



THE POSITION OF RENTS UNDER ZAMINDARI SYSTEM IN NORTH COASTAL ANDRA

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INTRODUCTION:

Right from the pages of history, it is a known fact that agriculture is backbone of economic development of a country. The Britishers particularly the Company rulers did not pay much attention for the welfare, of the ryots. This negligence of the British rulers had pushed Andhra back to the walls. The conditions of the peasants were not up to the mark. Throughout the British period, Andhra had faced several droughts. However, the British Government instead of paying concentration for the economic wellbeing of the people, they had involved in illegal collection of the taxes for their own benefit. The early days of 20th century had witnessed series of droughts that had broken the backbone of the small-scale farmers. Due to the liberal policies that had been advocated by some of the Britishers, the British Government had achieved some economic progress.¹

In the early British period, the land tenures evolved might be said to be the mere by – products of the various kinds of settlements made from time to time for purposes of revenue collection from land. Lands were settled as they came under British acquisition. When it suited them that a permanent settlement with the Zamindar and local military chiefs would ensure them a stable source of finance for expensive wars in early period, they framed a permanent settlement in Northern Circars with the poligars of the Southern districts. The institution of permanent settlement with the Zamindars in the presidency was largely due to outside influence. After the establishment of a permanent settlement in Bengal on the English Model, the Madras Government was pressed hard to follow the Bengal example. A series of measures were followed between 1795 and 1802, which decided the establishment of a permanent settlement in the Northern circars. The following were the main phases of the controversy.² The Court of Directors issued orders to follow the Bengal experiment in 1795. However, it had not been favoured by the Madras Government who asked for time for collection of necessary data. Some of the eminent district officers maintained that the establishment of a permanent settlement would not be possible except in the Northern circars in the face of too miserable and inadequate knowledge about the area and economic conditions in other parts of the presidency. “But



in 1799 positive orders were issued and threats were conveyed that officers found slack in introducing Zamindari system would be removed”, under these circumstances, the Madras Government reported that they could acquire data for permanent settlement only in certain parts of the province. A special committee was appointed, and during the years, 1802 and 1804 a permanent settlement was carried out in the circars and within the districts South and West of the province.³

The method and basis of the assessment adopted in enforcing the principle of a permanent settlement in the districts of the Northern circars were as follows: the basis of assessment adopted had more or less the basis of gross assets, the assessment was known as peshkash having been fixed at the ratio of 2/3 of 1/2 or 1/3 of the gross produce, which was assumed to be the share paid to the Government by cultivators estimated at an average of the previous thirteen years leaving a residue of 1/3 of 1/2 or 1/6 of gross produce to the Zamindar for his maintenance. Under this arrangement one – half of the gross produce was expected to accumulate to the peasant, while the other half had gone towards the dues of the Government and the share of the *estatedar* in the ratio of 1/3 and 1/6 of the gross produce respectively. (In other words, the ratios were - ryot; zamindar: Government 50:33:17 of the gross produce).⁴ The Haveli lands or the crown lands were similarly assessed and sold out in estates of convenient size as permanently settled farms to the highest auction – bidder. The tracts already in the hands of native chiefs or Zamindars were confirmed to them in perpetuity according to the above principle. It might be noted that many of the Haveli estates thus sold out had to fall back into the hands of the Government owing to the failure of payments of revenue by the purchasers. Since many of them could not attract people to purchase them back, those lands were subsequently subjected to the treatment of temporary settlement in a few cases. It was not, however, the case with the Zamindars. It might be true that many of the Zamindaris were similarly sold for arrears of Government dues but purchasers were not actually found for them. Only in a few cases where no purchasers could be found they were retained by the Government ‘khas mahal’ (i.e., estates retained in the lands of the Government).⁵

Some cases represented striking divergence between rent roll and peshkash. For example, the total income of Mandasa estate was Rs.2, 76,059 but they were paid only Rs.42, 828 as peshkash. Likewise, out of an aggregate income of the Zamindars only about 3½ % was accruing to the Government, while the rest about 96½% of the income derived was going to fill the pockets of the few *estatedars* of the presidency, at the expense of the



poor peasants in those estates as well as the revenue that might otherwise increase to Government treasury.⁶

Over and above those incomes; the Zamindars got incomes by a number of ways, as collecting of other levies from the peasants, income from Seri (home forms) lands, from assignment of wastelands, forests, fisheries etc. The costs of collection of rents, termed, as expenses for maintenance of revenue administration were low in the Zamindaris varying from 5% to 10% of the collections. In fact, according to the information available in the Prakasam Committee Report in the case of Bobbili and Vizianagaram, they amounted only to 3% and 7.5% of the revenue collected respectively. The divergence between the two margins of incomes and peshkush involved huge amount in the case of big estates like Bobbili, Kurupam, Mirzapur, Vizianagaram etc.⁷

Before entering into a detailed examination of the ways in which the incomes of the estates were being expended and the extent of benefit derived by the agrarian communities thereby, it is necessary to study about rents in the estates. It is only after a close analysis of the ways of deriving and spending the incomes of the Zamindaries, a correct idea about the economic effects of the system, as a whole, can be had.⁸

The permanent settlement regulations of 1802 have done the mischief in that while fixing the Peshkash of the Zamindars in perpetuity, they were not so clear about the question of demand and collection of rents from the ryots by the Zamindars. It naturally led to much confusion and many evils connected with the Zamindari rents and levies on the peasants. In fact, even the sanads and kabulayats granted to the Zamindars under the permanent settlement did not seem to have clearly laid down the amount of exact proportion of demand of the estate owners on their tenants.⁹

The patta regulation deals with the issue of pattas providing for the division of the produce of land between the Zamindars and peasants. It had been no doubt stated in certain state papers that the Government or its assignee, the Zamindar could not collect anything more than “the customary rent” or “established varam”. Though the system of ‘varam’ or payment of rent in kind (generally by a share of crop) may be said as implied, it is difficult to state whether the ‘Varam’ implied is half or less than half or more.¹⁰

In order to seek some light on the interpretation of the term “established varam”, otherwise claimed by the Zamindar as “Rajabhagam”, it



appeared profitable to have a look into the practice existed prior to the permanent settlement. There was, however, no uniform method of assessment before permanent settlement, sharing system, fixed rents in kind, and in certain cases even cash rents called 'Kists' were discernable. There were variations in the rates of varam ranging from $\frac{2}{5}$, $\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{2}$ etc in the proportion of the produce in different parts in the cirkars according to custom and the local agricultural conditions prevalent. The proportions allowed by the ancient usages were 8, 10 and 12 parts in 20 in case of paddy lands and fixed payment in kind on lands producing tobacco, indigo, sugarcane, garden crops and vegetables. The village system was also found in development. Thus, at, and before permanent settlement rents were either collected as a share of produce, fixed rent of grain and in small number of cases, even cash at different rates.¹¹

There has been no settled opinion, therefore, about the 'Rajabhagam' claimed by the Zamindars (whether it is half of the gross from half the net produce), though broadly it is taken as half the gross produce. The court's decisions on interpreting and fixing up this 'Rajabhagam' varied. So to say, in each case, no enquiry was made at the time of permanent settlement regarding the full implication or of the established 'varam' in accordance with the custom of the country or the usages prevalent in different villages or the ability of the ryot. In fact, many persons without an adequate analysis of the position had read the interpretation of the 'Rajabhagam' as half the produce into the permanent settlement. The question of how much the tenants had to pay to the Zamindars has not been examined fully until the enquiry of the Prakasam committee. The Zamindars were given a free hand to exploit the ryots by the enhancement of rents to a high pitch, until the passing of the Estate Land Act I, 1908. Every pretext known to the civilised world to enhance the rents had been fully employed. It is regrettable that even the Act of 1908 assumed that the rents obtained at the time of passing the Act, with all additions and enhancements as fair and equitable.¹²

Not only clarity about the system of assessment of rents is lacking but also there are no definite and scientific ideas about the basis of assessment of rents in many Zamindaries, until recently. It is interesting to note that, until a few years ago, even the area of land was not the basis of assessment. Rent was based either on yield, on the sowing capacity or the ploughing capacity of a peasant. Such practices may be justified in early times when boundaries were indefinite, in the absence of regular survey and record of rights, or in face of precarious agricultural water supply. For instance, the basis of rent in the estates of the Ganjam and Vizagapatam districts was generally "Garsi"



irrespective of any measurement of land a plot of land yielding one “garsis” was taken as the basis of rent. In Godavari Districts “Putties, Pundums” (measures of grain) etc were the basis. That is, a land capable of being sown with a “Putti or Pundum” of grain is taken as the basis.¹³

It is a matter of common knowledge that formerly rents on large extents of the Zamindaries were used to be collected, in kind which had been converted into money, in many of the estates at present, and it was the Madras Estate Act, 1908 that provided for the first time in section 40, that a Zamindar or a peasant might petition to the collector to have grain rents commuted into definite money rents. Commutation was to be made with the consent of both the parties but it was open to either party to revert to the Varam system, if he finds the money rents are unduly high or low. In course of time, the basis of assessment was converted into rough acreage. It is pointed out that this process of conversions has resulted in many cases in the enhancement of rents. A discussion of the basis of assessment and rates of assessment of rents naturally leads to a study of the methods of renting or assessment of rents. Rents were assessed both in kind and cash in the Zamindaries.¹⁴

Assessment of rents in kind is prevalent even then in many estates. Collection of rents in kind by sharing or fixed tenancy system; was not only primitive and incompatible with the modern principles of public finance, but it is found highly oppressive. Assessment in kind was prevalent to a considerable extent in estates of Vizagapatam, the Northern circars and in the South. At least three different methods of renting appeared to be in form, namely, Varam, crop – appraisal and cropwari systems.¹⁵

Thus, the life of the peasants was left at the mercy of both zamindars and British Government. 50% of the income on the land was to be paid to the British Government. In the remaining 50%, 35% was to be kept with the zamindars and remaining 15% was to be paid to the peasants. The peasants could not survive on the low income. The British Government on the other hand enhanced the problems by imposing illegal taxes. These hardships led the peasants to leave their fields. Finally, the government came to know that the peasant’s problems might push the British Government back to the walls by which the government agencies might be plunged into economic turmoil. The measures of the British government and steps taken by the zamindars were not adequate. The peasants even failed to get their supper at least once in a day. The government on the other hand adopted repressive measures on those who failed to pay the taxes as prescribed by them. These economic



constraints, which led the peasants to raise their voice rigorously and vehemently, against the British Government and zamindars.

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