

Chapter 10

Colonialism and the Countryside: Exploring Official Archives

- In India British rule was first of all established in Bengal.
- Permanent settlement of land revenue was adopted in Bengal in 1793.
- The economic measure adopted by the British government made India a consumer of goods manufactured in England.
- By the end of the 18th century when zamindars were facing a crisis, A group of such peasants, on other hand, was consolidating their position in the villages.
- With the emergence of the power of zamindars had considerably diminished. They did not surrender easily. So they devised many ways to withstand the pressure and keep their central focus on their zamindaris.
- At the end of 18th century, the most adverse effect of the colonial rule fell on the economic condition of the peasants.
- As a result of the British occupation of India the Indian economy faced disastrous consequences. To fulfil their vested interests, they shattered their tradition and structure of Indian economy.
- Because of the decline of Indian industry, Indian weavers and craftswoman were completely made jobless. The industries in Surat, Dhaka, Murshidaabad, etc which were once flourishing were destroyed.
- Historians like Percival Spear, P.E. Robot and R.C. Dutt have praised permanent settlement of land revenue, because
 - Government Income became stable
 - Administration became efficient
 - British rule got stable.
- Permanent settlement of Revenue was also criticised on the basis of—
 - It did not proved beneficial for Zamindars.
 - It ingrained the interest of cultivators.
 - Burden of taxes fell on other classes.
- Mahalwari system of land revenue was implemented in Punjab. The group of villages were called 'Mahal'. So the system was known as Mahalwari system.
- The objective of the Fifth Report was to restrain and control the activities of East India company in India.

The East India Company of England established its control in the countryside and implemented its revenue policies. In this chapter, we will discuss what these policies meant to people and how these changed the daily lives of people.

Bengal and the Zamindars:

- Colonial rule was first established in Bengal. In Bengal, East India Company tried to reorder the rural society and establish new land rights and new revenue system.
- There was an auction held at Burdwan (present day Bardhaman) in 1797, which was popularly known as Grand Public Event.
- Company fixed the revenue and each zamindar was supposed to pay. This fixing of revenue was done under the Permanent Settlement and it became operational from year 1793.
- The Zamindars who failed to pay the revenue, their estate was auctioned to recover the revenue. But sometimes it was found that the purchasers at auction were servants and agents of the zamindar himself, e.g. auction in Burdwan.

The Problem of Unpaid Revenue:

- The British officials felt that agriculture, trade and the revenue resources of the state could be developed by encouraging investment in agriculture. This could be done by securing rights of property and permanently fixing the rates of revenue demand.
- Company felt that when revenue will be fixed, it will provide opportunity to individual to invest in agriculture as a means of making profit and company will also be assured of regular flow of revenue.
- After a prolonged debate amongst company officials, the permanent settlement was made with the rajas and taluqdars of Bengal.
- Zamindars had several, sometimes even 400 villages under them.
- Zamindars collected rent from the different villages, paid the revenue to the company, and retained the difference as his income.

Reasons for Non-Payment by Zamindars:

- A number of reasons were responsible for non-repayment of revenue by zamindars which include that revenue demands were kept very high. It was imposed at a time when prices of agricultural produce was very low, so peasants found it difficult to pay.
- Zamindars were also treated by strict laws i.e. the 'Sunset Law', which was completely regardless of the harvest. According to this law, zamindars had to

pay revenue by sunset of the specified date, otherwise zamindari was liable to be auctioned.

- Besides these, permanent settlement and company reduced the power of Zamindars. Sometimes ryots and village headman-jotedar deliberately delayed the payments.

Limitations Imposed on Zamindars by the Company:

- Zamindars were important for the company but it also wanted to control and regulate them, subdue their authority and restrict their autonomy.
- Thus, the zamindars' troops were disbanded, customs duties abolished and their 'cutcheries' (courts) brought under the supervision of a collector appointed by the company.
- Zamindars lost their power to organise local justice and local police.
- Over time zamindars were severely restricted and their powers were seized.

The Rise of The Jotedars in Villages:

- The group of prosperous farmers were popularly known as jotedars. Jotedars were a class of rich peasants.
- They acquired vast areas of land, controlled trade, money lending and exercise immense- power over the poorer cultivators. Their land was cultivated through share cropper known as adhiyars or bargadars.
- Within village the power of jotedars was more effective than that of Zamindars. They fiercely resisted the efforts of Jama to increase the Jama of village and prevented zamindari official from executing their duties.
- Sometimes they also purchased the auctioned property of zamindar. Joiedar played an important role in weakening of zamindari system.

The Resistance of the Zamindars:

- To prevent the weakening of their authority, zamindar took series of steps-like fictitious sale or transferring of property to female- member of family, manipulated the auctions, with holding revenue deliberately, threatening or intimidating the people outside their zamindari, if they try to bought an estate.

The Fifth Report and its Impact on Zamindars:

- It was the fifth of a series of report on administration and activities of East India Company in India. It was submitted to the British Parliament in 1813.
- British Parliament forced the company to produce regular report on the administration of India and appointed committees to enquire into the affairs of

the company. It became the basis of intense parliamentary debates on the nature of East India Company's rule in India.

- Fifth report has shaped our conception of what happened in rural Bengal during that period and evidence contained in the 5th report are very important.

The Accounts of Buchanan:

- Francis Buchanan undertook detailed surveys of the areas under the jurisdiction of the British East India Company.
- Buchanan journey was sponsored by the company and it was planned according to its need. He had specific instruction about what he had to look for and what he had to record.
- Buchanan observed the stones, rocks, different layers of soil, minerals, and stones that were commercially valuable.
- Buchanan wrote about landscape and how these landscapes could be transformed and made productive.
- His assessments were shaped by commercial interest of the company and modern western notions of what constituted progress. He was critical of lifestyle of forest dwellers.

Pastoral Areas of Bengal:

- With gradual passage of time, settled cultivation expanded and reached to the area of shifting cultivation, swallowing up pasture and forest in the Rajmahal hills. Shifting cultivation was done with the help of hoe, while settled cultivation was done through plough.

In the Hills of Rajmahal:

- Francis Buchanan, a physician travelled through Rajmahal hills and he gave an account about it.
- Originally in the Rajmahal hills Paharias lived. They lived on hunting, shifting cultivation, food gathering and was intimately connected to forest.
- In last decade of 18th century British encouraged forest clearance and zamindar and jotedar also started to turn uncultivated land into rice fields. As settled agriculture expanded, the area under forest and pasture contracted. This sharpened the conflict between Paharias and settled cultivators.
- Around 1780, Santhal came into these areas. They cleared the forest and ploughed land.
- As the lower hills were takenover by the Santhal Settlers, the Paharias receded interior into the Rajmahal hills.

The Santhals became Settlers:

- Zamindars and Britishers after having failed to subdue the Paharias and transform them into settled cultivators turned to Santhals. The Santhal appeared to be ideal settlers, cleared the forest and ploughed land.
- After land was granted, population of Santhals increased exponentially and their villages also increased in number.
- When the Santhals were settling, the Paharias resisted but were ultimately forced to withdraw deeper into hills. It impoverished the Paharias in the long term.
- Santhals now lived a settled life, cultivated a range of commercial crops for market and dealt with traders, moneylenders. But state was taxing them heavily, moneylenders (dikus) were charging high interest rate and taking over their land when debts remained unpaid and zamindars were asserting control over their land. Later due to problems, Santhals revolted in year 1855-1856, and to pacify them, Britishers carved out new areas for the Santhals and imposed some special laws within it.

The Revolt in Bombay Deccan:

- One of the ways to explore what was happening in the area of Bombay Deccan is to focus on the revolt of that area. Rebels expressed their anger and fury.
- Revolt provides information about life of peasant, event associated with revolt, suppress or control of the revolt. Enquiries about the revolt produced results that can be explored by historians.
- Through the nineteenth century, peasants in various parts of India rose in revolt against money lenders and grain dealers, e.g. the revolt occurred in 1875 in the Deccan.
- A movement began at Supa Village in Poona in 1895, where ryots from surrounding rural areas gathered and attacked the shopkeepers and demanded their bahi khatas (account book) and debt bonds. Ryots burnt the khatas, looted shops and in few instances burnt the houses of Sahukars.
- Later revolt spread from Pune to Ahmednagar and even further terrified Sahukars fled the village leaving behind their property and belongings.
- British officials controlled these revolts, they established police posts in villages and arrested people and convicted them.

A New Revenue System Started:

- In the 19th century, the British company was keen to expand its financial resources in its annexed territories through other temporary revenue settlement policies.
- This was so, because after 1810, the agricultural prices rose and enlarged the income of the Bengal zamindars but not the company. This was due to the Permanent Settlement policy in which the revenue demand was fixed and could not be hiked. Therefore to expand its revenue source, company started to introduce temporary settlement.
- Policies of officials were also shaped by the economic theories they are familiar with. In 1820's, officials were under influence of Ricardian ideas. David Ricardo was a celebrated Economist in England.
- Ricardian idea states that landowner should claim only to average rent and when there is surplus, state should tax that surplus. He further says if tax will not be levied cultivators will likely to turn into rentiers and surplus income will not be productively invested in improvement of land.
- Ryotwari settlement was introduced in Bombay Deccan as a new revenue system. In this system, revenue was directly settled with cultivator or ryot. Average income from soil, revenue paying capacity of ryot was assessed and proportion of it was fixed as share of the state. In this system, there was provision for resurvey of land every 30 years.

Revenue Demand and Peasant Debt:

- Revenue demand was very high and when harvest were poor, it was impossible to pay. When peasant failed to pay revenue his crops were seized and fine was imposed on the whole village. In 1830's, prices fell sharply, famine struck and due to this 1/3rd of cattle in deccan were killed and half of human population died. So the problem became very severe, but the unpaid revenue mounted. In these conditions many peasants deserted their village and migrated to new places.
- To get over a troubled period, to purchase things for arrange marriages and to start agriculture, peasant needed money. So they borrowed money from moneylender. But once loan was taken, they were unable to pay it back. As debt mounted and loan remained unpaid, peasant dependence on moneylender increased.
- By 1840's, officials found that peasants were in alarming level of indebtedness, so they moderated the revenue demand slightly. By 1845, agricultural price

recovered steadily and peasants started expanding cultivation. But for the purpose of expansion they needed money to buy seeds etc, so they again turned to moneylender for money.

The Experience of Injustice of the Peasants:

- Peasants got deeper and deeper into debt and now they were utterly dependent on moneylender for survival but now moneylenders were refusing their loan. Along with this, there was customary rule that interest charged cannot be more than principal amount of loan. But in colonial rule this law was broken and now ryots started to see money lenders as devious and deceitful. They complained of moneylenders manipulating laws and forging accounts.
- To tackle this problem, British in 1859 passed Limitation Law that stated that loan bond would have validity for 3 years only.
- It was meant to check accumulation of interest. But moneylenders now forced ryot to sign a new bound every 3 years in which total unpaid balance of last loan was entered as principal amount and interest was charged on it.
- In petitions to Deccan Riots commission, ryots
- stated how moneylenders were suppressing and oppressing them by refusing to give receipts when loan were paid back, entered fictitious figures in bond and forced them to sign and put thumb impression on bonds or document about which they had no idea and they were not able to read. Money lenders also acquired the harvest at low price and ultimately took over property of peasant. They have no choice because to survive they needed
- loan but moneylenders were not willing to give it without bonds.

The Deccan Riot's Commission and its Report:

- The Government of Bombay set up a Commission to investigate a riot in Deccan. The Commission held enquirers in district where riot spread, recorded statements of ryots, sahuikars and eyewitnesses, compiled data on revenue rate, interest rate in different regions and collated reports sent by district collectors. Report of Commission was tabled in British Parliament in 1878.
- This report reflected the official thinking of colonial government. It came to one of the conclusion that peasants were angered by moneylenders, not by revenue demand of the company. It shows that the colonial government was reluctant to admit that popular discontent was against the governments action. Official reports are the invaluable source of reconstruction of history but they need to juxtaposed with other evidences also.

Cotton and its Global Condition:

- The American civil war broke in 1861. Due to war, cotton export to Britain decreased very much. To reduce dependence on America, cotton cultivation was promoted in India.
- Export merchants gave money to urban sahumars who in turn gave to rural moneylenders to secure the produce. So now the peasant had access to money easily and due to this, cotton production increased rapidly. But this brought prosperity to rich peasants mostly and for small peasants it led to heavier debt. By 1862 over 90 percent of cotton imports into Britain were coming from India.
- When in 1865 civil war ended, export of cotton resumed, prices of cotton and demand of cotton from India decreased. Thus merchants, sahumars and moneylenders were not extending credit to peasants, instead they demanded repayment of debts. At the same time revenue demand was also increased from 50 to 100 percent.

Important terms:

- Mahals: Estates owned by big zamindars who were called Raja locally.
- Raja: It is the term for Monarch but often refers to the big Zamindars in their respective local areas.
- Taluqdars: The owners of Taluq, taluq stood for piece of land or territorial unit.
- Ryots: Ryots means peasants.
- Jotedars: Rich peasants often owning large farmlands. They often controlled moneylending and trade at local levels. Sometimes village headman was also called Jotedar.
- Zamindar: The chain between farmer and the company in the system called permanent settlement. Zaminadars were responsible for collection of land revenue and depositing the same to the Company. They lived life of comfort and luxury.
- Amla: Official of Zamindar who would maintain record and collect revenue from villages.
- Benami: the literal meaning is anonymous. The term was to denote transactions wherein real person was hidden behind insignificant name or person.
- Lathy at: The musclemen of Zamindars.
- Sahukar: Trader who was also in money lending business.
- Rentier: A person who lived on rental income.
- Dewani: The Revenue department of state.
- Permanent Settlement: Land revenue system introduced by Cornwallis in 1793 in Bengal. Under this system, the land revenue was collected by Zamindars. Zamindari rights passed on father to son.
- Ryotwari System: The land revenue system introduced in Madras and Bombay Presidencies. Under the system, settlement was made directly with cultivators.

Time line:

- 1765 – East India Company got diwani right for the province of Bengal, in the wake of Battle of Buxar.
- 1773 – Regulating act enacted by the British Parliament aimed at controlling the East India Company.
- 1800's – Santhals began to settle in the hills of Rajmahal.
- 1818 – First land revenue settlement done in the Bombay Presidency.
- 1820's – Prices of agriculture produce decline.
- 1855-56 – Santhals rebel in Rajmahal.
- 1861 – Cotton boom for the Indian cultivators, in the wake of American civil war
- 1875 – Ryots in Deccan villages rebels

