South Indian Migration, c. 1800–1950

Sunil S. Amrith

The migration of South Indians to Southeast Asia was of overwhelming importance in the larger history of Indian emigration in the colonial period. As Kingsley Davis pointed out, 92.2 percent of all Indian emigrants between 1834 and 1900 went to Ceylon, Burma, and Malaya; between 1900 and 1937, this figure was 98.4 percent.¹ These circuits of overseas migration were closely integrated with more local patterns of mobility. This chapter seeks to examine South Indian networks of migration between 1800 and 1950.

Following the CCMR-model the following discussion aims to distinguish between, and where possible to quantify, different forms of South Indian migration. The underlying argument is that labor migration overseas was an important and distinctive feature of South India's migration regime; as my earlier work has shown, it also had significant ‘cross-cultural’ implications²—it is therefore on overseas emigration, between South India and Southeast Asia, that this chapter will focus. From the 1920s, however, urbanization assumed an increasing importance in patterns of migration in South India.

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From the second millennium of the common era, South Indian society exhibited distinct patterns of both mobility and immobility. In his classic work on medieval South India, Burton Stein wrote of the ‘peripatetic ways of many in South Indian society’,³ highlighting the importance of migration and conquest, and the long process through which new peoples were integrated into ‘established locality societies’. Initially, the circulations that knitted south India together were small in scale, but significant in cultural terms: the movement of Brahmin ritual specialists, poets, and scribes. Over time, military mobility gained in importance—though historians have not had access to material with which to quantify this process: throughout the medieval era, communities of Telugu peasant warriors invaded and settled in the Tamil country.

¹ Davis 1951: 100
² Amrith 2009.
³ Stein 1980.
Increasingly, in the second millennium—under the rule of the Chola
empire—lower peasant groups were absorbed into ‘expanding trade and agrar-
ian systems’. The growth of urban settlements, primarily centred on large tem-
ple complexes, stimulated spatial mobility on the part of peasant and artisanal
groups. Patterns of religious change were inextricable from economic trans-
formation. The rise of the Shaiva religious movement saw the rise of wealthy
temple complexes supported by peasant groups. The twelfth century, on Stein’s
account, ‘introduced the great age of religious pilgrimage in the Tamil country’,
and witnessed a widening circle of mobility that increasingly encompassed
most of the southern peninsula.4

Conversely, South Indian society involved distinctive forms of immobility.
Though an absence of sources makes concreteness difficult, it would appear
that various kinds of bonded agricultural labor were common long before the
nineteenth century. The most common of these forms of immobility in the Tamil
districts was the pannaiyal system of ‘permanent farm servants’. Compared by
British commentators at the time to European forms of serfdom, the pannaiyal
system saw regional and local variations: in most cases, servants were tied to
the land, but there were instances when pannaiyals could be sold indepen-
dently of the land—sold, on most definitions, as slaves. Such forms of tied
labor, on Dharma Kumar’s account, ‘spanned a wide range from near-freedom
to near-slavery’. Often, bondage came with a corresponding entitlement, even
a right, on the part of the pannaiyals to demand employment, access to land,
and support. Inevitably, such customary rights came under greatest strain dur-
ing periods of dearth and famine.

For our purposes, the key point is that forms of labor that imposed immo-
-bility were widespread in South Indian society: at the dawn of the nineteenth
century, they composed a ‘sizeable proportion of the total population’—up
to 20 percent—of many Tamil districts. Many British observers interpreted
(or misinterpreted) the nature of South Indian bonded labor through the lens
of European conceptions of slavery; the abolitionist movement focused its
attentions on Indian ‘domestic slavery’, yet the interventions of the colonial
state did little to change the structure of agrarian society until the nineteenth
century.5

Table 1, below, gives the aggregate population statistics for Madras Presidency
between 1801 and 1951. Figures for the period before 1800 are unreliable, where

4 Stein 1977.
5 Kumar 1965.