



INTRODUCTION AND COLLAPSE OF THE ZAMINDARI SYSTEM IN TAMIL COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT

The Zamindari System was a popular revenue settlement in Tamil Country in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries during the Colonial rule. Even though many revenue settlements functioned simultaneously, this system furnished a fixed revenue to the British Government. This system was introduced in Tamil Country based on the Bengal model, implemented by Lord Cornwallis. As the land revenue was the main concern of the British, the imperialists like Lord Wellesley and Lord Edward Clive took all possible measures to implement the system not bothering about its practicable difficulties in the dry regions. The Reports of the Collectors like S.R. Lushington portrayed the real pictures of the dry lands of the southern Tamil Country where the Poligars dominated. The overassessment of the land and exorbitant exaction of land revenue paved the way for the practical failure of the Zamindari System in Tamil Nadu. Among the Zamindaris, Ramnad and Sivagangai were big and larger Zamins.

KEYWORDS: Zamindars, Zamindaris, Tamil Country, Madras Presidency, Permanent Revenue Settlement, Lord Cornwallis, Poligars, Pollams.

INTRODUCTION

When the British assumed power in the Tamil Country, they gave attention for making a land-revenue policy aiming at a permanent source of income. As they were invaders, they were not well known about the existing assessment and revenue collection in the Tamil Country. They wanted a more convenient and easy way of revenue collection. They wanted to avert any trouble in the collection of revenue but were in need for the prompt collection of revenue. Based on the policy of Lord Cornwallis in Bengal in 1793, the Court of Directors insisted the Madras Government to enter into a permanent settlement with the mediators. It resulted in the introduction of the Zamindari System in 1802.¹ Thus in the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, the British were able to evolve a land revenue policy to be executed in the Madras Presidency. Thus the Permanent Revenue Settlement was introduced with Zamindars as their permanent agents. This system continued till its abolition by an Act of the Madras Government in 1948.²

ZAMINDARI REVENUE SETTLEMENTS

The term zamindar was derived from the Persian language, literally meaning (zamin = land, dar = possessor) an occupant of the land or a land-holder. Zamindari was the tract of land which was under the possession of the zamindar. During the Mohammedan administration, the zamindari was the status assigned to a zamindar in Bengal.³ The zamindars were given a fee for collecting revenue from the land,⁴

As an recognized agent of the state, the zamindar began to realise the public revenue for their own purpose.⁵ After the disintegration of the vast Mughal Empire, many zamindars had taken



extensive areas of land by all possible means. They almost acted as independent and assumed the title of prince or raja. They seemed like 'Little Kings' in the word of Bernard Cohn and Nicholas B. Dirks.⁶ In this situation, in 1765, Emperor Shah Alam granted the Diwani right of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the British. Thereafter, the British assumed the revenue administration in the eastern region of India.⁷

On the assumption of power in India, the British evolved a policy to make the revenue collector as the possessor of the zamindari. Revenue collection was assigned as their main duty.⁸ When Lord Cornwallis arrived in India in 1786, he was instructed by the Court of Directors to introduce a Permanent Revenue Settlement and he subsequently made this settlement with the landholders.⁹ In 1793, Lord Cornwallis made Permanent Settlement and proclaimed the settlement with zamindars, talukdars, ryots and other proprietors. He also passed a regulation for their protection and welfare. The property of the soil thus was given in the hands of the landlords, and the revenue payable of each estate payable annually to the Government was fixed permanently. In spite of the increase of resources by cultivation of waste land or other means, it was ensured that further demand would not be claimed upon the landholders.¹⁰

When Lord Edward Clive assumed power in the Madras Presidency, he declared that by the Carnatic Treaty of 1801, the British got full right to ascertain, determine and establish the right of property, to fix a reasonable assessment in the Carnatic, and to secure fixed permanent revenue.¹¹ Earlier the Board of Revenue sent letters to the Collectors of various districts to make the zamindari settlement with the landlords and hereditary military chieftains. Thus the new settlement which was introduced earlier in Bengal was made its realization in the Madras Presidency.¹² This settlement brought the poligars in its ambit., These hereditary armed chiefs who controlled pollams and later were deprived of their military power. The military service of the poligars was replaced by the zamindari service on a stable basis. The Permanent Settlement was introduced in the pollams which were converted into zamindari tenures.¹³ Along with the descendants of the royal chieftains, the British created another class of proprietors. The British lands were divided into *mittas* (created estates) and sold to the highest bidders. The British created estates. The sovereign chiefs and their rights were confirmed in accordance with canons of permanent settlement.¹⁴ The British appointed a Special Commission and it submitted the regulations to the Government on 12th July 1802. On the next day, the Governor-in-Council of Fort. St. George passed those regulations. Thus the zamindari system came into vogue.¹⁵

By the Zamindari System, a settlement with the zamindar was made by the Regulation XXV of 1802. It recognised the zamindars as land-holders. It also viewed that each zamindari included all the lands, both waste and arable within its boundaries. Each estate was assessed in perpetuity and land revenue was fixed, payable in all seasons. All the villages in the zamindari were collectively assessed. The condition of payment of the amount to each zamin was also noted down.¹⁶ The zamindar's claim on the ryot was restricted to a fixed portion of assessment in kind on traditional way. The British Government granted *sanad-i-milkiyat-i-istimirar*, a Persian phrase which the English equivalent is 'title deed of permanent property' to all zamindars. The zamindars were bound to execute a *kabuliyat* (agreement in return for service) to the District Collector. It noted the requirements of the zamindars to appoint a number of *curmams* (accountants) for village revenue units.¹⁷

The District Collectors of Tamil Country surveyed the whole region and assessed each village which contained wet, dry and garden land, and estimated the quality and productivity of soil and pointed out irrigation and market facilities. To assess the yielding capacity of land and to fix the permanent revenue payable by the *mittadars*, the preparatory method was adopted.¹⁸ After the introduction of the system, it was instructed that the poligars were not required to furnish military aid to the British. To accelerate the agricultural activities, the Poligars were made zamindars.¹⁹ There was a clear cut division between the landlords of the British period and the descendants of military chieftains of the pre-British period. The landlords who came into existence at the time of British Assumption or by virtue of purchase were called proprietors or *mittadars*. The British granted the title of 'zamindar' to the descendants of military chieftains popularly called poligars, who existed before the British Assumption. Except the title, the working system was common to both the *mittadars* and zamindars.²⁰

After the end of the period of Lord Edward Clive, William Bentinck became the Governor of Madras. He thought that the Zamindari System was not suitable to the large parts of British territories. According to him, the creation of zamindars never contributed to the improvement of the common people and most of the areas of the Madras Presidency were not properly and permanently assessed.²¹ He even asked Thackeray, the District Judge of Masulipatnam, to report on the comparative merits of the Ryotwari and the Zamindari settlements. In 1806, the Thackeray submitted his report in favour of the Ryotwari Settlement. Subsequently, in a minute on 29th April 1806, Lord William Bentinck recorded that he was dissatisfied with the creation of zamindaris because the zamindari system was not suitable to both interest of the Government and of the people. He even argued that the Zamindari Settlement was not the best, and that the condition in Madras Presidency was totally differed from that of Bengal Presidency.²²

As all the zamindari lands were over-assessed, the zamindars were unable to pay the fixed payment and the system failed in this count.²³ Even though the zamindari system was introduced on the basis of the survey and settlement of the District Collectors, it was seamed with inaccuracy. Most of the zamindars of Dindigul, Madurai and Tirunelveli regions fell into arrears. The effect of over-assessment brought a severe drought. As a result, the Government was unable to implement the demands of rent on the ryots. As the standing crops withered, the agricultural population suffered with untold misery. Hence they were unable to pay the high demands in the over-assessed lands.²⁴ The newly appointed *mittadars* also failed to pay their *peshcush* (annual payment) which fell into arrears. Hence the District Collectors had to assume the estates to adjust for arrears. Within a few years of its commencement, the collapse of the zamindari system was unavoidable.²⁵ On 15 May 1808, the Government appointed Hodgson, the senior member of the Board of Revenue to inquire the practical problems of the system. Finally, Hodgson reported that that over-assessment was the main cause for the failure of the zamindari system.²⁶ In the Wors of Pamela G.Price, “Within forty years of the settlement in Madras, Presidency, zamindari tenure had become associated in the official mind with disinterest in management, improvidence, financially suicidal litigation, burdensome debt and Bankruptcy”.²⁷ Thus the Zamindari System failed on many counts. One reason was over assessment and another one was fixed payment at all seasons. Besides the Zamindars exploited the ryots much and the ryots were compelled to plough the barren, fallow and waste lands which did not produce much yields.

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