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Mains Practice Questions

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Q. “Next to war, famine and pandemic the worst thing that can happen to agriculture is absentee-landlordism”. Analyse this statement with reference to the land revenue system of Britishers in India. (250 words)

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Approach

- In the introduction briefly explain the meaning of absentee landlordism.
- Establish the relationship of absentee landlordism with the land revenue system of Britishers.
- Highlight the implications of absentee landlordism on the agriculture sector.
- In the body, starting with the cause, analyse the effects of absentee landlordism under various headings in such a way that their implications are elaborated.
- Conclude by summarising the effects of absentee landlordism and with the future changes brought about by it.

Introduction

- An absentee landlordism in agriculture occurs when the owner of the land does not live within the agricultural region of its land holding. It was one of the worst effects of the **zamindari system** introduced by the Britishers in 1793.
- It had wide implications on the existing agricultural system, social structure and relationship of various entities such as zamindar and the cultivator with the land. The main victims of such an unprecedented occurrence were the peasants who cultivated land under the zamindari system.

Body

The main cause:

- Permanent settlement Act was introduced in 1793 in which the land revenue collection rights were auctioned to the zamindar, who had to pay the 10/11 of the collected revenue to the Britishers within the stipulated time.
- Most of the Zamindars used to sublet the land to middlemen and would relocate to big cities like Calcutta to live a luxurious life which created absentee landlordism.

Changes brought about by the absentee landlordism

Detachment of zamindars from the land: Zamindars were not the same old hereditary landholders, now anyone could become a Zamindar provided he had good connections in East India Company or some other hack. Many subordinates of old Zamindars and even traders and merchants became the so-called new Zamindars. They did not have the same kind of attachment with the land as the old hereditary Zamindars.

- **Increase in social inequality:** This system strengthened feudalism in upper sections and slavery in lower sections of society. Due to the fixation of land revenue, the income of the government through land revenue could not increase even if the cost of agricultural land and production increased.
- **Increasing the commercialization of land:** Permanent Settlement led to a commercialisation of land that previously did not exist in Bengal. Absent landlordism further increased it, as it led to a change in the social background of the ruling class.
- **Deterioration of agricultural productivity:** Most of the absentee zamindars had their focus on collection of maximum revenue rather than focusing on betterment of agricultural land, In lack of good inputs and over-cultivation the quality of land increased.
- **Over exploitation of the peasants:** The unofficial middlemen were oppressive in collecting the land revenue, in many cases they collected taxes at exorbitant rates which were higher than the official tax rate, many peasants could not even save enough for their sustenance.
- **Distress Migration:** The peasants were depressed by the excessive rent and by loans taken for the cattle, seed and other agricultural inputs. Most of the time they were not able to repay and they could never extricate themselves from debt.
- The peasants were disheartened by such abject misery that is why they could not labour in spirit. They could hardly earn a scanty subsistence without hope of bettering their situation, many farmers migrated to cities and towns to find better avenues of survival.

Conclusion

Thus absentee landlordism caused **sub-feudalization** in Bengal and deteriorated the condition of peasants and became one of the contributing factors of agricultural crises such as famine in and around Bengal. The plight of poor farmers due to oppression by these intermediaries was criticized by some of the British officers who opposed the emulation of the zamindari system in other parts of the British India. Thus for other areas, new systems revenue collection i.e. **ryotwari and mahalwari** were devised in subsequent years.