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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

COLONIALISM AND IMPACT ON AGRICULTURE

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Abstract:

Traditionally India is an agricultural nation and occupation of majority of its inhabitants has been agriculture and related activities. Even primary source of state's income was land revenue in pre-colonial India. During Mughal India administrative machinery of state i.e. Mansabdari system, was well synchronized and coordinated with the Jagirdari system, wherein land was distributed among the nobility in lieu of their salary for the military and administrative duties they were supposed to perform in service of the state.

KEYWORDS:

Agriculture , Colonialism , synchronized and coordinated , pre-colonial economy .

INTRODUCTION

They were expected to collect the revenue from their respected jagirs and send the same to the central treasury after deducting the sum incurred as expenditure for their maintenance but at the same time they were expected to invest the reasonable amount for the development of agriculture so that state's income could increase besides serving the well being of the cultivators. But with the arrival of English and after the conquest of Bengal and other territories subsequently the agricultural economy of India was completely transformed for the benefit of Metropolis (Britain). New Land Revenue Settlements were devised and agriculture was commercialized which torn asunder the social and economic fabric of the India. Its industries were smothered and agriculture was further choked with no equitable return and compensation. Rural India became the site of vulgar display of might by colonial masters on subject population.

PRE-COLONIAL AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

The mainstay of the pre-colonial economy was the land revenue collected from the Village as a unit. This surplus produce of the cultivators i.e. revenue, was collected and redistributed among the ruling classes. Upon the expenditure of this vast surplus by the ruling class was based the urban economy of pre-colonial India, with its large craft production, large volume of long-distance trade and a considerable development of commercial capital (Habib 1975: 24). Part of this revenue went to hereditary collectors of revenue called Zamindars, whose share generally in north India was one-tenth of the land revenue. Zaminidari was a hereditary right of the family whose sale was a common phenomenon. In the hierarchically stratified village society below the zamindars were the affluent sections of peasantry variously designated as khud-kashta or jotedars, below them were the small landholders and tenant cultivators, who cultivated others land on rent and finally at the bottom of this ladder was the landless labourers or village proletariat belonging to menial and untouchable castes. Upper section of the peasants or village head-man called muqaddams, etc imposed various rates of taxes on peasantry to make up the revenue from the village as well as in order to contribute to village expenses and for customary payment to village artisans and servants, which formed the basis of village community (Habib 1975: 25).

Transformation of the Land System and Revenue Collection under Colonial Rule

In Previous regime King's share was a proportion of the year's produce, fluctuating with the year's production, and surrendered as tribute or tax by the village community to the ruler. This during colonial regime was replaced by the fixed money payments, assessed on land, regularly due in cash irrespective of the year's production, in good or bad harvests (Dutt 1992: 228). Also the land revenue under the preceding Indian regimes was fixed as a share of the crop, and varied according to the crop cultivated. The pressure on the cultivators was elastic under the pre-colonial regimes, revenue corresponded with each season's yield and as a consequence the peasant was left with enough to carry on and debt was kept in bounds. The increasing indebtedness under the British, showed the mistake of fixity of assessment and of the assumption that an average of good and bad years was a correct method of arriving at an assessment. Apart from this many initial colonial settlements were fixed so high that it could not be sustained for long and rather forced the peasants on many occasions to migrate to other areas rather than accepting those high demands (Mukherjee 2005: 2-3).

The land revenue under the British, whether directly imposed on the ryots or assessed on the zamindars, was a tax on land. The assessment was on the basis of what and how much it ought to produce, not on what crop it actually raised (Habib 1975: 31). This payment was commonly spoken of by the early official administrators (British), and in the early official documents, as rent, thus revealing that the peasantry had become in fact tenants, whether directly of the state or of the state-appointed landlord. Moreover the introduction of the English landlord system, of individual landholding, of mortgage and sale of lands, and of a whole apparatus of English bourgeois legal conceptions alien to Indian economy and administered by an alien bureaucracy which combined in itself, legislative, executive and judicial functions, completed the process of transformation of land system in India (Dutt 1992: 228). These changes could be witnessed in the process of land settlements established by British after assuming the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

New Land Settlements during Colonial Period

Since the grant of Diwani for Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765, the major concern of the English administration in India was to collect as much revenue as possible. Therefore various land revenue experiments were introduced in hurry to maximize collection. In 1772, Warren Hastings, newly appointed governor of Bengal, introduced a "farming system", wherein revenue collecting right was farmed out to the highest bidders. Regarding the periodicity of the settlements, a number of experiments were made, but the farming system ultimately failed to improve the situation as the framers tried to extract as much as possible without the concern for the production process. All these random experiments were led to the ruination of the agriculture as well as of cultivators (Guha 1981: 16-17). In 1784, Lord Cornwallis was therefore sent to India with a specific mandate to set in order the revenue administration.

Permanent Settlement

Permanent Settlement was the outcome of the ideological thinking of Physiocratic School that assigned primacy to agriculture in the economy. Among its supporters were Alexander Dow, Philip Francis and Thomas Law, etc. The advocates of Permanent Settlement claimed that they had a policy which was based on 'the principle of property'. Dow wanted private property to be made secure because this according to him would strengthen the pillars of the society. Francis regarded the property as the stimulus to the agriculture. Cornwallis visualized it as the spring of all economic improvement. For law, it was important as the effective method of creating a land-market. According to historian Ranajit Guha, what united these different views together was not only the common aversion to the existing policies but also the veneration of private property. They all believed that a sound administration must have the security of landownership as its basis, and nothing but Permanent Settlement could ensure this. (Guha 1981: 17-18).

Permanent Settlement brought two new innovations in the Indian land system, one was the creation of landlordism and another was the introduction of private property rights. Pre-requisite to the settlement was the answer to the two questions i.e. i) with whom the settlement to be made, ii) state's share in the produce of the land. To find solution to the above questions Cornwallis in 1793 brought into being the Permanent Settlement. Regarding the first question, Cornwallis preferred selecting Zamindar. Guha asserts that the distance between the two countries and the inadvisability of colonization made it necessary that the property should be entrusted to the care of a class of native entrepreneurs who had solid interest in the land and were politically reliable. This alone could establish 'the permanence of dominion'(Guha 1981: 17). According to S. Bandyopadhyay, being a member of the landed aristocracy of Britain and imbued with the idea of improving lanlordism, Cornwallis's natural preference was for the zamindars. They were expected to invest for the improvement of agriculture if their property rights were secured.

There were also other practical reasons: it was easier to collect revenue from a small number of zamindars than from the innumerable peasants, which would require large administrative machinery; and finally, it would ensure the loyalty of a powerful class of the local population. Therefore zamindar became the proprietor of his zamindari and now he could sell, mortgage and transfer it and it could now be inherited by his hiers. This was the creation of private property in land (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 84). In spite of Permanent Settlement being favourable to zamindar, it too was at the mercy of British administration. The zamindar had to pay a fixed amount of revenue by a particular date (Sunset law), failure to pay the same before the sunset on due date could lead to the sale of zamindari through auction. As demand was too high, the result was the frequent sale of zamindaris (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 85). Many of the old traditional zamindar families who carried on the old methods of showing some consideration and relaxation for the peasants in times of difficulty, broke down under the burden and were at once ruthlessly sold out, their estates being put to the auction (Dutt 1975: 230). According to Irfan Habib pressure on zamindars especially outside permanently settled area was too much that considering them as allies of British "…had little significance in the actual world of revenue collection. There condition was actually worse in Mahalwari areas…" (Habib 1975: 36)

To the second question of state's share, the bulk of the surplus went to the company. Since the land revenue was going to be fixed in perpetuity, therefore it was decided to be fixed at a high level. Fixing of state share was also thought to reduce corruption as officials could not alter the assessment at will. The landlords would invest money in improving the land, as with the state demand being fixed the whole of the benefit from increased production and enhanced income would accrue to them (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 83). It all became meaningless as state demand was fixed at 89% of the rental, leaving 11% with the zamindars as their share for their trouble and responsibility. This high level of demand not only ruined the zamindars, whose zamindaris were acutioned off but also the peasantry, who ultimately had to bear this burden and were further reduced to penury.

Ryotwari Settlement

In the period after the Permanent Settlement an alternative method was attempted in a number of other districts, beginning in Madras. The conception was put forward that the government should make a direct settlement with the cultivators, not permanent, but temporary or subject to periodical re-assessment, and thus avoid both the disadvantages of the Permanent Settlement, securing the entire spoils itself without needing to share them with intermediaries (Dutt 1992: 234). 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 Ceded Districts. 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. Rent was the surplus from the land and state had a legitimate claim to a share of this surplus at the expense of unproductive intermediaries (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 87). Ryotwari created individual property rights in land, which was vested in peasants than zamindars.

Munro implemented this system in Madras during 1820 and claimed that this system had historical roots in India and would able to reduce the burden of rents on peasantry besides increasing the state revenue as no intermediary would have shared in the revenue surplus. It raised the revenue income of the state but had put the cultivator under great strain as no survey was carried out as was claimed and tax was assessed in arbitrary fashion. And wherever survey was conducted it was done in haste leading to over-assessment. Thus the cultivator was gradually impoverished and indebted, hence could not invest in the agricultural activities. It also created differentiation among the peasantry, big-landholders leased out their surplus land but the poor cultivators were exploited by rich peasants, creditors and were forced to sell off their small plots of land. With frequent crop failure and sliding prices, peasants either had to mortgage their lands to moneylender or had to abandon their lands. The Ryotwari system did not only eliminate village intermediaries but privileged rents and special rights of the mirasidars were also recognized and caste privileges of the Brahamins were respected (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 86-92). The existing village structure therefore remained unchanged. When Ryotwari system was extended to Bombay Presidency under Elphinstone, it faced the same problems and paved the way for peasant revolts.

Mahalwari Settlement

In the North-Western Provinces the Mahalwari system was introduced under Regulation VII of 1822 land revenue settlements, were made with the representatives of each village community or mahal. R. M. Bird provided for the survey to make an assessment of the entire mahal based on the potential produce of the field. The total revenue thus fixed was then to be shared by the members of the co-sharing body. The state would appropriate 2/3 of the net income from the land and term of settlement was made for 30 years. The village magnate in this area called taluqdar equivalent of zamindar in northern India was initially incorporated but in the revised settlement was gradually eliminated by the Bird. Village Community with whom settlement was made also ruined by the high revenue demand, increasing debt burden, arrears of revenue and the resulting sale of their properties. Land in most of the cases was passed in to the hand of moneylenders and merchants (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 92-95).

Thus English created three different land arrangement conferring proprietary rights on zamindars in case of Permanent Settlement, on peasants in case of Ryotwari and village community in case of Mahalwari settlement. As per an estimate the 19 percent of the cultivable area was under zamindari settlement, 29 per cent under Mahalwari settlement and 52 percent under Ryotwari settlement (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 95). Almost similar figures had been presented by R. P Dutt in India Today (Dutt 1992: 235-236).

The common feature of all these settlement was over-assessment, arrears of payment, mounting debt and increasing land sales and dispossession. The fiscal pressure on revenue payers increased massively as per the calculation of Irfan Habib. According to him in permanently settled areas excluding Banaras, Ghazipur and Jaunpur, all acquisitions made after 1806-7, puts the total land-revenue demand at Rs. 2.10 crores in 1806-7, Rs 3.06 crores in 1819-20, and Rs 3.60 crores in 1829-30, that means an increase of more than 70% in 23 years. In Bombay, the land revenue demand after the annexation in 1818 was reached to maximum levels. In 1837-38 the land revenue collection in Bombay Presidency stood at Pound 1.86 million, a figure that had only once before been exceeded in 1826-27. In the Madras Presidency, where Ryotwari settlement was made, the total land revenue collection amounted to Pound 3.79 million in 1819-20 and to Pound 3.43 million in 1837-38. The general picture, then, was that from about 1820 to 1850, the total revenue collections increased substantially in all the three major zones outside the permanently settled territories. Among these zones the highest increase undoubtedly happened in North-Western Provinces (Ceded and Conquered Provinces) (Habib 1975: 32-33).

Impact on the Peasantry

With reference to Permanent Settlement, Sumit Sarkar says that after 1850s British policies tried to bring into being enterprising raiyats on the model of English Yeoman farmers and provided them with the legal protection in 1859 and 1855 from arbitrary eviction but they resorted back to the old practice of shifting the burden to groups below them. And the direct producers were too oppressed to go for any improvement in agriculture. In Ryotwari areas tenants' trouble enhanced due to the fact that they were unprotected by the law. Below the landholding peasants were the mass of landless labourers, whose number swelled to 52.4 millions in 1901 (Sarkar 2008: 34). Even while referring to the later period of twentieth century with regard to colonial demands, Mridula Mukherjee points out that the incidence of land revenue at constant prices (1913-14) from 1906-7 to 1938-39 shows that there was no consistent trend of decline in the incidence of land revenue per acre in the twentieth century. And in the period 1929-39, the incidence of land revenue had stabilized at a substantially higher level compared to the earlier period (Mukherjee 2005: 5).

The Pauperisation of cultivators could be witnessed in the growth of the landless labourers to 1/3rd or even ½ of the agricultural population. In reality the condition of the large section of small peasants on uneconomic holding, of tenants was not far removed from that of the landless labourers as the distinction between the two was extremely shadowy one. In 1927, N. M. Joshi in All India Trade Union Congress, estimated 25millions to be the number of agricultural wage earner, and 50 millions more to be partly working wage earners on the land (Dutt 1992: 242). Habib asserts by quoting Crawfurd that ultimate poverty was reached could be witnessed in the diet of rural classes. As the British decided to elevate its revenue demand on individual it bypassed the Village community as revenue paying unit and hence the destruction of the Village community. As regards the agricultural labourers, so far as they depended on upper section of peasantry, naturally the burden passed on to them (Habib 1975: 35).

Commercialization of Agriculture

The old rural set up of India, undermined by the new land settlements between 1793 and 1850 received a death blow with the spread of commercial agriculture between 1850 and 1947. Commercial agriculture means production for sale than for consumption. Commercial agriculture grew due to various reasons, firstly, due to the recurring need of the peasant under the new land systems to find ways of getting money to meet the mounting demands upon them by the state and the landlords. Secondly, the rapid growth in the cultivation of cash crops was the fact that such a development was welcome to the British authorities in India. Thirdly, when Industrial Revolution happened in Britain, than British manufacturers clamoured for raw materials to fulfill their ever growing requirement, hence colonies were converted into agricultural backyard of metropolis. And finally, when railways were constructed it became possible for the inland areas of India to produce for the world market, consequently wheat sent out of the Punjab, cotton out of Bombay and jute out of Bengal (Daniel and Thorner 1974: 54-55).

Commercialization of Agriculture was construed as the sign of capitalist development of agriculture and was associated with prosperity. Cash crop like indigo, cotton, sugarcane, jute, etc were grown replacing food crops as the later one in terms of monetary return was not considered favourable. Usually in economies this transformation from food crop to cash crop cultivation is adopted once sufficiency of food grain and related products are secured but in case of India during colonial period this logic was conspicuous by its absence.

Moreover the impetus to grow cash crop must come from below among the cultivators, who in order to improve their income might like to venture into growing cash crops but again in case of India, cultivation of cash crops was forced from the above. In 1788, Company Government had advanced money to planters to cultivate Indigo but it could not become much successful as planters had no right to purchase land until 1829. This engendered the horrific tale of exploitation of peasantry as the later were forcibly advanced money to grow indigo in their lands and this ultimately culminated in the Indigo riots of 1859-60. In case of Western India, cotton was grown in response to the cotton boom owing to American Civil War in 1860s but soon this artificial demand collapsed paving way for agrarian riots of 1870s. Although, in case of Bengal peasants indulged themselves in cultivation of cotton voluntarily in the false hope of improving their earning but that assumption too turned fiction when jute economy crashed in 1930s (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 125-126).

For the better understanding of Commercialization of Agriculture the case studies of some commercial crops in the region of their growth is pertinent. The studies will manifest how Cane-growers in U.P and Bihar traditionally under the domination of landlord were kept under poverty despite the expansion of cash crops and in case of Bengal and Bihar how the production of cash crops i.e. jute (Bengal), cotton/wheat (Punjab) benefitted British capitalist interest more than the cultivators:

Sugarcane: Sugar is produced from the cane and when cane is harvested, the sucrose content begins to decline after just a few hours. This means that cane cannot be stockpiled and must be brought fresh from the field to the factory gate therefore requires the careful scheduling of harvest and delivery operation. In the region of eastern U.P and Bihar, where agrarian structure is dominated by landlords, in an effort to guarantee a steady supply of cane, the factories first relied on contracts with middlemen, who made the necessary arrangements with the cane growers. These middlemen were mostly zamindars or moneylenders who already had substantial claims on the crops grown by the villagers. The middlemen could use these claims to compel the villagers to harvest and deliver their cane to a certain factory at a certain time and to control the payments from the factories while taking a large cut for themselves. In this way, the factories were relieved of some of the problems of scheduling and coordinating deliveries and consequently, cane prices were held down, even in a period of rapid expansion of factory production, and a large portion of payments went into the pockets of middlemen (Attwood 1985: 63-64).

Jute: The jute production in Bengal was organized under dadan system. In dadan system cultivators were advanced money on the condition that they produce specified quantities of crops, the price of which was fixed beforehand. Here the jute interests succeeded in controlling very considerably, through a network reaching down to the village, both the quantity and the price of raw jute. The entire process of jute production from the raw jute stage to the final manufacturing and even export stages was organized through the collective monopoly of a few British-owned managing agency houses.

Cotton: The major commercial non-food crop in Punjab, was grown primarily in agriculturally more prosperous areas such as the canal colonies and parts of central Punjab where irrigation was assured and harvests less dependent on rainfall. Also the big cotton trading firms, most of which were based in Karachi, from where most of the Punjab cotton was exported , had their offices and commission agents in the major as well as minor cotton markets of the province, but the chain did not reach down to the peasant in the village. In fact, in Punjab the degree of manipulation of the price paid to the producer was much larger in the case of food-crops such as Wheat. The village moneylender-merchant gained an advantage both by buying wheat from deficit producers at harvest time, when prices tended to be low, and selling wheat to them for consumption requirements at off harvest prices (Mukherjee 2005: 67-69).

In reference to the impact of the commercialization of agricultural produce, according the Mridula Mukherjee, it was differential in nature. At one extreme, there were the subsistence and marginal peasants who were forced into the market by various pressures such as: land revenue payments, scarcity, famine or low prices, leading to indebtedness and interest payments which necessitated sale of produce; or land revenue demand necessitating sale of produce leading to deficit for consumption which resulted in indebtedness, interest payments and again sale of produce. Obviously those, whose holding were too small for subsistence would more often than not be at the receiving end of this commercialization. They would sell only under pressure of one kind or another, either revenue or water rate or debt or rent payment. Also they were often net buyers rather than sellers of food, high food prices were hardly to their advantage; in fact they often ended up buying back their food at higher off-season prices than those at which they had marketed their produce at harvest time. (Mukherjee 2005: 60-61).

According to Sumit Sarkar the British business houses were in virtual total control of the overseas trade, shipping and insurance of the country. So the bulk of the profits from the exports boom was appropriated by foreign firms and went out of the country as foreign leakages. A secondary but still substantial share went to Indian traders and mahajans, the middlemen who provided the necessary advance to the cultivators and thus established the control over production. Hence capitalist penetration helped to consolidate the already established structure of landlord and moneylender exploitation. Moreover the Indian peasants were made dependent on a very distant and unknown foreign market to bear the burden of wildly fluctuating prices leading to heavy indebtedness, famine and agrarian riots (Sarkar 2008: 31).

Famines

It is not easy to identify a direct co-relation between commercialization and famines, even though cash crops in some areas might have turned out food-grains from the land meant for food crops, with resultant impact on output (Charlesworth 1982: 25). In some districts the peasants shifted over completely to industrial crops and had to buy their foodstuffs from dealers. Villagers sent to market the cereal reserves traditionally kept for poor years. They became less prepared to meet poor harvest. Years of successive drought in the 1870s and 1890s led to great famines and agrarian unrest (Daniel and Thorner 1974: 55). Also it can be noted that production of food crops was far lagged behind the growth in population (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 126). George Blyn took 1893-96 as the base period, the decennial average of crop output for 1936-46 was 93 for food-crops, 185 for commercial crops, and 110 for agricultural production as a whole (Sarkar 2008: 36-37).

Moreover, severity of British assessments was notorious as was the inelasticity of demand: collections of revenue in full were insisted upon, irrespective of the seasons. In the scarcity year 1883-84, nearly all the revenue was collected despite the fact that over many hundreds of square miles, an estimated three-quarters of the total food supply of the people was said to have been annihilated in a crop failure which extended over the greater part of the provinces. Again in case of 1864-65, the inadequacy of the monsoon caused an almost total failure of the rice crop everywhere, which was the staple crop. The price of agricultural produce increased bringing distress among the poorer sections but still the rent-roll showed an increase of Rs.1 lakh over that of 1862-63 (Whitcombe 1972: 147-148).

Indebtedness of Peasants

The most important impact of British conquest of India was the disintegration of the self-sufficient village community and with this destroyed the stability and security of the peasantry. In the words of A. R. Desai, in pre-British India, the state exacted revenue from the village community as a whole and not from the village farmer separately. It was the village community which determined the share of its every member in the collective payment to the state. It was apportioned according to the realized product of each peasant family. This did not require peasant to borrow heavily in difficult times. But when the British came it refused to recognize the village community and made separate agreements with the agriculturists, they fixed the land revenue on the basis of the productive capacity of the soil as realized by the government officials and not on the actually realized product. This brought the peasantry in the strangling grip of the village Sahukar (Desai 1961: 88-89).

Desai further relates the process of peasant indebtedness with the process of De-industrialization. He contends that the ruination of the village handcraftsmen, artisans, and others, who in the absence of proportionate industrial development obstructed by the British Government to safeguard the British capitalist interest crowded the already declining agriculture. This has led to the increasingly minute fragmentation of land, the average peasant holding being only five acres. In his words "…this army of ruined artisans reinforcing the number of people already dependent on land, increased the poverty of the rural population, the prime cause of their huge indebtedness…" He further elucidates that the unity of agriculture and industry in the pre-British period wherein agriculturists exchanged his products with village artisans i.e. cloths with weavers, agricultural implements with blacksmith, etc, was disrupted. Gradually agriculturists depended on machine-made goods which they could purchase only with money. Therefore, first due to exorbitant demand of revenue with its periodical increase and secondly owing to the destruction of village handicraft and resultant dependence on machine-made goods of his necessities, peasant went into the clutches of the Sahukar. (Desai 1961: 88-90)

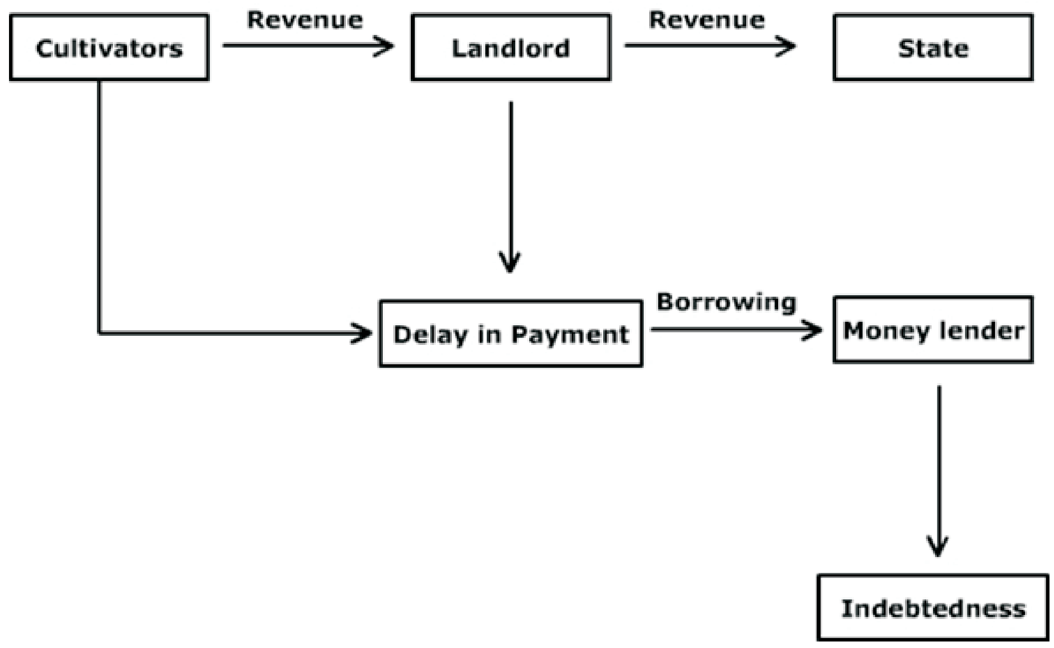
In pre-colonial times the local moneylender extended casual credit to meet occasional needs of the cultivators, but he occupied subordinate position in the economy of the village. The new forms of landholding, land revenue systems, legal procedures, and commercial agriculture of the nineteenth century opened a golden age for the moneylender (Daniel and Thorner 1974: 55). The working of the British revenue system created incentives to borrow but government supplied no alternative to provide credit except the takavi loans, which were insufficient and irregular. Therefore private creditors were free to exploit the peasantry and the provision of loans became the most profitable investment of local capital. A peasant might borrow cash to pay dues, where his zamindar's share of the produce was taken in cash, to buy cattle, or to spend on festivals, weddings, or funerals in order to fulfill his social obligations. A debt once borrowed, especially in circumstances of hardship owning to crop failures, was difficult to clear (Whitcombe 1972: 161-163).

Most of the cultivators in order to pay heavy dues to their zamindars were compelled to sell more of their produce at the time of harvest. Moneylender in this context was indispensable to the state as he converted the crops into cash due to which land revenue could smoothly reach to the government coffers. Therefore it was inconceivable that government would interfere with what was in fact its vital source of supply. Rather moneylender was encouraged to expand his activities with the assistance of new legal procedure according to which if peasant defaulted in payment of his dues than his land, livestock, and personal possessions could be attached (Daniel and Thorner 1974: 55).

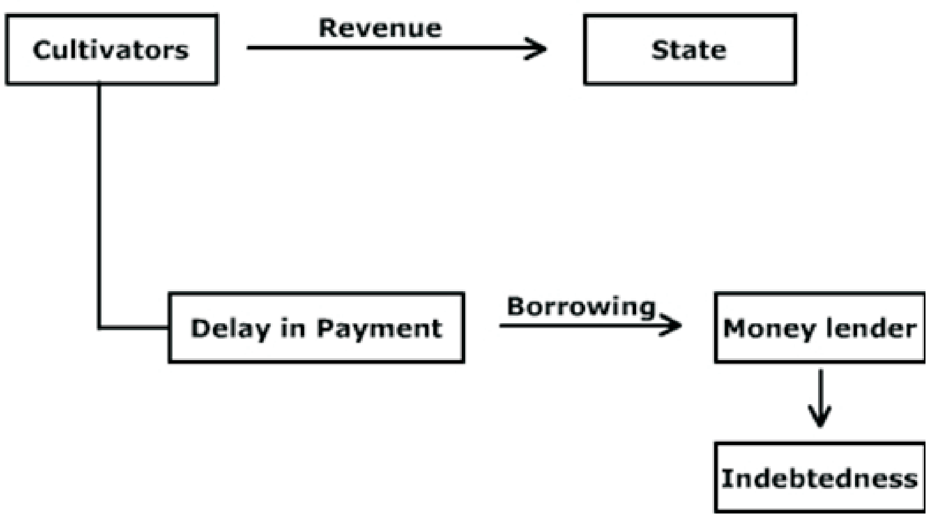
Burden of the cultivator could in no way be relieved by resorting to commercial agriculture as was assumed. As not only the cash crops were grown by means of loans but they were also subjected to the heaviest zamindari charges and were graded according to the scale of values ruling in the local markets. Sugar cane generally topped the list, followed by indigo, cotton and tobacco, etc. Local creditors who already reaped benefits from the reduction in takavi loans by the government and from the increased pressure on zamindars and cultivators to borrow owing to the system of revenue collection were presented with increased opportunities for business in those areas where the cultivation of finer grains and commercial staples had expanded (Whitcombe 1972: 171).

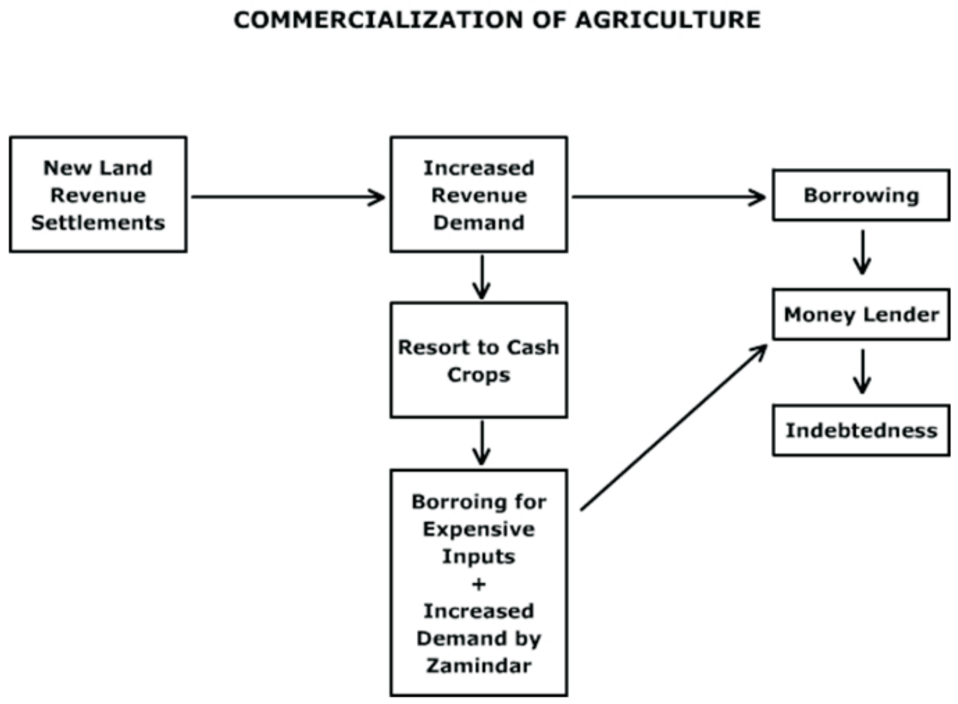
The colonial law and legal institutions contributed to the strengthening of the money lenders vis-à-vis the peasantry. The acquisition of land by sowkars was increasing rapidly. The stratification within the peasantry was becoming sharp and clear. The distinction between various groups in terms of size of landholdings and net incomes was clearly noticeable. The burden of the colonial state demand and usury was continuously increasing and majority of the cultivators and artisans were sinking deeper and deeper into debt. Social tension was building up by slow degrees. The agrarian discontent during the second half of the nineteenth century was mainly directed against the colonial state and professional usurers. Although differentiation within the peasantry was proceeding rapidly, internal antagonism came to surface only during the early twentieth century in the form of sporadic strikes by tenants and agricultural labourers against the dominant landowners (Nand 2003: 753).

PERMANENT SETTLEMENT



RYOTWARI SETTLEMENT





Peasant Discontent and protest

The conflict in rural society was essentially centered around the appropriation of agrarian surplus by various agencies. The colonial state extracted surplus through heavy land revenue demand, taxes and fines. In addition, various intermediate agencies, like usurers and landlords, extracted a large portion of produce in the form of interest and rent. It pressed heavily upon the small peasants and tenants and led to numerous anti-usury protests and rent conflicts between the superior and inferior land holders (Nand 2003: 739-740).

In 1873, an influential Kili of Jamburi in Poona organized a series of attacks with the help of a well-trained group on the professional moneylenders who habitually cheated and oppressed the hill tribes. In May 1875, peasants unitedly attacked the property of usurers in the Deccan districts. In several places stocks and houses belonging to the moneylenders were burnt and their property was plundered. Usually Marwari and Gujarati moneylenders, who constituted the dominant sections of usurers, were the exclusive targets of these attacks. The village panchayats also declared complete boycott of Marwari and Gujarati moneylenders. Through common agreement called sampatras the village communities forbade all section of rural society to assist moneylenders in any form, and fines and social boycott were declared for ryots who violated the agreement (Nand 2003: 756).

In Bengal, the rebellion was witnessed among the peasants of eastern and central districts. In 1873, the Agrarian League was formed in Yusufshahi pargana of Pabna district, where the oppression of a few landlords pushed the peasants to the threshold of tolerance. In this area, the rate of rent had been continually going up, along with the illegal cesses or abwabs. Here the peasants through legal means took landlords to the court of law. Agrarian Leagues came up in Dacca, Mymensingh, Tripura, Bakarganj, Faridpur, Bogra and Rajshahi districts, where civil courts were choked with rent suites. Peasant protest against landlord oppression was not confined to Bengal alone. The fight of the Moplah peasants against their jenmis continued in Malabar, while in Sitapur district of Awadh and in Mewar in Rajasthan peasants resisted rent enhancements and imposition of illegal cesses by their landlords in 1860 and 1879 respectively (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 194-195).

Another immediate and proclaimed motive of the peasant uprising was reduction in the land revenue burden. From the beginning, the colonial land revenue demand had been very heavy but it became unbearable after the enhancement of rates during the revision of 1868-71 which coincided with falling prices, shrinking markets and contraction of credit. The Poona Sarvajnik Sabha prepared the report on unjust rent and with the campaign carried out by native newspaper had to make reduction in 1875 (Nand 2003: 758). In the Kamrup and Darrang districts of Assam for instance, a new revenue settlement in 1893-

94 which enhanced rates by 50 to 70 per cent was met by the organization of raij mels, mass assemblies of villagers led to the rural elite (Brahmins, Gossains and Dolois) which enforced non-payment of revenue through the weapons of social boycott or ostracism of those who broke the popular consensus by submitting to the government. In Maharashtra Deccan in 1896-97, famine conditions led to looting of grain-shops and demand for revenue-remissions under the Famine Code – a demand which the government rejected. The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha sent agents out into the countryside between 1896-97 to popularize the legal rights of cultivators in the famine situation (Sarkar 2008: 53).

In the initial phase there were sporadic instances of protest but later on the political parties tried to channelize this discontent through various anti-colonial movements. Apart from the submission of petitions and memoranda, there were sporadic incidents of violent protests by the peasantry against the land revenue system. In July 1917, the Home Rule League started an organized political campaign in north Gujarat. Its strongest centres were Nadiad and Godra (Nand 2003: 779). The Indian National Congress launched the "No-Tax" movement in Kheda in 1918. During the 1921-22 (time of Non-Cooperation Movement) the centre of political activities shifted to bardoli taluka in the Surat district, and a very intense propaganda was concentrated at non-payment of taxes. In 1928, the Congress launched another no-tax campaign in Bardoli. (Nand 2003: 779-83) And similar other movements were witnessed in later periods as well throughout the colonial rule in different parts of the country.

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION UNDER COLONIAL RULE

As far as the direct contribution of colonial administration in the development of agricultural production is concerned they were by and large ineffective or half-hearted. In 1870, after much insistence by the Viceroy, Lord Mayo, a Department of Agriculture was finally set up as part of the central administration of the Government of India at Calcutta. His original plan had been for a real working agricultural bureau but he was forced to content himself with the miscellaneous department i.e. New Department: Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce. The department was doomed to ineffectiveness from the start, sandwiched between the two massive pillars of Revenue and Commerce. It collapsed finally in 1879 under the combined weight of interminable restrictions on its activity in the field, insufficiency of funds and lack of staff, and the unremitting pressures applied by the India Office (Whitcombe 1972: 100-101).

In 1874, a subsidiary department was set up in the North Western Provinces (NWP) with the same objects in view. The provision for department could hardly inspire confidence in its capacity to perform the monumental tasks. In 1887, when the department had been in operation for thirteen years, the total agricultural expenditure for the NWP for that year was accounted at Rs. 101,400. Of this, the cost in salaries and wages for the director and his subordinate staff came to Rs. 62,000; experimental farms took a further Rs. 12,400; well-sinking – throughout the provinces – took some Rs. 7,000. Given the resources allowed to it, the department could hardly do enough (Whitcombe 1972: 101-102).

Government also conducted various experiments with agricultural staples for export. For example New Orleans cotton seed amongst zamindars in Banda district in 1861for bigger and better production. In 1869, Carolina rice seed was distributed to zamindars in certain districts of the NWP selected on grounds of prosperity and influence. Attempts at the improvement of agricultural staples of this kind were also made on model farms established for this purpose in the districts of Allahabad, Cawn pore, and Bulandshahr. Most of these experiments turned out be an unqualified failure and met the similar fate due to the absence of any responsible controlling authority. Even in the occasional cases where government-sponsored experiments in improved agriculture were successful, problems arose as regards their diffusion amongst the rural population. Cultivators were indeed persuaded by a variety of incentives to produce valuable crops, and lamentable though this might be when viewing the declining production of coarse food grains (Whitcombe 1972: 102-107).

Takavi loans were also forwarded by government to the agriculturists but were either inadequate or arrived with so many conditions. According to Whitcombe, as early as 1861, it was recognized that advances were confined to the construction and repair of works of permanent utility i.e. for digging expensive type of wells, renovation of embankments. A period of 3, 4 or maximum 5 years was determined for repayment and in case of non-completion of work in stipulated time than entire advance with 12% interest was recovered. Advance for the purchase of seeds was restricted to the time of scarcity. In case seeds failed to germinate due to draught, government could intervene only when landlord was poor and even in later case the process suffered owing to the procedural hindrance. New law i.e. Land Improvement Act, XXVI of 1871, was introduced to amend the terms relating to advances for agricultural improvement but in too failed to narrow the gap between theory and practice. In 1874, due to failure of staple crop rice, famine occurred in Jaunpur, the loans advanced were at times were absurdly as low as four annas

(Whitcombe 1972: 114-115).

One positive improvement was beginning of canal irrigation in the Punjab, Western U.P and parts of Madras i.e. in non permanent settlement areas, where there was chance for enhancement in land revenue (Sarkar 2008: 36). From 1900 to 1939, canal irrigation doubled in absolute terms but better picture appears when we measure it in relative terms when colonial rule ended, only one fourth of area was under public irrigation. The reason for this was that these irrigation works were undertaken either with profit motive or to overcome the problem of ever increasing famines. For example, General Richard Strachey, as President of the Famine Commission of 1878-79, recommended immediate and special enquiry into two schemes: the Sardah Canal to be constructed in Oudh and Rohilkhand and a system of canals to be supplied from the rivers Betwa and Ken in Bundelhand. Work on the canals was proposed to provide relief for famine distress in the conventional form of temporary employment on public works that begun early in the 1880s (Whitcombe 1972: 66). These canal programmes only created island of prosperity and these were favourable to only rich sections as canal rates were very high and could be afforded by big landlords. Even the agriculture yield in India remained static and between 1920 to 1947 production could not keep pace with the growing population. Famines were not occasional but rather became a common phenomenon (Bandhopadhyay 2010: 124-125).

CONCLUSION

The impact of colonial rule was most deleterious on its agriculture economy. It witnessed the unprecedented changes in the land relations by altering the old pattern and replacing it with new settlement system suiting the colonial interest. On the one hand, Bengal experienced Permanent settlement, which supplanted the land rights of cultivators giving rise to the new phenomenon of landlordism, which was an alien concept suiting the land relations in Britain. On the other hand, Bombay witnessed the Ryotwari settlement, where direct contact with cultivators was made for the collection of land revenue, though their land rights were preserved but at the cost of heavy demand. In case of both the settlements ultimate looser was the village community, which so far had cushioned the poor tenants and landless cultivators from yearly shocks of heavy demands especially during the lean years owing to natural calamity. Besides landlordism two new concepts were also introduced those were that of absentee landlord and moneylender, who did not belong to the village society and hence had least concern for the cultivators. They charged usurious rate of interest drawing peasantry to deep under the indebtedness eventually depriving them of their small landholdings. The high demand of land interest and capitalist industrial demand for raw-material forced the cultivators to grow commercial crops, which on face value appear the sign of prosperity as was expected to bring high return to the growers of these crops. But in reality these crops required high inputs, which came from borrowed money that dragged cultivators further in debt and this was accompanied the high demand by landlords on such crops. The de-industrialization of India over-crowed the already exhausted lands when jobless craftsmen returned to agriculture in absence of any occupation. Colonial government did not invest much either in form of capital or technological development, which could have upgraded the agricultural economy therefore paving way for utter ruination both of agriculture and cultivators from which India could not recover even decades after independence.

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