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**Vivek kumar**  
*MA (History), UGC NET*

## **The economic impact of English administration on the rural life of India**

**Vivek kumar**

### **Abstract**

The impact of English Colonial rule on Indians can be better assessed if that be taken from the point of impact it had on the rural population and the socio-economic fabric of the nation. Before the British held sway over the Indian economic environment the villages were more or less free from the political fights going up in the capitals. But with the rule of Britain having stamped on the India soil the British started having their interest in the rural economy and also started changing the basic fabric of it which had remained unchanged for almost centuries.

The villages were mostly self-sufficing in traditional sense and more or less independent in their day to day handling of life. But the impact of the new rulers – the British- were quite far reaching. The major impact and far reaching too, of it was in the economic area.

**Keywords:** Economic, impact of English, rural life.

### **1. Introduction**

Before the advent of British rule in the Indian sub-continent, the villages generally, were mostly self-sufficient and supported the urban economy well. The Mughals tried to let the villages be the support of their military needs (animals, raw material and grains) and also help the urban economy with raw material. So they did not meddle much with the basic structure of the economy at the fundamental level.

But the British wanted to get the most from the village and too at the very earliest (they needed money for military expenditure and the civil administration which they had started in India) so they started changing the revenue system and after that the basic rural economy.

They started a Zamindari system in Bengal which brought havoc to the rural economy with absentee Zamindars and high rents, and famines and farmers leaving the lands and getting away to cities in search of new opportunities.

When the British realized that this system has not worked as well as they had thought it would they tried new system 'Ryotwari in South India' and 'Mahalwari in the North and North Western parts of India'. They tried to improve upon the Bengal experiment but made the situation worse. The farmers in South saw the land becoming a sellable item and also faced many droughts in the period. The farmers in the North India also were not well off. They also had to pay huge amount of rent on their lands and were barely able to pay the dues in times and this all started a vicious circle of indebtedness of the Indian Farmer.

But this all was not just about farmers. Many artisans who were dependent on the farm produce for their raw material also lost their jobs. They also could not support themselves as they have not only lost the supply but also the demand from the landlords and the rural gentry, so this was also a body blow to the basic Indian craftsmanship too.

The administration also helped to put down the Indian industries also as they were not getting enough material to produce good cloth and the British administration was so smart as to give advance payments to the farmers on their produce, so the Indian industry also felt the negative impact of the administration on the rural economy.

But this all was not all negative, the administrative policies also helped in making Indian farmers look toward the different crop patterns. They started cultivating cash crops for paying rent and also the interest on what they had borrowed. This started a new phase in Indian agriculture and also that the British tried to lay canals and other beneficial; projects for the agriculture at large so that the rural economy may help in pushing their British economy faster to new heights dreaming of Pax Britannica.

**Correspondence:**  
**Vivek kumar**  
MA (History) UGC, NET

## 2. Economic

Before the arrival of British the Indian villages were self-sufficient and farming and looming industry went hand in hand and both helped each other in the affairs of the villages. But that does not mean that villages were cut off from the rest of the world but it just meant that the villagers needed very little from the outside world for their consumption and they used to produce much of their needs in their own village. Much of what was produced in the village was taken by the state as revenue and the small part was sent to towns for purchasing of essential items. Both, the farmers and the state, were more interested in the land use than the land rights. The right over the land was ancestral and hereditary which the state seldom challenged. Even the 'banker' or loan provider had the right over the part of the produce and not on the land itself.

But the British imposed a very different type of Zamindar system on the Indian peasants. These new zamindars were totally ignorant of the village life and village traditions even the agricultural part of the zamindari was quite ignored in this type of zamindari system. Their only job and interest in the villages was to extract as much revenue from the farmer as they could and make profit not only to the new rulers but also to themselves as they had procured the rights of zamindari by making the highest bid, 'that was new to the Indian revenue system'. If the farmer could not pay the amount of the tax which was estimated by the new zamindars either his land was taken away from him and given to someone else who promised to give the revenue or tax like him or the farmer himself sold the land to someone to pay the tax. In this way the land was made a property to be sold in a market place like every other entity.

The state of the peasants in Permanent settlement and Temporary Settlement zamindari areas was worse than the zamindari system of Bengal. The farmers were left at the discretion of the zamindars and the British administration was least concerned about the farmers in these areas but used to help the zamindars in their dispute with the farmers. The farmers were forced to do *begaar* and also pay additional taxes i.e. *abwaabs* to the zamindars in addition to the regular land revenue they were paying. This made their condition more critical and they were constantly under extreme burdensome loans at high rates of interest.

The farmers in the *Ryotwari* and *Mahalwari* system were also not very good. The administration had proposed and imposed very high rates of taxes in the beginning and the calculations were done mostly arbitrarily without the consent of the *ryot* or any person having basic knowledge of the farming system in that area. It was mostly for the good of the British Administration and their people that this system worked and not the farmers. The tax collection at the beginning was as high as the one third to half of the production. This led to increase in the indebtedness of the farmers throughout the *ryotwari* and *mahalwari* system of revenue generation which had been the case of many peasant revolts in these areas.

The steep increase in the tax on farmers and their lands which allowed no money to put in to invest in the agricultural field in any way was one of the fundamental

reasons for the poverty of Indian farmer and decline in the agricultural production in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Many a times the farmer had to depend on the moneylenders to pay the taxes to the zamindars or the government as the cases was. But it was not easy to get away from these bloodsucking moneylenders so greedy as to suck away the last penny from the farmer. They would at the first, ask for an exorbitant rate of interest and after that they would fudge the records to suit their purpose of extracting as much money at their rate of interest. So the poor farmer was never able to get away from the clutches of these moneylenders and they were very powerful and had the full support of the British administration. They forced the poor farmers to pay them more than they had agreed upon by getting their thumb impressions on the fudged documents and the farmer and his son and after them his son and so on would be in perpetual indebtedness to the moneylender. So in this way the poor farmers were under the triple yoke of the British Administration, the zamindars and the money lenders.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Indian agriculture saw a new development; commercialization of the agriculture. Till then the agriculture was basically a mean to survival i.e. food and clothing and for some other basic material things of daily use and not for commercial gains. But with the British having say in the Indian agriculture the farmer had to move from the livelihood part of agriculture to commercial products. He started growing, cotton, tobacco, tea, coffee, rubber, indigo, sugarcane etc. not for his own good but for paying the taxes. And the tragedy for the farmer was that this was not helping him in any way but was only helping the British industrialists sitting thousands of miles away in Lancaster and Manchester or the Indian middleman helping the administration in extracting as much revenue from them as the administration could. With much focus on the commercial products the production of wheat and rice dropped and this shortage of grains led to very dangerous and more frequent famines.

Till 1800 the Indian industry could hold sway all over the world and especially the European market with the help of the Cottage Industry alone. The farmer would sell his extra produce in the market and the workmen would make something exquisite that made them the best in the world and this way the Indian cottage industry was regarded the best in the world at that time. The farmers could use this art for some extra income. In this way both the farmer and the craftsmen were having a good time. But with the industrial age, the start of the colonial rule in India and the differential treatment of the British administration toward the Indian farmers and agriculture led to the large scale closing of these small scale /cottage industry. The production of handmade items stopped and cottage industry started to crumble under the weight of British colonial rule and the industrial age. The worst impact was on the persons in the business of producing cotton and cotton based products because British mills were producing cheaper cloth and was at very low rates giving Indian cottage industry a death blow. The state of silk or woolen industry was also not good. They were also seeing bad days. Other village based industries also started crumbling under the impact of British administration's efforts to reach the farthest corners of Indian sub-continent.

With the British products with next to nothing taxes imposed on it reached the villages, nobody was now purchasing the Indian products and so in this way the British administration helped sound the death knell of the cottage industry. With no work for them the workmen and craftsmen working in the cities or other industries started getting back to their villagers and this in turn started making huge toll on the land. By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the population dependent on the agriculture rose to 80% and the land was not able to support this sudden rise. This also had a negative impact on the cordial relations of the farmers and craftsmen for centuries that had been the cornerstones of the social fabric of the villages.

So, with the pressure of increasing population to support, excessive taxation on agriculture, unscientific methods of revenue collection, starting a new type of zamindari system, increasing indebtedness, poverty of farmers were some of the reasons for the stagnation of Indian agriculture and for much part even downward spiral of it. In addition to it no efforts were made to help the farmers in increasing their produce, no any concerted efforts were made to help the irrigation projects; which could help the farmers and in turn would help regain the primacy of Indian agriculture and cottage industry.

All this also had a severe impact on the social framework of the villages. This helped in rising the tensions between the social classes and political movements also were the products of the British effect on the agriculture, which could be seen in the peasant revolts for example Pabna in 1873, Deccan revolts in 1875, several revolts during 1897-99 and revolts in Assam in 1894.

### 3. Conclusion

We can see that administration in trying to get as much profit it can from the land helped in ruining the basic structure of village economy and the whatever little good it did for the agriculture was not enough to get the whole rural economy I shape for a long time.

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