



***TRANSITION TO COLONIAL AGRARIAN ORDER: ALTERNATIVE MODES OF PROTEST AND SURVIVAL OF ZAMINDARI IN MIDNAPUR C.1760 — 1793**

Fakir Mohan Pradhan

Designation: Assistant (CSR)

Petronet LNG Limited, New Delhi

Abstract:

Midnapur was one of the first three Indian districts ceded to the English East India Company in 1760. So, this area bore the brunt of many early experiments and changes made by the Company till Permanent Settlement was introduced in 1793. The attempt made here is to focus on how rural landed elite was trying to react against or to cope with the intervention of the Company in land revenue. The emphasis is on alternative modes of resistance other than armed rebellion. Taking advantage of the inexperience of the Company Officials in matters relating to land and revenue, the landed elite tried every trick in the book to survive the pressure exerted by the Company. The alternative modes of protest did influence the decisions of the Company in matters of land and revenue which is reflected in the decision to continue with them (zamindars) though the initial attempt was to bypass them. In the process, the Zamindars lost some privileges while gained some rights which they did not have before the Company rule.

Introduction

Midnapur was one of the first three Indian districts ceded to the English East India Company in 1760. So, this area bore the brunt of many early experiments and changes made by the Company as the de facto sovereign power. In this sense, Midnapur is an excellent site to study the transition to a colonial agrarian order. Additionally, Midnapur had some distinctive features, which had the potential to add valuable dimensions to this study.

Firstly, there were three thousand Zamindars and Talluqdars in this district.¹ Very few of these Zamindars had jurisdiction over one or more pargana.² Even a small Pargana, Sabang, whose malguzari was only 87,000 Rupees (in 1775), had '102 Talluqdars besides petty Talluqdars to the number of about 80, whose Talluqs are included in those of the former...'³ This is in striking contrast with some other districts of Bengal like Bishnupur, Birbhum, Rajshahi, Burdwan, Nadia, and Dinajpur, where one Zamindari was spread over almost the entire districts.

Secondly, there was a high scale of land reclamation in Midnapur district during this period.⁴ Of course, there were a few other districts, which also went through a process of land reclamation, but the reclamation in Midnapur represents the opening of the agrarian frontier in this part of Bengal.

The attempt made here is to focus on some of how rural landed elite was trying to react against or to cope with the intervention of the Company inland revenue. While increasing revenue demand and the distress sale of zamindaris after the Permanent Settlement is the prime focus of many studies, the response of the landed elite deserves more

attention. The emphasis is on alternative modes of resistance other than armed rebellion. Harping on the inexperience of the Company Officials in matters relating to land and land revenue, they tried to draw maximum benefit from every given situation. At times the British Officials have harassed in such a vindictive manner that their conditions looked pitiable.

Initially, the Company tried to bypass this section. However, later the Company realized the potential and position of this section and ultimately conferred powers, which were not earlier enjoyed by them (Zamindars). Even though the Company zealously deprived the Zamindars of some existing powers.

Nature and Role of Landed Elite

The rural elites were those who enjoyed an intrinsically superior status in rural society by the lands personally held by them and by the power vested in them by the state to collect revenue, a part of which they retained.⁵ The category thus obviously includes Zamindars and Tallukdars. However, the holders of La-Kharaji or Baz-i-Zamin, though they didn't enjoy the right to levy or collect taxes on behalf of the state, must be accommodated in this category. The fact that their holdings were free from all revenue assessment, be it donations made in perpetuity or for life by the state or Zamindars, place them in the privileged group of landed elites. Midnapur harboured such a considerable size of this elite group of all hues that it attracts our attention at the first sight itself.

However, in the context of Midnapore, the term Zamindar is often loosely employed in contemporary records. We hear, for instance, of the Midnapur Zamindar — a lady the Ranee Siromani. On her were dependent a large number of Parganas each of which had its own particular Zamindar. Again in Cassijurah pargana out of 3,700 families resident there, 1500 are styled Khushnishan.

The role performed by the landed elite:

The Zamindars and Talluqdars' role in acting as state functionaries in rural areas, and as a collector of revenue, is fairly well known. The debate now is whether they performed only that role or they had a much bigger role that to play in the production process (both agricultural and non-agricultural). They played a key role in land reclamation and hence increase agricultural production.⁶

Providing taqavi (agricultural loans on lower interest) and erection and maintenance of embankments were traditional responsibilities of Zamindars. Sometimes raiyats refused to cultivate if bonds were not properly repaired.⁷ Maintaining peace in rural areas was another responsibility of the Zamindar. He maintained large bands of armed retainers composed of sawars (Horseman) and Paiks (footmen) through grants of Jagir Land⁸

Pressure from the Company

This varied role played by the landed elite, especially the Zamindar, came under severe pressure from the East India Company. This pressure was mainly in the form of increased revenue demand. The severity of land revenue assessment on the eve of 1793 Settlement was mentioned in a memorandum by the Zamindars to the Floud Commission as evidence of prolonged hardship.

The assessment was severe as it could be made; the amount realized in 1790-91 was double the assessment of Jaffar Khan and Suja Khan, three times the collection of Maharaja Nand Kumar in 1764-65 and double the collection made by Reza Khan in 1765-66 though one-third of the population had been shaped away and about half the lands remained uncultivated.

What was perhaps more pressurizing was the rigidity with which the Company tried to collect Jama in due time. The Governor General in Council declared that lands of the Zamindars and Talluqdars should be sold in case of failure in the payment of their rents.⁹ In another letter to PCRB, the Governor General in Council advised,

In case of failure to pay monthly kists by the fifteenth of next month, then keep the Zamindar in close confinement till we get the last penny; if remain in balance declare that we will take the management to our own hands.¹⁰

Further, the Company abolished many abwabs to the utter discomfort of the Zamindars. There were many complaints against the Zamindars and farmers for extracting taxes (abwabs).¹¹

This heavy revenue demand left many Zamindars and Talluqdars impoverished. Raja of Maina Chura had to part with his household assets to pay for his revenue.¹² The instances of the impoverishment of Zamindars can be multiplied.

In this context, it is interesting to see the ways through which they tried to withstand the pressure.

Response:

The Zamindars of western jungles took the Company administration head-on by refusing to accept a settlement. There was an implicit denial of the suzerainty of the Company. So what followed from 1767, when Capt. Fergusson took the first expedition against the jungle Zamindars, which were repeated expeditions against one or the other Zamindar. What proved to be the strength of the Zamindars in that confrontation was their proximity to dense forests. Whenever the British forces arrived they retreated into them (as they were no match for the troops of the Company). The Ghatshila Zamindar was supplied provisions into the forest by Zamindar of Fulkusma and Sildea whereas the Zamindar of Fulkusma gave protection to the family of one B.D Dhul.¹³ Even when it yielded to the pressure of the Company and accepted settlement (of course for a lower sum) it continued to remain a disturbed area. The main recalcitrant Zamindars were of Ghatshila, and Bhograi.

On the other hand, Zamindars from the regular cultivated areas could not dare to do what their counterparts in the western parts were doing. They neither had an advantageous strategic location nor commanded considerable resources to wage war against the Company. So, their opposition was of a different kind. The British Officers wanted to have the Zamindari accounts to understand the revenue system as well as to know the actual value of the province. But the Zamindars would not comply with it. They would put forward all kinds of possible impediments to the work of the British authorities.¹⁴

In another case, the Collector complained about the Zamindars not submitting the original accounts. He said...

Banchhrum Ray. C under Nundy, and other troublesome persons have raised a false accusation and are gone to Burdwan to complain against me. He ...raises the utmost difficulty to prevent the preparation of the accounts if due punishment is not inflicted on those, no one will deliver original accounts.¹⁵

The other way adopted by the zamindar was to immediately remove the qualified patwaris and Kannungous and appoint new officers without the necessary knowledge.

Evidence like this can be multiplied. But here is an **incident**¹⁶ with a difference and too interesting to be missed. It is about the harassment of a member of the provincial council of revenue who was deputed to Midnapur to inquire about the allegation of embezzlement and oppression against the naib of Midnapur, Cally Prasad Singh, and his colleague Chrono Ghose. To facilitate inquiry both of them were suspended. After the suspension of Cally Prasad Singh, the name of Bepur Prasad¹⁷ was taken into consideration to put him into the office of the Naib. But at that time the majority of members of the provincial council of Revenue disapproved of asserting Bipur Prasad to be a man with no understanding'. And Bajeram Ghose was appointed Naib temporarily. However, after some time Bajeram Ghose was dismissed and Peshkar Bipur passed was appointed Naib on 29-1-1976. Bepur Prasad acted in a very calculated manner during his tenure. To take the other zamindars and talluqdars into confidence he would occasionally recommend their claim for remission of Jama in the pretext of drought or inundation. At times such recommendations were not only rejected by the PCRB, GG&C but he was censured for recommending such claims. In one case Higginson accused that:

Bipur Prasad is continuing the practice of former Naib in crediting the zamindars and tallgrass around (Rs.) 50,000 which he has never received. By this, he shows to the Board that he had collected the revenue and, therefore, there is no balance. But he has converted the balance to credit given to the zamindars and talluqdars.¹⁸

Simultaneously, he has also appointed his favourites and thereby removed some others. He removed the Poddar of Jellasure who was earlier dismissed by Cally Prasad Singh and reinstated after an inquiry.¹⁹ He dismissed the tahsildar of Jahanpur for which he was censured for not consulting anyone before acting in that manner.²⁰

The most daring was the appointment of Chander Sekhar Ghose (Chrono Ghose) for the security of one pargana in direct opposition to a Parwan proclaiming Chrono Ghose to be debarred from being entrusted with any authority in the Chakla of Midnapur and Jelasor. He also appointed Narayan Satpathy to be the security of the other five Parganas removing the incumbents.²¹

On the other hand, Mr Rosewell who was at Midinapur expressed his 'displeasure' at the appointment of Bipur Prasad accusing him of embezzlement. Considering the close link of Bipur Prasad with Cally Prasad and Choono Ghose he urged the removal of Bepur Prasad on the ground that he would hamper his business (inquiry). Of course, even earlier also he had demanded the removal of Bipur Prasad on the occasion of his misconduct (earlier mentioned). But the Board would only censure him without actually punishing him. But now what the board replied certainly frustrated him. The Board replied in the negative with mention their inability to understand how Bepur Prasad could impede his inquiry about the conduct of Cally Prasad and Choono Ghose. Further, the Board asserted that Bepur Prasad was a 'man of capabilities'.²²

In a reply to the Board, he (Rosewell) was suspicious of the strong support Bepur Prasad enjoyed in Burdwan (PCR), frustrated Rosewell said -

the support is given to Cally Prasad, Chander Sikhar Ghose, Bepur Prasad and ca. From which it is natural to draw an inference that those who stood forth to protect so bad a cause and do it in open and glaring a manner have more interest in personal gain than that of securing the benefit of the Company ... The same person was not eligible some years earlier (a man with no understanding), now is a man of capabilities.²³

At this point, Bipur Prasad thought to take on Rosewell directly. He got a petition submitted by Sundry palookas and zamindars that while they were delivering the accounts Mr Roswell oppressed them and extorted these accounts. To make it more authentic he went with the thanadar to the Qazi's office when he (the Qazi) was absent and bullied his naib to put the Qazi's seal in that petition.²⁴ And he forwarded it to the PCR. Being asked to reply to the above allegations, Rosewell pleaded innocence. An enquiry was held and Bipur Prasad managed to make the talluqdars corroborate what was there in the petition.²⁵ But the Qazi, and his naib differed and Bipur Prasad's plot was exposed. Still, he was simply censured. Then their letter of Rosewell to the PCR reflected his anguish and frustration. He lamented how the naib was passing strictures at him. How they would sarcastically ask someone who could visit him with some grievances about the step taken or how the naib would refer someone to him to take appropriate action. Further, the naib would not supply the register etc. to him and if asked for, and should he choose to supply the naib would appear to be doing him a favour.²⁶

So, PCR referred the case to the Governor General and his council who dismissed the naib.

Secret land holdings were another way to cope with growing revenue demand. In a letter of instruction to the acting collector Mr G. Doveswell, the Governor General in Council wrote,

from the orders issued by the collector, it would appear that the Rajah of Cassijura was excluded from all interference in the management of his Zamindari in the past three years, but from the circumstances stated in the acting collector's letter of 29th ultimo and your proceedings, there is every reason to believe that the Raja clandestinely drew very considerable sums from his Zamindari during the above period ...²⁷

A report from Bazi Zamin Daftar revealed,

after the notice to get the lakharaj lands confirmed 16, 937 Bighas of land had been forfeited by several people who failed to furnish adequate proof of their holdings. In addition to this amount, the report shows eighty small villages and 160 Bighas of land were found to be forfeited to the government. Of these 24 villages were held by zamindars rent free neither is included in the jamabundy of the district nor held for any purpose of public activity and 46 villages were in the possession of the zamindars literally as nankar ...²⁸

Apart from this, alienation of revenue lands as Lakharaj land was another way of secret income. As Hunter said

many such tenures were created ... more often by zamindars and even by the officers of the Mohammedan Government appointed to the temporary superintendence of the revenue under the pretext that the produce of the lands was to be appropriated to the religious or charitable purpose. While in fact the alienations were made for the personal advantage of the grantee or clandestinely for the granters themselves. No effective measure to check these malpractices seems to have been adopted till 1793.²⁹

Though Mr Peiarce was directed to pay special attention to preventing any alienation of the smallest portion of land in the district under his superintendence, such grants in fact went up substantially between the period 1773 and 1787.

In addition to that —

it is well known that the zamindars in different parts of the country have given leases of lands to persons for a term of years or perhaps in perpetuity at a reduced rate of assessment. The influence of the local officers employed in the revenue offices and under British subjects was supposed to have procured such leases in their favour.³⁰

Claiming remission and getting them granted was another option before the zamindar. In the words of Francis, 'they streamed the country to accumulate a rapid fortune and in the end perhaps obtaining remission in the very lands of which they were themselves farmers and collectors, and put that remission into their pockets.'³¹

Zamindars sometimes made false claims to defer the payment of Jamma. The zamindar of Ameynagar claimed a robbery was committed in his pargana whereby villages were plundered of everything. He further added that such depredations from Bissenpur had occurred in that season, so he would not be able to pay his revenue. But, from an enquiry, it was found that people of those villages had been entirely removed from there sometime before. And the excuse to defer payment was exposed.³²

Mainachura Raja after slipping into considerable balance was claimed to have taken a personal interest to facilitate cultivation by making a circuit of his pargana in the year 1767 so that he would be able to discharge his balance. But as Vanisittart reported, after a visit to the pargana, the claim was false.

However, the pressure was not manifested only in the spheres of the relation between the state and the zamindar but also pervaded other spheres. Everyone seemed to be more conscious of his pocket than ever before.

Disputes between the zamindar and his under renters also reflect this. The zamindar of Gocool claimed that his under renters were not paying the balances even though he had paid the revenue in the sudder by borrowing. This clearly shows the effect of severe pressure, because normally, we get evidence of zamindar/farmer connivance with each other to make grants at a lower rate to lower the Jama of their holdings.

However, illegal collection of abwab and other oppressive demands on certain occasions had to be refunded at the order of the Board. Some of the refunds were made to - raiyats of Mirguda,³³ Cassijura,³⁴ and Goculpur.³⁵

In this race for survival, where almost every section was trying to help his cause, what suffered was the traditional role played by the landed elite. The worst sufferer was poolbunbdi. Shirking of responsibility by the zamindars, thus became prevalent.³⁶ So was the state of the local policing system. The resumption of jageer lands meant for paiks had a very adverse impact on the police system.

What is interesting is to set the large-scale land reclamation, which needed considerable money, in a situation when many zamindars and talluqdars were running into arrears and having portions of their holdings sold to make good of the arrears.³⁷

Thus it can be said that despite many cases of apparent insolvency, several other zamindars had enough money to invest in land reclamation. This shows the strength of zamindars.

The Company realised the necessity of the zamindars and its policy gradually changed from an attempt to bypass the zamindars [through the farming system] to conferring them more proprietary rights over land than they had earlier. They no longer needed to produce security as Zamindari itself was considered sufficient security.³⁸ (Earlier, all farmers had to produce security)

A further change took place when the Court of Directors instructed that the lot to be sold must bear a proportion to the amount of such balance (it being unjust to sell more than necessary).³⁹

Whatever, the rationale behind such orders of the Court of Directors, it was the zamindars who were relieved. The alternative mode⁴⁰ of recovering balance did not deprive them of their hereditary possession. Thus, though many Zamindaries were made Khas (management taken up by the govt), their fragmentation reduced considerably.

Conclusion:

Zamindari as an institution survived in this period. Taking advantage of the inexperience of the Company Officials in matters relating to land and revenue, the landed elite tried every trick in the book to survive the pressure exerted by the Company. The methods of protest did influence the decisions of the Company in matters of land and revenue as is reflected in the decision to continue with them though the initial attempt was to bypass the zamindars. In the process the Zamindars lost some privileges while gained some rights which they did not have before the Company rule.

¹ W.K. Firminger (ed.), 1926. Bengal District Records, Midnapur, 1763-1767, vol. I, P-144. (hereafter BDRM)]

² Ray, R. 1979. Change in Bengal Agrarian Society, 1760-1850, New Delhi, P-136.

³ Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue, Burdwan, 16 May 1774-30 December 1779, Dt. 26.06.1975

⁴ BDRM, vol. 1, P.191

⁵ Datta, R. 2000. Society, Economy and The Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal, C. 1760-1800, Delhi, P- 133.

⁶ Firminger (ed.), BDRM, vol- 1, P-24

⁷ Sengupta, J.C. and Bose S.C.(ed.) 1958. West Bengal District Records, New Series, Midnapur, Letters Received 1777-1800, P-542.

⁸ Hunter, W.W. 1973. A Statistical Account of Bengal, London, 1875-77, vol- III, P-165

⁹ Index to PCRB, vol- 1, Dt.01.03.1774

¹⁰ PCRB, vol- 21, Dt. 21.10.1777

¹¹ PCRB, vol- 21, Dt. 21.10.1777

¹² Firminger (ed.), BDRM, vol- 1, Dt. 27.07.1767, P-172

¹³ PCRB, Dt.20.06.1774.

¹⁴ see a report from report from H. Verelst in Firminger (ed.), BDRM, vol- 2, P-V

¹⁵ WBDR-N-M, Dt.15.04.1777, Pp-1-2.

¹⁶ This incident has been summarized from the proceedings of PCRB ranging zed from January 1776 to July 1776

¹⁷ Bipur Prasad was the Peshkar in the Collectorate when Cally Prasad was Naib

¹⁸ PCRB, Dt.16.05.1776

¹⁹ PCRB, Dt.25.04.1776

²⁰ PCRB, Dt.30.(?).04.1776

²¹ PCRB, Dt.19.04.1776.

²² PCRB, Dt.28.02.1776

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ PCRB, Dt.08.03.1776

²⁵ PCRB, Dt.29.03.1776.

²⁶ PCRB, Dt.19.04.1776.

²⁷ WBDRNM, Dt.19.01.1793, P-531

²⁸ *Ibid*, Dt.17.04.1787, P-225

²⁹ Hunter, W.W., Statistical Account, P-94

³⁰ WBDRNM, Dt.10.08.1787, P-234.

- ³¹ Sinha, N.K. 1962. The Economic History of Bengal from Plassey to Permanent Settlement, vol- II, Calcutta, P-78.
- ³² Firminger, BDR, vol- 1, Dt. 24.07.1767, P-167.
- ³³ PCR, Dt.23.05.1774
- ³⁴ PCR, Dt.30.05.1774
- ³⁵ PCR, Dt.02.06.1774
- ³⁶ PCR Dt. 26.05.1774
- ³⁷ Firminger (ed.), BDR, 4, Dt.30.01.1771, P-43.
- ³⁸ Sinha, N.K. Economic History of Bengal, from Plassey, vol-2, P-115. (see also-PCR, Vol-21)
- ³⁹ Firminger, Introduction to Fifth Report, P-cccxxvi.
- ⁴⁰ If deemed necessary the zamindars authority and interest should be totally suspended, and a deputy appointed to manage his affairs till all his debts to government are fully paid and satisfied, when the Zamindari should be restored to him or his heirs.

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