

CHAPTER 10

THEME TEN

Colonialism and the Countryside

Exploring Official Archives

1. Bengal and the Zamindars

- Colonial rule was first established in Bengal.
- In Bengal earliest attempts were made to reorder rural society and establish a new regime of land rights and a new revenue system.

An auction in Burdwan

- The Permanent Settlement had come into operation in 1793.
- The East India Company had fixed the revenue that each zamindar had to pay.
- The estates of those who failed to pay were to be auctioned to recover the revenue. (eg. *mahals* held by the Raja of Burdwan were being sold.)

The problem of unpaid revenue

- Over 75 per cent of the zamindaris changed hands after the Permanent Settlement.
- It was (Permanent Settlement), introduced by the British officials to resolve the problems of revenue
- By the 1770s, the rural economy in Bengal was in crisis, with recurrent famines and declining agricultural output.
- Officials felt that agriculture, trade and the revenue resources of the state could all be developed by encouraging investment in agriculture by securing rights of property and permanently fixing the rates of revenue demand.
- The Permanent Settlement was made with the *rajas* and *taluqdars* of Bengal.
- They were now classified as zamindars, and they had to pay the revenue demand that was fixed in perpetuity.
- In terms of this definition, the zamindar was not a landowner in the village, but a revenue Collector of the state.

- Zamindars had several (sometimes as many as 400) villages under them.
- In Company calculations the villages within one zamindari formed one revenue estate.
- The zamindar collected rent from the different villages, paid the revenue to the Company, and retained the difference as his income.
- He was expected to pay the Company regularly, failing which his estate could be auctioned.

Why zamindars defaulted on payments

- Zamindars regularly failed to pay the revenue demand and unpaid balances accumulated.

The reasons for this failure were various.

1. The Company pegged the revenue demand high
2. This high demand was imposed in the 1790s, a time when the prices of agricultural produce were depressed, making it difficult for the *ryots* to pay their dues to the zamindar.
3. The revenue was invariable, regardless of the harvest, and had to be paid punctually (*Sunset Law, if payment did not come in by sunset of the specified date, the zamindari was liable to be auctioned.*)
4. The Permanent Settlement initially limited the power of the zamindar to collect rent from the *ryot* and manage his zamindari.

zamindars

- The Company subdue their authority and restrict their autonomy.
- The zamindars' troops were disbanded, customs duties abolished, and their "*cutcheries*" (courts) brought under the supervision of a Collector appointed by the Company.

- Zamindars lost their power to organise local justice and the local police.
- Over time the collectorate emerged as an alternative centre of authority, severely restricting what the zamindar could do.

The rise of the *jotedars*

- While many zamindars were facing a crisis at the end of the eighteenth century, a group of rich peasants were consolidating their position in the villages.
- Location - Dinajpur district in North Bengal
- By the early nineteenth century, *jotedars* had acquired vast areas of land
- They controlled local trade as well as moneylending, exercising immense power over the poorer cultivators of the region.
- A large part of their land was cultivated through sharecroppers (*adhiyars* or *bargadars*) who brought their own ploughs, laboured in the field, and handed over half the produce to the *jotedars* after the harvest.
- The power of *jotedars* was more effective than that of zamindars.
- Unlike zamindars who often lived in urban areas, *jotedars* were located in the villages and exercised direct control over a considerable section of poor villagers.
- The *jotedars* were most powerful in North Bengal
- In some places they were called *haoladars*, elsewhere they were known as *gantidars* or *mandals*.
- Their rise inevitably weakened zamindari authority.

The zamindars resist (ingenious methods they used to retain their zamindaris.)

- Faced with an exorbitantly high revenue demand and possible auction of their estates, they devised ways of surviving the pressures.
- Fictitious sale and manipulating the auctions were some of the strategies
- Between 1793 and 1801 four big zamindaris of Bengal, including Burdwan, made *benami* purchases that collectively yielded as much as Rs 30 lakh. Of the total sales at the auctions, over 15 per cent were fictitious.
- By the beginning of the nineteenth century the depression in prices was over.
- Thus those who had survived the troubles of the 1790s consolidated their power.
- Rules of revenue payment were also made somewhat flexible.

- As a result, the zamindar's power over the villages was strengthened.
- It was only during the Great Depression of the 1930s that they finally collapsed and the *jotedars* consolidated their power in the countryside.

The Fifth Report

- Many of the changes we are discussing were documented in detail in a report that was submitted to the British Parliament in 1813.
- It was the fifth of a series of reports on the administration and activities of the East India Company in India.
- It contain petitions of zamindars and *ryots*, reports of collectors from different districts, statistical tables on revenue returns, and notes on the revenue and judicial administration of Bengal and Madras
- Due to the maladministration of the company, the British Parliament passed a series of Acts in the late eighteenth century to regulate and control Company rule in India.
- It forced the Company to produce regular reports on the administration of India and appointed committees to enquire into the affairs of the Company.
- The Fifth Report was one such report produced by a Select Committee.
- It became the basis of intense parliamentary debates on the nature of the East India Company's rule in India.

2. The Hoe and the Plough

In the hills of Rajmahal

- Buchanan (an employee of the British East India Company) travelled through the Rajmahal hills in the early nineteenth century
- Buchanan's journal gives us tantalising glimpses of the hill folk of Rajmahal hills in the early nineteenth century.
- These hill folk were known as Paharias.
- They lived around the Rajmahal hills, subsisting on forest produce and practising shifting cultivation.
- They cleared patches of forest by cutting bushes and burning the undergrowth.
- On these patches, enriched by the potash from the ash, the Paharias grew a variety of pulses and millets for consumption.
- They scratched the ground lightly with hoes, cultivated the cleared land for a few years, then left it fallow so that it could recover its fertility, and moved to a new area.

- From the forests they collected *mahua* (a flower) for food, silk cocoons and resin for sale, and wood for charcoal production.
- Activities of the Paharias – as hunters, shifting cultivators, food gatherers, charcoal producers, silkworm rearers
- They considered the entire region as their land, the basis of their identity as well as survival; and they resisted the intrusion of outsiders.
- With their base in the hills, the Paharias regularly raided the plains where settled agriculturists lived.
- As settled agriculture expanded, the area under forests and pastures contracted.
- This sharpened the conflict between hill folk and settled cultivators.
- In the 1770s the British embarked on a brutal policy of extermination, hunting the Paharias down and killing them.
- Santhals were pouring into the area, clearing forests, cutting down timber, ploughing land and growing rice and cotton.
- As the lower hills were taken over by Santhal settlers, the Paharias receded deeper into the Rajmahal hills.
- If Paharia life was symbolised by the hoe, which they used for shifting cultivation, the settlers came to represent the power of the plough.
- The battle between the hoe and the plough was a long one.
- The Paharias refused to cut forests, resisted touching the plough, and continued to be turbulent.
- The Santhals, by contrast, appeared to be ideal settlers, clearing forests and ploughing the land with vigour.
- The Santhals were given land and persuaded to settle in the foothills of Rajmahal.
- By 1832 a large area of land was demarcated as Damin-i-Koh.
- This was declared to be the land of the Santhals.
- They were to live within it, practise plough agriculture, and become settled peasants.
- The land was separated from both the world of the settled agriculturists of the plains and the Paharias of the hills.
- After the demarcation of Damin-i-Koh, Santhal settlements expanded rapidly.
- From 40 Santhal villages in the area in 1838, as many as 1,473 villages had come up by 1851.
- Over the same period, the Santhal population increased from a mere 3,000 to over 82,000.
- As cultivation expanded, an increased volume of revenue flowed into the Company's coffers.
- When the Santhals settled on the peripheries of the Rajmahal hills, the Paharias resisted but were ultimately forced to withdraw deeper into the hills.
- The Santhals, gave up their earlier life of mobility and settled down, cultivating a range of commercial crops for the market, and dealing with traders and moneylenders.

The Santhals: Pioneer settlers

- Location - Ganjuria Pahar (part of the Rajmahal ranges)
- The frontiers of cultivation here had been extended by the Santhals.
- They had moved into this area around 1800, displaced the hill folk who lived on these lower slopes, cleared the forests and settled the land.
- The Santhals, however, soon found that the land they had brought under cultivation was slipping away from their hands.
- The state was levying heavy taxes on the land that the Santhals had cleared, moneylenders (*dikus*) were charging them high rates of interest

How did the Santhals reach the Rajmahal hills?

- The Santhals had begun to come into Bengal around the 1780s.
- Zamindars hired them to reclaim land and expand cultivation, and British officials invited them to settle in the Jangal Mahals.
- Having failed to subdue the Paharias and transform them into settled agriculturists, the British turned to the Santhals.
- By the 1850s, the Santhals rebelled against zamindars, moneylenders and the colonial state, in order to create an ideal world for themselves where they would rule.
- It was after the Santhal Revolt (1855-56) that the Santhal Pargana was created, carving out 5,500 square miles from the districts of Bhagalpur and Birbhum.
- The colonial state hoped that by creating a new territory for the Santhals and imposing some special laws within it, the Santhals could be conciliated.

3. A Revolt in the Countryside

The Bombay Deccan

- Through the nineteenth century, peasants in various parts of India rose in revolt against moneylenders and grain dealers.
- One such revolt occurred in 1875 in the Deccan.

Account books are burnt

- The movement began at Supa, a large village in Poona (present-day Pune) district.
- It was a market centre where many shopkeepers and moneylenders lived.
- On 12 May 1875, *ryots* from surrounding rural areas gathered and attacked the shopkeepers, demanding their *bahi khatas* (account books) and debt bonds.
- They burnt the *khatas*, looted grain shops, and in some cases set fire to the houses of *sahukars*.
- Terrified of peasant attacks, the *sahukars* fled the villages, very often leaving their property and belongings behind.
- As the revolt spread, British officials saw the spectre of 1857.
- Police posts were established in villages to frighten rebellious peasants into submission.
- It took several months to bring the countryside under control.

A new revenue system

- As British rule expanded from Bengal to other parts of India, new systems of revenue were imposed.
- The Permanent Settlement was rarely extended to any region beyond Bengal.

Reasons

- **First**: As after 1810 agricultural prices rose, increasing the value of harvest produce, and enlarging the income of the Bengal zamindars.
- So in territories annexed in the nineteenth century, temporary revenue settlements were made to maximise its land revenue.
- **Second**: In Maharashtra when British officials set about formulating the terms of the early settlement in the 1820s, they operated with some of the ideas of the famous economist of 1820s David Ricardo.

Ricardo's theory

- A landowner should have a claim only to the "average rent" that prevailed at a given time.
- 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.

Ricardo's theory in context of Bengal

- In Bengal the zamindars seemed to have turned into rentiers, leasing out land and living on the rental incomes.
- It was therefore necessary, the British officials now felt, to have a different system.

Ryotwari settlement

- The revenue system that was introduced in the Bombay Deccan came to be known as the *ryotwari* settlement.
- Unlike the Bengal system, the revenue was directly settled with the *ryot*.
- The average income from different types of soil was estimated, the revenue-paying capacity of the *ryot* was assessed and a proportion of it fixed as the share of the state.
- The lands were resurveyed every 30 years and the revenue rates increased.
- Therefore the revenue demand was no longer permanent.

Revenue demand and peasant debt

- The first revenue settlement in the Bombay Deccan was made in the 1820s.
- The revenue that was demanded was so high that in many places peasants deserted their villages and migrated to new regions.
- By the 1830s, Prices of agricultural products fell sharply after 1832 and did not recover for over a decade and a half.
- This meant a further decline in peasants' income.
- At the same time the countryside was devastated by a famine that struck in the years 1832-34.
- Unpaid balances of revenue mounted.
- In such years revenue could rarely be paid without a loan from a moneylender.
- But once a loan was taken, the *ryot* found it difficult to pay it back.
- As debt mounted, and loans remained unpaid, peasants' dependence on moneylenders increased.
- By the 1840s, officials were finding evidence of alarming levels of peasant indebtedness everywhere.
- By the mid-1840s there were signs of an economic recovery of sorts.

- The revenue demand was moderated to encourage peasants to expand cultivation.
- After 1845 agricultural prices recovered steadily.

Then came the cotton boom

- In 1857 the Cotton Supply Association was founded in Britain, and in 1859 the Manchester Cotton Company was formed.
- Their objective was “to encourage cotton production in every part of the world suited for its growth”.
- India was seen as a country that could supply cotton to Lancashire if the American supply dried up.
- It possessed suitable soil, a climate favourable to cotton cultivation, and cheap labour.
- When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, raw cotton imports from America fell to less than three per cent of the normal
- These developments had a profound impact on the Deccan countryside.
- The *ryots* in the Deccan villages suddenly found access to seemingly limitless credit.
- They were being given Rs 100 as advance for every acre they planted with cotton.
- While the American crisis continued, cotton production in the Bombay Deccan expanded.
- Between 1860 and 1864 cotton acreage doubled.
- By 1862 over 90 per cent of cotton imports into Britain were coming from India.
- But these boom years did not bring prosperity to all cotton producers.
- Some rich peasants did gain, but for the large majority, cotton expansion meant heavier debt.

Credit dries up

- By 1865, the Civil War ended, cotton production in America revived and Indian cotton exports to Britain steadily declined.
- Export merchants and *sahukars* in Maharashtra were no longer keen on extending long-term credit.
- While credit dried up, the revenue demand increased.
- The first revenue settlement, as we have seen, was in the 1820s and 1830s.
- Now it was time for the next.

- And in the new settlement, the demand was increased dramatically: from 50 to 100 per cent.
- Yet again they (peasants) had to turn to the moneylender. But the moneylender now refused loans.
- He no longer had confidence in the *ryots*’ capacity to repay.

The experience of injustice

- Moneylending was certainly widespread before colonial rule and moneylenders were often powerful figures.
- A variety of customary norms regulated the relationship between the moneylender and the *ryot*.
- One general norm was that the interest charged could not be more than the principal.
- This was meant to limit the moneylender’s exactions and defined what could be counted as “fair interest”.
- Under colonial rule this norm broke down as investigated by the Deccan Riots Commission
- The *ryots* complained of moneylenders manipulating laws and forging accounts.
- Moneylenders used a variety of other means to short-change the *ryot*: they refused to give receipts when loans were repaid, entered fictitious figures in bonds, acquired the peasants’ harvest at low prices, and ultimately took over peasants’ property.
- Deeds and bonds appeared as symbols of the new oppressive system.
- Over time, peasants came to associate the misery of their lives with the new regime of bonds and deeds.
- They were made to sign and put thumb impressions on documents, but they did not know what they were actually signing.
- But they had no choice because to survive they needed loans, and moneylenders were unwilling to give loans without legal bonds.

4. The Deccan Riots Commission

- The Government of Bombay to set up a commission of enquiry to investigate into the causes of the riots.
- The commission produced a report that was presented to the British Parliament in 1878.

Exercise

Level – 1

1. The first Colonial rule was established in _____
(a) Bengal (b) Madras
(c) Bombay (d) Surat
2. The East India Company had fixed the revenue that each zamindar had to pay. The estates of those who failed to pay were to be auctioned to recover the revenue.
The above statement best describes which of the following revenue system
(a) Mansabdari System
(b) Permanent Settlement
(c) Ryotwari Settlement
(d) None of the above
3. Find the true statement with reference to Permanent Settlement in Bengal
(a) The zamindars were the landowners in the village
(b) The taluqdars were the revenue Collector of the state.
(c) There was a single village under each zamindar
(d) The Permanent Settlement was made with the rajas and *taluqdars* of Bengal.
4. In terms of Company calculations, one revenue estate consisted of
(a) villages within a province
(b) villages within the kingdom
(c) villages within one zamindari
(d) none of the above
5. The Permanent Settlement had come into operation in _____
(a) 1893
(b) 1814
(c) 1793
(d) 1799
6. Zamindars regularly failed to pay the revenue demand because which of the following reasons?
(a) High revenue demand pegged by the company
(b) The revenue was invariable, regardless of the harvest
(c) Limited the power of the zamindar to collect rent from the *ryot*
(d) All of the above

7. After the implementation of the Permanent Settlement, the Zamindar's *cutcherries* brought under the supervision of a Collector appointed by the Company.
The literal meaning of cutcherries is
(a) asset (b) land
(c) court (d) custom duty
8. Find the incorrect statement about jotedars
(a) The power of *jotedars* was more effective than that of zamindars.
(b) They were a group of rich peasants
(c) *Jotedars* were located in the villages
(d) The *jotedars* were the most powerful group in entire Bengal
9. Haoladars, gantidars or mandals are some of the other names of
(a) adhiyars (b) bargadars
(c) jotedars (d) zamindars
10. The zamindars collapsed completely during which of the following events?
(a) Great Depression of the 1930s
(b) Permanent Settlement
(c) Sunset Laws
(d) Emergence of rajas and taluqdars of Bengal

Level – 2

11. Find the true statement about the Fifth Report produced by a Select Committee:
(a) It contain petitions of zamindars and *ryots*
(b) It forced the Company to produce regular reports on the trade and commerce of India
(c) It became the basic of intense parliamentary debates on the nature of the East India Company's rule in India.
(d) Both 1 and 3
12. Consider the following statements
They lived around the Rajmahal hills, subsisting on forest produce and practising shifting cultivation. They cleared patches of forest by cutting bushes and burning the undergrowth. On these patches, they grew a variety of pulses and millets for consumption.
The above statement best describes which of the following section of people
(a) Mahua (b) Paharias
(c) Santhals (d) Both a and b

13. The revenue system that was introduced in the Bombay Deccan came to be known as the
 (a) Ryotwari settlement.
 (b) Permanent settlement
 (c) Mansabdari
 (d) None of the above
14. Find the correct statement about the Ryotwari settlement
 (a) The revenue was directly settled with the *ryot*.
 (b) The revenue demand was permanent.
 (c) The lands were resurveyed every 30
 (d) Both a and c
15. **Assertion (A):** The Permanent Settlement was rarely extended to any region beyond Bengal
Reason (R): As British rule expanded from Bengal to other parts of India, new systems of revenue were imposed.
 (a) Both A and R are true, and R is the correct explanation of A.
 (b) Both A and R are true, but R is not the correct explanation of A.
 (c) A is true but R is false.
 (d) A is false but R is true.
16. By 1832, a large area of land was demarcated as Damin-i-Koh. This was declared to be the land of the _____
 (a) Santhals. (b) Paharias
 (c) Daiku (d) Peasants
17. The Santhals were given land and were persuaded to settle in the foothills of
 (a) Rajmahal hills
 (b) Chotanagpur
 (c) Vidhyan range
 (d) None of the above
18. The Government of Bombay set up a commission of enquiry to investigate into the causes of the _____
 (a) The Deccan Riots
 (b) Santhals rebellion
 (c) Paharias invasion
 (d) Daiku intrusion
19. Find the true statement with reference to the cotton production in India during the mid-nineteen century
 (a) The *ryots* in the Deccan villages witness the expansion of cotton production
 (b) The raw cotton imports from America to Britain fell to less than three per cent of the normal
 (c) By 1862 over 90 per cent of cotton imports into Britain were coming from India.
 (d) All of the above
20. Deeds and bonds appeared as symbols of the new oppressive system for which of the following section of people?
 (a) Moneylenders
 (b) Peasants
 (c) Ryots
 (d) Santhals

Answers

Level-1

1. (a) 2. (b) 3. (d) 4. (c) 5. (c) 6. (d) 7. (c) 8. (d) 9. (c) 10. (a)

Level-2

11. (d) 12. (b) 13. (a) 14. (d) 15. (a) 16. (a) 17. (a) 18. (a) 19. (d) 20. (b)

Explanations

Level – 1

1. a

2. b

3. d • The Permanent Settlement was made with the rajas and *taluqdars* of Bengal.
- They were now classified as zamindars, and they had to pay the revenue demand that was fixed in perpetuity.
 - In terms of this definition, the zamindar was not a landowner in the village, but a revenue Collector of the state.
 - Zamindars had several (sometimes as many as 400) villages under them.

4. c • In Company calculations the villages within one zamindari formed one revenue estate.
- The zamindar collected rent from the different villages, paid the revenue to the Company, and retained the difference as his income.

5. c

6. d zamindars

7. c • The zamindars' troops were disbanded, customs duties abolished, and their "*cutcheries*" (courts) brought under the supervision of a Collector appointed by the Company.

8. d • Unlike zamindars who often lived in urban areas, *jotedars* were located in the villages and exercised direct control over a considerable section of poor villagers.

- The *jotedars* were most powerful in North Bengal

9. c • In some places *jotedars* were called *haoladars*, elsewhere they were known as *gantidars* or *mandals*.

- In some places they were called *haoladars*, elsewhere they were known as *gantidars* or *mandals*.
- Their rise inevitably weakened zamindari authority.

10. a • During the Great Depression of the 1930s they collapsed and the *jotedars* consolidated their power in the countryside.

Level – 2

11. d • Due to the maladministration of the company, the British Parliament passed a series of Acts in the late eighteenth century to regulate and control Company rule in India.
- It forced the Company to produce regular reports on the administration of India and appointed committees to enquire into the affairs of the Company.
 - The Fifth Report was one such report produced by a Select Committee.
 - It became the basis of intense parliamentary debates on the nature of the East India Company's rule in India.

12. b

13. a

14. d • Unlike the Bengal system, the revenue was directly settled with the *ryot*.

- The average income from different types of soil was estimated, the revenue-paying capacity of the *ryot* was assessed and a proportion of it fixed as the share of the state.

- The lands were resurveyed every 30 years and the revenue rates increased.

- Therefore the revenue demand was no longer permanent.

15. a

16. a • By 1832 a large area of land was demarcated as Damin-i-Koh.

- This was declared to be the land of the Santhals.

17. a • Having failed to subdue the Paharias and transform them into settled agriculturists, the British turned to the Santhals.

- The Santhals, by contrast, appeared to be ideal settlers, clearing forests and ploughing the land with vigour.

- The Santhals were given land and persuaded to settle in the foothills of Rajmahal.

18. a • The Government of Bombay set up a commission of enquiry to investigate into the causes of the riots.

- The commission produced a report that was presented to the British Parliament in 1878.

19. d • When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, raw cotton imports from America fell to less than three per cent of the normal

- The *ryots* in the Deccan villages suddenly found access to seemingly limitless credit.

- Between 1860 and 1864 cotton acreage doubled.

- By 1862 over 90 per cent of cotton imports into Britain were coming from India.

20. b • Moneylenders used a variety of other means to short-change the *ryot*: they refused to give receipts when loans were repaid, entered fictitious figures in bonds, acquired the peasants' harvest at low prices, and ultimately took over peasants' property.

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