

Revenue Policy of the British in the Ceded Districts

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The land tenure systems that were introduced by the British in Madras presidency in the first half of the 19th century made an immense effect on the rural economy. One among the prominent land tenure systems of British was ryotwari system. The ryotwari system though introduced for the first time in Baramahal by Col.Read in 1799, it came to prominence in the Ceded Districts under Thomas Munro, in a modified form. In fact, Munro's system became a model to the whole of the Madras and Bombay presidencies¹.

In as much the company's commercial interest was predominant in the first half of the 19th century; the company was trying to restructure its agrarian policy towards commercialization of agriculture. The ryotwari system was viewed as a potential source of translation to change the agrarian base of the Dry district. In the Madras presidency all the dry zones except Ramnad and Sivaganga in Tamilnadu, had Ryotwari system².

The Ceded Districts, being in the Dry zone due to geographical and ecological factors, gave rise to the existence of estates or in other words, large holdings where extensive cultivation was a normal feature unlike the wet regions, which usually needed intensive cultivation (which means small plots of land). The estates were in the hands of village headmen or rich ryots or influential Brahmins. All the estate holders tried to unite when the land revenues were assessed and controlled by the Central Government agents such as the amildars or a section of ruling elite, the palegars. The British were already victorious over the central powers (such as Nizam and Mysore Sultans), their next target was the 'local powers'. The rural elite were the potential force in the country side and prevented the British from the smooth collection of the land revenue. Under these circumstances the British had to follow a policy which will either pacify or disintegrate the local powers. Munro followed the policy of pacification by accepting the custom of Inam (or the privileged holdings) for smooth functioning of the ryotwari land revenue administration³.

The term 'Ryotwari' was generally taken to mean the elimination of intermediaries (rural elite), between the cultivators and the Government. But the plan of the Ryotwari system was not to remove in total the rural elite, but to subjugate it to the British authority, so that the revenues may be collected pacifically and smoothly in the country side. The term 'ryot' generally meant cultivator or citizen. It was commonly identified with the landless laborers or poor ryots⁴. But, in fact the ryot should be identified more closely with high caste elite, 'rayalu' or the leaders of the village, since the ryots originated from high born peasant warrior caste. Under the ryotwari system Munro made settlements with each individual ryot (or ratalu or village leader) and held him responsible for the payment of the land revenue directly to the Government. Thus the 'Divide and Rule Policy' was clearly evident from this mode of settlement. Instead of jointly tackling the rural elite, Munro's policy facilitated the company Government to deal directly with individual leaders or in other words individual families⁵.

In the sphere of the collection of the land revenue, the administrative machinery used for this purpose was also changed by the British, to suit the working of the Ryotwari system. The Palegars and the Amildars on one side, and the patels and the karnams on the other side were responsible for the collection of the land revenue. In this twin groups, the potails and Karnams were the real custodians of the land revenues of village where as, the palegars and the amildars with their military force and with the support of their overlords or the central powers acquired the right of the land revenue collection in their respective provinces. The British authorities looked down upon them as corrupt, parasitic and unwarranted elements between the state and the ryot. Hence the palegars were uprooted from their possessions. Thus, the mode of land revenue collection was changed from central 'power-palegar-ryot' pattern to that of central power-ryot pattern. In other words, through the ryotwari system, the intermediary agency was removed and a direct link was established between the Government and the cultivator in the land revenue dealings⁶.

This resulted in the elaborate establishment of the revenue administrative machinery. Right from the Board of Revenue to the village level is linked up by creating various offices. However, the traditional officers of the village were retained by the British administration.

The basis of the system of revenue administration is found in the village corporations, which had existed from time immemorial and in many respects still retain their vitality. IN almost every Hindu village there are twelve village servants, called the Barabulote or twelve men, who perform all needful public offices. The first five only who render service to government are recognized as part of the revenue administration. They are 1) Headmen 2) Karnam or Accountant 3) Shroff or Notagar 4) Nirganti and 5) Talary.

The Headman who goes by various names, such as manager patel, Naidu, Reddy, Peddakapu, Natamgar etc. is an important officer; he represents the Government in the village and collects the revenue. He also has magisterial and judicial powers⁷. As a magistrate he punishes persons for petty assaults and offences and as a judge he tries suits for sums of money or other personal property up to Rupees 10 value, their being no appeal against his decision. If parties consent he can summon a panchayat who will then adjudicate on suits without limit as to value and also without appeal. The headman is generally one of the largest land holders in the village, and as a rule exercises much influence over the inhabitants. Acting as a judge, he is a styled munsif. In some cases the custom of the place separates the Munsifship from the Managership, and sometimes more than one manager is appointed for a village⁸.

The Karnam is the village accountant and is a very important ministerial officer. The shroff is found only in certain villages, his duty is to test the money paid by villages, to the headman on accounts of Government. The Nirganti has charge of the irrigation of village lands where there is irrigation from tanks or channels. Some villages however have irrigation but no Nirganti, the work being done by the village peon or by the cultivators themselves. The villages are simply a village peon acting in the capacity of a watchman. In the remaining seven ayagars artisans are necessary to the internal conduct of a village community⁹.

Taluks are divided into five grades according to their importance. The Tahsildar's establishment consists of sheristidars, clerks, revenue inspectors and servants. The sheristadar is in immediate charge of the taluk treasury and also of accounts, abstracts, registers, and periodical returns. The clerks eight or nine prepare the accounts, bills, abstracts, cultivation statements, season reports, village abstracts of demand collection and balance, settlement accounts, registers et. In magisterial work they also attend to the correspondence, and take charge of office records, which under the ryotwari system are voluminous. The revenue inspectors three or four, are in charge of portions of taluks and go constantly from village to village to see whether the work of the village affairs properly performed, and conduct such local enquiries as may be considered necessary by the Tahsildar. Every Tahsildar is also a sub magistrate. In this capacity, and also to a limited extent in his revenue work, he is assisted by officer's viz., Deputy Tahasildar and Sub-magistrate, who are established in important towns and outlying portions of taluks. Some of these officers are also placed in charge of large estates which do not fall within the jurisdiction of any Tahsildar¹⁰.

The Deputy collector's main duties are to assist the collector in revenue administration and in magisterial work. When an Assistant Collector has passed a certain examination in Law and Language he is said to be a passed assistant, and may be placed in charge of one or two taluks. Until he passes, he is attached to some superior officer to learn the work. The head Assistant Collectors hold independent charge of two or three taluks, but are subject to the complete control of their collectors. The Sub-Collectors who are also magistrates have larger charges, and are more independent. Their establishment consists of a sheristadar or manage and clerks and servants¹¹. The Collectors who are also magistrates, have each a territorial charge immediately under them and exercise a general control over their sub-collectors, assistants and Deputy Collectors. The Superintendents who have control over all persons engaged in the administration of revenue are responsible for the treasury to which the taluk collections are sent, and which keeps and dispenses a stock of stamps. They see that the revenues are punctually realized and that when arrears occur the proper processes are resorted to, for recovering them they manage estates. They are expected to be thoroughly acquainted with the state of native feeling in their districts in regard to the policy and measures of government and to be the adviser of Government with respect to police, public work, education, sanitation and the miscellaneous matters which conduce to the welfare of their districts¹².

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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