

Theme 10 Colonialism and countryside

Colonial rule was first established in Bengal. The English East India Company first attempted to reorder the rural society and establish a new regime of land rights and land revenue system.

Auction in Burdwan due to default in payment of the revenue

- In 1793, the Governor General Lord Cornwallis introduced the Permanent Land revenue settlement
- The English East India Company had fixed the revenue that Zamindars had to pay.
- The estates of the zamindars who failed to pay the fixed revenue amount were auctioned.
- The Raja of Burdwan failed to pay his due and his estates (mahals) were auctioned in 1797.
- The British attempts to auction the estates of the zamindars failed.
- The purchasers who bought the estates in the auctions were servants and agents of the raja.
- They bought the estates for their raja. So, the estates remained under the control of the raja. Over 95 per cent of the sale at the auction was fictitious.

Introduction of Permanent Land Revenue Settlement

- Since the conquest of Bengal, the British officials were facing the problem in collecting the revenue.
- They thought to develop agriculture, trade and the revenue resources of the state by encouraging investment in agriculture.
- They proposed to do this by securing rights of property and by fixing the revenue demand permanently.
- Company officials thought that a fixed revenue demand ensure regular income.
- But the problem was in identifying the person who could increase agricultural production and pay the fixed amount of revenue to the state.
- After prolonged debate the company decided to make the rajas and taluqdars of Bengal as their contractors for purpose.
- The rajas and taluqdars were called now as zamindars. The zamindars had to pay the revenue demand fixed by the state.

Zamindars and their Functions

- Under the Permanent settlement, the rajas and taluqdars were converted as zamindars.
- In practice; the zamindar was not a landowner in the village, but a revenue collector of the state.
- They had about 400 villages under their control. In the calculation of the company, one zamindari formed one revenue estate.
- The zamindar collected rent and paid the fixed amount and keep the excess as his income.
- The zamindar collected rent from different villages. He was expected to pay the company on a regular base. If he failed to pay the amount his estates were to be auctioned.

Reasons for the failure of zamindars to pay the revenue demand

The zamindars failed to pay the fixed amount to the state because of the following reasons.

- The initial demands were very high
- The demands were made at a time of when the prices of agriculture produce were depressed and the ryots were unable to pay their dues to the zamindars.
- The revenue was invariable; regardless of the harvest. Even if the crops failed the revenue had to be paid punctually.
- The Sunset Law: According to this, if the revenue was not paid to the state by the sunset on a particular day, the zamindari was auctioned.

Measures taken by the state to control the zamindars.

- The company tried to control zamindars by taking some measures.
- The state subdued their authority and restricted their autonomy.
- The troops of the zamindars were disbanded, customs duties abolished
- Their courts-‘cutcheries’ were brought under the supervision of a collector appointed by the company.
- The zamindars lost their power to organize local justice and the local police.
- In course of time the collectorate emerged as powerful and restricted the power of zamindar.
- In one case when raja failed to pay the revenue, a company official was sent to his zamindar to destroy power and influence of the zamindar.

Problems faced by the zamindar during rent collection

- An officer of the zamindar came around to the village at the time of revenue collection. The revenue collection was a “perennial problem” for the zamindars.
- At the time of bad harvest and low prices, it was difficult for the ryot to pay the rent.
- At other times the ryots delayed the rent payment deliberately. Rich ryots and village headmen were happy to trouble the zamindar.
- The zamindars were unable to easily establish their power over them.
- The zamindars had the authority to prosecute the defaulters, but the judicial process was long drawn.
- According to sources in Burdwan alone some 30000 were pending related to the arrear payment in 1798.

Jotedars

- According to the Survey of Francis Buchanan, in the Dinajpur district in North Bengal, the rich peasants were known as jotedars.
- They consolidated their position at the end of the 18th century while many zamindars faced crisis.
- They had occupied a vast area of land and in some cases as much as several thousand acres.
- They controlled the local trade activities and money lending and had more power over poor peasants.
- Major part of their land was cultivated by the sharecroppers (adhiyars or bargadars).
- The sharecroppers brought their own ploughs and gave their labour and half of the produce to the jotedars after the harvest.

Powers of the Jotedars

- The jotedars had more power than zamindars. The jotedars were lived in the villages and exercised direct control over poor villagers.
- Zmaindars lived in urban areas. The jotedars were against zamindars.
- The jotedars resisted the efforts of the zamindars to increase the jama of the village.
- The zamindari officials were prevented from collecting the rent.
- The jotedars mobilized ryots against the zamindars and delayed the payment of revenue to the zamindar. when the estates of the zamindars were auctioned by the state, the jotedars were often purchasers.
- The jotedars were most powerful in North Bengal. In some places the jotedars were called as haoladars, qantidars or mandals.

Strategies of the zamindars to face the pressure from the state

- The zamindars devised some strategies to face the pressure from the state demanding high revenue and their estates being auctioned by the state.
- Fictitious sale was one such strategy. The zamindars transferred their zamindari to women, since the company had promised that they would not take over the property of women. For example, the Raja of Burdwan transferred his zamindari to his mother.
- The auctions were manipulated by the zamindar's agents. At the time of auctions the zamindar's men bought it and gave back to zamindar outbidding the other purchasers.
- The outside purchasers were attacked by the lathials of the zamindars. They felt that they are part of the zamindari control due to a sense of loyalty. They considered the zamindars as authority and themselves as Proja (subjects). Thus, the outsiders were not able to take the possession of the estates purchased by them.

The Fifth Report

- The Fifth Report was a Report prepared to submit to the British Parliament.
- The Fifth Report was a report on the administration and activities of the East India Company.
- The Report was having 1002 pages. It was submitted to the British Parliament in 1813.
- The Report's 800 pages were the appendices that reproduced the petitions of zamindars and rhyots, reports of collectors from various districts, statistical tables on revenue returns and notes on revenue and judicial administration of Bengal and Madras.
- When the Company established its rule in Bengal, many groups in Britain watched the activities of the Company closely.
- These groups opposed the monopoly of East India Company's trade with India and China.
- They demanded the revocation of the Royal Charter given to the company.
- News about Company's misrule and mal administration was hotly debated in Britain.
- Incidents of greed and corruption of Company officials were discussed.
- The British Parliament passed a series of Acts to regulate company rule in India.
- It forced the Company to produce reports on the administration of India. The Fifth Report was one such report.

- Researchers have carefully examined The Fifth Report in various archives of Bengal to write the history of colonial rule in Bengal.
- They suggested that the Fifth Report exaggerated the collapse of the traditional zamindari power in Bengal. It also has over estimated the scale on which zamindars were losing their land.

Buchanan and his accounts

- Francis Buchanan was a physician, came to India and served in the Bengal Medical Service.
- He also served as surgeon to the Governor General of India, Lord Wellesley.
- He organized a zoo that became the Calcutta Alipore Zoo.
- He was also in charge of the Botanical Gardens for a short period.
- He undertook detailed surveys of the areas which were under the control of the Company.
- He travelled the Rajmahal hills in the early 19th century.
- According to his description, the hills were very thick and impenetrable. It was an area that signified danger. Wherever he went, people were hostile and were apprehensive of officials.
- Buchanan's journal gives us information about the Paharias of the Rajmahal hills.
- His journal was written as a diary of places he visited.
- Buchanan wrote about a landscape and most often described not just what he saw, what the landscape was like, but how it could be transformed and made more productive by suggesting crops to be cultivated.

Life style of the Paharias in the 19th century

- The Paharias were the hill folk and lived around the Rajmahal hills at the late eighteenth century.
- Their main activities were to collect forest produce and practice shifting cultivation.
- They cleared patches of forest by cutting bushes and burning the undergrowth. These patches were enriched by the potash from the ash.
- They grew variety of pulses and millets for their own consumption.
- They scratched the ground slightly with hoes and cultivated the cleared land for years. Then left it fallow to get its fertility and moved to new areas.
- Their main forest produces were mahua(a flower) for food ,silk cocoons and resin for sale and wood for charcoal production.
- They were hunters, shifting cultivators, food gatherers, charcoal producers, silkworm rearers and strongly connected to the forest.

Raids of the Paharias

- The Paharias frequently raided the plains of the settled agriculturists. These raids were important for them at the time of scarcity. Their raids were a way of asserting means of negotiating political relations with outsiders.
- The zamindars on the plain areas had to pay regular tribute to the hill chief of the Paharias.
- Traders gave a small amount to the Paharias for permission to use the passes controlled by them. For this small tribute the Paharia chiefs protected the traders and ensured that their goods were not looted by anyone.
- In the last decades of the 18th century when the British, jotedars and zamindars started occupying the lands of the Paharias.

British policy of pacification with the Paharias

- During the 1770s the British a policy of extermination of the Paharias.
- But in 1780s when Augustus Cleveland became collector of Bhagalpur, he proposed for pacification with the Paharias.
- The Paharia chiefs were given an annual allowance and made responsible for the proper conduct of his people.
- They were also assigned the responsibility of maintaining the law and order in their areas.

The Santhals: Reasons for the Santhal Revolt.

- The Santhals had come to the **Rajmahal hills** in 1780s. The British officials invited them to settle in the Jangal Mahals.
- The British gave land to the Santhals and persuaded them to settle in the foothills of Rajmahal.
- By 1832 a large area was demarcated as **Damin-i-Koh** and was declared as the land of the Santhals who lived within it.
- After the demarcation, the settlement areas of the Santhals expanded rapidly from 40 Santhal villages in 1838 to 1,473 villages by 1851.
- Their population increased from a mere 3,000 to over 82,000.
- Santhal myths and songs of the 19th century refer frequently to a long history of travel. They represent the Santhal past as one of continuous mobility, a tireless search for a place to settle.
- The Santhals soon realized that the land they bought under cultivation was slipping out of their hands.
- The British started levying taxes on those lands and the money lenders were charging them with high rate of interest and took over their land in case of defaulters.
- By 1850s they realized that the time had come to rebel against zamindars, moneylenders and the colonial state in order to create an ideal world that would be ruled by the Santhals themselves.
- It was after the Santhal Revolt (1855-56) that the Santhal Pargana was created. The pargana was carved out of 5,500 square miles from the districts of Bhagalpur and Birbhum.

The peasant revolt in Bombay Deccan area

- The peasant movement began at Supa in Poona district on 12 May 1875, ryots from surrounding rural areas gathered and attacked the shopkeepers, demanding the account books and bonds used for lending money by money lenders.
- The revolt spread from Poona to Ahmednagar. Within next two months it spread further and covered 6,500 square km. More than thirty villages were affected. The pattern of the revolt was same everywhere. Sahukars were attacked and burnt their account books.
- To prevent the revolt, the British established many police posts in villages. Troops were rushed to the areas of the revolt. 951 people were arrested. It took several months to bring it under control.

A new revenue system

- The Permanent revenue system was not extended beyond Bengal. One reason was that since the revenue was fixed, the state could not claim any share of the increased revenue. So in territories annexed in the 19th century, temporary revenue settlements were made.

David Ricardo and his idea of land ownership.

- David Ricardo was an eminent economist in England in 1820s. His economic theories influenced the revenue policies of the British in India. His idea of land ownership was introduced in the Bombay Deccan.
- Land owner should claim only the average rent
- When the land yielded more than this “average rent”, the landowner had a surplus that the state needed to tax
- If tax was not levied, cultivators were likely to turn into rentiers, and their surplus income was unlikely to be productively invested in the improvement of the land.

Ryotwari settlement

- The revenue system introduced in the Bombay Deccan was known as the ryotwari settlement. Under this system,
- The revenue was directly settled with the ryot.
- The average income from different types of soil was calculated.
- The revenue paying capacity of the ryot was assessed. A proportion of it fixed as the share of the state
- The lands were resurveyed every 30 years and the revenue rates increased
- The revenue demand was no longer permanent.

Revenue demanded in the Bombay Deccan and peasant indebtedness

- The revenue demanded in the Bombay Deccan was very high.
- In many places peasants deserted their villages and migrated to new regions.
- When rains failed and harvests were poor, peasants found it unable to pay the revenue.
- The revenue collectors extracted revenue with utmost severity. If the peasant failed to pay, his crops were seized and a fine was imposed.
- By 1830s prices of agricultural products fell sharply
- There was a decline in peasant's income
- The countryside was devastated by a famine in the years 1832-34.
- The cultivators borrowed money from the moneylender to pay the revenue.
- But ryot found it difficult to pay it back and debt mounted.
- Ryot needed more loans to buy their everyday needs.
- By 1840s officials found the alarming state of peasant indebtedness.

The Impact of American Civil war on the cotton import of Britain.(The cotton boom)

- Before 1860s, three-fourth of raw cotton imports into Britain came from America.
- British manufacturers were about their dependence on American supply.
- In 1857 The Cotton Supply Association was founded in Britain and in 1859 the Manchester Cotton Company was established to encourage cotton production all over the world. These organizations found India that could supply cotton to Lancashire.
- India had suitable soil for cultivation, a favourable cultivation, and cheap labour.

- American civil war broke out in 1861. The raw cotton supply from America to Britain fell from 2,000,000 bales in 1861 to 55,000 bales in 1862.
- In Bombay the cotton merchants visited the cotton districts to encourage farmers to cultivate it.
- Cotton export merchants in Bombay gave advances to sahuks who in turn extended credit to rural money lenders to finance cotton production. These developments affected the peasants in the Deccan areas.
- The ryots in the Deccan villages suddenly found access to limitless credit. They were given Rs.100 as advance for every acre with the cultivation of cotton.
- Cotton production in Bombay expanded .90 percent of the cotton imports into Britain came from India. It resulted in a period of cotton boom.
- While the cotton boom lasted, cotton merchants in India had visions of capturing the world market replacing America.
- By 1865, civil war ended in America. Cotton supply from America to Britain revived. There was a fall in the export of Indian cotton to Britain.

Experiences of injustice felt by ryots on the refusal of extending loans

- By 1865 the American Civil war had come to an end. As a result cotton production in America revived and Indian exports to Britain declined.
- Shauks and export merchants in Maharashtra stopped long term credit and started demanding repayment of debts.
- While credit dried, the state's revenue demand increased.
- The government made new settlement and increased revenue demand from 50 to 100 per cent.
- The ryots were unable to pay the inflated demand at a time when prices were falling and cotton fields disappeared.
- The ryot had to turn to the moneylender .Money lender refused to give loans to ryots.
- The peasants were utterly dependent on the moneylender for survival. But the moneylenders refusing to come to save their life.
- There were various customary norms which regulated the relationship between the money lender and the ryot.
- There was a customary norm that the interest charged could not be more than the principal. It put limit on the moneylender's exactions. It could be counted as "fair interest".
- Under British rule this norm broke down. Deccan Riots Commission cited that the moneylender had charged cover Rs.2000 as interest on a loan of Rs.100.
- Petition after petition, ryots complained of the injustice of such exactions and violation of custom.
- The ryots came to see the money lender as devious and deceitful.
- The ryots complained of money lenders manipulating laws and forging accounts.
- Limitation Law was passed in 1859 that stated that the loan bonds would be valid for only three years.
- It aimed to check the accumulation of interest over time.
- The money lender forced the ryots to sign a new bond every three years. When the new bond was signed, the unpaid balance i.e. original loan and accumulated interest was entered as the principal. A new set of interest charged was calculated.
- In the petitions that the Deccan Riots Commission collected, the ryots wrote how the processes worked and what unjust methods were used by the moneylenders to short change the ryot. For example, they refused to give receipts when loans were repaid, entered fictitious figures in bonds, bought the peasant's harvest at low prices and ultimately took over the peasant's property.

Deeds and bonds

- Deeds and bonds were regarded as a symbol of the new oppressive system.
- The peasants came to associate their miseries with the new regime of bonds and deeds.
- The peasants were made to sign and put thumb impression on the documents, not allowing them to know what they were actually signing.
- They had no idea of the terms which the money lender inserted in the bonds.
- They feared the written word. But they had no choice because they needed loans for their survival.
- The money lender was not ready to give loans without legal bonds.

The Deccan Riots Commission

- The Deccan Riots Commission was set up the Government of Bombay to inquire into the causes of the Deccan riots. The commission presented a report in the British Parliament in 1878. It provides historians with a range of sources for the study of the riot.
- The Commission held enquiries in the districts where the riots spread
- recorded statements of ryots, shaukars and eyewitnesses etc.
- Collected statistical data on revenue rates, prices and interest rates in different regions.
- Collated reports sent by district collectors.
- However it is important to remember that these sources were official ones and reflect official concerns and interpretations.
- The commission was asked to find out if the revenue demand was the cause of the revolt.
- The commission reported that the government demand was not the cause of peasant anger.
- The commission blamed the moneylender
- The government's persistent reluctance to admit a mistake frequently seen in colonial records
- Official reports like Deccan Riot report have to be studied along with other sources-newspapers, unofficial accounts, legal records and oral sources