

**ZAMINDARI SYSTEM (LANDLORD BASED) OF LAND REVENUE
COLLECTION IN 18TH CENTURY**

Dr. Hareet Kumar Meena

Assistant Professor, Department of History
Indira Gandhi National Tribal University
Madhya Pradesh, INDIA

ABSTRACT

With the arrival of the East India Company (EIC) in India, the administrative structure in general and the agrarian composition in particular, underwent radical change. Several major factors were responsible in shaping the British Land Revenue Policy, in which the financial factors remained on the priority. The British needed the land revenue to meet the cost of conquest of whole of India, to pay for employment of thousands of Englishmen in superior administrative services and to meet the costs of economic and administrative charges. To meet the revenue requirements, the British introduced different types of land tenures in India. Under the Permanent Settlement, the zamindars or revenue collectors were converted into sole landlords. They were not only to act as agents of the Government in collecting land revenue, but also to become the owners of entire land in their zamindaris or estates. Their right of ownership was made hereditary and transferable. On the other hand, the cultivators were reduced to the status of mere tenants and were deprived of long-standing rights to the soil and other customary rights related with land. Early land revenue policy of British rule had disastrous effects on the peasants, and the experiments of Clive and Warren Hastings (1772-85) compounded their woes. Even the peasants deserted the villages and gave up cultivation due to heavy tax burden. The sufferings of the people found expression in a series of famines which emerged nearly in all parts of India in the second half of the 19th Century.

Keywords

Land revenue, Zamindar (land-lord), Diwani, Famine, Commercialization of Agriculture

Objectives of the Study

The present study underlines the basic design of Zamindari system for collection of land revenue and its consequences on socio-economic web of India. The primary interest of the British rulers was the collection of land revenue and consequently, the system of land records was also organized to serve that purpose.

Introduction

The Permanent Settlement also known as the Cornwallis Code or permanent Settlement of Bengal was an agreement between the East India Company and Bengali landlords, with far-reaching consequences for both agricultural methods and productivity in India. It was concluded in 1793, by the Company administration headed by Lord Cornwallis. The East India Company, on being awarded the *diwani* or overlordship of Bengal by the empire following the Battle of Buxar in 1764, found itself short of trained administrators, especially those familiar with local custom and law (Aghion, 2008; Bagchi, 2000; Baden-Powell, 1894). As a result, landholders found themselves unsupervised or reporting to corrupt and indolent officials; consequently the extraction of revenue proceeded unchecked by any authority. For the justification of the land revenue the Government officials tried to support from the Ancient Indian history as remarked by Trevaskis, *“the most pressing problem facing the British on annexation was that of land revenue, which had from the earliest times constituted the only material item in the State revenue. The Hindu kings had taken a share of the produce of their domain lands not generally exceeding a quarter, the actual amount being measured by the village accountants and collected in kind by the village headmen.”* After the battle of Buxar (October 23, 1764) the existing Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam II had granted the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to East India Company in 1765. Buxar is a town located on the bank of the river Ganga, about 130 km west of Patna (Misra, 1942). The Battle of Buxar was significant event in the rise and establishment of British rule in India.¹ In this ferocious battle British army, led by Hector Munro, defeated the military alliance of Mir

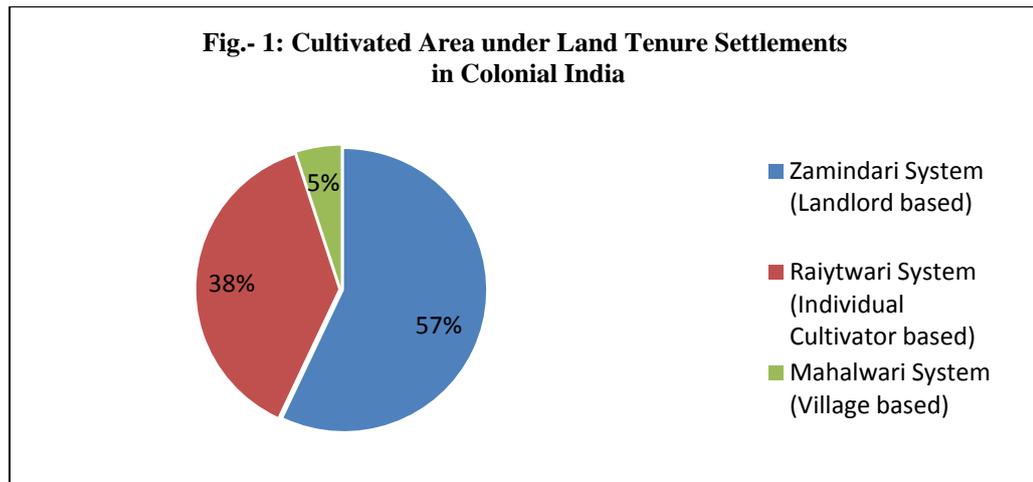
¹ The foundation of the British Empire in India, which was led by Clive at Plassey (1757), was strengthened at Buxar. Henceforth, the Grant of Diwani empowered the East India Company to collect revenue from the occupied territories of Eastern India, which were well known for their fertility and agricultural production (Bardhan, 1984). For a commercial enterprise like East India Company, extraction of maximum revenue was considered as the higher profit, in comparison to occupy monetary assets through fierce wars.

Qasim (dethroned Nawab of Bengal), Suja-ud-duala (Nawab of Oudh), and Shah Alam II (Mughal Emperor).

The East India Company (EIC), initially known as, *Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading into the East Indies* or *United Company of Merchants of England Trading to the East Indies*, was an English joint-stock company formed on December 31, 1600.² Acting as a monopolistic trading body, the company actively engaged in politics and emerged as an agent of British imperialism in India from the early 18th century to the mid 19th century (Stokes, 1978; Roy, 2013). The East India Company's conquest of various territories in India typically brought one issue forward i.e., how would land taxes, the principal source of Governmental revenue, be collected? However, taxation was not an independent concept itself; it was multifariously linked with ownership and indeed with the entire structure of land rights.

It is a well-accepted historical fact that land revenue was the most important source of income in India during the British rule (Moreland, 1968). Numerous primary sources narrates that land revenue contributed nearly 190 million out of the total revenue of 470 million in 1881-82; and it rose to 290 million in 1901-02, where the total generated revenue was 610 million (Kingsley, 1951; Crook, 1933). Up to a first approximation, all cultivable land in British India fell under one of three alternative systems: (a) a landlord based system (zamindari/Permanent Settlement), (b) an individual cultivator based system (Raiytwari), and (c) a village-based system (Mahalwari). Out of the total cultivated area in British India, the Permanent Settlement, the Raiytwari, and the Mahalwari system covered 57%, 38%, and 5% respectively, as shown in fig. 1. Through the furnished data it is quite clear that the British administration imposed the draft of Permanent Settlement in more than 50% of the total cultivated area.

² British imperialism was more pragmatic than that of other colonial powers. Its primary motivation was economic, where land revenue continued to be the major source of the Government of East India Company.



From the second half of the eighteenth century, the British used their control over India to elevate their own interest (Dirks, 2006). The nature of the British rule and its policies, changed with the changing pattern of Britain's own social, economic and political development.³ Under the colonial rule, land revenue was of notable importance because not only it occupied a very pivotal position as a source of revenue to the Government, but it also played a vital role in regulating the general administration of the country.

Plan and Nature of Permanent Settlement

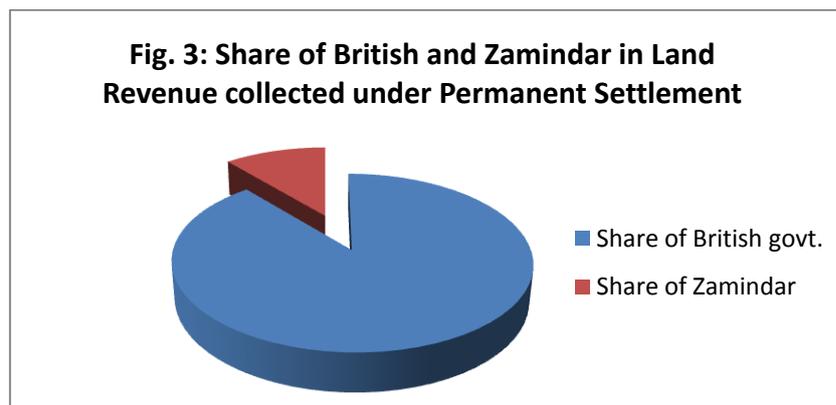
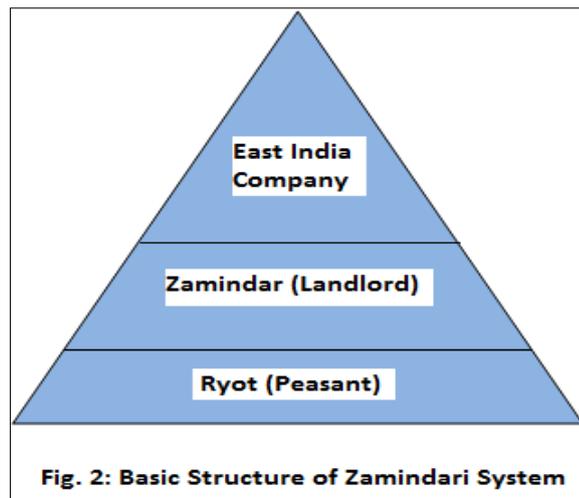
In comparison to other land tenure systems introduced by the British rule, the Permanent Settlement secured a fixed and stable income for the state. Further, it saved the Governmental expenses that had to be spent in making collections and assessments. Economically, it was claimed that the land tenures would encourage agricultural enterprise and prosperity (Dutt, 1906). It was thought that waste land would be reclaimed and the soil under cultivation would be improved. The Zamindars would introduce new methods of cultivation like better rotation of crops, use of manures etc. Thus, the settlements would create conditions for the development of the fullest power of the soil. This in turn would create a contented and resourceful peasantry (Bose, 1994). The Company hoped that the Zamindar class would not only become revenue-generating instrument but serve as intermediaries for the political aspects of their rule, preserving local custom and protecting rural life from the possibly rapacious influences. However, the immediate consequence of the

³ The colonial state used the system of taxation to secure its basic colonial needs or maintenance of the administrative and military structure. Moreover, land revenue also created surplus monetary asset for the British for its 'investment' in the purchase of Indian goods to sell abroad on the first stage of colonialism; and to secure a sufficient export of food grains and raw materials on the second.

Permanent Settlement were both very sudden and dramatic, and one which nobody had apparently foreseen.⁴

In 1789, Cornwallis prepared rules for a decennial settlement. After many discussions and debates, two theories involved Cornwallis, which were propounded by Sir John Shore and Mr. James Grant Charlesworth, 1985; Chaudhuri, 1984; Bose, 1994). Sir John Shore was the President of the Board of Revenue, and Mr. James Grant was the Record keeper with regard to the revenue settlement. John Shore opined that the Zamindars were the owners of the land, and the State had the right to a customary revenue from them. James Grant, on the other hand, held the outlook that the State was the owner of every piece of land and the State had the right to make the settlement either with the Zamindar or with the ryot (cultivator). Ultimately, Cornwallis accepted the view of John Shore. Accordingly, in 1790 a settlement for ten years was made with the Zamindars who were recognized as the sole owners of the land. With the approval of the Court of Directors, the proposed decennial Settlement was declared permanent on March 2, 1793 (Charlesworth, 1985; Patel, 1952). The basic features of the settlement were as, the Zamindars were made hereditary owners of the land under their possession, the Zamindars could sell and purchase the lands, the State had no direct contact with the peasants, and the company's share in the revenue was fixed permanently with the Zamindars. Broadly speaking the Permanent settlement involved three parties as the British Government, the Zamindar and the ryot (cultivator). The fig. 2 portrays the basic structure of this arrangement. As per this settlement, the role of the British Government and the Zamindar was fixed, but the role of the ryot was nowhere defined; and the ryot was put at the mercy of the Zamindar (Kumar, 1982; Zamindari Abolition Committee 1948). According to the newly introduced settlement, the Zamindars were recognised as the permanent owners of the land. They were given instruction to pay 89% of the annual collected revenue to the State and were permitted to enjoy 11% of the revenue as their share, as shown if fig. 3.

⁴ The British policy of extorting the largest possible land revenue obsessed Cornwallis to quote that, "one-third of Bengal, had been transformed into a jungle inhabited by only wild beasts." In permanently settled areas the lot of peasants was unenviable. They were left to the mercies of the zamindars who raised rents to unbearable limits, compelled them to pay illegal dues and to perform forced labour and oppressed them in devise other ways.



The Zamindars were left independent in the internal affairs of their respective districts. The Zamindars were required to issue *Patta* and *Quabuliyats* to the cultivators mentioning the area of their land and other details. This legal document pointed out the amount of revenue to be paid by the respective peasant. Historians think that the decision to recognise the zamindars as the proprietors of land was basically determined by political, financial and administrative expediency (Baden-Powell, 1972). Numerous researches explain three significant factors behind the favourable attitude of the British rule towards Zamindars. The first was the need to create political allies. The British officials realised that as they were foreigners in India, their rule would be unstable unless they acquired local supporters who

would act as a buffer between them and the people of India.⁵ Second, and perhaps the predominant motive, was that of financial security. The Permanent Settlement guaranteed stability of income. The newly created property of the Zamindars acted as a security of this. Thirdly, the Permanent Settlement was expected to increase agricultural production. Since the land revenue would not be increased in future, even if the Zamindar's income went up, the latter would be inspired to extend cultivation and improve agricultural productivity as was being done in Britain by the landlords (Blyn, 1966). The another major consideration was that the Permanent Settlement would create a class of loyal Zamindars who would be prepared to defend the company at all costs because their rights were guaranteed by the British.

Merits and loopholes of Zamindari system

The historians have expressed divergent opinions regarding the positive and negative aspects of Permanent Settlement. *According to Mr. Marshman, "It was a bold, brave, and wise measure; under the influence of this territorial character, which for the first time created inalienable rights and interests in the soil, population has increased, cultivation has extended and gradual improvement has become visible in the habits and comfort of the people."* R.C. Dutt remarks that, *"If the prosperity and happiness of a nation be the criterion of wisdom and success, Lord Cornwallis's permanent settlement of 1793 is the wisest and most successful measure which the British nation had adopted in India."* He further remarks, *"It is the one act of British nation within the century and a half of their rule in India, which has most effectively safeguarded the economic welfare of the people."*

Now we will discuss the positive aspects of the Permanent Settlement. Fore mostly, the Colonial Government became free from the problem of fixation of revenue year by year. The State secured a stable, secure and fixed income from India. In case the Zamindars did not pay the revenue, the loss was compensated by selling the land owned by the respective Zamindar. Secondly, the Zamindars paid great interest to increase the production of their lands, as the revenue from their holdings was fixed or permanent in nature. New areas of land were brought under cultivation, and the Zamindars introduced new methods of cultivation like use of manure, rotation of crops, new agricultural tools, etc. The improvement of

⁵ The Permanent Settlement secured for the Government the support of an influential class. The Zamindars of Bengal stood loyal to British rule during the great rebellion of 1857. Further, it was hoped that under the Permanent Settlement, the zamindars would act as the natural leaders of the peasants and show their turbid spirit in helping the spread of education and other charitable activities.

agriculture also influenced the trade and commerce up-to an extent. Thirdly, by making the Zamindars the owners of the land, the settlement created a class of loyal landlords who formed a stable element in the expansion of the Colonial rule. We know well that the permanent settlement secured the political support of the Zamindars of Bengal who stood loyal during the great mutiny of 1857 (Desai, 1948).

On the contrary, Holmes, James Mill, Thurston and Raja Ram Mohan Roy hold a very critical view about this settlement. A critical analysis of the actual operation of this settlement, in years to come, proves that this settlement was not at all beneficial to any party, i.e. the British Government, Zamindar and the ryot. Mr. Holmes held the view that, *“the permanent settlement was a sad blunder. The inferior tenants derived from it no benefit whatever. The Zamindars again failed to pay their rent charges and their estates were sold for the benefit of the Government.”* Charles Metcalfe opines that, *“Cornwallis instead of being the creator of the prosperity in India was the great destroyer of it. The cultivators who were reduced to the position of tenants suffered miserably at the hands of their landlords. The company, therefore, did a grave injustice to the peasants.”* Eminent scholar of Modern India, Bipan Chandra narrates, *“Compared to the British landlord, Indian landlord paid as tax 10/11th of his income from the land. As such, many landlords became defaulters of tax to the Government and had to sell their lands to pay the tax. Thus, the permanent settlements proved harmful to all parties concerned and as such, it was not introduced in other parts of India except northern circars in the south and in the districts of Banaras in the north.”* Mr. Beveridge remarked, *“A very grave blunder as well as gross injustice was committed when a settlement was made with the landlords alone and the right of the farmers were completely ignored.”* According to Setton Carr, *“The Permanent Settlement somewhat secured the interests of the Zamindars, postponed those of the tenants and permanently sacrificed those of the State.”*

Debating on the dark side, the Permanent Settlement turned into a machine of exploitation and affected the interests of the Zamindars, cultivators and the company alike. It created “feudalism at the top and serfdom at the bottom.” The immediate effect of the settlement was harmful to the landlords who failed to collect the revenue from the peasants and so were unable to pay the fixed revenue at the decided time (Chandra, 1966; Fagan, 1932). As a result, they lost their proprietary right over the land. Secondly, in the end the State sustained financial losses by fixing the revenue. With the course of time, the rents from

the land increased when new areas of land were brought under cultivation, the Zamindars continued to pay the revenue fixed by the State, and the State could not claim its legitimate share in the increase. Further, under the Permanent Settlement, the company was a financial loser in the long run. This is because the revenue to be paid by the zamindar was fixed in perpetuity. So, when the British conquered South India and Northern and Western India, they went for periodic settlements. They adopted the Ryotwari and the Mahalwari system of land revenues in which settlements were made directly with the ryots or the village community. Thirdly, most of the landlords did not take any interest in upgrading the land. The landlords became indolent and led luxurious lives staying in the cities. The novels of this era depict the landlords as the lovers of wine and women. Fourthly, the Government by recognizing the rights of the Zamindars, sacrificed the interests of the peasants. They were left at the mercy of the land-lords who rack rented them (Dahiya, 1994). It was a great blunder on the part of Cornwallis to deprive the cultivators of the right of ownership of land and made the Zamindars the sole owners of land. The settlement divided the rural society into two classes namely, the Zamindars and the tenants.

Under Permanent Settlement, the land rent was fixed at an excessive high rate and was collected harshly. Apart from that the peasants were compelled to pay illegal taxes and were forced to work as labourers in the fields of Zamindars or their relatives. For the Zamindars, enhanced collection of land rent meant additional income beyond their approved share in fixed land rent. As a result, agriculture deteriorated and poverty perpetuated (Zamindari Abolition Committee, 1948). The Permanent Settlement created a class of intermediaries who were responsible for collection of land revenue. In most cases, the land settlement was made with the rich merchants and money lenders who could afford for timely payment of land revenue to the British Government. From this time onwards, the merchants and money-lenders found the opportunity for investment of the capital and were solely concerned about the return in terms of collection of maximum revenue.⁶

Conclusion

⁶ They never intended for agrarian development and extension of cultivation. They remained unconcerned about the miseries of the peasants and did nothing to increase agricultural production. Heavy assessment of land revenue and rack-renting left the peasants in such a position where they could not afford for development and extension of agriculture.

For an agricultural country like India, economic development depended upon the improvement of agriculture and prosperity of agrarian class. However, from the initial phase, the burden of taxation fell heavily on the peasants. More to the stipulated land revenue, the peasants had to pay for wars of expansion and for the cost of administration. Land revenue was the viable source to maximize revenue collection and to make every Indian a taxpayer. The Permanent Settlement was introduced in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1793 by Lord Cornwallis. It had two special features. Firstly, the Zamindars and revenue collectors were converted into sole landlords. They were not only to act as agents of the Government in collecting land revenue from the ryot but also to become the owners of the entire land in their zamindars. Secondly, the zamindars or the sole land holders were to give 10/11th of the rental they derived from the peasantry to the state, keeping only 1/11th for them.

The introduction of private property in land turned land into a market commodity and marked unprecedented changes in social relationship. New Social Classes like the landlord, trader the moneylender and the landed gentry shot into importance. The class of rural proletariat the poor peasant proprietor, the sub tenant, and the agricultural labour multiplied in number. The climate of cooperation gradually gave place to the system of competition and individualism. The prerequisites of the capitalist development of agriculture were created. Further, new modes of production, introduction of money economy, commercialization of agriculture, better means of transport and hostage with the work market added a new dimension to Indian agriculture and rural economy.

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