

Ryotwari Assessment in Coimbatore Region in Tamil Nadu-A Historical Study

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Submitted: 01-02-2022

Revised: 11-02-2022

Accepted: 14-02-2022

I. INTRODUCTION

Nilamani Mukerjee's work on Ryotwari system in Madras State covers the whole Presidency with some details on the Coimbatore region. Except that work, there is no other work on Ryotwari system in Coimbatore. Hence an attempt is made in this article to discuss origin and development of Ryotwari system in the region which was proximate to Mysore.

Ryotwari system was one in which a direct settlement was made between the government and the Ryot. No middlemen was in existence as in the case of zamindari or village lease system. The payment was made in money or in kind according to the circumstances. The district of Coimbatore was acquired by the company through the Partition Treaty of Mysore on 13th July 1799.¹

Coimbatore region in the sixteenth and seventeenth century appears to have been largely in the hands of Nayak's subordinate's called Poligars, who divided the country between them. A Mackenzie Manuscript mentions the eighteen great poligars of Kongudesam i.e., present Coimbatore which was occupied by them. Rents were collected and paid in money even from the wet land. Collection under the Hindu government was subject to a division of the produce at the rate of two-thirds of the gross to government and one third to the ryots. It was assessed with money rents calculated in Viraraya fanams. This region also came under Tipu's rule. But the rule of Tipu sultan did not seem to have improved the conditions in Coimbatore. But evidence shows increased assessments with the result that more cultivable lands went out of the cultivation. But one positive element was Tipu was never able to realize his exorbitant demand. Taking advantage of the prevailing anarchy, the headmen of villages frequently fought each other as well as the

government in collecting the revenue. Many of them were notorious leaders of banditti.

Land Assessment:

In the country side parts of Coimbatore, particularly in the Southern division, possessed considerable wealth obtained by improper means, during the anarchy which prevailed at various periods in the province. This caused a great suffering to the common people and considerable loss of revenue to the government. When Baramahal was facing water scarcity in 1796, Graham, the Collector of the Northern Division of Baramahal requested the government to find out ways and means of improving water facilities in the region.² After the company assumed control of Coimbatore area in 1799, it was divided based on their resources. The river flowing areas such as North consisted of Erode, Bhavani, Satyamangalam, Coimbatore, part of Palladam and Kolegal Hills and was placed under the major MacLeod, while the rest of Palladam, Karur, Dharapuram, Udumalpet and Pollachi were placed under Mr. Hurdis, the collector of Dindugal.³

Meanwhile Macleod, who had inclination to follow Munro's system, experimented the same in his division and lands were surveyed and classified into gradations. Macleod found during the survey that the Karnam or native village accountants concealed the vast area of land in cultivation which resulted in a great loss to the government. Sullivan who became the collector of Coimbatore also found the faulty method of survey.⁴ In south Coimbatore, Hurdis followed a different method of survey. He surveyed and assessed the lands according to the capacity of the soil to produce. Hurdis was succeeded by Graeme and Macleod was succeeded by Garrow, the Collector of North Coimbatore. In his report of 17th May 1804, he described his method of Ryotwari assessment. He did not raise the assessment, but brought new lands into cultivation which resulted

in an increase of revenue. The condition in South Coimbatore under Graeme was not satisfactory because there Ryotwari assessment was not properly carried out. Many cultivators threw up their fields which resulted in a decrease in revenue.

Classification of Land:

Nevertheless, the government consolidated the two divisions into one under Garrow, who was appointed the principal collector.⁵ From the report prepared by Garrowit was found that the ryots were divided into three categories and the first being the persons who cultivated large stretches of land and they enjoyed huge profits; the second being the ryots who cultivated a moderate size of land with moderate capital but made only a moderate profit on the produce of their fields and the third group being the cultivators who looked to nothing beyond the maintenance of themselves and their families, whom the collector termed as “if not bankrupts, at least annual applicants”.⁶

The assessment remained the same throughout the period between 1801 to 1804 and the assessment was also unchanged. Although the district of Coimbatore had made satisfactory progress under the Ryotwari system, it was thought advisable to introduce the triennial lease in 1808. The district was divided into a number of small revenue farms of two or three villages a piece which were leased to village headmen and wealthy Ryots.⁷

The District of Coimbatore was the region much benefited from the new assessment. The revenue to the government along with the improvement in cultivation increased constantly since 1815. The collector of Coimbatore encouraged the people to occupy as much land as possible for cultivation by further simplifying assessments. His primary aim was the extension of cultivation and human habitation.⁸

Migration of labour:

The new assessment encouraged the migration of people from places of high assessments. It was noted that the flourishing agriculture of Coimbatore depended largely on favourable assessments compared with other districts. This fact was evident when the agriculture declined in several villages in the Pollachi taluk though it was earlier in progressive state of agriculture improvement. The reason for the decline of Pollachi was over – assessment of land revenue. Instead of bringing it to the notice of the collector, the Ryotshad found a remedy for themselves by emigrating to the villages of fair assessment. It was brought to the notice of the collector and by 1825 all the assessments were

overhauled and the district was back into a state of high cultivation.⁹

Assessments were differentiated on the basis of the garden or well land cultivation in Coimbatore. Though certain risky aspects such as force of the springs, quality of water and the soil were involved, the assessment was reduced to be very high compared to the common fields. Despite the difficulty in paying high assessment, the Ryots did not protest nor acquire among themselves, as for some time the garden cultivation yielded good return. The constant increase of garden cultivation and the revenue generated from it were suggestive of the extension of agriculture in Coimbatore.

In Coimbatore district the Ryots did not come forward to maintain the old channels and to excavate new tanks for want of capital. Because people thought that providing water sources was the responsibility of the government there was a separate establishment that superintended the flow of water of the Bhavani water course.¹⁰

In 1817, the collector reported that many new wells were dug in the district. When the Ryotwari system was introduced, the government realized the importance of water source for the increase of revenue. Thus the government authorized the collectors to issue Cows (Contracts) for digging wells and excavating tanks for the irrigation purpose.¹¹

Irrigation on tanks:

In the district of Coimbatore where the ryotwari system succeeded to a greater extent about 139 Cowles for new wells and 19 Cowles for repairing old wells had been granted. The Ryots took great interest in irrigation works in the districts like Coimbatore where the moderate Ryotwari assessment had made the cultivation profitable. In this area garden cultivation was familiar in the district and transformed it into a somewhat prosperous district.

Coimbatore contained huge stretches of pastures. The rich ryots in Coimbatore held the cultivation of land only as a secondary consideration. They mixed the trade of grassier with that of the farmer. The assessment on grazing field was very low. For example, the assessment of the dry grain lands of North Coimbatore was comparatively high, and one-third only of that amount paid on the land classified for sole purpose of grazing.¹²

From second decade of the nineteenth century, there was a tendency to bring as much land as possible under cultivation. For example in Coimbatore the ryots who were in possession of waste lands applied to the collector for permission to show horse gram in such lands with an offer of

paying a fixed tax of five fanams instead of 1 or 2 or 3 fanams which had been the rent usually paid for the pasture. Request was readily accepted because, it led to the expansion of cultivable lands by clearing jungles and continuous possession of such lands fetched full assessment for it from the next year onwards. In due course by the extension of cultivation through clearing jungles, the volume of pasture came down and the area where the owners of herds could graze their animals became more restricted.¹³

Bovine Economy:

During the period under review, some of the cattle breeds were very famous. The finest cattle was found also in Coimbatore. The cattle of Nellore, the cattle breeds of Coimbatore, Salem, Guntoor and Poonganur in North Arcot District were very famous. The Kangayyam cattle of the Coimbatore District were excellent. Buchanan makes no specific reference to them, but quoted that the Coimbatore cattle were one among the best breeds in the Presidency. Avenashi cattle in Coimbatore district also reared best cattle and was sold in all the places of the presidency. The Board of revenue had paid some attention to the question of animal husbandry. The Collectors were empowered to issue cowls for the breeding of cattle and sheep for sale. The people of the province realized the importance of livestock as part of the economy.

II. CONCLUSION

From these we come to know that British land revenue assessment was not purely fixed on land revenue collection alone, it was integrated with the overall development of the economy which required government's role in digging of wells, maintenance of tanks and expansion of livestock, as part of land revenue collection. Since the district was naturally gifted with the rivers and situated under the foot hills of Udhagamandalam on Western Ghats, it proved beneficial to the farmers to some extent. This cannot be said of other regions where ryotwari system was introduced.

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