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A Comparative Analysis of Colonial Land Revenue Systems in India: Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari Settlement and Mahalwari Settlement

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Abstract:

Colonial land revenue policies formed a central pillar of British administration in India, fundamentally reshaping agrarian structures, property relations, and rural society. Revenue collection was not merely a fiscal exercise but a political strategy that enabled the colonial state to consolidate authority and regulate agricultural production. (Bandopadhyay, 2004). Through systems such as the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari Settlement, and Mahalwari Settlement, the British introduced new frameworks of land rights and taxation that differed regionally yet shared the common objective of securing stable and predictable income for the state. (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). The Permanent Settlement institutionalized a class of intermediaries by recognizing zamindars as proprietors responsible for fixed revenue payments. While this arrangement offered administrative certainty, it significantly altered rural power relations and weakened customary tenures, often intensifying peasant dependence and indebtedness. (Guha, 1982). In contrast, the Ryotwari system sought to eliminate intermediaries by establishing direct settlements with cultivators. Despite its theoretical emphasis on peasant proprietorship, high revenue assessments and periodic revisions imposed heavy burdens on cultivators, contributing to economic insecurity. (Stokes, 1978). The Mahalwari system, designed around collective responsibility at the village or estate level, attempted to incorporate traditional institutions but frequently generated internal disparities and administrative complexities. (Ludden, 1999). This study comparatively examines these revenue systems to highlight their structural logic and socio-economic consequences. Although differing in design and implementation, all three systems reflected the colonial priority of revenue maximization rather than agrarian welfare. Their long-term effects included shifts in land ownership patterns, increased commercialization, and heightened vulnerability of rural populations. (Chandra, 2009). By situating land revenue policies within the broader framework of colonial governance, this paper underscores how fiscal objectives influenced legal reforms, social hierarchies, and rural transformations in colonial India. (Bandopadhyay, 2004).

Keywords: Colonial land policy, Revenue settlements, Agrarian structure, Peasant economy, Rural social change

Introduction:

Land revenue policy occupied a foundational position in the political economy of British India, shaping not only fiscal administration but also the broader transformation of agrarian relations. For the

colonial state, revenue derived from land represented the most reliable and substantial source of income, financing both governance and military expansion. Consequently, the reorganization of land rights and taxation became a central concern of British rule. (Bandopadhyay, 2004). Unlike pre-colonial arrangements, where revenue demands were embedded within customary obligations and negotiated practices, colonial policies sought to codify ownership, standardize assessments, and ensure predictable returns to the state. (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). The introduction of the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari Settlement, and Mahalwari Settlement reflected differing administrative experiments aimed at stabilizing revenue collection across diverse regional contexts. These systems were not simply technical reforms but represented deeper ideological assumptions regarding property, productivity, and governance. British administrators, influenced by contemporary European notions of private property and market rationality, attempted to restructure agrarian society through legally defined proprietary rights. (Stokes, 1978). Such interventions fundamentally altered older socio-economic relationships, replacing flexible and layered claims over land with rigid categories of ownership and liability. (Ludden, 1999). The consequences of these policies extended far beyond revenue extraction. By redefining the relationship between cultivators, intermediaries, and the state, colonial land settlements reshaped rural hierarchies and patterns of economic security. Scholars have shown that fixed revenue demands and monetized obligations often intensified peasant indebtedness and increased vulnerability to market fluctuations. (Guha, 1982). At the same time, the recognition or creation of proprietary elites contributed to new forms of social stratification and authority within rural society. (Chandra, 2009). These outcomes underscore that revenue systems functioned as instruments of governance as much as mechanisms of taxation. A comparative examination of the Permanent, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari systems allows for a more nuanced understanding of colonial agrarian policy. While differing in institutional design ranging from intermediary-based settlements to direct peasant agreements and collective village responsibility each system reflected the overarching colonial priority of fiscal stability and administrative control. (Bandopadhyay, 2004). Their structural variations therefore provide a critical lens through which to analyze the intersection of economic objectives, legal transformations, and social change in colonial India. (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006)

Historical Background:

Land revenue has historically been a fundamental source of state income in the Indian subcontinent, long preceding the advent of colonial rule. Pre-colonial regimes, particularly under the Mughals, developed elaborate mechanisms for assessing and collecting agrarian surplus. The Mughal system, associated with Todar Mal's reforms, was based on measurement, classification of soils and estimation of average produce, reflecting an attempt to balance state demand with agricultural capacity. (Habib, 1963). Revenue obligations were typically flexible and mediated through local officials, while customary rights and collective village structures continued to regulate agrarian relations. Thus, land

revenue functioned within a socio-political framework that recognized both state authority and local practices. The advent of the East India Company marked a decisive rupture in this older arrangement. Following the Company's territorial expansion after the Battle of Plassey, revenue collection became the primary concern of colonial governance. Unlike earlier regimes, the Company viewed land revenue not simply as a share of agricultural produce but as a predictable and monetized fiscal resource essential for supporting its military and administrative apparatus. (Bandopadhyay, 2004). The need for financial stability, coupled with limited understanding of indigenous agrarian institutions, led British administrators to experiment with new systems of assessment and property relations. Early colonial policies were characterized by uncertainty and frequent revisions. The Company initially relied on existing intermediaries but soon sought more standardized methods that could ensure regular income. This search for administrative efficiency gave rise to distinct revenue arrangements such as the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari Settlement and Mahalwari Settlement. These policies attempted to redefine land rights, fix revenue demands and integrate rural society into a colonial legal-economic framework. (Stokes, 1978). However, the imposition of rigid revenue obligations often disregarded climatic variability, customary tenures and subsistence patterns that had previously shaped agrarian life. Over time, land revenue policy became a crucial instrument of colonial control. By codifying ownership and linking taxation directly to land, the colonial state transformed agrarian relations and altered rural hierarchies. Scholars argue that this transformation reflected broader imperial priorities, where revenue maximization and administrative convenience outweighed concerns for agrarian stability. (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

Comparative Analysis of Revenue Systems:

The land revenue systems introduced by the British in India were central to the functioning of colonial administration and reflected the state's overriding concern with fiscal stability. Revenue collection was not merely an economic necessity but a mechanism through which colonial authority was institutionalized. The Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari Settlement and Mahalwari Settlement represented distinct administrative strategies designed to regulate land, assess productivity, and ensure a steady flow of income to the colonial state. (Bandopadhyay, 2004). Despite regional variations, these systems collectively signaled a decisive shift from pre-colonial agrarian arrangements toward legally defined and monetized property relations. The Permanent Settlement created a framework in which zamindars were recognized as proprietors responsible for fixed revenue payments. This arrangement, while ensuring predictability for the colonial administration, transferred significant power to intermediaries and reduced direct state involvement in rural society. Scholars have argued that the policy institutionalized landlord dominance and weakened customary rights of cultivators, contributing to agrarian stagnation. (Guha, 1982). In contrast, the Ryotwari system sought to bypass intermediaries by establishing a direct fiscal relationship between the state and individual cultivators. Although this

system theoretically acknowledged peasant proprietorship, high revenue demands and frequent reassessments placed cultivators under severe economic pressure. (Stokes, 1978). The Mahalwari system attempted to combine elements of both approaches by assigning collective responsibility for revenue payment to village communities or estates. While it appeared to preserve traditional village institutions, its practical implementation often intensified internal inequalities and administrative complications (Ludden, 1999). Across all three settlements, revenue assessments frequently disregarded local agricultural uncertainties, exposing rural populations to debt, land alienation, and insecurity. (Chandra, 2009). From a comparative perspective, these revenue systems demonstrate that colonial land policies were primarily shaped by the imperatives of economic extraction rather than sustainable rural development. Their structural differences did not significantly alter the broader outcome of increased peasant vulnerability and social stratification. The transformation of land into a taxable commodity and the reorganization of agrarian relations reveal the extent to which fiscal objectives guided colonial governance. ((Metcalf, 1995).

Administrative Challenges and Regional Variations:

The administration of land revenue systems in colonial India faced numerous practical difficulties that limited their effectiveness and intensified rural hardship. British officials relied heavily on surveys, record-keeping, and periodic assessments to determine revenue demands. However, inadequate knowledge of local conditions, climatic variations and agricultural practices often resulted in inaccurate evaluations. These administrative weaknesses led to unrealistic revenue targets that ignored fluctuations in crop yield and market conditions, placing cultivators under constant financial pressure. Furthermore, corruption and inefficiency within local revenue offices undermined trust between rural communities and colonial authorities. (Bandopadhyay, 2004; Metcalf, 1995). Regional diversity played a crucial role in shaping the functioning and outcomes of different revenue settlements. The Permanent Settlement was largely confined to eastern India, where zamindari traditions were more prominent. In contrast, the Ryotwari system developed in southern and western regions, where individual cultivation was widespread. The Mahalwari system emerged in north and central India, reflecting the importance of village-based landholding patterns. Despite these regional adaptations, colonial administrators frequently imposed standardized policies that failed to accommodate local social structures and ecological conditions, resulting in uneven development and persistent agrarian distress. (Stokes, 1978; Ludden, 1999) The interaction between colonial officials and indigenous elites further influenced the implementation of revenue policies. Zamindars, village headmen and moneylenders often acted as intermediaries between the state and cultivators, shaping revenue collection in their own interests. These groups exploited administrative loopholes to consolidate economic power, while peasants remained vulnerable to coercion and dispossession. Over time, the gap between official policy objectives and ground-level realities widened, exposing the

limitations of colonial governance. The persistence of administrative rigidity and regional imbalance ultimately weakened rural institutions and reinforced patterns of inequality across colonial India. (Guha, 1982; Chandra, 2009)

Socio-Economic Consequences:

The implementation of land revenue systems in colonial India had far-reaching social and economic consequences that extended beyond revenue collection. These systems reshaped rural hierarchies, altered patterns of land ownership and intensified inequalities within agrarian society. Although the Permanent, Ryotwari and Mahalwari settlements differed in structure, their impact on cultivators revealed common patterns of distress and instability. Colonial revenue policies prioritised fiscal extraction, often ignoring local agrarian conditions and customary practices, thereby weakening the foundations of rural society. (Bandopadhyay, 2004; Chandra, 2009). Under the Permanent Settlement, the elevation of zamindars as landowners led to the emergence of a powerful landed elite. This class exercised extensive control over tenants and cultivators, frequently increasing rents to meet fixed revenue obligations imposed by the colonial state. The lack of effective regulation allowed zamindars to exploit peasants, leading to impoverishment and stagnation in agricultural productivity. Similar pressures were observed under the Ryotwari system, where cultivators faced high revenue assessments and periodic revisions, often resulting in debt, land alienation, and dependence on moneylenders. (Guha, 1982; Stokes, 1978). The Mahalwari system affected rural society by imposing collective responsibility for revenue payment on village communities. While it appeared to preserve traditional village institutions, frequent reassessments and rising revenue demands disrupted communal cohesion. Wealthier landholders often transferred the burden onto poorer cultivators, deepening internal inequalities. Across all three systems, land increasingly became a marketable commodity, weakening customary rights and social support mechanisms. These developments contributed to recurring agrarian crises and rural unrest, leaving a lasting imprint on India's agrarian structure. (Ludden, 1999; Metcalf, 1995)

Peasant Resistance and Responses:

Colonial land revenue systems not only transformed agrarian structures but also generated widespread resistance among peasants and rural communities. Excessive revenue demands, insecure land rights, and harsh collection methods created conditions of persistent hardship. In many regions, cultivators responded through petitions, court cases and appeals to colonial officials. These forms of legal resistance reflected peasants' attempts to negotiate within the colonial system and protect their livelihoods. However, limited access to legal resources and administrative bias often restricted the effectiveness of such measures. (Bandopadhyay, 2004; Sarkar, 1989). When legal and administrative channels failed, rural discontent frequently took the form of collective protest and rebellion. Peasant movements emerged in response to eviction, rent increases and indebtedness under different revenue

systems. In Permanent Settlement areas, tenant uprisings challenged zamindari authority, while in Ryotwari regions, cultivators resisted excessive assessments and land confiscation. Similarly, in Mahalwari areas, village communities organized against collective revenue burdens. These movements were not spontaneous outbursts but reflected growing political awareness and social organization among rural populations. (Stokes, 1978; Guha, 1982). Colonial authorities viewed peasant resistance as a threat to political stability and responded through repression, legal reforms, and administrative adjustments. While some concessions were introduced, such as tenancy laws and limited revenue relief, these measures rarely addressed the structural causes of agrarian distress. Instead, they aimed to restore order and secure continued revenue flow. Over time, peasant struggles contributed to the emergence of rural leadership and influenced nationalist politics. The experience of resisting colonial revenue policies helped integrate agrarian issues into the broader movement for independence, highlighting the central role of peasants in India's anti-colonial struggle. (Chandra, 2009; Metcalf, 1995). The comparative analysis of the Permanent, Ryotwari and Mahalwari settlements reveals that colonial land revenue policies were primarily designed to ensure fiscal stability rather than foster rural development. Although these systems varied in structure and regional application, they were unified by a common objective of maximizing state income, reflecting the broader priorities of colonial governance (Bandopadhyay, 2004). This emphasis on revenue extraction strongly influenced both their implementation and their long-term socio-economic consequences, frequently disadvantaging cultivators and altering traditional village institutions (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). The Permanent Settlement created a class of zamindars who functioned as intermediaries between the colonial state and the peasantry. While this arrangement guaranteed predictable revenue flows, it weakened the position of cultivators and encouraged practices of rent extraction. The limited regulatory oversight allowed zamindars to prioritize private gain, often neglecting agricultural investment or improvement (Guha, 1982). In contrast, the Ryotwari system attempted to bypass intermediaries by showing direct settlements with cultivators. Despite its theoretical recognition of peasant proprietorship, high revenue demands, and periodic reassessments subjected cultivators to persistent economic uncertainty (Stokes, 1978). Similarly, the Mahalwari system, which imposed collective responsibility on village communities, aimed to retain elements of traditional rural organization but frequently generated financial strain and internal disparities (Ludden, 1999). Regional diversity significantly shaped the operation of these settlements. Differences in environmental conditions, cropping patterns and local social structures influenced both revenue productivity and agrarian stability. However, colonial administrators often relied on standardized assessment practices that inadequately reflected local variations, contributing to uneven outcomes and periodic agrarian distress (Chandra, 2009). Such administrative rigidity highlights the tension between centralized fiscal objectives and the complex realities of rural economies (Bandopadhyay, 2004). The analysis also underscores the connection

between revenue policies and social inequality. Intermediaries, moneylenders, and dominant rural groups frequently derived advantages from colonial arrangements, while small cultivators experienced growing indebtedness and vulnerability (Guha, 1982). These unequal effects fostered resentment and stimulated various forms of resistance, ranging from petitions to organized peasant movements, reflecting changing political consciousness in rural society (Stokes, 1978). Overall, the evidence suggests that colonial land revenue systems ran primarily as mechanisms of economic extraction and administrative control. Rather than strengthening agrarian foundations, these policies often intensified insecurity and dependency, leaving enduring structural consequences that continued to shape postcolonial rural challenges (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006; Chandra, 2009).

Conclusion:

The examination of colonial land revenue systems reveals that fiscal priorities were deeply intertwined with the restructuring of agrarian relations in British India. Although the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari Settlement, and Mahalwari Settlement differed in administrative design, they collectively reflected the colonial state's overriding concern with securing stable and predictable revenue. Land was transformed into a measurable and taxable resource, while complex customary arrangements were replaced by codified notions of ownership and liability (Bandopadhyay, 2004). This shift marked a significant departure from earlier practices, embedding revenue extraction within a legalistic and centralized framework of governance (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). The comparative analysis demonstrates that these systems, despite their regional variations, produced broadly similar socio-economic consequences. The Permanent Settlement strengthened intermediary elites but frequently marginalized cultivators, generating patterns of landlord dominance and peasant insecurity (Guha, 1982). The Ryotwari system, while establishing a direct relationship between the state and cultivators, imposed heavy revenue burdens that exposed peasants to debt and market vulnerability (Stokes, 1978). The Mahalwari system, designed around collective responsibility, often intensified internal inequalities within village communities and complicated traditional authority structures (Ludden, 1999). These outcomes underscore that structural differences did not fundamentally alter the extractive orientation of colonial policy. More broadly, colonial land revenue arrangements contributed to long-term transformations in rural society. The commercialization of agriculture, the rise of new landed interests, and the erosion of customary safeguards reshaped patterns of production and social hierarchy (Chandra, 2009). By prioritizing revenue maximization over agrarian stability, colonial policies frequently exacerbated economic uncertainty and social tensions. The legacy of these interventions persisted beyond the colonial period, influencing postcolonial debates on land rights, rural inequality, and state intervention. Ultimately, the study of these revenue systems highlights the centrality of land policy in colonial governance. Revenue administration functioned not merely as an economic mechanism but as a means of consolidating political authority and reorganizing social

relations. A comparative perspective therefore allows for a deeper understanding of how colonial rule reshaped India's agrarian landscape, demonstrating that revenue systems were integral to both state formation and rural transformation (Bandopadhyay, 2004; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006).

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