

CC-12:HISTORY OF INDIA(1750s-1857)

IV. RURAL ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

(A). LAND REVENUE SYSTEMS AND FOREST POLICY

PART- II

MAHALWARI SETTLEMENT

The northwestern provinces and Awadh had come under British domination at different periods of time. In 1801 CE, the Company had received the districts of Allahabad and its adjoining areas from the nawab of Awadh which were known as the ceded districts. After the second Anglo Maratha war, the Company had acquired the territory between the Yamuna and the Ganga. These territories were called the conquered provinces. Lord Wellesley, the first lieutenant governor of the ceded districts had made a settlement with the zamindars and farmers for three years, according to which, the state's demand was raised- by 20 lakh rupees during the very first year- over the nawab of Awadh's demand. Moreover, an additional burden of 10 lakh rupees was added before the third year was out. The Company officials were also very strict in the collection of land revenue. Similar land revenue settlements were also implemented in the conquered provinces. Mackenzie, the Secretary to the Board of Commissioners, in his Minutes of 1819 CE, highlighted the existence of village communities in northern India. In keeping with this, the Mahalwari system of land revenue was introduced in the region. The term was derived from the word mahal, referring to a neighbourhood. Under this system, the unit for revenue settlement was the entire village.

Generally lands in the village community were communally owned by the village community who were Jointly responsible for the payment of land revenue, though individual responsibility also existed. The village community together owned the common land comprising the village green, forestlands, pasture etc.

Under the Mahalwari system, the land was first surveyed, records of rights over land were prepared, and then land revenue demand in the mahals was fixed, and

finally collected through the village headman or lambardar. Regulation VII of 1822 CE legalized these recommendations and fixed the land revenue on the basis of 80 percent of the rental value payable by the zamindars. In cases, where estates were not held by the landlords, but by the cultivators themselves, the state's demand rose up to almost 95 percent of the rental. The system broke down due to the excessive demand of the state and its rigidity in the collection of land revenue.

When William Bentinck came as the governor-general, he thoroughly reviewed the scheme and came to the conclusion that the Regulation of 1822 CE had caused widespread despair. Bentinck's government, after prolonged consultations, passed the regulation of 1833 CE, according to which the terms and conditions of the Mahalwari system were made slightly flexible. An easy procedure was adopted for preparing estimates of produce and of rents. It also introduced the fixation of average rents for different classes of soil. For the first time, field maps and field registers began to be used. This new scheme supervised by Robert Merttins Bird, a British administrator, took care that land was first surveyed by demarcating field boundaries, and the cultivated and the uncultivated parts. Assessment was then done for the whole tract followed by fixing the demand of each village. The state demand was fixed at 66 percent of the rental value and the settlement was made for a period of 30 years.

The Mahalwari system of land revenue which worked under the scheme of 1833 CE was, completed under the British administrator James Thompson. Even the 66 percent rental demand formula was found to be too taxing. When Lord Dalhousie became the governor general he issued fresh directions. Under the revised Saharanpur Rules of 1855 CE, the state revenue demand was limited to 50 percent of the rental value. But the settlement officers did not implement the new rules; and as a result, the system proved to be very hard on the agricultural classes .

Thus by the middle of the nineteenth century the Company's administration had devised three systems of land revenue administration, creating private property in land and conferring that proprietary right on three different groups-the Permanent Settlement was made with the zamindars, the Ryotwari Settlement with the ryots or peasant proprietors and the Mahalwari Settlement with the village community. The latter system was extended to Punjab and -central India when those regions were conquered subsequently, while the Ryotwari system was introduced in Sind, Assam and Coorg. The zamindari system was tried in

the northern districts of the Madras Presidency where zamindars could be found. A common feature of all the settlements, as generally noted, was over-assessment, as the primary aim of the Company's government was to maximise revenue income. The results were arrears of payment, mounting debt, increasing land sales and dispossession the effects of these changes were less spectacular than once imagined, and had significant regional variations, as the land transfers could not fundamentally alter the structure of landholding everywhere. The agrarian society thus proved to be more resilient than once thought to be. But the groups and classes that survived had substantially different rights, obligations and powers. These changes and grievances generating from there were amply reflected in the series of agrarian disturbances that marked the first century of British rule in India.

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FOREST POLICY IN INDIA DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The forest policy of India during the British rule focused more on exploitation of forest resources without concerning conservation. As a result of centralisation, forests came under the states and thus under the control of British officials. Strict rules were enforced to bring the forests under the control of the states. The international demand for timber and the potential monetary benefits from the forests were well realised by the British administrative officer and thus in the name of development, huge amount of forest resources were exploited. From the 19th century onwards till the time India achieved independence, forest management in India was guarded by rigorous policies of the British Government.

Lord Dalhousie framed the Forest Charter in 1855 as a result of which restrictions were imposed on the local and native individual on terms

of utilizing the forest resources. Lord Dalhousie instrumented modern and scientific methods of conservation for the large tract of forest land in India by bringing them under the proprietorship of the Government, an initiative which had never before been undertaken in India.

In 1864 the Imperial Forest Department was established in India. In 1865 the Indian Forest Act was passed as a result of which the British Government could exercise monopoly right over the forest resources in India. Dietrich Brandis, a Forester from Germany was brought to India to look into the matters of management of the forest resources in India. The decentralised forest management system was converted into a centralised system of forest management under the British rule and was put under the supervision of the Forest Department which would effectively manage the demands of timber as well as revenue.

The Forest Act of 1878 brought all the forest land under the supremacy of the British government. Under this act forest land in India was grouped under three categories-Reserved Forest- those under complete control of the Government, Protected Forests-those under partial control of the Government and Village Forests-those under the control of villages. This act also imposed restrictions on the utility of the forest resources by the people who were essentially forest dwellers and depended on the products of the forest by large and whole. Violations of those restrictions were even declared as punishable offence.

In 1894, the National Forest Policy was passed. This policy was based on the report named 'Improvement of Indian Agriculture, 1893' formulated by Dr. Voeleker. Under this policy the zamindars were made to convert certain parts of the forest land into lands fit for cultivation which would increase the amount of revenue collected from cultivable lands. Also, under this policy forest land in India was grouped into four categories. Extracting revenue from the forests was given much importance and also the commercial activities based on the forest products garnered much interest of the British officials.

The Indian Forest Act passed in 1927 further strengthened the state control over forest land and even more restrictions were imposed on the activity of the native people in the forested areas. The community of the forest dwellers and also the local village communities who were closely associated with the forests from centuries ago, suffered to great extent under this Act. More and more restrictions were imposed on the people on such associations and utilization of

forest and forest products. The section of people depended on forest and forest resources for their livelihood were the worst sufferers.
