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An improbable reconstruction: The transformation of Madurai, 1837–47

Anne Viguier

He entered the city though a tunnel
Made of herds of elephants with long
Trunks to pass, that led from the invincible moat
With its expanse of rippling waters enclosed
By a closely guarded forest.
Unnoticed by the Yavana soldiers, who armed with swords,
Kept a close watch over the fortress-gate
That inspired fear in enemies, Kovalan slipped through.
In a blaze, the city snapped open before him.

Like the yawning treasure chest of thousand-eyed Indra. [...]
Kovalan walked past the big street
With its two rows of elegant mansions
That crowned kings, renowned of their upright sceptres
That remove injustice, visited in secret.
They were the homes of courtesans exempt from having
To carry on their heads red bricks as a punishment
For misconduct [...].¹

Thus is described, in a text composed between the third and seventh centuries CE, the city of Madurai, capital of the Pandyas, one of the three royal dynasties which then dominated South India. No visible remnant of this long-ago era remained in the city that became, under colonial domination, the seat of one of the nine districts of the Tamil region, thereafter included in the Madras Presidency. The immense Minakshi temple (Minakshi is a form of Parvati, the second consort of Siva), a masterpiece of Dravidian architecture built between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the Telugu Nayaka dynasty (dependents of the Vijayanagar Empire), transformed the ancient city into a temple city and drew admiration from passing travellers. However, it was not to preserve a city symbolic of Tamil culture or to stimulate its economic development that the British Collector John Blackburne, posted to Madurai from 1834 to 1847, decided to undertake the ambitious urbanising projects that he did. Upon being relieved of his duties in 1847, he wrote:

In the task forced upon me of converting the Fort of Madurai into an open town, I proposed to myself to effect it with the greatest possible advantage to the public that my means allowed and at the last risk of loss to Government [...]. I feel

¹ *The Tale of an Anklet*, trans. Parthasarathy, Canto 14, pp. 142 and 146.

strongly that I have never given to the Board or Government satisfaction in my labour in this respect: yet I think it my duty to record that miserable as the town still is and little as appears to have been done towards its improvement, there has really been much done, and the improvement of the present over its former state is really very great and if a liberal confidence be reposed in my successor it would in three years be the best town in South India.²

This work, which went on for nearly ten years, is exceptional within the context of colonial India, and the administrative correspondence of the Collector concerning its progress found in the London and Madras archives is a particularly precious source for the historian. Before the creation of the first municipalities in the Madras Presidency in 1866, there existed no specific collection of sources to further the study of South India cities besides those found in the colonial trading posts of the Coromandel Coast. We possess just a few European maps often drawn by soldiers, travel narratives describing the few monuments and the ‘exotic’ customs and several scattered documents found in the colonial archives (only to be found by sifting through the indexes of the vast correspondence records of the Board of Revenue and only mentioning the cities in the context of police investigations, urban taxes, or in the event of a rare local conflict). There is nearly nothing concerning the habitat and urban landscape, economic life, social interactions, or the rites and celebrations that are all too often described today with the help of more recent accounts, imagining that India is a traditional society having preserved its most ancient practices.

The limited utility of the colonial sources is largely due to the fact that in the nineteenth century, the cities were of no interest to the administrators. India was primarily perceived as a rural country and the collection of land revenue was the first task of the collectors assigned to circulate in their designated districts.³ Before 1800, no autonomous urban institution directly administered by their local rulers existed in the cities. However, roughly 10 per cent of Tamil Indians lived in urban areas. During the first half of the nineteenth century, approximately forty cities dominated the regional urban network, counting between 3,000 and 50,000 inhabitants. Often several centuries old, these cities were the markets, the centres of the textile industry, vibrant religious centres periodically attracting thousands of pilgrims and the places where ancestral culture was preserved and passed on. Nonetheless, these cities remained well outside of the focus of colonial activities.

John Blackburne lifts the veil on the city of Madurai. His official correspondence allows us to better paint a picture of the places and the people in the nineteenth century. Today Madurai has developed into an agglomeration of more than 1.3 million inhabitants, built around a centuries-old

² Tamil Nadu State Archives (TNSA), Chennai, Madura Collectorate Records (Madura CR), Vol. 4343B, pp. 272–76, 26/03/1847.

³ Markovits, Pouchepadass and Subrahmanyam, eds, *Society and Circulation*, p. 255.

core that still shows evidence of a complex, sophisticated structural framework of the type known in Europe as the ‘old town’. Certainly, apart from the temples and ancient palace of the Nayakas, few buildings found today are more than fifty years old, but the road system appears relatively unchanged when compared with maps that date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. How does one explain this continuity? The sources studied here offer first an insight into the manner in which the pre-colonial city was organised (for there was minimal colonial contact before 1837). They additionally supply information concerning the characteristics of the urban landscape and the ways in which the population came to claim it. Furthermore, the projects undertaken put the colonial administration in direct contact with the inhabitants. They reveal the role the Collector played in a district’s capital city and the ways in which his authority was constantly being renegotiated.⁴ Carried out purely for reasons of sanitation, following European standards, these works had lasting effects for the city of Madurai. What effectiveness and what relevance did this colonial intervention have in the urban context?

Madurai in 1837: A Capital in Decline

A Rich Heritage

Madurai is situated in the Vaigai Valley, in the southern Tamil region. It is a city endowed with a long, rich history, already recounted in the Sangam literature, as illustrated by Kovalan’s story recounted above. The seat, according to legend, of an academy of poets, it remained an important cultural and religious centre in the Tamil region. The urban area such as it appeared to be at the beginning of the colonial era was already defined by the Nayaka period (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries). According to the maps drawn by Europeans in the eighteenth century,⁵ the great Minakshi temple formed the heart of the city. The quadrangular plan contained three circular principal streets: Cittirai Street, Avani Moollay Street and Masi Street. The first and largest, Cittirai Street, ran along the four walls of the temple, and the last, Masi or ‘Car Street,’ was used by the immense chariots carrying the divine couple during the great annual celebration in honour of the marriage of Siva and Minakshi. The complex constituting the palace constructed by Tirumala Nayaka in the seventeenth century occupied a considerable amount of space in the southeast. The entirety of the city was protected by a fortress, punctuated by four doors and surrounded by a moat running 5,670 yards. Built to replace the wall that had been erected during the second Pandya dynasty (in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries), it thus encompassed the expansion that had grown

⁴ Before 1840, the Madras administration often adjusted itself to local society (Barrow and Haynes, ‘The Colonial Transition’; Washbrook, ‘South India’). The period studied here begins a new era.

⁵ Map by Marchand (1757) in Cambridge, *An Account of the war in India*, and an undated map in Grose, *Voyage to the East Indies*, p. 78. See Figure 2.

up outside of its former perimeter.⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century, the city centre had become densely populated while the portions of the city located beyond Masi Street were not entirely developed, possibly a consequence of a decrease in population following the Karnatak Wars in the eighteenth century. This great fortified city was quite different from the open temple cities of the region, such as Kanchipuram or Chidambaram: its political functions were as visible as its sacred element.⁷ However, as was the case throughout South India, the homes of city-dwellers were hardly distinguishable from their rural counterparts. Most were single-story buildings with earthen walls and thatched roofs (using palm leaves), surrounded by vegetation. The fortress built by the Nayakas had included cultivated land and crops, particularly orchards, and it continued to occupy an important place in the heart of the city in 1837. The palace itself contained several buildings and large gardens surrounded by a large wall.

Madurai was an administrative capital, a religious centre, a market and above all an artisanal hub: weavers, often very poor and living in wretched conditions, constituted the principal group.⁸ Its population of roughly 30,000 (the third largest of the Tamil districts found in the Madras Presidency, after Madras and Tiruchirapalli) grew slightly during the first third of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the city did not experience any significant economic upheaval that could have justified the redevelopment of the urban plan in 1837. The city's population doubled during the large annual festival that accompanied a large cattle fair⁹ and the great temple attracted thousands of pilgrims throughout the year, but that was nothing out of the ordinary within the Tamil cultural context. The traditional means of accommodation were used without the colonial administration judging their involvement to be necessary.

An Abandoned City

After the disappearance of the Nayaka kingdom of Madurai, conquered by the Nawab of Arcot in 1736, the city had gone through a difficult period. The English, the French and their Indian allies contested it and more than once it found itself under siege. Following the annexation of the Karnatak by the East India Company in 1801, it became a simple administrative centre for the district. The buildings inherited from the preceding periods quickly fell into decay. The palace of

⁶ The Figure 1 seems to show the city before this construction. But the map probably produced by the Jesuits from local informants is an ideal representation of the city as the one of Tiruchirapalli from the same source.

⁷ Lewandowski described it as a 'ceremonial city' in 'Changing Form and Function', pp. 185–96.

⁸ Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library (OIOC), Official Publications, V/27/66/138, 'Report on the Medical Topography and Statistics of the Southern Division of the Madras Army', 1843.

⁹ OIOC, V/27/840/28, Ranking, 'Madras Fairs and Festivals, 1868'.

the Nayaka, already abandoned in 1800,¹⁰ was in ruins by 1837 and 5,000 dwellings were contained within its walls. Throughout the city, encroachments had rendered the wide streets increasingly narrow, a common occurrence in Tamil cities. The 40-foot-tall rampart surrounding the city was threatening to collapse.

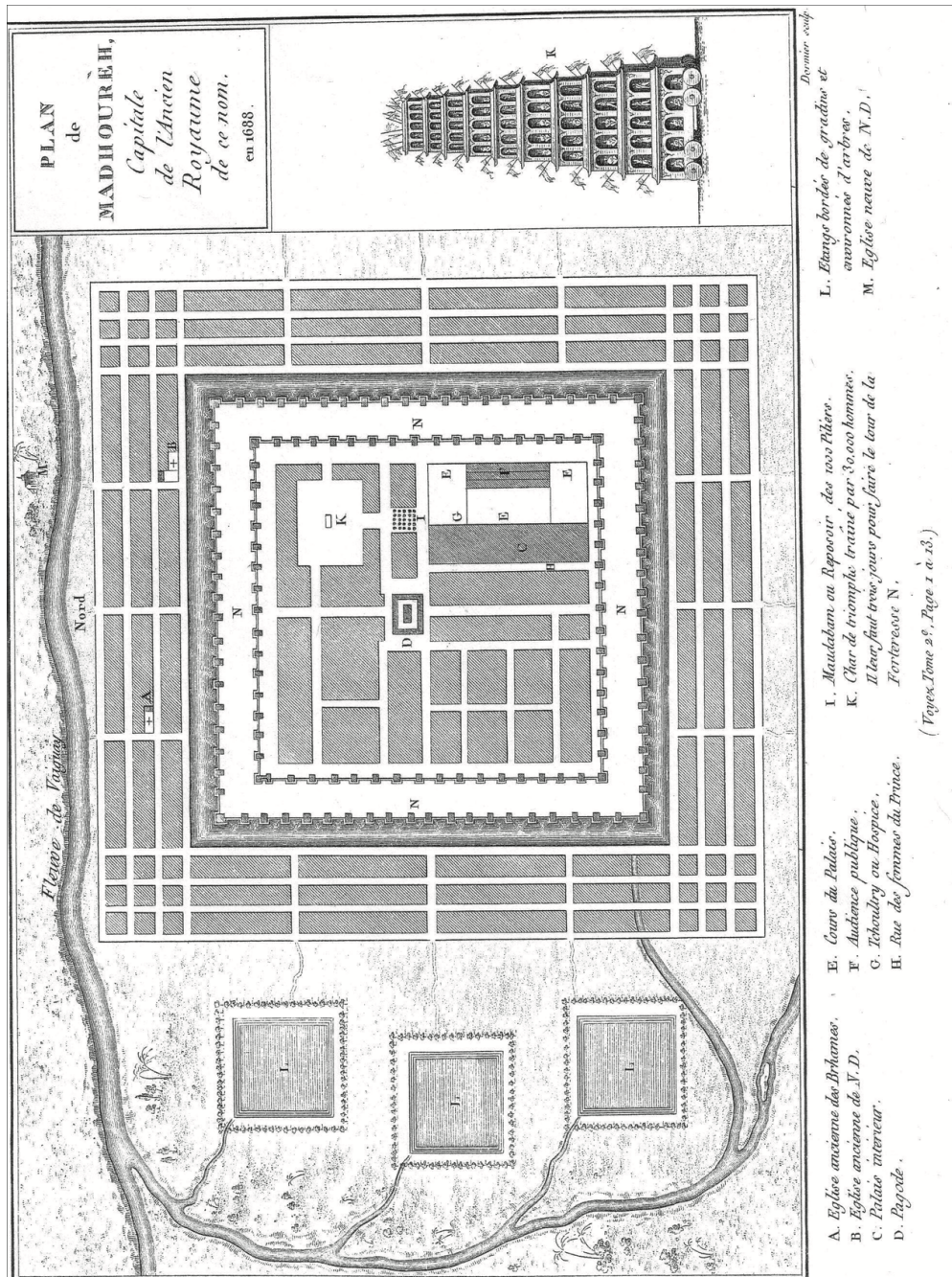
The colonial authorities did not view the administrative centres of the Madras Presidency as dynamic hubs of importance and the local administrators often complained of their economic sluggishness. It was out of the question to use the taxes raised largely from land revenue in the cities, which seemed to lack any element of ‘domination’ over the countryside. Thus there were no urban institutions in existence that could have undertaken the duties of city management. The only additions granted in the most populated centres were a *kotwal* and several peons charged with policing duties. The people were never involved with urban administration.

It is important to note that even the religious buildings were affected by this political abandonment of the cities. Since the Chola era, the Hindu rulers of the region legitimised their power by actively supporting religious institutions and Brahmans, financing costly construction programmes. During the colonial period, the maintenance of sanctuaries and sacred reservoirs relied solely on the temple’s own funds and donations from wealthy devotees. The management of religious institutions, however, was under the control of the East India Company until 1841, and any expenditure unrelated to the financing of regular rites appeared pointless to the British. One can point to the planned restoration of a *mandapam*, found in Madurai’s *teppakulam* to demonstrate how much the existing system left to be desired. In 1835, the Collector J. Blackburne expressed the view that this *mandapam* was ‘in a daily decaying’ and in a ‘very dangerous state’, which raised fears of potential accidents during the annual festival. A Nattukottai Chetti had advanced 1,000 rupees for its repair during Rous Peter’s administration (Collector from 1812 to 1828), but this sum had been kept on deposit awaiting further donations and ‘these money disappeared with the other embezzlements of that period’. In 1835, the ‘Merchant’, ‘still anxious for the celebrity of his name’, offered to add 3,000 rupees to cover the repairs in their entirety if the 1,000 rupees were reimbursed to him.¹¹ The buildings’ deterioration was an inevitable process under management such as this.

¹⁰ Daniell, *Oriental Scenery*, Vol. II, pl. 13, 15, 17.

¹¹ TNSA, Madura District Record (Madura DR), vol. 4683, pp. 416–17, 30/11/1835.

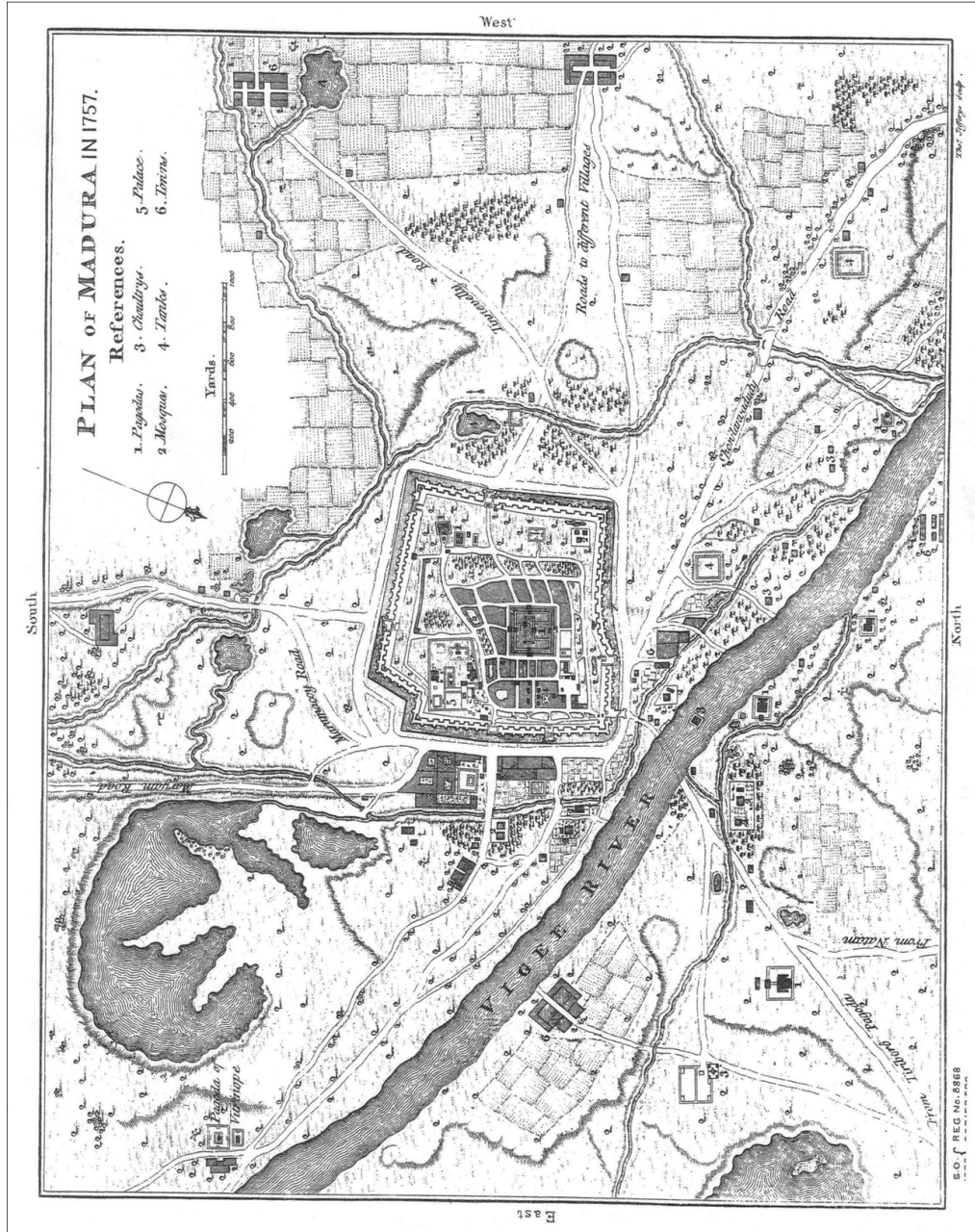
Figure 1
Plan of Madurai (1683)



Source: Langles, *Monuments anciens et modernes*, Vol. I., p. 98.

Figure 2

Plan of Madurai (1757)



Source: Marchand, in R.O. Cambridge, *An Account of the War*, p. 83.

The Project of the Collector

A Product of His Time

Enjoying little support, often even subject to active criticism by the provincial authorities and pressured by the discontented population's protests, the Collector John Blackburne is a somewhat typical Company servant representative of the Madras Presidency under the East India Company. Convinced that he acted for the common good, he did not take kindly to criticism. His administrative conception was contradictory: he claimed to personally control everything, implying a centralisation of the system, but he was unwilling to justify his actions and refused to become a cog in a bureaucratic system that would have required him to dutifully adhere to its hierarchy. He thus proceeded in an independent manner, not hesitating to develop illegal financial projects into which he contributed personal funds in order to accelerate the progress of work in Madurai. A man of his time, he lived at the beginning of the Victorian era, when one believed in the ability to change things by virtue of will without bothering with expert opinions or administrative red tape (much like Chadwick or Kingsley, key actors in the sanitation reforms taking place at much the same time in Great Britain).¹² Blackburne took care to foster his relations with his Indian employees, who were also his informants, in order to maintain his privileged position in the district. He conducted himself like a local prince as R. Peter had done, a Collector who had been integrated so thoroughly into the local society that he had been named 'Peter Pandya'. It was said that he had miraculously escaped death during a hunt (an elephant nearly crushed him) and that in gratitude he had made offerings of thanks to the goddess of Madurai. For Blackburne, however, this strong local integration did not involve associating with the inhabitants in the management of the city. Like the other magistrates in the Tamil region, sceptical of the inhabitants' ability to significantly invest themselves in local affairs, he deemed the application of 1842's Act X to be of little use in his district.¹³

The Sanitation Obsession

The years following 1801 saw few initiatives in the Tamil cities and most of them were undertaken with the aim of improving security. In 1805 ten new twelve-yard-wide roads were opened in Tiruchirapalli in order to improve circulation in a city that was then considered a crucial

¹² Briggs, *Victorian cities*, p. 22.

¹³ This Act allowed for the creation of urban institutions based on voluntary participation of inhabitants. OIOC, Madras Board of Revenue Proceedings (MBRP), P/305/26, pp. 15642–50, 29/10/1844 and 18/11/1844.

stronghold for the British Company.¹⁴ A reconstruction of Pudukottai—capital of the like-named principality—was begun in 1812 by the Raja, under the encouragement of the British Resident. By 1837, security in the cities was considered to be well in hand and had been replaced by hygiene as the reform priority due to the frequency of epidemics. In 1810, a lack of hygiene in overpopulated Madurai was cited in a medical report as the principal cause of a devastating cholera epidemic in the region. Cholera continued to ravage the city nearly every year.¹⁵ When the disease claimed 1,500 lives in 1836, the Collector was accused of negligence. It was this that motivated him one year later to make the decision to convert the town ‘from a dilapidated fort into an open city’.¹⁶

What was the reality of sanitation in the city in 1837? The few descriptions that we have at our disposal underline the contrast between the thriving countryside, criss-crossed by elegant roads lined by well-tended banyan trees, and a dirty city trapped within its own walls: ‘The streets are narrow, irregular, and dirty, and the houses of the most miserable description. Large herds of cattle were often found within the precincts of the town, and mephitic miasma were exhaled from the stagnant drains in the vicinity of the fort’.¹⁷ The city was undoubtedly very green. There were orchards to be found and the palace was surrounded by gardens. The main streets were lined with trees and, as was the case throughout the Tamil region, the inhabited parcels of land possessed a back courtyard that served as an outhouse, garden and cowshed. At the time, conforming to the accepted notions of hygiene, the primary method used to improve urban sanitary conditions was to promote better air circulation in order to allow for the dispersal of the ‘miasmas’ judged to be responsible for illness and to eliminate the standing water and trees considered to be carriers of disease. As a result, the most elaborate works undertaken were the destruction of the ramparts and the filling-in of the moat surrounding the city while enlarging the principal roads in the city centre and improving the drainage system. While the orchards and uncultivated areas had to be disposed of, they did not yet go so far as to drain the reservoirs, as would be the case at the beginning of the twentieth century (a process that the architect P. Geddes fought against).¹⁸

To limit overcrowding and combat fires, the Collector attempted to limit the use of thatched roofs in the city centre. The construction of markets and the development of areas in which to park were meant to avoid the periodic invasion of the roads by vendors’ stands, animals and carts, all while ensuring a more healthy environment in which to buy and sell. The Collector likewise wished to clear the areas that abutted the temple and palace, considered to be the two poles of the city. One

¹⁴ MBRP, P/288/15, p. 1312, 21/02/1805 and p. 2449, 22/04/1805. Earlier, an ambitious plan to reconstruct Coimbatore was elaborated in 1800, but probably never put into use (TNSA, Coimbatore DR, Vol. 591, pp. 106–11, 24/03/1800).

¹⁵ TNSA, Madura DR, Vol. 4680, pp. 61–2, 03/03/1832.

¹⁶ OIOC, MBRP, P/305/12, p. 8012, letter dated 13/06/1844.

¹⁷ Chandler, *Seventy-five years*, p. 2; Fullarton, *A Gazetteer of the World*.

¹⁸ Geddes, *Modern Review Town Planning*.

can see here a kind of intervention, typical of European cities since the Renaissance, which sought to create perspective and emphasise the urban ‘architectural heritage’. The palace (‘handsome and venerable vestige of the magnificence of the last Carnatic Dynasty’[sic] wrote the Collector in 1845), in ruins, was also renovated in order to serve the administration. The development of a public square, on the other hand, was never considered: this type of space (particularly favoured by the French in their colonial possessions) did not exist in the Tamil cities. The example of Madurai effectively demonstrates that the colonial authorities did not seek to modify the city’s norms when Europeans were present in low numbers.

Administrative Inertia and Conflicts

The context was especially unfavourable to large-scale investments during a difficult financial period for the British Company. In October 1837 the district civil engineer responsible for the public works had estimated the cost to tear down the ramparts to be 15,000 rupees, a sum that the government could not afford to pay.¹⁹ The Collector thus chose an economical method: the land holding the ramparts and moat were to be sold to private owners at auction. In order to receive a deed of ownership, they had to commit to tear down the walls, fill in the moat and build their house. By 1,844, 660 plots had thus been sold and 3,394 rupees collected, half of what was due, the rest to be paid upon receipt of ownership titles.²⁰ A list of 696 people was supplied to the Board of Revenue in 1846 for the granting of titles.²¹ The money thus received added to a fund created to compensate owners who had had their land expropriated in the course of the enlargement of roads, to contribute to drainage projects and to develop new marketplaces and police stations. The new occupants were further required to pay a tax (a ‘quit- rent’) in order to replace the one that had previously been paid by those cultivating the land found in the empty trenches that had constituted the moat.²² The sales of the land corresponding to the rampart, however, did not have the success hoped for at the outset. The Collector estimated in 1847 that the sale had been undertaken in unfavourable conditions due to the inflated prices of food at the time.²³ However, the sales nonetheless continued after Blackburne’s departure: by 1851 this property venture had reaped 39,381 rupees,²⁴ which is worth comparing to the 1,000 rupees paid by the government in 1837 to buy the orchards!²⁵

¹⁹ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5340A, pp. 341–46, letter dated 31/01/1844

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5342, p. 312, letter dated 02/05/1846.

²² Chandler, *Seventy-five years*, p. 13.

²³ OIOC, Madras Proceedings, Public Works, P/283/30, p. 106, 23/02/1847.

²⁴ Ibid., P/283/45, p. 845, 13/05/1851.

²⁵ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5340A, pp. 341–6, letter dated 31/01/1844.

In 1846, in order to quicken the work's pace, the Collector personally advanced 500 rupees in the form of a no-interest loan that was to be repaid by the sale of levelled lands.²⁶ The involvement of the Collector seems to have been appreciated by those on high, as a dispatch from the Court of Directors dated 19 December 1843 authorising him to tear down the glacis in order to allow for the expansion of the city noted that 'the improvement of the city of Madura' was 'very creditable to that Gentleman'.²⁷ The provincial administration, however, hardly helped him in his efforts. The Board of Revenue repeatedly neglected to relay his requests to the relevant offices. Because the Company lacked a single unified authority, rivalries between different services blatantly hindered the progress of projects. First of all, according to the Collector, in 1820 the military authorities had accepted the possibility of beginning the dismantling of the rampart and they had given the authorisation to use the glacis as a construction site in 1838. In 1847, however, Blackburne was unable to find any document legalising the sales that had already taken place and was therefore unable to deliver the titles of ownership promised to the buyers. Above all, the Collector was in outright conflict with the district's civil engineer who disputed certain technical aspects of the project, such as the drainage system or the destruction of houses in order to enlarge the streets. One can imagine that he resented being brushed aside from these important public works that, in his function as a specialist, under normal circumstances he would have supervised. He continuously accused the Collector and his assistants of incompetence and abuse of power and he even attempted to accumulate evidence against him from among the inhabitants of Madurai, a practice that, according to the Collector, served to stir up discontent in the city.²⁸ It was following the engineer's accusations that the Collector was suspended from his functions during the first six months of 1843, the time needed for the Board of Revenue to pursue an investigation into his management of the district. No charge was maintained against him, apart from a judgment that there had been an insufficient level of supervision over certain public works undertaken on roads in the district, and he was reinstated. It is noteworthy that this reconsideration coincided with the creation of a Department of Public Works intended to improve the communication networks within the Madras Presidency: one can imagine that these works were judged to take priority, a fact which would render the provincial authorities little disposed to encourage urban developments.

Blackburne was equally attacked by the discontented inhabitants, especially those who had been obliged to relinquish their property in the course of widening the principal streets. They addressed numerous petitions to the Board of Revenue, which most often referred them to court.

²⁶ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5342, pp. 200–9, letter dated 23/04/1846. Following his departure, he appointed Fischer to recover this money in 1847 (TNSA, Madura DR, Vol. 5343A, letter dated 5/08/1847. This letter possibly makes reference to another advance).

²⁷ OIOC, MBRP, P/305/6, pp. 4933–53, 25/03/1844.

²⁸ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5340A, pp. 338–59, letter dated 20/01/1844.

In 1844 the Collector acknowledged that he had also often been suspected of the use of ‘arbitrary violence’, ‘carelessness of existing right’, although he acted without hatred. Certain that he was working for the public good, he agreed to be personally brought before the court when he sued properties,²⁹ which the Board likely tolerated in order to avoid being held liable. But a Minute Consultation issued by the Madras Government dated 23 July 1844 in any case recalled that, as for all civil servants, the Collector was not allowed to defend his name before the court regarding acts committed in the exercise of his functions.³⁰

The 1840s correspond to a turning point in the history of the administration of the Madras Presidency as it developed a particularly advanced centralised bureaucratic system. The East India Company wished to avoid having its employees remain too long in any one post in order to hinder the formation of strong local bonds apt to influence them and cause rebellion against the established hierarchy in a region where there were no natural leaders as in the north on whom to rely. The promotion of civil servants furthermore implied frequent transfers, which were often precipitated by health problems. Many died on the job. European personnel in the district were of a very limited number (only a few for every one or two million inhabitants) while the Indian employees of the ‘cutcherry’ were primarily concerned with the collection of revenue and the maintenance of order. The Collector was therefore unable to obtain the nomination and retention of people assigned to urban works. Beginning in March 1842, Marrett, the assistant surveyor of the district who was very involved in the project, only had the authorisation to dedicate fifteen days per month to the city. The engineer who continued to refuse his promotion disputed his competence. Marrett worked with an Indian named ‘Master Peroomal’ (a contractor or Indian architect regarding whom no more precise information is given) and only one or two subordinates. On 13 February 1844, Marrett was suspended and replaced by someone judged by the Collector to be ‘inexperienced’,³¹ who was followed by two successive new assistants.³² Furthermore, the only available workers were the prisoners who were also required to assure the maintenance of the roads in a fifteen-mile radius around the city. The Collector was obliged to personally supervise the execution of the works, a very demanding task that in the end occupied him to an excessive extent. However, despite all of these obstacles, he succeeded in fundamentally transforming the city.

²⁹ OIOC, MBRP, P/305/12, p. 8007, 13/06/1844.

³⁰ OIOC, MBRP, P/305/15, p. 9867, 29/07/1844.

³¹ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5340A, pp. 350–51, letter dated 13/02/1844.

³² TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5341A, pp. 240–41, letter dated 11/12/1845.

A City Transformed

Urban Landscapes and City Customs

Madurai became an open city. To promote circulation and clean up the city, the urban plan was reorganised. The large pre-existing concentric main streets encircling the temple (squares within squares) saw their role reinforced. All forms of ‘encroachment’ that had led to their narrowing were eliminated. The width of the Car Street was fixed at nineteen yards.³³ Numerous secondary roads in the centre were also enlarged.³⁴ The original urban layout was maintained thanks to the creation of two new roads laid on the site of the rampart and moat, parallel to Masi Street (Marrett Street and Veli Street). Along these new axes, little by little land sold or granted in exchange for expropriated properties from along the main streets was built up. By 1844, 50 houses and shops had already been built, 114 were under construction and a further 57 foundations had been laid. In 1846 the Collector proceeded with the drafting of property titles for 1,741 buildings.³⁵ The urban expansion, however, was not limited to this zone and extended out towards the large ring that constituted Veli Street (meaning ‘outside street’). It was there near the river that the Parias, excluded from the centre, were relocated. On the municipal maps of the twentieth century, this zone is clearly situated to the north-east. Projects involved in the city planning, however, were largely limited to modifications to the road network. No public buildings were built aside from one ‘cutcherry’ established for the *kotwal* and 18 houses built to lodge the guards.³⁶ Meanwhile, the renovation of old buildings was reduced to a few projects in the palace and improvement to the Civil Hospital.

Following a long conflict with the owners, the Collector finally succeeded in ridding the centre of the city of a large plantation containing 182 coconut trees. By 1886, the city counted no more than a few small areca trees and other plantations here and there.³⁷ Construction on ‘waste land’ was encouraged in order to avoid them from becoming dumping grounds or de facto public facilities. Some plots were allocated to persons displaced by the projects; however, this was not without contestation, as people could claim a right of occupancy in these areas.

³³ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5340A, pp. 405–06, 15/07/1844

³⁴ In 1844 the Civil Engineer criticised this measure, estimating that ten yards would have been sufficient and that it would have avoided the destruction of homes near the rampart and in certain streets. OIOC, Madras Proceedings, Public Works, P/283/21, p. 611, 18/06/1844.

³⁵ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5342, pp. 300–09, letter dated 23/04/1846.

³⁶ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5340A, pp. 338–59, 20/01/1844.

³⁷ Madras Central Survey Office, map of ‘The Madura Town and Municipality’, 1886.

As in all European cities of the period, the zoning of residential and commercial areas became more functional: traffic lanes had to be cleared of all obstacles (shops, *pandals*, housing encroachments), while residential areas were to be clearly demarcated and built consistently and without vacant spaces. It is worth noting that the emphasis placed on city traffic, new to Europeans, was not so novel in India. According to architectural treatises such as the *Mayamata*,³⁸ streets, at once traffic and commercial areas, were to be plotted before filling in empty spaces with residential houses. The importance of religious or political processions required the maintenance of particularly large main streets. The projects thus had only to restore the city to its former functionality. On the other hand, the creation of permanent marketplaces and parking areas no doubt modified the usual routine of vendors and peasants in the city as well as the citizens' daily trajectories.

An Accentuated Social Segregation

Contrary to the generally accepted view, the separation of castes was far from strict in the large Tamil cities at the beginning of the nineteenth century outside of coastal towns. The demographic expansion, economic needs and the absence of strict regulation had led to, if not an intermingling, at least a certain acceptance of other castes and religions within different areas and even in the streets.³⁹ In a city as old as Madurai, the urban plan developed by the Nayakas certainly resembled that of the rajadhani cities found in antique architectural treatises. The silk weavers were regrouped around the palace and the Brahmans to the north of the Minakshi temple. But the areas surrounding the temple were inhabited by citizens of high caste and also by dancers and barbers whom the collector was determined to move from Cittirai Street.⁴⁰ In order to make this street—the largest in the city—a model thoroughfare as much for hygiene as for aesthetics, their huts had to be torn down. Their low social stature and, in the case of the dancers, the alleged 'immorality' of their activity, could not be tolerated in the very centre of the city by British sensibilities characteristic of the period. As a rule, the lower castes were systematically pushed out from the city centre. Officially, it was not a policy of social segregation. For those that the Collector called the 'Parias', without further precision, it was rather a consequence of the reconstruction of the most overpopulated areas into which they were crowded and along the principal arteries of the city, the replacement of huts and thatched roof houses by more durable 'substantial houses'. In any case, the necessity of moving them attests to their presence in the city centre before 1840. In 1847, the

³⁸ Dagens, *Mayamata*. This text in Sanskrit, most likely dating from the thirteenth century was largely used in South India.

³⁹ Lists of inhabitants provided during expropriations or for tax purposes prove this also for Kanchipuram and Tiruchirapalli.

⁴⁰ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5340A, pp. 174–78, report dated 24/02/1845.

Collector mentioned a 9,837-square-foot piece of land situated in the middle of Madurai, in the 'sacred square' (that is to say inside the square defined by the four streets of Masi) occupied by the Parias and 'abandoned' by them in 1844 for an equal piece of land that he had given them 'outside of the fort'. The land thus reclaimed was sold at auction and fetched 805 rupees from an Indian Brahman civil servant who intended to build shops and a *pettah* designed to accommodate wagons and animals.⁴¹ As one could not prevent the poorest from seeking accommodation somewhere, they were relegated to the periphery of the city, beyond the last outlying road, Veli Street, where huts were tolerated. Other groups were openly judged 'undesirable' in the city, certainly due to the polluting nature of their activities: launderers, *chucklers*⁴² and barbers had to be relocated 'outside the city' to land that had to be purchased for them; they were essentially relegated to an area in the northeast frequently liable to flood where they continue to live to this day. They joined artisan groups such as blacksmiths already established outside the former ramparts.⁴³ The newly built area around the site of the former walls could not accommodate the poorest and the low castes because the quality of construction there was closely supervised. To obtain a plot, one had to commit to build a durable, tiled-roof house. Thus, the silk weavers who had obtained the first plots of land in 1842 were obliged to build their houses 'of uniform fronts and material, with tiled roofs'. The Collector even wanted to dispose of the huts belonging to the indigenous soldiers that lined the southern portion of the rampart, arguing for the construction of proper houses, which their salaries did not permit. Above all, it must be noted that from the beginning the lands to be developed were granted according to caste and the resale of such property to those belonging to other castes was strictly forbidden. This principle of caste separation is clearly confirmed by the Collector: in a letter dating from 1845, he recalls that the land had been sold to 'particular castes or classes'. Any transfer to other classes was not allowed and indeed, he had denied one such sale in accordance with this rule.⁴⁴ In 1844, the northwest corner of the former rampart was allocated to the '*Moodaliars* and such castes'.⁴⁵ The Brahmans settled in the north and weavers in the eastern part of Veli Street.⁴⁶

The projects undertaken thus modified the social layout of the city. The lasting desirability of the central districts led to the lower castes being relegated to areas outside the urban perimeter already built up. At the same time, two new types of localities appeared: along the two new peripheral boulevards, new attractive houses drew inhabitants of a relatively affluent and

⁴¹ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5343A, p. 250, letter dated 27/01/1847.

⁴² In Tamil, *chakkili* is a low Tamil caste, often composed of tanners and cobblers.

⁴³ We know this thanks to the petition of a landlord who had leased land to them to the north of the rampart (TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5342, pp. 340–45, 08/08/1846).

⁴⁴ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5341A, pp. 183–4, letter dated 19/03/1845.

⁴⁵ Term used by the *Vellalars* and by the *Kaikkolars* of northern Tamilnadu. Chandler, *Seventy-five years*, p 15.

⁴⁶ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5342, pp. 300–09, 23/04/1846.

advantaged social stratum. A new agraaharam developed in the north with a marketplace for fruits, vegetables and flowers.⁴⁷ Beyond that, the lowest castes were obliged to settle in a transitional zone between the city and countryside, most often in an area prone to flooding near the river. The Christians reinforced their position with the construction of a church by an American Protestant mission⁴⁸ and the settling of Catholics in the southeast, in the redeveloped peripheral area.

Implications for the Inhabitants

Limited Resistance

The period of development in Madurai was a time of transition for the city and its inhabitants in more ways than one. It was in 1844 that the Company withdrew its oversight of 8,292 Hindu temples in the region. A great agitation characterised the city in 1843 because the inhabitants worried over the implications of the coinciding destruction of the city walls and the abandonment of the temples by the government. They feared that ‘with the walls, their religion was about to fall’.⁴⁹ At the time, the walls surrounding the great Tamil capitals represented the physical protection of the prince toward the inhabitants of urban territories, considered during the pre-colonial era to be microcosms of the kingdom. The tearing down of the wall thus signified the definitive closure of a chapter of the city’s history. The year 1845 saw another coincidence as the stationing of troops in Madurai was discontinued. Madurai had no more enemies—Indian or European—nearby and the internal threats, in particular those tied to the ‘thieving’ castes such as the *Kallars*, although still present, seemed to be of little concern, especially compared to certain situations in North India.

The archives provide no trace of collective protests against the projects undertaken. Certainly, one could suppose that the Collector would have been little inclined to inform the supervising authorities of such demonstrations, but the engineer would have nonetheless immediately seized this opportunity to attack him. The various charges presented at court, however, all stemmed from individual initiatives. As for the lack of enthusiasm, lamented by the Collector, for the purchase of land on the site of the rampart, it was not an indication of resistance to the project. Rather, it can be explained by the lack of wealthy individuals interested in a risky new financial investment.

However, various forms of passive resistance can nonetheless be detected. The poor living

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ OIOC, Madras Proceedings, Public Works, P/283/21, p. 611, 18/06/1844.

⁴⁹ Chandler, *Seventy-five years*, p. 15.

in close proximity to the temple refused to relocate and the archives do not reveal if the Collector succeeded in evicting all of them. His greatest difficulty involved ousting the owners of the large coconut tree plantation. Above all, the inhabitants refused to bend to the new rules concerning the use of space considered by the British as ‘public.’ The establishment of permanent markets did not succeed in entirely settling commercial activity to a fixed place. It must also be pointed out that in South India, the peasants from the surrounding environs who came to sell their produce in the cities hardly had the means with which to pay the costs of renting a shop. At the end of the nineteenth century, open sales in the streets from makeshift stalls often set up during the evening continued, despite orders from sanitation inspectors. Neither did the authorities succeed in eliminating the presence of vacant lots, despite the demographic expansion. In India, the selection of a place on which to build a house is not a simple matter of money, but rather calls a number of complex rules into play. An individual’s health is thought to be affected by incompatibility with a certain soil, for example. One can thus imagine the difficulties associated with transforming a former dumping ground into developable land.

A Traditional Patronage

Individuals as well as the Minakshi temple as an entity made significant contributions to the projects related to the reconstruction of the city. The temple, the direction of which was entrusted to a Temple Committee beginning in 1844, was the principal contributor. It financed the development of three marketplaces, on an unoccupied piece of land it owned on the large street of the bazaar, for 28,514 rupees.⁵⁰ The temples and mosques traditionally profited from commercial activities within their compounds or on lands that had been donated to them. However, the temple also invested 6,352 rupees,⁵¹ in order to ensure the proper drainage and enlargement of the primary street circulating around the temple as well as the cleaning of two principal reservoirs in the city in 1844.⁵² This effort continued after Blackburne’s departure in 1848 through the financing of a drainage canal running from the temple to Veli Street, in the eastern section of the city.⁵³ Blackburne courted the priests of the temple to win their support: in 1846, he refused to allow governmental use of surplus funds from the temple, that he deemed necessary for worship.⁵⁴ It must be noted that the colonial authorities had appropriated the surplus funds of religious institutions at the time of the decision to transfer the direction of the temples in 1841. In 1843, this represented a

⁵⁰ OIOC, MBRP, P/301/13, p. 16082, 11/12/1837.

⁵¹ OIOC, Madras Proceedings, Public Works, P/283/21, p. 611, 18/06/1844.

⁵² TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5340A, pp. 338–59, letter dated 20/01/1844.

⁵³ TNSA, Madura DR, Vol. 5344A, p. 226, letter of the Collector to the Civil Engineer, 10/10/1848.

⁵⁴ Breckenridge-Appadurai, *The Sri Minaksi Sundaresvarar Temple*, pp. 231–41. See also ‘Idolatri (India), a Parliamentary Report of 1849’, p. 496, cited by Fuller, ‘The renovation ritual’, pp. 40–63.

considerable total of 1,423,252 rupees for the Madras Presidency. The Collector also favoured the Brahmans in granting them land in the north of the city twice the size of the allocations given to the other castes, on North Veli Street,⁵⁵ an action sharply criticised by the engineer.

Several notable figures also involved themselves in the projects. G.F. Fischer, the last of the great English adventurers of the Madras Presidency, organised a fundraising effort among the inhabitants to restore the palace, giving himself the image of a disinterested benefactor.⁵⁶ In January 1847, he proposed to repair several buildings of the palace in order to allow the accommodation of justice court employees and plaintiffs. At the time, this entrepreneur was known as zamindar of Salem (the only English zamindar in South India) and he had significant interests in the district of Madurai since he managed the affairs of the zamindari of Ramnad, whom he had furthermore defended before Blackburne. Brahman Indian employees posted in the district were other patrons: in 1844, Ram Rao, an agent of the *huzur sheristadar* office erected a *chattram* on the banks of the Vaigai.⁵⁷ In 1847, the district's *sheristadar* undertook the restoration of a reservoir and garden near the Vaigai, in order to accommodate the crowd taking part in the cattle fair that accompanied the city's annual celebration,⁵⁸ a process his son continued after his death.⁵⁹ These developments, taking place along the fringes of the city's reconstruction project, were clearly charitable acts in line with tradition meant to bestow local prestige.

Other forms of collaboration, however, are rare. Numerous people set up market-places or parking areas in order to then rent out their access. In 1844, the Collector negotiated an agreement with the 'bricklayers of the city', who agreed to tear down the inner walls of the palace at no charge in exchange for the right to one third of the stone, an arrangement that saved nearly 4,000 rupees.⁶⁰ The motivation here was of an economic nature: this was the basis of the contracts for the raising of taxes, the supervision of markets or the collection of refuse that the municipalities established in 1866.

New Property Rights

In order to facilitate the expropriations and render more attractive the new peripheral acquisitions, the Collector was led to more precisely define property rights, a major issue during

⁵⁵ In 1846, only the northern part of the street was occupied by tile-roofed houses arranged in rows due to a lack of funds. TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5342, pp. 300–09, 23/04/1846.

⁵⁶ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 4343B, pp. 43–45, 15/01/1847.

⁵⁷ He obtained a portion of 600 yards of the stone wall and the recovery of a 60 rupee tax to finance it. OIOC, Madras Proceedings, Public Works, P/283/22, p. 1158, 22/10/1844.

⁵⁸ OIOC, MBRP, P/307/20, p. 5358, 08/04/1847.

⁵⁹ OIOC, MBRP, P/307/29, p. 9350, 12/07/1847.

⁶⁰ TNSA, Madura CR, Vol. 5340A, pp. 341–46, 31/01/1844.

the East India Company's time. The debates on the subject essentially revolved around land rights and were settled, in South India, under the governance of Thomas Munro in the 1820s.⁶¹ In Madurai, little by little the European methods of acquisition and transfer of land were imposed, but they did not seem to correspond to local practices. At the outset of colonial domination, the absence of clear rules allowed for abuse by the local administration or influential individuals, and led to an arbitrariness which was detrimental to the maintenance of urban developments since the inhabitants, lacking proper protection, were constantly in danger of losing their rights of occupation.

At the same time in Europe, one witnesses a redefinition of the rules governing urban ownership. Demographic growth, the demands of industrialisation, new technical possibilities and the growing hygienic concern drove the public authorities to regulate the use of the urban space and to support large development projects. In England, the very restrictive procedure of 'forced acquisition' was codified in 1842 and 1845. In France, the Napoleonic law of 1810 regarding expropriation was refined between 1833 and 1841.⁶² In South India, the Europeans considered that the land found within the cities had been, in the pre-colonial states, under the exclusive control of local rulers who used it as they pleased. The inhabitants thus possessed only the physical houses they had built on this royally-owned land. This conception allowed all fashion of expropriation judged useful by the state and for this reason, the practice endured. However, out of concern for a standard of justice, the colonial administration instituted remunerations for the inhabitants who had to be expelled by estimating the cost of materials according to the nature of the house, on condition that the occupation was judged to be 'legitimate'. This legitimacy was determined by the duration of habitation and in the case of buildings appearing to be inappropriately placed, proof of authorisation to build from the former princes was also required. In a letter dating 13 June 1844 regarding the coconut tree plantation labelled as 'illegal,' Blackburne listed three types of arguments used in the city to vindicate a right of ownership.⁶³ Often, inhabitants maintained that they had been in possession since 'time immemorial', which meant that their occupation had preceded the colonial conquest and that the Company could thus not question it. A second case corresponded to a more recent occupation of unclaimed land. These vacant lots were considered as belonging to no one, and all were free to settle there. The third source of legitimate occupation corresponded to verbally authorised donations or grants made in writing by the Collectors, but for

⁶¹ The question of urban ownership is hardly mentioned in the historiography. In towns, the British had no need to fix the revenue assessment and had therefore no obsession with defining property rights. In the Madras Presidency, no house tax existed. Town duties, taxes on trade (*mortupha*) and on cultivated urban land were the main sources of urban revenue.

⁶² Benevelo, *La ville*, pp. 206–07.

⁶³ OIOC, MBRP, p. 8012, 23/05/1844.

a limited duration. In the first case, the owners were considered to be ‘legitimate’ and they had to be compensated if their house was demolished. However, could they be forced to leave if need be? If the Collector could prove that the building was dangerous and encroached upon a public road or that the use of the property was detrimental to public hygiene, authorisation was granted. On the other hand, if the seizure was deemed to be for less vital reasons, the Board of Revenue refused the confiscation in the event of protestation on the part of the owner. It was thus that Blackburne was unable to acquire a house located near the Treasury because the owner refused the offered 123 rupees.⁶⁴

The second ground for legitimate ownership, the free occupation of unoccupied land, was long a ‘customary’ practice in the cities. In 1814, following complaints from the military office due to encroachments, the Collector pointed out that the inhabitants could not be blamed because, lacking a land registry, they were unaware of the limits of the military’s claims.⁶⁵ As for the third reason cited, verbal authorisation, it was without doubt largely used in order to ensure local support. In 1820, the Collector defended his right to grant land to inhabitants in an area near the parade ground claimed by the military.⁶⁶ Furthermore, in the years following the cession of the Karnatak to the East India Company, a latent conflict arose between the Nawab of Arcot and the colonial authorities because his agents and related families used his urban possessions in various cities to maintain a certain control on the financial market and commercial activities. This was particularly flagrant in Tiruchirapalli around the city’s main mosque. In Madurai, the family of former *qil’adars* of the Nawab continued to sell land within Madurai’s fort, claiming the property to have originated from the Nawab. By 1826, the Collector R. Peter, who had made use of his right to dispose of urban grounds several times,⁶⁷ disputed the *qil’adars*’ continued claim that such prerogatives still rested with them.⁶⁸

The apparent flexibility of property rights did not preclude the existence of more classic rights of ownership when it came to veritable houses rather than the ‘huts’ of the poor. Several instances of sales and mortgages demonstrate how real estate was handled. A piece of land located on South Chittirai street, across from the temple and following local lore, given by Tirumala Nayaka to his brother, had been put in the possession of Brahmans. At the time of the ‘Carnatic government’, a family of civil servants who built two houses on the property occupied a portion of the land. The other part, following the colonial conquest, became the ‘cutcherry’ of the Collector,

⁶⁴ OIOC, MBRP, P/299/33, p. 2298, 17/03/1834.

⁶⁵ TNSA, Madura DR, Vol. 1162, p. 15, 11/02/1814.

⁶⁶ TNSA, Madura DR, Vol. 1169, p. 257, 17/12/1820.

⁶⁷ OIOC, Madras Proceedings, PW, P/283/24, 8/04/1845, 284 (Consultation n°222 and 223 of 1843).

⁶⁸ OIOC, MBRP, P/295/72, p. 6259, 29/06/1826.

then the Treasury. The Brahman family then lost its possessions: one house was sold at auction by the government on 21 April 1819, and then resold on 2 June 1824. The other was sold by the wife of the owner on 13 May 1819 for 69 *pagodas* and resold on 28 July of the same year for 71 *pagodas*, the four sales being certified by deeds (with the purchase of stamps).⁶⁹ This affair demonstrates how houses could serve as a means to pay debts and the rapid resale seems to point to the presence of speculation (although it could also be explained by the inability of the buyer to pay for his purchase). Another example, regarding a property of 1100 square-feet located in the fort near the cantonment demonstrates the frequent changes in ownership. The land was given to a colonel of the British army in 1800. The property changed hands six times after him and in 1831, when coveted by the major of Madurai for soldiers' lodgings, was sold to an adjutant for 500 rupees by the weavers in possession of it. These weavers had spent 300 rupees to improve it. Its worth seemed to be reinforced by the presence of four wells.⁷⁰

Furthermore, houses of value could be mortgaged. In 1846, an 87 year-old invalid protested against the sale in public auction of a house for non-payment of the *abkary* farm of Madacolum (a tax originating from licences granted for the production or sale of alcohol). He claimed that the house served as security against a loan of 120 rupees that he had granted to his son in 1840.⁷¹ According to the Collector, this was 'against regulation'. He suspected a family arrangement designed to avoid the sale because the grandson was the owner and an occupant of the house. Even if it is related to fraud, this mortgage dispute demonstrates that the practice did exist.

It is difficult to determine the way in which the inhabitants valued houses and the link between the house and the land. The presence of trees or a well increased real estate value. The colonial authorities classified houses in three categories: thatched roof (using palm leaves) 'huts' of little value, tiled roof houses, and terraced houses, which were of much higher value. The location, however, had no monetary value and was never taken into account, as though all land was interchangeable in the city. It was this that allowed the Collector to make exchanges between properties at the city's centre and periphery without further financial compensation. It is feasible that the projects undertaken spurred real estate speculation, as certain buyers who purchased land around the rampart did so 'for profit', as several of the Collector's letters mention.⁷² Once levelled, the land was resold, undoubtedly at a much higher price. In 1847, the Collector who succeeded Blackburne estimated that the developable land had a high value in the city due to the population's density and wealth, which sparked a considerable number of charges of encroachment and several

⁶⁹ TNSA, Madura DR, Vol. 4681, pp. 68–71, 27/02/1833.

⁷⁰ TNSA, Madura DR, Vol. 4679, pp. 98–101, 22/04/1831.

⁷¹ OIOC, MBRP, P/306/44, p. 12787, 12/10/1846. The house had been sold at 375 Rupees and then 215 Rupees.

⁷² OIOC, MBRP, P/305/39, p. 1903, 10/02/1845.

cases of violent dispossession.⁷³

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, these projects have had long-term effects. In 1862, the city of Madurai featured ‘wide streets’ and the English traveller C.R. Markham declared it to be the best-built Indian city.⁷⁴ Although it had experienced only moderate demographic growth, the city had new axes along which to develop. By the end of the nineteenth century, it had reached a population of 87,000. Until the 1930s, it remained largely confined to its new limits with the exception of an extension to the north of the river, facilitated by the construction of a bridge on the Vaigai in 1889, where the administration gradually settled.⁷⁵

The urban landscape was modified, with an increase in more permanent housing and a marked reduction in open spaces. Finally, physical segregation was reinforced as the concept of castes being grouped together by area was clearly encouraged by the colonial authorities. As for the situation regarding sanitation, that was far from being settled. During the monsoon of 1843, during the height of the city’s period of public works, cholera claimed 50 people per day. While cities in Great Britain were progressively developing an underground sanitation system in the course of the 1840s, more elaborate than their transportation system, the treatment of waste water and refuse as well as the availability of potable water remained inadequate in India until the end of the nineteenth century.

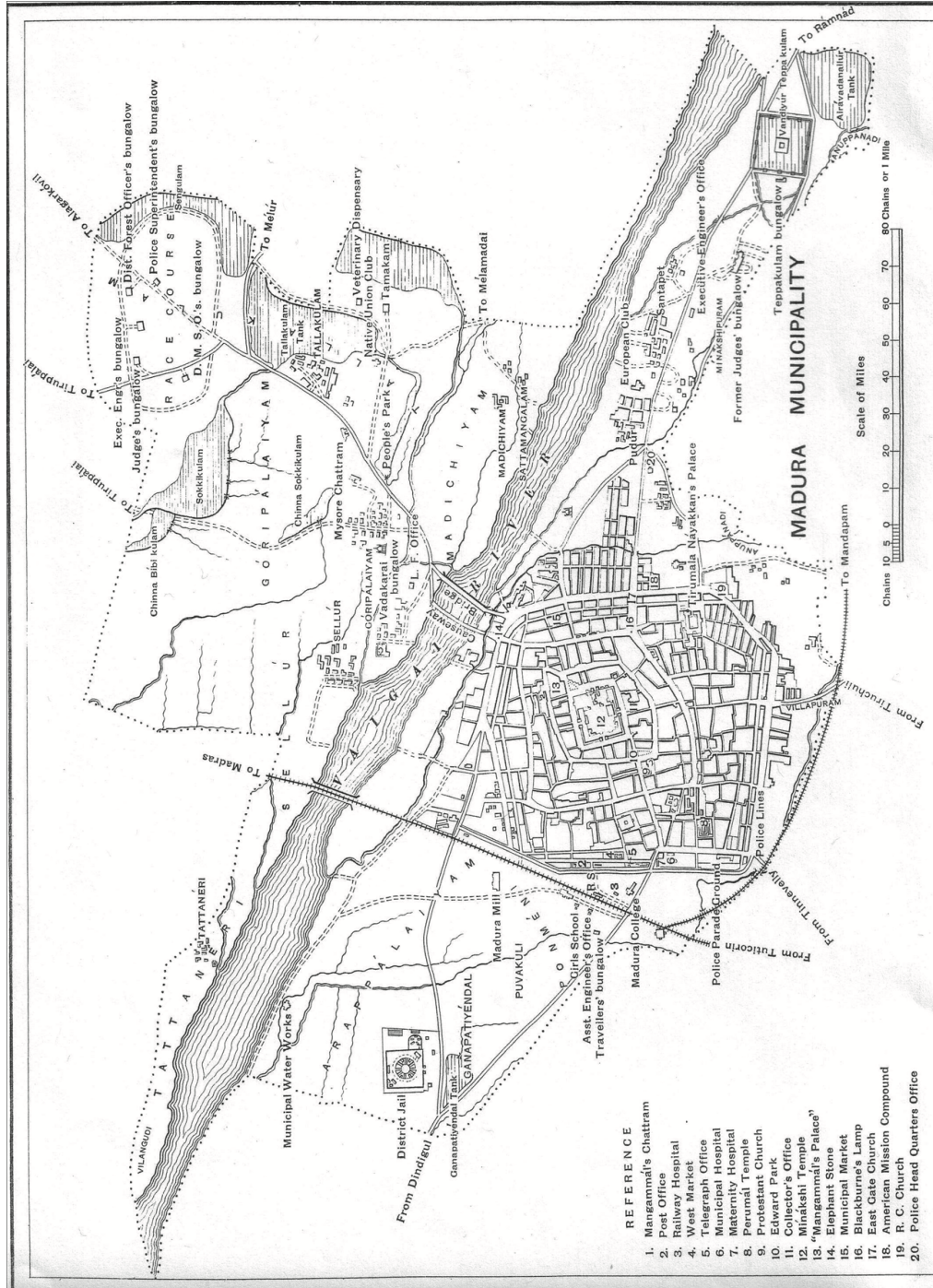
⁷³ TNSA, Madura DR, Vol. 5344A, pp. 448–54, 21/11/1847

⁷⁴ Markham, *Travels*, p. 422.

⁷⁵ See Figure 3.

Figure 3.

Municipality of Madurai (1906)



Source: Francis, Madras District Gazetteer, Madurai.

Looking beyond the specifics of the city of Madurai, this study throws a harsh light on the deficiencies of broader urban colonial administration. The absence of urban politics for nearly half a century led to a degradation of the cities. There was no attempt at innovation and no policy prone to encourage urban development was launched. The Colonial direction of the East India Company was pragmatic but often inefficient, due to a lack of means, knowledge of the environment and organisation. The local population was not considered in the course of projects undertaken. The Collectors, however, could only act by cooperating with those inhabitants holding prestige and authority in the cities. This drove them to favour certain groups, such as the Brahmans and those that demonstrated an ability to collaborate. This especially granted a larger role to the great urban temples, the only Indian institutions capable of action and the financing of urban projects. Those running them were able to occupy the space left vacant in the capitals in terms of political power, which had always been directly taken charge of by the Hindu or Muslim rulers. This phenomenon preceded the creation of municipalities in 1866. It endangered their chances of attracting the urban elite and motivating it to become involved in the direction of the cities, as the temples constituted areas of competing influence.⁷⁶ The enormity of the problems weighing on the big cities with their strong demographic growth at the end of the nineteenth century, especially concerning the question of sanitation, could not help but contribute to the unpopularity of an institution that generated its financial sources through a new system of taxation. This was because in order to better manage the cities, the colonial authorities did not dare to design a system any different from that, which was in place in England where the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 endowed 263 localities municipal privileges.⁷⁷ Here is an important paradox: in 1850, the Collector of Madurai could not elicit the slightest hint of an inclination by the inhabitants of the city for the adoption of the Improvement Act of 1850 that allowed, on a local voluntary basis, the creation of a municipal institution.⁷⁸ He attributed this indifference to the fact that the inhabitants had benefited from Blackburne's works without paying any money! However, this seems instead to point to something very different. In 1858, the inhabitants of Madurai came *en masse* to attend the public reading of Queen Victoria's proclamation declaring the transfer of India to the British Crown, believing that she had come to their city in person.⁷⁹ After 1866 the city's inhabitants were wary of an institution that threatened to deprive them of a direct line to the figure of the Collector who continued to represent supreme authority, as the governors for the all-powerful kings of bygone days had done.

⁷⁶ It is clearly apparent in Breckenridge-Appadurai, 'The Sri Minaksi Sundaesvarar Temple', pp. 351–54. Ritual transactions within the temple were still an important source of authority in the city: *Ibid.*, p. 459.

⁷⁷ Brigg, *Victorian Cities*, p. 42.

⁷⁸ MBRP, P/309/24, 12/12/1850, letter dated 06/12/1850.

⁷⁹ *Madras Time*, 1st December 1858.

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