



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Colonial Salt Regulation and Social Transformation in the Princely State of Pudukkottai

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Abstract

During the British colonial period, the Princely State of Pudukkottai was a semi-autonomous region in the Madras Presidency covering 1178 square miles with a population of 411,886 according to the 1911 Census. Though ruled by the Tondaiman kings, the state remained under British political and revenue influence. Today, Pudukkottai is a district of Tamil Nadu covering 4663 square kilometres with a population of 1,618,345 as recorded in the 2011 Census, and it continues to retain its rural character. Heavy colonial taxes limited access to sea salt from the Bay of Bengal coast, forcing inland communities to depend on earth-salt production for local use. The Uppiliyar community possessed specialised knowledge in this traditional family-based occupation, in which women played a major role. This paper investigates with evidences how the women especially from Uppiliyar community were able to be skilled in this occupation, and later threatened and subjected to judicial actions by the concerned authorities. The discussion further attempts to go deeper into the context of salt-based economy which was dominant during the era under the strict supervision of the colonial rulers. The producers and poor consumers of earth-salt were denied their right of occupation and consumption in order to sell the highly taxed sea salt by force. The study attempts to deepen the understanding of the exploitation of the colonial rule and the resistance of the marginalised. Different sources of data reveal the prolonged hardships faced by the women, legal action to criminalise a traditional occupation and consequent migration.

Keywords: Princely State of Pudukkottai, Earth-Salt Production, Colonial Salt Monopoly, Livelihoods, Social Transformation, Resource Exploitation.

Introduction

The British colonial administration gave high importance to monopoly control over essential resources, and salt became

one of its major concerns. The East India Company, and later the British Crown, gradually destroyed indigenous methods of salt production to secure complete authority over its manufacture and distribution (Boehme, 2024). By 1805, the Madras Presidency officially enforced the salt monopoly (Agnihotri & Verma, 2024). Under this system, local producers found it difficult to compete with the highly taxed sea salt controlled by the colonial government.

In Pudukkottai, the locally sustained earth-salt industry stood as a challenge to this monopoly. British officials repeatedly complained about the movement of Pudukkottai salt into neighbouring Thanjavur, claiming that such trade caused considerable revenue loss to the colonial administration (Renukadevi, 2011). These conflicts eventually resulted in a series of measures intended to suppress the earth-salt industry in Pudukkottai and bring the region more firmly within the colonial economic system.

The Earth-Salt Suppression Regulation of 1887 marked a decisive intervention in the traditional manufacture of earth-salt in Pudukkottai state (Gandhi, 1983; Manikandan, 2020; Raja Mohamad, 2004; Sethumanickam & Karkuzhali, 2022). Prior to the regulation, earth-salt production functioned as an established village industry among the Uppiliyar

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community and other inland labouring groups (Ayyar, 1938; Gandhi, 1983; Manimohan, 2011). The *Pudukkottai State Manual* records that nearly 175 villages in the state were directly engaged in the preparation of earth-salt for local consumption and exchange during the late nineteenth century (Aiyar, 1916; Raja Mohamad, 2004; Manimohan, 2011). The colonial administration, however, regarded indigenous salt manufacture as injurious to the revenue obtained from heavily taxed sea salt and therefore introduced stricter legal measures to suppress local production. Under the provisions of the regulation, the unauthorised preparation, possession and sale of earth-salt became punishable offences. Officials were authorised to inspect producing villages, confiscate stored salt, destroy salt pits and prosecute those involved in the occupation (Ayyar, 1938; Agnihotri & Verma, 2024). Thurston and Rangachari's account of the Uppiliyars also notes that communities traditionally associated with salt manufacture increasingly came under police surveillance and administrative restrictions after the enforcement of the regulation (Thurston & Rangachari, 1987). The implementation of these legal measures gradually altered the rural labour structure connected with earth-salt production. What had long functioned as a customary household occupation was transformed into an unlawful activity through colonial legal intervention. Women, who played a central role in collecting saline soil, filtering brine and boiling the extracted substance into usable salt, lost an important source of economic participation within village society. The administrative records of Pudukkottai state further indicate that salt-producing localities were subjected to periodic inspection in order to prevent clandestine manufacture and to enforce dependence upon government-controlled salt distribution (Ayyar, 1938; Sethumanickam & Karkuzhali, 2022). The suppression of earth-salt production therefore represented not merely a revenue policy but also a broader process of social transformation through which colonial authority attempted to regulate indigenous labour practices and reshape local economic life in Pudukkottai.

Materials and Methods

This study is based on archival, documentary and qualitative historical analysis. The principal materials include Pudukkottai State manuals, administrative reports, colonial-era historical works and secondary studies on salt policy, rural occupation, criminalisation and labour migration. Since the subject belongs to regional history, the method adopted here is interpretative rather than experimental. The aim is to read official records in relation to the social life of the producers who appear in them.

Along with the producers of the earth salt, the study about the contributions from the other sections of the society also plays a significant part in terms of understanding the process of distribution network to the end consumers. Although the Uppiliyars remained the principal producers

of earth-salt in Pudukkottai, the occupation also depended upon the participation of several other sections of rural society. Women contributed significantly to the preparation of brine, boiling and drying of salt, while seasonal labourers assisted in the collection and transport of saline earth from production sites. Petty traders and local transport workers were involved in the circulation of earth-salt among nearby villages and weekly markets. Ordinary rural households likewise depended upon locally produced salt because it was cheaper and more accessible than heavily taxed sea salt (Raja Mohamed, 2004; Manimohan, 2011; Renukadevi, 2011). The *Pudukkottai State Manual* indicates that earth-salt manufacture had spread across numerous villages by the late nineteenth century, suggesting that the occupation functioned through a wider network of labour and exchange rather than through the efforts of a single producing community alone (Aiyar, 1916; Gandhi, 1983; Manimohan, 2011). The suppression of earth-salt production therefore affected not only the primary manufacturers but also the broader rural society connected with the occupation through labour, transport and local consumption.

The study relies mainly upon prosecution records relating to earth-salt manufacture between 1888–89 and 1897–98. These records provide details regarding the number of registered cases, persons prosecuted, gender composition of the accused, conviction patterns and fines imposed under the salt regulations. Rather than treating these figures merely as criminal statistics, the present study interprets them as evidence of the expanding reach of colonial legal enforcement into everyday village occupations. The data further helps to examine the manner in which indigenous labour practices were brought under surveillance and administrative control during the late nineteenth century.

In order to situate the Pudukkottai experience within the broader history of colonial salt policy, the study also engages with relevant secondary scholarship. Taylor (2023) provides the larger political and economic background of the salt monopoly in colonial India, while Devi (2000) explains the functioning of salt administration in the Madras Presidency. The works of Neela and Ambrosia (2015a; 2015b) are useful in understanding the processes of criminalisation and community surveillance associated with salt-related occupations. Yanagisawa (1996) offers insights into wider transformations in land relations, labour mobility and rural society in Tamil regions during the colonial period. Together, these materials help to place the Pudukkottai case within the larger framework of colonial economic control and social change in South India.

Observations

The materials examined for this study point to six major observations. Earth-salt production in Pudukkottai was shaped by geography, Technical knowledge, women's labour, colonial law, court enforcement and livelihood loss.

Earth-salt and the Inland Ecology of Pudukkottai

Pudukkottai's lack of coastline during the princely period made earth-salt valuable for local consumption (Sethumanickam & Karkuzhali, 2022). Salt could not be drawn from coastal salt pans within the state. It enabled the villagers to take advantage of the natural availability of earth-salt and started producing earth-salt. This earth-salt was relatively whiter than the sea salt. 97.6 percent of sodium chloride content in the earth-salt was high enough for consumption. It solves the local salt need in significant amounts. This local trade helped both the producers and consumers for their livelihood.

Uppiliyar Occupation and Technical Knowledge

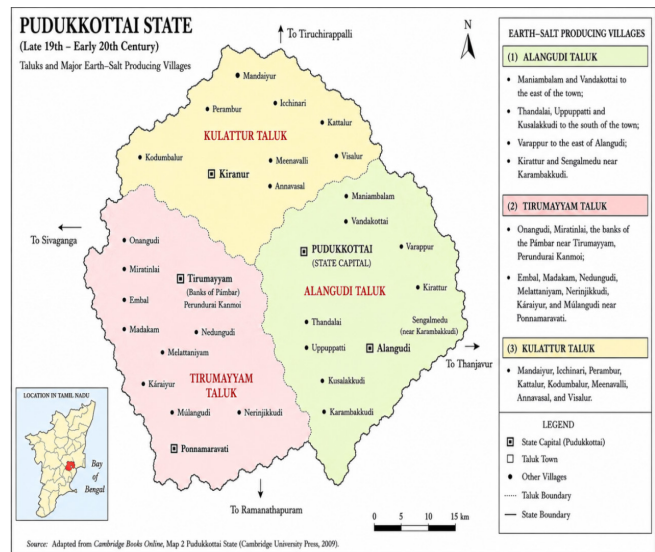
The Uppiliyar community originally came from Andhra Pradesh (Manimohan, 2011). They had been traditionally skilled in irrigation-based works and had adequate knowledge and experience in identifying and handling different kinds of soil on earth. These hard-working people were good at making camphor and saltpetre (Ayyar, 1938; Manimohan, 2011). This technical knowledge gave them the natural advantage and expertise to produce earth-salt. In 1911, the Uppiliyar population was found to be considerable in number around 1472 living in the villages of Pudukkottai (Aiyar, 1916; Ayyar, 1938; Thurston & Rangachari, 1987; Manimohan, 2011).

Women's Labour in the Production Process

The role of women in the process of earth-salt was crucial. They were deeply involved in every stage of the process.



Source: Madras Presidency 1900, Cambridge Books Online (Cambridge University Press, 2009)



Source: Adapted from Cambridge Books Online, Map 2 Pudukkottai State (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

From the data of the number of cases recorded, it is clearly visible that without the participation of women in the manufacturing process, the earth-salt trade would have been vanished much earlier. The sustainability and resistance of the process even after the strict suppressive measures was mainly due to the continued efforts and toil of the women. To recognize and encourage the women labour, they were honoured with gifts during marriages (Thurston & Rangachari, 1987; Manimohan, 2011).

The 1887 Regulation

In 1882, the implementation of the Madras Salt act had severe effects against those involved in earth-salt production. According to this act, if the court found the accused as convicted, a fine of Rs. 500 or six month imprisonment or both would be imposed on the convicted (Indian Salt Act, 1882; Salt Department, Ministry of Commerce and Industry [SDMCI], n.d.; Sethumanickam & Karkuzhali, 2022)

The Earth-Salt Suppression Regulation of 1887 changed the position of earth-salt producers. Before the regulation, production from saline soil belonged to local practice and customary occupation. After the regulation, unauthorised production could lead to fines, imprisonment and the destruction of production sites. The Pudukkottai administration also received compensation connected with the surrender of earth-salt revenue. The regulation created a new legal condition for salt producers. Collection, preparation and sale could now be treated as punishable acts. (Gandhi, 1983; Manikandan, 2020; Proceedings of the Pudukkottai Legislative Council [P.P.L.C.], 1926; Sethumanickam & Karkuzhali, 2022). This change prepared the ground for repeated prosecution in the following decade.

Table 1: Details of Earth-Salt Cases and Convicted Persons in Pudukkottai, 1888–89 to 1897–98

Year	Number of Cases	Number of Accused Persons			Convicted by Court (%)	Fine Imposed		
		Total	Men (%)	Women (%)		Rs.	Annas	Paise
1888–89	1618	1719	22	78	95	2	9	3
1889–90	1406	1514	18	82	96	1	12	0
1890–91	1254	1284	16	84	98	1	13	7
1891–92	1029	1056	14	86	98	1	5	10
1892–93	951	972	14	86	99	1	2	3
1893–94	980	1001	14	86	98	1	6	1
1894–95	821	836	17	83	99	1	4	0
1895–96	662	686	19	81	98	1	6	11
1896–97	398	413	15	85	99	1	3	8
1897–98	352	350	14	86	99	1	3	6

Source: Report on the Administration of Pudukkottai, 1897–98, p. 70, Pudukkottai Darbar Record Office.

Note: One rupee = 16 annas; one anna = 12 paise.

Prosecution and Gendered Enforcement

The prosecution data from 1888–89 to 1897–98 gives the clearest evidence of enforcement. Over this ten-year period, 9,471 cases were recorded, involving 9,831 accused persons. Women formed the majority of accused persons in every year. Their share ranged from 78 per cent to 86 per cent. Conviction rates remained between 95 per cent and 99 per cent. (Manimohan, 2011; *Report on the Administration of Pudukkottai*, 1897–1898, p. 70).

The cases declined from 1,618 in 1888–89 to 352 in 1897–98, a reduction of more than three-fourths over the decade. The decline may indicate that repeated enforcement weakened production. Yet the gender pattern remained stable. Even when the total number of cases fell, women continued to form the largest share of accused persons.

Occupational Displacement and Migration

The weakening of earth-salt production reduced one source of income for salt-producing communities. Restrictions on production, transport and exchange affected producers as well as poor consumers. This disruption did not stop with their occupational loss but extended to the decision of migration as they had no other opportunities of livelihood in their homes. It was recorded that between 1921 to 1931, more than 75,000 people moved to Ceylon to work in Tea and Rubber plantations (Yanagisawa, 1996; Wenzlhuemer, 2007; Kurian, 2018; Verité Research, 2019).

Discussion

The Pudukkottai evidence shows how colonial salt control could work inside a princely state. Taylor (2023) treats salt as part of the fiscal structure of colonial India. Pudukkottai supports this argument from an inland regional setting. Here, salt became important because a local product interfered with the revenue logic of the colonial monopoly.

Devi's (2000) work on British salt policy in the Madras Presidency helps to explain why local salt mattered. The colonial salt system depended on the protection of taxed salt against cheaper alternatives. Earth-salt from Pudukkottai circulated through local networks and served poor consumers. Its continued production could reduce dependence on colonial sea salt. The pressure on Pudukkottai to restrict production and align prices must be read as part of the larger attempt to defend salt revenue.

Sethumanickam and Karkuzhali (2022) discuss administrative reforms in Pudukkottai and show that the state had a distinct governance structure under its local administration. Such studies help to establish the state as more than a passive territorial unit. At the same time, the earth-salt case shows that local administrative arrangements could be drawn into colonial economic priorities. The state possessed internal authority, but that authority had limits when local resources affected British revenue interests.

The Pudukkottai evidence also modifies the usual understanding of salt monopoly as a matter of taxation alone. Aiyar (1916), Gandhi (1983), and Ayyar (1938) provide details of the state's administrative history and the suppression of earth-salt production. Read together with the prosecution data, these records show that monopoly control required legal transformation at the village level. The state had to redefine production, transport and exchange as punishable acts. The Earth-Salt Suppression Regulation of 1887 was therefore more than an administrative measure. It was a legal instrument through which customary labour was separated from legitimacy.

The role of the Uppiliyar community brings traditional occupation into the discussion of colonial resource control. Thurston and Rangachari (1987) associate the Uppiliyars with salt-related work and record their occupational specialisation. Thiagarajan (1921) provides demographic

evidence for the community in Pudukkottai. These records show that earth-salt production was sustained by rural-based occupational skill rather than casual labour alone. The colonial attack on the industry, therefore, affected a community's inherited knowledge and social identity. It weakened the economic base through which the community had participated in local exchange.

The figures pertaining to the gender composition provide the best proof. Women constituted between 78 percent and 86 percent of the accused during that decade. Salt monopoly has been frequently explained within the context of revenue generation policy. However, in the case of Pudukkottai, its enforcement extended into the industry through women's labour. Women collected soil, prepared brine, filtered the solution, and managed pans.

The conviction rates, which range from 95 to 99 percent, indicate that there was not much room for poor producers to argue their cases. As for the women accused, the colonial legal system was presented to them by way of fines, trials, and imprisonment.

This can be related to the work carried out on the process of criminalisation in colonial South India. Neela and Ambrosia have documented the way in which some communities became targets for surveillance and punishment under criminalisation policies. Earth-salt producers were not from that context; however, the classification system was quite similar. Practices of making a living fell into the legal discourse of punishment and control.

Conclusion

The salt production in Pudukkottai is one case of colonial control in a princely state by means of utilizing natural resources. Soil-based salt benefited economically deprived people along with the knowledge of Uppiliyar and women's labour. The Earth-Salt Suppression Regulation of 1887 changed this position. It treated unauthorised production as an offence and placed producers under police and court control. The prosecution data from 1888–89 to 1897–98 shows the gendered force of this change. Women formed the majority of accused persons in every recorded year, while conviction rates remained very high.

The Pudukkottai case expands the history of colonial salt policy beyond coastal production and nationalist protest. It shows how indirect rule could serve colonial economic interests in a princely state. It also shows that resource monopoly, rural occupation, gendered labour and criminalisation were closely connected. The suppression of earth-salt was the legal remaking of a livelihood.

The British colonial rulers did not even spare the marginalized sections to lead their life peacefully. It established its unchallenged dominance over a princely state to take advantages of economic opportunities by imposing taxes and legal regulations against the poor

people. Consequently, the people were forced to leave their homes and livelihood and resort to other countries like nomads to find some employment opportunities, and work as coolies in Tea and rubber plantations.

In the present context, this study assumes significance because it highlights questions that continue to remain relevant in contemporary discussions on labour, local industries and the control of natural resources. The history of earth-salt production in Pudukkottai demonstrates how state regulation and economic policy could reshape rural occupations and weaken small-scale indigenous production systems in favour of centralized control. Such historical experiences provide an important background for understanding the long-term transformation of village industries and the gradual decline of traditional occupations in many parts of South India.

The study is also relevant today because recent scholarship increasingly emphasises regional histories, everyday forms of labour and the experiences of communities that remained outside mainstream nationalist narratives. In this context, the Pudukkottai case offers insight into how ordinary rural populations negotiated legal restrictions, economic pressure and administrative intervention during the colonial period. The prosecution records further reveal the extent to which women participated in productive labour within household-based industries, a dimension often underrepresented in colonial documentation. By reconstructing the history of earth-salt manufacture through archival records and administrative reports, the study contributes to a broader understanding of colonial economic intervention, rural social transformation and the historical roots of the decline of traditional village industries in Tamil society.

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