

MAHALWARI SETTLEMENT

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DR. MD. NEYAZ HUSSAIN

PROFESSOR & HOD

PG DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

MAHARAJA COLLEGE, VKSU, ARA(BIHAR)

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The aggressive policies of Lord Wellesley led to large territorial gains for the British in North India between 1801 and 1806. These areas came to be called the North-Western Provinces. Initially the British planned a settlement on the Bengal pattern, Wellesley ordered the local officials to make the settlement with the zamindars wherever they could, provided they agreed to pay suitably high land revenue. Only if the zamindars refused to pay, or no zamindars could be found were the settlements to be made village by village 'giving the preference to the *mokuddums*, *perdhauns*, or any respectable *ryots* of the Village'. Ultimately, the settlement was to be made permanent, as in Bengal.

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In the meantime, however, every effort was made to enlarge the revenue collection. The demand in 1803-4 was Rs.188 lakhs-by 1817-18 it was Rs. 297 lakhs.

Such enormous increases provoked resistance from many of the big zamindars and rajas, who had been almost independent in the earlier period. Many of them were therefore driven off their lands by the new administration. In other cases the old zamindars could not pay the amount demanded, and their estates were sold by the Government. Increasingly, therefore, it became necessary to collect from the village directly through its *pradhan* or *muqaddam* (headman).

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In the revenue records the word used for a fiscal unit was a '*mahal*', and the village wise assessments therefore came to be called a *mahalwari* settlement. It was however quite possible for one person to hold a number of villages, so that many big zamindars continued to exist. Furthermore, as in Bengal, the confusion and coercion that accompanied the collection of the very land tax created fine opportunities for the local officials, and large areas of land were illegally acquired by them in the early years. Meanwhile, the Government found that its expenditures were always exceeding its revenues, and the idea of a permanent settlement was dropped.

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Mahalwari Theory and Practice

In 1819 an English official, Holt Mackenzie, developed the theory that *taluqdars* and zamindars were originally appointed by the State, and the real owners of villages were the zamindars who lived in them, or constituted the village community. He argued that their rights and payments should be clearly established by a survey. His ideas were embodied in a law, Regulation VII of 1822. This required that Government official should record all the rights of cultivators, zamindars and others, and also fix the amounts payable from every piece of land. The Governor-General orders:

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It seems necessary to enter on the task of fixing in detail the ranges of rent and modes of payment current in each village, and applicable to each field: and anything short of this must be regarded as a very imperfect Settlement.

In practice, this proved impossible to implement. The calculations made were often quite inaccurate, and the Collector in any case slanted them so as to increase the revenue due to the Government. Far from favouring the village communities, the new *mahalwari* often ruined them by imposing impossible tax assessments. In 1833 it was decided that the detailed effort to regulate all rights and payments should be given up, and that a rough and ready estimate of what the village could pay to the State was adequate.

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In later years, these estimates came to be guided could pay to the State was adequate. In later years, these estimates came to be guided by the rents paid by the tenants of village lands to the owners. From these rents the Settlement officer would calculate the theoretical amount that all the lands of the village or *mahal* would yield. Then some part-ultimately 50 per cent of this would have to be paid to the Government. All these calculations involved a large amount of guesswork: and, not surprisingly, the guesses tended to be on the high side, increasing the amounts to be paid to the State.

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Effects of the Mahalwari Settlement

One of the early effects was that the area under the control of the big *taluqdars* was reduced. The British officers made direct settlements with the village zamindars as far as possible, and even supported them in the law courts because it was planned to extract the highest possible revenue from them. They were freed from *taluqdar's* claims only to subject them to a full measure of government taxation. The result was often the ruin of the village zamindars. One officer reported that in many villages of Aligarh:

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The *Juma* (land revenue) was in the first place considerably too heavy; and in which the *malgoozars* revenue payers seem to have lost all hope of improving their condition or of bearing up against the burden imposed on them. They are now deeply in debt, and utterly incapable of making any arrangements from defraying their arrears.

The result of this situation was that large areas of land began to pass into the hands of money-lenders and merchants who ousted the old cultivating proprietors or reduced them to tenant as will.

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This occurred most frequently in the more commercialised districts, where the land revenue demand had been pushed to the highest level, and where the landholders suffered most acutely from the business collapse and export depression after 1833. By the 1840s it was not uncommon to find that no buyers could be found to take land that was being sold for arrears of land revenue. As in the Madras Presidency, the tax in these cases was so high that the buyer could not expect to make any profit from the purchase.

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Overall, therefore, the *mahalawari* settlement brought impoverishment and widespread dispossession to the cultivating communities of North India in the 1830s and 1840s, and their resentment expressed itself in popular uprisings in 1857. In that year villagers and *taluqdars* all over North India drove off government official, destroyed court and official records and papers, and ejected the new auction purchasers from the villages.

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Thus we have seen how the three major land systems devised by the British came into existence. When new areas came under British rule the settlements made resembled either the *ryotwari* or the *mahalwari*. Thus Punjab, North-West Frontier, Agra, Central Province came under the *mahalwari*. In Awadh, after the revolt of 1857 the government recognised the *talqudars* as proprietors so as to ensure that they supported it in any future revolt. The assessment itself was *mahalwari*.

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An ever-present theme throughout the discussion has been that the drive to collect large revenue was central to British Policy. Sometimes this led to the development of a land market-to the sale and purchase of land. But at other time, the State's demands were so heavy that no purchasers were to be found. The need to collect so much was itself made necessary by the heavy expenditures of the Government in India, and its need to send large sums to Britain for its expense there.

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