



Chapter

3

The Peasants and The Raj



In this chapter you will learn about :

- ➊ Colonial Agrarian Policies
- ➋ Commercialisation of Agriculture and Cultivation
- ➌ The Nij System
- ➍ Land Revenue Policies Under British
- ➎ The Indigo Revolt



The economic policies of the British Government in India brought about many changes in agriculture, industry and trade. Thus, the natural consequences of the British Rule were the economic exploitation of the country, ruin of the peasantry and the decline of trade and handicraft.

Land revenue was the amount paid by the farmers to the king. It formed the major part of the state's income. During the Mughal Period, the revenue was fixed as per the productivity of the land with concessions during floods and droughts. The land revenue was collected by **zamindars** or revenue collectors. These **zamindars** or revenue collectors were the intermediaries between the king and the farmers.

In return for the revenue paid to the king, the farmers got irrigation facilities like wells, tanks and canals provided by the king and maintained by the community.

Various land revenue systems came into practice across the Indian subcontinent. Besides, when large tracts of the countryside came under the British rule, certain crops which had greater commercial value came to be favoured for cultivation. As a result, indigo and tea in the earlier period and jute and tea in the later period

of colonial rule became the main commercial crops as they helped Britain maintain a healthy balance of trade. Usually, these crops were cultivated at the cost of food crops such as rice and wheat. The British adopted fraudulent contracts and oppression to force the peasants to cultivate these crops.

Responding to the tyrannical regime and its dictates, many peasant groups rose in revolt against the colonial authorities and those among their compatriots who were responsible for implementing colonial policies.

Colonial Agrarian Policies

The Dual System of Governance started by the British in Bengal aimed at increasing the revenue for the Company and buy fine cotton and silk cloth at cheap rates with that revenue. The urge to maximise revenue directly led to the infamous Bengal Famine of 1770 in which one-third of the population of Bengal perished and agriculture was abandoned in many parts of Bengal.

So, the EEIC embarked on a systematic approach to land revenue collection with a view to collect the maximum amount of revenue in a timely and predictable manner.

The EEIC introduced three main types of land



revenue settlements in India. The **Permanent Settlement** covered Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and the Benaras division of UP accounting for 19 per cent of the British territories. **The Ryotwari Settlement** covering Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai) presidencies accounting for 51 per cent of the company's territories. The **Mahalwari Settlement** accounted for 30 per cent of the company's territories covering United Provinces (large parts of modern day Uttar Pradesh), Central Provinces and Punjab.



(a) Lord Cornwallis (b) Thomas Munro introduced the Permanent Settlement and the Ryotwari Settlement in colonial India, respectively

Land Revenue Policies Under British

When the British gained Diwani of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa in 1765, they continued with the existing methods of revenue collection. However, till the 1770s, the company's income was too little to meet out the expenses. Hence, **Warren Hastings** introduced the **Ijardari system** according to which the right to collection was given to the highest bidder for the period of 5 years. But this system was a failure as land was auctioned periodically.

To ease revenue collection, the Company introduced three new revenue collection systems.

Permanent Settlement (1793)

In 1793, **Lord Cornwallis** introduced the scheme of **Permanent Settlement**. Under the scheme, the Company fixed the land revenues of Bengal and Bihar on a permanent basis. Later, Cornwallis extended it to Orissa, northern Madras (Chennai) and Varanasi.

Key Features of the Permanent Settlement

The revenue for the area was fixed permanently at the highest possible amount that can be derived from the land. The local zamindar was asked to collect the revenue from the farmers. The zamindar was made a landlord and from a tax collector, he became a hereditary landowner of huge areas of land. The farmer became the tenant of the zamindar and lost rights to his land. Every year, the zamindar had to pay the fixed amount by a certain date. He could extract any amount from the farmers, pay the fixed revenue amount and keep the surplus amount with him. In case the zamindar was unable to extract enough money from the farmers, he himself had to pay very high dues and had to pay on time, even if the crops failed. In case of non-payment, his land was taken over and sold off to someone else.

Advantages of this system for the British

This system ensured them a fixed and regular income without taking the trouble to collect it from each and every farmer. The zamindars turned out to be firm supporters of the British as the rate of revenue was fixed and they could keep the surplus with themselves.

Disadvantages of this system for the farmers

The zamindars ill-treated the farmers to extract the revenue. The methods of cultivation remained backward and the productivity dropped with each passing year. The failure of monsoons and improper irrigation facilities forced many farmers to leave their lands and migrate to other regions. The farmers lost their rights to land and had to pay very high revenue even if the crop failed. To pay the revenue, the farmers often had to borrow money from moneylenders and were deeply indebted. It was very difficult for them to repay this debt.



Farmers irrigating fields



▼ Ryotwari Settlement (1820)

In the 1820s, **Thomas Munro** devised the **Ryotwari Settlement**. This system was introduced in parts of Madras and Bombay Presidencies. Under this system, the Company made a revenue settlement directly with the **ryot** or farmer. As long as the farmer paid the land revenue, he was recognised as the owner of the land. The revenue was fixed as per the fertility of the soil. This was a better system but the revenue, at half of the produce, was too high.

Key Features of the Ryotwari Settlement

The land revenue was not collected by the zamindars but was taken from the ryots or cultivators directly. The cultivators became the landowners and there was no intermediary for collecting the revenue. The revenue was very high and collected rigidly. The cultivator had to pay, even if his crops were destroyed. The land revenue was revised and increased after every 20 or 30 years. The system benefitted the government instead of the cultivators, as the Company itself became the zamindars. The peasants were overburdened with heavy taxes. They often had to take a loan to pay the land revenue.

▼ Mahalwari Settlement (1822)

The Mahalwari settlement of revenue was introduced in 1830 in the western Uttar Pradesh, parts of Madhya Pradesh and Punjab by **Holt Mackenzie**. In these areas, the land was commonly owned by a group of villages called **mahals**. The talukadar or the headman of each mahal was assigned the task of collecting and paying the revenue to the Company. The revenue demand was not fixed permanently and it could be revised periodically.

Key Features of the Mahalwari Settlement

The unit of revenue settlement was the village or the mahal and the revenue demand was made collectively on the village. The village headman or the **lambardar** was responsible for collecting

the revenue and making it over to the government. The lambardars fixed the revenue on the basis of the type of land, total land under cultivation, the customs and right of different agricultural groups. The estimated revenue of each plot within a village was added up to calculate the revenue that each village (Mahal) had to pay. The rate of revenue was to be revised periodically and not fixed permanently.

▼ Rural Indebtedness

High revenue demands led to devastation, as it led to poverty and the deterioration of agriculture in the 19th century. It forced the peasant to fall into the clutches of the money-lenders. If the peasant could not pay the money, his land was sold off. Gradually, more land passed into the hands of money-lenders, merchants, rich peasants and other wealthy classes.

The growing commercialisation also helped the money-lender-cum-merchant to exploit the cultivator. The peasant was forced to sell his produce just after the harvest and at whatever price he could get, as he had to meet in time the demands of the government, the landlord and the money-lender. Added to the above factors, the increase of population pressure on agriculture weighted on the peasants heavily.

Commercialisation of Agriculture and Cultivation

The term 'commercialisation' means production of something for sale in the market. Commercialisation of agriculture simply means that a peasant grows more than he and his family can consume, and he sells the rest in the market. It usually happens in an economy where the land revenue demand is in cash and not as a part of the produce. In India, after the various land revenue settlements were put in place, the commercialisation of agriculture took place. All the three land revenue settlements that we read about earlier were based on cash



payment. So the zamindar, lambardar or the ryot had to make enough provision for cash by selling a part of the produce in the market to be able to pay cash revenue.

Secondly, as a direct result of the land revenue settlements, there was also a rapid commercialisation of land. This means that the rights to own land did not depend on birth rights or any other traditional right but on the ability to pay revenue on time. In case of default, the land would be put up for auction. This was a fundamental change in the previous land systems that existed in India leading to much disruption in rural societies.

The third change was brought about in the rural areas by the forced cultivation of some commercial crops, sometimes referred to as **plantation crops**. Peasants were forced to cultivate high value commercial crops. These crops were not needed locally and were meant only for export. In the first phase of the colonial rule, **opium** and **indigo** were the main commercial crops. Opium was cultivated in western India and exported to China in exchange of Chinese tea. Indigo was cultivated mainly in the Bengal province and exported to Britain and Europe helping the Company make huge profits. America was the only other country that produced indigo in large quantity. However, after America became independent in 1776, supplies to Britain stopped. So the Company turned to its newly occupied colony of Bengal to ensure supplies of indigo.

From the middle of the 19th century, however, the demand for new types of commercial crops rose. Jute, cotton and rubber were now needed from India to meet the needs of the Industrial Revolution in England.

There were two important results of cultivation of commercial crops on peasants. First, since these were sold in international markets, their demand fluctuated widely. While in the good years, it benefitted the peasants to some extent, in the bad years the peasants suffered very

badly. In the absence of cash from cash crops and because of the fact that much of the land was set aside for non-food crops, the peasants did not have enough to eat. Famine, therefore, became a standing feature of the Indian subcontinent. So if the colonial rule began with the **Bengal Famine of 1770**, it also ended with the Bengal Famine of 1943.

Many peasants rebelled against such oppressive practices.

Case Study : Indigo Revolt Or Neel Bidroh

Indigo is a dye. It was a major item of international trade from the 16th to the late 19th century. Although it has other uses apart from dyeing (mainly medicinal uses), its usefulness as a dye was the main factor in indigo cultivation.

The trade of Indigo from Asia was controlled by the Portuguese in the middle of the 16th century. The Spanish established hundreds of commercial indigo establishments in their colonies in North America. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Central American indigo became a very successful product. In their Caribbean and North American colonies, the French and the British set up successful indigo industries. The Dutch set up their indigo industries in Java.

In the beginning of the 19th century, the Central American indigo trade collapsed because of a war between England and Spain. After the American Revolution, the British lost their control over North American indigo. Thus there was a crisis in the global indigo market.



You must know

The British textile industry was largely dependent on indigo produced in India. By the 13th century, Indian indigo was being used by cloth manufactures in Italy, France and Britain to dye cloth. However, only small quantity of Indian indigo reached the European market and its price was very high. European cloth manufactures, therefore, had to depend on another plant called **Woad**, which was easily available in Europe. However, European cloth manufacturers preferred Indian indigo rather than European woad, as indigo



produced a rich blue colour whereas woad produced a pale and dull blue colour.

Bengal was one of the surviving regions, unhindered by this sharp drop in global indigo production and trade. As labour was cheap in Bengal, indigo could be produced in large quantities.



An indigo plant

The EEIC began to look for ways to expand the area under indigo cultivation. The prospects of huge profits led many officials of the company to invest in indigo cultivation.

The Nij System

In the beginning, the planters adopted the **nij system** of cultivation, where the planters produced indigo on lands that they directly controlled, but soon they faced a number of problems.

Large areas of fertile lands for indigo cultivation were not available because the lands were already densely populated, and eviction of the tenants led to conflicts. Secondly, they could not even hire labour to work on indigo plantation, as the peasants were busy on their fields with their rice cultivation. Thirdly, from the same reasons, it was difficult to arrange for ploughs and bullocks as the peasants required these to work on their own fields. Thus, the planters failed to bring large areas of land under indigo cultivation.

The failure of the **nij** method led to its replacement by another method, which came to be known as the **ryot method**.

Ryot Method of Cultivation

Under the **ryot** method, a contract was signed between the **ryot** or the village headman and the planters. The **ryots** were given loans and forced to grow only indigo on at least 25 per cent of the area under their holding. Later, the planters informed the peasants that loans could be repaid only by supplying indigo to them at fixed rates.

Soon this system also resulted in a number of problems like:

- ❖ Peasants growing indigo on their fields got a very low price for the product. So they were not able to pay back the loan, which led them into the clutches of moneylenders. Large-scale oppressive measures were used, such as holding the cultivator and his family prisoners, burning his house, etc. This inhumane oppression of indigo cultivators forced them to revolt against the British.
- ❖ After growing indigo, the same land could not be sown again with rice, as the deep roots of indigo had already exhausted the fertility of the soil.
- ❖ The indigo planters advanced small sums of money to the peasants and forced them to enter into contracts to cultivate indigo in a part of their lands. The planters also took recourse to coercion by beating up, kidnaping, confining, burning and looting. Most of them maintained armed goons called **lathiyals** and were supported by the local police and favoured by local magistrates.

Case Study : Agrarian Revolts

Since farmers were not happy, a number of revolts took place. Most of these revolts were against heavy land revenues. In 1875, the Deccan riots took place in Pune and Ahmednagar districts. The farmers of Jessore (Bangladesh) revolted in 1883. The Moplah farmers of northern Kerala and Chuars of Bihar and Bengal revolted against the oppression let loose by the landowners.

Revolts by Religious Groups

Sometimes, religious groups that had risen from peasant background organised peasant revolts.

Sanyasi Revolt (1763-1800)

The Sanyasi Revolt took place in Bengal. It was organised by the Sanyasis or holy men against excessive revenues forced on the farmers.

Wahabi Movement (1830-1860)

In India, it was started under the leadership of Syed Ahmad of Rae Bareilly. Some Wahabis in Bengal organised a Wahabi Movement for the economic rights of farmers and artisans.



Faraizi Movement (1838-1848)

The Faraizi sect led a movement under Dadu Mian in Bengal. They called upon the peasants not to pay land revenue and not to grow indigo either.

Kuka Revolt (1866-1872)

The Kukas of Punjab turned a social and religious reform movement into an armed rebellion.

The Indigo Revolt

In 1859, ryots in Bengal refused to grow indigo, and refused to pay rents to the planters. At some places, they even attacked indigo factories and socially boycotted those peasants who worked for the planters. Ryots decided not to take any advances from the planters to sow indigo. In many villages, headmen who had been forced to sign indigo contracts mobilised the indigo peasants and fought against the indigo planters. Even zamindars went around the villages urging the ryots to resist the planters. In

September 1860, the peasants refused to grow indigo under duress.

The revolt started from a small village in Bengal, Govindapur in Nadia district, and the leadership was provided by Digambar and Bishambhar Biswas, ex-employees of the planters. They gave up indigo cultivation and when the planters sent lathiyals to attack their village, they fought back with the help of villagers. The indigo uprising soon spread to all parts of Bengal. The peasants even filed cases against the planters. They also boycotted other peasants who were still cultivating indigo. Ultimately, the planters could not withstand the collective might of the peasants and began shutting down factories. Indigo plantation at this time gradually moved to Bihar where as late as 1917 Mahatma Gandhi took up the cause of the indigo cultivators against the local planters in Champaran.

Terminology

Zamindar	: a landlord who used to collect tax
Agrarian	: related to agriculture
Mahalwari Settlement	: a system in which a village or estate collectively was responsible for paying the revenue
Ryot	: a cultivator

Recap

- ❖ Various land revenue systems came into practice across the Indian subcontinent.
- ❖ The Dual System of Governance started by the British in Bengal to increase the revenue.
- ❖ Some revenue settlements in British India were—Permanent settlement, Mahalwari settlement and Ryotwari settlement.
- ❖ Commercialisation of agriculture made the condition of the peasants worse.
- ❖ The peasants revolted against the British in which the Indigo revolt was prominent.

Evaluation Time

Objective Type Questions

A. Tick (✓) the correct option :

1. The British gained Diwani of Bihar, Bengal and Orrisa in :

(a) 1775

(b) 1785

(c) 1765

(d) 1795



2. The Permanent Settlement scheme was launched by :

(a) Lord Cornwallis	<input type="checkbox"/>	(b) Thomas Munro	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Holt Mackenzie	<input type="checkbox"/>	(d) none of these	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. The British textile industry was dependent on :

(a) cotton	<input type="checkbox"/>	(b) silk	<input type="checkbox"/>	(c) indigo	<input type="checkbox"/>	(d) satin	<input type="checkbox"/>
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4. In the beginning, the planters adopted :

(a) Mahalwari settlement	<input type="checkbox"/>	(b) Rayotwari settlement	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Permanent settlement	<input type="checkbox"/>	(d) Nij system	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. The Indigo Revolt took place in :

(a) 1849	<input type="checkbox"/>	(b) 1859	<input type="checkbox"/>	(c) 1855	<input type="checkbox"/>	(d) 1865	<input type="checkbox"/>
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B. Fill in the blanks :

1. The urge to maximise revenue directly led to the infamous _____ of 1770.
2. Warren Hastings introduced the _____ according to which the right to collection was given to the highest bidder for the period of _____.
3. In the Ryotwari system, the company made a revenue settlement directly with the _____.
4. The growing commercialisation also helped the _____, _____ to exploit the cultivator.
5. The _____ turned a social and religious reform movement into an armed rebellion.

C. State True or False :

1. The zamindars or revenue collectors were the intermediaries between the king and the farmers.
2. The Ryotwari system by Holt Mackenzie was introduced in parts of Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai) presidencies.
3. High revenue demands forced the peasants to fall into the clutches of moneylenders.
4. The Sanyasi Revolt took place in Bengal, was organised by the sanyasis against excessive revenues forced on the farmers.
5. Ryots decided to take advances from the planters to sow indigo.

D. Match the following :

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------|
| 1. Permanent settlement | (a) 1859 |
| 2. Mahalwari settlement | (b) 1770 |
| 3. Ryotwari settlement | (c) 1793 |
| 4. Bengal Famine | (d) 1820 |
| 5. Indigo Revolt | (e) 1822 |



Subjective Type Questions

E. Very short answer type questions :

1. Who introduced the permanent settlement?
2. Who devised the Mahalwari settlement in India and when?
3. Where was the Indigo Revolt started from?
4. What do you mean by commercialisation?
5. What was indigo used for?

F. Short answer type questions :

1. What was the permanent settlement?
2. Write the key features of the Mahalwari system.
3. What was a ryot?
4. Write a short note on commercialisation of agriculture.

G. Long answer type questions :

1. Explain the permanent settlement in detail.
2. Differentiate between the Mahalwari and Ryotwari systems.
3. What were the consequences of the three settlements introduced by the British?
4. What was the Nij System? Explain.
5. Give an account of the Indigo Revolt.



To Do Hour

Make a project on the condition of the peasants after the introduction of the three settlements.



Net Check

Browse the internet and know more about the Indigo Revolt.

<https://kids.britannica.com>indigorevolt>



Think and Answer

Why did the British adopt different land revenue settlement in different parts of the Indian subcontinent?

