

REVENUE EXPERIMENT :PRO AND ANTI-TRENDS ON VILLAGE LEASE SETTLEMENT IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TAMIL COUNTRY

G. Rengaraju

Assistant Professor in History R.V.Government Arts College Chengalpattu

Abstract:Based on the exhaustive report of Hodgson, a Member of the Board of Revenue who examined the local revenue system, the Government directed the introduction of Village Lease Settlement from 1808 to 1809, a system of village-rents for three years -Triennial Lease Settlement (faslis 1218-1220). The rates were finally fixed in April 1809 due to the difficulty in finding figure and because of the fluctuation of revenue from year to year. The system was evidently considered satisfactory enough. Hence in 1811 the Government ordered for the introduction of a decennial village-rent intending thus to pave the way for the establishment of permanent leases. The Court of Directors, on learning of these arrangements, strongly disapproved and directed that the system of Village Lease Settlement should be withheld. Further the Court of Directors expressed their great surprise that the Board of Revenue, who had issued circular instructions on the subject to collectors, should have sanctioned such an arrangement and should have assumed such "extraordinary and unwarrantable discretion". The decennial lease had been actually introduced in fasli 1222 (1812-1813). The Madras Government pointed out in reply that it was impracticable, at any rate in case of the wet lands, to adopt a ryotwari system. They were prepared to follow such system in regard to dry lands. In 1815, the most positive orders, directing the discontinuance of rents and the introduction of a ryotwari system reached the Madras Government. In 1817 a definite attempt was made to introduce a ryotwari settlement in the place of Village Lease Settlement in one wet village, Perunkulam in Srivaikuntam Taluk of Tirunelveli District. One school headed by Thomas Munro, Graham and Ravenshaw favoured the Ryotwari Settlement. The other school including Hodgson, Place, J.N. Norton, John Briggs and Campbell insisted the continuance of Village Lease Settlement. The pro and anti- Village Lease Settlement affected the revenue experiment of the Company Government and subsequently the ryots suffered at the hands of the Land Lords, Money Lenders, Rack Renters and Speculators who exploited much the ryots and tillers of the soil.

Keyword: Village-Lease, Ryotwari, Ryots, Mirasidars, Fasli, Kist, Circar.

INTRODUCTION:

Anti-Ryotwari School under Place

The ryotwari system was expected much in the beginning. Then it was thrown overboard. Munro who against any system other than ryotwari felt sincerely that to sell land of the ryots to the highest bidders would be gross violation of private rights.¹ The Anti-Ryotwari School headed by Place favoured the village lease settlement with which it hoped to preserve the best traditions of the village communities by making them real little republics.

The anti-ryotwari School emerged in 1806. By placing its argument, this school impressed the supreme government at Calcutta. Instead, the Supreme Government directed the Government of Fort St. George to implement the village lease settlement, with a view to giving real impetus to cultivation. The Board of Revenue also favoured it with a firm hope to promote unity among people, peace and prosperity. The Board of Revenue, was clearly aware of the difficulty if not the impossibility of one Collector being to attend to all the legal formalities prescribed by the new code on the various occasions, real or fictitious, which would

occur for resorting to them, among the numerous inhabitants of an extensive province under ryotwari leases; the danger of delegating authority to an interest unfeeling, or perhaps corrupt Tahsildars, the general incompetency of individual ryots to pay, in all seasons, the money rents assessed on their fields, the constant change of fields, occupants and consequent probable deterioration of agriculture, the expense to the Government, the trouble to the Courts, the difficulty of collection, the interference with the private concerns of the cultivators and with the public functions of the officers of the government, understand as detailed system would, we apprehend, be found insurmountable embarrasments to a ryotwari mode of administration".²

AGE OLD SYSTEM

The Village Lease System was an age old system. It was in vogue and very popular till the advent of the British. The Board of Revenue found it in tune with the ancient traditions of the region. Every village was pretty commonwealth and India were a great assemblage of such commonwealths. From the Age of Manu to the present day,

the settlements have been made either with or through the head inhabitants. When the revenue was thought to be high enough and the head-inhabitants agreed to it, he was usually left to settle with ryots, if it was too low, and the head inhabitant rejected to an increase, amuldar settle with the ryots in his presence.³

HODGSON AND BOARD OF REVENUE

Hodgson, an influential member of the Board of Revenue collecting and examining all the revenue aspects pleaded for its introduction as it was best adopted to secure the revenue of the state and the prosperity the country.⁴ The Board also favoured it to enable the tillers to obtain exclusive interest in the cultivation of their lands in proportion to their right to property".⁵ Hodgson who was appointed to study the system also confirmed of its adequate revenue if allowed to continue uninterrupted.⁶ Unlike the Munro's plan, he argued, there would be no insecurity in the scheme and if put into practice, it would be a great relief to the Board as well as the ryots. From the political point of view also, it seemed to be an ideal scheme, by which, it was hoped to avert all revolts by reducing Zamindars and Poligars to insignificance so that they could not take up arms against the company. But at the same time, the Board was not ignorant about the defects in the system which it felt, could be rectified through the Court of Law. (The Regulation XVII, 11, 1802)

Opposition of Collectors: Graham and Ravenshaw

The Board of Revenue, after considering all such factors into account, directed all Collectors to conclude triennial settlement with the mirasidars. From the commencement of the fasli 1218 (1808); though Collectors like Graham and Ravenshaw did not see eye to eye with the Board and opposed it on the ground that it was oppressive and injurious to the welfare of the peasantry, the Board, unmindful of such oppositions, stuck to its guns and argued that the stock and spirit of the ryots would be increased to such a degree that if the seasons were favourable, the whole of the land which had been waste for many years, that it was overgrown with jungle, would soon be brought into culture".

Frustration of Board's Hope

The hope of the Board was litted down. There was no enthusiasm from the headmen, who, when invited, due to heavy assessment were reluctant to accept the offer made. The lands, due to lack of suitable headman to bid were rented out to strangers who mostly were speculators and with whose advent the homogeneity of the village life was shaken to its foundations. Not discouraged by such adverse circumstances, the Board directed the collectors to induce headman to take up the leases which mostly were accepted with utmost reluctance. As the settlement was heavy and a free hand allowed, they oppressed the ryots as Collector wrote thus: "They have made the ryots pay for all Cavis and poolthy (chaff and dust) which was remitted to them under the former system. They have in many cases made them pay more than their rent; and in most cases the full rent for all waste lands cultivated by them, for which under the old system, they had a remission granted them for first three

years. Hundreds of complaints on these subjects, and other similar acts of oppression have been to me, but I have no power to grant redress. I can only refer them to the Court; and the Court would not have time to redress such grievances. It is cheaper for complaints of that description to submit to be plundered than to attempt redress. The humble situation, their ignorance and poverty, compared with power, affluence, influence and ability of those they have to contend with, are, I fear, inseparable obstacles to their way".⁷ Large number of people, especially from Trichi, Salem, Ramnad emigrated from their hearth and home and "acrage in many villages had very much diminished". In many other places they were "frequent bickerings and clashes the ryots and the renters, the one complaining of unjust demand, the other of unnecessary and evasive delay in payment of rent".⁸

Grievances of Renters

Like the ryots, the renters suffered much. They also had their own grievances as Ravenshaw the Collector of South Arcot had pointed out: "The seasons are bad, they will not be able to pay the present rent, without numbers of them being ruined and the prosperity of the country suffering of course in proportion". A single unfavourable season would ruin them completely and their entire property and belongings would hardly suffice to meet the arrear. The Collector of Trichinopoly was for revision of the commutation rates as he was afraid that it "would cripple the resources of the country further"

Rack-Renters, Money Lenders and Speculators

Not discouraged by the adverse circumstances, the Board of Revenue, boldly recommended it for a decennial settlement by which it wanted to make the tillers to drive a common and exclusive interest in the cultivation of their lands in proportion to their right to property.⁹ Yet, it failed due to over assessment as one of the leading servants of the company indicated. "These efforts to draw a higher revenue, under what was in fact a system of rack -renters, left the country at the expiration of the lease in a state of exhaustion" In many places, for fear of outsiders and strangers, headmen were forced to undertake the leases for the high tiravas, the payment of which forced them to sell their lands for arrears to be paid for the Circar. Due to incessant wars and rebellions, there was no class of wealthy landlords to compete with speculators and moneylenders who alone could bid much to the detriment of cultivation. As they had no interest in tilling, they exploited the peasantry to its ruin. The seasons were also bad, accompanied by low prices which totally had brought cultivation to naught. The fall in price in fasli 1219 (1809-1810) was roughly about 50 percent and as a result of it the mirasidars of Trichinopoly and Tanjore could not sell their surplus produce at the commutation price, which had greatly reduced them, "to poverty and left them without means of discharging their kists at the usual periods.¹⁰ In the other regions, as result of the fall in prices, the mirasidars had to part with the customary share from 20 to 25 per cent of the gross produce to the Pallars who were the actual tillers. As a result of such impoverishment, most of the mirasidars abandoned cultivation as risky and deemed it unworthy an occupation to

pursue.

Oppressive and Coercive System

A notable serious defect in the system was bidding which ruined the corporate life of the villages. The headmen also with unlimited powers entrusted became oppressive and coercive in order to extend cultivation which due to such a policy pursued proved disastrous. Even after such a bitter experience, the Board of Revenue with the approval of the government wanted to confirm it by a decennial lease in 1810/11 with which they were confident that the productive principle inherent in this system would give a powerful incentive to the improvement and extension of cultivation".¹² In Trichinopoly and other areas, the settlement was started with a revision of rates which too was heavy. As a result of complaints made, an inquiry was ordered in 1811 in which it was ascertained that it was impossible for the renters to fulfil their contracts".¹³ In 1814 when prices fell due to good and abundant harvest, the collectors wanted to arrest further fall by a further reduction of rent.¹⁴ which the Board did not favour. Further, the vagaries of nature combined fluctuation in prices" led to its failure for which the Board felt distressed.

Eminent Men's support to Village Lease Settlement

After 1811, the Court of Directors warned both Board and the Government for such an extraordinary discretion. They thoroughly displeased with such a course of action favoured and taken. They openly favoured the ryotwari system which accordingly re-introduced in 1817, though many eminent men in the field like J.N. Norton, John Briggs and Campbell still favoured the Village Lease Settlement as an ideal system suitable to Indian setup. To them, Indian village was a republic, a city state that have survived onslaughts of time and tyrants, and embodiment of customary law and justice and an institution of mutual co-operation. Through it, they hoped to revive democracy and its institutions which had fallen into desuetude under the Telugu and Muslim Rulers whom such institutions were a potential threat to their centralized autocracy.

Munro View on Village Lease Settlement

The village communities not only lost their vigor but also lost their corporate unity long ago due to many historic forces. As Munro rightly said, "the break up of the joint village system was but in the natural course of things and must always precede every material improvement". He added, "the common tenure had existed in many nations, but usually in the rude and early stages of agriculture, and has always, I believe, been considered as hostile to improvement". Further, "the village Lease Settlement is incompatible with improvement and advancement. It is impossible to allow land to be used as a security for money as nation advancing" Munro argued that the distinctions of castes must ever render the interference of the government offices necessary. Even in allotting lands, to the ryots first a peon, then a samutdar and afterwards a Tahsildar, are successfully called for their aid and matter is not finally arranged without constant references to European Officers, whose authority is necessary to adjust dispute and difference" In many villages,

there is a sort of compulsion from first to last; nothing seems to go on without the interference of the government offices and the village machinery, so to speak cannot work without their assistants". Again arrangements which answer when the numbers of the village community are homogeneous or related by ties of blood, utterly fall on the introduction of alien speculation. The control of headman is destroyed and the village constitution breaks".¹⁵ The farming system of the Nawabs, the Poligari system of the Nayaks had destroyed its corporate spirit without which the village Lease System w/as thrown overboard.

Note of Court of Directors

Numerous experiments made in the land revenue administration with least concern about the governed had greatly retarded their prosperity. Hence the Court of Directors in an important note instructed that "in all the provinces that may be unsettled, the principle of ryotwari system, as it is termed shall be acted upon, and that village rents upon any other principle shall have been established, the lease shall be declared terminable at the expiration of the period for which they have been granted".¹⁶

Munro for Ryotwari Settlement

Thomas Munro's ryotwari policy set down definitions for key terms. His ryotwari principles defined the state itself as supreme land lord, and individual peasants as landowners who obtained title by paying annual cash rent, or revenue assessments, to the Government.¹⁷ The system, as Munro described was beneficial by which, the ryot has the advantage of knowing in the beginning of the season, when he ploughs his land, the exact amount of what he is to pay; he knows the fixed rents of the different fields which he cultivates and that the demand upon him, cannot exceed their total amount; he knows the utmost limit of his rent, not only for the present, but for every succeeding year; for it cannot be raised unless he takes additional land, and he is thereby, the better enabled to provide for the regular discharge of his kists, and against the losses of bad, by the profits of good seasons".¹⁸

Favoritism of William Bentinck

Lord William Bentinck, as the Governor of Madras(1803-1807) based on the report of Thackrey, the District Judge of Masulipatnam was in favour of Ryotwari Settlement in Madras Presidency.¹⁹ also was impressed by its advantages as his words will justify. "These advantages, consisted in the equal distribution and the defined amount of land tax, and upon the security afforded the poor against extra assessments from head inhabitants. Everyman knew his exact obligations to the circar, and was assured of the quiet enjoyment of the surplus produce of his labour. Hence arose, the true encouragement to industry; from this principle has followed increased cultivation; and contrasted with former times the easy realisation of the public revenue".²⁰

Besides the Officialdom, the tillers also preferred it as it made them real owners of the land free from all harassment from within and from without. The lower classes, depending totally on land for survival, were allowed

to paddle their canos which they enthusiastically hailed. Under the new ryotwari, the tirva was neither heavy to the tillers nor unfavourable to the government .21 After deducting 15 per cent towards the marketing charges and from 1/4 to 1 1/5th for the vagaries of nature and cost of cultivation the net produce was equally divided between the tillers and the government.22 As totally free from all middlemen to meddle with, it was greatly favoured by the ryots to whom it gave not only status but also ownership which they enthusiastically acclaimed and accepted.

END NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Collector of Trichinopoly, letter, to the Board, 30 November 1806.
2. Board of Revenue Consultations, 25 June 1808.
3. Board of Revenue, letter, to the Madras Government, 25 May 1808.
4. Report of the Board to the Fort. St. George, 25 April 1808; Fifth Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, Vol. III, London, 28 July 1812, p. 434.
5. Paden Powell, P.H., The Land System of British India, New Haven, 1956, p. 27.
6. Hodgson's Report on the Province of Tinnevely, 24 September 1804, para 109.
7. Settlement report of South Arcot for the year 1808-1809, p. 59.
8. Ibid.
9. Board of Revenue letter to the Collector of Madurai, 16 August 1807, Madurai District Collectorate Records, Vol. 1195, para 3.
10. Collector of Trichinopoly letter, to the Board of Revenue, 28 March 1810.
11. Minute of the Board of Revenue 5 August 1810.
12. Board of Revenue Proceedings, 12 August 1811.
13. Ibid.
14. Collector of Trichinopoly, letter, to the Board of Revenue, 8 September 1814.
15. Ibid.
16. Revenue Despatch from England, 16 December 1812, Vol. 5. para 33.
17. David Ludden, Peasant History in South India, Delhi, 1989, p. 104.
18. Board of Revenue Proceedings, 5 January 1807; Fifth Report, op.cit., Vol. III, pp. 207-208.
19. Renganathan, G., Zamindari System in the Madras Presidency, 1802-1948, Chennai, 2010, pp. 82-83.
20. Extract of L.ord Bentinck's Minutes, 25 November 1806; Fifth Report, op.cit., Vol. III, p. 467.
21. Ibid.
22. Collector of Madurai, letter to the Board of Revenue, 3 December 1817, Vol. 825, Madurai District Collectorate Records, para 7.