Conclusion

The formation of the Vijayanagar Empire in the southern Tamil country occurred in the first half of the fourteenth century. Nayaks were appointed to Madura as the Empire’s representatives. Visvanatha Nayak (1529-64) is considered as the founder of the Nayak rule of Madura. Apart from Madura, Tanjore, Senji and Vellore were tributaries of Vijayanagara Empire. Visvanatha Nayak was the organiser of Poligari or Palayakarar system in the Madura country. He divided his territory into seventy-two palayams for the purpose of getting cooperation from local chieftains, who belonged to different communities. Among the seventy-two bastions Ramnad was the largest one and the ruler of Ramnad emerged as the chief of all the Palayakarars. Though systems similar to the Poligari had been reported in southern India, the local systems are not clearly evidenced. By general consensus among scholars Visvanatha Nayak was the initiator of the Poligari system in the southern Tamil country.

The decline of the Mughal Empire in northern India after the death of Auranqazeb (1707) created a political turmoil in southern India. The representatives of the Mughal rulers declared themselves independent sovereign rulers of their respective domains. Among them, Chanda Sahib, one of the tributaries of the Mughals, declared himself the autonomous ruler of the Carnatic provinces. The internal disputes and disturbances in the court of the Madura Nayaks set Chanda Sahib’s eyes on the Madura kingdom in 1736. The weakness of the Nayaks of Madura, made the local chieftains under Madura Kingdom proclaim themselves as
independent rulers. They refused to accept the supremacy of Madura Nayaks. After the suicide of Rani Minakshi (1736), the last Nayak ruler of Madura, began the decline and fall of Madura Nayaks. This situation paved the way for Muslim rule under Chanda Sahib, the Navayat Nawab of Carnatic, who entered the Madura country. Muhammad Ali Walaja, Chanda Sahib’s rival, became the Nawab of Carnatic region in 1755 with the help of the British. Poor administration and great financial debts made his inevitable tie-up with the Company, and ultimately he lost his territory to the Europeans.

The treaty of Allahabad was made between Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II and the Company on 16th August 1765. It granted Diwani right to the Company for collecting land revenue from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The second half of the eighteenth century, witnessed the process whereby the Company changed into an administrator of India. In this circumstance, the Nawab’s poor administration and debt burden forced him to make an agreement with the Company for finance. Nawab and the Company’s agreements of 1781 and 1792 played a major role in the Company’s establishment of administration in the Carnatic region. The emergence and strength of Ramnad Setupathis turned the Company’s attention towards the Marava ruler. The rise of the Maravas encouraged the southern poligars to oppose the Company and the Nawab’s rule. Therefore, the Nawab and the Company made an alliance and tried to suppress the chief Poligar of Ramnad. Ultimately in 1795, the Company captured Ramnad and brought it under their control. The transformation of the Company’s role from that of a merchant Company to a political agent and bureaucratic power in southern India occurred in the beginning of the nineteenth century (1801). After their entry and establishment of power in Ramnad, the
Company began its activities to get regular land revenue from Ramnad. Therefore, the Company tried for a permanent settlement in the Madras Presidency based on the model of the Bengal Presidency. In 1802, the permanent or Zamindari land tenure was introduced in the District of Chingleput and the rest of the districts followed afterwards. The treaty of Allahabad made the Company the administrator of the Bengal region. The treaties of 1781 and 1792 made the Company political administrator of the Carnatic region.

The formation of Ramnad Kingdom occurred in the beginning of the seventeenth century (A.D 1605). There is no clear evidence to ascertain the beginning of the rule of Setupathis of Ramnad. Sadaika Tevar was appointed as the protector of pilgrims to and from Rameswaram. He was considered the first ruler of Ramnad Kingdom. The weakness of Madura Nayaks caused the emergence of Setupathis as powerful rulers in the southern Tamil country. During the period of the treaties of 1781 and 1792 Muthuramalinga Setupathi I (1782-95) was the ruler of Ramnad. He defied the dominance of the Nawab and the Company. The powerful status of the Ramnad Maravas as rulers of Ramnad distressed the British policy of expansion towards the southern Tamil country. Between 1792 and 1795, resistance rose against the Company under the Marava ruler Muthuramalinga Setupathi I; he was called ‘rebel’ Muthuramalinga Setupathi I by the Company. After the suppression of Muthuramalinga Setupathi I, it kept him at Trichinopoly as prisoner and later transferred him to Madras. Eventually he passed away. The suppression of the poligari wars (1799) of southern Tamil country in the end of eighteenth century gave the Company the ultimate control of southern Tamil country. As a result, the entire southern Tamil country came under the direct control of the Company. The beginning
of nineteenth century saw the Company suppress the poligars and their opposition: poligars were converted to Zamindars and *palayams* were changed to Zamindari or estate. After the suppression of Poligari resistance, poligars were forced to accept the Company’s supremacy. The Poligars were redesignated and reduced to Zamindars without political power, or the status of a ‘hollow crown’.

Before the Zamindari settlement, local chieftains played the role of sovereign rulers over their Kingdoms. The ruler of the kingdom was the ultimate power who had maintained political, economic and social legitimacy over his territory. The Vellalans, Reddies and Maravans had supreme positions in the social order. On the other hand, Shanans were placed in the second stage. They considered themselves superior to Pallans, Paraiyans and Chakkiliyans. The Maravans were considered superior to Kallans and Agambadians. Later these three communities together were called *Mukkulathor* in the twentieth century. Agambadians were servants in the Zamindar’s palace and Kallans were soldiers. Parts of them were entertained in agricultural activities. The Rajus community worked guardians of queen’s quarters of Ramnad Zamindars.

The earlier social structure changed after the introduction of the permanent settlement in Ramnad. The beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed great changes of political and social stratification in the southern Tamil country owing to the British economic policy. In 1802 the entire southern Tamil country came under the direct control of the Company and converted the assigned poligars to Zamindars or landlords of their respective *palayams*, and *palayams* changed into Zamindari or estate. The local chieftains were redesignated Zamindars without military force or
political power. In the beginning of the nineteenth century the circumstance of political turmoil greatly changed the poligars into Zamindar and their palayams into Zamindari. Ramnad was converted from a Little Kingdom to Zamindari in the beginning of nineteenth century (1803). The introduction of Zamindari settlement in the southern Tamil country was a milestone in the history of southern Tamil country. The status of little kingdoms was reduced politically and economically. The Zamindars of respective Zamindaris became revenue collectors and representatives of the Company. The Zamindari system changed the economical and social hierarchical order of the Ramnad society. The settlement made dynamic changes in the agriculture order. This system created social imbalance in the Ramnad society, based on land holding and land owning.

Rani Mangaleswari Nachiyar (sister of Muthuramalinga Setupathi I) was recognised as Zamindarini of Ramnad under the control of the Company. In the eighteenth century, local chieftains maintained supreme role in their respective palayams. After the introduction of Zamindari settlement, the Company, with supervision of the Zamindars, tried different kinds of lease system to collect land revenue such as kattukuthagai (lease), amani (1793-1793), village lease (1808-09), decennial lease (1811) and olungu (1821). During the nineteenth century, in the Madras Presidency, out of 90 million acres of cultivable area, 27½ million acres was held by 849 Zamindars. Among them fifteen Zamindars held 6¾ million acres. They were paying around two lakh rupees as peshcush to the government. 128 Zamindars held 9½ millions of acres; they paid regularly a peshcush amount of 18,100 rupees to the government. 706 Zamindars and mittadars held 2¾ million acres and paid a peshcush amount of 1,300 rupees to the government annually. A million acres of land
was under the Zamindar system in Madura, North Arcot and Salem Districts. By the end of the nineteenth century, in Madras, an estimated 804 Zamindars controlled 40 per cent of the land. The remaining 60 percent was under Ryotwari tenure.

The introduction of Zamindari tenure in 1803 created a new social ladder in Ramnad. The British government placed on top of the ladder; Zamindars were in the second place; Mirasidars or tenants were third; peasants or sub-tenants were fourth; and lastly were landless and marginalised labourers. After the implementation of the permanent settlement, Zamindars were considered landowners. Zamindars leased land to mirasidars for certain periods and collected fixed rents for the land. Ramnad Zamindari belonged to Maravan community. Apart from the royal family, most of the Maravans were mirasidars and some of them were agricultural labourers. The mirasidars were from Vellalan, Maravan, Reddi, Nayakkan, Raju and Agambadian castes. Most of the sub-tenants or landless labourers were Pallans, Paraiyans and Chakkilians, who chiefly served as pannayal and padiyal in the Vellalan’s land. The permanent settlement created two major divisions in the social hierarchy based on the ownership of land such as land-owning groups and landless groups in Ramnad Zamindari. Landownership decided a specific community’s social status in the hierarchical order. The Shanans of Ramnad were considered as traders, while in Tinnevelly, they were known as marameri or toddy tappers. They migrated to Ramnad as traders. Shanans considered themselves above Pallans, Paraiyans and Chakkiliyans of Ramnad.

Zamindars followed different methods of assessment while collecting land rent for nanjai and punjai lands. They appointed karnams and other officers to collect
land revenue from mirasidars and ryots. The British government, Zamindars and mirasidars were keenly interested in collecting more income from the land; therefore they used rigid methods to collect the share of the produce from the peasants. The peasants and landless labourers always struggled to survive the suppression by Zamindars and mirasidars. The Zamindars used different kinds of land assessment to collect revenue based on the nature of soil. The land rent or tax was fixed and the ryots could pay their land rent in six or seven instalments. In case of drought or famine, ryots were exempted from the current year payment; they should pay that amount in the next year as arrears to Zamindars or mirasidars. The internal disputes of the Zamindars of Ramnad, their litigations and heavy tax arrears and debt burdens led to the collapse of the administration of Ramnad Zamindari.

The karnams’ and other government officials’ mismanagement and malpractices reflected the degradation of entire land revenue administration and peasant lifestyle. The increase of land tax and heavy debt burden paved the way for new elite groups, based on the agrarian crisis. The imposition of new taxes and heavy tax burden pushed the peasants to borrow more money from money lending communities. Lack of maintaining irrigation sources, Zamindar’s litigations and heavy debts led the peasants to sell or mortgage the land to money lending community or Nattukottai chetties. The Nattukootai chetties of Ramnad were initially traders; gradually they developed into bankers for rulers and peasants. Ultimately they had a supreme position in the social structure. In the second half of nineteenth century they became landowners through money-lending. The Zamindar’s inattention, internal problems and litigations among royal family members paved the way for neglect of the irrigation sources. As a consequence, artificial and unavoidable famine,
starvation and draught took place in Ramnad Zamindari during the period of 1876-78. The commercialisation of agriculture was the root cause of the famine of the second half of the nineteenth century. Zamindar’s ignorance and mismanagement and unskilled village officials lead to the ryots’ heavy tax burden, leading to great changes in Ramnad. These causes led to the selling or mortgage of land which initiated the formation of a new social group from among the Nattukottai chetties. The Zamindars loan dues made them lease several villages to chetties in compensation for the loan amount. During the second half of nineteenth century, the Nattukottai chetties became landowners of Ramnad Zamindari from being bankers.

The economic crisis and the Zamindars mismanagement were the major causes for the migration of common people and social inequality based on landowning. There were communal conflicts and religious conversions in the Ramnad Zamindari. The land transformation from Maravan communities to Natukottai chetties happened during the period of the second half of nineteenth century. Maravans were mostly affected by heavy debt burdens, because apart from the royal Maravans, others mostly depended on agricultural field. But after the famine of 1876-78, Maravans could not continue their agricultural production due to the loan burden. Thus the major reason behind the sale of their lands was over-debt. The rest of the landowning groups such as Vellalans, Reddies, Nayakkans and Rajus were rich and could continue their agrarian production without any financial problems. The landless labourers (pannayal and padiyal) Pallans, Paraiyans and Chakkiliyans always depended on landowning groups and struggled to survive being constantly oppressed by landowning communities. These social imbalances flourished and were well-established under the provision of land owning and holding rights.
Before the entry of the British, Indian society had common ownership of land or was under the control of local chieftains. The colonial society was constructed based on the nature of landowning, which decided one’s position in the social strata. The Shanans of Ramnad who were transformed from *marameri* to traders tried claiming equal status with the landowning caste of Maravans. But they always kept away from Pallans, Paraiyans and Chakkiliyans, who were considered of lower status than them. Shanan’s homeland was Tiruchendur of Tinnevelly district where they were known as *marameri* or toddy tappers. They migrated to Ramnad as traders. The Shanans developed well economically on the basis of their trading activities. After attaining wealth, they started to resist the oppression of so-called caste Hindus. The progress and development of Shanans disturbed landowning castes especially Maravans of Ramnad who always wanted to maintain Shanans, Pallans, Paraiyans and Chakkiliyans under their dominance. That was why the Marava ruler of Ramnad denied the Shanans entry to Hindu temples which were under their control. Consequently, social inequality in the social structure of Ramnad Zamindari pushed the Shanans to conversion to Christianity, which offered equal status and honour in the social order. The serious debt burden forced the people to migrate to other territories for basic needs and survival.

Whenever Ramnad Zamindari faced litigation issues, minority issues of Zamindar’s heir or issues of adoption of Zamindars, the government appointed a Court of Wards to manage the estate issues. In this case, Ramnad Zamindari was under the control of the Court of Wards for twenty-one years (1795-1803, 1816-1822, 1843-1846 and 1872-1889). Whereas peasants faced several problems and were treated badly under the control of Zamindars, under the control of Court of Wards,
peasants’ condition was not that bad and ryots’ problems were solved under the supervision of the Court of Wards.

The ryots of Ramnad Zamindari faced difficulties from both the management of Zamindars and the Court of wards. Because both of them were intent on more revenue from ryots without considering the welfare of the ryots. The government made a new act to collect more land revenue and Zamindars were the tools of the government to implement it. The government’s economic policy in Ramnad Zamindari was only to get more and regular income from the agrarian sector. They considered the cultivators as promoters of their wealth. So they wanted to save them by enacting legislations and protecting them legally from the Zamindar or government officers. Ultimately, whether it is the Zamindar’s rule or the government reign, peasant groups suffered and struggled for survival in the Ramnad Zamindari. There were some wealthy peasants who filed suits against the Zamindars to oppose their occupation of land and their rate of assessment in the second half of the nineteenth century. Peasants could not be successful in their revenue suits because of the power and influence of Zamindars. In the nineteenth century the circumstances created new kinds of elite groups in the southern Tamil society such as money lenders. Giving to their influence land right was transformed from cultivators to wealthy groups. As a result, the condition and life of the peasant was fully pathetic. The economic growth and development of new social elites made dynamic changes in the social order, thus leading the way to social conflicts in the nineteenth century.