



THE ECONOMIC CONDITION OF PEASANTRY IN EARLY MODERN INDIA

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Abstract

The people of India developed village communities and lived under Polygars and Zamindars, Jagirdars and Talukdars because they needed them². East India Company was also special for its strong naval presence, as a successor. The coastal shift in the business while the Company passed to the colonial state. Land trade in India decreased during this period with the increase in maritime trade. The maritime trade represented only a small part of the economy. Some parties, with internal interests lost, while others successfully went to work with European companies. The strongest statements on both sides, the evidence underlying the arguments are often weak due to insufficient or unreliable economic data. It offers a measured assessment of the salient transitions in this important period of Indian history that begins with the death of Emperor Mughal Aurangzeb in 1707 and ends in the early 1800s when the British East India Company came to control vast territories, including most of coastal India.

Introduction

The agricultural population of India now works on very meager resources which, if we consider the well-being of the peasants themselves, are very poorly distributed¹. The early days of modern India are characterized by debates about the decline of the Mughal Empire, the rise of the East India Company and the times when India fell behind Europe. The strongest statements on both sides, the evidence underlying the arguments are often weak due to insufficient or unreliable economic data. It offers a measured assessment of the salient transitions in this important period of Indian history that begins with the death of Emperor Mughal Aurangzeb in 1707 and ends in the early 1800s when the British East India Company came to control vast territories, including most of coastal India. The political turbulence at the summit between the various warring factions led to a general decline in public goods, but did not substantially weaken the property rights of peasants. In India, many people could claim the final agricultural production that ranged from military nobles and tax collectors on top of the landowners in the middle and finally to the farmers who cultivated the land below.

The people of India developed village communities and lived under Polygars and Zamindars, Jagirdars and Talukdars because they needed them². East India Company was also special for its strong naval presence, as a successor. The coastal shift in the business while the Company passed to the colonial state. Land trade in India decreased during this period with the increase in maritime trade. The maritime trade represented only a small part of the economy. Some parties, with internal interests lost, while others successfully went to work with European companies. This change in orientation is also reflected in urbanization models. Agra, Delhi and Lahore among other internal cities of the Mughal empire decreased when the coastal cities of

Bombay, Calcutta and Madras came to dominate the urban landscape. The latter were new industrial hubs, which was so important in accounting for their rise as their status as colonial cities. That

said, there was no trend towards long-term urbanization. Many old production centers linked to the Mughal Empire suffered a decline, but this was offset by the rise of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Having now generally shown that the proprietors of estates in both Oudh and the North Western Provinces have been subjected to over taxation in recent years, it will be advisable to present in some detail instances of the various modes in which settlement officers have persuaded themselves to fix these excessively high assessments³. The land tax is, as a general rule to be fixed on the basis of actually existing rents; obviously the state can only justly exact half of that sum which does or with ordinary care can be made to represent the rent role of the assessed estate. If the landowner will fully allow his rental to fall below the standards of other properties of the same capabilities he can not expect the state to consent to forego its quota of the full realizable rent, except however in the case of an estate which falls to yield the average returns owing to the undoubted negligence or the deliberate intention of the proprietor⁴. The state can not equitably take more than the fair half of the average annual collections of the landowner. It is manifest that if the assessing officer get half of what he considers ex-cathedo might under other circumstances be the full rack rent of the village, instead of what is in fact without fault of the proprietor the existing rent roll, he may double or even triple the allowed rental of the land owner with very little difficulty. Yet it is to be feared that settlement officers have too fondly relied on spic and span tables of average rent rates, instead of basing their calculations mainly on the village rent roll and on the special circumstances and condition of each estates. For instance, there are districts or subdivisions of districts where the high caste cultivators invariably pay at lower rates than those which can be exacted from men of inferior caste, such as Muraus, Lodhs, Ahirs and Chamars. The Thakurs and Brahmans do not plough or till with their own hand but keep ploughmen⁵.

The Indian economic history will appreciate the political-military history of 18th century successors, the nature of interactions between agriculture and the organization of agricultural production. The economic policies followed by the British led to the rapid transformation of the Indian economy into a colonial economy whose nature and structure were determined by the needs of the British economy. The British conquest of India was different from all previous foreign conquests. The previous conquerors had overthrown the Indian political powers, but they had not made fundamental changes in the economic structure of the country; they had gradually become part of Indian life, political as well as economic. The peasant, the craftsman and the merchant had continued to conduct the same kind of existence as before. The basic economic model of the self-sufficient rural economy had been perpetuated. The change of rulers had simply meant a change in the personal of those who appropriated the peasant surplus. But the British conquerors were completely different. They completely destroyed the traditional structure of the Indian economy.

However, they never became an integral part of Indian life. They have always remained foreigners in the land, exploiting Indian resources and taking away the wealth of India as a tribute. The results of this subordination of the Indian economy to the interests of British commerce and industry were many and varied. There was a sudden and rapid collapse of the urban handicraft industry that for centuries had made India's name a watchword in the markets of the entire civilized world. This collapse was largely caused by competition with

them, the cheapest imported car produced by Britain. The British imposed a unilateral free trade policy on India after 1813 and the invasion of British producers, especially cotton fabrics, followed immediately. India's products manufactured using primitive techniques could not compete with goods produced on a large scale by powerful steam engines. All this does not mean that the rural economy lacked pocket of dynamism. During the first half of the 18th century, several recalculations have suggested that new investment, technology and enterprise led to considerable increase in the yields of wheat, cotton and sugarcane⁶.

The ruin of Indian industries, especially the rural artisan industries, proceeded even more quickly once the railways were built. The railways allowed British producers to reach and uproot traditional industries in the remotest villages of the country. The weaving and spinning industries of cotton were the hardest hit. Silk and woolen fabrics were no better and a similar fate surpassed iron, ceramics, glass, paper, metals, guns, shipping, the pressing, tanning and dyeing industries.

In addition, the influx of foreign goods, some other factors resulting from the British conquest contributed to the downfall of Indian industries. The East India Company and its servants on the Bengal artisans during the second half of the eighteenth century, forcing them to sell their products below the market price and to hire their services under the prevailing salary, forced a large number of them to abandon their ancestral professions. Indian craftsmanship would have benefited from the encouragement of the company to export them, but this oppression had the opposite effect. High import duties and other restrictions imposed on the importation of Indian goods into Britain and Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, with the development of modern manufacturing industries in Britain led to the virtual closure of European markets to Indian producers after 1820.

The gradual disappearance of Indian sovereigns and their courts, which were the main customers of the craft produced, has also given a blow to these industries. For example, the Indian states were completely dependent on the British in the production of military weapons. The British bought all their military and other government stores in Britain. Moreover, Indian rulers and nobles were replaced as the ruling class by British officers and military officers who patronized their household products almost exclusively. This has increased the cost of craft items and reduced their ability to compete with foreign goods.

The ruin of Indian craftsmanship was reflected in the ruin of cities that were famous for their manufacture. The cities, which had resisted the ravages of war and looting, could not survive the British conquest. Dhaka, Surat, Murshidabad and many other populous and flourishing industrial centers were depopulated and devastated. At the end of the nineteenth century, the urban population made up just 10% of the total population. The bones of the cotton weavers were bleaching the plains of India. The decline of traditional industries was not accompanied by the growth of modern mechanical industries, as in the case of Great Britain and Western Europe. As a result, the ruined artisans and artisans could not find alternative employment. The only possible choice was to crowd agriculture.

In addition to the British domination he also upset the balance of economic life in the villages. The gradual destruction of rural craftsmanship broke the union between agriculture and domestic industry in the countryside and thus contributed to the destruction of the self-sufficient rural economy. On the one hand, millions of peasants, who had integrated their revenue into part-time spinning and weaving, now had to rely on cultivation overwhelmingly; on the other, millions of rural artisans lost their traditional livelihoods and became

agricultural workers or small tenants with small plots. They added to the general pressure on the earth.

Thus the British conquest led to the deindustrialization of the country and the growing dependence of the people on agriculture. This growing pressure on agriculture has been a major cause of extreme poverty in India under British rule.

India became an agricultural colony of production of the British empire which needed it as a source of raw materials for its industries, the most striking change in the cotton textile industry. While India had for centuries been the largest exporter of cotton products in the world, it was now transformed into an importer of British cotton products and a rough cotton exporter. Although, it was now free from internal wars, its material conditions deteriorated and sank constantly into poverty. At the beginning of British rule in Bengal, Clive and Warren Hastings' policy of extracting the largest possible income had led to such devastation that even Cornwall complained that one third of Bengal had been turned into an inhabited jungle only from wild beasts. There were no improvements later. In both the permanent and the temporary settlement areas of Zamindari, the fate of the peasants remained unenviable. They were left to the mercy of the zamindari who raised the rents to unbearable limits, forcing them to pay illegal shares and to perform forced labor or beggars and oppressed them in various other ways.

The conditions of the farmers in the Ryotwari and Mahalwari areas were not better. Here the government took the place of the zamindars and collected excessive land income which was initially set at one-third of half of the products. The heavy evaluation of the land was one of the main causes of the growth of poverty and the deterioration of agriculture in the nineteenth century. For example, gross land product was required by the government. Although, the demand for land revenue had been increasing year by year. The proportion of total products taken as land income tended to decline, especially in the twentieth century when prices increased and production increased. No proportional increase in land revenue was made, as the disastrous consequences of exaggerated extortion revenues became obvious. But by now the population's pressure on agriculture had increased to such an extent that the lower demand for income in subsequent years weighed heavily on the peasants as well as on the increased demand for income from previous years of the administration of the Society.

The twentieth century, the agrarian economy had been ruined and landowners, usurers and merchants had made profound raids in the village. The evil of the high demand for revenue has been exacerbated by the fact that the farmer has obtained few economic gains for his work. The government spent very little to improve agriculture. He devoted almost all his income to meet the needs of the British-Indian administration, making direct and indirect tax payments to England and serving the interests of British trade and industry. Even the maintenance of law and order tended to favour the merchant and the usurer rather than the peasant. The damaging effects of an excessive demand for land revenue were further accentuated by the rigid manner of his collection. Land revenue had to be paid on time on fixed dates even if the crop had been lower than normal or had completely failed. But in the bad years the farmer found it difficult to meet the demand for income even if he had been able to do it over the good years. The farmer has failed to pay the land revenue, the government has put his land up for sale to collect the arrears of revenue. But in most cases the farmer himself took this step and sold part of his land to meet the government's request. In both cases, he lost his land.

The lot of cultivators was not certainly enviable, because they did not live in the affluence. In most cases they lacked initiative and spirit of enterprise to adopt any novel methods to better their condition⁷. To pay revenue they prompted the farmer to borrow money at high rates of honest interest. He preferred to borrow by mortgaging his land to a usurer or a wealthy neighboring peasant for having lost it permanently. He was also forced to go to the lender whenever he found it impossible to deal with both parties. But once in debt he found it difficult to get out of it. The usurer paid high rates of interest and through cunning and deceptive measures, such as false accounting, counterfeit signatures and the fact that the debtor signed for amounts greater than those he had borrowed, he brought the farmer more and more into debt until to separate from his land.

The landowners of the earth were greatly aided by the new legal system and the new revenue policy. In the pre-British era, the money lender was subordinated to the village community. He could not behave in a totally unpleasant way for the rest of the village. For example, he could not charge usurious interest rates. In fact, interest rates were set by use and by public opinion. He could not seize the land of the debtor; he could at most take possession of the debtor's personal effects as jewels and part of his permanent crop. Introducing the transferability of the land, the British revenue system allowed the barn or rich farmer to take possession of the land. Even the benefits of peace and security established by the British through their legal system and the police were mainly collected by the heck in whose hands the law has placed of power; he also used the power of the stock exchange to transform the costly litigation process in his favor and to make the police serve his purposes. Moneylender could easily take advantage of skilled and astute the ignorance and illiteracy of the peasant to distort the complicated processes of the law to obtain favourable judicial decisions. The farmers in the areas of Ryotwari and Mahalwari sank increasingly into debt and more and more land passed into the hands of usurers, merchants, wealthy peasants and other monetary classes. The process was repeated in the zamindari areas where tenants lost their tenancy rights and were expelled from the land or became sub-tenants of the lender. The process of land transfer from farmers had been intensified during periods of famine and draught. The farmer did not get nearly savings for the critical times and every time the crops failed, he fell on honesty, not only to pay the land revenue, but also to feed himself and his family. At the end of the nineteenth century, the money lender had become an important curse of the campaign and an important cause of the growing poverty of the rural population.

During the 1857 uprising, peasants rose in revolt, very often his first target of attack was the money lender and his bahia. These peasant actions soon became a common event. The pressure of taxation and growing poverty have weakened the farmers, who in turn have increased their poverty. Growers often failed to understand that the usurer was an inevitable cog in the mechanism of imperialist exploitation and turned their anger against him because it seemed to be the visible cause of their impoverishment. The emerging commercialization of agriculture also helped cash-money lenders to exploit the grower. The little poor farmer was forced to sell his produce immediately after harvest and at whatever price he could get because he had to meet the demands of the government, landlord and lender in time. This put him at the mercy of the grain merchant, who was able to dictate terms and who bought his products at much less than the market price.

Conclusion

Thus a large part of the benefit of the growing trade in agricultural products was collected by the merchant or moneylenders, who were very often the village moneylender. The loss and overcrowding of the land caused by deindustrialization and the lack of modern industry forced landless peasants and artisans in ruins to become renters or usurers and zamindars by paying salaried workers or farm workers to starvation wages. So the peasants were crushed under the triple burden of the government, the zamindar or the landlord and the honest. After these three had taken their part there was not much left for the grower and his family to subsist. This contributed to the coastal shift in activity as the Company switched to a colonial state. The land trade in India decreased during this period with the increase in maritime trade. The maritime trade represented only a small part of the economy. Some groups with internal interests lost, while others who successfully went to work with European companies gained. In this regards, change of orientation is also reflected in urbanization models of England. Agra, Delhi and Lahore among other internal cities of the Mughal empire decreased when the coastal cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras came to dominate the urban landscape. The latter were new industrial hubs, which was so important in accounting for their rise as their status as colonial cities. There was no trend towards long-term urbanization. The old production centers linked to the Mughal Empire suffered a decline, but this was offset by the rise of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Agra. The result was that the impoverishment of the peasants continued with an increase in the incidence of famines. People died in millions every time droughts or floods caused the failure of crops and scarcity. The focus that should be on peasant resistance was seen outside the peasant community⁸.

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