

Land and Revenue Systems in British India

- Land revenue was one of the major sources of income for Britishers in India.
- There were broadly three types of land revenue policies in existence during the British rule in India.
- Before independence, there were three major types of land tenure systems prevailing in the country:
 - **The Zamindari System**
 - **The Mahalwari System**
 - **The Ryotwari System**
- The basic difference in these systems was regarding the mode of payment of land revenue.

The Zamindari System:

- The zamindari system was introduced by **Lord Cornwallis** in 1793 through Permanent Settlement that fixed the land rights of the members in perpetuity without any provision for fixed rent or occupancy right for actual cultivators.
- Under the Zamindari system, the land revenue was collected from the farmers by the intermediaries known as Zamindars.
- The share of the government in the total land revenue collected by the zamindars was kept at 10/11th, and the remainder going to zamindars.
- The system was most prevalent in West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, UP, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

The Permanent Settlement Agreement:

- According to the Permanent Land revenue settlement the Zamindars were recognised as the permanent owners of the land.
- They were given instruction to pay 89% of the annual revenue to the state and were permitted to enjoy 11% of the revenue as their share.
- The Zamindars were left independent in the internal affairs of their respective districts.

Issues with the Zamindari System:

- **For the Cultivators:** In villages, the cultivators found the system oppressive and exploitative as the rent they paid to the zamindar was very high while his right on the land was quite insecure.
- The cultivators often had to take loan to pay the rents, on failing to pay the rent, they were evicted from the land.
- **For the Zamindars:** The revenue had been fixed so high that the zamindars found it difficult to pay, and those who failed to pay the revenue lost their zamindari.
- The zamindars were not so keen about improving the land.
- As long as they could give out the land and get rent, they preferred it.
- **For the Company:** By the first decade of the 19th century, the cultivation slowly expanded and prices rose in the market.
- Although this meant an increase in the income of Zamindars, it was no gain for the company since it could not increase a revenue demand that had been settled permanently.

The Ryotwari System:

- In the British territories in southern India, there was a move away from the idea of Permanent Settlement.
- A system that came to be known as the Ryotwari System, was devised by **Captain Alexander Read and Sir Thomas Munro** at the end of the 18th century and introduced by the latter when he was governor of Madras Presidency (1819–26).
- Under the Ryotwari system, the land revenue was paid by the farmers directly to the state.
- In this system, the Individual cultivator called Ryot had full rights regarding sale, transfer, and leasing of the land.
- The ryots could not be evicted from their land as long as they paid the rent.
- It was prevalent in most of southern India, first introduced in Tamil Nadu.

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- It was later extended to Maharashtra, Berar, East Punjab, Coorg and Assam.
- The advantages of this system were the elimination of middlemen, who often oppressed villagers.

Issues with the Ryotwari System:

- This system gave much power to subordinate revenue officials, whose activities were inadequately supervised.
- The system was dominated by the mahajans and moneylenders who granted loans to cultivators by mortgaging their land.
- The moneylenders exploited the cultivators and evicted them from their land in case of loan default.

The Mahalwari System:

- By the early 19th century, the Company officials were convinced that the system of revenue had to be changed again.
- The revenues cannot be fixed permanently at such a time when the Company needed more money to meet its expenses of administration and trade.
- In 1822, **Englishman Holt Mackenzie devised** a new system known as the Mahalwari System in the North Western Provinces of the Bengal Presidency (most of this area is now in Uttar Pradesh).
- Under the Mahalwari system, the land revenue was collected from the farmers by the village headmen on behalf of the whole village (and not the zamindar).
- The entire village was converted into one bigger unit called ‘Mahal’ and was treated as one unit for the payment of land revenue.
- The revenue under the Mahalwari system was to be revised periodically and not fixed permanently.
- The system was popularised by Lord William Bentick in Agra and Awadh and was later extended to Madhya Pradesh and Punjab.

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Issue with the Mahalwari System:

- A major drawback of the system was that the survey was practically based on faulty assumptions which left a space for manipulations and corruption.
- At times, it made the Company spend more for the collection than the revenue collected.
- Consequently, the system was regarded as a failure.

Conclusion:

- Optimistic officials had imagined that the new system would transform the Peasants into rich enterprising farmers but this did not happen.
- Driven by the desire to increase the income from land, revenue officials fixed too high a revenue demand that peasants were unable to pay.
- Consequently, the Ryots fled the countryside and villages became deserted in many regions.

