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THE PERMANENT SETTLEMENT ABOLITION IN THE MADRAS PRESIDENCY

History

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ABSTRACT

The Permanent settlement or the Zamindari system which prevailed in the Madras Presidency due to its inherent defect did not live long. The permanent settlers raised their power and position at the expense of the ill literate peasants. Their inborn vices, extravagancy, frequent wars of succession, over debt did not allow them to lead a trouble-free life. Their exploiting nature induced discontent among the riots. The elite public and the political parties took up the cause of the peasants and demanded the abolition of the zamindari system. But the British Government turned against this demand in order to keep up aristocracy in this province. This article is intended to highlight the pernicious socio-economic problem and decline of permanent settlement or zamindari system in Madras presidency.

INTRODUCTION:

Land Revenue is the back bone of a government. It was in the hands of petty officials and middlemen. Tamil Nadu has been described as a country almost a nation of its own. The Madras presidency was formed at the close of the 18th century. It was in 1765 the question of land revenue first came up before the East India Company and then in Madras Presidency of Tamil Nadu. Land revenue was necessary in early days to fulfill the Company's obligation to the proprietors of its stock. From the original place Bengal the zamindari system or the permanent settlement system extended to Tamil Nadu, evolved by Lord Cornwallis. The unsympathetic foreign rule, the Englishman's ignorance of Indian situation growing financial needs of the East India Company, the excess of the new class of Speculating India revenue farmers and the zeal of the European revenue collectors cut at the roots of the old ethical principles of public wheel. After the liquidation of the Company in 1858 the British squeezed as much money as possible out of India. As soon as India became free several changes were introduced.

The peasant community desired to get freed from the cruel hands of the zamindars. The situation was availed itself by the Congress party against the British and announced economic reforms and obtained the good will of the peasants. The ideological war to abolish the zamindari system was dragged on for some decades and finally, it was ended in favour of the riots in 1948.¹ The demand for the abolition of the zamindari system was already suggested and discussed by certain British officials during the nineteenth century itself. The circuit Committee also observed the oppressive nature of the zamindars and advised the Court of Directors to abolish the zamindari system, so that it would raise the Company's income.² In 1824 Roberts, the collector of Masulipatnam strongly suggested to the Board of Revenue that the best remedy for the evils of the zamindari system was that of talking over all the estates in his district and pensioned off the zamindars. The collector said, under the zamindari system it was impossible either to realize the public revenue punctually or to protect the riots against the exactions of the Zamindars.³

The government deputed Henry Montgomery, a member of the Board of Revenue to make an investigation on the growing arrears. The suggestion made by the bold officials of the British was rejected by the Home authorities in England. It was because the British wanted to maintain in dignity of the zamindars under any cost. The oppression of the riots continued. The riots lost their tolerance and resorted to agitate against the zamindari system.⁴ The ignorance and the poverty of the peasants provided much opportunity for the zamindars to exploit in many ways. Before the Great Mutiny of 1857, the poverty and miseries of the peasants did not receive any attention of the rationalist because there was no force to raise voice against the zamindari system.⁵

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, some native

Sabhas and organizations were started which made representations to the government. One among them was the 'Madras Mahajana Sabha' started in 1884. In 1886 the sabha stressed the need to improve the condition of the peasants. G.Lakshminarasu Chetti organized a grand constitutional agitation against the Madras Tortures Act.⁶ In the twentieth century, many political leaders took up the cause, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel visited the Madras presidency and attended many peasants meetings for the welfare of the peasants. Motilal Nehru emphasized the need for unity among the peasants.⁷ Subramania Iyer a leader of the peasants pointed out that the main point of the peasants poverty was the existing system of land assessments. He strongly criticized the zamindari system. He propagated that the cultivators were the real owners or proprietors of the soil and not the Zamindars.⁸

Rangasamy Iyengar a member of the Legislative Council mainly attached the importable estates Act of 1904 which made the zamindars irresponsible. He stated that it infringed the liberties and privileges of the tenants. He further stated that there was no justification for the continuation of the zamindari system. He pointed out that the 1904 Act was unprogressive legislation and an anachronism unsuited to the society. Swadesamitron commented Subramania Iyer had courage to express boldly his support for the cause of the peasants.⁹ 'Andrakesari', said that the main cause of poverty and sufferings of the peasants was the over-land assessment. It also published Subramania Iyer's strong view that, the land must belong to the peasants.¹⁰

Owing to the lack of education and ignorance, there was no awareness among the peasants against the zamindars. Further the passing of the Madras Estates Land Act of 1908 added much strength to the riots. By this Act, occupancy right was given to them. This Act was an eye-opener to the riots. It clearly mentioned that the riots should not be ejected from their holdings. The riots that were still afraid of eviction were relieved from fear. They decided to fight against the zamindars. Meanwhile, the zamindars failed to adjust themselves to the changing conditions.¹¹ So, in the Madras Presidency, various peasants associations were formed. The main goal of these associations was to abolish the zamindari system. Under the inspiring leadership of N.G. Ranga, the zamin riots Association was formed. It conducted a conference in Venkatagiri and demanded the abolition of the zamindari system through legislation. The other prominent association formed in 1928 was the 'Andhra Provincial Riots Association'. It held its conferences in different parts of the Presidency.

N.G. Ranga succeeded in organizing a number of peasant's conference and organizations not only in the Madras Presidency but also in other parts of India. He was rightly called "the peasant of peasants".¹² N.G.Ranga's slogan, "down with the Zamindars" had good response among the riots.¹³ Many peasants marches were organised in different parts of the Province. The Peasants Marches from various part of the Madras Presidency submitted a memorandum to C Rajagopalachari, the premier of Madras, on

27th August, 1938. N.G. Ranga went to vellore on 21st April, 1937 and formed a North Arcot Kisan Society. He visited Tinnevely district on 25th April of the same year and formed a District Riots Association. The peasants continued their agitation in different parts of the Madras Presidency. A Zamin Ryot's Conference was held in the Chengleput district on 12th April 1941. It passed resolutions to abolish the zamindari system. Various resolutions were passed which attacked the zamindars. Some of the Kisan Sabha members conducted a 'No Rent' campaign. As a result great difficulty was experienced in the collection of rents, in the estates.¹⁴

The communities fought for the cause of the peasants against the zamindars. They demanded the abolition of the zamindari system. The Education Minister T.S. Avanasilingam Chettiar made a temporary arrangement. Accordingly, 1/3 of the produce must go to the cultivator, 1/3 to the land owner and 1/3 to the government.¹⁵ The Indian National Congress came into existence in the late nineteenth century, it began to champion the cause of the oppressed peasants only in the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁶ The Government of India Act was passed by the British in 1935 giving more autonomy to the provinces. Accordingly, elections were held. The Congress decided to contest the election to the provincial Assemblies under this Act. In August 1936 the Congress party published its Election Manifesto in which the land question was given more prominence. The following was the Election Manifesto of the Congress in 1936 relating to the land reforms. Hence in 1937 C. Rajagopalachari formed the first Congress Ministry in Madras. Besides criticizing the zamindari system, the newly selected members of the Madras Legislature strongly demanded the abolition of the zamindari system. In 1937, a resolution was passed in both the House of the Madras Legislature.

In 1937, as a result of the agitation in the legislature, the Congress Ministry appointed a committee known as the Madras Estates Land Act committee under the Chairmanship of T. Prakasam, the Revenue Minister to enquire into the whole condition of the peasants and relations between the ryots and the zamindars in the zamindari estates. This Committee had nine members. All the members were either from Legislative Assembly or from the Legislative Council.¹⁷ The Congress party was particular to abolish the zamindari system and made recommendations to the Ministry to pass a bill in this regard. The Madras Government also decided to abolish the Zamindari system through a permanent legislative measure as soon as possible with equitable compensation to the Zamindars. Hence, a Bill was drafted and it was sent to a Joint Select Committee consisting of twenty members from the Assembly and ten members from the Council. The Chairman of the Committee was P. Subbayyan. The State Legislature passed the Bill in November 1948 and received the assent of the Governor General on 2nd April 1949. It became law on 19th April 1949. This Act was called the Madras Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act 1948.¹⁸

CONCLUSION:

Thus the abolition of the Permanent settlement or zamindari system gave much relief to the ryots. Though the steps were taken earlier it was the Congress Party which brought the Bill. Since then, only Ryotwari tenure prevailed in the Madras Presidency. The ryots began to work hard and enjoyed their hard-earned yield. In this way, one of the pernicious socio-economic problems of Madras Presidency was put to an end.

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