

# Revenue and Land Reforms in British Administration – A Study

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to study cause-effects relationship of different modes of revenue assessments aka **Land reforms in British India**, The Zamindari, Ryotwari and Mahalwari Land Revenue Settlements were introduced by the Britishers to collect land revenue. The comparison between these settlements is made on the basis of their territorial distribution, implementation and their impact on the society. Ryotwari system was introduced by Captain Alexander Reid in 1792 which was later improvised by Thomas Munro in 1820, the major areas where it was implemented was Madras, Bombay and parts of Assam, Sind and Berar. In this system the ownership right was handed over to the peasants and the British government directly collected taxes from the peasants also known as Raiyts, the revenue could be revised after 20 to 30 years and increased unlike the permanent settlement. It was implemented in 51% of British areas. The major problem that was seen in this system was the excessive tax. There was usually no middleman between the government and the peasant. He is at liberty to sublet his property, or to transfer it by gift, sale, or mortgage. He cannot be ejected by Government so long as he pays the fixed assessment, and has the option annually of increasing or diminishing his holding, or of entirely abandoning it. The peasants under this system is virtually a Proprietor on a simple and perfect title, and has all the benefits of a perpetual lease without its responsibilities, inasmuch as he can at any time throw up his lands, but cannot be ejected so long as he pays his dues; he receives assistance in difficult seasons, and is irresponsible for the payment of his neighbours. The levy was not based on actual revenues from the produce of the land, but instead on an estimate of the potential of the soil; in some cases more than 50% of the gross revenue was demanded.

*Keywords: Diwani (revenue collection right), Mahal (estate), Patta (lease), Raiyat (peasant), Zamindar (landlord)*

## Introduction

The core of the utilitarian philosophy of political economy developed by Ricardo professed a scientific foundation for the land revenue system. James Mill played a master role in the institution of new land revenue system. He was from 1819 until 1830 immediately responsible for drafting the revenue dispatches to India for following liberal land revenue assessment. Utilitarian's hopes of inaugurating a comparative society, based on individual rights in the soil, depended as much upon the revenue assessment, and the registration of landholdings which accompanied it, as upon the superstructure of judicial cods and establishment. In this context Stocks has argued, in a well-known study that the ideological distaste for landlordism, born of utilitarian philosophy, was a major force behind the development of Ryotwari and Mahalwari settlements, with the implication that policy may have ruined traditionally powerful landlord groups. Possible example here is the "Talukdars" of northern India, whose previous control over the revenue settlements of many villages was frequently

set aside by Mahalwari arrangements. In the mind of such as Munro and Wingate- the leading figures behind respectively the Madras and Bombay systems- utilitarian dislike of landlordism was doubtless reinforced by political experience of regions where cultivating peasants typically controlled the land. Without any doubt, the ideas in vogue in Great Britain at the time also played certain role in choosing the pattern of settlement. They echoed in effect the growing intellectual influence of utilitarian philosopher like James Mill, Bentham, Stuart Mil etc., whose aversion to landlordism was markedly asserted. Perhaps it also reflected at the dawn of the European Romanticism, the idealization of rustic values that had currency in the home country.

## POSITION OF TENANTS

Mr. Dutt in his latter to Lord Curzon pointed out the condition and actual position of tenants in these settlement areas. He asserted the Bengal peasants were more prosperous, more resource full and better able to help themselves in years of bad harvests than cultivators in any other part of India. Therefore apparently means because of the permanent settlement coupled with the restrictions on enhancement of rent by the Zamindars. The Zamindar settlement turned the entire peasantry formally into the Zamindars' tenants, liable for rent payment. The principle problem with the position of the tenants in the early years was that the government left open the question of whether or not the Zamindar could raise rent. And in this game, the dominant and large tenants were often bribed into collusion or a silent acceptance so that the weaker tenants had no option but to pay. RatnaLekha Ray argued that taking advantage of the Zamindars' own distance from land and unstable economic condition, wealthy peasants with superior tenancy rights extended their landholdings, so much so that they put limit.

Ryotwari system weakened the middle tier and strengthened peasant rights. However, the Raiyat in question differed in character between regions. One particular variation of this principle occurred in parts of Northern India, where joints peasant rights were strengthened. In the upper Doab and Rohilkhand, talukdars were suppressed and the „village republics“ were recognized as the proprietary body. The joint landlords of village land were collectively responsible for the revenue. Agriculture were unsecured and population too thin here to generate large rents. Therefore joint rights cemented by clan or kingship were possible. By and large, in southern and western India, „mirasdars“ were granted proprietary rights. The Mirasdars being technically holders of shares in village land, the system and the joint-landlord type of assessment could become in many cases indistinct. The political prelude to this system in the south was the suppression of poligars in 1799-1800. They were partly like the northern Zamindars. A few of them did become Zamindars under British rule.

In Ryotwari area the proprietary right is perfect, and as long he pays affixed assessment on his land, he can be ousted by no one; there is no principle of Ryotwari management more fixed or better known than this, and the government denied that any right can be stronger. It is thus abundantly clear that the distinguishing feature of Ryotwari is the limitation is perpetuity of the demand of the state on the land, the Raiyat have thus all the advantages of the Zamindari tenure, while the state has a valuable reserve of waste land whence, as cultivation extends, its resource will be augmented so as to meet the increasing demand on its finances which the progress of the country will entitle. In deciding who gained and who lost through this process, we need to note first of all that the answered varied by regions because the precise mix between colonial ideologies and practice varied too. In Zamindari area the older elite on the whole gained. But some of this gained faded away as the nineteenth century wore on and groups of rich farmers consolidated their economic power by participating in the market,

something that the Zamindars never could do. The general character of land transfers in colonial India was not only from the poor to the rich, but contained a significant element of rich-to-poor as well. In the process, asset inequality remained broadly unchanged .

## MAGNITUDE OF ASSESSMENTS

In the Zamindari settlements, the land tax was fixed forever. In the Ryotwari areas, the land tax was fixed subject to periodic revision like northern India. It generally believed that the first round of settlements set taxes too high, possibly causing peasant distress and an agrarian depression. The idea of an agrarian depression sometime in the second quarter of the nineteenth century has been articulated in regional histories of the Bombay-Deccan and Madras. Therefore second round of settlements in the 1840s moderated the tax burden considerably.

The institutional reforms were a curious mix of old practices and new ideas. Many element and custom were suppressed. Chief among these was the authority of local officials to punish the defaulting tax collectors or peasant. Suppression of this right made it possible for land to change hands faster and more easily when default occurred. By the permanent settlement and the Ryotwari settlement to follow in Madras and Bombay, the new regime of the East India Company made public sale of ownership rights mandatory when tax default occurred. The revenue officials after 1816 combined in themselves both revenue collection and police duties in the countryside. This enhancement of power inevitably resulted in coercion, bribery and corruption by the subordinate officials of the collectors who were revelled in abundant and gory details in Madras Torture Commission Report in 1855.

In Madras and Bombay things are worse. There the land tax is paid generally by the cultivators of the soil, there being, in most parts of those provinces, no intervening landlords. The British government declared its intention in 1864 of releasing as land tax about one half of the economic rent. But what the British government does take as land tax at the present day sometimes approximates to the whole of the economic rent, leaving the cultivators little beyond the wages of their labour and the profit of their agricultural stock. The land tax is revised once every thirty years; the cultivators does not know on what grounds it is enhanced; he has to submit to each renewed assessment, or to his ancestral fields and perish. This uncertainty of land tax paralyses agriculture, prevents savings, and keeps the tiller of the soil in a state of poverty and indebtedness.

After a period of inactivity, the government of 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 Acts (1859-1928) recognized and strengthen the occupancy rights of the tenants settled on a land for many generations. This is a process that later writers called "sub-infeudation". Mr. Dutt asked for the protection as possible under the land system of each province against frequent reassessments and undue enhancements be granted to the cultivators all over India. This precisely represents the policy pursued by the government of India. During the Viceroyalty of Lord Ripon and subsequently Viceroyalties several measures followed in the context on the relations of land lord and tenant. As a result the Bengal, North-Western provinces and Oudh, the Punjab and Central Provinces ere all equipped with tenancy Acts, the main object of which was to strengthen the position of the actual cultivators and afford him that protection which Mr. Dutt desires to see established.

In all the British territories under the Ryotwari or Mahalwari system, codified methods and specialized administration gradually put in place for the registration of land and for the registration of land rights, of rents and charges. The same work had to be under the Zamindari system, not for the assessment of tax but for the protection of rights of tenants and for the requirements of justice. As earlier in the countries of permanent settlement, land revenue in these provinces was generally fixed too high in order to meet the tax demand of the East India Company, and its integral and punctual payment was enforced with inflexible rigor. There followed many regions, in the course of the first few decades of the nineteenth century, an important trend of alienations, as the farmers, especially in the times of crisis, were forced to sell due to excessive indebtedness, or their land were confiscated and sold by auction on the ground of a tax default.

In practice the British land revenue policies may have been most disruptive, not through their adjudication of land tenure, but at the simple level of financial demands they made. Many of the early British settlements- notably the “permanent settlement” of Bengal of 1793 and Pringle’s in Bombay during the 1820s and the 1830s were marked by considerable over assessment. The in their zeal for funds, often accepted the most optimistic inherited estimates of agriculture’s capacity to pay, claims which were excessive in the depressed conditions of the first third of the nineteenth century. Finally it terms of political consequences, Stokes’s recent work has undermined the notion of the mutiny conflagration of 1857-8 as a simple outburst by the victims of British agrarian policy, particularly in Mahalwari regions. On the other side several peasant uprising occurred in nineteenth century both in Zamindari and Ryotwari regions, and a number of grim famines appeared in these settlement area.

In concluding paragraph I would like to draw the final assessment of aftermath of various land settlements in together. The process of “Drain of Wealth”, that started by the advent of the British colonial power in India, hastened through accumulating primary capital based on landed revenue. The important channel of draining wealth from India to England was trade, but the main source of moving wealth was land tax. This is the British government which first realized to keep up a constant relation with the native people in regard to became a financially healthy ruler of India. As a result they first concentrated into economic reforms in India specially the land reforms missions. Not only the government officials but also the English people of home engaged themselves to launch several land settlement, in modified shape equipped with statistical methods under the influences of modern liberal and economic thoughts. The British East India Company was the pioneer of three major land settlements in India, viz., Permanent, Ryotwari and, Mahalwari, were introduced in various regions of India on the basis of contemporary circumstances and colonial requirements. Basically these were the modern way of extracting maximum revenues from the peasants and, an absolute plan to plunder Indian resources constantly. The land tax was the major source of revenue for the British Government; amounting in 1858-59, to Rs 18.12 corers or 50.3 percent of total its revenues. It is true that the British land reform programs no-doubt provided a great zenith to the process of agrarian transformation from medieval to modern time and, brought several changes both in agricultural methods and its patterns and, revolutionaries several rural and urban areas. But in other sense these process had been indulged the process of sever stratification of Indian society on the basis of occupational position and, paved an era of future secondary contradiction between the rich and poor in Indian political, economic, and social history, along with impoverishing a considerable portion of Indian mass (agricultural population), leading towards human inequality.

**TERRITORIAL ACQUISITION UNDER THREE SETTLEMENTS**

Permanent Zamindari settlements were made in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Banares division of U.P. This settlement was further extended in 1800 to Northern Carnatic (north-eastern part of Madras) and North-Western Provinces (eastern U.P.). It roughly covered 19 percent of total area of British India. The Mahalwari tenure was introduced in major portion of U.P., the Central Provinces, the Punjab (with variations) and the central providences; while in Oudh villages are placed under taluqdar or middlemen with whom the government deals directly. This system covered nearly 30 percent of the British controlling area. The Ryotwari settlements were made in major portions of Bombay, Madras and Sindh Province. The principles of this system are also applied to Assam and Burma. A few hilly tracts in Bengal and the coast strip of Orissa have been temporally settled. This system covered roughly 51 percent of the total British Indian territory. One fifth of the total area of the British India has been permanently settled, viz., about 5/6 of Bengal and Bihar, 1/8 of Assam, 1/10 of U.P., 1/4 of Madras. Of the total land revenue 53 p.c. comes from the first two classes of land, and 47 p.c. from Ryotwari tracts.

All these major areas were subdivided into many tracts for the better management of land assessment. The three settlements region has been distributed under the in charge of several British officials and native landlord to look after the function of Land Revenue System. For example; initially Bengal territories were distributed among twelve major and many other small Zamindars that not only played the impotent role in land assessment process but also in local administration. The Madras territories were sub divided into several tracts of Nellore, Trichinopoly, Coimbatore, Tanjore, Arcot etc. The Mahalwari settlement region like Central Province was distributed through several divisions of Meerut, Agra, Rohilkhand, Allahabad, Bundelkhand, Varanasi, Gorakhpur, Lucknow, Faizabad, Kumaun etc.

The important of landlord group in land settlement area are: (a) Under Permanent settlement the Zamindars were recognized as proprietors of the soil with rights of free hereditary succession, sale and mortgage, but subject to the loss of their property on failure to the revenue on a fixed date. (B) Settlement limited forever the state demand to a fixed revenue and certain duties or services. (C) System stipulated that the Zamindar should safe-guard the rights of their tenants by granting those pattas or documents stating the area and rent of their respective holdings. (D) The Zamindars were made „subject to such rules as might be enacted by the government for securing the rights and privileges of the tenants in their respective tenures and for protecting them against undue or oppression“. All abwabs, or cesses levied by the Zamindars in addition to the rent, were abolished. The transit duties and road and ferry tolls were taken over by the government, but the market tools and profits from fisheries, trees and waste land were left entirely to the Zamindars. (E) The talukdars of Bengal were raised to the position of Zamindars and allowed to pay fixed revenue directly to the government. (f) In Madras and Orissa many petty tributary chiefs have been deprived of their ruling powers and reduced to rank of Zamindars, subject to the payment of fixed revenue. Basically the Zamindari system was so-called creator of private property in land.

Under the village settlement (Mahalwari) the revenue is settled for a limited period (30 years in U.P. and 20 years in Punjab and C.P.), with the entire body of villagers who were jointly and separately responsible for the revenue of the whole village. Their head called the Lambardar, sign the agreement with the government to pay the revenue on behalf of the villagers. The assessment of the revenue by the village council is supervised by the settlement officer of the government, and the village maps and records of rights are carefully preserved and brought up to date.

## Conclusion

The people of Bengal and of northern India gradually obtained some relief from the heavy land assessment of the early years of the British rule. In Bengal the assessment was made permanent; and it has not been raised with the extension of cultivation, it now bears a ratio of about 35 percent, on the rental. In northern India the assessment was not made permanent, but it was reduced to slightly over 50 percent, including all „cesses“, in 1885. But new “cesses” were added; calculations were made, not on the current, but on the prospective rental, until the tax rose to close upon 60 percent on the rental. The first fifteen years of the permanent settlement saw a burst of distress- driven auction of Zamindari estate in greater Bengal induced by sharply raised effective revenue collection, a series of minor or large agrarian crisis, and the „proverbial incompetence“ of Zamindars in managing their estates. We need to remember that many among these groups were never cultivators themselves and were unable to meet the increased demand by improving their cultivation practices. The distress sale declined thereafter as the rental value of and exceeded the revenue burden that had been fixed in money terms. The auction sales tended to large estates into smaller lots. Those who brought these lots included adventure s and outsider, who were equally rapacious towards the peasants as some of the Zamindars. The peasants mockingly called these new people “lotdas”, or owners of lots. The frequent sale of Zamindari estates caused poverty highly. Between 1794 and 1807 land yielding about 41% of the revenue in Bengal and Bihar was sold out in auction; in Orissa between 1804 and 1818 about 51% of the original Zamindars were wiped off.

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