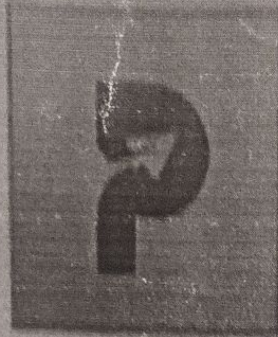


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Land Revenue System during British India

Mrs Gurvinder Kaur

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Guru Nanak Girls College, Yamunanagar

Abstract: Agriculture has been the most important source of income in India. Tax from land was a major source of revenue for the kings and emperors from ancient time. So administration needs a proper care to handle land revenue system. During the eighteenth century, the process of decline the Mughal Empire continued and the British colonial power have risen in India. After securing the Diwani rights of Bengal in 1765, the British East India Company worked to enlarge the company's revenue which was reflected in their land policies and settlements. The British company invented and experimented different land revenue settlements in colonized India. Here, in this paper an attempt has been made to analyze the British East India revenue system and how it brought many changes in all sectors of the Indian society. Many changes produced in the agrarian social structure i.e. in the structure of land control in agrarian class relations as well as the peasant revolts against these changes.

Keywords: British Diwani, mahal, raiyat, revenue, settlement, Zamindar,

Introduction: During the Muslim period Indian polity had only three constituents: the ruling sovereign, the army that supported the throne and a peasantry that paid for both¹. Agriculture being the most important occupation before the British rule and during it. It was the most important source of income for the state also. So the crucial importance of well managed land revenue administration. The essential feature of the land revenue system was a three tier framework of rights. The lowest tier consisted of rights to collect taxes, and the upper most tiers consisted of rights to grant taxation rights vested ultimately in the imperial center. Each one of these levels was differentiated with in itself.

After gaining full control over Bengal in 1765 and securing the Diwani rights the administrators of the British East India Company primarily worked to enlarge the company's revenue which was reflected in their land policy and settlement² In beginning, company followed the traditional land assessment system but after that they modified the existing land settlement from time to time to collect maximum revenue from land to fulfill their needs of colonial administration³

First of all Lord Cornwallis introduced Zamindari system in 1793 through Permanent settlement Act. Zamindars were recognized as owner of the lands and were given the rights to collect the rent from the peasants. They were declared full owner with absolute proprietary rights in land, without realizing that they were only tax collecting intermediaries during the preceding regime. Infact the Britishers wanted to introduce property rights in land and thus redefine the relationship between the



cultivators and the state. The Zamindars were the key link between the central authority and the vast numbers of peasants who occupied and cultivated land. But it was a great injustice to the peasants (raiya) as the Zamindari settlement totally ignored their occupancy rights and reduced them to the position of mere tenants at-will on their own fields.⁴ the Britishers thought that the Zamindars were like the landlords of Britain that is a superior type of cultivator and they believed in that the Indian Zamindars also brought a commercial revolution in Indian agriculture as enterprising English landlords had done in England. Some historians attribute that the permanent settlement was devised to create a class of loyal collaborators for building the empire.⁵

After sometime the government of the East India Company fixed the rent charged by the Zamindars to their tenants. Bitter complaints about Zamindari exploitation of cultivators continued, however a series of tenancy act recognized and strengthened the occupancy rights of tenants on a land for many generations. Tenancy regulation encouraged a rental market. Superior right-holders could hope to make money by leasing out land to inferior right-holders. A large numbers of these leases were unregulated. It is clear that the land market is to push in to lease market.⁶ Ratnalekha Ray argued that taking advantage of the Zamindars own distance from land and unstable economic conditions, wealthy peasants with superior tenancy rights extended their landholdings, so much so that they put limits on the Zamindars ability to take closer hold of actual cultivation.⁷ After 1857 revolt the British Crown took the colonial administration authority from East India Company and established a new law and order in India. A commercial revolution increased the production of cash crops. Now food crops were shifted in to commercial crops which required credit facilities. Credit system was not properly organized in nineteenth century India. So poor peasant naturally turned to the money lender, who exploited him by charging exorbitant interest rates on loans. Peasant unable to repay loans with interest had to surrender their land to their creditors. This strengthened the position of the money lenders and rich landlords in rural India.⁸

If the permanent settlement in Bengal was an experiment in transplanting the enterprise and dynamism of the English landlords on to Indian soil, then the experiment unquestionably failed as it did not end parasitic landlordism.⁹

Perhaps learning from the failure and also under the impact of nineteenth century- utilitarianism the British tried to introduce a new form of revenue settlement in Madras, Bombay and Berar regions. The Raiyatwari system is associated with the name of Sir Thomas Munro who was appointed governor of Madras in May 1820. Subsequently this system was extended to Bombay area under the supervision of Thomas Reid. Under raiyatwari settlement, a direct contact between the raiyat (the cultivator) and the state. It meant a tax contract that remained valid for a period of time, usually thirty years and was renegotiated thereafter.

At every subsequent resettlement or revision, assessment invariably went up by between 25- 60 percent on average, depending upon factors such as soil quality, yield, improvements made in land



plots, surplus/profit earned by cultivators and so on¹⁰. Raiyats were turned in to rent tenants and share-croppers came in to existence. In the raiyatwari areas various categories of tenants- such as 'protected', 'occupancy', 'ordinary' and 'sharecropper' tenants, besides different types of attached labour emerged¹¹.

The third variety of land is known as the Mahalwari or Malguzari system. It was adopted in the united provinces (excluding Oudh) Punjab and the central provinces and also excluding the Berar region. Cultivation of land was done on a co- sharing basis and co-sharer of good social standing was generally selected to undertake the responsibility of paying the assessment fixed for the entire village¹². Conquered ethnic groups- lineages, tribes or castes were made to work on the lands of the Co- sharing landholders. Unfortunately the system did not work successfully because the settlement officers who were the carrier of the settlement, turned corrupt and the revenue was at their own discretion. As a result the system proved miserable to the agricultural classes. This created widespread discontent and finally the Mahalwari system failed to create any extensive effect.¹³

Agrarian Discontent and peasant Revolts: All the agrarian classes were distressed by the British government's high revenue demands. Either the peasants (actual cultivator) revolted against their oppressors- the landlords under whom they held land, or sometimes all the agrarian classes joined together and rebelled against the severe demands of the state. The body of the rebel army was the cultivating peasant who resisted the intruders whether they were the new Zamindars, money lenders or the British troops often commissioned to enforce the new system.¹⁴ the new landlords were given unlimited powers to increase the rents of their tribal tenants then tribal uprising occurred in the whole of Bihar and Orissa. Kol, Bhumi and Santal uprising was the part of agrarian unrest. The tribal sentiment was deeply hurt when the land was transferred to urban money- lenders the tribal people rose in arms and they murdered several landlords, mahajans and darogas. Similarly in Pabna and Bogra(Bengal) the peasants destroyed a large numbers of agreement forms-Kabuliyats. In 1875 the peasants riot against British government were spread in several villages of Poona, Ahmednagar, Satara and Sholapur district. Physical violence was rare and resorted to only when the money lenders refused to surrender the legal documents which they used for exploiting their debtors. The direct result of the Deccan riots was the Deccan Agricultural Relief Act which was passed in 1879. But this act did not cure the poor peasant of Maharashtra and they were left completely unprotected at the mercy of the money lender- the new - despot. Like western Maharashtra Punjab also experienced serious agrarian unrest. The tenants, share-croppers and poor landholders faced enormous economic burdens, evidenced by the fact that by 1874 a million acres of land were mortgaged in the Punjab and the figures had gone up to four million acres in 1891.¹⁵ The partition of Bengal had radicalized the national movement in Punjab. The agrarian distress of the peasantry broke out in the form of Punjab peasant riots. However the Punjab riots were neither a neither purely agrarian nor purely political agitation, but a combination of both, hence failed to bring about any change in agrarian relations.



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Conclusion: The British East India Company introduced new revenue policy which has completely destroyed Indian agriculture system. All rural classes' especially poor peasants had been disturbed by the British land revenue policy and administration. The new revenue policy also worked against the interest of small land owners, raiyats and share- croppers who constituted the poor peasantry. Growing indebtedness among the poor cultivating classes and consequent transfer of lands to money-lenders had considerably worsened agrarian relations and the resultant unrest threatened the political stability of British rule.

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