

BEGINNING OF LAND REVENUE SETTLEMENT IN THE CENTRAL PROVINCES

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The Central Provinces were constituted in 1861 by combining two adjoining areas of central India – Province of Nagpore and Saugor-Nerbudda Territories, as they were known at that time. Both these areas were earlier under the Maratha Rule and came under direct British administration at different periods. The Saugor-Nerbudda Territories came under direct British administration in 1817 after conclusion of third Anglo-Maratha war. The State of Nagpore lapsed to direct British control after demise of the last Bhosale ruler, Raghuji III, without leaving an heir to his throne.

Land revenue was a major source of earnings for the British Government and due importance was given to the land revenue administration. Under the Maratha rule, the government was the owner of all the land and any private holding of land was not recognized. For agriculture purpose the land was given on rent to the farmers in annual land revenue settlements, and generally fields allotted to the farmers were changed every year. A Patel was assigned to each village as government representative to collect rents. The farmers started yearly cultivation season some time in June on the allotted lands, even before fixation of the rent values for the year. At this time the farmers knew only the relative value of their fields in comparison to all the productive fields of the village. Low productive fields, called thok fields, were also allotted but on fixed rents. The rent to be given by the entire village was known later in the cultivation year when the expected output from the fields could be judged with fair certainty. In fact, the expected output in the season was one of the major considerations for deciding the rent for the whole village. After the fixation of rent for the whole village, the rents from thok fields were set aside and remaining amount was distributed among the farmers in proportions to the value of their fields.

After the Saugor-Nerbudda Territories came under British administration, the field revenue officers tried to change the land revenue system to their advantage. They did several experiments for more than 15 years with unfavourable results. They fixed rents at high values¹ at the beginning of the season for a five-year term². The terms of settlement were often so severe that time and again the field officers had to give remissions. In 1835, long term land revenue settlement was adopted with 20-year tenure. At this time, the Saugor-Nerbudda Territories had been annexed to the North Western Provinces³. After the end of 20-year settlement period, further long-term settlements were done with revised set of rules and directions. These set of rules, generally known as proclamation of 1854⁴, provided for grant of proprietary rights. The land settlements were done through administrative directives, without any applicable statute. Generally proprietary rights were given to all cultivators who were in possession of their holdings since 1840 in the absence of other and stronger claims. The proprietary rights were given free of cost as a gift from the government. The proclamation of 1854 and Saharanpur Rules of 1855 formed the basis on which land revenue settlement of the newly formed Central Provinces was conducted.

The Nagpore State had also come under temporary British administration in 1817. At the time, the proclaimed King, Raghuji III, was a minor and the British assumed the administration till the time of his minority. The British administration also made some fundamental changes in the land revenue system. They fixed land revenue at the beginning of the season and brought some efficiency in land administration. After taking over the administration in 1830, Raghuji III continued with the existing system with some changes. Even after his demise, the system was, continued by British administrators. After formation of the Central Provinces, long-term land revenue settlements were initiated.

Initially, the Proclamation of 1854 was used for guidance in land revenue settlements in the Central Provinces. Local experience led to formation of new directives that were added to the Proclamation of 1854. All these directives and rules were combined into what was known as Settlement Code of 1863, which was essentially a collection of circular orders and rulings on settlement procedure in NW Provinces, issued mostly for Saugar and Nerbudda Territories, with supplementary instructions to Settlement Officers. It was a stop-gap arrangement.

Conferring of proprietary rights led to recognition of different type of tenants. Section VI of Bengal Act X of 1859 was used for the CP which assigned right of occupancy to the raiyat who held the land for a period of 12 years. This practice coincided with the Proclamation of 1854 and extended to the CP in March 1864⁵. This was followed by Circular G of 1865, added as Appendix VII to the Settlement Code of 1863 – result of further proclamations that created the status of absolute occupancy tenant.

Land settlements progressed in stages and by 1865 the proprietary tenures were declared in more than twenty-five thousand villages or estates and more than eleven thousand conflicting claims were adjudicated. Due consideration was given to the rights of the tenants along with the rights of the malguzars. More than twelve thousand cases of lesser proprietorship were recognized. Full rights of occupancy were declared for more than fifty thousand qualifying tenants. Additionally, more than seventy thousand

tenants were ranked as holding the proprietary claims contemplated by Act X of 1859. The tenants-at-will status (short term tenancy) was recognized for more than two lakh ten thousand tenants⁶.

Although the long-term land revenue settlement replaced centuries old system, the long tenure and fixity of rents induced the tenants to invest in the land.

¹D. P. Mishra, ed., The History of Freedom Movement in Madhay Pradesh (Nagpur – 1956); p. 31

²The Central Provinces Land Revenue Administration, 1920; para 28

³D. E. U. Baker – Colonialism in an Indian Hinterland The Central Provinces 1820-1920; Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1993; p. 61.

⁴The Central Provinces Land Revenue Administration, 1920. para 31

⁵The Central Provinces Land Revenue Administration, 1920; para 40

⁶R. Temple - Report on the Central Provinces Administration, 1864-65; National Archives of India, New Delhi; p. iv.

