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## The nature of land revenue in colonial Bengal

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### **Abstract:**

*In an agrarian country like India, the economic aspects of land, revenue, and farmers have long influenced rural society and the larger state system. It is necessary to reveal the extent to which land-revenue management protected the interests of those in the contemporary state system and how the land-revenue-peasant-landlord-state relationship was conducive to economic development or how it helped improve the living standards of the common man. In addition to this, it is necessary to determine the extent to which the conventional land policy of the British rule and the land management associated with it protected the interests of the British ruling class or their loyal community. Since the introduction of Company rule in India, the land revenue system of this country has been experimented with in various ways. In the light of this point of view, Bengal became one of the areas of experimentation in the land-revenue policy of the British government. In order to collect revenue regularly and adequately, British administrators like Lord Warren Hastings, John Shore, Philip Francis and Barwell tried to build a revenue system in Bengal. But Lord Cornwallis took the helm of the land revenue system of Bengal as a kind of coercive revenue collection did not succeed. But the land revenue policy introduced by him needs to be properly ascertained as to how much the land settlement of Bengal and the peasant society associated with it, the interests of the zamindars were protected, or not at all. Through this research paper, my aim is to highlight the impact of the land revenue system of Bengal during the colonial period.*

**Keywords:** company, governance, land revenue, farmer, landlord, influence.

### **Introduction:**

Colonial rule is considered to be a particularly important chapter in the history of the land-revenue system of Bengal. Although the land system of post-Mughal Bengal was managed by the Nawabs, the main management of the land settlement was in the hands of the zamindars. However, there is room for debate in this regard regarding the nature of land ownership and land revenue. This debate is still flowing in the socio-economic field of post-independence Bengal. Whatever the debate among economists, researchers, theorists on land settlement, land relations with farmers, land revenue management and its impact on farmers, it is necessary to discuss in detail what measures

were taken by the British rulers in land revenue in colonial Bengal. Especially in an agricultural country like India, the economic aspects related to land, revenue, farmers have been particularly influential in the rural society and the wider state system since time immemorial. It is necessary to reveal the extent to which land-revenue management protected the interests of those in the contemporary state system and how the land-revenue-peasant-landlord-state relationship was conducive to economic development or how it helped improve the living standards of the common man. In addition to this, it is necessary to determine the extent to which the conventional land policy of the British rule and the land management associated with it protected the interests of the British ruling class or their loyal community.

Through extensive research and analysis of data from various economists, historians and scholars, it is natural to say that contemporary land policy has been conducted in the interest of the English. Involved with this interest was the so-called free trade policy of the colonial rulers. It is not difficult to acknowledge that the British trade system was strengthened by Indian food grains and products. This opportunity has allowed British products to be sold freely in the Indian market. But as a result, India, especially Bengal, has suffered a great loss. The various land reforms, trade policies or industrial policies pursued in India were not directly linked to the interests of India, but to the interests of the British. Grain laws were lifted from India, and Bengal's agricultural crops and raw materials began to be imported freely to Britain. Thanks to this raw material, Britain had the opportunity to develop as a colonial power. Against this background, we need to determine how the revenue policy was followed in the land system of Bengal and how much impact it had on the peasant society and the common people of Bengal.

In particular, from the time of the acquisition of civil rights in 175 Bengal-Bihar-Orissa, the British government and their able fellow bureaucrats and intellectuals carried out extensive research on the nature of land ownership in India and the rights of zamindari. This study looks at the nature of land, fertility, farmer's rights, etc., to see what kind of revenue can be collected. Naturally, this observation shows that it is not possible to determine the same land-revenue policy across the country for regional variation in different parts of India. There are differences in relations between regional zamindars, tenants and peasants and it is not similar to the European style zamindari.<sup>1</sup> In the light of this point of view, Bengal became one of the areas of experimentation in the land-revenue policy of the British government. In the test, land management, land ownership and revenue determination became the basic principles. Although the experiment of colonial land-revenue policy began during the reign of Lord Warren Hastings, it was later completed by Lord Cornwallis, the next Governor General of Bengal. He redefined the land-revenue policy of Bengal by the "Permanent Settlement".

Before the introduction of the Permanent Settlement, Cornwallis saw the introduction of the ten-year system, and in 1893, he formally introduced the Permanent Settlement. But Cornwallis had to face controversy because the purpose of land reform during the colonial period was to collect revenue through the introduction of zamindari system and give it a permanent foundation. However, the policy of revenue maximization during the civil period brought disaster to Bengal, which did not succeed in the long-term revenue collection for the British. The group following James Grant sought to extort money, which Cornwallis could not accept. He thought that the introduction of a system of permanent revenue collection like the Permanent Settlement would increase the happiness of the Indians on the one hand, and the regular and sure collection of revenue by the British on the other. Cornwallis was of the opinion that the long-term revenue collection would improve farming with the active support of the zamindars. This will improve the condition of zamindars as well as farmers. The zamindars will become more loyal to the monarchy, even if the rate of revenue does not increase, the collection of revenue will be much more assured. Cornwallis also hoped that the improvement of agriculture would increase trade and indirectly increase revenue, courtesy of him.

Whatever the controversy between Philip Princess and John Shore, Cornwallis ignored them and introduced a permanent settlement in Bengal. We need to analyze whether this settlement was permanent at all. Because there was already a doubt about the reality of the permanent settlement. According to the agreement with the zamindar, nine-tenths of the rent collected by the zamindar had to be paid to the government as revenue. This payable revenue of the zamindar as a percentage is fixed unchanged. In this case, the government would have been happy if the company had been given the revenue. The zamindar could inherit his zamindari. But it is noteworthy here that the state would not have intervened if the zamindar had increased the rent. Because it would also increase the amount of nine-tenths as revenue. Another thing to note is that the permanent settlement cannot be said to have left the company's revenue claim completely unchanged. Because it has been seen that in 1893 the revenue collection was 90 percent but by the end of the nineteenth century it was reduced to 26 percent. Later in Orissa or Assam this policy of permanent settlement followed in Bengal was introduced in a modified form without keeping it straight.<sup>2</sup>

One of the biggest problems of the company was exactly from whom the revenue would be collected. Until now, the Nawabs of Bengal used to collect revenue from the zamindars in their own way. Some of these zamindars were again big landlords, they had large areas under their control, they even had their own armed forces. In contemporary Bengal there were 12 such landlords who were called 'Baro Bhuiyan'. In 1890, the Bara Bhuiyans received 53% of the revenue. In addition to this there were many other small and big zamindars who paid revenue directly or through big zamindars. On the whole, the zamindars traditionally paid the revenue. This former revenue system, known as 'Abwab', was disrupted by the Company's intervention in 1890.

Although the company left the responsibility of revenue collection to the zamindars under the new system, some zamindars were dismissed and their lands were handed over to a new class of revenue collectors. They were responsible for collecting rent from the company with a certain amount of money. Needless to say, the previous revenue collection system was shaken by the company. Cornwallis, observing the extreme chaos in the land system of contemporary Bengal and India, became determined to formulate a new type of land revenue policy. Cornwallis' attitude towards the Indian zamindars as a whole was quite advanced. According to him, if the property rights of the zamindars are ensured and secured, they will invest money in the development of agriculture. In addition to this, if the responsibility of collecting revenue is given to the big zamindars as compared to the numerous small and big scattered zamindars, the collection of revenue will be relatively easy. Moreover, it is important to have a large administrative organization to collect revenue from the farmers scattered in the villages. This will make it easier to gain the allegiance of a strong class locally. In view of all this, it is seen that the vast and vast lands of contemporary Bengal, Bihar and Orissa became part of the zamindari property. The zamindars had to pay the revenue due on each plot. If necessary, the zamindar could change, sell and mortgage the land. He could have inherited the land, but if he failed to pay the required revenue, the English government would take away the land. Someone else would have the right to occupy this land at auction. With all this, Cornwallis thought that agriculture would improve on the whole.

It is true that the zamindars benefited from the permanent settlement. But in reality the zamindars enjoyed only the right to collect rent from the land. But the main basis of agriculture was lost by the farmers. The zamindars had to rely on the kindness of the south. The right of the peasants to occupy the conventional land so far has been neglected, their identity being treated as 'tenants' instead of peasants. He was given a lease according to the amount of rent the farmer would pay. Although the zamindars did not attach much importance to this system of leasing, the peasants also did not like this system. Because there was always a fear of losing land in any formal agreement of land rights and obligations. Moreover, the additional burden of revenue was on their necks. In addition, if the farmer could not pay the rent, the zamindar could consume his property.

It should be kept in mind that the permanent settlement did not benefit the zamindar class. They were also plagued by a number of problems. In this regard, Daniel Turner wanted to show, "The issue of private property is wrong; In fact, the final ownership of the land was in the hands of the imperial authorities."<sup>3</sup> This is because the revenue due to the zamindars had to be paid to the company within a certain date of the year which is known as 'Sunset Act'. If he failed to pay the revenue on this due date, the company would sell the zamindari property and recover the money due. Moreover, it was not easy for the zamindars to collect revenue from the farmers. Added to this were various natural calamities, which made it impossible for the farmers to pay the revenue to the

zamindars on time. So the zamindari property would be sold as the revenue could not be met. According to one statistic, the amount of land sold at auction in Bengal and Bihar between 1894 and 1806 accounted for 41 per cent of the total revenue. Between 1804 and 1806, 51.1 per cent of zamindari in Orissa went up due to auction.<sup>4</sup> The zamindars who used to buy such land at auction were not new people in the agrarian society of rural Bengal. In most cases, the surrounding zamindars or tenants would divide the old lands among themselves.<sup>5</sup> For example, in the case of Burdwan Raj, the zamindari maintained its existence by introducing a system of leasing and as a result the structure of land acquisition became completely unrealistic.<sup>6</sup> Among the zamindars and peasants, sometimes 12 types of tenant middlemen appeared. Under their influence, the pressure of revenue would increase at a huge rate, which would inevitably fall on the shoulders of the farmers.

In order to alleviate the burden of the peasants, the rights of the peasants were recognized by passing the Tenancy Act in 1859 and 1855. The safety of the farmers was protected to some extent by these two laws. But thanks to the permanent settlement, the company was able to increase its strength and become a self-sufficient state. He was able to pave the way for the expansion of empire throughout the country thanks to the spread of domination in Bengal. In this case, the company tries to fulfill its own interests by employing Indians. But in order to protect the interests of the farmers, in reality the company was tightening the hands of a group of rich farmers or strongmen. In this context, the researched realization of Rajat Roy and Ratnalekha Roy can be highlighted, “It is believed that these jotedars were the real controllers of land at the rural level. The zamindars were only entitled to rent.”<sup>7</sup> However, Rajat Roy and Ratnalekha Roy admitted that, “despite all these changes, the power and control of the jotedar class remained unchanged in the rural society of Bengal. This was the main character of the rural social structure in colonial Bengal. It was consistently maintained.”<sup>8</sup>

There is controversy among historians as to the origin and existence of the landlord class in the perpetual settlement of the land system during the colonial period. In this debate, Sugat Basu slammed the statements of Rajat Roy and Raktalekha Roy. Sugat Basu wanted to show that the dominance of the jotedars was limited to North Bengal only. In other parts of Bengal he found two more modern forms of agrarian economy - the khastaluk of the landless peasants in West Bengal, where production was carried out by employing laborers, and in East Bengal the peasants cultivated on small plots of land. According to him, the power of zamindars continued in these two parts of Bengal. Until 1930, there was no one in Bengal to stop them. However, it must be admitted that there were some well-to-do farmers in the rural areas of Bengal who had considerable influence.<sup>9</sup> He noted that “a class of rich peasants controlled the village market, arrears and business relations. The zamindars lose power to them.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, it appears from Chitta Panda's statement that there was more change in agriculture in Bengal than in the post-permanent settlement period. And this

change had a huge impact on the farmers. As a result, for a long time the peasants did not have control over the land, nor did they have any power and dignity. In order to achieve this status, the peasant society of Bengal jumped into one rebellion after another, which later strengthened the hand of the mass movement in India.

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