

Utilitarianism and Rayotwari Revenue System in Western India

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Abstract – After the completion of the permanent settlement in Eastern India, the East India Company was in favour of extending it to Madras. However, attention was soon focused on the effects of the permanent settlement, particularly in respect of State's share of land revenue and, in consequence, official opinion began to favour the Ryotwari System.

Under this system, the ryot was directly under the state. Land revenue was assessed on each separate holding held by the ryot who was recognised as proprietor, i.e. he could sublet, mortgage or transfer by gift or sale. He could not be ejected so long as he paid the assessment. Ryotwari settlement was a temporary one, the period of assessment varying between 20—40 years.

Keywords: Utilitarianism, Rayotwari, Revenue

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INTRODUCTION

The ryotwari settlement was first made by Captain Read and Thomas Munro in the districts of Bara Mahal in 1792. Gradually, it was extended to other parts of the province where a permanent settlement of the land revenue had not been made or where the permanently settled estates were sold up for inability to pay the fixed revenue. In course of time, it spread to Bombay, Assam and Berar also.

Baden Powell has contended that the ryotwari village was the original type in India and that individual property was the rule in early land settlements. He further asserts that the early settlers in India had no idea of a common tribal ownership of property, including land.

Likewise, the Madras Board of Revenue recommended between 1808 and 1818 'the wise plan of recognising the village communities'. Mukerjee further asserts that these ancient Indian communities held all property in common. Therefore, the claim of the authorities that, in recognising the ryotwari system, they only gave legal recognition to what was already in vogue, cannot be sustained.

The author of the system claimed many merits for it. It was claimed, firstly, that the system put the cultivator in direct touch with the state. Secondly, the ryot, being a virtual proprietor on a simple and perfect title, had all the incentive to make the investment in land and improve it.

Thirdly, it was thought the system would establish a self-confident, self-reliant peasantry and thereby help in the creation of peace and stability in the country. Fourthly, it was claimed that the system would enable the govt. to help and aid the ryot in difficult seasons by lowering its land revenue demand.

In practice, these hopes were not realised. With this system, the British tax collectors were able to constantly enlarge the assessment, draining the very life blood out of the peasants. Bhowani Sen aptly observes that "Rent-grabbing by the state was by no means different from the Zamindari extortion".

In fact, the credit of an officer depended upon the amount of revenue he was able to collect. No wonder that every assessment led to upward revision of revenue.

What is more, the system left too much in the hands of the revenue officers whose estimates were often based on mere guess work. Individual cultivators were never allowed a chance of proving what total produce they obtained, what their expenses of cultivation were and what net income remained to them. They had even no right of appeal and had either to pay the assessed revenue or quit their ancestral fields.

In order to make prompt realisation of revenue, all manner of torture such as 'keeping a man in the sun, preventing his going to meals or other calls of

nature, confinement, quartering a peon on him, putting a low caste man on his back, blows with fist or whip' was frequently used.

This, no doubt, increased the income of the govt.—in the province of Madras alone, the income from land revenue increased from £32.90 lakhs, in 1861 to £41.80 lakhs in 1874—but—epidemics, malnutrition, and starvation causing death of scores of thousands became common in areas where the system prevailed. The Madras famine of 1877 fatally proved how little was the security and staying power of the cultivators.

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An impossibly high revenue demand which the ryots found themselves unable to pay, inevitably led them into the clutches of the money-lender. That land revenue was a major cause of indebtedness is confirmed by the evidence of Vaughan Nash who found that **“the authorities regarded the moneylender as their mainstay for the payment of revenue.”**

It was this indebtedness and not the establishment of peace and security and rise in the market value of land, as Dr. Verma Anstey wants us to believe, which lead to large scale transfer of land from the agriculturist to the non-agriculturists.

Peasants were reduced to the status of labourers or share croppers completely working for the moneylender, paying over to him, as rent and interest combined, the greater part of what they produced.

Thus the system which aimed at creating self-reliant peasant proprietors, was reduced, in practice, to the Zamindari System. The same elements, who had become Zamindars in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa i.e. the Urban rich, dispossessed the actual tillers but chained them to the land as serfs. The seriousness of the problem can be imagined from the fact that in 1947—48, 60% of the cultivators in Gujarat were tenants.

The system was expected to provide incentive to the ryot to make investment on his land. The high revenue demand, however, left very little to the producer to carry out the necessary improvements. This deprived the ryot of the confidence and zeal which private ownership of land was supposed to confer on him.

This system, under which revenue was revised every now and then, bred corruption and encouraged immorality. The Tehsildars, who went about to make inquiries and fix revenues, had almost entirely under their control the amount of assessment which was raised for the govt.

In all ryotwari districts. Consequently whenever they went to a village, the first thing the ryots of a village did was 'to endeavour to buy them over to get a low assessment'.

The Ryotwari system, although it was advocated as a closer approach to Indian institution, in point of fact, broke right across these institutions by making the settlement with individual cultivators. The individual being assessed directly, the village Community lost its economic function and the collective basis of its life was destroyed. R.C. Dutt points out that “ancient village communities of Madras declined from that date.”

By and large **“the system did not, in general, increase production or prosperity of the people.”** Top heavy assessments rendered the lands of little value and people with capital were shy of investing in agriculture for want of adequate returns. This can be seen from the fact that in Coimbatore, where assessment was moderate, agriculture flourished.

Objectively, by introducing this system, the colonialists helped a section of the small feudals, who had risen from the upper strata of the village community to strengthen their hold on land seized from the community. Thus, the Ryotwari system, far from destroying the foundations of feudal landholding, merely consolidated it.

However, the Ryotwari system was different from the Zamindari system in two respects. The occupancy ryot under Zamindari tenure was the victim of illegal exactions. His right of sale and transfer was restricted and in many cases even denied. Fraudulent accounting deprived him, not infrequently, of his possession.

Under the ryotwari tenure, the bigger peasant proprietor was in many cases free from these handicaps. This gave him the strength to struggle against rackrenting and market domination, with slightly greater advantages than the occupancy ryots under the Zamindari Tenure.

Another difference between the two system lies in the fact of uneven development of irrigation facilities. There were better irrigation facilities in the ryotwari areas than in the Zamindari areas. The result was that a section of the ryotwari peasants was able to retain some surplus and to develop cultivation with wage labour to a relatively greater extent than the occupancy ryot in the Zamindari areas.

DISCUSSION

Under the Zamindari System, land was held by one person or at the most by a few joint owners who were responsible for the payment of land revenue

to the state. Actual cultivation was done by tenants who held the land under landlords.

There were two types of Zamindari tenures. In the first type, known as the Permanent Settlement, the revenue to be paid by the landlord was fixed permanently. The landlord was however, free to raise the rent to be paid by his tenant. This system prevailed in Bengal, Orissa, part of Madras, Benares and parts of South India.

In the second type of the Zamindari System, the revenue to be paid by the landlord was revised from time to time. This system prevailed in the C.P. (Part of present Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra) where Malguzars, who were merely revenue collectors under the Marathas, were recognised as Landlords.

The Zamindars who failed to meet the company's demands were ex-appropriated while "the peasants were left little else than their families and bodies—the tyranny of Hastings extinguished every sentiment of father, son, brother, and husband. Everything visible and edible was seized and sold. Nothing but the bodies remained."

Large areas went out of cultivation so much so that by 1776, more than half of the total cultivated area had been rendered waste. Famine visited the province in 1770, 1784, 1787, and 1790. Despite the tyranny, the company failed to collect the required revenue. In-fact, its exorbitant demands were resisted by the people.

The Great Fakir and later the Sanyasi rebellion that broke out in 1772—1789 were India's first agrarian revolts. In 1783, the peasants of Ranpur and Dinajpur rose in revolt. They were, of course, suppressed but the stipulated revenue did not come forth.

It was then that the directors of the East India Company hit upon the idea of Permanent Settlement with the Zamindars whom Burke had condemned as the 'wickedest of human race'. By a proclamation issued on 22 March, 1793, the decennial Settlement of Bengal and Bihar was declared to be permanent.

It gave the Zamindars proprietary rights in the soil, subject to their regularly paying the revenue to the Government. As a result, the real owners were dispossessed of their hereditary claims to the soil while the Zamindars, who were merely agents of the govt. for the collection of revenue, became owners of big estates which never belonged to them.

A definite motive was to stabilise the hitherto uncertain and fluctuating income. With the introduction of the permanent settlement, the company was assured of a certain minimum, whatever the conditions of production. Besides, it was saved of botheration and expense involved in periodic revision of revenue.

A second aim was to create a class of rich and powerful landlords who, from motives of self-interest, would be "deeply interested in the continuance of the British Dominion" and would support the company in every hour of trial.

The revenue collectors, who overnight became landlords, clearly understood that if they were to exist as a class, it was their duty to strengthen the hands of the govt. A third aim was to divert the money capital accumulated in the hands of the new class of urban rich into agricultural channels.

Cornwallis trusted the Zamindars "to reduce the country to an agricultural land, to draw more and more people away from indigenous trade, commerce and industry."

It was expected to secure a twofold objective. Firstly, it would keep India an agricultural country, a raw material appendage to British industry and a market for Britain's industrial goods. Secondly, the agricultural crisis hampering expansion of govt's revenues could be solved by investment of capital in the field of agriculture.

CONCLUSION

The Zamindari System was apparently modelled on the English landlordism in so far as the landlords with whom the State had settled the estates were made the sole proprietors of the soil. But while the English landlord grew out of the peculiar social conditions of England, the Indian Zamindar was artificially created by neglecting the traditional land relations.

Unlike his British counterpart, the Indian Zamindar was not so much interested in agricultural production as in making money. This had disastrous consequences for the cultivating ryots.

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