



Mains Practice Question

Q. "Colonial land revenue settlements not only transformed agrarian relations but also reshaped rural society and politics in modern India." Comment. (150 words)

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Approach:

- Introduce the answer by highlighting the impact of Colonial land revenue settlements on India
- Highlight how it transformed Agrarian Relations
- Mention how it reshaped Rural Society and Politics in Modern India
- Conclude by referencing the developments in post-independence India aimed at dismantling the same structures.

Introduction:

As stated by **Shashi Tharoor** in *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*, by the end of the nineteenth century, India was Britain's biggest source of revenue.

- The British land revenue systems, such as the **Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari System, and Mahalwari System**, played a significant role in this, impacting agrarian relations and reshaping both rural society and politics.

Body:

British Land Revenue Systems Transforming Agrarian Relations:

- **Introduction of Fixed Land Revenue:** The **Permanent Settlement** introduced a fixed revenue system in which the revenue demand from the land was permanently fixed, regardless of changes in agricultural productivity.
 - This system transformed agrarian relations as it separated the actual cultivators (peasants) from land ownership, making them tenants under the Zamindars.
- **Increased Land Commodification:** The **Mahalwari System** commodified land, making it a tradable asset.
 - The system allowed land to be sold and purchased easily, which changed the economic dynamics in rural areas.
 - The peasants, who had traditionally cultivated land under communal or feudal ownership, now found themselves increasingly alienated from the land, leading to a transformation in the way agricultural wealth was distributed.
- **Disruption of Traditional Agricultural Practices:** The heavy revenue demands led to a shift from subsistence farming to commercialized agriculture under the **Ryotwari and Mahalwari Systems**, where peasants were encouraged to grow cash crops such as cotton, indigo, and sugarcane.
 - This shift disrupted the traditional practice of growing food crops, affecting local food security and creating dependency on global markets.

British Land Revenue Systems Reshaping Rural Society and Politics in Modern India:

- **Emergence of Class Divisions in Rural Society:** The colonial revenue systems contributed to the rise of distinct classes in rural India, particularly the separation between landlords and peasants.
 - The **Permanent Settlement** made Zamindars a dominant class in rural society.
 - The **Ryotwari** and **Mahalwari Systems** further entrenched class divisions by promoting individual ownership but simultaneously imposing heavy taxes that kept peasants in poverty.
- **Political Mobilization and Peasant Movements:** The oppressive taxation and the exploitation of peasants eventually led to the rise of **peasant movements** in the 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - The land revenue policies played a central role in shaping the **political consciousness of rural India**, leading to resistance against the British.
 - The **Champaran Satyagraha of 1917, led by Mahatma Gandhi**, was a direct consequence of the exploitation of peasants under the **Indigo cultivation system**.
- **Influence on Rural Elites and Agrarian Power Structures:** The British revenue systems entrenched the **power of intermediaries, who often exploited the peasants**.
 - These systems reshaped rural politics by empowering a few landlords or intermediaries who maintained strong political influence, while peasants had little to no voice.
 - **Example:** The **Mahalwari System** empowered **taluqdars and other intermediaries, especially in regions like Uttar Pradesh and Punjab**, creating rural elites who played a role in local politics and resisted land reforms after independence.
- **Exploitation and Debt Traps:** The high tax rates imposed by these systems created **socio-economic vulnerability among the peasants**.
 - In many cases, they were forced to borrow money from moneylenders at high-interest rates to meet the tax demands, which led to cycles of debt.
 - The **Deccan Riots** of 1875 were a direct result of the oppression by moneylenders and the high taxes under the **Ryotwari System**, where peasants were caught in a vicious cycle of debt.

Conclusion:

Post-independence, India took significant steps to address these colonial legacies, particularly through land reforms such as the **Zamindari Abolition Acts and land redistribution policies**. Thus, while colonial land policies entrenched exploitation, post-independence India's land reforms marked a **positive shift towards a more just and inclusive rural society**.