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## The Impact of British Land Revenue Policies on Indian Peasantry in the 19th Century

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### Abstract:

British land revenue policies introduced in nineteenth-century India fundamentally transformed agrarian structures and profoundly affected the livelihood of the peasantry. This paper examines the impact of the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari systems on Indian peasants by situating these policies within precolonial land tenure arrangements and regional variations. It argues that colonial revenue reforms, while claiming administrative efficiency and fiscal stability, institutionalized new forms of exploitation through fixed revenue demands, intermediary dominance, frequent reassessments, and commodification of land. These systems intensified peasant indebtedness, dispossession, and vulnerability to market fluctuations while eroding customary rights over commons and communal resources. Drawing on comparative regional analysis, the study highlights how differing administrative practices produced uneven outcomes across Bengal, Madras, Bombay, the United Provinces, and Punjab. The paper further explores mechanisms of extraction such as taxation burdens, mortgage debt, and restricted access to common lands, which collectively reshaped rural social hierarchies and limited peasant mobility. The findings suggest that British land revenue policies played a decisive role in restructuring agrarian relations, embedding long-term inequalities, and shaping patterns of rural distress that continue to influence contemporary agrarian issues in India.

**Keywords:** British Land Revenue Policy, Indian Peasantry, Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari System, Mahalwari System, Agrarian Economy, Colonial India.

### 1. Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the British colonial administration instituted several notable changes in the infrastructure and forms of land appropriation in India. These modifications, broadly termed land revenue reforms, were significant because they affected the agrarian economy and revenue structure critical to colonial expansion and state consolidation. However, unlike other colonial states such as Africa and Latin America, the intervention in land revenue in colonial India remained constrained, resulting in diverse forms that both responded to and shaped agrarian structure, tenancy, and class formation. The varying configuration of British land revenue policy, although contingent at one level, had profound and far-reaching consequences in the agrarian economy, fiscal management, and peasant livelihood in British India.

As observed by Richards, in their sequence of interaction between the British colonial state and the subject population in the context of land revenue policy, British India depicted

a “large measure of continuity” rather than “catastrophic change.” An analysis of land revenue policies in British India presents peasant livelihood at one level of analysis. Such an investigation allows an exploration of the nature of exploitative relationships that emerged between the peasant and the state and middlemen. As argued by Chatterjee, earlier interpretations of the colonial trajectory leading to capitalist land appropriation by the British state have suffered from Eurocentric assumptions. Such preconditions were viewed as absent in the British colonial regime, as the European expansion preceded capitalist agrarian change. A geographical inquiry into the socio-economic consequences of British land policies stimulates a shift from a planetary perspective to the examination of the diffusion of capitalism within a particular geographical space and its diverse path along the structural and cultural variation embedded in the specific location. Such an undertaking would simultaneously qualify the notion of capitalism embedded in the quest for European wealth in general and stimulate thinking on development patterns in the contemporary BJP-led state. (Amin Sofi, 2018)

## **2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

The nineteenth-century British land revenue policies affected agrarian structures in India to diverse extents due to differences in pre-colonial land tenure systems, revenue administrative involvement, peasant adaptability to institutional shifts, and assorted regional determinants. Four regions Bengal, Madras, Bombay and the United Provinces—illustrate various degrees of institutional embedding. Schemes initiated in 1793 (Permanent Settlement) and 1820 (Ryotwari) produced starkly differing outcomes in Bengal and Madras, while the 1830 Mahalwari system adopted both approaches, prompting moderate change in the United Provinces. Punjab, annexed in 1849, experienced extensive agrarian evolution shaped by the local socio-political landscape. The colonial framework influenced the trajectory and nature of subsequent institutional alterations, ultimately determining the primary processes underpinning exploitation and peasant dispossession (Amin Sofi, 2018).

## **3. Precolonial Land Tenure and the Administrative Context**

The primary form of land tenure in precolonial India was collectively held land in rural communities. Customs regulated various agrarian rights and obligations, which nonetheless took distinctive local forms. Although villages possessed considerable autonomy, they tended to operate within fiscal zones, which British colonial intervention subsequently transformed. The East India Company’s land administration, legislation, and revenue collection methods must be understood in the context of its extensive pre-colonial administrative legacy.

Collectively held land was the dominant form of tenure for thousands of years before British intervention (A. Michael, 2007). The precise arrangements surrounding precarious rights such as possession and transfers—certainly varied, but compliance with customs prevailed. A single uncomplicated tenure prevailed during the Mughal period, while considerable variety had developed by the British period. Each village’s revenue settlement could either favour the owner of the land or a wealthy individual, depending on local conditions. The site’s importance and the time span of rules were also influential. Although British regulations initially conformed to Mughal prescriptions, flexible practices still prevailed.

The East India Company possessed an extensive pre-existing administrative apparatus, which underwent gradual modification to accommodate revenue aims (Kenna, 2013). The Mughal fiscal zone remained the principal administrative unit within the East India Company’s Bengal province; the zamindar’s authority, still formally recognised by British authorities, persisted. Collection took place through intermediaries, who usually operated on a share basis. By fixing the zamindar’s assessment under the Permanent Settlement, British authorities increased the zamindars’ power over peasantry while simultaneously limiting the central authority’s influence over zamindars, greatly increasing the risk of discretionary exploitation in the Bengal province.

## 4. Land Revenue Reforms: Diagram of Policy Evolution

The British mission to make India revenue secure drew on aspirations expressed in national finance reform proposals, notably the Bengal Regulation of 1793, and was guided by an evolving appraisal of revenue advancement. It unfolded along four principal lines. The Permanent Settlement constituted both foundation and apex. Intended to promote symbolic permanence in land tenure, it established the zamindar's function as intermediary collector between state and individual ryot while fixing an unalterable demand, tree and water right, and determination not to increase revenue assessment. Praised as a breakthrough in security-investment sought by Evans Bell and his contemporaries, it more tantalizingly linked expropriation risk directly to zamindar ownership duration.

In the ryotwari area of Bombay and Madras presidencies, revenue was allied to individual cultivation and thus rested upon direct contact with the ryot and access to timely information about his circumstances. Colonization of the Deccan, Elphinstone reported in 1827, occurred under a revenue system enjoined by the specification of a temperate demand, and prosperity had spread universally. Thereafter the emphasis shifted towards assessment itself; detailed surveys were undertaken and consultations with local authorities organized. A scrutiny of ryot demand and examination of rental relations across different holdings was further recommended. The ryotwari system civilized or eliminated interference by middlemen such as moneylenders, enabling native gentlemen to undertake land improvement and manufacture rental contracts as famines slackened pressure. Certain disadvantages, yet related to inter-ryot balance, remained. In first developing Jatri in North-western provinces, the settlement sought to satisfy local restrictions on external land investments (A. Michael, 2007).

### 4.1. Permanent Settlement (1793) and its Mandates

In 1793, the British East India Company framed a new land revenue policy known as the Permanent Settlement. This policy established the zamindars as intermediaries in the revenue collection process and created a permanent fixation of the revenue demand on the zamindars. According to the terms of this settlement, zamindars became the proprietors of the land and acquired ownership rights. Zamindars were to collect taxes and pay a fixed land revenue to the government. The Permanent Settlement was expected to secure a stable and regular revenue flow for the British government while providing certainty of tenure for the peasants under zamindars (A. Michael, 2007). The basic premise behind the tax policy was to create a legally established land market, the theory being that if zamindars became the owners of land, they would have a greater incentive to invest in private improvements and modernize agricultural production. The zamindars possessed strong and individual rights and could undertake property transactions; they were required to pay their tax regularly and as such were considered protectors of the economic interest of the public. Extraction from the zamindar to the ryot was thought to be limited and so the zamindars under this system were supposed to be more committed to empirical improvement and private investment in agriculture. However, the fixation of the revenue demand at the inception subjected the ryots to severe pressure and risks.

### 4.2. Ryotwari and the Ryotwari System

The land revenue system adopted by British authorities in India affected peasants in different ways. In the Ryotwari System, direct assessment of revenue from ryots was carried out, with the demand based on the value of land cultivated by them. Each ryot could negotiate the total amount of tax, the specific time for payment, and even the nature of the payment, but all these agreements were to be settled with the local Collector. Ryots enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy, but the nature of revenue collection and measurement created points of pressure. A major concern was the frequency of reassessment; according to previous collector surveys of the land, ryotwari rent was supposed to be fixed for a lengthy period, but in many of the settlements, especially of the 1859-65 period, it was not given any time limit. The

Collector might instead of the period-fixed assessment prefer year-to-year approval followed by fresh subscription of tax. In this case all the autonomy granted to the ryots vanished.

Another focus in the 1860s was a definite percentage of the assessment. As the Collector had the right to adjust the amount of tax either to increase it or to decrease it—records began to crop up fixing a definite percentage. But both the fixing of the assessment and the percentage for approval were bound to exert a deterrent effect from their very nature (Amin Sofi, 2018).

### **4.3. Mahalwari and Varied Regional Implementations**

The Mahalwari System was simultaneously among the least centralised and most adaptable land revenue systems introduced by the British in India. Introduced in the late 1820s and named after the province of Mahalwar, the system aimed to tap into precolonial arrangements that permitted communal ownership by the village community. Under this system, revenue was fixed on the basis of an overall assessment of the village estate, which included all agricultural land, grazing tracts, and forests. Individual landowners or ryots were thus free to cultivate and sublet as they wished, while the community as a whole remained collectively responsible for payment. Although Mahalwari came to be implemented in varying forms across northern India, the greater adaptability of the system led to further significant regional and inter-region variation within the Punjab, the United Provinces, and Bihar.

Mahalwari revenue assessments were initially made with respect to an entire village estate rather than to separate individual holdings as under the Permanent Settlement or Ryotwari. They were also influenced by certain modern tendencies that operated throughout the British empire. The overall village valuation drew upon assessments already made by local authorities on behalf of pre-British sovereigns; indeed, maintaining such valuations provided an “insurance” policy for the ruler enabling the latter to recover constantly the bulk of the revenue expected. The village collective held legal property rights over the entire estate without splitting it up into numerous individual parcels because each cultivator remained dependent upon the community. This constraint served to deter any attempts to confiscate individual holdings. Every individual holding did not require separate recording since no transaction affecting ownership could occur without the participation of the community. The presence of cultivators whose land had become unproductive, declined in value, or otherwise withdrawn for a stated period did not complicate matters as long as the community remained engaged.

The overall adaptability of Mahalwari promoted further administrative heterogeneity within northern India. In the Punjab, for instance, the absence of properly organised villages prior to colonisation warranted modification. Each canal colony received the mandated village estimate from a superior revenue officer who remained responsible for enforcing compliance with community valuation. The extensive occupation of waste land under the Colonial Development Programme encouraged re-evaluation of the entire estate, which the Punjab Board of Revenue deemed a proper administrative practice. During the early period of Colonial Settlement in the United Provinces, on the other hand, the evolutionary system enabled officials to assess village valuation progressively, whereby the first-year estimate held only provisional validity. Even after establishing a definite valuation, reliability diminished in regions prone to periodic agricultural failure of large areas linked to spontaneous village settlements. (A. Michael, 2007)

## **5. Mechanisms of Exploitation and Peasant Displacement**

British land revenue systems, exploiting persistent precolonial agrarian structures, intensified colonial rule and deprived rural subjects of rights safeguarded by village panchayats. Crop taxes under permanent settlements, continuous demand under ryotwari, and stringent land surveys under mahalwari constituted quasi-rent collection from estates, peoples, and the Crown (Amin Sofi, 2018). Parallel credit systems extended mortgage financing. Progressive defaults, compounded interest, courts favouring creditors, and illusory settlement reforms

fostered bonded servitude. Designer common-property approaches broadened the enclosure imperative. Rights to pasture, woodland, and crop-share reallocation eroded agrarian commons and shifted risk toward cultivators.

Institutional transformations favoured revenue enhancement at public cost. Evolving models of agrarian governance sought refinement of treaties between estates and Crown, persistent thereafter. Settlements emerged as collection mandates at difference from locally defined rights recognised under empire. Penetration expanded through formal channels inaccessible or elusive under precolonial complicities.

### **5.1. Taxation Burdens and Revenue Extraction**

Gradually monetized by diverse means, agriculture became the chief contributor to revenue generations, thus shaping colonial attitudes towards it. Apart from agriculture, the colonial state also saw other sectors, especially industry, as crucial for revenue generation (Govinda Rao & Kavita Rao, 2009). In rural areas, agriculture was the vast base for taxes, providing a considerable portion of revenue. The agricultural economy in India was affected directly by the revenue settlements and the nature of the system pursued in British India.

British policy-makers introduced three main systems— the zamindari, ryotwari, and mahalwari—in order to attain agricultural revenues. Each system attempted revenue extraction through a variety of strategies that had direct implications for agriculture; and also established a framework within which peasants operated. Overall, there was a steady amount of revenue that was assessed under different systems, which were collected at eight different intervals, despite a gradual rise in prices of agricultural commodities and limited growth in production in the peasant sector.

### **5.2. Mortgage, Debt, and Debt-Bonded Labour**

By nature, credit is risky but critical for rural development. Agricultural credit- especially crop credit in the colonial situation is both unsurpassed and limited. In precisely the manner of the sovereign, landlords, zamindars, talukdars etc. exploit as well as vacillate . Under the Ryotwari system, the British directly settled with the ryot. Against this background, the Debt Bondage Abolition Act of 1976 was not only declared but also amended. Laws alone cannot resolve the problem while credit for agriculture remains adversative. An attempt to manage it with an MIT or private sector model can make little difference. A structure of full borrowing-capital is needed in order to go ahead with an alternate model. No significant change in the system can occur- with 80% of production and 80% of labour without suitable intervention. Brains, education and intelligence are part of the system and exist in every community.

The zamindars borrow more than the ryots. Zamindars borrowing goes into the many corrupt areas like the construction of marriage pandals, the liquor business, etc. Loans of ryots within 50 to 60 meter distance go for new houses constructed for their family dignity lying between drought stricken areas for food security. Where, direct construction of construction structure and other material, like unprocessed bricks where works are being run by their efforts on daily basis only on day wages . The wealth and tenure of zamindar is national property. Between 1934 to 1946 the ryots were facing the gradual increase of public mark up of land revenue; instead of it ryots were losing their land piece and were more into debts the rate seems to double where above 60% of Tomarsees and zamindars have created huge amount of unpaid debts which they cannot normally repay. The direct proportion of public expenditure for purchasing railway locomotive factory materials are figures like public, credit, formal credit, money lenders and self see whether our sikhs are more in demands setup and revive as 70% became nakla for new loans.

### **5.3. Access to Common Lands and Agrarian Commons**

During the 19th century, policies intended to maximize revenue extraction and state control resulted in the enclosure and appropriation of common lands and agrarian commons across Colonial India. These policies led to the enclosure of community lands, reduction of land with

patta rights, and altered access to woodlands and resources, fundamentally reshaping the agrarian commons and the rural economy. The peasantry depended heavily on common lands for irrigation, fuel, fodder, and a host of other materials. Enclosure of the commons severely curtailed the ecological and productivity base of peasant livelihoods, increasing both economic dependence on the cultivation of cash crops and vulnerability to the vicissitudes of the market and climate change.

By jettisoning the tradition of communal land ownership and privatizing the economic commons, British revenue policies facilitated a move towards intensified accumulation and promotion of agrarian capitalism at the expense of the peasantry. The occupancy rights over commonly owned plots, grazing lands, and homogeneous flora customary in British territories became subject to appropriation when modernization and commercialization of agriculture moved state apparatus and funds towards the emerging market economy and integration of surplus-oriented agricultural marketing networks and systems (Amin Sofi, 2018).

## **6. Economic and Social Consequences for Peasantry**

Despite careful design, British land revenue policies had a few unintended consequences that severely affected Indian peasantry in the nineteenth century. Revenue policies compelled a shift in crop choice and growing risk, affected rural credit conditions, and influenced social structures and agrarian resistance.

Land revenue policies altered cropping patterns and risk management among regions. Revenue extraction could therefore often be reduced by switching to crops that were high in price and low in public demand, such as indigo or sugar. In less-favorable years when insolvency was likely, risk-averse villages frequently moved to rent-free dry crops with an insignificant cash economy (Amin Sofi, 2018). The differential exposure of various crops to regional taxes led to the early, widespread introduction of sugar and logan on the eastern plain—a consequence of heavy taxation on rice—and the abnormally early development of indigo, which was placed on the reverse list. With the changed crop pattern, colonies were increasingly drawn into cash markets, implying greater exposure to price fluctuations; an increase in costs, the setting of the crop, and a greater period of tillable area frequently reduced the economic hold of the peasant and contracted his terrain of seasonal employment.

The land revenue system further influenced the long-horizon liquidity of a monopolistic credit system. Wherever the interest rate permitted, credit was advanced by the state, talukdars, revenue officers, or ranges of the propertied class; mortgages constituted the essential and most arbitrary diwani link in the landed tenure and propertied settlement. Although the government restricted interest rates to 12 and later 8 percent (which nevertheless were exorbitant), prosecution, besides an effort at establishing associations of agriculturists, fell inevitably into the hands of a hierarchical credit structure.

### **6.1. Crop Choice, Risk, and Market Integration**

Policies and market access have affected cropping decisions and risk management. The Permanent Settlement, by fixing land revenue, lowered risk management stress compared to Madras Ryotwari, where revenue varied with precipitation and crop choice. Official price support for wheat increased exposure to market risks in Western India (Jabbar et al., 2020). The 1870s and 1880s saw wider cultivation of cotton in Central India, despite severe macrostability (crop failure in Malwa 1264, 1267; (S. Ward et al., 2019) Government pricing support further created incentives to cultivate commodities with higher price uncertainties. Coarse cereals, legumes, and oilseeds, previously crucial for rural subsistence, lost area to cash crops.

### **6.2. Rural Credit and Informal Institutions**

Access to rural credit in the nineteenth-century Indian countryside was characterised by an extensive porous network of informal lending and borrowing arrangements, which all too frequently involved village moneylenders as initial contacts. Formal sources of credit

were rarely accessible to a wide spectrum of the peasantry. Some commercial banks did offer limited loans for the purchase of bullocks, seed, or agricultural implements; however, as interviewed villagers reported, these transactions were never of a value sizeable enough to influence the overall financial situation of borrowers and did not cover daily needs (Kumar et al., 2015). The services offered by the credit cooperative societies established during the late nineteenth century were still less satisfactory. The intended accumulation of saving and limited withdrawal rights did not permit loans to become part of the process; the amounts lent were small, and in almost all instances had to be repaid within a short period (Singh, 2008).

Access through informal channels was acquired gradually yet retained its relevance through the century. In villages lacking land or agriculture, a stage preceding individual acquisition of land often involved a preliminary investment obtained through the informal network; subsequently, pieces of land were acquired from close relatives. In acquisition itself, land was commonly obtained in a number of parcels from extended family on the understanding of future repayment with one or another crop in the intervals. Moneylending almost invariably accompanied cropping; even more than the land purchase itself, purchase of farm returns in advance through a moneylender constituted the initiation of the borrowing process. Without such support, peasants lacking land found it difficult to enter agriculture, even as late as 1930.

### **6.3. Social Strata, Mobility, and Resistance**

Strata of status distinguished certain groups of peasants from others, shaping their resilience against change. Certain groups tended to own ploughs and bullocks, and generally constituted the backbone of ryotwari production, producing coolie labour power. Others were functionally landless, supplied a fair amount of labour all year round, and a considerable quantity of remitted labour during peak periods. Some groups were dynamic and prosperous, yet others were drifting downwards. The rate of descent appeared higher among the low caste and tribal groups but the rate of ascent was also higher. In many areas, rising indebtedness and grazing, and forestry conservations measures had closed the social space necessary for mobility. The inverse relation between economic status and ability to cope with revenue and other related pressures can be summed up as follows: Pressure from the revenue collectors went on growing. Serious default with the consequent auction and loss of tenure was inevitable on the part of the poor peasants. The unsold lands were mostly acquired by rich proprietors or non-proprietors who were availing of the moneylending facilities of the urban sahumars and set up a new kind of servile production by forcing the landed poor to work on the fertile lands on a very low wage. Various forms of protest began to develop against these processes but generally the response of the well-to-do peasants was one of quiet submission. As long as law and order were maintained they felt safe. On the deep-rooted complexes of inequality within the villages there set in a certain kind of policing response from the upper would-be-protectors of the village against delinquency.

## **7. Regional Variations and Comparative Perspectives**

Differences in British land revenue policies shaped the agrarian economies of India's regions in the nineteenth century. Bengal, Madras, Bombay, the United Provinces, and Punjab adopted divergent models. Within the framework of three broad systems—zamindari, ryotwari, and mahalwari—conditions nevertheless varied widely. Even under the same regime, the state's adaptation to precolonial conditions produced heterogeneous outcomes. Aside from administrative and geographical factors, contrasts in agrarian structures influenced peasant and elite responses to settlement. Regions that retained major elements of precolonial agrarian organization received less formal tenure security and experienced similar under-protection of peasant interests (Kenna, 2013). The state's reliance on intermediary zamindars and moneylenders meant rising security for influential elite groups in Bengal and the United Provinces, while land concentration and state-implemented market integration controlled access for cultivators in heavily monetized areas. In Punjab, the British encountered a far

more militarized agrarian order, leading to multiple policy borrowings from the neighbouring nucleus of North India but eventual convergence towards zamindari features along with institutionally assured property security (A. Michael, 2007).

## 8. Conclusion

The preceding analysis has illuminated the evolution and consequences of British land revenue policies in nineteenth-century India—coverage distinctive for its comparative scope. It has investigated the genealogies of Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari systems; the mechanisms of peasant exploitation they engendered; their socio-economic impact; the administrative voices that peasant resistance corralled; and regional variations in the patterns of both policy and agrarian outcome. The inquiry's overarching findings affirm that British land revenue systems materially reshaped the character of the Indian peasantry—transformations that not only redeployed the revenues extracted toward railroads, law courts, and similar infrastructures of a modernizing state but redefined foundational features of agrarian social structure that persist into the present.

Such an inquiry elucidates the agrarian transformations wrought by the introduction of British revenue systems in the 19th century—impacts and processes overlooked by the prevailing stress on the economic and social disintegration following the Indian de-industrialization. These insights proffer a deeper, long-range perspective on the unfolding consequences of British rule—reflections of contemporary agrarian distress shaped not only by the de-industrialization noted in the classic literature but also by the embedded legacies of earlier state actions. Such ramifications of past public policy remain pertinent in contemporary agrarian contexts, thereby endowing these historical developments and processes with enduring significance.

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