

Land Rights, Revenue Systems and Long-Run Growth: A Comparative Economic History of Medieval South Indian Agrarian Institutions

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Abstract— This study investigates how land rights and revenue systems shaped long-run agrarian growth in medieval South India through a comparative institutional lens. Focusing on major agrarian regions under the Chola and Vijayanagara political orders, it examines how different configurations of property claims, revenue assessment practices, and delegated fiscal authority influenced cultivation incentives, irrigation investment, and the durability of agrarian surplus. The research treats “rights” as layered bundles—cultivation, management, and tax-collection claims often held by different actors such as the state, temples, Brahmadeya corporations, and village assemblies. Using a mixed historical method that combines epigraphic evidence (land grants, sales, tax remissions, and measurement terms) with regional case comparisons, the study evaluates how institutional arrangements affected risk management and productivity in wet delta zones versus tank-irrigated interiors. The central argument is that revenue predictability and locally enforceable rights strengthened incentives for intensification when collective-action institutions could sustain water-control infrastructure, while fragmented fiscal intermediations increased extraction uncertainty and weakened maintenance over time. By linking micro-level institutional records to macro patterns of agrarian stability and expansion, the study contributes to comparative economic history debates on pre-modern state capacity, property regimes, and the institutional foundations of long-run growth.

Keywords— Medieval South India; agrarian institutions; land rights; revenue systems; property regimes; irrigation governance; temple economy; Brahmadeya settlements;

village assemblies; comparative economic history; long-run growth; institutional change

Introduction

Understanding the sources of long-run economic growth requires close attention to the institutional arrangements that governed land, labor, and surplus extraction in agrarian societies. In pre-industrial economies, where agriculture formed the primary base of production, land rights and revenue systems were not merely administrative tools but central determinants of investment incentives, social stability, and productive capacity. Medieval South India offers a particularly rich context for examining these relationships because its agrarian institutions combined sophisticated local governance with varying degrees of state intervention across time and regions. The coexistence of irrigated riverine zones, tank-based dry regions, and mixed agrarian ecologies makes the region well suited for a comparative institutional analysis of growth outcomes.

Between roughly the ninth and sixteenth centuries, South Indian polities such as the Cholas and the Vijayanagara rulers presided over agrarian systems characterized by layered and overlapping rights. Cultivation rights, revenue claims, and managerial authority were often distributed among different actors, including the ruling state, temples, Brahmadeya corporations, village assemblies, and hereditary cultivating groups. Rather than a simple dichotomy between state ownership and private property, land was embedded in a complex web of social, fiscal, and ritual relationships. These arrangements shaped how surplus was assessed and extracted, how risks were shared, and whether cultivators and local institutions were willing to invest in land improvement and irrigation infrastructure.



Fig. 1: Land Rights, Revenue Systems and Long-Run Growth

Revenue systems formed the critical link between political authority and agrarian production. Assessment practices, tax rates, exemptions, and delegated collection rights directly influenced the predictability of surplus claims. Where revenue demands were stable and locally negotiated, agrarian actors could plan cultivation cycles and undertake long-term investments such as canal construction or tank maintenance. In contrast, heavily intermediated or militarized revenue arrangements often introduced uncertainty, increasing short-term extraction pressures and undermining incentives for sustained improvement. The variation in revenue practices across regions and periods thus provides an important lens for understanding divergent agrarian trajectories within medieval South India.

This study situates South Indian agrarian institutions within broader debates in comparative economic history concerning property rights, state capacity, and collective action. While much of the global literature focuses on European or East Asian experiences, pre-colonial South India demonstrates that alternative institutional pathways could also support agricultural expansion and regional prosperity. By comparing land rights and revenue systems across different political regimes and ecological zones, this research seeks to clarify how institutional design influenced long-run agrarian growth. In doing so, it aims to bridge micro-level evidence from inscriptions and local records with macro-level patterns of economic stability, intensification, and institutional persistence.

Historical Context of Medieval South Indian Agrarian Systems

The agrarian systems of medieval South India developed within a long historical continuum shaped by ecological diversity, political change, and evolving social institutions. From the early medieval period onward, agriculture formed the economic foundation of regional polities, supporting state authority, religious establishments, and local communities. The landscape itself played a decisive role: fertile river valleys such as the Kaveri, Tamiraparani, and Krishna supported intensive wet cultivation, while large interior tracts depended on rainfall management through tanks, wells, and seasonal streams. This ecological variation produced distinct agrarian strategies and institutional responses across regions.

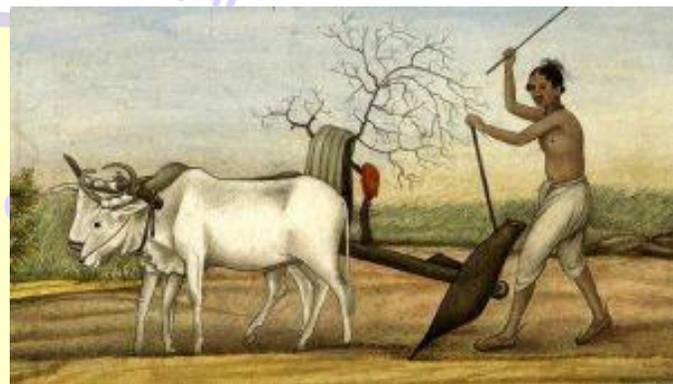


Fig. 2: Source: <https://theindianlaw.in/land-tenure-system-in-medieval-india/>

By the early medieval era, South Indian agriculture was organized around settled villages that combined cultivation with local governance. Village assemblies and corporate bodies managed land distribution, irrigation maintenance, and dispute resolution, creating a framework for collective action. These institutions operated alongside political authorities rather than in isolation from them. Rulers rarely cultivated land directly; instead, they asserted authority through revenue claims and the redistribution of land rights. As a result, agrarian organization reflected negotiated relationships between the state and local institutions rather than uniform administrative control.

The expansion of state power during the Chola period marked a significant phase in agrarian restructuring. Rulers promoted land surveys, classification practices, and systematic revenue assessment, particularly in core irrigated regions. Large-scale land grants to temples and Brahmadeya settlements altered existing property relations by transferring managerial and fiscal privileges to corporate religious and scholarly groups. These grants often encouraged the extension of cultivation, settlement of new areas, and consolidation of irrigation networks, embedding agriculture within religious and institutional frameworks that extended beyond individual households.

In the later medieval period, especially under the Vijayanagara polity, agrarian systems evolved in response to military demands and territorial expansion. Revenue rights were increasingly delegated to local elites and service holders, linking agricultural surplus to political and military obligations. While this arrangement facilitated rapid mobilization of resources, it also introduced new layers of fiscal authority that reshaped local agrarian relations. Across these centuries, medieval South Indian agrarian systems remained dynamic, adapting to shifting political priorities and environmental constraints while sustaining the long-term productivity that underpinned regional economies.

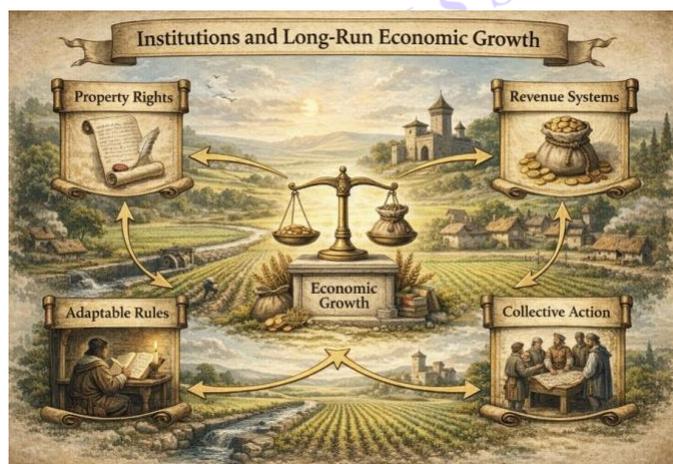


Fig. 3: Institutions and Long-Run Economic Growth

Theoretical Framework: Institutions and Long-Run Economic Growth

The concept of long-run economic growth in pre-industrial societies is closely tied to the nature and performance of institutions that regulate access to resources, define rights and obligations, and coordinate collective action. In agrarian economies, institutions governing land ownership, revenue extraction, and labor organization play a decisive role in shaping incentives for production and investment. This study adopts an institutional perspective that views growth not as a linear outcome of technological change alone, but as the cumulative result of stable and adaptive rules that structure economic behavior over extended periods.

At the core of this framework is the idea that property rights are not singular or absolute, but composed of multiple, overlapping claims. In medieval agrarian contexts, these claims often included rights to cultivate land, rights to collect revenue, and rights to manage or transfer property. The distribution of these rights among states, local elites, religious institutions, and cultivating groups affected how surplus was generated and shared. When rights were clearly defined and socially

enforceable, economic actors were more likely to invest in land improvement, irrigation infrastructure, and risk-reducing practices. Conversely, ambiguous or frequently contested claims increased uncertainty, discouraging long-term investment and favoring short-term extraction.

Revenue systems constitute a second pillar of the theoretical framework. Fiscal arrangements determine how much surplus is appropriated, by whom, and under what conditions. Predictable and negotiable revenue demands reduce transaction costs and allow cultivators to plan production cycles over time. In contrast, unstable or highly intermediated revenue systems can raise extraction risks, fragment accountability, and weaken incentives for maintenance of productive assets. From a growth perspective, the critical issue is not the level of taxation alone, but the degree of consistency, transparency, and local embeddedness in revenue collection.

The framework also emphasizes collective action as a key mechanism linking institutions to growth. Many agrarian investments, particularly in irrigation and flood control, require coordinated labor and long-term maintenance beyond the capacity of individual households. Institutions such as village assemblies, temple administrations, and corporate landholding bodies functioned as coordination mechanisms that reduced free-rider problems and enforced shared responsibilities. Where such institutions were resilient and aligned with property and revenue incentives, agrarian systems were more likely to sustain productivity across generations.

Literature Review

1) Framing the problem: why “institutions” matter for agrarian growth

Research on long-run growth often treats **property rights and fiscal capacity** as core institutional channels shaping investment incentives, surplus extraction, and the ability of states (or local corporate bodies) to sustain public goods like irrigation. Medieval South India is especially useful for institutional comparison because the agrarian economy ranged from **high-productivity wet zones** (e.g., Kaveri delta) to **riskier dry zones** (tank- and runoff-dependent landscapes), and because land and revenue rights were frequently **layered** (king → temple/Brahmin recipients → local assemblies/corporate groups → cultivators). The main analytical tension in the literature is whether these arrangements created (a) **secure, transferable claims** that encouraged intensification and infrastructural investment, or (b) **fragmented sovereignty** and heavy extraction that discouraged accumulation.

2) Evidence base: inscriptions, land-sale records, and institutional “micro-data”

A distinctive feature of South Indian economic history is the density of **epigraphic records** (lithic inscriptions, copper plates) documenting land grants, tax terms, remissions, sales, measurements, and local corporate decisions. Work building from Chola-period inscriptions uses these records almost like an administrative dataset: who held what rights, how land was measured/graded, what taxes applied, and what kinds of exemptions were granted. Subbarayalu's classic study of **Chola land revenue assessment** is often cited because it shows how revenue was not merely customary but tied to **classification and assessment practices** that evolved over time.

At the same time, scholarship cautions that inscriptions reflect **transactions worth recording**—often grants to Brahmins or temples—so the evidentiary lens can overrepresent elite or corporate property forms unless complemented with village-level studies and later archival materials that preserve older institutional residues.

3) Chola agrarian institutions: land grants, corporate villages, and fiscal standardization

A major strand argues that the Chola state (c. 9th–13th centuries) combined **local corporate governance** with measurable elements of **central standardization**. Interviews and syntheses by Subbarayalu and others highlight regularized **land measurement, grading, and survey practices**, and the spread of “grid-pattern” Brahmadeya settlements that suggest systematic re-ordering of space and rights rather than purely ad hoc control.

Brahmadeya and devadana: reallocating rights and the political economy of exemption

Land grants—especially **brahmadeya** (Brahmin settlements/lands) and **devadana** (temple endowments)—sit at the center of debates on growth. One line of interpretation, associated with Karashima's epigraphic work, argues that grant policies and associated privileges **reconfigured common or prior holdings**, creating stronger elite landholder claims and new local hierarchies, with implications for surplus control and labor organization.

A competing emphasis is functional: grants and temple endowments could stabilize revenue expectations, expand cultivation through organized settlement, and mobilize resources for irrigation and storage—especially where temples served as **economic coordinators**. The literature tends to treat exemptions (or remissions) not as “lost revenue” alone but as instruments of **statecraft**, bargaining, and local coalition-building.

4) The “state” debate: segmentary sovereignty vs. central capacity

A large interpretive literature—often anchored in Burton Stein—questions whether medieval South Indian polities should be read as territorially uniform states. Stein's “segmentary state” framing emphasized uneven sovereignty: strong ritual/ideological integration with **variable administrative penetration** across regions. Stein later revisits the concept in response to critiques, clarifying what the model can and cannot explain.

Subbarayalu-style readings push back by pointing to administrative regularities (surveys, standardized measures, assessment routines) that appear difficult to reconcile with a purely minimal center, especially in core wet zones. For your topic, this debate matters because the growth mechanism changes depending on which side you accept:

- **If segmentary:** growth and intensification rely more on **local corporate institutions** (assemblies, temples, lineage/property groups) and less on state-provided public goods.
- **If more centralized:** fiscal capacity and standardization can lower transaction costs, coordinate irrigation, and support market integration.

5) Irrigation as an institutional outcome: canals, tanks, and collective action

The most “growth-proximate” public good in this literature is irrigation. Work on Vijayanagara-period intensification and reservoirs stresses that irrigation is not just technology: it is a **governance system** for labor mobilization, maintenance, conflict resolution, and rights to water. Kathleen Morrison's overview of **agricultural intensification under Vijayanagara** emphasizes that reservoirs (tanks) became key intensification devices in many areas, and their trajectories depended as much on **political dynamics and settlement** as on hydrology.

A related line by Morrison & Sinopoli examines how an empire integrates diverse productive systems—wet agriculture, dry farming, craft production—without necessarily exercising direct control over all production. These works are especially useful for “long-run growth” framing because they connect political-fiscal arrangements to **changes in cropping intensity, risk management, and regional provisioning**.

6) Vijayanagara and late-medieval fiscalism: revenue assignments and militarized extraction

Compared to Chola-core discussions, the Vijayanagara literature more often foregrounds **revenue assignments** and **military-fiscal structures** (e.g., nayakas holding rights to collect revenue in exchange for service/tribute). Burton Stein's *Vijayanagara* (New Cambridge History of India) remains a key reference for interpreting how rule operated through a pattern of **delegated authority** and local power-holders.

Anthropological/archaeological political economy work adds nuance: Morrison & Sinopoli (and related pieces) find limited evidence for tight imperial micromanagement of production, instead highlighting multiple channels of control and integration (ideology, militarism, and selective intervention in distribution).

For your comparative design, this points to a hypothesis widely implied (though not always tested directly): **where revenue rights were more heavily intermediated and militarized**, extraction could rise and local autonomy could shrink, with ambiguous effects on investment—sometimes prompting intensification to meet obligations, sometimes undermining stability and long-term maintenance.

7) “Mirasi” and layered property: local rights, transferability, and persistence

A second cluster of literature investigates **local property regimes** that are neither pure private property nor simple state ownership. Work on the **mirasi** system (especially in Tamil regions) emphasizes hereditary privileged claims and the social distribution of shares/rights. A dedicated “mirasi system in pre-colonial South India” paper frames mirasi as a core component of local society, with claims that could be **transferable by sale, mortgage, or inheritance**—features often associated with stronger property institutions.

The “mirasi question” literature also highlights how later colonial debates reframed older institutions, but it remains valuable for tracing how pre-colonial rights were interpreted and contested, and how these interpretations fed into later policy.

David Ludden's *Peasant History in South India* is central for long-run persistence arguments because it tracks peasant communities and agrarian change over a long horizon (well before 1900), making it a bridge between medieval institutions and later outcomes.

Research Questions

This study is guided by a set of research questions that seek to explain how agrarian institutions influenced long-run economic outcomes in medieval South India. The questions are designed to link institutional arrangements at the local and regional levels

with broader patterns of agricultural stability, intensification, and growth over time.

Research Questions

1. How were land rights structured and distributed among the state, religious institutions, local corporate bodies, and cultivating groups in medieval South India?
2. In what ways did revenue assessment and collection systems differ across political regimes and ecological zones, and how did these differences shape agrarian incentives?
3. How did layered property rights and delegated revenue authority affect investment in land improvement and irrigation infrastructure?
4. To what extent did collective-action institutions, such as village assemblies and temple administrations, contribute to the sustainability of agrarian production?
5. How did variations in institutional arrangements influence long-run agrarian growth and regional economic stability during the medieval period?

Data Sources and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical methodology grounded in institutional analysis to examine the relationship between land rights, revenue systems, and long-run agrarian growth in medieval South India. Given the pre-modern context, the research relies on a critical synthesis of primary historical materials and secondary scholarly interpretations rather than quantitative datasets in the modern sense. The methodological approach is comparative and interdisciplinary, combining economic history, institutional theory, and regional agrarian studies.

Data Sources

The primary sources for this research consist of epigraphic records, including stone inscriptions and copper-plate grants issued between the ninth and sixteenth centuries. These records provide detailed information on land grants, revenue assignments, tax exemptions, land measurement practices, irrigation endowments, and the roles of temples, Brahmadeya settlements, and village assemblies. Inscriptions are treated as institutional documents that reveal how rights and obligations were defined, negotiated, and enforced at specific moments in time.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed historical and economic history studies on South Indian agrarian institutions, land tenure systems, and political economy. Monographs, journal articles, and edited volumes are used to contextualize

epigraphic evidence, interpret institutional patterns, and identify regional and temporal variations. Archaeological and environmental history studies are also consulted to understand irrigation systems, settlement patterns, and ecological constraints affecting agricultural production.

Methodology

The methodological framework follows a comparative institutional approach. First, land rights and revenue arrangements are categorized into analytically distinct components—cultivation rights, revenue collection rights, and managerial or administrative authority. This allows for systematic comparison across regions and political regimes. Second, case comparisons are conducted between ecologically distinct zones, such as riverine wetland regions and tank-irrigated dry interiors, to assess how institutional configurations interacted with environmental conditions.

Third, the study traces institutional continuity and change over time by examining how land and revenue practices evolved under different ruling powers. Rather than treating political transitions as discrete breaks, the analysis emphasizes gradual adaptation and persistence of local institutions. Finally, the findings are interpreted through the lens of long-run economic growth, focusing on investment incentives, irrigation maintenance, risk management, and agrarian stability.

By integrating diverse historical sources with an institutional analytical framework, this methodology enables a nuanced understanding of how medieval agrarian systems shaped economic outcomes over extended periods without imposing modern assumptions on pre-modern societies.

Typology of Land Rights and Revenue Systems

Medieval South Indian agrarian society was characterized by a complex and layered system of land rights and revenue arrangements rather than a single, uniform model of ownership or control. Understanding this diversity requires a typological approach that distinguishes between different categories of rights and fiscal practices while recognizing their frequent overlap in practice. This typology provides a structured framework for analyzing how agrarian institutions shaped incentives, authority, and long-term economic outcomes.

Cultivation Rights: Cultivation rights referred to the claim to occupy and work the land, often held by hereditary cultivating groups. These rights were generally stable across generations and socially recognized within village communities. Cultivators enjoyed considerable autonomy in production decisions, cropping patterns, and day-to-day land use, even when they did not hold revenue or managerial rights. The

relative security of cultivation rights was a key factor in sustaining agricultural continuity, particularly in regions where investment in soil preparation and water management was essential.

Revenue Rights: Revenue rights involved the authority to assess, collect, and appropriate a share of agricultural surplus. These rights were typically claimed by the ruling state but were frequently delegated to intermediaries such as temples, Brahmadeya corporations, military service holders, or local elites. Revenue rights could be temporary or hereditary and were often subject to political negotiation. Their structure influenced the predictability of surplus extraction and shaped the relationship between cultivators and authority. Stable and clearly defined revenue claims tended to support long-term planning, whereas fragmented or frequently reassigned rights increased uncertainty.

Managerial and Administrative Rights: Managerial rights encompassed responsibilities related to land measurement, classification, record-keeping, dispute resolution, and maintenance of shared resources such as irrigation systems. These rights were commonly exercised by village assemblies, temple administrations, or corporate landholding bodies. Although not always directly linked to surplus appropriation, managerial authority played a crucial role in coordinating collective action and enforcing local norms. Effective management often determined whether land and water resources were used sustainably over time.

Land Grants and Institutional Ownership: Land grants represented a distinct institutional category in which cultivation, revenue, and managerial rights were partially or wholly transferred to religious or scholarly institutions. Brahmadeya and temple lands illustrate how agrarian resources were embedded within ritual and social frameworks. These grants frequently carried tax exemptions or reduced assessments, altering local revenue flows while strengthening institutional control over land. Their economic impact depended on how effectively grantee institutions balanced surplus extraction with investment in cultivation and irrigation.

Delegated and Intermediated Revenue Systems: In later medieval periods, revenue systems increasingly relied on intermediated arrangements in which fiscal authority was linked to military or administrative service. Under such systems, revenue rights were tied to obligations rather than permanent ownership. While this model facilitated resource mobilization for state purposes, it also introduced multiple layers of authority between cultivators and the state, affecting accountability and investment incentives.

Together, these categories highlight that medieval South Indian agrarian institutions functioned through interdependent rights rather than exclusive ownership. The interaction between cultivation, revenue, and managerial claims shaped the economic logic of agrarian production and provides a foundation for comparative analysis of long-run growth.

Comparative Analysis of Agrarian Institutions in Medieval South India

Dimension	Chola Agrarian System (c. 9th–13th C.)	Vijayanagara Agrarian System (c. 14th–16th C.)	Comparative Implications for Long-Run Growth
Nature of Land Rights	Layered rights with strong recognition of cultivation rights alongside state and institutional claims	Layered rights, but with greater delegation of fiscal authority to intermediaries	Secure cultivation rights in both systems supported continuity, but stability differed due to fiscal arrangements
Revenue Authority	Predominantly state-based assessment with localized implementation	Revenue rights frequently assigned to military or service holders	Direct assessment enhanced predictability; delegated systems increased uncertainty
Revenue Assessment	Regularized land measurement, classification, and assessment practices in core regions	Less uniform assessment; revenue often linked to service obligations	Standardization lowered transaction costs and improved planning
Role of Temples and Brahmadeya Institutions	Central role in land management, irrigation, and surplus coordination	Important but increasingly integrated into broader fiscal-military networks	Institutional landholders could promote investment when insulated from excessive extraction
Village Assemblies and Local Governance	Strong corporate village institutions managing land, water, and disputes	Continued local governance but with greater oversight by intermediaries	Collective institutions supported maintenance of irrigation infrastructure

Irrigation Systems	Extensive canal networks in wet zones; strong collective maintenance	Emphasis on tanks and reservoirs in dry zones	Irrigation sustainability depended more on governance than technology
Fiscal Intermediation	Limited intermediaries between cultivator and state in core areas	Multiple layers of intermediaries between cultivator and state	Increased intermediation weakened accountability and long-term incentives
State Capacity	Relatively high administrative coherence in core regions	Strong military capacity but uneven fiscal penetration	Administrative capacity mattered more than military strength for agrarian stability
Risk Management	Revenue flexibility through remissions and exemptions in adverse years	Pressure to meet fixed obligations increased agrarian vulnerability	Flexible institutions reduced long-run risk and volatility
Growth Orientation	Emphasis on agrarian expansion and intensification	Emphasis on revenue mobilization for political-military needs	Growth outcomes diverged due to institutional priorities

Agrarian Institutions and Long-Run Growth Outcomes

Long-run economic outcomes in medieval South India were shaped less by a single “growth engine” and more by the way agrarian institutions organized rights, obligations, and coordination over time. Because agriculture was the primary source of surplus, institutions governing land and revenue effectively decided who could invest, who bore risk, and who captured returns. In this context, growth did not only mean “more output.” It also meant the ability of agrarian systems to remain productive across generations, recover from shocks, and sustain costly infrastructure such as canals, tanks, embankments, and storage facilities.

A key institutional driver of growth was the **clarity and enforceability of cultivation claims**. Where cultivators had socially recognized and relatively stable rights to use land, they were more likely to pursue improvements whose benefits accumulated slowly—such as soil conditioning, bunding, deepening fields, or adopting cropping routines that demanded higher initial effort. Even when cultivators did not control

revenue rights, predictability in their access to land created continuity in labor and knowledge, which is essential for sustained productivity. In contrast, when land access became frequently contested or insecure due to political transfers, layered claims without clear enforcement, or rapid turnover of intermediaries, incentives shifted toward short-term extraction and minimal maintenance.

A second major channel was **revenue predictability**. Taxation by itself did not automatically suppress growth; rather, the decisive factor was whether assessment and collection followed stable rules that local actors could anticipate. Revenue systems that were regularized—through land measurement, classification practices, and negotiated expectations—reduced uncertainty. This encouraged investment in irrigation maintenance and land development because households and corporate bodies could estimate how much surplus would remain after obligations. Where revenue authority was heavily intermediated or tied to service obligations, cultivators often faced variable demands and weaker accountability. Such uncertainty could discourage long-horizon investments, leading to gradual deterioration of irrigation works and slower intensification.

Long-run growth outcomes were also closely linked to **collective-action capacity**. Many productivity-enhancing investments in South India, especially in tank and canal systems, required coordinated labor, rules for water allocation, and enforcement against free-riding. Village assemblies, temple administrations, and other corporate bodies acted as institutional mechanisms that could mobilize resources, manage disputes, and maintain shared infrastructure. Where these collective institutions remained resilient, agrarian systems were better able to sustain irrigation works, stabilize yields, and absorb climatic variability. When collective governance weakened—due to conflict, fiscal pressures, or competing authorities—maintenance burdens often shifted downward to households, making large-scale systems vulnerable to neglect over time.

The role of **temples and endowed institutions** produced mixed growth outcomes depending on how their rights were structured. In many settings, temples functioned as stable corporate actors capable of coordinating labor, redistributing resources, and supporting irrigation maintenance. Their long time horizons could align with infrastructural investment, especially when endowments were protected and local cooperation remained strong. However, when endowed lands became vehicles for aggressive surplus capture, or when exemptions and privileges created rigid hierarchies that limited cultivator incentives, the same institutional form could reinforce inequality and reduce productive dynamism. The growth impact therefore depended on whether institutional

control translated into reinvestment and coordination or into sustained extraction.

Finally, long-run agrarian growth depended on **institutional adaptability**. Medieval South Indian agrarian systems operated under shifting political regimes, demographic changes, and environmental stress. Regions that could adjust revenue expectations during poor rainfall years, reorganize labor for repairs, or renegotiate obligations without collapsing local legitimacy tended to show more durable growth trajectories. By contrast, when revenue demands remained inflexible during shocks, or when authority was too fragmented to coordinate repairs, agrarian systems faced compounding decline—lower yields reducing maintenance capacity, which further reduced yields, creating a cycle that weakened long-term productivity.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the central role of agrarian institutions in shaping long-run economic outcomes in medieval South India. Rather than viewing growth as a direct consequence of technological progress or political dominance, the analysis underscores how the organization of land rights, revenue systems, and collective governance structured incentives and constraints over extended periods. The discussion brings together the comparative evidence to interpret why some regions and institutional arrangements supported sustained agrarian stability while others experienced uneven or fragile growth trajectories.

One of the most significant insights is that **institutional predictability mattered more than institutional form**. Neither centralized revenue assessment nor delegated fiscal authority was inherently growth-enhancing or growth-inhibiting. What proved decisive was the degree to which cultivators and local institutions could anticipate obligations and retain a share of surplus for reinvestment. In contexts where revenue expectations were stable and negotiable, households and corporate bodies were more willing to invest in irrigation maintenance and land improvement. Conversely, when fiscal authority was fragmented among multiple intermediaries or frequently reassigned, uncertainty increased, shifting behavior toward short-term extraction and reduced care for shared resources.

The discussion also clarifies the importance of **layered property rights** in agrarian societies. The coexistence of cultivation, managerial, and revenue claims did not automatically undermine productivity. On the contrary, layered rights could function effectively when roles were clearly understood and locally enforced. Problems arose when the separation of rights weakened accountability, particularly when those who extracted revenue bore little responsibility for

maintaining productive assets. This disconnect helps explain why similar land tenure structures produced different growth outcomes across regions and periods.

Another key theme is the role of **collective institutions as growth stabilizers**. Village assemblies, temple administrations, and other corporate bodies were not merely social or ritual entities; they were economic institutions that coordinated labor, managed risk, and enforced norms of maintenance. Their effectiveness often determined whether irrigation systems could survive across generations. Where collective governance remained strong, agrarian systems displayed resilience even under political change. Where it eroded, ecological stress and fiscal pressure translated more directly into declining productivity.

The comparative perspective further suggests that **political transitions alone do not explain agrarian performance**. Changes from one ruling power to another altered revenue priorities and authority structures, but long-run outcomes depended on how new regimes interacted with existing local institutions. Where political authority adapted to established agrarian practices, continuity and growth were more likely. Where it disrupted local governance without providing effective alternatives, institutional fragmentation increased, weakening long-term economic performance.

Finally, this discussion situates medieval South India within broader debates on pre-modern economic growth. The evidence challenges simplistic assumptions that strong centralized states or private property regimes are prerequisites for sustained growth. Instead, it points to a more nuanced conclusion: long-run agrarian growth emerged from institutional arrangements that balanced surplus extraction with investment incentives and collective responsibility. By emphasizing institutional interaction rather than institutional dominance, the study contributes to a more flexible understanding of how pre-industrial societies could achieve and sustain economic stability over time.

Limitations of the Study

Despite offering a structured institutional analysis of medieval South Indian agrarian systems, this study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting its findings. These limitations arise primarily from the nature of historical evidence, methodological constraints, and the scope of comparative analysis.

First, the study relies heavily on **epigraphic sources**, such as stone inscriptions and copper-plate grants, which do not represent a complete or neutral record of agrarian life. Inscriptions were typically produced to document transactions

of legal, religious, or political significance and therefore tend to emphasize land grants, privileges, and institutional actors such as temples or Brahmadeya corporations. Everyday practices of ordinary cultivators, informal arrangements, and conflicts that did not warrant inscriptional recording are likely underrepresented. As a result, the institutional picture reconstructed from these sources may reflect elite or corporate perspectives more strongly than grassroots realities.

Second, the analysis is constrained by the **regional unevenness of available data**. Certain areas—particularly core regions of major polities—are far better documented than peripheral or marginal zones. This imbalance can bias comparative conclusions, as regions with sparse records may appear institutionally simpler or less dynamic than they actually were. Ecological diversity further complicates comparison, since similar institutions may have functioned differently across wet and dry landscapes.

Third, the study adopts a **qualitative and interpretive methodology**, which limits the ability to measure growth outcomes in quantitative terms. Concepts such as productivity, stability, and long-run growth are inferred from institutional patterns, irrigation sustainability, and continuity of cultivation rather than from direct output or income data. While this approach is appropriate for pre-modern contexts, it inevitably introduces a degree of analytical uncertainty and dependence on interpretive judgment.

Fourth, the long temporal span covered by the study poses challenges related to **institutional change over time**. Agrarian institutions evolved gradually, often adapting to shifting political, demographic, and environmental conditions. Distinguishing continuity from transformation can be difficult, and there is a risk of overstating institutional coherence across periods that were in fact marked by significant local variation.

Finally, the comparative framework focuses primarily on land rights and revenue systems, which may underplay other factors influencing long-run growth, such as trade networks, craft production, demographic movements, and climatic fluctuations. While these elements are acknowledged, they are not examined in detail. Future research integrating environmental data, archaeological evidence, and broader economic linkages could offer a more comprehensive understanding of medieval South India's growth dynamics.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how land rights and revenue systems shaped long-run agrarian growth in medieval South India through an institutional and comparative lens. By moving beyond narrow notions of ownership or state control, the

analysis demonstrates that agrarian performance was deeply embedded in the interaction between property arrangements, fiscal practices, and collective governance. Medieval South Indian agriculture functioned within a complex institutional environment where rights were layered, authority was negotiated, and economic outcomes depended on stability and coordination rather than on centralized power alone.

The findings suggest that **secure and socially recognized cultivation rights** provided the foundation for continuity in agricultural production. Even in the absence of exclusive private ownership, cultivators were able to sustain and transmit productive knowledge across generations when access to land remained predictable. Growth, therefore, did not hinge on the concentration of land in individual hands but on the reliability of use-rights within local communities.

Equally important was the structure of **revenue systems**. The study shows that long-run growth was more closely associated with predictable and locally embedded revenue arrangements than with the level of extraction itself. Where assessment practices were stable and responsive to local conditions, agrarian actors retained the capacity and motivation to reinvest surplus in irrigation and land improvement. In contrast, fragmented or heavily intermediated fiscal systems often weakened accountability and undermined long-term maintenance of productive assets.

The analysis further highlights the critical role of **collective institutions**, such as village assemblies and temple administrations, in sustaining growth. These bodies enabled coordination, enforced shared responsibilities, and managed ecological risk, particularly in irrigation-dependent landscapes.

Their resilience often determined whether agrarian systems could absorb political change and environmental stress without entering cycles of decline.

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