

The Decline of Village Common Lands and Changes in Village Society: South India, c.1850-2000

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In nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu, a significant portion of village lands were not cultivated but used by villagers for grazing their livestock, and collecting fuel wood, fodder, manure, etc. Such common lands were, however, not jointly used equally by all villagers but, like the cultivated lands, were controlled by the dominant landholders in the village. Upper class farmers had initiated the conversion of common land into cultivated land by the middle of the nineteenth century, and in effect had privatised a large amount of common land by the end of the century.

The hierarchical structure of landholding and control over natural resources started weakening at the end of the century, and villagers who had been excluded from owning land gradually acquired small pieces of land. Furthermore, probably in the 1920s and thereafter, Dalits and other landless people started cultivating village common land. A similar type of

development occurred in other parts of India. Over the past forty years, Dalits in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra have encroached on village common land and established private ownership there, and from time to time this encroachment has been regularised by the state government.

There seem to be two types of community control of resources in India: the 'elite-dominant' type and the 'egalitarian' type. It may be inferred that in nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu, natural resources, including village common lands, would have been under the control of the elite-dominant type, but as a result of socio-economic changes in the village social structure, the elite failed to maintain this control.

Contrary to the former pattern of control, in some parts of India, in particular in mountainous regions where village society was not very differentiated but composed

mainly of small landholding farmers without a large group of landless people, the use of natural resources was regulated by rules and norms approved in common among the villagers. It may be inferred that the creation of a more egalitarian village social structure could contribute to creating a prerequisite for preservative control of natural resources based on equal participation by all segments of village society. If the acquisition of land by, and the emancipation of, the landless, as witnessed in Tamil Nadu, implies a trend towards an egalitarian-type society, it may be seen as a positive development in the long run, in terms of environmental preservation.

The cases witnessed in Tamil Nadu and some other parts of India after the 1980s suggest that the growth of non-agricultural job opportunities could possibly weaken the pressure on land, and also induce farmers to change cropping patterns, leading sometimes to an expansion in farm forestry. The acquisition of land by the landless, and their emancipation, works toward reducing the supply of labour to the market and contributes to a rise in the wage level and the cost of supervising employees, thus leading to the expansion of farm forestry. Hence, the empowerment of the lower strata of village society may contribute to the conservation of natural resources by tightening the labour market.

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Irrigation tank in a village in Tamil Nadu in south India

