



CONTOURS OF REGIONAL COMMERCIALIZATION OF AGRICULTURE AND THE COMPANY

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ABSTRACT

Commercialization of Agriculture was a covert tool in the hands of the colonial intruders to further their economic interest in India. The areas that were newly occupied served as a laboratory to test their intentions. When the Baramahal District came under the control of the British, mainly food grains were being cultivated using age old methods of agriculture. The farmers cultivated enough land to provide food for the village community. Grain was rarely traded internally except during drought times. The British authorities took over all the Revenue Records of Tipu's Government and decided that in order to increase the amount of profit made from their recent conquests, cash crops would have to be grown. The crops like indigo, sugar, cochineal and others were to be exported to Britain and traded for profits. The produce would be transported to the Coast by bullock cart and shipped to England. The East India Company realized that a huge amount of profit and Revenue Collection could be made if production of cash crops was increased and food grain cultivation was reduced.



KEY WORDS: Ryots, Zamindars, Money Lenders, Seasonal Crops, Commercial Crop, Betel Wine, Sugar, Indigo, Mulberry, Nutmeg, Cotton.

INTRODUCTION

The English East India Company was very eager to expand and consolidate its efforts on empire building for the first 40 years. Then a meticulous effort was taken to extract revenue from its Indian Holdings. One step towards the process of revenue exaction was commercialization of agriculture. The soil and climate of Baramahal region favored the production of a variety of crops. Dr. Roxburgh, a Company Botanist stated that the area contained some of the finest lands in India which were fit for the cultivation of a large number of products ranging from sugar cane to mulberry trees.¹ Mr. N.C. White, Member of the Board of Revenue, who had served in the Presidency from 1776, observed at the close of the eighteenth century that in the Northern Circars in general, cotton, indigo, sugarcane and other crops could be raised to any extent, and that indeed the whole country possessed so many 'natural advantages of situation and climate and so rapid a progress of vegetation that innumerable sources of industry and wealth might be introduced by way of manufacture.'² His view is confirmed by Munro who asserted that sugar cultivation in the Madras Presidency could be increased to any extent provided there was a reduction of the duty on it.³

Hence the Company made very serious attempts to improve the quality and quantity of commercial crops like indigo, cotton, sugarcane, coffee, tea and spices. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the cultivation of these crops was negligible, as they were considered unimportant. During the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, the area brought under the cultivation of crops like indigo and cotton became more popular.

Dr. Anderson was called to the Baramahal in order to cultivate indigo, black pepper, mulberry, cardamom, cinnamon, coffee and tea. He talks of the land as being barren and rocky in many places.⁴ The dry land was rent free for the Ryots. It was also discovered that two thirds of the tanks needed repair in the Baramahal, so contractors were given the duties of organizing the labor for the repairing of the tanks. The Commercial crops introduced by the East India Company were introduced on irrigated land only.

CROPPING PATTERN IN BARAHMAHAL

There were two crops annually, the 'Kadarambam' or dry crop and the 'Nirarambam' or wet crops from near talabs, or ponds and wells. The dry crops included bajra, ragi, thuvai, channa, urad and til. The wet crops were sugarcane, betel, plantains, coconut, tobacco, chilly, onions, haldi or turmeric, ginger and annually four crops of paddy.

The Board of Revenue was not aware of the true conditions of the Baramahal District. Captain Graham in one letter dated 19th April, 1797 says regarding Rayakotta - "there is too little water, no scope for sugar cultivation, hardly any rice and the natives are distressed for water. They need to dig more wells and tanks." There was ample dry ground where the seasonal crops are cultivated like Ragi, cumbu, some indigo and cotton.⁵

Alexander Read instructs Captain Macleod to make the ryots produce, "canes, betel, and tobacco....anything more valuable than paddy..." Pattas were granted liberally to the Ryots, canes were said to yield 4-5 times the value than the average paddy produce of the country. Rents were not raised; instead, the production of commercial crops was encouraged. Mulberry was first tried out on 54 acres by 1797, one lakh cuttings were planted. Mulberry production was extended to Tirpatur.⁶

SUGAR

Sugar cane manufacture was concentrated on in the Baramahal Region. The rents were fixed, the ploughing details, manure, seed, weeding and reaping details were carefully instructed by the Board of Revenue to Captain Alexander Read and his assistants.

Even though the interest of the Company with regard to the extension of sugarcane cultivation was much less compared to its efforts for the extension of cotton cultivation, it cannot be denied that the Company attempted to improve the cultivation of this crop by introducing new varieties and by conducting researches through its botanists and naturalists.

An enquiry by the Board of Revenue in the year 1797 revealed that there was a great potential for the extension of the sugarcane cultivation in the Baramahal District of the Presidency which was very well suited for cane cultivation.⁷ Dr. Roxburgh who has carried on extensive surveys and investigations said, "I believe there are few districts in which the Company's botanist carried on extensive possession, where there will not be found large tracts of land fit for the culture of sugarcane."⁸ It was repeatedly emphasized that the sugar manufactured at the Presidency out of the cane grown there was not only cheaper than the Bengal and China sugar but equal in quality to Chinese sugar and "incomparably finer than that of Bengal."

NUTMEG

Trade with India was initiated as a Spice Trade. Pepper, Nutmeg, Cardamom and other spices were exported from the Malabar Coast to the rest of the world. This trade was most lucrative for the East India Company. The Company had large estate holdings in Indonesia, the Moluccas and Macau. Due to the long distance of transport, costs were high for these spices. The British encouraged the growing of spice producing plants in order to reduce their manufacturing costs. At this time in History, the Malabar Region was not yet totally under British control, hence they tried spice plant cultivation in the Baramahal. Nutmeg plants were carefully transported from the Moluccas islands - modern day Indonesia, they arrived by ship and were planted at Rayakotta by Major Doveton on 12 June 1798. But these died soon and the experiment was abandoned.⁹

BETEL NUT & LEAF

This was a wet land crop which required great quantities of water. Estates were set up to cultivate the Betel Nut Palm with the Betel Leaf Creeper growing on it. Betel leaf was propagated in the District. As an incentive, there was no rent required for the first three years, then rent in the 4th and the whole rent after that. It worked out to 1 pagoda annually for every 2 stems of Betel.¹⁰

For the Betel nut, for the first 5 years, there was no rent charged, and then from the 6th, half rent, and then thereafter the whole rent. Till today many areas in the erstwhile Baramahal Region cultivate Betel nut and Betel leaf as a cash crop.

SILK & MULBERRY

The Indian weavers wove bales of silk cloth from time immemorial and it was exported from Ancient Roman times. But the Industry was not regularized. During the eighteenth century, there was a great demand for silk cloth in the European Market. The British wanted to regularize the production of this commodity and set up factories to manufacture silk, successfully killing the local cottage industry.

The mulberry plant was cultivated and encouraged by the Mysore Government and also Tipu Sultan, but it did not meet with much success. Later on after Baramahal was ceded; mulberry was cultivated hesitantly as we can see by the Baramahal records but not in a great commercial quantity.¹¹

There were three kinds of mulberry grown in the Baramahal, the white mulberry cultivated in Europe, the dark purple mulberry cultivated in China and the Indian mulberry. There were two kinds of worm - the country worm and the annual worm brought from Italy or China and producing a finer silk. The cultivation of the mulberry and the production of the cocoons were left to the people, the Company making advances to them, and setting the price after the delivery of the silk or the cocoons.

It is interesting to know that the efforts of Read and Munro have resulted in extensive silk worm farming in the Baramahal District. The silk produced in Mysore is legendary even today, large markets being near modern day Srirangapatnam.

INDIGO

Even though the cultivation of indigo as a commercial crop both for indigenous and export markets was undertaken from time immemorial, it was not until the seventeenth century that it became an important article of commercial value.

The European nations, especially the Dutch, showed a keen interest in this commodity and built up an extensive export market. Although the establishment of colonies in America resulted in a big reduction of India's indigo exports, by the closing years of the eighteenth century, the position of India in its indigo exports greatly improved, partly due to the increased demand abroad. From this time onwards the production of indigo was steadily increasing and by the closing years of the Company's rule, a quantity of about 7000 chests was exported from Madras Presidency alone.

The Baramahal was ideally suited for the cultivation of indigo. We are told by Col. Cullen that the uncultivated lands in the Northern Division of Arcot alone are sufficient for the supply of all Europe under a very trifling support from Government.¹² Even though Col. Cullen was not taken seriously by the Board of Revenue, we find the records of Fort St. George and in the Baramahal Records, several references to indigo planting and its extension. The Company's Government took note of this and encouraged the cultivation of indigo by suspending export duties. The Court of Directors was also very much impressed and requested the government to induce the people to undertake the cultivation of indigo "under every reasonable degree of encouragement."

In due course, both the home government and the authorities at Fort St. George realized that the supply would far exceed the demand for indigo.¹³ Therefore they became restrained in their support, fearing over production leading to excess supply. By the year 1808, it was resolved to discontinue the suspension of

export dues on the excuse that the industry was prospering without Government subsidy. Despite this lukewarm attitude of the government, there was an expansion of indigo cultivation owing to the rising demand for this article in Europe. The method of manufacture of indigo also improved due to the introduction of up to date plant and machinery by European manufacturers. In the Baramahal, European agency houses in Krishnagiri advanced sums of money to the ryots for the cultivation. Although very poor ryots were excluded for the grant of such advances because they could not put up any security for the loans. But at the same time, many ryots were benefited by this as it went a long way in relieving them from the clutches of the village money lenders and shroffs, who by charging exorbitant rates of interest were ruining the poor ryot.

Cotton

Right from the beginning of its rule in Madras the Company was very much interested in the cultivation of cotton although this was motivated by the desire to keep down the manufacture of cloth in Indian factories. Promotion of cotton cultivation within the territories of the Company was considered a very important object not only for the Company's investment but also for its revenue as it resulted in keeping down the prime cost of the cloth and also in the saving of species which had to be exported for the purchase of raw material from other countries.

To facilitate the progress of its 'investment' the Company directed all its officials to abolish all duties in the movement, importation and transit of cotton and cotton yarn throughout its territories. We also find that the Board of Trade forwarding a questionnaire to the Board of Revenue to ascertain from collectors of revenue 'the real Resources of the Peninsula in the article of cotton and affording the means of determining the expediency of generally extending the cultivation of cotton.'¹⁴

Even as early as 1790, one Dr. Anderson was engaged in distributing a variety of foreign cotton seeds obtained from Malta and Mauritius throughout the Presidency. As a result of his endeavors, a variety of cotton known as 'Bourbon Cotton' was introduced and it became naturalized especially in the districts of Baramahal, Salem, Tinnevely and Coimbatore.¹⁵ In this measure Dr. Anderson was greatly assisted by a private merchant by name Hughes who was cultivating Bourbon cotton in Tinnevely.

The loss of the American colonies at that time when Lancashire's cotton industry was being built up induced the British manufacturer to look to India for the supply of the raw material and so pressure was brought to bear on the Company to improve the quality and quantity of Indian cotton. There was also a growing demand from China. In the year 1811, it was requested that all surplus cotton should be sent to China since there was demand for any amount of cotton that might be sent.¹⁶

During the thirties of the nineteenth century, the Lancashire textile industry was also able to establish and capture not only the markets of the rest of the world but also of India, its demands and requirements of raw cotton increased immensely. More and more pressure was brought to bear on the Court and the Lancashire interest for developing superior varieties of cotton all over the British possessions. Accordingly, instructions were sent out to the authorities of India to experiment with new and exotic varieties of cotton in India. They also procured directly from the United States seeds of "upland Georgian" and "Sea Island Georgian" cotton and sent them to the Presidency of Madras along with detailed instructions about the methods of cultivation. The Cotton seeds which were imported were sent to the Collectors of Tinnevely, Coimbatore, Baramahal-Salem and South Arcot for distribution to the ryots to experiment with.¹⁷

Unfortunately these experiments did not meet with outstanding success in the initial stages either due to a bad season or the indifference of the ryots. To encourage the ryots, the government assured full remission of land revenue for the succeeding year for the lands which experimented with American cotton. Even the import duty on Indian cotton was reduced from 6 percent to 4 percent but it did not meet with any appreciable success.

In this way while during the first decade of the nineteenth Century, the Company was interested in merely purchasing whatever quantity of raw cotton was produced in the Presidency and by exporting the same to overseas markets, by the second decade it made attempts to improve the quality of the cotton exported. During the thirties, American varieties of Cotton were introduced in the Baramahal District and during the forties, three American planters were traveling the district assisting ryots in planting, cultivation, cleaning and packing of cotton. But all these and similar experiments proved thoroughly unsuccessful and by the fifties it was officially acknowledged that the experiments with American cotton varieties were a failure and so were given up. It was more expensive and exhausting than many other crops and required greater labor and attention.¹⁸

The result was that a large amount of land under Cotton cultivation was brought under other crops. During the tenure of Sir Thomas Munro efforts were made to reduce the burden to some extent resulting in some improvement in the thirties and forties. But lack of enthusiasm and absence of grievance solving for the ryots prevented the extension and success of Cotton. The cultivation of Cotton proved detrimental to the ryots some times as there was only one crop in a year. In the case of dry grains or oil seeds, there were two crops or even three which fetched the farmers more profit.

CONCLUSION

The large scale movements of commodities to European countries started only with the opening up of the Suez Canal, which lead to the easy transport of raw materials. The Company was die hard in encouraging the ryots to cultivate Commercial Crops, as a result the indigenous cropping pattern was altered to larger extent. In an appetite to get more revenue the farmers of the Baramahal Region were forced and coerced indirectly to adopt commercial crops. Though the Commercialization of agriculture relieved the ryots from the clutches of money lenders and Zamindars, the doors of oppression still remained. With the commercialization though area of uncultivated land brought under cultivation widened, its amazing to note that 1/5 of the cultivable land still remained barren. At the end of the Company's rule, although considerable scope was still left for further expansion of the cultivation of these crops, it cannot be denied that a vigorous policy of encouragement was followed by the Company throughout the period of its existence in the nineteenth century.

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