



Unit – X:
Colonialism and Rural Society – Evidence from Official Reports.

Theme: (*Explosion of rural indebtedness and poverty due to British economic Policies in the Nineteenth century*).

- ⇒ The British, during their rule of nearly two centuries, brought many significant changes in India. The East India Company established its raj in countryside and implemented its revenue policies.
- ⇒ Since ancient times, the main source of income of the native rulers was land revenue which they collected from peasants through big landlords or Zamindars. This land revenue also became the main source of income of the East India Company.
- ⇒ Colonial rule was first established in Bengal. The earliest attempt to reorder rural society was made in this territory. A new revenue system through “Land Settlement” was established
- ⇒ The East India Company acquired the “Diwani” i.e the right to collect revenue of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa initially by the Treaty of Allahabad with the Mughal Emperor in 1765 AD. At first the company continued the system of revenue collection through Zamindars. In 1772, Lord Warren Hastings decided to manage the land revenue system directly but the system was not successful.
- ⇒ In 1773, Lord Cornwallis, the Governor General, introduced a new system of land settlement and land revenue collection known as the Permanent Settlement of Bengal, covering Bihar and Orissa as well.
- ⇒ The Zamindars were made permanent owners of the land by the Permanent Land Settlement in Bengal requiring to pay a fixed land revenue to the company.
- ⇒ In introducing the Permanent Settlement, British officials hoped to resolve the problems that they had been facing since the conquest of Bengal.
- ⇒ The Rajas and Taluqdars of Bengal, now classified as Zamindars, were thought by the British as individuals who could both improve agriculture as well as pay the fixed revenue.
- ⇒ The Zamindars improved their estates but found that they could not pay the revenue demands and so unpaid balances went on accumulating.



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- ⇒ The reasons for the failure/default on payments were many – first, the initial demands were high; second, the ryots could not pay their dues to the Zamindars as the prices of agricultural produces were depressed; third, the revenue was invariable, regardless of the harvest, and to be paid punctually; and finally, the Permanent Settlement initially limited the power of the Zamindar to collect rent from the ryot and so manage his Zamindari i.e administrative and judicial powers were taken away.
- ⇒ Over 75 percent of the Zamindaris changed hands after the Permanent Settlement.
- ⇒ In Burdwan (Bengal) alone, there were more than 30,000 pending suits for arrears of rent payment in 1789 and the estates of Burdwan raj were not the only ones to be sold during the closing of the 18th century.
- ⇒ A rich class of peasants known as Jotedars had become owners of vast areas of land by the early nineteenth century.
- ⇒ The power of the ‘Jotedars’ was more effective than that of Zamindars who often lived in urban areas whereas Jotedar were located in the villages and exercised direct control over a considerable section of poor villagers.
- ⇒ The Zamindars resisted and their authority in rural areas did not collapse. Faced with an exorbitantly high revenue demand and possible auction of their estates, they devised ways of surviving the pressures.
- ⇒ Fictitious transactions happened on a large scale. During 1793 – 1801, big Zamindars of Bengal, including Raja of Burdwan, made benami purchases amounting to 30 lakh rupees.
- ⇒ In addition to such fictitious sale or transferring of property to female members of family, Zamindars manipulated the auctions, withheld revenue deliberately, threatened and intimidated people outside their Zamindari who tried to buy their estate.
- ⇒ The nature and consequences of the East India Company’s rule in Bengal in the late 18th century can be understood and studied from the documents known as the Fifth Report. The Fifth Report is the fifth of a series of reports on administration and activities of East India Company in India which was submitted to the British Parliament in 1813.
- ⇒ The British Parliament forced the company to produce regular reports on the administration of India and appointed committees to enquire into the affairs of the company.
- ⇒ The Fifth Report became the basis of intense parliamentary debates on the nature of East India Company rule in India.



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- ⇒ With gradual passage of time, settled cultivation expanded and reached the area of shifting cultivation, swallowing up pasture and forest in the Rajmahal Hills of Bengal.
- ⇒ Francis Buchanan undertook detailed surveys of the areas under the jurisdiction of the East India Company. In the nineteenth century, he travelled through the Rajmahal hills.
- ⇒ The Paharias originally lived in the Rajmahal Hills. They lived on hunting, shifting cultivation, food gathering and were intimately connected to the forests.
- ⇒ The British wanted to tame these forest people and make them civilized by enlarging their sources of revenue by turning to settled agriculture. The company officials tried to control and subdue the Paharias but it was a difficult task.
- ⇒ Ultimately in 1780s, the British started a brutal policy of extermination of the Paharias but Augustus Gleveland, the collector of Bagalpur proposed a policy of pacification of the Paharias but they withdrew deep in the mountains.
- ⇒ Santhals began to pour into the area of the Paharias. They cleared the forest and ploughed land. Land was granted to them and the population of Santhals increased exponentially.
- ⇒ The Paharias at first resisted. It was a battle of the hoe (symbol of shifting cultivation of Paharias) and the plough (symbol of Santhals). The Paharias ultimately withdrew deeper into the hills and become impoverished.
- ⇒ A large area of land in the foothills of Rajmahal was given to the Santhals and by 1832, this land was demarcated as Damin-i-koh.
- ⇒ Santhals now lived a settled life, cultivated a range of commercial crops for market and dealt with traders and moneylenders. However, they were heavily taxed by the state and moneylenders charged high interest rates, taking over their land if debt were unpaid. The Zamindars were asserting control over the Damin-i-koh area.
- ⇒ The Santhals revolted in the year 1855-56. The revolt was suppressed and the British wanted to pacify them. So, the British created the Santhal Pargana by carving out districts of Bhagalpur and Birbhum and passed special laws for them.
- ⇒ Rural indebtedness and agrarian unrest was not confined to the Paharias and Santhals alone. It was happening in the countryside in the British Deccan too. The Deccan riots refer to the agrarian riots which broke out in Poona and Ahmednagar districts in 1875.
- ⇒ A movement began at Supa village in Poona in 1875 where ryots from surrounding rural areas gathered and attacked the shopkeepers and demanded their bahi khatas (account book)



and debt bond. Ryots burnt the khatas, looted shops and also burnt the houses of Gujarati Sahukars (moneylenders).

- ⇒ In 1875, the Government appointed a commission to enquire into the Deccan riots which concluded that poverty and consequent indebtedness of the cultivators were the chief causes of the riots.
- ⇒ These were the consequences of the New System of Revenue Assessment introduced by the British. While the Permanent Settlement was for the Bengal region, they introduced in the Bombay Deccan, the system called the Ryotwari settlement.
- ⇒ The Ryotwari Settlement too guaranteed individual ownership of land and the Landlord was responsible for payment of land revenue to the Government. Second, an accurate survey of each village was made and a map with description of all holdings prepared. Third, land was classified according to productive capacity. Fourth, the rate of land revenue (fixed in terms of money) could be changed time to time. Fifth, cultivators could sell or mortgage their land to raise loans and the government could auction the land in case of default.
- ⇒ Peasant debts mounted due to the high revenue demands. Moreover, the effects of the Cotton Boom which took place due to the breaking out of Civil War in America, benefitted only the rich merchants but the large majority of peasants fell into heavier debts due to this cotton expansion.
- ⇒ When Civil War in America ended in 1865 and cotton production in America revived, Indian cotton export dried up. Credits too dried up and the peasants fell in deeper debts.
- ⇒ In this way, the conditions of peasants in the nineteenth century changed for the worst due to the colonial rule of the British. Thus, the first evil consequence of British rule was the economic exploitation of India. The deterioration of the economic condition of the peasants was one of the adverse effects of the British rule in India.
- ⇒ The British Government in India pursued economic policies which accelerated the commercialization and specialization of Indian agriculture. Although from the point of view of world trade, it was a great progressive development, it proved to be harmful to the farmers of India as they could not keep up with the goods produced by advanced cultivators.
- ⇒ The experiments of the British in the methods of land settlement and collection of land revenue proved to be the nail in the coffin for Indian peasants.
- ⇒ First, high rate of land revenue was one of the major causes of the growth of poverty, indebtedness and deterioration of agriculture during the 19th century



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- ⇒ Second, land holdings become fragmented due to partition among family members as land becomes the personal property of individuals. As land holding became very small, it was not profitable to cultivate land anymore.
 - ⇒ Third, rigid methods of land revenue collection added to the misery of peasants.
Fourth, burden of other taxes such as taxes on articles of daily use impoverished the peasants.
 - ⇒ Fifth, forest became monopoly of the state. Peasants unable to buy firewood used cow dung which affected agriculture (lack of manure).
 - ⇒ Sixth, Peasants had to raise loans for spending on religious practices, death, marriages etc.
 - ⇒ Seventh, increasing indebtedness to moneylenders and the moneylender's getting favorable judicial decision due to expensive process of litigation further worsened the peasant's conditions.
 - ⇒ Lastly, natural calamities forced them further on the moneylenders.
 - ⇒ Moneylenders thus became the main cause of the growth of poverty of the peasants in the rural areas.
 - ⇒ In the Ryotwari areas as well as the Zamindari areas, a large number of land holdings passed into the hands of the moneylenders.
 - ⇒ The British Government did pass laws from time to time to protect the interest of the farmers such as the Tenancy Acts but despite all these measures, the problem of rural indebtedness remained unsolved.
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