

Indian Agriculture during Colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

The colonial period had established the system in such a way that, that could generate source of income for the British government. During the middle of the 17th century, the British entered in India. Initially they were addressed as the merchants from England. They could establish themselves as efficient traders and merchants, especially in the coastline of India. Gradually, the British merchants got success in establishing political supremacy during the middle of 18th century. Since then, the British government started establish the Indian economy with their interest. The exploitation of resources of India and transferring the economic gain to England, this was the main intention of British rulers. This research paper examines the consequences of British rule on Indian agriculture. Or this paper analyzes the position of Indian agriculture during colonial period.

1. Introduction

Indian agriculture has gone through various ages. Before the independence, the Indian agricultural system was in backward stage. The land relation during the colonial period was more feudal in nature with backward technology. This was resulting into low agricultural productivity. The feudal structure of Indian agriculture was benefitting the British government. The colonial period had established the system in such a way that, that could generate source of income for the British government. After the Independence, the government of India had to establish a strategy to promote the agricultural growth, which can benefit the nation. The colonial period Indian agriculture must be analysed considering some of the features of it. During the middle of the 17th century, the British entered in India. Initially they were addressed as the merchants from England. They could establish themselves as efficient traders and merchants, especially in coastline of India. Gradually, the British merchants got success in establishing political supremacy during the middle of 18th century. The political power of British government was started to establish in India, especially after the win in the 'Battle of Plassey' (in 1757) and the 'Battle of Buxer' (in 1764). In the later phase of these battles, the British government became the ruler of India. Since then, the British government started establish the Indian economy with their interest. The exploitation of resources of India and transferring the economic gain to England, this was the main intention of British rulers. This research paper examines the consequences of British rule on Indian agriculture. Or this paper analyzes the position of Indian agriculture during colonial period.

2. Objectives of the Study:

- 2.1 To study the economic system in British India
- 2.2 To explore the position of Indian agriculture during colonial period.

- 2.3 To study the consequences of British government on Indian agriculture

3. Hypothesis of the Study:

- 3.1 The Indian agriculture before the British India was self sufficient
- 3.2 The Indian agriculture became feudal system to benefit the British India
- 3.3 The commercialization of Indian agriculture began during colonial period

4. Literature Review:

Prakash B.A. (1988) has argued that the 'Malabar' region under 'Madras' presidency remained agriculturally backward due to the unfavourable policies of the British rule. David Washbrook (1994) has argued that the railways and road transportation in colonial period could help the commercialization of agriculture in India. Anwasha Borthakur and Pardeep Singh (2013) argued that, the frequent occurrence of famines during colonial period gave birth to agricultural research in India. The British government encouraged the development of agricultural research in India. Nitesh Kumar (2016) argued that, the British colonial rule distracted the Indian agriculture, and main intention behind this was the collection of land revenue.

5. Methodology:

The present research analysis is based on the secondary data viz. Reports and Books. The period of the study is whole British period i.e. from 1757 to 1947. However, selected position and consequences of Indian agriculture have been given in the analysis.

6. Analysis of Data and Results:

Before the colonial period, the Indian agriculture was stated as self-sufficient economy. There was practice of subsistence occupation and large segment of the people were depending on agriculture. The cropping pattern during pre-colonial period was simple and dedicated to food crops. The production food and consumption of food was being carried out in village. This was showing as the rural economy was self-sufficient economy. Besides the farmers and agricultural labourers, there was also other segment of the people whose occupation was non-agriculture. The occupations were designed on the basis of hereditary system. In general the rural economy was divided into three segments. One- agriculturists, Two-village artisans and Three- village officials. Each village economy was established as an independent and self-sufficient. The production and marketing of the products were being done at its level. This shows that, the village economy during pre-colonial period was self-sufficient.

However, the British government has changed the situation of Indian agriculture. The agricultural system in India was re-established during colonial period in the interest of British government. The rule of British India can be divided into two major phases- One- the phase of the East India Company (from 1757 to 1858) and Two- the phase of the British Government (from 1858 to 1947). During both the phases of the colonial period, the interest of the Britain was satisfied. The Industrial revolution began in Britain in the middle of the 18th century, which later spread to nearby countries of Europe. The industrial revolution in Britain expanded the market for various raw materials. There was increasing demand for raw materials, which further expanded the industrial revolution. The Britain merchants also needed the market for the sale of finished products. The Britain merchants and later British government was interested in Indian economy for two reasons. One -to secure raw materials from India for factories in Britain, and Two-to ensure permanent market in India for the British manufactures. These two economic reasons put pressure on Indian agriculture through British government. The exploitation of resources in India began as per the demand came from the Britain. The position and consequences of Indian agriculture during colonial period can be given in three major segments as below.

6.1 Commercialization of Indian Agriculture:

The industrial revolution in Britain and Europe had influenced Indian agriculture and which changed the trade policy in British India. The trade policies during colonial period were formed to encourage the export of raw materials from India to Britain and import of manufactured goods from Britain to India. The British government forced Indian farmers through 'Zaminars' to change the cropping pattern. The food crops (viz., wheat, paddy, millets etc) were being produced by the majority of the farmers. Later the farmers were being forced to produce cash crops (viz., cotton, jute, tobacco etc).

These cash crops were being exported to Britain. The practice of cash crops in Indian agriculture started during colonial period. This was nothing but the beginning of commercialization of agriculture. The process of commercialization was again gone at higher speed as the development of railways began in India.

6.2 Feudal Land Relations in India:

British government had established their political supremacy in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa provinces. After the battle of 'Buxer' (in 1764), the East India Company started to collect land revenue, which was called as 'Diwani', from the farmers. The right of collecting land revenue was with the British government initially the above stated provinces. The purpose of the government was to raise land revenue as much as possible. The collection of revenue was essential for the British government for their political stability in India. In the year 1793, the British government introduced permanent land settlements in 'Bengal' and in neighbouring provinces. The settlement raised the position and rights of revenue collectors, who later became as private landlords. This was nothing but introduction of 'Zamindari' system for the collection of land revenue. The 'Zaminars' were required to collect the land revenue from the farmers and deposit it with the British government. The land revenue was also re-assessed after certain period. The introduction of 'Zamindari' system in India helped British government to establish themselves as the rulers. By this the British government was successful in three points- One- the British government made land revenue collection system as simple for them, Two- the British government could establish political stability and Three- the British government could create one faithful class for them. These changes could help the British government to rule India for longer years. However, this system brought severe effects on Indian agriculture and farmers as well. The rural Indian economy was also affected by this system. There was the absence of landlords in the process of cultivation; on the contrary the actual cultivation was being done the farmers or tenants. The land revenue system discouraged the cultivators. This had seized the process of land improvement. The cultivators were not sure about their tenancy, which was higher as compared to their production. The British government gradually increased the rent, which established 'feudal' land relations in India. Agricultural land improvement was completely neglected by both (by 'Zaminars' and 'Cultivators'). Over the years the fertility of agricultural land declined. The 'Zamindars' or 'Landlords' were enjoying the luxury life, where as the cultivators were suffering from severe shortage of resources. As a whole the new land settlement system or the 'Zaminary' system introduced by the British government led to concentration of economic power in the hands of landlords and moneylenders at the cost of poor peasantry. The feudal agricultural relation later brought the social unrest among the Indians.

6.3 Occurrence of Famines and Scarcities:

The British government had established their power in most of the provinces of India; however 'Bengal' province was mostly affected by severe famines and scarcities. During the British rule, India, especially in 'Bengal' province, there was frequent occurrence of famines and scarcity. The Famine Commission Report (1901) has argued that, during the colonial period, India had to face twelve severe famines and four severe scarcities (during 1765 to 1858). The situation of India became worse after 1858, i.e. after the transfer of power to British crown (in 1858). During 1860 to 1908, around 20 famines occurred in India. The 'Bengal' famine (in 1943) was worse in India. Officially, it was estimated that around 1.5 deaths were found during this famine. The unofficial estimate about these deaths was around 3 million. The failure of crop production due to failure of monsoon and lack of transportation of food to the affected region, the severe shortage of food came out, which killed millions of the people. The area which affected by famines was 'Bengal', 'Bihar', 'Orissa' and other nearby provinces.

6.4 Discouraging British Policies:

During colonial period, the British government had declared wrong policies which always benefitted the government and brought adverse effects on Indian, especially farmers. Despite of continuous failure of monsoon, the British government took no special step, which resulted into severe famines. In addition to this, the British government forced the Indian farmers to change the cropping pattern i.e. from the food crops to cash crops. This brought huge imbalance between the demand for and supply of food grains. Finally, the severe shortage of food grains situation came in India. The lack of sufficient transport facilities for supply of food grains was also a reason for severe shortage of food grains. On the supply side, the situation became worse. The prices of food grains rose to higher level. The traders were busy in hoarding and speculation, which again made rise in the prices. The British government could not take effective measures to stop such malpractices. Thus the British government policies were not supporting Indian agriculture; rather they brought severe famines in India.

7. Discussion

After going through the analysis, Indian agriculture had gone through several situations during colonial period. The brief discussion from the above analysis can be given as below.

- i) The industrial revolution in Britain and Europe influenced Indian agriculture during colonial period
- ii) The trade policies during British India were supporting the Industrial revolution and Britain economy.

- iii) The British government forced Indian farmers to change the cropping pattern from food crops to cash crops.
- iv) The Introduction of 'Zaminars' helped to British India to establish their control on Indian agriculture.
- v) The commercialization of Indian agriculture actually began during colonial period.
- vi) The development railways helped the Indian agriculture to make the process of commercialization fast.
- vii) British government had established their political supremacy in India after the battle of 'Buxer' (in 1764).
- viii) The collection of revenue was essential for the British government for their political stability in India.
- ix) The British government could create one faithful class for them through the 'Zaminars'.
- x) The British government gradually increased the rent, which established 'feudal' land relations in India.
- xi) Agricultural land improvement was completely neglected by both (by 'Zaminars' and 'Cultivators').
- xii) Over the years the fertility of agricultural land declined.
- xiii) During the colonial period, India had to face twelve severe famines and four severe scarcities (during 1765 to 1858).
- xiv) The situation of India became worse after 1858, i.e. after the transfer of power to British crown (in 1858).

8. Conclusion:

The position of Indian agriculture during colonial period was not good for Indian farmers. The British government imposed several restrictions on Indian farmers regarding cropping patterns and land revenue, which made the social and economic situation more badly. The political supremacy of British government was continued from 1764. The colonial period had witnessed several famines and scarcities, which affected most of the India. The British government started establish the Indian economy with their interest. The exploitation of resources of India and transferring the economic gain to England, this was the main intention of British rulers.

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