

**RETHINKING THE CAUVERY DELTA AS RESOURCE:
FROM RIVER WATER TO NEW ECONOMIES**

ADITYA RAMESH

Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine - University of Manchester

Date: March 9th, 2020

Time: 11 AM – 12:30 PM

Place: Coromandel conference room

In 1949, a report published by the newly established Planning Commission in independent India, remarked that the Tanjore (today Thanjavur) delta, a large region in southern India fed by the river Cauvery, had transformed from a multi-crop region to producing only rice. Yet, seventy years later, ethnography and oral history interviews conducted on the fringes of the delta towards the coast, indicate that what was primarily a rice economy is turning into spaces of shrimp farming and oil wells. This paper asks how a river fed delta, has transformed into one dependent on groundwater, shrimp farming and oil. The decades following independence from British colonial rule saw remarkable strides towards self-sufficiency in food production which had been disrupted during the Second World War and the partition of Burma from British India, from where India imported most of its rice. Wolf Ladejinsky, a World Bank economist who toured the Tanjore delta region claimed that it seemed a space of ‘rich soil and rich country’. The increase in food production was accompanied by changing land structures, with communist supported *dalit* and lower caste agriculturalists slowly gaining control over portions of land and the rice economy. In parallel however, this paper follows the slow processes of increasing groundwater usage, salinization in the coastal regions of the delta and the exploration for oil. The British, in 1863, had built a long canal to transport salt from a salt swamp at the southern tip of the delta to a port in the centre. The canal slowly became the primary inlet for salt water into the delta, which went unnoticed until the 1950s. With new European markets opening up for fish and the Indian government importing Norwegian shrimp species as part of India’s ‘Blue Revolution’, these saline lands started to become prime property to cultivate and farm shrimp. Concurrently, during the oil crisis of the 1970s, the Oil and Natural Gas Company started seriously exploring the delta for oil reserves. This paper asks what the changing landscape, from river fed paddy lands based lands to salt water shrimp farms and oil wells implies for 1) communities of low caste agriculturalists and fisherman 2) the long history, politics and effects of colonialism and commodities 3) environmental change as a harbinger of new economies and communities.

All are Welcome

MOSS (The Making of Social Sciences) Team