

**Bulletin of the Department of Museums  
Chennai**

**Rao Bahadur Vemuru Ranganatham Chetty  
Endowment Lecture**

**“URBAN HISTORY OF TAMILNADU - FEW PERSPECTIVES”**

*by*

**Dr. G.J. SUDHAKAR,**

Professor and Head, Historical studies, C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation, Chennai

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Dated 29-08-2016

### FOREWORD

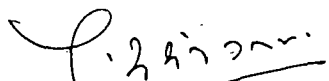
Rao Bahadur Vemuru Ranganatham Chetty Endowment Lecture was instituted by Thiru. N.Subramaniam, Secretary / Correspondent of Rao Bahadur Vemuru Ranganatham Trust in 1998 and since then, four lectures have been conducted in the Department of Museums. This bulletin is being brought out on the occasion of Rao Bahadur Vemuru Ranganatham Chetty Endowment Lecture, 2016.

This lecture which is the 5<sup>th</sup> in the series recalls to our mind about the urban History of Tamil Nadu - few perspectives. This study deals with expansion of urban centers in the span of time, the factors, and the natural environment in the economic system in the political and social network and even in the mind of men living in urban areas.

It is also noticed that the most permanent of the urban settlements in Tamil Nadu are the pilgrim sites. The first large scale-de-urbanization occurred in 1790. The Madras city was a federation of villages. The British had not created any new pattern of urbanization in Tamil Nadu except for Madras. As you find this lecture on "Urban History of Tamilnadu-few perspectives" being delivered by Prof. G.J. Sudhakar an Historian and scholar-interlia deals with urbanization in Tamilnadu.

We are really grateful to Prof. G.J. Sudhakar for his gracious presence and deliverance. We thank him for providing the script well in advance, which enable us to release the bulletin along with his lecture on the occasion of 'Rao Bahadur Vemuru Ranganatham Chetty Endowment Lecture' - series.

I am sure that this bulletin will be a valuable addition to the library of historians and students alike.

  
(Dr. D. Jagannathan, I:A.S.,)

## **-Urban History of Tamil Nadu of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

- An Overview

Urban History is the study of urbanisation, of the expansion of urban centres in the span of time, the factors which promote and retard such growth, and the ecology which towns generate in several related dimensions, in the natural environment, in the economic system, in political apparatus, in societal network, and even in the minds of men living in towns.

Urban History would be based on a core of questions which are to be answered by the study undertaken. It would be analytical and based on a conscious hypothesis, a hypothesis which is amenable to modification, even rejection on retrospect, but which furnishes the starting base for the inquiry.

Significantly, the growing volume of contemporary urban studies has a fairly slender base in History. The kind of issues with which social scientists deal are relatively ahistorical, they focus on problems which are of fairly recent origin. Moreover, not many researchers feel the need of the historical dimension, for which in any case, they are either not or inadequately trained.

Secondly, not many historians have so far opted to work on themes of urban history. This area, thus, a rapidly growing field of studies in the west, remains relatively unexplored and underworked in India.

Some of the crucial problems of Indian history require a far more detailed analysis of urban centres and their social and economic as well as physical ecology than has been attempted so far.

It would be impertinent even to suggest the potential of this growing field and to indicate its value in our attempt to understand the Indian past.

Indians have yet to produce a corpus of writings on their own urban history comparable atleast to the volume of output on agrarian history.

For urban history, the lack of systematic data makes it difficult to answer many questions.

The rationale and content of Indian urbanism have to be studied, and comparisons made in terms of location, morphology, range of economic and civic activity, of communities between these towns and a colonial enclave like Madras.

Such comparison has to some extent been done for Calcutta and Bombay, but not for Madras.

The justification for studying the South Indian case is that it was here that British military rule was first established, through it was not till the 1820's that the administrative settlement of Madras Presidency was completed.

### **Background**

From 1698 (when the Mughals conquered Jinji ) to 1806 (when the last stage of the South Indian revolt was suppressed) India south of the Krishna was the arena for a "struggle for supremacy".

In such a situation of prolonged instability, the urban areas played an important part, and their fortunes were tied up with the changing economic and political map.

South India had more of middle sized towns.

It is worth pondering over as to why the older towns continued to be populous but whereas towns like Gangaikondacholapuram lasted only as long as its empire.

The agricultural abundance of the kaveri valley encouraged many large urban settlements.

The major towns in the eighteenth century were, Hosur, Salem, Erode, Dindugal, Madurai, Tirupattur, Tiruchirappalli, Tanjavur, Kanchi and the ports.

There was great difference between the price of grain in Madras and in Tiruchirapalli in the 1780's and this indicated that communications, while steady, were slow.

It was also often noticed that urban areas bred their own demands of items of conspicuous consumption. These multiplied as political power became fragmented.

The most permanent of the urban settlements in south India were the pilgrim sites, which can be regarded as culturally generative.

The twenty- two major shrines especially Kumbakonam, Tiruchirapalli, Kanchi and Madurai, had been economic nodal points at the time of their inception.

The functional classification of towns raises serious inadequacies.

Were Bhavani and Tirunelveli became important because of their sanctity as sangams (confluence of two rivers) or became important as they were situated as keypoints on east – west routes ? was Coimbatore's significance religious or strategic? Were Madurai and Karur important as shrines or because they were located at conveniently fordable points of the river?. Were Arcot and Vellore commercial centres or defensive points?

The answer is that sites at convenient geographic points become commercial centres and therefore had to be defended, and that the main arteries of pilgrim traffic led to central places becoming large towns.

The successor states of the Vijaynagar empire were not based in new towns (as were the successor states of the Mughal empire) but reverted to established central places like Tanjavur, Kumbakonam, Madurai, Vellore, Gingee, etc.,

During the Vijaynagar period, Ginjee, Dindugal, Madurai, Tanjavur, Tiruchirappalli and Vellore were fortified defensive points.

The demilitarization of Palaiyagars forts creates a large degree of dislocation for the erstwhile military personnel, the "peons". These either joined the British army or turned to trade or agriculture.

This was the first large scale de – urbanisation that occurred as a result of the change of regime in the 1790's.

Towns in Kongunad- Erode, Coimbatore and Salem, are the best examples of this.

The late eighteenth century in north and eastern India has a large number of poems on the "ruined city"

Early Tamil Literature has magnificent descriptions of towns, but there is no such strain in the eighteenth century ballads. The inference is that the towns affected by the wars suffered less devastations than did those of the north, and that the spoliation of the town was not an occasion for total grief, because the inhabitants could make a new beginning in the country side.

There is not a remark by Europeans from Paris or London that South Indian towns were crowded or the lanes narrow ; infact, their comments were usually complimentary.

It is significant that Rennell should have stated that Indian towns accommodated fewer people in the same area than did a European city. Much land was reserved for gardens and reservoirs. Tiruchirapalli had numerous gardens and in Thirvottiyur, atleast, there was a ban on the cutting of trees in the fort.

Thoroughfares were very wide - the rath streets around Coimbatore, Pudukkottai and Tanjavur palaces, and the Madurai temple and that between the palace and the Ekambareswara temple in Kanchi are typical.

**Towns grew by accretion :**

Most towns had strong stone forts which enclosed a well planned urban area, some had concentric wall indicating the growth of populations (Srirangam had seven, Chidambaram three). Exceptions were Arcot and Kanchi, which were open cities.



Some urban complexes broke up after the British conquest and demilitarization. Such was the Ginjee - Pádaividi urban complex, sixteen miles in circumference, which split up later into fort, village and market area.

The Madras complex, on the other hand, was a federation of villages (at its maximum numbering 26) adjoining Fort St. Geroge (for example, Chintadripetta was a "weaving village" , all the revenues of which were controlled by one family).

The pattern of growth by accretion instead of by extension is explained by the preference of Indians for settling in villages near the town (only the Europeans had the curious habit of building sprawling houses in open country) and also by the needs of drainage, which made channels between different clusters of habitation necessary.

Predominantly commercial towns like Vellore had ribbon development. Vellore fort at the turn of the century had two pettas near it, one old and full of buildings, another comparatively new. Apart from the fort proper, the petta was also often fortified.

Drainage and water were provided in the major towns and even in fort towns built at an elevation for example, Tanjavur, Gingee and Vellore.

Towns were scrupulously clean. Bowland and many others spoke of the remarkable workmanship of buildings in Madurai and Tiruchirapalli and of Tipu's palace in Coimbatore. Others commented on the palaces of Ramnad and Bednur.

Descriptions of Indian methods of building indicate that this was a continuous activity in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There was a rule that no building should exceed the height of the temple gopuram.

Ram Raz of Tanjavur, at the behest of the British, in 1834 translated the Silpa Sastras, which indicated the sophistication of Indian town planning. The Tanjavur ruler Sarfoji's specifications for an elaborate chatram complex planned in the 1820's indicate the holistic nature of Indian planning where areas were demarcated at the outset for houses, places of worship, schools and tanks.

In the early nineteenth century, many towns were described as being "ruined". Taking a cue from this, C.J. Baker had written that "the valleys of Tamilnadu were strewn with the remains of political headquarters and temple centres Kanchi, Arcot, Trichy, Madurai, Ramnad. Tenkasi and Palamcottah.

Madurai's 400 houses has "sunk to 250 by the expeditions of Cornwallis and been reduced to 100 by Tipu's oppression. Many buildings and part of the suburbs of Tanjavur were destroyed in 1776.

As late as the 1830's, Coimbatore and Chingleput are noticed as erstwhile centers of large populations. In 1796, the Board of Revenue noticed the flight of inhabitants in the jagir (ie., Madras - Chinglepet) to the Madras settlement. This was obviously a sanctuary during war. In 1803, it was repeated that "all the non cultivating people in, the jagir were flocking to Madras."

It was added, and this was the significant point, that the only other major towns were Kanchi and Thiruvallur which were supported by the importance of their temples.

Reverting back to the discussion on Madras the issue is that when the multi-nodal economy gave place to the political and commercial monopoly of the city, its mercantile, artisan and service population was bound to grow.

It is easy to derive from this the corollary that "the British established a new pattern of urban growth ie., Madras city was the capital, and the lesser towns were subordinate posts and administrative headquarters. An examination of the "lesser towns' will show that they were not all that new.

As the towns were recycled, so was the building stock. Cities like Arcot had to be built up quickly, from the ruins into which it has fallen, because it was important in the trade network. Many buildings were renovated - like the Madurai palace (which was being used by weavers) and the Coimbatore palace (described as 'an ornament to the town).

As nayakas and nawabs and palaiyagars in the past had done, order was being brought after about fifty years of intermittent warfare , by building up the old urban centres.

If the British were heirs to a well developed urban pattern, they had also inherited a well developed road network.

When the proposed imposition of town duties was announced, the merchants abandoned the towns for the villages, as Munro and Buchanan noticed.

The effect of the heavy mohturpha duties and the edging out of the cotton weavers was to reduce many middle size towns to the status of villages. (A place was described as a grama in one case in the 1830's and it was earlier identified as a qasba).

In many larger towns there was depopulation, caused by the loss of employment for certain other categories - officials of Indian rulers, those employed in arsenal factories, and in the manufacture of luxury items of

furniture or transportation equipment. This was particularly marked in Tanjavur.

In Tanjavur, the population of over 100,000 was reduced to 80,000 by the wars of the 1780's, and remained at this level till 1855, when the abolition of dynasty led to many groups losing employment. These included officials, craftsmen, merchants, palanquin – bearers and leather – workers.

In the distress migration to foreign countries, a large percentage was from the Tanjavur district.

By the 1850's, in demographic terms, certain changes had occurred- Vellore, a military base, recovered its position as a major entrepol, especially after the railway was built.

Coimbatore and Mettupalayam developed to provision Ootacamund.

Apart from the large size of the total Madras urban area, there was nothing in the census of 1871 that marked a revolution in the urban pattern.

Tamilnadu has a few large and several middle size towns.

The largest (excluding Madras) continued to be Tiruchirapalli, Madurai, Tanjavur, Kumbakonam, Kanchi, Vellore, Coimbatore, Cuddalore, Nagapattinam – five pilgrimage centres, four strategic sites, and three ports, all important central places over the centuries.

The British had not created any new pattern of urbanism, apart from setting up the enclave of Madras.

The fifty years of upheaval, political and military, had been followed by a century of peace but not necessarily of accelerated urbanisation.

Similarly, the stability of the trunk roads has to be attributed to the permanence of the major towns.

We can agree that the imposition of British rule led not only to a dislocation of a long established commercial pattern, but to the atrophying of a long established pattern of urban regulations.

The commutation of temple dues had led to a large surplus over and above the running costs of the temples.

In 1846, these 'surplus pagoda funds' were set aside for town improvements.

The tradition of south Indian urbanism was one where a society with a clearly demarcated code of conduct lived in a limited area, and accommodated people from other areas and traditions.

Tanjavur, with its population of Marathis, Telugus and Tamilians, and the various port towns with large number of foreigners was as cosmopolitan as Madras.

Madras, on a sprawling spatial plane (26 villages within the municipal limits) was a federation rather than an Indian city writ large.

In conclusion, it can be said that the British did not contribute to the urbanisation of Tamilnadu except for Madras. They were in India to amass wealth and to trade.

\* The author is fully responsible for his views in this Bulletin.