

# THE ZAMINDARI SYSTEM AND THE LAND REVENUE ADMINISTRATION IN TAMILNADU UNDER THE BRITISH -A HISTORICAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

The British land revenue administration in Tamil Nadu faced significant challenges when they assumed control over revenue collection from the Nawab of Arcot. The existing revenue system, which already placed a heavy tax burden on the Poligars through the *Peshcush* (a tribute paid to the ruling authority), was exacerbated by additional demands for lavish gifts from British officials. This imposition further deepened the exploitative nature of the British land revenue policies, making them highly oppressive for local landholders and farmers. In an attempt to streamline and consolidate their control over the region, the British introduced the *Zamindari system* within the Poligars' palayams (territories). The British intended this shift to stabilize the revenue system and reduce the administrative burden by making local elites responsible for tax collection. In February of that year, the Madras Legislative Council passed a resolution calling for the abolition of the Zamindari system, a critical step in the region's broader land reform agenda. Subsequently, the *Zamindars Abolition Bill* was introduced, and the *Zamindari Abolition Act* came into force on April 2, 1947.

## Introduction

In British dominance in India began to solidify after the *Battle of Plassey* in 1757, which marked the victory of the East India Company over the Nawab of Bengal. This victory laid the groundwork for British control over vast parts of India. Following the *Treaty of Allahabad* in 1765, the East India Company was granted *Diwani* rights, giving it control over the revenue collection in Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. This marked the beginning of British political and economic dominance in these regions, where they established systems to extract wealth, which would later be replicated in other parts of India, including Tamil Nadu. **1793** Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General of India, introduced the *Permanent Settlement Act* in Bengal, creating a new system of land revenue collection. The Permanent Settlement established a fixed annual land tax, which was paid by the Zamindars (landowners) to the British government. The Zamindars were granted ownership rights over the land, but they were also made responsible for collecting taxes from the peasants working on the land. This system was intended to create a

stable and predictable source of revenue for the British, and it laid the foundation for the Zamindari system as a model for land revenue collection across the British territories. **Late 1790s** Following the success of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal, the British extended this system to parts of Tamil Nadu in the late 1790s. The system was initially implemented in regions like North Arcot, where it was modeled on the Bengal Zamindari system. The Zamindars were empowered with the authority to collect taxes from the peasants working the land and were given control over vast estates. This extension of the Zamindari system aimed to streamline revenue collection and solidify British control over the agrarian economy in Tamil Nadu. **1799-1818** During this period, the British gradually consolidated their control over Tamil Nadu, having already gained dominance over other parts of South India. British administrative reforms were introduced to streamline the collection of land revenue, with the goal of increasing efficiency and ensuring a steady flow of revenue to the colonial government. The Zamindari system, which had been introduced in certain regions of Tamil Nadu, was expanded further as part of these reforms. The British also began to rely on the Zamindars as intermediaries in managing agricultural production and ensuring the collection of taxes. **Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century** By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Zamindari system had become the dominant land revenue model in Tamil Nadu. The Zamindars held vast estates, which they controlled through their tenants, who worked the land. The British administration fixed the land revenue in perpetuity, ensuring a predictable income for the colonial government. This system concentrated landownership in the hands of a few wealthy Zamindars, who, in turn, were responsible for the economic wellbeing of the peasants working on their land. The system allowed the British to extract agricultural surplus and further integrate Tamil Nadu into the colonial economy. **1820s** As the Zamindari system expanded, it led to increasing discontent among tenant farmers. Zamindars, in their quest to maximize profits, often raised rents and imposed harsh conditions on their tenants. This exploitation led to widespread agrarian distress in many regions of Tamil Nadu, with farmers facing oppressive demands from the landowners.

The peasants, who were already struggling with the high taxes imposed by the British, now faced the dual burden of exploitation by both the British government and the Zamindars. This period saw growing unrest and protests from the farming communities. **1857-1860s** The Indian Rebellion of 1857, also known as the First War of Indian Independence, marked a significant turning point in British policies. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the British government reassessed its colonial strategies and made some adjustments to address rural unrest and dissatisfaction. However, despite these changes, the Zamindari system remained entrenched in many parts of India, including Tamil Nadu. Although the British sought to address some of the grievances of the peasants by introducing reforms, such as reducing the Zamindar's power to some extent, the core structure of the Zamindari system remained intact. The system continued to benefit the British colonial administration and the Zamindars, while the peasants remained at the mercy of the landlords. The exploitation of the rural population continued, contributing to long-term agrarian distress in the region.

The role of intermediaries, known as Zamindars, became a cornerstone of revenue administration under the Muhammadan rulers, who heavily depended on their services. These Zamindars were tasked not only with land tax collection but also with maintaining law and order within their designated estates. Historical interpretations suggest that the term *Krory* during the Muhammadan period evolved from *Chaudri*, a term used under earlier Hindu rulers. However, a

key distinction lies in the administrative approaches of these periods. Unlike the Hindu rulers, who avoided reliance on intermediaries for land revenue collection, the Muhammadan rulers institutionalized the intermediary class, positioning them between the state and the peasants to maximize revenue extraction. The genesis of the intermediary class, whether as *Chaudris* in Hindu administration or *Krory* and Zamindars under Muhammadan rule, remains debated. While some argue that the system originated with the Muhammadan rulers, others trace its roots back to Hindu governance, where *Chaudris* likely fulfilled ancillary roles.

The Muhammadan adaptation, however, formalized the position into a revenue-assessment framework, assigning the *Kror* (a unit of assessment) to these intermediaries. This evolution not only transformed traditional revenue practices but also marked a shift in governance dynamics, embedding a layer of intermediaries that deeply influenced socio-economic structures of the time. The statement got reinforced due to the subsequent intermediaries such as *inam*, jagirs.<sup>1</sup> The term *inam* by itself is an Arabic word that the Muhammadan conquest brought in replacing the existing ones being *Manyam*. The advent of Europeans, especially the advent of British East India Company, opened a new chapter in the history of land revenue administration in Tamil Nadu. Europeans were always attracted towards India, for several factors like enormous supply of commodities like pepper, which were in great demand in European markets, cheap labour etc. This was called the Carrying Trade and it prevailed much before the Industrial Revolution in England. The invention of mariners' compass, better maps, combined with the missionary zeal of the Christian church, motivated the Europeans to undertake geographical discoveries and colonization. When the British East India Company was burdened with increasing war-related expenses, especially during the Second Mysore War, the growing weakness of the Nawab of Arcot was the exploited by the Company. During the period, 1790-1792, when the Second Mysore War in progress, the Company asked the Nawab to assing the power of revenue administration to their control. Though this act of Assignment was in force only for a short period, the company came in direct contact with the poligars and appropriated the revenue collection, leaving a little for the Nawab's personal expences.<sup>2</sup> This was the thin end of the wedge and it ultimately led to the full assumption of revenue administration over the entire Carnatic by the British Company. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a variety of tenures with their local peculiarities prevailed here that caused great concern in the mind of the rulers. In addition, the conditions of the newly acquired territories were really appalling and it was almost impossible for the Company to know the 'probable value' of them and to distinguish the just revenue of the former years from the improper exaction of the manager which rendered the attempts of the British administration to form a fair settlement far from easy task. Under such circumstances, the interest of the cultivate had been at stake as he was subject to oppression of so grievous a kind that he was compelled to throw up his holdings in despair ad emigrating to a more promising or country.<sup>3</sup> The renters without taking the sufferings of *ryots* into consideration collected the revenue with such a vigor and rigour that the tiller was to struggle to keep his body and soul together only by fraud and bribery. The object of the render according to a learned Christian Missionary, too is frequently to ransack and embezzle, that he may go off at last enriched with the spoils of his produce. The fact is that in every part of India, where the renders are established, not only the ryot and the husbandman, but also the manufactures, the artificer and every other Indian inhabitants, is wholly at the mercy of those ministers of public exactions. The Company preferred the Permanent Settlement on the ground that it was impossible for the foreign government to impair

or unnerve the Zamindars in their own soil.<sup>4</sup> With the introduction of the Permanent Settlement in 1793, they thought it would be easy for them to mobilize the active support and cooperation of the Zamindars and with which they hoped to bring about peace and stability to the region. The Carnatic Treaty of 1792 empowered the British East India Company to assume full control over the Carnatic. According to this act called Assumption, the Britishers were enabled to station their army in the territories of the Nawab, garrison the forts and bring all the poligars under the direct control.<sup>5</sup> These two decisions called Assignment and Assumption reduced the Nawab to a mere tribute-paying chief the elevated the Company to a supreme position of authority over the entire Carnatic.

### **Immediate and Long-Term Socio-Economic Effects of the Zamindari System on Tamil Nadu's Peasantry**

The Zamindari system placed a heavy tax burden on the peasantry. Zamindars, as intermediaries between the British government and the cultivators, were required to collect a fixed revenue from the land, which they often demanded from tenants in the form of high rents. The fixed nature of these taxes, regardless of the crop yield or economic conditions, meant that the peasants were compelled to pay a significant portion of their earnings, leading to financial strain. Zamindars, given their elevated status and control over large estates, often exploited the peasantry by increasing rents, imposing arbitrary charges, and forcing labor. The peasants had little legal protection, and as a result, the system led to widespread exploitation, making it extremely difficult for them to thrive. Many cultivators, especially small farmers and tenants, lost their land rights under the Zamindari system. The Zamindars retained the ownership of land, while peasants worked as tenants, which meant they were dependent on the goodwill of the Zamindars to continue farming the land. This created a precarious situation for the peasantry, as they were vulnerable to eviction or rent hikes at the discretion of the landowners. Over time, the Zamindari system contributed to prolonged agrarian distress. With the Zamindars extracting high rents and often not reinvesting in the land or infrastructure, productivity remained stagnant. Farmers struggled to pay taxes and often went into debt to meet their obligations. As a result, the long-term economic impact was a cycle of poverty and dependency that persisted in rural areas for decades. The system heavily contributed to rural indebtedness. To meet the high rents and taxes, peasants often had to borrow money from moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates. This created a vicious cycle of debt, with peasants unable to repay loans, resulting in the loss of land and further entrenching their economic dependence. The concentration of land in the hands of a few Zamindars further deepened social and economic inequalities. It entrenched a hierarchical social structure, where a small elite controlled vast agricultural resources, while the majority of the population remained landless or marginally employed as agricultural laborers. The transformation of the traditional agrarian system under the Zamindari system disrupted existing farming practices and local governance. The introduction of a more commercialized model, driven by the demands of the British revenue system, did not take into account the needs or welfare of local communities. The focus on maximizing revenue for export contributed to unsustainable farming practices and neglect of local agricultural traditions.

## **Contribution to Agrarian Distress and Rural Indebtedness**

The fixed revenue assessments under the Zamindari system encouraged Zamindars to maximize their profits by charging exorbitant rents and imposing heavy labor demands on tenants. This practice was particularly harmful during times of crop failure or economic downturns, when peasants struggled to pay their dues. The inability to meet rent obligations often resulted in eviction and further impoverishment of the peasantry. Faced with the pressure of high taxes and rents, many peasants resorted to borrowing from moneylenders to meet their financial obligations. The moneylenders, often linked to the Zamindars or other elite classes, charged high-interest rates, which led to a debt trap for farmers. Unable to repay these loans, many peasants had to pledge their land or livelihoods, resulting in the further erosion of their economic independence. As the burden of rent and debt increased, many farmers were unable to maintain their land. With no legal protections or support, these farmers lost their lands to Zamindars or moneylenders, deepening the cycle of poverty and landlessness. This contributed to a growing class of landless laborers who were left with few options for survival.

## **Inadequate Support for Agricultural Development**

The British revenue policies focused more on extracting revenue than on improving agricultural productivity. While Zamindars were expected to manage the land, they often lacked incentives to invest in land improvements or sustainable farming practices. This neglect led to underdeveloped rural infrastructure, poor irrigation systems, and low agricultural yields, further exacerbating the hardships faced by the peasantry. Overall, the Zamindari system significantly contributed to agrarian distress, rural indebtedness, and the concentration of wealth and land in the hands of a few. The socio-economic consequences were long-lasting, and it took many years after India's independence to begin addressing the inequalities and hardships created by this colonial land revenue system.

## **Revenue administration of the British**

Thus the revenue administration, in the area under study, passed from the hands of the Nawab to the control of the British East India Company. The primitive revenue administration was governed by customs and traditions and they must have been paid more voluntarily. The norms tribal system were internalized and therefore, land tax was paid without much coercion. But as the jurisdiction of the state extended over larger areas, informal arrangement was replaced by more formal, bureaucratic arrangements to collect the land tax.<sup>6</sup> With the assumption of land revenue administration by the British government, they now had to confront the poligars directly. Hence the land revenue administration under the Britishers came under a severe strain as soon as they assumed revenue- collecting authority from the Nawab of Arcot. As mentioned earlier, any tax system is taxing and land revenue is no exception<sup>7</sup>. The land revenue, demanded from the poligars, under the name of *Peshcush*, was already taxing enough. In addition, the officials from the British Company also demanded expensive gifts from the poligars. This rendered the land revenue system, under the Britishers, very oppressive. To compound the tax-collecting problem for the company, the poligars had developed aversion for the Company because it was a Company administered by foreigners. This alien-averse attitude of the Poligars, made the tax burden more taxing than it was in reality.<sup>8</sup> Even the Muslim Nawab was accepted as Indian because even though the Muslims had population. But Britishers, like other European

Colonisers, never settled down in India. In fact, they had one foot in India and another foot in their own mother land. This was evident from the early settlements on the sea coasts. The Britishers in Madras settled on the Coramandel Coast, Portuguese in Goa on the West Coast and the Dutch in Nagapattinam because in the event of any trouble from the native population, which was far superior in number, they could set sail to their motherland. The Europeans ruled the seas and the native population could not touch them.

### **Impact of Poligar Rebellion**

This foreign character of the British Company made it difficult for the alien government to collect land revenue from the Poligars.<sup>9</sup> The only way out was to militarily conquer the Poligars<sup>5</sup>. As far as the oppressive tax structure was concerned, except in the ancient period, it was oppressive under the British Company also. But it was more unacceptable under the Company because it was a demand from a foreign company. The result was the outbreak of the South Indian Rebellion of 1800-1801, long before the much publicized First War of Independence in 1857. Now here in India did the common people organized a fight for the nationalist cause, so extensive and so violent a rebellion against the Imperialism, as the patriots of the South especially the Poligars of Sivaganga, did in the memorable years of 1800-1801.<sup>10</sup> As the Eighteenth Century advanced towards the end, the clouds of horror, wrought by the alien power, thickened and the masses moved swiftly into a climate of despair, bewilderment and revenge. Ridden with blatant evils, wanton obliteration of political institutions, bequeathed by the past and systematic spoliation of the material glories possessed by the land, British Imperialism, with its entire abhorrent ramifications, drifted into a violent collision with the might of organized peasants. This was the South Indian Rebellion the most widespread of all the liberations of the pre-Congress Epochs and the first and the last violent popular struggle of any formidable dimensions in the annals of British India.<sup>11</sup>

The destruction of the local rulers like the Poligars of Ramanathapuram and Sivagangai, paved the way for the ultimate paramountcy of the British Government, it also provoked the wrath of the local population in the process. When the Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram was deposed in 1795, it did not ensure the loyalty of the inhabitants. This continuous erosion of the customary privileges of the Poligars, was viewed by the people as an insult to their traditions. When they were enraged by the loss of their traditional system of government by the Poligars, their rage was compounded by the unfair land revenue system. The peasants felt that they were robbed of their due share of the crop yield and they stood by the Marudhus in their just war against the unjust alien rule. Thus land revenue administration, under the Assumption by the British Company, played key role in the conflagration called the south Indian Rebellion of 1801.<sup>12</sup>

In 1802, a special commission was appointed to study the possibility for introduction it for which William Petrice, a member of the Governor's Council, Thomas Cockburn, a member of the Revenue Board and Josian Webbs who had enough experience in the revenue affairs and settlement in Bengal, were appointed as members with John Hodgson, Secretary to the Government, Revenue Department, as Secretary. With a view to regulate the land revenue collection, the British government, according to the Permanent Land Revenue Settlement of 1802, provided that Zamindars were made the proprietors of land in the Madras province.<sup>13</sup> Regulation XXV of 1802 prepared by the Revenue Department was passed on July 13, 1802 making the Zamindars as the actual proprietors of the soil on a permanent basis. To implement

the scheme immediately, the Circar lands were divided into convenient mittas and sold by public auction to the highest bidders among whom the majority were speculators with no knowledge of agriculture. For better implementation of Permanent Land Revenue System successful in Bengal, a Special Commission reinforced by the Regulation XXV of 1802 was appointed in 1802. The British virtual created Zamindars by auctioning and conferring the tenurial rights.<sup>14</sup>

The Peshcush was fixed in perpetuity, Zamindars were made heritable and transferable and uncultivated arable lands and wastes lands were given to Zamindars free of assessment. Zamindars of Tamil districts were descendants of the Poligars and the estates were most extensive in the southern most districts. The Zamindars Systems, seeking for the settlement of revenue within a stipulated duration laid down that the estates of Zamindars would be forfeited and put up for public auction if he failed to fulfill the requirements. The local government were instructed by lord Cornwallis to settle the land revenue permanently modeled on Bengal, to introduce Zamindari Settlement to Zamindaris; and to create Zamindars to which the revenue settlement introduce Permanent Settlement of revenue was made with Zamindars who were originally the ancient Rajas and Poligars. But the Permanent Settlement rendered it impossible for the government to carry out in other districts that formed the Presidency.<sup>15</sup>

### **Land Tenure in Madras Presidency**

In Madras, Zamindari tenure and settlement was practiced over an area 13.1 million acres, out of a total area of the state of 84.7 million acre that accounted for 15.5 percent of total area of the state. By 1829-39, there were some 49,607 square miles under the Zamindari that amounted to about 35 per cent of the whole area of the Presidency.<sup>16</sup> While the Zamindar was allowed to have a portion of the produce, the claims of cultivators amounted to around 50 per cent of the gross produce and a variety of mode of collection and rates rendered generalization of rates difficult. Under the instruction of the Board of Revenue, *Peshcush* was fixed at two thirds of the collection.<sup>17</sup> The assessment was not with reference to a single village but with reference to the entire Zamindari. However, no uniform mode assessment was carried out in the Madras Presidency. Sevaram lands allotted to Zamindar as remuneration for his service of revenue collection did not come under assessment; but was dispensed by Zamindar at pleasure among peasants for certain amount of rent. Land of each Palayam was converted into an estate and Poligars were made Zamindars, but not all. Even among friendly Poligars, those who commanded respect were made Zamindars. The first quarter of the nineteenth century had been marked by the experimentation of the British with the land revenue system namely Permanent Settlement, the Village Settlement, and the Ryotwari Settlement.<sup>18</sup> The Permanent Settlement modeled on the namesake introduction in Bengal by Lord Cornwallis in 1793. In 1794, in a declaration made in the Northern Circars by the Chiefs and council, the Government declared their intention of introducing the Permanent Land Revenue Settlement after sufficient informations about the resources of the country. In 1795, the Court of Directors of the East India Company recommended the adoption of such a measure in the Northern areas, in the jagirs (Chingleput district), in a portion of Baramahal and in Dindugal.<sup>19</sup> Before Cornwallis left India, he furnished the Madras Province with the documents relating to the Bengal system and his successor Lord Wellesley warmly recommended its adoption in Madras.

The Government of Madras, by appointed a Special Commission in 1803, carried out the Permanent Land Revenue System in the southern division of Baramahal, the four division of Masilipatam, the two divisions of Vizagapatnam, the Western *Palayam* of Venkatagiri, the

Southern Palayams of Sivaganga and Tinnevely. The Zamindars were restricted in their demands on the ryots to the customary rates of assessment in money or in division of produce in kind. They were required to issue pattas to the ryots fixing their rates of customary rents.<sup>20</sup> Lord Bentinck who succeeded Lord Clive in 1808 was also against a system which protected the interest of Zamindars at the cost of *ryots*. The opinion of the Court of Directors also changed then as they were convinced that by permanent settlement, while the state had been deprived forever of its legitimate income derivable from the prosperity of the country, the *ryots* had been left to the oppressed and exactions of the Zamindars.<sup>21</sup> In February 1947, the Madras Legislative Council passed a resolution accepting the general principle, the abolition of Zamindars System and recommending the Government to bring forward legislation to this purpose. Accordingly, a Bill was prepared and it was sent to a Joint Select Committee. It was named Zamindars Abolition Bill. The Act as finally passed by the Legislative Council came into force from 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1947.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The introduction of the Zamindari system in the palayams, previously governed by the poligars, heralded a profound shift in the socio-political and economic framework of Tamil Nadu. Prior to the British intervention, the poligars had held military and administrative authority in their territories, often engaging in local warfare and maintaining control through military prowess. However, with the onset of British colonial rule, the British sought to pacify the region and transform its socio-economic landscape. This transformation was motivated by a desire to end the recurring cycles of predatory warfare that had plagued the Southern Province for centuries. The British authorities envisioned a shift toward agricultural productivity and peace, which they believed would be achieved through a carefully structured revenue system that would replace the poligars' military control with a more orderly system of land management. In an effort to achieve this goal, the Governor in Council announced the establishment of a permanent revenue assessment, grounded in the principle of Zamindari tenures. Under this system, once the revenue assessment for land was fixed, it was to remain unchanged indefinitely, providing both stability and predictability for the colonial administration.

The poligars, in exchange for relinquishing their military duties, were to be transformed into Zamindars, or landowners, of their hereditary estates. This move was designed to shift their role from military leaders to revenue collectors, consolidating power in the hands of a few who were now tasked with ensuring the collection of taxes from the peasantry. In return, these newly minted Zamindars were exempted from military service, a significant concession that reflected the British strategy of creating stable and loyal landed elite. However, this restructuring did not unfold without challenges. The transformation of the poligars into revenue administrators created a deep-seated instability in the region's revenue system. Previously, the poligars had relied on their military strength and control over local populations, but as tax collectors under the Zamindari system, they lacked the necessary administrative skills and resources. This shift caused widespread confusion and inefficiency in revenue collection. Additionally, the local peasantry, now burdened with increased taxes and exploitation by the Zamindars, became increasingly resentful of the new system. The discontent culminated in the Poligar rebellion, a significant uprising against British authority, fueled by the growing resentment of the poligars' new role and the hardships imposed on the agrarian communities.



The rebellion highlighted the deep fractures created by the Zamindari system and underscored the failure of the British to fully integrate the Southern Province into their colonial framework. As the British sought to assert control, the socio-political landscape of Tamil Nadu became increasingly volatile. In the aftermath of the rebellion and as the struggle for independence gathered momentum, the necessity for land reform became more apparent. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial-era system was widely viewed as outdated and exploitative. After India gained independence, the issue of land reform in Tamil Nadu gained considerable attention. In February 1947, the Madras Legislative Council passed a resolution that officially endorsed the abolition of the Zamindari system. The resolution emphasized the need for a more equitable land distribution system that would serve the interests of the common people rather than the colonial elites. This led to the drafting of the Zamindars Abolition Bill, which was reviewed by a Joint Select Committee before being introduced in the Legislative Council.

The bill aimed to dismantle the Zamindari system and redistribute land more fairly among the peasantry. After careful deliberation, the bill was passed, and the Zamindars Abolition Act came into force on April 2, 1947, bringing an end to the colonial land tenure system. The abolition of the Zamindari system marked a significant turning point in the socio-economic history of Tamil Nadu. It not only removed the remnants of colonial land policies but also laid the foundation for a more equitable land reform process in the state. The act of abolition ushered in an era of land redistribution, aimed at empowering the peasantry and addressing the socio-economic imbalances that had long plagued the region. The changes introduced by this legislation had far-reaching effects on the agrarian structure of Tamil Nadu, and while they were a step toward greater social justice, the legacy of the Zamindari system continued to influence the region's socio-economic dynamics for years to come.

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