



Distance Learning Programme

UPSC Mains

History of Modern India & Freedom Struggle





drishti

HISTORY OF MODERN INDIA & FREEDOM STRUGGLE


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Economic & Administrative Policies

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Chapter

After the Battle of Plassey, the British presence in the inland trade of Bengal increased significantly and later it extended to other parts of the country too. Britishers transformed the Indian Economy into a British colonial economy so as to establish it as a source of regular and quality supply of raw materials for its own industries in Britain as well as to create a market for its finished products in India.

Stages of British Colonialism in India

The British came to India as mercantilists and indulged primarily in trading activities. In the initial stages, they tried to compete against other European powers viz. the French, the Portuguese, the Dutch etc., to create a share for themselves in the Indian markets. Over the period of time they realized that they can use their military prowess to dominate other European powers and local Indian rulers to not only increase their share in the profitable Indian markets but also to get a disproportionately larger share in the overall trade originating from the subcontinent by means of free trade agreements, etc.

All these seemed more plausible if they could strengthen their grip over the politics of this country, which was not a difficult task, given the weaknesses of the Indian rulers due to internal infighting and a weak administrative structure. Incidentally, the British were successful in their efforts and they went on to establish their political hegemony over the entire subcontinent.

Once the British Empire was established over India, the systematic process of her colonial exploitation and drain of wealth, raw materials and resources for the enrichment of the colonial power started so much that till the close of the 18th and early 19th century, India was the largest producer and exporter of the industrially produced goods which were exported to all parts of the world by the European companies but during the close of the 19th century, India was transformed from a self sufficient economy to a dependent colonial economy.

The British colonialism in India passed through different phases as the economic and commercial policies of the Britishers unfolded over the years. R. P. Dutt in his book 'India Today' has drawn a picture of the Indian colonial economy. It passed through different phases such as:

Mercantile Phase (1757-1813): This phase was marked by direct plunder and the monopoly trade of East India Company. Surplus revenues were used to purchase Indian finished goods cheaply for export to England and Europe.

Free Trade Phase (1813-1860): During this phase, Britishers made India not only the exporter of raw material but also the consumer of British industrial goods. The monopoly of the company was ended and trade with India was opened for other British merchants. But Indian goods entered Britain with huge tariffs while British goods entered India duty free leading to disintegration of traditional Indian handicrafts and cottage industries.

Financial Capitalism (Post 1860): During this period, Britishers searched for avenues to invest their accumulated capital and found India as the safest place to invest. They soon established industries and infrastructure such as railways, plantation, etc., to earn profit.

Land Revenue Systems During British Rule

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.

Izaredari System

This system was introduced by Warren Hastings in 1772.

Features of Izaredari System

- Under this system, the highest bidder would get the right for revenue collection. Initially it was for 5 years but in 1777 it was made annually.
- Zamindars were considered as revenue collectors and not as landlords for which they got commission.

Result

This system was a complete failure because of the following reasons:

- Bidders were mainly contractors who had no interest in welfare of peasants and they tried to maximize their profit.
- In auction, bidding for a particular land was assumed higher than the actual capacity of land, and revenue was fixed at its maximum.
- Officers from company also participated indirectly in auction through their servants.

Permanent Settlement

It was introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1793. It was prevalent in 19% of British India which included the regions of Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Banaras region of Uttar Pradesh, and areas of North Karnataka. Under this system, zamindars were recognized as the owners of the land. 1/11th of the revenue could be retained by zamindars while 10/11th was to be submitted to the Company. The estate of the landlord was to be treated as his property and was divisible among his dependents upon his death.

Features of Permanent Settlement

- Land revenue was fixed for zamindars and their heirs which would not change in future.
- Due to fixed income from revenue, government would be able to decide their expenditure.
- Politically, Cornwallis was assured that this system would produce zamindars who will be loyal to the british government which was true as we know that in 1857 revolt many zamindars or land owners kept themselves away from revolt.

Drawbacks of Permanent Settlement

- This system strengthened feudalism in upper sections and slavery in lower sections of society.
- Due to fixation of land revenue, the income of government through land revenue could not increase even if the cost of agricultural land and production increased.

- Most of the zamindars had their focus on collection of maximum revenue rather than focusing on betterment of agricultural land which degraded the condition of farmers.
- Zamindars started shifting to the cities which gave rise to “Absentee Landlordism”.
- ‘Sunset Law’ was introduced in 1794 according to which if a Zamindar fails to submit the revenue from his land by the sunset of the fixed date, his estate would be confiscated and auctioned.

Ryotwari System

It was introduced in the territories of the Company by Thomas Munroe and Captain Reed in 1820. It was first employed by Captain Reed in 1792 in the Baramahal region of Tamil Nadu of Madras presidency. It was effective in 51% area of British India which included regions of Madras, Bombay, Eastern Bengal, Assam, and Koorg. In Bombay presidency, it was applied by Elphinstone, Chaplin and Winget.

Ryots (or Raiyyats) were recognized as owners of the land they cultivated and the revenue was to be collected directly from them. The farmers had to pay revenue between 45% and 55% to the Company. The system was revised and improved by Wingate and Goldsmith after 1836.

Features of Ryotwari System

- This system seemed to be more beneficial and so it was adopted in large extent.
- Ryots were comparatively more independent in this system.
- Revenue was not fixed so that government can increase revenue in case of more production.
- Barren land was under the British control, agriculture practices can be carried out on these lands and government had its share on the income generated.
- Land could be confiscated in case of non payment of revenue.
- In this system, lessee were allowed to leave any land or part of land whose lease is available to them by providing prior notice and get themselves free from giving revenue for that land.

Drawbacks of Ryotwari System

- This system was very expensive in comparison to Zamindari system.
- Under this system, the government had to know the accurate condition of land and agriculture and had to fix the tax rate accordingly which was an additional work for government and for this they had to expand their revenue department.
- Corruption increased rapidly among the officers employed in this system.
- Bribery was popular during the assessment of land by the officers.
- On the basis of one land, revenue for other lands was decided and in this situation land revenue was fixed which was often more than the capacity of land.

Mahalwari System

This system was devised after Permanent Settlement and Ryotwari System. Mahalwari system was formally launched in 1822 based upon the regulation of East India Company secretary Holt Mackenzie. It was used in 30% area of British India (North-West provinces, parts of Central India, Punjab and Ganga Valley). Under this system, revenue was fixed on the basis of assessment of production of the complete village (mahal) and was fixed

collectively for all the landowners. This revenue settlement was done with the landlords who collectively claim to be the landlords of the village. Mahalwari system was basically a dual system in which settlement was done collectively with the whole community and also with the individual landlords.

A major drawback of the system was that the survey was practically based on faulty assumptions which left a space for manipulations and corruption. At times, it made the Company spend more for the collection than the revenue collected. Consequently, the system was regarded a failure.

Taluqdari System

The term 'talukdar' has different meanings in different parts of India. In Oudh, talukdar is a great landholder. But in Bengal, a talukdar is next to zamindar in extent of land control and social status. The big zamindars themselves had created many taluqs under several denominations, such as, junglburi taluq, mazkuri taluq, shikimi taluq, and so on. These were created partly as a strategy of zamindari management and partly as a fiscal policy measure for raising zamindari funds for specific purposes. After the Permanent Settlement, new variety of taluqs were created by zamindars. Under the pressure of the Permanent Settlement, many zamindars were creating dependent taluqs denominated as pattani taluq, noabad taluq and osat taluq.

Malguzari System

The land tenure prevailing in the erstwhile Central Provinces was known as Malguzari system in which the Malguzar who was merely a revenue farmer under the Marathas. When the Marathas came into power in this region, they farmed out the revenues of villages to persons of influence and wealth, who were called Malguzars. During the British Rule, they were given proprietary rights and were held responsible for payment of revenue. If the headman was weak or was for any other reason, unable to answer for the sum the authorities expected, or if a court favourite wanted the village, the headman was replaced without hesitation by a farmer. The farmer, or manager was at first called Mukaddam (the Hindi or Marathi form of Arabic Mugaddam). But under the rule for summary settlement of 1855, the title of Malguzar was given. Under the Malguzari system, the Lambardar/Sadar Lambardar appointed from among the Malguzars, was the revenue engager. Other cultivators were either Absolute occupancy tenant, Occupancy tenant, Sub-tenant, Raiyat-Malik or lessees, who could be ejected from their holdings on various grounds. Malguzar (proprietor or co-sharer) held land under special description, namely, Sir land and Khudkast land.

Impact of British Land Revenue System

The revenue systems introduced by the British had adverse impacts on the Indian peasantry and the agriculture in general.

Backwardness of Indian Agriculture

On account of the British land revenue settlements, the Indian agriculture progressively became backward leading to the decline in agricultural production, scarcity and high prices of food grains, thereby making Indian agriculture non-remunerative, subsistence or below subsistence agriculture. The consequences of this backwardness were faced for more than 25 years even after Independence. Because of this backwardness, the GDP and the per capita income remained very low. It was on account of the low per capita income

and the resultant low purchasing power that the famines of the British India were very deadly. The causes of the backwardness of agriculture were:

- The British land revenue settlements tried to extract the maximum from land without any concerns or measures for agricultural production or the plight of the Indian peasantry.
- The landed intermediaries like the Zamindars, revenue collectors, money lenders, Mahaldars, etc., who emerged as a consequence of these land revenue settlements had no interest in the promotion of agriculture.
- The Indian peasantry neither had any interest nor any incentives to improve the agricultural production. After paying rent or land revenue they were left with very little or no surplus to invest in agriculture.

It was because of the above reasons that the agriculture in India could not be revived for a number of years. Peasants had no money to buy seeds or agricultural equipments. It was after repeated famines and recommendations of the famine commissions that the Imperial Department of Agriculture was set up in 1904, but very few steps were taken for the promotion of scientific agriculture, extension of irrigation, provision to provide agricultural credit, etc., in the absence of which the Indian agriculture not only remained stagnant but the agricultural production even continued to decline.

Commercialization of Agriculture

During British India, more and more land were brought under cash and commercial crops like cotton, jute, sugarcane, indigo, opium, tea, coffee, etc., because of the coercive hold of the landed intermediaries like Zamindars, British planters, money lenders, etc. It is for this reason that the commercialization of agriculture is known as coercive cultivation. The classic example of coercive methods was the cultivation of indigo forced upon the peasantry of Bengal & Bihar through the nexus of Zamindars and British planters. Because of demand of opium in China and of Sugar and Indigo in Europe, these commercial crops were promoted by the British. To stop the import of tea from China, tea plantations were promoted. To further ensure the success of the industrial revolution in Britain, cultivation of these commercial crops was also promoted with very ruinous consequences such as:

- The area under food grain declined leading to the scarcity and high prices of cereals.
- The self sufficiency of Indian agriculture also declined because the production was not made for consumption but to cater to the market needs.
- It further exposed the peasantry for being exploited by the British planters, merchants and money lenders.

The Indian agriculture came to cater to market needs and since a large number of commercial crops were exported, their prices came to depend on world demand and prices. This commercialization of agriculture became the source of drain of Indian wealth and also for frequent famines.

Frequent Famines

The most tragic consequence of the British rule in India was the recurrence of famines about which Dr. R C Dutt said, "The British rule in India has reduced the country to a land of famines, more frequent, more widespread and more fatal than ever known in the history of India or the world". Beginning with the famine of Bengal in 1770 till the great famine of Bengal in 1943 every decade of British rule in India faced a major famine and in certain decades such as in 1890-1900 more than once in which at least a million or more people died of starvation followed by a further toll of human life in epidemics such

as Bubonic Plague or Cholera. These famines became more frequent during the latter half of the 19th century particularly after the revolt of 1857. The famine of 1860-61 in the North West provinces was an acute famine in intensity and fatality as nearly 13 million people were affected by that famine. The famine of 1865-66 in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa affected a vast area and it was during this famine that the Orissa Famine Commission under the Chairmanship of George Campbell was appointed. In 1866-67, there was a famine in the Madras presidency. The worst famine of this decade took place in Rajasthan, North Western provinces, Punjab and Central provinces in 1868-70. Rajasthan was worst affected where the death toll ranged around 1/3 to 1/4 of the total population. In the next decade of 1870-80, Bengal was affected by a famine in 1873 and in 1876-78, followed by a famine in Punjab in 1878. During 1880-90, there were a number of local and regional famines. Besides, in the last decade of the 19th century, two major famines were witnessed; one in 1896-97 when the Lyall Commission on famine was appointed and another was the Great famine of 1899-1900, which was described by Lord Curzon as the severest and the most terrible famine which affected the country in the 19th century. It was during this famine that Curzon appointed the Mac Donald Commission on famine.

As a matter of fact, the recurrence, severity and intensity of distress caused by famines were determined by a variety of social and economic factors such as the quantity of existing food stocks in the affected areas, the facility of transport, the extent of rise in prices, the availability of employment etc.

As early as 1861, Col. Baird Smith defined the Indian famines as “the famine of work than of food” i.e. food was available but people had no money to buy the food grains. Dr. R.C. Dutt connected famines with high rates of land revenues and the poverty of the peasantry in the Zamindari and the Ryotwari areas where the maximum and the worst famines took place. The private trade of food grains led to the hoarding and black marketing which further increased the distress of people. The report of the Orissa Famine Commission in 1866 laid the foundations of a definite famine policy and made some useful recommendations.

Causes: The government hardly had any statistical or general or accurate information about the distribution of population, the area under cultivation, the amount of food production, existing food stocks in different regions, food habits of the people and general economic conditions of the masses. Without this vital data, the relief measures could not have been undertaken. The Famine Commission of 1878-80 appointed by Lord Lytton urged the need for the collection of statistical information regarding the condition of the peasantry.

During the famine of 1896-97 and the famine of 1899-1900, two famine commissions were appointed which suggested non official assistance for famine relief on a large scale. The above and other recommendations led to the formation of another famine Court, during the tenure of Lord Curzon who undertook a few symbolic measures like the appointment of the Famine Commission in 1901, setting up of the imperial department of agriculture in 1904, passage of the Cooperative Societies Act 1904 to promote agricultural credit, and the foundation of an agricultural research station at Pusa in 1904. These were some of the measures taken to minimize the impact of famines, but these measures were too late and too little to avert the frequency of the famines. The British land revenue settlements which created a series of landed intermediaries had no interest in the promotion of agriculture and the peasantry had no incentive to increase agricultural production and no surplus to invest in agriculture. The backwardness of Indian agriculture and the poverty of the agrarian masses were the two most important causes for the intensity and high starvation deaths during the famines.