



Reconfiguring Agrarian Relations: Travancore Under Ayilyam Thirunal Ramavarma

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ABSTRACT

The ancient kingdom of Travancore forms the southernmost portion of west coast of India. The kingdom also known as the state of Travancore was an earlier Hindu primitive kingdom up to 1858, and the princely state of India was ruled by royal family of Travancore. Ayilyam Thirunal RamaVarma ruled Travancore from 1860 to 1880. The agrarian reforms introduced during the reign of Ayilyam Thirunal marked a significant transformation in the land relations of the princely state of Travancore. Prior to these reforms, the agrarian structure was characterised by feudal dominance, insecure tenancy, and heavy revenue demands on cultivators. Recognizing the need for administrative modernization and social justice, Ayilyam Thirunal implemented policies aimed at protecting tenants and rationalizing land revenue administration. The reforms not only improved the economic condition of peasants but also weakened the feudal land system that had constrained rural society in Travancore. Collectively, these agrarian measures laid the foundation for later land reforms in Kerala and contributed to the emergence of a more equitable and stable agrarian order.

Key Words – Diwan, Jenmis, Kudiyans, Pandara Lands, Ryots

INTRODUCTION

Travancore was a princely state located in the southern part of the Indian subcontinent, covering much of present – day southern Kerala and parts of Tamil Nadu. Travancore is pre-eminently an agricultural country. The kingdom also known as the state of Travancore was an earlier Hindu primitive kingdom up to 1858, and the princely state of India was ruled by royal family of Travancore. The capital of Travancore state is Thiruvananthapuram or Padmanabhapuram. Travancore emerged as a powerful kingdom in the 18th century under the leadership of Marthandavarma, who consolidated several smaller principalities and established a strong centralized administration. The reign of Marthanda Varma marked a new epoch in the history of Venad. He conquered the neighbouring territories and merged with the Venad empire created by him came to be called Travancore. He is known as the maker of modern Travancore. Most of the people of Travancore speak Malayalam as their mother tongue. Traditions Hindu Manners and customs and the Hindu religion are still preserved in their original simplicity and purity. It is owned chief of continuous and prosperous rule of a long line of Hindu kingdom from the old.

Ayilyam Thirunal RamaVarma (1832 – 1880) was the Maharaja of Travancore from 1860 to 1880, a period marked by significant administrative, social, and agrarian reforms. He ascended the throne of Travancore on 7th October 1860. During this time Travancore was transitioning from a traditional feudal system to a more modern administrative structure. Ayilyam Thirunal was a scholar and has received a liberal education in English under Madhava Rao who had the honour of serving him as Dewan. As observed by a Dewan since his time, himself a very clever man, he was naturally kind and forgiving most polished in manners and as a ruler most enlightened and constitutional in his way.

THE AGRARIAN REFORMS UNDER AYILYAM THIRUNAL RAMAVARMA

During the reign of Ayilyam Thirunal Rama Varma, the Maharaja of Travancore from 1860 to 1880, significant agrarian reforms were introduced to modernize land relations and enhance agricultural productivity. These reforms marked a progressive shift from the existing feudal system, where land was primarily controlled by landlords (jenmis), and cultivators had minimal rights or security. Under Ayilyam Thirunal's leadership, efforts were made to improve land administration, ensure better rights for tenants, and develop public infrastructure. His rule is remembered for initiating key changes that laid the foundation for a more equitable and productive agrarian system in Travancore. The agrarian reforms were introduced to improve the land revenue system and address tenancy issues. The land revenue reforms aimed to rationalize and systematize the collection process by implementing scientific land surveys and settlement operations. These measures allowed for the proper assessment and classification of land based on productivity, which in turn reduced corruption, ensured better revenue collection, and made taxation more equitable. Although no major tenancy reforms were enacted during his time, the idea of tenant protection started to gain attention, laying the groundwork for future reforms in the 20th century.

The agrarian reforms, significant emphasis was placed on encouraging cultivation and strengthening institutional frameworks. Efforts were made to bring waste and uncultivated lands under active agricultural use, thereby expanding the area of productive farmland. Peasants were motivated to engage in agriculture through improved security and attractive incentives, fostering a sense of stability and purpose among cultivators.

To further boost agricultural productivity and ensure better market access, the state invested in infrastructure development, including the construction of canals and roads. These projects not only supported irrigation and transportation but also connected remote agricultural regions to commercial centers. Alongside these efforts, institutional reforms were introduced to enhance the efficiency of administration. A dedicated Revenue Board was established to centralize and streamline revenue collection and land management processes. Additionally, systematic record-keeping of land ownership, tenancy rights, and tax obligations was promoted, laying the foundation for transparent governance and better accountability in land-related matters. These reforms collectively marked a transformative phase in Travancore's agrarian structure.

Ayilyam Thirunal Rama Varma is remembered as a visionary and progressive ruler who played a key role in modernizing Travancore during the mid-19th century. His legacy is deeply rooted in his forward-thinking approach to governance, marked by substantial reforms in administration, education, public infrastructure, and agriculture. He laid the foundation for a more structured and equitable agrarian system through initiatives that emphasized scientific land assessment, fair taxation, and improved administrative efficiency. His efforts to bring waste lands under cultivation, encourage peasant participation, and invest in infrastructure like canals and roads significantly boosted agricultural productivity and rural connectivity. Moreover, Ayilyam Thirunal's establishment of a centralized Revenue Board and promotion of systematic record-keeping practices helped create a transparent and accountable governance structure. Though tenancy reforms during his reign were limited, he initiated early discussions around tenant protection, paving the way for more comprehensive reforms in the future. Collectively, these agrarian reforms were not only pioneering but also foundational setting the stage for Travancore's transformation into one of the most efficiently governed princely states in India. His reign is widely regarded as a turning point that propelled Travancore toward socio-economic progress and inspired future rulers, such as Sree Moolam Thirunal Rama Varma to carry forward his reformist vision.

Jenmi- Kudiyan Proclamation

The Jenmi–Kudiyan Proclamation (often dated to the mid-19th century Travancore state) was one of the earliest attempts in south India to curb landlord (Jenmi) absolutism and give some protection to tenant cultivators (Kudiyans). Below is a deeper dive into its genesis, key stipulations, implementation challenges and legacy. The jenmis nominal ownership of the land, enjoying large tracts and deriving rent or service dues from those who actually worked the field. The kudiyans also cultivators with customary rights to farm particular plots, but with insecure tenure and subject to arbiter demands and evictions.

Land holding in Travancore:

From the early modern period, land in Travancore was vested in hereditary landlords known as Jenmis. These Janmis enjoyed proprietary rights, collected all rents and dues, and could evict cultivators at will. Most actual tillers-smallholders and sharecroppers-had no formal leases. They paid a fixed share or cash rent, but lacked any legal security and bore the entire risk of harvest failure or rent hikes. Peasant petitions and occasional outbreaks of resistance (sometimes termed “Kudiyan uprisings”) alerted the Travancore Durbar to the need for some regulation. British land revenue practices in Madras Presidency—where the Ryotwari system granted tenants fixed and recognized holdings-served as a partial model, though Travancore remained a princely state.

Security of Tenure Prevent arbitrary expulsions. Cultivators could only be evicted for specified, “valid” reasons (e.g., non-payment of rent after formal notice). Curb sudden, excessive rent hikes by Jenmis. Though no standardized ceiling was set, any increase had to be evidence-based and recorded. Establish government “Revenue Courts” or appointed officers as arbitrators between Jenmi and Kudiyan, replacing purely extra-legal coercion. Mandate written tenancy agreements (even if informal), with registers maintained in each taluk (sub-division) office.

Provisions:

- Security of Tenure Tenants could not be evicted without a written notice and hearing.
- Formal Notice Requirements Janmis must issue notice in prescribed form, stating grounds for eviction.
- Right of Appeal Tenants could appeal to a local “Tahsildar” (revenue officer) within 30 days.
- Evidence of Cultivation Kudiyans had to prove continuous cultivation for a specified period (e.g., 3 years) to claim protection.
- Record Maintenance Taluk offices kept registers of tenants, their lands, rents and tenure terms. Interim Relief. In disputed cases, tenants could continue cultivation (and pay rent) until final decision.

Implementation & Limitations:

- Patchy enforcement jenmis often flouted the Proclamation by colluding with local officials or demanding “under-the-table” payments.
- Literacy & Awareness
- Many poor Kudiyans were illiterate, unaware of their rights or intimidated by powerful landlords.

Administrative Capacity:

- The Travancore revenue bureaucracy was small and sometimes biased toward Jenmi interests.

Precursor to Land Reform:

- Though weakly enforced, it set a precedent for recognizing tenant rights—later built upon by the Travancore–Cochin Tenancy Act (1950) and the Kerala Land Reforms Act (1963–70).

Social Awareness:

- It stimulated rural discourse on rights and responsibilities in agrarian society, contributing to the growth of peasant unions and political mobilization.

Legal Foundations:

Many procedural elements—notice requirements, appeals, and record-keeping—became templates for subsequent landlord-tenant legislation across princely states. They were the owners of large tracts of land, particularly under the feudal land system that prevailed in the region. Their lands were not alienated, meaning they were not easily transferred or sold. Exempt from taxation, showing their privileged status. Though janmi lands were originally not alienated, over time alienation began to occur under specific arrangements.

Kanampattom Tenure:

A form of land tenure under which alienation of jenmi lands mostly took place. Under this system, a tenant (called a kudiyan) paid rent for using the land. The tenant was allowed to deduct from the rent the interest on the Kanam amount. Kanam was a lump sum payment or a kind of mortgage paid by the tenant to the jenmi at the start of the tenancy. Essentially, the tenant paid a lump sum up front and then paid reduced rent, subtracting interest on the Kanam.

Ryots:

A term for cultivating tenants or peasant farmers. By the time of this proclamation, thousands of ryots were occupying janmomm lands, often under the Kānappāṭṭom system. While the Janmi–Kudiyan Proclamation did not radically alter the power balance in Travancore agriculture, it was a landmark first step: for the first time, tenants were recognized as having any legal stake in the land they tilled. Its real value lies in having introduced the concept of tenure security into south Indian jurisprudence, paving the way for far-reaching land reforms in the decades that followed.

The Sirkar Anchal Proclamation:

The Sirkar Anchal Proclamation, as mentioned in the image, refers to an administrative or legal notification potentially made during the British colonial period or the early years following Indian independence. However, this particular term—“Sirkar Anchal Proclamation”—does not appear in standard historical or legal records as a recognized, documented event. This suggests that the term might have been used locally or informally,

possibly within a specific administrative or regional context. To better understand the phrase:

“Sirkar” (or Sarkar) is a Persian-derived term, commonly used across India to denote government or ruling authority. During British rule, it also referred to a division of territory, akin to a district or revenue subdivision. “Anchal” (or Anchal) is a word used in several Indian languages, especially in Eastern and Northeastern India, and can mean region, jurisdiction, or administrative block.

Therefore, the combined term could be interpreted as a government order or proclamation concerning a specific regional administrative boundary or governance matter. However, due to the lack of official or scholarly references, it’s likely that this phrase was either:

- Locally coined or remembered, possibly referring to a specific administrative policy or land/taxation notice; or

- A non-standardized or oral-history-based term that never became part of formal legal codification.

- All Sircar Pattam lands were officially held by the Sircar (i.e., the State/government), which acted as the Jenmi (landlord) over these lands.

- Ryots (cultivators/tenant farmers) occupied and worked on these lands but had no ownership rights. They could not sell or transfer the land, making their possession insecure and economically limit the proclamation transformed thousands of ryots into legal landowners, drastically improving their social and economic status. It marked a decisive break from the traditional feudal Jenmi system. The reform was so progressive for its time that it earned praise from the Madras Government and even from the Secretary of State for India—a rare feat in colonial India. These actions laid the foundation for later land reform policies in Kerala, culminating in the radical land redistribution movements of the 20th century. The enfranchisement of Sircar Pattam lands was a landmark moment in Travancore’s history, shifting landholding power from the state to the actual tillers of the soil. It reflected the forward-thinking vision of the Travancore monarchy, especially under Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal, and set a precedent for agrarian justice and land rights in India.

Pandarappatta Proclamation

The Royal Pattom Proclamation of 1040 M.E. (1865 AD)-often referred to as the “Magna Carta of land reforms” in Travancore-was a milestone in agrarian history, especially in the context of South India’s feudal land structure. Issued during the second half of the 19th century, this proclamation was one of a series of progressive royal decrees aimed at granting land rights to actual cultivators, rather than the traditional landholding elites. At that time, most people were engaged in agriculture, but the land was largely under the control of Jenmis-a landlord class consisting of the Sircar (state), Brahmins, or temple trusts (Devaswoms). Cultivators, often referred to as ryots, held land under various lease arrangements such as Pattom, Otti, Inam, and Viruthi, but had no ownership rights.

The 1040 M.E. Proclamation specifically addressed Pattom lands-leaseholds created by the Sircar (government) on Pandara lands (also called Pandaravaka lands, i.e., government lands). It legally recognized these lands as private property, enabling ryots to inherit and sell them, marking a crucial first step in converting tenancy into ownership. This proclamation is often glorified as the Magna Carta of Travancore peasants because it empowered actual tillers of the land, dismantling the feudal hierarchy and initiating a transition toward agrarian justice. It laid the groundwork for subsequent reforms, culminating in the full-scale land redistribution movements of the 20th century. In essence, this proclamation did not just reform land policy—it redefined the relationship between the state, the landlords, and the cultivators, firmly placing rights in the hands of those who worked the soil.

The opening lines of the 1040 M.E. Proclamation (2 June 1865) make it crystal-clear that Travancore’s ruler was determined to turn state-held “Sirkar Pattom” lands into genuinely secure, marketable property for the people who actually tilled them. By formally “surrendering, for the benefit of the people, all optional power” that the government once reserved over various categories of land—whether wet paddy fields, garden plots or dry holdings—the Maharaja effectively relinquished his own landlord’s rights. In doing so, he guaranteed that these tenants (the ryots) would no longer live at the mercy of periodic rent hikes, arbitrary evictions or no transferability: instead, their tenure would be fixed, their land’s legal status elevated, and its economic value enhanced. This single act of royal forfeiture-not merely a benign gesture but a radical reallocation of property rights-laid the cornerstone for the modern system of private, heritable, and saleable land ownership in Kerala.

Categories of Land Covered:

- Lands like Venpattom or Verumpattom (A simple lease without any debt or money consideration entering into the transaction. Its tenure is heritable and saleable), Vettolivu Pattom (A common tenure on Sirkar as well as janmom lands) etc. are officially included.
- These lands had fixed tax liabilities until the next formal Survey and Assessment—ensuring predictability and protection from arbitrary revenue increases.

Full Proprietary Rights to Ryots (tenants) :

- Ryots (tenants) were granted absolute rights to the land: it became private, heritable, saleable, and transferable property.
- This broke from the feudal tradition where the state (Sirkar) or a landlord (Jenmi) retained ultimate ownership.

Legalization of Transactions:

From then on, sales, mortgages, and transfers of these lands became legally valid. Transactions were to be recorded on stamped Cadjan’s (traditional palm-leaf documents) and registered—marking a shift to formal, bureaucratic recognition of property rights.

- Lands could now be used as collateral, both in private dealings and with the government.

Security of Tenure:

Landholders were assured peaceful possession as long as they paid their taxes.

- This offered protection from eviction or encroachment, promoting economic stability and investment.

Freedom to Develop Land:

Holders were granted full liberty to invest in, improve, or develop the land as they saw fit, removing previous restrictions imposed by landlords or the state. This portion of the Proclamation essentially freed the ryots from feudal bondage, transforming them from dependent cultivators into autonomous landowners. It legally empowered them to treat the land not as borrowed or leased but as a secure economic asset. In doing so, it laid the foundation for:

- Capital investment in agriculture
- Rural credit systems
- Legal certainty in land disputes

Economic upliftment of tenant-farmers. This Proclamation is rightly referred to as the “Magna Carta” of agrarian reform in Travancore, symbolizing the beginning of a more equitable and progressive land ownership regime.

CONCLUSION

The agrarian reforms initiated during the reign of Ayilyam Thirunal Ramavarma marked a significant turning point in the agrarian history of Travancore. By curbing the unchecked power of landlords and strengthening the rights of cultivators, these reforms laid the foundation for a more equitable land system. During Ayilyam Thirunal Ramavarma’s twenty-year reign, Travancore underwent sweeping modernization and reform. Under his Dewans (notably T. Madhava Rao), the government cleared all its debt (by 1863) and abolished many old monopolies, taxes and cessations. Salaries for civil servants were raised over 50%, and new laws expanded education, public health, agriculture and infrastructure. The state’s finances turned prosperous (a ₹4 million surplus by 1872) and the Madras government repeatedly commended Travancore as a model of good administration. The main achievements of Maharajah and his Dewans are the elimination of Travancore’s public debt and centralized finance. Monopolies and regressive levies were dismantled, and a professional civil service with higher pay greatly improved efficiency. This transformed Travancore into a stable, well-managed state within the British Indian system. In the long run, the policies of Ayilyam Thirunal contributed to the modernization of Travancore’s agrarian structure and influenced later land reforms in Kerala, leaving a lasting legacy in the region’s socio- economic development.

During 1865–1867, Ayilyam Thirunal Ramavarma issued landmark land proclamations. The Pandarapattom Proclamation (1865) granted tenant cultivators permanent rights to their holdings, and the Jenmi-Kudiyan Proclamation (1867) legally defined fair relations between landlords (jenmis) and tenants. These measures secured land tenure for peasants and alleviated rural distress, easing social tensions. Together, these reforms earned Travancore a reputation as a progressive, prosperous state. British authorities even elevated Ayilyam Thirumal’s title (from “Rajah” to “Maharajah” in 1866) and decorated him with high honors (GCSI- Grand commander of the order of the Star of India, 1866 and CIE- Companion of the order of the Indian Empire, 1878) in recognition of his enlightened rule.

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