

Economic Insights from Jesuit Missionary Letters: Unveiling South India's Agricultural, Taxation, and Trade Systems (17th–19th Century)

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Abstract: This study explores the economic conditions of South Indian regions, particularly Senji, Vellore, Tanjore, and Tirunelveli, through the letters of Jesuit missionaries. These letters, written between the 17th and 19th centuries, provide valuable first-hand accounts of the prevailing economic, agricultural, and taxation systems. The research highlights the impact of political transitions on economic prosperity, the role of irrigation in sustaining fertile lands, and the socio-economic challenges faced by local communities. By analysing missionary epistolary correspondences, this study sheds light on taxation burdens, traditional savings practices, and the agricultural economy, contributing to the historical reconstruction of South India's economic landscape.

Keywords: Economic Prosperity, Irrigation, missionary epistolary correspondences.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Society of Jesus, one of the largest religious orders within the Roman Catholic Church, established missionary stations worldwide. Founded in 1540 by Ignatius of Loyola, they expanded their mission to India in the mid-16th century. Their mission records contain detailed accounts of political, social, economic, and environmental aspects of the regions they operated in. These letters serve as reliable and authentic historical documents.

2. AIMS OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the economic conditions in South Indian regions as documented in Jesuit missionary letters.
2. To assess the impact of political rule changes on agriculture, trade, and living standards.
3. To analyze taxation policies and their implications for farmers and other economic groups.
4. To investigate traditional savings and financial practices prevalent during the period.
5. To highlight the role of Jesuit missionaries as observers and documenters of economic history.

3. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on South India during the 17th to 19th centuries, utilizing letters written by Jesuit missionaries stationed in Tamil Nadu. The research primarily examines economic aspects, including agriculture, taxation, savings, and labor conditions. Additionally, it explores climatic influences and their effects on economic activities. While the study centers on economic history, it also considers the broader socio-political environment influencing these economic structures.

Economic Conditions of Senji and Vellore mentioned in the Letters

Laynes conducted a comparative study on the economic situations in Senji and Vellore before and after the Nayak rule. In a letter from 1701, he described how, under the Nayaks, these cities flourished with dense populations and low living costs. The land was highly fertile, supported by efficient irrigation, and lined with flourishing plantations.

However, during the Mughal viceroys' governance, living costs soared, and agricultural activity declined. Cultivable lands were abandoned and overtaken by forests, providing refuge for thieves. Consequently, many inhabitants migrated to Tanjore, Mysore, and Madurai.

Fertile Regions of Cholamandalam

Fr. Louis Noel de Bourzes noted in his correspondence that Eylur, a part of the region known as Cholamandalam, was extremely fertile. The Chola Dynasty once ruled these lands, constructing irrigation canals that drew water from the Cauvery River. The eastern region of Tanjore Kingdom was among the most fertile in India, yielding lush landscapes filled with palm groves and other trees. Numerous irrigation channels enabled extensive rice and grain cultivation.

The North West monsoon, which reached the Mysore and Malayalam mountain ranges around July or August, replenished the Cauvery River. As the river flowed into the Chola Mandalam region, the surrounding landscape transformed into a vast water-covered area resembling a lake.

Following the monsoon, agricultural work commenced in earnest. Laborers tilled the fields, planted rice seeds, and manually replanted the seedlings. Within a few months, aided by rain and irrigation, the land yielded a bountiful harvest.

According to British census data, nearly 20% of Tamil Nadu's revenue originated from this area. Agriculture was the primary occupation, and almost all available land was utilized for cultivation.

Fr. Cyr Louis wrote about the Cauvery River, describing it as a perennial river originating in Kudagu, Karnataka. Spanning approximately 480 kilometers, it traversed regions including Mysore, Salem, and Trichy before emptying into the Bay of Bengal at Kaviripoompattinam. The local population celebrated the river's significance with the Aadi Perukku festival on the 18th day of the Tamil month Aadi.

Fr. Louie Duranquet, in his 1838 letter from Palayamkottai, detailed the cotton farming practices in Tirunelveli. Cotton fields employed men, women, and even children. Once cotton bolls ripened and burst, workers collected them in sacks.

Fr. Trincol's 1845 letter described farming equipment, including small spades affixed to large wooden handles and lances.

Climatic Conditions

Jesuit missionaries recorded the climatic conditions in Palani and Uttamapalayam in their letters. These regions suffered during June and July due to strong winds, which, while aiding travel, also increased the risk of illness, particularly for foreigners unaccustomed to the local weather.

Beschi mentioned in one of his letters that the missionaries' attire exposed them to harsh climatic conditions. The extreme heat, strong winds, dry air, scarcity of drinking water, and unfamiliar food posed severe challenges, though they managed with divine support.

Taxation

Despite Tanjore's widespread irrigation and fertile lands, cultivators faced severe economic hardships due to heavy taxation. The king collected nearly 70% of the produce as tax, leaving farmers struggling to survive.

Tassis, in an 1843 letter, elaborated on Tamil Nadu's tax structure. Agricultural lands were heavily taxed, though Brahmins were exempt. However, individuals who purchased temple lands for farming had to pay levies to district administrators, sometimes surrendering half of their cultivation profits. This system effectively alienated farmers from enjoying the fruits of their labor.

Begging Practices

Begging was prevalent in Tamil society, particularly among Hindu mendicants. Devout individuals generously offered alms to religious figures, believing in their divine significance. Some individuals, disguised as pandarams, exploited people's faith by feigning ascetic lifestyles to collect large donations.

Certain Brahmins, despite belonging to the wealthiest caste, also engaged in begging, viewing it as a noble practice. They received monetary donations from local governors, and even affluent Brahmins insisted on their share of these alms, including low-value copper coins.

Traditional Savings Practices (Cheetu Poduthal)

Bourzes wrote about small-scale money-saving schemes practiced in Kottar, a tradition that persists in many coastal villages of Tamil Nadu today. Primarily involving women, these savings groups helped accumulate funds for significant expenses, such as weddings for their children and siblings.

4. CONCLUSION

Francis Xavier pioneered the practice of sending letters from India, urging Jesuit missionaries to provide annual reports on their activities in regions like the Fishery Coast, Malabar Coast, and Goa. These letters offer insights into the socio-economic, political, and cultural lives of the people of that era.

The annual reports not only influenced the Church but also resonated in the secular world. Both Jesuits and non-Jesuits eagerly received these letters. Prominent historians like Sri Ram Sharma and A. Vincent Smith praised them, emphasizing their importance in reconstructing historical narratives.

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