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Agrarian Shift in Colonial Coimbatore: From Subsistence to Commercial Crop Cultivation, 1899-1919

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Abstract

Agriculture is fundamental to human civilisation and continues to be one of the most vital economic and social development sectors. Coimbatore, the third largest city in Tamil Nadu, is one of the state's most industrialised hubs. Known as the "Textile Capital of South India" or the "Manchester of South India," the city is located along the banks of the Noyyal River. The soil composition of the Coimbatore region was better suited for dry grain cultivation than for wet crops. Until the late 19th century, agriculture-focused mainly on food crops. However, after the 1850s, the area experienced significant commercial growth. As the agricultural landscape transformed, the rising prices of various agricultural products encouraged farmers to shift toward more profitable cash crops. Cotton remained a key cash crop, closely tied to the development of the handloom and spinning industries. Despite this, the cotton grown in Kongunadu (western part of Tamil Nadu) was not up to the standards required by European markets, and British attempts to introduce higher-quality varieties and improved processing methods in the mid-19th century largely failed. Conversely, the commercialisation of agriculture created more employment opportunities than traditional farming methods, resulting in better conditions for peasants and enhancing regional trade. This paper examines the commercialisation of agriculture, including cotton and oilseed cultivation, shifts in farming practices, and their effects on Coimbatore.

Keywords: Cash Crops, Commercialisation, Cotton Cultivation, Food Crops, Oil Seeds

1. Introduction

Agriculture provides a livelihood for about 70% of the rural population in Tamil Nadu, making any small intervention in this sector have a significant impact on the state's economic development. Historically, Coimbatore district was lineage in the western part of Tamil Nadu popularly known as the Kongu region and was ruled by the Cheras. Its strategic location as the eastern gateway to the Palakkad Gap made it a key trade route between the west coast and Tamil Nadu. The region's fertile black soil has been instrumental in the success of its agricultural sector, particularly in the cultivation of cotton, which laid the foundation for Coimbatore's renowned textile industry. The first textile mill was established as early as 1888, and many more followed, creating employment opportunities for people both within the district and from neighbouring areas. Politically, after Tipu Sultan's death in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War in 1799, the British East India Company (EIC) took control of the 7,842 square miles that became Coimbatore District. This newly acquired region was then placed under the administration of the Madras Presidency, and Coimbatore District was divided into 12 taluks[1].

Coimbatore district was strategically bordered: to the north by the river Cauvery, to the south by the district of Madura and the Travancore hills, to the east by Salem District, and the west by the Western Ghats. It spanned approximately 120 miles from north to south, and its width ranged from 80 to 90 miles from east to west. The region's major rivers included the Cauvery, Bhavani, Noyyal, and Amaravathi, which, along with 504 tanks, a

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significant number of wells, and river-stemming canals, provided water for farming[2]. These water bodies were replenished by the Southwest monsoon (June to August) and the Northeast monsoon (October to December), with minimal rainfall occurring in March. The climate of Coimbatore was generally regarded as healthy, and its soils comprised red sand, red loam with gravel, and black cotton soil. The red soils, while deep, did not retain moisture for extended periods. Transportation primarily relied on bullock carts, with well-established main roads connecting Coimbatore to the neighbouring districts[3]. The district also boasted a significant stock of high-quality cattle, typically raised by local ryots (tenant farmers) on the grazing lands[4].

2. Objectives

- Understand the commercialisation of agriculture in the Madras Presidency.
- Trace the growth of cash crops and the government's role in agrarian reforms.
- Examine the impact of commercialisation on Coimbatore's agricultural landscape.

3. Methodology

In this study, both primary and secondary sources have been extensively consulted. The historical narrative method has been employed. The primary sources include the Madras Government's annuals, reviews, reports, files, records, and gazetteers, Secondary sources consist of essays and articles from contemporary journals, various books and e-sources from the secondary sources.

4. Rise of Commercialisation of Agriculture in Madras

The commercialisation of agriculture refers to the shift from growing crops for personal consumption to cultivating them for sale in the market. This shift led to a focus on cash crops like cotton, sugarcane, oilseeds, and indigo, replacing traditional food crops. Beginning in the late 18th century, South Asia transformed production and consumption processes. These changes coincided with the establishment of colonial governance and the integration of the region into emerging global markets for goods, capital, and labour—a process known as globalisation. After becoming a British Crown colony in 1858, India swiftly adopted this commercialised model of agriculture[5].

The development of railways and road transport played a crucial role in facilitating the growth of cash crop cultivation, enabling agricultural produce to reach both domestic and global markets. Consequently, production systems across India faced new opportunities as well as increased pressures to meet demand[6]. In the Madras Presidency, European merchants dominated the export and import trade. Agricultural exports included cotton, oil and oilseeds, grain, coffee, ginger, turmeric, dyewood, indigo, hides, and skins[7].

As Madras agriculture became increasingly linked to international trade, there was a significant rise in internal market prices, which adjusted to align with global market rates. Despite this substantial initial adjustment, prices remained relatively stable, with fluctuations mainly reflecting seasonal changes. While Madras was gradually drawn into international trade, its integration was cautious, with the effects of globalisation felt more slowly compared to other regions[8].

5. Cotton Cultivation

The section on Cotton Cultivation highlights the significant developments in cotton farming in India, particularly in the Madras Presidency, under British rule. Here's a refined summary of key points:

Until the 18th century, Indian farmers predominantly cultivated indigenous, short-staple cotton varieties. However, the introduction of long-staple American cotton varieties in 1790 marked a pivotal shift, spurred by the demands of the Industrial Revolution in Europe. The British administration initiated various efforts to expand these cotton varieties across India, with notable success in the Madras Presidency, especially following the American Civil War of the 1860s, which disrupted the cotton supply to Europe.

In 1891, the Madras government took steps to improve cotton cultivation by appointing a cotton specialist. This led to the establishment of a cotton research station in Coimbatore, under M.V. Ramanathan Ayyar, aimed at improving the Cambodian cotton variety. By 1904, the Madras Agricultural Department successfully introduced an exotic American strain known as Cambodia cotton, which was disseminated across Tamil Nadu through seed depots and experimental farms. In the Coimbatore

district, cotton cultivation became particularly important. Numerous experiments were conducted to produce pure-line cotton varieties, and Cambodia cotton from Avinashi taluk gained national recognition, attracting merchants to Tirupur for its high-quality yield[9]. Other cotton varieties, such as Karunganni, Uppam, Nadum, and Bourbon, were also cultivated in the region.

The government played a significant role in distributing improved seed varieties to farmers through various agencies, marketing associations, and cooperative unions, ensuring a steady supply of high-quality cotton for both domestic use and export. This marked a transformation in the agricultural landscape of Coimbatore, reinforcing its importance in the cotton trade[10]. This account of cotton cultivation can also emphasise how these advancements led to Coimbatore's emergence as a major hub for cotton production in India, laying the foundation for its later industrialisation[11].

6. Oil Seeds Cultivation in Coimbatore District

Groundnut is a key commercial crop extensively cultivated in the Coimbatore district, especially in Pollachi taluk, with significant cultivation also occurring in Avinashi, Bhavani, Coimbatore, and Gobichettipalayam taluks. The predominant variety grown is the Coromandel variety, also known as local Mauritius, along with the Spanish Peanut and Pollachi Red varieties. Groundnut cultivation mainly depends on rain-fed conditions, with sowing occurring between June–July and harvesting between December–January, contingent upon the arrival of monsoon rains[12]. Its inherent value and resilience in low-quality soil with minimal fertilisation have driven efforts to enhance its cultivation across various regions[13].

Gingelly (sesame) is cultivated in diverse land types, including wet, dry, and garden lands, primarily after the usual crop in Dharapuram taluk. In this same taluk, gingelly is also grown as a third crop from March to June, following ragi and paddy. The agricultural department has introduced improved varieties of gingelly, specifically TMV 1, TMV 2, and TMV 3, to boost yields[14]. Gingelly seeds are known for producing high-quality oil, which is sold in shops, while the oil cake generated from processing is used as cattle feed, providing additional profit for oil mongers[15].

Castor is another significant oilseed cultivated extensively in Pollachi taluk, as well as in Udumalpet, Bhavani, and Avinashi taluks. It is often grown alongside cereals and pulses and occasionally as a garden crop alongside ragi or as shade for turmeric. The primary product derived from castor seeds is castor oil, commonly referred to as country lamp oil[16]. These oilseed crops not only contributed to the agricultural economy of the Coimbatore district but also played a vital role in the livelihoods of farmers and the local economy, reinforcing the transition towards cash crop cultivation in the region. The successful cultivation of these oilseeds demonstrates the adaptive strategies employed by farmers in response to market demands and climatic conditions[17].

7. Tobacco Cultivation in Coimbatore District

Tobacco has historically been one of the significant commercially valuable crops in India, cultivated across a range of environments, from irrigated lands to arid areas, and in diverse soil types including sandy and black loam soils[18]. In Coimbatore, tobacco was a prominent crop within the Madras Presidency, with major cultivation occurring in Dharapuram, Palladam, and Gobichettipalayam taluks. The cultivation process involved thorough manuring and ploughing of the fields, followed by careful tending to the tobacco leaves. Tobacco is primarily grown in well-irrigated lands, and various local varieties are distinguished by the shape and colour of their leaves, which can range from dark brown to nearly black. These varieties are mainly used for chewing and for making cheroots[19].

The region's tobacco is not only consumed locally but also exported to other areas. Its high quality is attributed to the fertile alluvial plains and the irrigation systems utilising wells. However, the production of tobacco in Coimbatore faced challenges, including the risks of inadequate rainfall, depletion of well water, overcast weather, and easterly winds, all of which could negatively impact crop yields[20].

8. Sugarcane Cultivation in Coimbatore District

India is recognised as the birthplace of sugarcane, with its cultivation tracing back to the Vedic period[21]. In the Coimbatore district, sugarcane is a vital cash crop, primarily grown in the taluks of Coimbatore, Dharapuram, and Udumalpet, with some cultivation in other areas. The

crop is mainly cultivated in wetland conditions[22]. The introduction of sugarcane to the district began in 1840 with the Mauritius cane, which was eventually supplanted by improved strains such as Co. 413, Co. 419, Co. 421, Co. 449, and Co. 527. These varieties are heavily manured and adapted to the local growing conditions[23].

Sugarcane cultivation follows a rotational farming system, where sugarcane is grown for one year, producing a ratoon crop in the second year, followed by crops such as ragi, cholam, vegetables, or fodder in the subsequent years. This method enhances soil fertility and crop productivity. In 1912, the Government of Madras established a sugarcane breeding station in Coimbatore, which became a crucial facility for supplying seedlings across India. The seedlings developed at this station were particularly successful in North India, centralising sugarcane breeding efforts within the Madras Presidency. One of the most popular varieties introduced was Co. 01, known for its high yield and excellent quality of jaggery, further cementing the importance of sugarcane cultivation in the region's agricultural landscape[24]. Through these initiatives and practices, sugarcane cultivation in Coimbatore has evolved, reflecting the region's agricultural heritage and its role in the broader economic framework.

9. Progress of Development in the Agricultural Sector in Coimbatore District

The Kongu region of western Tamil Nadu, characterised by its historical and geographical features, faced challenges such as low rainfall and limited riverine irrigation[25]. Consequently, many areas within the region, including the Coimbatore district, experienced dry conditions and were often susceptible to famines and scarcity due to inadequate rainfall. The soil composition in this area was more conducive to dry grain cultivation than to wet crops[26]. Until the late 19th century, the focus remained primarily on food crops. However, post-1850s, the region underwent significant commercial development[27].

As the agricultural landscape evolved, the prices of various agricultural products experienced sustained growth, encouraging farmers to shift towards more valuable cash crops[28]. This prosperity enabled cultivators to thrive without significant reductions in their livelihoods[29]. The ryotwari land tenure system, which allowed direct ownership of land by cultivators and facilitated tax payments directly to the government without intermediaries, played a crucial role in this transition[30].

In 1858, the Madras government initiated a new settlement process through the Department of Revenue Survey, employing scientific methods to conduct land surveys. This revised settlement eliminated barriers to the timely collection of land revenue, making the process more convenient and agreeable to the cultivators[31]. Given the limited availability of land for cultivation, the need for efficient utilisation of existing land became paramount to meet the growing demands for food and cash crops. This intensified land use necessitated the application of additional resources such as water, manure, and cattle power, along with more productive and efficient labour utilisation[32].

In the drier taluks of Pollachi and Udumalpet, as well as various villages in Coimbatore, two harvests are typically cultivated each year. In contrast, other areas may yield only one annual crop. The wetlands in the taluks of Dharapuram, Udumalpet, Sathyamangalam, and Erode facilitate two harvests annually, reflecting the diverse agricultural practices within the district[33]. Furthermore, the Agricultural Department prioritised staff training and technical education in agriculture, enhancing the skills and knowledge of individuals interested in advancing agricultural practices. Through these concerted efforts, the Coimbatore district's agricultural sector progressed significantly, contributing to the region's economic development and resilience[34].

10. Transition of Cultivation in Coimbatore District

The agricultural landscape of the Kongu region, particularly the Coimbatore district, underwent a significant transformation due to the active involvement of local agriculturists, enhanced capitalisation, and improved transportation infrastructure. Initially, groundnut cultivation faced resistance in this area due to its perceived unsuitability for local conditions[35]. However, during the First World War, groundnut farming gained prominence, especially in the irrigated western part of the region, notably in Pollachi taluk. This shift coincided with the expansion of other cash crops in Kongunadu.

The thottams of this area proved particularly favourable for tobacco cultivation, which, despite its high

cultivation costs and need for precise irrigation, yielded significantly high returns per acre. Conversely, the emergence of new crops contributed to the rapid decline of previously cultivated cash crops[36]. Cotton remained a vital cash crop in the region, historically linked to the development of the handloom and spinning industries. However, the type of cotton grown in Kongunadu did not meet the standards of European markets, and British efforts to introduce superior varieties and processing techniques in the mid-nineteenth century were largely unsuccessful[37].

Nonetheless, the American Civil War sparked a surge in demand for Kongunadu cotton, leading to an uptick in cultivation by local farmers. This trend, however, was short-lived as cotton cultivation declined after the war. The expansion of railways in the 1870s and a gradual increase in global prices revitalised the cultivation of cotton and other cash crops. Enhanced transportation and trade infrastructure facilitated the export of these crops while allowing for food imports[38].

Table 1. Cultivation of cash crops (in acres)

Year	Cotton	Oil Seeds	Sugar cane	Tobacco	Total
1899-00	182,651	149,917	6,258	21,193	360,019
1900-01	169,877	153,217	6,314	22,963	352,371
1902-03	231,219	117,583	8,274	31,474	388,550
1905-06	253,899	78,949	9,689	26,884	369,421
1907-08	310,292	122,148	8,203	23,975	464,618
1909-10	253,336	148,481	9,913	31,626	443,356
1911-12	264,815	127,103	11,431	19,146	422,495
1916-17	274,027	138,294	10,720	34,371	457,412
1917-18	362,506	133,446	11,035	31,528	538,515
1918-19	355,544	71,629	7,482	21,220	455,875

Source: G.O. of Madras Government (G.O.Nos. 599 of 1900, 1029 of 1902, 1007 of 1903, 1355 of 1907, 952 of 1909, 883 of 1911, 940 of 1913, 1454 of 1918, 995 of 1919, 57 of 1920)

Following the 1850s, the introduction of railways dramatically reshaped the agricultural economy, transforming railheads into crucial entrepot marketplaces. Key markets included Erode for tobacco and chillies, Tirupur and Coimbatore for cotton, and Avinashi and Pollachi for groundnuts. The response of local peasants to this shift towards cash crop cultivation is evidenced by the data presented in the table below:

11. Impact of Commercialisation of Agriculture

The commercialisation of agriculture in the Coimbatore district led to the establishment of cooperative societies that facilitated the collective selling and purchasing of agricultural products, tools, and fertilisers. These societies also promoted agricultural education, established dispensaries and schools, and introduced improved farming techniques. Agricultural education was further supported by farm schools and night schools, providing learning opportunities for young agricultural labourers[39].

The economic and technological advancements resulting from commercialisation contributed to the growth of the middle class within the agricultural sector. Landless agrarian labourers, who were generally paid better than their counterparts in other regions of colonial Tamil Nadu, often formed long-term working relationships with landowners. Their remuneration shifted from grain-based payments for food crops to cash payments or shares of the produce for cash crop cultivation, sometimes even receiving dividends at the end of the year[40].

The rapid expansion of roads and the arrival of railways contributed to soaring land prices in Coimbatore. Under the influence of commercial agents, various marketable crops such as cotton, sugar, and tobacco thrived, while increased market demand facilitated the elimination of less successful agricultural practitioners. The burgeoning industries associated with these crops also created a dual advantage—processing raw materials into marketable products and bolstering agricultural practices in the region[41].

12. Conclusion

The demand for industrial raw materials in European markets precipitated significant changes in agriculture across colonies, particularly in British territories. This shift prompted heightened interest from policymakers in transportation, communication, land management, scientific and experimental cultivation, and irrigation developments. Following this trend, the governments of Madras and India prioritised these subjects in the Madras Presidency after the 1850s, laying the groundwork for the successful commercialisation of agriculture in the Coimbatore District. This commercialisation introduced advanced cropping patterns, pest management techniques,

modern agricultural tools, financial instruments, global market opportunities, and improved transportation infrastructure. These developments transformed the region, ushering in a modern lifestyle. Although the cultivation of food crops declined, this decrease was offset by imports from other regions, facilitated by the rapid transportation networks. The commercialisation of agriculture created more employment opportunities compared to traditional agricultural practices, significantly improving the conditions for peasants and enhancing trade in the region. The benefits of commercial agriculture bolstered the capital investment capacity of local farmers, who reinvested in land and industries, further fueling the development of both the agrarian and industrial economy in Coimbatore District.

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