

THE RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY - A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of Ryotwari system in Madras Presidency. The ryotwari system introduced at Salem and Baramahal after the Third Mysore War (1792) had totally changed the whole land revenue set up of South India, as a time honoured system of the Deccan", as Munro claimed. Read when took charge of Baramahal found the ryots miserable under the mercy of the big landlords and oppressive middleman. Therefore, his policy was "securing the revenue its dues, the industries their fair advantages and to all the inhabitants every accommodation consistent with good policy".

Key words : Ryotwari system, Baramahal, Tahsildars, Zilla Court

INTRODUCTION

Munro policy was "securing the revenue its dues, the industries their fair advantages and to all the inhabitants every accommodation consistent with good policy".¹ "To draw the line between the higher and the lower classes and to secure them the fruits of their industry"² were his motto which to him was feasible only after a thorough survey of the region for which he wanted "an inquiry into the nature and progress of agriculture. It is the surest means of ascertaining an equitable mode of assessment and collection of land rent".³ He was not for any middlemen as he argued convincingly, "as such (middleman) must have his share or trouble and of profit, the Collector has the least trouble and government received the least revenue from that mode of management where there are most of them and viceversa".⁴ Unlike the other white bureaucrat, he stood for small farms and opined : "one cause of this smallness of farms in general is the assessment, but a still stronger cause is the poverty of the inhabitants to which may be added facility of farming and the cheapness of land; high rents and poverty operate much in the same way against the enlargement of farms, by leaving little to the cultivator and

preventing the accumulation of stock. When farms are small from these causes, they make the distress of the country, but they are all small from opposite causes. To commence farming in this country very little capital is required. The farmer makes his own hut, and has no occasion to expend a single rupee on any kind of building; all that he wants is a pair of bullock, a plough and a little grain. With these three he begins and succeeds in his undertakings. It is, therefore, obvious that every advance towards improvement in the condition of the labouring peasantry tends to oppose the enlargement of farms, because whenever labourers acquire any property, they will lease their master's and farm for themselves and this will constantly happen as long as land continues cheap, or as government have plenty to give gratis to whoever demands it. There is also little doubt but that, in consequence of this desertion of labourers the head farmers in order to retain them will augment their ways, and thus had what they wish to prevent, if price were put on all waste lands, it would be checking this desertion contribute to promote the enlargement of farms and likewise, the sale ability of the lands in cultivation. But this measure though it would be advantageous to the principal farmers, would be prejudicial to the great body of the cultivators. There is no reason to regret that farms are small; it is better on every account that they should be so far population for industry and for general wealth. It does not produce men of great fortunes and over grown possession; but it lessens the number of poor and raises up everywhere a crowd of men of small but of independent property, who when they are certain that they will themselves enjoy every extraordinary execution of labour, work with a spirit of activity which would in vain be expected from the tenants or servants of great land-holders. If the expense of collection be source what increased by the smallness of farms, it is amply repaid by the augmentation of revenue. There is also less danger of loss by outstanding balances from small than from great farms; because the failure of the small farmer is far a trifling sum is known at once and can be easily remedied but the great farmer will not stop payment until he has ruined men under him, and rendered them incapable of paying their usual rents for a number of years. Were there any necessity for making greater farmers, it could only be done by wronging all the petty farmers, and diminishing revenue, for there is no man in the country who has more stock than is barely sufficient for his own lands, if waste is given to him, he cannot cultivate it if other farmers are placed under him. It can be of no use to him unless a reduction of rent is granted, or part of which may go to him and the other part to them, both will then be gainers, but as they are entitled to the full proportion that falls to their respective lands, and, i.e., lord to be obliged to share it

with him, and many of them were not consider the remission obtained as an equivalent for being rendered dependent on an equal. It would be indeed extremely absurd to apply any portion of it to the purpose of enriching particular farmers and raising above their neighbours. If every area is allowed, it ought to be distributed among them all. Everyone ought to have just as much land as they stock and cultivate themselves, all of them ought to have the same advantages and they ought to have entirely left to their own exertions to extend or contract their farms to their various fortunes". He added "there would probably in time, be no country in the world, which could boast of such numerous of race of substantial middling farmers whose condition though inferior to that British landlords, would certainly be preferable to that of the great bulk of the tenants".⁵

Joint communal venture was a failure as there was no active cooperation between various village communities whose decay affected the agriculture adversely. Maclead who understood this, wrote to Read thus : "I believe that few countries can have smaller proportion of beggars and of persons under restraint for debts or a greater proportion of persons who are independent of each other than these districts".⁶

There was no consistency in the policy of the government as well and hence there was no improvement even in the fertile districts like Trichy and Tanjore where too agriculture was extremely risky to be undertaken with vigour and confidence Read and his assistants were the first to understand the problems of peasantry to which the land taxes were too high and coercive and with which it was striving hard to make both ends meet. Getting half the produce as rent, he felt, was an extortionate demand and hence he was for light money assessment which to him, "is the preferable policy of modern times". He also wanted assess the land "on the basis of a portion after deducting the of cultivation and the cost of living of the ryots family which which was the first measure of its kind. Even before this also, some deductions were made, for the village servants, brahmanas and village Gods, but the cost of living of the ryots family was never taken into consideration. For the first time, the cost of living was thought of as an index of assessment."⁷

As a result of such a good policy, tilling became lucrative and area of cultivation also enormously increased. The yield of land revenue in Bengal per square acre was about 47 pagodas whereas in a comparatively dry treat like Baramahal, thanks to the impetus given under the ryotwari it

was 67 to 70 pagodas per square acre. Read feels, "the difference may appear extraordinary and the more so which considered that a quarter of these districts is in barren mountains and jungles, that its only trade is with Karnatic and the Bengal is a level country, extremely fertile and the greatest source of wealth and commerce in India. It may be inferred that if the countries be equally fertile and rich in specie, a greater share of the common stock, or individual property of these districts is taken for government than in Bengal, and if they be less wealthy, that the share taken for it is proportionately more; and this influence is correspondent with fact, for here government receives the rent of the land, and there only a tax or part of that rent"⁸ This was one of the reasons for the ryotwari system to be favourably considered.

Another great quality of Read was that he had deep faith in social justice and fair play as he neither wanted to favour nor encourage brahmanas and Muslims who till then were a favoured few. Instead, he wanted to favour the poor by bringing down the rates they paid to the level of Muslims and brahmanas about whom he writes: "this is a parsimony disgraceful to government. The indulgence should be extended to all description by a general remission".⁹ He further says, "my plan is to bring every charge, religion, revenue and police into our cash accounts by adding them all to our jumabundy and disbursing them all from our treasury, that is, abolishing the mode of defraying all such charges by grants of land, which was the policy of the rude times and adopting that of paying them all in money which is the preferable policy of modern times. All castes to pay the same rent and payment of taxes in cash and by grain may be considered as measures adopted to abolish Feudal practices and attempts made to modernise the economic"¹⁰

This system too was not a success as the privileged who enjoyed the fruits of communal labour so far did not accept the new system. At the same time, the British could not enforce it because they lacked the active support of those who were immediately below with whom it was introduced also were not benefitted owing to its over assessment which even Read and Munro were aware of. Another serious flaw in the system was that it needed the undivided attention of a few European officials who had to devote their entire energy on revenue administration. In an alien country, they had to rely mainly on the subordinate Indian Revenue staff who were generally corrupt and unscrupulous as Munro and others had rightly lamented.

Out of enthusiasm, the new masters encouraged people to take as much of land as possible for cultivation. In many places, it became a forced cultivation and tillers in many areas, due to dearth of hands for cultivation, were even punished if they did not oblige. Even if season failed, no remission was usually made unless "the ryot was unable to pay the demand".¹¹

The zamindars who lost the patronage of the company also did not like the system as the underdogs were most favoured at their own cost. Even some of the servants of the company also did not favour the extreme democratic step taken by some of them. The mirasdars who enjoyed till then all benefits of cultivation, lost all such gains like *tuntuvaram* which, now, were incorporated, with the general revenue. The brahmanas and the leading Muslims who were the favoured few till then also opposed it as there was no scope for grant or *manyam* to them in the new set up.

The new judicial system which came into force in 1802 was a great hurdle to it as it was against compulsion of any kind. Without such, no agricultural operation could be possible in those days. The Tahsildars and other revenue officials used *Kittikole* (a tool of torture) to compel people to undertake cultivation, which now, without such a means of coercion came to a standstill. Moreover, the revenue of a whole village could be held even if a single ryot filed a case in a Zillah Court".¹² The ryotwari system, after much expectation was thrown overboard. Munro who was against any system other than ryotwari felt sincerely that to sell the land of the ryots to the highest bidders would be gross violation" of private rights.¹³ The anti-ryotwari school headed by Place favoured the village lease settlement with which it hoped to preserve the best traditions of the village communities by making them real little republics.

REFERENCES

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- ⁴ *From Read to the Board of Revenue, Baramahal Records,, Section I*, pp.7-9.
- ⁵ *From to Read, Jan. 26*, 1798.
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- ¹⁰ *From Read to the Board of Revenue, Baramahal Records,,*

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¹² *From the Collector of Trichinopoly to the Board*.
¹³ *From the Collector of Trichinopoly to the Board*.

