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PERMANENT SETTLEMENT AND ZAMINDARY SYSTEM IN BENGAL

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Abstract: The present paper is related to my M. Phil dissertation entitled “The Impact of British Administration on the Zamindars of North Bengal” and is based on the investigation on the socio-economic and political as well as administrative effect due to promulgation and implementation of ‘Permanent Settlement’ on the traditional zamindary system in Bengal. Lord Cornwallis assumed the office as the Governor General of Bengal from Warren Hastings and promulgated ‘Permanent Settlement’ in 1793 with the firm intention to systemize, regularize and increase land revenue collection in order to consolidate colonial rule in Bengal. This promulgation through the Act led to the introduction a new zamindary system in Bengal. It defined and fixed the land rights of the zamindars but the rights of the actual cultivators on their land were ignored. New zamindars were created. The zamindars were empowered to hold and manage land and collect revenue on land but divested of their traditional independent existence. Their zamindary was dependent on the pleasure and satisfaction of the colonial administration. This policy raised many questions of the colonial administration with respect to its attitude towards the zamindars and the traditional zamindary system. The growing pressure for increased revenue on the zamindars affected the peasants and led them to face the scourge of grinding poverty. The new revenue policy sapped the back bone of rural economy of Bengal.

Keywords: Zamindars, Zamindary System, Land Revenue, Colonial Ruler, Permanent Settlement, Peasants and Peasantry.

Introduction

The zamindary system was a traditional system in the socio-political and socio-economic history of Bengal. This system took its organized shape in the Mughal otherwise called pre-colonial period of the history of Bengal and re-shaped and re-organized in the British otherwise called colonial period. It was inextricably related with the social, economic and political life of Bengal. Collection of revenue in a systematic way was the primary aim of the formalization of the zamindary system by both the pre-colonial and colonial rules or administrations of Bengal. The zamindary system which was re-designed, re-shaped and formalized in British Bengal time to time exerted a deep impact on socio-economic and socio-political situations and paved the way for the long-term economic and political benefit of the British regime. The colonial administration favoured this system and used it as an instrument to exploit Bengal. The system undeniably rocked the traditional agrarian economic foundation of Bengal and strengthened the treasury of Delhi. The zamindars were made or reduced to the agents of the British revenue administration to collect revenue in favour of the British Government. Another major aim that influenced and controlled the system was to perpetuate British or colonial rule and boost and retain imperialism in the country. The promulgation of ‘Permanent Settlement’ by Lord Cornwallis gave a new shape to the zamindary system in 1793 that adversely affected the traditional zamindary system and the peasantry in Bengal.

Zamindars and Zamindary System in Bengal

Zamindars are landlords. They held wide areas of land under their direct revenue control and thus came to be called ‘landholders’. Each of them was land owner and originally entrusted with the responsibility to collect taxes or land rents from farmers of which a certain fixed amount was to be paid to the government. This was the traditional denotation of the word ‘zamindar’. The meaning of this term had been subjected to various interpretations in both the pre-colonial and colonial periods thanks to the introduction of various administrative and judicial decisions and reforms on the collection of land revenue. The leader of a particular zamindary was designated as ‘zamindar’. The term ‘zamindar’ originated in India in the pre-colonial period. It is of Persian origin and denotes ‘the controller or holder of zamin or land’. In the pre-colonial period the zamindary system existed and the zamindars were known as rajas, rais, raos, rawats, etc.1. A zamindar was a ‘vassal chief’ and zamindary was defined as ‘the right granted to a rural class standing above the peasantry’ in Mughal period. To speak precisely, a landed person was known as a zamindar 2. The word consists of two elements which include ‘zamin’ meaning land and ‘dar’ meaning holder or controller. India was then a land of agriculture and agrarian economy was the main source of Indian economy. The colonial ruler continued to make and re-make laws to consolidate the colonial position in the country and firmly installed and set the machine economic exploitation in order to serve the purpose of British imperialism. The zamindary system formalized and introduced in Bengal took its deep root and made the zamindars excessively powerful in the collection of land revenue. The British administration had tacit consent to the oppressive process of land rent collection. Farmers were the victims of exploitation and oppression of the zamindars. Primary zamindars and Intermediary zamindars reaped the benefit of the prevailing zamindary system. Intermediary zamindars used to collect revenue from Primary zamindars and deposit it to the imperial treasury. The zamindary system was also made a small part of British administration in the enforcement of imperial laws administrative decisions.



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The zamindars were in constant fear and apprehension of losing zamindary in the case of their failure to appease the administration through their blind and dumb obedience to and compliance with the laws and decisions of the ruler. The relation between British Administration and the zamindars of Bengal was tantamount to the relation between the master and the slave and more specifically characterized by mercantilism. Revenue was the determining factor intervening between the relation between the zamindars and the British Administration. zamindars were the central point of the zamindary system but they were servilely treated by the revenue officials. Independent existence of the zamindars ceased to be in Bengal. the zamindary system was re-designed and re-organized by Lord Cornwallis through his policy made an Act, captioned 'Permanent Settlement' that gave power to the zamindars to collect land rent from peasants. The Act accorded recognition to the zamindars as the owners of land but reduced the actual farmers to tenants.

Permanent Settlement

The historic 'Permanent Settlement' was proclaimed in 1793 and it vested the zamindars and other actual proprietors with the landlord right. Under this system the areas of land or a few villages were held by one person or a few joint land owners who were to pay land revenue to the Government. This system made the zamindars land owners. The peasants were transformed into land tenant farmers, rents were collected by a range of intermediary's zamindars. This system had a damaging impact on the peasants' traditional right and interest. They were divested of land right and title along with other rights and privileges which they were entitled to enjoy during the pre-colonial period in Bengal. The creation of multi-level ranks of collectors who used to work under the directions of zamindars hampered the general interest of the peasants. The peasants were sometimes divested of share in produce from land and pushed into abject poverty and miseries.

Warren Hastings played a leading role in implementing the land revenue system proclaimed by the East India Company (1765) which led to the development a new relationship between zamindar-jotdar-mahajan and cultivator and in consequence of it the tenants' right on land was done away with. PIT India Act was passed in British Parliament in 1784 which was the source of information of the zamindar-jaigidar-rayat relations, right of land, revenue report and so on. A few zamindars had paid a fixed sum as revenue to the Bengal provincial government and in return they established their rights in their own areas. The Court of Directors appointed Lord Cornwallis to replace Warren Hastings as Governor-General of Bengal with the intended purpose to properly implement PIT India Act. Cornwallis studied and reviewed the factors leading to the failure of five-year settlement and then assessed the collection of revenue and settlement. He constituted 'Board of Revenue' in 1786. The rules and regulations the Board prepared empowered the zamindars to collect revenue from the tenants and raiyats. The zamindars took initiatives to convert waste land into arable land. This initiative benefitted the revenue collection for the revenue administration and led to the adoption and introduction of 'Permanent Settlement' in Bengal.

Impacts of Permanent Settlement on the Zamindars of Bengal

'Permanent Settlement' ushered in a new phase of the British revenue policy and re-structured and re-organized the system. The primary aim of this new Act was to increase land revenue and thus to strengthen the foundation of the colonial rule in Bengal' Bihar and Odisha (Orissa). The new policy adopted by Lord Cornwallis deeply impacted on Bengal. The drain of gold from Bengal was stopped. The system of Dual Government was withdrawn and rescinded. Cornwallis accorded top priority to the consolidation of British position in the land. He sought to increase the collection of land revenue in order to tighten the grip of the colonial power. Indian economy was agrarian economy. Agriculture was the main source of Bengal's economy. Land was a wealth for the province. Sirajul Islam (1979) wrote that agricultural land was the chief source of national income 3. The zamindars were main and effective collectors of land revenue for the colonial ruler and so the zamindary system was favoured and encouraged. The Court of Directors ruled that no zamindar should be evicted from land and izaradari system to which the members of the Court were opposed was abolished.

Cornwallis did not defend the recommendation of zamindars being the hereditary proprietors of land for an initial period of ten years on the basis of recent collection of land revenue. He was not in favour of the system in the interest of of the existing zamindars. His aim was to impose the system to serve the purpose of the Company best. He assessed and fixed the revenue demand from land. What came out from this fixation of revenue was the whole burden of government demand being upon the land holders. He introduced a new zamindary system through the promulgation of 'Permanent Settlement' (1793) but did not divest the old zamindars of their zamindaries. The zamindars continued to pay land revenue to the Government. By the strength of this proclamation new zamindars were created and they were declared 'proprietors' of the areas of land they were allowed to hold and manage. They were permitted to convert wide stretches of waste land into arable land and thus they came to own or possess the land. They were also allowed to install farmers in the converted arable land of which total revenue went to their own treasury. But with the passage of time the independent right of the zamindars over the waste-turned-arable land was withdrawn in favour of the administration of Colonial Bengal. The right of the cultivators over land was seized as the consequence of the promulgation of 'Permanent Settlement'. The peasantry of Bengal was badly affected by it. The peasants were converted into land tenant's farmers. 'Permanent Settlement' defined and fixed the land rights of the zamindars but did not provide for fixed rent or occupancy right for actual cultivators. The zamindars were empowered to hold and



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manage land and collect revenue but they were divested of their independent existence which they had in the pre-colonial period. In this new system the peasants lost their ownership on the land which they traditionally cultivated. They became the victims of the zamindars' oppressions and exploitation.

Impacts on Economy of Bengal

Bengal's economy was agrarian economy. It was seriously affected by the policy introduced by Lord Cornwallis. The pressure for increased land revenue on the zamindars compelled them to exploit and oppress the farmers. The zamindars were in constant apprehension of losing their zamindari on the ground of failure of payment or deposit of revenue to the land administration within the fixed period of time. The zamindars had often to face a situation of financial deficiency of which adverse impact was found to have fallen upon the socio-economic life of the people within the zamindari area, and this was a reality throughout Bengal. The zamindars were empowered to assess and collect the revenue on land under their zamindari limits. They were free in this respect and this was one of the major reasons of exploitation and oppression upon the peasantry which led to the very adverse effect of the agrarian economy of Bengal. The 'Permanent Settlement' re-structured the rural economy which served the purpose of the British administration but harmed the agrarian economy of Bengal. The traditional rural economy became so weak that it lost its strength till the end of the colonial rule to stand up again in Bengal.

Permanent Settlement and Administrative Reforms in Bengal

Through Permanent Settlement Cornwallis introduced a new age of administrative system in India. He made some important reforms in revenue and general administration to re-shape and re-organize the system of the government in accordance with the system of administration of England. He brought about changes in the judicial system and separated the civil judicial system from the department of revenue. He introduced the service code known as Cornwallis Code to improve and strengthen discipline and accountability in official works and the system of Indian Civil Service in order to systematize British administration. He also re-structured the judicial system in Bengal. His reforms on revenue collection increased the revenue of the government and gave economic benefits to the zamindars and peasants but we cannot overlook its harmful impacts on the zamindari system and the status of the peasants. The interest of the ordinary cultivators was reduced to tenants and divested of their traditional right over land and this had adversely impacted on the cultivators' economic status. Even they were denied their right over waste land. The 'Sun-set Law' which he enforced in Bengal was reflective of his autocratic political philosophy which led him to relieve many zamindars of their zamindari right. The political purpose of 'Permanent Settlement' was the exploitation of Bengal and the destruction of Bengal's cottage industry.

Conclusion

Bengal had a long history of zamindars and zamindari system. Zamindars played many positive roles in the structure of Bengal's social, economic and educational life during pre-colonial as well as colonial period in the history of Bengal. They were regarded as 'guardians' of the people within their respective zamindari limits. The zamindari system was an inseparable part of Bengal's life. But the British rule in Bengal had a damaging impact on the sweet and constructive relations between the zamindars and the subjects. The colonial ruler shaped and re-shaped, structured and re-structured the zamindari system in Bengal with the only aim to increase land revenue, regularize the collection of revenue and firmly establish the colonial regime in Bengal. The colonial power exploited the cultivators and the people of Bengal through the zamindars and used the zamindari system to serve the British administration and as the instrument of exploitation. Cornwallis' 'Permanent Settlement' was designed to maximize the collection of land revenue through direct exploitation of the peasants, to strengthen the economy of the colonial government and to consolidate the colonial regime in Bengal. This policy of Cornwallis had been strongly criticized in various accusing terms and expressions as it had rocked the strong foundation of the traditional zamindari system which enjoyed popular acceptance. It smashed Bengal's rural economy and paralyzed people's enterprise of cottage industry. Above all, 'Permanent Settlement' caused almost the death of Bengal's agrarian economy and gave additional force to the wheel of colonial administration to perpetuate exploitation in Bengal.

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