

# **LAND SETTLEMENT UNDER RYOTWARI SYSTEM**

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Meanwhile other ways of assessing and collecting the land-tax were being devised by British officials. Two officers, **Munro and Read** were sent to administer a newly conquered region of Madras in 1792. Instead of collecting from the zamindars, they began to collect directly from the villages, fixing the amount that each village had to pay. After this they proceeded to assess each cultivator or *ryot* separately – and thus evolved what came to be known as the ‘*ryotwari*’ system. This early *ryotwari* was a field assessment system. This means that the tax payable on each field was fixed by a government officer, and then the

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cultivator had the choice of cultivating that field and paying that amount, or not cultivating it. If no other cultivator could be found, then the field would not be cultivated: it would lie fallow.

The officer fixing the tax, or settling the revenue, has a difficult task. He has to fix the tax on thousands of fields in sub-division or district, and to fix it in such a way that the burden on each such field is approximately equal. If the burden is not equally distributed, then the cultivators will not occupy the heavily assessed fields, and cultivate only those with a light assessment.

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Now, in fixing the assessment of a field, the revenue officer had to consider two things:

- (1) the quality of the soil-whether it was rocky or rich, irrigated or dry etc.;
- (2) the other was area of the field.

It followed, therefore, that this system depended on a survey, that is, a classification of it. Thus one acre of first class rice land should pay the same amount regardless of whether it was located in this village or that one. But how was this amount to be fixed?

Munro usually fixed it by estimating what the usual product of the land was-for example-2600 lbs. of paddy per acre.

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He would then claim that the State share of this amounted to one third of this, or two-fifths of this, and thus calculate the amount that the cultivator had to pay the State. This, of course is the theory of *ryotwari*-in practice, the estimates were largely guesswork, and the amounts demanded so high that they could be collected with great difficulty, and sometimes could not be collected at all.

## RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN MADRAS

After some experiments with other ways of managing the land revenue, the Madras authorities were by 1820 converted to the *ryotwari* system, and its triumph was indicated by the appointment of Munro as Governor of Madras. Munro advanced many arguments in favour of this system. He argued that it was the original Indian land tenure, and the one best suited to Indian conditions. Its adoption was due, however, to one main reason-it resulted in a larger revenue than any other system could have produced. This was because there were no zamindars or other intermediaries who received any part of the agricultural surplus-whatever could be squeezed from the cultivator went directly to the State.

## RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN MADRAS

The Madras government was chronically short of funds, and such a system would naturally appeal to it. So taking advantage of the rejection of the Permanent Settlement, it introduced the temporary *ryotwari* settlement.

# RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

We have outlined the *ryotwari* system as it was developed by Munro in the districts under his charge. After 1820 however, *ryotwari* was extended to most of the Madras Presidency in forms quite different from those visualized by Munro. His *ryotwari*, was a field assessment, leaving the cultivator free to cultivate or give up any particular field. And, as we saw, the working of such a system depended upon the government carrying out a detailed measurement and assessment of each field. But after 1820 the system was extended to many districts where no surveys had ever been carried out.

# RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

No one knew how much land a peasant cultivated, or what its product might be. His tax came to be fixed on an arbitrary basis, usually by looking at what he had paid in earlier years. This was known as a 'putcut' assessment.

Again, in theory the *ryotwari* allowed the *ryot* to give up any field that he chose. But it soon became clear that if this was freely permitted the tax revenue of the State would fall. So government officers began to compel the cultivators to hold on to (and of course, pay for) land that they did not really want to cultivate. Since cultivation was not voluntary, it was always difficult to collect the revenue and so the use of beating and torture to enforce

# RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

payment was also widespread. These methods were exposed by the **Madras Torture Commission in 1845**. After this certain reforms were introduced. A scientific survey of the land was undertaken, the real burden of tax declined, and there was no need to use violent and coercive methods to collect the revenue. However, these improvements occurred after 1860.

## EFFECTS OF THE RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN MADRAS

There is hardly any doubt that the effects of this system upon the rural economy were distinctly harmful. The peasants were impoverished and lacked the resources to cultivate new lands. The Government of Madras itself noted in 1855 that only 14 ½ million acres of *ryotwari* land were cultivated, while 18 million acres were waste. It confessed: ‘There is no room for doubt that an increase of cultivation would follow reductions of the Government tax.’

Apart from this depressing effect upon the rural economy, the heavy burden of taxation distorted the land market.



## EFFECTS OF THE RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN MADRAS

Land in most districts of Madras had no value in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No one would buy it, because buying in meant that the new owner would have to pay the extortionate land revenue. After paying it, he would have no income from the land, and obviously, in such circumstances, no one would purchase land.

# RYOTWARI SETTLEMENT IN BOMBAY

Ryotwari in the Bombay Presidency had its beginnings in Gujarat. The British began by collecting the land revenue through the hereditary officials called *desais* and the village headmen (*Patel*). However, this did not produce as much revenue as the British wanted, so they began collection directly from the peasants in 1813-14. When they conquered the Peshwa's territory in 1818 the *ryotwari* system on the Madras pattern was also introduced there, under the supervision of Munro's disciple Elphinstone. The abuses that characterised the Madras *ryotwari* soon appeared in the Bombay Presidency also, especially as the Collectors began trying to increase the revenue as rapidly as they could.

# RYOTWARI SETTLEMENT IN BOMBAY

A regular measurement and classification of the land was commenced under the supervision of an officer named **Pringle**. This survey was supposed to be founded upon the theory of rent developed by the English economist Ricardo. This theory was hardly applicable to Indian conditions, and, in any case, Pringle's calculations were full of errors, and the resulting assessment was far too high. When the government tried to collect the amounts fixed by Pringle in Pune district, many of the cultivators gave up their lands and fled territory of the Nizam of Hyderabad. This assessment thus had to be abandoned after some years.

# RYOTWARI SETTLEMENT IN BOMBAY

It was replaced by a reformed system devised by two officers named Wingate and Goldsmid. Their system did not try to apply any theoretical rules: instead it aimed at moderating the demand to a level where it could be regularly paid. The actual assessment of each field depended upon its soil and location. This new assessment began to be made in 1836 and covered most of the Deccan by 1865. Its effects upon agriculture were beneficial, and the cultivated area expanded as the new assessment was introduced.

## EFFECTS OF RYOTWARI SETTLEMENT IN MADRAS AND BOMBAY

We have seen how the Permanent Settlement established a few big zamindars in a position of dominance over the mass of the peasants. The social effects of the *ryotwari* settlements were less dramatic. In many areas the actual cultivating peasants were recorded as the occupants or '*ryots*, and thus secured the title to their holding. However, as we saw, the tax was so heavy that many peasants would have gladly abandoned at least some of their land, and had to be prevented from doing so. It was also possible for non-cultivating landlords to have their names entered as the occupants (or owners) of particular holding, while the actual cultivation was carried on by

## EFFECTS OF RYOTWARI SETTLEMENT IN MADRAS AND BOMBAY

their tenants, servants or even bonded labourers. This was particularly the case in irrigated districts like Thanjavur (in Tamil Nadu) where many of the '*ryots*' held thousands of acres of land. There was no limit to the amount of land that a *ryot* could hold, so there could be great difference in wealth and status between one *ryot* and another. However, money-lenders and other non-cultivators were not much interested in acquiring lands because of the heavy taxes that came with them. Hence the small peasants, oppressed though they might be by the tax-collector did not have fear expropriation by the money-lender or landlord.

## EFFECTS OF RYOTWARI SETTLEMENT IN MADRAS AND BOMBAY

Under the reformed *ryotwari* system that gradually developed in Bombay after 1836 and Madras after 1858 the burden of the land revenue was somewhat reduced, and land acquired a saleable value. The purchaser could now expect to make a profit from wrong owning land: the State would not take it all as tax. One result of this was that money-lenders began to seize the lands of their peasant debtors and either event them or reduce them of tenants. This process led to considerable social tension, and caused a major rural uprising in the Bombay Deccan in 1875.