

Changes of Societal Units in Colonial South India

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Whether the potential of GIS is fully acknowledged by historians depends on whether it can produce works that analyze historical change deeper and present the results clearly in space. Compared with the physical changes occurring on land surface the mapping of social change seems to have more problems, and I have not found good solutions.

This paper attempts to argue that the societal unit in south India shifted from a local society to a land lot during the 18th-19th centuries by examining the records of a few thousand villages.

In pre-colonial South India the basic societal unit was a local society having dozens of villages. Developments in the local societies were continuously reorganized within a system called “mirasi system.” The system assigned some specific role and its linked share in the produce hereditarily to some community member who performed essential role in reproducing the local society. This system had been formed in the social structure in which some of the dominant community members called mirasidars controlled the resources in the respective villages backed by the inter-community structure in the local society.

In the late pre-colonial period, however, there emerged from among mirasidars a class called “village leaders” who took advantage of economic developments in the period and grabbed the village leadership. The local society came to be on the verge of dissolution into respective villages, when south India was colonized by the British.

The colonial land settlement, however, placed the basic production relation on the respective land lots in order to eradicate all the intermediaries between the state and a lot and those between the state and a peasant. Though it took several decades for the colonial state to accomplish the purpose, the late nineteenth century found the society totally different from the one a hundred years ago.