

A Comparative Study of Zamindari, Raiyatwari and Mahalwari Systems



History

KEYWORDS:

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Introduction

Agriculture has been the most important economic activity of the Indian people for many centuries and it is the main source of income. Naturally, land revenue management and administration needs a proper care to handle because it was the most important source of income for the state too. The establishment of East India Company worked as the tool of colonial plunder which operated through monopoly of trade and realization of land revenue. To annihilate the traditional Asiatic mode of production, the British Moneyocracy had converted India into its landed estates and hastens the process of commercial revolution in India. They unleashed far reaching changes in Indian agrarian structure in order to maximize extraction which slowed down the country progressive development and raised the burden on the Indian peasantry. To consolidate political sword, the English East India Company inherited the institutional form of agrarian system from the Mughal. They super-imposed a system over the existing land settlement pattern in tune with British customs and laws relating to land. Accordingly, government sponsored cooperative movement through different land revenue experiments and brought several changes in land tenure, property relation, agrarian productivity, food supply, marketing, agriculture indebtedness and cultivated land in British-India. Gradually, all these changes transformed Indian economic history from mercantile phase to finance capitalism. After gaining full control over Bengal in 1765 (year of Diwani rights acquisition), Company follow traditional land assessment system in the starting but gradually modified the existing land settlement from time to time to collect maximum possible land revenue which was a need of colonial administration. They initiated auction based farming system as the first experiment in 1772, where land revenue collection rights had been allotted on contract basis. This farming system slowly developed into three major land settlements, viz., Zamindari in Bengal, Raiyatwari in Madras and Bombay, and Mahalwari in North Western Provinces which exposed the „colonial character of British rule and became the basis of primary accumulation of capital. The basic characteristic of each system was the attempt to incorporate elements of the preceding agrarian structure. The existing systems under the colonial policy produced widely different local results and hybrid forms. Indian economy had been colonized on basis of two important things, first, the mode of production specially the system of surplus extraction existing on the eve of the British conquests. Other was the nature of the British Imperialism which transferred the Indian economy under the impact of the industrial revolution. Basically, the comparison of all the settlement was made on the basis of its territorial boundary, its assessment procedures and its impact on society and social order.

Land Revenue Settlements

Permanent Settlement was both sudden and very dramatic, and one which nobody had apparently foreseen. By ensuring that Zamindars' (Land Lord) lands were held in perpetuity and with a fixed tax burden, they became desirable commodities. In addition, the government tax demand was inflexible and the British East India Company's collectors refused to make allowances for times of drought, flood or other natural disaster. The tax demand was higher than that in England at the time. As a result, many Zamindars immediately fell into arrears. The Company's policy of auction of any Zamindari lands deemed to be in arrears created a market for land which previously did not exist. Many of the new purchasers of this land were Indian officials within the East India Company's government. These bureaucrats were ideally placed to purchase lands which they knew to be under assessed, and therefore

profitable. Historian Bernhard Cohn and others have argued that the Permanent Settlement led firstly to a commercialization of land which previously did not exist in Bengal. And secondly, as a consequence of this, it led to a change in the social background of the ruling class from "lineages and local chiefs" to "under civil servants and their descendants, and to merchants and bankers".⁶ The new landlords were different in their outlook; "often they were absentee landlords who managed their land through managers and who had little attachment to their land". The Company hoped that the Zamindari class would not only be a revenue-generating instrument but serve as intermediaries for the political dominance of their rule, preserving local custom and protecting rural life from the possibly rapacious influences of its own representatives. However, this worked in both ways; Zamindars became a conservative interest group. There was a tendency of Company officials and Indian landlords to force their tenants into plantation-style farming of cash crops like indigo and cotton rather than rice and wheat. This was a cause of many of the worst famines of the nineteenth century. In addition, Zamindars eventually became absentee landlords, with all that implies for neglect of investment on the land. Once the salient features of the Settlement were reproduced all over India, the political structure was altered forever. The limitation of the state demand enabled the Zamindars to accumulate capital which expended in fostering agricultural enterprise, industries, public and private institutions, and in supporting the poor in the time of distress. The capital accumulated by the Zamindars was widely distributed and promoted well being of all classes. The Raiyatwari system instituted in some parts of British India by 1820 was one of the two main systems used to collect revenues from the cultivators directly. However, the amount of revenues included undifferentiated land taxes and rents, collected simultaneously. Where the land revenue was imposed directly on the Raiyats - the individual cultivators who actually worked the land - the system of assessment was known as Raiyatwari. Where the land revenue was imposed indirectly - through agreements made with Zamindars - the system of assessment was known as Zamindari. In Bombay, Madras, Assam and Burma the Zamindar usually did not have a position of middleman between the government and the farmer. John Stuart Mill in 1857 explained the Raiyatwari land tenure system as „the System where every registered holder of land is recognized as its proprietor, and pays rent directly to the Government. 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. In unfavorable seasons remissions of assessment are granted for entire or partial loss of produce. The assessment is fixed in money, and does not vary from year to year, in those cases where water is drawn from a Government source of irrigation to convert dry land into wet, or into two-crop land, when an extra rent is paid to Government for the water so appropriated; nor is any addition made to the assessment for improvements effected at the Raiyat's own expense. 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 neighbors. The Annual Settlements under Raiyatwari are often misunderstood, and it is necessary to explain that they are rendered necessary by the right accorded to the Raiyat of diminishing or extending his cultivation from year to year. Their object is to

determine how much of the assessment due on his holding the Raiyat shall pay, and not to reassess the land. In these cases where no change occurs in the Raiyats holding a fresh Potta or lease is not issued, and such parties are in no way affected by the Annual Settlement, which they are not required to attend. Lastly, even though prejudicial to the landed gentry where it existed, this system perturbed less, apparently at least, the customs and social balances of the rural world. 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. Utilitarians 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 Raiyatwari and Mahalwari settlements, with the implication that policy may have ruined traditionally powerful landlord groups. Possible example here are 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. The Mahalwari system was introduced by 1822 with the estate or „mahals proprietary bodies where lands belong jointly to the village community technically called the body of co-shares. The body of co-shares is jointly responsible for the payment of land revenue though individual responsibility was not left out completely. The question of introducing a settlement of land revenue in the ceded and conquered provinces came to be the fore by the coming of 19th century. However, this system was started only by passing the Regulation VII of 1822 which the practical implication of Mackenzies minute of 1819. The system had been broke down because of the excessive state demand and rigidity in its working and collection of land revenue. In a typically Mahalwari village, the co-sharers are actually the cultivators. According to J. S. Mill, the peasant proprietors compound with the state for a fixed period. The proprietors did not engage themselves individually with the government, but by villages. When William Bentinck assumed the governorship of India, he made a thorough review of the scheme of 1822 by which Mahalwari system had been introduced. The government of Bentinck came to the conclusion that the Regulation of 1822 had caused a widespread misery. After a prolonged consultation and discussion he passed the Regulation IX of 1833. This regulation made the terms and conditions of the Mahalwari system more flexible. The new scheme worked under the supervision of Martins Bird. The new system started a new scheme of land revenue assessment and given the right of internal adjustments. Unfortunately, the system not worked successfully because the settlement officers, who were the carrier of the settlement, turned corrupt and evaded the actual rules and collected the revenue at his 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.

Total Area 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 Raiyatwari 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.

Similarities among the Settlements.

Similarities among three settlements behind the apparent differences, the Raiyatwari and the Zamindari system shared certain fundamental similarities. In both cases, the British had favored certain categories of right holders to the detriments of the others by conferring on them full and undivided ownership of the land. Other hand in Mahalwari region the local chiefs (rajahs, Zamindars, talukdars), being of ancient stock or firmly established were conformed as owner. But most often, it transpired that the mastery over village cultivated lands, in these regions, traditionally belonged to the undivided community of farmers, in general presented by the village chief. Here, as elsewhere, the group of powerful individuals who became full-fledged proprietors did not include all the cultivators. It consist of a peasant elite like intermediaries of others settlement area that employed agricultural labour, and whose land were often cultivated by tenants. The Raiyat of South India was dominant peasants with whom, in each village, the agents of the company had deemed it expedient to negotiate and with whom other categories of subordinate right holders subsisted. As the customary organization of land rights often varied considerably from one region to another, the standard term of Raiyatwari system in effect embraced passably different configuration. In these systems, the spirit of the law tended towards the institution of ownership in the modern sense of the word, and with it, of a mode of agrarian relations whose logic was contractual and commercial, even if in practice, the evolution of mentalities towards this direction proved to be very slow. The very dissimilar land stratification that both the system seemed to announce soon tended to find a common meeting ground. Owing to the practice of the judicial sale of the properties of defaulting tax payers, on the one hand the domains of Zamindar were divided into medium and small properties, and on the other, Raiyats became medium or big owners by successive acquisitions. The colonial administration had come through the phase of familiarizing itself with local realities and simple adopted the models elaborated in the course of the conquest of the diverse regional contexts, with the two fold objective of ensuring sufficient tax revenues and of gaining the support of the rural elites. Under these the system, the place of the land in social life remained unchanged. Enjoying a preponderant right on land, in the Indian society, says at the same time benefiting from the revenue that this land produced and exercising power over dependents that drew from it the whole or part of their subsistence. The relation to the land was, as it were, encompassed in social relations. The introduction of ownership- and of a judicial conception of agrarian relation on a contractual basis- initially only reinforced in the villages the local power of the already dominant individuals or groups, who were to become the first users or the principle beneficiaries of the colonial legislative and legal machinery. The seeds of modern conception of the relation between owners and tenants or employees were showed in the minds, but they would produce a perceptible effect in mentalities only in the long run.

Position of the Peasants.

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.⁴³ The Zamindar settlement turned the entire peasantry formally into the Zamindar 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. Ratna Lekha 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. Raiyatwari 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 joint 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 Raiyatwari 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 Raiyatwari 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.

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