INTERVIEWS

Reconstructing Chola Agrarian History

Parvathi Menon Interviews Y. Subbarayalu

Parvathi Menon* and Y. Subbarayalu†

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Y. Subbarayalu is an eminent historian and epigraphist of ancient and medieval south India. He one among a small and dwindling group of historians in India with specialist epigraphical skills. Parvathi Menon interviewed him for the *Review of Agrarian Studies*.

In the interview, Subbarayalu draws on inscriptions, the primary source material of this period, to discuss aspects of the agrarian history of Tamil Nadu, and particularly of the Cauvery delta, between 900 and 1279 CE. A great deal of what we know of modern Tamil Nadu's ancient and medieval past, including its economic and agrarian history, lies inscribed on the walls of the numerous temples of South India. Subbarayalu discusses inscriptions as a historical source, the difficulties encountered in deciphering them and in drawing evidence-based conclusions from what they offer. The Epigraphy section of the Archeological Survey of India in Mysore holds nearly 50,000 inscriptions in the four south Indian languages. Of these, the Tamil inscriptions number 27,000, out of which only 11,000 have been published in properly edited volumes. Much history remains to be written from these, particularly the history of the Vijayanagar period.

The interview makes the following points. The first is that there was a significant growth and consolidation of private property in land (a change from earlier forms of joint ownership) over the 400 years of Chola rule (900 CE to about 1279 CE), first in Brahman settlements, and then within non-Brahman settlements. Secondly, the complex mechanism of land measurement, land gradation, taxation, and tax collection, plus the evidence of a standing army, would suggest that the Chola state was a centralised one, and not a "segmentary" state, as proposed by some historians.

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Thirdly, with the growth of private property, society became increasingly stratified, with landowners, tenant cultivators, agricultural labour, and artisanal groups becoming clearly identifiable components of a social structure that was also stratified by caste. Lastly, the inscriptions provide undeniable evidence of social protests by direct producer castes against the Chola state and landowning classes, Brahman and non-Brahman.

Significant gaps remain in our knowledge of the agrarian world of that period, Subbarayalu points out in the interview. Agricultural labourers, for example, are relatively "invisible" in the inscriptions, as are women, particularly those from the working classes and castes. The interview provides a summary of the current state of knowledge and scholarship on the agrarian history of ancient and medieval Tamil Nadu, and signposts paths for future research.

PARVATHI MENON: Please tell us about your current work.

Y. SUBBARAYALU: I am working on a new edition of my book, *Political Geography of the Chola Country*, which was first published almost 50 years ago. The historian Burton Stein quoted one of its chapters in his book, and my book was then widely discussed. The first edition studied the *nadu*, which in Chola times denoted a cluster of villages. I had only a few pages on the village as a unit, and that was, I think, insufficient, so I have expanded the analysis of the village in Chola times in the new edition. The book is on historical and political geography in Chola times (900-1300 CE). It looks at the changes in territorial divisions and the changes introduced by Chola administrators. It will be ready for the press in a month or so.

Besides that, I am collaborating with a team from the French Institute, Pondicherry, on a study on the history of science and technology over the last three or four hundred years. This also involves data from inscriptions, on which I am helping them. In the course of this study, I have come across other issues of possible future research.

PARVATHI MENON: By the mid-1970s, when I studied history at the Madras University, major breakthroughs in the history of south India were already happening (although there were many who continued to bemoan the "neglect" of the south by "north Indian" historians). There was Nilakanta Sastri, of course, and many others of his generation, such as T. V. Mahalingam and others. Burton Stein, Noboru Karashima, yourself, and many others were breaking new ground in history and historiography.

My question to you is about the source base for the study of economic and social history in ancient and medieval south India. Tamil Nadu has a unique corpus of secular literature for the ancient period. But it is largely inscriptions that have been used for reconstructing the history of the medieval period. Could you discuss the sources of the period, what they offer, and how they complement and supplement each other?

Sources

Y. Subbarayalu: For the early period, say from the beginning of the Common Era, we can use Sangam literature to some extent as a source. There was a time lag between the composition and collection of this literature. The anthologies were compiled by the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era. We also have what is called the ethical literature, like the Tirukkural and Nalatiyar, which were part of the *Patinenkilkkanakku*, or the 18 ethical works. These are mainly ethical sayings that were composed from the fifth century of the Common Era. The ethical literature is not so useful for our purposes. *Patinenkilkkanakku* has borrowed some ideas from the Dharmashastras and expressed them in the local language.

The Sangam period is coterminous with the Satavahana period, and had somewhat similar state systems. These were not very developed states.

Parvathi Menon: What was the nature of state formation in the first three centuries of the Common Era?

Y. Subbarayalu: The historian Rajan Gurukkal says that the evidence that emerges from Sangam literature does not indicate the existence of a state, but of a pre-state. I think the evidence shows some characteristics of a state. You have the king and his army, even though not a big army. We don't know whether there were officials, but there was some form of tax collection. The area is very limited: the three kingdoms of the Chera, Chola, and Pandya were mostly confined to the river basins. They also controlled some port towns like Kaveripattinam, Korkai, and Musiri. While much of the land between the kingdoms was not occupied, there were chieftains who engaged in fighting and plundering, and we read of skirmishes and wars between these chieftains and the kingdoms. Although an environment for the growth of agriculture was missing, in some pockets, there were agricultural settlements and limited agriculture on tracts in river basins (called *marutham* in Sangam literature).

This is the early stage, that is, up to the third and fourth centuries CE. Then there is the period of the ethical literature, followed by the so-called Kalabhra interregnum, a term used by Nilakanta Sastri to refer to the period 400-600 CE.

The earliest inscriptions are from between 100 BCE and 300 CE, and largely found in rock shelters. These are called label inscriptions, because they each contain only one or two sentences. The main corpus of inscriptions begins from 600 CE. However, there is one inscription of note prior to this. This is dated to the fifth century and is called the Pulankurichi inscription. It is important because it offers the earliest inscriptional reference to land relations. Inscribed on a large rock face in Pulankurichi (Ramanathapuram district), it mentions some Brahmadeya villages [a Brahmadeya village is one in which the landowners are Brahmans] with references to the agrarian. I have mentioned it in my book, and Raghava Variar and I have published

an article on it. For the first time we read of a king, Chendan Kuttran (who orders the inscription), and also of his son, Chendan. I suggested they could be Kalabhra rulers, although I now believe they must have been Pandya kings. Chendan claims a wide area as his territory. The inscription records a donation by an army commander of Chendan Kuttran to three temples. One of them is a *devakulam* (Siva or Vishnu temple), which is located on the small hillock above the rock. The second temple (called Taapatappalli, perhaps a Jain place of worship) is in Madurai, and the third (another *devakulam*) is at Vilamar on the Ramanathapuram coast. The inscription however only gives details about the first *devakulam*. The donor bought land from some Brahmadeya villages and donated the state's share of the land tax for the upkeep of the temple. The king names a group of people that include the temple priests and some soldiers, and asks them to protect the temple and its property. He also states that only the tenants (*kudumbi*) assigned specifically for the purpose by a previous ruler continue as tenants after the donation. It is interesting that he uses the term *kudumbi* (the Sanskrit term for the Tamil *kudi* or tenant). We find here the existence of landowners (the temple) and cultivators as separate entities. The land was purchased from two or three Brahmadeyas, though the only village names that remain unmutilated on the inscription are Chittur and Kadayavayal (which still exist near Pudukkottai).

Compare the Pulankurichi inscription with the Pallava copper plate inscriptions in Prakrit of the third century and the Sanskrit copper plates of the fourth to sixth centuries. We come across the earliest creation of Brahmadeya villages in the Prakrit Pallava copper plate inscriptions.

In the inscriptions of the Pallava and Pandya kings of the seventh and eighth century, there are more land grant inscriptions than before. Even though these are small inscriptions, they refer to land grants either to temples or Brahmans. We have some bilingual (Tamil and Sanskrit) Pandya copper plates also in this period. After this, without a gap, we see an abundance of inscriptions that are carved on the walls of temples until the sixteenth century. In fact, their numbers increase and their content gets ever more detailed. Most of them are found on temple walls, and we get information related to society, land, and other related issues.

Parvathi Menon: What are the other sources of the history of agrarian society and agrarian change in early and medieval Tamil Nadu?

Y. Subbarayalu: We don't have many literary sources after the Sangam period. From 600 to 1600 CE we have some court literature, mainly poetry, in praise of kings and chieftains. They don't mention much else, although we can still use them for our purposes. For example, take the *Periyapuranam* composed in the twelfth century by Chekkizhar, in praise of Saivite saints (a few of these saints have been mentioned as rulers before they became Saivite). In the *Periyapuranam* there is some passing information about villages and village settlements, evidence that can be used to

corroborate inscriptional evidence. For example, there is the well-known life sketch of the Saivite Dalit saint called Nandanaar, to whose life story Nilakanta Sastri has also made reference. Chekkizhar graphically describes the village settlement (on the outskirts of the main village) in which Nandanaar grew, and we can compare that description with the Chola villages mentioned in inscriptions. Other stories give information about agrarian life, though again, only in passing. Otherwise, we do not have clear literary evidence on socio-economic conditions in the Chola and Pandya periods. The literature is mostly about warfare and religion.

Parvathi Menon: What about other sources? Numismatics, for example.

Y. Subbarayalu: In the early stage and up to the peak period of Chola rule, that is, the eleventh century, numismatic evidence is limited. Even though we come across lots of coins that are supposed to be Rajaraja Chola's coins, they are actually later coins that imitate early coins. The circulation of money in the economy was low in the tenth and eleventh centuries. It was only in the twelfth century that we find more coinage. During the Chola period, the economy was mainly a natural economy, a barter economy. Paddy was the standard currency of revenue collection and payment. Gold was used as bullion, not as coins. We find gold in temples. Gold was also used for big transactions, such as the purchase of land. For day-to-day transactions, or in temples, it was paddy that was used as a medium of exchange, even as payment for rare commodities such as imported incense.

Parvathi Menon: You speak of three or four phases of the Chola period. First, the phase of small chieftaincies with a central Chola power becoming stronger. Then the peak phase, of Rajaraja's and Rajendra's rule, a phase of consolidation and expansion of Chola territory, with smaller chieftaincies being absorbed into Chola territory. Finally, there is a phase when the control of the territory once again passed into the hands of other regimes. How did land holdings and rights change across this period? What was the social formation that emerged?

The Emergence of a New Social Formation in the Cauvery Delta

Y. Subbarayalu: That periodisation was first suggested by Karashima and B. Sitaraman when they worked on revenue terms. They divided the four centuries of Chola rule from 900 CE to about 1279 CE, into four roughly equal phases. The first was the pre-Rajaraja or pre-imperial phase, mostly a continuation of the Pallava period. The next was the imperial period, one of intense warfare and expansion in the eleventh century. In the next phase, there was a change of the family line, when Kulottunga I, a ruler from the Chalukya line, came to power. It is a phase that I would see as a continuation and not a break with the imperial phase. After Kulottunga, the expansion of Chola territory stopped. He had to give up Sri Lanka and Karnataka, and he fought his own family members, the Eastern Chalukyas, in the Andhra region. This went on for another century. In the fourth phase triangular wars

amongst the rulers of Sri Lanka, the Pandyas, and Cholas took place and most of the energies of these rulers were taken up by warfare. This was as far as political change went.

However, we see a lot of social and economic change over this period.

As far as society is concerned, the Pallavas started the process of bringing Brahmans from the Andhra area to create Brahmadeyas or Brahman-owned villages. This was a slow process of migration into the northern parts of Tamil Nadu and the Cauvery delta. New settlements were established for the Brahmans. The early settlements were small, comprising only a few families. By late 800 CE, the settlements became bigger, with some of them having a hundred households each. Thus, Brahmadeyas were created throughout the northern parts of the territory, or what was called Tondainadu, as well as in the delta region, or Cholanadu. The Cholas encouraged the migration of Brahmans even more vigorously than the Pallavas. By the time of Rajaraja, there were already about 250 Brahman settlements (constituting fifty per cent of the total known to exist by the thirteenth century) in the Cauvery delta. This was the first change in the agrarian regime. As Karashima argues, it represented the breakup of communal ownership and its replacement by private ownership, the Brahmadeya settlement acting as one of the catalysts for the growth of private ownership by individual Brahmans. When a settlement was created, the village was divided into shares (*pangu*), say of 100 shares or so, and one share was given to each Brahman. They possessed this individually, even though they may have cultivated the land communally. They also sold land. For example, there is evidence of outsiders from faraway villages purchasing land in a particular village and donating it to the local temple.

Parvathi Menon: What was sold – the rights to the land, or the land itself?

Y. Subbarayalu: That is a bit difficult to say. For example, the inscription might state that an extent of land belonging to person A is sold to person B, who could be someone from a distant place, maybe a non-Brahman, and that that person B then donates it to the temple. All rights on the land are sold, and the boundaries of the land clearly marked. Therefore, it is not just the rights to the land, but the land itself that is sold. Such land was often resold or mortgaged.

Karashima argues that such transactions encouraged private ownership in the non-Brahman villages as well. The increase of private ownership in non-Brahman settlements happened gradually, but by 1100 CE it had become fairly widespread. However, it was in the Brahmadeya villages that many transactions, such as the sale of land to outsiders, took place. Non-Brahmans did buy land in Brahmadeya villages, and in time, non-Brahman landowners even started to live in Brahmadeya villages, a practice that emerged very clearly in the twelfth century.

Brahman villages had a few streets for wealthy non-Brahmans such as merchants and others. Cultivators lived in the village, too, but separately. In Uttaramerur, for example, two streets were set aside as commercial streets. Later, Vellalar (a non-Brahman "upper" caste) landowners are mentioned as living in a Brahman village, although they too lived separately from the Brahmans. Once a Brahman village was established, so too were the hamlets attached to it, but at some distance away from the main village. These hamlets were called *pidagai*. In the *pidagai* lived tenant cultivators, artisans, and other constituents of the village community.

Karashima has written about two donative inscriptions dating to 1014 CE from the temple that Rajaraja built in Thanjavur. These inscriptions record that Rajaraja assigned 40 villages as temple villages (*devadana*), and diverted government revenue from these villages towards the upkeep of the temple. The ownership as such did not change here; but the king's share of revenues was henceforth paid to the temple.

The descriptions of the 40 villages are interesting. These were non-Brahman villages, not Brahmadeyas. There appears to have been a main village and some outside extensions called *cheri*. The landholders, in this case maybe Vellalar, lived in the main village, and the other castes in the *cheri*. The Dalit connotation of *cheri* came much later, although in these inscriptions a reference to some "untouchable" castes is also found. The inscriptions record castes and occupational groups such as agricultural labourers or *paraiyar*, toddy tappers or *izhava*, artisans or *kammala*, and four or five other categories. A few villages were commercial, and they were called *nagaram*. The revenues of the 40 villages were given to the temple. We know from other inscriptions that such caste-segregation was in place in Brahmadeya villages too at this time. However, it is obvious from the inscriptions on the 40 villages that by 1014 CE, or the last years of Rajaraja, such segregation was commonplace in non-Brahman villages as well.

Parvathi Menon: To sum up what you have said, there was an increase in private property in land, as seen in the Raja Chola inscriptions you have referred to, and caste-class segregation permeated into non-Brahman villages as well. What were the other developments in agriculture? An increase in land-revenue rates?

Y. Subbarayalu: A striking feature of the Brahmadeyas lay in the manner in which they were first created, that is, before the Brahman settlers arrived. The government redrew the arable lands of the village in a grid of squares and rectangles of equal size. A group of such squares/rectangles (*sadukkam* or *chaturam*) constituted shares or *pangu* each of one *veli* (a *veli* was a standard Tamil measure of 2.5 hectares). If the land was poor, each *pangu* was of two *veli*. The borders of these *pangu* were formed by east-west and north-south canals. Each Brahman landowner would be given an equal (*samaanya*) share or *pangu* of one *veli*. Thus, the number of *pangu* in each village equalled the

number of new settlers. For example, if a newly formed Brahmadeya had say 45 new Brahman settlers, the arable land of the village would total 45 *pangu* of one *veli* each, so that each settler received one *pangu* of one *veli* each (in rare cases, say for a learned Brahman scholar, a *pangu* could be of two *veli*). If the number of settlers in a new Brahmadeya was 100, the village would be divided into 100 *pangu* of one *veli* each, and so on. The layout of arable land in a grid of plots was only seen in Brahmadeya villages.

PARVATHI MENON: Is there any link between the feature you have just described of the village and the land survey that Rajaraja undertook in his reign?

Y. SUBBARAYALU: No, the re-drawing of Brahmadeya villages had already taken place. Rajaraja's survey was undertaken because he wanted to regularise land rights all over his kingdom. Land rights were thus created and recorded in his survey, as we see in inscriptions dating from 1000 CE onwards. In the 40 non-Brahmadeya villages we mentioned earlier, for example, we have graphic descriptions of all the lands in each village along with evidence of the measurement of land and the calculation of the land tax. This involved some mental calculations too by the accountants. Inscriptions mention that land was graded by features such as soil type and irrigation into 14 and sometimes 20 grades by the corporate body, the *Sabha* or Ur. For government tax purposes there was just one standard grade called *madakku*. First the tax assessors would measure the cultivated land of the village. Say this village had 10 *veli* of fifth grade land. This was recorded in the village register. In the same register the accountant would also record the same land under the standard grade. Ten *veli*, for example, may only have been equal to one *veli* of the standard grade. In this way, the accountants converted each grade into a common standard. The references in the inscriptions to land gradation and the creation of a common grade for record and revenue purposes started around 1000 CE, a little earlier than Rajaraja, but he seems to have perfected the process. Such conversions are also found in later Pandya inscriptions, but not in Pallava times.

PARVATHI MENON: You have talked about the grid pattern of shares or *pangu* in Brahmadeya villages. It would appear that this would have made land transactions, at least in Brahmadeya villages, much easier. Then came Rajaraja's land survey and the development of a standard grade to assess land for tax purposes. Apart from these two very interesting changes, what other developments occurred in the agrarian system in this period?

Y. SUBBARAYALU: As I mentioned, the maintenance of the grid pattern in Brahmadeya villages, and the new standards of grading and measurement of land became regular features of the countryside. This brings us to the question of the centralisation of power in the Chola kingdom, and to Burton Stein's argument that the economy of the Cholas was not under centralised control. What I just described could not have happened without centralised control. Of course, this is confined to the central or

core area of Cholamandalam conforming to the old districts of Thanjavur, Trichy, and South Arcot. It is here that the inscriptions are concentrated.

PARVATHI MENON: You have argued that these records are evidence of a centralised state economy, because the state needed these sorts of measures for revenue assessment and collection. Were there other changes in the land system?

Y. SUBBARAYALU: Land transactions increased; more sales started taking place. And because land was donated to temples as *devadana* by the royalty and by wealthy citizens (and sometimes by ordinary people too), prominent temples became large landowners and their lands were cultivated by tenants.

LANDOWNERS AND TENANT CULTIVATORS

We do not have much information about the relations between landowners and cultivators in the eleventh century. The two classes are mentioned, but inscriptions portray a somewhat peaceful picture of the relationship. But when we enter the twelfth century, a clear picture emerges of growing antagonisms in the relationship between landowners and tenants. Tenant cultivators become increasingly prominent in the inscriptions.

The Chola kings tried to increase agricultural production because they needed to enhance revenues. They therefore required that land was cultivated well. Cultivation on temple lands appears not to have been always well managed, and the relationship between temples and the intermediaries, tenants and sub-tenants, became antagonistic, according to inscriptions from the reign of Rajendra, Rajaraja's son. Temple lands were being deserted (perhaps due to intense warfare). We see royal orders from Rajendra to several temples in the northern part of the kingdom, with the same inscription appearing in several temples, warning those who had abandoned the land that their land would be given to other cultivators if they did not return within three years.

There are several inscriptions dated to the time of Kulottunga I [1070-1122 CE] and after, in the early twelfth century, that record the inability of tenants to cultivate the land, leading to landowners requesting the government to reduce taxes. (The reasons why tenants could not cultivate are not stated, but it could perhaps have been because of conditions of drought.) The state refused to give the owners any concessions, and landowners had to borrow from the temples. Unable to pay back the loans, the landowners had to sell their land to the temples.

PARVATHI MENON: Is there evidence of increased land tax over this period?

Y. SUBBARAYALU: Yes, in the context of Brahman villages, but this information is described in the inscription in an indirect way. The standard rate of land tax was

100 *kalam* (one *kalam* was approximately 30 kg) for one *veli*, though this rate could fluctuate. When landowners asked for tax concessions, the state would first increase the rate and then reduce it by a certain proportion as a concession. For example, in the inscription I just mentioned, the government said that the landowner must pay 6/10ths or *pathu aaraaki* (six out of ten portions of the gross produce), which was a reduced tax. But even here, the king was not lenient as far as tax concessions were concerned, and there were cases of Brahman landowners leaving the land and going away. Therefore, it appears that the burden of land tax continued to increase.

Parvathi Menon: What were the taxes and services that cultivating tenants had to pay and provide landowners?

Taxes, Rents, and Labour Services

Y. Subbarayalu: There were two types of taxes. One was the main land tax. The term commonly used was *kadamai*, although the term *melvaram* was also used. This was generally fixed in terms of paddy per unit of land, though there were fluctuations in the rate. The other portion, which, though local, was also demanded in the name of the king, was called *kudimai*. It was a bundle of services in kind. There were several other terms for *kudimai*, like *vetti* (a Sanskrit term) and *amanji*. These taxes were not paid in paddy but in labour services that were locally demanded and performed. By 1300 CE, we see that some of these taxes were commuted into cash, but otherwise *kudimai* was paid in labour.

The amount that the tenant had to pay as rent to the landlord was also referred to *melvaram* or *kadamai*. The same terms also refer to the land tax paid to the government by the landowners. It is only by the inscriptional context that we can tell whether the term *melvaram/kadamai* refers to rent or tax. Landowners, whether Brahman or Vellalar, had to pay the major tax, the *melvaram/kadamai* to the state. Cultivators had to pay rent (also called *melvaram/kadamai*) to the landowners, and, in addition, to perform *kudimai* services, or a bundle of labour services, such as irrigation management and other village duties, performed in lieu of tax.

The *kudimai* became more prominent in later Chola inscriptions. Early grants of the period usually refer to *kudimai* in the context of land donated to temples (*devadanam)*. In such grants, the donor stated that the temple did not have to pay the tax *(melvaram)* on the donated land to the state. Who then paid this tax? The donor provided for such taxes by giving a sum of money, usually in the form of gold, to the local *sabha* (in the case of Brahmadeya villages) or the *ur* (in the case of non-Brahman villages), and it was from this sum that the local village committee paid land tax *(melvaram/kadamai)* on temple land to the state. We also find inscriptions that state that temple tenants were exempted from performing labour services (*vetti/kudimai*) on such donated land. This latter concession was made, perhaps, to encourage cultivation.

The relations between Brahman landowners and their tenant cultivators worsened because the state demanded more tax from landowners, and they, in turn, transferred that burden to tenant cultivators. Tenant cultivators then complained of the burden and of their inability to cultivate. From the twelfth century onwards, kings became increasingly ruthless in collecting taxes. There is another reason for the increase in the tax burden. From Kulottunga's time [1170 -1122 CE], Chola territorial power decreased and there was a parallel growth of the power of officers who become local magnates in the areas north and south of the delta. Chola kings now depended on the delta for their revenue and they therefore intensified tax collection in the delta. There is inscriptional evidence of the increase in tax mainly in Brahmadeya villages. In big Brahmadeya villages we come across inscriptions in which, for the first time, landowners – Brahmans, but others, too – complained to the king about the tax burden.

Service tenure lands (*jivitams*) given to officials, and military tenure lands (*padaipattru*), given to soldiers, also increased over time. (These officials were not paid in cash but were assigned land from which they could collect revenue.)

In the twelfth century we find landowners complaining that their tenants were being subject to increasing rents levied by service-tenure and military-tenure holders. The tenants complained about being unable to cultivate their lands because of exactions by officials and military officers. The king, in response to the complaints, ordered the abolition of military tenures as shown by inscriptions from the second half of the twelfth century. We do not know how long this order was in operation, but there is evidence of such an order. We can say, therefore, that there was increasing pressure to extract taxes on land during the twelfth century.

Parvathi Menon: Are such inscriptions, those that show the increasing burden of tax and other agrarian exactions, quite common?

Y. Subbarayalu: Yes. Such complaints of increasing burden of land tax occur in many places in the twelfth century.

Parvathi Menon: What does the evidence say about the growth of the agricultural labour force, the nature of the work of agricultural labourers, and about their living conditions?

Y. Subbarayalu: There is no direct evidence on these issues in inscriptions. There is evidence about tenant cultivators, but the labourer seems invisible. We can only infer their presence from the use of the term *aal-kuli* (wages for labour) in the context of sharing the produce between the landowner and the tenant. Karashima has discussed the evidence of the sale, by the landowners, of rights over land and dwellings in the *paraicheri*, or the place where Dalit labourers lived, in the thirteenth century. In other words, *paraiyar* agricultural workers had no rights,

even over their dwellings. This may have been the case in earlier times too. There are some incidental references to landless workers only in the case of *devadana* or temple lands, though these references are made not with respect to agricultural land but to groves and flower gardens called *nandavanam*. Temple tenants would have used agricultural labour on agricultural land, but there is no mention of this in the inscriptions.

Agricultural labourers become more visible only during the Vijayanagara period, from c. 1400 onwards. A particular genre of literature called Pallu (relating to a Dalit community of labourers) that appears in the late Vijayanagara period, sixteenth century and after, throws some light on agrarian labour. The poetry describes the Pallu labourers and their relationship to the *Andai*, or lord. The authors of the poems are themselves Pallu men, and the stories include references to their wives as well. This poetry has been edited and discussed. I earlier mentioned that in the *Periyapuranam*, the author Chekkizhar writes about the Saivite Nandanaar, a *paraiyar* and leather worker by birth, and his early life. Nandanaar, in fact, was an *ur paraiyar* (a village *paraiyar* as opposed to a *paraiyar* agricultural worker) and was assigned the work of distributing footwear in the village, and of providing some services to the temple. He was given a small piece of service tenure land.

PARVATHI MENON: Is there any inscriptional evidence on the methods of cultivation?

Y. SUBBARAYALU: There is no inscriptional evidence on this. The *Periyapuranam* and the Pallu literature I mentioned above makes some references to cultivation.

AGRARIAN PROTESTS

PARVATHI MENON: You have argued that one pointer to the decline of the Cholas lies in the sharpening of conflicts between the rulers and landholders on the one hand and tenants on the other. Are there instances of other sections, like agricultural labourers and artisans, for example, uniting against heavy taxation or other oppressions?

Y. SUBBARAYALU: This kind of general social protest surfaces only in fourteenth century Vijayanagar inscriptions, under the banner of the right- and left-hand castes (*valangai* and *idangai jati*). This may have started in the late twelfth century itself with the consolidation of the *idangai* or left-hand castes.

The first stage of conflict, mostly reflected in complaints by landowners to the king, also mentions tenants protesting against the burden of heavy rents. Such conflict is mentioned in several inscriptions in the decade between 1170 and 1180 CE. Tenant-cultivators refused to cultivate in several places, with landowners, Brahman and Vellalar, negotiating and trying to pacify them by saying that they would reduce rents. Tenants also refused to transport the king's share of the tax in paddy

from the threshing floor to the places it was required to be sent (the exact locations to which paddy had to be transported is not mentioned, but we can assume it was to granaries in local towns). The inscriptions describe the landlords' insistence that it was the duty of tenants to transport grain from the threshing floor, and the tenants' reply that it was not their duty but that of the landlords. The inscriptions describe these negotiations. There was also conflict over the sharing of labour expenses or *aal-kuli* for agricultural labour. *Aal-kuli* did not come under the *kudimai* labour services.

The process of sharing the gross produce took place as follows. The entire paddy crop was heaped on the threshing floor and measured. The portions for the state, landowners, cultivators, and village servants were then measured out. There were disagreements over who was to pay the *aal-kuli*. Was the payment to be made from the share of the landowners or from the share of the tenants? The landowners tried to bypass the original agreement and pass the payment of *aal-kuli* on to the tenants, while the tenants refused and told them to take the *aal-kuli* from their own share of the produce.

Parvathi Menon: What was the share of the produce that the tenant had to pay the landlord as rent?

Y. Subbarayalu: It ranged between three-fifths and two-fifths between landowners and tenants, in other words three out of five shares of paddy to the tenant and two for the landowner, or in some cases, two shares to the tenant and three to the landowner. There are cases recorded where the share to both was equal. The proportion depended on the crop.

I described the first stage of social protests as shown in the inscriptions between 1170 and 1180 CE. The second stage emerged around 30 years later and was centred on the issue of labour services or *kudimai*. The inscriptions provide some interesting details on this. Differences between landowners and cultivators regarding *kudimai* flared up between 1230 and 1235 CE. These occurred mainly in the delta area or Cholamandalam (by this time the rulers had only nominal control over Tondaimandalam).

There were three or four categories of labour service. One was for the upkeep of irrigation resources. A second was the provision of labour for temple services during festivals. A third category included tasks such as the upkeep of the roofs of the common halls of the village (for which the workers had to supply thatch). A fourth category comprised labour services in the palace.

Temple services were important and included labour services for local temples as well as for big temples at Chidambaram and Thiruvavur, temples very dear to the Chola kings. The temples were often situated very far from the villages from which people

and material had to be sent. Negotiations in this regard took place between landowners and tenant cultivators. Tenants complained about the burdens of such services, and stated that they could not send as many labourers to the temples as had been demanded. The protests resulted in landowners and the state agreeing to restrict the numbers of labourers sent to temples and to the palace to perform *vetti*. In respect of palace *vetti* services, the number of people to be sent by a tenant cultivator depended on the number of units of land he cultivated. Some inscriptions mention the numbers of people and the number of days of work allocated for particular tasks.

There are examples of such protests over labour services from inscriptions in several places on the east coast and up to Kumbakonam. There may be more on this subject from inscriptions that remain unpublished.

Parvathi Menon: In this context, you mentioned the role of the left-hand and right-hand (*idangai-valangai*) castes, whom we sometimes read of as producer castes. Which were the castes that comprised these groups and did they play a role in social protests?

Y. Subbarayalu: In my understanding, the *idangai-valangai* started as a military classification in the Chola period. The *valangai* regiments were in the main army (strong people are generally called *valangai*). Several military regiments were called *valangai velaikkara padai* and they were present right into Kulottunga's period. There were no *idangai* regiments in the early period, that is, under Rajaraja and Rajendra. The first mention of *idangai* regiments is in the middle of the eleventh century, with mention of the taxes to which they were entitled. My understanding is that *idangai* regiments were perhaps formed of new recruits drawn from pastoral and warrior communities of the conquered areas of the northern Chola territories. Until the twelfth century they were only military people, but by the late twelfth century, the *idangai* people began to issue their own inscriptions in which they declared their solidarity and determination to remain united "like sons and daughters of the same parents," although it is not clear at this stage to whom they were to be united against. By this time many of them seem to have become landowners too. I therefore suggest that by 1200 CE the *idangai* people were not only army recruits, but also owners of newly acquired land north of the Kollidam river. The inscriptions show that they clashed with the old landowners based south of the Cauvery. In fact, inscriptional evidence shows that the king forbade landowners from the south purchasing land from landlords north of the river. The northern landowners self-identify as *idangai* in the inscriptions. By this time, the *idangai* have perhaps become an upcoming group who see the *valangai* as privileged. In fact, in earlier inscriptions, we read of conflicts between the *idangai* and *valangai* over rights to perform some temple tasks.

From 1300 CE until early 1400 CE, other groups, such as artisans, joined the *idangai* group.

Information on the composition of the *idangai* people is given in a series of Vijayanagara inscriptions, dated between 1429 and 1430 CE. The *idangai* people were now joined by artisanal groups such as *kammalar* and *kaikkolar*. The inscription refers to the *idangai* 98 and *valangai* 98 (the number 98 did not necessarily refer to the actual number of castes in each category). In the inscription, the spokespersons of the *idangai* 98 and *valangai* 98 state that they had come together to oppose three groups that oppressed them, namely, the state (the Vijayanagar ruler they refer to is Devaraya II), landowners (Brahman and Vellalar), and military officials. This particular solidarity inscription is replicated in around 12 or 13 temples, all of which lie between the Pennar and Cauvery rivers. They span the Tamil year Saumya (roughly from December 1429 to December 1430 CE). The inscriptions trace the progression of the struggle over one year, starting in the Tamil month of Chithirai. The earliest inscriptions in this series register the complaints of these (largely) direct producer castes against the state, landowners, and military personnel, and their tone is sharply confrontational. The tone becomes more conciliatory as the year passes, and finally records them celebrating the concessions they have won. In gratitude, the *idangai-valangai* people contributed to the temple on the walls of which the inscription is carved.

Also of great interest is the fact that the many *jati* in the two *idangai-valangai* groups are listed individually, although the group to which each *jati* belonged to is not recorded. Some are landowning castes, some are commercial people, some are artisans, and some are labourers. *Paraiyar* or agricultural labourers are mentioned in two categories, namely artisan *paraiyar* and cultivating *paraiyar*.

About what did those who issued the inscription complain? The arbitrary demand of land tax was one complaint, and the use of improper tools for land measurement was another. There must have been irregularities in such tools, as the complainants carved a sample of a measuring rod on the temple and urged the authorities to use rods of the specified length for future measurements.

Parvathi Menon: What are the important gaps in the sources?

Y. Subbarayalu: This relates to an earlier question you raised. Apart from some stray references, we have very little information about the labour performed by the working people. The *idangai-valangai* references help to some extent to fill this gap, but we need to understand more about the working people from inscriptions and field studies. We must submit the inscriptions to new questions and new angles of interpretation and understanding. Vijayanagar inscriptions have not been studied much, other than those we studied with Karashima. But here, too, our effort was focussed on understanding the administrative system. We now need to study agrarian change and agrarian settlements during the Vijayanagar period.

Parvathi Menon: What about the study of gender? Do the sources have references to women and their role in production?

Y. Subbarayalu: Here too there is a big gap in scholarship. Leslie Orr has studied the role of women servants in temples, on whether, for example, they had land rights. I think that we have not given enough attention to the literary sources, such as the Pallu literature and the *Periyapuranam*, which make references to women in the societies of that time.

Parvathi Menon: You say there are gaps in our information, largely because the sources do not speak about them, on agricultural workers, on the role of women (particularly women in the work force and at the lower rungs of the social order), and on the process of agricultural production. What about information on the crops that were grown, the agricultural calendar, and so on?

Y. Subbarayalu: There are references in the inscriptions to the agricultural seasons. There was a short-duration crop called *kar* or *kuruvai*, and a long-duration crop called *samba* or *pasaanam*. There is mention of other crops, such as *vambu*, which we know was paddy, although we do not know the season in which it was cultivated. I must mention an interesting work, the *Nelviduthuthu*, or the "messenger of paddy," (its title mimicking the title of the famous Sanskrit poem by Kalidas, the *Meghaduta*, or "The Cloud-Messenger"). It is a small anonymous Tamil work of the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and it remains to be analysed. It contains a large number of words for paddy.

Parvathi Menon: The Maratha Modi script records are a potential source of economic and agrarian history, aren't they?

Y. Subbarayalu: There are more than 100,000 paper records from 1680 to 1815 CE, in Marathi and written in the Modi script, which is a sort of shorthand Marathi script. Some of these documents are bilingual records in Marathi and Tamil. They are very underutilised, mainly because very few people know the script. These records have all been digitised now. They pertain to the Cauvery delta and will be very useful in throwing light on the period that they cover. Some of the big gaps of the earlier period that we mentioned can certainly be filled in by information from these manuscripts.

Parvathi Menon: The discipline of epigraphy is facing a crisis, with fewer and fewer scholars receiving the specialised training needed to read inscriptions. What is the reason for this, and how do you think this issue can be addressed?

Y. Subbarayalu: For more than a century, the Epigraphy Branch of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has been carrying out the arduous task of collecting and preserving inscriptions. It is engaged simultaneously in the deciphering of early

scripts, transcribing them into modern scripts, and editing and publishing inscriptions. While the north Indian inscriptions in Prakrit, Sanskrit, and other local languages have been to a great extent published, the same cannot be said with regard to south Indian inscriptions, particularly in view of the much larger body of information available in Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu.

According to a recent official estimate, the Epigraphy office (in Mysore) is in possession of 70,000 inscriptions, of which nearly 50,000 are in south Indian languages. As for Tamil, it has a collection of 27,000, out of which only 11,000 have been published in properly edited volumes. The case of Kannada is a little better, because the old Mysore State published around 10,000 inscriptional texts in the *Epigraphia Carnatica* series. Over the last few decades, the Mysore University has revised and published some of these in enlarged volumes.

One reason for the slow progress in the publication of inscriptions by the Epigraphy section of ASI in Mysore is the relative neglect over the years of this important task by ASI administrators in Delhi. When the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was expanded after Independence, and centres established elsewhere, the Epigraphy wing in Mysore did not get the attention and resources it deserved. Posts allotted to the Mysore wing were not filled up for one or other reason, and today it is languishing without senior epigraphists to lead and guide young epigraphists. In the last few years, the Epigraphy wing in Mysore has sought the help of some retired epigraphists to edit and publish a few volumes. This cannot go for long, as the number of senior retired epigraphists is fast decreasing.

If the urgent task of editing and publishing the huge collection is to be completed, young scholars must be trained by experienced epigraphists.

The Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department has, from the 1960s, published nearly 7000 inscriptions. Even so, it has a big publication backlog. Here again, most epigraphists of the older generation have retired, and there are very few trained epigraphists to replace them. The urgent task of editing and publication of the huge collection requires a new generation of trained epigraphists.