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Bengal and the Zamindars

During the 16th and 17th centuries, about 85 per cent of India's population lived in villages and were engaged in agriculture. The English East India Company (E.I.C.) established its empire in the countryside and implemented revenue policies that affected different social groups in varied ways.

Colonial rule was first established in Bengal. In 1793, the British introduced the Permanent Settlement, fixing the land revenue that zamindars had to pay to the Company. Estates of zamindars who failed to pay were auctioned, though many sales were fictitious. The Raja's estates were publicly sold, but he often retained control.

The rural economy of Bengal was in crisis by the 1770s, with recurrent famines and declining agricultural output. The Permanent Settlement aimed to stabilize revenue and bring property rights, but the fixed revenue demand was high, and depressed agricultural prices made it difficult for peasants to pay rents. Consequently, zamindars often failed to pay the Company.

Zamindars acted as revenue collectors, collecting rent from villages and paying the fixed revenue to the Company, keeping the surplus as income. However, their powers were limited, and many went into debt.

Wealthy peasants known as jotedars acquired large tracts of land, controlled local trade and moneylenders, and supervised sharecroppers (adhiyars) who cultivated land and shared produce.

Zamindars used benami (fictitious) transactions to reclaim auctioned estates cheaply. They employed lathiyals (strongmen) to prevent outsiders from taking possession of land, often using violence.

Despite challenges, zamindars maintained control over the countryside through economic and physical means. These changes were documented in reports to the British Parliament, such as the Fifth Report of 1813, which became a basis for debates on Company rule.

Bengal and the Zamindars: Exam Questions

Q1: What was the Permanent Settlement and why was it introduced in Bengal?

A1: The Permanent Settlement was a land revenue system introduced in 1793 that fixed the revenue zamindars had to pay to the British East India Company. It was introduced to stabilize revenue collection and resolve problems faced by the Company after conquering Bengal.

Q2: Who were the jotedars and what role did they play in rural Bengal?

A2: Jotedars were wealthy peasants who acquired large areas of land, controlled local trade and moneylenders, and supervised sharecroppers. They gained power as zamindars weakened.

Santhals and Paharias

In the early 19th century, the Rajmahal Hills were inhabited by the Paharias, who depended on forests and practiced shifting cultivation. They resisted outsiders and raided plains to protect their lands.

By the late 18th century, British expansion of settled agriculture in Eastern India increased conflicts between Paharias and settled agriculturists. In 1810, the Santhals arrived, clearing forests and cultivating rice and cotton. The area called Damin-i-Koh was declared Santhal land.

The Santhals expanded rapidly, increasing Company revenue. The Paharias retreated further into hills, becoming poorer. The Santhals, though settled farmers, faced heavy taxation, exploitation by moneylenders, and land claims by zamindars, leading to the Santhal Rebellion of 1855-56.

After the revolt, the British created the Santhal Pargana to satisfy the Santhals by establishing new administrative units.

Santhals and Paharias: Exam Questions

Q1: How did the arrival of the Santhals affect the Paharias?

A1: The Santhals cleared forests and expanded settled agriculture, forcing the Paharias to retreat deeper into the hills, which negatively impacted their livelihoods.

Q2: What were the causes and outcomes of the Santhal Rebellion?

A2: Causes included heavy taxation, exploitation by moneylenders, and zamindar land claims. The rebellion led to the creation of the Santhal Pargana, a special administrative region for the Santhals.

Agrarian Distress and the Deccan Revolt

The Deccan Revolt of 1875 began in Supa village, Poona district, with peasants attacking moneylenders (sahukars), burning account books (bahi khatas), and destroying debt

bonds. The revolt spread over 6,500 sq. km, affecting more than 30 villages.

The ryotwari revenue system in the Bombay Deccan taxed peasants directly with periodically revised rates, increasing financial strain. High revenue demands, crop failures, and falling agricultural prices caused widespread indebtedness.

The American Civil War (1861–65) caused a cotton boom, increasing cultivation but also debts. After the boom ended, prices fell and credit tightened, worsening peasants' conditions. Moneylenders exploited peasants with high interest and forged accounts.

Colonial policies required formal written contracts, replacing traditional informal agreements, increasing mistrust. Deeds and bonds were often misunderstood by illiterate peasants, symbolizing oppression.

The Deccan Riots Commission (1875) investigated causes, highlighting high revenue demands, falling prices, and exploitative moneylending. The revolt exposed agrarian distress and peasant resistance under colonial rule.

Agrarian Distress and the Deccan Revolt: Exam Questions

Q1: What were the main causes of the Deccan Revolt of 1875?

A1: Causes included high revenue demands under the ryotwari system, crop failures, falling agricultural prices, and exploitation by moneylenders.

Q2: How did the American Civil War affect agriculture in the Deccan region?

A2: The war caused a cotton boom, increasing cotton cultivation and peasant debts. After the boom ended, prices fell, worsening economic conditions.

Colonial Revenue Systems and Regional Variations

The British introduced different revenue systems in India, notably the Permanent Settlement in Bengal and the Ryotwari system in the Bombay Deccan and Madras regions.

The Permanent Settlement fixed revenue demands permanently and recognized zamindars as landowners responsible for tax collection. It led to the rise of zamindars and jotedars but also caused rural distress due to high fixed demands.

The Ryotwari system taxed peasants directly, with periodic revisions of revenue rates. This system increased peasants' financial burden and indebtedness, as seen in the Deccan Revolt.

Regional variations in implementation reflected local conditions and colonial administrative priorities, affecting rural society differently across India.

Colonial Revenue Systems and Regional Variations: Exam Questions

Q1: What are the main differences between the Permanent Settlement and the Ryotwari system?

A1: The Permanent Settlement fixed revenue permanently and recognized zamindars as intermediaries, while the Ryotwari system taxed peasants directly with periodically revised rates.

Q2: How did regional variations in revenue systems affect rural society?

A2: Different systems led to varied impacts; for example, zamindars held power in Bengal, while peasants faced direct taxation and indebtedness in the Deccan.

Official Reports and Surveys

The British produced official reports and surveys to study rural India, such as the Fifth Report (1813) and Buchanan's surveys. These documents aimed to understand and control rural areas but often overlooked local resistance and complexities.

Reports highlighted issues like peasant revolts, revenue collection, and economic changes but reflected colonial biases. The Deccan Riots Commission investigated the causes of peasant unrest, blaming moneylenders more than tax policies but acknowledging colonial contributions to problems.

Critical reading of these documents is necessary to understand their perspectives and limitations.

Official Reports and Surveys: Exam Questions

Q1: What was the purpose of British official reports and surveys in rural India?

A1: To study rural areas for better control, revenue collection, and understanding of social and economic conditions.

Q2: Why should these reports be read critically?

A2: Because they often reflected colonial biases and overlooked local resistance and complexities.

Solved Examples

Example 1: Explain the impact of the Permanent Settlement on zamindars and peasants in Bengal.

Solution: The Permanent Settlement fixed revenue demands on zamindars, making them landowners responsible for tax collection. Many zamindars went into debt due to high demands and declining agricultural prices. Peasants faced increased rents and exploitation, leading to rural distress.

Example 2: Describe the causes and consequences of the Santhal Rebellion.

Solution: Causes included heavy taxation, exploitation by moneylenders, and zamindar land claims. The rebellion led to the creation of the Santhal Pargana, a special administrative region, aiming to satisfy the Santhals and reduce conflict.

Practice Set

Easy

- Who were the zamindars under the Permanent Settlement?
- What was the main occupation of the Paharias?

Moderate

- Explain the role of jotedars in rural Bengal.
- What were the effects of the cotton boom on Deccan peasants?

Challenging

- Compare and contrast the Permanent Settlement and Ryotwari systems.
- Analyze the causes and outcomes of the Deccan Revolt of 1875.

Answer Key

Easy

1. Zamindars were landowners responsible for collecting land revenue and paying fixed taxes to the British East India Company.
2. The Paharias were shifting cultivators who depended on forests and resisted outsiders.

Moderate

1. Jotedars were wealthy peasants who acquired land, controlled local trade and moneylenders, and supervised sharecroppers.

2. The cotton boom increased cultivation and debts, but its end caused price falls and economic hardship.

Challenging

1. The Permanent Settlement fixed revenue permanently and recognized zamindars as intermediaries; the Ryotwari system taxed peasants directly with periodic revisions.
2. The Deccan Revolt was caused by high revenue demands, crop failures, and moneylender exploitation; it led to government investigations and highlighted agrarian distress.

Quick Reference

- **Permanent Settlement (1793):** Fixed land revenue system in Bengal.
- **Zamindars:** Landowners and revenue collectors under Permanent Settlement.
- **Jotedars:** Wealthy peasants who gained land and power.
- **Santhals:** Forest clearing settlers who revolted in 1855–56.
- **Paharias:** Forest-dependent shifting cultivators.
- **Ryotwari System:** Direct taxation of peasants with periodic revenue revisions.
- **Deccan Revolt (1875):** Peasant uprising against moneylenders and revenue policies.
- **Deccan Riots Commission:** Investigated causes of the revolt.

Glossary

Adhiyars

Sharecroppers who cultivated land and shared produce with landowners.

Benami

Transactions made in the name of a fictitious person to conceal the real beneficiary.

Bahi khatas

Account books used by moneylenders and peasants.

Lathiyal

Strongmen employed by zamindars to enforce control, often using violence.

Ryot

An Indian peasant or tenant farmer.

Sahukar

Moneylender who also acted as a trader.

Talugdar

Holder of a taluqa or land connection, often classified as zamindar.

Zamindar

Land revenue collector and landlord under British colonial rule.

Chronology of Key Events

Year	Event	Significance
1765	English East India Company acquires Diwani of Bengal	Start of British revenue collection in Bengal
1773	Regulating Act passed by British Parliament	Regulated East India Company's activities
1793	Permanent Settlement introduced in Bengal	Fixed land revenue and recognized zamindars
1800	Santhals begin settling in Rajmahal Hills	Expansion of settled agriculture and conflict with Paharias
1820	Agricultural prices begin to fall	Economic distress for peasants and zamindars
1855–56	Santhal Rebellion	Peasant uprising leading to creation of Santhal Pargana
1875	Deccan Revolt	Peasant revolt against moneylenders and revenue policies
1878	Deccan Riots Commission report	Investigation into causes of peasant unrest