



A Comparative Study of Zamindari, Raiyatwari and Mahalwari Land Revenue

Settlements: In Ancient India

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Abstract: As a colonial mechanism of exploitation the British under East India Company invented and experimented different land revenue settlements in colonized India. Historically, this becomes a major issue of discussion among the scholars in the context of exploitation versus progressive mission in British India. Here, in this paper an attempt has been made to analyze and to interpret the prototype, methods, magnitudes, and far-reaching effects of the three major (Zamindari, Raiyatwari and Mahalwari) land revenue settlements in a comparative way. And eventually this paper has tried to show the cause-effects relationship of different modes of revenue assessments, which in turn, how it facilitated Englishmen to provide huge economic vertebrae to the Imperial Home Country, and how it succors in altering Indian traditional society and economic set up.

Keywords: Diwani (revenue collection right), Mahal (estate), Potta (lease), Raiyat (peasant), Zamindar (land lord)

Introduction: As 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.¹ They unleashed far reaching changes in Indian agrarian structure in order to maximize extraction which slowed down the country's 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴

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. The immediate consequence of implementation of the 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.⁷

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 Raiytwari. 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.⁸

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.⁹

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. John Stuart Mill, Examiner of the India Office, "Return to an Order of the House of Commons (June 97), showing under what tenures, and subject to what Land Tax, lands are held under the several Presidencies of India.¹⁰

The Raiyatwari system is associated with the name of Sir Thomas Munro, who was appointed Governor of Madras in May 1820. Subsequently, this system was extended to the Mumbai area under the supervision of Thomas Reid. Munro gradually reduced the rate of taxation from one half to one third of the gross produce, even then an excessive tax. 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.¹¹ Half the gross produce of the soil is demanded by Government, and this, which is nearly the



average rate wherever there is not a Permanent Settlement, is sadly too much to leave an adequate provision for the present".¹²

Basically, the Raiyatwari system was more pragmatic than doctrinal. By that time the local chiefs were mostly eliminated or reduced to insignificance. The contact of the administration with each individual farmer, implied in the Raiyatwari system appeared more conducive to the interest of the state, which could itself assess the cultivated area and the income of the tax payer, and which could itself carry out the collection of taxes. This system also the advantage for the peasant would be liberated from the oppressive domination of a big land owner. 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.¹³

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 codes and establishment.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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 Mill 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.¹⁶

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 Mackenzie's 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“.¹⁷

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.

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 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.¹⁹ 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., ¼ of Madras. Of the total land revenue 53 p.c. comes from the first two classes of land, and 47 p.c. from Raiyatwari tracts.²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²²

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.²³

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 Lambardar²⁴, 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. The government demand is estimated by a careful calculation of the value of the land, the price of the crops, and the recorded actual produce of the field. In the Mahalwari settlement, the government deals only with the middlemen, whether individuals or group of villagers, who were held responsible for the revenue. Nearly half of the area thus settled is cultivated by these middlemen themselves, and the other half by inferior tenants subject to the middlemen. The government demand was formally 90 p.c. of the net assets, but it was now been reduced to 50 p.c., or even less, except in Bombay, where there was no limit of to the maximum. The net asset is taken to be the economic rent which the actual cultivators pays to the superior proprietors, where there is subletting. In other places, the net assets is arrived at by deducting from the assume price of the crops the approximate cost of production, and little extra for his luxurious. In the province of Oudh, the government settled the revenue of a group of villages with a Talukdar or chief. These Talukdars differ from the Zamindars of Bengal in two respects: (1) the settlement with the former is temporary, and they have no absolute right over their estates such as the Bengal Zamindars possess.²⁵

Under the Raiyatwari settlement the government deals directly with the cultivators and recognizes no middlemen. Each village is carefully surveyed, and every cultivator“s holding or plot of land in it was marked and separately numbered. Village maps with accurate boundary lines, classification of the soil, and the names of the occupants, are carefully compiled and preserved, and the revenue was assessed on each occupant. This



right of occupancy can be inherited and transferred by the peasants; hence there was some amount of sub-letting even in the Raiyatwari provinces. In other respects the method of assessment was the same as in the Mahalwari settlement.²⁶

The Zamindari and Raiyatwari areas differed in the pattern of their subsequent development. One important determinant was investment. In Zamindari area, the government left the responsibility of making investment to the Zamindars. In Raiyatwari areas, they implicitly or explicitly assumed this responsibility. Perhaps there was an element of calculation too behind this discussion. Taxes being fixed forever in the Zamindari areas, the government could not hope to recover returns to increased asset value of the land in the form of taxes. In Ryotwari the road remained open. This was one of the reasons, but perhaps not the only one, why irrigation development occurred to a greater extent in the Ryotwari areas. Further, revenue farming had already weakened the official information-gathering system in the villages on the eve of the Permanent settlement. Consequently, Zamindari areas continued for long to remain statistical back holes.²⁷

Resemblance: 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 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.⁴³The 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.⁴⁴ 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.

Magnitude of assessments: In the Zamindari settlements, the land tax was fixed forever. In the Raiyatwari areas, the land tax was fixed subject to periodic revision like northern India. It is 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.⁴⁹ 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 elements and customs 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 Raiyatwari 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 revealed in abundant and gory details in Madras Torture Commission Report in 1855.⁵⁰

Conclusion: 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 become 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, Raiyatwari 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 crores or 50.3 percent of total its revenues.⁶⁰ 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 severe 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, economical, and social history, along with impoverishing a considerable portion of Indian mass (agricultural population), leading towards human inequality.

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