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Ryotwari Settlement

Lord Cornwallis expected that his Permanent Settlement, or the zarnindari ystern, would be extended to other part of India as well. When Lord Wellesley came to India, he and Henry Dundas of the Board of Control equally shared a faith in the Bengal system, and in 1798 Wellesley gave orders for its extension to Madras Presidency. Here the problem was to fmd a sizeable zarnindar class as in Bengal; but still between 1801 and 1807 the Madras authority introduced it in large areas under its control. The local poligars were recognised as zarnindars, and in other areas, where such people could not befound, villages were aggregated into estates and were sold in auction to the highest bidders. But before this could go on very far, in British official circles there was growing disillusionment with the Permanent Settlement, which provided for no means to raise the income of the government, while the increased income from land was being garnered by the zamindars. This distrust for the large landlords was also partly the result of Scottish Enlightenment, which insisted on the primacy of agriculture and celebrated the importance of the yeoman farmer within the agricultural societies. Such ideas obviously influenced Scottish officials like Thomas Munro and Mountstuart Elphinstone, who took the initiative to change the Company's revenue adrninistrarion.P This was also the time when Utilitarian ideas had begun to influence policy planning in India, and among them David Ricardo's theory of rent seemed to be hinting at a revision of the existing system.s3 Rent was the surplus from land, i.e., its income

minus the cost of production and labour, and the state had a legitimate claim to a share of this surplus at the expense of the unproductiveintermediaries, whose only claim was by virtue of their ownership right. The theory provided, therefore, an argument to eliminate the zamindars and appropriate a larger share of the increasing income from the new acquisitions of land. But theories alone hardly guided policies in India." A more powerful reason for a new settlement was the perennial financial crisis of the Madras Presidency, worsened by the rising expenses of war. This was the genesis of the Ryotwari Settlement in Madras Presidency.

The Ryotwari experiment was started by Alexander Reed in Baramahal in 1792 and was continued by Thomas Munro from 1801 when he was asked to take charge of the revenue administration of the Ceded Districts. Instead of zamindars they began to collect revenue directly from the village , fixing the amount each village had to pay. After this they proceeded to assess each cultivator or ryot separately and thus evolved the Ryotwari System. It created individual proprietary right in land, but it was vested in the peasants, rather than in the zamindars, for Munro preferred it to be "in the hands offorty to fifty thousand small proprietors, than four or five hundred great one ".55 But Munro's sy tern also made a significant distinction between public and private ownership. In David Ludden's words: "it defined the state itself as the supreme landlord, and individual peasants landowners who obtained title by paying annual cash rents, or revenue assessments, to the government" . 56 This was, as it evolved eventually, a field assessment system, as rent payable on each field was ro be permanently asse sed through a general survey of all landsAnd then annual agreements were to be made between the government and the cultivator, who had the choice of accepting or rejecting the agreement. If he agreed, he would get a parta, which would become a title to private property and if no cultivator was found, the land might lie fallow. The system, therefore, in order to be attractive and equitable, required a detailed land survey: the quality of soil, the area of the field and the average produce of every piece of land had

to be assessed and on the basis of that the amount of revenue was to be fixed. But this was the theory; in practice the estimates were often guesswork and the revenue demanded was often so high that they could only be collected with great difficulty or could not be collected at all. And the peasants were to be coerced to agree to such unjust settlements. So the Ryorwari system was almost abandoned soon after Munro's departure for London in 1807.

But around 1820 the situation began to change as Thomas Munro returned to India as the governor of Madras. He argued that Ryotwari was the ancient Indian land-tenure system and therefore best suited to Indian conditions. 57 This reference to the past was however in the interest of the empire. He believed that the British empire needed a unified concept of sovereignty and the R yotwari system could provide a foundation for that. The security and administration of the empire needed, as his experience in the Ceded Districts revealed, the elimination of the overmighty poligars and collection of revenue directly from individual farmers under the supervision of British officers. He therefore justified his position by arguing that historically land in India was owned by the state, which collected revenue from individual peasants through a hierarchy of officials paid through grant of inam land. The power of this landlord-state rested on military strength and when that declined, the poligars appropriated land and thereby usurped sovereignty. This process of alienation needed to be reversed now.ss In arguing this, he briskly set aside thecontrary observations by men like Francis Ellis who argued that property right was traditionalJy conferred on the community or tribes and that family had a variety of rights to the community assets. Munro at the same time insisted that this system would reduce the revenue burden for farmers, while it would yield larger amount of land revenue for the state, as no intermediaries would be having a share of the surplus." And London was happy too as this system would place authority and power directly in British hands in a way which the Cornwallis system would never hope to achieve. 60 The Madras government was chronically short of funds and so it decided

to introduce the Ryotwari Settlement in most parts of the presidency; bur gradually it rook quite different forms than the one which
Munro had visualised. It raised the revenue income of the government, but put the cultivators in great distress. In many areas no surveys were carried out and the tax of a ryot was assessed on an arbitrary basis, based on village accounts. Known as the putcut settlement, the revenue to be paid by a ryot was fixed on his entire farm, not on each field, which might have varying irrigation facilities and therefore different levels of productivity. And where the survey was actually undertaken, it was often "ill-conceived and hastily executed", resulting in over-assessment. 61 Contrary to Munro's insistence that the cultivator be given freedom to take as much or as little land as he chose to, this "right of contraction or relinquishment" was effectively dropped by 1833.62 The cultivating peasants were, therefore, gradually impoverished, and increasingly indebted and could not invest for the extension of cultivation. Except for Coimbatore, there was p ractically no land market in Mad ras, as buying land would mean paying extortionate land revenue.
The Ryorwari system did not also eliminate village elites as intermediaries between the government and the peasantry. As privileged rents and special rights of the mirasidars were recognised and caste privileges of the Brahmans respected, the existing village power structure was hardly altered, and indeed even more strengthened by the new system. 63 This whole process was actually supported by a colonial knowledge, collaboratively produced by officials and Tamil writers, that the mirasidars of good agricultural castes, like the Vellalas, were the original colonists and good agriculturists. Such stereotypes made such traditional village elites as the mirasidars pivotal to the British ideal of a sedentary agricultural community. 64 The latter thereforecould gradually position themselves comfortably in the subordinate ranks of the revenue establishments, and some of them bought lucrative and large tracts of irrigated land after getting their official appointments. **65** These revenue officials after 1816 combined in themselves both revenue collection and police d uties in

the countryside. This enhancement of power inevitably resulted in coercion, bribery and corruption by the subordinate officials of the Collectorate, which were revealed in abundant and gory details in the Madras Torture Commission Report in 1855, indicating the need for effective reform. **66**

It was from this year that a scientific survey of land and a fresh assessment of revenue were undertaken, resulting in decline in the real b urden of tax. It was decided that the revenue rate would be half of the net value of the produce of the land and the settlementwould be made for thirty years. The reformed system was introduced in 1864, immediately leading to agricultural prosperity and extension of cultivation. This was interrupted by two famines in 1 865-66 and 1 876-7 8 ; yet, as Dharma Kumar asserts, "recovery was faster in the Presidency as a whole". She also argues that contrary to prevalent myths, "statistics . . . fail to support the view that land was increasingly passing into the hands of rich farmers and 'moneylenders". Inequality increased only in the prosperous and irrigated areas, such as the Godavari delta; elsewhere it declined. There is also no evidence, she affirms, that indebtedness was resulting in widespread dispossession. Debts varied in nature, while absentee landlordisrn, except in Tirunelveli, declined- everywhere else. However, where the tenants existed, there was hardly any protection for them in the entire presidency .67

The impact of the Ryotwari system on the agrarian society of Madras can be looked at in different ways. As a number of recent micro-studies have revealed, by redefining property rights, it actually strengthened the power of the village magnates where they did exist, and thus intensified social conflict. However, it is also true that this impact had wide regional variations, depending on the existing social structures and ecological conditions. David Ludden's study of the Tirunclveli district, 68 for example, shows how the locally powerful mirasidars manipulated the system to get privileged rents and convert their collective rights into individual property rights. The M adras government since 1820 showed absolutely no

interest in protecting the rights of the tenants, despite their active but futile resistance to mirasidari power. However, mirasidars in the wet zone , Ludden argues, did much better than their counterparts in the dry or mixed zones. Willem van Schendel's study of the Kaveri delta in Tanjavur (Tanjore) district also shows "the golden age" of the mirasidars, who entrenched their control over land and labour and thus "intensified the polarisation of local society". Their power eroded somewhat in the second half of the nineteenth century, because ofgreater social and economic differentiation within their community and the older families giving way to new commercial groups. But this by no means marked the end of mirasidari power in local society.69 Among other Tamil districts, the situation was largely similar in the wet taluks of Tiruchirapalli (frichinopoly), while in South Arcot and Chingleput such privileged landownership rights were being increasingly challenged by the actual cultivators. In other vast areas of Tamilnad, however, where there was abundance of cultivable land, the situation was dominated by a large number ofowner-cultivators and a small group of middle landowners. 70 In the Andhra districts of the Madras Presidency too the Ryotwari system promoted differentiation within the peasantry. By the beginning of the twentieth century, there was an affluent group of big landholders- whom A. Satyanarayana calls "peasant-bourgeoisie"-who controlled large farms and leased out surplus lands to landless tenants and sharecroppers. The intermediate strata also did well and lived under stable economic conditions. On the other hand, the poor peasants, who constituted the majority of the rural population, lived in squalid conditions, were exploited by rich ryots, creditors and lessors, were forced to hire themselves despite wretched conditions and remained tied to small plots of land. 71

The Ryorwari system in the Bombay Presidency had its beginning in Gujarat after its annexation in 1 803, and then when the peshwa's territories were conquered in 1 81 8, it was extended to those areas as well under the supervision of Munro's disciple, MountstuartElphinstone. Initially, in these areas the British had been collecting

revenue through the desmukh and the village headmen or the patil. But this did not yield as much revenue as they hoped for, and hence from 1 81 3-1 4 they began collecting directly from the peasants. The abuses that characterised the Madras system soon appeared in Bombay too, as the revenue rates that were fixed turned out to be extraordinarily high. With frequent crop failures and sliding prices, peasants either had to mortgage their lands to moneylenders or abandon cultivation and migrate to neighbouring princely states where rates were lower. A land survey was therefore undertaken by an officer called R.K. Pringle, who classified the land and fixed the revenue at 55 per cent of the net value of the produce. The scheme, first introduced in the Indapur taluk in 1 830, was soon found to be faulty and abandoned. It was replaced in 1 83 5 by a reformed 'Bombay Survey System' devised by two officers G. Wingate and H. E. Goldsmid. It was a practical settlement aiming at lowering the demand to a reasonable limit where it could beregularly paid. The actual assessment of each field depended on what it paid in the immediate past, expected price rise, the nature of soil and location. This new assessment began to be made in 1 836 on the basis of a thirty years settlement and covered most of Deccan by 184 7.

The impact of the Ryotwari Settlement on the agrarian society of western India is the subject of a major historical controversy, as it gave rise to a rural uprising in Bombay Deccan i n 1 87 5. Historians like Neil Charlesworth (1985) do not think that the Wingate senlements actually introduced between 1840 and 1870 caused anydramatic change in western India. I t reduced the 'Village patil to the status of an ordinary peasant and a paid employee of the government. But the erosion of his power had started in pre-British days, and British rule "was merely completing a process already in full morion." And the settlements did not universally displace all village elites either; in Gujarat the superior rights of the bhagdars, naru/adars and the Ahmedabad taluqdars were respected, and as a result, i n these regions "greater political and social stability was guaranteed." It was only in central Deccan that a power vacuum was created,

which offered opportunities for a greater active role for the Marwari and Gujarati banias. And for the peasants, the new settlements "were making revenue assessment less burdensome and inequitable". If they became massively indebted by the middle of the nineteenth century, such indebtedness was indeed "Jong-standing", not because of the land revenue demands, and did not in itself result in any large-scale alienation of land, as the Marwari creditors had little attraction for the cultivator's land. " H. Fukazawa also endorses thisinterpretation and asserts that: "There is no evidence that land was increasingly being bought up by traders and moneylenders" . " Ian Catanach thinks that dispossession and land transfer from agriculturists to non-agriculturists did occur in Deccan in mid-nineteenth century, but this did not necessarily cause the Deccan riots. 74 But on the other hand, Ravinder Kumar and Sumit Guha have argued that a significant social upheaval was being caused by Ryotwari Settlement which undermined the authority of the vilJage headmen and thus caused a status revolution in the Maharashtra villages, and that discontent ultimately propelled into the Deccan riots . " We will discuss this controversy **i n** greater detail in chapter 4.2, when we will be looking at the Deccan riots of 1 875. What perhaps can be observed here is that the social effects of the Ryotwari system, both in Madras and in Bombay, were perhaps less dramatic than those of the Permanent Settlement. But it is difficult to argue a case for "continuity", as the older forms that continued were now "differentially ensrrucrured by imperialism";"