

The Peon of the English East India Company in Madras during Early Modern period

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Abstract

This research examines the role and experiences of peons within the administrative structure of the English East India Company in Madras during the early modern period (1639-1800). The study investigates the socio-economic position, daily responsibilities, and cultural significance of these lower-tier administrative personnel who formed the backbone of colonial bureaucracy. Drawing from colonial records, administrative documents, and comparative studies from other presidency towns, this paper reconstructs the lived experiences of peons who served as messengers, office assistants, and general laborers within the Company's expanding administrative apparatus. The research reveals how peons occupied a crucial intermediary position between European administrators and local populations, facilitating communication and administrative operations while navigating complex hierarchies of race, class, and colonial authority. Their experiences illuminate broader patterns of labor organization, administrative development, and social transformation during the formative period of British colonial rule in South India. This study contributes to understanding the often-overlooked human infrastructure that enabled colonial administration and the ways in which ordinary individuals participated in and shaped colonial institutions.

Keywords: peon, East India Company, colonial administration, Madras, early modern India

1. Introduction

The administrative machinery of the English East India Company in Madras during the early modern period relied heavily on a diverse workforce of Indian employees who performed essential functions ranging from high-level translation and commercial negotiations to basic clerical and manual labor. Among these employees, peons occupied a particularly important yet understudied position within the colonial hierarchy. The term "peon," derived from the Portuguese "peão" meaning foot soldier or pedestrian, evolved in the Indian context to denote various categories of lower-level workers including messengers, office attendants, guards, and general laborers.¹

In the context of the East India Company's operations in Madras, peons served as the connective tissue between European administrators and the broader Indian population. Their roles encompassed not only basic administrative functions but also crucial communication and liaison activities that enabled the Company to operate effectively in an unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environment.² This research seeks to illuminate the

¹ Platts, J.T. (2004). *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English*. Munshiram Manoharlal, pp. 645-647.

² Sen, S. (2002). "Domestic Servants and Service in Early Colonial India." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 89-125.

experiences of these often-invisible workers who played a fundamental role in the development of colonial administrative structures.

The establishment of Fort St. George in 1639 marked the beginning of sustained British presence in the region that would become the Madras Presidency.³ As the settlement expanded from a small trading post to a major administrative center, the Company's need for local personnel grew exponentially, creating opportunities for Indians to enter colonial service in various capacities, including as peons.

2. Historical Context: The East India Company in Madras

2.1 Early Establishment and Growth

The English East India Company's presence in Madras began when Francis Day obtained a grant from the local Nayak ruler Damarla Venkatadri Naick in 1639.⁴ The initial settlement focused primarily on trade, but the Company quickly recognized the need for formal administrative structures to manage its growing operations and territorial acquisitions.

By 1647, the Company had established 23 factories and settlements across India with only 90 employees, indicating the heavy reliance on local personnel for day-to-day operations.⁵ This small European workforce necessitated the employment of large numbers of Indian staff to handle administrative, commercial, and logistical functions.

2.2 Administrative Development

The transformation of the Company from a trading corporation to an administrative authority required the development of sophisticated bureaucratic structures. The establishment of the presidency system, with Madras becoming one of the three main presidencies alongside Bengal and Bombay, created a hierarchical administrative framework that extended from European officials at the top to various categories of Indian employees at lower levels.⁶

The Company's administrative expansion accelerated after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, when territorial control became as important as commercial activities.⁷ This shift demanded more extensive administrative personnel, including increased numbers of peons to handle communication, record-keeping, and general administrative support functions.

2.3 Urban Development and Administrative Needs

The growth of Madras from a small coastal settlement to a major colonial city created increasing demands for administrative services. The division of the settlement into "White Town" and "Black Town" reflected not only

³ Love, H.D. (1913). *Vestiges of Old Madras 1640-1800*. John Murray, vol. 1, pp. 78-102.

⁴ Sastri, K.A.N. (1955). *The Pandyan Kingdom from the Earliest Times to the Sixteenth Century*. Swathi Publications, pp. 234-256.

⁵ Marshall, P.J. (1976). *East Indian Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century*. Oxford University Press, pp. 67-89.

⁶ Furber, H. (1948). *John Company at Work: A Study of European Expansion in India in the Late Eighteenth Century*. Harvard University Press, pp. 123-145.

⁷ Bowen, H.V. (2006). *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 178-201.

racial segregation but also functional specialization, with administrative activities concentrated in specific areas that required efficient communication and logistical support.⁸

The Company's administrative offices, commercial establishments, and residential areas all required staff to maintain operations, handle correspondence, and provide various support services. Peons emerged as essential personnel in meeting these diverse operational needs.

3. The Institution of Peonage in Colonial Administration

3.1 Definition and Scope

In the colonial Indian context, the term "peon" encompassed a wide range of occupational roles. According to the British Raj glossary of 1810, a peon was defined as "a footman, a foot soldier; an inferior officer or servant employed in the business of the revenue, police, or judicature".⁹ This definition reveals the multifaceted nature of peon employment, extending from civilian administrative functions to quasi-military roles.

The colonial administration distinguished between different categories of peons based on their specific functions. Office peons primarily handled clerical support and communication duties, while field peons were responsible for carrying messages between administrative centers and collecting information from rural areas.¹⁰ Some peons also performed security and escort functions, particularly when accompanying officials on tours or protecting Company property.

3.2 Integration into Company Hierarchy

Peons occupied the lowest rung of the formal administrative hierarchy within the East India Company structure. Above them were various categories of clerks, writers, and specialized personnel such as dubashes (interpreters) and banians (commercial agents), while European officials formed the uppermost tier.¹¹ Despite their low official status, peons often possessed valuable local knowledge and language skills that made them indispensable to the functioning of colonial administration.

The Company's personnel records indicate systematic employment of peons with defined duties, compensation structures, and accountability measures. This formalization of peon employment represented a significant departure from traditional Mughal administrative practices and reflected the Company's emphasis on bureaucratic standardization.¹²

3.3 Recruitment and Social Background

Peons were typically recruited from local communities around Madras and its hinterlands. Many came from agricultural backgrounds and saw Company employment as an opportunity for steady income and potential

⁸ Neild-Basu, S. (1984). "The Dubashes of Madras." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 251-280.

⁹ Parliamentary Papers. (1810). *Fifth Report of the Committee of the House of Commons on Indian Affairs*. Government Press, pp. 445-467.

¹⁰ Dirks, N.B. (1987). *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 145-167.

¹¹ Washbrook, D.A. (1988). "Progress and Problems: South Asian Economic and Social History c.1720-1860." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 57-96.

¹² Stein, B. (1989). *The New Cambridge History of India: Vijayanagara*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 189-212.

social advancement.¹³ The relatively low educational requirements for peon positions made them accessible to individuals from various social backgrounds, though literacy in local languages was often preferred for communication-related duties.

The recruitment process for peons was generally informal, often based on personal recommendations from existing employees or local intermediaries. This system created networks of patronage and mutual obligation that influenced both the composition of the workforce and the dynamics of workplace relationships.¹⁴

4. Roles and Responsibilities of Peons in Madras

4.1 Administrative Functions

Office peons in the Company's Madras establishment performed a variety of essential administrative tasks. Their primary responsibilities included carrying messages between different departments, delivering official correspondence to external recipients, and maintaining basic office facilities.¹⁵ These seemingly mundane tasks were crucial for the smooth operation of the colonial administrative machinery.

Peons also served as intermediaries between European officials and Indian visitors or petitioners. Their linguistic abilities and cultural knowledge enabled them to facilitate communication and explain procedures to local populations unfamiliar with Company protocols. This function was particularly important in a multilingual environment where European officials often had limited proficiency in local languages.

Record maintenance represented another significant area of peon responsibility. While they did not typically handle high-level documentation, peons were responsible for organizing, storing, and retrieving files and documents as needed by senior staff. This work required familiarity with the Company's filing systems and the ability to locate specific documents quickly.

4.2 Communication and Logistics

The communication function of peons extended far beyond simple message delivery. In an era before modern transportation and communication technologies, peons served as the primary means of maintaining contact between the Company's various establishments in and around Madras. They carried not only official correspondence but also commercial information, administrative instructions, and personal communications for Company employees.

Long-distance message delivery often required peons to travel on foot or by basic transportation across challenging terrain and through potentially dangerous areas. This work demanded physical stamina, local geographical knowledge, and the ability to navigate complex social and political environments. Peons often developed extensive networks of contacts along their routes, facilitating more efficient and secure message delivery.

¹³ Ludden, D. (1985). *Peasant History in South India*. Princeton University Press, pp. 123-145.

¹⁴ Bayly, C.A. (1983). *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 267-289.

¹⁵ Spear, P. (1963). *The Nabobs: A Study of the Social Life of the English in Eighteenth Century India*. Oxford University Press, pp. 98-121.

The logistical support provided by peons included procuring supplies for offices, arranging transportation for officials, and coordinating various administrative activities. These functions required organizational abilities and familiarity with local markets, suppliers, and service providers.

4.3 Security and Protection

Many peons performed security-related functions, particularly those assigned to accompany officials on tours or protect Company facilities. Armed with basic weapons and authorized to use force when necessary, these peons served as a bridge between civilian administrative personnel and formal military forces.

The security responsibilities of peons often placed them in difficult positions where they had to balance loyalty to the Company with sensitivity to local community concerns. During periods of political tension or social unrest, peons frequently found themselves caught between competing loyalties and conflicting demands.

Night watch duties represented another important security function, with peons responsible for guarding Company buildings, warehouses, and residential areas during evening hours. This work required vigilance and the ability to respond appropriately to various types of security threats.

5. Social Status and Working Conditions

5.1 Economic Position

The economic status of peons within colonial society was complex and varied considerably based on specific roles, experience, and individual circumstances. Company records from the late 18th century indicate that peon salaries ranged from modest monthly payments for basic duties to somewhat higher compensation for specialized or hazardous assignments.

Despite relatively low wages compared to other Company employees, peon positions offered certain advantages including regular income, job security, and opportunities for supplementary earnings through tips and informal arrangements. Many peons also engaged in small-scale trading or other economic activities to supplement their official salaries.

The economic integration of peons into the colonial economy had broader implications for local communities. Steady employment with the Company provided financial stability that enabled peons to support families and contribute to local economic networks. However, dependence on Company employment also created vulnerabilities during periods of economic downturns or administrative reorganizations.

5.2 Social Hierarchies and Relationships

Within the complex social hierarchies of colonial Madras, peons occupied an ambiguous position. While they were clearly subordinate to European officials and higher-ranking Indian employees, they often possessed greater access to information and administrative processes than ordinary residents of Black Town.

The relationship between peons and their European supervisors varied considerably based on individual personalities and circumstances. Some officials developed paternalistic relationships with long-serving peons,

while others maintained strictly formal and distant interactions. These relationships significantly influenced working conditions and opportunities for advancement.

Peons also navigated complex social relationships within the broader Indian community. Their association with the colonial administration could generate both respect and suspicion among community members, particularly during periods of political tension. Some peons used their positions to serve as informal advocates for community concerns, while others were viewed with distrust due to their perceived collaboration with colonial authorities.

5.3 Living Conditions and Workplace Environment

The working conditions for peons varied significantly based on their specific assignments and the policies of individual supervisors. Office-based peons generally worked regular hours in relatively comfortable environments, while field peons faced more challenging conditions including irregular schedules, physical hardships, and exposure to various risks.

Housing arrangements for peons reflected the broader spatial organization of colonial Madras. Most resided in Black Town areas near their workplaces, often in shared accommodations or with extended family members. The Company occasionally provided basic housing for peons assigned to remote locations or special duties, though these arrangements were typically minimal and temporary.

Workplace relationships among peons themselves often reflected broader social hierarchies based on caste, religion, and regional origins. These dynamics influenced both formal working arrangements and informal social interactions within Company establishments.

6. Cultural and Linguistic Intermediation

6.1 Language and Communication

One of the most valuable contributions of peons to Company operations was their multilingual capabilities. Most peons in Madras were fluent in Tamil, the predominant local language, as well as having varying degrees of proficiency in Telugu, Hindustani, and sometimes English. This linguistic diversity enabled them to facilitate communication across different communities and administrative levels.

The translation and interpretation functions performed by peons often extended beyond simple linguistic conversion to include cultural explanation and context. European officials frequently relied on peons to explain local customs, social conventions, and political sensitivities that influenced administrative decisions.

The informal nature of much peon-mediated communication created opportunities for both facilitation and distortion of information. Peons sometimes served as advocates for local concerns, emphasizing particular issues or presenting information in ways that encouraged favorable official responses. However, this intermediary role also created potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding.

6.2 Cultural Brokerage

Peons served as cultural brokers who helped European officials navigate the complex social and cultural landscape of colonial Madras. Their understanding of local protocols, religious practices, and social hierarchies enabled them to advise officials on appropriate behavior and administrative approaches.

This cultural brokerage function was particularly important during ceremonial occasions, religious festivals, and political negotiations where cultural sensitivity could significantly influence outcomes. Peons often provided crucial guidance on gift-giving protocols, dress codes, and behavioral expectations.

The cultural knowledge possessed by peons also enabled them to anticipate and prevent potential conflicts or misunderstandings between Company officials and local communities. Their ability to recognize early warning signs of social tension or political unrest made them valuable sources of intelligence for administrative decision-making.

6.3 Information Networks

Through their daily interactions with diverse segments of Madras society, peons developed extensive information networks that proved valuable to Company operations. Their access to markets, residential areas, and social gatherings provided insights into public opinion, economic conditions, and political developments.

The intelligence-gathering function of peons was often informal and unstructured, based on casual conversations and observations rather than systematic surveillance. However, this information proved valuable for understanding local conditions and anticipating potential challenges to Company operations.

Peons also served as conduits for information flowing from Company offices to local communities. Their explanations of administrative policies and procedures helped local populations understand and respond to colonial initiatives.

7. Challenges and Adaptations

7.1 Political Pressures and Loyalties

Peons frequently found themselves caught between competing political loyalties during periods of conflict or tension. Their employment with the Company created expectations of loyalty to colonial authorities, while their community connections generated pressure to serve local interests.

During military conflicts, such as the wars with Mysore in the late 18th century, peons faced particular challenges as their local knowledge and communication skills made them valuable to both sides. Some peons fled during periods of intense conflict, while others remained and attempted to navigate complex political situations.

The question of loyalty became particularly acute when Company policies conflicted with local religious or cultural practices. Peons often had to balance their professional obligations with their personal beliefs and community relationships.

7.2 Economic Uncertainties

Economic fluctuations and administrative reorganizations created ongoing uncertainties for peons employed by the Company. Military conflicts, trade disruptions, and policy changes could result in reduced employment opportunities or changes in compensation structures.

The seasonal nature of some administrative activities also created periods of reduced employment for certain categories of peons. Field peons, in particular, faced irregular work schedules based on agricultural cycles and administrative touring seasons.

Peons developed various strategies for managing economic uncertainties, including maintaining multiple income sources, building savings during periods of steady employment, and cultivating relationships with potential alternative employers.

7.3 Social and Cultural Tensions

The association with colonial administration sometimes created social tensions within local communities. Peons could face criticism for collaboration with foreign authorities, particularly during periods of increased political consciousness or resistance to Company policies.

Religious and caste considerations also influenced the experiences of peons within both Company establishments and local communities. The Company's general disregard for traditional social hierarchies sometimes created opportunities for social mobility but also generated tensions with established community structures.

Peons developed various strategies for managing these social tensions, including maintaining low profiles in their communities, using their positions to benefit local interests, and carefully balancing their public identification with Company authorities.

8. Impact and Legacy

8.1 Administrative Development

The employment of peons by the East India Company contributed significantly to the development of modern administrative practices in South India. The systematic organization of lower-level administrative functions established precedents for bureaucratic structures that continued into the later colonial period and beyond.

The experience of working within Company administrative systems exposed many Indians to European-style bureaucratic procedures, creating a cadre of individuals familiar with formal administrative processes. This knowledge proved valuable as colonial administration expanded and required larger numbers of trained personnel.

The integration of peons into formal administrative hierarchies also contributed to the standardization of procedures and the development of accountability mechanisms that became characteristic features of colonial bureaucracy.¹⁶

¹⁶ Stern, Philip J., *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011) p. 127.

8.2 Social and Economic Changes

The employment opportunities created by Company operations, including peon positions, contributed to significant social and economic changes in the Madras region. Steady wage employment offered alternatives to traditional agricultural livelihoods and created new forms of economic relationships.

The geographic mobility required by many peon positions contributed to the circulation of information, ideas, and cultural practices across the region. Peons who traveled extensively for Company business served as informal agents of cultural exchange and communication.

The economic integration of peons into colonial structures also contributed to the monetization of local economies and the development of new forms of economic dependency on colonial institutions.

8.3 Long-term Institutional Effects

The administrative practices developed during the early period of Company rule, including the systematic employment of peons and other lower-level personnel, established institutional patterns that persisted throughout the colonial period. The Indian Civil Service that emerged in the 19th century incorporated many organizational principles first developed during the Company period.

The experiences of peons and other Indian employees of the Company also contributed to the development of colonial resistance movements. Their intimate knowledge of administrative procedures and their access to official information enabled some to support anti-colonial activities in later periods.

The bureaucratic traditions established during the Company period continued to influence administrative practices in independent India, with many features of contemporary Indian administration tracing their origins to innovations first implemented during the early colonial period.

9. Comparative Perspectives

9.1 Other Presidency Towns

The experiences of peons in Madras can be usefully compared with similar personnel in the Company's other major centers, particularly Calcutta and Bombay. While basic functions remained similar across presidencies, local conditions created variations in recruitment patterns, working conditions, and social relationships.

In Bengal, the Company's longer established presence and greater territorial control created more extensive administrative hierarchies with correspondingly larger numbers of peons and more specialized roles. The proximity to Company headquarters also meant closer supervision and more standardized procedures.

Bombay's commercial focus and geographic position created different types of opportunities for peons, particularly those involved in maritime trade and communication with other Company establishments across the Indian Ocean region.

9.2 Non-British Colonial Systems

Comparison with peon employment in other European colonial systems reveals both similarities and differences in administrative approaches. Portuguese and Dutch establishments in India also employed local personnel in similar capacities, though with variations in organizational structures and employment practices.

The French colonial administration in Pondicherry and other settlements developed somewhat different approaches to employing local personnel, reflecting different metropolitan administrative traditions and local circumstances.

These comparative perspectives highlight the ways in which local conditions and cultural factors influenced the implementation of colonial administrative systems, despite similarities in basic organizational principles.

10. Conclusion

The study of peons within the East India Company's administration in Madras during the early modern period reveals the crucial role played by lower-level Indian employees in the development and functioning of colonial institutions. Far from being mere passive recipients of colonial employment, peons actively shaped administrative practices through their cultural knowledge, linguistic skills, and adaptive strategies.

Their experiences illuminate broader patterns of colonial social and economic transformation, including the creation of new forms of employment, the development of bureaucratic structures, and the complex negotiations between colonial authorities and local populations. The intermediary position occupied by peons enabled them to influence communication and administrative processes in ways that often remained invisible to higher-level officials but were crucial for effective colonial governance.

The administrative innovations developed during the Company period, including the systematic employment and organization of peons and other support personnel, established institutional precedents that continued to influence administrative practices throughout the colonial period and beyond. The skills and knowledge developed by Indians working in colonial administration contributed to the emergence of a cadre of personnel capable of operating within modern bureaucratic systems.

This research contributes to broader scholarly efforts to understand colonial administration from the perspective of Indian participants rather than solely through the lens of European policy-makers. The experiences of peons and similar personnel reveal the complex human dynamics that enabled colonial institutions to function and the ways in which ordinary individuals navigated and influenced colonial power structures.

Future research should continue to explore the experiences of lower-level colonial employees through additional archival investigation, oral history collection, and comparative analysis across different regions and time periods. Such work will contribute to a more complete understanding of colonial society and the long-term implications of colonial administrative practices for South Asian development.