

## **THE RYOTWARI SYSTEM OF BRITISH ADMINISTRATION IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY**

By

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### **Abstract**

*Land Revenue is the principal source of finance for Company administration in India. In order to bring about stability in agriculture, the British introduced land settlement in 1793. In Bengal and neighbouring areas "Permanent settlement" was introduced. The settlement raised the status of revenue collectors to that of private landlords. It fixed land revenue in perpetuity. This was called the Zamindari System. Another land system was evolved for a large part of Bombay and Madras. This system is called "Ryotwari system". According to this system, each peasant holding a plot of land was recognized as the landlord and made directly responsible to the state for the annual payment of land revenue. The Ryotwari system was vigorously implemented in the Madras Presidency during the administration of Governor Munroe (1820-1827). This system reduced the assessment to one-third of produce. The Government adopted the provisions of the system strictly and collected the tax regularly even during the time of famine, droughts, floods, etc. Due to practical difficulties, this system was failed.*

**Keywords:** *ryotwari system, land revenue, company administration, british india, government, madras presidency, landlord, tenants.*

### **Introduction**

Land revenue was a principal source of finance for Company administration in India. The twenty years struggle between the French and the English ended by the Peace of Paris in 1764. The settlement of Pondicherry and a few other places were restored to the

French. The English remained supreme in Southern India. Mohamed Ali was the Nawab of the Carnatic. Nominally Mahomed Ali was the Dewan or revenue administrator as well as the Nizam or military governor. But the real power was the company. The military defense of the country was undertaken by the Company (Ramesh

Dutt 97-98). To accumulate the wealth of the country, the British got themselves directly involved in land revenue collection. To collect tax directly from the tenants, they adopted various methods such as Jagirdari, Amuldari, Mahalwari, Mirasdari, and Zamindari systems in various parts of India. Due to its abuse and other evils, these systems failed miserably.

Hence, the British administration decided to introduce a new system in land revenue collection that was Ryotwari System. During the period of Captain Munro, who was the Governor of Madras Presidency in 1820-1827, this system functioned effectively and it was made permanent. The Government Principle objected to the village system because the headmen were often very rapacious and untrustworthy and so that it was incompatible with the "Progressive improvement of the country" and especially with the "increase of revenue" which was the criterion of the progress. The result was that with the exception of the permanent zamindari land in the Northern Circars, Jaghire, and Ramnad comprising from one third to one-fourth of the Presidency, all the districts were settled on a ryotwari basis (Rajayyan 1982).

### **Objectives of the study**

The main objectives of this research paper are following.

1. To know the land Revenue policy of British Administration.
2. To understand the conditions of tenants under the British Administration.
3. To highlight the munro's principles of Ryotwari system.
4. To list out the effects of the Ryotwari system.

### **Importance of the study**

During British administration, they adopted various methods to collect land revenue from the tenants. The government had not implemented uniform system of revenue throughout India. For example, in southern India they adopted ryotwari settlement; in northern India they adopted Mahalwari settlement. In this study the researcher give importance to highlight the principles, merits and demerits of the ryotwari settlement.

### **Research Methodology**

This study is based on historical method.

### **Introduction of the Ryotwari System**

In Tamil country during the administration of Visvanathanayak,

who was the founder of the Nayak dynasty of Madurai in 1529. He recognized 72 palayams, which were ruled by poligars, who were under the control of Nayaks. They were permitted to maintain a standing army. Maintaining peace and collecting land tax in palayams and rendering military assistance to the Nayaks at the time of wars were the important duties of the poligars. They paid special attention to agriculture and collecting tax from the land. Based on the fertility of the soil they fixed the tax more or less. Among the revenue collected 1/3 was set apart for the personal expenditure of poligars. Again it was utilized for the welfare of the people. Another portion of the revenue was given to the Nayaks as a tribute. In this way, they administered the palayam before the consolidation of the powers of the British (Devanesan 105).

After Cornwallis reforms, the administration had wonderfully improved and the credit goes to the great administrators, such as Read, Munro, Graham, Hurdis, Wallace, Hodyson, Thakeracy, their first measures were directed towards the suppression of the power of the poligars. The large bands of armed followers plundered the country. There were 80 Poligars in the ceded districts,

who had 30,000 armed peons. Especially poligars in the Madura and Tinnevely districts fought desperately for their independence but were finally reduced to submission (Sreenivasa Raghava Iyengar 25).

After the success of the third Mysore war, the British brought Salem, Dindugul, and Malabar under their administrative's control (Ramesh Dutt 122). Due to the collection of land revenue directly from those districts, the resources of the country had been brought to the last stage of exhaustion by the previous misgovernment. Before ascertains the true revenue capabilities of several districts, wars and famine occurred. The districts of Chingleput, Salem, and Dindigul were divided into a number of mittahs and sold to the highest bidder. Most of the purchasers after pillaging the ryots, failed in the course of a year or two and the whole settlement collapsed. In the ceded districts especially, wherein the suppression of the ryotwari system introduced by Colonel Read afterward Sir Thomas Munro, the village leases were introduced (Sreenivasa Raghava Iyengar 25). But the result was not favourable though. The village leases functioned under unfavourable conditions of over-assessment, lack of co-operation between the authorities,

adverse seasons and depressed state of agriculture and industry (Sreenivasa Raghava Iyengar 25). It was expected that the village body would agree to the leases, but, as the assessment was high, the leases were taken to make mere speculators. The ryots impoverished and the administration was left in the hands of the Government. If a reduction in assessment had been effected, the system might have had a better chance, but the court of Directors now convinced that the village leases were a washout (Sreenivasa Raghava Iyengar 25). The same event also happened in Bengal, there the zamindars collected land revenue and they were responsible for the law and order in their jurisdiction. But they misused their position and power. They collected more revenue and paid less to the company. Further, the collected revenue was not properly deposited in the treasury and the revenue to the company was decreasing year by year (Jayapalan 25). Knowing the defect of the revenue collection, Lord Cornwallis decided to adopt a Permanent system to collect land tax from the landholders. So he introduced the Zemindari system in 1793 at Bengal. Later this was extended to Benares in 1895. In Madras, a Permanent Zemindari

Settlement was made in the Northern Circars elsewhere between 1802 and 1805, and then there was a change in the policy of the Directors (Ramesh Dutt 122). The task was entrusted to Captain Read and Captain Munro. The other lieutenants too assisted them in this endeavor. The result was the "Ryotwari System". After the experimental measure the Government implements the system in two provinces of India, first at Madras later at Bombay. The newly acquired territories of Salem and Baramahal in the Madras Presidency too had given top priority of this system (Ramesh Dutt 122).

In 1792, Col. Read appointment in Baramahal, during his period his main duty was the collection of revenue. At that time Tipu's Land Revenue administration could be described as heavy taxation, inadequate revenue to the state, administration inefficiency, department corruption, and misery of the ryots. Due to the survey of the land, Read and his assistants were tackling a very difficult problem because they had no uniform pattern. They varied from region to region. But Read in his experience of renting system, he knows how the renters oppressed the ryots. So he suggested to the government the effect of the

renting system. Later the Board of Revenue decided to establish a lease of five years.

Read requested the Government to postpone the introduction of the lease settlement until the survey was finished. His method was fourfold. Firstly to ascertain gross revenue as settled by Tipu three years ago, Secondly, his collection of the previous year, thirdly the ryots, statement of the produce on the ground checked by the estimates of his own people. Fourthly the officers made by patels and others well-acquainted with the state of every district for which they became candidate.

In the meantime, muntro adopted a policy to rent every village separately in order to benefit the inferior patels and inferior the chief Gours and headmen. In December 1796 Read proclaimed ryotwari system with 26 rules which were criticized by muntro earlier in November 1796. But later Murtro converted his faith to the ryotwari system which was declared in his letter on September in 1797 that was at that time least accepted by Reading. In 1799 when the fourth Mysore war broke out Read and muntro were recalled to the military duty. After the fourth Mysore war Read never returned to Baramahal. Later

muntro became the strongest champion of the ryotwari system in Madras (Nilamani Mukherjee 153).

In the Rayadrug taluk alone Sir Thomas Muntro states "nearly half the ryots had emigrated, most of the headmen were reduced due to poverty and many of them had been sent to jail. The substantial ryots, whose stock supported the agriculture of the villages were gone." Sir Thomas Munro calculated that out of Rs100, the value of the gross produce, the Government assessment was represented by 45-12-0 and the expenses of cultivation by Rs.40, leaving a profit liable to be turned into loss not only in bad seasons, which were by no means infrequent but also in good seasons, when the prices of produce fell. His opinion that to encourage the cultivation of land and give it a saleable value, the Government should be limited to one-third of the gross produce, and strongly urge the Government in 1807, to reduce the assessment on wet and dry land by 25 and on garden lands by 33 1/2 percent.

The Government while acquiescing in the justice of the recommendation was unable to sanction, because of consequence orders received from England for the remittance of an additional sum of a million sterling

annually, accompanied by a threat from the court of Directors. When sir Thomas Munro became Governor of Madras in 1822, he sanctioned the proposals made by himself for the reduction of assessment in the ceded districts and granted alleviations in other districts also, These measures, though averted the further decline of the country, had owing to adverse circumstance, little effect in improving the condition of the ryots. In 1833-34 occurred the famine known as the "Guntur famine", which though confined to a small area, was more destructive in its effects than that of 1876-78. The mortality and suffering caused by it were terrible. In the Guntur portion of the Kistna district from one-third to half of the whole population perished (Sreenivasa Raghava Iyengar 26).

Thomas Munro recorded his famous report recommending a Permanent Ryotwari Settlement of the ceded districts. He described the exorbitant revenue which he had raised, being 45 percent, of the gross produce; he recommended a reduction of this revenue by a quarter; and he proposed that the assessment should then be made permanent.

Hence, Thomas Munro recorded opinions that in the Permanent

Settlement of Ceded Districts, the rent of Government should be about 45 percent. To bring it to the proposed level would require remission of 25 percent, (Ramesh Dutt 1902) as may as seen from the following example:

**Table No. 1: Gross produce**

Total gross produce, say	100
Government share by the present assessment	45
Deduct 25 Percent, of assessment	11¼
Government share by proposed permanent assessment	33¾

#### Munro's Principle Recommendation of Ryotwari Settlement

- The settlement shall be Ryotwari.
- The amount of the settlement shall increase and decrease annually, according to the extent of land in cultivation.
- A reduction of 25 percent, on all land, shall be made in the survey rate of assessment.
- An additional reduction in the assessment of 8 percent, in all, be allowed on all lands watered by wells, or by water raised by machinery from rivers and nullahs; provided the cultivators keep the wells or embankments (Dirroas) in

repair at their own expense. A similar reduction shall be allowed on the lands watered by small tanks, wherever the cultivators agree to bear the expense of repairs (Romesh Chunder Dutt 137).

- Every Ryot shall be at liberty, at the end of every year, either to throw up a part of his land or to occupy more, according to his circumstances; but whether he throw up or occupy, he shall not be permitted to select, but shall take or reject proportional share of good and bad together (Romesh Chunder Dutt 137).
- Every Ryot, as long as he pays the rent of his land, shall be considered as the complete owner of the soil and shall be at liberty to let it to a tenant without any limitation as to rent, and to sell it as he pleases (Romesh Chunder Dutt 137).
- No remission shall be made, on ordinary occasions, for bad crops or other accidents, Should a failure occur which cannot be made good from the property or land of the defaulters, the village in which they happen shall be liable for them to the extent of 10 percent, additional on the rent of the remaining Ryots, but no further.
- All taxes on houses, shops, and professions, all duties, licenses and

etc, shall belong exclusively to Government. The Ryot on whose land house or shops may be built shall not be entitled to receive a higher rent from them than the equivalent of the survey rent of the ground which they occupy.

- The repairs of all tanks which are not rendered private property by an extra remission, or Desivundum Enaum, shall be made at the expense of Government.
- Tuccavie shall be gradually discontinued.
- Patails, Curnums, and all other village servants shall remain as heretofore under the Collector.
- Private creditors, who may distrain the property of Ryots, shall discharge the rent which may be due from such Ryots to Government, and shall give security for it before they begin the distraint (Romesh Chunder Dutt 138).

His methods were the first to ascertain the average produce of each field in a favourable season. Secondly to reduce its average produce during season good, bad and indifferent. Thirdly, to convert this average produce into money, and fourthly to divide this money in a certain proportion between the ryot and the government (Sraradaraju 1941).

Under the Ryotwari system, every registered holder of land is recognized as its proprietor and pays directly to the Government. He was at liberty to sub-let his property, or to transfer it by gift, sale, or mortgage. He cannot be ejected by Government, so long as he pays the fixed assessment, and has the option annually of increasing or diminishing his holding or of entirely abandoned it. In unfavourable seasons, remission of assessment was granted for entire or partial loss of produce. The assessment was fixed in money, and not year to year, except in those cases where water was supplied from a Government source of irrigation to convert dry land into wet or one into two-crop land (Rajayyan 1982).

The elaborate land revenue personnel with its Indian base were the direct result of the ryotwari system. Under the permanent zemindary settlement as well as under the village system the land revenue establishment of the Government was minimized, because the task of the collection was in the hands of either the zemindars or renters or village headmen, whereas under the ryotwari system the Government had to collect revenue from the vast mass of ryots. Owing to ryotwari settlement which had been universally adopted by the

Government of Madras, the Indian officers were in fuller employment in the Revenue Department (Nilamani Mukherjee 350).

The Ryot under this system was virtually a proprietor on a simple and perfect title and had all the benefits of a perpetual lease without its responsibility. A certain portion of the produce was first set aside from the gross produce as a joint contribution of the Ryot and Government for the payment of village officers, and the remainder divided in certain proportions. The share allotted to the Government being commuted into money at the average value of the produce for a period of years antecedent to the settlement. Unfortunately, the share of government was generally fixed too high and the result of over-assessment which led to much interference with the Ryots and re-assessment of the land.

The “annual settlement” under Ryotwary was often misunderstood and it is necessary to explain that they were rendered necessary to try the right, recorded to the Ryot. Year to year their cultivation had diminishing or extending, even though the Ryots should pay and not to the reassessment of the land. The tenants



who possessed the land should remit the tax or assessment to the government had the ultimate power to lease out it. Under this system, the procurement was given to the tenants for 20 or 30 years. It permanently confirmed the land rights of the tenants. Moreover, the government acted as a landlord or owner of the land (Rajayyan 1982).

### **Merits of the System**

The introduction of the Ryotwari system resulted in increased yield. The yield of land revenue in Bengal per square acre was about 47 pagodas whereas, in a comparatively dry tract like Baramahal, it was 67 to 70 pagodas per square acre. Hence, Read felt that the system gives extraordinary production and great revenue. Another great quality of Reading was that he had a deep faith in social justice as he neither wanted to favour nor encourage Brahmanas and Mulims who till then were a favoured few. Instead, he wanted to favour the poor (Subramanian 1996). Another feature of the ryotwari administration was the increased employment of Indian in the revenue service. The posts of Tahsildarship downwards were open to a local man (Nilamani Mukherjee 348).

This system was appreciated on the ground that for the first time it maintained direct contact between the government and the tenants. The tenants had land rights permanently. The priority of this system was to suppress the domination of zamindars. They exploited both the government and the tenants. This system gave satisfactions to the government and more profit to the tenants. The formation of various departments and the enforcement of various rules and regulation indicated the attitude of the government towards the development of administration. Especially the jamabandy and inspection systems enabled the government to regularize the state revenue and to minimize corruption and mal-administration.

### **Demerits of the system**

The introduction of the Ryotwari system as many expected did not relieve them from pain or distress even after a quarter of the century of British rule. According to Subramanian in his book Social history of the tamils, As a personal narrative, one points out that many houses were remained unroofed. "Bones of men and animals were scattered everywhere, owing to such affliction and adversity only a small percentage of people possessed properties worth about £ 1000

(Sterling). People who possessed properties worth about 5000 pagodas were very rare and could easily be counted". Bourdillon, he was one of the ablest servants of the East India Company, in his report (1853) he states: "The ryots are in worse conditions than they were at the beginning of the century. However this may be, their present condition is inevitably bad and must be improved (Subramanian 192).

Though the system was appreciated, it was also criticized due to various reasons. The government officials were entrusted with enormous powers. They were empowered to classify and to assess the tax. So, to get the sympathy and favour of the officials, the tenants were forced to give bribes to them. Government officials utilized the illiteracy of the natives. They exploited and collected more money from them. The government adopted the provisions of this system strictly and collected the tax regularly even during the time frequent natural calamities such as earthquakes, floods, famines, droughts, and cyclones. According to Prof. K. Rajayyan in his book of South Indian Rebellion (1800-1801) States that Governor Edward Clive and his Council congratulated the collectors, Munro

and Macleod, for their extraordinary merit of improving the Company's revenue (Rajayyan 59).

Another defect of this system is due to the compulsion of the revenue official; the tenant borrowed money from money-lenders at a high rate of interest and remitted the tax. They found it very difficult to repay the amount. It affected the socio-economic welfare of the people adversely. For example, the report of a district Collector at Bellary in 1845 mentioned, the tenants in Rajamundari became debtors due to famine. Due to famine, the tenants who resided at Nellore were forced to sell their agricultural products at a low rate. It affected them a lot. It also pushed the ryots to poverty. The same condition prevailed in North Arcot, Coimbatore and Madurai, Thiruchirappalli, Salem, and other places. The government servants who collected the tax were given meager salary. They were forced to involve in corruption and other unlawful activities. Though the Ryotwari land revenue system was appreciated in various quarters, due to practical difficulties in the working of the system, it was criticized vehemently.

## Conclusion

Land Revenue is the principal source of finance for company administration in India. The collection of land revenue was naturally the most important part of the Company's administration. They adopted various methods all over India. The main feature of this system was to consolidate the land rights of the tenants. They maintained direct relation with the government, there is no involvement of middleman. At the same time government also had permanent revenue. Another effect of this system was the apparently increased expenses of the revenue department. The zamindars who lost

the patronage of the company also did not like the system. Even some of the company servants also not like this system. The raBhmanas and Muslims also not like the system because there was no scope for grant or manyam to them. According to this system, Munro reduced the assessment to one-third of production, yet it was criticized because the revenue officers strictly collected to the tax during the natural calamities like floods, famines, and droughts. Due to the difficulties, the tenants became poor. The researcher to sum up the system was satisfactory to the government and not unsatisfactory to the people.

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