

BRITISH ADMINISTRATION IN TAMIL NADU LAND REVENUE SYSTEM

The suppression of the rebellions of the natives and the subsequent success of the British over French enabled them to consolidate their position in Tamilnadu. As a part of it, they introduced various administrative systems. Among them, the introduction of Ryotwari system, the spread of European education, the decentralization of power and the enforcement of law and order, were noteworthy. These administrative changes had telling effects on the society, which in turn put an end to the traditional systems that prevailed in Tamilnadu. Since these systems were found to be good, Tamilnadu adopted similar systems, even after independence.

Ryotwari system

To accumulate the wealth of Tamilnadu, the British got themselves directly involved in land revenue collection. To collect tax directly from the tenants, they adopted various methods. In the eighteenth century, the British East India Company adopted Jagirdari, Amuldari, Mahalwari Mirasdari and Zamindari systems in various parts of India to collect land revenue. Due to its abuse and other evils, these systems failed miserably. Hence, the British administration decided to introduce a new system in land revenue collection.

Introduction of Ryotwari system

The Third Mysore war came to an end in 1792. As a result, the British brought Salem under their administrative control. Knowing the defects of the above systems of revenue collection, Lord Cornwallis decided to adopt a new system to collect land tax from, the land holders. The task was entrusted to Captain Read and Thomas Munroe. The other lieutenants too assisted them in this endeavour. The result was the Ryotwari system.

Implementation of the system

Though there was criticism, government decided to implement the system as an experimental measure to two provinces of India, first at Madras and later at Bombay. The Ryotwari system was vigorously implemented in Tamilnadu during the administration of Governor Munroe (1820-1827). As this system functioned effectively, it was permanent. This system reduced the assessment to one third of the produce. Government adopted the provisions of this system strictly and collected the tax regularly even during the time of famine, droughts, flood etc.,

Salient features of the system

The permanent land revenue system introduced by Munroe was totally different from that of the previous systems. It possessed certain attractive features. This system provided an opportunity for the farmers or the tenants to get the lands directly from the government without the mediation of the zamindar. As the tenants maintained direct relation with the administration (Company), the importance given to the mediator was neglected.

According to the new system, the tenants who received the land from the government had the right to sell or lend or lease or mortgage at his own will. As long as he maintained the agreement, nobody can terminate or interfere in his rights. In short, it consolidated the land rights of the tenants.

Another feature of this system was that after getting the land from the government, the tenants had the right to increase or decrease the area of cultivation at their own whims and fancies. Moreover, the tenants enjoyed the right to lease out land partly or fully to somebody else. By doing so, no written agreement was made between tenants and sub-tenants.

The tenants who possessed the land should remit the tax or assessment to the government regularly, without dues. If dues occurred, government had the ultimate power, to lease out it.

Under the Ryotwari system, the procurement was given to the tenants for 20 or 30 years, it permanently confirmed the land rights of the tenants. Moreover, the government acted, as landlord or owner of the land.

Method of Implementation

Till the end of eighteenth century no regular methods were adopted for the assessment of land tax. Land was neither surveyed periodically nor its income assessed properly. Therefore, the department arranged for a regular and comprehensive survey settlement. A regulation was adopted for the effective functioning of the revenue survey and, settlement, Accordingly, a systematic and scientific settlement scheme was introduced. Qualified demarcators, field surveyors and classifiers were appointed to carry out the settlement work. Manual was adopted for the guidance of the demarcation work. Lands were surveyed and its boundaries were fixed. For the demarcation of villages and fields, settlement of boundary disputes and the preservation of survey and boundary marks, the act of 1860 was amended in 1884. The officials engaged is survey workers were also authorised to settle the survey disputes and to remove the doubts of the tenants. The affected landholders met the officials and rectified their rights. This department surveyed all areas of the Madras province including the villages.

According to Ryotwari system, the government had not implemented uniform system of survey throughout India. For example, basically due to certain reasons the survey methods adopted in the Madras presidency differed from that of the survey system adopted in Bombay.

Working of Settlement Department

After the completion of survey work, the survey officials handed over the records to the revenue department, to settle the revenue due from each holding. Supervisors were appointed to look after settlement work in the taluks. In the village, a classifier with the assistance of an accountant and a peon carried out

the settlement work. They assessed tax based on the fertility and nature of the soil. Generally, they classified the land into wet, dry, garden land, and residential areas for the convenience of assessment of tax.

The settlement department consisted of a settlement party. It consisted of a Deputy Commissioner of settlement or Settlement Officer, his assistant and office establishments. It also consisted of a field establishment of four head classifiers and thirty classifiers of the soil. The Board of Revenue regularised the activities of the department. It functioned under the Commissioner of Revenue Settlement. After duly inspected, the field staff prepared the Chittahs and pattahs. The completed pattahs were submitted to the field agencies who distributed them to the respective land holders.

Along with this, a separate settlement register was prepared and handed over to the revenue department. The settlement register consisted of the field pages, the abstract settlements, the ayacut memo or the abstract of settlement results.

Merits of Ryotwari system

During the administration of East India Company, Ryotwari system was adopted in Tamilnadu, with a view to regularise and to enhance the land revenue. This system had improved over the previous systems. It possessed certain merits. *This* system was appreciated on the ground, that for the first time it maintained direct contact between the government and the tenants. They remitted the tax directly to the government. Hence an opportunity was given to the tenants to rectify their grievances directly with the government.

According to this system, the land rights of the tenants were confirmed permanently. It enhanced his attachment with the lands which ultimately induced him to produce more from the *land*. This system also authorised the tenants even to sell or lease or mortgage the land at his will. It enhanced the status of the tenants.

Prior to the introduction of the ryotwari system there existed the domination of zamindars. They both exploited the government and the tenants. The effective working of the new system gave satisfaction to the government and more profit to the tenants. Moreover, it put an end to the traditional domination of the zamindars. Based on the system, lands were brought under the direct control of the government. The officials, appointed to look after the land revenue administration, frequently visited the villages. It enabled them to understand the socio-cultural habits of the people directly. The illiteracy and the outdated traditional beliefs that existed in the villages enlightened them to introduce various welfare schemes. They also induced the natives to fight against social injustices. The formation of various departments and the enforcement of various rules and regulations indicated the attitude of the government towards the development of administration. Moreover, the introduction of Jamabandi and inspection systems enabled the government to regularise the state revenue and to minimise corruption and mal-administration.

Defects of Ryotwari System

Though the system was appreciated, it was also criticised due to various reasons. Under the Ryotwari system, the government officials were entrusted with enormous powers. They were empowered to classify and to assess the tax. So to get the sympathy and favour of the officials, the tenants were forced to give bribes to them. Moreover, utilising the illiteracy of the natives, the government officials such as karnam, Tahsildar etc, exploited and even collected more money from them. Such inhuman attitude paved the way for the establishment of the autocracy of the revenue officials. The attitude and working of the revenue department revealed this fact.

The revenue officials were very particular and keen on the collection of land revenue from the people. But the frequent natural calamities such as earthquakes, floods, famines, droughts and cyclone affected the cultivation considerably. Hence, the tenants found it difficult to pay the taxes. Instead of giving concessions and tax reduction to the tenants, at these critical situation, the revenue officials forced them to pay the tax. Such-uncompromising and inhuman attitude of the government affected the welfare of fee people badly. Due to the compulsion of the revenue officials the tenant borrowed money from money lenders at high rate of interest and remitted the tax. They found it very difficult to repay the amount. It affected the socio-economic welfare of the people adversely. The government reports of this period revealed this fact. For example, the report of a district Collector at Bellary in 1845 mentioned the tenants in Rajamundri became debtors due to famine. Due to famine, the tenants who resided at Nellore were forced to sell their agricultural products at a low rate. It affected them a lot. It also reduced the ryots to poverty. The same condition prevailed in North Arcot, Coimbatore, Madurai, Thiruchirappali, Salem and other places. Utilising this opportunity, the money minded landlords purchased the lands of the affected parties and became zamindars. Thus the aim of abolishing zamindari system was not visualized.

Another defect of this system was that the government servants who collected the tax were given meager salary. Hence, the low salaried servants were forced to involve in corruption and other unlawful activities. Though Ryotwari land revenue system was appreciated on various quarters, due to practical difficulties in the working of the system, it was criticised vehemently.