Abolition Of Zamindari System And It’s Impact On Agriculture

Dr. Mrs. B. Bala Parameswari
Assistant Professor Of History, S.F.R.College For Women, Sivakasi, India.

Abstract : During the nineteenth and till the middle of the twentieth centuries, the Zamindari System played a significant role in the revenue transactions of the British government in Tamil Nadu. The term ‘zamindar’ denoted mainly the landed gentry, who were also the ‘local bosses’. But during the nineteenth century, it assumed a different connotation. It stood for the intermediaries, who aided the British in revenue collection for which they received a sizable amount. Hence they were also called the ‘middlemen’. The complexities of the Zamindari System led to an immense volume of litigation and problems. The continuous exploitation of the Zamindars made the peasants poor and ignorant. On many occasions, the government used police force to suppress the peasant’s agitations. The peasants continued their agitation in different part of the Madras Presidency. The Madras Estates Land (Reduction of Rent) Act XXX of 1947 gave considerable relief to the ryots. The land reforms adopted by the congress Government in Tamil Nadu gave some relief to the peasants, which gave a great impact on the development of agriculture in Tamil Nadu subsequently.

Keywords : Zamindar, Peasants, Tenants, Ryots, Pattah, Agriculture, Kisan Conference

1. Introduction

During the nineteenth and till the middle of the twentieth centuries, the Zamindari System played a significant role in the revenue transactions of the British government in Tamil Nadu. Following the annexation of territories, the English East India Company adopted a series of measures to develop the source of the land revenue. The collection of land revenue depended mainly on three important settlements namely the Ryotwari, the village and the zamindari settlement. The first two settlements were indigenous where as the zamindari settlement otherwise known as Permanent Land Revenue settlement was invented and introduced by the company administration. It was a kind of contract concluded between the East India Company and the zamindars.

Under the zamindari system of land tenure, the zamindar held more than one village under his control. His right and control over land extended not only over people connected with its cultivation, but also a social and political authority over the people living on such land. He held some land for personal cultivation, which he cultivated with the help of hired or attached labourers while the remaining was leased out to tenants and sub-tenants. Towards the end of British rule, in spite of the legal measures to protect the rights of tenants and to provide security to them from eviction, there existed a social situation characterised by tenants –at will who were vulnerable to the whims and fancies of the zamindars. The second, gramwari land tenure pertained mainly to the rent or revenue village as a corporate whole. Such “village community” was not the village population, rather was that segment of the elders, leaders and notables of high castes who governed the affairs of a village and faced the revenue demands made by the superior officer backed by higher political authority. The third, ryotwari tenure recognized the ryot as one of the leading villagers and was intended to deal with him directly.

2. Zamindar-The Landed Gentry

The term ‘zamindar’ denoted mainly the landed gentry, who were also the ‘local bosses’. But during the nineteenth century, it assumed a different connotation. It stood for the intermediaries, who aided the British in revenue collection for which they received a sizable amount. Hence they were also called the ‘middlemen’. Immediately after the conquest, the Company had to rely heavily on native agents, who had intimate connections with the people at the grass root level. So the need for creating a cadre of zamindars became absolutely necessary. This contrivance also helped the British to provide a berth in their administration to some of the fallen poligars, killadars, and influential chieftains and also to reward the loyal and devoted servants under the zamindary or permanent revenue settlement. The amount of money to be paid by the zamindar to
the government treasury was fixed whereas the amount to be collected as tax from the ryots was not fixed and hence the zamindars exploited the ryots without any rhyme or reason. Among the newly created zamindars there were four categories namely traditional zamindar, traditional poligars, proprietors of hasely estates and jagirdars. They assumed titles such as muttadars, land lords, zamindars and rajas commensurating with their economic and political power. In fact they were operating economic control in their localities very similar to those of the rural chiefs. The poligar families of Salem, Coimbatore, Tiruchi, Madurai, Ramanad and Tirunelveli exercised great influence on their respective regions. The Muttadar of Kumaramangalam who was one of the largest landowners lends money, grain and cattle to his tenants insinuated his influence into every corner of his petty domain.

In the Ramanathapuram District the zamindar was constituted the biggest by occupying seven out of the nine taluks in the district. In the Zamindari area the revenue administration was in the hands of the zamindars. The land tax system in the areas was peculiar and oppressed to the ryots. Ramanathapuram Zamindar was mostly under the ‘Warapathu’ or the division system i.e., the ryots had to share the produce from the land with the proprietor. The share of the proprietor ranged from 48 to 53% of the produce in addition to ‘konganam’ and other customary demands like ‘Mahimai’ etc. It was different in the Sivaganga Zamindars. They paid on land both in kind or cash with little advantage to the ryots. When a close study of these types of zamindars with reference to the income they raised, the extent of land they possessed, it would reveal that they ranged from a petty zamindar holding tiny bits with an income of thousand rupees annually to landed magnets of vast estates with rich revenues sometimes to the tune of several lakhs. It clearly shows the disparity and the uneven distribution of wealth.

Again these lords hailed from high caste community whereas the ryots belonged to the suppressed communities. These zamindars like the government was a rent collector but possessed far greater powers. The Zamindari System formulated a kind of relation between the administration and the zamindars on the one hand and the zamindars and the tenants on the other. The objects of this system were two fold, economic and political. Again this system rested on two fundamental principles. They granted hereditary and proprietary right to the zamindars and also fixed the rate of assessment in perpetuity. Further it declared the respective zamindars as proprietors of land till they paid the fixed rent regularly. The Company’s share fixed at two-third of the gross produce received by the zamindar from the ryots, leaving the remaining to the zamindar as his share. Further the zamindars were required to give pattahs to their ryots fixing their rate of customary rents. In case of any violation, the ryots could seek redress in the courts. The zamindars also obtained a written agreement from the ryots called muchalika. The zamindars were also informed to be liberal during drought and scarcities. Waste lands were distributed to the zamindars free of additional assessment to improve their estates.

Even in the early stages of its introduction, the system was found defective in its operation. The ryots had been left to the oppression and exactions of the zamindars. The pattah regulation intended to protect the privileges and rights of the ryots, had become ‘almost a dead letter’. The faulty principle of this system had been aggravated by the character of the zamindars. They were in the habit of leaving the responsibility to the inferior agents who forwarded their own selfish ends by freeing the vanity of their feudal lords with ideas of princely grandeur. The division of the produce between the zamindar and the ryots was stated in government papers that not to collect more than the customary rentor the ‘established varam’. This term ‘established varam’ was otherwise known rajabhagam. In fact the word rajabhagam was interpreted by the zamindars according to their needs. Further these feudal lords received incomes through a number of ways like collection from the ryots, seris, lands, home farms, waste lands, communal lands, pasture lands, forests, markets, fisheries etc. The feudal lords did nothing for their tenants towards soil conservancy or irrigation facilities. But the ryots were oppressed through raising of rents and the severity of their collection. The zamindars altered the rent from time to time as they pleased. Considering themselves as kings or lords they developed an attitude that they could do anything as they liked. They enhanced the rent arbitrarily without taking into account the sufferings of the ryots. The government could not intervene forth the rights of the ryots as the pattah regulation prevented such interferences in the administration of the zamindars. Exploiting the helpless position of the ryots, the zamindars compelled them to cultivate the ammani lands and forest lands. This brought huge profit to the zamindars. It was estimated that only four percent of the total revenue was spend for the benefits of the ryots whereas the rest of the amount was exploited by the land lords. During the beginning of the twentieth century, it was calculated that the net income of the zamindars...
increased to 30% while the amount spent for agriculture and other facilities remained 4% only.

The major income of these feudal lords was spent towards personal expenditure, particularly on city life, foreign travel, building palaces, sports and all sorts of comforts and luxuries and economic waste in functions. Due to extravagant expenditure, many of the zamindars fell in arrears to the government. As a result the relationship between the ryots and zamindars was of antagonism from the very beginning. The only remedy available for the ryots at that time was to submit their grievances to the court of justice. But the fear of alienating the zamindar, the colossal expenditure and the long distance of the location of the court of judicature prevented the ryots to proceed to the courts. Forced to pay the rents at a high rate, they turned to the money lenders and when they would not settle the arrears they starved and migrated to other places. The complexities of the Zamindari System led to an immense volume of litigation and problems. The continuous exploitation of the Zamindars made the peasants poor and ignorant. Owing to the lack of education and ignorance, there was no awareness among the peasants against the Zamindars. But in the twentieth century, the condition changed better for the peasants. It was due to the influence and preaching's of the elite and the political leaders and the timely publications of their opinions by the newspapers. In the year 1905 the zamindars had received the revenue of Rs.232.6 lakhs from the ryots whereas they paid only Rs.41.2 lakhs to the government. Accordingly the government passed the Madras Estates Land Act of 1908. By this Act occupancy right was given to peasants and the Act clearly mentioned that the ryots should not be ejected from the holdings." The ryots who were till afraid of eviction were relieved from fear. They decided to fight against the zamindars. Meanwhile the zamindars failed to adjust themselves to the changing conditions. These attitudes of the zamindars paved the way for conflicts.

3. Peasant Satyagraha

In the twentieth century, many political leaders and intellectuals took up the cause of the peasants. Gandhiji was a magic man of peasant satyagraha. N.G.Ranga was a champion of the peasant's movements. Through his speeches, writings, and various associations, he instilled anti-zamindari feelings in the minds of the peasants. In order to educate the peasants, he started peasant institutions in many parts of Tamil Nadu. His motto in life was to abolish the zamindari system. Associations and organisation work considered the backbone of every kind of agitation. Therefore in Tamil Nadu various peasants' associations were formed. The main goal of these associations was to abolish the zamindar system. He led many peasant movements and he was arrested many times for his provocative speeches and anti-zamindari activities. Many peasants' marches were organised in different parts of the province. The peasant marchers from various parts of the Madras Presidency submitted a memorandum to C. Rajagopalachari, the Premier of Madras, on 27th August 1938. Twenty eight marches were organised in twenty one districts of Madras Presidency during November 22 to December 7 of 1935. They demanded the abolition of Zamindar System. In order to propagate the anti-zamindari system and organise various peasant movements, N.G. Ranga made an extensive tour in Tamil Nadu. In 1935, he visited Tanjore. There he had a thirty-member peasants to meet the collector. He went to Vellore on 21st April, 1937 and formed a North Arcot Kisan Society. He visited Tirunelveli district on the 25th April of the same year and formed a District Ryot's Association.

On many occasions, the government used police force to suppress the peasant's agitations. The peasants continued their agitation in different part of the Madras Presidency. In Tanjore, the relations between the land holders and their tenants were not cordial. There was an agitation against the Ettaiyapuram zamindar for various demands. In order to encourage the agitating peasants, many conferences were held in the chingelput district. It passed resolutions to abolish to zamindari system. The Tamil Nadu Kisan Sabha held its conference in Madras in February 1944 and attacked the Zamindari System. It gave much encouragement to the agitating peasants. In Tanjore the Kisan Conference was presided over by Parlaker, an MLA from Bombay. It was attended by five thousand peasants. The communists fought for the cause of the peasants against the zamindars. They demanded the abolition of the zamindari system. In order to prevent Communist influence in Tanjore, a new Association known as Agriculturist's Welfare Association was formed in the Mannargudi area by pro-congress land owners. The Association decided to offer increased wages to labourers.

The Kisan movements had rapidly spread to Tanjore district especially in Tiruturaipundi and Mannarguditaluks. The kisans organised on agitation claiming half of the yield. The agitation assumed serious proportions so much so that K.Bhashyam, the Minister for law at that time, had to visit the village to effect a settlement. On September 1947, T.S. AvanashilingamChettiar, the Education Minister,
during his procurement campaign, visited Sholavandan and as a result of his efforts, both the sides agreed to abide by the decision of the arbitrator. The Education Minister made a temporary arrangement. Accordingly 1/3 of the produce must go to the cultivator, 1/3 to the landowner and 1/3 to the government. Both the parties accepted the arrangement made by the Education Minister.

4. Prakasam Committee

The ryots association induced both the workers and the ryots to agitate against the government and the Zamindars and demanded to abolish the zamindari system. The government also made efforts to settle the agrarian dispute. The peasant's movements opened the eyes of the government and the political parties. Despite the fact that the Indian National congress come in the existence in the late nineteenth century, it began to champion the cause of the oppressed peasants only in the beginning of the twentieth century. The Government of India Act was passed by the British in 1935 giving more autonomy to the provinces. Under the provisions of the Government of India Act 1935, the elections were held in 1937. The sufferings of the ryots under the zamindari system and the efforts made by the Congress to abolish the system were mainly focused in the election campaign in Tamil Nadu. The zamindari system in all its aspects came to be criticised, discredited and condemned with more and more vehemence. In 1937, the Congress Ministry appointed a committee known as the Madras Estates Land Act Committee presided over by T. Prakasam, the Revenue Minister, to enquire into the whole question of zamindari and relations between the ryots and zamindars in the zamindiar estates. The Prakasam Committee in its report submitted some recommendations also to the government. On the basis of its recommendations the Estates Land Reforms Bill of 1938 was drafted. But the Bill and a revised Bill prepared in 1939, however, could achieve nothing as the Congress Ministry soon afterwards resigned office. In 1940 the care taker Government, which succeeded the Congress Ministry, drew up a scheme for the conversion of zamindari tenure into ryotwari by buying out zamindari lands and paying them compensation on the bassissof net income. The Famine Inquiry commission of 1945 in its report severely criticised the zamindari system. The Famine Inquiry commission recommended the policy of reforms of the Zamindari system through the enactment of legislation. In the 1945 elections, the Congress party obtained majority seats and was particular to abolish the Zamindari System. When the Congress realised its inability to abolish the system immediately the Madras Government passed an Act on 28th August 1940 to provide temporary protection to the ryots.

5. Madras Estates Land (Reduction Of Rent) Act Xxx Of 1947

But the Congress Party was very particular about abolishing the zamindari system. In February 1947, the Madras Legislative Council passed a resolution accepting the general principles of the abolition of the zamindari system. Early in 1947 after the National Government came to power the legislature passed a resolution accepting the general principle of the abolition of the zamindari system. An Act called the Madras Estates Land (Reduction Of Rent) Act XXX of 1947 gave considerable relief to the ryots. Thus the Zamindars lost their right to collect taxes from the ryots. The reduction of rent through legislative measures gave only temporary relief to the ryots of the zamindari estates. Meanwhile the Congress party urged the removal of all intermediaries between the peasants and the state through a permanent legislative and the rights of such intermediaries or the zamindars.


The State Legislative passed Bill in November 1948 and received the assent of the Governor General on 2nd April 1949. It became law on 19th April 1949. This Act was called the Madras Estates (Abolition and Conversion in to Ryotwari) Act, 1948. The impact of the Zamindari Abolition Act on the people was dramatic. Firstly, it improved their social status to a certain extent. Secondly they were made better off economically, and thirdly, it changed their outlook politically. Economically, the ryot was well off because the reform had provided the favourable framework necessary for increased agricultural production. The Act brought the ryots under a single control, direct management and uniform administration. The right of the ryots to the land became secured and protected by the issue of patta. It is argued that the British intention of creating a commercial agriculture in India in which the landowners would make use of the new knowledge and technology did not result as intended and implied in the land policy. The British agrarian policy to be responsible for the deteriorating conditions in the pre-independent Indian agrarian social structure, characterised by hardship of small holders and maldistribution of landownership.
With all the efforts of British administration in restructuring the agrarian social structure in India, prior to Independence it was characterized by a high degree of concentration of landownership at the top and a large class of tenants who held no proprietary rights over the land or very little rights as tenant cultivators. Since Independence several measures have been taken to alter the traditional agrarian structure and ensure socio-economic justice in agrarian relations. Land reforms programme may be mentioned as one such attempt which gained both political and economic importance in the Independent India for a variety of factors. During their struggle for freedom, the leaders of National Movement had mobilized peasants with the promise of land to the tiller and an egalitarian agrarian social order.

As a first step in fulfilling the promise made to the peasants, the congress appointed the Agrarian Reforms Committee in 1949. As it has been generally understood, the programme of land reforms could have been implemented with the aim of replacing the existing pattern of landownership either by (a) transforming the actual tillers into owner-cultivators by a large scale and radical redistribution of land among the small peasants and labourers, or (b) landlords themselves to take up actual cultivation by hired labourers. Instead the policy makers in India adopted a mid-way approach, at least in the initial stages, by abolishing the intermediaries. In the process, tenants were evicted from land much before the policies became effective.

7. Conclusion

Following the abolition of intermediaries, the cultivator now paid his rent to the state instead of the zamindar. It has also been argued that the abolition of the zamindari system was more beneficial to the zamindars than to the poor tenants as the zamindars were able to retain an enviable and sizeable portion of land for personal cultivation and getting a handsome compensation for the rest of land. While analyzing the success of land reforms a distinction has to be made between the number of cases of tenancy reported to the official agencies for settlement, and the magnitude of tenancy that existed at the time of legislation. Such a distinction is necessary because, as has been reported, of the tendency for evicting the tenants from the land in the wake of land reforms as well as settlement outside the administrative machinery.

In the districts of Tamil Nadu, there had been 24,555 cases registered for settlements were only 3.3 percent of the estimated tenant households. A great majority of them had been settled outside the official machinery. It is anybody’s guess as to who were in an advantageous position in such informal settlements. The tenants had given up their tenancies because they were unable to face the power of bigger landowners in the villages. In the midst of all difficulties, the land reforms adopted by the congress Government in Tamil Nadu gave some relief to the peasants, which gave a great impact on the development of agriculture in TamilNadu subsequently.

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