrestic labourers due to changes in socio-economic structures post-emergence of colonial rule and despite abolitionist rhetoric focused on the betterment of slaves on humanitarian grounds. Partly because of 'abolition by denial' and the reluctance of the colonial state to radically alter the social order, the state chose to overlook the conditions of many social groups whose conditions were as bad as the enslaved, partly based on a definitional understanding of slaves as being essentially those in the plantations of the West. Restrictions on mobility further deteriorated their conditions. The paper situates the social, political, and legal discourse on agrestic servitude in late-eighteenth and nineteenth century Madras to changes in climate, and the role it had in further entrenching bondage relations in the region.

East Indian 'slavery' and the abolitionist movement in South Asia

Current-day historians often deal with the problem of defining slavery, but such a dilemma is perhaps as old as the institution of slavery itself, as far back as the Graeco-Roman times. The emergence of the abolitionist movement provoked the need for a clear articulation of what slavery was, and eventually 'slavery' came to be seen exclusively as it appeared in the plantation systems in the Atlantic world.[1] Such an understanding of slavery was located within a dialectic of 'freedom' and 'unfreedom,' with slavery representing an ultimate state of

[1] See, for example, Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, 1772–1843* (Liverpool University Press, 2012), 17-34

unfreedom. However, this narrow definition of slavery cannot be applied across spatial and temporal contexts, considering the different forms in which bondage relations appeared.

In the South Asian context, conceptualising bondage using the Atlantic models of slavery and within the paradigm of freedom-unfreedom remains inadequate. As Richard Eaton and Indrani Chatterjee have argued, South Asian society is intricately organised around webs of hierarchically structured groups, classes, and castes, which complicate how bondage relations were structured. They show that the antithesis of slavery was not 'freedom' in the European Enlightenment sense of the term, but instead represented a state of complete detachment from culturally specific webs, with 'slaves' being dependent on the will and the power of someone else compared to non-slaves.[2] Beyond 'freedom' and 'unfreedom', South Asian slavery needs to be located within locally specific usages and bondage relations, which were regularly fluid and dynamic.[3]

Working with this somewhat 'loose' conception of slavery, it is pertinent to consider caste as structuring bondage relations in South Asia. Caste remains a major determinant in structuring social relations in South Asia—the fixation of caste identity and its transmission across generations condemn a large segment of the population on the lower rungs of the social ladder to the same vocation with part or complete dependence on members of the upper castes without much possibility of social mobility. The colonial state, too, grappled with the ubiquity of caste in structuring bondage relations in India and its association with slavery.[4]

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[2] Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton eds., *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 3.

[3] Indrani Chatterjee, "Renewed and Connected Histories: Slavery and the Historiography of South Asia" in Eaton and Chatterjee ed. *Slavery and South Asian History*, 19

[4] Whereas the caste system was a crucial determinant of social relations in the pre-colonial period, during the colonial rule, there was a significant shift in the way in which caste began to operate as an identity marker. A number of scholars, such as Bernard Cohn and Ronald Inden have argued that there was an increased rigidification of caste during colonial rule as a direct consequence of colonial knowledge production. This change in understanding of caste has been explained by historians such as Nicholas Dirks as emerging from a collusion between the colonial state and the upper caste natives who acted as intermediaries and played a critical role in colonial knowledge production. Caste became an important category used by the state to demarcate people as well as to accord a sense of fixity to otherwise overlapping identities claimed by people. See Bernard Cohn, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia" in *An Anthropologist among the*

Seeking to understand the relationship between castes and slaves within a dialectic of freedom and unfreedom, Dharma Kumar has highlighted the pervasiveness of caste in structuring bondage relations in South Asia, whose complexity cannot be encapsulated within the term 'slavery'. For Kumar, slaves were outside the caste structure; the lowest castes were not slaves, even though the conditions they were subjected to in agrarian contexts made their position similar to that of slaves.[5] However, in her study of labour statistics in the late nineteenth-century censuses, she notes that there was a significant overlap between 'slaves' and lower castes.[6] Even so, other scholars have begged to differ—Sanal Mohan's landmark work on slavery in Malabar is based on the argument that caste and slavery were intertwined for millennia, even though during the colonial rule, the persistence of caste-based slavery was denied by the upper castes as the colonial state began to document cases of caste slavery in Kerala. Mohan argues that beyond official discourse on caste, it is essential to consider alternative archives, such as records left behind by missionaries, which make these connections much more explicit because of caste slavery, as it operated in the agrarian context in Kerala, began to be seen as akin to Atlantic slavery by the colonial state.[7] However, this was an exception to the norm adopted by the colonial state—in other regions, it refused to consider many caste-based bonded relations as representing 'slavery', as deployed in the conventional Atlantic sense.

In the initial years of the Company rule, as Manjari Dingwaney has shown, the state adhered to following 'ancient' Classical Hindu law and the Anglo-Mohammedan law while dealing with questions of slavery and bondage. Classical Hindu law was compiled based on

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Historians and Other Essays. (Oxford University Press, 1987):224-254; Ronald Inden, *Imagining India,* (Indiana University Press, 2001); Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India,* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

[5] Dharma Kumar, "Colonialism, Bondage and Caste in British India" in Martin A. Klein ed. *Breaking the Chains: Slavery, Bondage, and Emancipation in Modern Africa and Asia* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993): 112

[6] Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India, (*Cambridge University Press, 1963): 49-63.

[7] P. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of slavery: Struggles against caste inequality in colonial Kerala*. (Oxford University Press, 2015): 313

several 'authoritative' texts that the colonial state considered to be the basis of governance of the Hindu society. Within Classical Hindu law, slavery was fully recognised, and manumission was allowed only in a limited manner. Similarly, in Anglo-Mohammedan law certain forms of slavery were recognised. Dingwaney has also argued that, within Classical Hindu Law, the *shudra* castes were in a constant state of servility to the other three upper castes.[8]

With the abolitionist movement gaining strength in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, it took various forms across the British Empire. India proved to be a peculiar case because it was ruled by the English East India Company and was not under direct Crown rule until after the 1857 Rebellion. The question of sovereignty loomed large in the debates around abolition, since any attempt by the Crown to interfere in Company affairs was seen as a transgression into its jurisdiction. The spread of Company rule in India was uneven, with differing degrees of influence in different areas. This made Company officials highly sceptical of regulating local practices in the fear of angering local elites, whose support the Company heavily relied on. Moreover, the nature of Indian society was considerably different to Western societies, where slavery was an integral part, making the application of Western models of slavery difficult. Such difficulties of definition were acknowledged in the debates surrounding slavery in the British Parliament.[9] Even so, as Andrea Major argues, understandings of Indian slavery were not "ideologically neutral" but driven by "evangelical agendas, colonial expediencies, orientalist constructions and economic imperatives all [of which] interacted to inform how Indian slavery was conceptualised in both colonial and metropolitan debates." [10]

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[8] Manjari Dingwaney, "Unredeemed Promises: The Law and Servitude" in *Chains of Servitude: bondage and slavery in India*. edited by Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney. (Sangam Books, 1985): 284-298.
[9] Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India,* 5
[10] Major, 13-14

The Company administration enacted several laws at the local/presidency level, stipulating punishment for engaging in the slave trade, but they remained largely ineffective.[11] Nevertheless, considerable negotiation was made on the 'slave question' among the Court of Directors, the Government of India, and the metropolitan government. Before the 1830s, South Asian forms of bondage and slavery remained on the periphery of abolitionist discourse, with plantation-based modes of slavery becoming the embodiment of 'real' slavery. There was a clear distinction made between slavery prevalent in the 'East' and plantation-based 'Western' slavery. In the East, there was no visible element of racial difference, as slave owners and slave masters belonged to the same race. The peculiarity of caste eluded the colonial state, which did not wish to interfere in what they deemed as obligatory service (rather than coercion, which they defined in slavery).[12] Slavery in the 'East' was also 'benign' and devoid of the capitalistic elements that defined Western slavery, and was seen by the state as "least of India's problems."[13] As Indrani Chatterjee has argued, master-slave relations in colonial India had an idiom of kinship in such structuring bondage relations. While critiquing the understanding of domestic slavery as 'benign', Chatterjee argues that slave recruitment was a principal aspect of nineteenth-century households, an aspect ignored by the Company, who refused to interfere in matters such as concubinage, which was a major means of upholding slavery.[14]

Nonetheless, post-1830s, some official steps were taken at the highest levels of the Company to control the slave trade in British India. The Charter Act of 1832, renewing Company rule over India, made references to steps that the Government of India should take to mitigate the state of slavery and improve the conditions of slaves. In 1834, a despatch from the Court of Directors gave instructions regarding how the intentions of the legislature as

[11] Dingwaney, 299
[12] Howard Temperley, "The delegalization of slavery in British India." *Slavery & Abolition, 21(2),* (2000):169-170
[13] Temperley, 174-175
[14] Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India,* 17-28

expressed in the Charter Act could be carried into effect. A landmark step in the process of abolition was taken with the formation of the Indian Law Commission in 1835, which came up with the Anti-Slavery Report of 1841. According to Manjari Dingwaney, this did little to help the abolitionist cause, since some bondage relations were defined based on a 'contract' that made it legitimate to curtail someone else's freedom.[15]

Multiple rounds of negotiations between the different stakeholders culminated in the Anti-Slavery Act of 1843, which amended laws regarding the condition of slavery in different areas of Company rule. However, the Act was somewhat limited in scope and was only meant to control the buying and selling of slaves:

> no public officer shall in the execution of any decree or order of the Court or for the enforcement of any demand of rent or revenue, sell or cause to be sold any person on the ground that such person is in a state of slavery;
> that no rights arising out of an alleged property in the person and services of another as a slave shall be enforced by any Civil or Criminal Court or Magistrate within the territories of the East India Company;
> that any person, who may have acquired the property by his industry, or by the exercise of any art, calling or profession, or by inheritance, assignment, gift or request, shall be dispossessed of such property thereof on the ground that such person or that the person from whom the property may have been derived was a slave; and
> that any act which would be a penal offence if done to a free man shall be equally an offence if done to any free person on the pretext of his being in a condition of slavery.[16]

While the Act aimed to improve the conditions of the slaves, its implementation was lax. When the Draft Act was initially published in 1841, it evoked strong reactions from the landed elites from Bengal and Madras, fearing that its provisions would wreak havoc on their privileges. Scholars are also divided on the intention and the effects of the Act, although they generally agree to its limited scope and implementation. For Dingwaney, the need to control the sale and recruitment of slaves emerged from a need to direct indentured labour to other parts of the British Empire. She points out that the emergence of an indentured system coincides with the

[15] Dingwaney, 306
[16] Indian Slavery Act, 1843. https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealedfileopen?rfilename=A1843-05.pdf

‘abolition’ of slavery, where the actual conditions of the labour were often as bad as for slaves.[17] In a similar vein, Andrea Major argued that the humanitarian discourse of the abolitionist movement functioned “within a complex matrix of moral, economic, political and pragmatic imperatives that produced fissures and contested ideological formations that were applied unevenly across the sites of empire.”[18] Moreover, within abolitionist discourse, there was an absolute distinction drawn between slavery and other forms of ‘unfree’ labour, which could not be bridged: slavery was the epitome of bondage.[19] According to Sanal Mohan, the shift from slave status made labour susceptible to extra-economic coercion, often by tapping into traditional modes of social organisation, such as caste.[20]

Indrani Chatterjee has argued that in South Asia, what played out was an “abolition by denial.” This was rooted in the debates around what constituted ‘slavery’, which for the official mind mostly referred to Western plantation-based slavery.[21] Chatterjee notes that over the early nineteenth century, there was an eventual erasure of the word “slave” from both official records and the writings and memoirs of Company officials. This definitional manoeuvre of the bureaucracy led to the exclusion of domestic slavery from their understanding of slavery, which disproportionately affected several women and children.[22]

Keeping in mind the context of how the colonial state understood slavery and the contours of the abolitionist movement in India, this paper considers the case of agrestic servitude in colonial Madras. It focuses on how the entrenchment of the colonial rule in South India resulted in a further degradation of condition of agrestic labour in Madras by fixing the labourers to the agrarian context by various coercive means. Early colonial accounts had no

[17] Dingwaney, 313
[18] Major, 337
[19] Major, 337
[20] Mohan, 33-34
[21] Indrani Chatterjee, "Abolition by denial: The South Asian example." In *Abolition and Its Aftermath in the Indian Ocean Africa and Asia,* edited by Gwyn Campbell (Routledge, 2013): 146
[22] Chatterjee, “Abolition by Denial”, 140-141

hesitation in describing the situation of the pariah as representing slavery.[23] Even in Tamil, the caste names, *paraiyar, pallar and chakkiliyar*, were used interchangeably with slavery, with a number of these outcaste labouring groups coming to be subsumed under the broad category of the "pariah."[24] These groups were largely absent from the official discourse on abolition and were considered to be an example of a "mildest and most benignant" form of slavery, unlike the plantation-based labour regime.[25] This paper thus examines the changing conditions of the pariah over the course of the consolidation of colonial rule in Madras. The changing depiction of the pariah in official discourse serves as an excellent example of Chatterjee's understanding of 'abolition by denial.' The paper considers factors such as the role of the colonial state and the landed elite in the emergence of a new immobile agrarian labour regime based on pariah labour, the role of the missionaries in the abolitionist context and will conclude with a discussion on the possibility of natural factors such as climatic extremes in shaping the changing labour relations and labour mobility in the region.

Agrestic servitude in the Madras Presidency

The consolidation of Company rule over a large part of southern India beyond Madras only took place in the nineteenth century, with the defeat of the Marathas and Tipu Sultan in, respectively, the Anglo-Maratha and Anglo-Mysore wars. By the late-eighteenth century, the French had also become an insignificant player in South India, restricted only to Pondicherry, scattered across a few enclaves. The second half of the eighteenth century was marked by frequent conflicts between the colonial state and the local Indian rulers, adding to a period of political instability in the region. The 1780s saw massive desertion by agriculturalists outside Madras due to the conflict between the British and Mysore, which found abundant mention in

[23] Major, 201
[24] Viswanath, 3
[25] Viswanath, 5-6

the colonial records.[26] Such a portrayal, as Eugene Irschick has argued, was part of a larger attempt to construct Hyder Ali as an Oriental Despot and an attempt to 'reform' and 'stabilise' the anarchy left behind by the previous regime.[27] Ravi Ahuja has argued that the agrarian migration that peaked in the 19th century was part of a wider process of labour mobility that had existed since the days of the Vijayanagara Empire. Even *paraiyars*, who were agrestic labourers by caste, were shown to have been engaged in other professions, such as weaving.[28] The militarization of the Carnatic economy and the emergence of Madras as a metropolis further added to this shift from agriculture to other professions, thereby causing a labour shortage to emerge in the region.[29] The *paraiyars* were often employed in Madras in the construction of buildings and other service occupations seasonally, leading to the emergence of several *paracheris* (*paraiyar* settlements) in the city. David Washbrook has called the closing decades of the eighteenth century representing the "golden age of the pariah" for the increased mobility and the opportunities that the pariahs had access to in moments of crisis. Not only did they become an important part of the new urban economy, but the labour crisis also resulted in a competition between the warring states to secure *paraiyar* labour for their military ends. Moreover, Washbrook notes that some *paraiyar* began to hold land in the intervening period, resulting in an inverted socio-economic reality accentuated by moments of crisis.[30]

The stabilisation of colonial rule over Madras and other parts of South India by the beginning of the nineteenth century following the defeat of Mysore brought about considerable changes in the structuring of agrarian society and land relations in the region. There was now

[26] Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795-1895.* (University of California Press, 1994.): 4-5
[27] Irschick, *Dialogue and History*, 5
[28] Ravi Ahuja, "Labour unsettled: mobility and protest in Madras region, 1750-1800", International Review of Social History 35, 4, (1998): 384-385
[29] Ahuja, 386-389
[30] David Washbrook. "Land and Labour in Late 18th century South India: The Golden Age of the Pariah?" in *Dalit Movements and Meanings of Labour in India,* edited by Peter Robb (Oxford University Press, 1993): 68-86

a shift in Company interests, with an impetus to increase land revenue, which remained difficult in a situation where land rights remained rooted in local customs and obligations. Meanwhile, the labour crisis persisted in the hinterland. Thus, the colonial state had to stabilise land revenue, for which they devised a new system, known as the *raiyatwari* system, to shift from the existing *mirasi* tenure. Within the *mirasidar* system, the harvest was divided into a series of shares, both over the harvest and over the control of the agrestic labourers. This was essentially dictated by caste, with the *mirasi* holder often being brahmana or *Kondai vellala*, while the labourers were from the *panniyal* castes, who began to be described as slaves in the nineteenth-century colonial records.[31]

The attempts to take away *mirasi* rights did not yield much fruit around Madras due to the protests by the *mirasidars*. Through the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, they resisted any attempts by the colonial state to increase revenue or bring in any outsiders. Eugene Irschick has argued that the *mirasidars* often used their privileged position in the village and their connection with officials in the city to ally different groups against the colonial state. Reading Lionel Place's accounts, Irschick shows that the *mirasidars* often compelled their pariah labourers to organise a strike or threaten Company officials with violence when they came to collect revenue.[32] Thus, in Irschick's view, by the late eighteenth century, a rural solidarity had emerged against the colonial state. This was rooted in annual ritual reversals from the precolonial period, in which pariahs demanded a stipulated portion of rice from their masters as part of claims to custom or *mamul*. This annual rehearsal, Irschick argues, was critical in shaping moments of actual rebellion against the colonial state.[33] Yet, this rural solidarity would break down by the early nineteenth century, with the emergence of new alliances.

[31] Irschick, *Dialogue and History,* 32-33
[32] Eugene Irschick, "Peasant Survival Strategies and Rehearsals for Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century South India", Peasant Studies Vol 9 Number 4 (Summer 1982): 216-226
[33] Irschick, "Peasant Survival Strategies", 238

The *raiyatwari* system attempted to transform this communal-based land-holding system into an individualised one, based on the logic that those who laboured on these lands would be liable to pay the revenue. Yet, this was hardly the case, as the system was seen to be extremely radical. The lower caste labourers who were recognised as the original claimant to the land. This was opposed tooth and nail by the upper caste *mirasidars*, who continued to dominate the rural landscape. Eventually, colonial rulers had to broker power and stabilise their rule by recognising the *mirasidars*, who had earlier held the land communally among themselves as hereditary landowners, as the original cultivators of the land, even though they were barely involved in the actual process of cultivation. The actual labouring in the fields was done by pariahs. Not only did this recognition of land rights restore the rights and powers of the *mirasidar*, but significantly disenfranchised pariah labour, as it restricted their mobility through an invocation and construction of an idealised past that the colonial state sought to uphold.

The emergence of a centralised neo-absolutist state, to use Chris Bayly's formulation, was critical in the restriction of labour mobility that characterised much of the medieval period up to the late eighteenth century, by inducing a process of "sedentarisation and peasantisation".[34] This process was partly achieved through a process of spatialising, reconstructing, and resacralising rural society in Madras in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The reconstruction of local Tamil society involved collaboration, negotiation, and mediation between the Company officials and local elites, often upper-caste *mirasidars*, to restore order in a society that, in the colonial mind, was beset by immorality and deceit, requiring corrective measures to go back to the distant, idealised past.[35] Within this idealised past, the *mirasidars* were the original inhabitants and cultivators of the land, whereas,

[34] Ahuja, 393
[35] Irschick, *Dialogue and History,* 11-12

pariahs remained outsiders. Thus, there emerged a concerted attempt by the colonial state to reverse the progress made by pariahs, forcefully settling them back in their villages.

Aparna Balachandran has noted in her study of outcaste petitions in the late 18th century that there was violent dispossession of pariahs from their *paracheris* in Madras as the colonial state began to impose a sense of order in the burgeoning metropolis of Madras. This was achieved by displacing its less affluent residents, as urban property became saleable with time and as the tax exemptions granted to the pariahs were no longer valid.[36] Colonial rule resulted in the end of conceptualising the city as a space of collaboration between different contending communities with the emergence of a new colonial legal sphere with a shrunken legal plurality. In this context, even as changes in the socioeconomic and legal order severely disenfranchised pariahs' ability to negotiate with the colonial state, there were certain petitions by the pariahs to the Company seeking protection of their settlements and rights in the city. These petitions were written with a certain format and precedent befitting the new colonial legal regime., but the petitioners also used different means to put forward their case. While upper caste petitions often made claims based on traditions since time immemorial, the pariah petitions often claimed the protection of the Company based on their marginal status, even as the invocation of their different roles and vocations was an attempt to remind the Company of the significance of their labour, which was critical in the emergence of a 'literate mentality' among the subaltern groups of Madras city.[37]

The control of pariah labour was necessary since it fundamentally determined the productive capacity of the land. Agrarian practices in different parts of South India became increasingly labour intensive due to the commercialisation of agriculture. The relation between the *mirasidar* master and the pariah encompassed the entire life of the pariah. Within colonial

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[36] Aparna Balachandran "Petitions, the city, and the early colonial state in South India." *Modern Asian Studies 53, no. 1* (2019): 152

[37] Balachandran, 170-172.

records, this exploitative relation has been described as emerging from a situation of debt-bondage, defined by service agreements based on a token sum of money and terms of employment, with the pariah not having any possibility of paying the former. However, Rupa Viswanath has argued that the rendering of this relationship within a paradigm of debt bondage is misleading because there was no possibility of breaking the contract. Within local parlance, this situation was described as a form of "man-mortgage"[38], which was by nature hereditary, and the complete monopolisation of the authority of the *mirasidar* in the Madras hinterland ensured that pariahs had no escape. Moreover, the caste strictures defining their relationship were also regulated by the local-level courts acting as caste councils, where the slightest forms of misdemeanour were punished. Also, within the discourse of Tamil identity construction, pariah castes were also seen as 'outsiders', both spatially in terms of their locations at the periphery of the village, as well as at an ideological level.[39] Thus the recognition of the *mirasi* claim by the colonial state as representing an ancient form of land ownership, the banishing of the pariahs from Madras city and their entrenchment in the agrarian context with limited scope of mobility led to a worsening of the situation of the pariahs—a situation that Rupa Viswanath describes as a "caste-state nexus."[40] The denial of pariah servitude as constituting slavery and the construction of their relation with the *mirasidars* as benign was critical in further accentuating pariah bondage in the mid-nineteenth century within the abolitionist context. The "pariah problem," as such, emerges in government discourse only in the late 19th century with the famine in Madras in the 1870s, further leading to a decline in their socio-economic status, catching the eye of the Christian missionaries and the eventual publication of J.H.A. Tremenheere's *Note on the Pariahs of Chingleput* in the 1890s.

[38] Viswanath, 28-32.
[39] Viswanath, 36-37.
[40] Viswanath, 13-14

Christian missionaries, the state, and the dilemma regarding agrestic servitude in Madras

Missionary activities in colonial India were under considerable control in the initial years of Company rule, with the state remaining cautious to not alienate the upper castes. The Charter Act of 1813 opened up missionary activity for the first time in India. While missionary activity in India is presently construed as merely an attempt at proselytization to hapless lower caste and tribal groups, the interactions between pariahs and missionaries, especially in 1870s Madras, reveal a far more complicated picture of missionary activities in colonial India.

Moving beyond a paradigm of "mass-conversion", Rupa Viswanath argues for the emergence of a "pariah-missionary alliance"[41] in colonial Madras. Missionaries and non-official societies were often used by the colonial state to maintain, educate, and train rescued/emancipated slaves. However, given the association of many of these missionary groups with the abolitionist campaigns of the Atlantic world, the potential for conflict loomed large in situations in which the colonial state failed to act. Indrani Chatterjee notes that this conflict became more common towards the end of the nineteenth century, with missionaries often revealing embarrassing details about the situation in India.[42] This was in stark contrast to the government's view that its rule had improved the conditions of the pariahs, with a gradual reduction of *mirasi* hold in the region from the 1820s onwards, which they argued directly benefitted pariah labourers.[43]

[41] Viswanath, 72

[42] Chatterjee, "Abolition by Denial" p.143.

[43] Arun Bandyopadhyay, "Agrarian Change and Social Mobility in Colonial Conditions: The Mirasi Question in Nineteenth-Century Tamil Nadu." *Indian Historical Review, 36(2),* (2009): 243-247, 250 From the early-19th century onwards, the government began to challenge the *mirasidar* rights to wastelands and village common lands and the right to sell them, while through the 1850s and 1870s, the exclusive rights of the *mirasidars* was challenged as landholdings were becoming commercialised with time, and different groups of landowners began to emerge.

Yet, the missionaries, while considering the degraded state of the pariahs, overlooked the relation between their material status and caste location. For the missionaries, caste remained essentially a religious (Hindu) issue than an economic, which did not warrant any intervention by either themselves or the colonial state, owing to their position of official religious neutrality where they did not intervene in the matters of other religions. As Vishwanath points out, the missionaries were highly sceptical of the pariah motive towards conversion, believing they were driven by 'temporal' motives, rather than spiritual ones, hence focused on their spiritual upliftment. This conundrum becomes clearer in the 1870s when the missionaries were flooded with requests from the pariahs to move to Christianity, which the missionaries thought were driven by economic motives.[44]

Thus, missionary understandings of the state of the pariahs and the ways to ameliorate their condition were complicated, owing to the missionary perception of the root of the pariah's challenges. For missionaries, these challenges were moral and not material. They did not intend to intervene in the caste arrangement, which they believed was basis of the pariah's servile status. They also believed that social harmony could only be maintained if distinctions between different classes could be maintained, even as they opposed the ritual basis of the caste order, which they interpreted to be a religious problem rather than a socio-economic one. The problem, to the missionaries, was the pariah self's lack of respectability—a problem of the individual rather than an institutional problem. Missionary efforts, by imparting education or improving the sartorial choices of the pariah were meant to uplift the pariah self, but not meant to radically disturb the existing caste order. Yet, pariahs exercised considerable agency in harnessing certain aspects of missionary activities to their advantage to transform their labour

[44] Viswanath, 40-70

conditions in the region, often defying missionary expectations in the process and mounting a challenge to the established caste order.[45]

Even as missionary activities sought to improve the condition of the pariah and the government continued to claim that its actions had improved their lives, the 1890s saw the emergence of a discourse on the "pariah problem". There were inquiries being made into the nature of the land system in the region and the conditions of the *pariahs*, especially over concerns on *mirasidars* preventing *pariahs* from taking over house plots, despite the significant reduction in *mirasi* powers officially.[46] The question of the conditions of the pariahs was linked to the question of *mirasi* rights in the region, and the government's need to commercialise the land. There was thus a shift in the way the colonial state began to perceive the pariahs—Irschick argues the *pariah* was now portrayed as a loyal group, who were advanced owing to their sedentary nature, and in need of emancipation from being 'slaves' of the *mirasidars.*[47] Thus repressed earlier, an understanding of the pariah as a 'slave' re-emerged in the colonial discourse—even though this was not still treated as 'real' slavery.[48]

A strand of official thought, represented by C. Mullaly, argued that there was hardly any improvement in the terrible conditions of the pariahs,[49] even as Mullaly had undertaken efforts to provide the pariahs with house sites. Tremenheere, the Collector of Chingleput, produced a damning report, *Note on the Pariahs of Chingleput*, in which he described the situation being faced by the pariahs in some detail. He pointed to the famine-like situation in the region, with the pariahs holding very limited land owing to the dominance of the *mirasidars.*[50] The report also touched on the origins of the pariahs and attempted to glorify their past by positing them as the "original Dravidians"— representing for Eugene Irschick a

[45] Viswanath, 88-90
[46] Bandyopadhyay, 250.
[47] Irschick, *Dialogue and History,* 157
[48] Irschick, *Dialogue and History,* 176
[49] Irschick, *Dialogue and History,* 172
[50] Bandyopadhyay, 251-252

key epistemic moment, wherein they could lay claim to being the “disinherited children of the soil.”[51] This was a stark departure from the official understanding that the upper-caste *mirasidars* were seen as the original cultivators, which was the basis of the extension of the *mirasidari* system and the root of the construction of a glorified Tamil past. Thus, the report was dismissed by the state as being too sensational. However, this construction of the ‘original’ Dravidians was to have significant ramifications in the twentieth century—significantly influencing the Dravidian movement, which came up in opposition to the Brahminical upper caste elites.

Climate and the changing labour regime in colonial Madras

An avenue for further research is to examine climatic influences on agrestic slavery and changing labour regime in colonial Madras. The period under review coincides with major changes in global climatic conditions linked to the transition from the Little Ice Age to the current period of global warming.[52] Further, the period between 1788 and 1796 was characterised by a series of long El-Nino events, the strongest manifestation of the phenomenon in a millennium,[53] which coincided with periods of low rainfall, droughts, famines and epidemics in Madras. This was also among the coldest periods of the Little Ice Age. Climatic data between 1778 and 1794 suggests that there were six major storms reported in the region, with particularly higher devastation caused due to a hurricane and a high-intensity storm in 1787 and 1789. This had major repercussions on rice production, a dietary staple, while also causing seasonal floods, coastal inundations, and river flooding. Such situations would have

[51] Irschick, *Dialogue and History,* 182.
[52] Gwyn Campbel eds. *Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World* (Springer, 2018): 19
[53] Richard H. Grove, “The Great El Niño of 1789–93 and Its Global Consequences: Reconstructing an Extreme Climate Event in World Environmental History,” *The Medieval History Journal* 10, no. 1–2 (October 1, 2006): 76-77, https://doi.org/10.1177/097194580701000203.

had severe repercussions for food security, and they may have aggravated indebtedness, especially among agrestic servile labourers.[54]

This is likely to have disrupted farming patterns, leading to an agrarian crisis in the region. Famines were frequent in the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period of expansion and consolidation of the Company rule. According to Company records, the famine in 1781-82 was attributed to drought as well as the conflict between the Company and Mysore under Hyder Ali, with the latter crucial in cutting off of supply chains of grains.[55] Throughout the nineteenth century, colonial records have discussions on famines induced by rain failures impacting the Bombay and Madras presidencies.[56] Even though rain failures make an increasingly frequent appearance in the archives, with the Famine Commission drawing a direct causality between the droughts and famines,[57] scholars have argued that weather statistics indicate that fluctuations in rainfall may not have been as severe as suggested in the archive and may not represent climatological extremes.[58]

In such a case, it is pertinent to consider the emergence of the colonial state and its land policies as a major break in reshaping the agrarian context and the labour regimes in colonial Madras, disrupting the existing human-environment interactive context through increased sedentarisation and control over labour mobility. Even within minor climatic fluctuations, famine-like situations emerged, which likely affected the pariahs disproportionately. For instance, even as the state in the late eighteenth century began to assume a sense of responsibility towards its subjects during food crises, attempts at regulating the grain market were often resisted by the merchants, and allocation of resources was often unequal, with upper

[54] Grove, 82
[55] Gemma Ives, *A History of the Monsoon in Southern India between 1730 and 1920 and Its Impact on Society: With a Particular Focus on Tamil Nadu.*(phd, University of Sheffield, 2020), 104–5, https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/27995/.
[56] Ranjini Ray et al., "Extreme Rainfall Deficits Were Not the Cause of Recurring Colonial Era Famines of Southern Indian Semi-Arid Regions," *Scientific Reports* 11, no. 1 (September 2, 2021): 17568, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-96826-2. See also, Indian Famine Commission Report, 21-24.
[57] Indian Famine Commission Report, 26-27
[58] Ray et al., argue that the fluctuations represented less than 1 SD, which was normal across years.

castes getting a higher share. [59] With the consolidation of colonial rule, and the emergence of a labour system that was largely fixed with limited room for mobility, famine-like conditions left pariahs with limited opportunities to move as they did in the earlier periods when such crises struck—and such crises of grain availability was frequent in the late eighteenth century.[60]For instance, earlier, when famine stuck in the 1780s, there were increased possibilities of migration to fortified towns in the region or to Mysore.[61] In 1795, a destructive cyclonic storm-induced increased desertions by both *mirasidars* and the *paraiyars* which saw significant high-handedness by the government.[62] The Indian Famine Commission Report of 1880 points out how people migrated during the famine of 1807 to Madras in the hope of better conditions, but descriptions of the later famines and relief measures make no such mention of people migrating, which might indicate a stricter clampdown on the mobility of the people.[63] Within a changing political regime, desertion was seen as akin to insurrection, a departure from pre-colonial traditions in which labourers used desertion as an important political tool to pressure the government.[64]

The restriction of mobility and the ties between the *raiyats* and the labourers are likely to have had a catastrophic effect during extreme climatic conditions, as seen in the case of the famine of the 1870s, which spurred missionary action in the region and precluded the damning report on the conditions of the pariahs. This was a prolonged famine, with the earliest occurrence occurring as far back as the late 1860s,[65] continuing well into the 1870s, taking a calamitous turn by 1876-78, with rains failing and plague affecting the region. The famine has been recognised by scholars as having significant effects on the broader political and

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[59] Ravi Ahuja, "State formation and 'famine policy' in early colonial South India", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review ,* 39,4,(2002):378-380
[60] Ravi Ahuja, "Famine Policy in colonial South India": 366
[61] Ahuja, "Labour unsettled",. 391.
[62] Irschick, *Dialogue and History,* 29-30
[63] Indian Famine Commission Report, p. 10
[64] The colonial state saw mobility of people with great suspicion,
[65] Ives, 108-109. This famine fell within a period of multi-year drought that affected Asia, Brazil and Africa as a result of strong El-Nino.

community life of the region.[66] It was noted in the sources of the period that there was a massive price rise, which affected the outcaste labourers more significantly than anyone else—hoarding, a high burden of taxes in the period of the famine crushed these groups, leading to a considerable labour scarcity.[67] The lower caste peasants bore the worst brunt of the famine,[68]even though for Arnold, this was an "extension and intensification of familiar anxieties and hardships and an event charged with exceptional religious significance and destructive potency."[69] However, there was a gradual change in the *raiyat*-labourer ties as well, as the former could no longer uphold their customary duties to provide for their labourers in times of distress.[70]

Even as the colonial state in its official reports constructed famines as "immemorial, natural and indigenous" to India,[71] it often followed a policy of denial with respect to famines—accepting their occurrence only when things went out of hand. On the other hand, the peasants' familiarity of rain cycles and the association of natural calamities with divine intervention spurred them to conduct rituals. Even as the state claimed that modernisation policies and relief measures introduced by them helped mitigate hunger of the affected people and reduced conditions of the famine, the figures below certainly suggest otherwise. Moreover, crimes skyrocketed in spite of attempts at providing (limited) famine relief.[72] Increasing commercialisation and changing land relations accentuated the crisis of these lower caste labourers further, especially because they could lay minimal claim to the village commons, and at the same time, the construction of an enclosed 'self-sufficient village community' meant that

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[66] David Arnold, "Famine in Peasant Consciousness and Peasant Action:1876-8" in *Subaltern Studies III Writings on South Asian History and Society,* ed. Ranajit Guha (Oxford University Press, 1984): 62-115 and Ravi Ahuja, "State formation and 'famine policy' in early colonial south India": 352

[67] Mike Davis, *Late Victorian holocausts: El Niño famines and the making of the third world*, (Verso Books, 2002): 27

[68] Davis, 112, Arnold, 67

[69] Arnold, 67

[70] Arnold, 77-82.

[71] Ira Klein, "When the rains failed: famine, relief, and mortality in British India." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review 21*, no. 2 (1984):187-188

[72] Arnold, 90-93.

they had limited scope for mobility, even as famine affected the wealthier social groups as well and the villages had little resources to offer[73] Arnold notes that in many cases, the upper-caste *raiyats* refused to partake in relief measures and camps due to their disdain for the lower castes, refusing to share space or break bread with them, despite the state attempting to respect caste sensibilities.[74]

Province	**Affected Population**	**Average Number Receiving Relief**	**Deaths**
Madras	19.4	.80	2.6
Bombay	10.0	.30	1.2
North Western	18.4	.06	.4
Mysore	5.1	.10	.9
Punjab	3.5	-	1.7
Hydrabad & Central Provinces	1.9	.04	.3
Total	58.3	1.3	7.1

Table 1. Parameters of the 1876-78 Famine in India (Millions).[75]

Thus, the emergence of a new socio-economic-political structure premised on *laissez-faire* policies was critical in accentuating the effects of extreme climatic events such as famines on the lowest rungs of society the most. Migrations to cities yielded little, as there was little demand for labour. However, overseas migration provided some scope of relief. Thus, there was an increase in servitude, as large segments of the rural population were enlisted as indentured labour for the British plantations in Ceylon, Mauritius, Guyana and Natal—the colonial state exploited these famine-like conditions in other situations as well by recruiting indentured labour.[76] Even then the scale of migration was limited in the late nineteenth century,

[73] Klein,188
[74] Arnold, 107-109
[75] Klein, 199 and 209-11.
[76] Davis, 112-113, Arnold, 97-102

for the rural labour failed to transcend their ties to the land, and emerge as a wage-earning mobile proletariat group.[77]

Conclusion

This paper has situated the changing conditions of the pariah against the backdrop of a new socio-economic order, which resulted in the emergence of new labour regimes, wherein the mobility of the pariah labour was severely restricted. This paper also considers the role of the state as well as non-state actors, such as the missionaries, in shaping the discourse around the pariah 'problem' as it emerged in the 1890s. It makes the argument that, in spite of the context of the abolitionist movement regarding the emancipation of slaves or categorising certain forms of bondage as 'benign' owing to the deployment of kinship and other rhetorical devices, there was a significant degradation in the position of the pariah over the course of the nineteenth century, causing much concern to the state in the late nineteenth century. The precarity of the pariah in the new socio-economic regime based on a fixity of social position and limited physical/social mobility was further constrained due to major climatic events, which had significant ramifications on their food security, among other things—earlier unfavourable climatic conditions forced the pariahs (and the *mirasidars)* to migrate for greener pastures. Thus, a combination of social, economic, political and climatic factors resulted in the deterioration of the conditions of lower-caste pariah labour over the course of the nineteenth century, contrary to the claims made by the government that slavery had been brought to an end in general, and more specifically, it had improved the conditions of the pariah labourers over the nineteenth century.

[77] Arnold, 103.

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