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Mirasi Production System in Pre-Colonial  
South India

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This paper will be an attempt to view the pre-colonial society from the aspect of 'Mirasi System' and to describe the changes in South Indian society by focusing upon the status of Nattars.

Lives of those engaged in production activities in the eighteenth century were maintained by the shares in the produce, which had been customarily established and linked to the specific roles necessary for maintaining the local society. Such combination of roles with the right in the share of the produce, including that of the tax-free land, was widely found not only in South India but also in other parts when the British began its rule. We will call such share distribution system as Mirasi system. Mirasi system constituted the core of the local society in the pre-colonial period.

The Mirasi system was the product of the competitive power-balance between the state and the communal 'formation,' which can be defined as 'the wielding of power as well as movement to maximize one's own interest.' These two formations were mutually competitive in seeking

more shares in the produce and more dominance over others to reach a maximum of autonomy. Their relation was expressed in different ways in the Mirasi system, such as amount of dues, extent of tax-free land, or the composition of recipients in the respective villages.

The Nattars or the representative of the local society called Nadu in the Chola period were the bearers of communal formation and negotiated with the state power or the representative of the state formation in adjusting interests in the mechanism of Mirasi system. Their role, however, had ceased to function by the eighteenth century when the entirety of local society had broken down by several causes. My paper will discuss the causes and the processes which led such a change.