

## PREFACE

Tamil University of Thanjavur holds some 160 bundles of palm-leaf records, which were transferred there about 15 years ago from the office of the then Collector of Chengalpattu District at Kanchipuram, where they had been lying for perhaps the last two hundred years. Each of these bundles contains on the average about 600 uncut and untreated palm-leaves, each about a metre long and 3-4 centimetres wide, with writing on both sides in old Tamil script. These manuscripts preserve the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century locality accounts of the Chengalpattu region of Tamil Nadu, which forms a part of the cultural area traditionally known as Thondaimandalam. The accounts present the most detailed picture available anywhere of the functioning of Indian society, economy and polity at its basic level, before it was disrupted and transformed through the instruments of British administration.

Of the 160 bundles of palm-leaves, about 20 contain accounts collected between 1767 to 1774 at the instance of a British engineer, Thomas Barnard, and Rajasri Chengalvaraya Mudaliar, who served as an interpreter, *dubash*, for the British. These accounts, referring to about 1,500 localities, are part of the original data that formed the basis for an extensive survey of about 2,100 localities of Chengalpattu, undertaken by Mr. Barnard on instructions from his superiors in the British administration. From these palm-leaf records he got some information extracted and translated to a specific format. About fifty volumes of these English Summary records are available in the Tamil Nadu State Archives at Chennai.

The Chengalpattu Survey of 1767-1774 was one of the first efforts that the British made to understand the ways of the Indian people, before devising modes of effectively subjugating and administering them. The information recorded in the survey is extraordinarily important. It obliges us to revise our ideas about life and society in India towards the latter half of 18<sup>th</sup> century, just prior to the establishment of British administration. We have so far been led to believe, on the basis of rather tenuous historical evidence, that India of that time was a poor, scientifically and technologically backward, and socially and politically dysfunctional nation. The

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accounts presented in these manuscripts, however, present a picture of Indian society and polity that is the exact opposite of these images of poverty and dysfunctionality.

Our attention was drawn to these palm-leaf manuscripts through the work some of us at the Centre for Policy Studies had begun more than ten years ago on the archival records of the survey. The English archival records have now been copied and compiled into a database at the Centre for Policy Studies. The palm-leaf records, wherever available, add graphic details to the archival records and present a vivid picture of the locality in all its varied aspects.

The palm-leaf manuscript accounts for several hundred localities have also been copied in a collaborative exercise between the Centre for Policy Studies, Chennai and the Department of Palm-leaf Manuscripts, Tamil University, Thanjavur. Pulavar V. Chokkalinga Swamigal and Pulavar B. Kannayyan helped with the copying and transcription of these manuscripts at the earlier stages; later much of the copying was done by one of the authors, T. Pushkala. The last named author also presented an analysis of the Tamil palm-leaf accounts for about ten localities in her thesis, *Chengalpattu Avanangal: Samudaya Poruladharam*, which was awarded the Ph.D. degree by the Tamil University, Thanjavur, in 1998.

In this book we present detailed accounts for two localities, Thirupporur and Vadakkuppattu. These are first presented in the original script of the palm-leaf manuscripts, for which special fonts have been developed. This is followed by an English translation of these locality accounts. For the sake of comparison, we have also reproduced the English summary accounts for these localities from the English archival records. The book also includes an introduction giving an overview of the Chengalpattu information and highlighting some of the important features revealed in the detailed accounts of Thirupporur and Vadakkuppattu.

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