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Labour Relations in an Early Colonial Context: Madras, c.1750–1800

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I. Introduction

Since the 1990s, academic fashion has rediscovered and revamped theories of the 'clash of civilizations' (or rather, of the solipsism of cultures) that had already been popularized successfully in the early years of our 'age of extremes' by conservative ideologues like the German Oswald Spengler.[1] Indian 'indigenism' appears to be another subsidiary branch of that ideological current. Recent writings on India's colonial period thus often tend to disconnect its precolonial from its colonial past, in order to construct incompatible exogenous and indigenous 'principles' of social organization. The imposition of 'alien' discourses on the Indian context is presented as the disruption of a communitarian social system that has been painted sometimes in pastel colours.[2] 'Indigenism', as has been

This essay is an abridged and revised English version of chapter 5 of the present author's Heidelberg thesis *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit und das Problem der Arbeit. Eine Studie zur Sozialgeschichte der Stadt Madras und ihres Hinterlandes zwischen 1750 und 1800* (Beiträge zur Südasienforschung 183) (Stuttgart, 1999). There relevant evidence has been reproduced in greater detail. An earlier English version of this article was presented in March 1998 to the 1st Conference of the Association of Indian Labour Historians in New Delhi where a lively discussion encouraged me to develop my argument further. As always, I am indebted to Dr Nicole Mayer-Ahuja whose help was essential in more than one way.

[1] See: Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (Munich, 1995; reprint of the revised 1922 edition). For an assessment and critique of Spengler's influence on contemporary historical thought see: András Gedö, 'Geschick versus Geschichte', *Topos 1 (Weltgeschichte)*, pp. 77–100.

[2] For a specimen of a primordialist and harmonizing depiction of precolonial society in South India see: Chitra and S. S. Sivakumar, 'The Meaning of Social Order in the Tamil Country', in: Peter Robb, (ed.), *Meanings of Agriculture, Essays in South Asian History and Economics* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 332–89 and especially pp. 352, 367–71, 381–3.

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rightly remarked, tends to harmonize the precolonial past.[3] The obsession with abstract cultural 'principles' (or, to use Spengler's term, 'Urphänomene', i.e. 'primordial phenomena') is often accompanied by a lack of interest in empirical research that is concerned with the material conditions of human existence and with the relations between human beings emerging from these concrete historical conditions. These trends notwithstanding, this paper is concerned with elementary aspects of social praxis, which rendered, for all their apparent 'triviality', members of South India's society, to use an expression of Marx, 'actors and authors of their own history'.[4] Hence, an analysis is attempted of labour relations in Madras City and its hinterland in the late eighteenth century, in the transitional period between the precolonial and colonial regimes. The discussion of the source material will highlight the problem of continuity and change—it is intended to identify *ancien régime* forms of subordinating labour that proved to be compatible with colonial conditions and to distinguish them from forms that did not survive or were newly created.

Studies of eighteenth-century labour relations in South India have usually focused on weavers employed in export-oriented commercial manufacture whose situation cannot be assumed to be representative even for all artisanal occupations, much less for other categories of manual labour. Few historians have dealt seriously with other sizeable groups of textile craftsmen such as spinners and bleachers. Other skilled artisans such as carpenters and smiths, brick makers, minters or quarrymen have caught even less attention.[5] South India's 'military labour market' has likewise been neglected despite its crucial importance in the period under review. Moreover, students of the Tamil region's agrarian society have scrutinized the structure and distribution of land rights, which were a formative, yet not the only element of the productive relations agricultural labourers were involved in. The present paper will, however, confine itself to those

[3] Sarah Joseph, 'Politics of Contemporary Indian Communitarianism', *EPW*, XXXII/XL (1997), pp. 2517–23. See also: Sumit Sarkar, 'Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva', in: David Ludden (ed.), *Making India Hindu* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 292–3.

[4] Cf.: *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. IV (Berlin, 1959), pp. 134–5.

[5] But see: Sergio Aiolfi, *Calicos und gedrucktes Zeug: Die Entwicklung der englischen Textilveredelung und der Tuchhandel der East India Company, 1650–1750* (Stuttgart, 1987). Valuable information on South Indian commercial manufacture can also be obtained in: A. I. Chicherov, *India: Economic Development in the 16th–18th Centuries: Outline History of Crafts and Trade* (Moscow, 1971).

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non-military occupational groups which were predominant in late eighteenth-century Madras City: construction workers and some other artisan groups, but chiefly labourers employed in what Dharma Kumar has called the 'forgotten sector',[6] i.e. the services, namely various denominations of transport workers, domestic workers and watchmen/runners (*peons*).

Before entering discussion, two preliminary remarks ought to be made. First of all, the distinction between 'free' and 'unfree' labour has been employed as a conceptual tool for the analysis of the highly differentiated complex of labour relations in late eighteenth-century Madras notwithstanding Gyan Prakash's rejection of these terms for the Indian context.[7] In my opinion, their use does not necessarily imply an acceptance of the assumption that bourgeois society restored the 'state of nature' as it made 'free wage labour' predominant and destroyed 'artificial' forms of bondage. It certainly did not when Marx, well aware of the tendency to reflect prevailing socio-economic conditions as a 'second nature', characterized 'free wage labour' as a fully *historical* phenomenon. In his view, which was later accepted even by liberal theorists like Max Weber, wage labour was *formally* free under two conditions: (a) if the worker could decide by himself to which employer he sold his labour power and (b) if he was at the same time 'free', i.e. detached, from his conditions of existence, from the means of production. Accordingly, freedom of contract between employer and labourer was a specific form in which economic domination could materialize—'free wage labour' emerged as the dominant form of subordinating labour under capital.[8] In the present paper the concepts 'free' and 'unfree labour' will be applied as analytical tools in the strict sense of this well-known definition—a definition that has been recapitulated simply for the reason that it tends to be disregarded in recent discussions while more incisive theoretical concepts are still not at hand.

A second preliminary remark anticipates one of the results of the author's research. Hence it has proved to be virtually impossible to

[6] Dharma Kumar, 'The Forgotten Sector: Services in Madras Presidency in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century', *IESHR*, XXIV/IV (1987), pp. 367–93.

[7] Cf.: Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge South Asian Studies, vol. XLIV) (Cambridge/New York/Melbourne, 1990), pp. 1–12, 218–25.

[8] Cf.: *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. XXIII (Berlin, 1983, first ed. 1947), pp. 181–3; *ibid.*, vol. XLII (Berlin, 1983), pp. 371–421. See also: Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen, 1990, reprint of 5th rev. ed.), pp. 70–1, 86–7, 123, 439–40.

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explain the structure of labour relations in late eighteenth-century Madras City without taking into account the regional context. In other words: the structure of labour relations in the hinterland's agriculture and rural manufacture not only conditioned the remarkable mobility of the regional labour force and thus the extent to which the growing demand for labour power in the emerging colonial metropolis could be satisfied. Moreover, rural labour relations left their imprint on the metropolitan ones: Working people could be bound only into such relations in Madras that they conceived at least as acceptable as the alternatives open to them in the hinterland. Else they simply left town as is well documented in the Company's and other European sources.[9] Furthermore, labourers did not only carry their capacity to work to Madras but also their own 'common sense', norms of economic behaviour moulded in a specific historical environment. Hence *kulis* and artisans had their own ideas about legitimate and illegitimate forms of social domination, about the mutual duties of master and servant, about 'working morale', 'just' compensation for their work, the 'proper' forms in which such compensation should be given and about grievances that justified resistance. Urban labour relations, even in the emerging colonial metropolis of Madras, are, therefore, best understood as modified rural labour relations. As the majority of the labourers who worked in Madras permanently or seasonally were farmhands, agricultural labour relations should be regarded as the most important 'raw material' from which the city's social organization of labour was produced by the combined and conflicting efforts of various social groups. To appreciate the nature and extent of the modifications achieved by the early colonial regime's intervention in this process we need to get acquainted with the texture of that 'raw material'. This is what the following section tries to do.

II. Agricultural Labour Relations in Eighteenth-Century Tondaimandalam

There are excellent studies on agricultural labour relations in the Tamil country for later periods.[10] Yet, as David Washbrook has poin-

[9] Occupational and spatial labour mobility in late eighteenth-century Madras are discussed at length in Ravi Ahuja, 'Labour Unsettled. Mobility and Protest in the Madras Region, 1750–1800', *IESHR*, XXXV/IV (1998), pp. 381–404.

[10] See especially: Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India* (Cambridge, 1965) and Benedicte Hjejle, 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India in

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ted out, the late nineteenth-century position of agricultural labourers differed considerably from that their ancestors had experienced a hundred years earlier:

> [. . . M]embership of a 'landless labour caste' in the eighteenth century did not necessarily imply an absence of all 'property' and an entire reliance on the sale of 'labour power', as, to a considerable degree, it did later. Moreover and conversely, the 'ownership' of land did not imply full or absolute proprietary rights over territory as also it did later in the nineteenth century: the subsidiary claims on its products were not abrogable.[11]

The early period of colonial rule in South India witnessed a chronic scarcity of labour until the 1790s which created relatively favourable conditions for social, occupational and spatial mobility of *Paraiyar*,[12] of members of other castes mainly employed in cultivation and of rural artisans. Thus their subordination to the *kaniyatchikkarars* (i.e. the class of peasants that controlled the majority of land rights) was, notwithstanding recurrent subsistence crises, not as comprehensive as that of landless labourers to landowning *ryots* one hundred years later: Agricultural labourers possessed a number of rights that were well worth defending. First, farmhands from the *Paraiyar* caste could claim the right to make use of the *parcheri* district of their respective agricultural settlement free of all taxes. These districts comprised not only their habitations but also adjacent land, so-called 'back yards' (*'puzhacadei'*), where they planted fruit and vegetables and kept their own cattle. Secondly, they had a right to a proportional share of the agricultural settlement's harvest. Thirdly, some of them performed certain duties in the village, e.g. watchman (*talaiyari*) or measurer of grain and land (*toti*), which entitled them to additional shares of the crop and in some cases even to tax-free land. Fourthly, they possessed customary claims to various compensations and privileges such as periodical allowances in money or grain, a regular 'present' of cloth and financial support in case of marriage. Not the least important was the so-called *purakalam* right of gleaning on the threshing floor which gave occasion to several conflicts. Moreover,

the Nineteenth Century', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, II/I–II (1965), pp. 71–126.

[11] David Washbrook, 'Land and Labour in Late Eighteenth-Century South India: The Golden Age of the Pariah?', in: Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India* (Delhi, 1993), pp. 69–70.

[12] The denomination '*Paraiyan*' is used in this article in spite of its discriminating connotations for reasons of historicity. Expressions like 'Adidravida' or 'Dalit', which symbolize present aspirations of emancipation, would be anachronistic when applied to the period under discussion.

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eighteenth-century village society permitted upwards mobility to a certain extent. Even *Paraiyar* could, as Collector F. W. Ellis noted as late as in the early nineteenth century, become tenants, possessors of land though they had to pay a higher rent than *payirkarars* (tenants) of other castes.[13]

Though most agricultural labourers in the Madras hinterland seem to have been compensated for their labour according to the customary rights outlined above, their relations to the dominant class of peasants diverged considerably in other respects. Three distinct forms of labour relations in agriculture are documented by contemporary sources. However, this differentiation has not always been noticed by modern historians and as yet not been explained adequately. Minute research into this subject is indispensable to come to safe conclusions—I can only touch upon this problem briefly.[14] The *first form* of labour relations we encounter is that of *Paraiyar* or *Palli* farmhands being collectively 'bound to their home village's soil'. These agricultural labourers who were called '*pannaiyals*'[15] were thus not subordinated as individuals to individuals but as a community to the respective village's community of dominant peasants. This relationship was considered unlimited and the implicated mutual obligations inviolable—*pannaiyals* were neither free to leave nor were their masters permitted to expel or transfer them to another village even if they sold their *kaniyatchi* shares to foreigners and moved away themselves. The *second form* of agricultural labour relations that can be discerned from eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century sources was that of yearly contracts between so-called *padiyals*, i.e. 'a hired servant, especially one paid with

[13] Essential sources for these rights are: Lionel Place, Report on the Jagir, 1795 (hereafter: Report on Jagir 1795), Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library (hereafter OIOC), Board's Collection F/4/31, esp. § 35, 37; Lionel Place, Report on the Jagir, 1799 (hereafter: Report on Jagir 1799), OIOC, Board's Collection, F/4/111, esp. § 448; *Papers on Mirasi Right Selected from the Records of Government [. . .]* (hereafter: Papers on Mirasi), Madras 1862, esp. pp. 308, 336–7 (F. W. Ellis in 1816). *Inam* land for *Paraiyar* village servants is mentioned in: OIOC, Madras Revenue Proc., P/274/17A, 12 July 1775, pp. 242, 245. See also: Tsukasa Mizushima, *Nattar and the Socio-Economic Change in South India in the 18th–19th Centuries* (Tokyo, 1986), pp. 214–31, 255–6; Hjejle, 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India', pp. 81; Chitra and S. S. Sivakumar, *Peasants and Nabobs: Agrarian Radicalism in Late Eighteenth Century Tamil Country* (Delhi, 1993), pp. 14, (for *purakalam* right: 54–5, 76); *Paraiyar* landownership in southern Tamil Nadu is noted by: David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India* (Delhi, 1989, 1st edition 1985), p. 82.

[14] For a more detailed discussion see: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, ch. 5.2.

[15] Cf.: Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India*, pp. 41–5; Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South-India, 1795–1895* (Delhi, 1994, 1st Indian ed.), p. 33.

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grain',[16] and dominant peasants. This relationship resembled 'free wage labour' in that it did not imply *unlimited* subsidiary rights to land use or the village's crop. Yet the forms of compensation do not seem to have differed substantially between *pannaiyals* and *padiyals*: Monetary gratifications were only one element, usufructuary rights and crop shares still remained crucial. The process that separated land and labour was still under way.[17] The *third form* of productive relationships was agrestic slavery in the sense that the master was the private proprietor of the slave whom he could sell, mortgage or rent out as he pleased and whose productive and reproductive capacities he was entitled to exploit.[18] The occurrence of agrestic slavery may appear to contradict the hypothesis presented above that labour's bargaining position was relatively strong in that period. This form of subordination did, however, not predominate in Tondaimandalam, the wider hinterland of Madras, and it appears that agricultural labourers entered such relationships chiefly in periods of war and famine when living standards dropped dramatically.[19] Slaves were procured both from outside and within the agricultural settlements. The sellers were often relatives—*pannaiyals* and/or *padiyals* who obviously possessed enough formal 'freedom' from the dominant peasants to undertake such transactions. Women were bought preferably together with their children as a *kottadumai*, i.e. a 'bunch of slaves' and seem to have fetched double the price as men.[20] However, even agrestic slaves enjoyed some of the customary rights of the other categories of agricultural labourers.[21]

[16] H. H. Wilson, *A Glossary of the Judicial and Revenue Terms, and of Useful Words Occurring in Official Documents Relating to the Administration of the Government of British India* (London, 1855), p. 386.

[17] For the distinction between *pannaiyals* and *padiyals* see: Report on the Jagir 1795, § 22, 35–7; Report on the Jagir 1799, § 75–9; *Papers on Mirasi*, pp. 334–7 (see also: 304–9, 327–9); Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India*, pp. 41–5; Hjejle, 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India', p. 81; Irschick, *Dialogue and History*, p. 33.

[18] Cf.: Hjejle, 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India', p. 93.

[19] There is abundant evidence for this practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See e.g.: *Bericht der Königlich-Dänischen Missionarien in Ostindien* (hereafter *Hallische Berichte*), 37–43 continuations, Halle (Saxony), 1735–6, pp. 448–9. See also: Sundaraj Manickam, *Slavery in the Tamil Country: A Historical Overview* (Madras, 1993, 2nd revised and enlarged edition), pp. 42–3, 47–51.

[20] See esp.: Ramaswami Naidu, 'Remarks on the Revenue System and Landed Tenures of the Provinces under the Presidency of Fort St George', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, I (1834), pp. 292–306. (The Ms. was apparently written in 1820 by a retired revenue official, cf.: Chitra and S. S. Sivakumar, *Peasants and Nabobs*, p. 102.) For samples of slave contracts see: Papers on Mirasi, pp. 332–9 and Manickam, *Slavery in the Tamil Country*, pp. 70–1, 117–24.

[21] Cf.: *Papers on Mirasi*, pp. 335–6 (F. W. Ellis in 1816).

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Compensation of labour was thus similar in all three forms of organizing agricultural production. Therefore, these forms should not be regarded as separate phenomena but rather as divergent tendencies in the development of class relations between dominant peasants and agricultural labourers. The emergence of both agrestic slavery and 'wage labour' was connected to a general process of social differentiation in pre-colonial South India, to a commodification of agricultural production in which the organic unity of land and labour was gradually eroded. The subordination of agricultural labourers to a single employer became practically relevant only to the extent that individuals could also acquire land. This period's tendency of 'privatizing' land rights, impressively documented by the Japanese scholar Tsukasa Mizushima, fostered the emergence of labour relations compatible with these new forms of property.[22] The present author is aware that these hypotheses would require an elaborate discussion and the presentation of sufficient evidence to be more convincing. Yet I have to content myself with pointing at two implications this process of differentiation had for the formation of urban labour relations in South India's emerging colonial metropolis. First of all, it ought to be stressed that 'wage labour' was not introduced by the colonial power as an element of an alien capitalist modernity—this form of the social organization of labour had already been produced on the paddy fields of the rural Tamil country. Secondly, these rural 'wage labourers' were, however, not entirely 'free', i.e. disassociated, from the land as their main condition of existence: Money wages were only one part of the gratifications they were accustomed to receive—fixed shares of the crops and subsidiary rights to land use were at least as important. Various features of the late eighteenth-century complex of labour relations in Madras City can only be understood on this background. We will return to this point in sections V, VI and VII.

III. 'Al-amanji' to 'Pressing Coolies': The Enforcement of Tributes in Labour

The above section has dealt with the organization of labour within agricultural settlements. Before we turn to the recasts of these social

[22] See: Tsukasa Mizushima, *Nattar and the Socio-Economic Change*, esp. pp. 255, 258. A similar explanation for the emergence of agrestic slavery (though as a marginal phenomenon) in fourteenth-century Tamil Nadu has been given by: Noboru Karash-

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relations produced in Madras City we should briefly consider those rural forms of labour organization that involved not only *kaniyatchikkarars* and farmhands but also supralocal powers. *Al-amanji* or *vetti*—concepts that can be adequately translated as 'corvée'[23]—had been demanded from villagers in the Tamil region since the medieval period. At least from the eleventh century these terms recur frequently in inscriptions pertaining to revenue matters.[24] *Al-amanji*, as other forms of surplus extraction, was considered an obligation associated with the ownership of *kaniyatchi* rights. Thus, when one Periya Mudali sold his *kaniyatchi* shares in the village of Tondiarpet in 1727, the sales contract did not only specify the rights that were to be transferred on the buyer but also his duty to 'furnish the *Al Amanji* for the *Sircar* service'. In this case, the *sarkar* (government) was impersonated by the Governor in Council of Fort St George who were thus familiar with this form of tribute at a rather early stage of colonial state formation.[25] In the second decade of the nineteenth century Ellis admitted that these services were still extracted from villages to fulfil the transport requirements of travelling government officials though not as extensively as in earlier periods.[26] In fact, the late eighteenth-century colonial regime had not merely accepted this redistribution channel of agricultural surplus as an inheritance from its Indian predecessors—it made excessive use of this legacy. *Nawab* Muhammad Ali's administrators complained in 1772 that immoderate and often unjustifiable requests for transport services on the part of British officials and their Indian partners or dependants had become a major impediment for agriculture. They even asserted that

> this arbitrary manner of forcing the Country people from their labour by which they maintain their families, has obliged many of them to leave their habitations and to seek for shelter and more security under the Government of those Indian Princes, who are much less connected with Europeans, and what we call Despotism and Slavery.[27]

ima, *Towards a New Formation: South Indian Society under Vijayanagar Rule* (Delhi, 1992), pp. 123–6.

[23] Cf.: *Papers on Mirasi*, p. 313; Wilson, *A Glossary of the Judicial and Revenue Terms*, pp. 18, 21; Noboru Karashima, *Towards a New Formation*, pp. 199–200.

[24] See: *ibid.*, pp. 211–12, 229; K. V. Raman, *The Early History of the Madras Region* (Madras, 1959), p. 270.

[25] This contract is reproduced in: Papers on Mirasi, pp. 311–13. For a similar contract of 1772 see: *ibid.*, pp. 325–6.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 313.

[27] OIOC, Paterson Diaries, vol. 3, 28 July 1772, p. 226. See also *ibid.*, 31 July 1772, pp. 229–30; 4 Aug. 1772, p. 231 (this volume was drawn up by Paterson as Admiral Harland's diary, cf.: OIOC-Handlist MSS.EUR.E.379).

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If the Company's demand for corvée was thus perceived by the rural population as a major grievance even in the early 1770s[28]—an exceptionally peaceful period—the pressure for unpaid services increased considerably during wartime when the survival of states largely depended on logistics and namely on the availability of transport capacities, when the army required a far larger number of labourers and artisans than of fighting men to take the field efficiently. The fortifications of Fort St George that acquired their final shape in this period were built by thousands of *kulis* and artisans many of which were recruited from the surrounding villages with reference to the government's right to *al-amanji*.[29] In the earlier years Nawab Muhammad Ali and his *amildars* were requested to send labourers[30]—later Company servants and officers took recruitment into their own hands. The demand for unpaid services exceeded by far the capacity or willingness of the dominant peasants to furnish labourers. Hence the emerging colonial power resorted to military force to push through its orders and to break resistance. There are frequent references to activities like 'pressing coolies' or 'catching coolie carpenters' in the Company's records, especially in those of the early 1780s when the most serious crisis of early colonial rule in South India occurred.[31] This was not merely a continuation of the traditional practice of *al-amanji* or corvée: Tribute in labour was transformed into another variation of involuntary service as a new model state with military despotic features emerged from the almost incessant wars of late eighteenth-century South India. Armed press gangs recruited labourers not only for short-term tasks but also for longer periods of employment. In the latter case, their home villages could

[28] For similar complaints see: *ibid.*, vol. 4, 6 March 1773, p. 236 and: OIOC, Madras Public Proceedings (hereafter MPP), (P/240/33), 24 Jan 1772, p. 23.

[29] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/13, 3 March 1755, pp. 112–14; Records of Fort St George (hereafter RFSG), Diaries and Consultation Books (hereafter DCB), 17 July 1758, p. 111; OIOC, MPP, P/240/26, 12 Jan. 1768, pp. 9, 28; OIOC, Letters to England, E/5/309, 30 Oct. 1781 (Select Committee to Court of Directors), § 34; TNSA, Military Consultations (hereafter: MC), vol. 76B, 21 Sept. 1781, pp. 2624–5. For more evidence of military labour requirements see: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, ch. 4.3.

[30] Cf.: RFSG, DCB, 17 July 1761, p. 16. See also footnote 27.

[31] See e.g.: TNSA, MC, vol. 73C, 4 March 1781, pp. 637–9; *ibid.*, vol. 76A, 9 Sept. 1781, p. 2436; OIOC, Mackenzie Collection General ('Extracts Chief Engineers Books Fort St George [. . .]', hereafter: Mackenzie), vol. 69, 'The humble Petition of Peanny Smith Mastry and Veerasamy Carpenter Mastry of Wallajahbad', undated, placed between extracts from documents dated 18 May 1788 and 9 June 1788; TNSA, Chingleput District Records, vol. 443, R. Dighton to Board of Revenue, Aug. 1788, and Vencatachella to R. Dighton, 5 Aug. 1788.

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not be made responsible for their support.[32] The labour relations of these construction workers, grass cutters or *kulis* appear to have been created on the model of those of contemporary European soldiers and sailors who had often not chosen their employer (the state) freely though they were compensated with wages. These militarized labour relations were not only introduced to recruit and control labour locally. In some cases, South Indian artisans were also conscripted to serve the Company outside India, for instance in Burma and Sumatra.[33]

IV. Slavery in a Colonial Urban Context

Slave trade in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century South India was lively and even soared during the recurrent famine periods when slaves were amply available at low prices. The English as well as other European East India Companies participated in this profitable branch of commerce almost from the beginning of their presence in the region well into the latter half of the eighteenth century.[34] Besides, they had use for slaves themselves which accounts for a considerable amount of evidence in records and other European sources. However, only a small minority of Madras City's labour force was bound into relations of slavery, which is why this aspect is only cursorily dealt with in this paper.[35] Imported slaves, men and women acquired by Company contractors mainly in Madagascar but also on the shores of the African mainland, represented the smaller segment of the city's slave population. Most of these so-called '*Coffreys*' were disembarked in Madras, quartered in barracks for a couple of months before being sent on to their final destination in South East Asia.[36] Yet part of the males was enrolled into the Madras army in the 1750s and formed into a separate '*Coffrey Company*'.[37] The efficiency

[32] See e.g.: OIOC, Letters to England, E/5/309, 30 Oct. 1781 (Select Committee to Court of Directors), § 34; Irschick, *Dialogue and History*, pp. 38–9.

[33] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/12, 4 Feb. 1754, pp. 133–4; RFSG, DCB, 20 Oct. 1758, pp. 212, 215.

[34] For a brief overview see: B. Natarajan, 'Slave Trade in Madras', in: *The Madras Tercentenary Commemoration Volume* (London *et al.*, 1939), pp. 247–55.

[35] For further evidence see: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, ch. 5.4.

[36] Cf.: RFSG, DCB, 19 March 1749/50, p. 97; *ibid.*, 13 Aug. 1750, p. 151; *ibid.*, 1 Sept. 1752, pp. 164–5; *ibid.*, 18 Sept. 1752, p. 168; *ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1752, p. 183; *ibid.*, 23 Oct. 1752, pp. 209–10; *ibid.*, 30 Oct. 1752, p. 213.

[37] Cf.: W. J. Wilson, *History of the Madras Army* (Madras, 1882), vol. I, p. 74; RFSG, DCB, 16 Sept. 1758, p. 170.

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of this unit seems to have been satisfactory as it was still mentioned a quarter of a century later when it was recorded that the sons of the Malagasy and African *sepoys* had now been enlisted.[38] Moreover, gangs of female imported slaves were occasionally employed on the fortification works of Fort St George and at least a few in European households.[39]

Another, more sizeable group of Madras slaves was of South Indian origin. The majority of them served in private households. The city's 'Hindu' merchants seem to have recruited their domestic servants mainly from client castes though it cannot be ruled out totally that slaves were employed too.[40] Special slave quarters existed in the *nawab*'s palace.[41] Triplicane, the suburb where the *darbar* was located and most Muslim nobles resided, seems to have been one of the city's prime markets for slave children in the 1790s. From the viewpoint of the British authorities, these transactions were perfectly legal as long as the respective children had not been kidnapped which was apparently a rather widespread phenomenon.[42]

Moreover, the growing population of European gentlemen also required thousands of domestic servants. The sources suggest that most of them were rather wage labourers than slaves. However, until at least the end of the eighteenth century there is continuous (though not quantifiable) evidence for domestic slavery in European households. The Madras Justices of the Peace, i.e. the Governor in Council, confirmed European property rights to domestic slaves in several law cases.[43] These relations of subordination were clearly not

[38] Cf.: TNSA, MC, vol. 73B, 9 Feb. 1781, p. 434; TNSA, MC, vol. 74B, 15 April 1781, p. 968.

[39] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/11, 1 Oct. 1753, pp. 599–600, 612; TNSA, Quarter Sessions (hereafter: QS), vol. 2, 11 Jan. 1769, pp. 25, 28; *ibid.*, 29 April 1769, pp. 48–65. See also: Henry Dodwell, *The Nabobs of Madras* (London, 1926), p. 174.

[40] Wills of prominent Hindu merchants did, to my knowledge, include several bequests to domestic servants but no regulations concerning slaves. See, for instance: OIOC, Wills, L/AG/34/29/193, 1791 (part 2), pp. 639–46: will and admin. of Chokappa Chetti. However, a report referring to the early nineteenth-century situation admits that domestic servants were also held in Hindu households in some rare cases: *British Parliamentary Papers. Minutes of Evidence before the Select Committee [. . .] 1831–2. Colonies. East India* (Shannon, 1970, 6th reprint), pp. 572–3. Indrani Chatterjee has cautioned me from her experience with Fort William records that references to slavery could have been lost as the wills were translated.

[41] Cf.: N. S. Ramaswami, *Political History of the Carnatic Under the Nawabs* (Delhi, 1984), p. 321.

[42] Cf.: TNSA, QS, vol. 12, 9 March 1796, pp. 64–9; *ibid.*, vol. 13, 28 March 1798.

[43] See e.g.: TNSA, QS, vol. 8, 8 May 1788 & 3 July 1788, pp. 8–18; TNSA, Public Department, Miscellanies: vol. 1A (March–May 1791), no. 21, pp. 17–22; *ibid.*, no. 185, pp. 83–6; *ibid.*, vol. 3B (Jan.–March 1792), no. 267, 22 Feb. 1792, pp. 342–3.

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founded on the model of predial slavery as described in section II of this paper. To mention only one obvious difference, agrestic slaves and their masters inhabited intersecting but clearly distinguished spaces separated by barriers of caste while domestic slaves and their European masters were cohabitants. What was the advantage for Europeans to keep at least some of their domestic servants in slavery? Most importantly, domestic slaves could be more easily subjected to menial services that less subordinated categories of servants often flatly refused to execute on grounds of religion or caste.[44] European masters and mistresses could further constrain such appeals to community norms by promoting their slaves' conversion to Christianity. The German traveller Carsten Niebuhr reported from mid-eighteenth-century Bombay that the slaves of Europeans were always Catholics[45]—he could have said much the same about Madras: All domestic slaves of Europeans that I could trace in the sources bore Christian, mostly Romanic names. Catholic priests and German Protestant missionaries competed bitterly for the privilege to proselytize the slaves of British households. The connection between conversion to Christianity and slavery seems to have been so evident as to prevent some members of intermediate, nonbrahmin castes to convert to Protestantism.[46]

To conclude this section, three points should be recapitulated. First of all, slavery was not a major form of organizing labour in Madras City. Secondly, there is abundant evidence for domestic slavery but no indication that slaves were employed for commercial purposes. Thirdly, the regional forms of agrestic slavery could hardly be made use of in the households of the Madras colonial oligarchy. Hence they introduced a hitherto uncommon form of 'Christian slavery'.

V. 'Freedom' and 'Bondage' in Urban Labour Relations

We shall now turn to labour relations more typical for the urban society of Madras between 1750 and 1800. A glance at the records

[44] See e.g. Mrs Kindersley's letter no. XIX from Teneriffe, reproduced in: Henry Davison Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras* (New York, 1968, reprint of 1913 ed.), vol. II, p. 617.

[45] Cf.: Carsten Niebuhr, *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern* (Zürich, 1993, 1st ed. 1774), p. 457.

[46] There are numerous relevant reports by German missionaries, e.g.: *Hallische Berichte*, 37–43 Cont., 3 April 1733, p. 177; *ibid.*, 26 Dec. 1734, p. 453; *ibid.*, 62–6 Cont., 28 Aug. 1748, pp. 946–7; *ibid.*, 67–72 Cont., 6 Dec. 1749, p. 1919; *ibid.*, 73–

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of Fort St George discloses numerous references to wages and their regulation. The labour relations of construction workers and well diggers, of boat workers and *kulis*, of minters and bleachers, of domestic servants and palanquin bearers, of *sepoys* and *peons*, in fact, of most members of the urban labour force, appear to have been relations of *wage labour*. At first sight, the impression arises that labour relations in Madras City were predominantly contractual relationships between formally equal parties thus starkly contrasting those of the countryside. Historians have occasionally taken such a dualistic view. Sinnappah Arasaratnam, for instance, has assumed that members of the *Paraiyar* and *Palli* castes who had moved to the city 'were not bonded to serve any of the other castes or the state, as would happen in a hinterland village or town, but worked for wages and became the nucleus of a wage labouring class'.[47] Did Madras City, after all, represent an alien civilization in respect of labour relations, a civilization diametrically opposed to that of its hinterland? Were corvée and slavery but ephemeral phenomena in a stronghold of 'free wage labour'? I have already argued that a *continuum* of 'free' and 'unfree' forms of organizing labour had been created in rural society in a process of commercialization covering several centuries. This continuum extended to Madras City although the specific pattern of labour relations in this commercial and administrative centre was of course considerably different from that of a paddy-producing rural settlement: The impact of wage labour was far stronger in Madras than in the average Tondaimandalam village. However, other forms of labour relations were integral constituents of the city's social structure, too—traditional forms of corvée, as we have seen, could blend into 'modern' wage labour when the Company resorted to 'traditional' rights for recruitment but secured continuous employment by wages.

One of the oldest and most frequent types of wage labour in Madras City was that of members of the armed forces, of *peons* and *sepoys*. Indeed, the region's militarization during the second half of the eighteenth century could be described as a 'factory' in which wage labour relations were mass-produced: The imperatives of militarization induced the regional powers, including the British, to dis-

7 Cont., 25 Nov. 1750, p. 147; *ibid.*, 23 Sept. 1751, p. 448; *ibid.*, 7 June 1752, p. 802; *ibid.*, 78–83 Cont., 21 March 1754, p. 1365; *ibid.*, 26 March 1754, p. 1366; *ibid.*, 104–8 Cont., July 1766, p. 1448.

[47] Sinnappah Arasaratnam, 'Society, Power and Factionalism and Corruption in Early Madras 1640–1746', *Indica*, XXIII/I–II (1986), p. 117.

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rupt customary labour relations and to create new links to a substantial segment of the region's labour force.[48] These relationships had to be at least partially voluntary if mass desertion was not to jeopardize military efficiency to a degree exceeding contemporary standards. As these connections were of recent origin no deeply rooted moral bonds existed between masters and servants, for example, between British officers and Indian *sepoys*. The economic ties of wage labour offered a feasible alternative. Wage labour in Madras was thus not *only* a prolongation of current regional forms of organizing labour—it also marched into town in the East India Company's red service coat. However, the soldier in contemporary Europe (on whose model the Madras *sepoy* was created in the mid-eighteenth century) was no 'free wage labourer' in the archetypical sense: Neither could he change his employer as he pleased (except by desertion as many actually did) nor was his officer merely the employer's foreman. It has been observed that the relationship of soldiers and officers in eighteenth-century Europe often mirrored agrarian relations between landlords and peasants.[49] Correspondingly, *ancien régime* forms of social organization left their imprint on the relationship between officer and *sepoy* in the Carnatic too. Not all of these pre-bourgeois 'techniques of subordination' were of South Indian origin—the English and especially the Scottish gentry's collective experience with controlling tenants travelled to India as their offspring filled the civil and military ranks of the early colonial administration.[50] This subject would, once again, require closer examination. However, for our present purposes suffice it to note that South Indian as well as European influence did impede the emergence of 'free wage labour' in its 'pure' or archetypical form. There is, indeed, abundant evidence for labour relations that combined aspects of wage labour with elements of bondage. This observation corresponds with Tanika Sarkar's remark:

> In colonial India, labour in general was hardly ever entirely free and extra-economic compulsions in varying proportions dictated the existence of all

[48] For implications of the South Indian Wars for the labour force see: Ahuja, 'Labour Unsettled'. See also: Henry Dodwell, *Sepoy Recruitment in the Old Madras Army* (Studies in Indian Records, publ. by IHRC) (Calcutta, 1922).

[49] M. S. Anderson, *War and Society in Europe of the Old Regime, 1618–1789* (London, 1988), pp. 115, 122–3. See also: Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Vol. I: Vom Feudalismus des Alten Reiches bis zur Defensiven Modernisierung der Reformära, 1700–1815* (Frankfurt/Vienna, 1987), pp. 252–3.

[50] Cf.: Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London/Sydney, 1994), pp. 126–32.

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forms of labour, ranging from the formal slave to the wage worker in the modern factory.[51]

The specific historical blend of economic and extra-economic coercion in early colonial Madras manifests itself in various documentary references to corporal punishment that European as well as Indian masters frequently imposed not only on slaves but also on wage-earning employees. Domestic servants suspected of theft or other misdemeanours were thus severely disciplined by their masters. These practices became cognizable to the Justices of the Peace only in cases when a servant was tortured to death.[52] In the Company's service corporal punishment was employed as a regular instrument of discipline. For example, the British soldiers who supervised the Indian horsekeepers in Fort St George kept a rattan in their tent to punish those who did not report for work punctually.[53] The British 'Master Attendant' (the port captain) who was in charge of the embarkation and disembarkation of goods and persons in the harbour had his subordinates frequently whipped. The anchor divers, John Thomson claimed in 1783, were 'under no controul farther than I can punish them'.[54] What had been practised over decades[55] was legalized before the turn of the century when influential European agency houses convinced the Governor in Council to invest the Master Attendant with the right to punish the 'boat-men' (port workers) summarily in cases of embezzlement.[56] Ritualized floggings were repeatedly performed on the beach and other public places as a deterrent.[57] A relationship that permitted the employer or his representative to take control of the labourer's body cannot be regarded

[51] Tanika Sarkar, 'Bondage in the Colonial Context', In: Utsa Patnaik/Manjari Dingwaney (eds), *Chains of Servitude. Bondage and Slavery in India* (Madras, 1985), p. 97.

[52] See e.g.: TNSA, QS, vol. 12, 2 March 1796, pp. 24–46; *ibid.*, 3 March 1796, pp. 50–1; *ibid.*, 12 March 1796, pp. 85–6; *ibid.*, 26 Oct. 1796, pp. 162–79, 181.

[53] Cf.: TNSA, QS, vol. 6, 7 April 1784, pp. 61–72.

[54] OIOC, MPP, P/240/56, 6 June 1783, p. 738.

[55] For further evidence see: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, chs 3.4., 3.7. and 6.4.

[56] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/241/70, 24 Feb. 1797, pp. 581–5; OIOC, MPP, P/241/73, 22 June 1797, pp. 2082–3; *ibid.*, 24 June 1797, pp. 2113–14.

[57] See e.g.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/48, 29 May 1779, p. 152; *ibid.*, 20 Aug. 1779, p. 443; OIOC, MPP, P/240/55, 3 Dec. 1782, pp. 1322–7; OIOC, MPP, P/240/56, 6 June 1783, pp. 738–9; TNSA, Public Consultations (hereafter: PC), 188B, 10 Jan. 1794, p. 66; TNSA, PC, 189B, 21 Jan. 1794, p. 659; OIOC, MPP, P/241/68, 17 Dec. 1796, pp. 4234–45, 4238–9; OIOC, MPP, P/241/73, 22 June 1797, pp. 2082–3; *ibid.*, 24 June 1797, pp. 2113–14; OIOC, MPP, P/241/75, 29 Sept. 1797, pp. 3180–1.

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as contractual relationship between legally equal persons—it was rather the relationship of ruler and subject, of master and servant: The contract was ratified by means of the employer's whip. Moreover, the early colonial regime's judicial practice left no doubt that there could not be any equality of employers and employees before the law. According to the English 'master and servant laws' to which the Justices of the Peace implicitly and explicitly referred corporal punishment could only be imposed on servants, never on their masters.[58]

The blending of wage labour with forms of labour organization based on extra-economic compulsion is, however, symbolized even more appropriately by the debt contract than by the whip. Debt bondage had already been a familiar form of subordinating labour in precolonial South India. There are many accounts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but let us here take a German missionary's report of 1734 as a sample:

> For it often happens that parents of such lowly stock raise money on themselves and their children which they pay back successively from their daily pay while serving their creditors. Yet if they have a large family or if the times are dear, their debt remains unpaid. In case the father dies, his sons are obliged either to pay back the debt or to work it out, and thus it happens that some are bound as their creditor's slaves for half or the whole of their lives.[59]

Even this brief description indicates that the term 'debt bondage', if applied to the period under review, covered a wide range of relationships beginning with the wage labourer indebted for a short period and extending to the life-long bondsman whose family had at some stage become his creditor's property.[60] This ambiguity, enforced by a far higher level of spatial and social mobility than characteristic for the nineteenth century, made the practical interpretation of 'debt bondage' a matter of negotiation and conflict.

An interesting case in point dates from 1784 when the Carnatic started to recover from the disastrous Second Mysore War.[61] In the

[58] For a discussion of early colonial labour jurisdiction see: Ravi Ahuja, 'The Origins of Colonial Labour Policy in Late Eighteenth-century Madras', *International Review of Social History*, 44 (1999), pp. 159–95.

[59] *Hallische Berichte*, 37–43 cont., 11 Sept. 1734, p. 447 (my translation, R. A.).

[60] See also: *ibid.*, 67–72 cont., 15 April 1747, p. 1227; Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara, and Malabar* (London, 1807, vol. I), pp. 124–5; Hjejle, 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India', pp. 121–4.

[61] For the following paragraph see: OIOC, MPP, P/240/59, 27 June 1784, pp. 764–5; *ibid.*, 13 Nov. 1784, pp. 1143–5; *ibid.*, 31 Dec. 1784, pp. 1355–9.

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summer of this year the Master Attendant reported to the Governor that almost three hundred (or about a third) of the 'boat people' had absconded to Pondicherry, Tranquebar, Cuddalore, Sadras and other coastal towns thus creating major logistic problems. The 'boat *maistries*' (who owned the *masula* boats required for crossing the Madras surf) and the Master Attendant, therefore, applied to the Governor to send out *sepoys* in order to catch the 'deserters' and force them back to Madras. The various parties involved in this long-drawn conflict submitted rather contradictory descriptions of the 'boat men's' labour relations. The *maistries* opined that a reduction of wages had been one of the main reasons of the 'boat men's' desertion. At the same time they claimed, however, that the absconders had, like the majority of the Madras 'boat men', borrowed from them 'different Sums of money & thereby covenanted to continue in their Service during their natural Lives'.[62] The Master Attendant did not support the *maistries*' claim to life-long service. Instead he argued, probably influenced by British legal ideas, that the 'boat men' should not be permitted to leave their creditors before having settled their debt. Some of the fugitives presented their case in yet another light. In a petition, the 'boat men' of Covelong asserted that they had taken up work in Madras only temporarily during war-time, but had by no means forfeited their right to return to their customary occupations, plying the boats and working on the salt pans of their home village. Evidently, they considered the *maistries*' claims by no means indisputable as they had not absconded farther than to nearby Covelong. They were supported by the local tax renter who was apparently rather unimpressed by these claims and who insisted that the local *kaniyatchikkarars* possessed a prerogative to the 'boat men's' labour. This case is extraordinarily well documented but was probably not untypical. It demonstrates that the potentiality of renegotiating labour relations was comparatively large in the period under review as compared to the era of consolidated colonial rule when a centralized administration petrified debt bondage on the basis of the 'Workmen's Breach of Contract Act' (1859).[63]

Contemporaries repeatedly observed that labourers submitted to debt bondage in exchange for relatively trifle amounts of money

[62] *Ibid.*, 7 Dec. 1784, pp. 1229–31.

[63] Cf.: Hjejle, 'Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India', pp. 100–2, 115–16, 122–3; Sarkar, 'Bondage in the Colonial Context', pp. 110–11.

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often not exceeding one or two monthly wages of a *kuli*.[64] As in later times, urgent ritual obligations, such as marriages, may have been the immediate cause of borrowing in some cases.[65] Besides, labourers were most liable to sell themselves or members of their families into debt bondage in times of war and famine as in the above case. The loan they received for compensation was hardly sufficient to maintain their families for more than a few days since grain prices soared in these periods.[66] Though fear of starvation may provide favourable conditions for reducing 'labour costs', one or two *pagodas* appear to be a suspiciously low price for the acquiescence into long-term or even life-long bondage. More important than the loan itself was probably the 'guarantee of maintenance' implied in these relationships—as Dharma Kumar has observed: '[A]n obligation to work could be construed as a right to employment.'[67] Labour mobility, so typical for the Madras region's social landscape in the eighteenth century and rather advantageous for the labourers in peaceful periods,[68] could turn into a scourge in periods of subsistence crisis. Contrary to Prasannan Parthasarathi's recent assertion of a high level of financial security of South India's labouring classes,[69] such subsistence crises occurred frequently in the second half of the eighteenth century. The present author has counted ten incidents of dearth in Madras between 1748 and 1798 including a major famine in the early 1780s, which were regularly accompanied by a drop in the demand for labour and of real wages.[70] Under these conditions a higher level of security could possibly outweigh the losses in income and the restrictions of movement implied in a relationship of debt bondage. Yet it would be wrong to assume that relations between

[64] See e.g.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/20, 5 Oct. 1762, pp. 457–8; *Hallische Berichte*, 37–43 cont., 9 Sept. 1734, p. 446; *ibid.*, 67–72 cont., 15 April 1747, p. 1227.

[65] Cf.: Sarkar, 'Bondage in the Colonial Context', p. 113.

[66] See next section.

[67] Kumar, 'The Forgotten Sector', p. 45.

[68] See Ahuja, 'Labour Unsettled' and the following section of this essay.

[69] Prasannan Parthasarathi, 'Rethinking Wages and Competitiveness in the Eighteenth Century: Britain and South India', *Past and Present* 158 (1998), pp. 85, 89, 92, 101.

[70] Evidence for dearth or famine is documented for: 1748, 1750, 1759, 1763, 1769, 1773–74, 1779–83, 1789, 1792 and 1798. Cf. Figure 6.2. in Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*. See also: Roland Lardinois, 'Deserted Villages and Depopulation in Rural Tamil Nadu c. 1780–c. 1830', In: Tim Dyson (ed.), *India's Historical Demography. Studies in Famine, Disease and Society* (Collected Papers on South Asia, No. 8) (London, 1989), pp. 16–48.

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creditors and bonded labourers were generally harmonious—the case mentioned above shows that at least in some instances creditors used means of coercion to keep bonded labourers subordinated in more prosperous periods when a subsistence could be gained more easily elsewhere.

References to debt bondage abound in official records relating to British activities that required large numbers of labourers. Serious problems of recruitment and discipline had to be solved for which the Company's servants often relied on Indian intermediaries though there were also attempts to establish direct control over the labour force.[71] Until the establishment of regular *sepoy* companies in the mid-eighteenth century such 'recruitment contractors' were regularly engaged in times of war to muster and command Indian '*peons*', i.e. foot-soldiers, and thus closely resembled the *condottiere* of early modern Europe.[72] In the civil departments of the early colonial administration 'recruitment contractors' were employed much longer. Here they were often called '*maistries*', a word of Portuguese origin denominating a foreman or master craftsman in this period.[73] Alternatively, they were labelled 'headmen', a term which could indicate their being caste headmen but also that they had merely been installed as supervisors by British officials.[74] On the extensive fortification works and other construction sites of Madras City the Company's servants made the experience that Indian *maistries* were cheaper and far more efficient supervisors than the English craftsmen they had originally employed for this task.[75] Though evidence for the relationships between *maistries* and construction workers is sparse and scattered, the existing material seems to indicate that the former were often no mere foremen but employed the latter on their own account. Wages were often not paid to the employees but to the 'recruitment contractors' who were responsible for their distribution.[76] However, the agreements between *maistries* and workmen

[71] Cf.: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, ch. 3 and 6.3.

[72] Cf.: Dodwell, *Sepoy Recruitment in the Old Madras Army*, pp. 6–10. However, irregular units commanded by Indian condottiere were at times mustered as auxiliary troops even in later decades. See e.g.: TNSA, MC, vol. 79A, 19 March 1782, p. 810.

[73] Cf.: Henry Yule/A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson* (New Delhi, 1984, 1st ed. 1903), pp. 538–9.

[74] See e.g.: OIOC, Mackenzie, vol. 69, The humble Petition of Peanny Smith Mastry & Veerasamy Carpenter Mastry of Wallajahbad (see footnote 31).

[75] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/32, 20 Sept. 1771, p. 637.

[76] See e.g.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/41, 4 May 1776, p. 247.

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did not necessarily imply direct payment of wages to the labourers as some of them had received advances from their *maistries*. The records refer to at least one case when 'recruitment contractors' tried to enforce the repayment of loans from carpenters and smiths.[77] More information is available on the relations between so-called 'boat *maistries*' and 'boat men' in the Madras harbour.[78] This is due to the fact that the Presidency's communication and supply line to Bengal and Britain depended on the services of this specialized occupational group. Therefore, Governor and Council dealt frequently and at length even with organizational details of that branch. Notwithstanding the Company administration's repeated attempts to impose direct control on the stevedores, the *maistries* proved to be indispensable and their resistance against such measures insurmountable. Even the direct payment of wages to the 'boat men', though ordered by the Governor in Council time and again, could not be enforced.[79] As the city's maritime traffic increased during the second half of the eighteenth century, a handful of *maistries* emerged as rather prosperous entrepreneurs who were not only major boat owners but held, as they asserted in 1784, the majority of 'boat men' in debt bondage, too. In case of disputes with their dependants these *maistries* could usually rely on the Company's armed support. Hence, when the *maistries* demanded from the Governor in Council in 1784 to send *sepoys* after their absconded debtors they referred to five similar incidents between 1755 and 1775 when they had been granted troops to regain control over their subordinates.[80]

VI. On Wages and Shares as Compensations for Labour

The preceding section has sought to demonstrate that Madras workmen of this period cannot be regarded as 'free wage labourers' in the strict sense only on account of references in the Company's records to their 'wages', 'hire', 'pay' or, if using the Tamil term, to

[77] See footnote 74.

[78] For a detailed case study on the relations of various groups involved in the stevedoring business see: ch. 3 of Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*. See also: Ravi Ahuja, 'Subcontractors in Early Colonial South Asia: The Case of the Madras Maistries', in: Jan Lucassen/Ratna Saptari (eds), *Subcontracted Labour in Asia*, (Richmond/Surrey, forthcoming).

[79] Cf.: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, chs. 3.5–3.7.

[80] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/59, 7 Dec. 1784, pp. 1229–31.

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their *kuli*.[81] Moreover, the specific late eighteenth-century Madras blend of various 'free' and 'unfree' forms of organizing labour in society had also implications for the forms in which labour was compensated. Interestingly, various occupational groups, who were regarded as wage labourers by their employers, staunchly refused to accept *kuli* and insisted on shares. For example, the Muslim anchor divers fought repeatedly for their customary right to between thirty and fifty per cent 'salvage' of any goods reclaimed from the sea.[82] The compensation of the cornmeters employed in the Company's 'paddy godowns' remained an equally controversial matter for many years. In agricultural settlements, *totis* (i.e. cornmeters) were usually members of the *Paraiyar* caste who, according to local custom, received a share of the village's crop and sometimes even usufructuary rights to some land for their services.[83] Madras cornmeters accordingly claimed a fixed sum of money (one *fanam*) and one 'handful' of every *pagoda*'s worth of paddy. They strictly refused to accept the 'proper wages' merchants tried to impose on them.[84] The compensation they preferred for their labour was of course quite different from a share of the village's crop—it was rather a type of incentive pay. However, customary agrarian forms of social distribution clearly prefigured urban forms. Agricultural labourers in Tondaimandalam villages, *padiyals* as well as *pannaiyals*, received a betel present from the *kaniyatchikkar* every summer before the start of the cultivating season, which symbolized and confirmed the bonds and mutual obligations between masters and servants.[85] The cornmeters and other occupational groups in Madras likewise received betel or a special gratification for betel from their employers, 'as long as they behaved faithfully'.[86] This argument should, however, not be pushed

[81] For the double meaning of the Tamil term *kuli* ('wage labourer' and 'wages', 'pay') see: Wilson, *A Glossary of the Judicial and Revenue Terms*, p. 301; L. Winslow/L. Spaulding/C. Appasami Pillai, *Winslow's English and Tamil Dictionary* (New Delhi, 1980, reprint of 1888 ed.), p. 770.

[82] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/48, 29 May 1779, p. 151; *ibid.*, 20 Aug. 1779, pp. 441–2; OIOC, MPP, P/240/56, 6 June 1783, p. 738.

[83] Cf.: Naidu, 'Remarks on the Revenue System', p. 299; Tsukasa Mizushima, *Nattar and the Socio-Economic Change*, pp. 215–18, 229. For a detailed description of these rights in the tax farm of 'Trivendaporam' see: OIOC, Madras Revenue Proceedings, P/274/17A, 12 July 1775, p. 242.

[84] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/33, 15 May 1772, pp. 293, 296, 305–6, 319–32. See also: OIOC, MPP, P/240/63, 12 May 1786, p. 646.

[85] Cf.: Report on Jagir 1795, § 36; *Papers on Mirasi*, p. 337.

[86] OIOC, MPP, P/240/33, 15 May 1772, p. 321. For 'presents' of betel and other goods demanded by well diggers see: OIOC, MPP, P/240/63, 26 May 1786, p. 765.

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too far. The difference between wage labour and personal or collective bondage was quite perceptible for contemporary workmen. When the Justices of the Peace inquired into the violent death of a labourer in 1796, the victim's social position was described by one of his colleagues as follows: 'he was a Cooly[,] he was nobody's servant'.[87]

Any attempt to ascertain wage rates of an eighteenth-century Indian city faces considerable difficulties. Wage statistics are, of course, not available. As for Madras, further problems ought to be taken into account. First of all, the fact that the demand for labour as well as pay rates were—*pace* Prasannan Parthasarathi—subject to dramatic seasonal shifts makes any statement about average wages hazardous.[88] Secondly, regular money wages were often augmented by '*batta*' and other irregular allowances, or by complementary payments in kind.[89] Thirdly, wage labour was often no more than one of several sources of income a person or a household relied on. Thus 'boat men' continued fishing as a side-line.[90] The so-called 'washers' who bleached the Company's cloth and even *Paraiyars* who were generally employed as *kulis* or domestic servants appropriated urban land on which they grew garden crops or burnt *chunam* (lime mortar).[91]

It is, however, possible to glean enough data from the sources to get a general idea of the development of Madras nominal wages. In this paper, I have to confine myself to a summary of my findings, which I have presented more comprehensively elsewhere. Though David Washbrook has recently claimed that Company wages for 'coolie labour' remained stable at about one *pagoda* throughout the second half of the eighteenth century,[92] there is sufficient evidence

[87] TNSA, QS, vol. 12, 2 March 1796, p. 43.

[88] On these shifts see: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, chs 3.1. and 4.3. See also: RFSG, DCB, 22 Aug. 1758, pp. 136–7. Though the present author would not refute all parts of Parthasarathi's argument, his assertion that eighteenth-century South Indian labourers enjoyed a high level of financial security is clearly untenable (as is his claim that they experienced neither poverty nor oppression). Cf.: Parthasarathi, 'Rethinking Wages and Competitiveness in the Eighteenth Century', esp. pp. 85, 101.

[89] Cf.: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, chs 3.3., 3.4., 3.7. and table 8.5. A table of *batta* to be paid to palanquin bearers in long-distance journeys can be found in: TNSA, Public Sundries (hereafter: PS), vol. 64, pp. 34–6, see also p. 45.

[90] See e.g.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/56, 6 June 1783, pp. 739–40.

[91] Cf.: TNSA, Revenue Sundries (hereafter: RS), vol. 27, 8 Jan. 1792, *ibid.*, 3 Feb. 1800; *ibid.*, 15 Sept. 1800.

[92] Washbrook, 'Land and Labour in Late Eighteenth-Century South India', p. 74.

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to prove that nominal wages at least *doubled* in the course of that period (see figure 1).[93]

The mid-century pay of less specialized workmen such as porters, *peons* or palanquin bearers was often below one *pagoda*—by the 1790s their hire amounted not infrequently to two *pagodas*. Wages of construction workers generally exceeded these *kuli* rates by half a *pagoda*. The 'boat men's' pay rose faster than that of the other occupational groups for which data were available—this was probably due to the strategic importance of the services provided by them. These calculations are, it has to be admitted, only reliable to a certain degree as they are based on rather heterogeneous data. However, three very

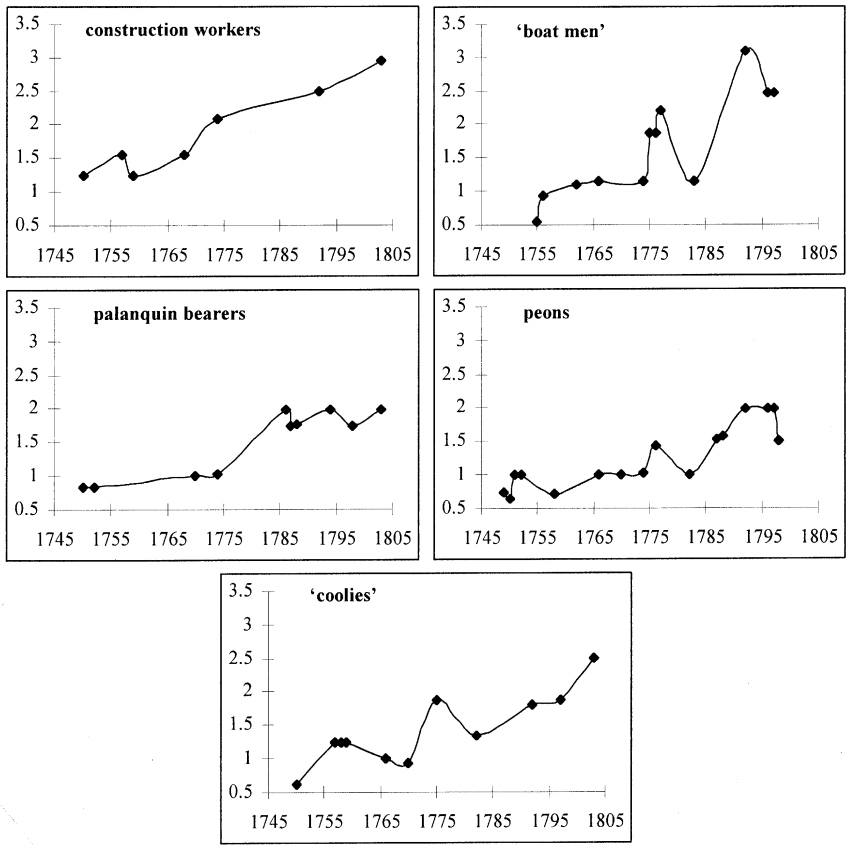


Figure 1. Monthly wages in Madras (in *pagodas*), 1749–1803.

[93] For detailed references see tables 8.3.–8.13. in: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*.

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comparable tables can be found in the records, which fixed the pay, four specific groups of workmen (carpenters and smiths, 'coolies', 'bellow boys', 'hammer men') were to receive when employed in the Company's service (see figure 2). These tables, dating from the years 1750, 1759 and 1803, indicate that the nominal wages of all four occupational groups rose by about 250 per cent from the middle to the end of the century.[94]

What did these nominal pay rises amount to in real terms? The crucial parameter is surely the price of paddy as the region's most important staple food. Again, there are no long-term serial data for Madras and hardly any for other subregions of the Tamil country. Seasonal shifts in prices, the great number of paddy sorts cultivated in that period and considerable price differences between them render positive assertions as to the development of grain prices inadmissible. Moreover, the numerous though scattered data that various historians have gathered from the Fort St George records cannot be discussed adequately here.[95] However, to the present author the

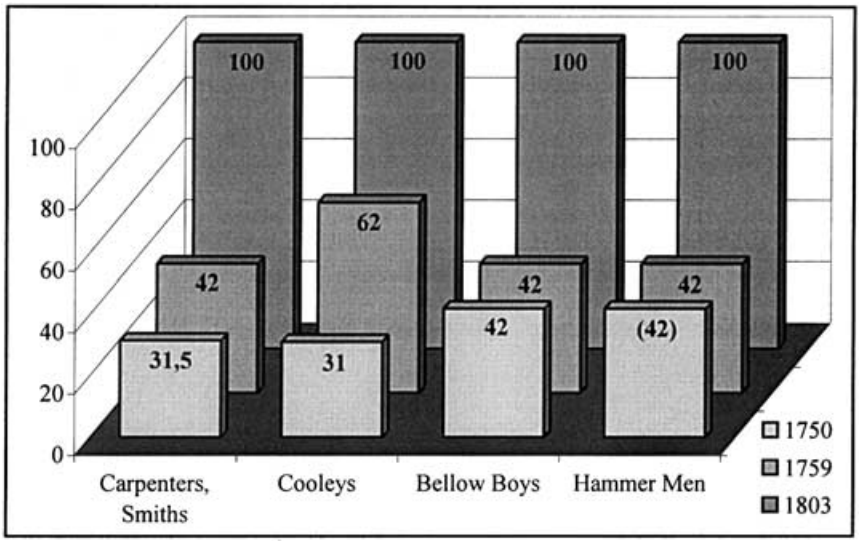


Figure 2. Wages of five occupational groups, 1750, 1759 and 1803 (1803 = 100 %).

[94] Cf.: RFSG, DCB, 5 Sept. 1759, pp. 213–14; TNSA, Military Sundries, vol. 120, 'Tables of Pay & Allowances to the Madras Army, and to His Majesty's Troops Serving upon the Madras Establishment, in Garrison and in the Field [. . .]', Madras, 1803, printed.

[95] See: Tsukasa Mizushima, *Nattar and the Socio-Economic Change*, pp. 282–90; Lardinois, 'Deserted Villages and Depopulation'; Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*,

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hypothesis appears safe that there was no proportional growth of nominal wages and grain prices in the Madras region between 1750 and 1800. Paddy was probably more expensive on an average in the fourth quarter of the century than it had been in the third. There were severe price hikes when the general crisis of agriculture, which had set in at about the middle of the century, coincided with one of the frequent droughts and periods of intensive warfare in the second half of the eighteenth century and most dramatically in the early 1780s.[96] Yet when peace and the monsoon returned to the villages, paddy prices were usually reduced to their former level. Thus in the peaceful middle of the 1790s rice was no more expensive in Madras bazaars than it had been forty or fifty years earlier.[97] For all lamentations of European gentlemen that wages were disproportionately high[98] and notwithstanding various efforts of the early colonial administration to lower them in periods when paddy was comparatively cheap,[99] wage labourers could increase their commodity's price and keep it high until the last decade of the century. This reflected the relative strength of their bargaining position in this period of labour scarcity.

VII. Artisans and Wage Labour

So far we have mainly discussed those labour relations in Madras City whose characteristic features had already been moulded in the hinterland's paddy fields. However, other forms of organizing labour in society had been created in the non-agricultural rural crafts. This paper's scope only permits to touch briefly upon labour relations of skilled artisans in Madras. We will not deal here with commercial weaving that has been subject of numerous studies.[100] For this craft

p. 112; Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, ch. 5.6., tables 8.1.–8.2. and figures 8.1.–8.5.

[96] The hypothesis of a long-term agricultural crisis in the Tamil region is convincingly developed in: Lardinois, 'Deserted Villages and Depopulation'.

[97] For paddy prices between 1730 and 1760 see: Tsukasa Mizushima, *Nattar and the Socio-Economic Change*, pp. 282–90 and Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, figure 8.2. For mid-1790s prices see: *Madras Courier*, vols. IX–XI (1793–95) or Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, figure 8.4.

[98] See e.g.: *Madras Courier*, vol. XI, No. 507, 24 June 1795.

[99] See Ahuja, 'The Origins of Colonial Labour Policy'.

[100] For a recent study presenting many new sources on weavers in the late eighteenth-century Madras region see: Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Maritime Commerce and English Power. Southeast India 1750–1800* (New Delhi, 1996).

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largely remained a rural occupation, concentrated rather in peculiar agglomerations of weaving villages (*payakatts*) than in Madras City that generally served only as a temporary abode in times of warfare. The only exception was that of St Thomé/Mylapore, which had been a weaving settlement for centuries.[101] One branch of commercial textile manufacture had, however, become heavily concentrated in Madras from the end of the seventeenth century:[102] Bleaching was the final operation in the production of most of the Company's export cloth. It was convenient to get the finishing done in Madras itself where the bleached fabric could await shipment to Europe in the Company's storehouses without risk of soiling or theft. Thus a sizeable 'washermen's town' emerged in the vicinity of 'Black Town'. Commercial bleaching required more working capital than weaving since the semi-finished products processed by the 'washers' were of considerable value.[103] If the production was concentrated in one location, it was also necessary to dig special wells and tanks for the requisite amount of fresh water, to build storehouses and to provide protection. These investments could not be afforded by the artisans themselves, which rendered them far more dependent on merchant advances than the weavers. While the East India Company's Court of Directors in London was not keen on employing bleachers as wage labourers in the early 1700s[104] they nevertheless made all necessary investments in the latter half of the century. The bleachers washed the Company's cloth in the Company's wells, dried it on the Company's lands and stored it in the Company's *godowns* under the protection of Company's *sepoys*.[105] The records, even the bleachers' own petitions, identify them as receivers of 'pay', 'hire' or 'coolie', thus as wage earners.[106] Yet it seems impossible to decide conclusively whether they were paid a piece *wage* or a piece *price*. For though the Company was proprietor of the principal means of production the

[101] For weavers and weaving settlements in Madras City see: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, chs 2.1., 2.7. and 4.2.

[102] For bleachers in Madras before 1750 see: Aiolfi, *Calicos und gedrucktes Zeug*, pp. 304–21, 337–45.

[103] Cf.: Chicherov, *India: Economic Development in the 16th –18th Centuries*, pp. 68, 176. For the problem of protection see e.g.: TNSA, MC, vol. 78B, 29 Jan. 1782, pp. 237–9.

[104] Cf.: Aiolfi, *Calicos und gedrucktes Zeug*, pp. 314–21.

[105] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/22, 3 Jan. 1764, p. 3; *ibid.*, 24 Jan. 1764, p. 56; *ibid.*, 7 Feb. 1764, p. 109; TNSA, MC, vol. 78B, 29 Jan. 1782, pp. 237–9.

[106] Cf.: RFSG, DCB, 17 Sept. 1744, pp. 177–8. See also: RFSG, DCB, 30 April 1736, pp. 77–9; OIOC, MPP, P/240/53, 14 Sept. 1781, pp. 826–8; OIOC, MPP, P/241/32, 18 May 1792, pp. 1339–40, 1343–4.

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bleachers possessed rights to them resembling those of a tenant. They were for instance free to use the production sites for finishing the cloth of private merchants on their own account if their services were not required by the Company.[107] Moreover, the considerable tracts of land allotted to them were utilized by the bleachers not only for drying the fabrics but also for growing profitable garden crops without having to pay the usual urban land tax ('quit rent') until at least the end of the century.[108] The rates for bleaching the Company's cloth in 1792 were, on the other hand, only half of those demanded from private merchants:[109] This difference may be understood as a rent payment for production sites and land based on a tacit agreement between washers and Company officials. For the latter, this agreement had two advantages: Permitting the 'washers' other means of subsistence in Madras than working for the Company not only secured their permanent residence in Madras even in seasons and periods when their services were not needed but also achieved this goal without creating any costs.[110] Bleachers had thus not quite ceased to be petty commodity producers though the door to 'free wage labour' had clearly been opened. The sources are less informative as to the impact of caste institutions on the organization of labour: Bleachers lived in a separate settlement and stray references to 'caste headmen' can be found. The impact of these or other corporate institutions remains largely concealed though it is mentioned once that the bleachers collectively employed *kanakkappillais* (accountants).[111] It is possible that caste organization was not very deeply rooted as the bleachers had only emerged as a specialized occupational group in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries.[112]

This does, of course, not preclude that corporate institutions were more prominent in other cases. For example, the caste organization of the so-called 'tank diggers' (*ottars* and/or *uppiliyars*) seems to have been rather formidable if we rely on George Paterson's diary entries.

[107] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/241/32, 18 May 1792, pp. 1339–40; see also: OIOC, MPP, P/241/75, 7 Nov. 1797, pp. 3577–8.

[108] OIOC, Mackenzie, vol. 68, Patrick Ross, Chief Engineer, to President and Council, 14 June 1786; TNSA, MC, vol. 74D, 24 May 1781, pp. 1297–8; TNSA, RS, vol. 27, 8 Jan. 1792, 14 May 1792, 20 May 1792.

[109] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/241/32, 18 May 1792, pp. 1339–40, 1342.

[110] For seasonal patterns and the Company's efforts to encourage permanent residence of bleachers in Madras see: Aiolfi, *Calicos und gedrucktes Zeug*, pp. 337–45.

[111] Cf.: OIOC, MPP, P/240/11, 10 Sept. 1753, pp. 547–9.

[112] Chicherov, *India: Economic Development in the 16th – 18th Centuries*, pp. 64, 67–8.

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These specialized nomads travelled, we are told, in bands up to one thousand women, men and children. Their 'headmen' who were 'perfectly supreme and who exercise[d] an unlimited authority' entered into contracts with employers on behalf of the whole community. They regulated wages and were even authorized to impose capital punishment on women deemed guilty of adultery.[113]

Both bleachers and well diggers were not transformed into 'free wage labourers' by being employed in the East India Company's service. Other groups of artisans that worked less collectively and had less protection by a community (such as carpenters, smiths or bricklayers) seem to have been bound more frequently into relations of wage labour that were often consolidated by whip and debt contract as we have seen already. Early colonial rule rather continued than transformed established forms of artisan labour organization in Madras City. New organizational forms of production based on the division of labour such as the manufactory appear to have been no more prevalent than in other South Indian states. There was, of course, a mint with a considerable output, a powder mill, the Master Attendant's cooperage and carpenter's yard.[114] The 'arrack godown', owned by an Indian merchant who held the monopoly for arrack and toddy in Madras, must have been a fairly large workshop too.[115] Yet the present author has not been able to find any detailed information about the size and functioning of these manufacturing units in the records, and there are no references to metal-working manufactories as existed in contemporary Mysore or to shipyards like those of Golcondah.[116]

[113] See especially: OIOC, Paterson Diaries, vol. 2, 23 Nov. 1770, pp. 98–9; *ibid.*, vol. 7, 6 Feb. 1774, p. 220. For more information on this occupational group see: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, chs 4.4., 5.7.

[114] For the Madras mint see: Davison Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, vol. III, p. 223, 375–7, 426; OIOC, MPP, P/242/6, 22 Aug. 1798, pp. 2356–60; K. N. Chaudhuri, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company 1660–1760* (Cambridge *et al.*, 1978), pp. 187–9. For a report on an accident in the powder mill that killed about fifty labourers see: *Neuere Geschichte der Evangelischen Missions-Anstalten zu Bekehrung der Heiden in Ostindien* (Halle, 1782), 25. Stück, p. 42 (report for 1780). For the Master Attendant's workshops: OIOC, MPP, P/240/51, 12 Aug. 1780, p. 678; OIOC, MPP, P/241/64, 29 April 1796, pp. 1596–7; TNSA, PS, vol. 16, 10 April 1770, pp. 28–9.

[115] Cf.: Board of Revenue (proper), Miscellaneous Records, vol. 101; OIOC, MPP, P/240/26, 11 April 1768, pp. 311–12. See also: OIOC, MPP, P/240/19, 25 July 1761, pp. 313, 315–16.

[116] Cf.: Chicherov, *India: Economic Development in the 16th – 18th Centuries*, pp. 190–208.

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VIII. Conclusion

Various aspects of Madras City's early colonial labour history that have been outlined in the preceding sections appear to be of a puzzling inconsistency. The level of social and spatial mobility was, for example, high while slavery did not only survive but was even refurbished. Slave prices remained stable though real wages rose. Attractive money wages notwithstanding, labourers insisted on shares, on payments in kind and on side-line occupations. The peculiar complementarity of *kuli* labour and corvée, of wage, debt and whip rendered wage labour and bondage almost indistinguishable in many cases. A regional labour market had emerged—community structures were yet rather supplemented than superseded in the social organization of labour. Though a certain brittleness of community structures and customary patron–client relationships was discernible in the countryside throughout the eighteenth century, these bonds had actually been reinforced when the nineteenth century, the age of consolidated colonialism commenced. Which social context could generate, encompass and reproduce all these paradox phenomena?

The expansion of India's commodity production from about the seventeenth century implied a monetization of social relations that involved, as Frank Perlin has rightly pointed out, even the lower classes of the population.[117] The smallest monetary unit in Madras, the *kasu* or *cash*, amounted to about the three thousand three hundred sixtieth part of a monthly wage of one *pagoda*.[118] This alone indicates a relatively high frequency of small financial transactions. Customary client relationships, corporate structures were corroded and uncomfortably complemented by social relations that could be expressed in monetary claims. *Pannaiyals* who were partly recompensed by money payments, *kottadimai* who were sold by their families to a slave-holder, agricultural labourers employed as *kulis* in Madras during the lean season, fishermen who borrowed money in times of dearth, artisans who were pushed towards 'free wage labour' or took to commercial gardening as a side-line occupation—money and 'the market' occupied a large space in their lives.

[117] Cf.: Frank Perlin, 'Proto-Industrialisation and Pre-Colonial South-Asia', *Past and Present*, 98 (1983), pp. 69–79; Frank Perlin, 'State Formation Reconsidered. Part Two', *MAS*, IXX/III (1985), pp. 134–7, 150, 155, 176–7, 183, 189, 212–13; for the Madras region see: Tsukasa Mizushima, *Nattar and the Socio-Economic Change*, esp. pp. 257–9.

[118] Cf.: Ahuja, *Die Erzeugung kolonialer Staatlichkeit*, appendix 8.1.

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The second half of the eighteenth century was a period of ambivalence in the city and hinterland of Madras: social transformation was *possible*—the extent to and the concrete form in which it was finally *realized* depended on the social praxis of various historical agents. The colonial state in South India and its metropolis Madras were generated in this unsettled and undecided situation. The 'neo-absolutist' or 'military despotic'[119] form of this state was moulded on the battle field: Recurrent and protracted armed conflicts between South India's regional powers from about the middle of the eighteenth century, with the Second Anglo-Mysore War as their peak of intensity, induced a *militarization* of economy and society.[120] Militarization brought about a concentration of regional resources that permitted the creation of a new model state and created simultaneously, in a contradictory process, corresponding institutions. Labour relations in Madras—city and hinterland—were reshaped through this process of militarization in several ways. In one respect, the older process of 'commercialization' was even sustained: The English East India Company's and its competitor states' demands for military and civil labour boomed. Numerous labour relationships bearing features of wage labour were thus newly created. However, another tendency of the same process impeded the formation of a formally 'free' wage labouring class: Militarization of economy and society also implied the appropriation of resources by coercive means, especially of human resources. Labour relations were thus militarized themselves—labourers in the Company's civil departments bore often more resemblance with contemporary soldiers than with 'free wage labourers'. Coerced and unpaid labour services were a current form of tribute no state involved in the fierce regional struggle for dominance chose to dispense with.

The utilization of a considerable share of the region's resources for military purposes and the annihilation of still further resources by intensifying warfare deflected the development of labour relations in yet another way: Declining investment into irrigation works, heavy taxation, requisitions of livestock and interruptions of the inflexible cycle of paddy cultivation brought about a permanent agricultural

[119] I borrow these terms for characterizing the early colonial state in South India from: C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 162 and C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian. The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London/New York, 1993), p. 86.

[120] For a similar application of the term 'militarization' cf.: C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*, p. 74.

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crisis. One of its most serious implications was that periodic droughts could be compensated for to a lesser extent. At the same time, commercial manufacture, especially the production of export textiles, was severely obstructed by the massive reallocation of resources. Consequently, recurrent subsistence crises imperilled the lives of 'free wage labourers' and petty commodity producers even more than those of bonded labourers whose masters had at least an interest to support their debtors, servants or slaves in famine periods.[121] If wage labour relations were often more attractive and lucrative than customary agrarian relationships in years of peace and rich harvests, the picture changed dramatically in times of crisis when bondage could prove to be preferable. The usual prevalence of labour scarcity was, conversely, a strong incentive for employers to keep labourers in permanent bondage notwithstanding the risk of considerable loss in times of drought and dearth when the demand for labour dropped. There is evidence that such relations actually dissolved when a master could or would not fulfil his obligation to support his servants.[122]

One tendency of the social processes induced by militarization thus already counteracted the older process of commercialization with its corrosive effect on 'unfree' labour relationships. Bonded labour relationships (especially in agriculture) were reproduced and even reinforced before the consolidated colonial regime of the nineteenth century adapted them to British law. As far as labour relations are concerned, the emerging colonial metropolis Madras did thus not submit to Rhoads Murphey's definition of colonial cities as 'transplants of the new urban-commercial-industrial order'.[123] Though Madras offered employment for wages the respective labour relations were frequently rather based on extra-economic coercion than on a contract between formally equal parties. Highly coercive as well as immaculately 'indigenous' forms of subordinating labour such as *al-amanji*, agrestic slavery or hereditary debt bondage were ingeniously appropriated and modified by the new colonial rulers. This applies as much to labour relations mediated by *maistries* and 'headmen' as to those where the East India Company employed a work force directly. Moreover, these new wage labourers were predominantly employed in the 'forgotten sector', in domestic or trans-

[121] Cf.: footnotes 68 and 70.
[122] See e.g.: Lionel Place, Report on Jagir 1799, § 79.
[123] Rhoads Murphey, 'Traditionalism and Colonialism: Changing Urban Roles in Asia', *JAS* IXXX/I (1969), p. 83.

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port services and the armed forces. The expansion of wage labour relations was thus hardly ever connected with changes in the organization of production such as the emergence of capitalist manufactories.

Heterogeneity thus remained one of the most significant features of the landscape of labour relations in early colonial Madras City and its hinterland. Though labour power had become a commodity to a considerable extent, the labour market's impact was too limited to engender a homogenization of labour relations and other living conditions of the plebeian classes. Customary social barriers, most importantly those of caste, were far from being levelled though they were not insurmountable. Certain occupational groups or *segments* of the plebeian classes acted autonomously and collectively in numerous incidents to defend their specific interests. The threat and actual realization of collective 'desertion' was an efficient and one of the most frequent forms of protest.[124] There is, however, no indication that these segments were about to merge into a social class possessed of a shared plebeian culture and capable of expressing itself autonomously.

The labourers of late eighteenth-century Madras should not be regarded as a *singular* working class, not even as the 'nucleus of a wage labouring class' but rather as a plural phenomenon, as a loose configuration of *heterogeneous*, yet *interconnected* social groups. They were *heterogeneous* as a result of the forementioned processes of social differentiation that were already under way in the Madras hinterland when in the mid-eighteenth century a period of militarization set in. Before the emergence of the colonial state, Tamil society appears to have been not only dynamic in terms of productivity of commercial agriculture and manufacture, but also regarding the *forms of organizing production in society*, in its ability to create a startling diversity and coexistence of seemingly incoherent labour relations. Yet the labouring classes were *interconnected* through a high level of mobility that entailed historically unique chances of improving one's social status as well as abysmal levels of existential insecurity: Petty commodity producer, 'free wage labourer', debt servant and slave were social roles that could be assumed by a single household of the labouring classes at a single moment or within a short time-span. The emerging colonial state thus found a rich assortment of social techniques of subordinating labour in Tamil society several of which

[124] Cf. footnote 9.

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could be appropriated to its needs and were remoulded in the process. When labour scarcity disappeared after the establishment of *pax Britannica* and the imposition of a colonial economy, the bargaining position of the labouring classes deteriorated and their social and spatial mobility was severely curtailed. The interconnectedness of these social groups subsided in the process, while their heterogeneity was further heightened.

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