
THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ZAMINDARI SYSTEM IN TAMIL NADU-WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE RAMANATHAPURAM AND SIVAGANGA DISTRICTS

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Abstract

A Zamindar in the Indian subcontinent was an autonomous or semi autonomous ruler of a province who were originally known as Bhumipatis. They accepted the suzerainty of the Emperor of Hindustan and were converted into Zamindars by the Mughals and later the British. The title Zamindar as they held enormous amount of land and ruled over peasants. The Mughal Empire Zamindars belonged to the nobility and formed the ruling class. During the colonial era, the permanent Settlement consolidated what became known as the Zamindari system. The British rewarded supportive zamindars by recognising them as Princes. The British East India Company established themselves in India by first becoming Zamindars of three villages of Calcutta, Sultani and Govindpur. Later they acquired the 24 Parganas and in 1765 got control of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Later in 1857 the British Crown was established as the Sovereign. Zamindari System was introduced by Cornwallis in 1793 through the Permanent Settlement Act. It was introduced in the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Varanasi also known as Permanent Settlement System. Zamindars were recognized as the owner of the lands. Zamindars were given the rights to collect the taxes from the peasants. While the Zamindars became the owners of the land, the actual farmers became tenants. The introduction of Zamindari System, by the British East India Company, was not done in a vacuum. There was already a system in place and the company only improved upon it because any radical change would create social unrest and might lead to their ouster from India.

This was achieved by the British company through the simple formula of converting the traditional leaders of the palayams into Zamindars.

This was very clever on the part of the British because Zamindars were vested with revenue administration alone and they were deprived of the earlier power of maintaining their own army. The relevant portion of the Proclamation of Edward Clive, the Governor of Madras, explains this principle of Zamindari System in the palayams, controlled by the Poligars. In the confident expectation of reclaiming the people of the Southern Provinces from the habits of predatory warfare and in the hope of reducing them to resume the act of peace and agriculture, the Governor in Council announces to them that it is the intention of the Government to establish a Permanent Assessment of revenue upon the principles of Zamindari tenures, which assessment, being once fixed, shall be liable to no change at anytime to come, that the Poligars becoming, by these means, Zamindars of their hereditary estates, will be exempted from all military service. Thus the once proud Poligars were reduced to the level of mere revenue administrators under the Zamindari System. The system was abolished during land reforms in East Pakistan today Bangladesh in 1950. In India 1951 and West Pakistan today Pakistan in 1959. The Zamindari system was finally abolished by law after Independence in 1951, the First amendment of the Constitution of India amended Article 19 and Article 31. The right to property was modified to allow to legislate on ending the Zamindari System.

Key words: British East India Company, Poligar System, Land Revenue Village System

Objectives of the Study

- The study analyse the British East India company abolished the Poligar System
- To analyse the historical background of the Zamindari System
- To analyse the Zamindari system

Sources

This research paper is mainly based on primary and Secondary sources have been consulted. The primary sources constitute Archival Records, Government Records. Besides, Secondary sources were also consulted for the construction of the study.

Methodology

The study is mainly based on both Primary and Secondary data. The Historical method of the investigation has been resorted to the writing of this paper. The Analytical method and Descriptive method have been followed depending upon the context.

Introduction

The introduction of Zamindari System, by the British East India Company, was not done in a vacuum. There was already a system in place and the Company only improved upon it because any radical change would create social unrest and might lead to their ouster from India. The British generally adopted the extant Zamindari system of revenue collection in the north of the country. They recognised the Zamindars as landowners and proprietors as opposed to the Mughal Government and in return required them to collect taxes. Although some Zamindars were present in the south, they were not so in large numbers and the British administration used the ryotwari (cultivator) method of collection, which involved selecting certain farmers as being land owners and requiring them to remit their taxes directly. The Zamindars of Bengal were influential in the development of Bengal. They played pivotal part during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857.

The British continued the tradition of bestowing both royal and noble titles to zamindars who were loyal to the paramount. The title of Raja, Maharaja, Rai Saheb, Rai Bahadur, Rao, Nawab, Khan Bahadur were bestowed to princely state rulers and to many zamindars from time to time. According to an estimate in the Gazetteer of India, there were around 2000 ruling chiefs holding the royal title of Raja and Maharaja which included the rulers of princely states and several large chiefdoms. This numbers increases tenfold if Zamindar/Jagirdar chiefs with other non royal but noble title are taken into count.

Since land revenue administration is related to the village structure, it is worth examining the village system in Tamil Nadu. The village in Tamil Nadu formed a separate Community, a self-dependent and largely self-supporting social system¹. The village, as a community, demands closer scrutiny. Tonnies, the sociologist, considered social formations as either GEMEINSCHAFT (Community) or as GESELLSCHAFT (Society). According to him, Community or Gemeinschaft refers to all forms of relationships, which are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion and continuity in time. In other words, Community is founded on man, conceived in his wholeness rather than in one or another of the roles,

taken separately, that he may hold in a social order². The classic example of a community is the family in which emotional bonding and personal intimacy are palpable. This emotional bonding is extended to a village because a village is an assemblage of families and these families are either related to each other through blood or they had been staying in the village for along period. The classic example of Gesellschaft or society is a modern organization, which Max Weber conceptualized as Bureaucracy, in which members are subject to impersonal relationship and all are governed by the same impersonal law.

In a village system, every one was known to everyone and he could get help from anybody in the village community. But in a factory system, everyone was a stranger because workers were drawn from different villages. In fact, there was a law against combination of workers to fight for fairworking conditions in England at the time of Industrial Revolution. In the absence of union, the workers were compelled to demand the intervention of the Government. This was the beginning of Welfare State and with the introduction of a Welfare State, the tax burden also increased.

Among the various sources of income, available to the Government in ancient Tamil Nadu, land revenue formed the major source of income. Since majority of people in the ancient Tamil Nadu, were engaged in agriculture, the Government of the day also attached a lot of importance to agriculture and provided irrigational facilities to the agricultural population in order to gain more revenue from land.

Southern districts of Madurai, Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram formed part of the territory of the First Pandyan Empire, from the Seventh Century to the Eleventh Century. The Pandyas found land revenue to be the main source of income for the Kingdom. Dr.Kanakasabhai describes in the revenue administration in the Pandya Kingdom, in his book, "The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago". If land was undervalued, then the King would suffer loss of revenue. On the other hand, if the land were to be overvalued, then the tax-paying subjects would be excessively taxed and they would suffer. As suggested earlier tax collection must be like the bee collecting the honey, without hurting the flower. In order to bring about such equitable taxation, land must be assessed. The Pandyas are credited with the classification of land on the basis of the fertility of the soil and the nature of the crop³. It is interesting to note that the one sixth of the produce, by the Pandyas, synchronised with the prescription of Manu, in the Dharmasastras, that the King could claim one sixth of the produce⁴. The land tax was paid, either cash or in kind. The mode of payment of land tax was left to the option of the tax payer.

During the period of the Imperial Pallavas, between Seventh Century and Nineth Century, the term "Puravupon" was used to refer to the land tax. Pallava inscriptions reveal that *Puravupon* was the tax paid by the agriculturists to the King and it was in cash. In other words, it was a custom that King was entitled to a share of the produce of the land. 'Adai' was another term, used to refer to the King's share of the land produce. The term, 'Adainilam' refers to the stretches of cultivable land which comes under the jurisdiction of the Sovereign. Incidentally, this term also implies that the King owns the land and hence he is entitled to a share of the produce of the land. The process of payment of Adai was known as 'Adaikoduttal'⁵.

The Chola period was also known for its famous local Government which was

characterized by different committees called Variams⁶. The most important Variam was the Eri Variam which maintained tanks and maintained the key water sources, used for irrigational purposes⁷. This Eri Variam collected a water cess, for executing its responsibility, towards water management⁸.

After Common Era 1279, the Chola Empire declined and it was replaced by the Second Pandya Empire. Southern Districts like Madurai, were under the sovereign authority of Pandyas. Inscriptions of the period provide plenty of information about the land revenue administration under the Pandyas. The land revenue, from the land under cultivation, was referred to by terms like, Kadamai, Antaravamend, Vaadaakkadamai etc⁹. The rate of assessment was based on the nature of soil¹⁰(Taram) and the type of crops raised (economic value of the output).

The glorious period of Tamil Kings, Pandya-Chola Kings, came to an end when there was a dispute over succession between Sundara Pandya and Vira Pandya and it paved the way for the invasion of Malik Kafur in Common Era 1311. After half a century of rule by the Delhi Sultanate, the Vijayanagar Empire emerged and Kumara Kampana wrested Madurai from the Muslims in the year Common Era 1371¹¹. Madurai was incorporated into the Vijayanagar Empire. Vijayanagar Empire appointed a Nayak to rule Madurai on behalf of the Empire. Soon the Nayaks became Independent of the empire and ruled Madurai and the southern districts like Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli as *de facto* rulers. The rule of the Nayaks extended upto the presentday Coimbatore and Salem. The Vijayanagar Empire, represented by the Nayaks in Madurai, was credited with a well-planned, land revenue system.

Viswanatha Nayak organized his kingdom into Palayams. The territorial boundaries and revenue jurisdiction were well defined in order to avert inter-palayam conflicts. Sometimes, the jurisdiction of the Palayam would go beyond the assigned territorial limits if the Poligar had to defend the rights of villages in the Crown land or Circar land. Since the Poligars were entrusted with the responsibility of police and revenue functions, they combined in themselves the functions of a Jagirdar and a Zamindar. Poligars were also required to render military service, if required by the Nayak¹².

The Mughals replaced the Nayaks in 1736 and soon the Nawab of Arcot became Independent¹³. The Carnatic, consisting of Tirunelveli, Ramanathapuram, Madurai, Tiruchirappalli, Tanjore, South Arcot, Chengalpet and North Arcot in Tamil Nadu and Nellore and Chittoor today in Andhra Pradesh, came under the control of the Nawab of Arcot¹⁴. The Nawabs also introduced some innovations in the land revenue administration. Since the Nawabs were continuously at war, they did not find time for the survey of land. Hence, they adopted a system called Amani System in which the tax was fixed without conducting a land survey and without assessing the quality of land and its possible yield capacity. They provided a standard deduction called Swatanthiram according to which $6\frac{1}{4}$ Kalams were retained by the cultivator, for every 100 Kalams. After this standard deduction, half of the produce was appropriated by the Nawab. Another innovation, introduced by the Nawab, in land revenue administration was the office of Amildars. The Nawab persisted with the Nayak division of land into Crown lands and Palayams. Amildars, who were basically contractors of revenue, collected the land tax. In some cases, the Nawab rented the villages, under the Crown land, to wealthy speculators. As in the

days of the Nayaks, income from Poligars, in the form of Peshcush, was never consistent because the Poligars dodged payment whenever there was a weak Nawab.

The advent of Europeans, especially the advent of British East India Company, opened a new chapter in the history of land revenue administration in Tamil Nadu. Europeans were always attracted towards India, for several factors like enormous supply of commodities like pepper, which were in great demand in European markets, cheap labour etc. This was called the Carrying Trade and it prevailed much before the Industrial Revolution in England. The invention of Mariners' Compass, better maps, combined with the missionary zeal of the Christian Church, motivated the Europeans to undertake geographical discoveries and later Colonisation¹⁵. Portuguese were the first European power to enter India when Vasco da Gama reached the Malabar Coast on May 20 1498¹⁶. It is interesting to record that the first European Coloniser was welcomed by the Zamorin of Calicut, just as the American settlers were welcomed by the native population of America, the Red Indians.

The Portuguese established themselves on the West Coast of India. Later their influence spread to San Thome where St. Thomas was buried, Porto Novo and Nagapattinam. On the West Coast, when the Paravas were harassed by the Muslims, they appealed to the Portuguese for help. When the Portuguese defeated the Muslim forces, Paravas, in thousands, became Christians. Their hold over the Pearl Fishery Coast led to the emergence of Tuticorin as a sea port. Soon the Portuguese were followed by other European Powers. The most successful of all the European Powers was the British Company. This was mainly due to the successive Governments in Britain, continuously supporting this commercial venture, which later led to political annexation. The French, who joined the race for colonies in India, were the last to land in India and they also posed the strongest resistance to the growing influence of the British Company, resulting in the three Carnatic Wars (1746-1748, 1749-1754 and 1757-1761). The main reason for the French failure against the British was mainly due to the royal support from France not being continuous and sustained, as it was in the case of the British Company.

The interesting thing about the Carnatic Wars was that these two powers did not clash directly with each other. They were engaged in the Carnatic wars on behalf of Indian Princes, who were claiming the right to be the Nawab of Carnatic. In other words, they were fighting a proxy war, as agents of the Indian Princes. Ultimately the British Company won the Carnatic wars and emerged as the supreme power in the Carnatic. The irony of the Carnatic wars was that the Company fought for the cause of the House of Wallahs but in 1801, the Nawab of Arcot was totally replaced by the British Company.

This foreign character of the British Company made it difficult for the alien government to collect land revenue from the Poligars¹⁷. The only way out was to militarily conquer the Poligars¹⁸. The Poligars also, at this point of time under study, were planning to militarily oust the alien, Government from the Indian Subcontinent¹⁹. As far as the oppressive tax structure was concerned, except in the ancient period when taxation was based on custom and tradition and therefore, more voluntary, it was oppressive in the period of Pandyas and Cholas, as explained earlier, it was oppressive under the Nayaks, it was oppressive under the Nawab of Arcot and it was oppressive under the British

Company also. But it was more unacceptable under the Company because it was a demand from a foreign company. The result was the outbreak of the South Indian Rebellion of 1800-1801, long before the much publicised Sepoy Mutiny in 1857. No where in India did the common people organised a fight for the Nationalist cause, so extensive and so violent a rebellion against the British Imperialism, as the patriots of the South especially the Poligar of Sivaganga, did in the memorable years of 1800-1801. As the Eighteenth Century advanced towards the end, the clouds of horror, wrought by the alien power, thickened and the masses moved swiftly into a climate of despair, bewilderment and revenge. Ridden with blatant evils, wanton obliteration of political institutions, bequeathed by the past and systematic spoliation of the material glories possessed by the land, British Imperialism, with its entire abhorrent ramifications, drifted into a violent collision with the might of organised peasants. This was the South Indian Rebellion the most widespread of all the liberations of the pre-Congress Epoch and the first and the last violent popular struggle of any formidable dimensions in the annals of British India²⁰.

The patriots fought bravely but lost the battle against the British Company. The outcome was predictable because the British were equipped with better weapons, made possible by the superior western technology of the day. Their job was made easier because of dissensions within the local forces. For example, the royalist group of Maravars did not like the emergence of Marudu Brothers because they belonged to the Agambadaiyar Caste (Servai). Hence the cunning Britishers declared PadamathurOyya Thevar as the King of Sivagangai. The royalist group dissociated themselves from the liberation movement and went to the extent of helping the Britishers against the Marudhus. The elevation of Oyya to a show of royal status misguided the people of Nalukottai, Okkur, Erakur, Partimangalam and Paghinery and they deserted the camp of Marudhus²¹.

After the ruthless execution of rebels, Edward Clive, the Governor of Madras, issued a Proclamation in which he asserted the invincible power of the Company and warned the people against the delusion of opposing the British might²². "The Right Honourable Governor in Council regrets that the desperate resistance to the British troops, should have been attended with so great a loss of lives of the deluded inhabitants"²³.

The Proclamation of the Governor then went on to address the basic reasons for the outbreak of the South Indian Rebellion of 1801. The main reason was the unceremonious way of deposing the Poligars, who had defaulted on the payment of Peshcush, to the British Company²⁴. The Poligars were highly esteemed by the people because their eminence was due to the sanction of custom. When customary privileges of the Poligars were trivialised by the imperious acts of arrogance by the alien government, the people deemed it an insult to the customs of the land. Hence the Proclamation made amends to the past mistakes and proclaimed a general amnesty to all the Poligars and rebels except the Marudhus and rebel leaders who were actively involved in the Rebellion²⁵. The cruel execution of Marudhus and their close associates were considered exemplary enough to dissuade others from ever contemplating on insurrection²⁶.

Having firmly established the invincible power of the British Company, the Proclamation of the Governor sought to strike a balance between honouring customary practices of the land and the emasculation of the Poligrars in such a way that no uprising

would be realisable in future. Hence the Governor wisely retained the customary institution of Poligars but without military obligations²⁷. This was achieved by the British Company through the simple formula of converting the traditional leaders of the palayams into Zamindars. This was very clever on the part of the British because Zamindars were vested with revenue administration alone and they were deprived of the earlier power of maintaining their own army. The relevant portion of the Proclamation of Edward Clive, the Governor of Madras, explains this principle of Zamindari System in the palayams, controlled by the Poligars. "In the confident expectation of reclaiming the people of the Southern Province from the habits of predatory warfare and in the hope of reducing them to resume the act of peace and agriculture, the Governor in Council announces to them that it is the intension of the Government to establish a PERMANENT ASSESSMENT OF REVENUE upon the principles of ZAMINDARI TENURES, which assessment, being once fixed, shall be liable to no change at anytime to come, that the Poligars becoming, by these means, Zamindars of their hereditary estates, will be exempted from all military service". Thus the once proud Poligars were reduced to the level of mere revenue administrators under the Zamindari System²⁸.

Conclusion

Unlike the autonomous or frontier Chiefs, the hereditary status of the Zamindar class was circumscribed by the Mughals, and the heir depended to a certain extent on the pleasure of the sovereign. Heirs were set by descent or a times even adoption by religious law. Under the British Empire, the Zamindars were to be subordinate to the Crown and not act as hereditary lords, but at times family politics was at the heart of naming an heir. At times, Cousin could be named an heir with closer family relatives present, a lawfully wedded wife could inherit the Zamindari if the ruling Zamindar named her as an heir. The Zamindari system was abolished during Land reforms in East Pakistan today Bangladesh in 1950. India in 1951 and West Pakistan today Pakistan in 1959.

The Zamindari system was mostly abolished in Independent India soon after its creation with the First amendment of the Constitution of India which amended the Right to Property as shown in Article 19 and 31. The East Pakistant (Bangladesh) Acquisition the Tenancy Act of 1950 had a similar effect of ending the system.

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