



## British rule and mahalwari system

Sharad Yadav

Reasearch Scholar, Department of Western History, Lucknow University, Uttar Pradesh, India

### Abstract

The Mahalwari system was one of the three major land revenue settlements of British colonial India introduced under the administration of East India Company. It was the last land settlement experimented by the company administration and expected to be an improvement over both the previous working settlements. This paper focuses on provisions and implications of Mahalwari system.

**Keywords:** revenue, british rule, mahal, settlements

### Introduction

The Mahalwari system was one of the three major land revenue settlements of British colonial India introduced under the administration of East India Company. It was the last land settlement experimented by the company administration and expected to be an improvement over both the previous working settlements. The other two major settlements were Zamindari (in Bengal presidency) and Ryotwari (in Madras and Bombay Presidency). It was a settlement for the estates of proprietary bodies first introduced in the region of North-Western Provinces under the regulation VIII of 1822<sup>[1]</sup>. Further, it was extended up to areas of the Central Provinces\* and the British Punjab. It was an intermediary type of the land settlement, first implemented in the Ceded and Conquered provinces which Lord Wellesly had acquired between 1801 and 1802<sup>[2]</sup>. The settlement under the Mahalwari operation was directly made with the villages or estates or Mahals by the instruction of the settlement officers, who fixed the rent with the consultation of 'lambardar' and the rent to be paid by the cultivating peasants. The settlement possesses a mixture of Bengal Zamindari as well as Madras Rayotwari. Here, the settlements had neither been with great hereditary revenue farmers like the Bengal `Zamindars nor with the humble cultivators asa in madras, but generally with the co-sharing village brotherhood called as "village community"<sup>[3]</sup>. Most of the historians placed the new system as a modified version of Permanent Zamindari of Bengal which was usually made with the 'body of co-sharers'. In all Mahalwari regions, the land revenue was revised periodically.

The Mahalwari system of land revenue was of temporary in nature and implemented with the provision that the assessment should be revised after certain fixed period of time usually after 30 years.<sup>4</sup> In few cases, the assessment of land revenue should be revised only after a period of 20 years and even at some occasions it was revised after a marginal gap of 10 years. In a simple revenue language, the Mahalwari settlement was famous as a 'mauzawar' settlement where 'mauza' stands for a village or a unit of assessment. The foundation of entire land revenue assessment and realization in the Mahalwari operated region was based on the records of 'shajra' or field map and

"khasra" or field register.<sup>5</sup> Under the system, the settlement was made directly with Mahals or estates in which a recognized landlord or proprietor of some kind declared responsible for the payment of land revenue to the government. <sup>6</sup> The collection of land revenue amount in Mahalwari settlement was directly connected to the existing Mahals or mauzas.

The Mahalwari system was introduced by 1822 with the estate or mahals' proprietary bodies where lands belong jointly to the village community technically called the body of co-shares. The body of co-shares is jointly responsible for the payment of land revenue though individual responsibility was not left out completely. The question of introducing a settlement of land revenue in the ceded and conquered provinces came to be the fore by the coming of 19th century. However, the mahali system was started only by passing the Regulation VII of 1822 which the practical implication of Mackenzie's minute of 1819. The system had been broke down because of the excessive state demand and rigidity in its working and collection of land revenue. In a typically Mahalwari village, the co-sharers are actually the cultivators. According to J. S. Mill, 'the peasant proprietors compound with the state for a fixed period. The proprietors did not engage themselves individually with the government, but by villages'. When William Bentinck assumed the governorship of India, he made a thorough review of the scheme of 1822 by which Mahalwari system had been introduced. The government of Bentinck came to the conclusion that the Regulation of 1822 had caused a widespread misery. After a prolonged consultation and discussion he passed the Regulation IX of 1833. This regulation made the terms and conditions of the Mahalwari system more flexible. The new scheme worked under the supervision of Martins Bird. The new system started a new scheme of land revenue assessment and given the right of internal adjustments. Unfortunately, the system not worked successfully because the settlement officers, who were the carrier of the settlement, turned corrupt and evaded the actual rules and collected the revenue at his own discretion. As a result the system proved miserable to the agricultural classes. This created widespread discontent and finally the Mahalwari System failed to create any extensive effect<sup>[4]</sup>. The idea and proposal of Mahalwari system was first given

by Holt Mackenzie, then the territorial secretary of the Board of Revenue, in his famous and detailed minute of 1st July 1819. 17 The minute had proposed and laid the foundation of village-wise system of land revenue which later became popular as mahali or Mahalwari settlement. The commencement of the new land settlement under the minute of 1819 was considered as the starting point of modern knowledge about the North Indian land tenures. Mackenzie declared Permanent Zamindari settlement as a 'loose bargain' with careful extensive research of the area. 18 When he declared Zamindari system as a 'loose bargain' it means that the settlement was neither proved profitable to the British Government, nor to the Indian peasants as well as other agricultural communities. Finally, on the basis of local existing conditions, Mackenzie advocated for the village or 'Mahal' based land revenue system. In the minute, he complained about the words 'possession' and 'property' which was commonly used without any established nature of possession or the sort of property. 19 This minute proposed a number of measures related to the land revenue administration which was not avoided if success could be attained. The advice of Mackenzie's minute was finally incorporated in the regulation VII of 1822 and became the basis of Mahalwari system. The regulation marked a revolutionary beginning in the improvement of land revenue administration under the Company rule. It provided a basis of detailed field-to-field survey for revenue assessment. By the introduction of Mahalwari system, the Colonial government of the Company tried to divert the attention from 'Tallukdars' to Khudkasht or primary resident Zamindars and the village communities. 20 In Mahalwari mode of land revenue settlement, the groups of cultivated holdings were shared among themselves and the payments which Biswadars or inferior cultivators made to them as overlords for the right of occupying the remaining lands of village. In most of the instances, however, the settlement had been made with single individuals –either temporary revenue farmers or more established local magnets termed as tallukdars who contracted the whole group of villages or mahals for the revenue payment<sup>[5]</sup>.

Under the village settlement (Mahalwari) the revenue is settled for a limited period (30 years in U.P. and 20 years in Punjab and C.P.), with the entire body of villagers who were jointly and separately responsible for the revenue of the whole village. Their head called the Lambardar, sign the agreement with the government to pay the revenue on behalf of the villagers. The assessment of the revenue by the village council is supervised by the settlement officer of the government, and the village maps and records of rights are carefully preserved and brought up to date. The government demand is estimated by a careful calculation of the value of the land, the price of the crops, and the recorded actual produce of the field. In the Mahalwari settlement, the government deals only with the middlemen, whether individuals or group of villagers, who were held responsible for the revenue. Nearly half of the area thus settled is cultivated by these middlemen themselves, and the other half by inferior tenants subject to the middlemen. The government demand was formally 90 p.c. of the net assets, but it was now been reduced to 50 p.c., or even less, except in Bombay, where there was no limit of to the maximum. The net asset is taken to be the economic rent which the actual cultivators pays to the superior proprietors, where there is subletting. In other places, the net assets is arrived at

by deducting from the assume price of the crops the approximate cost of production, and little extra for his luxurious. In the province of Oudh, the government settled the revenue of a group of villages with a Talukdar or chief. These Talukdars differ from the Zamindars of Bengal in two respects: (1) the settlement with the former is temporary, and they have no absolute right over their estates such as the Bengal Zamindars possess<sup>[6]</sup>.

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