



ADMINISTRATIVE MODERNIZATION IN THE PUDUKKOTTAI PRINCELY STATE: REASSESSING SIR A SESHAYYA SASTRI'S REFORMS, 1878-1894 C.E

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Abstract:

This article reassesses the administrative changes associated with Sir A. Seshayya Sastri in the Pudukkottai princely state between 1878 and 1894 C.E. It corrects a chronology that has often been blurred by attributing later measures to Sastri and distinguishes reforms initiated during his administration from developments completed by his successors. Using the Manual of the Pudukkottai State as the principal institutional source and reading it alongside scholarship on indirect rule, princely sovereignty, and bureaucratic change, the study analyses four connected fields: agrarian revenue, public finance, law and administration, and urban and social infrastructure. Sastri abolished the amani sharing arrangement, converted cultivators' possession into holdings subject to fixed assessment, reorganized temple administration, expanded official publication and registration, introduced British Indian procedural law, and promoted roads, tanks, education, sanitation, and town planning. During the regency, inam enfranchisement and the opening phase of revenue survey further altered the fiscal relationship between the state and landholders. These measures did not create a neutral modern bureaucracy. They increased recordability, fiscal reach, and executive control while also providing more stable tenures, selected remissions, and public services. Pudukkottai therefore illustrates modernization as a negotiated reordering of authority under indirect rule, not a simple transition from tradition to modernity.

Key Words: Pudukkottai; Seshayya Sastri; Princely States; Land Revenue; Inam Settlement; Indirect Rule; Administrative History

1. Introduction:

The political history of Indian princely states cannot be reduced to a contrast between static indigenous rule and dynamic British administration. Princely governments operated within British paramountcy, but their rulers and ministers retained room to reorganize taxation, law, public works, education, and the machinery of government. That room was constrained by treaties, political agents, fiscal resources, local landed interests, and the need to preserve dynastic authority. The result was an uneven field of institutional change rather than a single colonial model (Fisher, 1991; Ramusack, 2003; Qiu, 2023). Pudukkottai offers a useful small-state case. The Tondaiman state survived under British paramountcy and developed an administrative order shaped by royal authority, local tenure, and growing bureaucratic intervention. Studies of Pudukkottai as a South Indian "little kingdom" show that political power was embedded in caste, kinship, land control, service, and ritual, not located only in formal offices (Dirks, 1979, 1989, 1993). Administrative reform therefore altered social relations as well as official procedure.

Sir A. Seshayya Sastri entered this setting in 1878. He first served as the state's senior administrator, received the designation Diwan in 1885, and acted as Diwan-Regent during the minority of Martanda Bhairava Tondaiman from 1886 until 1894 (Venkatarama Ayyar, 1940/2002). His term is frequently misdated as 1894-1903. The latter date was the year of his death, not the end of his Pudukkottai service. Correct chronology matters because the revenue survey begun near the close of his regency continued under later administrations. Treating every reform completed by 1903 as Sastri's achievement obscures both institutional continuity and the work of his successors. A historical portrait of Sastri is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Sir A. Seshayya Sastri, Diwan of Pudukkottai, 1878-1894.

Source: Historical photograph supplied by the author

This article asks three questions. What administrative changes can be securely attributed to Sastri's tenure? How did those changes redistribute authority among the Darbar, officials, landholders, cultivators, and service groups? What does the Pudukkottai case contribute to the study of modernization in princely India? The argument is that Sastri's importance lay less in creating every later department than in consolidating a new governing logic based on fixed assessment, written regulation, public reporting, specialized offices, and planned infrastructure. This logic expanded state capacity while producing mixed effects for different social groups.

2. Historiography and Analytical Framework:

The category "princely state" conceals wide variation in size, wealth, political status, and administrative capacity. Berkemer and Frenz (2005) caution against treating little kingdoms and princely states as interchangeable or uniform political types. Pati (2005) likewise challenges stereotypes that portray princely territories as either feudal remnants or progressive exceptions. The wider historiography treats princely territories as active political arenas shaped by rulers, ministers, landed groups, colonial officers, and emerging publics (Ernst & Pati, 2007; Jeffrey, 1978; Ramusack, 2003). A comparative approach must therefore attend to the particular institutional trajectory of each state.

Ramusack (2003) locates princely bureaucracies within a wider political economy of indirect rule. British officials promoted recognisable standards of administration while preserving rulers whose legitimacy supported imperial order. Qiu (2023) emphasizes that paramountcy developed through legal and political practices that left sovereignty divided and negotiable. These insights help explain why reforms could serve several purposes at once: satisfy the paramount power, strengthen the dynasty, expand fiscal control, and answer selected local grievances.

Colonial prescriptions of "good government" were grounded in broader imperial ideas about improvement, difference, custom, and political tutelage. Metcalf (1995) shows how liberal claims and constructions of Indian difference coexisted within the ideology of the Raj. Mantena (2010) further explains how late nineteenth-century imperial thought often justified indirect governance through appeals to custom and historically embedded authority. In princely India, modernization consequently operated through selective adaptation: states borrowed bureaucratic instruments without dissolving dynastic sovereignty.

Administrative reform is also a political process. Groves (1971) treats reform as part of political development, while Cheung (2021) stresses the interaction of drivers, opportunities, institutional barriers, and resistance. Mathur and Mathur (2017) show that reform cannot be evaluated solely through formal reorganization; implementation capacity and the surrounding political order matter. In Pudukkottai, reforms affected inherited offices, service tenures, religious endowments, and cultivators' obligations. Their significance must therefore be assessed through changes in rights, records, and enforceable authority.

The concept of bureaucratic modernization is used here in a limited sense. It refers to the expansion of written rules, specialized offices, standardized procedures, record production, fiscal calculation, and professional personnel. It does not imply that the administration became democratic, socially neutral, or free of colonial influence. Nor does it assume that every written rule was implemented uniformly. This definition avoids turning "modernization" into praise and permits attention to both public benefits and stronger governmental penetration.

3. Sources and Method:

This is a qualitative historical study based on critical reading and source triangulation. Its principal source is the second and revised edition of the Manual of the Pudukkottai State, prepared under the authority of the Pudukkottai Darbar and edited by K. R. Venkatarama Ayyar. The manual supplies a detailed institutional chronology, descriptions of revenue arrangements, and figures for selected measures. The Imperial Gazetteer provides a contemporary external overview, while the official district history confirms Sastri's arrival in 1878 and his role in remodelling Pudukkottai town (Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1908; Pudukkottai District Administration, n.d.).

Official manuals are indispensable but not neutral. They often organize history as a sequence of administrative achievements and may understate conflict, coercion, uneven implementation, and popular criticism. Colonial knowledge practices converted complex social relations into governable categories, while archival records preserved the priorities and vocabulary of the institutions that produced them (Cohn, 1996; Irschick, 1994). Accordingly, the article uses later scholarship on Pudukkottai's political structure and on princely states to interpret rather than simply reproduce the official narrative (Dirks, 1979, 1989, 1993; Ramusack, 2003). Claims not supported by the manual or corroborating literature have been removed. In particular, the article does not attribute to Sastri detailed secretariat rules, staffing systems, or judicial outcomes for which the available evidence is insufficient.

The analysis follows process tracing. Measures are arranged chronologically and grouped into agrarian-fiscal, legal-administrative, public works, and social-infrastructure domains. A reform is attributed to Sastri only when the source places its initiation or execution within 1878-1894. Measures begun during his tenure but completed later are identified as continuities rather than finished achievements. Comparative references to Mysore and Travancore are used to clarify patterns, not to rank states.

4. Political and Administrative Setting:

Pudukkottai's institutions had been changing before Sastri arrived. Earlier interventions had created territorial offices, revenue records, treasury rules, and courts. The state was therefore not administratively blank in 1878. Yet its land system, service tenures, and official procedures still combined inherited rights with changing fiscal demands. Across South India, revenue categories and documentary practices were produced through interaction among colonial officials, local elites, cultivators, and inherited claims rather than imposed in a single administrative act (Irschick, 1994). The relevant question is not whether Sastri replaced "tradition" with government, but how he redirected an existing state apparatus.

Sastri brought experience from the Madras administration and from his service as Diwan of Travancore. In Pudukkottai he initially held the older title used for the chief administrator. In July 1885, the titles of Sarkil, Karbar, and Deputy Karbar were changed to Diwan, Diwan Peishkar, and Deputy Peishkar, making Sastri the first administrator of the state formally designated Diwan (Venkatarama Ayyar, 1940/2002). This terminological change was more than cosmetic. It made Pudukkottai's hierarchy

more legible to the Madras political establishment and placed its chief minister within a recognizable princely-state vocabulary.

When Ramachandra Tondaiman died in 1886, the successor was a minor. Sastri became Diwan-Regent and exercised regency powers until 1894. The regency expanded his authority but also increased the need to justify policy through orderly administration. The residency system had long institutionalized British influence through advice, supervision, and political representation rather than routine annexation (Fisher, 1991). Under indirect rule, the ruler, regent, British political authorities, and local elites formed an interconnected field rather than separate sovereign spheres (Qiu, 2023). Sastri's reforms should be read within that arrangement.

5. Agrarian and Fiscal Reordering:

The abolition of the amani sharing system was the central agrarian change associated with Sastri's early Pudukkottai administration. Under this arrangement, cultivators were treated as tenants at will and revenue was connected to sharing rather than a stable proprietary holding. The state manual records that abolition converted the lands concerned into the private property of their holders, subject to fixed assessment (Venkatarama Ayyar, 1940/2002). This altered both fiscal calculation and the cultivator's legal position. Fixed liability made demand more predictable, while recognized holding rights could increase the value and transferability of land.

The change should not be romanticized. Fixed assessment enabled the state to define, record, and enforce claims more systematically. It reduced one form of uncertainty while extending bureaucratic supervision. Dirks's work on Pudukkottai shows how colonial-era land categories reshaped relationships among rulers, intermediaries, and cultivators (Dirks, 1989, 1993). The reform therefore combined security with intensified legibility.

During the regency, Sastri undertook an inam settlement. More than 300,000 acres were held under inam tenure, much of it connected to military, palace, temple, charitable, or village services. Some service obligations had become nominal, and some holdings were alleged to have been acquired irregularly. Rules modelled on the Madras Inam Department came into force in September 1888. By 1894, most militia tenures had been enfranchised through quit-rent, reportedly adding about one lakh rupees to state revenue. Religious, charitable, and necessary service inams were retained on existing terms, while other lands were brought under full assessment (Venkatarama Ayyar, 1940/2002).

Enfranchisement changed service land into a more marketable right, but it also commuted older obligations into monetary payments. Holders could gain secure and valuable property, while the state gained a regular revenue stream. This was a classic feature of fiscal modernization: heterogeneous obligations were translated into standardized money claims. The distributional effect depended on the holder's capacity to pay, the accuracy of records, and the treatment of customary users.

A revenue survey and settlement began in 1893 to correct unequal assessment caused by inaccurate measurement and soil classification. Sastri should receive credit for initiating this work, not for completing it. The manual indicates that survey and settlement continued after his retirement. This distinction corrects a central overstatement in the earlier manuscript. A reform programme often crosses administrative tenures, and later completion does not erase the initiating role or justify sole attribution.

Fiscal reform also included relief. Following successive poor years and severe conditions in 1892, the government reduced selected demands. The special assessment on garden crops was abolished, high rates were capped and reduced proportionately, and the tax on trees standing on patta land was removed. The manual estimated the resulting remission at more than half a lakh of rupees (Venkatarama Ayyar, 1940/2002). These measures show that fiscal consolidation did not operate only through higher demand. The administration adjusted assessment when drought exposed the limits of cultivators' capacity.

The state's overall financial position strengthened. The manual reports that by 1883 treasury surpluses were invested in government securities as a reserve against adversity while expenditure on public works continued. Such claims come from an official retrospective and require caution, but they indicate a policy of combining liquidity, reserve formation, and capital spending. The salt convention of 1887 also converted suppression of local earth-salt manufacture into annual compensation of Rs. 38,000 from the Madras government (Venkatarama Ayyar, 1940/2002). This arrangement illustrates how princely fiscal policy was negotiated within colonial regulatory power.

6. Law, Publication, and Administrative Legibility:

Sastri's administration expanded the production and circulation of official information. The State Gazette and printed Administration Report appeared for the first time in 1878, and the State Press was enlarged. Publication created an official record of policy and performance, helped standardize instructions, and made administration more visible to superior authorities. It also gave the Darbar a medium through which to define its own account of good government.

Registration was separated from the revenue hierarchy when registration powers were withdrawn from tahsildars and deputy tahsildars and assigned to sub-registrars. Functional separation could reduce conflicts of duty and improve specialization. It also placed transactions within a dedicated documentary system. These changes exemplify bureaucratic legibility: people, property, decisions, and obligations became increasingly processed through specialized records.

Legal procedure was similarly standardized. A regulation introduced the British Indian legislative acts governing civil and criminal procedure into the state in 1882 (Venkatarama Ayyar, 1940/2002). The earlier manuscript incorrectly attributed this judicial codification to Raja Serfoji II. The corrected evidence connects the measure to Sastri's Pudukkottai administration. Adoption of external procedural codes did not erase princely sovereignty. It aligned judicial practice with a wider legal order and made the state's courts more intelligible to colonial officials and litigants familiar with British Indian forms.

A British post and telegraph office opened in the capital in 1884, and a 1894 regulation provided for amalgamation of the state postal department with the British system. Communications integration reduced administrative distance but also tied the state more closely to imperial infrastructure. Such measures demonstrate the dual character of modernization under paramountcy: local capacity expanded through deeper incorporation into colonial networks.

The Devasthanam Department was reorganized by abolishing the manager's office and transferring supervision of institutions, establishments, receipts, and expenditure to tahsildars. This measure extended fiscal-administrative oversight into religious endowments. It may have improved accounting, but it also strengthened executive control over institutions embedded in local religious life. A balanced assessment must recognize both dimensions.

7. Public Works, Urban Improvement, and Education:

Infrastructure was a visible part of Sastri's programme. Before the regency, many irrigation tanks had been repaired and the main roads toward Trichinopoly, Tanjore, and Madura had been improved. The relationship between tanks and revenue was direct in a drought-prone agrarian economy. Repair could stabilize cultivation and tax receipts, although the surviving evidence does not support every detailed claim in the earlier manuscript about tank classification, ayacut surveys, and village-level assessment formulas.

Pudukkottai town was also remodelled. Streets and lanes were cleared of encroachments, drainage was improved, markets were relocated or regularized, and the urban layout was reorganized. The official district history specifically identifies town remodelling as one of Sastri's reforms (Pudukkottai District Administration, n.d.). The state manual further associates his administration with the drainage and cleaning of Pallavankulam, which was linked in the official account to a reduction in guinea-worm disease. The causal language of the manual should be treated cautiously, but the episode demonstrates an early connection among water management, sanitation, and urban governance.

Education formed another strand. A girls' school opened in Pudukkottai town on 13 June 1883. The English school established in 1857 was raised to a second-grade college, and grant-in-aid rules for primary education were framed in 1885 (Venkatarama Ayyar, 1940/2002). Across princely India, education could function simultaneously as public policy, elite formation, administrative recruitment, and a language of sovereign competence (Bhagavan, 2003). Pudukkottai's measures expanded institutional provision and created a supply of educated personnel. They did not, by themselves, establish universal access, and the evidence available here does not justify claims of a measured rise in literacy during Sastri's term.

The connection between schooling and administration is explicit in the manual's observation that public offices were increasingly filled by young men educated on modern lines. Education thus served both social and governmental purposes. Female schooling widened the boundaries of state-supported education, while college and primary provision helped staff the expanding bureaucracy. The benefits, however, would have varied by caste, class, gender, and location, questions that require enrolment records and local evidence beyond the present source base.

Taken together, roads, tanks, drainage, communications, schools, and official buildings made government materially present. They also linked public welfare to fiscal and administrative capacity. The works were not separate ornaments of a reforming regime. They were part of a connected project in which revenue supported infrastructure, infrastructure supported production and mobility, and education supplied officials.

8. Comparison with Mysore and Travancore:

Comparison clarifies Pudukkottai's scale and sequence. Mysore's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century administration developed large departments, representative institutions, and a complex political system. Manor (1975) analyses the later state-level politics of Mysore, while Yazdani (2014) traces earlier experiments in military, administrative, and technological change under Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan. Bhagavan (2003) shows how education also became a field through which princes articulated sovereignty and developmental legitimacy. Pudukkottai lacked Mysore's territorial and fiscal resources. Its modernization centred on tenure conversion, revenue stability, urban works, and a compact administrative apparatus.

Travancore provides a different comparison because Sastri served there before coming to Pudukkottai. Later Travancore history combined bureaucratic development with intense social and political contestation (Ouwerkerk & Kooiman, 1994). The movement of experienced ministers among princely states helped circulate administrative techniques, but reforms did not travel unchanged. In Pudukkottai, local service tenures, tank irrigation, and a small capital shaped the priorities adopted.

The comparison supports two conclusions. First, professional ministers mattered because they carried administrative experience across jurisdictions. Second, rulers and diwans acted within local political economies. The same language of good government could lead to different institutional packages. Pudukkottai's significance lies precisely in showing what modernization looked like in a small, agriculturally dependent state rather than in reproducing the trajectory of a larger "model state."

9. Discussion:

Sastri's reforms can be understood through three connected processes: commutation, differentiation, and legibility. Commutation converted service and sharing arrangements into money assessments and quit-rents. Differentiation separated functions such as registration, revenue, religious-establishment supervision, and legal procedure. Legibility expanded through gazettes, administration reports, registers, surveys, and formal regulations. Together these processes increased the state's ability to know, classify, and govern.

The reforms also redistributed security and risk. Fixed assessment and enfranchised tenure could offer holders greater stability and market value. Drought remissions acknowledged limits to extraction. At the same time, monetization could expose households to cash obligations, and survey could turn contested or flexible claims into enforceable categories. Administrative order was therefore not experienced uniformly.

The Pudukkottai case also complicates the language of agency. Sastri exercised substantial initiative, especially during the regency, but he did not govern alone. The Raja, Madras government, political authorities, officials, landholders, and local institutions shaped the reform process. Studies that recover princely rulers and institutions as political actors caution against treating the states as mere puppets of the Raj (Copland, 1997; Ernst & Pati, 2007; Jeffrey, 1978). British models influenced inam rules, procedural law, titles, postal integration, and official reporting. Yet the Darbar selected, negotiated, and adapted these devices. This was constrained agency, not passive imitation.

Institutional continuity is a final theme. Sastri initiated the revenue survey in 1893, but later governments completed and revised settlement work. The same is true of broader modernization: successor administrations built representative, technical, and sectoral institutions on an earlier administrative base. Historical evaluation should identify sequence and cumulative change rather than attach an entire era to one administrator.

These findings align with reform theory that emphasizes political support, administrative capacity, sequencing, and resistance (Cheung, 2021; Groves, 1971; Mathur & Mathur, 2017). Sastri's authority as regent created an opportunity for change.

Existing fiscal pressures supplied incentives. Written rules and specialized offices provided implementation mechanisms. The durability of reform depended on whether later administrations maintained and extended those arrangements.

10. Limitations:

The study relies heavily on an official state manual compiled retrospectively. Its language often celebrates administrative achievement and provides limited access to cultivators' voices, opposition, litigation, caste conflict, gendered experience, or differences between policy and practice. Quantitative claims reported by the manual have not been independently reconstructed from annual accounts. The article therefore avoids causal claims about public trust, corruption reduction, literacy growth, or administrative efficiency that cannot be directly demonstrated.

Future research should examine Pudukkottai administration reports from 1878 onward, settlement registers, court proceedings, petitions, correspondence with the Madras government, school enrolment records, and village-level land documents. Such sources could test implementation, identify beneficiaries and losers, and recover local responses to fiscal and legal change.

11. Conclusion:

Sir A. Seshayya Sastri's Pudukkottai career belongs to 1878-1894. Within that period he helped redirect the state toward fixed assessment, monetized tenure, printed administration, specialized functions, standardized legal procedure, planned public works, and state-supported education. The abolition of amani, the inam settlement, selected revenue remissions, institutional publication, procedural regulation, town improvement, and educational expansion are supported by the state manual and can be securely associated with his administration. The scientific revenue survey should be described as a reform initiated under Sastri in 1893 and continued after his retirement. This correction replaces a heroic but inaccurate narrative with a stronger institutional history. Sastri's contribution was foundational, but cumulative modernization involved rulers, officials, British authorities, local groups, and successor administrations. Pudukkottai shows that bureaucratic modernization under indirect rule was neither simple Westernization nor an uncomplicated public good. It created more predictable rights and selected welfare gains while extending the state's fiscal, documentary, and regulatory reach. Its historical importance lies in that negotiated reordering of authority.

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