

# ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN THE MADRAS PRESIDENCY 1800—1850

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6. Economic Life in a Malabar Village.
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8. The Economic Results of Prohibition in Salem District.
9. Commodity Prices in South India, 1918-38.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

A full and detailed economic history of India of the nineteenth century embracing all aspects of the economic life of the people is yet to be written. It would require the organised co-operation of a band of scholars, each devoting his whole time to a study of particular problems extending over the whole range of the country. In the meanwhile all that is possible to make partial studies on a regional basis confined to limited periods of time.

The present work represents one such. It is a study of the economic conditions of Madras Presidency in the half century commencing from 1800. The period is undoubtedly one of great strain and stress, involving a difficult process of adjustment to the changing economic and political conditions. The old economic order was passing away; but in its place no stable structure had yet been built. The village which was the centre of all economic life was being disrupted and its self-sufficiency undermined. It came to be regarded only as a unit of a vast centralised administrative system and its officials the instrument for the execution of the orders of a distant central government. But the break-up of its isolation and its closer contact with the rest of the world did not bring any prosperity to it.

Thus the decay of village life was definitely a set-back. The decline in the cultivation of land which had set in as a result of the previous state of insecurity was arrested, but there was no marked improvement in cultivation as the ryots were unable to bear the weight of the high incidence of the land revenue. They had to be coerced rather than tempted to cultivate. Settled government did not therefore bring about the expected increase in the area under cultivation or in the profitability of agriculture.

Government by a trading company was hardly suited to bring about the economic amelioration of the people so much needed at the time. The East India Company was only interested in the raising of those crops, e.g., indigo and cotton, which were profitable from the commercial point of view. But even that interest was not sustained, and all efforts to improve cultivation were scotched on account of the adoption of a misguided policy of *laissez faire* and free trade, wholly unsuited to the conditions of India which needed a policy quite the opposite of that which was actually pursued.

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*Laissez faire* worked havoc as much in agriculture as in industry. To cite only one instance, even irrigation which was a *sine qua non* of successful cultivation and which directly affected land revenue in which Government was so vitally concerned was either neglected or received scant attention. Under the pressure of a serious threat to the economy of a whole district consequent upon the unfettered flow of water from one river to another the first great irrigation project was undertaken in 1832, but a definite change in the irrigation policy of the Government came only after the report of the Public Works Commission in 1852.

To the artisans and urban workers the period was a specially trying one. It was the age of transition, and as in all periods of transition there was widespread suffering and distress. Even if the Government had been more sympathetic and active, the sufferings of the weavers and other artisans could not have been averted. The decay of cottage and urban industries was inevitable, but the Company's policy only accentuated the distress. Their efforts to promote cotton manufactures received a crushing blow from the opposition of British manufacturing interests; but they consoled themselves with the reflection that what was lost by manufactures would be made up by the increased demand for raw cotton, a view which failed to take note of the difference in the terms of exchange. But the vicious fiscal policy by which raw materials were taxed, while foreign goods were given free entry, could not be justified in any circumstances.

Dr. Sarada has in this work presented these and other aspects of the economic condition of the Madras Presidency in an objective manner. She has made use of all sources and materials, examined their relative importance and trustworthiness and fully documented her narrative. Of particular interest are her chapters regarding trade and transport and prices. Her account of the influence of the economic policy of the State on famine policy, irrigation, and generally on the economic conditions of the people throws a flood of light on the theoretical foundations of such a policy. The conclusions which she arrives at follow from the facts which have been set forth and are marked by the objectivity and impartiality of the student.

P. S. LOKANATHAN.



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SARADA RAJU.

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