

Land and Revenue Systems in British India

- Land revenue was one of the major sources of income for Britishers in India. There were broadly three types of land revenue policies in existence during the British rule in India.
- Before independence, there were three major types of land tenure systems prevailing in the country:
 - The Zamindari System
 - The Mahalwari System
 - The Ryotwari System
- The basic difference in these systems was regarding the mode of payment of land revenue.

The Zamindari System

- The zamindari system was introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 through Permanent Settlement that fixed the land rights of the members in perpetuity without any provision for fixed rent or occupancy right for actual cultivators.
- Under the Zamindari system, the land revenue was collected from the farmers by the intermediaries known as Zamindars.
- The share of the government in the total land revenue collected by the zamindars was kept at 10/11th, and the remainder going to zamindars.
- The system was most prevalent in West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, UP, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

The Permanent Settlement Agreement

- According to the Permanent Land revenue settlement the Zamindars were recognised as the permanent owners of the land.
- They were given instruction to pay 89% of the annual revenue to the state and were permitted to enjoy 11% of the revenue as their share.
- The Zamindars were left independent in the internal affairs of their respective districts.

Issues with the Zamindari System

- For the Cultivators: In villages, the cultivators found the system oppressive and exploitative as the rent they paid to the zamindar was very high while his right on the land was quite insecure. The cultivators often had to take loan to pay the rents, on failing to pay the rent, they were evicted from the land.
- For the Zamindars: The revenue had been fixed so high that the zamindars found it difficult to pay, and those who failed to pay the revenue lost their zamindari.
- The zamindars were not so keen about improving the land. As long as they could give out the land and get rent, they preferred it.
- For the Company: By the first decade of the 19th century, the cultivation slowly expanded and prices rose in the market.
- Although this meant an increase in the income of Zamindars, it was no gain for the company since it could not increase a revenue demand that had been settled permanently.

The Ryotwari System

- In the British territories in southern India, there was a move away from the idea of Permanent Settlement.
- A system that came to be known as the Ryotwari System, was devised by Captain Alexander Read and Sir Thomas Munro at the end of the 18th century and introduced by the latter when he was governor of Madras Presidency (1819–26).
- Under the Ryotwari system, the land revenue was paid by the farmers directly to the state.
- In this system, the Individual cultivator called Ryot had full rights regarding sale, transfer, and leasing of the land.
- The ryots could not be evicted from their land as long as they paid the rent.
- It was prevalent in most of southern India, first introduced in Tamil Nadu. It was later extended to Maharashtra, Berar, East Punjab, Coorg and Assam.

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- The advantages of this system were the elimination of middlemen, who often oppressed villagers.

Issues with the Ryotwari System

- This system gave much power to subordinate revenue officials, whose activities were inadequately supervised.
- The system was dominated by the mahajans and moneylenders who granted loans to cultivators by mortgaging their land.
- The moneylenders exploited the cultivators and evicted them from their land in case of loan default.

The Mahalwari System

- By the early 19th century, the Company officials were convinced that the system of revenue had to be changed again.
- The revenues cannot be fixed permanently at such a time when the Company needed more money to meet its expenses of administration and trade.
- In 1822, Englishman Holt Mackenzie devised a new system known as the Mahalwari System in the North Western Provinces of the Bengal Presidency (most of this area is now in Uttar Pradesh).
- Under the Mahalwari system, the land revenue was collected from the farmers by the village headmen on behalf of the whole village (and not the zamindar).
- The entire village was converted into one bigger unit called 'Mahal' and was treated as one unit for the payment of land revenue.
- The revenue under the Mahalwari system was to be revised periodically and not fixed permanently.
- The system was popularised by Lord William Bentick in Agra and Awadh and was later extended to Madhya Pradesh and Punjab.

Issue with the Mahalwari System

- A major drawback of the system was that the survey was practically based on faulty assumptions which left a space for manipulations and corruption.

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- At times, it made the Company spend more for the collection than the revenue collected. Consequently, the system was regarded as a failure.

Conclusion:

- Optimistic officials had imagined that the new system would transform the Peasants into rich enterprising farmers but this did not happen.
- Driven by the desire to increase the income from land, revenue officials fixed too high a revenue demand that peasants were unable to pay.
- Consequently, the Ryots fled the countryside and villages became deserted in many regions.

