



# "RYOTWARI SYSTEM: IMPLICATIONS AND EFFECTS ON THE SOUTH INDIAN AGRARIAN LANDSCAPE"- AN OVERVIEW

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## Abstract

This research aims to highlight the importance in the revenue history of India and the Madras revenue system. In the first place it was in Madras that the Rayatwari method of settlement as a system under the government originated in the next place, the history of Madras Presidency throws great light on the constitution of villages and the early customs of landholding which are really at the bottom of all revenue systems. The British was fully established in South India by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the early years of that rule there was little to choose between English administration and native princess so far as the agricultural classes were concerned. The ill-paid English writers and actors who carried on extensive trade on their own found themselves suddenly transformed into governors of provinces and they behaved as worst oppressors of people than most of the local rulers. But after the Cornwallis' reforms the condition had improved much. Administrators like Reade, Munro, Graham and Thackray helped the pacification of the country by the suppression of the poligars who, with large bands of armed followers, plundered the country. The Ryotwari settlement was first tried in Baramahal in the 1790's after third Mysore War by Captain Alexander Read. Subsequently his assistants, such men as Thomas Munro and John Macloed extended the system to the ceded districts, Coimbatore and the whole of the Carnatic. It was an agreement made directly between the government and the ryots or "Cultivators" of land, to the complete exclusion of intermediaries. Under this agreement the government usually sought to receive its due in the form of money value fixed upon the actual fields under cultivation.

**Key Words:** Rayatwari method, Madras Presidency, Reade, Munro, Baramahal

## Introduction

The Madras revenue system has an importance in the revenue history of India which is all its own. In the first place it was in Madras that the Rayatwari method of settlement as a system under the government originated in the next place, the history of Madras Presidency throws great light on the constitution of villages and the early customs of landholding which are really at the bottom of all revenue systems. It has often been said of Bombay, for example, that the rayatwari system was not invented, but existed this is perfectly true. If the Muhammadan conquest obliterated the old village institutions and bought zamindars of estates into a position of prominence, the zamindari system is inevitable. If there are no zamindars, but the villages show a strong tribal organisation and a joint title to the entire area of a village, whether waste or cultivated, a system dealing with the body through its headmen is equally sure to develop itself. If the village consists of individual holdings its bond of union being such as has no reference to common

landholding or united responsibility of any kind a rayatwari system or method of dealing with each landholder individually is the only one which is practicable without injustice and without a purely artificial creation of an upper proprietary title over the whole village.

### DIVISION OF THE MADRAS TERRITORY

The Madras Presidency both as regards the effect of these immigrations and otherwise may be roughly into three tracts-

- (1) The North or Telugu country, extending as far south as the Nellore District
- (2) The Tamil country below Nellore and to the east and south of Mysore, including the districts of Chingleput, North and South Arcot, Salem, Tanjore, Madura and Tinnevely
- (3) The West Coast, Kanara and Malabar (The rest-Cochin and Travancore-being Native States) <sup>1</sup>

### EARLY MEASURES OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT: THE PERMANENT SETTLEMENT

Besides the zamindari lands there were others called “**haveli**” lands, not held by middlemen, but directly under government. The lands were leased out annually or on short settlements and in some cases lump sums were assessed on the entire village. The Madras government undertook the charge of the Northern Circars, the Bengal Government entered on the management of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. When the Permanent Settlement with zamindars was introduced in 1793, the Court of Directors in 1795 desired the Madras government to adopt the same system. The northern circars were accordingly permanently settled. The Haveli lands were parcelled out into states of convenient size and were sold as **Mootabs (muttha)** to the highest bidder. While these measures were in progress the districts known as the “Ceded Districts” were given over by the Nizam of Hyderabad and in 1801 the Nawab of Arcot’s domains were ceded, so that the Presidency assumed its present form. Some of the lands formed estates held by chiefs called Poligars and then **Paleams (Pollams)** became zamindari estates permanently settled.<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION OF THE RYOTWARI SYSTEM

The British was fully established in South India by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the early years of that rule there was little to choose between English administration and native princess so far as the agricultural classes were concerned. The ill-paid English writers and actors who carried on extensive trade on their own, found themselves suddenly transformed into governors of provinces and they behaved as worst oppressors of people than most of the local rulers. But after the Cornwallis’ reforms the condition had improved much. Administrators like Reade, Munro, Graham and Thackray helped the pacification of the country by the suppression of the poligars who, with large bands of armed followers, plundered the country. The resources of the country had been brought to the last stage of exhaustion by wars and famines and before helping to replenish them, Permanent Settlement of the revenue was introduced. The districts of Chingleput, Salem, Dindigul were divided into a number of **mettals** and sold to the highest bidders. The defects arose from the fact that the British adopted the old assessments which were in themselves excessive. Even though Munro wanted the government to reduce their demand to one-third of the gross produce, the government could not introduce the reform on account of orders received from England for the remittance of an additional sum of a million sterling annually. <sup>3</sup>

The village leases thus functioned under unfavourable conditions of over-assessment, lack of co-operation between the authorities adverse seasons and depressed state of agriculture and industry. If a reduction in assessment had been effected, the system might have had better chance, but the Court of Directors were now convinced that the village leases were a washout. On the other hand they had developed a strong predilection for ryotwari system, influenced no doubt by Munro who had returned home, and their opinions were communicated to the local government. In vain the Board of Revenue protested that the ill success of the village leases was due not to any inherent defects but to the excessive rents based on “the fallacious data” of the previous ryotwari collections. When Munro returned as Governor, the ryotwari system superseded the village system. The government’s principle objection to the village system were the headmen were often very rapacious and untrustworthy and that it was incompatible with the progressive improvement of the country and especially with the increase of revenue which was the criterion of that progress. The result was that the Northern circars, Jaghire and Ramnad, comprising from one-third to one-fourth of the presidency, all the districts were settled on a ryotwari basis.<sup>4</sup>

## EXECUTION OF RYOTWARI SYSTEM IN SOUTH INDIA

The Ryotwari settlement was first tried in Baramahal in the 1790's after third Mysore War by Captain Alexander Read. Subsequently his assistants, such men as Thomas Munro and John Macloed extended the system to the ceded districts, Coimbatore and the whole of the Carnatic. Due to opposition in the Madras Government, it was abandoned in favour of the Gramawari or Village System in 1808. Acrimony filled the air in the years that followed. Finally a revised form of Ryotwari was restored in 1819. Thereafter the system gradually grew until it became the recognized mode of Land Revenue administration in South India.<sup>5</sup>

The Ryotwari system besides uprooting the traditional socio-economic institutions in a large portion of the Madras Presidency put greater strains on the peasant population there. During the Read's administration Baramahal was a scene of scarcity and famine condition. The draught that appeared there in 1797 caused many hardships to the people and the peasants in despair of getting any produce drove their cattle into their own cornfields. In 1799 Dindigul passed through a similar situation. Tanjore and South Arcot districts witnessed a famine in 1804, 1805 and the districts of Cudappah, Kurnool, Bellary and Ananthpur in 1803. Munro recommended no remission in the ceded districts because he feared that such a measure would be considered as a proof of British weakness rather than of indulgence. The Board of Directors insisted that the local administrators should not interfere with the grain market by fixing the price on government account.<sup>6</sup>

### NATURE OF RYOTWARI SYSTEM

It was an agreement made directly between the government and the ryots or "Cultivators" of land, to the complete exclusion of intermediaries. Under this agreement the government usually sought to receive its due in the form of money value fixed upon the actual fields under cultivation. Since this money value was not supposed to be set according to a fixed percentage or share of the produce, but rather according to a fixed valuation of the soil in each field, supply of water, proximity to market and other specific local circumstances the amount of revenue realized annually varied according to conditions affecting the crop each year instead of according to the size of the harvest. In short the percentage or share of the harvest realized by the government each year varied because soil valuation per field remained fixed. The ideal form of Ryotwari Settlement often called the **Makta or fixed field assessment** was more exception than the rule during early nineteenth century. Much more common were the traditional **Asara (Sharing) or Kallu (Heaping)** forms of revenue assessment with money value being computed only after the government's fixed percentage of grain had been set aside. It differed basically from **Zamindari or Mutthadari** system and from **Gramawari or Joint- Village** or Village lease system not so much in how revenue was assessed and taken from the ryot, whether by "fixed field" (**makta**) or by "fixed share" (**asara**). Under the Zamindari system "property rights" or personal privileges and powers to collect revenue from many villages were conferred by the **Mdaras** Government upon individuals under conditions which were conferred by the Madras Government upon individuals under conditions which were to remain "**perpetual**" or "**permanent**". Under the Gramawari or Village system (called Mahalwari in the North), the government collected a fixed amount, a joint-rent from each village. The government usually came to an agreement or made a settlement with each village by fixing its revenue demands for a period of three to ten years. Both Ryotwari and Gramawari systems came under what was called **Amani or Government administration** as against Zamindari or non-governmental or delegated administration.<sup>7</sup>

### EFFECTS OF RYOTWARI SYSTEM

The Ryotwari Settlement had its own consequences. The policy swept away village elite groups and that it eliminated their role as intermediaries between government and other villages. The Ryots began paying taxes directly to government officers. In the early years of Ryotwari administration revenue collectors were extremely critical of village leaders, patels, whose influence was considered to be pernicious. The collectors in Madras Presidency took a uniformly unfavourable attitude toward village headmen and leaders, regarding them as little better than pests. In Nellore minor social revolution occurred when Payakari Ryots, who were subordinate landholders were dealt with on equal terms with the Kadim ryots, who were the village lords. In South Arcot Mirasidari privileges were simply incorporated into the general ryotwari assessments without any special acknowledgements or compensation being made. One

South Arcot collector admitted in 1817 that his predecessors had never denied recognizing or acknowledging the existence of Mirasi privilege.<sup>8</sup>

In North Arcot also local claims to such special superiorities, together with the special entitlements and revenue exemptions were resumed and proceeds accruing there from simply absorbed into the company's revenue. When the second Ryotwari system was put into operation in 1818 and thereafter, collectors were enjoined to guard against infractions of established landholdings in each district. The collectors of Dindigul, Madura, North and South Arcot were instructed to revise earlier ryotwari settlements. The collectors of Tamil districts were ordered to be careful to preserve the ancient positions of Mirasidars, Kadims and Ulkudis from infringements made by their subordinates or tenants. Along with the influence of the village leaders or headmen, caste was a traditional force with which company's Ryotwari administrators had to cope. During the rule over Baramahal, Read allowed remissions of revenue to various privileged castes. Thomas Munro disagreed with Read and pointed out that all should pay the same for the same kind of Land. Altogether the Ryotwari system during 1792 to 1827 didn't greatly change the social fabric.<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Ryotwari system made matters worse for ryots and cultivators and drove out mirasidars. Over-assessment ruined the peasants and scared away businessmen and traders from the agricultural pursuit. Elimination of concealment under the British system further made agricultural operation not only highly unremunerative but, if continued, also ruinous to the peasant. The non-agriculturist capitalists. Therefore transfer of land from the debtor to the creditor in discharge of his debt took place within the agricultural community itself in the Madras Presidency. In introducing the ryotwari system the administrators had the intention to prevent a middle class living on rent of land to arise in India. What they wanted was to create only a few individual rich men, not a class of them, and to keep the generality of peasantry in poverty and abject servitude. This clearly shows that the British administrators wanted Indians ever to remain mean and impecunious to divide their abundant poverty among themselves, and share their miseries equitably after making over the fruits of their labour to the white ruler. They did not want Indians to prosper in industry, trade, arts, and crafts to grow rich by agriculture and also to develop the faculties of mind.

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